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The World in Miniature:
The Interrelationship of Humans and Landscape
in G. Mend-Ooyo's *Altan Ovoo*

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Abstract

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The leading Mongol writer G. Mend-Ooyo's poetic novel *Altan Ovoo* offers a vision of nomadic literature based as much on the history and worldview of Mongol nomadic herders as on the late twentieth century Mongolia, poised between Soviet-influenced socialism and Euro-American democratic capitalism, in which it was written. This dissertation has two aims, namely to offer an overview of Mongol nomadic society and culture and to show the place of literature – and poetry in particular – within this worldview, and then to present *Altan Ovoo* as a prism through which the ideas on which nomadic culture is based can be shown as being central to the self-image of Mongolia's people, both in relation to the past and to the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
A Note on Terminology	15
Part I.....	16
Chapter 1: The Concept of Homeland (<i>nutag</i>) within Mongol Society	17
Chapter 2: The Expression of Shamanism and Buddhism in Mongol Culture, and Their Relationship with the Environment	38
Chapter 3: The Impact of Stalinist Policies on Mongol Nomadic Culture (1921-1953)	65
Part II	89
Chapter 4: Themes in the Poetry of B. Yavuuhan and Their Influence upon Post-Stalinist Mongol Literature	90
Chapter 5: The Poetry of D. Nyamsüren and O. Dashbalbar during the 1970s and 1980s	112
Part III	140
Prelude to Part III:	141
Chapter 6: <i>Altan Ovoo</i> as a “book-stūpa”	149
Chapter 7: Environment and History in <i>Altan Ovoo</i>	170
Chapter 8: Environment and Story in <i>Altan Ovoo</i>	195
Intermezzo: An Overview of Mongol Poetry and Poesis	216
Chapter 9: Environment and Poetry in <i>Altan Ovoo</i>	219
Chapter 10: Environment and Nature in <i>Altan Ovoo</i>	241
Chapter 11: Environment and Auto/biography in <i>Altan Ovoo</i>	261
Part IV	275
Chapter 12: The Influence of <i>Altan Ovoo</i> on Mend-Ooyo’s Later Work and that of His Contemporaries	276
Chapter 13: The Influence of <i>Altan Ovoo</i> on the Work of the New Generation.....	303
Postscript.....	332
Appendix: Echoes of <i>Altan Ovoo</i> beyond Mongolia	334
Bibliography	349
Filmography	357

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Seattle, Washington

May 2012

бүх миний багшид хариулсан

INTRODUCTION

Much as my thesis¹ was the first academic treatment of B. Yavuuhulan and the writers who have been most influenced by him, so this dissertation is the first treatment, in any language, of the work of G. Mend-Ooyo, or indeed of any contemporary Mongol writer.

It should also be understood that the quality of critical secondary material in Mongol literary studies – indeed the quality of Mongol literary studies itself – is, to put it kindly, extremely poor. The model for such academic work comes, of course, from the Soviet educational system, and such writers as Ludmilla Gerasimovich² provide fine examples of the ways in which initially Soviet, and subsequently Mongol, scholars have addressed, or have failed to address, the various pertinent thematic and historical and stylistic aspects of literature within the context of Mongol culture.

My principal secondary sources have, in fact, been the writers under discussion themselves. G. Mend-Ooyo, the author of *Altan Ovoo*, has unfailingly answered my questions about the history of Mongol literature and its place within the cultural landscape. His views, while ultimately traditional, remain broad and inclusive, and he has been able to indicate to me sites of similarity between his work and others' where I had failed to see any connection whatsoever. He has also, as with my thesis on his mentor B. Yavuuhulan,

¹ Simon Wickham-Smith, "Nomadic Influence in Contemporary Mongolian Poetry: the Influence of B Yavuuhulan (1929-1982) and the *Shine handlaga*," (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Washington, 2010).

² Ludmilla K. Gerasimovich, (trans. Members and Friends of the Mongolia Society), *History of Modern Mongolian Literature (1924-1964)*, (Bloomington, IN: The Mongolia Society, 1970). This book, originally written in 1962 by one of the leading Soviet Mongolists is an excellent overview, *from the point of view of Marxist theory*, of Mongol literature. However, Gerasimovich deals in a progressively cursory manner with post-revolutionary literature, and such glaring lacunæ as Chinggis Haan and the psychospiritual importance of landscape, while expected in a work of this period, nonetheless render this book a shadow of what it might otherwise have been. There are other treatments of Mongol literature in Russian, but the Soviet period is barely addressed in any of these, and then in much the same way as Gerasimovich's treatment.

helped greatly in understanding the interrelationships between the various literary trends that developed during the 1970s.

In addition to Mend-Ooyo, I have also spent much time exchanging emails with Ts. Bavuudorj, D. Nyamaa, B. Odgerel and with O. Dashbalbar's son D. Gangabaatar. Their perspective, while personal and thereby prejudiced, has been helpful in many ways for understanding the ways in which Mongol literature has developed during the post-Soviet period. Odgerel's insights into his own work and his friendship with the late T. Sodnomnamjil, and Gangabaatar's perspective on his father's political life have helped to throw light upon the project of cultural recovery which developed rapidly during the 1990s.

In case this introduction should turn into the type of encomium which ordinarily should be kept for the acknowledgements, I would say that, due to the severe lack of secondary material, the scholarly progress of this dissertation has been greatly eased through discussions with the writers themselves. It seems to me, indeed, that there is precious little interest among the Mongol reading public for literary theory, literary history and genuine literary comparative studies has in fact been replaced by the writers themselves getting together frequently, wither in private homes, in bars, at readings or – as is the case with Mend-Ooyo – in government offices, passing round copious amounts of boiled meat and alcohol, and reciting and discussing both their own poetry and that of their colleagues. In so doing, theirs becomes a more interactive relationship, akin perhaps to the symposium, in which writers learn by listening as much as by doing. This is clearly the traditional way of poetry, clearly how nomadic poets would have learnt, honed and developed their craft, in a manner quite different from the occidental post-enlightenment poet alone and starving, both for nourishment and for company, in his garret.

The dissertation falls into four distinct parts, viz.:

Part I addresses the Mongols' traditional and historical attitude to the environment in which they live and through which they journey. This

nomadic heritage remains central to Mongol life, even for many people today in Ulaanbaatar, and the psychospiritual presence of the ancestors and the *locii genii* within the land remains of great importance to the cultural life of the country as much as to its political wellbeing. This part also discusses the political and cultural implications of the Soviet revolution and its aftermath, especially upon the quality and nature of the literature produced.

Part II presents the Mongol post-Stalinist literature and the development of the movement under the leadership of B. Yavuuhulan. This is the movement that nurtured the talents of younger writers during the 1970s, such as D. Nyamsüren, O. Dashbalbar and G. Mend-Ooyo himself, and thus prepared the way for this new generation to define Mongol literature following Yavuuhulan's sudden death in 1982. In particular, this part will examine the understanding of the nomadic experience of environment in the work of these writers and the ways in which this understanding might have influenced the composition of *Altan Ovoo*.

Part III presents a systematic analysis of *Altan Ovoo* according to the following criteria: religion and spirituality, history, prose narrative, poetry, the natural world, auto/biography. By approaching the text in this way, and along this specific trajectory, relationships can be seen as developing from first principles (spirituality, history, lineage) and so broadening out towards the final, overarching idea of biography and its fundamental interrelationship with the land and with the ancestors.

Part IV presents an overview of Mongol literature since the publication of *Altan Ovoo* in 1986, and this effectively constitutes an overview of post-Soviet literature. The writers of Mend-Ooyo's generation are discussed first, followed by those of the younger generation. The latter group, it will be seen, has developed along different lines from the former group, with a creative blurring between the poles of tradition and innovation, and many writers seeking to negotiate a way of being true to their heritage while wishing to develop their own distinct voices.

Tradition, Hybridity and the Production of Culture: Theoretical Considerations

*Paradise is exactly like where you are right now – only much, much better!*³

In the piece that occupied her during the late 1970s, *United States Parts I-IV*, the performance artist and cultural critic Laurie Anderson sought to understand the idea of tradition and culture in the United States. The idea expressed in the line cited above is one, which in a postmodern sense very much in keeping with Anderson's aesthetic can be appropriated and applied to Mongolia. There is a way in which the nomadic worldview is a constant presence within the minds of even the most urbanised Mongol, a reminder of their connection with the land and with the ancestors who dwell in the land. And this, within the concept of the sealed container of the earth (*yertöntsín sav*), renders the world as it is as a paradise waiting to be remembered, waiting to be truly apprehended. Moreover, while this dissertation is not about literature in contemporary Mongolia – although it is, in part, about the Mongols' apprehension of their nomadic culture and history insofar as it has been

³ Laurie Anderson, "Language is a Virus (From Outer Space)" (*United States I-IV*, Warner Bros., 1983).

influenced by works such as *Altan Ovoo* – it is nonetheless strongly defined by the way in which the Mongols regard nomadic tradition and nomadic culture.

In the wake of Stalin's death in 1953, and even more so in the wake of the democratic revolution of 1990, Mongols found themselves with the freedom to interrogate their history and to draw from it the ideas with which they wanted to define themselves and their society. The result of this interrogation has been that Mongols are today a people who, whilst looking forward to economic prosperity and political democracy, are also firmly rooted in the legacy of Chinggis Haan and the *altan utas*, or "golden thread," which links all Mongols throughout history back to Chinggis Haan.

But how can we properly understand the role of nomadic culture in contemporary Mongolia (and especially as it is presented in *Altan Ovoo*)? Is it fair to say that Mend-Ooyo's view of nomadic culture is sentimental and romantic, and based upon a privileging of this culture as being somehow more genuinely Mongol than the urbanised and (even in the late 1980s) increasingly westernized inhabitants of Ulaanbaatar?

Some kind of theoretical model is necessary, upon which a consideration of these issues may be based. However, since this is the first dissertation, as far as I can ascertain, either in Mongolia or outside, to deal with Mongol literature following the death of Stalin, it is my intention that the bulk of the text be given over to an analysis of *Altan Ovoo* as it exists in historical and sociocultural relationship with nomadic culture and with Mongol literature as a whole. By presenting in this way both my research and its exposition, without the explicit overlay of foreign theory, I will allow *Altan Ovoo* – and Mongol culture in general – to define itself from within itself, thus creating a basis from which further research may be essayed and from which also new theoretical models might be suggested, or new approaches at least to models already presented, suitable for the description of, and for research into, nomadic culture.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in an autobiographical meditation on the nature of his work, says that “[t]he study of other people’s cultures...involves discovering who they think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it...”.⁴ As a statement of anthropological fact, this is unremarkable, but it is noteworthy that he emphasizes the primacy of the studied culture. As with the scientific observation of light, our intervention as researchers and scholars into a culture and a society of which we have only learned knowledge, and with which we are not intimately and personally involved, will render that other culture as somehow *other*, as somehow not-us. And we should be aware of its being not-us, if only so that we recognise both that we are merely interpreters and that our interpretation, while constituting valid observations and valid questions, is nonetheless made incomplete by our otherness. Read in this way, then, Geertz’s statement offers a profound caveat, which we should heed before presuming to analyse a literary text or the multilayered culture from which it was birthed.

The approach taken to Mongol culture in this dissertation adheres closely to Geertz’s, working outwards from the ways in which Mongols see themselves. One of the key terms in this discourse is *ulamjalal*, glossed in most lexica as “tradition.” The word is at a second remove from the verb *ulamjlah*, which means “to hand down, to transmit.” The dynamic implications of this etymological data seems somehow to contradict the concept of tradition. Indeed, in his study of “[invented] tradition” (my parenthesis), the historian Eric Hobsbawm writes, “The object and characteristic of ‘traditions,’ including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer, imposes fixed (normally formalized) practises, such as repetition.”⁵ There is clearly a tension between Hobsbawm’s idea of tradition and the idea of *ulamjalal*, which suggests, I would say, a dynamic nexus determined

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

by the nomadic apprehension of cyclical spacetime and the constancy and immanence of the ancestors. This worldview of course runs counter to the Eurocentric worldview upon which the volume is based, and for which Hobsbawm's essay is the introduction.

Geertz's dynamic interrogation of a given people, in order to establish "what they think they are doing," is a development of his own understanding of the concept of "thick description," initially advanced by the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle in his essay "The Thinker of Thoughts: What is *Le Penseur* Doing?"⁶ Geertz expands Ryle's idea within an ethnographical framework, and for him culture – "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit"⁷ – should be unknotted and observed and analysed from the point of view of its complexity and its contradictions. The importance of *ulamjalal* in Mongol nomadic culture (indeed, in Mongol culture in general) comes not from a desire to reinforce or to (re)create an idea of the past (as is suggested by Hobsbawm concept of "tradition"), but from the desire to pass historical and cultural knowledge and understanding from one generation to the next *through a dynamic interaction with the ancestors*.

This dynamic interaction will be greatly expanded in Part I of the present text, but for now it is necessary to understand the ways in which it manifested during the late 1980s, at the time when Mend-Ooyo was composing *Altan Ovoo*.

Between its initial occupation by the Manchu in 1685 and the first democratic elections of 1990, Mongolia enjoyed only about a decade of independence (1911-1921). The result has been, to use Geertz's image, a knotting of cultural phenomena to produce what Homi Bhabha describes as "hybridity." This concept was developed within the discourse of postcolonial theory, and focuses on the dynamic of power and, to a large

⁶ Gilbert Ryle, "The Thinker of Thoughts: What is *Le Penseur* Doing?" in Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers. 2*, (London: Hutchinson. 1971), 480–496.

⁷ Clifford Geertz "Thick Description: toward an interpretive theory of culture" in Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

extent, of race. In my opinion it is debatable to what extent this discourse is valid in pre-modern Mongolia. Before the collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, Mongolia had such a small population density, that the real impact of the Manchu occupation on the nomadic herders, and upon Mongol culture in general, is not only hard to quantify, but very possibly was almost insignificant. We know from the work of the monk-poet Danzanravjaa⁸ that he for one was troubled by the power of the Manchu, but his was a position of power, he was a (perhaps self-appointed) spokesman for nomadic culture, and so he had direct interaction with the Manchu officials present in Mongolia. The impact of the Manchu upon the Mongol population in general was primarily financial and political, with increasing levels of taxation exacted from herders and traders, but (unlike those responsible for the literatures, described as colonial and postcolonial, with which Bhabha is concerned) Mongols were for the most part illiterate, their cultural expression remaining largely indigenous and untouched by the Manchu and other foreign cultures.

The impact of Soviet culture in Mongolia, of course, was very different. Despite its population density remaining small, nonetheless, that population came swiftly under the control of the policy of rapid industrialisation advocated by the Soviet Union, and the imposition of collectivisation during the late 1920s had dire consequences. In cultural terms, of course, Soviet colonial power sought – at least within the Soviet Union itself; its effects on its satellite states, such as Mongolia, is perhaps harder to quantify – to create a Soviet *patria*, in which culture, a key issue in the preservation or destruction of nationalism, was largely defined from Moscow. In Mongolia for certain this catalysed what Bhabha calls “the threatened ‘loss’ of meaningfulness in cross-cultural interpretation,”⁹ especially during the period of Social Realism prior to Stalin’s death, in which Mongol art forms were co-opted

⁸ See Chapter 2.

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 179.

and transformed by Soviet cultural praxis from largely social interactions to performative phenomena, distanced both from its social and cultural origins and from its audience.

The policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* advanced by Mikhail Gorbachev during the mid-1980s, and Mongolia's ever closer ties with Moscow under the new MPRP General Secretary J. Batmönh, offered writers such as Mend-Ooyo the freedom to write about nomadic culture without fear of repression. It was in this atmosphere, then, that he wrote *Altan Ovoo*, and, while it could be argued that this was indeed a period of post/colonialism, I would argue nonetheless that, as I will hope to show in the extensive analysis of *Altan Ovoo*, there is precious little non-Mongol culture in the book.

In fact, the history of post-1921 Mongol literature is really a battle between those who might be described as colonised (those writers, for instance, who deliberately aimed to study at the Gorky Institute in Moscow), and those who resisted colonisation and who explicitly developed along traditional lines.¹⁰ In this way, the traditional (*ulamjal tai*) literature advocated by Mend-Ooyo's teacher B. Yavuuhan can, I would argue, only be seen as post/colonial insofar as it was composed during a period of colonisation and its aftermath. I would also argue that the almost complete lack of cultural analysis even now in Mongolia, is indicative in part of the perceived irrelevance, in the minds of Mongol intellectuals, of Soviet culture and cultural theory as it pertains to Mongol culture.

So far as the theory surrounding colonial and postcolonial literatures is concerned, then, I am personally not convinced that the model is applicable to Mongolia, despite the fact that Mongolia was colonised for more than two centuries by the Manchu and for almost seventy years by the Soviet Union. I would also say that, while postcolonial theories such as that advanced by Bhabha might seem to some to be a suitable springboard for the

¹⁰ The first group is treated in Chapter 3, and the second group in Part II.

development of a more suitable model, for me they constitute simply the least inapplicable model, and thus hardly useful without considerable reform.

Geertz's idea of thick description, Hobsbawm's idea of tradition (and the concomitant Mongol concept of *ulamjilal*) and Bhabha's idea of hybridity, however, are all trajectories along which a discussion of cultural power can develop, and *Altan Ovoo* moreover is an essay in the poetics of cultural power. Indeed, *Altan Ovoo* can be a site in which nomadic culture is articulated through the gradual negotiation of power between the Soviet Union, the MPRP and Mongol advocates of democracy, and as such is an example of the ways in which sociopolitical power is articulated and transformed within a situation of Bhabha-esque hybridity, in which Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of cultural polyphony, influential in the development of Bhabha's own theoretical standpoint, comes to the fore. In fact, the polyphony which results from this tripartite sociopolitical hybridity, a polyphonic discourse in which colonial Soviet cultural practise necessarily melds with, but is in some ways erased by, Mend-Ooyo's explicit intention to "reveal the world of *Altan Ovoo* as the world of Mongolia's nomadic culture."¹¹

This image of *Altan Ovoo* as an interaction between Mongol sociopolitics and culture brings us to the final theoretical level, that which Pierre Bourdieu has described as "the field of cultural production."¹² I take issue with Bourdieu's basic distinction between *habitus* (ways of perception, acquired and learned over time) and *doxa* (beliefs and values, infixed within and by the culture), and would claim rather that the two have a mutuality which plays out rhythmically over time and space. In terms of Mongol nomadic culture, moreover, the explicit privileging of the group over the individual means that there is a dynamic

¹¹ G. Mend-Ooyo, email message to author, 2009 (my translation). I have chosen to render "Altan Ovoo" here as the title of the book, but the context is clearly ambiguous, and so the toponymic usage must also be borne in mind.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, Or: The Economic World Reversed," *Poetics* 12, 318.

interaction of habitus and doxa by which they meld and create a society where people and families and groups move (again nomadically, it might be argued) between their urban and rural existences, notwithstanding their geographical location. Thus, a person can work in a business in Ulaanbaatar during the day, yet gather with an extended family that evening as *though* they were on the steppe in a ger. This kind of cultural slippage is natural in Mongolia, where the limens between the traditional (*ulamjal tai*) and modern, between the steppe and the urban are very porous indeed. So that which is learnt consciously through the indwelling of Mongol society (habitus) and that which is unconsciously assimilated through the process of a person's self-recognition as a Mongol (doxa) come together to inform the dynamic of Mongol society and cultural.

With this Mongol understanding of habitus and doxa, we can examine how Bourdieu's theory of cultural production could be read in context. His tripartite analysis of cultural capital – as embodied, objectified and institutionalised – opens up, in relation to this especially potent period of cultural negotiation during the late 1980s, considerable scope for interrogation, both of Bourdieu's own theories (although to do such a study justice would itself take a short book) and of the Mongol field of cultural production.

I would argue that we can map two distinct embodied states in Mongolia during the mid twentieth century, namely the Soviet and the nomadic. The Soviet embodiment of literary culture is defined by its adherence to Social Realism and the general revolutionary (or, better perhaps, "revolutionary") Eurocentric cultural project advanced by Moscow and imposed through compulsory education, while its nomadic embodiment is defined by the understanding of the interrelationship of humans and the natural world.

The Soviet objectification of literary culture is the publication of books in Moscow of Mongol literature in Russian translation, the presence in Soviet academic institutions of Mongol culture, cultural scholars and cultural producers, and of Soviet scholars seeking to understand Mongol literary culture, and (perhaps most significantly) the publication of

revolutionary literature (or at least literature with a revolutionary theme or discourse) in Ulaanbaatar, and in Mongolian for the consumption and education of Mongol readers. The nomadic objectification of literary culture is the composition and memorization of texts and their recitation, and the materialist possession of (almost exclusively) religious texts, often in Tibetan, which are used as mnemonic devices for the habitus|doxa binary, and which the majority of Mongols (at least historically; at least until relatively recently), being illiterate or barely literate, were unable fully to read.

Finally, the Soviet institutionalisation of literary culture is achieved through the performance of poetry and drama, the use of literature in education and, I would argue, through the very significance of literature in both Mongol and Soviet culture. Thus the Soviets used the objectification of culture (as in the religious texts mentioned above) to institutionalise Mongol literature. The nomadic institutionalisation of literary culture is achieved initially through the privileging of literacy, and then through ascribing considerable social caché, firstly to poets and latterly (especially during the early revolutionary period, when European-style short fictions became a popular medium among intellectuals) to prose-writers.

Notwithstanding the alluring simplicity of Bourdieu's model (and especially when presented in such an abbreviated form as this), Mend-Ooyo's place (and that of many of his colleagues too) within this model, and thus the place of *Altan Owoo* too, is highly complex. He was never educated in the Soviet Union, although he graduated as a teacher and so taught within the Soviet system in Mongolia during the 1970s. His work has been published in Mongolia since 1980, and he has long been regarded as one of Mongolia's leading literary and cultural figures. However, his resolute privileging of the Mongol nomadic tradition over the Europeanised Soviet approach has set him apart, on all levels of Bourdieu's schema, from the truly institutionalised field.

It goes without saying that these three key aspects of Mongol nomadic culture – tradition, hybridity and cultural production – can be analysed with regard to moments in history different from that during which *Altan Ovoo* was written. To what extent the Euro-American theories that predominate in the academy can effectively be applied to Mongol nomadic culture is a matter of opinion. It is my opinion that such an application might be possible, although with considerable caveats, and with a mindset formed by the likes of Clifford Geertz's ethnographic model, according to which, I would say, a scholar is obligated to allow a culture's history and praxis (in this case Mongolia's) to define the basis upon which the analysis of a cultural phenomenon (in this case *Altan Ovoo*) is formed.

Notwithstanding the fact that I have been translating and thinking about Mongol literature for more than a decade, I do not believe that it is too naïve of me to expect Mongol culture to grow steadily, in terms of exposure and popularity, over the next few years. The growing geopolitical importance of Russia and China means that, as the country enveloped by those two superpowers, Mongolia will come to play an important negotiating rôle. If this is so, then it will also become necessary for the western world to understand the culture and the people of Mongolia, and for such an understanding, a literary perspective is invaluable.

Such a perspective, moreover, will also be of use when dealing with the economic growth predicted for Mongolia over the next decade or so. That the World Bank suggests that Mongolia will be one of the swiftest growing economies over the next few years is only one aspect of this growth, and the huge deposits of minerals and precious metals in the Gobi are set, if handled successfully and appropriately, to benefit both Mongolia and the region as a whole. The nature and the practicalities of such appropriate practise, however,

when dealing with the land over which the Mongol nomadic community has moved for generations, for centuries, should be studied carefully by any outside investor, and again this is where a full understanding of Mongol culture and cultural practises becomes necessary.

While this dissertation can only begin to develop an occidental perspective on contemporary Mongol literature, I hope nonetheless that it will show the richness of the literary heritage, the feeling of continuity preserved within that tradition, and the sensitivity with which that tradition is being developed in the present day. I also hope that it will serve as a catalyst for other scholars to examine the work of other writers and other literary groups, and so expand the appreciation of Mongol literature within the scholarly and literary communities alike.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Given the fact that the Mongol ethnic population spans Russia, China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan, as well as having diasporic groups in other countries around the world, and given the politically sensitive situation over the last century in Eurasia in particular, there is some question as to how ethnic Mongols should be designated, as opposed to Mongols living in Mongolia. I have decided to adopt the following strategy. I use the term “Mongol” for ethnic Mongols and their culture (and, explicitly in this current study, their literature) in all contexts *except* those pertaining to the BNMAU (Bügd Naramdah Mongol Ard Uls – the Mongolian People’s Republic) between 1921 and 1990. I am grateful to Professor Henry G. Schwarz for his advice and dogged resilience in this regard.

PART I

CHAPTER 1**The Concept of Homeland (*nutag*)****within Mongol Society**

The people who live on the land are our land, they are our ancestors, our lineage, our motherland, living their lives, laboring, producing children, loving, creating things, being absorbed into this earth, and they are a part of the Motherland, Thus we have purely recognised this land, which has over time absorbed our ancestors, as the Motherland, and we should note that our homeland was not brought from someone, and we will not give this homeland to anyone.¹³

When the poet and politician Ochirbatin Dashbalbar died in October 1999, many of his friends and supporters believed that he had been murdered¹⁴. Suspicion fell upon the Mongolian government, or at least upon the executors of its orders, their intention being to rid themselves of a popular and controversial leader who was explicitly encouraging opposition to the Land Law that was currently being drafted and discussed in the People's Great Hural.

Dashbalbar's particular concern regarding the proposed legislation focussed on a radical proposal that plots of land be sold to individuals. The passage cited above, from the one of the essays which Dashbalbar circulated to his fellow parliamentarians (and which were later published by his son in book form), illustrates explicitly the traditional Mongol understanding of their relationship as a people with the land upon which they live, and implicitly the principled reasoning behind his own, and many Mongols', opposition to the Land Law.

¹³ O. Dashbalbar (trans Simon Wickham-Smith), *The Battle for Our Land Has Begun: poetry and political writings 1990-1999* (Ulaanbaatar: Dashbalbar Foundation, 2008), 269.

¹⁴ Dashbalbar's son D. Gangabaatar has told me (personal communication 2008) that he remains convinced that his father was poisoned because of his political views.

Throughout the many essays which Dashbalbar wrote against the thinking which had resulted in the draft Land Law, and for the freedom of the Mongol people to live on, and appropriately use, their land, he constantly emphasizes the power of Mongol tradition and custom, the fact that Chinggis Haan, from whom the “golden thread” of the Mongol lineage has progressed through the centuries, had himself unified the Mongol homeland for the benefit of his descendents.

The way in which Mongols conceive of their land, and of their intimate relationship with it, is founded upon such ideas as those put forward in Dashbalbar’s texts. The independence inherent to nomadic herding and pastoralism¹⁵, the depth of familiarity with the natural world and its concomitant dangers and benefits, and the interdependency of humans and their livestock are all central aspects of the Mongols’ cultural history, their way of life and their understanding of the world. This was, after all, until the Socialist Revolution of 1921, the only way of life available to, and perhaps even desired by, the majority of Mongols, and it defined the worldview both of the writers who reconstructed Mongol letters during the 1960s and of the generation which followed, of which Dashbalbar was one, and Mend-Ooyo another. For this reason, it behoves us to examine the nomadic tradition, not only how this tradition is understood today, but also how it has been understood in the past, how nomadic culture has been developed over time, and how its many facets fit together in order to create the efficient and culturally rich society which is reflected in Mend-Ooyo’s *Altan Ovoo*.

¹⁵ As Humphrey and Sneath (Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath, *The end of Nomadism?: society, state, and the environment in Inner Asia* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999], 1) suggest, the use of the term “nomad” is full of “suppositions about pastoral life, such as that it is free and egalitarian...or based on segmentary lineages...or uses a wandering type of movement.” While I agree with these caveats, and with the tenor of their alternative term “mobile pastoralists” (used “because it does not bring with it the suppositions such as those mentioned above”), I prefer to use – though not exclusively – the word “nomad,” it being more generally and immediately comprehensible.

Manai Nutag – Our Homeland

Any investigation of nomadic people must begin with the land through which they move and upon which they depend. In Mongolian, the word for “homeland” is *nutag*, and this is frequently found as *manai nutag*, “our homeland.” This collocation is telling, and the more one encounters it, the more one begins to realise that it illustrates a profound connection between the speaker – the people – and the land.

The word *nutag* seems to derive from an unattested Proto-Mongolian form **nuntug* or **nintug*, indicating a field or a place for grazing or hunting. This appears to be cognate with languages across the Bering Strait, namely Yup’ik and Inupik, in which the word *nuna* means “land, earth, country, tundra.” There might also be a connection with the Proto-Indo-European root **yAun-*, which produces the old Indic *yóni-*, meaning “womb, uterus, vulva, vagina; place of birth, source, origin,” and this is significant when we remember that another term in Mongolian for homeland is *eh oron*, literally “motherland,” where *eh* means “mother, source, origin” and *oron* means “country.”¹⁶

There are many benefits in the present context of establishing a potential link between the Mongol and Arctic peoples. The Italian scholar of shamanism Silvio Zavatti is most explicit when he says, “It is beyond doubt that the Eskimos are of Asiatic origin and that there ‘culture’ is close to palaeosicctic cultures and to that culture produced in the

¹⁶ These etyma are all attested in various sources, but my specific information comes from the late Dr Sergei Starostin’s research (Starostin [2003]). The connection between the languages of the northwestern United States and Canada and those of Eurasia has long fascinated scholars – including Nostraticists such as Starostin and his colleagues Aharon Dolgopolsky and Vladislav Illich-Svitych, and Joseph Greenberg, who advanced a similar theory of Eurasiatic – and I would like here to acknowledge the pioneering work of Dr Edward Vajda at Western Washington University, whose analysis of the connections between the Na-Dené family and the language of the Siberian Ket people is a significant contribution to the study, and one which casts light upon possible Altaic/Inupiak cognates (Vajda 2009).

magdalenian phase of the European palaeolithic."¹⁷ From a purely linguistic viewpoint, note the similarity of terms such as **nuntug* and **nuna* and their common meaning. From the idea of **nuntug* as a place for grazing or hunting, we can understand the nomad's life as a livestock herder and as a hunter, for instance of squirrel or marmot.

The transhumance¹⁸ of nomadic Mongols across their homeland takes place seasonally, with groups of families (*hot* or *hot ail*¹⁹) moving from one area to another, dismantling their circular felt tents, or *ger*, and leading their livestock to different pastures, depending upon the season and the prevailing weather. The Mongols have been involved in nomadic herding for centuries, as have their Turkic neighbors in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and although it is clear that in the main such groups do not traverse especially large tracts of country, the sociocultural relationship between the nomadic peoples of Central Asia is explicit and readily visible through the evidence of trading and material culture. It is worth noting, in this regard, the fact that the word *aimag*, now used as the principal organisational unit in Mongolia's local government – not dissimilar in scope to the idea of a UK county –, is originally a word meaning "tribe" and so indicates a rough area within which a tribe might operate, notwithstanding that it would also perhaps trade (or, presumably, in the pre-Chinggisid polity, make war) further afield.

¹⁷ Silvio Zavatti, *Poesia Eschimese* (Fermo: La Rapida 1973), 16. The Magdalenian period of the Upper Palaeolithic cultures of Western Europe lasted between 17,000 and 11,000 years ago.

¹⁸ Note, in passing, that this latinized term indicates the crossing (*trans*) of the earth (*humus*), and that the latter term is cognate not only with the Greek *gē* ("land"), *genea* ("race") and *gune* ("woman") and Latin *genus* ("race") (all from PIE root **-gon*, meaning "to produce") but also with the Mongolian *hün* ("man, person"), *hümüüs* ("people").

¹⁹ Note here that the word for *town*, *hot*, was originally used for an enclosure, and by extension for a group of *ger*. The dyad *hot ail* is also used for a group of *ger*, and *ail* itself further indicates home or family. One can understand then that the term *hot* indicates an encampment of families.

The rhythm of the seasons, then, was the defining factor of nomadic lifestyle. Given the development of Mongol culture into a city-based population²⁰, it is not difficult to understand that full participation in the traditional nomadic society required a profound and practical grasp of the natural world in all its forms. That Mongols even today – as we have already seen – start from the assumption that the land is not only theirs but that, in some ways, they themselves are their land, this micro- and macrocosmic apprehension of their relationship with, and reliance upon, both the land itself and the natural world which give it definition, provides their existence with form and with meaning.

In the following chapter, I will examine Mongol religion – both the indigenous shamanism and the more recent Buddhism – from the point of view, among others, of the nomadic understanding of *nutag*, but it is also helpful to understand the intricacies of the landscape from the point of view of shamanic praxis and spirituality, since much Mongol literature – and *Altan Ovoo* is an excellent example of this – relies extensively on a complex interweaving of many threads linking the ancestors, the gods and the people.

The Mongols consider the sky to be a god, *Tenger* (or *Höh Tenger*)²¹, the main force within the shamanic worldview. Whether the respectful term for “to die,” *tenger boloh*, literally means “to be a god” or “to be [a part of] the sky” is open to debate, but the difference might equally be a problem of English, rather than Mongol, semantics. Nonetheless, the association between the sky and deities and death is common enough, and yet we will see below that the ancestors, at least, remain in the earth and suffuse it with their spirit in a physical, and not a metaphorical, way.

In order to understand this, we should recall the idea of *eh oron* “motherland, or country of origin,” and the gravid etymological link between *nutag* and the old Indic word

²⁰ This has occurred, moreover, only since 1921, and largely at the instigation of the Soviet-backed MPRP (Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party).

²¹ *Höh Tenger* means “the blue sky,” and indicates the vast skies which stretch over the low-lying flat steppes.

for a womb. In her study *Metaphors and Nomads*, Alena Oberfalzerová points out that the common dyad *Tenger Hangai* (the sky [god] and the source, the physical world²²) are associated with male and female energies respectively^{23,24}. Thus we have a universe, an explicit unity of male and female, and Oberfalzerová continues, "Nature and the Sky are in constant dialogue with mankind. In the case that an individual is not responding and reacting, the parents can teach him a lesson in many different ways. To respond or react means to offer sacrifice incessantly"²⁵. This understanding of the sky and the land as parents further enhances the idea of the people as the natural and vital occupants of the land, the *nutag* being perhaps akin to a house passed down from parent to child. It is interesting too, insofar as an individual or a group is effectively enclosed within the sky overhead and the land beneath the feet, and such an image of enclosure and protection has resonance within what, even for the most seasoned of nomads, is at times an unpredictable and frightening environment.

The idea of *hangai* is also found toponymically, in the extensive Hangai ridge in the central-western area of present-day Mongolia. Mountains and hills all take part in the *hangai delhii*, the "maternal world," and command particular respect among Mongols. It is not unusual to hear the word *hairhan* added to the name of a mountain, this being a term used exclusively as a honorific title for a mountain²⁶.

²² The *Hangai* is also called the *otgon hangai*, the word *otgon* deriving from the verb *odoh* "to begin, initiate," which is a clear connection with the traditional female aspect.

²³ Alena Oberfalzerová, *Metaphors and Nomads* (Prague: Triton, 2006), 29-30

²⁴ The C19 lama and poet Danzanravjaa makes a definite link between the Hangai and his mother when he writes, "It is always fresh/on the beautiful Hangai./I am always mourning/my dakini-mother." The Sanskrit word *Dākinī* (Tibetan *mkha' 'gro ma*) is used for a divine, female being who philosophically represents the mind of enlightenment and who in popular Buddhism appears to help the faithful.

²⁵ Oberfalzerová, 30.

²⁶ Interestingly, *hairhan* is a diminutive, almost a term of affection, indicated by the suffix *han*. *Hair* means "love" moreover, and so we can only assume a similar kind of intimacy to that indicated by Oberfalzerová use of the word "parents" when describing *Tenger Hangai*.

Mountains are frequently seen as the physical manifestation of diine figures, such as gods and Buddhas. The name of Bogd Uul, for instance, just outside Ulaanbaatar, means “Holy Mountain,” and Otgontenger, near where B.Yavuuhulan – one of the prime movers of post-Stalinist literature Mend-Ooyo’s teacher and mentor – was raised, is held to be the physical form of the Buddha Vajrapāṇi.

The contemporary poet T-Ö.Erdenetsogt, in the prolog to his poem “The Eternal White Stūpa, or Noble, Lofty Otgontenger,” seems to conceive of this mountain as being similar to the *axis mundi* of Buddhist cosmology, Mount Sumeru:

*Traversing the edges of the cosmos,
it flashed in the moon’s sphere.
It broke from its site upon the land,
it crossed the boundaries of the world,
and held fast to the stars and planets.
It gathers up the world’s great mountains,
the ornament of the blue rises aloft.
Otgontenger.²⁷*

Although Erdenetsogt’s poem is primarily Buddhist in theme, this opening section bears certain shamanistic elements, such as the epithet “ornament of the blue,” which recalls *Höh Tenger*, and the motile and physical potency, its perceived ability to act at once within the world and beyond it, in the cosmos. This, perhaps, is the implication of the interaction of Tenger and Hangai too, the one bearing the other forward in time and space, much in the same way that, together, they bear the nomadic Mongol society forward, and safeguard it – at least existentially, at least as a group if not as individuals – from danger.

If the mountains and the hills are the physical manifestations of divinity, then they are surrounded by the ancestors, who dwell not so much under the soil but in it and within it. One especially striking image, which has become popular in recent years partly through

²⁷ T-Ö. Erdenetsogt, *Setgelin ogtorgui* (Ulaanbaatar: BISHÜBI Töv, 2005), 23-28.

the work of both Dashbalbar and his contemporary D. Nyamsüren²⁸, is that of the grass which springs from the soil, which in its waxing and waning defines the cycle of the seasons, as being the next stage after a human's life²⁹. Nyamsüren wrote,

*I shall step upon the grasses, and
later they will grow upon me.*³⁰

Nyamsüren's student Ts. Bavuudorj has extended this idea, and its extensive treatment in Dashbalbar's work, in his most recent book, *When Humans Become Grass*. For Bavuudorj, the grasses may or may not be the Mongol ancestors³¹, but they and the steppe upon which they grow somehow, as Oberfalzerová suggests, stand at the center of the natural world, creating for the poet a rhythm to define his own – and, by extension, the nomadic – place within the world:

*When the springtime grasses are tinged with blue,
the nightingale's heartfelt poems fly to you.
You are the homeland steppe, the dawn's rays,
you are the familiar wind, the silver clouds,
you are the gentle moon, the dew on flowers,
you are merely, merely the bright sky.
This is the direction of my heart's last flight, trembling into
eternity.
This is the direction of my last petal, beaten by the hail.
The nightingale's trembling poems fly to you
when the springtime grasses are tinged with blue*³².

²⁸ For a fuller discussion of the work of Dashbalbar and Nyamsüren, see Chapter 5.

²⁹ This is an interesting take on the Buddhist idea of reincarnation, since traditional Buddhist culture would not necessarily see being reborn as grass as a positive reward for goodness in this life. It is clear, however, that this is a standard expectation in shamanic terms for Mongols.

³⁰ From an unpublished and undated (probably late 1990s) poem. Nyamsüren's complete works (his three published volumes and a fourth of his unpublished poems) are published in Mongolian, of which my translation is forthcoming 2012.

³¹ Bavuudorj, though sensitive to the shamanic worldview, is one of the more Buddhist poets in Mongolia. Nonetheless, in one of his poems, he hints at uncertainty, perhaps even a desire, when he writes: "Solitary white grasses /bend with fascination./They are not my forebears /who lived so long ago./But if they were..."

³² Ts.Bavuudorj, *When Humans Become Grass* (Ulaanbaatar, 2010), 116.

The term used most frequently in such poems for grasses – *övs*, or *övs nogoo*³³ – is perhaps closer to “vegetation” than to “grass,” and it is worth noting the relationship which the nomads have with grasses and trees. Tsui Yenhu, discussing the wider Turkic world, quotes a teacher in Xinjiang, who says that there was a custom which “forebade the pulling-up of grass. If one did this as a child it was said one would grow up stunted with crippled limbs.” A Tuvan herder says, “We never cut trees or grasses. Why should we do this! Nature created us, it feeds us, why should we damage it?”³⁴

Tsui points out, moreover, something which we should keep in mind when thinking about the nomadic world, especially since the foundation in 1924 of the MPRP, that many of the tabus that these informants describe “result from state and local authority laws and regulations concerning environmental protection.”³⁵ That notwithstanding, the financial and environmental impact of despoiling the natural world must not be ignored here, simply because it fails somehow to coincide with our view of how nomads should understand their world. On the contrary, it could be argued that, in the postrevolutionary world, the relationship between nomads and their environment had shifted and expanded to integrate socialist principles with concern for the motherland³⁶.

The personal intimacy that Mongols experience with the landscape, then, holds within it a wide range of ideas. The power and presence of the ancestors, hinted at in the quote from Nyamsüren above, is central to the nomadic outlook. It recalls the ancient lineage of Chinggis Haan, but it also strays somehow beyond the tribal history and into the mythic, and it is this admixture of ancestral myth and societal transcendence to which we now turn.

³³ *Nogoo* moreover is connected with the word *nogoon*, “green.”

³⁴ Tsui Yenhu “A comparative study of the attitudes of the peoples of pastoral areas of Inner Asia towards their environments” in Humphrey and Sneath (Vol 2), 6.

³⁵ Yenhu, 6. It is debatable, of course, whether these tabus do in fact come from state laws, or whether the laws are in fact informed by far older traditions.

³⁶ the term *eh oron* (lit “motherland”), is almost synonymous with *nutag*.

I have already suggested that there might be value in exploring the presumed ethnic link between the peoples of the arctic and Eurasia. The physical immanence of nature, in particular, and the way in which nomadic society has sought to mitigate it, can exercise especial resonance in our understanding of the Mongols' worldview.

The creation and positioning of stones and stone cairns as offerings to the gods, and latterly to the Buddhas, is a tradition as central to Mongol culture, as it is, albeit in another form, to Inuit culture. A comparison between the Mongol *hün chuluu* and the Turkic *balbal* with the *inuksuit* of Baffin Island reveals remarkable sociocultural and structural similarities, which extend certain aspects of the work of scholars such as Vajda, and point to some common purpose among the nomadic societies in their migrations through Eurasia and across the Bering Strait.

The permanence of rocks and boulders, as of hills and mountains, is of central importance to nomadic people. It is not only Mongol culture, of course, which sees a mountain either as the abode of the gods or else as a god itself, and we can presume I think that one of the reasons, in addition to a mountain as being closer to the sky and thus to the gods, is that it is a feature which appears both to be permanent and to overwhelm the world of humans.

But rocks and stones themselves are also powerful, and the Mongol *ovoo* is as though a power point on the surface of the earth, frequently on a hill or outcrop, a focus for the wishes and dreams and prayers of the nomads who pass by. The importance of the *ovoo* is such that people make offerings to an *ovoo* on the steppe in the same way as they do to a statue of the Buddha in a temple, placing cigarettes, alcohol, pictures, money and

blue offering scarves³⁷ upon, beside and around the ovoo, and always adding another stone, however small, to the existing pile.

Ovoo stand throughout the steppe, built up by people passing by and, presumably, destroyed by the elements. They can also be seen as markers within the landscape, a kind of map perhaps, in the same way that the hills help to locate the traveller. What is interesting, however, is how relatively little mention is made of hills in this regard in Mongol literature until, in the work of writers such as D. Natsagdorj and M. Yadamsüren during the 1930s, the idea begins to be considered that people might be so used to living in Ulaanbaatar that they might not necessarily feel at home on the steppe. In Natsagdorj's story "Dark Cliffs," the unnamed narrator, very much an urban character, feels the strange power of a rock in a ger where he is resting, and his understanding of its history is axiomatic somehow of the broader Mongol sensibility regarding rocks and stones:

*It had come from the peak of a high mountain, located a few hours from here, it was a creature which somehow had come from the depths of that great river, risen up the mountain valley, along the mud and marshes which lined the forests, and, from time to time, when there were no tracks or paths, it had taken the form of a black raven.*³⁸

There is a morphic trajectory in Mongol stone structures, from the abstract ovoo to the flying deer and standing figures, which latter two I shall consider below, which can be seen as one aspect in the development of the *inuksuit* figures, stones acting "in the capacity of a human." Norman Hallendy's research on *inuksuit* has shown that they are placed on the landscape for any number of reasons and with any number of intentions. The various different types of *inuksuk*, Hallendy tells us, are "a nuanced and once vital form of

³⁷ These are a Mongol version of the white *kha btags* which are offered in Tibetan culture. The blue, of course, is the blue of the sky, and is a permanent reminder that Buddhism in Mongolia is a syncretic religion.

³⁸ Simon Wickham-Smith and Sh Tsog (trans), *An Anthology of Mongolian Literature* (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture 2008), 139.

communication.” They seem to function, as the name suggests, very much as someone encountered on a journey might (hopefully) act, as “a proxy for a human in every sense of the word; it provides comfort to the travel weary, life-saving advice to the disoriented, a focus of veneration to the spiritual seeker.”³⁹

But these structures are more than temporary comfort and assistance, notwithstanding the importance of these in a landscape such as the arctic’s. Hallendy quotes one Inuit elder who told him, “This attaches me to my ancestors and to this place,” a feeling very much in tune with that of the Mongol nomads. Of course, other cultures – the Australian aborigines in particular – have a profound sense of nomadism (“walkabout”) and of intimacy with the landscape⁴⁰. But the likelihood of an ethnic and cultural connection between the peoples of Eurasia and the American northwest suggests that there might be an echo here of some level of common ancestry. There is more to this, perhaps, in the Inuit’s societal memory of the Tunniit, the previous inhabitants of their land. It is no doubt wishful thinking to equate the Tunniit with those peoples who supposedly crossed the Bering Strait from Siberia, to see them as adventuresome proto-Mongols, but that such speculation is not entirely idle, and productive in certain ways, cannot be denied.

The western end of this route, on the Mongol steppe, holds not only the ovoo structures, but also the *hün chuluu* (“human stones”) and *bugin hashaa* (lit. deer monuments, but generally called “deer stones”). The term *hün chuluu*, of course, reminds us of *inuksuit*: these are not stone humans but human stones, with its powerful implication of life and vitality. These are, indeed, anthropomorphic stelae, stones with carved faces at least, and sometimes hands too, and feet. They, like the *inuksuit*, are just one variation on

³⁹ Norman Hallendy *Inuksuit: Silent messengers of the Arctic* (Vancouver BC: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 2000), 44.

⁴⁰ In this connection, see the many field recordings of aboriginal singers and musicians made by the ethnomusicologist Alice Moyle, and the work carried out by Geoffrey Bardon with aboriginal painters at Papunya in the 1970s.

the universal theme of early statuary, but the significance of the name *hün chuluu* cannot be stressed too much. For these are people made of stone, and they would seem not, as many have suggested, to be memorials to the dead so much as a combination of ancestor and guide to the landscape upon which they sit.

It is only since the 1960s that the relationship between Mongols and the stones which cover the steppe has been addressed in literature, and even that has not been extensive. It is almost as though their unremarkable presence hides their force. We hear an echo of this in Dashbalbar's "A Song for the Stones," part of a longer cycle of prose and poetry called "Stone," written in Moscow and Ulaanbaatar between 1979 and 1984, when he writes:

*I know that my ancestors are here,
costumed as the stones of this world.*

*Oh, my stones,
do I not hear your breathing?*

The reference to the ancestors, though explicitly to stones in general and not to the *hün chuluu*, indicates to me that the *hün chuluu* are simply particular manifestations of the ancestor/stone dynamic, which is also what Hallendy's Inuit informant appears to be saying.

Moreover, when we consider the visual and structural similarities between the *inuksuit*⁴¹ and the more anthropomorphic *hün chuluu* and Turkic *balbal*, we should be aware that there would be very little point in a culture establishing and creating such objects if they were not to express something. After all, unlike sedentary culture, three-dimensional art is rare in nomadic culture, and, transportation of these figures being unfeasible, we can in fact only assume a spiritual or memorial function. Indeed, I would discount the latter option, since none of these figures indicates the individual to be memorialised.

⁴¹ More accurately perhaps in this case the structures called *innunguait* (plural of *innunguaq*), meaning having "the likeness of a human," and constructed, as Hallendy says, "to tell whalers that Inuit were nearby or to express thanks for living in a favorable area."

The presence of stone people within the landscape may indicate, then, the presence of the ancestors, of atavistic genius residing, as we have seen, in the earth and the grasses, but also in the rocks. The placement of *ovoo* and *hün chuluu* across the landscape as objects of veneration, direction and memory, and the association of geographical features such as hills and mountains as the manifestation of the gods, shows how the Mongol nomadic psyche conceives of the landscape as being suffused with life and, in particular, with spiritual power. I will return to this theme when discussing Mongol religious traditions in Chapter 2, but on a more quotidian level, it can equally be seen as a way by which nomadic groups, or nomadic individuals (as we saw in the quotation from Natsagdorj's "Dark Cliffs"), can best understand the world surrounding them.

The *bugin hashaa*, on the other hand, are not so much the presence of ancestral beings, but are seemingly indications of shamanic religion. They are in fact megaliths bearing carved images of flying deer, dating probably from the late Bronze to the early Iron Age (about 3000 years ago). Like the *hün chuluu*, and unlike *ovoo*, the *bugin hashaa* are no longer constructed by Mongol nomads, but are objects of scientific and academic interest. That said, they remain very much part of the landscape, and the idea of the flying deer remains very much in the human consciousness. We will see later how Mend-Ooyo favors the flying horse in his work, but it is obvious that both deer and horse represent (or reproduce) the simple human wish to fly, a belief in metempsychosis, the ascent of the souls of the dead into the sky, or (as we know from the image of flying reindeer from the practises of Sámi shamans around *Amanita muscaria*, whence Santa Claus on his reindeer-drawn sled⁴²) the result of ingesting hallucinogenic drugs.

⁴² Cf. David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). I should point out that this research has been challenged, most notably by the historian Ronald Hutton (*The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 118-19), but I personally feel that Hutton's objections are not sufficient to deny the basic argument.

From this discussion of the interventions made by Mongol nomads (and by nomadic people in earlier times, much as the Tunniit predated the Inuit) on the landscape through which they have moved for many centuries, and from the fact that these nomads have identified geographical features (specifically hills and mountains) with gods and, latterly, with Buddhas, we can presume that this understanding comes partly from a wish to become familiar and comfortable with the landscape, and partly from a historical and spiritual focus, in which the gods (specifically the father/mother Tenger Hangai) and the ancestors interact directly with the people in the place where the people find themselves.

When nomads come to rest, they settle and erect their ger, they ride out on their horses to herd their livestock. It is therefore necessary not only that they understand the animals which they herd, but that they have an intimate grasp of how the landscape and the meteorology of a particular area – the *hangai* and the *tenger* – might affect the livestock. It is commonly held⁴³ that one of the reasons for Danzanravjaa's popularity among the nomadic community which he served was that he was able to relate to their practical, as well as to their spiritual, needs. What can certainly be ascertained from Danzanravjaa's writings is an especial connection with horses and with the desert around his monastery near modern-day Sainshand. As I will show in Chapter 2, Danzanravjaa – indeed, the majority of premodern Mongol Buddhist poets – tended to eschew the explicitly theological in their work and to allude to religion through more traditionally “poetic” topics, and using such metaphor and simile as to be entertaining to their audience. Thus, in a poem bearing the coy title “Another Little Song about my Sadness,” he contrasts the kind of practical advice common for those living on the steppe in the severe Mongol winter, with advice on relationships:

⁴³ At least in Mongolia, where I have discussed the implications of Danzanravjaa's background with a number of people, including the director of the Danzanravjaa Museum in Sainshand, Z. Altangerel, and L. Odonchimed, head of the Danzanravjaa Foundation.

*Before the months of cold winter
come to Hüree,
it's a good idea to make ready
some thick, warm clothes.*

*Before other people's slander
flows out in flurries,
it's a good idea to decide
that you'll be patient with your friends.*

Danzanravjaa's parallelism, forging a link between Hüree and an individual's community of friends, provides a nexus from which we can explore the sociocultural history of the Mongol *ger*, and its role in the development of Mongol nomadism.

Architecture on a circular plan is common not only in Central Asia but also elsewhere, such as the Inuit igloo and Native American kiva, tipi and hogan. The word *ger* refers originally to an enclosure, and is etymologically cognate (through a PIE root **ghort-*) with the Latin *hortus*, Greek *khortos*, Celtic *gardd* and Anglo-Saxon *ġeard*⁴⁴. The *hashaa*, or enclosure, in which the *ger* sits (especially in the so-called "*ger* quarter" of modern Ulaanbaatar) defines the space which the family occupying the *ger* temporarily occupies, but it is in no way exclusive – a group nomadic of families, a *hot ail*, will travel together and come to rest together, and will then herd their animals together. In an interview conducted with him by I.Lhagvasüren, R.Minjüür recalls how, in his childhood before the 1921 revolution, the children would herd the sheep belonging to different families as one: "We would go down, through the neighborhood, and the neighbors would all add their lambs to the *ail*'s flock. Their lambs would all be added in with our flock, and in this way the *ail*'s flock would become enormous. And we'd get the sheep milked in very short order."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The Mongol word *ail* is cognate with the Kazakh, Karakalpak and Uzbek word for enclosure, *aul*.

⁴⁵ I. Lhagvasüren (Ed.). *XX Zuuni Mongolchuud* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology 2003), 12-13 (my translation).

The ger is created by stretching woolen felt over a wooden frame. The traditional arrangement of an encampment is in a circle, or *hüree*, with the chieftan's ger placed in the center. The term *hüree* – deriving from the verb *hüreh*, “to reach” – implies both the extent of the encampment and its military use as a headquarters, whence Ulaanbaatar's original name of Ih Hüree, the Great Encampment. The establishment of Mongol Buddhism in the sixteenth century meant that the *hüree* became the default arrangement for monastic communities, and it was only later that the Tibetan-inspired *hiid* became more common.

Each ger is erected with the door facing south⁴⁶. The open roof, the *toono*, is covered with a flap, and the *toono* is used both as a sundial to gauge the passage of time, and as a flue through which the smoke from the dungfire is released. The traditional arrangement within the ger is defined by gender and age: the women sit in the northeast, and the most important – either the oldest person, or a special visitor – occupies the furthest point from the door, the *hoimor*⁴⁷.

Traditionally, the *hoimor* also holds an altar, bearing offering bowls and images of Buddhist *yidam*⁴⁸ and teachers such as the Dalai Lama. During the seven decades of communism, these pictures would have been replaced with images of Lenin or Stalin, and a Mongol leader such as Sühbaatar or Choibalsan. In M. Yadamsüren's short story “The Young Couple,” written in 1936, during a period in which the government was beginning its anti-Buddhism campaign, we find the following description of the inside of a ger:

There was a fire blazing, a deep roseate mirage, loose dry dung on a large dilapidated iron brazier, and there was tea on the boil. To left and right were black trunks with loose fasteners, and cushions and pillows and felt and skins collected higgeldy-piggeldy all around, and between the rafters where the roof met the walls were squeezed bridles and hobbles, and

⁴⁶ “South” and “in front of” are both translated with *ömnö*, pointing to the centrality of the ger's orientation, but presumably the latter meaning postdated the former.

⁴⁷ This word is cognate with *hoino*, both of which translate the ideas “north” and “behind”.

⁴⁸ A *yidam* (Tib *yi dam*, lit “mind-bond”) is a perfect embodiment of enlightenment, whose application to spiritual practise is not unlike the *ikon* in Orthodox Christianity.

on the doorjambs right and left there were stands holding rows of leather airag bags.

*In the place of honor to the rear of the ger, in the middle of three red boxes, before a picture, in a sooty frame, of a high lama was a small brass bowl holding food offerings and a small copper bowl holding a candle. Directly above the Buddha they had stuffed a book called *The Fundamental Law*, which the smoke had turned to grey.*

*On a box to the left in the back was a red pioneer's neckerchief, and a book in a case, and against the wall, near a large and artless portrait of Lenin, which had been placed there with great respect, there was propped a framed picture of *Sühbaatar*.⁴⁹*

The occupants of Yadamsüren's ger are poor nomads, very much in contrast to the urbane eponymous young couple, but the encampment of these nomads nonetheless is "full of sheep" and, nearby, "two horses were tied up and chewing, in a lazy fashion, at the grassy hill"⁵⁰. Mongol herders recognise five types of livestock, the *tavan hoshuu mal*⁵¹, and these five animals – sheep, goats, cows, horses and camels – constitute the principal sources of food, drink and clothing.

Livestock herding – and livestock-based economics – is central to the day-to-day life of Mongolia's nomads. As Minjüür recalls, "There was a lot of exchange of livestock between herders. One animal would be swapped for another....Livestock was very cheap."⁵² The implication here seems to be that there was a fairly relaxed system, akin to barter, at least in Minjüür's home region of Arhangai, in the centre-west of Mongolia.

The interdependence of the herders, their livestock and the grass which provides the animals' fodder reminds us of the importance of the grass, and the earth which supports it.

⁴⁹ M.Yadamsüren [Unidentified collection of prose and poetry] (Ulaanbaatar: n.d.), 36-37. (My translation.)

⁵⁰ Yadamsüren, 36. (My translation.)

⁵¹ Lit "five muzzles of livestock" (although *mal* originally meant "cow" it now means "livestock" in general – a reversal of the way in which Anglo-Saxon *dēor* "animal" became Modern English "deer.")

⁵² Lhagvasüren, 18.

Thus, we can see how the ancestors, coexisting with the grasses, fulfill a practical role in preserving the life of their descendents, the present inhabitants of the land. P.B.Tseren describes a ritual through which the Oirat Mongols establish an explicit connection between their animals and the gods:

Herders tie a string or cloth around the necks of certain males of all five types of domestic livestock and then these become sacred beasts (seterlisin mal). They are dedicated to Tengger (the sky) to make sure they are protected. These animals must not be sheared or ridden by either men or women. When the animal dies, the herder takes it to the top of a high mountain, but not where there is an oboo. These animals have their own lord (Tengger) and they themselves become spirit lords over other livestock (malyn ezen).⁵³

Such animal spirits have also become associated with local spirits, or *sadag*⁵⁴, throughout Mongolia, and I will deal with such Buddhist influences from Tibet in the following chapter. It is unclear from Tseren's article as to what this tradition of taking the dead animal "to the top of a high mountain," and specifically not close to an oboo, actually means, but I suspect that it is an act of returning the animal to Tenger and acknowledgement that it belongs to the divine world and not to the herder's everyday world.

As we have already noted, Mongol nomadic society is very much sited within the framework of the seasons and the micro- and macrocosmic rhythms of nature. One important aspect of this is the movement of the stars. The stars, of course, move across and through, Tenger, and are part of its manifestation, and they move too above the Hangai. Notwithstanding the tradition of shamanic divination, augmented by centuries of Buddhist astrology, not only do the nomads use the stars as navigation devices, but also, as

⁵³ P.B. Tseren "Traditional pastoral practice of the Oirat Mongols and their relationship with the environment," in Humphrey and Sneath, 150. The alternative orthographies reflect the difference between Oirat and Halh (or Khalkha) Mongol.

⁵⁴ Mongol pronunciation of the Tibetan term *sa bdag*, meaning "local lord," but with an implication not unlike the original idea of "faerie" as a "nature being, force of nature."

Minjüür remembers of his herding experiences during the winter months as a child, as a timepiece:

"When dusk fell, and there were still not a hundred stars in the sky, we didn't yet have to drive the livestock back. We lay down in front of the cows and looked behind us, counting as one, two, three stars came out. As soon as a hundred had emerged we got up and, herding the cows together, returned home. If we'd brought the cows home before there were a hundred stars come out, we'd be in trouble."⁵⁵

Minjüür's practical experience is mirrored in both poetry and prose. D.Nyamaa's collection *Narni Alga*, is suffused with references to the stars and their appearance in the cold light of winter. In one story, "The Spring," we read, "The evening stars fall like cups of glistening silver onto the ice of Nariini Gol⁵⁶. There are cracking noises, as though the ice is splitting. The rays of the moon are cold and stiff." These perceptions are heightened by the stillness and emptiness of the steppe as much as by the voice of the narrator's memory of childhood. Nonetheless, to read Mongol literature is to enter into an expansive world in which the apprehension of nature – the shining of the stars, the movement of the grasses, the glowering hills – bears a signification which has been culturally determined over many centuries of watching and listening and moving through the landscape.

This interrelationship between the macro- and microcosmic worlds, this immanence of nature and, in Tenger-Hangai mother-father, of cosmic presence, draws us back into the unit of the *hot ail*, the group of families who move together across the steppe. For what the arc of this chapter has shown, I hope, is that the communities which travel across the Mongol landscape, and at the intersection of the landscape which is their mother, their home, their nurturing environment, and the place of their birth and their death, and the sky, which is their father, their link with the world of spirit, the rhythms and systems of that

⁵⁵ Lhagvasüren, 12. (My translation.)

⁵⁶ A river near to where the author was raised, and which takes a central role in this book.

weather that surrounds them, and the source of the rain and the sunshine which brings forth food and the food for their livestock, that central to the worldview of these communities is both the practical and the spiritual, both their ancestral past and their own bodily and spiritual future, both the microcosmic uncertainty of the natural order and the macrocosmic certainty of the seasonal cycle.

While there is a spiritual element to the practical daily life of Mongol nomadic herders, there is also a practical element in their spiritual life. The next chapter will show the ways in which religious practise and culture has influenced Mongol nomads. The history of religion in Mongolia, both shamanic and Buddhist, however, due to the centrality to the culture of nomadic movement and livestock economics, must be read with a very clear understanding of this way of life, and the ways in which it has developed over the centuries and has come to define the Mongol psyche and Mongol society.

CHAPTER 2

The Expression of Shamanism and Buddhism in Mongol Culture, and Their Relationship with the Environment

*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,
only Buddha in their minds...
Their calm, clear eyes are heavy, their
mantras flying,
an ornament of sound...⁵⁷*

The religious history of Mongolia begins and ends with shamanism. Despite over four centuries of Buddhist influence throughout the country, it is shamanism which defines Buddhism in Mongolia, and not Buddhism which defines shamanism. It is possible in this regard to see clear parallels with Tibet, but whereas the shamanist Bön practices of Tibet have been incorporated – one might almost say coerced – into a Buddhist framework over the centuries⁵⁸, not only does the shamanic tradition of Mongolia, called *böö*, stand very much without the Buddhist tradition, but up until the 1921 revolution there were still ostensibly Buddhist images being drawn which explicitly showed the performance of shamanic rites⁵⁹.

The previous chapter presented aspects of the way in which Mongol nomadic society conceives of itself as placed in the protection of Tenger Hangai, the sky and the earth. This

⁵⁷ "Music," Bavuudor, 114.

⁵⁸ The relationship between Bön and the schools of Tibetan Buddhism is uncertain and controversial.

⁵⁹ The collection amassed by R. Otgonbaatar in his Ulaanbaatar apartment includes many such images. Otgonbaatar was a student of the great Mongol Tibetologist Ts. Damdinsüren (who himself revived the study of Danzanravjaa during the 1960s), and bought up as many images and texts from the pre-revolutionary period as he could, during the time when interest in such objects was discouraged. Unfortunately, Otgonbaatar's collection has yet to be catalogued or described.

results in an approach to the natural world which is sensitive and reverent, as well as being focused more upon the group than upon the individual. Only the shaman⁶⁰ him- or herself operates outside the group, and that only to deepen his efficacy in connecting with Tenger. The yearly cycle of rituals within Mongol shamanism – including the midsummer ritual – share similarities with most shamanic cultures, which fact lends further credence to the theory of Eurasian migration across the Bering Strait⁶¹.

The etymology of the term *shaman* has long been a source of contention. The Hungarian scholar of shamanism and Manchu-Tungus linguistics Vilmos Diószegi held that it was derived from the Tungusic verb *sa, ša* ("to know"), with the deverbative (actor) suffix *-ma*, giving a word meaning "(s)he who knows."⁶² The Mongol term for "shaman," *böö*, comes from an earlier form *böge*, which is most likely cognate with *böh* or "strength." The female shaman is called *udgan*, which points to a link with the hearth goddess *Etügen*⁶³. The spirits that hold the shaman in trance are called *ongo*, and "to be possessed by a spirit" is *ongod oroh*⁶⁴.

The history of Eurasian shamanism, and Mongol shamanism in particular, is not easily ascertained. A central characteristic – and one which was especially favorable during

⁶⁰ Much of the material on shamanism in this chapter comes from the Mongol state shaman D. Byambadorj. From this point, only secondary sources will be cited in reference to shamanic practise: all other material comes from my discussion with Byambadorj.

⁶¹ See *inter alia* Henry N. Michael, *Studies in Siberian Shamanism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, for the Arctic Institute of North America 1963), and Mihaly Hoppál (Ed.), *Shamanism: Selected Writings of Vilmos Diószegi* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 1998) for further insights into the relevant palaeoarcheology and anthropology.

⁶² Diószegi "Samán" in *Magyar Nyelv* vol.XLIII (1947) pp.211-212, cited in Hoppál, xvii.

⁶³ Although this is the common etymology, it seems to me to miss the importance of vowel harmony in Mongolian. Unfortunately, the best candidate for the source for *udgan* is probably the verb *udah*, meaning "to cause trouble."

⁶⁴ That this latter term literally means "to enter into a *ongo*" is worth noting, since it indicates that the relationship between the spirit and the shaman works, explicitly at least, in the opposite direction of our English term.

those periods in which it has fallen into disfavor – is that, unlike Buddhism, shamanism does not rely upon written texts. As was the case with Byambadorj, the calling to be a shaman comes from the spirits themselves, and requires oral training from a senior shaman rather than textual study, as with Buddhism or Christianity⁶⁵. As Diószegi writes, the shaman “does not become a shaman simply by willing it, for it is not the shaman who summons up the spirits, but they, the supernatural beings, who choose him.”⁶⁶ The lack of written records, then, means that the history of shamanism tends to be written by scholars or by oppressors.

That said, the German Mongolist Walther Heissig has noted periods of official support and repression of shamanism as far back as 821CE. When, in that year, Khan Bögü introduced Manichaeism as the official religion of the Uighur state, he “forbade worship of shamanic gods and spirits. In a trilingual inscription from Kharbalgasun he ordered 'the burning of traditional sculptured and painted images of demons' and abstention from 'prayers and worship of demons'.”⁶⁷ Shamanist practises received official support for a period between the thirteenth and fifteenth century, and then, with the official Mongol adoption of vajrāyana Buddhism, shamanism once again underwent severe repression. Heissig also mentions that, during the nineteenth century, there was violent anti-shamanic policies among the Buryat:

Reports about the burning of wooden idols, the fining of supporters of shamanism through confiscation of horses and sheep, fumigation of shamans, both male and female, by Lamaistic monks who used dog-excrement for exorcism run

⁶⁵ It should be said, though, that some Buddhist schools – the rNying ma and the bKa' rgyud for instance – and, among Christian orders the Carthusians and certain protestant sects, which emphasize meditation or the guidance of the Holy Spirit over more cerebral practise.

⁶⁶ Diószegi, cited in Hoppáll, 4-5.

⁶⁷ Walther Heissig "Recent East Mongolian shamanic traditions" in Juha Pentikäinen, *Shamanism and Culture* (Helsinki: Etnika, 1998), 249-258.

*through the centuries like a red thread and are still reflected in aspects of contemporary oral tradition.*⁶⁸

Despite such accounts, it is also clear that shamans have not been reticent in their own defence. Diószegi cites a song of Darhar shamans, whom he describes as being “passionate anti-Lamaist.” The song runs as follows:

*On arriving, he devoured 90 lamas,
on leaving, he devoured 100,000 lamas;
his fuel was Kanjur and Tanjur.*⁶⁹

That the shaman fuelled himself with the central texts of the very religion which he was attacking is interesting, not unlike those headhunter cults in which the enemy’s spirit is seized by means of his head.

In his conclusion to the account of his fieldtrip in May 1960, Diószegi confirms the importance of scholarly training in the predominance of Buddhism over shamanism:

*It is not without interest to note that the influence of Buddhism was everywhere stronger in respect of ideology than in that of physical manifestations (garments, ritual) so that, spiritually, not even the Darkhat people – the most obstinate resisters of the new religion – were able to keep themselves immune. This phenomenon may be due to the fact that Buddhism propagated its ideology systematically and that its priests received religious instruction. No such practise was known to shamanism.*⁷⁰

The power of shamans and their fierce resistance to outside forces is also evidenced in Mongolia before the introduction of Buddhism. The struggle between Chinggis Haan and the powerful shaman Teb-Tengri, who was the son of his mother Yesügei’s servant Mönglik, as told in the Secret History of the Mongols, Paul Ratchnevsky gives an account of the development of the enmity between these two figures, and notes that Chinggis Haan was

⁶⁸ Heissig, 249.

⁶⁹ “Problems of Mongolian Shamanism,” Hoppál, .20. The Kanjur (Tib *bka’ ’gyur*) and Tanjur (Tib *bstan ’gyur*) are, respectively, the oral teaching of the Buddha and the later commentaries upon the teaching.

⁷⁰ “Problems of Mongolian Shamanism,” Hoppál, 25.

“determined to get rid of this dangerous shaman, but it was certainly not easy for him to overcome his superstitious awe of the shaman’s supernatural powers.”⁷¹

From what historical evidence remains available to us, it can be seen that Mongol shamanism has exercised considerable power, not least because of its relationship to the supernatural. The fact that there are *harin böö* and *tsagaani böö*, black shamans and white shamans, who work for bad and for good, and with bad spirits and good spirits respectively, is sufficient to show the power and the influence which shamans might exercise among people (Chinggis Haan, for instance), for whom such abilities and such connections with external forces inspire a genuine sense of awe.

It is, I think, easy to see how shamanism, with its reliance upon nature and the divinities of Sky and Earth, is a consequent expression of the nomadic worldview as presented in the previous chapter. The power of the shaman resides, after all, in his or her intimacy with the spirits, and the summoning of those spirits through word and ritual.

In her book *Metaphors and Nomads*, Alena Oberfalzerová points to the powerful relationship between Mongol linguistic culture and its nomadic tradition. “Mongol nomads have,” she says, “to a certain extent, preserved the archaic ontology of the world, characteristic of native thinking in general...Among these [native] groups, we can detect certain similarities in their concept of the world, in the magic power of the word, in the role of the individual’s name, in the approach to symbols, and so forth.”⁷² Clearly, for a nomadic community, the spoken word remains the most convenient way of carrying knowledge, books being cumbersome and unwieldy in transit, and it is the expression of thought through speech, with all the requisite metalinguistic elements that that entails, which

⁷¹ Paul Ratchnevsky, *Ghenghis Khan: his life and legacy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1993), 100. For the entire story see pp.98-101.

⁷² Oberfalzerová, 29.

remains the principle literary medium, in the form of poetry, still very much an oral tradition in Mongolia.

The cultural expression of language was also inherent in the gradual development of the relationship between indigenous Mongol shamanism and the vajrāyana Buddhism which was introduced from Tibet. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the Mongol psyche tends to regard the landscape as somehow sacred, with hills being manifestations of the divine, and grasses and stones being manifestation of the ancestors. Thus, it is that a description of the landscape, so frequent in Mongol literary writings, can in some ways be seen as a spiritual map of the *nutag*, the atemporal and ancestral landscape.

Although Buddhism was formally introduced to Mongolia much later, there are already some indications of its presence at the turn of the first millennium CE. In his standard text on Mongol Buddhist literature, Tserensodnom includes with great certainty early accounts of Buddhism in the Hūnnū (3rd century BCE-1st century CE) and Kitan (911-1125 CE) civilisations, and of the tradition of a meditation cave once used by an Indian pandit. While none of these are explicitly recounted in the literature, they do have currency both in terms of the Mongol tradition which informs later writings, and as unestablished historical speculation. These civilisations, however, show no literary tradition and, as we will see, it was really only in the late sixteenth century that Buddhism became sufficiently established to warrant its own traditions of creative literature and translation.

Three hundred years earlier, in 1246, Mongolia had already toyed with Buddhism, in the form of the Sa skya pa school, at that time preëminent in Tibet. When the Sa skya Pandita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan and his two nephews arrived at the court of Gödan Haan, they both handed over political control of Tibet to the Haan, they also stirred his interest in Buddhism. Three years later, Gödan was initiated and became a protector of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus it was that Mongolia and Tibet were able to favor each other through the simple expedient of religious observance.

Between that point and 1374, when Buddhism had all but disappeared from Mongolia, the importance of the faith to Mongolia was as much sociopolitical as cultural. As Jerryson notes, Kubilai Haan had already been converted in 1242, and “had moved the political capital of the Mongols from Qaraqorum to Peking. Under these circumstances, [Kubilai] needed to have his political role socially recognised, and that was made possible through Buddhism.”⁷³ This first wave of Mongol Buddhist expansion, then, was focused on politics, and did not even address the problem of how to communicate the ideas of Buddhism in a Mongol idiom for Mongol practitioners, an issue which would only be addressed during the next period of expansion, in the sixteenth century.

When Altan Haan invited the dGe lugs pa hierarch bSod rnam s rgya mtsho to Mongolia in 1576, it seems that he did so out of great respect for the lama’s faith and for the political situation that pertained in Tibet at the time. As Jerryson points out⁷⁴, the discussions between the two men resulted in a number of agreements, two of which were the ordination of Altan Haan and the exchange of names, in which the Tibetan became Dalai Lama. This powerful combination of politics and religion secured a fealty between Tibet and Mongolia which lasted at least until the incursion of the Red Army in 1921, and which one might suggest endures to the present.

Altan Haan’s death in 1582 came at a point at which other Mongol leaders were taking notice of the sociopolitical importance of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus Abadai Haan had also been converted in the late 1570s, by a Kar ma pa lama, but it now became clear that, with the swift rise of the dGe lugs pa political fortune in Tibet, it would be better for Abadai to align himself with that group and not with the Kar ma pa.

⁷³ Michael K. Jerryson, *Mongol Buddhism: The Rise and Fall of the Sangha* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2007), 16.

⁷⁴ Jerryson, 19-20.

The end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century is really the first period of genuine Mongol Buddhist literature. The Mongolian scholar Bira equates this development with the common acceptance of Buddhism as a national religion, and suggests that it now began to play "a decisive role in the formation and development of Mongolian culture."⁷⁵ This took the form as much of educational and scientific formation as of literary formation, and these all came together to bring about a revival of the vertical Mongol script and a broadening of the literary focus, to include in particular translations of the canonical Tibetan and Indic Buddhist texts.

In 1629, the first complete Mongol translation of the Tibetan bKa' 'gyur was made under the direction of Gunga-Odser, although there is reason to believe that some parts of the text had been translated during the Yüan dynasty (1271-1368). That notwithstanding, it seems that the amount of effort which went into this seventeenth century translation catalysed a great catalysed considerable interest in literature in general, and translation in particular, in Mongolia at the time. Thus it was that there developed at this time an increased enthusiasm for Mongol historiography⁷⁶, which necessitated both a greater expertise in translation among writers, but also greater literary and stylistic ability. Thus, by the second quarter of the seventeenth century, Mongol Buddhism had catalysed not only a focus on translation and on historical study, but also it had laid the ground for the development of a Mongol literary tradition, founded upon, but in no way in thrall to, Indo-Tibetan religious discourse.

In his survey of Mongol shamanic texts, the scholar and poet P. Rintchen⁷⁷ indicates the presence of an extensive literature – both written and oral – of prayers and chants addressed to, propitiating, or referencing the spirits of mountains and the land. Indeed,

⁷⁵ Bira, 122.

⁷⁶ Bira treats of this in considerable detail.

⁷⁷ P.Rintchen. *Matériaux pour l'Étude du Chamanisme Mongol* (3 volumes) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1959).

instead of Tenger Hangai, frequent mention is made of Tenger Γajar us, the latter name being the Middle Mongolian for "landscape,"⁷⁸ and referencing the same mother-deity as Hangai.

Rintchen's survey shows textual evidence for the importance of the natural environment for Mongol shamanic practice. A random sample of the objects of these prayers – the spirit of Bogd Han mountain, the spirits of the landscape, a milk offering for the spirits of the cows, a sūtra to pacify the malign spirits who are upsetting camels, and a sūtra for the fire⁷⁹ – shows clearly not only the wide range of these focal objects, but the practical importance of their beneficence to the daily wellbeing of the nomads.

The influence of Buddhism on shamanism can already be seen in the use of sūtras, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Rintchen's survey contains many such texts, as well as many ostensibly shamanic texts containing mantras (which themselves, of course, were effectively shamanic Indic utterances absorbed into the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, whence their introduction to Mongolia).

Rintchen also notes the presence of so-called "yellow shamans," a reference to the "yellow hat" Tibetan dGe lugs pa school, which makes up the majority of the Buddhist community in Mongolia. About these Buddhist shamans, he writes, "In northern Mongolia the white shamans, embracing the yellow religion of Tsongkapa [ie the dGe lugs pa school], and to show their superiority over the black shamans, often used Tibetan writing in their Mongol language prayer texts, that script being holy in the eyes of the Buddhist clergy."⁸⁰ He gives examples of standard Tibetan Buddhist prayers, being uttered as part of a shamanic ritual, as for instance in the formulaic dedication prayer said at the close of every

⁷⁸ The Greek letter Γ here is a voiced velar affricate, roughly equivalent to *gh*. The modern Mongolian equivalent to this name is *gazar us*, "earth and water."

⁷⁹ Rintchen, 72, 49, 32, 58, 23.

⁸⁰ Rintchen, xii-xiii. My translation.

practise session in the Tibetan tradition, here noted as being “pronounced prior to the invocation of the Prince of Shamans by Buddhist shamans.”⁸¹

Of course, as I have already suggested, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition itself was in part formed under the influence of the pre-Buddhist shamanic Bön religion. One has only to look at practises such as *gcod*, with its ritual use of hand-held drums and thighbone trumpets, the practitioner’s visualisation of offering his or her physical body, and its invocation of local spirits and of both good and malign forces, to recognise this influence⁸². The wide range of Tibetan Buddhist practises has been brought *en masse* into the Mongol tradition, and such rituals as *gcod* and the lama dances, or *tsam*⁸³, are especially popular in today’s Mongolia. It could be argued that such practises, being more esoteric, other and aesthetically rich, are more likely to attract people in Mongolia, after seventy years of religious and spiritual repression, much as they also attracted western youth jaded by the materialism of the postwar years. However, from my own observations, it seems that there is still a profound cultural link between Mongols and their religious tradition, and at these pregnant points where shamanism and Buddhism merge it appears that their enthusiasm and devotion grow stronger.

One of the ways in which Mongol Buddhism has accepted shamanism (but note that there is no explicit reciprocation) is in the absorption of specifically Mongol cultural figures into what is, to all intents and purposes, a Tibetan Buddhist schema. In his history of

⁸¹ Rintchen, 81. My translation. The last four lines of the oral text as recorded here are a transcription of a Mongol pronunciation of the Tibetan prayer *bla ma sangs rgyas chos ldan tshogs gyi chos rnam la/byang chub bar du bdag ni skyabs su mchi/bdag gi sbyin sogs ji dbang 'di dag gis/'gro la dbang phyug sangs rgyas sdus bar shog*. In English: “Until I attain enlightenment, I go for refuge to the lama, to the Buddha, to the traching and to the community of practitioners. May whatever power is accumulated through my beneficent activity bring all beings to enlightenment.”

⁸² Not everyone agrees that the *gcod* ritual is shamanic. I have been told by lamas that it is purely Buddhist, but that seems highly unlikely. See Jérôme Edou *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod* (Ithaca NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1996) for a descriptive and historical analysis of *gcod*.

⁸³ Tibetan '*cham*.

Buddhism in Mongolia, Jerryson mentions how the thirteenth Dalai Lama incorporated into a *tsam* the *tsagaan övgön*, or “White Old Man of the Herds,” a figure from Mongol shamanic culture, who watches over the livestock, thus legitimizing this character within the Buddhist worldview⁸⁴.

Such a move on the part of what we might call the colonising religion might be seen in very much the same light as, for instance, the colonisation of the midwinter festival by the Christian missionaries to northern Europe in the form of the Christmas celebration. However, while I think that it would be naïve to deny this analysis, it is also true that, within Tibetan Buddhism, there is a strong emphasis upon what one might characterise as aspects of a shamanic belief system, such as local spirits (*sa bdag*) and water spirits (*klu*⁸⁵). It could be said, then, that there is an acceptance on both sides of a commonality, as we have already seen from the examples cited by Rintchen, and an understanding that the shamanic world of the spirits reflects, and is coeval with, the Buddhist world of local deities and, one assumes, of the Buddhas themselves.

Abadai’s conversion and alignment with the dGe lugs pa prepared Mongolia for just over two centuries of Manchu rule (1691-1911), which created a frame within which Buddhism was able to develop locally through the presence of influential teachers and their more enterprising students. On a more political level, however, the Manchu sought to control the influence of Buddhism and to render it a political tool for the control of the people in general, and of the monastic community in particular.

The political importance of Buddhism and the monastic hierarchy in Mongol life during the nineteenth century – and the corresponding suppression of shamanism – can be seen in the dramatic expansion of literary focus, an expansion which reaches its zenith with

⁸⁴ Jerryson, 12-13.

⁸⁵ The *klu* moreover are Tibetanised versions of the Indic *nāga*, who tend to be shown as snake-like creatures. *kLu* is the Tibetan word for snake, or dragon, but Mongolian translates *klu* as *luu*, and not as *mogoi* (snake).

the groundbreaking life and work of the Noyon Hutagt Danzanravjaa in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even before Danzanravjaa's rise to prominence, and following the death of the First Bogd Haan Zanabazar in 1723, the scholar-poet Luvsanchultem⁸⁶ (1740-1810) had opened the way for Mongol Buddhist literature to widen and deepen its scope, to move away from the influence of Tibetan culture and towards a discourse more inclusive both of Mongol culture in general, and of Mongol spirituality in particular.

Luvsanchultem was born in the Tsahar region, and so was generally referred to by the name Tsahar Gevsh. Having received ordination at the age of six, he received education in Mongol, Sanskrit and Tibetan, and his poetic output is characterised by the influence of Sanskrit and Tibetan poetic form as much as by indigenous Mongol verse.

From the point of view of his explicitly religious writings, Luvsanchultem tended to reconfigure traditional subject matter for his Mongol audience, although his use of non-Mongol classical literary styles suggests that he might have been interested in broadening the outlook of his audience, so as to educate them in the more traditional Buddhist discourse. Many of these texts – such as the *Description of Sukhavati* and the combined *Subhaṣitaratnanidhi* translation and commentary – show Luvsanchultem's skill in presenting complex ideas in simple form, which became a hallmark of his translations and his commentaries on classical Buddhist texts.

It could be argued that the many translations and commentaries which Luvsanchultem prepared from Tibetan and Sanskrit, and his detailed exploration and explication of traditional Buddhist themes were merely a complex preparation for his *magnum opus*, the biography of Tsongkapa, *Sayin amuyulang bükun yarqu-yin oron* (*Source of All Good Fortune*) which dates from 1794. This work constituted a radical departure for Mongol Buddhism, presenting the life of the founder of the dGe lugs pa order

⁸⁶ Tib bLo bzang tshul khrim.

in the vernacular, and offering to the wider Mongol Buddhist society material previously available in Tibetan alone. The opening up of Buddhism in this way to a wider public during the late eighteenth century prefigured the socially radical writings of Danzanravjaa by some fifty years and it illustrates too the way in which Luvsanchultem was able, concisely and with considerable literary style, to present the biography of Tsongkapa to a general audience.

But it is not only his renditions of traditional themes that characterise Luvsanchultem's work. His poetical handling of the themes of Buddhist, and especially traditional Mongol, spirituality⁸⁷ touches upon much the same material as we have seen addressed by Rintchen's oral literature, such as the god of the hearth, the gods who bring a rain of blessings, fire-offerings for the White Old Man of the Herds, and rituals to welcome a bride. Throughout his poetic work we find at once great clarity of expression and a sophistication in its development of traditional *vajrayāna* imagery which I would argue is heretofore unknown in Mongol religious verse. For instance, here is his description of the god of Fire, the all-important element which finds its place in the hearth, at the center of the Mongol ger:

*Risen from silver Aries
in the southern sky,
amidst the lotus flower's fiery body,
with the moon overhead, the god of Fire,
white in color and gentle to behold,
white hair parted at his forehead,
his beard thick and white,
a rosary of white glass in his right hand,
an offering vase, filled with nectar, in his left,
his clothes of white silk,
the cushion where he sits, upon a lotus-throne,
of white silk down, and many all around
bowing down to him...*

⁸⁷ It should be pointed out that these texts are found only in his Tibetan *Collected Works*, and it is uncertain whether he also prepared Mongol versions.

Such an acknowledgement of the god of the hearth within the works of a Buddhist monastic is not so much an indication of the importance of the shamanic culture, as an indication that there remained then (as still today) an aspect of Mongol culture which required the appeasement and honoring of the shamanic gods even within the context of Buddhist practise.

Luvsanchultem died in 1810, a year after Urga was proclaimed the capital of Manchu Mongolia⁸⁸, and the year when Danzanravjaa⁸⁹, at the age of six or seven, wrote his first poem, *Hormusta Tngri*. During his relatively short life⁹⁰, Danzanravjaa would do more than perhaps any other writer of the premodern period to preserve and promote Mongol culture, both within his own community of the Gobi and through his interactions with foreign travellers, and this poem, written in honor of the Mongol sky god Hormust⁹¹, is a significant prefiguring of the work which Danzanravjaa would carry out, as much within his religious ambit as within his immediate society.

That Danzanravjaa should dedicate his first poem to Tenger (for Hormust is equated by Mongols with Tenger) is significant. As a *huvilgaan*⁹², he was ostensibly expected to promote and preserve Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist tradition, albeit in its more esoteric Tibetan form. However, this illustrates how Tenger/Hormust remained central to the worldview of the Mongol nomads among whom, and for whom, Danzanravjaa had been

⁸⁸ Which act removed social and religious influence away from the previous capital Qarqorin, and placed it closer to the Manchu capital.

⁸⁹ Tib bsTan 'dzin rab rgyas.

⁹⁰ He was born in 1803 and died (by poisoning, administered ostensibly by his own hand, in order to save one of his lovers, who it is said had been bribed by the Manchu rulers to kill him, from the torments of hell) in 1856.

⁹¹ In fact this word appears to be a corruption of the name for the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda, which suggests that Hornust is not in fact indigenous to Mongolia.

⁹² Tibetan *sprul sku*, a reincarnated teacher. Danzanravjaa had already been officially recognised as the "drunken" (*sogtuu*) reincarnation of the previous Noyon Hutagt, and his future reputation for alcohol consumption appears to bear this out.

born. The poem itself is a very simple and unsophisticated meditation on karma, as the following verses (two from the original five) will make clear⁹³:

*If you plant a wild cherry,
there'll be snakes there to poison you.
If you fall in with bad people,
there'll be wickedness to beat you down.*

[...]

*The stars in the sky are many,
but only one or two have a special gleam.
The people of the world are many,
but only one or two have a special wisdom.*

In the colophon to this poem, Danzanravjaa asks, "Is it not so, my dear ones?/May the Triple Jewel forgive me." This invocation of the Triple Jewel (the Buddha, the teaching and the community of practitioners) is so standard a part of Buddhist texts that we can imagine that, even at this young age, it was natural for Danzanravjaa to add this short prayer to his poem, as he would continue to do (in various different forms) throughout his life. Once again, though, we can see that this ostensibly Buddhist poem – albeit one with the kind of wise saws common also in traditional oral literature – entitled in honor of the main pre-Buddhist god, and with a traditional Buddhist prayer to close is an excellent example both of why Danzanravjaa was so popular with the local herders and of how shamanic and Buddhist thinking are able to work together within Mongol literature as much as within Mongol culture as a whole.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Danzanravjaa's poetry to the ways in which Mongol literature developed with regard both to Buddhism in general, and to its relations with shamanism in particular. Whereas Luvsanchultem's detailed and sophisticated treatment of Buddhist themes made his contribution central to the

⁹³ This is a slightly retranslated version of Danzanravjaa (trans Simon Wickham-Smith), *Perfect Qualities: The Collected Poems of the 5th Noyon Khutagt Danzanravjaa (1803-1856)*, (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture 2006), 75.

understanding of Mongol vajrayāna, and whereas his social criticism exposed the problems inherent in the relationship between the monastic and lay communities, Danzanravjaa's work expressed not only the social and spiritual implications of Buddhist practise in new and dramatic ways, but also the powerful effect of pre-Buddhist shamanic religious and cultural praxis upon the lives of his students, and of the Mongol nomadic community as a whole.

We can understand Danzanravjaa's contribution to nineteenth century Mongol Buddhism from the viewpoints of social criticism and pedagogy. Beyond his literary work and his religious teaching, of course, he was an expert in animal husbandry, dramaturgy, music and astrology, and a keen promoter of equal education for girls and boys⁹⁴. His motivation seems always to have been educational, and his literary work was constrained only by the minds of his listeners.

Unlike Luvsanchultem, Danzanravjaa chose consistently to couch his ideas in language which reflected the nomadic life of the people in the area of the Gobi around his monastery of Hamriin Hiid⁹⁵. This not only endeared him to his students, but it also meant that the discourse of Mongol Buddhism was given room to grow. For Danzanravjaa, who travelled vast distances across the desert and the steppe to visit his teachers and students alike, nomadic movement remained central to his life in a way that, for a more sedentary monastic in Mongolia, it might not have done. Thus we find many poems in which the long journey to enlightenment is mediated by the horse, so refocusing the animal's important

⁹⁴ See Michael Kohn, *Lama of the Gobi* (Ulaanbaatar: Maitri Books, 2006) and Simon Wickham-Smith, "The Way of the World" (IIAS Newsletter, Leiden, #40 Spring 2006) p19 for extensive accounts of Danzanravjaa's life and career.

⁹⁵ There is now a museum devoted to Danzanravjaa in the nearby town of Sainshand, containing at least one of his own manuscripts.

cultural role within a Buddhist framework. There are places, moreover, where the horse becomes almost a metaphor for the practitioner's commitment to the path⁹⁶:

*Riding my true friend
far across the earth,
from the depths of my heart
it's clear, like a mirror.*⁹⁷

At other times, as with the poetry of Tibetan yogis such as Milarepa or Drukpa Kunley, we see Danzanravjaa conflating the journey with the goal, and making the poetry of love from the poetry of spirituality:

*What is this thing called love?
It is a lovely ancient benediction.
Let us take the short cut by the southern slope
and reach the distant land.*

*It is a pleasure to meet
the one you desire –
you'll need the riches of the dharma.
Let's enter abhidharma and enjoy eternity.*⁹⁸

Danzanravjaa's gift then, as shown in these poems expressing the interplay of romantic love and spirituality, is to show his understanding of the human condition in general, but also of the nomadic psyche in particular. The significance of movement and of journeys on horseback to the nomadic people of the Gobi remains even today a potent force, and one which is played out from the very start of *Altan Ovoo*, and while it is true that, having himself been raised in a poor nomadic tradition, such an idea would have been natural to Danzanravjaa, his ability to make a connection between the most profound spiritual concepts and the quotidian life experiences of his audience must not be disregarded.

⁹⁶ There is also a connection to be made here with the Tibetan genre of "Calling the Lama from Afar" (*bla ma rgyang 'bod*), in which we might see the horse as the metaphor upon which the practitioner is carried to the Lama.

⁹⁷ "*Bardam sergelen borigoo*" ("My Proud and Clever Grey") Danzanravjaa, 24.

⁹⁸ "*Dömön*" ("Gently") Danzanravjaa, 43.

Unlike many senior Buddhist teachers of his generation, Danzanravjaa never travelled to, or studied in, Tibet. Despite his facility with the Tibetan language, he tended to write in Mongolian, and developed in his later years a fierce anti-Manchu nationalism. Like Luvsanchultem, he found much to be dissatisfied with in the behavior of the monastic population, and we can hear echoes of the poem of Luvsanchultem's cited above in these lines from Danzanravjaa's famous poem of excoriation, "*Ichige, Ichige*" ("Shame, Shame"):

And oh, the old get older without collecting merit – what a shame!

And oh, the young get dressed up without straightening their minds – what a shame!

And oh, the wise don't join their Dharma minds – what a shame!

And oh, the princes are showy when they serve – what a shame!

[...]

And oh, the monks study by day in the monastery and wander the streets by night – what a shame!

And oh, the students pray openly and stuff themselves in secret – what a shame!

For all his irritation and brilliance⁹⁹, one of Danzanravjaa's saving graces was a recognition of his own failings. Much in the style of the Tibetan "crazy-wisdom" practitioners (*mnyon pa*) he is forever referring to himself with monikers such as "fool" or "crazy monk" or "staff-wielding beggar" and, at the end of "Shame, Shame," he writes, "And oh, if I have these faults myself, then I am first amongst equals – what a shame!" It seems to be partly this acceptance of his own nature which both endeared him to his students and protected him, although not ultimately, from the anger of the Manchu authorities.

It is clear that Danzanravjaa, while he was able to compose in Tibetan, was far happier to write in Mongol, and the work of scholars such as Ts. Damdinsüren and Ch. Altangerel have shown that many of the Tibetan texts which are ascribed to Danzanravjaa

⁹⁹ Indeed, one of the most common labels attached to him is *dogshin*, which suggests a combination of genius and barely-controlled aggression.

might well, in fact, have been composed or translated by students or amanuenses¹⁰⁰. This preference for his native language, as opposed to the Buddhist *lingua franca* shows, I think, that Danzanravjaa's specific energies were focused on the development of that aspect of Mongol Buddhism – namely its explicit references to shamanism and the people's Chinggisid ancestry – which makes it stand out from the Tibetan version.

In this way, then, Danzanravjaa can be seen as a powerful exemplar for the gradual integration of shamanic culture with Buddhist thought during the nineteenth century. One of his principal interests was in the *tsam* dances, and the wide variety of masks and costumes whose design and creation he oversaw (and to which he most probably contributed his own work), and the enthusiasm which he brought to the annual productions of his own drama *Saran Höhöö*¹⁰¹ show the extent of his interest in engaging the local community, as well as his commitment to a dramaturgy based upon Mongol culture and not upon a more traditionally Tibetan or even Indic culture.

The images of the natural world which stand at the center of Mongol literature were especially meaningful to Danzanravjaa, and it was not unusual for him to inject his teachings, to his students and the nomadic herders of the Gobi, with asides more pertinent to equine management and accurate reading of the seasons than to purely spiritual development. With the deepening relationship between Buddhism and Mongol society during the nineteenth century, there developed a genre which mixed advice and social

¹⁰⁰ See for instance the introduction to Ch. Altangerel, *Mongolin zohiolchdin tövödөөр бичсэн бүтээл: Vol 2 (D Ravjaa)* (Ulaanbaatar: BNMAU Shinjleh uhaani akademi, 1968) and especially the analysis of the Tibetan and Mongol versions of the poem "Your Perfect Qualities" ("*Ülemjin Chanar*").

¹⁰¹ "The Moon Cuckoo," based upon a *jātaka* tale and regularly performed at Danzanravjaa's theater (the first of its kind in Mongolia) in the desert near Hamrin Hiid. It is today being revived and studied. See *inter alia* S.Hövsgöl "Saranhöhöönii namtar jujgiin 'Gorim' nairuulagchiin төлөвлөгөө болон ни" in L.Odonchimed, *Danzanravjaagiin mendelsnii 200 jiliin oid zoriulsan olon ulsin erdem shinjilgeenii hurlin iltgeliin emhtgel* (2 vol). Ulaanbaatar: Danzanravjaa Foundation 2005), vol 1, 58-70.

criticism through texts purporting to be words addressed to the reader by inanimate objects or animals.

These *üge* texts¹⁰² date originally from an idea ascribed to Agwangqayidub¹⁰³ (1779-1838), but that idea was built upon and expanded by Sanday (1825-1860). The *üge* began as a Mongol reframing of the traditional Tibetan moralistic commentary texts, a genre with which Agwangqayidub was clearly familiar. And while he wrote primarily in Tibetan, he reserved Mongol for the ostensibly less serious, albeit philosophically no less meaningful, *üge*.

One of Agwangqayidub's best known texts relates a conversation between a sheep, a goat and a cow on the subject of human – specifically in this case, of monastic – meat-eating. As though plainly to express the cruelty of the situation, the three animals ask the monk what they have done wrong to incur their own slaughter. The monk replies that they have done nothing wrong, “but I would have nothing to eat were you not to be slaughtered.” The monk however is not the slaughterman, the job being done by a layperson, so that the monk does not break his vows against taking life. We can see that the text, then, is part social criticism, part moralistic commentary, and almost entirely a wise and pointed satire on a complex subject.

Indeed, it is worth noting that it is unusual for a writer of *üge* to present his arguments in an unsubtle and simplistic form. Agwangqayidub appears to have set the bar high, placing the onus on the writer not only to make his audiences laugh, but also to make them think, and subsequent writers, possibly because they use the genre to address important social and religious questions, tend to rise to the challenge.

¹⁰² The word *üge* literally means “word,” but “dialog” or “monolog” – though perhaps themselves unweildy Hellenic terms – might better indicate their inherent expository nature.

¹⁰³ Ngag dbang mkhas grub.

Needless to say, in a society such as Mongolia's, in which animals are bred and herded for slaughter, the questions of *karma* raised by Buddhism have deep implications. However, since Buddhism had come to Mongolia from Tibet, where such practises are also commonplace and accepted, and where the eating of meat is accepted by Buddhist practitioners, such texts seem to have been written to challenge people to behave with more compassion, rather than simply to foresake a particular lifestyle.

Sanday sought to develop the *üge* away from a dialog, whether between a human and an animal, or between animals alone, to a monolog in which the speaker presented a specific point of view. The title *qauliči* appears to refer, not to legal expertise (the term meaning "lawyer, legal scholar") but rather to a writer's facility with language and with wordplay.

According to Süglegmaa, the *üge* arose "from the popular oral tradition, and developed alongside the artistic tradition of oral texts."¹⁰⁴ Thus it was that, even within a Buddhist context, there remained a clear relationship to the shamanic world of the nomadic Mongols, and it is from this tradition that Sanday took many of his ideas. He would take a traditional Mongol folktale and subvert it to his own ends. For instance, this is a verse from a popular song called "The Young Rabbit:"

*No matter that we are many on the northern steppe.
No matter that we leap around the lonely taiga.*

And here is Sanday's response, in his "What Wolf Said as He was Hunted":

*It is a long way
to the northern mountains.
In between
are many steppes.*

¹⁰⁴ H. Süglegmaa, *Mongolin uran zohiol dahi "üg" zohiolin töröl züil*, (Ulaanbaatar: Ulaanbaatarin Ih Sargaal' Mongol Sudlalin Töv, 2005), 17 (my translation).

And such is his humor, as equally with Danzanravjaa's, that the characters appeal to the readers *because* rather than *despite* what they are thinking. Sanday's ability to enter into the mind of his animal characters (the wolf's speech here is not at all subtle compared to other, more complex, examples in Sanday's extensive output) comes, as we have seen, from his experience and from observation.

Sanday also introduced the inanimate character to the *üge* tradition, as we can see in *What the China Cup Said*, the full text of which runs as follows¹⁰⁵:

Sanday went with someone into a ger and, having exchanged greetings and sat down, the lady of the house took a china cup and offered him tea. Thereupon the man who was with him asked Sanday, "Sanday, what would that china cup say?" To which Sanday replied:

*Don't let the children see me!
Place me in a dresser.
If I make a sound, then I'm dead!*

Here then we have an example of how Sanday (and, by extension, the *üge* tradition in general) perceived the world around him. He was aware of the value of china – particularly within a nomadic situation – and, in speaking for the cup (rather than perhaps for the cup's owner, who clearly in this case wanted to show off her possessions and/or offer her guest the very best she had), he was able to comment with humor upon what was undoubtedly an everyday hazard in the small environment of a nomadic ger.

That Sanday was not a monk should lead us to believe neither that he was uninfluenced by Buddhism, nor that he did not wish to express Buddhist ideas. It does mean, though, that his characterisation and subject matter were at once more subtle – that is, less obvious in their adherence to religious concerns – and more popular, at least in their settings and language. It is noteworthy that Danzanravjaa did not seem to have had any interest in writing *üge*, since his pedagogical texts (*surguuli*) already in many ways deal

¹⁰⁵ Suglegmaa, 129. (My translation.)

with the same moral and practical complexities as the *üge* tradition, and retain an equally sensitive understanding of nomadic culture. Both he and the *üge* writers turn their humor upon human failings, but the dynamic between spiritual and practical serves to illustrate the differences and the similarities between a monastic writer such as Agwangqayidub and a layman such as Sanday.

The animal tales of Isisambuu¹⁰⁶ (1847-1906/7) were not only the natural development of Agwangqayidub's *üge*, but their writer was also held to be the rebirth of the earlier teacher. Thus it was, as Heissig suggests¹⁰⁷, that his choice of thematic material was perhaps a result as much of cultural expectations as of his own predilections. But clearly Isisambuu had a deep sympathy with the animals of whom he wrote, sharing with their suffering and their joy in language of great sensitivity and great passion. Listen to the feeling expressed in this passage, from the long work "*Önöčin injaya tarbaya kögsin üniye yurba-ber öber öber-ün orosiqu yosu kiged jobalang-iyān alayčīn kümün-dü kelegesen-ü yosun-du bičīgsen udqa-tai nom-un üges terigüten*" ("Words of wisdom, in the form of a conversation in which a young antelope, a marmot and a milchcow each tell the story of their life, with all its sadness, to the slaughterman"), in which the young antelope is wandering forlorn after its mother has been killed by a hunter:

*He lost his way in the misty gloom,
was burnt by the hot sun,
tortured by black flies,
and bellowed, poor thing, in a feeble voice,
wrenched from his beloved mother,
and wandering without beloved companions,
his black steps without feeling,
his black eyes a bright blue,
he went onto the high mountain,
crying and bellowing,*

¹⁰⁶ Tib (Ngag dbang) ye shes bzang po.

¹⁰⁷ Walther Heissig, *Geschichte der Mon.golische Literatur*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 616.

*his eyes watching,
as he ate a few blades of grass,
to catch sight of his mother...*

In the coda to this poem, Isisambuu says that this song is designed “to arouse pity for the orphaned and motherless young antelope,” which would seem to be a reference to the central Buddhist idea of compassion. Isisambuu has here developed the ideas of the *üge*, in which moralistic lessons are offered to the reader through the medium of talking animals, into an extensive treatment of the way in which animals, implicitly because of the karma of their previous lives, are subject to cruelty and misfortune. So this is not so much a presentation about how humans should act with compassion towards animals – although that is definitely one aspect of the message – but rather it is a wake-up call to people who, by “arous[ing] pity” for the antelope, will hopefully arouse pity for their own situation.

Despite the political upheavals during the period of Manchu decline and the decade of Mongol independence between 1911 and 1921, the traditional literary output continued apace. One is led to believe, from reading secular literature as much as religious literature, that the change in governance had little or no impact upon the established course of events. Most of the major figures in the literary scene continued to write secular Chinese-influenced poetry, while the *üge* tradition continued to present moralistic subject matter in continually more sophisticated forms. This seems to suggest that, while more sophisticated Mongol writers and readers preferred to look away from their own culture and find distraction in Chinese styles, the preference among the majority of the society was for the tradition of humor, frequently anti-establishment and always pertinent to the immediate environment and its human and animal inhabitants.

In addition to literature expressing Buddhist themes in secular form, the more traditional Buddhist text genres – strongly influenced by Tibetan forms – of praise (*irügel*) and blessing (*maytayal*). Arguably the most influential of writers in this genre was

Geligbalsang¹⁰⁸ (1846-1923), whose death, just before that of the Bogd Haan, came at a point when Buddhism itself had only a few years before the communists began to purge the monasteries.

Geligbalsang's oeuvre consists mainly of a large number of primarily ephemeral prayers, and his work is characterised by the specifics of the time and the situation in which they were written. For instance, while his collected works have never appeared in print, and while it is believed that he wrote many prayers to celebrate people's birthdays, to wish them good fortune in the year to come, none of these has ever come to light.

We can get an understanding of the way in which Geligbalsang weaves together intention and technique in the poem "*Tngri-eče boruyan qura yuyuqu*" ("Prayer Requesting the Gods for Rain"), which was composed during the disastrous drought of 1905.

*We all, so many unbelievers,
fallen into stupidity,
would scream aloud with all our might, and say
a drought is come, and we can't bear it any more!*

These words, of the people to the sky god Tenger, show the extent of anger with the powers of nature and frustration at the situation in which they find themselves. And, as he continues, in the event of no rain falling,

*What will happen tomorrow – "Let it go," they say –
your cattle, with whom you have always been good friends,
who are now in agony, die,
and our hearts cannot endure it.*

This association with one's animals is, as we have seen before with the *üge* tradition, a common topos in Mongol literature. What Geligbalsang, however, we have an understanding, from the point of view of prayer, that the local gods (whether or not they have completely been syncretised in the minds of the audience members with the Buddhist

¹⁰⁸ Tib dGe legs dpal bzang.

pantheon) need to understand the situation which will occur is the prayers are not answered. So it is that Geligbalsang's work illustrates the extent of the power which shamanic belief still exercised, notwithstanding the popular acceptance of Buddhist philosophy and praxis, and that it is Tenger Hangai, and not the Buddhas, from whom one must make immediate supplications concerning the natural world and the elements.

Geligbalsang's precatory work covers many different aspects of Mongol life, and he was able to impart much of his skill and knowledge to his students. Heissig devotes several pages to the legacy of Geligbalsang and other specifically religious writers¹⁰⁹, but suffice it to say here that, by the time Sühbaatar and the Red Army marched into Urga in 1921, the importance of shamanism as an adjunct of Buddhism had not diminished, and likewise the influence of writers such as Danzanravjaa, Sanday, Isisambuu and Geligbalsang had not grown weak over time. During the period of independence under the Bogd Haan, Mongol literature remained in much the same way as it had during the later Manchu period, and this was still the case in 1921 and latterly in 1924, when the Mongol People's Revolutionary Party was established, and Urga was renamed Ulaanbaatar, to honor Sühbaatar, who had died the previous year.

The distribution of primary sources in this chapter offers an explicit indication of the importance of the written word in Buddhism, and its relative insignificance in shamanism, and thus it would seem easier to establish a place for Buddhism in the Mongol literary world than it might be for shamanism. However, I would argue that, *pace* scholars such as Beckwith, just as Tibetan Buddhism has been influenced by pre-Buddhist Tibetan shamanism in the form of Bön, so Mongol Buddhism has been subject to a similar set of influences, and these are more explicitly recorded on MSS such as those in the collection of R. Otgonbaatar mentioned above.

¹⁰⁹ Heissig, 472-491.

The material presented in these first two chapters, then, show a society based upon the economics of herding and the material and spiritual culture of a nomadic people who perforce can transport relatively little in the way of material possessions and whose primary spiritual focus is on the weather and the terrain, since these are the immediate sources of nourishment and safety for themselves and for the animals which provide their food and are the basis of their economy.

The following chapter will explore the ways in which these issues were transformed and suppressed during the years between the Revolution in 1921 and the death of Josef Stalin in 1953. These new forces in Mongol society had a substantial impact, moreover, upon the literary sphere, and created a context in which Mend-Ooyo's teacher and mentor B. Yavuuhan was able to begin the reconstruction of Mongol letters during the latter years of the 1950s.

CHAPTER 3

The Impact of Stalinist Policies on Mongol Nomadic Culture (1921-1953)

*Lenin finished
reading his text,
he raised his head.
He said "We
will help you
in every way."
These words
flashed across
the Mongolian land,
the struggle
thundered
its victory.¹¹⁰*

The long epic poem, Ts. Gaitav's *Damdinii Sühbaatar*, from which this brief image is taken, was composed between May 1956 and February 1957, around the time of Nikita Krushchev's coruscating speech rejecting Stalin's policies, and published in 1957, by which time a period of relaxation had been established in Mongolia, similar to that instigated in the Soviet Union. *Damdinii Sühbaatar* won Gaitav the 1960 State Poetry Prize and confirmed his position as the country's leading exponent of popular socialist (even populist) poetry.

The picture painted by Gaitav in his poem, of the life and struggles of the revolutionary hero Sühbaatar (1893-1923), though full of poetic license, is careful not to address, in any way, the period following Sühbaatar's death. Indeed, one of the benefits of choosing Sühbaatar as its revolutionary hero *par excellence*, is that the Mongolian People's Republic (hereafter MPR) was able to promote, and almost apotheosize, the only one of the revolutionaries who remained untouched either by the messy business of politics and socialist governance (which claimed H.Choibalsan), or by suspicion (which resulted in the

¹¹⁰ From Ts. Gaitav, *Damdinii Sühbaatar* (Ulaanbaatar: State Publishing House 1957), my translation.

elimination, *inter alia*, of D.Bodoo and S.Danzan). Moreover, that a statue to Sühbaatar still stands at the center of Sühbaatar Square, at the center of Ulaanbaatar (the capital city whose name – translated as “Red Hero” – specifically honored Sühbaatar a year following his death) is tribute both to his political invincibility and to the need and desire of the Mongolian people to remember the positive aims of the revolution as it was initially conceived.

In this chapter, I will investigate the way in which the 1921 revolutionaries chose to frame and address the specific problems faced by the Mongol people at the time. Political infighting notwithstanding, the early years of the MPR had a fairly catastrophic effect upon the nomadic economy and culture, and subsequently – and, in some ways, consequently – upon the people’s religious and spiritual life. At the same time as this, the movement in the Soviet Union towards the doctrine of Socialist Realism was beginning to have its effect in Mongolia, and both the resulting literature and the execution of leading figures in the contemporary literary scene prepared the ground, out of which Mongolian literature was revived, or possibly recreated, following Krushchev’s denunciation of Stalin.

The 1921 Revolution and the Effects of Leftist Policies on Nomadic Mongolia

As scholars such as Rupen and Murphy have shown¹¹¹, the situation in which the Soviet Red Army occupied Mongol territory, thus creating the MPR, was not one initially conducive to Marxist expansionist philosophy. The fact that Mongolia was a nomadic society meant that, according to Marxist-Leninist thinking, it was not an economy ripe for development. However, Lenin’s idea was to involve the proletariat directly in the

¹¹¹ Robert Rupen *How Mongolia is Really Ruled: A Political History of the Mongolian People’s Republic, 1900-1978*, (Stanford CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1979), and George G. S. Murphy, *Soviet Mongolia: A study of the oldest political satellite*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

transformation of underdeveloped states and, by 1916, with regard to "the Mongolians," he had established this idea as follows:

*We shall exert every effort to become friendly and to amalgamate with the Mongolians...We shall strive to give the nations which are more backward and more oppressed than we are, "unselfish cultural aid"...[and] we shall help them on towards democracy and socialism.*¹¹²

By 1920, moreover, Lenin had formulated the theory of bypassing capitalism altogether, that a country might move from being a poor and underdeveloped economy to being a communist economy, assisted by the proletariat of more developed communist nations. This made Mongolia a prime target for Leninist ideology, as Gaitav's poem (and the section called "Lenini Üg" [Lenin's Words] in particular) makes clear, and the actors in this drama were already beginning to make themselves known.

The incursions into Urga of troops led by Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, an unhappily demented White Russian monarchist who dreamed of a pan-Asiatic empire with him as Emperor, and his intention to push forward and destroy the Bolsheviks in Russia, whom he detested, gave the Bolsheviks an excuse to attack. The inequity between the vast and well-armed Red Army and the inept and poorly armed White Army¹¹³ made the latter's defeat, and the baron's subsequent trial and execution, a *fait accompli*. Given Lenin's desire to "become friendly" with the Mongolians and "help them towards democracy and socialism," Ungern-Sternberg's shelling of Urga and northward movement can, then, in no way be seen as the main pretext for the Bolshevik's own movement towards Mongolia.

There is, however, evidence that the Mongol people actually desired a change from the newly established Chinese hegemony, which had been implemented by a Chinese

¹¹² Cited in Allan S. Whiting, *Soviet Policies in China 1917-1924*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 22.

¹¹³ This is an understatement. The no more than 5,000 white guard soldiers had but twenty machine guns and twelve artillery pieces (Murphy, 10).

warlord, Hsu Shu-Ch'eng, and which had effectively returned the Mongol people to their previous state under the Manchu, which had ended with the introduction of an independent Mongol government in 1911. Some of those who were agitating for change included lamas and nobles who had come under the sway of prominent intellectuals such as the Buryat lama-scholar Zhamtsanaro, but there were also many Mongols who had had extensive exposure to Bolshevik thinking both in Russia and among the Russian diplomatic population in Urga.

Thus, the main concern for the Mongol people was autonomy and a return to self-determination. While the Bolshevik philosophy might have appealed to a nomadic society, this was most likely due to the ideals of communism, and their similarity to nomadic practise, rather than to the sociopolitical machinations which were required to support it. But we should be aware, nonetheless, that the nature of the landscape and the life of its inhabitants were such that there had thus far been limited imposition of centralised control upon the movement and livelihood of the people, and that the sedentary monastic community was a largely self-governing body.

This notwithstanding, the two groups which met in November 1919 in order to discuss making contact with the Bolsheviks, did not consist of nomadic herders. The leaders of these groups – a twenty-six year old non-commissioned officer Sühbaatar and a twenty-four year old former student of Zhamtsanarano named Choibalsan – had both, at one time, been monks, but were now very much concerned with the reestablishment of Mongol independence, with the help of the Red Army. It is arguable, I believe, that the foundation of the MPR and the subsequent decades of Soviet control stem from an unfortunate naïveté on the part of the groups led by Sühbaatar and Choibalsan, for their willingness to embrace the Soviet project, as presented to them by Lenin, was catalysed in part by a realisation that their troops would not be able to withstand the Chinese forces alone.

It is not my intention to give an account of the development of the relationship between the Mongolian revolutionaries and the Red Army, nor indeed of the series of meetings and agreements by which the MPR came into being, for this is all covered extensively in other studies¹¹⁴. My specific aim here is to give a brief account of the ways in which the 1921 revolution, and the 1924 establishment of the MPR, laid the groundwork, both logistically and socioculturally, for both the collectivisation of nomadic herders and the suppression of both Buddhism and shamanism, both of which processes transformed the lives, and therefore the culture, of the majority of Mongolians. And it was the transformation of the culture which led, in the late 1950s, to the revitalisation of the literary culture, initially by Yavuuhulan, and subsequently by his students.

The rule, between the end of the Manchu dynasty in 1911 and 1924¹¹⁵, of the Bogd Gegen – the senior Mongolian lama and a highly-respected political and spiritual figure – created a theocracy not unlike that of Tibet's, with spiritual and temporal rule brought together in a government of five ministries, those being the interior, justice, foreign relations, war, and finance, whose ministers were appointed by the Bogd Gegen.

The changes which came into force during this brief period of independence created a stable society, in which the authority of the Buddhist clergy seemed to remain entrenched, but in which also the idea of class – a key concept, of course, in terms of communist theory – played precious little role. Despite a governmental infrastructure of *hutagt* and *hoshun jasad*¹¹⁶, the Mongols themselves felt themselves part of the "golden thread" of the Chinggisid dynasty, and thus entitled to their nomadic life, herding livestock in the region of their *nutag*. Moreover, the organisation of the three basic units of Mongol society – a small

¹¹⁴ For instance, see B. Baabar, *Twentieth Century Mongolia*, (Knapwell: White Horse 1999), also Murphy and Rupen.

¹¹⁵ Notwithstanding the brief return to Chinese imperialism under Hsu Shu-Ch'eng and the fleeting rule of the despotic von Ungern-Sternberg.

¹¹⁶ *Hutagt* is a Mongolian term for senior lama (often but not always a *huvilgaan* [cf.note 80]). *Hoshun Jasad* is a Manchu term indicating a local prince.

number of *darhan*, whose previous service gave them a tax-free status; the *hamjilga*, who tended their prince's herds, and received proportionate rights to the land and the herd; and the majority *albatu*, who paid a series of taxes and levies and who were expected to provide for the smooth running of the society – was such that, by the time the Red Army entered Urga in 1921, the people were generally content to be ruled through, if not directly by, the authority of the Bogd Gegen, and there was little evidence of any real dissatisfaction with the *status quo*.

The economic situation, however, in which the religious and nomadic societies operated, was largely primitive and unsophisticated. Most important of all was the fact that, with Urga as really the only urban center, the majority of people lived so far away from any administrative center as to make the cost of all but the most local mercantile interaction unsustainable. Moreover, there was a high rate of illiteracy, and what educated elite existed was monastic, and it was that monastic majority which controlled most of the people's common resources. As I have suggested, though, the average nomadic herder was not necessarily interested in being a part of the growing world market, and this again emphasizes the importance of the small group of political leaders in Urga in shaping the country's future.

By the time of the Bogd Gegen's death and the subsequent establishment of the MPR in 1924, about half the original number of revolutionaries who had sought the assistance of the Soviets against Hsu Shu-Ch'eng and von Ungern-Sternberg had been eliminated. Sühbaatar had died, perhaps through poisoning, and his replacement Danzan, who now threatened the power of the Buryat pan-Mongolist Rinchino¹¹⁷, was himself executed in 1924.

¹¹⁷ Rinchino was a close collaborator with Zamtsanaro and appears to have been encouraging the Soviet invasion of Mongolia specifically in return for an improvement in the

One of the principle benefits of this extensive purging of the Mongolian revolutionaries was that it sensitized those who replaced them to the wishes of the overarching Soviet leaders. The significance of the visit by the revolutionaries to Lenin in Moscow during 1920, and of his advice to them to implement a national-revolutionary party – which became the MPRP – was that Mongolia was hauled by zealots, rather than guided by politicians, into the Soviet fold, and that the subsequent economic and cultural developments were oddly antithetical to Mongol society.

This gradual inclination towards Moscow inspired, during the mid- to late-1920s, a dramatic leftward shift. The Seventh Party Congress, held in Moscow towards the end of 1928, had called for the wholesale confiscation of feudal property, the lowering of taxes on the middle- and lower-class workers and the swift implementation of a trade monopoly with the Soviet Union. The Fifth Great Hural in January 1929 accepted all these measures. The Eighth Party Congress and the Sixth Great Hural, later in 1929, introduced collectivisation, along with the development of a five-year plan.

The swift implementation of these measures – though clearly catalysed by an increased connection between the MPRP and the Soviet Union – is perplexing, given the fact that not only were the monasteries still as powerful as they had been at the time of the revolution, but there was neither a genuine proletariat to implement the revolutionary policies, nor had the influence, whether fiscal or political, of the nobility been at all weakened. Nonetheless, the policies went ahead, Stalin having secured his powerbase in Moscow, ready to institute leftist policies such as collectivisation and the development of planning in the Soviet Union, and to encourage the institution of these policies in satellite states such as Mongolia. Critically, however, as Murphy points out, “the Soviet experts who

treatment of the Buryats and a broader acceptance of the pan-Mongolist cause (cf. Murphy, 24).

planned Mongolian affairs gave no special thought to Mongolian problems, they merely applied to the MPR policies that were being implemented in the Soviet Union.”¹¹⁸

Thus, the catastrophic five-year plan of 1931-5 played out, with the MPR trying valiantly but blindly to implement policies better suited to the Soviet Union. The fundamental plan would result in an increase of annual income from the actual 1930 level (86.4m₮) to an expected 1935 figure of 137.3m₮¹¹⁹, being a 158.9% increase. The specifics of the plan focussed on more livestock breeding and the aggressive development and marketing of agriculture and crafts, all this moreover while being collectivised, a complex proposition even for those nomadic herders who were favorable to the policy.

The lack of realistic planning can be seen from simple statistical analysis. State industry figures were expected to rise from 1.6m₮ in 1930 to 5.0m₮ in 1935 (312.5%), while the profit from agriculture and haymaking was expected to rise from 3.5m₮ to 12.5m₮ (357.1%). These projections were admittedly the most extreme, but even the almost 150% increase in the total revenue from stockraising suggests the unrealistic expectations, both of the Soviet planners and their MPR counterparts.

Had the five-year plan worked, of course, there would have been specific benefits for the MPR – an increase in overall power, the weakening of the power among the nobles and the monasteries, and a dramatic shift from effective Chinese control to an explicit Soviet monopoly. However, the situation that eventually played out, dependent largely upon the previously unseen sociopolitical and implementation problems involved in the process of collectivisation, resulted in the destruction of the national infrastructure, due primarily not to practical but to ideological forces. Thus, by 1934, the leftist anti-religious policies had not only wiped out the monastic population as described below, but it had crippled the

¹¹⁸ Murphy, 120.

¹¹⁹ ₮ is the sign for the Mongolian currency, the *tögrög*. At this point, the *tögrög* had been linked to, and was at parity with, the ruble.

monastic economy, and this had a catastrophic effect due to the importance of monastic culture, to Mongolia as a whole.

The figures for monastic livestock holding alone speak eloquently to the level of expropriation between 1927 (prior to the implementation of the five-year plan) and 1934. Thus, the five types of nomadic livestock held by the monasteries (and, we should be aware, successfully – albeit not in a way favorable to leftist ideologists – herded by laypeople) declined so that, by 1934, 10.36% of camels, 0.09% of horses, 0.04% of cattle, 0.06% of sheep and 0.07% of goats, and thus 0.06% of all livestock holdings had been removed and either collectivised or destroyed.

As I say, these figures are eloquent in themselves. The implications, however, for the society in which the monasteries were placed – and, whether this relationship was generally good or bad is a matter of opinion, and a matter of shifting fortunes moreover – were socioeconomically and socioculturally devastating. Even those herders and monks whose life could be said to have improved during these years – whether due to an increase in personal freedom or fiscal amelioration – were broadly affected by these policies, due to collectivisation and to the increase in centralisation.

One of the most influential and able of the senior MPR leaders, Gendun, spoke out at the Seventh Great Hural in 1934, pointing out the deficiencies in planning and the gulf between the principles on which the five-year plan was constructed and the political and economic reality of Mongolia in 1930. The famine of 1931-2, he suggested, was in part caused by the elimination of private trade, and to this we must add the loss in confidence which was growing in response to the worsening fiscal and social climate, in addition to severe inflation. This loss in confidence manifested in many ways, but possibly the most

shocking was the mass-slaughter of seven million head of livestock over the first three years of collectivisation, in direct rejection of that policy¹²⁰.

Gendun, who was eventually liquidated by Choibalsan in 1937, was unstinting in his criticism of the five-year plan. One of his most significant comments was that, with the imposition of increasingly draconian control over the monasteries, local administrators were effectively left to interpret the laws as they pleased. Such lack of consistency resulted in even less confidence in, and respect for, the law and those administering it among the Mongolian people.

In short, then, the five-year plan was based upon the unrealistic ideas of Soviet planners who were ignorant of the nature of Mongolia, and it resulted in social chaos, economic meltdown and a devastating famine. It is arguable that Gendun was only able to air his criticisms due to his seniority, and even his seniority could not protect him indefinitely. The plan was scrapped in 1934, collectivisation was quietly dropped, and the creation of state farms and workers' coöperatives was abandoned. Mongolia was left in a parlous state, leftist elements were purged, Stalin – principally through Choibalsan – retained his influence, and for a while the political repression of religion was relaxed.

So far as the Soviet-imposed anti-religion polices were concerned, criticism such as Gendun's had a positive effect. Nonetheless, with the expropriation of monastic holdings underway, it was neither possible, nor perhaps desirable (especially for the newly-liberated serfs and junior monks, a large minority of whom would most probably have been placed in their monasteries by their family for economic, rather than spiritual, reasons) to reestablish Buddhism at its previous level. Over the past decade, scholars such as Sanday , Kendall and Kaplonski have sought to reveal the extent of the anti-religious purges, ostensibly

¹²⁰ Similar demonstrations of disaffection with the policy of collectivisation had occurred in the Soviet Union, especially in other nomadic societies such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

initiated against Buddhism but which also focussed on shamanism, which took place during the 1930s, but mostly in the eighteen months between late 1937 and early 1939.

What is clear in this regard is that the first wave of suppression was a response to uprisings in Ulanom against collectivisation, initiated by monks but with participants drawn also from the herding community. In subsequent years, the increase in governmental control over the monasteries increased gradually and forcefully, and from 1933 agents were placed in monasteries to ensure that the new anti-religious legislation was being followed. These included a ban on the search for reincarnate lamas (a cultural and religious necessity in Mongolian Buddhism) and on the ordination of children. Moreover, in an attempt to separate the senior monks from the juniors, the latter were informed that they were not obligated to obey the former, and were encouraged to join guilds (*artels*) and to accept low-ranking jobs within the state machinery.

During this time, the government began to investigate the behavior of certain lamas, with a view to placing them on trials in legal processes akin to the show trials held in the Soviet Union. The nature and the history of these trials is well covered by Kaplonski, whose research focusses upon "the justification of violence, the prelude to violence rather than the violence itself."¹²¹

The violence, however, was pervasive and, from 1936, not only were families with fewer than four male children forbidden from sending any of them to be ordained as a monk, but monks – in express contravention to their vows – were forced to do military service. Having transformed the monasteries from having the biggest financial stake in Mongolia in the early 1930s, to having, as we have already seen, 0.06% of the country's total stock, the government now began to offer communist propaganda to junior monks, specifically through the offer of such necessities as medical treatment.

¹²¹ Christopher Kaplonski, "Prelude to violence: show trials and state power in 1930s Mongolia." *American Ethnologist* Vol.35 No.2 pp.321-337, *passim*.

There are many conflicting figures regarding the extent of the annihilation of the Mongolian monastic community during the 1930s, but what is true is that by the end of 1938, the great majority of monks had been forced to disrobe, most of the senior monks had been murdered, and all but a few of the monasteries had either been closed or destroyed.

And so the effect of the MPR's implementation of Soviet policies, with regard both to economics and religion, was certainly transformative, yet it left Mongolia not only increasingly dependent upon the Soviet Union (which had not, as Gendun himself had pointed out, even begun to meet its export commitments to Mongolia) but also semi-collectivised and, notwithstanding the social problems which had been integral to monastic rule, peculiarly unconvinced by the tenets of atheism, yet still very much a nation and a people committed to the tradition of nomadic culture.

An Overview of Mongolian Literature during the Stalinist Era

The adoption of Maxim Gorky's term (though ultimately ascribed to Stalin) socialist realism in Mongolia followed quickly on the heels of its general adoption within the Soviet Union. In May 1934, *Pravda* (and, soon thereafter, its Mongolian equivalent *Ünen*) published the following definition of the term:

*Socialist realism, the basic method of Soviet artistic literature and literary criticism, demands truthfulness from the artist and a historically concrete portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development. Under these conditions, truthfulness and historical concreteness of artistic portrayal ought to be combined with the task of the ideological remaking and education of working people in the spirit of socialism.*¹²²

¹²² *Pravda*, 6 May 1934, cited in Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet public culture from revolution to Cold War*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 108.

In August of 1934, the first Congress of Soviet Writers was so influential that, for the first time, literature and its writers entirely occupied the pages of *Pravda*. The congress sought to redefine culture, and by its end, poetry was defined by the work of writers such as Pushkin, Nekrasov and Shevchenko, rather than by that of modernist writers, such as those in the USA and Western Europe, whose spread and influence required the type of transnational individualism that was anathema to Soviet culture.

The imposition of socialist realism as a cultural norm within the Soviet Union resulted, and the radical shrinking of what might define Soviet culture, created a community of artists who opposed the official view, writing “for the drawer” and defining the artist, as Brooks says, as “witness, victim and preserver of memory.”¹²³ While the idea of “memory” had different implications from culture to culture and from nation to nation, the importance of nomadic tradition in Mongolia – as among Siberian, Kazakh and Kyrgyz communities – meant that, in Mongolia, writers in opposition became “preserver[s] of memory” in a specific way, and tied to the particular issues discussed in the previous two chapters.

The list of writers killed (or who died in circumstances which might be described as compromising) during 1937 and 1938 includes the large majority of the leadership of the Mongolian literary community. Three of the most important victims – D. Natsagdorj, S. Buyannemeh and M. Yadamsüren – had all somehow been closely involved with the MPRP during the first decade following the revolution.

It should be said that, much as many writers and artists in the Soviet Union – one thinks of Malevitch, Rodchenko and Tatlin and the poets of the Zaum and OBERIU groups – were closely involved with the development of ideology during the first years following the revolution, so the leading Mongolian writers took a lead in the implementation of theory as it related to art and culture, but also in terms of the new society. Choibalsan, of course,

¹²³ Brooks, 124.

had successfully managed to keep Mongolia independent from the Soviet Union, which allowed a certain level of creative and cultural autonomy among the writers and intellectuals. Nonetheless, it was already clear in the late 1920s, with the coming of collectivisation and a greater focus on Moscow, that the Mongolia celebrated in the work of writers such as Buyannemeh and Natsagdorj was vulnerable, yet still writers such as these chose to focus their energy upon the Party's cultural organs, such as Huvisgalt Uran Zohiol ("Revolutionary Literature").

In a poem published in 1937, ostensibly to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, Ts Tsedenjav mounted a savage attack on the leading lights of Mongolia's literary world:

*Buyannemeh has disgraced poetry with his name, and
Ayush has broken the stage with his lies.
Yadamsüren has made love poems Chinese, and
Sanjid has rendered journalism tasteless.*

It seems that Buyannemeh's crime had been to promote the Mongolian style of reading poetry, a dramatic style not unlike the musical Sprechstimme. Ayush had offended by focusing his creative energy on poetry. Yadamsüren's new approach to love poetry was being criticised as overly Chinese and not sufficiently Mongolian, and Sanjid was perceived as being more interested in money than in journalistic ethics. None of these seems per se to have been ill-founded: indeed, Buyannemeh's melodramatic style had been criticised by his peers¹²⁴, while Yadamsüren had himself acknowledged his creative debt to Manju¹²⁵ poetry, which had also influenced writers of the middle and late nineteenth century, such as the poet and early exponent of the Mongolian novel V Injannashi. However, it is not so

¹²⁴ This said, the Mongolian declaratory rendition of poetry is unusual and, to my ears, sometimes overblown.

¹²⁵ The Manju Qing dynasty had ended in 1911.

much the validity or otherwise of these attacks, as the fact that they should have been made at all of these writers.

The fate of these writers played itself out over a period of some two years, beginning with the harassment of Natsagdorj. Having been sent to Germany and the USSR between 1925 and 1929, he had been considered sufficiently revolutionary to have been made in 1930 both secretary of the Mongolian Revolutionary Writers' Union and the literary editor of the Mongolian Revolutionary Youth League's newspaper *Zaluuchuudin Ünen*¹²⁶. However, as the 1930s rolled by, Natsagdorj began to attract negative criticism for his poetry and stories, which were considered to be not revolutionary enough. Unlike Natsagdorj, S Buyannemeh had been deeply involved with the development of revolutionary politics right from the early 1920s. Not only had he been the editor of the Party newspaper *Ardin Ünen*, but he also held a number of positions within the Party hierarchy, finally becoming chairman of the MPRP's Ulaanbaatar committee in 1926.

Buyannemeh was suspected of involvement in the case of S Danzan, who had been executed in 1923 for the crimes of hampering Mongol-Soviet¹²⁷ friendship and of engaging in business with China. He was also accused in 1932 of referring to Stalin as "a madman" (*galzuu*). These developments came to a head in 1937¹²⁸ when he was named as one of 115 people accused of counterrevolution, right deviation and of spying for the Japanese. He was arrested on September 11 and executed on October 27¹²⁹.

In his 1961 article "The Standard Poetic Form of the 1940s and 1950s and the Reasons for its Adoption," B. Yavuuhulan, to whose poetic work we shall turn in the next

¹²⁶ This is the young people's version of the Party newspaper *Ardin Ünen* ("The People's Truth".)

¹²⁷ This despite the fact that both he and Danzan had successfully been sent to Moscow in January 1922 for the Congress of Toilers of the East.

¹²⁸ In the interim, he had been awarded in September 1935 the title "State Meritorious Literary Worker" by the State.

¹²⁹ The Mongolian Supreme Court announced on November 16 1962 that this evidence had been falsified, thus reinstating Buyannemeh.

chapter, gives a precise account of the moment when the focus of Mongolian letters shifted towards encomia concerning the revolution and in particular Marshal Choibalsan. Yavuuhulan writes¹³⁰: “Suddenly, in the second 1938 issue of the journal ‘The People’s Cultural Road’ [*Ündesnii soyolin zam*], numerous poems were published praising Choibalsan. [...] Before this issue of the magazine, Choibalsan’s name had not shown up in poems, although there had been poems concerning Sühbaatar¹³¹. Not only did the work published in this edition feature for the first time the names of Choibalsan and the Dotood Yam, but the laudatory way in which their work was described was somewhat awkward.”

Yavuuhulan’s account is noteworthy for its specificity, and it would indicate that, although coinciding with the ongoing purges of so-called “anti-revolutionaries,” in the form of intellectuals and monastics, whilst at the same time focusing upon and emphasising the personality of Choibalsan and the work of his Dotood Yam, the MPRP had decided that this would be the moment at which a new cultural path would be forged. And, from this moment forward, the official literary output of Mongolian writers took a definitive turn, and the literary model which developed – which Yavuuhulan characterised as “suggesting that Choibalsan had, through his own strengths and abilities, singlehandedly made the discoveries which had in fact been made by the people’s revolution of 1917” – held sway until 1959 (only two years before this essay was written), creating what Yavuuhulan describes as “severe obstacles for the development of poetry.”¹³²

¹³⁰ B. Yavuuhulan *Selected Poems*, (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture, 2009), 90-91. All translations are my own.

¹³¹ D. Sühbaatar (1896-1921) the de facto leader of the 1921 Revolution, although there is evidence that his position was no greater than that of any other of the principal revolutionaries.

¹³² Yavuuhulan, 91.

Thus it was then that Mongolian literature – and Mongolian society in general – entered into the period in which “the cult of one man”¹³³ was the norm. 1939 marked the outer limit of the “purges” conducted by the Dotood Yam at Choibalsan’s instigation, and the period which now began resulted not so much in the death of writers and intellectuals, but in their silencing. The practical manifestation of this was simply that no writer could be published whose work did not conform with the explicit MPRP guidelines for poetry.¹³⁴ The result is that, having lost writers such as Natsagdorj and Buyannemeh¹³⁵, those who controlled Mongolian letters now raised up the likes of L. Tsend-Ochir, D. Sengee and B. Baast, who appear merely to have been apologists for the very régime which had eliminated many of the first-rate writers.

It is not difficult to caricature this literature as being unremittingly dull and quite lacking in artistic skill and emotional depth, and to read books such as the standard Mongolian work on the literature of this period¹³⁶ might suggest this as an accurate analysis. This text, for instance, cites Sengee’s “Berlin Gravemarker” (*Berlini yodor*) as one of the most notable poems from the early period¹³⁷, describing it as “showing the desires of our people and expressing faith in how the Red Army had changed from what it had been during

¹³³ This term – *neg хүнийг тахиж шүтэх явдал* – has similarly disturbing overtones in both languages.

¹³⁴ I have recently been trying to ascertain the extent to which writers circulated work not approved by the Party, whether in handwritten MSS or in samizdat versions. As yet, I have discovered no information, although I suspect that there was a healthy, if careful, group of writers doing precisely that, and throughout this period.

¹³⁵ To these two we could add, among others, the playwright Sh. Ayush, the monk-poet G Ser-Od and the poet and short story writer M. Yadamsüren.

¹³⁶ P. Horloo, S. Luvsanvandaan, Ts. Mönh and D. Tsend, *Mongolin Orchin Üyeiin Uran Zohiolin Tovch Tüüh (1921-1965)*, (Ulaanbaatar, 1968.)

¹³⁷ There are two periods in the 1938-1959 catchment, being defined by the First Writers’ Congress of 1948, which resolved that “the themes of our contemporary poems should be Lenin and Stalin, the great leaders of the October revolution, Sühbaatar and Choibalsan, who spearheaded our own Mongolian people’s revolution, the firm friendship between the Mongolian and Soviet peoples, their labor, their military life and their characteristic natures.” Thus literature in the second decade, between 1948 and 1959 (although perhaps slightly earlier, following Krushchev’s speech against Stalin in spring 1956), was marked by specific themes.

the early part of the Second World War.” Indeed, during the early 1940s of course, the Red Army – assisted by troops from countries within, as well as allied to, the Soviet Union – was involved in the war against Germany and its allies, and so it is perhaps not surprising to read poetry such as Ch Chimed’s “The Germans Perish at the Hands of the SSSR” (*Darhan SSSR yalj dainch german sönöv*):

*On the top of every flag,
on the fringe of every standard,
at the center of every statue
in the sockets of every man’s eye,
you are shining there,
you are happily smiling there, my
Victory, awaiting love
from our hearts, greetings to you!*

Chimed’s poetry tends very much towards these themes, especially those works written during the 1940s. This is not poetry characterised by a broad vision, nor by intellectual depth. But it is very much in keeping with the spirit of the united front, which the Soviet Union and its allies wished to show during the war, and as such can be seen as exemplary of the poetry written at the time.

One of the reasons for Sengee’s success during the war years was his powerful, though sentimental, poems about the love between soldiers at the front and their sweethearts at home. In her 1970 book on literature in the first four decades after the revolution, the Russian Mongolist Ludmilla Gerasimovich expresses admiration of Sengee’s famous poem “Holiday Night” (*Bayarin shöno*) from the Soviet point of view: “During World War II, Sengee’s verses about constant love and faithfulness in the face of wartime separation enjoyed great popularity. There were verses and songs about the separation of girls from their beloveds, the waiting for a meeting, the anguish of it all. Revealing the features of a lyric hero, the poet showed that his personal and civic feelings were inseparable. This military lyric is forthright and poetic, although inherent in it is the

monotony of common lyric situations and literary devices."¹³⁸ This is the same Sengee, we should realise, who had described Choibalsan as "rain falling on parched ground, and sun upon a parched landscape in winter" in his paeon to mark the 25th anniversary of the revolution.¹³⁹

Thus, it was that the first decade following the deaths of Natsagdorj and Buyannemeh produced poetry to encourage the troops and the Mongolian people in their support of the USSR, and to establish Choibalsan and the Dotood Yam as the principal forces in Mongolian society. Following the First Writers' Congress in 1948 (cf footnote 17) and its declaration of prescribed themes for literature in the postwar years, we can see the extent to which Mongolian letters stagnated and became hidebound to these strictures. It should be said that the specific list of themes in the Congress' declaration was created partly because the traditional poetic themes of love, nomadic life and the Mongolian landscape were not socialist enough, did not sufficiently focus the reader's mind upon the revolutionary struggle¹⁴⁰. Thus it was that the human and psychological elements of poetry were lost, especially as the 1940s gave way to the 1950s.

During the 1950s, the renewals of that first Mongolian Writers' Congress continued to emphasise its decisions. Thus it was that younger poets and writers came to the fore, addressing much the same material as had been addressed by the likes of Chimed, Sengee and Tsend-Ochir in the previous decade.

Besides his almost exact contemporary Yavuuhulan, Ts. Gaitav (1929-1979) was the leading poet and cultural critic of his generation. Right from the first, Gaitav's output was exclusively patriotic and partisan: he was, in many ways, the natural successor to Sengee,

¹³⁸ Ludmila K.Gerasimovich (trans Members and Friends of the Mongolia Society), *History of Modern Mongolian Literature (1924-1964)*, (Bloomington IN: The Mongolia Society, 1970), 146.

¹³⁹ This is taken from a longer analysis of Sengee's statement in Yavuuhulan, 92.

¹⁴⁰ See Gerasimovich, 130.

although Gaitav chose not to address the more traditional themes at all. Yavuuhulan, on the other hand, immediately saw that there were problems with the nature of Mongolian poetry at the turn of the 1950s. Indeed, the “severe obstacles” of the literature which defined the Choibalsan cult, which he described in his essay cited above, were such that it became impossible for him to write the traditional Mongolian lyrics which he felt drawn to write. And so he took to writing patriotic verse, which he himself described as the “parachute” (*shüher*) under whose protection he was able to develop his own style.¹⁴¹

To read Gerasimovich’s parallel account of these two writers¹⁴², however, offers perhaps a more realistic understanding of how the MPRP might have understood the two writers’ development. Of Gaitav, she writes “[He] is the bard of the new Mongolia. His patriotic emotions are nurtured on the grandiose accomplishments of the times, his poetry is permeated with the dream of Communism as a real, realisable goal....Gaitav’s poetic hero dedicates himself totally to high civic goals and sees therein the purpose of his life which he follows without waivering...”.

Gerasimovich’s analysis of Yavuuhulan, on the other hand, is especially significant when we consider that his early work is today regarded as both thoughtful and powerful examples of youthful writing. “As a whole,” she writes, “the verses in the first collections are far beneath their author’s possibilities. This is to be explained first by the fact that Yavuuhulan was a young author, and by the fact that in taking the theme of patriotism that was greatly popular in the 50’s, he attempted to solve it with the genre of publicistic poetry which was traditional for that period. This form did not coincide with the nature of the poet’s talents, and he seemed to be singing with someone else’s voice.” I hope it will

¹⁴¹ These comments on Yavuuhulan come from email exchanges and discussions with his principal student G Mend-Ooyo.

¹⁴² Gerasimovich, 212-223 (Gaitav) and 223-232 (Yavuuhulan).

become clear that Gerasimovich's analysis is at best misguided and at worst simply propaganda against a troublesome voice.

The stark contrast between these analyses can really only be seen from reading a representative sample of both writer's works, as for instance those offered by Gerasimovich¹⁴³. As exemplars of Mongolian poets' creative work during the 1950s, however, we can see that Gaitav and Yavuuhulan represent two significant trajectories. Gaitav, as the successor of Sengee and the other patriot poets of the 1940s, seeks in his work to promote the new Mongolia, a land and people seeking to benefit from its deep association with the Soviet Union. Yavuuhulan's focus, on the other hand, is very much to revive the literary tradition of Natsagdorj and Buyannemeh, which itself was a development of the work of the nineteenth century writers such as Injannashi, Danzanravjaa and Sanday.

While it is not possible to compare the work of two writers by means of single poems, such an approach can show some of the central ideas which defined their work. Gaitav's epic poem "The Song of Sükhe Bator" is ostensibly a long biographical poem about the revolutionary leader Suhbaatar, who had died in 1923, but it is clearly in fact a poem written to inspire and develop the relationship between Mongolia and the Soviet Union. In Gerasimovitch's translation¹⁴⁴:

*Is the current of the Orkhon
Visible
In the roaring Angara?
No! they have joined
Forever –
The two stormy rivers.
The same way
The Mongolis and Russians
Have joined their dreams.*

¹⁴³ For a general overview of the entirety of Yavuuhulan's work, see also Yavuuhulan 2009 and Wickham-Smith 2010.

¹⁴⁴ See the discussion of this poem on Gerasimovitch, 218-219.

This poem – as is much of Gaitav's work – is of interest because it shows how he was able to use the central ideas of Mongolian traditional literature for the benefit of the new society. Unlike Sengee and the writers of the earlier post-revolutionary period, Gaitav was less constrained in the late 1950s by the requirements of socialist realism, such as the lessening of the importance of the natural world, and was able to produce works which used Mongolian themes to promote, as in this case, the relationship between Mongolia and the Soviet Union and the achievement of Sühbaatar and the other revolutionary heroes.

In fact, the development of socialist literature shows with especial clarity the way in which writers were beginning to seek compromise, between the desire to make a new society with the help of, although not incorporated into, the Soviet Union and the equally powerful desire to remain true to their Mongolian heritage and traditions and sensibilities. The decade beginning in the late 1930s was largely defined by Choibalsan's purges and, subsequently, by the war, whereas the years from 1948 to about 1957 revealed the influences of the friendly relationship with the Soviet Union and, following Stalin's death in 1953, the easing of censorship and the highly repressive control to which the arts had been subject.

Choibalsan died in January 1952, on a visit to Stalin in Moscow. Stalin died in March 1953, and three years later the new General Secretary Nikita Krushchev revealed the extent of his brutality. This statement brought forth a period of relaxation in Mongolia, as it did throughout the Soviet bloc, which lasted until the replacement of Krushchev with Leonid Brezhnev in 1964. It should be made clear that Gerasimovich's book was originally published in 1962, and so she does not reflect the repression orchestrated by forces responsible to the Mongolian leader Yu Tsedenbal, which followed Brezhnev's assumption of power.

That notwithstanding, even during the late 1950s, however, critics and writers were strongly encouraged to promote themes of socialist realism. Horloo et al. (1968) points out

that "in supporting the idea that 'our literature is the mirror of revolutionary truth,' writers have strong empathy with the blood and guts struggle of the people, and it is this strong empathy which reveals the gravity and beauty of the waves of thought within the human mind."¹⁴⁵ Despite this passage's appeal to the human spirit, it is anodyne and vague enough to allow most any interpretation in terms of literary praxis. Taking Gerasimovich's analyses of Gaitav and Yavuuhulan, it would allow for the former's emotional patriotism as well as for the way in which the latter's traditional approach deals with the experience of the people¹⁴⁶.

In fact, the work of Horloo and other literary scholars of the 1960s indicates another important avenue, along which the literature of this period can be analysed. Unlike contemporary western literary criticism, the criticism undertaken by Mongolian journalists was an excellent gauge of a given author's or work's adherence to socialist principles. From a cursory overview of the literature available to me¹⁴⁷, it would seem that it was the critics who gradually, during the 1950s, began to control literature and to steer it towards the MPRP's socialist future. Before this, writers such as Sengee and Chimed had tended to develop their themes along lines very much in keeping with the Party view, but with the new leaderships of Krushchev and Tsendenbal, Mongolian critics began to detect a dissipation of revolutionary energy and came to think it their job to redirect the literary arts.

Conclusion

The concatenation of the collectivisation and destruction of the nomadic livestock tradition, the suppression of religious practise, the censorship of literature and the murder

¹⁴⁵ Horloo et al., p488.

¹⁴⁶ See for instance Yavuuhulan's long poem of 1960, "Song of a Penny" (Yavuuhulan, 91-99).

¹⁴⁷ There is copious material in books such as Horloo et al. (1968), although much of it is repetitive, dealing with the general themes which have been touched on in this paper – such as patriotism, love, the socialist reponse to the natural world, the war.

of many of the country's most prominent writers and cultural figures resulted, as I have shown, in a period of desperation and confusion among the majority of Mongols. While the literary scene was in the main confined to Ulaanbaatar, nonetheless the impact of the political changes was felt by the population at large.

While the 1940s and 1950s were in no way as socioeconomically calamitous as the 1930s had been, nonetheless they were not, as we have seen, good days for Mongolian literature. As the likes of Sengee prepared to hand over the reins of official culture to the likes of Gaitav, writers such as Yavuuhulan were, by the mid-1950s, despite the death of Stalin and his discreditation throughout the Soviet world, only slowly feeling able to develop a plan through which Mongolian nomadic culture, and its literary tradition in particular, might be revived and reinvigorated by the new thaw in censorship.

In Part II, I will show the way in which Yavuuhulan initially prepared the soil for this revival, and how his students Dashbalbar and Nyamsüren continued his work, alongside Mend-Ooyo, who was already, during the 1970s, conceiving and writing parts of what would become Altan Ovoo.

PART II

CHAPTER 4

Themes in the Poetry of B. Yavuuhulan and Their Influence upon Post-Stalinist Mongol Literature

From the end of the 1950s until his final years, the poems and songs which Yavuuhulan wrote can be seen as the highest achievement of twentieth century Mongolian poetry. The teachers from whom he learnt were poets of the Mongolian people – Injinashi, Gulirans, Ravjaa and Natsagdorj. The very best of traditional Mongolian poetry, the gentle melody of the east and the free expression of poetry in the west were amazingly conducive to Yavuuhulan's poetry and enriched its world.¹⁴⁸

The sociohistorical background presented in the first three chapters is central to an understanding of that critical moment which Mongolian literature had reached by the time of Stalin's death in March 1953. The death in 1937 of Natsagdorj, and the executions of Genden and Amar, had ushered in a period of repression in Mongolia which enveloped and constricted its cultural life as much as its political and economic development. As we have seen, writers were forced to compose paeans to Stalin and Lenin and to the revolution, and to denounce and work against counterrevolutionary activity at all levels¹⁴⁹. The work of writers such as Sengee and Gaitav – who, while undoubtedly skilled craftsmen, were so sycophantic to the Party that their work was thereby both artistically and culturally devalued – tended to present Mongolian society in a way which was at once unrealistic (in its glorification, for instance, of the leaders and ideals of the communist project) and brutally

¹⁴⁸ From G. Mend-Ooyo "Yavuuhulangiin tungalagshuulagch uyanga," unpublished text. My translation.

¹⁴⁹ The literary arts being historically so important within Mongol culture, as indeed they were in pre-revolutionary Russia, poets were seen as one of the most important forces in the promotion of socialist philosophy and praxis. Thus, Natsagdorj was lauded on his return from Germany as a powerful new voice for Mongol literature because he introduced to it an intellectual European influence. That influence, however – as, for instance, the constructivists in the early Soviet Union – fell out of favor with the MPRP because its results were radical in a way which ran counter to radicalism as defined by the Politburo.

perverse (in its relentless encomia of the Soviet Union and the heroic proletariat). Thus it was that this period of repression resulted in a general trivialisation and devaluing of culture and the arts and, correlatively, of the people's spirit, much as the collectivisation of the herds and the purge of religion had resulted in a devaluing, not only of the nomadic lifestyle, but equally of the economic, social and spiritual foundations upon which it was founded.

The following two chapters will focus on the literary background against which *Altan Owoo* can most profitably be viewed. The situation which pertained in Mongolian letters in the years prior to Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin's cult of policy and personality was gradually relaxed, and an opening appeared, in which writers were permitted a broader scope and vision, were encouraged to explore new ideas and so to expand the Mongolian cultural vista.

I will begin in this chapter by showing how the journalist and poet B. Yavuuhulan's own background, born the son of a hunter into a nomadic community in the west of Mongolia, shaped both his work and the outlook which came to define the movement which he initiated. The next chapter will present the early poetry of Yavuuhulan's three principal students – Nyamsüren, Mend-Ooyo and Dashbalbar – and how their work responded to Yavuuhulan's influence, absorbed it and subsequently developed along several differing trajectories¹⁵⁰.

Begziin Yavuuhulan was born into a nomadic family in 1929 at Tasarhai, near the holy mountain of Otgontenger¹⁵¹. His father was a hunter and it was partly under his

¹⁵⁰ Much of the material in these two chapters has been developed from Simon Wickham-Smith, "Nomadic Influence in Contemporary Mongolian Poetry: B. Yavuuhulan (1929-1982) and the *Shine handlaga*" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Washington, 2010.)

¹⁵¹ This mountain, the highest peak (3905m) of the Hangai range, is situated in Zavkhan Province in western part of Mongolia.

influence that Yavuuhulan developed the deep understanding of the natural world which appears in his work.

As we have already seen, the period during which Yavuuhulan grew up was one of great social and economic discord in Mongolia. The collectivisation program had an enormous impact, not only upon the herders as a community, but upon those who, like Yavuuhulan's father, used an understanding of the natural world to pursue his living. The ethos of the collective farm was one of centralisation and imposed frameworks, and not one of organic and nomadic hunting and herding. While Tasharhai was some distance from Ulaanbaatar, and while too the country's infrastructure was fairly chaotic, nonetheless the news during this time telling of the loss, not only of politicians who were seeking to resist Stalin's influence, not only of the majority of its monastic population, but also of several of its leading literary figures¹⁵², would have filtered into the countryside through a number of sources, so creating a sense of unease within the local community.

Yavuuhulan¹⁵³ began his career as a student in Moscow during the late 1950s, and it was clear to him at this time that the cultural and political thaw which was spreading through the Soviet Bloc would also touch Mongolia. One of the results of the political relaxation was that there was more opportunity to read and study the traditional literature. Most literate people could still read the old, vertical script, which had only recently been

¹⁵² Most significant of these was, of course, Natsagdorj. There seems to be no doubt that the massive stroke which is given as the official cause of his death was induced by pressure placed upon him from the highest levels.

In addition to Natsagdorj, Mongol letters also lost the great lyrical poet S Buyannemeh in 1937 and, three years later, the twenty-three year old G Ser-Od.

¹⁵³ The discussion which follows, concerning Yavuuhulan's attitude in promoting and establishing his ideas of tradition and innovation, is largely a result of discussions and emails with his student, the poet and cultural critic G. Mend-Ooyo.

replaced by an adaptation of the Cyrillic script¹⁵⁴, and thus it was that premodern writers such as Danzanravjaa began once again slowly to be readmitted to the canon¹⁵⁵.

Despite having become one of the figureheads of Mongolian literature in the period following Stalin's death, Yavuuhulan seems to have had no specific intention to create a new literary movement.¹⁵⁶ His primary aim, as one who had been raised on the poetry and themes of traditional literature, and who was passionate to express the Mongol cultural worldview through poetry, was to revive aspects of the literature which had been written in Mongolia before the revolution. This, he determined, would be done also so as to preserve the spirit of the ancestors, and the deep relationship between the people and the Mongol nutag, and he saw that this could best be expressed by himself and by the writers of his generation through the development and adaptation of the traditional forms. This was not a rejection of the present in favor of an older and more pastoral fantasy, as for instance with the Pre-Raphaëlite movement in nineteenth century English letters, but an acknowledgement of the constancy of the Mongol lineage and of the traditions of its nomadic society, as presented in earlier chapters.

¹⁵⁴ The vertical script (*Mongol bichig*), still used today in Inner Mongolia, was replaced in 1940 by an adapted Roman script, but this was scrapped in 1942 in favor of a similarly adapted Cyrillic script.

¹⁵⁵ The new wave of Danzanravjaa scholarship began during the late 1950s with the pioneering work of Ts.Damdinsüren, and his students D.Tsagaan and Ch.Altangerel, who worked primarily on the Mongolian and Tibetan versions of the poetry.

¹⁵⁶ The *shine handlga*, or "new tendency" with which Yavuuhulan would become associated, is a term initially coined by his teacher, the Russian poet Lev Oshanin (1884-1962). At some time in about 1960, when Yavuuhulan and D.Pürevdorj (1933-2010) were establishing their respective schools of poetry –Pürevdorj being a follower of Socialist Realism, and a student of Gorky, Mayakovsky and Demian Bedniy – Yavuuhulan invited Oshanin to present a talk to Party members and leaders of the cultural establishment at Ulaanbaatar's Eldev-Ochir Theater (now the home of the Mongolian Stock Exchange). During his speech, Oshanin described Yavuuhulan's ideas as representing a "new tendency" in Mongol literature, and it was from this that the moniker originated. Nonetheless, *shine handlaga* is not the name of a movement *per se*, but rather indicates a break from the Socialist Realism which had been the *de facto* literary style since the mid-1930s, and to whose tenets Yavuuhulan's main rival Pürevdorj adhered.

But not only was Yavuuhulan concerned to preserve and work within the tradition of the Mongol literary arts. He had also, during his time in Moscow, developed an interest in the literature of other cultures, and he spent time translating works from Russian¹⁵⁷ as well as translating Russian versions of Chinese and Japanese literature¹⁵⁸. Although his poetry shows the influence of foreign literature only in formal terms¹⁵⁹, his attitude to the literary world, and to Mongolia's place within that world, was remarkable for its openness and he was determined throughout his life to make connections outside the Soviet Bloc as well as within it¹⁶⁰.

The Main Themes of Yavuuhulan's Poetry¹⁶¹

In her study of Mongol literature between 1921 and 1964, the Russian scholar Ludmilla Gerasimovich explains that, in his early work, in which he "took the theme of patriotism, which was greatly popular in the 50s, [and] attempted to solve it with the genre of publicistic poetry which was traditional for that period," Yavuuhulan seemed to be "singing with someone else's voice."¹⁶² Yavuuhulan put it slightly differently, and referred to revolutionary literature as a "parachute" beneath which he could write the poetry which he sang in his own voice.

It could be argued that the single most important theme of Yavuuhulan's verse is love, that the love poems directed at women in his early work gives way to love poems directed at the landscape and natural history of Mongolia in his more mature work. Even

¹⁵⁷ He is particularly known for his translations of the poetry of Sergei Esenin.

¹⁵⁸ Yavuuhulan is credited with introducing the *haiku* form into Mongol literature.

¹⁵⁹ In addition to the haiku form, he also explored – if only through the obligatory, second-hand, Russian translation – the poetics of Latin American writers, the Bengali verse of Rabindranath Tagore, the *ruba'yi* style of Persian poetry and modernist free verse.

¹⁶⁰ The Mongol Academy of Poetry and Culture, led by Mend-Ooyo, is involved in the publication of translations from other languages into Mongol and in the establishment for a center for literary studies, to be named after Yavuuhulan, in Ulaanbaatar.

¹⁶¹ For the poems discussed here see Yavuuhulan.

¹⁶² Gerasimovich, 223.

his earliest of his poems written about women, he shows a particular psychological sensitivity. For instance, consider this short poem from 1959, "The Sound of a Silver Bridle:"

*I'm waiting for my lover to arrive,
the sound of horses' hooves pressed upon my heart.
Outside, the night is soundless, peaceful, and
the moon lights up the rafters.*

*Sleep has fled and, on my orphaned pillow,
I am snared by lovesickness.
And the dull sound of a silver bridle
brings happiness to my passionate heart.*

In these two verses, Yavuuhulan expresses the universal human emotion of desire, the expectation of the arrival of one's lover. But what is significant here is that the focus of the poem is in sound. Anyone who has spent time out on the Mongol steppe will be aware of the stillness of the night, how every sound is held, momentarily amplified upon the air. Similarly, with the longed-for sound of a horse's hooves here, and the actual sound of a silver bridle, Yavuuhulan places a universal human emotion in the specific ambit of Mongol nomadic experience.

The forces of love and nature work together throughout Yavuuhulan's early poetry to enhance one another. In both "I Love You" and "A Silver Autumn Morning," written respectively at the beginning (1955) and end (1968) of Yavuuhulan's early period, he expresses love simultaneously at several different levels, although the focus at this stage of his career is always a woman, whose image is served by, rather than coequal with, the natural world and, in both of these poems, the horse.

The first of these poems echoes, whether consciously or not, some of the lyrical poetry of Danzanravjaa. The idea of riding out with, or at least to meet with, a lover, and the distance (metaphorically or literally) of that lover from the poet, is a theme which lends itself to the nomadic framework. But "I Love You" appears to offer more than a superficial

echo of Danzanravajaa:, and I would argue that – as in the earlier poet’s ambiguity between romantic love and spiritual love – this poem seems to point to some level of transcendence (although, given the religious context of Mongolia during the mid-1950s, this might not constitute Buddhist poetry in the manner of Danzanravjaa’s poetry):

*Light the broad sky
in fresh springwater,
the depths of my heart
reflect your clarity.*

[...]

*I drop the reins
and my dappled grey ambles off.
You laugh slightly, and
I hang back a while.*

Here then there are subtle whispers, barely audible echoes of the tradition which Yavuuhan so admired. The love stories of Natsagdorj (“Dark Cliffs”) and Yadamsüren (“The Young Couple”), with their subplots of travel and arrival and mutual recognition, which were discussed in Chapter 1, are very clearly reflected in such poems as this. Equating the power of the natural world with the power of love, and tamed horses with (barely?) tamed love is an effective summoning up of previous spiritual and secular strains in Mongolian literature.

While I have sought to explain Mongol nomadic culture and literature from the point of view of observable phenomena – such as the landscape, livestock, nomadic movement and religious observance – there are, of course, aspects of emotional and romantic love, not so easily analysable, which result from the singular nature of the internal and external Mongol topographies. I have already mentioned how, in the work of poets touched to some degree by Tibetan literature, the love poetry written on and about the steppes and grasslands of Mongolia exhibits a special quality of loneliness and uncertainty which comes with the combination of unfriendly terrain and meteorology, and extremely long distances. We

have already seen this combination at work in Yadamsüren's story "The Young Couple," but it is also clear from much premodern literature, such as in certain of Danzanravjaa's poems, in V.Injannashi's nineteenth century fictionalisation of Chinggis Haan "The Blue Annals" (Köke Sudar), and even in older texts such as the poem of deep longing written by Queen Manduhai in the fifteenth century¹⁶³, that extreme distance and separation produces a poetry in many ways quite different from that composed in a more urban setting, where the exigencies of travel are not so pressing.

Yavuuhulan's work provides many such examples of this. "I Love You" is about a single moment of love, extended and brought into focus across sixteen lines. "A Silver Autumn Morning" – written thirteen years later, when Yavuuhulan was almost forty – is about a tense and gentle prelude to separation.

The refrain, which alters back and forth between the direct and the concessive¹⁶⁴, reveals how, in communicating his emotion to his horse, the speaker both propels and resists the coming separation:

*My love I'm going now
excites the horse's body.
In the clarity of a silver autumn
morning. I'll gallop away.*

Thus every second refrain, the thrill between the horse and the rider becomes an obstacle to the latter's remaining with his beloved. The fact that the final refrain, the final verse indeed, is the more direct version indicates an acceptance of the separation.

The story which develops around this uncertainty, however, is a story of what appears to be a destructive passion. The parallelism and variation throughout the poem – the horse freezing outside the ger, the contrast of warmth and cold when wrapped in a thin

¹⁶³ Translated in Tsog and Wickham-Smith, 29-30

¹⁶⁴ The alternative begins with the concessive – "though" – and there is a run-on between the second and third lines.

silk deel¹⁶⁵, the image of the silver morning light – creates an environment of great intimacy between the lovers, and between the narrator and his thoughts too, but also it emphasizes the sadness of separation and the journey for both people, one leaving and one staying, that is still to come.

It is important, however, not to see the relationship between the two lovers as the only intimate relationship in the poem. The companionship between a rider and his horse – a sine qua non within Mongol culture and, in many ways, the most significant and necessary relationship that a nomadic herder can have – is such that, as we see in Yavuuhulan's poem, the final exclamation of each refrain, and of the entire poem, is "I'll gallop away," addressed to the horse, to the narrator's lover, or (maybe most likely) to both.

The structure of "A Silver Autumn Morning" – the refrains and variations – provides Yavuuhulan with an elegant solution with which to express the human fears of separation and loneliness, and the specific fears moreover associated with a long journey over hazardous terrain. This latter is, in many ways, the most pressing concern here, and the promise of a future meeting – "On the day we meet, our stirrups will clash/We'll dismount at the door of the ger" – reminds us of the scenario in "The Sound of a Silver Bridle," which suggests a deliberate parallelism here too on Yavuuhulan's part.

As he grew older, Yavuuhulan began to write longer and more philosophically-driven poems about the natural world. In the late 1970s, he wrote several poems which focussed upon specific aspects of the nomadic life and its environment. In "Camels" (1977), he offers a celebration of "the ships of the desert/these famous camels," (italics Yavuuhulan's) who traverse the Gobi. What is unusual about this poem, however, is that there is almost no acknowledgement of the camels' interactions with humans. It is as though the poet is

¹⁶⁵ A traditional Mongol long jacket.

simply observing the camel, objectifying it almost as an image for the desert itself. Indeed, towards the end of the poem, we read:

*Without the desert, no camels, no camels would there be!
Without the camel, no desert, no desert would there be!*

And then, in the very next, the penultimate, stanza:

*Look then at the glimmering sky
in the distant, distant blue,
and watch the airplanes, floating
in the vice of the dark horizon!*

For the nomad in Yavuuhulan, this poem is not only a celebration of the camel. It is also a celebration of the nomadic life which the camel makes possible. The absence of humans is not absolute, after all, for we also read how

*The column of caravans drops tears
for the camel who carries days and years...*

But this in fact is a profound acceptance and realisation of the place within nomadic society (for which the caravan is a symbol) of the camel. The airplanes, held in "the vice of the dark horizon," carry people too, although this word "vice" is clearly meant to show how, their apparent freedom notwithstanding, they are bound for, and to, their specific destination, whereas the camel, and the caravan which it makes possible, is able to walk continually and in whichever direction it, and the people who follow it, wish.

It might seem a somewhat romantic cliché to contrast the natural freedom of a camel caravan with the fixed steel-plated focus of an airplane, but Yavuuhulan's point seems quite other than that simplistic notion. On the contrary, I feel that he – as many Mongol poets in previous centuries have celebrated the horse – is profoundly aware that the lifestyle of the nomad, and so the lifestyle of his biological and ethnic family through history, is dependent upon its place within, its dependence upon, and its preservation of, the natural environment. There is no doubt here that the camel is the subject and focus of

this poem, but the poet is also urging the reader to look at what the camel signifies for the people with whom it interacts. As we see in Davaa and Falomi's film *Die Geschichte vom weinenden Kamel*, there is an intimacy and regard for the camel among Mongol nomads which is as much to do with mutual dependency as with the specific needs for human sustainability¹⁶⁶.

In the same year, 1977, Yavuuhulan completed one of his most important poems, "My Verse, My Horse," in which he creates an intricacy of meaning, a knot of images in which he identifies himself with "verse" – "unresting sleep, unwearying exhaustion" – riding a horse "born, upright and slender, from my wisdom."

This poem appears to be something of a call to arms to the literary community. It is true that, at this time, Yavuuhulan's students were beginning to blossom as poets in their own right, members of the underground "Gal" ("Fire") group were beginning to develop individual voices, and the literary community in Mongolia – thanks in part to a sluggishness on the part of the Mongolian censors, in part to a new and educated artistic elite, now increasingly more aware of the international literary scene – was beginning to express itself in ways at once more innovative and more traditional, just as Yavuuhulan's idea had been during the 1950s..

The repetition of the first verse as the final verse is a common practise throughout Mongol poetry. By using this in "My Verse, My Horse," Yavuuhulan focuses upon the natural

¹⁶⁶ Yavuuhulan's corpus contains many poems which speak of the relationship between the nomadic people, their animals and the desert, and it is not possible here to treat each separately. However, in connection with Davaa and Falomi's film, I would offer the following lines from Yavuuhulan's 1964 poem "Gobi:"

*In the great cold of the open Gobi,
the women who sang among the dunes
cared for nothing
but the camels and the saxaul.*

world as micro- and macrocosm, and shows the similarity of its emotional life to that of humans:

*My verse, my horse, you and I
must sing until the flowers weep, glinting dew.
My verse, my horse, you and I
must sing until the moon, brimming tears, sleeps in the open
country.*

This recalls not only the deep feeling of nomadic Mongols for the natural world, it also indicates a level of intimacy which Yavuuhulan presumes between himself, his verse and the world which surrounds him. This could be seen as something akin to the European Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Blake or Novalis (or even to the nature-mystical tradition of Teresa de Ávila or Walther von der Vogelwiede), but I would suggest that this is more in keeping specifically with the Mongol tradition of spirituality as inseparable from nature and the cosmic order. Thus Yavuuhulan can make the flowers weep, can send the moon to sleep, with the beauty of (his) poetry.

There is a stronger link still in this poem with the Mongol worldview and with Mongol nomadic culture. In what again seems to be a battle-cry of sorts, Yavuuhulan speaks of the need to speak both for the nation and for the nation's culture:

*My verse, my horse, gallop quickly!
We need the distant land, where the horse's sinews show.
Again and again think of our people's call, and gallop on!
My horse, we need the field of the world!*

Here Yavuuhulan shows a practical understanding of equitation – only someone who had ridden over a long distance would have in mind the strain on his mount's legs – at the same time as he calls, on behalf of his own people (for all people?), for "the field of the world." The profundity of this vision – not dissimilar in scope and tone to Dashbalbar's 1980 poem "Love One Another, my People!" – is hidden within a common Mongol conceit of a journey on horseback, but the importance of this poem to the subsequent development of Mongol

letters cannot be downplayed, and it is frequently quoted by Mend-Ooyo and others whose careers have been shaped by the influence of Yavuuhulan and his students in describing the vision of modern Mongol letters.

We have seen how movement and emotion are linked in Yavuuhulan's poetry through the themes of horses, travel and both romantic and fraternal love. In terms of the inner journey, of the spiritual and the philosophical concerns through which we come to understand both our own lives and our interactions with others, Yavuuhulan tends – as in "My Horse, My Verse" – to focus upon the universal, rather than the intimate. However, in what is possibly Yavuuhulan's most famous poem, "Goat Peak," written in 1969, and dedicated "in loving memory of my father, the famous hunter, Begz," he uses a very specific image to open up a long philosophical discourse on the issues surrounding life and death, which he places, significantly, in the mouth of the hunter, his father.

"Goat Peak" takes its name from a mountain to where, according to local tradition, goats¹⁶⁷ climb at the end of their lives. As the poet's father, who has seen a goat there, who has first shared his discovery with his son the poet, tells the community, his voice "choking with sadness:"

*The way of animals is to die
once they are born!
A difficult mountain path
leaves their birthplace behind.*

The use of the word *amitan* here refers to animals, but it also, as with the word "animal" in English, refers also to human animals¹⁶⁸. This is clearly of some significance, since the hunter has seen a specific animal, a goat, and so his immediate opening up of the discourse

¹⁶⁷ Here the word which Yavuuhulan uses is *teh*, which refers to a male mountain goat.

¹⁶⁸ In Mongol Buddhist texts, the word *amitan* is used to translate the Tibetan *sems can*, which is frequently translated into English as "beings."

to encompass animals – and, by implication, humans too – throws the focus back upon his audience, and thereby upon Yavuuhulan’s readers.

As the poet’s father speaks, he describes¹⁶⁹ the way in which the goat, in its final days, climbs the mountains and “looks back then/at its life.” In some ways, then, his is an anthropomorphic presentation of the goat’s demise, but we should also bear in mind, as we saw with the camel, the physical and emotional proximity between the nomadic people and their environment. Indeed, as a hunter, the poet’s father would have had practical knowledge about the animal kingdom which could only have come from hours spent on the steppe in pursuit of prey.

The hunter ends his speech with an acknowledgement of loss, which the people sitting around him take up:

*“They say that, overcome by its horns,
it falls from the high peak.
They say that the colorful world
is then bereft.”*

*They all listened in silence to
my father’s words.
The old women of the camp, who held the goats dear,
dropped tears.*

Once again, it is the old women who respond most directly to the loss of the creature, and, while we might choose to speculate as to the specific cultural reasons for Yavuuhulan’s including this comment, the mixture of silence and weeping is nonetheless significant. It is not only the loss of the animal itself which is of grave importance, but – as with “Autumn Leaves” – it is the macrocosmic significance of this single event which resonates with the listeners and with the readers. The next stanza shows that the hunter himself was moved by what he had said:

¹⁶⁹ In fact, each of his statements ends with *gene*, which indicates something like “it is said.” So this is clearly a form of folk wisdom, which has been passed down to the hunter, maybe by his own family or maybe by other hunters.

*After this, my father
developed a tenderness.
For a while, he moved away
from the winter camp.*

The hunter has thus far been speaking of popular wisdom, and the goat which he had actually seen, however, had not yet died. Earlier in the poem, when the goat was first seen at Goat Peak, an eagle had appeared there, "circling the heights/guarding its nest." This eagle, as a bird of prey, is an indication of the natural cycle, of the goat's impending death, and its parenthetical presence before and after the hunter's speech can be seen to emphasise the various levels on which the natural cycle plays itself out.

When, finally, the eagle returns and is seen again, the hunter also returns to camp, where he sits, "drinking tea, smiling happily at what he saw." It is as though the world has somehow been returned to balance, to a sense of normalcy. The poet's parents confirm this, in lines which, beneath their hackneyed surface, further emphasise the inevitability and constancy of the process of life and death:

*Father said,
"Poor thing, he has gone the way of all things!"
"That's good, that's good, poor thing!"
said mother.*

And so, quickly, as though they had been waiting specifically for the goat to die, as though Yavuuhulan has no reason to prolong the story which he is telling, the poem comes to a close over its three final stanzas. In the penultimate stanza, there is an unremarkable moment of profound realisation:

*My father looked back
at Goat Peak.
"My homeland," he said
to himself.*

The phrase which I translate as “my homeland” is, in Mongol, *törson nutag mini*, which means literally “my homeland, where I was born.”¹⁷⁰ Is this perhaps a further reference to the cycle of nature, or a direct acknowledgement of his own mortality? It is hard to say for sure, of course, what Yavuuhulan – or his father – meant by this remark, but it seems fitting as a conclusion to a poem in which the realisation and process of death, perhaps the deepest mystery of nature, is pushed to the fore and expressed with such personal intimacy and social significance.

In concluding her discussion of Yavuuhulan, Ludmilla Gerasimovich says the following: “The virtue of Yavuuhulan’s poetry consists in the fact that it makes the reader think and is directed not to the superficial, but to the deep processes of the spiritual life of man.”¹⁷¹ In this brief treatment of the major themes of his work, I have not been able to address in depth his various stylistic and lexical innovations, but only the topics pertinent to the current study. Nonetheless, it is these very topics, which can be summarised as the fundamental relationship which takes place between nomadic herders and the environment in which they move, and the level of intimacy which Yavuuhulan bring to his treatment, which makes this body of work stand out against much of the work being produced by his contemporaries¹⁷² in the fifteen or twenty years beginning at the end of the 1950s.

One of the aspects of the nomadic literary tradition which was not rejected by Mongolian Socialist Realism was the interplay of alliteration and rhyme. Being rooted in the epic form common to central asian verse – the best example in Mongolian being the *Secret History of the Mongols* – the poetic form is structured within a framework known as *tolgoi/süül* (head/tail). This terminology, with its metaphorical reference to an animal’s

¹⁷⁰ It also recalls the titles of two more of Yavuuhulan’s famous poems, both composed in 1959, *Alag delhiid törsön mini uchirtai* (“Telling it is that I was born in the colorful world”) and *Bi haana törlöö be?* (“Where was I born?”).

¹⁷¹ Gerasimovich, 232. It should be remembered, however, that her book deals with the period 1921-1964, and so covers only Yavuuhulan’s early period.

¹⁷² For example M Tsedendorj (1932-1982) and S Erdene (1929-2000).

body, is rooted within a herding tradition. Thus there are long poetic texts where the same letter begins each verse, although in the modern era it is more common to have simple verse-to-verse alliteration, in which every line of a given verse begins with the same letter. The poem “Four Seasons” (“*Dörvön Uliral*”), for instance, by Yavuuhulan’s student D. Nyamsüren, contains sixty-four verses, each of them having two couplets, in which both lines (and sometimes the lines of both couplets) begin with the same letter, while every line of the poem ends with the word *saihan*¹⁷³.

One of the ways in which Yavuuhulan uses alliteration, together with internal and end rhyme, is to create subtle echoes within the text. He manages to work within the poetic tradition, while repeating, not entire stanzas, nor always consistently, certain lines and couplets in what are frequently unexpected places. The effect is not haphazard, and it seems sometimes that there are voices heard here other than the poet’s, as though others – the ancestors, perhaps – were repeating his thoughts.

In “Mongolian Verse,” Yavuuhulan contrasts the various artistic wonders of the world – the Taj Mahal, the Mona Lisa, Ethiopian dance – with “the ideas” of Mongolian poetry. Note that this is not Mongolian poetry *per se*, not the form or the language or the prosody, but rather it is everything that these elements seek to communicate. And this is what he describes as “something more.”

The way in which ideas weave themselves through the core of this poem renders it both structurally and sonically complex. But it is not so much what Yavuuhulan says

¹⁷³ Here is one verse as an example (in Cyrillic script, to show the visual impact. For those who don’t know the script, the word *saihan* is written сайхан):

Навч ганц нэг унах нь сайхан
 Нар толгодын цанаат гарах сайхан
 Сэв сэв салхи үүсэх сайхан
 Сэм сэмхэн хуй босох сайхан

directly about Mongolian verse – that it calls to mind great art, the love of women, the desire of men – as the effect that it has upon the listener and the reader.

*In the power of Mongolian verse,
in its singing of the beauty of women,
there is the key
to purify the mind.*

How realistic is it to speak in these terms about literature, though? For Yavuuhulan, and for many other Mongolian poets, poetry has a quite extraordinary, almost shamanic, ability to transform the heart, to transform reality. But it is also the way in which that which is unspoken can be spoken, in which that which is not perceived by the gross senses can be perceived. As we saw with the poet's father, explaining the way of death of goats and the meaning of Goat Peak, verbal expression, the sound and the meaning of words, do indeed provide "the key/to purify the mind."

But Yavuuhulan is still very clear that nature is in a different league from human art.

When he says,

*Though nature in its splendor
is in every aspect art,
it really does not chime
with human beauty.*

he is not denying that human art – his own included – has value and beauty. But nature is different, it produces female beauty, and since Yavuuhulan holds woman to be "the mother of beauty," so "beauty, better than all else/is gathered in ourselves."

Such a treatment of female beauty is, admittedly, problematic to western sensibilities, but the place of the mother in nomadic Mongolian culture, located in a far more direct relationship to the natural cycle than it is in our occidental urban culture, is such that the connection made by Yavuuhulan between nature's beauty and female beauty is entirely consequent.

By the end of the poem, Yavuuhulan has moved away from the mysterious “something more,” whispered to him by Mongolian verse. He chooses, instead, to acknowledge what Mongolian verse appears to have in common with these great works of art, especially with Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. It might be, of course, that he feels that a concrete example of human art conveys more successfully the idea which he wants to express, and this of course would tie in with his personal interest in translation, of presenting the world’s literary classics to Mongolian readers. But it could also be that the hints which he places in the center of this poem, to a more subtle, unspoken, intangible quality to which he believes Mongolian poetry approximates better than does that of other cultures, point to the limitation of the poet’s art and, from a more positive viewpoint, to the direct experience which is open to the individual alone, which comes from a clear apprehension of the place of humans within natural world and for which “the key/to purify the mind” is available.

Tradition and Innovation

In his introduction to the English translation of Yavuuhulan’s poetry¹⁷⁴, his student G. Mend-Ooyo writes that, “In his final years¹⁷⁵, he headed the poets’ section of the Mongolian Writers’ Union and organised a club for young poetry, and we, who were enthusiastic for contemporary poetry, worshipped him, and formed a circle around our teacher Yavuu. And our teacher Yavuu said that we should create our poems with no more and no fewer words than necessary, that they should be neither more sparse nor more dense than necessary,

¹⁷⁴ Yavuuhulan.

¹⁷⁵ Yavuuhulan died in 1982, at the age of fifty-three.

and that they should have rhythm and music. And he said that the principal job of the poet was to try to represent the inner form of the heart." (my italics)¹⁷⁶

As I have said before, it is not clear whether Yavuuhulan in fact wanted to create a new literary movement per se or whether he simply wished to take the opportunity granted by the political relaxation following Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin to start afresh and to use his influence within Mongol letters to revive the literature and return it to a semblance of the state it had been in before the purges of the 1930s. It is clear, however, that the result of his bringing young poets, such as Mend-Ooyo, under his wing and mentoring them closely and enthusiastically, exposing them anew to Mongol poetry as well as to the best work of foreign poets, was the education and honing of a group of writers – led by Mend-Ooyo, O Dashbalbar and D Nyamsüren – which would, with equal enthusiasm and determination, produce work which reflected both Yavuuhulan's own stylistic and thematic concerns, but which also allowed their own artistic sensibilities and aesthetic sense to process the texts which they were reading and the subjects with which they were concerned.

Gerasimovich speaks of Yavuuhulan's desire to "broaden the limits of traditional poetry"¹⁷⁷ and it is this I think which gives his poetry its particular appeal and interest. After all, Natsagdorj had returned from Germany with the short story form, which he proceeded to develop and inspire others also to employ, and Yavuuhulan too, in his advocacy of, and enthusiasm for, international poetry, was introducing into his own work, and encouraging his students likewise to explore, new approaches to style and diction and the treatment of thematic material.

¹⁷⁶ G Mend-Ooyo "Yavuuhulangiin tungalagshuulagch uyanga" (unpublished; my translation).

¹⁷⁷ Gerasimovich, 230

So it was that Yavuuhulan worked during the last twenty-five years of his life to revitalise Mongol poetry¹⁷⁸ and to arouse in his students a passion for that poetry, to express “the inner form of the heart.”

The revitalisation of the literary scene in Mongolia during the 1960s was welcomed by the older and younger generation of poets alike. The likes of Ts. Damdinsüren (1903-1986) and B. Rinchen (1905-1977), who had managed to avoid the religious and cultural purges of the 1930s, though they were already respected figures, were able to work with subjects or attitudes which previously might have been censored. Thus, Rinchen’s story “Bunia the Parachutist”¹⁷⁹ (Bunia shüherch), written in 1957, during the initial period of freedom, tells of a monk who dreams that he will one day fly, who secretly creates a parachute. The metaphorical implications of this story, from the point of view of Stalinist Mongolia, and even from the relative freedom of Mongolia in 1957, is clear, but it is also reminiscent of earlier psychologically complex texts, such as G.Ser-Od’s memoir *Mother’s Heart* (Ehni setgel¹⁸⁰) or the poetry and fiction of D.Natsagdorj.

Yavuuhulan’s contemporaries, in particular M. Tsendorj (1932-1982), and those – such as R. Choinom (1936-1979), D. Shagdarsüren (1939-1977) and D. Urianhai (b1940) – who were old enough to appreciate the freedoms of the post-Stalinist era, were well-placed to develop, alongside Yavuuhulan and with a mutually encouraging vision, those aspects of the literature with which they were personally most concerned. Thus Urianhai, for instance, was able to write from the very beginning highly experimental prose and philosophically abstruse poetry, drawing on his close relationship with his grandfather, who had been a shaman, and his deep interest in ontology and mystical spirituality.

¹⁷⁸ Yavuuhulan’s specific vocation was as a poet, but it should be noted here that he was committed also to the revitalisation and development of Mongol literature as a whole.

¹⁷⁹ Translated in Tsog and Wickham-Smith, 147-154.

¹⁸⁰ Ser-Od died in 1940, at the age of twenty-three. It is uncertain as to the cause of death. I have no date for *Mother’s Heart* (the title could also be translated as *Original Mind*), but I suspect it was written within the final two years or so of his life.

But the group which benefitted most from Yavuuhulan's advocacy and from his call – "My horse, we need the field of the world!" – was made up of those who were sufficiently young in the late 1950s so that their worldview could be formed free from the fear and sadness catalysed by the Stalinist era. This group constituted Yavuuhulan's students, those in whom he would invest time and energy, that his vision might be expressed through them, and that they might in turn integrate his vision and develop it in the context of their own work, thus following the trajectory which he himself had conceived for Mongolian letters.

The author of *Altan Ovoo*, G. Mend-Ooyo, was one of Yavuuhulan's principal students, and he – together with D.Nyamsüren and O.Dashbalbar – were the ones who worked with Yavuuhulan's ideas and who promoted and investigated them following his death in 1982, both to preserve his legacy and to expand the horizons of Mongolian literature. This chapter has presented an approach to understanding Yavuuhulan's personal philosophy and his approach to poetry. The next chapter will show how Nyamsüren and Dashbalbar worked, together and individually, with Yavuuhulan's ideas and what influence they had upon Mend-Ooyo's work lead up to the publication of *Altan Ovoo* in 1986.

CHAPTER 5

The Poetry of D. Nyamsüren and O. Dashbalbar during the 1970s and 1980s

*My distant mountain, silvercapped,
you have bound a century of centuries.
The lark sang in the silent wilderness.
The flowers were like showy young girls.
On the steppe, blue smoke from the ger,
I was raised close to the shining sun.
On the steppe, blue smoke from the ger,
I was raised close to the shining sun.¹⁸¹*

Having analysed Yavuuhulan's writing in the context of the Mongol literary and cultural tradition, and having seen also the effect of Soviet influence – and especially of Socialist Realism – during the Stalinist period, we can now turn to the milieu in which Mend-Ooyo developed his voice as a writer, in which he conceived *Altan Ovoo*.

In order properly to site Mend-Ooyo's work, to show how it relates to the writers of his generation to whom he was closest, we need in particular to look at the poetry and thought of Yavuuhulan's two other most influential students, Nyamsüren and Dashbalbar. Their work is at once more extreme than Mend-Ooyo's and, at the same time, consequent with it, and an analysis of their poetic and philosophical approach to the landscape, in particular how it relates to Mongol nomadic tradition, will help to frame Mend-Ooyo's ideas as presented in *Altan Ovoo*.

The careers of these two writers, and of Mend-Ooyo too, began to flourish during the 1980s. This was a time in Mongolia when, with the early deaths in 1982 of influential writers such as Yavuuhulan and M. Tsedendorj, and with the beneficent influence of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the literary scene began to bring forth new approaches and new

¹⁸¹ This is a song written by Dashbalbar as a young man.

movements. One of these, the Gal ("Fire") group, formed in secrecy during the years of censorship in the mid-1970s, was precipitated and revitalised in 1986 with the publication of Dashbalbar's book *Gol Us Namuuhun Ursana (The River Runs Gently*¹⁸²). The acronym GUNU became the name of a new and highly influential movement, with Dashbalbar as its nominal leader and spokesman. Indeed, as Dashbalbar's biographer H. Süglegmaa says, despite being very young even then, "he was able to be one of the leaders of his poetic contemporaries, due certainly to the poetry he was writing at that time."¹⁸³

As late as December 1995, when GUNU had become well-established amid the plethora of post-communist movements (many of them short-lived), one of its central aims was declared¹⁸⁴ to be "to preserve, in the orient generally, and specifically in Mongolia, the special qualities of Mongol poetry." We can see in this the clear influence of Yavuuhulan the teacher, as well as Yavuuhulan the poet, and its specific focus on preserving Mongol poetry within an oriental context is significant. We will see, especially in Dashbalbar's large body of work, how central to him was the Mongol people and the Mongol tradition, but we should not lose sight of the focus within Mongolian society of the Chinggisid "golden thread," and of the importance, both to it and to the idea of *nutag*, of the literary tradition.

Although Dashbalbar is the youngest of Yavuuhulan's three principal students, he was by far the most prolific and, by the end of his life, the one with by far the highest public profile. He was, too, as we have seen from Süglegmaa's account¹⁸⁵, the *de facto* teacher of both Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo. Consequently, I will address the wide swathe covered by his work before looking at the smaller, more intimate oeuvre produced by Nyamsüren.

¹⁸² See Dashbalbar.

¹⁸³ Süglegmaa, 89. (My translation.)

¹⁸⁴ In the government's *Zasgin Gazrin Medee* newspaper, and presumably penned by Dashbalbar himself.

¹⁸⁵ And as I have heard personally from Mend-Ooyo and others.

O. Dashbalbar (1957-1999)

In 1980, at the age of twenty-three, Dashbalbar wrote what would become probably his most famous poem, "Love One Another, my People!". It is so necessary to an understanding of Dashbalbar's poetic and political work that I quote it here in full:

Love One Another, my People

*Love one another, my people, while you are alive.
Don't keep from others whatever you find beautiful.
Don't wound my heart with heedless barbs, and
don't push anyone into a dark hole.*

*Don't mock someone who's gotten drunk,
think how it could even be your father.
And, if you manage to become famous,
open the door of happiness to others!
They should also not forget your kindness.
To someone who is lacking a single word of kindness,
You should search for it and speak it out.
Whether outside in the sun or at home when it's cold,
don't spend one moment at rest.*

*Don't use harsh words to complain, you women,
about the kind young man you remember.
Speak lovingly to those who loved you!
Let them remember you as a good lover.*

*Our lives are really similar,
our words constrict our throats the same way,
our tears drop onto our cheeks the same way -
things are much the same as we go along the road.
Wipe away a halt woman's tears without a word,
talk your lover up when she's tripped and fallen!*

*Today you're smiling, tomorrow you'll be crying.
Another day you're sad, and the next you'll be singing.
We all pass from the cradle to the grave -
if for no other reason, love one another!
People must not lack love on this wide earth!
I grasp happiness with the fire of my human mind,
the golden sun shines lovingly upon us all the same, and
so I think that loving others is the path of life,
I understand that to be loved by others is great joy.*

It is perhaps tempting to view this one poem as a nexus of all that Dashbalbar subsequently wrote¹⁸⁶, but I would suggest rather that it be used as a multi-faceted prism, a focus through which his essays and poems may usefully be viewed, and that it offers a framework for a discussion of the emotional and conceptual aspects of Dashbalbar's vision.

This poem, written during the years immediately before the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev, is significant due to its unusual emphasis on ideas which are Buddhist in all but name. For instance, "Today you're smiling, tomorrow you'll be crying/.../We all pass from the cradle to the grave" reminds us of karma and the inevitability of death, and Dashbalbar's exhortation to compassionate activity throughout the poem suggests the importance to him of human warmth and kindness, a quality present both in his poetry and in his subsequent career as a politician.

The ways in which Dashbalbar articulates in his work the idea of love range from the universal to the individual, but what is especially striking is the intimacy with which he describes his perception of love. In his essay "Spring's Braid, or the Lyrical Precipice", he meditates on the apprehension of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*: he says, "when we look at this picture, we forget everything, we forget that we are on the earth, we grasp the magic of the picture but we gaze at the picture, we are breathing with the picture." Neither the identity of Leonardo nor that of Mona Lisa are important here, rather what is important is the psychophysical experience of the image. It is more than seeing, more even than looking, it is an interbeing, where the observer and the observed meld together, in a kind of unity delineated by the fragility of time and space. We read such deep intimacy throughout ashbalbar's work and it becomes clear that for him the expression of love is somehow the expression of the human condition.

¹⁸⁶ H. Süglegmaa, *Ochirbatin Dashbalbar* (Ulaanbaatar 2009), ascribes more than 1300 poems to Dashbalbar, and lists fourteen volumes of poetry, seven published posthumously.

But this is also, of course, part of what constitutes the nomadic sensibility towards the earth. As I have sought to explain in Chapter 1, these feelings of interbeing and intimacy between an individual and the *nutag* lies at the heart of the Mongol nomadic experience and, as we are seeing, at the heart of the work of Yavuuhulan and his students. But with Dashbalbar, the expression of love – whether between people or between people and the landscape – is central to his understanding of the world in which he lives. Throughout Dashbalbar's work, then, the human heart is seen both as a universal and as highly personal phenomenon. In "Love One Another, my People!", however, the expression of openness and of a highly developed level of personal empathy indicates a feeling for the wider world, for a kind of family of man, which the poet trusts lies at the heart of our experience.

We can compare this poem with two others, written a little later – "For You" and "A Man". The titles alone should provoke some awareness of what Dashbalbar is seeking to convey. Their simplicity seems perhaps to indicate a simplicity of purpose, and in some ways that is precisely what we get.

"For You" is ostensibly a love poem, addressed to a woman who has once been, or is maybe still, Dashbalbar's lover. But as we read through the text, we can be struck by the universal language used: the setting is the world, rather than a specific place, the love is expressed in terms of intimacy, but it appears to me that she who is addressed is more than an individual, that her presence is in some way a mirror or a representative of the world of which Dashbalbar is part.

In "A Man", too, we should note how the language, though wide and extensive and open, is equally personal and intimate. Dashbalbar is able, by inserting into a text which is ostensibly about the nature of humanity the experiences of being an individual ("I travel on a distant road, singing and carrying my backpack./I am A MAN! I like to get wet in the snow, to stand out in the rain./I am A MAN! I like to read a brand new book, to kiss a

woman's lips") and by adding these to the idea of the universal (he often cited Leonardo's Vitruvian Man as an influential image), to express the profundity of the human condition, of being neither fully an individual nor fully a manifestation of society as a whole.

It is, I believe, one of the most subtle aspects of Dashbalbar's poetic writing, that he manages to embody this role of the individual as being distinct from, as well as an integral part of, his society. For it behoves the nomad to be such a person, since while it is necessary to take a full part of the nomadic unit, it is equally important to recognise one's place as an individual. We saw this in the work of Danzanravjaa – how he conveys the journey of life, even the movement towards enlightenment, through the solitary journey (albeit with the companionship of a horse) – and we will also see it in the approach of Mend-Ooyo in *Altan Ovoo*. And it is the deep apprehension of these two aspects of human existence which returns us to Dashbalbar's injunction to love, for this again is the idea of deep and intimate love expressed in "Love One Another, My People!"

One of Dashbalbar's concerns as a politician was the importance of Mongolia's independence and nationhood: he was a passionate advocate of self-sufficiency and campaigned against the activity within the country of foreign business, as well as against the relationship between the Mongolian political and business communities and foreign governments, in particular the Chinese. It is instructive, then, to look at the way in which he emphasises self-reliance whilst emphasising also the unity of the world and the environment.

In his essay "Ochirbatin Dashbalbar and the Art of Being Proud,"¹⁸⁷ the poet and journalist P.Bathuyag speaks of the first conversation he had with Dashbalbar. Dashbalbar's words provide another access point into his work: "An Indian ascetic said that, when we've finished cutting down all the trees and catching all the fish, we'll understand that we cannot

¹⁸⁷ The full text of my translation of this essay can be found online at www.ccalt.net/Texts/Mongolian/Essays/Batkhuyag/Dashbalbar_Ochirbat.pdf.

eat gold. In just this way, when one aged eagle is left in the mountains and one dark wolf is left on the steppe, then people will understand the wisdom of being proud. These creatures were born from a divine lineage and it seems that they have more pride than we humans do. So that we might be proud, we can learn one small thing from the eagle and the wolf, which is to speak the truth. In our behavior, we should appear to be just like the eagle, just like the wolf rushing over the steppe.” This statement fits into the long tradition of wilderness writing and of ecological advocacy, and in many ways it echoes speeches such as Chief Seattle’s 1854 address to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for Washington Territory. The passion and directness with which Dashbalbar speaks of the natural world, and of the human position within it and response to it, suggests an understanding, both of the personal and the corporate toll which humanity exercises. It is interesting to see how, during the 1990s and, following Dashbalbar’s death, into the twenty-first century, environmental and land-based politics – such as that concerned with mining – have developed in Mongolia, alongside the interventions of both domestic and foreign concerns¹⁸⁸.

The interweaving of the natural world and the world of politics is made clear in the three “Grass” poems, written in 1983. The first few lines of the first poem in the sequence expresses Dashbalbar’s vision, not only concerning the grasses but also, I would hazard, nature itself and the living organism of the universe as a whole:

*Oh, grasses, my parents and my brothers and my children at a
Single time....
Oh, grasses, my dear body and my pure desire and my loving
companions....
Sighing gently, I stroke the grasses.
My grasses, I take in your scent as an infant’s soft curly hair.
My grasses, I stroke you as old men stroke their white beards.
My grasses, I kiss you as I kiss my passionate lover’s hair,*

¹⁸⁸ See inter alia Mette Marie High, *Dangerous Fortunes: an anthropological study of the Mongolian informal gold mining economy*, (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation: University of Cambridge, 2009.)

*black as spades.
 Oh, grasses, my coursing blood, my pigtails...
 Oh, my ancestors in times rubbed and wasted away,
 oh, they blow in the wind, dissolve into grasses.*

What is significant about these lines is the way in which they associate the grasses with the ancestors, at once dead and still very much living in the land and in the traditions of Mongolia. They are, "at a single time," Dashbalbar's family, another indication of the extent to which he felt himself directly connected to the natural world, and to the ancestors and to his own society. Nonetheless, it seems to me important to notice the depth of physical, corporeal connection that Dashbalbar perceives here, in how truly unified a whole he appears to view the world. It is the language that is unusual here, rather than the ideas which it conveys. Dashbalbar's highly sensuous image of his caressing the grasses as his lover's black hair is picked up in the third poem in the sequence where he writes, "I am the carpet beneath a pair of lovers." It is almost as though he is imagining himself, as the grasses, as a kind of matchmaker: in fact, elsewhere in this poem, he writes,

*In peaceful times, men and grasses make friends,
 and they strive to support each other beneath the distant stars,
 and they are great allies!*

So here we have Dashbalbar not only envisioning himself directly in the form and psychic aspect of the grasses, but equally he is showing the deep and ancient relationship which exists between the human world and the world of grasses.

Again in these poems we are reminded of the political aspect of Dashbalbar's poetic voice. There is clearly a strong connection between the grass and the people, and this relates to his advocacy of humanity as part of, rather than acting against, the universe.

The second of these three poems illustrates why Dashbalbar feels such a connection with grasses. The entire text is concerned with the power and resolute nature of grass, how

they “grow and completely cover the world”, how, “like needles, their young bodies directly penetrate the road.” They are even more like humans:

*The grasses, with humans and animals, manage every
calamity,
dying together, awakening together, through many eons,
falling, exactly like a man, struck down by the scythe of cruel
war,
rising, exactly like a man, from the smoke of fires,
never abandoning the world!*

*Dashbalbar is offering us, then, a way of understanding the world, in which grasses are not merely metaphors for humans, they are specifically identified with humans, and humans thereby with grasses; they are perceived as existing in the same way, as being simply two species of equal and related worth, as having comparable feelings and desires and experiences. And it is this way of understanding the relationship between human beings and the grasses which cover the world upon which they dwell that informs his vision for how humans should be living. As if to compliment what he says in “Love One Another, My People!”, that “the golden sun shines lovingly upon us all the same”, so here he says, “The grasses of the world, like anyone else, love freedom.” Thus our common humanity is replaced by an even deeper idea, our common existence under the sun: we and the grasses and the world as a whole all desire and yearn for freedom, for the opportunity to live a complete and fulfilled life, to express ourselves and to **grown** and develop as we have been made to do. There is no more potent expression of Dashalbar’s faith in humanity, I would suggest, than these three poems about grass.*

This faith in the human experience and in the relationship of humans with one another and with the natural world is perhaps the most potent and significant expression, both of Dashbalbar’s love and of his encouragement of love in others. Again, in “Love One Another, My People!”, we read:

*Our lives are really similar,
our words constrict our throats the same way,*

*our tears drop onto our cheeks the same way –
things are much the same as we go along the road.*

While this is obviously a reference to the human world, we have already seen that he makes clear connections between the human world and the world as a whole, and it takes little imagination to make the connection between the sentiment expressed in these lines and those of the three “Grass” poems. The extrapolation from the “Grass” poems into the universe as a whole does not constitute a vast leap of understanding and it is in the depth of intimacy, the feeling of love between the poet and the universe, that we find the social and political import so vital, so gravid.

According to Süglegmaa, “On March 30th 1990, Dashbalbar published an important article in the *Utga Zohiol Urlag* [the government’s literature and culture newspaper] entitled ‘The Compassionate Great Buddha.’ This was the first time since the revolution [of 1921] that an educated person was able, free from fear, to write about the Buddha’s life story, about emptiness, compassion and karma...”¹⁸⁹ Dashbalbar was a Buddhist practitioner, who studied under the erstwhile Indian ambassador to Mongolia, Bakula Rinpoché. He became also a friend of the current Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and his son Gangabaatar was a monk in India during his teens. The spiritual breadth of his poetry suggests, as we have already seen in relation to the “Grass” series, a sympathy as much with shamanism as with Buddhism, but his commitment to the relocation of Buddhism in the new, post-Soviet Mongolia was quite clear.

This commitment, as Süglegmaa indicates, was seen more obviously during the last decade of Dashbalbar’s life, with the introduction of greater freedom of expression, but from the beginning of his career, with Buddhism taking a subtle role in the narrative of poems such as “Love One Another, My People!,” Dashbalbar seems to have been aware of how the

¹⁸⁹ Süglegmaa, 113.

sociopolitical aspects of Buddhist teaching – for instance, the emphasis upon compassion – can be subverted presented within the framework of comradesly socialism.

As the D. Sumiya says in an essay on Buddhism in Dashbalbar's poetry, poems such as "Love One Another, My People!" express "the wisdom of humanity as manifest in Mongol civilisation." But, she continues, "when we analyse the poem from the viewpoint of compassion, which is central to the Buddha's teaching, it is the poet's intuition which has been awoken in its writing and, from its opening lines to its conclusion it speaks of an attitude of love and compassion, of care and help."¹⁹⁰ Sumiya's point throughout her paper is that Dashbalbar's Buddhism is an expression of what she frames as human goodness, but that his approach is at the same time personal, directed towards the Mongolian people, "my people" as he calls them.

The importance of Buddhist philosophy to Dashbalbar's career during the 1990s as a politician and as a poet, and, in particular, of his association with Bakula Rinpoché, is not especially pertinent to a discussion of his early work leading up to the publication of *Gol Us namuuhun Ursana*. Nonetheless, it is important to read his work with an awareness of Buddhist teaching, and how in particular it might show the source of his later work in favor of the Mongol people and Mongol traditional culture. In this regard, and having looked at Dashbalbar's poetry through the prism of human relationship, we turn now to the wider world, and to his understanding of nomadic Mongolian society and its place within the natural world.

It should initially be said that it is this aspect of his work which best illustrates his friendship with Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo, both of whose poetry celebrate the many forms taken by the natural world. Nonetheless, Neither Nyamsüren nor Mend-Ooyo have

¹⁹⁰ "O. Dashbalbarin yaruu nairgiin burhni shashni üzel barimtlal," in D. Gangabaatar, *O. Dashbalbar – Galav erinii zönch*, (Ulaanbaatar: Dashbalbar Foundation/Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture, 2007), 35.

exhibited, either in their life or in their writing, the social and political thrust which marked Dashbalbar's final years, but as we will see, all three express nomadism, and all that flows from it, with a profound appreciation.

The common theme of the human connection with the earth is at the center of the poem "Motherland", which is presented as a kind of prayer to Mongolia, and not specifically to the *nutag* in which Dashbalbar had been raised. To read the poem, we could at most point substitute the word "mother" for "motherland", emphasizing how the country of his birth, of his mother and thus of his lineage, constitutes what we might in English refer to as "Mother Earth". Indeed, this discourse is closely related to the shamanic worldview, and clear parallels with Goddess worship lie not too far from the surface. Right from the opening two lines - "I make obeisance to You, my divine motherland./I believe that the truth dwells in the stones lying here and there" - we are before a godlike figure.

As the poem develops, there are echoes of other (quasi-)religious texts from other places and from other times. There are conceptual echoes of the Psalms, perhaps, and of ancient Babylonian and Egyptian texts, and there is also the idea that the Motherland will deliver the poet - and in fact, all of us - from impurity:

*Oh, my motherland, I know the blazing, harsh fire to be You.
I live my life, relying on the gentle breath within!
Oh, my motherland, I know the pure bright air is Yours.
You penetrate me in the counting of my breaths!
Oh, my motherland! You come to us, changing into all things.
My way of life is Your deep joy.
I try to find You in the rocks,
You stand up out of the world's vegetation.
To be of benefit to all, You dwell in everything,
and You lead us from the path of wickedness.*

The capitalisation of You is present in the original and, while I have not read any Mongolian translation of the Bible, my feeling is that Dashbalbar is, consciously or not, drawing from such sources, outside his own imagination, so as to express his feeling for his Motherland as a kind of salvatrix.

That this text is panentheist (“You dwell in everything”) points simply to the ancient approach to the earth, to the universe as a whole, an idea that is found in Mongolian shamanic worship. Dashbalbar, as Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo, perceives the universe as alive, a realisation of the wild, gentle, radiant, violent, all-encompassing and all-embracing principle which is traditionally associated with the Mother. The panentheism expressed by Dashbalbar, however, is motivated by a specifically Buddhist intention, “to be of benefit to all”: this is at once a direct reference to one of the basic vows of vajrayāna Buddhism, as well as to the general theme which I have suggested for Dashbalbar’s work, and which we find in “Love One Another, My People!”.

The place occupied by nomadic society in Dashbalbar’s work is not as explicit as it is, for instance, in Mend-Ooyo’s. Dashbalbar does not talk of conversations around the hearth, nor does he discuss the movement of livestock and the packing up of the ger and the family possessions before a journey. For Dashbalbar, nomadism is more an expression of the landscape itself: nomadic perception moves across the landscape, across the hills and through the skies, fixing upon ideas or physical objects for a while, before once again moving on.

The final piece in Dashbalbar’s landmark book (and the catalyst for the GUNU movement) *The River Flows Gently*, “I am Slowly Living in the Perfect World”, is a sequence of poems and contemplative essays on landscape and emotion. Before I address the issues of nomadic society present in this work, I want briefly to touch upon the title, which is also the title of the sixth and final part of the sequence.

The atmosphere conveyed through the idea of “slowly living” might suggest a kind of Thoreau-like “back to nature” theme, where one lives life in contrast to an urban craziness, sensitive to and living with the rhythms of nature. In some ways, this is precisely what Dashbalbar appears to be addressing, but his intention I feel is also to preserve his own

continual (re)connection with the natural history (and the historical nature) of Mongolia, the country of his lineage and of his people.

In Mongolian, the “perfect world” of the title is “*ülemjin orchlon*”, which carries a strong echo of Danzanravjaa’s most famous poem, “Perfect Qualities” (“*ülemjin chanar*”). I find it hard to believe that Dashbalbar did not have this connection in mind: Danzanravjaa’s poem was addressed to his wife and speaks of the emotional and spiritual effects that her “perfect qualities” engender in him. The same is true of this “perfect world” of which Dashbalbar writes: this, his book’s final meditation, presents us with ideas concerning hills and rivers and lakes and love and music before returning to the title and to a memory, a vision of a happy family at rest in this perfect world.

We can thus perhaps see the title as more than a summary of the text. In some ways, we might understand it as being for Dashbalbar the very statement which gives rise to the text, a thought, a seed from which the words of exposition grow and develop over the pages which follow, in a manner then not unlike the grasses in the “Grass” triptych which we examined earlier.

If we turn to the text of the sequence itself, we can again see Dashbalbar intensely observing the natural world and its interplay with the human world. In each section, we are offered an example of how the landscape presents itself – or, perhaps more accurately, how it is perceived by the human eye – and we are thereby encouraged to enter into our own contemplation.

One very human theme runs throughout “I am Slowly Living in the Perfect World”, and that is the theme of a beautiful woman, presumably the reality or the memory of Dashbalbar’s own lover. For instance, in the third part – “Lakes” – he says:

The beauty of Lake Ganga¹⁹¹ by night is ravishing, like a woman. The lovely river is like a fine lover, it holds thought, it gives pleasure to the mind. The stars shine in the waters of the lake as though in the sky and the expression of their beautiful bodies was the sound of poetry, as wondrous as the girls of my homeland.

At night, amidst the breathing of my Ganga and the whispers of the young couple beneath the red willows on its bank, in this world of dreams I take my hat and walk away. The Ganga is really one of the beautiful waters of the world.

Such highly sensuous and emotional thoughts flow right through this sequence of poems and essays, and while the feeling is of an intense and powerful sweetness, it is, strangely, in no wise overwhelming. We find this also – though in different ways and to different degrees - in the work of Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo. It would seem that the experience of the stretch of the landscape is, for Dashbalbar, not the crass experience of the physical body of a woman, but a metageography of the human body as much as of the body of the earth. In this way, it is possible to conceive of the poet's relationship with the landscape, and his movement over the landscape, just as nomadic caravans move over the landscape – with care and respect and with an intimate, sensitive feeling.

I would suggest that "I am Slowly Living in the Perfect World" is an exemplary text through which to understand Dashbalbar's relationship to the nomadic experience. It seems to me in fact simply to be the experience of traversing the land with care and with love, of living with the landscape in a natural and intimate way. As Dashbalbar says in the first part of the text, "Mountains", "I knew that, upon a thoroughbred horse, as it whinnied at the beautiful mountains, I visited the meadow of dreams, and I raised the pennant, splashing in the soft rain of memory. And so, during my life, I gave my heart to the mountains and the mountains' peaceful nature was revealed to me." This last sentence, in which he "gave my

¹⁹¹ I should note here that the River Ganga was of great importance to Dashbalbar, so much so that he named his son Gangabaatar after her.

heart to the mountains”, holds the language of marriage, of commitment to something from which one cannot be parted.

In the closing paragraphs of the text, we read the following:

I am fully preoccupied with love for all that I know within myself, and that I celebrate in the shining sun. Though the sun rises every day, the perfect world beneath does not appear old to me!

I am in a hurry slowly to watch the blueness of the sky, slowly to listen to the whispering of the rivers, and slowly to live among people, How can people, the sun, the birds, trees and waters be too lovely? It is a crime to live a few years amidst this perfection! This is not greed, rather it is an attempt to feel completely the loveliness of existence.

With the memory of what we have discussed before, I believe that we can again see here Dashbalbar’s feeling for the landscape of Dariganga, for the family and for the people which he so loves and for the feeling of profound (inter)relationship with the cosmos which runs through the poems and essays of *The River Flows Gently*.

D. Nyamsüren (1949-2002)

Nyamsüren chose not to live in Ulaanbaatar and take part in public life. Indeed, for much of his adult life, he lived in Ereentsav, on the northeastern border with Russia, where his wife Handmaa worked (and still works) as an immigration official on the railroad.¹⁹² Though an important stopover point, Ereentsav is nonetheless a town where very little happens, where the winters are especially harsh, and Nyamsüren was there able to develop a style of refined simplicity, quite different as we will see from Dashbalbar’s emotionally charged and socially focussed work and Mend-Ooyo’s lyrical and romantic approach, and quite different too from Yavuuhulan’s more contemplative and humanistic style.

¹⁹² B. Zolbayar’s essay “Warmth” provides an evocative and moving account of a visit to Handmaa in Ereentsav following Nyamsüren’s death. See B.Zolbayar, (trans Simon Wickham-Smith, *An Entirety*, (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture, 2009.)

Nyamsüren published only three volumes of poetry during his life¹⁹³. There are clear themes connecting the poems contained in the three published books, and connecting Nyamsüren with both Dashbalbar and Mend-Ooyo, and with Yavuuhulan too, and I shall here treat each book separately.

Spring's Flow (1984)

These poems date from 1968, when Nyamsüren was nineteen, and cover the years during his period of study under Yavuuhulan. Many of these poems are personal and intimate, written to or about the author's lovers, his mother, or to the natural world, to which he feels a special attachment. Indeed, it is in his relationship with nature that Nyamsüren shows most the influence of Yavuuhulan. For instance, here is a short poem, not unlike a haiku in its feeling, but which clearly expresses, not only Nyamsüren's personal philosophy, but the overarching theme of Mongolian nomadic tradition:

*I plant a cutting,
a life is added.
I break a cutting,
a life is taken away.*

*While nature gives us birth,
we cut down trees.
This is not the life we live –
felled trees are counted by the unfelled.*

The deep realisation that plant cuttings are lives, and just like an individual's life, is both simple and profound, and this poem recalls poems such as Yavuuhulan's "Lullaby for Number Four Tree at Hovd"¹⁹⁴ and Dashbalbar's "Grass" sequence¹⁹⁵, in which respect is paid to trees and grasses, and thereby to nature itself. In the second stanza, Nyamsüren

¹⁹³ His widow has enough poems for a further volume, which I am currently translating and which will be published in 2012.

¹⁹⁴ A tree of especial importance for the poet, who referred to it as "the poet's tree," and under which his students gathered in the years following his death to pay their respects.

¹⁹⁵ See the discussion of these poems, and their place within Dashbalbar's oeuvre, below.

describes how, though we are birthed by nature, yet still we fell trees, and yet his tone is one of observation and not of condemnation, just as in "Goat Peak" Yavuuhulan's father describes the eagle waiting for the goat's death: such are the processes of birth and death, although that "felled trees are counted by the unfelled" hints at a melancholy brought on by a sense of loss.

Spring's Flow contains many such poems of observation. There is a quality to Nyamsüren's writings which can be said to reflect the ex-journalist Yavuuhulan's style of passionate reportage, and also the latter's interest in Japanese verse forms such as waka and haiku. In "A Cycle of Thoughts," Nyamsüren offers short verses, some abstract and some highly descriptive, but all of them full of the poet's perception of nature.

*An ancient insect,
cross-legged in the ashes.
I lullaby the birds,
who sit upon the branches.*

*I love to travel through my homeland,
beating, pulsating in the distant stars.
A meteor fragment fallen from the sky
is no loss.
Those poor stones
which struck my homeland!*

*Evening, and the bus
gallops like a thoroughbred.
Amid the silence,
I look through the window,
listening to the crunch of snow.
I am waiting for your coming,
happy to sit
alone.*

In all of these poems, he exhibits a deep love for the world around him. Nyamsüren, like Dashbalbar, frequently expresses his love for the world through the image of

astronomy¹⁹⁶, and it is the movement of the stars through the sky, and the interaction of the planets and, here, his association of his own travel through his homeland with the travel of meteorites through the heavens, through which his perceptions find expression.

In the third of these stanzas, the ancient image of a rider bound for his lover¹⁹⁷ is updated, with Nyamsüren travelling by bus, "waiting for your coming." The combination of snow here and his content isolation is repeated frequently in connection with his life in Ereentsav, and it is significant here that, despite the bus and the horse and the almost palpable silence, the sole indication of sound is the "crunch of snow."

This last verse also introduces a very important part of Nyamsüren's poetic output. Again like both Dashbalbar and Yavuuhulan, he wrote love poems to a number of different named and unnamed women, and in each of them he expresses his love through images drawn from the natural world and from nomadic life. For instance, in "Güsim," about a Kazakh girl, he writes:

*A horseman
wants to dismount and look.
A man on foot
wants to stand and shade his eyes.
Such a lovely woman!
They want to greet her,
and go with her,
and swans would
float in her sweet gaze.*

And, again, in "Birds of Fate," a more urban setting brings forth gallantry and care for an unknown, but equally alluring, woman:

*You're wet through, please wait!
I call after an unknown woman.*

¹⁹⁶ Dashbalbar wrote poems in which he praises Yuri Gagarin and the Mongolian astronaut J Gurragchaa, and also theoreticians such as Einstein, Tycho Brahe and Giordano Bruno.

¹⁹⁷ Nyamsüren seems here to be recalling the text of some of Yavuuhulan's poems on this theme, for example "The Sound of A Silver Bridle," "A Silver Autumn Morning" and "I Love You," in whose final stanza I detect a similar combination of longing and hesitation in this poem (see Chapter 4).

*I give her my raincoat,
she wants to be wet, like grass she is lovely,...
You're very kind,
this unknown woman says to me.
It's hard for you without a raincoat,
I hazard, at the door of my ger.
The rain was beating on the roof,
and she went off, far away, with my mind.*

In both of these works, Nyamsüren combines the ancient love lyric with a sensitivity to nature – to swans in the first verse and to the grass in the second. Here too we can see the way in which something that is beautiful can capture the mind away. In this we are reminded again of Yavuuhulan's love lyrics, of Dashbalbar's poems such as "For You" and "My Sweet Love was Waiting for Me"¹⁹⁸ and also of the work of Danzanravjaa, in which love is conveyed upon horseback¹⁹⁹ and across the steppe, in the mind as much as in the physical world.

It is not impossible to frame such poems as ecstatic and visionary, dealing as they do with the power of love and with an intense apprehension of nature. *Spring's Flow* contains by far Nyamsüren's longest work, "The Four Seasons," his personal and almost mantric version of this traditional topos. Fifty-six of the fifty-seven verses (and so 224 of the 228 lines) end in the word *saihan* ("lovely"), in which Nyamsüren is declaring, over and over, the loveliness of the world. Here are two verses from the beginning of the second section, on winter:

*Fallen snow at daybreak is lovely.
Snow falling down the ropes and through the roofhole is lovely.
The mountains and hills shining outside are lovely.
Just one blade of grass blowing in the wind is lovely.*

*To see a light at home late in the evening is lovely.
The feet of a birthing foal are lovely.*

¹⁹⁸ O. Dashbalbar ((trans Simon Wickham-Smith), *The River Flows Gently*, (Ulaanbaatar: Dashbalbar Foundation, 2007), 98, 134.

¹⁹⁹ I have seen photocopies of Danzanravjaa's own version of the Kāmasutra, in which lovers are portrayed having sex, among other places, on horseback.

*When you spend the night at home, women are lovely.
Stray dogs barking in the moonlight are lovely.*

Such a short extract can only hint at the intensity which the repetition here gives to this poem. That everything is “lovely” does not tend to pall; rather Nyamsüren’s skill is to alternate the specific and the general sufficiently so that the poem becomes like a prayer, an encomium which one feels could – and might have done in Nyamsüren’s mind – go on eternally.

We perceive in “The Four Seasons” Nyamsüren’s presence with and within nature, a presence which reflects his teacher Yavuuhulan’s work, but also which reflects the traditional, nomadic understanding of the land and the cosmos, and his awareness of his position within that environment.

The Nature of Mind (1991)

The title of Nyamsüren’s second book is as ambiguous in Mongolian as it is in English. The nature of which he speaks is the nature of the world around him, as much as it is the essence of his mind. With the poems in this book, written mostly during the 1980s, Nyamsüren begins to show himself as more than an individual, as being a part of his society.

The family, and his wife Handmaa, begin to take a more central rôle. As with *Spring’s Flow*, there are poems in which Handmaa is addressed directly, as are other women, and in which Nyamsüren continues his exploration of the love poem as developed both within the context of Yavuuhulan’s ideas of tradition and innovation, and within the larger framework of Mongolian love lyrics, such as in the works of Danzanravjaa, Ser-Od and Buyannemeh, and Yavuuhulan’s contemporary M Tsendendorj.

One of the most touching love poems in this book shows well how Nyamsüren is beginning to develop his own style under the influence of Yavuuhulan. He presents nature

in the form of horses, and the colors of white snow and golden summer, he notes “the wisdom of the seasons” and speaks of his daughters as “Venusian.”

*The snow rages
like a shy white horse,
but at evening
the sky clears, yes it clears.
In the wisdom of the seasons,
fall follows golden summer,
and we two
remain, yes we remain.
My childhood
friend, stay close,
we'll coax
the world in, towards
the open fire!
The light of our mind touches
the window, clears the frost.
Our daughters will be Venusian,
playing music on hollow reeds.
In the good times yet to come
my motherland will be great.
And all my songs' melodies
will be turquoise, and soft in your hair.*

This is an invocation, also, of the tradition of Mongolia in the heart of its people. The utopian ideas expressed here are not so much mystical as somewhat other-worldly²⁰⁰, and Nyamsüren seems to want here to emphasise not Mongolia alone but a combination of the universal presence of love and an intimate coziness of family.

What I have identified here as being other-worldly could also be seen as reflecting the universal ideas propounded by Yavuuhulan in his teaching and translation work, and by Dashbalbar in poems such as “Love One Another, My People.” Nyamsüren is not so motivated by social forces, and while even in the previous poem there is far more intimacy and wonder than power and social rhetoric, there is also a wish for thoughtful and careful interaction, and for the wisdom which comes from observation. In the following poem, we

²⁰⁰ While there is no suggestion that Nyamsüren was familiar with the work of science fiction or fantasy novelists, some of his poems from the 1980s hint at imagistic scenes common to books of this genre from the previous two or three decades.

can see how Nyamsüren's passive vision in a work such as "The Four Seasons" has developed into an exhortation to the reader to wonder and learn:

*Please go gently, gently
the sky and your steps will alternate.
If my people from the north had no sky,
with the birds in flight they would expire in a breath.
The grasses and the plants are watching us.
The stars and the rains know us.
Now, two tiny cells in a smattering of dust
bring forth the world in love.
A stone is felt to be an egg,
it is not too cold to kiss, my Motherland,
the grass has eyes
the water has melody
the stars have love
and the sky
has every month a son.*

In this poem, Nyamsüren, as with Dashbalbar's references to the mysticism of spaceflight, acknowledges the cosmic forces that are present within himself and in the world outside. When he writes, "The grasses and the plants are watching us./The stars and the rains know us," he is speaking a kind of truth which is both personal and universal. In this he recalls the ancient shaman invocations, and Danzanravjaa's sermon on how the bear manages during the winter months, and the wise animals of the *üge*²⁰¹, and also the wisdom which Yavuuhulan learnt from hunters such as his father. He writes of the cellular level and of the cosmic level, and in doing so he offers love to his *nutag*, his Motherland, in the form of a kiss upon a stone.

But this intimate vision has its practical expression too. Nyamsüren writes of children increasingly in his poetry, as he and Handmaa established their family in Ereentsav. Here he combines the play of children with the cycles of time, and camels and laughing nomad women with Natsagdorj's famous grey Homburg: hat

²⁰¹ See the discussion of the *üge*, and other traditional nomadic and religious poetry, in Chapters 1 and 2.

*At every
 moment,
 the children's
 shirts, flapping.
 Coming and going –
 camel cows droning
 among the yellow hills,
 and women laughing.
 Eternal,
 as dawn breaks,
 Natsagdorj's
 grey hat.
 This is the time of return.
 In the dusk of evening,
 your ponytail,
 and stars are the smiling of young girls.
 This is the time to come.
 At every
 moment,
 the children's
 shirts, flapping.
 Coming and going –
 camel cows droning
 among the yellow hills,
 and women laughing.*

Nyamsüren does not often describe the movement of nature, there are very few falling autumn leaves, white flurries of snow or trotting horses in his verse, and this poem reminds us that the world is motile and mobile and that it is full of noise and laughter, and the bellowing of camels. We can feel here the vitality of the natural world, and the nature of mind, and the ways in which the one acts upon, and empowers, the other.

That "Natsagdorj's/grey hat" should be considered "eternal" is significant here, for it emphasizes both the importance of that writer's work and the eternity of Mongolian letters, which Natsagdorj in many ways came to represent during the period in which Yavuuhulan was developing the ideas which would underpin his own work and that of his followers.

The Nature of Mind, then, shows the ways in which Nyamsüren's style was developing into a strange and visionary combination of wonder at, and preservation and enjoyment of, the natural world. It works, upon the psyche, then, to define its nature, not

in an explicitly spiritual way, but rather in a way which parallels, but never touches, Dashbalbar's social consciousness, which would develop along specific political lines during the 1990s.

That said, we might see in Nyamsüren's observation of the macro- and microcycles of nature, his growing awareness of family and place, a new understanding of *nutag*, a viewpoint different from that of nomadic society but nonetheless similar to the extent that it shows the placement of people within nature.

From the Lonely Steppe (2001)

Nyamsüren's final published book, containing works primarily from the 1990s, is a collection far more contemplative and melancholy than either *Spring's Flow* or *The Nature of Mind*. The title itself is indicative of this change, and these poems reveal a poet cut off from the world in a way quite different from what he has shown in the two previous volumes. There is far less exuberance now, far more meditation upon existence, upon transformation and upon the cycles of nature, and there is less celebration of love too. In comparison with his earlier poetry and with the poetry of Dashbalbar and Mend-Ooyo, Nyamsüren shows himself to have grown introverted, as though aware of oncoming death.

This is evident in the way in which he describes his life in the traditional way, changing through the seasons. Gone is the idea that all the four seasons are "lovely," now there is a trajectory from passion to weakness:

*My first youthful days of fireflame
galloped past like the best of horses.
And my bright years of flashing lightning,
with the warrior's standard of pure freedom,
flew up like the movement of caravans.
Before my forty years in the eternal world,
on an autumn evening of silver moon,
I met with the blue wistful eyes of spring and,
on the branches of trees, the hoarfrost sadly crumbled.*

It is worth noting how Nyamsüren, now at the age of fifty, is starting to reference the Mongol warriors of antiquity and the movement of camel caravans, it is as though the onset of old age has awakened in him an interest, not so much in the nomadic culture *per se*, but in the Mongolia of the *Secret History*, of the bloodline of Chinggis Haan.

Undoubtedly, although Nyamsüren was living in Ereentsav²⁰², he was aware of the development of Dashbalbar's political career, and his personal popularity. Dashbalbar's invocation of the ancient Mongolian tradition of keeping the land intact and available for the nomadic people to herd their livestock, and his controversial calls for the expulsion of foreign business interests, impacted upon the community of poets, and his closest friends within that community in particular.

On November 1st 1999, few days after Dashbalbar was killed, Nyamsüren wrote a requiem for his friend, "A Song of Loss:"

*In the elms upon the northern tundra,
the magpie is twittering.
My younger brother, gone to the north,
has not come back.*

*"On the ridge at Altan Bogd,
the swallows are singing."
Nothing is moved
by the swallows' voices.*

*Yellow rays touch
the door of Shambhala.
My pupil has not left
the springs upon the salt-marsh.*

*"A yellow rainbow arches
over the yellow rocks."
My younger brother, the gazelle,
was not shot down by arrowhead words.*

*A gazelle and a man, wounded or not wounded,
you are both our younger brothers...*

²⁰² It is interesting to note how, in each successive volume, the number of poems identified as having been written in Ereentsav increases.

There are ancient voices in this poem, it is not only one man's requiem for a friend. It recalls the third century CE Sino-Mongolian poem "A Song of the Sianbi Brothers," Agai's fourteenth century poem "Bitterness,"²⁰³ it reminds the reader of Danzanravjaa's Shambhala complex at Hamrin Hiid²⁰⁴, and it conjures an image of birds flying around the holy mountain of Altan Bogd. In short, Nyamsüren here contains in these eighteen lines some of the major themes of traditional Mongolian poetry, acknowledging as he does so the themes of brotherly friendship between humans and the relationship of humans with the natural world and with the world of the ancestors.

In *From the Lonely Steppe*, Nyamsüren also introduces explicit references to Buddhism. His poem "Amitabha" (1992) is reminiscent of Danzanravjaa's prayer-poems, its repetitive form based upon the structure of oral poetry. The final verse will suffice to show the way in which this poem is structured and the ideas which Nyamsüren is entertaining:

*How should I, like Amitabha, understand that a flower can
destroy a bee?
How should I, like Amitabha, understand that one verse can
destroy another?
How should I, like Amitabha, know that worlds exist in distant
emptiness...?
How should I, like Amitabha, realize space and time and my
own non-existence...?*

This philosophical trajectory is quite unlike anything written by Dashbalbar, or even by Yavuuhulan. In this poem, Nyamsüren seems to be coming to grips, as we have seen elsewhere in his writing of this final period, with his own mortality and with the nature of the world around him, in which destruction is as present as birth. This is not the positive and comprehending acceptance of death which Yavuuhulan describes in "Goat Peak," it

²⁰³ Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 21, 26.

²⁰⁴ Danzanravjaa created his Shambhala (the western paradise of Buddhism) just outside his monastery in the Gobi at Hamrin Hiid. He said that he would return there to meet with his followers after his death.

seems rather to be acceptance in the form of a desperate wish to grasp the truth of existence.

In his 1996 poem "A Birth Certificate," Nyamsüren writes again of these matters, this time in a strangely absurd manner:

*And when the aeon is poured away, I
will be born on the planet...
I will give to the monkey a banana,
and take a human birth...
Before the aeon was poured away,
a single poem remained.
I shall give the banana
back to the monkey,
and, with no debt upon this earth,
my mind will be at peace again.*

Although there were still six years left to him at this stage, Nyamsüren appears to have come to some kind of peace in his own mind. Over the next six years, and especially at the time of Dashbalbar's death, he used poetry to think through his place within the world, and especially his relationship with the natural world. He wrote a poem called "I am become snow," he wrote poems to the rain, and he spent more and more time in Ereentsav. His end was, like Dashbalbar's, messy and the exact nature of his death is still uncertain even today, although it seems to have involved both drink and violence²⁰⁵.

²⁰⁵ From what I have been able to piece together, Nyamsüren was attacked and killed by a group of men while he was drunk. He was not unfamiliar with such experiences, moreover, having been imprisoned for two years as a young man for murder.

PART III

PRELUDE TO PART III

Part III addresses *Altan Ovoo* – its style, its content and its message – from six different yet related aspects, each of them being a constituent part of the whole. Before starting to work on this section, however, I asked Mend-Ooyo to write a brief statement about the genesis of the book, in order that I might better understand how it formed and developed in his mind, how the structure and the subject matter came together.

Mend-Ooyo wrote me a short explanatory essay, translated below, entitled “The Circumstances Surrounding the Composition of *Altan Ovoo*.”²⁰⁶ The subsequent discussion of *Altan Ovoo*, and its relationship to Mongolia’s environment and nomadic society, will touch upon many of the wider issues raised in Mend-Ooyo’s statement, but it seems proper that the author himself should introduce the book:

My father became sick in the summer of 1982. At the beginning of autumn, I took a vacation and went back to see him, as the gentle roseate days passed over Dariganga. Even though my father was ailing, he saddled a couple of horses and took me out to the place where I had been born. This was the place, upon whose earth I had first rolled about, whose essence the nomadic herders had, since antiquity, continued to taste. And the nomads had also certainly told stories to their children here, ancient stories of this land, of a foal, stolen from its mother and taken abroad. During the 1960s, horses loaded onto trains to Vietnam had run back to their homeland. And my father said, “How would they get out from the iron paddocks in foreign lands? How would they cross the railroads and rivers weaving unendingly through China? How could they survive such suffering?” As he told these stories, he would cry. Father and I rode along, our stirrups clanking together, we spoke about all this beneath the yellow autumn sun. Sadly, these were the last days that I, the nomad’s child, spent with my father in our homeland. He showed me the place where our ancestors had been born, the country where they had wandered. We made the decision to move our father into a hospital in Ulaanbaatar, close to his family. He left his ger, near to my elder brother’s place, but took with him the

²⁰⁶ “*Altan Ovoo*-g tuurvisni uchir” – G. Mend-Ooyo, email to author, October 5, 2010. My translation.

offerings placed on the family chest in the place of honor – a stone from Altan Ovoo, a book of ancient prayers and blessings and a horsehead fiddle. The latter was a melodic summary of my father’s story. Thus I understood that our homeland was preserved in the stone, the book and the horsehead fiddle and, at the moment of his final breath, his return to his homeland would be completed through these three. That winter, when father had returned to the heavens, I placed by his head the stone from Altan Ovoo, I touched the book of prayers and blessings against his corpse and made his horsehead fiddle resound on his final journey.

It seems that in this way I understood the wisdom of the mutual respect between Mongol nomadic herders and their homeland. The following spring, my mother hurried back home to organise the production of milk and the other white goods. Through the window of the Russian-built truck, a Gaz69, we felt the breeze of my homeland, scented with wormwood and juniper, a few swallows flew around us, and the rolling wilderness turned white with the evening.

I watched as my mother placed her hands together, looked out at her homeland and whispered three times, “My Altan Ovoo, my Altan Ovoo, my Altan Ovoo.” The distant hills were moving amid the watery skyblue mirages, the distant horizon between earth and sky, here and there the nomads’ livestock their white ger...stories, histories, the long songs, the melodious fiddle...the world that was welcoming us, our homeland, reduced entirely to a single phrase, Altan Ovoo. At that moment, I missed my father keenly. My dear father would come to meet me, shading his eyes...It was as though my father remained throughout our homeland, in the dark hills, in the swaying grasses, in the elders living nearby. Everything was unhappy and full of pity. A man came jogging across on a horse. It was not my father, my eyes were mistaken. A few strands of feathergrass fading in the rustling wind. I felt the warmth of my father’s hands twisting them in his hands. The nomad then had been absorbed entirely into his homeland, and all of this remained to safeguard wisdom.

I took my eldest son, nine-year-old Naranbaatar, for a few days in my homeland and we headed for Altan Ovoo. We climbed to the top of Altan Ovoo and I pointed out to him the landscape, and told him the stories of the place, again and again my son’s questions knocked me harshly, and I missed my own enfeebled father, and I felt his questioning in the days that followed. I whispered to myself that I should write an epic tale about my homeland, that it would be called Altan Ovoo. It would be a stūpa for my father, it would be an answer to the questions of future generations.

So that summer I created a plan for Altan Ovoo and the lines of the book began to take shape, and in my spare time I found the answers to these questions, from the elderly nomads, men and women, from my mother, from the land.

Luckily I finished writing Altan Ovoo while my mother was still alive. We greeted the democratic revolution and, sadly, four years later, with the book's publication, my mother left the earth.

Altan Ovoo is a name which preserves the name of the mountain forever, and although it is true that it shows the respect with which I held my homeland, that is not its principal theme. Certainly, the name Altan Ovoo has for three centuries been spoken with reverence, prayer and contemplation, the name somehow took on a mysterious feeling, it was a magical incantation of power and might. Looking back now, there might have been a secret power in my writing of Altan Ovoo, since my main wish was to illuminate the name of Altan Ovoo.

Mend-Ooyo's account not only provides us with his personal vision for *Altan Ovoo*, but it also shows how closely that vision relates to the nomadic tradition and lifestyle discussed in Part 1. For Mend-Ooyo the symbiotic relationship of the landscape and the people was a primary catalyst in writing *Altan Ovoo* – it was “as though my father remained throughout our homeland, in the dark hills, in the swaying grasses, in the elders living nearby” – and this symbiosis is also a defining theme of the Mongol nomadic experience and the nomadic history of the Mongol people.

The analysis of *Altan Ovoo* which follows – literary (and) historical – might in some ways be seen as a biographical experiment, with Mend-Ooyo as its subject. For its part, *Altan Ovoo* might equally be seen as a(n auto)biographical experiment, or even an experimental (auto)biography – of Mend-Ooyo, of the Mongol Everyman, and of the Mongol nomad through space and time. For, while it is possible to regard Mend-Ooyo as a highly traditional and decidedly unexperimental writer, the themes and structure of *Altan Ovoo* – poetic, novelistic, a history-cum-memoir, a dream-vision-fantasy; the book which he regards as his most important to date – suggest to us perhaps that we are dealing with an author who identifies so profoundly with his ancestors, with the golden thread of the Chinggisid lineage, that this everchanging and organic book is a topographical reflection of his relationship with his people, his ancestors and the landscape of his homeland.

It seems fitting, then, that my preamble here should reflect Mend-Ooyo's preamble to *Altan Ovoo*. *Even though my father was ailing, he saddled a couple of horses and took me out to the place where I had been born*. It is not so much his dying father's gesture, his kindness, which is important here, but the fact that Mend-Ooyo opens *Altan Ovoo* with a return journey, taken with his father, to the hill of the title. Even before recounting this journey, however, he mentions the stone – "A stone from Altan Ovoo stood in the place of honor at the rear of the ger" – and so seems almost to lend breath and life to this stone, "it rose amid the mighty flames, which promised peace, the light of the world had dominion over the play of shadows, it called upon a moment of time from a thousand years ago."²⁰⁷

But even before this stone is invoked, Mend-Ooyo invokes a very different spirit, the goddess Yangchen Lhamo, *dbyangs can lha mo* in Tibetan, whose name means "melodious goddess". Yangchen Lhamo is the Tibetan form of Sarasvātīdevā, traditionally pictured holding a *vīnā*, a long-necked Indian lute, and it is significant that Mend-Ooyo's first poem, his first prayer, is to the goddess of the arts – and, in particular, of the arts of music and poetry. Mend-Ooyo's father, moreover, was a musician, and we hear at various points during the book about his playing of the *morin huur*, the traditional two-striged horsehead fiddle.

While this prayer rehearses the material found in traditional Tibetan invocations, Mend-Ooyo's melding of his ideas with tradition is seamless. Thus the metaphor of the full moon, found throughout Tibetan literature as an indicator of the purity and completeness of the enlightened mind, is used here to illuminate the author's heart and to reveal within him

²⁰⁷ G. Mend-Ooyo, (trans Simon Wickham-Smith), *Golden Hill*, (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture, 2007), 4. Henceforth, annotated references to this text, my translation, will be indicated by the letters GH (i.e. GH, 4), while references to Mend-Ooyo's original Mongol version will be indicated by the letters AO. It should also be noted that, due to my ongoing work on this text, in particular with regard to the future 2nd printing of the translation, there will be places where the text given here differs slightly from the published edition. These differences are primarily stylistic and do not affect the meaning of the text.

the enlightened body, speech and mind of Yangchen Lhamo. This prayer, moreover, as with all such prayers, embodies the wish not only for personal enlightenment, but also that the book will bring pleasure and enlightenment to its readers, an intention found in Tibetan texts as frequently as in Mongol.

Over the course of this analysis, I will show how Mend-Ooyo is able to discuss his own personal topography parallel to the local topography around Altan Ovoo. This opening section offers the reader a radical telescoping of focus, one which recurs throughout the book, from the overarching invocation of the divine – powers both Buddhist and shamanic – to the author’s intimate recounting of his final trip with his father to Altan Ovoo.

This brief account condenses the burden of the book into just a few pages. Indeed, Mend-Ooyo’s statement that “Altan Ovoo is the world on a reduced scale” lays bare his intention in writing the book, *to illuminate the name of Altan Ovoo*.

The trajectory of this account, moreover, moves in and out through the text. Mend-Ooyo tells of the movement of the Big Dipper over Altan Ovoo, of how his father recites a litany of the surrounding hills, of how the hill itself seems “ignited like a blue flame.”²⁰⁸ Thus, through this opening account, we are prepared for the tenor of the entire book, extreme in its focus, intimate and heartfelt, oneiric, a visionary exposition of history and spirituality and memoir.

And there is movement here too, the movement of horses and the movement of the mind through time and space. But this is also, by extension, the movement of nomadic communities across the steppe. The first of the book’s refrains – “time goes flying by/time comes flying by”²⁰⁹ – references not only the metaphor familiar to English-language readers, but also the theme of visionary flight found throughout Mend-Ooyo’s work. This image,

²⁰⁸ GH, 9, 8, 7.

²⁰⁹ This is also the refrain of Mend-Ooyo’s poem “The Wheel of Time,” which he incorporated, *sans* title, into *Altan Ovoo* (GH, 156-159).

indeed, is central to what we might describe as the author's possession by the spirit of Altan Ovoo. He writes,

...the vague image of a grey horse appeared in my mind, light as a feather and seemingly created from cloud, unbridled it was and almost flying.

"I can see a grey horse in my mind," I said happily. My father said,

"That's the horse of Altan Ovoo."

In this way Altan Ovoo took its place in my mind and remained there always. On Altan Ovoo, turning through the distance of landscape and the length of the waters, everything grew indistinct. We heard the horses' hooves in the ancient stories, the souls of the old ones who were sleeping upon the land had come from the heavenly state of the Buddhas. And the tale was told, and from the farthest distance something came to me, unseen, like the flowing of water. The power of stories and of history slowly slowly woke me from my sleep.²¹⁰

In describing this process of benign possession, Mend-Ooyo seems to be held in a trance, in which history and story become as one, in which the horse-spirit of Altan Ovoo reveals – through the author's father, whose approaching death is keenly felt – its subtle presence in the topography shared by the author, his society and, as *Altan Ovoo* unfolds, his readership. For it is not only those who know the physical landscape of Altan Ovoo who take part in this unfolding of myth and story and memoir, but even those at a distance may be touched by the nonlocal *genius loci*. It is this nonlocal element, I think, which is perhaps the most important aspect of Mend-Ooyo's intention in writing the book, for if Altan Ovoo is in fact "the world on a reduced scale" – while acknowledging nonetheless that such an understanding constitutes "a long and arduous journey" – then it is possible for all of us who read the book, who experience the myth, who respond to the wisdom of the landscape, to apprehend Altan Ovoo and its spirit within ourselves, much as Mend-Ooyo seeks through his

²¹⁰ GH, 9-10.

work to grasp "the difference between in this world between animate and inanimate, [...] between past and present."²¹¹

Thus Altan Owoo stands at the center of the conceptual topography both of Mend-Ooyo's homeland and of this book. It is the *axis mundi* of his homeland, Dariganga, its spirit is his tutelary deity, and the book itself is a "golden book,"²¹² which Mend-Ooyo once described to me (using the English word) as an "almanac." But this brief introductory chapter presents the hill in both its spiritual and physical aspects, and the depth of his relationship with his father, and his father's place in relation to Altan Owoo.

This complex interaction of spirit and flesh, of heart and mind, of time and space, continues throughout the book, and both conceptually and stylistically this opening material sets the scene for the narrative which follows.

The six themes according to which the following study is constructed – spirituality, history, narrative story, poetry, the natural world and auto/biography – are themes important not only to Mend-Ooyo but also to Mongol nomadic society in general, as I have shown in Parts 1 and 2. Moreover, the concept of "environment" with which we are here concerned is as much internal as external, reflecting the way in which the population, currently less than three million and historically far smaller, functions not unlike a family. Thus the sociocultural environment, changing according to the season and according to nomadic movement, reflects also the interaction between social groups and the individuals in which these consist.

This interaction is especially clear from the dialog of Mend-Ooyo and his father, expressed as much through their hearts as through their words - in the introduction, and in the symbolic handing over of the "golden sutra" of Altan Owoo. But, as Mend-Ooyo suggests, his father has a complex relationship with the book: "All that is human is a single

²¹¹ GH,10.

²¹² GH, 225.

volume sutra. All that we know, everything that we have hear and seen, is written in the sutra of the mind. My son, please recite from your own sutra! Father will listen.”²¹³ The tenderness of this interaction, the father’s acknowledgement of his son’s individual experience, but also a profound grasp of human relationship, is the basis upon which *Altan Ovoo* is written, and the place occupied between them and in their hearts by Altan Ovoo. And this is a place defined on a spiritual level, a place of shamanic and Buddhist spiritual, a place of the ancestors, and a place soon to be occupied by Mend-Ooyo’s father, and in the future by Mend-Ooyo himself. It is to this spirituality, then, that we turn first, and to the idea of *Altan Ovoo* as a repository of wisdoms.

²¹³ GH, 13.

CHAPTER 6:

Altan Ovoo as a “book-stūpa”

*My old and gentle faith,
which pleases everyone,
I dedicate to you all.
My belief in truth alone,
which upholds many things,
I offer to the perfect and compassionate Buddha.
The antelope on the steppe is always darting
about.
The flames in the fire are always burning.²¹⁴*

Even before the invocation of Yangchen Lhamo, even before we turn the first page, Mend-Ooyo announces his spiritual profile. *This book-stūpa/has been erected/in memory of my parents.* The idea of the stūpa, though, stretches in *Altan Ovoo* beyond its Buddhist origins, and in Mend-Ooyo’s vision embraces not only the spiritual wisdom of Buddhism and shamanism, but also the ideas of lineage, memory and tradition, which, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, are so central to Mongol nomadic culture. This initial chapter of close analysis of *Altan Ovoo* will, then, address itself to the ways in which the book deals with these diverse issues, not so much in terms of narrative and text, but in terms of being itself a repository.

The term stūpa²¹⁵ is a Sanskrit word, referring to a reliquary in which are placed the remains of a venerated spiritual teacher. The symbolism in the construction of a stūpa, most importantly in relation to *Altan Ovoo*, is such as to represent the infinite universe in a single, finite building. Thus, there is the earth (the square base), water (the hemispherical body, representing an offering vase), fire (the conical spire), air (the parasol and crescent moon) and space (the sun and the point at which the tip ultimately tapers

²¹⁴ From T-Ö.Erdenetsogt’s poem “Song of Sacrifice,” in Erdenetsogt, 145.

²¹⁵ Mend-Ooyo uses the term *subarga*, which is the Mongol rendition of *stūpa*.

upwards). There is a fundamental parallel here, then, between Altan Owoo as the *axis mundi* in Mend-Ooyo's vision and his conception of *Altan Owoo* as a "book-stūpa," such that the book incorporates perhaps the universe which it is describing, the universe with Altan Owoo at its center.

The relationship, then, between *Altan Owoo* and Altan Owoo, the ways in which the one depends upon and expands the social and cultural signification of the other, can be seen to reflect the relationships between Buddhist texts and practise, and between the sensate world and shamanic practise. The remainder of this chapter will seek to explicate both of these relationships, the interaction between macrocosm and microcosm, between the inner, spiritual, wisdom of human beings and the outer, topographical, wisdom of the landscape, so as to show how Mend-Ooyo's vision expresses his own personal philosophy and that of Mongol nomadic society.

The expression of these relationships is found even in the structure of the book. The titles of the eight chapters – The Endless Knot, Topaz, the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel, The White Lotus, The Golden Wheel, The Glorious Jewel, The White Conch, A Pitcher of Spring Water – reflect a combination of the seven traditional Buddhist symbols of royal power²¹⁶ and the eight auspicious symbols²¹⁷. These constitute the temporal manifestation of the enlightened

²¹⁶ These are the precious queen, representing loyalty and the feminine polarity (the king being the masculine polarity); the precious general, representing the wrathful power to conquer enemies; the precious horse, whose ability to travel through the sky represents the transcendent vision of the Buddha; the precious jewel, which fulfills all desires; the precious minister, representing the lay community, through whose presence the monastic community can continue; the precious elephant, representing stability of mind; the precious wheel of dharma, representing truth.

²¹⁷ These vary slightly from tradition to tradition, but within the Tibetan Mahayana tradition, they are a lotus flower, representing purity and enlightenment; an endless knot, representing harmony; a pair of golden fish, representing conjugal happiness and freedom; a victory banner, representing a victorious battle; the wheel of Dharma, representing knowledge; a treasure vase, representing inexhaustible treasure and wealth; a parasol, representing the crown, and protection from the elements; a conch shell, representing the thoughts of the Buddha.

mind²¹⁸, and their use as structural markers in *Altan Ovoo*, while not explicitly related to the material within a given chapter, nonetheless shows the macrostructure of the mental landscape as much as of the physical landscape.

Indeed, there seems no narrative reason behind Mend-Ooyo's choice of this structure. It could be suggested, however, that to entitle the chapter based largely around Chinggis Haan's funeral cortège "The Endless Knot" is indicative, at least in part, of the unbreakable "golden thread" of the Chinggisid lineage, and herefore of the Mongol people themselves, but such claims cannot be made for each of the chapters.

That said, the fact that the book's macrostructure places the enlightened mind, and its embodiment in human form, at the conceptual center of the narrative shows one way in which Mend-Ooyo conceives of Buddhism's place within Mongol culture. After all, he starts *Altan Ovoo*, as we have seen, with both the image of a stūpa and a prayer to the Indo-Tibetan goddess of poetry, but these are explicitly formal devices, and it is the account of the stone from Altan Ovoo which follows, and its relationship to the hill and to Mend-Ooyo's homeland, which is most important in the succeeding pages.

The structure, however, as expressed through the title of each chapter, is significant not only because it refers to the Buddhist tradition, adopted by Mongol society from Tibet, which itself had adopted it from India centuries before, but also because the images are highly stylized indices of perfection and continuity. Thus we might see reflected in Mend-Ooyo's choice of this particular structure the way in which he conceives of *Altan Ovoo* as being a stūpa, itself also a stylized image of perfection. This seemingly artificial, yet highly symbolic, highly meaningful, approach provides the author with a form, through which he can develop parallel conceptions of fiction, myth and both personal and social history. The reader also benefits from this, insofar as a close inspection of the series of abstracted

²¹⁸ The association of kingship with the Buddha is seen in Mongol by the literary usage of the word *haan* to describe the Buddha.

images which structure the narrative will preëempt the way in which the trajectory of ideas and their development is understood: we cannot expect realism from such a book, nor narrative consistency, but we can expect a journey of contemplation, into what might constitute the enlightened mind, and into what might constitute the manifestation of shamanic wisdom.

But *Altan Ovoo* is neither an especially religious book nor indeed an especially spiritual one. The ideas, which Mend-Ooyo gradually explores over the course of the eight chapters, are much more concerned with the interrelationship of human beings and of the humans with the natural world that they inhabit. Nonetheless, within the Mongol context, these are indeed topics that we might label as spiritual, insofar as they directly invoke the environment, and thus the ancestors, in social acts. In this way, the book's overarching Buddhist structure, which calls to mind the perfect qualities of the enlightened mind, provides a clear methodology for both the author, through writing the book, and the reader, through reading the book, to come to an understanding of their individual place within the world as a whole, and the particular world that they inhabit. And so, as with Buddhist meditation and shamanic practises, the macrocosmic and general (Mend-Ooyo's world of Altan Ovoo) is focussed through the prism of the individual (the reader) and thus perhaps transforms that individual in ways both personal and societal, which in turn transforms the society itself. In this way, then, the presence of Atan Ovoo within the confines of *Altan Ovoo* is able to act upon the minds and the hearts of its readers, just as it acts in the landscape of Dariganga and upon Mend-Ooyo's mind and heart:

The eternal sun and moon does not blaze forth from the summit, which is like a towering mountain. Rather, the moon shines in the night and the sun illuminates the day and the fire blooms in our hearts and our minds.

This stūpa-eye at the center of our thoughts cannot be seen from Altan Ovoo, but it is in our hearts and our minds. On Altan Ovoo, when a person looks beyond thoughts, beyond the distant time, it is their own stūpa which rises aloft.

*This stūpa is a small mountain on the steppe reflected in the mirror of the eyes, its timeless meaning and import towers into the sky of the mind, reflected in the mirror of the heart.*²¹⁹

This passage, right at the end of the book, closes a short section entitled “Creating a Stūpa,” and it shows us yet again how, for Mend-Ooyo, the idea of the stūpa, the physical embodiment of the transcendent and perfect wisdom of the enlightened mind is ultimately linked with Altan Ovoo. It behoves us, however, to investigate how the hill itself, given its own potential to inspire realisation in the human world, it is to be understood in relationship to the book.

For both shamanism and Buddhism, the word, whether it be uttered or set down on paper, possesses the power to transform, and thereby to catalyse individual enlightenment.

In Tibet, with its largely static communities of laypeople and monastics, the written word became a repository of wisdom. The Geluk, in particular, placed great importance upon formal practise and upon the memorization of key texts before a person could undertake long retreats, and it was primarily the Geluk which brought Buddhism to Mongolia. The importance in Tibet, however, of the tradition of non-partisan practise²²⁰ was such that the teachings of one sect were frequently used by another, and thus it was that the tradition of xylographic printing developed.

In Mongolia, despite a commitment to the printing of both canonic texts and the biographies and commentaries, by Mongol teachers as much as by their Tibetan counterparts, the use of such texts took on a very different aspect. For, whereas in Tibet,

²¹⁹ GH, 226-7.

²²⁰ This “non-partisan” rimé (Tib *ris med*) tradition, which arose formally in the late nineteenth century, was promoted by two powerful lamas, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (‘Jam dbyangs mkhyen rtse dbang po, 1820-1892) and Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé (‘Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas, 1813-1899). The situation during the previous centuries of Buddhism in Tibet, however, was far more fluid than this might suggest, and these practitioners of what might be called pre-rimé had considerable temporal and religious power.

the majority of laypeople lived in settlements, in Mongolia all but the monastics were nomadic herders and, since books constituted extra weight and took up room which otherwise would have been used for storing necessities such as food and, since the majority was functionally literate prior to the implementation of Soviet-backed educational policies following the 1921 revolution, there was very little reason for nomadic groups to carry texts around as they moved from site to site.

Notwithstanding all this, it is also true that a Buddhist text, insofar as it holds within its pages words which catalyze – and this is especially true of texts containing *mantra* – enlightenment in an individual practitioner, are held to be sacred *an sich*. For this reason, to possess such a text, particularly one which has been blessed by a spiritual teacher, is itself considered powerful, and so this would be one way in which a nomadic group would be able to retain both the letter and the spirit of faith.²²¹

The place of text within shamanic practise is quite different. Because Shamanism appears to have developed in pre-literate societies, it is the incantatory power of language rather than the recitatory power of text, which creates a vital link, via the shaman, between the individual and the gods.²²² But it is incantation and utterance, perhaps paradoxically, which function as the lynchpins of shamanic activity. We can see traces of this in such practises as glossolalia²²³, and in the idea of mantra-recitation within the Indo-Tibetan tradition. My own instruction and personal experience as a monk within the Tibetan

²²¹ It is also true that, in Mongolia as in Tibet, certain practitioners or monastics would, due to their education, be invited to recite a given text for the benefit of a person or a group of people. This, I believe, constitutes a different use of text, but it is nevertheless pertinent in a discussion of the relative spiritual practises within Tibetan and Mongol Buddhism.

²²² The idea that shamanism eschews texts – or, rather, that it developed in pre- or nonliterate societies – is widely attested. See, *inter alia*, Mircea Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les Techniques Archaïques de l'Ecstase*, (Paris: Payot 1951) and Hoppál.

²²³ The anthropologist Felicitas D. Goodman, who later investigated the spiritual power inherent in postures employed by cultures throughout the world, initially concentrated her research on glossolalia. See Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

tradition has shown me that, for instance, the mantra *om mani padmé hum* (the sonic manifestation of the *yidam* [cf Chapter 2] Chenrezik) is a prayer, uttered as an invocation of the *inner* essence of Chenrezik, as well as a vocalisation intended to entrain the practitioner in such a way that s/he is made available to the essential presence of the yidam. This phenomenon is necessarily complex and hard to understand, but it becomes clear when observed in others or enacted on a personal level²²⁴.

Mend-Ooyo's approach to the spiritual element of text and language in *Altan Owoo* relates more to shamanic culture than to Buddhist culture. It is interesting, moreover, that the book eschews specific references to shamans and shamanic practise, whereas Buddhism is explicitly invoked, both through poetry and prayer, and through the use of individual characters (such as Aгаа Lharampa, GH pp.120-121) and explicit ideas (such as the erection and offerings of a temple, GH pp.184-187).

The second half of Chapter Seven offers what we might see as an overview of Mend-Ooyo's approach to the spiritual power of language, the power which defines the book and somehow propels it, and each of its parts, forward. The invocation in these passages of poetic language and the poetic vocation²²⁵ is based upon the conceptual melding of the

²²⁴ Bernardo Bertolucci's 1994 film *Kundun* contains remarkable scenes including the Néchung (*gnas chung*) Oracle in a state of trance, which illustrates my point here. The oracle's glossolalia is *recorded* and *intepreted* rather than explained: the oracle becomes embodied by the Dalai Lamas' protector Dorjé Drakden (Tib *rDo rje grags ldan*) and his utterance is expected, and understood *per se*, to be meaningful. The origins of such phenomena are unclear, but parallels can be observed in the idea of *enchantment*, and its etymological reference to song. Thus we can see, for instance, that the varying registers of discourse in the Amazonian language Pirahã described by Daniel Everett (Everett [2008], pp.185-9), the incantatory *joik* in Sámi culture, and the singing of hymns and plainchant in Christian culture all indicate direct communication with the divine through language, yet mediated by metalinguistic elements.

²²⁵ The semantic and etymological relationship here between *invocation* and *vocation* should be noted.

shamanic and Buddhist worldviews²²⁶, which, as I have already suggested, is central to an understanding of the power and implication of mantric utterance:

I remember there were two pills, I don't know who gave them to my father. They said that these precious objects, which had been placed, wrapped in an offering scarf, into the ritual urn, were tantric pills. I asked father about these pills, the days and months passed by, and the interest I felt on that day slipped my mind. One day, father took out the urn and undid the offering scarf, the pills had greatly multiplied. It wasn't a seed from a plant, so it hadn't been planted in the earth, and yet it had generated, and that was a real surprise. Father said,

"They have been blessed by many millions and thousands of millions of mantras. This is what gives them their power."

"What's a mantra?" I asked him. He replied, "Words."

The magic of words had increased two pills to twenty or thirty but at that time I couldn't understand the explanation. I'm thinking that, while later I got the idea of sparking endless meanings from two words in an alembic, in my youth I felt that I had no need to find the key which might unlock this box of inexplicable secrets.²²⁷

While the idea that words have "magic" is not an uncommon one, it is perhaps unusual for an autobiographical vignette of this kind to include so explicit a reference to the way in which *physical* (rather than psychological) characteristics might be transmuted through the recitation of mantra. Mend-Ooyo's father's direct and definitive statement, that mantra is simply words²²⁸, speaks to what we might, from an occidental viewpoint, label "mysticism" but which, in reality, is simply the way of understanding the psychospiritual impact of the language of mantra. But the word *üg*²²⁹, moreover, is simply the word *word*,

²²⁶ It should also be realised, of course, that the practise of Tibetan Buddhism is a syncretism of pre-Buddhist Tibetan shamanism (*bön*) and the Buddhism imported from India.

²²⁷ GH, 211-2.

²²⁸ AO, 236.

²²⁹ This is also the modern spelling of the Classical Mongol word *üge*, although I don't feel that Mend-Ooyo is here echoing the late C19 movement, spearheaded by the work of Sanday, and described in Part 1.

and thus we are reminded, almost at the end of the book, of the book's opening statement: "The towering Altan Owoo of the mind, the stūpa of enlightenment, was built from stones, an ornament of precious words, through ancient prayer."

These two quotations provide us with Mend-Ooyo's conception of the psychophysical interaction of words and form. He has said to me that "language is the mediator of thought,"²³⁰ and thus it is that Altan Owoo can be a manifestation of enlightenment, constructed through "precious words, through ancient prayer." Of course, that this is an "ancient" prayer is significant, and as we read through the prolog, we realise how immanent the ancestors are, both to Mend-Ooyo himself and to Altan Owoo. Their antiquity is less important than their presence and the wisdom that they have, through their constancy and their presence, accumulated: "If you ask about the enchanting books written by wise people in the past," Mend-Ooyo's father tells him, "they exist in the purity of body and mind."²³¹

This aspatialtemporal potency lends to the language of these books, and perhaps to the books themselves, a prayerful demeanor, not dissimilar from mantra, and one moreover through which an individual can transform their world. The section called "How Words Can Light A Lamp" is explicit in this:

A poor man had no oil for a lamp, so he went before the Buddha and asked, Please light the lamp. His thoughts raised up the flame and afterwards he committed himself to worship. I don't know in fact how many hundreds of millions of prayers he offered. We experience how every prayer we offer purifies and illumines the mind and how, like a gushing spring, they cleanse and clear our troubled thoughts.

When this pious man began to pray in the gloom of evening, he suddenly saw before his eyes many lamps brightly burning. If he stopped praying, he saw no lamps there. When he began to pray the following night, the lamps were once again burning. As he prayed like this, he noticed flames upon the pads of the fingers of his hand. Many hundreds of millions

²³⁰ Personal communication.

²³¹ GH, 213.

*of times he prayed Please light the lamp and he imagined that his mind was truly like a burning lamp and knew that his prayers had been fulfilled.*²³²

The purificatory power of such prayer is central to Tibeto-Mongol Buddhism, and it is considered to heal both the mind and the body ready for the process of realisation²³³. Mend-Ooyo's intention here seems to be to focus more on the power of words spoken with intent and with faith, and we can see from the this chapter's remaining sections on the force of language (in particular, in "Predicting the Future, "the unhappy fate of one who misuses language"²³⁴" that there are consequences which result from the mis/use of words.

There is a sense throughout *Altan Ovoo* that, for Mend-Ooyo, words hold a kind of spiritual essence. Not only in the narratives of Chapter Seven, but also in the very language which he uses to describe the speech act. For we must not forget that the word *duu* means "voice" and "sound," and also "song," and in using this most quotidian of Mongol words, Mend-Ooyo is constantly reminding his readers – with a concision that I, as a translator, cannot hope in English to replicate – of what we might suggest was a kind of "enchantment," of "giving voice," of "singing into being," of "magicking" concepts through the utterance of sounds in which those concepts are realised, are made real for us.

This process will become clearer in our discussion of narrative and poetry (see Chapters 7 and 8 below), but we should remain constantly aware of the interpenetration in Mend-Ooyo's work of the spiritual with the verbal. The textual and the spoken, after all, are

²³² GH, 217.

²³³ The preliminary practises (*ngöndro* [Tib *sngon 'gro*]) undertaken at the beginning of a long retreat within the Tibetan tradition is itself regarded as a *sine qua non* for those wishing for the most benefit from their practise. In my own case, as a retreatant at Kagyu Samyé Ling monastery in Scotland during the long retreat from 1993-1997, this initial focus on the 100,000 iterations of full-length prostrations and of symbolic offerings of the universe, each accompanied by mantra recitation, and of a further 100,000 iterations each of prayers to the root guru and of the purifying mantra of Dorjé Sempa (Tib *Rdo rje sems dpa'*) was explained as the minimum psychophysical effort which we should expect of ourselves in order to be ready for the subsequent tantric practises.

²³⁴ GH, 218-9.

what define in part the physical: intent is expressed through narrative, either uttered within and to ourselves or without and to others, and it is to this intent that we might feel ourselves held, whether by ourselves or by others, and whether these others are physical or metaphysical is irrelevant.

In the next section, we will look at how the spirituality of physical world is made manifest in *Altan Ovoo*, as much through the work of the mind as through the hands. Here too we should remember that this is a “book-stūpa,” erected by Mend-Ooyo for his parents, and that even a book – even an academic dissertation – requires considerable physical and mental labor on the part of its writer. And so we are offered the ambiguous psychophysical idea, of how “the towering Altan Ovoo of the mind, the stūpa of enlightenment, was built from stones...through ancient prayer.”²³⁵

The construction of a space, such as a temple or a monastery, in which Buddhist ritual and meditation might be practised, has a particular resonance in Mongolia. The catastrophic purges of Mongol Buddhism during the 1930s, at the apparent bipartite behest of Josef Stalin and General Secretary Choibalsan, and with the notorious Nogoön Tsamts, or Green Shirts, as their instrument, remains very much a part of social memory, and indeed there are of course a very few people remaining who were directly impacted.

In 1986, however, with the movement towards *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, intellectuals in Mongolia, such as Mend-Ooyo, were relatively free to discuss religious topics, and his explicit description and acknowledgement of the forces of spirituality in *Altan Ovoo*, and the presence throughout of the non-material and transcendent world, even then went some way to reconstitute the culture and discourse of Mongol Buddhism as a vibrant part of the Mongol experience.²³⁶

²³⁵ GH, 3.

²³⁶ The appearance, also in 1986, of O. Dashbalbar’s *Gol Us Namuuhan Ursana* was equally important, if not more so. Dashbalbar’s book brought into the public sphere a discourse

Chapter Six of *Altan Ovoo* deals with origins. As Mend-Ooyo has written²³⁷, “Everyone comes into being within the golden vessel of their mother, and so enters the world. And the world is the origin of the maternal. The world has arisen from emptiness. This chapter is about origins, it addresses the endless question about how things began.” Mend-Ooyo’s correlation here between the maternal principle and the emptiness which stands at the center of Buddhist philosophy and practice is a powerful reminder, towards the end of the book, of the initial idea of the “book-stūpa,” but it also reminds us of the mother’s presence within Buddhist culture as a guiding force for what we might describe as ethical and enlightened behavior.

This is an echo of the universal Buddhist exhortation to regard “all sentient beings as your mother.” There is no one standard example of this idea. Rather, it pervades the literature, just as the number of one’s own rebirths is so vast that the universe is pervaded by beings who, at some point in the past, had all been one’s mother. The corollary is, one must suppose (though it is not generally spelt out), true: that an individual must also have been the mother of every other being at least once throughout eternity. In this way – and, though Mend-Ooyo does not express this directly, the relationships central to nomadic shamanic and Buddhist societies would seem to point towards such a conclusion – the individual’s mother can be seen as a focus for a mixture of universal gratitude and compassion, which thus informs their every interaction with the world and its inhabitants.

This is a similar understanding, of course, to that through which the ancestors are invoked within Mongol shamanism. We saw in Part I the way in which the ancestors *are* in

based upon both shamanic praxis and what might be described as a nomadic nationalism. This defined the philosophy of the acronymic group GUNU (which included Mend-Ooyo), and informed also Dashbalbar’s political career and his campaign against private ownership of the land. That both Dashbalbar’s and Mend-Ooyo’s books appeared at the same pivotal point in history is, however, sociopolitically significant, and indicates the way in which Mongol intellectuals were beginning to develop the thinking which would define the postmaterialist world of post-Soviet Mongolia.

²³⁷ G. Mend-Ooyo, email to the author, November 2010.

many ways the landscape, how they exist both physically within the earth (and how, for many writers, they symbolise the cyclical relationship between the human and the nonhuman world) and existentially within the social landscape of the nomadic community. It is in this way that the landscape, the nomadic *nutag*, can be seen as the physical manifestation of the ancestors, and also of the maternal principal – and thus, in many texts, in the work of many writers²³⁸, it *is become* both the ancestors and the mother.

With one text in Chapter Six – “The Temple of My Protecting Mother” – Mend-Ooyo presents the erection and blessing of a temple through the power of words. The title of this text – *Getelgegch Ehiin Süm* – is noteworthy, since the word for “mother” here – *eh* – is also the word for “origin.” Thus we have, not the emotional relationship which is elsewhere present (when the word *eej*, or “mom/mommie” is used), but rather the mother as the eternal principal of origin.

The trajectory through which Mend-Ooyo erects this temple is similar to the manifestation, within vajrayāna Buddhism, of the *yidam* or Buddha principle. This trajectory begins with meditation, and precedes through the establishment of a (sacred: protective) circle to the erection, blessing and veneration of the temple. The personal description of Mend-Ooyo’s meditation, in preparation for – or maybe simultaneously with – the creation of this temple (of the mind) is noteworthy for its echo of standard tantric Tibetan religious texts:

I am sitting among Ongon's many great hills of yellow sand. I close my eyes, reflecting, dissolving into eternal skylike mind, a blue thumb-sized spot with a red triangle of flame flickering imperceptibly within...and then...a white dot...like a square of

²³⁸ The relationship between the nomadic people and their homeland was described in Chapter One. The presence of this topos in Mongol literary tradition is so widespread and universal that it is pointless to list exemplars. Suffice it to say that, among those contemporaries of Mend-Ooyo’s with whose work I am familiar, there are definitive parallels to the correlation running through *Altan Ovoo* in the work of D. Nyamaa, D. Nyamsüren, L. Myagmarsüren, O. Dashbalbar and Ch. Galsan.

yellow sunlight striking the door of a ger...the qualities of the wise, their form and appearance, appear from beyond time.

So how should the excellent seed of human activity, from the peaceful void of the fully purified mind, be seen as the holiness of nirvana, a departure from the world in that space which is no more than the flickering tip of a candle?

The mind, meditating in the brilliance of mind upon the form of Dharma, together with the quality of emptiness, finally achieves the superior holiness of constancy.²³⁹

Thus it is that, within “the superior holiness of constancy,” which is, we must assume, the mind of enlightenment, Mend-Oyoo erects the temple to “the protecting mother.” Notice that he closes his eyes, thus somehow shutting out the physical world, and raises up the temple:

I am creating a temple of bright quartz for my mother. The eternal blue skies are the covering sphere of an inverted shining temple.

[...]

I meditate in the clarity of mind, contemplating the assembly of Buddhas, divinely canopied by the light of the perfect land which glimmers on the yellow hills of the plain.

My mother, my homeland...oh, this is your shining quartz temple, my mother.²⁴⁰

In creating this temple, then, this temple of the mind, Mend-Ooyo’s discourse manifests directly not only the idea of a physical Buddhist temple, insofar as it is created through this specific and personal description, but also the dynamic and meditative Buddhist-shamanic psychological expression of enlightenment. For the temple here is a manifestation of enlightenment, and in the poem which closes this sequence, at the very end of the chapter – “Chanting Sutras” – Mend-Ooyo links the physical topography of Dariganga around Altan Ovoo with both the nomadic manifestation of shamanic philosophy and the spiritual aspect of that topography:

The heavenly spirit of Dariganga is the azure overhead.

²³⁹ GH, 184-5.

²⁴⁰ GH, 185.

*The land in the soul of Daringanga is the gilding underfoot.
 The cloud of garudas over Dariganga is a flashing flight.
 The turquoise hills of Dariganga are growing green.
 The hearthfires of Dariganga are turning to crimson.*

*The light of pure Sukhavati grants transformation,
 the gentle rain drops from the clear vessel,
 the white conch of Dharma sounds in all directions,
 the cushions of pure nectar blossom, and
 I meditate upon the shining temple whose vitality is a
 blessing.²⁴¹*

But to what extent is this temple an environment of meditation? The unification of the mother (and the implied presence here, within the idea of the “mother,” of a highly personal and emotional “mom”) with human origin, with meditative manifestation and with the explicit multilevel psychophysical landscape in which all this takes place, is effectively the temple which Mend-Ooyo is describing here. To describe this erection, this manifestation, as a “temple” is to embody the processes by which thought itself is made manifest, which opens up both the author and the reader to a powerful psychospiritual multivalence.

Having looked at various aspects of religious and spiritual expression in *Altan Ovoo*, it is necessary to look at the presence of Mend-Ooyo’s teacher Yavuuhulan within the text. Yavuuhulan, as explained in Chapter Four, was the son of a shaman, and his work following Krushchev’s repudiation of Stalin in 1956 laid the foundation for a new tradition in Mongol literature in which spiritual sensibilities were permitted a greater freedom. Thus it was that, like others of his generation, Yavuuhulan was able to express his personal apprehension of the interplay of the spiritual and the nomadic within Mongol society, which led after his untimely death in 1982 to works such as *Altan Ovoo*, with their more open attitude towards both Buddhism and shamanism.

²⁴¹ GH, 187-8.

It is especially important, with regard to the presence of spirituality in *Altan Ovoo* and Mend-Ooyo's conception of it as a repository of wisdom, to analyse the way in which Mend-Ooyo has extended and developed Yavuuhulan's idea of *nutag*, and the immanence of the ancestors within the topography of the *nutag*. I showed in Part II how Yavuuhulan adapted the conception of *nutag* within the Mongol sociocultural tradition, how in poems such as "Goat Peak" he was able to express (notwithstanding the lack of clarity during the late 1960s of the policies around the official censorship) that aspect of shamanic understanding which focuses on the relationship between human beings (here represented by the community of nomadic herders and, especially, the author/narrator's shaman father) and the world of animals (here represented by the goat).

While this might be a useful analysis with regard to "Goat Peak" itself, the poem exhibits also a psychological depth which we can see taken up by Mend-Ooyo in *Altan Ovoo*.²⁴² Such a depth of psyche needs must run concomitant with a depth of apprehension, and for Mend-Ooyo it manifests both in the structural conception of the book as a repository of (spiritual, nonmaterial) wisdom – which we should read as traditional nomadic wisdom – and in the thematic conception, from the titles of the succeeding chapters right down through the individual texts to the individual poetic line and the many

²⁴² This claim is also true of much of Yavuuhulan's work of the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, "My Character" (1968), "A Silver Autumn Morning" (1968), "The Stars Plunge into the Water" (1969), "Polygonum" (1975) and "Stags" (1978) can all be read in parallel with both "Goat Peak" and *Altan Ovoo*. Moreover, we might also substitute the work of Dashbalbar or Nyamsüren for that of Mend-Ooyo, and thereby show not only the profound influence of Yavuuhulan on the philosophical worldview and the poetry of his students, but also – and more important here – the way in which Yavuuhulan was able to set in motion a revival of the traditional nomadic psychospiritual worldview, in which the ancestors, though not explicitly invoked, are nonetheless immanent and protecting presences.

examples in the text of how internal resonance and echo is applied to the thematic and to the verbal²⁴³.

In the final pages of *Altan Ovoo*, Mend-Ooyo invokes the guardian of Altan Ovoo and offers prayer and supplication similar to that which closes a *sadhana*²⁴⁴ in the Tibeto-Mongol vajrayāna tradition. One part of the invocation runs as follows:

I pray you, make the rivers pure and clear, and brightly color the flowers and plants, take pleasure in the gentle world, cover the steppe with the five types of livestock, invest grains and crops with their savor, give long life to us and to the people of our region and our nation, enjoy our riches, release us from sickness into health, abundance leads us far away from thirst and hunger, and grant us everything of which our minds conceive!

I pray you, please spread joy and good fortune and enhance our blessings, and brighten our spirits!

Grant that our lineage not be severed, that our wealth grow plentiful; we deliver into your protection the great treasure-house of offerings, the richness of our talents and, oh lords of our homeland, we entrust to you our wonderful swift steeds, our herds of cattle and our valuable livestock.

*Do you not protect us with the strength of a shining hubilgaan by looking down with the eyes of heaven, listening to us with the ears of heaven, reflecting us in the mirror of blazing magic?*²⁴⁵

Through this invocation, Mend-Ooyo is again showing how the landscape and the livestock, in which and with which his Mongol nomadic society lives, is intimately bound up with the immanent world of the ancestors, and with the Buddhist and shamanic spirits. The discourse here is clearly influenced by *glasnost*, and Mend-Ooyo is able to write explicitly about the relationship between the people and the landscape.

²⁴³ This last, the verbal, is harder to see – and harder to render – in translation than in the original. I have tried to retain as much of Mend-Ooyo's verbal dexterity and its implications throughout the book, although sometimes it has proved to be beyond my abilities.

²⁴⁴ A practise text, designed to be recited by the practitioner, and including the entirety – verbal, sonic, physical and psychological – of what would necessary, *given the optimal circumstance and the individual's perfect practise*, for the realisation of enlightened mind.

²⁴⁵ GH, 232. The term *huvilgaan* is the Mongol version of Tibetan *trülku* (Tib *sprul sku*) and refers either to the physical reëmbodiment of a deceased spritual teacher or else to a manifestation of enlightened mind.

Yavuuhulan, unable to use such language in his work, was nonetheless able to indicate such spiritual presence, and the impact of that presence upon the nomadic people. In "Goat Peak," the wisdom of the goat as it approaches death is perceived by the poet's father. But for a nomadic community, for a hunter to be successful he has to understand deeply, and forge a relationship with, the hunted²⁴⁶. In forging this relationship with the animal world, a hunter (as we might hazard from observing the widespread and well-documented shamanic rituals involving dancers wearing antlers for the sake of propitiating the gods in preparation for a hunt) somehow invokes, through his experience as a hunter, the animal spirit, and this is what Yavuuhulan's father appears to be doing in "Goat Peak," and this is clearly what Mend-Ooyo is doing as the supplicant voice throughout *Altan Ovoo*.

Of course, it is hard to do anything but analyse Yavuuhulan's poetry in this context: as far as I can ascertain²⁴⁷, he did not speak on the record about whatever spiritual life he in fact had, and when he died in 1982, Mikhail Gorbachev had not yet become General-Secretary in Moscow, the Cold War was still a powerful presence, and censorship was still exercised against Mongol intellectuals. I do, however, see flashes of such spiritual influence in certain of Yavuuhulan's poems, and if, when we read a poem such as "The Reeds of Blackwater Lake," written during the post-Stalinist thaw of 1959, we consider how Yavuuhulan, in describing the lake's natural beauty, is also subtly referring to the unseen shamanic world, then the poem is shown as a clear precursor of parts of *Altan Ovoo*, as well as the work of many other writers of Mend-Ooyo's generation and younger:

The reeds of Blackwater Lake

²⁴⁶ There are many sources for this hunter/shaman binary, but Eliade throws particular light on this aspect of "Goat Peak" in claiming that, in early agricultural societies, the shaman/hunter was probably both a hunter and guardian (Mircea Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas, Volume 1: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1981], 35). We can I believe assume that this situation had developed out of the experience of earlier nomadic societies.

²⁴⁷ I am still looking for such a text, since this would naturally be of immense help in the analysis of his work.

*whistle in the autumn wind.
Looking at them, so sad,
lower and lower they bend.*

*The lake water of clear blue,
no form appears to the eye.
The bare mountains, silent,
shade the surface.*

*The trilling wind
speckles the surface,
and the gentle whistling reeds
conjure a light sadness.*

*Does autumn freshness
ride upon such backs?
Does the Queen of Blackwater Lake
feel sad, as the pelicans fly?*

*The reeds of Blackwater Lake
whistle in the autumn wind.
To look at them, so sad,
lower and lower they bend.*

Is this simply anthropomorphism, or pathetic fallacy? For me, it is unrealistic, given the cultural and historical context in which Mongol literature is sited, to have so one-dimensional a viewpoint. More and more in Mongolia, writers are beginning now, not to adopt the knowing and analytical western viewpoint, as we might have expected, in which poetry such as Yavuuhulan's and Mend-Ooyo's is considered rhetorically loaded, but they are remaining ambivalent – and often ambiguous – in terms of the spiritual content of their work and as to the literal or metaphorical presence of the ancestors within the Mongol landscape. This intellectual openness seems to me also to be present in Yavuuhulan's work, even after the post-Stalinist thaw had again frozen over somewhat, and the influence of this upon his students, and perhaps also upon Mongol literature over the last four or five decades, remains striking.

Looking at the varying spiritual and religious expressions in *Altan Owoo*, and sensitive too to the particular historical moment during which the book was written and subsequently

published, how can we now best understand Mend-Ooyo's conception of *Altan Ovoo* as a book-stūpa?

Throughout *Altan Ovoo*, there is a melding of the inner and outer landscape. This melding – or we might construct it as an active mediation between these two aspects – renders the narrative threads, together with the landscape as defined through the nomadic psychophysical context, both as an expression of historical Mongol spirituality and as the universe defined by the active presence of the ancestors and the ancestral spirit.

To see *Altan Ovoo* as a repository for, and manifestation of, enlightened mind requires that we pay close attention to Mend-Ooyo's conception of language and of spirituality. The following text from the final chapter is definitive in its association of the two ideas, and how they come together in the stūpa that is *Altan Ovoo*:

Joining letters together to make words, speaking words to express meaning, I have erected my own stūpa upon my Altan Ovoo. I haven't taken stones from the land and moved them from one mountain to another, rather I have collected my endless thoughts from across the steppes, like stones lying here and there abandoned, and I have piled them high. I have not dug in the earth and extracted clay and limestone, rather I have balanced individual stanzas and rhythms, as though correcting blemishes, and I have organised these innumerable thoughts of mine into some kind of pattern.

[...]

This stūpa-eye at the center of our thoughts cannot be seen on Altan Ovoo, but it is in our hearts and our minds. On Altan Ovoo, when a person looks beyond thoughts, beyond the distant time, it is their own stūpa which rises aloft.²⁴⁸

This stūpa, then, though not physical in the way that traditional stūpas are physical, is nonetheless Mend-Ooyo's personal understanding of his relationship with Altan Ovoo. It is a nonmaterial stūpa – the "written" words and the published book, although in no way trivial, are the sole embodiment of these ideas, and somehow necessary for their transmission – and, in its nonmateriality, in its being "in our hearts and minds," it merges with, and further

²⁴⁸ GH, 226.

defines, the spiritual aspect of Mend-Ooyo's experience, and the experience of nomadic Mongol society. In this way, *Altan Ovoo* and Altan Ovoo become one and the same thing: the book which Mend-Ooyo has assembled, through manifold genres and styles and expressions, embodies the hill that is present in Mend-Ooyo's heart, in the same way as a traditional Buddhist stūpa becomes, through the collected stories and art and scripture and philosophy and prayers placed within it, a manifestation of Buddhist wisdom.

CHAPTER 7

Environment and History in *Altan Owoo*

Spring of 1162, the year of the black horse. As the hero Yesühei, ruler of Bet, sits on top of a high hill in the south of Balguu, upon an expanse of cloth embroidered with lions, and instructing an army of his people, He Wang Tooril, the ruler of Hereid, comes and bows to him, he says, "My father's brother Zür is going to kill me, he would capture all my subjects and become Haan. My heroic lord, won't you take your proud army and take revenge?" Although the hero Yesühei knew that He Wang had acted improperly, that he had murderously found fault with his brothers and pursued his father's brother Zür, still he thought how, since the time of his own father, the hero Bartan, He Wang's father had protecte Bailuu, and thus it was that he brought together a tried and tested army and thrashed He Wang's father's brother Zür on the hill at Galuun, he forcibly brought the people of Hereid to heel, gave to He Wang Tooril all the enemy's riches and summarily took power.²⁴⁹

This is the beginning of *Köke Sudur*, arguably the first Mongol novel, by the leading nineteenth century poet and writer V. Injannashi (1832-1895). The prominence during the nineteenth century, thanks to the imperial influence of the Manchu Qing, of Chinese cultural traditions impacted considerably upon Injannashi's output. The two other novels of his which have come down to us²⁵⁰ are, as I pointed out in Part I, heavily influenced by the contemporary predeliction for Chinese romantic fiction.

²⁴⁹ V. Injannashi, *Höh Sudar*, (Ulaanbaatar: Monsudar, 2000), 5. In fact, Injannashi's father Vanchingbal (1795-1847) wrote the first eight chapters of the book before he died, and these Injannashi later reworked, completing the book for publication in 1871. Note that, in this discussion, I use the premodern orthography, preserving the original spelling, as opposed to the Cyrillic used in the modern printing of Injannashi's book.

²⁵⁰ *Nigen Dabqar Asar (The One-Storey Pavilion)* and *Ulaghan-a Uqilaku Tingkim (The Hall for Mourning the Red Ones)*, both most probably completed during the period immediately following the publication of *Köke Sudur* (1872-1882). A third, incomplete, work, *Ulaghan Önggeten-ü Nilbusu (The Tears of the Red Ones)*, seems to have been Injannashi's first mature work of fiction, begun during the 1850s.

On this basis, then, there would seem to be no real similarities between *Köke Sudur* and *Altan Owoo*. Nonetheless, there are certain aspects of the former book through which we might begin profitably to apprehend Mend-Ooyo's treatment of Mongol history.

Even today, that history revolves around, and focuses upon, a single historical figure, namely Chinggis Haan, and Injannashi's book – although it seems to have been his intention to write a complete history of the Mongol people – is an account of the entire life of Chinggis (1162-1227) and the first eight years of the next Haan, Chinggis's third son Ögödei's reign (1229-1241). Later in this chapter, I will show how Chinggis Haan figures in *Altan Owoo*, but for now it is worth remembering that he is the lead character in Injannashi's book, the first novelistic treatment of his life in Mongol literature.

The great Inner Mongol scholar John Gombojab Hangin has written that, in terms of historical accuracy, *Köke Sudur* "contains more fancy than facts. In fact, many of the facts as we know them are mutated to reconcile the morality of the author."²⁵¹ This perhaps renders *Köke Sudur* more a imagistic treatment than a historical novel, and we will see how such an understanding can be applied also to the historical elements in *Altan Owoo*.

As a literary scholar, Hangin is also at pains to show the poetic quality of Injannashi's work, and this is where we can see greater similarities between *Köke Sudur* and *Altan Owoo*. That there are more than two thousand lines of poetry in Injannashi's book, much of them written in the traditional epic style, makes this book a natural predecessor to, and clearly an influence upon, *Altan Owoo*. While the books' structures are different – *Köke Sudur* is a continuous text, interspersed with poems; *Altan Owoo* is an episodic omnium-gatherum of story and poetry and reminiscence – we can see nonetheless how the style and thematic material of earlier book, with its poetic development of ideas initially presented in prose, with its emphasis upon ornate and hypertactic description, and

²⁵¹ John Gombojab Hangin, *Köke Sudur (The Blue Chronicle)*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1973), 23.

with its commitment to illuminating traditional Mongol society and culture, relate to the ways in which Mend-Ooyo seeks to express specific aspects of Chinggisid history through poetry and narrative.

Indeed, to read Hangin's description of *Köke Sudur* as literature, it is easy to mistake this book for *Altan Ovoo*: "Its vivid description of characters, its wit and humor, its richness in artistic expression, folklore and legend, and ethnographical material make the *Köke Sudur* an anthology of Mongolian literary expressions..."²⁵² In considering the literary and historical precedent set by Injannashi, then, together with the general influence upon the Mongol psyche of earlier texts dealing with the Chinggisid era, such as the *Nuuts Tobči* (*Secret History of the Mongols*), it becomes clear that *Altan Ovoo*, while an unusual book in terms of contemporary Mongol literature, is in fact the extension of a tradition. Injannashi's book has a far more restricted subject matter, and exhibits a far narrower palette of styles, but nonetheless the historical material of *Altan Ovoo*, and its literary expression, can now better be viewed with its predecessor in mind.

Chapter One of *Altan Ovoo* provides Mend-Ooyo with the opportunity of giving an overview of the emotion and atmosphere of Mongol history. As Hangin wrote of Injannashi, Mend-Ooyo is not so much concerned with the established facts as he is with linking the past with the present, forging a connection across the centuries, and establishing the homogeneity of the Mongol people:

*The author stops at the junction of distant roads, the point where a father comes together with his son, he stops at the junction of roads in his homeland, where all the countries of the world come together. This road links the present moment with the history and stories of his homeland.*²⁵³

²⁵² Hangin, 28-29.

²⁵³ Mend-Ooyo *Altan ovoo nomin tuhai*.

The interplay of historical narrative with the ideas of auto/biography straddles the themes of the present chapter and those of Chapter Eleven. It is hard to discuss Mongol history, in fact, without constantly being aware of the *altan utas*, the “golden thread” linking the Mongols – collectively and individually – with the lineage of Chinggis Haan. Thus it is that here, in his brief commentary upon *Altan Ovoo*, Mend-Ooyo emphasises the way in which the present, the time of his own writing and the time at which others are reading, with “the history and stories” of Mongolia.

Mend-Ooyo has spoken²⁵⁴ of how, for Mongols, history and stories are not mutually exclusive, but are complementary, the one illuminating the other, giving breadth to cultural understanding and revealing those aspects of history which otherwise might have been ignored. We can see this approach throughout *Altan Ovoo*, but the eight stories in Chapter One, and the context in which these stories are placed, not only provides a path into reading the book, it also grants a perspective from which we can view how Mongol history and culture inform one another.

The opening of Chapter One offers us an image of Mend-Ooyo as the medium through which the world which he is going to expand upon is placed in focus. He is placed between the past, embodied by his recently deceased father, and the future, embodied by his two sons. He is standing liminally, on the edge of a road, between the landscape itself and the unnatural principle by which it is tamed and set in order, it is “the point at which [we] entered the world of *Altan Ovoo*.”²⁵⁵

The image of the road is of particular significance in terms of Mongol culture. The grasslands of the steppe were never divided by roads, and it was only under the influence of Soviet planning that roads were developed. They are still not plentiful outside Ulaanbaatar, are frequently potholed, and tend to disintegrate into haphazard tracks after once one is

²⁵⁴ Personal communication.

²⁵⁵ GH, 17.

twenty or thirty miles or so from the city.²⁵⁶ That said, the making of tracks between one encampment and another, or between one monastery and another, is natural when one travels on horseback, and Mend-Ooyo's comments about his life's journey reflect the larger view, of these tracks and roads as holding within themselves the history of their own making and of those who have travelled them through the centuries:

The long path through my life, stretching from my earliest experience of the sunlight, the path from the morning sun to the evening moon, the path of mind from infancy into the vigor of youth, all paths in fact have a single beginning.

*Now I am standing at the edge of the road leading to the lower slopes of my native mountain. This road is the artery of eternal time which joins me with the universe, tens of thousands of feet are moving, striking out in the pulsing moments of history.*²⁵⁷

So this is also the road which leads to Altan Owoo, and thus it holds a special meaning for Mend-Ooyo. There is a physicality about his language – the artery of eternal time, thousands of walking feet, the pulsing of history – that relates to the world as an organism, a living creature, and we are reminded of the ancestral presence, hidden but immanent throughout the Mongol landscape, and most emphatically so among the hills and mountains.

Before launching into the first of the eight stories, and then at the juncture between the stories, Mend-Ooyo inserts poems. These brief texts, with their short lines, are meditations on time and destiny, like long haiku perhaps²⁵⁸, abstract and yet profound in their message. Each of these poems, moreover, have at their closing the couplet, "I travel the roads./Destiny leads me." It seems, however, as though Mend-Ooyo sometimes is

²⁵⁶ This is my own personal experience, although I last drove out of Ulaanbaatar in July 2009 and it may be that some improvements might have been made since then.

²⁵⁷ GH, 17.

²⁵⁸ They could be seen as relating to the particular haiku style which Mend-Ooyo's teacher Yavuuhulan developed during the 1960s. Yavuuhulan translated Russian versions of Japanese haiku, and these two stages render the finished product somewhat surreal. Yavuuhulan's own haiku are no less Japanese, rather they are – as I am suggesting Mend-Ooyo's interstitial poems are here – Mongol haiku, imbued with the same brief and telegraphic style of contemplation of the original.

seeking to convey a sense of confusion, of being lost and unprepared, of being overwhelmed by the very tradition that leads him, and by the history that that tradition defines:

*Confused,
complex,
these roads,
open roads,
small roads,
indistinct tracks,
like needles, they sew
the mists of history,
like cord, they bind
the years and years.
Abandoned
ancient tracks,
the knot of
destiny.²⁵⁹*

We will continue to see this technique throughout *Altan Ovoo*, of poetry being used to open up the mind to other perspectives, where the prose passages seem based far more on direct and physical experience, as of Mend-Ooyo's standing at the edge of the road and looking towards Altan Ovoo. These poems might be understood as a means by which our perception is destabilized, enchanted even, so that we are finally restabilized at another moment in history. Needless to say, Mend-Ooyo begins his personal history of Mongolia with Chinggis Haan.

But this first narrative is not in fact about Chinggis Haan himself, but about the transferring of the haanate from Chinggis to his son Ögödej,²⁶⁰ and about the transporting of Chinggis' embalmed body across Dariganga following his death. The trajectory of the story shifts through time, creating three moments of focus.

²⁵⁹ GH, 18.

²⁶⁰ This is true, although Chinggis's youngest son Tului (1192-1232) served interregally from 1227-1229.

The first of these is the journey of the cart bearing Chinggis's body. It gets stuck, not once, but twice, each time "up to its hubcaps," such that a full team of horses was required to remove it. This, on both occasions, allows the local people to pay their respects to his memory. This they did by making obeisance to, on the first occasion, "his tunic and one of the stockings which he had worn" and, on the second, to "the second of His Majesty's stockings, his golden belt and an awning he had used when traveling."²⁶¹

It seems here almost as though the cart has become some kind of reliquary, a focus of honor but also of spiritual devotion. The later development of Chinggis as a cultic persona, the embodiment of the Mongol state – seen even today in the recent statues of him erected in Mongolia, one outside the parliament building in Ulaanbaatar, another in the countryside, the latter a vast statue of Chinggis on horseback, inside which visitors may climb to view the landscape at lookout points, a kind of Chinggis-eye view allowing a brief form of personal association with a demigod – this development, then, a development halted by the anti-Chinggis feeling of the Soviet period, finds itself renewed in contemporary literature, no more so than in *Altan Ovoo*²⁶².

Mend-Ooyo's account of the events leading up to Chinggis's death are told from a personal viewpoint. They emerge from a characteristically practical decision on the part of the Haan, designed to better understand the nature of the men whom he commanded, and presumably to offer them a respite after battle and a long journey:

[...T]o see how educated the cavalry soldiers were in horsemanship, he camped on open land at Kharvaakh in modern Dariganga. During their brief stay there, the soldiers

²⁶¹ The text of this first story is on GH, 19-23, and all relevant quotations are from those pages.

²⁶² In passing, we should note that at least one other Haan has been made the central character of a contemporary work of Mongol fiction. The seventeenth century Oirat haan Galdan Boshigt Haan is the subject of *Aguu ih sūr hüchnii tuhai duuli (The Ballad of Might and Power)* written in 2006 by D.Enhboldbaatar (b.1971). Chinggis Haan is then only the most notable of the historical characters to be revived in the culture of the new and democratic Mongolia.

shot wild ass, wild camel, saiga, gazelle and antelope, all from horseback. Their ability and good fortune having revived, they rode to Zos, together with Yesünhe the Wise, son of Khasar, and there they hunted wild ass. Queen Yesüi was sad, she told Boorchi of her sadness. Then, they set off southwards but, as they reached the Seven Wells of Ongon, His Majesty fell from his horse and was injured. In the open land amid the Hills of Sand, where springs sent out the five types of pure water, they looked after the Haan's wellbeing.

With this passage, Mend-Ooyo shows three vital aspects of Chinggis's person and the intimacy of his relationship with the land. First, as I said above, Chinggis was concerned to understand his soldiers, and to optimise their performance. Second, he is shown as a mere mortal, subject to injury. Third, as a result of that injury, the land itself responds and offers its "five types of sacred water"²⁶³ as a salve. These three factors, together with Yesüi, Chinggis's wife's, troubling intuition, point to the idea of Chinggis as moving between the realms of the gods and of humanity, much as a shaman might. The shamanic aspect of statecraft and *Realpolitik* has been mentioned already in Part I, but in historical terms we should be aware of the way in which Chinggis's position has been changed over the centuries.

We should not, however, allow an historical evaluation of Chinggis Haan's career to cloud our evaluation of Mend-Ooyo's literary perspective. After all, there are highly contradictory approaches within the historical record. David Morgan, for instance, in one of the standard modern accounts, includes not only the aforementioned idea of Chinggis as a wise and enlightened commander, but also details less uplifting examples of his warcraft – for instance, a siege on a powerful city conducted by tying paper to 1,000 cats and 10,000 swallows, and thereby setting them alight, so routing the city with fire. To his credit,

²⁶³ The word used here is *arshaan*, a borrowing from Buddhist Sanskrit, specifically meaning "holy or sacred water."

Morgan mentions that this is taken from Sayan Sečen's seventeenth century *Erdeni-yin Tobči*, and so lacks a certain contemporary witness.²⁶⁴

As a contrast, the work of the French anthropologist and museologist René Grousset offers a considerably more favorable image of Chinggis:

*Dans le cadre de son vie, de son milieu at de son race, Genghis-khan se présente à nous comme un esprit pondéré, d'un ferme bon sens, remarquablement équilibré, sachant écouter, d'amitié sûre, généreux et affectueux malgré sa sévérité, ayant de réelles qualités d'administrateur, pourvu qu'on entende par là l'administration de populations nomades et non celle de peuples sédentaires don't il concevait mal l'économie. Dans ces limites, il montrait un goût inné de l'ordre et du bon gouvernement.*²⁶⁵

Were Grousset not so explicit that he is referring to Chinggis within the context of "*le cadre de son vie, de son milieu at de son race*," it would seem fair to criticise this portrait as lacking breadth and perspective. However, this image of a wise and enlightened military ruler ("*malgré sa sévérité*") is not too far from how he is seen in contemporary Mongolia. Certainly Mend-Ooyo's account – nor those of Injannashi, nor those found in texts such as the *Secret History* – indicates nothing but honor from the people among whom the ruler's body passed, and no indication is made of the cruelty spoken of by writers such as Sayan Sečen. It is not so much that both sides of Chinggis did not exist, that he did not deliver swift and cruel judgment to those who crossed him, but that for Mongols it is expedient – from the point of cultural consistency, social homogeneity and historical passivity – to portray him as, at worst an enlightened despot and at best a divinity, as the ancestors also divinities, and it is in this latter role that Mend-Ooyo constructs him in *Altan Ovoo*.

The remainder of this story is obscured by mists, literal mists which "interweave over the yellow hills of the great Sands of Orgon...[and which] hang distractedly among the

²⁶⁴ Morgan , 65.

²⁶⁵ René Grousset , *L'Empire des Steppes*, (Paris: Payot, 1939), 311.

branches of the red willow trees,” and figurative mists in which the “hazy stories are indistinct traces,” and “which lie beyond distance, which lie in sleep.” Mists, of course, do tend to obscure both the literal and the figurative, and in Mongolia, where the weather conditions mean that mist, and having to deal with its consequences, is a fairly common occurrence, and it seems to take on a more pervasive metaphorical role in Mongol culture than it might elsewhere.²⁶⁶

In the Mongol original, much of what is said about Chinggis’ movement through the area around Altan Ovoo constitutes phrases ending in “*gene*,” indicating that what is being claimed is hearsay, and not known personally to the person speaking. This does not so much render the statements fictions as to envelop and obscure them in figurative swirls of mist. And these statements can either be apparently naturalistic:

*They say Chinggis Khaan passed this way. There's a horsepath on the cliff. They say Chinggis' horse stepped out here. Two silver cliffs, like darning needles fallen from heaven. They say they staked the tethering line for Chinggis' mare.*²⁶⁷

or else apparently super- or præternaturalistic:

*There are two great areas of sand in Dariganga, the Sands of Ongon and the Tufted Sands. They say Chinggis' two black bulls were wandering around, when they bashed into one another and so formed these great sands.*²⁶⁸

Such stories as these have a particular currency in Mongol culture, for they lie at the nexus of the visible world and the world of invisible forces. Their presence in Mend-Ooyo’s text work in parallel with the obscuring mists to reinforce the power of the mythic and the shamanic within what is commonly perceived and understood by the culture. The word used by Mend-Ooyo, which I translate as “story” is *ülger*, a term whose primary meaning is

²⁶⁶ John Keats’s description of autumn as “season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” indicates a parallel cultural treatment of the phenomenon.

²⁶⁷ GH, 21.

²⁶⁸ GH, 22.

“example, pattern.” It also gives the term *ülgerch*, “bard, storyteller,” and thus we can see not only the connection made in the Mongol psyche between an example and a story, but also how, for writers such as Mend-Ooyo, the blurring of what for others may be delimited by the terms “fact” and “fiction” is of no consequence, its strength and meaning in fact increased somehow by the uncertainty.²⁶⁹

While these eight stories each address different aspects of Mongol history, Mend-Ooyo seeks, as he does throughout *Altan Ovoo*, to create a sense of continuity, perhaps explicitly to mirror how the stories, though disparate, together make up a narrative whole and, more importantly, an historical whole. The next story, about Togoön Tömör Haan²⁷⁰, is introduced by a strangely epigrammatic text:

*They say Togoön Tömör Haan the Wise passed by here, so says wise old Mr Baagiul from down south, who suddenly adds, after some thought, that there are no traces found through Mongolian history. We should revere the person who has discovered the end of the road....*²⁷¹

Togoön Tömör Haan’s leaving the city of Daidu, established by his predecessors as the capital of the khanate, signals the beginning of the new Mongol state. This second story, then, follows on from the death of Chinggis Haan, and in a time during which Chinggis’s influence was still strongly felt. However, Mend-Ooyo’s story is concerned, neither with politics nor with warfare but with love, both on a personal and a national level, and with the power of, and the relationship between, love and song.

²⁶⁹ I am reminded here of Tertullian’s statement (admittedly in a far different context, that of the bodily resurrection of Jesus), “*certus est quia impossibile est*” – in which the natural rejection of that which appears supernatural is overturned, not so much by the doctrine of fideism, but by the *knowledge* of the truth in one’s heart. There seems to be a similar process going on here in Mend-Ooyo’s heart, and by extension in the heart of the Mongol people, who, for their own sense of community, have to believe, to know, that Chinggis Haan and his entourage did indeed spend time Dariganga.

²⁷⁰ 1320-1370. Also called Togoontömör Uhaant, *uhaant* being translated as “wise” in our text.

²⁷¹ GH, 23.

The effect of music upon the psyche and upon the soul – and this is enchantment, of course – is a constant theme of Mongol poetry, primarily because it is still a performed art. Poetry is published in books, it seems sometimes to me, only as an adjunct to the poets performing their work in public. With her clear and beautiful voice, the girl Uyanga (her name means “melody”)

*sang a long song and brought peace to his heart. The swans were calling, the pale red bullrushes and the red willows were swaying to and fro, these dear Mongol brothers and sisters had treated him with such kindness and respect, and His Majesty shook away the dust, shook away the foreign soil, all weariness was released, and the threefold waters of the Tsagaan Nuur washed away his sorrow, they are called the Waters of Three Smiles.*²⁷²

The love between the haan and the girl in whose song he heard the compassion of the Mongol people remained unfulfilled, for Togoön Tömör died before he could return to be with Uyanga. In such a difficult situation as the steppes, with their droughts and extreme weather, even a Haan has no control over his destiny, and in the poem which closes this brief love story, Mend-Ooyo writes of the lack of constancy in things:

*A meeting, upon
the great road,
a dusty farewell, upon
the wide highway.
Days come
together,
time splits
apart.*²⁷³

The unpredictability of life which allowed the people of Dariganga to honor and welcome the embalmed body of Chinggis Haan also prevented Togoön Tömör Haan to be united with his beloved Uyanga. Such unpredictability is far more definitive in the Mongol climate than in other, easier climates, and the susceptibility of nomadic peoples and of the

²⁷² GH, 24.

²⁷³ GH, 25.

livestock upon which they depend to disease and other calamity has required them to embrace a philosophical system – such as Buddhism – in which the world is explicitly understood as lacking consistency and completeness, and a shamanic spiritual system in which communication with and propitiation of the spirits at least preserves, or appears to preserve, the cosmic order.

The third of Mend-Ooyo's stories takes us outside the modern understanding of what constitutes history, but we must realise that, with the land as a potent and forceful presence, and defined by the immanent presence of the ancestors, the relationship of the land and the sky, and their living presence moreover, constitute history from a different perspective., which after all is what myth is.²⁷⁴

We might think that the previous two stories, with their admixture of historically attestable characters and fictional treatment, were but a preparation for the trajectory of the third story, which is not so much a story as an account of military action playing itself out against the traversing of the sky by “[a] carriage harnessed with eight creamwhite horses, whose extraordinary athleticism could never previously have been imagined.”²⁷⁵

The nature of this carriage – natural or supernatural, history or myth – is unclear. It would seem, however that Mend-Ooyo intends that their initial descent at the beginning of the text be read as their appearance into the world, for they eventually come to rest on the spine of the three chestnut horses of Orloi the Wise,²⁷⁶ and there interbreed with other white horses.

The way in which this story develops, with the creamwhite horses interspersed between the appearance of the mountain of Otgontenger “[i]n the thaw which followed the

²⁷⁴ The Greek etymon from which the word “myth” comes, *μυθος*, refers not only to story and legend, but also to the idea of speech and thought, showing how these ideas relate to, and so inform, one another.

²⁷⁵ GH, 25.

²⁷⁶ These hills, a central part of the topography around Altan Owoo, feature elsewhere in the book, for instance GH, 61.

great ice age which overwhelmed our world” and the invitation extended to “the living tree on the mountainous peak of Dari, which bears the black and sacred standard,”²⁷⁷ suggests a melding, once again, of the real and the unreal (or perhaps the surreal). The removal and replanting of the tree of Dari is told in detail, and the denouement of what one might initially read as a shamanic ritual turns out to be of quite another sort:

*And, as morning rose over Dari, from the lower slopes to the north there came files of men, climbing the mountain, carrying upon their shoulders the living tree, and they gathered upon the hill at about the time of the sun's rising over the subtle world. They raised up the living tree of the ten fathom high white stūpa, so that it stood like a relief against the sky, and at its tip they placed a golden finial, and so they erected a most unusual symbol. From its four flanks, one hundred and eight horsemen rode out in separate files towards Dari, and they were from the Halha homeland, but also from the Ölet and the Chahar, and they crossed the distant waters.*²⁷⁸

By describing the tree as a stūpa, and by having one hundred and eight horsemen ride out from what we must assume are the sides of the tree facing towards the four primary compass points, Mend-Ooyo is repositioning this ostensibly Mongol and shamanic narrative within a Buddhist framework.

But this story also refers to the Mongol imperial conquest,²⁷⁹ and here we see too how the attested military and political history of Mongolia is intimately linked – and not only with reference to Chinggis Haan alone – with shamanic culture. The description of the

²⁷⁷ It is not completely clear what this description means. The term *amin* mod literally means “living tree” and so it would appear to emphasize the vitality and immediateness of the tree. *Sülden tahilgat har tug* includes the idea of the *süld*, which refers to the genius, the spirit represented on a standard almost as a *yidam* is represented on a Tibetan *thangka* or an image of Christ is represented on an icon.

²⁷⁸ GH, 26.

²⁷⁹ Personal communication.

stūpa/hill, which “has spread good fortune, and peace and happiness throughout the land,” is explicitly Buddhist in tone moreover, and thus we see Mongol syncretism at work, the same syncretism which made of a young man named Temüjin the demigod Chinggis Haan, and the same syncretism which Mend-Ooyo expertly uses to fuse historical fact with visionary mysticism, in order better to understand, better to explicate, the nature of Mongol culture and Mongol history.

The two stories that follow are both brief and grounded, for the most part, in what passes for objective reality. The first is a simple tale of betrothal, although there is a folktale element here, of the beautiful girl betrothed to the ugly and foolish young man, a take on Beauty and the Beast perhaps. The second text tells of a relay across Mongolia using shoes, and the “barefoot crazy” who appears to have initiated it.

How do these apparently unremarkable texts relate to the mythohistorical material which precedes them? While not on such a grand scale as the stories of Chinggis Haan and Togoön Tömör Haan, and while not showing the connection between heaven and earth, they present unusual and personal aspects of Mongol sociohistory.

A family which “possessed as much gold as stones on a mountain and as many livestock as there are wandering clouds”²⁸⁰ wielded considerable power, and could exert force on a potential daughter-in-law. This young woman, though, was said to have been brought by dakinis, she is described as “fortunate,” presumably because of her association with these divine figures rather than with her suitor. Nonetheless, what are presumably her spiritual accomplishments, physically manifest here as “brocades of colorful flowers,” according to Mend-Ooyo, do not guarantee a successful match.

²⁸⁰ GH, 28.

The closing paragraph of this story suggests that this part of Mongol history is the universal story of greed and dissatisfaction with one's lot, and the implied need to find an inner satisfaction, similar to that realised by the young woman:

*I am travelling the brocade road, my thoughts turning through
the nature of life, through possessions, through good and bad,
and through cupidity and desire.*²⁸¹

The story of the shoe-relay, on the other hand, appears to be anomalous, an example perhaps of how Mongols value individualism, despite the need of nomadic herders to remain part of a group and to depend upon each other.

Rather than look at the prose texts in these stories, the poems that summarise them shed light upon how we might read them. The first story has a self-proclaimed riddle attached:

*Like a riddle,
so very ancient,
like eyelids.
Guarding dreams,
I travel the roads.
destiny leads me.*²⁸²

The idea of "guarding dreams" is significant, I believe, for what it tells us about the Mongol psyche, and of Mend-Ooyo's own approach to dreams. The young man, approached by the beautiful and spiritually prepared young girl, has his dreams, which must be guarded, notwithstanding that "the two were ill-matched, like fire with water, or a camel with a goat." Eyelids can perhaps be understood as riddles, insofar as they hide a person's intention, as expressed in their eyes, just as in this story the true feelings of the young man are hidden by his ugliness.

²⁸¹ GH, 28.

²⁸² GH, 28-29.

The poem that closes the text about the shoe-relay appears to be even less unclear, it seems an abstract list of the musings of the elders, which Mend-Ooyo overheard. Perhaps, then, the shoe-relay is placed here to represent the endless stream of ideas and gossip flowing among those who sit around the fire and talk.

This interlude leads into a text about a very specific character in Mongol folk history, the outlaw Toroi Bandi. I will deal later (Chapter Eleven) in greater detail with the character of Toroi Bandi and Mend-Ooyo's biographical treatment of him in Chapter Two of *Altan Owoo*, but the sixth story here offers an account of his pursuit by the Uрга (later Ulaanbaatar) police.

Mend-Ooyo establishes Toroi Bandi's personality by presenting him as one who sidesteps those who would catch him with clever tricks. One of the best known of these is told as follows:

He escaped again, riding a black horse across the river from this side, and again he hoodwinked them, they didn't realise that he was the one riding the white horse. He'd originally smeared a white horse with soot and, wading through the water, it had returned naturally to its original color.²⁸³

Mend-Ooyo uses the topos of Toroi Bandi as an extension of the previous two texts, using him as a focus for a particular aspect of folk culture. Just as stories four and five illustrated such themes as greed, spiritual achievement, the relative merits of wisdom and physical beauty, eccentricity and the social aspect of the traditional relay system, this story points to the importance of local wisdom (and, by implication I believe, of support from local populations) over centralised authority. Nomadic society, being internally organised and autonomic, places great store upon the individual's responsibility to the community, and it is

²⁸³ GH, 30.

for this reason that Toroi Bandi sought the redistribution of wealth collected by foreign traders, "this one rich as Cræsus, that one as thin as he was mean."²⁸⁴

The confusion rendered by mists and haze, to which I have already referred, has a role also in this story, where Toroi Bandi climbs Altan Ovoo and there mixes the blue smoke from wormwood (a healing herb comonly used in religious ritual) with the greywhite smoke from a fire lit with sparks from stones, and intones what we should understand as songs which sound like prayers, thus throwing the city police off the scent. He was able to avoid detection, moreover, because he knew Altan Ovoo, and had ascended along a path on the steepest of its four sides. Such local knowledge, such intimacy with the physical topography of the area, proves again and again invaluable to Toroi Bandi, a further indication of the importance of place within the nomadic community, and of the striking ignorance and insensitivity displayed by the outside authorities.

Towards the end of this narrative, Mend-Ooyo reminds us again of the link – almost a singularity – between the present and the past. He writes, "Unbroken is the string which carries with it this moment of history, the tale is not forgotten, it passes through our time and heads off into the future." There is then a living connection in Mend-Ooyo's mind, and in the minds of Mongol nomads, a link through which Toroi Bandi, like the ancestors who lived there many hundreds and thousands of years ago, is immanent in the landscape

²⁸⁴ The parallels with characters such as Robin Hood (also attested in one historical identity or another) are undeniable. Indeed, in the Middle English poem *A Gest of Robyn Hode* (c1450), Robin Hood specifically enjoins his men not to target the local poor, but (by implication) the rich landowners and merchants:

*Loke ye do no husbonde harme
That tilleth with his ploughe.
No more ye shall no gode yeman
That walketh by gren-wode shawe;
Ne no knyght ne no squyer
That wol be a gode felawe. (stanzas 13-14)*

around Altan Ovoo by dint of having so intimate an understanding of the landscape's contours, of its implicit vitality and its explicit power.

The seventh story, which takes place sometime after the Second World War²⁸⁵, echoes the second story, about Togoön Tömör Haan and Uyanga. Here there is no explicit indication of affection between the woman and the soldier for whom she offers to fetch water, but in making her journey longer and more arduous than she had at first imagined it to be, Mend-Ooyo is able to strengthen her intent and thereby deepen their implied relationship. That the soldier, on her return, is the only one still remaining there makes the situation even more poignant, and her promise to prepare tea, and his physical response more than his verbal one – “The soldier's black, staring eyes were full of smiles now, he turned and waved and disappeared from sight towards the rear of the long column” – suggests a deepening intimacy.

We are not told anything about the woman. She is just an old woman, *emgen*. There is no indication, despite what I have said here, of any affection beyond her desire to serve the army.²⁸⁶ But still she waits for the soldier to return,

*[h]er new deel faded and grew tattered in the yellow sun of autumn. The soldiers returned in columns and columns. The soldier with staring eyes did not return. He never came back.*²⁸⁷

The similarity between stories two and seven lies, not so much in the implicit or explicit affection between the two characters, but rather in the constancy of the feeling, the

²⁸⁵ After the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact of 1941, Mongolia remained neutral for the majority of the Second World War. Small numbers of Mongolian forces took part in the Battle of Khalkhin Gol in 1939 and in the Soviet-led invasion of Manchuria in August 1945.

²⁸⁶ This discourse was common during the Soviet period. In M.Yadamsüren's short story "Anhaarch bishirsen chavgants, ataarhan horsson lam hoyorin ünen baidal" ("The True Story of an Old Woman Who Trusts what She Sees and a Monk Who is Poisoned by Envy," Yadamsüren, 73-74]), written during the early 1930s, an old woman makes offerings to an airplane, her young son having gone to serve the Motherland and become a pilot.

²⁸⁷ GH, 33.

commitment. Nomadic society, as I have already indicated, necessarily depends upon individual responsibility and mutual commitment, and even the promise of boiling water for tea takes on a symbolic meaning which goes far beyond the quenching of a single soldier's thirst. Without this mutuality, life on the steppe would be far more hazardous, if not impossible, and there remains even today the expectation that, if one enters another's home – whether a ger on the steppe or an apartment in the center of Ulaanbaatar – one will be offered tea and a little food.

We can see this idea as a continuation of the principle for which Toroi Bandi became famous (or infamous, depending on one's point of view), the principle of mutuality. The historical imperative, moreover, according to which mutuality and personal connection between people and their environment is established as a *sine qua non* of Mongol life is given a strange twist in the final scene of this story. Just as Toroi Bandi decided to climb Altan Ovoo to safeguard his freedom – in the expectation that the spirit of the hill would protect him – the old woman intuits, five years later, from the strange appearance of an elm tree, that nature had somehow declared the area off limits:

*The elm wasn't exactly doing anything...but it reached out as if in prohibition, DON'T CHOOSE THIS PATH. What nature thinks is not what humans think. Nowadays tanks don't pass along this path, soldiers don't march along it in columns. But the earth and the water do not forget.*²⁸⁸

While “[w]hat nature thinks is not what humans think,” it is important to realise that – even in the era when the Soviets sought to subjugate the environment – nature was able to impose its will. More importantly, the local people were happy to accede to nature's decision. Mend-Ooyo's telling of this story, and his placement of it towards the end of this patchwork of fictive and symbolic histories, I believe is a way of emphasizing the dynamic interaction of humans, and of humans with the natural world. The stories thus far have

²⁸⁸ GH, 33.

been uncharacteristically silent about the intervention of landscape in the people's lives but this scene is a stark reminder of how the one impacts the other, since nature's decision is clearly – from the internal narrative structure as much as from Mend-Ooyo's actual words – based upon the way in which the land has been used by the military, and perhaps it is the woman who intuits this prohibition because she has sought to support the military.

In many ways, this story is the closest Mend-Ooyo gets to social history, and its greater impact. Although it is the account of a single incident, a brief exchange between an elderly woman and a soldier, it is the meeting of these two worlds, within the ever larger frameworks of Altan Owoo, Dariganga and Mongolia, that encourage us to reflect upon the general and the specific, the macrocosmic and the microcosmic. The last of these eight narratives addresses the same idea, but from the stars.

"We all come from Höhdei the Wise, you know," says Mend-Ooyo's father, about one of the stars beyond the constellation of Orion.²⁸⁹ In Chapter 8, I will discuss the narrative which runs through *Altan Owoo*, concerning the so-called "people of light" and how they came to populate the earth. In this current story, however, Mend-Ooyo is concerned with the cosmic figure of Höhdei the Wise and the tale of how he injured the three harts of Orion.

For nomadic people, an accurate and clear understanding of the night sky is of utmost importance, for upon this skill depends safe travel in the correct direction. Mend-Ooyo's understanding of the sky comes from experiences such as that recounted here,²⁹⁰ listening to his father's stories and observing the physical relationship between the stars. These relationships – as we read in this story – have their basis in what appear to be mythological accounts, but of course such myths are more than fictions, they deal with

²⁸⁹ I have been thus far unable accurately to identify this star, called *Höhdei Mergen* in Mongol.

²⁹⁰ The story, and the quotations which pertain to it, is found on GH, 34-40.

subjects such as desire and hunting and patience that are central to human life, and it is for this reason that they are told, and for this reason that they are related to the macrocosm.

This story, unlike the other seven, has a prolog. The prolog deals with the conversation between Mend-Ooyo and his father, and then with Mend-Ooyo's personal journey better to understand the nature of these myths. In the end, having rediscovered his faith in the mythology,

I was consumed with a longing for the stories of my childhood. Stars, after all, are part and parcel of human consciousness, they bring together all that our ancestors experienced, they are the conjunction of our desires. The stars represent everything to us, they influence the weather, and progress and evolution, and the purity of human minds. And I listened to these many ideas, I believed in the story of Höhdei the Wise. After this, I found joy from such stories, a desire for wisdom, a pure faith, the power to strive. They say it's mistaken to believe that beyond the stars there are pure human souls ...but a story is a story...

This account, of returning to a cosmic vision, could in context be seen also as a rejection of the materialist Marxist-Leninist view according to whose philosophy Mend-Ooyo was educated, both in Mongolia and in the former Soviet Union. The constant presence of the sentimental education he received from his father remained however, and it is this which informs and inspires his literary work.

The narrative of how Höhdei the Wise came to be in some kind of suspended astral animation, while the three harts of Orion heal, whom he has wounded with his bow and arrow, is interesting, not only because it shows – as I suggested above – the way in which Mongol astronomic traditions have been passed down through generations (and have managed, moreover, to survive Marxism-Leninism), but also because it talks to the subjects of time and patience. That Höhdei determined to “spend these three days and three nights waiting in meditation” – one day and one night in the sky being equivalent to thirty-three æons on Earth – seems to me to be an indication of the power of patient contemplation.

Having started this sequence of stories with the funeral cortège of Chinggis Haan, Mend-Ooyo brings us full circle with the following statement, which closes the account of the mythology of Höhdei the Wise and Orion's three harts:

Höhdei the Wise's earthly lineage will wait a thousand thousand years to return to heaven, it will bring the state into line, and it will heal all the distress of illness and suffering and natural disaster.

Suddenly we are drawn from our astrological reverie and back to what seems almost a millennial prophecy. It is as though, with the healing of Orion, Höhdei and his lineage will be released, and will ascend into the sky, returning to whence they came. That this statement comes at the close of the story whose narrative takes us furthest from the physical world makes it all the more surprising and disturbing.²⁹¹

Mend-Ooyo's treatment of Mongolia as a site for mythic and historical narrative is characterised by his refusal to differentiate between what many western, materialist readers might describe as "fact" and "fiction," or "truth" and "lies," or even a combination of these two frameworks. He speaks of the trajectory, along which he constructed this chapter, by referring to the ancestors:

The ancestors, with their mottled horses, with whom I journeyed, explained the road to me. This is how a old man, riding by on a mottled horse, gave me directions. Attempting, as I had been taught in school, to use Chinggis' Path to find the indistinct track that ran through the text, I sought to hook single words from the reminiscences of the old people, and only later did I catch the pulsing warmth of one of the stories.²⁹²

This track, moreover, is called Chinggis's Path, which clearly places Chinggis Haan at the center of the journey which Mend-Ooyo ascribes to the Mongol people. And, when he writes in the epilog to the chapter that he is traveling on the path of Chinggis Haan, of Togoön

²⁹¹ I have been told that the forthcoming edition of AO will have a ninth story, but I have not yet received it.

²⁹² GH, 19.

Tömör Haan, of Toroi Bandi, and of all the other people and ideas expressed within these eight stories, he says also that “everyone is wandering along, right before my eyes.”²⁹³ This, he is saying, is the path trodden by the Mongol people, it is a path connected to the Chingisid lineage, connected to the lineage of Höhdei the Wise.

We have no business asking whether or not it is true, we should rather know it to be meaningful. In the epilog, Mend-Ooyo speaks to this in personal terms, raising the concomitant ideas of Buddhist cause and effect and shamanic envisioning²⁹⁴:

*But I am travelling too along the path of my own suffering. They used to say that my path was too impartial. And I say I'm travelling along my own path. They used to say that my path was too nationalist and slippery. And I repeat that I'm travelling along my own path. And they tell me that I'm travelling slowly upon a path that's too complex. I can't speed along as though I'm on a highway, and I can't crawl along as though I'm a tortoise. But I'm travelling along this complex path of mine, and at my own speed.*²⁹⁵

This is one of the only passages in *Altan Ovoo* where Mend-Ooyo hints at his own political viewpoint. In 1986, of course, the Soviet influence was waning, and Mongolia was gradually entering the path of *glasnost* and *perestroika* and moving towards the democratic revolution of 1990. His “nationalism” was – and is – definitively more pro-Mongol than anti-Soviet, and his “impartiality” more the result of spiritual practise than apathy or quietism.²⁹⁶ However, these criticisms do speak to his vision of the Mongol people as somehow being other and special, different from those among whom they live.

²⁹³ GH, 38.

²⁹⁴ The distinction here is minimal, but the worldview is significant. In Buddhism, the concept of *karma* suggests that one is in a constant process of creating the present through the force of previous actions, whereas the individual in a shamanic society uses the power of thought to create the present according to their wishes. One is thus created by karma, but the creator of one's world in shamanism.

²⁹⁵ GH, 38.

²⁹⁶ I will further examine Mend-Ooyo's autobiography as it unfolds through *Altan Ovoo* in Chapter 11.

In the end, Mend-Ooyo suggests, the interplay of Mongols with their history and across the landscape of Mongolia is a circular path, its macrogenesis being in a prelapsarian era of interstellar travel, its microgenesis being the unification of certain Central Asian tribes under the rule of Chinggis Haan. The entirety of *Altan Owoo* is, we might say, a meditation on the subtle complexity of human history, with Chapter One as its preparatory material, its initial clear exposition. As Mend-Ooyo writes in the final poem of Chapter One, the paths we follow are defined by the topological and emotional landscape, they define the confusion and the complexity of human interaction:

*My roads,
your roads,
the roads which
we all desire,
leading ourselves,
interweaving ourselves,
our stirrups
uneven, rubbing,
we cover the world
like feathergrass,
we knot our thoughts
like string.²⁹⁷*

²⁹⁷ GH, 39.

CHAPTER 8

Environment and Story in *Altan Ovoo*

I took the stone and placed it on the table, the evening sun touched the western horizon and in its light, this piece of rock which had split away gleamed, and suddenly my interest was piqued. I would travel to the place from which this stone came. It had come from the peak of a high mountain, located a few hours from here, it was a creature which somehow had come from the depths of that great river, risen up the mountain valley, along the mud and marshes which lined the forests, and, from time to time, when there were no tracks or paths, it had taken the form of a black raven.²⁹⁸

Like *Altan Ovoo*, the short story "Dark Cliffs," by the great early twentieth century writer D.Natsagdorj (1906-1937), focuses upon a piece of rock, brought from a hill down to a ger upon the steppe. Natsagdorj, whom the new, Soviet-backed government had sent to study in Germany towards the close of the 1920s, had returned to Mongolia eager to introduce to Mongol literature a more progressive and innovative style, coupled with a deeper understanding of the still relatively novel psychology of Freud and Jung. It was he who introduced the European style of short story to Mongolia, and in works such as "Dark Cliffs," "A Venerable Lama's Tears" and "New Year's Joy with Sad Tears,"²⁹⁹ he opened up the literature – and its readers – to ideas such as the subconscious mind, to Jungian symbolism and to Freudian ideas of repressed sexuality.

The importance, however, of this passage from "Dark Cliffs," and of Natsagdorj's influence on later writers, upon Mend-Ooyo's generation in general, and upon *Altan Ovoo* in particular, is that not only did Natsagdorj's sojourn in Europe expose him to modernism and to psychoanalysis, but that he was able on his return to create truly Mongol literature – with

²⁹⁸ From D.Natsagdorj "Dark Cliffs" (1930), in Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 139

²⁹⁹ The first of the latter two stories is translated in Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 141. The second remains as yet untranslated.

all that that entails, those ideas with which Mend-Ooyo is concerned throughout his work – through exposing the traditional concerns of Mongol nomadic society to these new European ideas.³⁰⁰

The development of modernist fiction in Mongolia was cut short by the purges carried out in 1937 and 1938 against monastics and intellectuals, during which not only Natsagdorj, but other eminent poets and writers such as S. Buyannemeh and M. Yadamsüren, met their deaths. The latter's loss hit the burgeoning fiction scene particularly hard, and we can only guess, from stories such as "The Young Couple" and "Three Girls," what he might have produced in later years.

The legacy of Natsagdorj and Buyannemeh, however, was continued by writers such as B. Rinchen and Ts. Damdinsüren, whose poetry and short fiction came to define literature during the mid-twentieth century. The fact that both of these writers managed to survive the very darkest days of the so-called "difficult period" (*berhsheel tsag*) is a tribute, in part, to their ability to work ostensibly within the system and yet remain true to their vision and to their culture. It was from this milieu that Yavuuhulan developed his own vision, wguh he sought to express in his own writing and to promote in the writing of his students during the years following Stalin's death, and it was of course in the ferment of this movement during the 1970s that Mend-Ooyo came of age.

In looking at the way in which Mend-Ooyo handles narrative in *Altan Ovoo*, we should remember that he considers himself primarily to be a poet, that the traditional Mongol culture, and its literature too, is surrounded by the myths and stories, by the ancestors who inhabit them, and by the ancestral voices who initially gave them voice.

³⁰⁰ In many ways, then, there is a parallel between Natsagdorj's modernist challenge to Mongol literature in the 1930s and Yavuuhulan's revivalist challenge to it in the late 1950s. Natsagdorj, unfortunately, was ultimately hounded to his death by the MPRP's censorship and propaganda machine, but in my opinion the parallel is extremely telling and potent.

Aside from the many stories which form the narrative voice which runs through *Altan Ovoo*, and to which I will return later, the book is structured according to two distinct narratives. The first of these is the thematic text woven around the stone, sitting in the place of honor at the back of Mend-Ooyo's family ger, this stone's presence in most of the book being all the louder, because of its silence and because of its being a fragmentary microcosm of the hill itself, the hill being, as Mend-Ooyo tells us, "the world on a reduced scale"³⁰¹.

The second text, which I believe place the entire book in context, and which is therefore the text to which I will turn first, is what might be described as a creation myth, insofar as it is about the creation of the world of nomadic Mongolia.

This story, which unrolls at the closing moments of every chapter³⁰², is a much longer prose version of a poem, "The Legend of Human Light,"³⁰³ which Mend-Ooyo wrote in 1990. It is, in many ways, a Mongol version of the story of the fall, although Mend-Ooyo is careful to sidestep both the issue of *karma* and that of divinity.

Each section of the development of this story occurs parenthetically between two repeated statements: "...the path of thought is vague/the ways of books are clear..." and "...the ways of books are vague/the path of thought is clear...". This interplay of focus between thought and books indicates for me the lack of clarity in myth and narrative, but also in individual memory and societal memory. It is as though Mend-Ooyo is reminding us – as also in the episodic nature of space and time all through the book – that human

³⁰¹ GH, 4

³⁰² The sections, in fact, are found between chapters, although they seem to function more as the final page of a chapter than as the prelude to the next. In the 2007 edition of *Altan Ovoo*, the visual presentation is of particular interest, with the text printed upon what appears to be an ancient piece of parchment, as though it – and the text which it holds – might be some kind of archeological artifact.

³⁰³ Translated in G.Mend-Ooyo (trans. Simon Wickham-Smith). *Nomadic Lyrics*, (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture 2007), 42-43.

experience is never quite clear, that there is always another approach and that ours is not the only viewpoint.

This being so, the story of the people of light and their transformation into humanity, into ourselves, is an excellent example of how Mend-Ooyo, both as the book's authorial voice and as its autobiographic subject, uses narrative to illuminate and to counsel and to exhort his readers, as he himself has been illuminated and counseled and exhorted.

Although the story of the people of light proceeds much as we might imagine, the opening section is significant for a number of reasons:

*...the lights in the canopy of heaven were human stars. Travelling in a pyramid, they journeyed through space and landed on an unknown mountain. At that time, there was total darkness. Light came from the pyramids and it could be seen that there was no water flowing nor grass growing, that in fact everything was empty. The human stars went searching for whatever they could find, but they could find nothing and returned by the light of the pyramid on the mountain peak. But, for no apparent reason, they went off again and as they roamed about they discovered a path through the world...*³⁰⁴

It is not hard to observe in the movement of these travellers across space the movement of nomads across the steppes and the deserts of Mongolia. Their persistence, moreover, in searching a second time for "a path through the world" is echoed throughout the book, as in the lives of nomadic peoples, in their resilience and visionary practicality. That they brought light to the world, and so enlightened it, seems to indicate in Mend-Ooyo's vision an atavistic spirituality, for these perhaps are the ancestors invoked by Mongols within and without the shamanic context, who physically dwell within the land, who are in many ways the most profound expression of the common *nutag*.

Of Chapter Six, which deals with human origins and so is in many ways a companion text to the story of the people of light, Mend-Ooyo has written, "Everyone comes into being

³⁰⁴ GH, 14.

with the golden vessel of their mother, and so enters the world. And the world is the origin of the maternal. The world has arisen from emptiness."³⁰⁵ This idea, of the world as having arisen from emptiness, finds a parallel in astronomy's pre-Big Bang cosmic singularity, and the combination at the start of Mend-Ooyo's story of an ellipsis – suggesting an unspoken prehistory – and the embodiment of the stars allows for both the origin *ex nihilo* and the arrival of people from the stars.

The trajectory along which the people of thight travel, moreover, is almost the identical with that of the children of the First Mother in Chapter Six. In the latter text, the Mother's search for light and her need for a place to embrace her child brings forth the sky, "she trned her soul into unlimited space."³⁰⁶ But as the pimordial Mother's search continues, she gradually turns her heart into the sun and her body into the earth, and in this way the first child is brought forth.

As the children of the Mother grow older and gradually reproduce themselves, they grow disconnected from their origin³⁰⁷. Similarly, the people of light become inured to the world and the world they have created begins to be transformed:

*...the warm glow of the people of light decreased. It lit up the darkness, it revealed wickedness and over the coldness it spread warmth. Many children were born. The pyramid was not enclosed within the light. It drew in all the light held by the stars in the canopy of Heaven. The people made copies of the pyramid. And so the light spread. The people lived separately. They began to distinguish between superior and inferior. The canopy of the tent stretched up towards the canopy of Heaven and leeched away the light. Then there burnt fire in the hearth. And always the fire blazed upwards like a lotus flower...*³⁰⁸

The pyramid in which they had reached the earth became the catalyst for change, just as the bodies given to her children by the First Mother catalyse their changes. And these

³⁰⁵ Mend-Ooyo, Altan ovoo nomin tuhai.

³⁰⁶ GH, 169.

³⁰⁷ Remember that the word *eh* means both "mother" and "origin."

³⁰⁸ GH, 129-130.

changes are, Mend-Ooyo suggests, somewhat ambiguous, insofar as the warm glow of the people of light not only spreads warmth and light, even as it is decreasing through their own malfeasance, but it also reveals that malfeasance,

What seems to be a somewhat predictable parable of the people of light's fall from grace becomes far darker in the story of the First Mother. "They began to use the creative power of the Mother's soul," we hear, "to commit good deeds, but also to commit evil deeds."³⁰⁹ This echo of the Buddhist idea of karma, in which one is borne by one's mother, through and with the predispositions from previous lives,³¹⁰ reflects the situation of the characters in both stories, as it reflects the situation of the reader, and that of the author too, showing the ways in which the world into which we are all born, and for whom "the Mother...had sacrificed herself for the sake of humanity in order to create the universe and the earth"³¹¹, has somehow also predisposed us to become separated from one another and to act in ways deleterious to humanity and the environment.

The gradual downfall of the people of light extends through the chapters of *Altan Ovoo*, reaching its zenith just before the story of the First Mother. This focus of Mend-Ooyo's on the figure of the mother is also a characteristic feature of Mongol society, and the resolution of what otherwise would have been a story about human failings into a barely concealed account of contemporary society seems to develop directly from the presence of the First Mother.

*...the light fell upon the earth and its shining eased the frozen ground and there flowed streams and rivers. There appeared winged creatures. It was spring. It became more and more agreeable, and summer came forth.*³¹²

³⁰⁹ GH, 171.

³¹⁰ It also echoes the Christian doctrine of free will, although this is not Mend-Ooyo's intention.

³¹¹ GH, 171.

³¹² GH, 188.

It is interesting here how the light returns and thus brings forth the spring. The way in which the light had deserted those who had originally borne it might have suggested the darkening into blackness of utter evil and the bringing forth of forlorn existence. But the light and the appearance of birds and the gradual turning of the seasons redeem the people of light, who are perhaps now become humans as we are humans, and the subsequent equation of summer's pleasure with boredom, and the "self-awareness" brought by the withering of autumn, and the hard work of winter, and the return of spring – "such alchemy," we are told, "transformed the human mind...".³¹³

It is, of course, the alchemical transformation of the human mind which is the focus of spiritual practise, and the self-awareness which occurs through labor in the fall and winter – presumably this is the awareness of the fragility of one's life and the changeability of nature – contributes to the human understanding of social interaction which is related in the next and final part of this story. The coöperation which results from the struggle of good and evil manifests in the following denouement:

Then the people of light grew bold and determined and gathered all the light from their bodies into a great sphere, and this they raised up into the sky, and it was the burning sun. The people trusted that the light shone upon all things and from the earth they replenished their vitality, and there was death and there was birth, there was arising and there was dissolving...³¹⁴

That the people of light had not thus far been subject to birth and death had not occurred to me as I read through this for the first time. This realisation, and the acceptance of it, is a human *rite de passage*, of course, and here especially we are faced with the deliberate pooling of resources so that the sun – and thus the passage of time and the circadian cycles and the explicit cycle of life – is made manifest to all. The facts of birth and death, of

³¹³ GH, 188

³¹⁴ GH, 222

arising and dissolving, through being manifest at the end of the story rather than at the beginning, take on an unusual quality in relation to *Altan Ovoo* as a whole, and it is as though this new apprehension is redemptive, as the act of individuals combining their light to illuminate the world.

By presenting the story of the people of light like a thread woven through *Altan Ovoo*, Mend-Ooyo is able to allow a looseness in the book's overall structure, which allows the development of different themes and styles. That these many sections all relate on some level to the landscape around Altan Ovoo, and to the nomadic society gathered around it, means that this story becomes akin to a creation story. The people of light become, as I said earlier, the human inhabitants of the world in general, but especially of this area (Mongolia, Dariganga, the area around Altan Ovoo), and so this narrative not only weaves the book together structurally, but also it weaves together the nomadic people and their nutag, their homeland.

Having passed once through *Altan Ovoo* upon a story which somehow stands without the text proper, one might say interstitially, and which yet functions as a framework for the whole book and thereby comments upon it, we can turn now to the other story that runs through the book, namely that of the stone from Altan Ovoo which is described at the very beginning of the text.

*A stone from Altan Ovoo stood in the place of honor at the rear of the ger. My ancestors had in fact been worshipping it for five generations. This stone from Altan Ovoo came to life amid the mighty flames, which promised eternal peace, the light of the world had dominion over the interplay of shadows, it called upon a moment of time from a thousand years ago.*³¹⁵

The place of honor at the rear of every Mongol ger, the *hoimor*, is the locus of respect, the place reserved for the oldest person or for a visitor. What are we to make of

³¹⁵ GH, 4.

this treatment of a stone, then? It seems to me that this stone is Altan Ovoo in microcosm, and Mend-Ooyo says soon thereafter that "Altan Ovoo is the world on a reduced scale"³¹⁶, which suggests that, for Mend-Ooyo and his family, this stone, worshipped for five generations³¹⁷, is therefore itself the world in miniature. The relationship which is expressed here, between the family and this stone is one which can be used to summarise the import of *Altan Ovoo*, for this is a relationship in which the nomadic community transports societal memory in a single object. This stone functions as far more than a symbol, for it is the world in miniature and therefore holds the family's – the society's – experience on a quantum level, just as we have seen how for poets such as Dashbalbar and Nyamsüren the grass holds the ancestors and the ancestral voices of the community.

In the fire's dynamic animation of the stone from Altan Ovoo, and in the light of the world's "dominion over the interplay of shadows," we have the prefiguring of the story of the people of light and, more importantly, of the denouement of that story. Moreover, the fire's ability to conjure up images of the past, and thereby to re/create those images *in situ*, and the presence of the world in a single lump of rock, set up parallels with the act of storytelling, with which Mend-Ooyo is concerned in *Altan Ovoo*.

The warp and weft of *Altan Ovoo*, of course, is narrative, in which much of the poetry is also focused upon narrative subjects³¹⁸. Mend-Ooyo's decision to focus on Altan Ovoo as the figurative and topographical centerpiece of his work in general, and this book in particular, is related to the signification of the hill to the people of his *nutag* in Dariganga and their relationship with the hill:

The lovely hill named Golden Hill is located in the wilderness on the south-eastern border of Mongolia. The local inhabitants have come, for many centuries, to pray and make offerings

³¹⁶ GH, 4.

³¹⁷ The Mongol original reads "minii övgiin tavan üyeiin shüteen bilee" (AO, 8), *shütee* being one of the standard synonyms for "to worship."

³¹⁸ See Chapter 9.

*there. Golden Hill is supreme among the hills and the waters of this area and it unites them at the place where story meets with the natural world. The local people offer prayers to, and compose stories and poems about, Golden Hill, they take stones to place in the place of honor in their ger, and so the spirit of Golden Hill sinks its teeth into their neck. Golden Hill is a symbol of the wisdom and cultural history of Dariganga. Writers have spoken with love of how the land has granted to the world the culture, history, traditions and intuition of the nomadic community on the wild steppe. The name of the book Golden Hill, however, reveals not only the name of the mountain but also the wisdom enclosed within the stūpa of enlightenment.*³¹⁹

The placement at the very beginning of his book of the iconic rock from Altan Ovoo shows the intensity of Mend-Ooyo's feeling for the hill, but we also need to understand how this rock continues through the book as, in many ways, the central character, more important even than the narrator/author.

By placing the stone from Altan Ovoo in the place of honor, as I have said, it is honored as the oldest and most respected person present, and as a guest. My use of the word "person" here is not metaphorical, moreover, for in Mongol nomadic society, as I pointed out in Part I, a hill is not only the abode of a local god or of a Buddha, it is the physical embodiment of that entity. And in the final chapter, Mend-Ooyo makes the following invitation³²⁰ to the entity which is Altan Ovoo:

I invite the lord of Golden Sumeru³²¹ of Dariganga, who protects and supports the people and livestock in this mighty land, with its mountains and waters, mounds and hillocks, ravines and gullies, cliffs and talus, springs and fountains, green lawns, saltmarshes, feathergrass and hillpaths. And I invite the gods and waterspirits in the eight aimags, the local

³¹⁹ Mend-Ooyo Altan ovoo nomin tuhai.

³²⁰ The use of this term in English reflects the traditional translation of a Tibetan term, *gdan 'dren pa*, which is used in Buddhist ritual texts to indicate an invitation or summoning of a *yidam* (Tibetan *yi dam*: an aspect of the transcendent Buddha) into the mind and body of the practitioner. The Mongol term used here, *urin zalmui*, is used in a similar way in religious language to the Tibetan, and which can thus be understood as indicating a melding of the two registers.

³²¹ Sumeru is the *axis mundi* in Buddhist cosmology.

*rulers, the haans and their queens, the ministers and their wives, and everyone close at hand. May the shining joy that this brings about be always present.*³²²

It seems as though, with this invitation, Mend-Ooyo has come full circle in terms of the book's narrative trajectory, while somehow moving barely at all from the place of honor in his family's ger. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the thematic and stylistic character of the narrative, but in preparation for that we should notice how the final chapter, with its litany of those who are "no longer here," with its offerings to the "lord of Sumeru" and with the idea of "meeting my father again" further recalling the book's opening pages, seems to fold the text – and all the stories and poems thus far told and recited – back upon itself, linking the past and the future with the present in which mend-Ooyo is writing and in which we are reading, it is as though the prayers and the offerings are being made to the stone, which "stood in the place of honor at the rear of the ger."

In his introduction to *Altan Ovoo*, the poet D. Urianhai writes of Mend-Ooyo's language,

*Through the flow of power across the mirror of his mind, a flow which is not dependent upon the awakening of form, omens, intuition, dreams or feeling, the poet engages with the power of the local spirits and guardians of his own country, and passes to us a translation of the secret language of that country. His life being illuminated by the pure heavenly human mind, to this man the mountains and waters of his locality appear close, he proclaims words unheard by others.*³²³

Urianhai's poetic sensibility is obvious here, but there is also a prosaic and narrative aspect to what he is saying. In Mend-Ooyo's own words, "it has been pointed out how Altan Ovoo weaves together many different literary styles, as on a rosary, and one might say that it

³²² GH, 230-231

³²³ GH, ix.

replicates ancient Mongol forms of scripture or verse.”³²⁴ In drawing our attention to this stylistic and spiritual breadth, both Urianhai and Mend-Ooyo himself are, I think, pointing to the way in which *Altan Ovoo* captures ideas from Mongol cultural and historical experience and transforms them, placing them perhaps as successive beads on a rosary, but also allowing them to relate, as the stone in the place of honor relates to the “lord of Sumeru,” forwards and backwards across the mental and physical fields of the book and its readers.

Urianhai’s comments also remind us of the interplay in Mend-Ooyo’s work – as elsewhere in Mongol literature – between story and myth, between one writer’s fiction and the symbols used by a society to understand the psychospiritual aspects of their shared experience. On a crass level, this is the kernel at the heart of the religious urge, and we should be careful to grasp the complex spiritual messages present within the landscape, Mend-Ooyo’s description of it, and the dynamic between that description and the understanding of the Mongol people at large.

Rather than further emphasize the spiritual aspects of *Altan Ovoo*, I intend now to look at the flow of stories within the text as a whole. One of the characteristic features of the book’s narrative is the proliferation of repeated phrases – “this is how the story goes,” for example, and “they also say” – which help to structure the narrative. This acknowledgement of outside sources is important, for it emphasises that Mend-Ooyo is more the conduit for the stories than their creator, that it is he who has arranged and perhaps rewritten stories and myths which have been passed down from previous generations.

The use of myth and story to illustrate what Mongol society deems culturally significant is exemplified by the way in which Chapter Seven addresses the subjects of the

³²⁴ Mend-Ooyo *Altan ovoo nomin tuhai*.

Pole Star – so vital to the navigation, and thus the survival, of nomadic people – and the morin huur, through which Mongols have managed to meld their love of horses and music.

A story, told through the creative genius and poetic skill of the nomadic people, recounts how one of the ancient rulers of the steppes gathered together and tethered to the Pole Star all the local wisdom and riches.[...].

The wonderful and magical power of the morin huur, or the horsehead fiddle, comes to us through a direct personal connection with author's father, a simple nomad and a fine musician. These texts about the morin huur, written out of the tradition, reveals a most important aspect of Mongol cultural tradition.³²⁵

The story of the Pole Star³²⁶ again reminds us of the story of the people of light. An omnipotent haan holds sway over everyone, “from the Milky Way down to the earth he had smashed their peace and happiness, and had created enmity and dissent.” His solution is to have his subjects contribute the entirety of their gold to building “an ovoo, a golden mountain, within the walls of the great palace.”³²⁷

He decides to tether “peace and tranquility” to the mountain, so as to reestablish his power. However, one of his advisors suggests that such a move might render the mountain “a focus for constant, obsessional greed.” This dialog is interesting insofar as nomadic society would clearly have had little personal connection with the acquisition of quantities of gold, and would be far more interested in the profits of livestock herding. It is as though the haan is a foreign ruler – no Mongol haan would have lived permanently in a palace, after all – and therefore holds a somewhat otherworldly role in relation to Mend-Ooyo’s audience.

Far from being a truly wicked ruler, the haan listens to his minister. In an interesting comment on his own rulership – or at least on its effect upon his subjects – he

³²⁵ Mend-Ooyo, Altan ovoo nomin tuhai.

³²⁶ The Pole Star is called *Altan Gadas* (Golden Nail) in Mongol, terminology which clearly relates to this story.

³²⁷ This story is found on GH, 191, and all quotations in respect of the story are from that page.

says, "If the earth is not fitting for it, then nail it to the sky!" Not only does he abjure the presence of his golden mountain within his own palace, within his own kingdom, he places it in the sky. His command in the Mongol original is "*Tengert gadasla*," and this choice of *tenger* as opposed to, for instance, *ogtorgui* indicates a releasing of power to the sky (or to the sky god), and an explicit instruction moreover to *nail* it there. Following this, we are told, the people returned, not so much to a time before the haan "had created enmity and dissent", but rather to a state approaching a prelapsarial paradise:

And so the polestar showed direction upon the earth, and to the people of the steppe the golden polestar was their own golden pole, straight and tall. The set up home according to this straight and tall star of their minds, they carried out their work, they made handcrafts, they wrote their long songs, they penetrated the secrets of the world.

This is perhaps the signification of the Pole Star, that it resolves social issues by giving direction. And, as we hear in the comparison story which follows this text, even though "[i]t's said that the Pole Star has gotten slightly bent," still it is possible if one knows the land – as Mend-Ooyo's father does – to find one's way in the utter darkness of a night without stars.

The bent Pole Star clearly refers, on one level at least, to the moral compass of the society in which and for which Mend-Ooyo was writing this book in 1986. This was the final period of Soviet rule, *glasnost* and *perestroika* had reached Mongolia and it was becoming possible to critique both the system and the Party. At many points during the book, as he does here, Mend-Ooyo writes in a way that suggests that we might also benefit from reading the text from an alternative point of view.³²⁸

³²⁸ Mend-Ooyo is reticent about the political aspects of his work and I have not been able to establish the extent to which my analysis is in fact an accurate representation of his intention at the time. Nonetheless, there is a long history of writers in Mongolia – as elsewhere under the Soviet system – producing texts whose apparently innocent story hides (or, perhaps better put, obscures) the writer's true message.

But this story also shows how the nomadic people of the steppe grow to know their landscape intuitively, so much so that the Pole Star becomes superfluous. In contrast, then, with the story of the haan, we have reminiscences about Bööörjöö, who understood the medicinal properties of artemisia, and the possibly insane³²⁹ Tseren, who dug a well and thus struck water, "to provide my homeland with an everlasting supply of water for tea."³³⁰ The details of these stories, these reminiscences, are probably not as important to the present study as the fact that in both cases – indeed throughout *Altan Ovoo* – we find central characters who are mavericks with a special understanding of some aspect of the world, or of their place within the world. As Mend-Ooyo writes later in the chapter, "Though we figure the most ordinary things to be of no interest to us, when we pay close attention and increase our awareness, then everything becomes of interest."³³¹

We can see how this idea, that everything becomes interesting if we would only pay attention, suffuses *Altan Ovoo*, and how it defines the ongoing narrative of the book. After all, if the central character is indeed the stone from Altan Ovoo, sitting as the honored guest in at the rear of the ger, then there is no better exemplar of the importance of paying close attention, lest such an important element be overlooked.

The first half of Chapter Seven, proceeding away from the story of the Pole Star into a discussion of native wisdom and the deep intuition and one-pointed focus of one who seems thereby to be somehow insane, seems to be dealing with the non-rational apprehension of the world and the ways in which, despite ever more contrary information, Mongol nomadic society has been able to create its own destiny within the landscape through which it moves.

³²⁹ The Mongol reads *soliot*, which roughly corresponds to the English "deranged, unhinged," *Solih*, from which this adjective is derived, originally means "to change, exchange."

³³⁰ GH, 196

³³¹ GH, 201.

The remainder of the chapter deals with creative communication, through the *morin huur*, the horsehead fiddle, and through the spoken word³³². In the textual pivot between these two halves, entitled "A loveliness unnoticed on the steppes,"³³³ Mend-Ooyo's account of time spent with his father on the steppe, surrounded by nature, lost in his reverie while at the same time intent on observing all that he can, shows I think how nature, though beautiful and striking to the senses, is nonetheless for the nomadic communities who live in its midst a quotidian and commonplace experience.

As the sun and moon came together and embraced one another across the omnipotent sky that fifteenth day, we jogged along and observed the outlines of the ger. Beneath the moon, the white ger upon the steppe appeared white, like pale model stūpas. Even on a cloudy day, the full moon is lit by the sun. We hobbled the horses, untacked them and walked towards the ger. I held back a little and didn't scream my joy at what I could see.

"Caragana!" Father heard my loud cry, but showed no particular concern as he walked on, the stirrups clanking against his saddle. The moonlight struck the stalks of the caragana and, as I looked more intently, its rays lit up the golden caragana as though they held flames.³³⁴

It is the nomadic experience of the landscape as a constant presence and as everchanging movement which characterises the narrative of *Alan Ovoo*, and this experience moreover which transforms even this most mundane carigana grass into something extraordinary, and the gers into religious objects. The intensity of description matches the intensity of recollection, and as Mend-Ooyo turns his attention to the *morin huur*, and his father's musical skill, he develops this narrative through the musicality of his poetry and his understanding of the relationship between these two artforms and the landscape.

³³² I deal with his treatment of the spoken word in Chapter 9.

³³³ GH, 199-201.

³³⁴ GH, 201.

He *morin huur*, or horsehead fiddle³³⁵, plays a central rôle in Mongol culture, both for Mongols themselves and for foreign observers. It was the medium of transformation in the film *Die Geschichte vom weinende Kamel*, by which a mother camel accepted her newborn calf, and further it is the sonic semeiosis of Mongolia, the music which is used in media to signify Mongolia and its nomadic culture.³³⁶

Mend-Ooyo's approach to the *morin huur* in *Altan Owoo* straddles both the personal and the universal. The way in which he introduces the subject of the fiddle is interesting, and one that has analogs elsewhere in the book, when his intention is to contrast the general (expressed through poetry) to the specific and/or the narrative. He moves, then, from a poem, through a kind of atemporal oneiric vision, to land upon a specific topic:

[...]

*The horses hooves are coming clipclap towards us!
Iron stirrups sound straightaway against the hitching-post.
The Mongolian character, a sound to save the voice!
And so, no longer upon the earth, my father comes!*

the fire's blazing at home

*Father's fiddle stands in the place of honor. Its melodies are asleep, its strings quite silent. But I keep writing, like magnetic tape, recording in my heart the melody of father's fiddle.
The precious pure melody, which I sucked with my mother's milk, gushed forth its tune from my heart and mind.*

the horsehead fiddle's playing

The style of father's fiddle was exquisite. With great respect, father picked up his fiddle with both hands and, placing it on his lap, tuned it up by playing an opening melody, The Fiddle's Brow. The spirit of the horsehead fiddle woke up and melded with the universe, the eternal ancient melody.³³⁷

³³⁵ The Mongol actually means "horse fiddle."

³³⁶ The trailer for the hiphop documentary *Mongolian Bling* mocks this ubiquity. See <http://www.mongolianbling.com>.

³³⁷ GH, 202-3.

Here we experience one of the most intimate parts, in my opinion, of *Altan Ovoo*. The author's relationship with his father, as we read throughout the book, was deep and close on many levels, but it is through the medium of the fiddle – and perhaps because also it was he who taught Mend-Ooyo about traditional Mongol culture and language – that this closeness makes itself most manifest.³³⁸

Later in this section, Mend-Ooyo tells of how his father taught him to string the fiddle, with hairs from a horse's tail. Their discussion about the number of strings a fiddle has opens out into a statement about the multivalence and unity of a person's life. Mend-Ooyo counts two strings, but his father asks him:

*"How can you bring a song from two of anything? It seems that we run our fingers along two strings, but in fact there are three hundred and sixty of them. Everything has its reasons. Three hundred sixty days to one year. But just one quality." This is what father told me. So, please may the melody sound long and far away, as though playing the strings of three hundred and sixty days.*³³⁹

The idea of an entire year having but one quality indicates the constancy of Mongol nomadic life as it has been lived for millennia. The analogy with the fiddle, however, means that there is also a constant subtlety to this life, as there is to the bowing and intonation and tone of the fiddle itself.

Mend-Ooyo speaks of the melody inherent to each one of us, it is as though we are sounded somehow by interaction with one another and with our environment. Poetry and melody is central to *Altan Ovoo*, and the one thing that all the book's characters possess is an innate sense of destiny, of how they reveal and realise their own melody within the world. Immediately after the dialog with his father, he makes this telling and provocative paragraph:

³³⁸ See in this regard his account of his father's death in the "Prelude to Part Three" above.

³³⁹ GH, 206.

*Everything has its melody. A song never fades away into nothingness. Everything has its sign. If you go into a house where there's a fiddle, it will reveal its harmony. If you end up somewhere where there's no fiddle, the elders of the steppes will tell you that melody comes from oneself or from others.*³⁴⁰

So it is that the melody, the "sign," of all things will innately reveal itself. This is a very powerful statement by Mend-Ooyo the trained teacher, but also by Mend-Ooyo as a cultural leader and critic writing within the Soviet system towards the end of the 1980s. My personal view – unsubstantiated by Mend-Ooyo, however – is that this is an example of how *Altan Owoo*, through its expression of the individual's place within, and relationship with, the Mongol landscape, shows the strength of Mongol autonomy and independence, notwithstanding the political climate. We can hear a little of the pride placed in the music and culture of the morin huur in the following paragraph, in which Mend-Ooyo describes his father's playing. Although his father is a respected musician,

*The melody is for me more artistic and more meaningful when heard, not from the stage, but from the place of honor at the rear of the Mongolian ger. And when the fiddle is played, the colt neighs from where he is tethered and the lark sings upon the roof, and it is so accented.*³⁴¹

This is a nomadic image, in which the music of the fiddle is given the place of honor, in which the ger is the microcosmic *axis mundi*, and in which the horse on the earth and the lark in the air join earth and heaven. Music is Mend-Ooyo's way of realising peace and harmony within his home and within his homeland.

As the previous quotation suggests, the morin huur is not only made from hairs from a horse's tail. There is something enchanting about its music, enchanting in particular

³⁴⁰ GH, 206.

³⁴¹ GH, 209.

perhaps to horses.³⁴² In his text "My Own Story about the Amazing Qualities of the Horsehead Fiddle," Mend-Ooyo tells the story of a young man who expresses this relationship in a most remarkable way. He comes to a market, where there is a dappled grey and white horse, anxiously pawing at the ground.

*As the young man came close, the horse kept its distance. He played and he played. Three days and three nights he played. The third night passed and, as the pale dawn spread its light, wings like a swan's fanned out from the top of the horse's legs, and then folded back once again. For three more days and nights the young man played and three times he brought the mottled white and grey horse soaring and flying back to him.*³⁴³

The sensitivity and openness of both the man and the horse is one which, while not always ending in the horse's flight, finds analogs among Mongol literature, where speed and distance and consistency and power are qualities favored in the horse. The shamanic meaning of flight, and the assistance of the animal world, are both elements which are vital to an understanding of Mongol society, as well as of *Altan Ovoo*. Mend-Ooyo's development of Chapter Seven continues now into a discussion of the power of the word, it follows directly on the heels of this alchemy, this admixture of horse and musician, which in turn follows from the intimacy between the human world and the heavenly world as expressed through nomadic intuition of nature and the stars.

It is hard to summarise the narrative structure and development of an episodic book such as *Altan Ovoo*. My principal concern in this exposition has been to show the interdependence between the stories in at least one chapter (Chapter Seven), as well as in the overarching structure of the book. By reading episodically, by dipping in here and there, we are better able, I believe, to grasp Mend-Ooyo's vision as a writer, recording for

³⁴² *Altan Ovoo*, as Mongol literature in general, is full of references in song to horses, and we must assume that this is not by chance, but because of the intimate relationship between Mongols and their horses, and also that between their horses and the music that they help to create.

³⁴³ GH, 204.

his own people and for the world outside Mongolia's borders the various aspects of Mongol culture and society. We'll see in the next chapter how he intertwines the narrative with poetry, and how that narrative is further broadened through the use of the poetic voice, but the stories which he tells in *Altan Ovoo* still do not, in Urianhai's words, "stand out, like patterns sewn onto silk,"³⁴⁴ rather they speak somehow of the subtle melancholy of remembrance, acknowledging but not triumphantly proclaiming the wisdom and depth of Mongol nomadic culture and the constant spiritual and physical presence of the homeland.

³⁴⁴ GH, x.

INTERMEZZO

An Overview of Mongol Poetry and Poesis

While the present work deals exclusively with Mongol literature in translation, it is necessary nonetheless, in order to understand the ways in which poetry and music interact in throughout the culture, to offer a brief overview of the principal structural features of Mongol poetry and poesis.

Mongol poetry is founded upon a simple schema known as *tolgoi süül* (head and tail). The structure generally involves the first letter of every line (of a couplet, a verse, or sometimes of an entire poem) beginning with the same letter (sometimes the same consonant+vowel combination) and, though far less frequently, the last word of every line being identical. An excellent example of this is D Nyamsüren's long poem "The Four Seasons," in which the first verse of the final section is as follows³⁴⁵:

*Навч ганц нэг унах нь сайхан
Нар толгодын цанаат гарах сайхан
Сэв сэв салхи үүсэх сайхан
Сэм сэмхэн хуй босох сайхан*

The first sixty-four of the poem's sixty-five verses follow this pattern, and we can imagine that, for an oral culture, such a structure would have been (and still is) an excellent mnemonic device³⁴⁶. The same is true of the alliteration that runs throughout Nyamsüren's poem as much as through the literature as a whole, and these two phonological elements of structure clearly define the way in which the poetry is delivered. There has not been any significant alteration of this standard form and, although many poets choose now to write

³⁴⁵ D. Nyamsüren, *Havrin Ursgal* (Ulaanbaater, 1984), 22-29. I have deliberately neither transliterated nor translated these lines so that the reader new to Mongol poetry will be able visually to appreciate the structure of the verse.

³⁴⁶ Such poetic structure clearly emerges from the oral tradition, but it is clear to me, from having talked with Mongol poets, that this repetitive and alliterative structure remains very much tied to the recitation of poetry.

what we might call “free verse,” still even the most radical and western-influenced are happy on occasions to write using this form.

Even in today’s Mongolia, the default literary form is poetry. There are writers of every generation who write fiction and essays, but any writer worthy of the name is first and foremost a poet. One of the most common terms for “to sing” and “to speak” is *duulah*, and the word *duu* means both “voice” and “song.” The (atavistic and archetypal) understanding that a voice is a song and that to speak is to sing is central to understanding Mongol poetry from within and central too to the understanding of the poets who create it.

The importance, then, of performance and recitation to the Mongol literary tradition, means that poets are expected to be able to present their work in public. Nomadic culture, as we saw in Part I, does not make viable the collection of books, and so the memorization of one’s own, or another’s, texts, becomes a vital skill.

The modern literature that is the subject of this study has not been affected by orthographic and phonetic changes. However, this is not the case with the work of writers pre-1940, such as D. Natsagdorj, who worked exclusively in the traditional vertical script. While we can debate the ways in which so dramatic a change, from a fluid vertical script to a script imported from a different culture (an adapted Cyrillic from the Soviet Union) and running left to right, might affect the text thus composed, there is no doubt that the complex and not altogether happy relationship between the sounds of Mongol and the Cyrillic alphabet had a definite effect upon the literature. Thus it was, for instance, that the words “white” and “red” changed from *čagaghan* and *ulaghan* to *tsagaan* and *ulaan*: notwithstanding the change in pronunciation of the modern Mongol language which the script shift reproduced³⁴⁷, the new script distanced those who used it from the ancient

³⁴⁷ The vertical script recorded the earlier pronunciation of the language, but the Cyrillic script recorded the “standard” pronunciation of Mongol around 1940.

tradition of the vertical script and the language which it both recorded and, thereby, represented.

CHAPTER 9

Environment and Poetry in *Altan Ovoo*

*The ger where I was born
begins on the railway,
and this railway of mine
is linked to the state.
The sound of the trains
is in my throat,
and its distant puffing
is in my organism.
The metal roads are my ventricles,
and my love is joined with the earth.
And, on nights when the moon is full,
the beating of the track, the trainwheels,
is my poetry,
read upon the earth and in the sky.³⁴⁸*

This poem, by Mend-Ooyo's contemporary and friend D. Nyamsüren, shows the way in which Mongol contemporary poetry has successfully managed to refocus the traditional ideas within the world of modernity and development. This approach, as we saw in Part II, was central to the vision of B. Yavuuhan, who mentored both Mend-Ooyo and Nyamsüren, and the apprehension by the poet of his "organism"³⁴⁹ in the journey and the mechanism of a train³⁵⁰, and the direct and physical intuition of it "upon the earth and in the sky," illustrates the level at which not only does the land (and the ancestors thereby) absorb the ephemeral but the poet feels this absorption, this association, this meeting of experiences and ideas, within himself.

³⁴⁸ D. Nyamsüren *Havrin ursgal*, 81.

³⁴⁹ Nyamsüren's choice of words here is significant. *Mahbod* indicates an organism, but also an element, part of a given structure, and I read his selection here as indicating his presence within the world as a constituent part, as well as being an organism within the world, thus showing their natural interdependence.

³⁵⁰ Nyamsüren's wife Handmaa still works as an immigration official at the border crossing between Russia and Mongolia at Ereentsav.

In this chapter, I will show the structural and thematic ways in which Mend-Ooyo uses poetry in *Altan Ovoo*, and what these poetic texts tell us about how Mongol nomadic society understands the environment. Unlike the narrative texts discussed in the previous chapter, the experience of poetry has a particular resonance in traditional Mongol society, being, as Nyamsüren suggests in the poem above, the reading (and note the explicitly performative choice of verb) of individual experience within the context of landscape.

Altan Ovoo begins and (almost) ends with poetry, prayers of invocation (at the beginning, to Yangchen Lhamo) and of offering (to Altan Ovoo and its tutelary deity) at the close. Notwithstanding the importance of such texts within both Buddhist and shamanic practise, the placement is important for another reason, namely that this book of stories and of reminiscence, is above all a poet's book, and is therefore defined, in a meaningful way, by the poetry that courses through it.

This being the case, it is possible to see poetry as one of the book's principle structuring devices, in which ideas presented in prosaic form are seen through the particular focus of verse. Since Mongol verse – or at least the traditional verse (based in part on the *tolgoi/süül* form discussed in the brief exposition immediately preceding this chapter) with(in) whose strictures Mend-Ooyo tends to work – affords its own aural and visual structures, and since its language and performance invokes the nomadic, and by extension the Chinggisid, tradition in which it developed, it lends a strangely distanced intimacy to the material which it addresses. Mend-Ooyo's use of poetry to focus his ideas, and the minds of readers upon those ideas, means that we are able, through a chapter or through the entire book, to follow the traces of those ideas, as they illumine the narratives about them.

Of Chapter Five, "The Golden Wheel,"³⁵¹ Mend-Ooyo has written, "This chapter unrolls the ancient way of life of nomadic people, their everyday existence, and the stories

³⁵¹ GH, 131-166.

told around the fire at the center of their ger.”³⁵² If we look at the structure of the chapter, the rhythm of prose and poetry, we can see how the narrative of a family, sitting “around the fire at the center of their ger,” creates a context into which Mend-Ooyo introduces a poetic exposition of the nomadic experience. This exposition, in contrast to the narrative portion of the chapter, speaks at once to more general themes and to experiences which, reading between the lines of what is spoken here around the fire, are central to a life common to Mongol nomads.

The refrain which runs throughout the chapter, linking the speech and the poetry and the stories together – *the fire’s blazing*³⁵³ – shows how important fire is within a nomadic community. It stands at the center of the ger, is the place where cooking takes place and from which warmth radiates out to protect – and, in contexts such as that recounted in “The Storm”³⁵⁴, to save the life of – whomever it touches. So it is that Mend-Ooyo is able through poetry, as we shall see, and through the interaction and contrast of poetry and prose, to create a sense of the social unit – a single family, but a family as part of the larger nomadic community – as being, in a real sense, at the center of the world, and this in turn returns us to the lodestone of how Mongol culture seeks to express the place of Mongol society within the wider topology of the natural world.

The first words of Chapter Five – “This is what they said”³⁵⁵ – are, as I discussed in Chapter 8, both a formula for structuring the text and a way of emphasizing the understanding of the nomadic social group and of allowing the ancestral voice to speak.

³⁵² Mend-Ooyo, *Altan ovoo nomin tuhai*.

³⁵³ *Gal dürelzen asch baina* in the original, *passim* throughout the chapter.

³⁵⁴ GH, 146-154.

³⁵⁵ The Mongolian – *ögüüleḥ inu* – is unmarked for tense, and so could equally – and maybe more usefully – be rendered as “This is what they say.” It should be noted that the verb *ögüüleḥ* (“to say”; generally used in respectful discourse) is the causative form of the verb *ögeḥ* (“to give”), and so there is a feeling, I believe, that such utterance is considered – albeit not consciously – some kind of gift or offering.

In the opening poem, it is this traditional ancestral voice we hear, describing the world and the landscape and talking of their presence within it as the seasons change. These thirteen verses, as will be clear once the chapter is finished, present thematically the narrative of the story. There is the passage of time, described as both physical and spiritual travel:

*The mirage of time shimmers like water.
The white ger seem to flash like lightning.
Like waterfowl floating upon the waves,
it's as though they're flapping up and down.*

*I am the son of a country herdsman,
under the wings of the travelling years.
Exhausted from the road,
they cross the southern ridges on a cart.*

*Through these silent times,
we carry breath like a stuffed carriage.
We loosen the wisdom of life,
we're in step with the camels.*

Then there are the ravages of nature, a storm, which requires the effort of the family to consolidate resources to bind the ger fast:

*Though light as a feathery bird,
we don't dance about, bristling in the wind.
In the storm which tears up the trees,
our seat is firm as a mountain.*

[...]

*The dust is pushed to the center of the sky,
the mist hangs like buttons on a skirt.
The tent's felt walls and roof are heavy, we lift them up.
The girthrope's tough, we pull it tight.*

And finally, there is that transcendent aspect of nomadic life in which the ger is somehow at the center of a universe, as the individual is at the center of his or her own mandala, or sacred space, a "satellite" as Mend-Ooyo calls it here, which moves through space and time but which in many ways, as is the nature of tradition, remains constant:

*Amid the wispy snow-white steppes,
our ger is like a stūpa on an altar.
We know the riches of deep wisdom,
on which the elders fly through eons.*

*Looking from afar, it's like a white bird.
We enter it, we leave, it's like the wheel of time.
The Buddhas' work is like a vehicle or a history,
upon the world, this little sphere.*

*Turning through the cycling seasons,
the white satellite of the open plains.
And, within this little sphere,
a man is raised to stretch felt.*

This poem has much in common, I would suggest, with the prose narrative of the “people of light” which closes each chapter of *Altan Ovoo*. The burden of the narrative is different, of course, but it is the descriptive and emotive vision which Mend-Ooyo offers us, of a society, defined by the ger in which its members live, the ger itself being compared in shamanic terms with birds and in Buddhist terms with the mystical wheel of time³⁵⁶, moving through an ever changing and ever constant topographical and emotional landscape, all the while returning to the mundane, and yet vital, stretching of felt, an enterprise of husbandry, showing the interconnectedness of the human world with the world of animals.

It is interesting that the poet Mend-Ooyo chooses to open this chapter alone with poetry. It seems that he gives the oldest and most traditional literary form only to those who are closest to him, to the nomadic people of Dariganga, whose seasonal journey has them circumambulating Altan Ovoo and honoring the local spirits and their own ancestors. The critic B. Magsarjav says of Mend-Ooyo that “although [he] is an oriental, although he wears a tattered old sheepskin deel, still he wraps his books in the finest silks, and he is a child of Mongolia, its ancestral wisdom, religion, culture and customs preserved in its songs

³⁵⁶ The *kālacakra* (Skt, literally “wheel of time”) is a Buddhist practise in which realisation is developed through the apprehension of the various macro- and microcycles of life.

and prayers and stories and epic poems:³⁵⁷ these contrasting aspects of Mend-Ooyo's personality and literary style show not only that he is keen to promote Yavuuhulan's idea of bringing traditional Mongol literature into the modern world, but also that he is writing with a deep awareness of the nomadic traditions, in which such ideas are indeed presented in poetic form, or as song, and are voiced in various ways and in various contexts – not least of them in the ger, around the fire at night – by the very people whose lives they describe. And of course it is this level of cultural self-referentiality, of cultural awareness, that forms the bedrock of *Altan Ovoo*.

"We'll sit around the fire, which in a thousand years has not slept, and consider the world. Coming in from outside, the fire in the hearth is good. And the fire's blazing." With this idea, Mend-Ooyo again brings together the constancy of nomadic life and the immediacy of the scene described, and the blazing fire provides the common link which connects the generations. The fire's refrain adds a synaesthetic element, and it is this feeling of warmth which Mend-Ooyo seeks to create throughout this chapter which draws us further and further into the scene.

The brief poem which introduces the first part of the discussion around the fire is again interesting in that, before the narrative can present nomadic life through talk and through story, it is revealed through imagistic poetry:

*The fire burns, and
the flowers are in blossom,
or else its glowing patterns
break open their red and blue petals.
These flames, in fact,
were flowers on the broad steppe.
The livestock stuck together,
shit hanging off their tails.
Mother carried a basket, collected the dung,
the fire blazed in father's hearth.
Quietly we recite our origins,*

³⁵⁷ B. Magsarjav, "The Poet's Achievement, Separate from Time." (Trans. Simon Wickham-Smith) unpublished MS, 2010.

and the flames blossom forth.

The vacillating images here, between flowers and flames, between the dung collected by the women in baskets and the fires which the dung eventually feeds, are seen as though through the prism of quotidian nomadic lifestyle. Mend-Ooyo's technique is to shift focus, from the intimacy of the fire to the breadth of the steppe, and from nomads carrying out the necessary tasks of life to the extent of history and genealogy, and back once more to the flames of the fire. It is like a breathing, like the existence which the writer is seeking to describe, and in the final couplet we can see, through individuals describing their place within history, that in such ambiguity of historical focus, these individuals, Mend-Ooyo himself³⁵⁸, even we the readers, we are all made part of this story through the movement of the language and its imagery.

The poems in this introductory part of Chapter Five, then, serve to show how Mongol nomadic society exists in relation, both on the microcosmic and the macrocosmic level, to broad topological and generational landscapes. The flames of the fire burning, not only in this ger of Mend-Ooyo's family, but in every other Mongol ger too, are the flames which figuratively warm and protect all those who are joined by the Chinggisid *altan utas*, the golden thread which is held by the Mongol people to be their common bond.

Mend-Ooyo uses poetry elsewhere in *Altan Ovoo*, and similarly contrasting it with the prosaic, to express the shifting of focus through which the melding of lineage and tradition and nomadic lifestyle may be understood. For instance, when Mend-Ooyo tells of his journey to take up residence as a teacher in a remote area of the Gobi, west of where his family was living, he speaks about his horse, the one which his father has given him, the

³⁵⁸ I will discuss the autobiographical element of *Altan Ovoo* in Chapter 11, but attention should here be paid to the inherent ambiguity of the terms "mother" and "father" as they are used here. There is a sense in which these words refer as much to the older generation as to Mend-Ooyo's parents, which further emphasises the swift shifting of focus throughout this poem.

"topaz" of the chapter title, but he is also speaking of the relationship between all Mongols and their horses, speaking too about the nature of horses and equitation out upon the Mongol steppe. And the language becomes visionary and oneric, while also shifting between the practical and the essential. Mend-Ooyo also uses prose here, as he does elsewhere and in similar situations, to effect a kind of alchemical shift in apprehension on the part of his readers and, I believe, in his own literary and perceptive consciousness, so as to write not from memory, but rather directly and from his own youthful perception, it is as though he is, in a concrete way, both perceiver and perceived:

Just then there was nothing but the whinnying of horses, and I was lost, and this was what came to me:

*A haze of stories
gathers over my wide and ancient homeland.
And, from within that haze,
comes a powerful horse...
 come, come here, come here
Oh, I load up this horse in my story, it
goes before me northwards, goes before me
southwards.
My horse -
oh, indeed it is like topaz, and
oh, indeed it is a Mongol's jewel.*

*A mist of histories
gathers over my peaceful homeland.
And still, from within that mist
comes a heroic horse...
 come, come here, come here
Oh, I load up this horse in my story, it
goes before me northwards, goes before me
southwards.
My horse -
oh, indeed it is like topaz, and
oh, indeed it is a Mongol's jewel.*

*A fog of songs
gathers over my sonorous blue steppe.
And from that fog
comes a saddled horse...
 come, come here, come here
Oh, I load up this horse in my story, it
goes before me northwards, goes before me
southwards.*

*My horse -
oh, indeed it is like topaz, and
oh, indeed it is a Mongol's jewel.*³⁵⁹

The framework which Mend-Ooyo creates for this poem, his becoming "lost" and perceiving "what came to me," as well as the haze and the mist and the fog, all suggest the idea of transformative dream-vision, in the manner of such mediaeval narrative poems such as *Piers the Ploughman*, *Pearl*, but also in the manner of shamanic vision quests such as described by practitioners and recounted by scholars.³⁶⁰ We can therefore see this poem perhaps as a form of invocation, in which Mend-Ooyo calls horses – powerful, heroic, saddled – and requests that they carry his stories, the stories of his people, across the steppe and out into the world. The repetitive structure, of course, is invocatory, precatory, a formula around which other verses can be built and other horses invoked.

While the description of the horse conjures up the idea of preparedness, of power and of resilience – all of which are necessary in order to protect the homeland and to successfully traverse the steppe – the Mongol homeland itself is described as wide and ancient, and as peaceful, and the steppe, more localised to Mend-Ooyo's own *nutag*, is a "sonorous blue." This contrast runs throughout Mend-Ooyo's work, inherited perhaps via his teacher Yavuuhulan from writers such as Injannashi and Danzanravjaa,³⁶¹ and it is the nomadic understanding of how the a powerful yet disciplined horse must work with the harsh beauty of the terrain, and frequently severe weather, and how this interaction can be

³⁵⁹ GH, 44-45.

³⁶⁰ Writers on shamanism (such as Carlos Castañeda, Mircea Eliade, Vilmos Diószegi, Felicitas D. Goodman, Terence McKenna), whether scholars, spiritual practitioners or adventurers (or maybe a combination thereof), frequently report on the oneiric nature of the shamanic journey. Vision moreover – in the form of "visualisation" (Tib *snang ba*) – is one of the fundamental methodologies of vajrayāna Buddhism.

³⁶¹ Yavuuhulan's poem "A Silver Autumn Morning" (Yavuuhulan, *Mongolian Verse*, .69) gives a good idea of how that writer addresses the need for a strong and valient horse whilst riding across the undulating steppe in soft light of morning. This level of romanticism, however, matched with the martial imagery in Mend-Ooyo's poem, is reminiscent of the language and thematic treatment in Injannashi's Chinggisid epic *The Blue Annals*.

imputed in the bond between horse and rider, and how that bond can bring forth poetry, which characterises the Mongol tradition, and which Mend-Ooyo uses here, and throughout *Altan Ovoo*, to express the interrelationships which make nomadic life tenable.

Each of the poems in *Altan Ovoo* forges its own place within the text, of course, and in relationship to the stories which surround it, and each moreover relates to that surrounding prose in a nuanced way. Nonetheless, we can see from this one example how Mend-Ooyo employs poetry *within the context of prose* to enhance the message and the theme of the prose narrative, and how with poetry he unfolds the deeper implications of the prose, expanding the scope from the intimate and the personal out to the vastness of the steppe and the breadth and depth of the historical experience of the Mongol people. And it is the fire, around which the family are sitting and talking, which acts as a focus for this experience in Chapter Five.

The large expanse of prose that follows these initial poems is punctuated by a single poem, which comes as the summation of a story about how, in the Mongol landscape, one erroneous move can bring disaster. The poem is, once again, introduced and mediated by the enchantment of song and the mysterious and transformatory flickering of the fire:

The old people joined their voices in a melancholy song. The flame aglow on the stove flickered imperceptibly.

*...The error of one man
spreads itself about.
If a second loses his vigor,
then peace is shattered.
We think about the world,
we trust the majority view.
We trust this way of thinking, and
the gods kick up a storm.
The group of blue hills,
and all the wild earth,
and all the green grasses bending,
all of these grow sick.
The horses are broken,
they are savage and difficult, and*

*the beating of the world's heart
is out of step with man...*³⁶²

What I have called “the enchantment of song” clearly expressed here through the constant influence of the ancestors and the gods. Notwithstanding the ancestral presence described extensively in Part I, we should also be aware when we read here about the gods or the sky, that this refers – whether explicitly in Mend-Ooyo’s semantic choice or implicitly in the native readers’ apprehension – to the idea of *tenger*. And that, because of the wrong-headed behavior of one man, the gods “kick up a storm,” the sky becomes stormy, and the grasses and the hills become “sick” continually reemphasizes the presence of the ancestors and of the shamanic skygod.

The act of song in Mongol nomadic society, as in many premodern societies, is an act of communion, with one’s family and friends, with humanity in general, and with the natural world and the ancestral spirits. As I have already said, the ideas of song and voice are expressed by the same word in Mongolian, and so the idea of utterance – the outing, the expression, of something within oneself – is intimately connected with prayer and invocation, and so with the mediation between the human and the divine. By using verse to describe the cosmic – rather than the mundane – implications of human actions, Mend-Ooyo is offering a warning to his readers, much as a shaman might offer a warning. For Mend-Ooyo, as for many Mongol poets³⁶³, the work of poetry is not so far removed from that of shamanism, and these few lines (introduced by an ellipsis, presumably to indicate that this is part of a longer poem, or perhaps to encourage readers to contemplate the passage’s meaning) help to remove us, only in part, and only temporarily, from the fireside scene, and

³⁶² GH, 140-141.

³⁶³ This is a general statement, but poets such as D. Urianhai (b1940) – whose grandfather was a shaman – and D. Nyamsüren (1947-2002) are examples of writers whose contribution to Mongol letters parallels their expression of the cosmic and spiritual.

to make us think about how the ancestors – who, as I have said before, are present throughout the landscape – and the gods interact with the Mongol people.³⁶⁴

This theme finds another outlet in the description of the interaction of the nomadic people and their horses. As we saw earlier, there is an explicit level of mysticism in *Altan Owoo* – and in Mongol culture as a whole – where the bond between people and their horses is concerned, but Mend-Ooyo also uses his horse throughout the book to talk about liberation, as much on a practical as on a spiritual level.³⁶⁵

In “The Horse Had Wings,” the horse of the title carries his master, Höhöö Namjil, to see his lover. At the liminal moment of dawn, he sets off on horseback and then,

*from where the two front legs of his fast mount met its belly, there stretched a pair of light feathery wings. The horse's four hooves pulled away from the ground and he soared towards the east. This man, who lived on the steppes far in the east, skirted the southern ridges of the Altai, rolled up thirty-three deserts in the rays of dawn, and stroked his face upon the mists of cloud.*³⁶⁶

This is presented in the form of a mythical tale, but in the long poem which follows the narrative, we are told clearly that this is a true story, and that to disbelieve it is “simple ignorance.”

*The moon lights up the country of glass, and
flying horses take birth in Mongolia.
Is this a normal story?
Is there an honest explanation?
The day lights up the country of the moon, and*

³⁶⁴ An interesting question which I have yet to ask of Mend-Ooyo is how he imagines the people of other societies might relate to *Altan Owoo* in terms of their own ancestors and the presence of those ancestors in their own local landscape.

³⁶⁵ When considering the brief discussion that follows, concerning the poetical use of the horse in *Altan Owoo*, we should be aware that the book was written during the final days of Soviet influence in Mongolia. It is perhaps not surprising, and particularly so when we realise that Mend-Ooyo had been working on the book even before the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev and the policies of glasnost and perestroika, that the idea of flight (in both senses of the word), and personal liberation from worldly troubles, would have been so constant throughout the text.

³⁶⁶ GH p.67.

*fine horses are found in Mongolia.
 Is this rumor unreliable?
 Is this song unreliable?
 Velvetblack horses,
 free upon the wind,
 move unexpectedly, singing
 upon the full earth's moonlit sky.
 Speckled brown horses,
 free upon the wind and rain,
 move through the sky,
 like thoughts of the true earth.
 Real gold is falsely claimed as brass,
 and space between the clouds is claimed as Paradise.³⁶⁷*

Whatever we believe, it is clear that, in raising such questions as "Is this rumor unreliable?/Is this song unreliable?", the author is challenging us to rethink our way of seeing the world. This is a proposition common to poetry, of course, but in the context of Mongol culture, and especially with regard to the horse, what we are expected to believe here is not clear. That poetry allows such questions reasonably to be posed, that it introduces ideas which do not fit within our common perspectives and apprehension of what is "normal" and "reliable," is not so much the point here as is the understanding of myth and how it relates *directly* to the culture from which it develops. That is to say, we have to read this story, and hear this poetry, within the Mongol context, and that, I would argue, is the way in which we must read the entirety of *Altan Ovoo*. In the present context particularly, the poetic passages that enhance and comment upon the prose should be seen as having the potential to enhance and transform the minds and hearts of the listener. After all, Mend-Ooyo has himself said, of stories such as this, that "in ancient times, the Mongols composed stories about horses with wings, *showing how they themselves would fly up into the sky, up to the gods.*"³⁶⁸ We are asked, therefore, to open our minds and to understand these poems as being "normal" and "reliable," and to see them as profoundly

³⁶⁷ The whole poem, from which this is taken, is on GH, 68-69

³⁶⁸ Mend-Ooyo, *Altan ovoo nomin tuhai*.

true and not as objects about which to theorise. And it is for this level of deep apprehension that Mend-Ooyo selects the poetic voice.

With this in mind, we can return to Chapter Five and look at the final two poems. Both of these – “The Storm” and a poem which is here untitled, but which elsewhere is called “The Wheel of Time”³⁶⁹ – are long texts, and both occupy significant places in Mend-Ooyo’s œuvre.

The first of these is ostensibly a reminiscence of something that happened to Mend-Ooyo’s family during the twenty years before he left home to pursue his education. As he puts it, “[t]he days and moments of those twenty years tell their own history,”³⁷⁰ and the story which unfolds – perhaps the one place in the entire book where the author and his family are placed in any real danger – is one which serves both to personalise the events recounted and to address the more general perils to which nomadic society is subject.

The opening verses very quickly set the scene, and we are plunged into the snowstorm along with Mend-Ooyo. The description of the weather, moreover, reminds us again of the sky’s divine presence:

*A bell warned against the weather,
it rang, it tolled unease abroad.
A wind ripped through the heart,
it stormed the hundred compass-points of home.*

*Looking through the window, the face of Heaven
seemed pallid and flabby and diseased,
and everything grew dull and gloomy.
We wondered that it might be ill at ease.*

*That year, the snowstorms
pierced my heart.
My father herded the sheep downwind.
without a sound, they vanished.*

The great snowstorm was in control.

³⁶⁹ Respectively GH, 146-155 and 156-159. The latter poem appears, with its title, in Mend-Ooyo, *Nomadic Lyrics*, 12-15.

³⁷⁰ GH, 146.

*It slapped our faces like a whip,
it bound us in our homes,
and I was left stir-crazy.³⁷¹*

The psychological effect of how the storm prevents human movement, in addition to the disappearance of the sheep, livestock being central to the nomadic economy, matches the unsettled and possibly “ill at ease” sky/god with the palpable distress of a family. A bell sounds to warn against impending disaster, but – as with much in the nomadic life – there is little which anyone can do, except to retire to their ger and wait out the storm. That the turn in the weather “pierced [Mend-Ooyo’s] heart” is a physical and definitive indication, however, that this storm was going to have a powerful effect upon him. This we can surmise from the length of the resultant poem and the detail with which he wrote it.

And now, with his mother and sister-in-law³⁷² gone to find his father, and his brother not at home, young Mend-Ooyo is alone and exhausted in the gathering cold of the ger, “thinking hard/how I had met with such terrible separation.”³⁷³ Wrapped in a goatskin against the cold, he falls asleep and awakens to a shaft of light, indicating the storm’s passing. The remainder of his narrative tells of how, despite being cold and tired, he manages to battle the snowdrifts and collect dung for a fire. And then there is the lark.

*Like a jerboa, I dug myself a hole.
Strong as a wild sheep, I excavated snow.
I dug till I was sweating,
I fought the compacted snow.*

*I stored dried dung in my sheepskin deel.
And I brought it home.
At the threshold, I found
a lark, frozen and unseeing.³⁷⁴*

³⁷¹ GH, 146.

³⁷² Though, keeping with the Mongol tradition, Mend-Ooyo refers to her simply as *egch*, or “elder sister.” The term for sister-in-law, *bergen*, is only used to introduce her two verses of dialog.

³⁷³ This has echoes of practises in Buddhism, where one considers the nature of separation, and the fact that such separation is natural and part of life.

³⁷⁴ GH, 148.

We should be aware here how Mend-Ooyo copies the behavior of animals as he comes to terms with his situation. This is certainly metaphor, but it also indicates the ways in which nomadic society observes the natural world. This represents the melding of the quotidian and the spiritual, for a shamanic society such as Mongolia's has no place for purely contemplative practise. After all, the harshness of life, as recounted in this poem, is such that everyone – shamans included – has to be able and willing, *in extremis*, to work so as to keep everyone alive. Thus, after a fashion, everyone has to realise the nature of other animals within themselves, and in this particular context to mimic deeply the activity of jerboa and wild sheep.

The lark – frozen and clearly in mortal danger – is at once a cipher for the precariousness of Mend-Ooyo's own situation (and presumably that of his family: "How did I know," he asks of his mother and sister gone in search of his father, "if they had fund him or not?") but also, as we come to hear, for the resilience of the natural world. As the ger warms and the child relaxes, he opens the flap which covers the flue and which reveals the blue sky which is so vital a part of Mongol culture.

The final lines of Mend-Ooyo's remembrance focus upon the renewal of life – through the cipher of the lark – thanks to the beneficence of the Buddha and of the ancestors and, finally, a return to the fireside setting of the chapter (albeit as part of the narrative poem, illustrating a movement backwards and forwards of time), from which Mend-Ooyo's father takes up the story.

*The lark had warmed up, suddenly
it rose into the calm world.*

*It was the protection of the merciful Buddha.
It was the prayers of the old people.
Our large family around the hearth,*

*talking about the times gone by.*³⁷⁵

The remainder of this poem, and so its overarching structure, is of an extended familiar dialog through narration, with each character telling their own experience of the storm and its aftermath. It is not the place here, perhaps, for a close analysis of the dialog, but as we read it we should keep in mind the structure which Mend-Ooyo has sought here to create. After all, the story that emerges from the narrative is of two women seeking, through the blizzard and the subsequent cold and deep snow, for their husband/father-in-law, and of this man seeking the family's flock of sheep. So it is that each person seeks for that which will sustain, not only their place as far as the family and the wider society is concerned, but also their economic wellbeing. The apparent simplicity of this story – a tragedy averted by resilience and determination – belies its complexity when read as a manifestation of the life of a nomadic family.

Back at home, moreover, young Mend-Ooyo's gathering firewood and building the fire, and his saving of the lark, are also meaningful contributions to the family's situation, as well as to his own immediate needs. The lark, as an obvious cipher for the family unit, flies up and out through the tent-flap, away into the sky, and therefore in some way towards the divinity, *tenger*, who has wreaked this har upon the family. So the lark, we might say, is a intermediary of sorts.

The massive repercussions of this episode in the lives of Mend-Ooyo and his family seem at once deeply meaningful and yet trite. He writes,

*There was wisdom born then,
in my childish, seven-year-old mind.
If this storm had not calmed down,
I realised, we'd not have been sitting there then.*

*I had remained alone, protecting the ger
from the snowstorm overhead,*

³⁷⁵ GH, 148.

*And, some time later, I would protect
the home of my old, grey parents.*

*Do we not think our destiny inevitable,
that it will surely come to pass?
Do we not know, then,
that we will leave the old couple?*

*But do we not ignore
the thought of helping others,
like warming these poor birds,
chilled to the bone, into flight?³⁷⁶*

These apprehensions, from the memory of childhood, are yet not sentimental, nor are they in fact trite. They lie at the basis of the Mongol nomadic experience, for in that society, the immediate concerns are of safety and security, and the central need is for the protection of family and resources. This poem, then, is an intimate and personal retelling of the Mongol nomadic experience, and the way in which the characters are both sitting around the fire in the narrative prose, while recounting their experience in verse, is not only another reminder of Mend-Ooyo's use of poetry as a vehicle through which perception can be expanded and broadened, but it is also an acknowledgement of how verse, with its rhythm and repetition, is always moving towards the achronic, as Mend-Ooyo's father suggests in his – and the poem's – closing verse:

*When all's said and done,
we stood against the storm, we didn't calm it!
We managed the moment,
this instant of my eternal history!*

Achronicity, however, is a natural feature of a book such as *Altan Owoo*, a book full of myth and stories and history, and yet told from the perspective of a modern writer's own biography. In his preface to the book, D. Urianhai describes it as an example of "quilting," a metaphor that cleverly expresses the idea of a text of many layers, woven through time.

³⁷⁶ GH, 153-154.

Having discussed “The Storm,” I would like to turn finally to the final poem in Chapter Five, a meditation on the passage of time, its directionality and its place within Mongol nomadic culture.

The cycle of the seasons, as I discussed earlier, is central to the practicalities of nomadic society, the changing movement of the sky overhead, and the changes in the landscape and in the livestock spread across it, defines the world for those who live in its midst. In what might be called a prelude to this final poem, Mend-Ooyo speaks of the changing face of the landscape through the season in very personal terms:

When I was young, my father taught me the Mongol script by tracing the letters with his whip in the snow which covered the sheep's pastureland. In the depths of winter, the white steppes were like sheets of paper in a book. And when spring came round again, the first anemones stood out in the white snows like letters, the summer flowers spread their calligraphic leaves, the autumn grew yellow and dull like ancient parchments and, as time's hoarfrost pressed its weight down, these texts but glimmered in the misty whiteness.³⁷⁷

The movement traced out through the poem is likewise based upon the natural world and the place of humans within it. Each group of two or three verses ends with the refrain “The time goes flying, flying by./The time is gone, is gone”³⁷⁸, and each verse begins with the line “Quite unexpectedly the time flies, rushing by.” The emphasis upon the transience of time is matched and countered of course by the constancy of tradition with which the nomadic life is imbued.

³⁷⁷ GH, 156. There are echoes here of the so-called “secret” or “hidden” life of the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (*Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho'I gsang nam*), where the young Dalai Lama tells of being taught the ritual steps of lama dances by following his teacher's footsteps through the snow (Simon Wickham-Smith, *The Hidden Life of the Sixth Dalai Lama*, [Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2011]).

³⁷⁸ This is not necessarily the best translation of the Mongol original, which reads “*On tsag nisen nisen irnem/On tsag nisen nisen odnom.*” A more literal translation might be “The time comes flying, flying/The time goes flying, flying,” which emphasises the constancy of the flight metaphor – reminding us Anglophones of the phrase “time flies” and the Mongol readers of the flight of birds, which act as cultural registers for the spring and the fall, among other things.

Each of these verses holds within it the idea of transience and of constancy, then, of the observation of the natural world. It also speaks eloquently of the nomadic perspective of history, and Mend-Ooyo weaves aspects of history with the landscape to evoke – as in “The Storm” – both an experience of the immanence of time and a broader and less specific perspective on its movement. For instance,

*Children knock together pebbles to make percussion.
A clash of steel pans, and the seasons fall silent.
We listen to our dear bodies, resonating to a thousand years of
song.
The tune of earthmother's stones, the time goes flying, flying
by.
Along the roseate ridges of the still mountains of evening,
The swallows fly up with wings of flame.
Weaving ancient stories to kindle joy and good fortune,
we're thinking like the older generation, the time flies by and is
gone.*

*Ancient heroes gallop through my story.
Old and young smile upon the shining screen.
Face faces face when self meets self,
the Vajradhara is reflected in the present, and the time goes
flying, flying by.
The heart beats out the peace of the world, and
we check the hidden nature in the movement of the stars.
Mindful of the map of stations spanning the infinite cosmos,
we hurry towards the future time, the time flies by and is
gone.³⁷⁹*

We might see the spatiotemporal complexity of this poem, as with so much in *Altan Owoo*, as a microcosmic version of the book itself. And yet, at the end of the poem, the fire is still blazing, returning us (or maybe we have never left) to the intimacy of the family, sitting around the fire in a ger on the Mongolian steppe. As Mend-Ooyo says, moreover, in an acknowledgement of the totality of the experience (and thus, as though “The Storm” might not be sufficient, giving the lie to any of the not uncommon claims that he might be simply a romantic traditionalist),

³⁷⁹ GH, 157-158.

*Running through the steel rope of history that is time, without end and without beginning, twining itself through the four seasons, it is the world that we recognise, that we take pleasure in perceiving, whose taste we savor, and from whose boredom we retreat.*³⁸⁰

There is enough poetry in *Altan Ovoo* to stand alone in a book, and the present chapter can only skim the surface and point out the more important aspects of Mend-Ooyo's style and how he manages to convey his meaning. For he is, first and foremost, a poet, as Mongol writers tend even now to be, and there is no doubt that his vision stretches far beyond the descriptive and far beyond the historical present.

Altan Ovoo renders the nomadic experience in terms which not only foreign readers can appreciate. It is also written, one must suppose, for the (re)education of Mongol readers. In 1986, the Soviet influence, while the push for collective farms had dwindled following the death of Stalin, still made city living at least superficially preferable for many of the nation's nomads, but since the introduction of democracy in 1990 the interest in Mongol tradition and history has meant that poetry by writers such as Mend-Ooyo is now a way by which the growing number of urban, professional Mongol readers can perhaps reconnect with a part of their history³⁸¹. We must not forget that the themes which I have addressed here – the landscape, the passing of time, spiritual life, natural disasters – are still, and increasingly so, inherent parts of the Mongol experience³⁸², and, in Mongolia, it is through poetry that these ideas are best expressed. So it is, then, that the poetic thread

³⁸⁰ GH, 158.

³⁸¹ Part IV will address the ways in which *Altan Ovoo* and its themes have influenced the work of Mend-Ooyo's contemporaries and the generation which came of age during the first decade of democracy.

³⁸² The famines, or *zuud*, which devastated Mongolia during the early years of the present century offer a good example of how profound the impact of nature remains for Mongol society. Moreover, since most urban families either have close relatives living in the countryside, or else keep their own ger for weekend and holiday visits (not unlike a Russian *dacha*), this impact is felt throughout the society.

which runs through *Altan Ovoo* speaks to the deepest and most universal elements of Mongol society, and so contextualise the narrative prose.

CHAPTER 10

Environment and Nature in *Altan Ovoo*

*Outside, dawn's chill wind
gusts like a fox's brush, shaking.
The small bird on the bare branch
quivers, like an orphaned spadix.³⁸³*

The extent to which the natural world permeates *Altan Ovoo*, and permeates Mend-Ooyo's vision of the eponymous hill, is such that this can be but a summary of what otherwise would have been an entire volume on its own. Nature is the defining feature, the central character even, of the book, and Mend-Ooyo's naturalist's sensibilities and his taxonomic precision³⁸⁴ mean that the feathergrass is described with as much love and understanding as the hills which march across the steppe.

Nature is presented in *Altan Ovoo* in such a way that the reader is forced constantly to perceive the world from conflicting viewpoints. Thus in Chapter Two, through which Mend-Ooyo weaves the story of the trickster-outlaw Toroi Bandi with the presence of Mongol culture and history of the cream-colored horse called the sharga, and with a narrative addressed to the telling of stories about the natural world, and with the mysterious transformation of a quotidian horse into a flying horse, all of these punctuated with the onomatopoeic refrain "*clipclap clipclap*."

The weaving of these patterns, moreover, become more and more intricate. Each section of the overarching structure of Chapter Two as described above contains within it a parallel structure. This will be clearer if we look at one of the shorter passages, "Red Warhorses Reflected in Crystal:"

³⁸³ From "The Bright Earth is Warm," Yavuuhulan, *Mongolian Verse*, 105-106.

³⁸⁴ I'd like to thank Lyn Coffin for pointing out this aspect of Mend-Ooyo's work.

My father's red horse³⁸⁵ galloped like a living fire through dreadful battles, which scorched the wings of the songbirds overhead. Our ancient world rolled upon this living fire and extinguished it, and the bloody cycle of history rose up. In the thirteenth century, we witnessed the fiery determination of Chinggis' cavalry, their weapons, their blazing anger, their burning pride, their shamans' banners, and the horses from the peaceful centuries, the fierce red horses of Amarsanaa van, the fiery horses of Galdan Boshigt and, watching nearby, the red horses of the inspired revolution, which rose in Sühbaatar's stirrups, charged in wild succession down through the moments of history. It was a lineage which galloped through the wild red horses of the Halha rivers, the succeeding years of this dreadful war blazed with gunpowder cast upon the fire, red foal after red foal was born throughout the land, one hundred million foals neighing across the four directions of my country, and the water welled up, the southern slopes turned to green, the sky cerulean, the airag sloshed in a skin sack, and prayerflags fluttered in the wind.³⁸⁶

What is noteworthy here is that the horse, though used here simply as a medium through which to discuss the martial trajectory of Chinggisid Mongolia, is also a medium to invoke, almost as a litany, the presence of these horses as a description of the nation and culture of Mongolia. Moreover, with this description – including the Halha rivers, the birthing of foals, the colors of the land, the direct affect of the battles upon the songbirds flying overhead – Mend-Ooyo shows a world broken by battle, and yet depicted in language both beautiful and dramatic.

As these horses passed through history, then, so the landscape was changed, *the water welled up, the southern slopes turned to green.* But, within this everchanging landscape, of course, there is the constancy of the Mongol *nutag*, and for Mend-Ooyo this constancy offers a basis upon which the tomes and poetry is allowed to unfold and to breathe. A case in point is the toponymic Three Chestnut Horses of Orloi³⁸⁷, which feature

³⁸⁵ This refers to a horse, whose mane was described as “flying, red like fire,” and who was the subject of the section immediately preceding this.

³⁸⁶ GH, 64-65.

³⁸⁷ GH, 61-63 *et passim*.

both as horses and as hills at various points throughout the book, but most specifically here in Chapter Two.

Mend-Ooyo's poem about this feature is preceded by a personal testimony regarding the writing of the poem. The interweaving of stories, as I have said, happens on many different levels in *Altan Ovoo*, and this is an explicit point at which Mend-Ooyo himself places himself within the narrative, a passage which gives an insight into his vision as a writer and a guardian of local mythic history, an inhabitant of the area around Altan Ovoo seeking, as in his book, to pass on this lore to others:

The autumn before last, I made friends with my dear brother Baatar who was interested in the stories of my homeland. Galloping along the northern and southern sides of the three horses of Orloi, thinking that the name of this place definitely reflected the color of the horse, I realised the meaning of the story which I had read from among my horses, from my life.

Even when a story is recovered, and the narrative grows blurred, still the human mind contains the strength to clarify and revivify all that is confused and forgotten.

This fierce trust in the power of the human mind *to clarify and revivify all that is confused and forgotten* is, I think, one of the factors which have driven, and still drive, Mend-Ooyo to write. As is clear from the brief text quoted in full at the beginning of Part III regarding the genesis of *Altan Ovoo*, this book was created in part to preserve the presence of his father, after the latter's death. Moreover, by recounting the stories that run through the book, and by exposing the deep tripartite relationship here between the landscape, its fauna and flora, and the human beings who inhabit it, he is able to preserve the unchanging presence of his homeland, while resolving – at least for himself, at least in his own mind – the complexities inherent in this relationship.

The hills of Orloi, of course, are horses in a metaphorical sense, but to the regular human eye they are hills. As I discussed in Part I, the association between landscape and the spirit, the essential melding for instance of the Buddha Vajrapāni with the mountain

Otgontenger, is central to Mongol nomadic tradition. In *Altan Ovoo*, the physical geography of the locale is described in mythical terms, but also (as with the hills of Orloi, their ridges being horses' backs³⁸⁸) in far more quotidian language.

The theme of Altan Ovoo as the *axis mundi* of Dariganga, of Mend-Ooyo's world even, is developed in Chapter Three through the idea of family relationship. I have not been able to establish to what extent this understanding acts as metaphor in Mend-Ooyo's mind, or to what extent and on what level he sees it as metaphysical truth, but the parallels between human society and topographical society are clear:

If you say you'd know humanity in its entirety, they say you should know your mother and father, your brothers and sisters, your relatives and your friends.

If you say you'd know Altan Ovoo in its entirety, then you should know its brothers and sisters, its dear relatives and the many mountains and waters with whom it feels close.

But I cannot hold the stones in which my homeland is gathered, I cannot taste the waters. They say its essence is mighty.

In this way, I can say that I recognise a single stone from a mountain, a few grains from a great desert, a droplet of water from a lake. Is not the precious wish-fulfilling jewel symbolised through these three tokens?

They say that all the brothers and sisters of Altan Ovoo - stones from the mountains, droplets of water from the lakes and grains of sand - are gathered within it.³⁸⁹

The interaction, then, between people and the environment in which they live is one of recognising both the singular and the general, as it is in the understanding of the interaction between people. The term "mountains and waters" could also be rendered as "landscape" or "terrain," and so indicates the interconnectedness of the world around Altan Ovoo and its inhabitants.

This equation of society and topography, of course, is found throughout Mongol literature, and Mend-Ooyo's intention here is to instill in his readers a cultural remembering,

³⁸⁸ Note that the word *nuruu* is the standard word for both concepts.

³⁸⁹ GH, 81-82.

and not to introduce to them some new understanding. In this way, the presence of the world within the waters and the hills around Altan Ovoo becomes real, its “brothers and sisters” are recognised and honored, and the “precious wish-fulfilling jewel” of realisation is thereby apprehended.

This language, while explicit in Mongol, is not clear in English. The idea of “brothers and sisters” covers not simply the children of one’s parents, but in fact all members of society. To give a personal example, when I write to Mend-Ooyo, I refer to him as “Mend-Ooyo ah” and, in his reply, he refers to me as “Simon düü.” These two words – respectively for “elder brother” and “younger brother” – are standard ways of referring to other people, and this feeling of society as an extended family shows the extent to which Mongol culture remains untouched by the implications of the individuation of modern western culture’s nuclear family. Moreover, to be even more specific, it could be said that the very concept in English of *brother* is unsuitable for rendering the Mongol *ah* and *düü*, simply because its limitations and specificity overly restrict the mind of the English reader³⁹⁰, which limitations should be borne in mind when considering the familiar relationship of the topography found throughout *Altan Ovoo*.

The idea of the “precious wish-fulfilling jewel,” or *cintamani* in Sanskrit, is perhaps less obvious even to today’s Mongol audience, raised largely on Soviet atheism or post-Soviet spiritual apathy. When Mend-Ooyo talks of this jewel as being symbolised through “a single stone from a mountain, a few grains from a great desert, a droplet of water from a lake,” he is referring to the idea, gleaned from Buddhism, of the jewel of enlightenment as being the essential concentration of all the Buddhas, their spiritual practise and the teaching which results from that practise. Thus the stone, the grains of sand and the droplet of

³⁹⁰ Needless to say, this is the perennial problem of translation, and my rehearsing it yet again casts no further light on a murky subject. Nonetheless, the contrast between the family of Mongol nomadic society and our own western nuclear family is, I feel, sufficiently radical as to make this terminological foray meaningful.

water are the essential concentration, not only of the features of Dariganga surrounding Altan Ovoo, but of *the many mountains and waters with whom [Altan Ovoo] feels close* and, by extension, of the whole world.

To suggest such topographical alchemy is not, I think, to overstretch Mend-Ooyo's metaphor. After all, we have already seen how the traditional understanding of Buddhist and shamanic spirituality views the micro- and macrocosmic relationship between the inner and the outer landscape. Elsewhere in this chapter, Mend-Ooyo describes how "a man of genius"³⁹¹

...muttered a magical incantation over the stone from Altan Ovoo and thereby gained strength. Thinking about it now, a man goes to Altan Ovoo and takes a stone from its lower slopes, placing it upon an ovoo³⁹². The stone absorbs into itself the warmth of his hands and, through them, the man's warm and gentle mind, and these remain there, upon the ovoo. Is there a stone on Altan Ovoo which has not absorbed the trembling of a man's mind and the warmth of his body?

The ideas which I formed upon Altan Ovoo, and the loving words which I muttered there, all like tumbleweed and inchoate, were they all not absorbed into the stone body of the hill?

The thoughts of people have at all times been absorbed into the mountains and water and stones, they were written and placed inside a magical box. And all creation recites aloud the most precious and pure thoughts from Altan Ovoo.³⁹³

Prayer and invocation, then, as much as simple human interaction, are absorbed into the landscape, and affect the landscape, so that the people who inhabit the landscape, and the landscape itself, become increasingly and deeply connected. This is not an unusual idea

³⁹¹ The Mongol original (AO, 93) reads "gegeenten hün," also indicating a saintly or enlightened person. I would argue that this combination of spiritual and temporal wisdom is central to a broad understanding of Altan Ovoo itself and Mend-Ooyo's text.

³⁹² The fact that the word *ovoo* covers the idea not only of a cairn erected to honor the gods and the Buddhas (see Part One) but also of a topographical hill should not be lost on the reader. I have not found any anthropological or historical evidence to suggest a direct correlation between the stone *ovoo* and the hill on which it was placed, but conversations with Mend-Ooyo and others have led me to believe that there is such a metonymy in the mindset of Mongol nomadic society.

³⁹³ GH, 79-80.

in Mongol literature, needless to say, and we have already seen such ideas expressed in the work of premodern writers, and in the work of contemporaries of Mend-Ooyo's, such as Nyamsüren and Dashbalbar. That said, the constancy with which this thread runs through *Altan Ovoo*, and the way in which the relationships between the nomadic community and their environment are expressed, through the act of movement, through prayer and through physical touch, and through direct observation, illustrates the sense of unity and completeness which Mend-Ooyo and his contemporaries view the Mongol landscape as a whole, and their own *nutag* in particular.³⁹⁴

We have seen how Mend-Ooyo expresses the interaction of people with the landscape of their *nutag*, and the ways in which the features of that landscape themselves interact, the overarching message being that the universe is an organic whole, in which and through which the various elements move and respond to one another.

The final part of this chapter will look at the presence of animals in *Altan Ovoo*. For Mongol nomadic society, animals constitute both a benefit (the five types of livestock) and a potential threat (wolves, for instance, or creatures infected with pestilence³⁹⁵). Rather than deal piecemeal with Mend-Ooyo's use of animals throughout the book, I will concentrate here upon their appearance in Chapter Four, the material of which constitutes an extended meditation on the interaction, for good and for ill, between humans and animals.

There are clear indications here of Mend-Ooyo's close relationship with his teacher Yavuuhulan. The latter's long poem "Goat Peak," from 1969, is a precursor to much of the

³⁹⁴ Lest this sound overly romantic, I should say that this was, and is, clearly not a summation of the Mongol approach to their environment. I move generally in privileged and creative circles, and it seems that they consider such things who have the security to do so. Moreover, of course, during the communist period, when *Altan Ovoo* was composed, Mend-Ooyo's was a voice at odds with the socialist culture of materialism and atheism, and we should have no illusions that his viewpoint was held, at least not in its entirety, by the majority of Mongols.

³⁹⁵ Marmots, in particular, are bearers of bubonic plague, and tracts of Mongolia are frequently placed under quarantine, against the spread of this disease.

material found in this chapter, insofar as the various animals and birds – horses, cranes, swans, camels, gazelles – all exhibit a wisdom more generally ascribed by human beings, however ignorantly, however more frequently, even in Mongolia, to human beings, and the insight shown by these creatures illuminates not only human behavior but also the direct and profound apprehension common to Nature.³⁹⁶

First, however, it is necessary to look at the prolog to the chapter, in which Mend-Ooyo's interest in Mongol nomadic tradition is made explicit through the introduction of a stock character from this tradition, the Lord of the Herds.

The Lord of the Herds³⁹⁷ is held in Mongol Buddhism to be an aspect of the Buddha, one associated especially with the care of the natural world, and animals in particular. He is not found in Lőrencz's classification³⁹⁸, and although Mend-Ooyo might be the only literary writer to include him, he is definitely still acknowledged in popular culture.

The introduction to this chapter places the Lord of the Herds, then, at the center of a community, of animals and people:

The morning sun rose, it spread out as though it was wearing ten-league boots, it cast patterns around the door of the ger. I sat amid such good fortune drinking tea on a quilted mattress, watching my homeland with great interest. A magpie kept hopping backwards and forwards between the horns of an old spotted cow which lay there mumbling, disinterested in the world beyond. The sheep rose up around the tents and stretched. A pair of cranes flew over the edge of the encampment, their droppings fell and bounced upon the earth. A young, darkcolored kid grew interested and came along inquisitively with pointed ears, it was sweet how it kept its distance. A brown bird came to rest upon the tent roof, he looked down into the ger, his neck swelled and, with a bump,

³⁹⁶ This of course relates to the work of Sanday and Danzanravjaa, as discussed in Chapter Two, as well as to the likes of Aesop, Perrault, and the traditional storytellers and compilers of such texts as Pañcatantra.

³⁹⁷ In Mongol, his name is *tsagaan sahaltai övgön*, or Old Whitebeard. He is frequently represented in the *cham*, or ritual monastic dance (from Tibetan *tsam*), and is shown as an old man who protects and cares for the animals.

³⁹⁸ László Lőrencz, *Mongolische Märchentypen*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979.

he flew down inside and as he struggled the flaps of the tent flew up.

An old man with a white beard sits at the base of a fruit tree, and the wild animals and the birds which ranged about him were joyful upon the earth and at peace with the local guardian. This was how the neighborhood looked.³⁹⁹

This placement of the iconic figure in a naturalistic landscape is common throughout *Altan Owoo*, but it mimics the placement of such figures throughout the world of folk literature. We will see how the animals and birds are invested here with specific characters in order that the author might advance some idea regarding their relationship with the human world, and even here we have a clear exposition of the relationship between the fruit trees and the nurturing, almost venusian bounty of the influence of the Lord of the Herds.

That this description of “the neighborhood” is similar to that of a prelapsarian “paradise” is clearly significant, in terms both of the Western European and of the Mongol folktale tradition. Throughout the introductory material to Chapter Four, we read also of the relationship between the poet and the swallows, couched in language which suggests a commonality, a relationship, missing from the “modern” world, although not from Mend-Ooyo’s apprehension of the landscape. Moreover, this relationship between the author and the swallows is one of the granting of health and the revelation of stories:

And here I am, by the town stūpa, the smell of wild leek intoxicating my feeble and cosseted body, it burns my mind, there's a melody galloping in like the tuned strings of a fiddle, the swallows on the steppes come in the vanguard to meet me. And the swallows have brought me the fire of joy! And the swallows have brought to my homeland the waters which I gulp down! And the swallows bear upon their wings the best of stories, telling of the strongest wishes of ancient peoples.⁴⁰⁰

Thus it is that we have here what we might call a folktale fragment, were it not for its autobiographical nature, It is then the swallows which have brought the stories, ostensibly

³⁹⁹ GH, 105.

⁴⁰⁰ GH, 105.

from “ancient peoples,” which once again recalls the idea that folktales come from “time out of mind.”

So the interaction between the animal and human worlds is already set up within this introductory passage. The swallows follow, as we shall see, into the section immediately following, where there is established a clear mutuality. For now, though it suffices to notice how Mend-Ooyo functions here both as the author of the book *Altan Ovoo* and as a kind of Everyman, placing himself within the psychogeographical sphere of the Lord of the Herds, receiving the gift of stories from the swallows much like an ancient bard, and all the time presenting them in language which is somehow also hanging between times and between worlds⁴⁰¹.

“The Swallows”⁴⁰²

This a poem, rather than a poetic epic (which description might better suit “The Cranes,” discussed below), but the theme of the mutuality of human beings and, in this case, birds is to the fore. Mend-Ooyo uses a number of devices – the journey, the waters of eternity, the explicit acknowledgement of the swallows as a medium for telling the story – to create a complex web of explicit fiction and implicit fact, and thereby a world of mystery in which the search for the waters of eternity, which “will be found eventually,” is made credible.

The narrative of this poem focuses on time and the discovery of the waters of eternity. The trajectory of the narrative starts with “the distant time,” from which the

⁴⁰¹ Of course, using translation makes such a claim impossible to explain and illustrate. But the nature of Mend-Ooyo’s language is such that it presents a kind of semimythical, visionary world for the semimythical, visionary stories described to take place. Reading William Weaver’s translation of Italo Calvino’s stories, it occurs to me that Calvino’s Italian might have a similar relationship with modern Italian as Mend-Ooyo’s Mongol does with the modern language.

⁴⁰² GH, 106-107.

swallows are flying into the poem and into the author's life, and ends with the future, when eternity will be "shared/with these, my story's swallows." The fulcrum, around which the narrative turns, is the author and his father. That they are seen riding out "many years ago" places the action in an immediate past. Thus, it is then that the narrative encompasses both the distant past and the immediate past, allowing the image of the swallows to be both universal and specific.

This unity of the universal and the specific within time is a theme of folktales, it is what allows us to talk about "once upon a time" while still sympathising with the characters in the story. In "The Swallows," Mend-Ooyo not only includes his journeying out over the steppe with his father, but he also brings the fact that the waters of eternity remain undiscovered to bear on his own father's life:

*And once,
I promise that, before the swallows did,
I'd find and offer him the waters of eternity.*

*In this brief world promises are not always fulfilled.
My father's gone now, his son's not found the waters of
eternity.*

This is a narrative in which the characters clearly do not "all live happily ever after," since there is no access yet found to eternity. Such an idea of eternity is, within the Buddhist universe, untenable of course, but the phrase used here to talk about the waters of eternity⁴⁰³ is clearly talking about a kind of everlasting life. More research is needed to determine to what extent this idea is present in earlier stories within the Mongol tradition, but for now we need only observe that *Altan Owoo* is shot through with Mend-Ooyo's own autobiographical reflections, and so it might be that he is here matching the folkloric voice which spoke earlier of the Lord of the Herds with his own personal desire to have his father once again riding over the steppe beside him.

⁴⁰³ A literal translation of the Mongol *mönhiin us*.

The conclusion of the poem's narrative is, then, that the swallows are still, like Mend-Ooyo, waiting for eternal life. In an earlier verse, he offers a brief yet curious vignette of a past time in his life, when

*I saw a swallow pass away, though
it had found the waters of eternity.
I grieved it hadn't drunk.*

It is unclear to me precisely what this means, although in some ways it is reminiscent of Buddhist texts which claim that enlightenment is immanent and not something to be striven and searched for. Nonetheless, this is another example of the way in which Mend-Ooyo presents a modern way of looking at a traditional theme.

Though a short poem, "The Swallows" contains a number of important elements which, while not being characterised by Lórencz as falling within the remit of Mongol folktales, are nonetheless related to this tradition. The swallows themselves are associated with the Lord of the Herds in the prolog to the chapter, and they carry through into the next story, there to harass and annoy a lonely foal in search of his herd⁴⁰⁴. It also shows us how humanity, represented by both the author himself and his father, offers to the natural world, represented by the swallows, the beneficence of eternal life. It is as though, by showing the connection between the mythical spacetime inhabited by the Lord of the Herds and the constancy of the author's family (his father, himself and his son, and this through the key image of the hearth, or *golomt*, in the ger, which connects the family with the Mongol people), Mend-Ooyo is able to present the tale of the swallows as a tale about his own family. And it is this link, between the natural world and the human world, which lies at the center of *Altan Ovoo*, and at the center of traditional Mongol literature as a whole.

⁴⁰⁴ "A Foal Heads Home" GH, 107-108.

“The Ballad of the Forty-One Swans”⁴⁰⁵

This story is similar to the folktale topos of the surrogate child, insofar as the young swan, unable to follow the flock, is taken in by an old couple and raised as a surrogate child. But this is where the link is severed between Mend-Ooyo’s tale and the classification exemplified by Grimm’s *Fundevogel*. In Mend-Ooyo’s tale, the swan is not threatened by its new family, rather it is encouraged to find its destiny and encouraged at the end to fly away with its flock.

The development of the story takes place in three specific sections⁴⁰⁶. The first section shows how the young cygnet is thwarted in his attempts to fly. But what is maybe more important here, and in the general context of the chapter, watched over by the Lord of the Herds, is the description of autumn. Autumn is a central topos in Mongol literature, it is the point at which transformation begins to affect adversely the land and the people who depend upon the land, and so it is a time of sadness and of concern. In this story, this sadness and concern is focused in the attempts by the cygnet to fly, and so become a fully-fledged swan.

“He called out to the darkening sky,” writes Mend-Ooyo, “in distress at being left, circling round and round in this way, abandoned by the flock.” That he calls to the sky is clearly a reference to the prayers traditionally addressed by the Mongol people to the sky⁴⁰⁷. Like the swallows in the previous story, there is at once here a universal image presented, of the bird looking to the sky both as a medium through which to traverse the world, and also as a divine figure.

⁴⁰⁵ GH, 109-110.

⁴⁰⁶ These correspond, as we shall see, to the seasons autumn-winter-spring. The use of the seasons to delineate the development of a work of literature is a Mongol tradition and well attested in both the premodern and the modern literature.

⁴⁰⁷ This is the *höh tenger*, the blue sky which is regarded as a god within the traditional Mongol belief system.

The old couple who rescue the cygnet do so with the best of intentions, they “bandaged up his broken wing into a splint.” But, as though aware of the implications at work in stories such as *Fundevoegel*, we are told that “The forty swans circled over the ger several times, wondering whether they could trust the harmless old couple, whether the passing of time would inevitably push them forward.” Here Mend-Ooyo presents the birds’ inner compulsion to fly south with their concern for the well-being of their injured fellow, and clearly he expects the former to win out over the latter.

Thus, it is that, as with the child’s saving of the foundling-bird in the Grimm tale, so here nature supercedes nurture, for the birds as well as for the old couple. It should be noted though that the reader is alerted to the fact that the two old people are “harmless,” a fact of which the forty swans are not certain as they fly away for the winter. This realisation allows the reader to see in this story already the fact that the humans are again helping the birds, that there is a mutuality once again being explicitly played out.

The second, and shortest, part of the tale is the description of the movement from winter into spring, which comprises but a single paragraph:

By the third month of winter, all that the dark blue cuckoo beside the pond knew was that the thaw had passed into springtime, bringing the red willows into bud. Over the winter, the old man and woman had gotten used to the swan, and thought of him now as their child. Stretching up towards the sky, he would come home to the brown ger, where mother liked to lay his wing near the pluming smoke of the fire.

This time of year, of course, is a season of potential. We have only to read the traditional “four seasons” poems by such writers as Natsagdorj, Danzanravjaa and Mend-Ooyo’s friend and contemporary Nyamsüren⁴⁰⁸ to realise how the Mongol apprehension of the seasons and their transitional points impinge upon, and influence, the Mongol worldview. And here, the

⁴⁰⁸ D. Natsagdorj (1906-1937), Danzanravjaa (1803-1856) and D. Nyamsüren (1949-2002) all wrote famous expositions of the four seasons.

cygnet is healed and once again flying, "stretching up towards the sky" in another at once incantatory and divine gesture, seeking but not yet choosing to return to his rightful place within the flock of swans.

The final section of the tale brings all the images together – the fond foster-parents, the flock of swans, the birds circling around the ger, the triumph of nature over nurture, and the forty-first swan's symbolic gift of thanks. Many of these images, moreover, are once more exemplars of how this story links the universal with the particular, of how a timeless folkstory can be seen as a particular narrative about an old couple and the swan whom they cared for and brought back to health.

It is also important, in relation to the story of "The Cranes" immediately following, that the relationship between humans and the natural world is seen here to be pure, that the old couple were trustworthy and did the right thing, nurturing the swan and allowing him when healthy to follow his destiny. The rightness of the denouement here is shown by the swan's circling of the ger and by the flock's hanging in the sky "like prayer beads strung together." Both of these Buddhist images of prayer – the beads strung in a rosary and the circumambulation of the ger as though it were a stūpa – seem to indicate the importance of looking at the macrocosmic picture, in which correct behavior and natural behavior is allied to good karma.

Good karma, though a specifically Buddhist image, is also in keeping with the traditional Mongol shamanic value system, in which it is what could be described as the "natural flow" of things which takes precedence. Thus far, we have seen in both "The Swallows" and "The Ballad of the Forty-One Swans" the way in which humans and the natural world (specifically birds) can interact, and to what extent they can assist one another. In the next section of *Altan Owoo*, we see a very different type of interaction.

"The Cranes"⁴⁰⁹

In his introduction to this story, Mend-Ooyo writes, "As lord of the infinite steppe, our character is to be concerned with the poor creatures all around us. One day we spend our time thinking about them with sensitivity, while another day we wish to forget them." In this way, human beings are seen to be fickle, and in direct contradiction to the Lord of the Herds, whose presence as an aspect of the Buddha is of constancy and compassion.

Unlike the previous stories in Chapter Four, "The Cranes" shows a human world very much at odds with the natural world. This is very much a morality tale, an indication of what happens when one acts malefocantly and without due care for the environment. This is the way in which Mend-Ooyo is able to show the power of the world of birds and animals, how they too can behave when forced into protective action. Thus far we have seen only the ways in which birds and human beings work together for their own betterment, but this is a story of human greed and the tragedy which results from it.

In its opening lines, the poem reveals the importance of the macrocosmic cycles of the year, and shows thereby the interrelationship of the movement of the birds with the humans among whose encampment they nest:

*They travel their destiny,
returning to their birthplace,
cranes paired together
over the spacious steppe,
Exhausted from the long flight
back to their regular haunt.
And, year after year,
the locals become used to these birds.*

In this also we are shown the loyalty of the cranes, how they are "paired together" throughout their migrations. The cranes are presented here as an exemplar of the turning world of the seasons and, although this poem deals with specific actions of specific cranes,

⁴⁰⁹ GH, 110-112.

their constant presence year after year is equally important for a proper understanding of the poem.

The ignorance of human beings is their downfall and the cause of chaos in the natural world, just as their wisdom in the previous story is seen to be beneficial to the creatures who visit the place they inhabit. In "The Cranes," it is ignorance indeed, and not malfeasance, which is the ultimate problem. And so, the cranes laid their eggs, and protected them from adversity.

*An inquisitive fellow, they say,
with not a thought,
trod local wisdom underfoot,
and subversively pocketed the eggs,
getting home
without arousing suspicion.*

Here, moreover, it is not only human ignorance, but the act of "[treading] local wisdom underfoot," which creates discord. While Mongol folk wisdom is one of the principal themes of *Altan Owoo*, it is also one of the aspects of their culture which is most important to the Mongols themselves. Thus the wanton ignorance of, and lack of concern for, the traditions is seen to be of the greatest significance in the trajectory of this story.

The reaction of the cranes, and their subsequent revenge, are both presented through images of sadness and loss. The birds "stepped into pools of rainwater,/his their feathers as though they had no wings," but, of the human beings, tainted it would seem by the lack of thought for "local wisdom," we are told that "nobody noticed their grief/as the horses were trotted out." Thus it is that the world continues, and the cranes' misery is not considered.

The remainder of the poem is concerned with the apparent abduction of the son of the farmer who had initially stolen the eggs. It is interesting that the idea is raised that the boy had "sprouted wings" and, it is implied, flown away with the cranes. This not only somehow echoes the idea of the previous story, in which a swan was raised by an old

couple as their own child and then flew away with their blessing, but it also echoes another theme found throughout *Altan Ovoo*, and which Mend-Ooyo has told me is a tradition of folklore with which he was raised, of the otherwise unwinged creature sprouting wings and either flying away forever, or else using this ability to fulfill a mission.

The final four lines of the poem again contain a significant element of Mongol folk wisdom. The "melancholy song" of the cranes echo over the farmer's ger as they circle in the sky. Again like the swans, this is a circumambulation of the ger, the focus of the story and, insofar as it contains the hearth, the focus of the family that is the Mongol people, and who are implicated in the action of the story. And within the ger, "the milk in the pan has turned," as though the sadness of the family and the sadness of the cranes at the sadness caused by their actions had curdled the milk.

So it is that Mend-Ooyo uses traditional Mongol imagery here to point out the importance of caring for even the birds who visit every year. This is, he has said to me, a way of showing how the Mongol people might act wrongly in regard to the land, and what havoc might be wreaked upon them in this case.

These stories, like the majority of the stories in *Altan Ovoo*, owe as much to Mend-Ooyo's imagination and knowledge of Mongol folk wisdom as to traditional folktales. However, we are forced to conclude too, I would say, that there is a powerful argument for seeing these as modern folktales in the style of Italo Calvino's Italian folktales.

The main thrust of the narrative of the entire book focuses upon nature, and especially the natural world of Dariganga, wherein stands the eponymous Altan Ovoo and where Mend-Ooyo was raised. But I would also say that *Altan Ovoo*, and the stories in Chapter Four in particular, are very much a challenge to the social situation in the post-Soviet era.

Mend-Ooyo's intention, it would seem, is to implicate the entire Mongol people in the future of their land, insofar as their relationship with the natural world has a direct effect

upon the way in which the land is encouraged and allowed to develop. That he associates himself, through the authorial voice, with the Lord of the Herds in the opening part of this particular chapter would appear to be a way of acknowledging the importance of the Lord of the Herds as a guardian of the natural world, but also of Mend-Ooyo himself as the narrative voice. So it is that, unlike traditional folktales, where the author is not explicitly named, we are able to focus on this authorial voice and observe something of the development of the folktale, at least from a modern perspective.

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, an entire book could be written about the use of the natural world in *Altan Ovoo*. I have examined here only Mend-Ooyo's apprehension – and, by extension, that of Mongol nomadic society – of the idea of *nutag* through a mutual relationship with the land, the topography and the animals resident there, and with those animals with whom the nomadic people have a singular and interdependent relationship. However, this one important trajectory of thought shows I believe how Mend-Ooyo, through his personal experience and understanding of nomadic society, is able to express the closeness and intimacy of the landscape as well as its harshness and emptiness.

The sociopolitical and ecological implications of *Altan Ovoo* have become far more significant with the introduction of foreign mining and the increase in vehicle-ownership since 1990. It is perhaps unrealistic to conceive of *Altan Ovoo* as some kind of ecological manifesto in a contemporary western sense, but the close friendship between Mend-Ooyo and Dashbalbar exercised considerable mutual literary influence in terms of their joint ecological vision⁴¹⁰ and, moreover, upon the latter's political career as a member of the Great Hural during the 1990s.

⁴¹⁰ See, for instance, my discussion of Dashbalbar's work in Chapter Five, in addition to O.Dashbalbar *The Battle for Our Land Has Begun* and H.Süglemaa *Ochirbatin Dashbalbar*. Both Mend-Ooyo and Dashbalbar's son D.Gangabaatar have expressed (via email and discussion) the mutual influence of both writers' work and friendship.

In conclusion, then, the expression of the natural world in *Altan Ovoo* acts both as a backdrop for the narrative which plays out across it, and as a powerful character in its varied manifestation. It is not, however, so much a primary character as a defining character, because it holds within it the ancestors' spirits and their transformed physical substance, and is the place moreover into which the characters and Mend-Ooyo and all their descendents will likewise transform, and thereby perpetuate the natural world for future generations⁴¹¹. In this way, then, this theme is central for Mend-Ooyo, but it also fades into the background, allowing daily life to continue in the forefront.

⁴¹¹ This is a central theme of much of the work of Yavuuhulan's closest students. Nyamsüren's couplet "I walk upon the grasses, later/the grasses will grow upon me" is an excellent summary of this idea, developed along many trajectories by many different poets.

CHAPTER 11

Environment and Auto/biography in *Altan Ovoo*

*Everyone
is looking backwards!
A semicircle,
 like the head of a question mark,
a full circle,
 like the sun above clouds,
like a sentence, then, dot...dot...dot..
like a horse's hooves...side by side...together,
 a circular path,
the warm silence of referring to
the Word - a continuation of powerlessness,
 space pushing against spacelessness,
an intersection,
a negation,
and most significantly
the people of the future!⁴¹²*

*I took my birth in the blue lands of Heaven,
in the stories of Mongolia's famous past,
in the flame of liberation, shining in the
 homeland of Chinggis Khaan.
And, lost within the wrinkles of the golden earth,
I took my birth in the blue lands of Heaven.⁴¹³*

The discussion thus far of the various prisms through which *AltanOvoo* can be viewed has focused upon how Mend-Ooyo has presented his material – which we might summarise as the Mongol nomadic heritage – according to a thematic interweaving that defines both the structure and the trajectory of the book. We have not, however, looked at the ways in which he represents the individuals who make up that nomadic society. Mend-Ooyo himself stands among these people, of course, and it is necessary, in order to understand the world of *Altan Ovoo* from the personal point of view, to conclude this analysis with an exposition of the autobiographical and biographical aspects of the book.

⁴¹² D.Urianhai, *Holdoh Tov* (Ulaanbaatar 2007), 43.

⁴¹³ Yavuuhulan, *Mongolian Verse*, 49.

The two citations, from Urianhai's 2002 poem "Looking Backwards" and from Yavuuhulan's 1959 poem "Where Was I Born?", offer us two ways of approach the apprehension of auto/biography in *Altan Ovoo*. Urianhai's characteristically philosophical discourse reminds us that we, as individuals, are in the center of our own worlds, looking backwards, into history as a social phenomenon and into our own history as well, and looking forwards too, to those who follow us. So we are "an intersection/a negation" and ("most significantly") we too are the future of the place where we are now. Urianhai's point – and we must remember that this poem is ostensibly written for the same Mongol audience for which Mend-Ooyo wrote *Altan Ovoo*: there is not much heed paid to the possibility of foreign readers – is, then, that everyone stands at their own central point, looking at the past even as they move inexorably into the future, yet constant at their own place of intersection.⁴¹⁴

Yavuuhulan's simpler, if no less profound, idea, developed in much of his writing, is that the individual is born as the representative of Mongolia, the direct descendent of Chinggis Haan and with a powerful and unbreakable connection with Heaven. In his hands, the idea of biography takes on a broader and universal perspective, and in "Where Was I Born?" Yavuuhulan creates a link between himself as an individual with the Mongol people as a united group, while still retaining an intimate and personal connection with the land and with the sky, and thus with the ancestors.

The idea of auto/biography as expressed in *Altan Ovoo* presents a combination of Yavuuhulan's broad and expansive vision of the individual as a microcosmic, fractal version of the Mongol people, and Urianhai's idea of the individual as being constantly and transformationally at the center of their own world. This binary allows for a potent shifting back and forth between the two poles, between biography and autobiography, and between

⁴¹⁴ Urianhai is fascinated by intersections, and has written a book of poetry entitled *Intersections (Ogtlotsohgui)*, dealing with the concept as it plays out in all aspects of life.

the individual as a reflection of the people and the people as the reflection of the individual. In this way, then, this final chapter will offer a perspective through which we can understand Mend-Ooyo's approach to his own place within the community of Mongol people, and so return to the stone from Altan Owoo, which lay in the place of honor in Mend-Ooyo's childhood ger and which represented for him a microcosmic version of the whole world.

The auto/biographical structure of *Altan Owoo* moves in waves, from personal memoir through the lives of people known to Mend-Ooyo, or to his family, to characters from history or from myth. In this way, the narrative suggests the idea of a timeless progression, the seamless development from one historical reality to another, much as we saw in the discussion in Chapter 7 of how history is portrayed in the book.

Mend-Ooyo's presentation of his own life in *Altan Owoo* revolves around his childhood. His mother and father are, in many ways, ciphers for the traditional family unit, for the gender-specific, occupations of traditional Mongol culture. His mother tends the home, and his father ventures further afield and plays the horsehead fiddle (*morin huur*). Mend-Ooyo himself is seen particularly as a child and, by inference, as a young man, freshly educated, heading off to take up a position as a teacher.

This transitional Mend-Ooyo is of especial interest, since in leaving home, in setting out towards employment, he is ostensibly moving towards the position occupied, many years later, by the successful and powerful writer of the book itself. In the vignette, in which Mend-Ooyo sets off to start teaching, it is his father who prepares the horse which he has chosen for his son:

Father took from the family chest, which was placed in the western part of the ger, a saddle, wrapped up in many two-ply pieces of cloth. He assembled all the equipment, adjusting the saddleflaps, and threading the girth.

Thus, at the age of eighteen, with my official credentials as a teacher stuffed in my pocket, I took up a job in a remote settlement of the Gobi. I would be coming home every fortnight.

*Father said not a word, he took the saddle outside and placed it upon the chestnut. He took the reins, the bridle jangling its ten ounces of silver, and tied them behind the pommel. He took the horse and lead it some way from the hitching-post.*⁴¹⁵

His father, too, “dribbled over my stirrups some milk my mother had brought,” showing the very specific gender roles common to nomadic society. The combination here of his father’s gift of a horse, fully caparisoned and ready for the journey, and the milk brought by his mother to bless the horse, and thereby the enterprise being undertaken, is the last point of Mend-Ooyo’s life narrated in *Altan Ovoo*. This liminal point is the point at which, as I suggest, Mend-Ooyo becomes the educated person who would later become the poet and author, but it is also the point at which he leaves his family behind, at which he is no longer the child enclosed and protected by nomadic society. This was the journey which not only led to employment, but which also led to Ulaanbaatar and thence to Moscow and thence to the complex and compromised western world. And so this moment of farewell is more than a farewell to his parents, it is a moment of farewell to the world which held to itself Mongol tradition and Mongol history, which had so released him.

Though there is intimacy in Mend-Ooyo’s description of his father, he reserves a special discourse and special feeling for his mother, to whom much of Chapter 6 is dedicated. He writes his mother a letter, quoting his first poem, which he had written for her:

This was my first poem, mom, I dedicated it to you. A smiling child and a weeping mother, but all this has been upended in the scales of the hilly world. For twenty years I have caused you distress, mom, I lost sight of you as I chased along my road of books, spending my time having fun and being entertained, and what have I learnt? At home on the steppe, this son of yours didn’t even manage to learn your lessons in honest living, never thought about what you said as you stirred the pot on the fire.

⁴¹⁵ GH, 43.

I hadn't even learn to spin yarn by the time I graduated high school. Nor had I learnt to quilt mattresses, to sew buttons or properly to distill, things with currency in our world. In no way did I grasp the family's elegant routine, how we would rise with the dawn and go on our way, nor the rhythmic song of the pestle and mortar. I rummaged among dusty books, ignoring news from my own country about lackluster white stallions, forgetting the song of Bayan Bargi's horse. I didn't get it. My body was exhausted from travelling here and there, I sat and tasted the best of my mother's pungent tea, and I knew that key phrases from my mother's tales of the lackluster stallions and Bayan Bargi's horse would remain forever in my memory. And as mother stoked the dungfire, I also knew that all these things – spinning yarn, quilting mattresses, sewing buttons, distilling – were as easy for her as falling off a log.⁴¹⁶

By talking so eloquently about his mother's abilities, and how he cannot hope to live up to the skills and acuity which she has developed, Mend-Ooyo speaks of his own shortcomings in comparison, it is as though he is emphasising the importance of what his mother accomplished in comparison with his own accomplishments.

The memories of his mother – of her tea, her stories and her needlework – refer, beyond the personal, to what one might presume is an experience common to most Mongol nomadic people. Mend-Ooyo's recollection, then, is a way in which, at the same time as recalling his own memories, reaches out to his readership, perhaps in the hope of reminding them of their own parents' kindnesses and abilities, and for sure in the hope of having them recall their own childhood.

Mend-Ooyo has told me⁴¹⁷ that one of his ideas in writing *Altan Ovoo* is to remind his Mongol readers about the lineage of which they are a part, and clearly he intends also to create in other people's minds analogs of his own devotion to, and memories of, his family and the traditions which they exemplify. And, while his mother's story includes domestic tasks common to the majority of Mongol nomadic women, his father's story, of being a

⁴¹⁶ GH, 178.

⁴¹⁷ Personal communication.

skilled musician and performer, is not universal, and so occupies a more personal space in the text. In the story, "How Father Became an Artist," he writes of how his father's musicianship, his presence on the stage, and the (quasi-)shamanic embodiment of the horse in the instrument is felt even in the fiddle when it stands, unplayed, in the ger:

*He would put on his deel with ceremonial gold braid. It was lovely for us to listen to him playing the fiddle on the stage, under the shining electric lights. The smoke from the dungfire fluttered about the cuffs of the old deel at the rear of our ger but, just as when my father's fiddle brought forth music, my mind was not bestirred. The melody is for me more artistic and more meaningful when heard, not from the stage, but from the place of honor at the rear of the Mongolian ger. And when the fiddle is played, the colt neighs from where he is tethered and the lark sings upon the roof and so it is ornamented.*⁴¹⁸

Such images of kindness and skill and closeness are, though unabashedly nostalgic and somewhat romanticised, nonetheless the portrait of his childhood and of his family which Mend-Ooyo wants to convey. The grittier memories – such as the account of a dramatic and dangerous storm⁴¹⁹ – help to create a rounded portrait of Mend-Ooyo's family, and they also help to broaden the scope of his autobiography, so that it addresses people and subjects beyond those present in the stories of those within his own ambit.

Much of *Altan Ovoo*, as I have already discussed, contains a wide range of stories, the interaction of whose narratives help to establish the nature of Mend-Ooyo's perspective on traditional Mongol culture, but which also helps to contextualise the character of Mongol nomadic herders, thus offering a multivalent social biography, in which Mongolia is defined by the lives of its inhabitants.

With the exception of Mend-Ooyo himself, the personality given the most attention is Toroi Bandi, whose story has already been touched on in relation to the treatment of history

⁴¹⁸ GH, 209.

⁴¹⁹ GH, 146-154, discussed in Chapter 9 above.

in the book.⁴²⁰ Here, however, I want to explore how in Chapter 2 Mend-Ooyo deals with Toroi Bandi's biography, and especially his relationship with the people and the authorities of his own time.

The way in which the story of Toroi Bandi is incorporated into the text reveals the interaction of extraneous biography with Mend-Ooyo's autobiography. The story is held parenthetically within another story, that of "The Little Sharga," which in turn is placed parenthetically within his own childhood recollection of the conversation of some elders. The depiction of the scene contributes to our understanding of Mend-Ooyo's apprehension of those who filled his youthful memories, showing how a sense of intimacy is mixed here with one of distance and respect:

Some way from the encampment, to the north of the feathergrass in the dried-up saltmarshes, I sat among the elders taking tea from a large, brass teapot, and tending a gun. What was I to do? When the sweating horse was stepping out, it stayed close to its young. The talk of the elders grew louder, grew fainter...I loved to come close into the words. And it seemed that what they were talking about was the spotted sharga colt, who had carried me with such elegance. The poor thing probably wasn't at all imagining that this bunch were talking about him, he stood there, now and again dopily startling the flies from his eyes, dozily tossing his head. Excited by the words of Tavkhai, a smart old monk they'd nicknamed Chatterbox, I came and sat closer.⁴²¹

For Mend-Ooyo, then, such interactions were a means whereby he could deepen his connection with his neighbors and with the wider world, but they were equally a means of deepening his exposure to local myth as much as to practical wisdom.

The story of Injeneerov's sharga⁴²², which seems to have been catalysed by Mend-Ooyo's horse and by the carved head of one of the elders's pipes, is told later in the chapter, but the immediate referent is the story of Toroi Bandi. This layering and

⁴²⁰ See Chapter 7 above.

⁴²¹ GH, 49.

⁴²² A small light bay horse.

interweaving of yarns, told within a group, is found throughout *Altan Ovoo*, and reflects the interaction of such stories across time and space within Mongol culture as a whole.

The Mongol anthropologist S.Demberel has examined the sociocultural circumstances of the story of Toroi Bandi, and we can see from his account⁴²³ that the personality of Toroi Bandi was created, in much the same way as that of Robin Hood, through myth and hearsay and social history and through romantic wishful thinking, and that the account given here by Mend-Ooyo reflects this circumstance, informed by the elders in whose company he grew up.

Mend-Ooyo's choice of stories to illustrate Toroi Bandi's life emphasises the outlaw's popular appeal, rather than his rejection of authority. For instance, there is a description of him which reads like the union of a Buddhist meditational deity and a romantic film lead:

*People compared this young man's burning pride with a star in the daytime. In many people's mind, he seemed to be a marvellous hero, he had an elegant white face, his clear white eyes brimmed with tears like springwater, his body moved gracefully, he was like another man's wife.*⁴²⁴

This putative union provides an appropriate cipher for the tradition of the *sain er*, the "good men" or outlaws of whom Toroi Bandi was one. On the one hand, the clarity of his appearance symbolises the (apparent) clarity of his mind and his purposeful vision, while, on the other hand, his position as heroic rebel, acting on behalf of local people and against the presumed external interests of government, renders him both marginalised from, and profoundly connected to, the people.

The passage cited above continues to tell the story of Toroi Bandi's acquisition of his horse, the sharga from whom Mend-Ooyo's own horse is related. And the discourse

⁴²³ S. Demberel, *Tsastin Tsagaan Uuland Tsantaagui Toroi Bandi*, (Ulaanbaatar, 2006), passim.

⁴²⁴ GH, 51.

continues to meld holiness with romance, and Toroi Bandi saves the foal from a prowling wolf, not through any physical skill, but, it would appear, through his own intuition:

At that moment, the sinewy foal stood upon the plain and, in his mind, Toroi welcomed that spindly frame. He visualised the cintamani, like a brand from heaven, fixed upon the right of this sharga, who had been born that day beneath a fair constellation. As if to say let's go, let's go, he jerked the reins, following where the wild horse led, he stood in the stirrups, the four hooves struck the earth, beating like drums over the steppe. The foal just now greeting his mother stopped and pricked his tufted ears - was this not some kind of sign?⁴²⁵

This passage, with its invocation of the Buddhist wish-fulfilling jewel (*cintamani*) the soundless communication between man and horse, and the assumption that the foal's response is "some kind of sign," makes it clear that, for Mend-Ooyo as for nomadic people of Dariganga in general, Toroi Bandi's person – in its formation through popular opinion – conjures up the image of a solitary man in the Mongol landscape, a man battling not so much against nature (the wolf) or against officialdom, but for the weak (the foal) and the poor.

In battling for the poor and for the local people, of course, Toroi Bandi emphasises the nature of Mongol nomadic communities. It is important for each nomadic caravan to be, in practical terms, self-sufficient, and so the community requires a type of self-serving honesty simply in order to survive. The story of Toroi Bandi and the sharga foal relates how he vacillates between taking it with a lasso and sending it back to its herd, the dynamic central to political control and, in the Mongol psyche, the dynamic central to the nomadic experience of human society as much as equine society. And so we read how Toroi Bandi, representing the *sain er*, also represents the people in the people's heart, and how he is seen in relation to the land over which he travels:

⁴²⁵ GH, 51-52.

*...a man can bring forth piety from honest thought and this is the aspiration which we teach our grandchildren. The earth has one secret, that the prayers of the people support such a man where he goes astray, they support him where it's slippery, and so he stands out upon on the dusty earth.*⁴²⁶

Toroi Bandi encounters a young man searching for his daughter, who has been kidnapped by a local dignitary. The man says that he has heard Toroi Bandi's voice before, and how "he thought happily how such a person would bring pleasure to everyone."⁴²⁷ To hear voices in the air is not uncommon in Mongol nomadic society⁴²⁸ and we can hear in this the relationship between the *sain er* tradition and the Mongol people, and so Toroi Bandi's biography becomes an aspect of the people's biography.

The denouement of this story is interesting for the way in which Mend-Ooyo shifts the focus from Toroi Bandi to the sharga foal. Toroi Band offers the young man his horse, telling him that it was "as good as a man, and I offer it to your song and your mind, my friend from Dariganga. It will fulfill your every need." The shift of focus is interesting thsofar as it points away from the outlaw and his place in the local psyche towards that of the sharga, and thus biographies become melded together.

On a broader level, Toroi Bandi's story reveals much the same strange feelings of openhearted melancholy as we can read throughout Mongol literature. This is clear from Mend-Ooyo's "Song of Toroi Bandi," in which there is a parallelism between the human perspective of history and the perspective of landscape:

*It wears away before it gets worn down -
ah, the river bend upon the mountain's lower slopes.
Superior joy gets worn away -
oh, this homeland of my ancestors!*

*It sorrows in the time of sorrow -
ah, my sorrowful body.*

⁴²⁶ GH, 54.

⁴²⁷ GH, 54.

⁴²⁸ It is therefore debatable whether this could be described as an auditory hallucination.

*A challenge to the elders -
oh, my fine story!*

*Given birth when birth was born -
ah, my ancient body.
Destroyed by powerful nobility -
oh, these ancient customs!⁴²⁹*

Toroi Bandi's life, and his myth, is founded on this melancholy, yet fundamentally wise, acceptance of the nature of existence, an acceptance found as much in nomadic culture *per se* as in the spirituality of Buddhism and shamanism which defines Mongol nomadism.⁴³⁰ In this way, it becomes possible to see him as a kind of Mongol Everyman, not necessarily one upon whose life to model one's own, but one whose wisdom and whose generosity of spirit should be used as models.

Mend-Ooyo, in fact, seems to treat biography as a message for his readers. The account of the relationship between Toroi Bandi and his sharga, and Toroi Bandi's relationship with the local populace, are presented as something more aspirational than as entertainment, and we read elsewhere in the text of people whose behavior and whose life convey to us ideas through which we might better understand our own life in general and the life of Mongolia in particular.

As I described in the preceding chapter, Mend-Ooyo places a particular weight on the relationship between humans and the animal world. The majority of these stories are of Mend-Ooyo's own creation, but we should assume that they are based, to some extent, upon hearsay or upon myths which are themselves based upon historical truth.

There are examples of this in Mend-Ooyo's treatment of stories surrounding war and conflict. "Quickwit the Camel,"⁴³¹ for instance, draws upon the true story of a battle

⁴²⁹ GH, 55.

⁴³⁰ It should also be pointed out that "bandi" is a term taken from Buddhism, a Mongol form of our modern English word "pandit" (Skt *pandita*), indicating a wise spiritual practitioner.

⁴³¹ GH, 121-128.

between the Enshōo clan and a band of powerful robbers, while "The Python of Golden Hill"⁴³² tells of the mysterious appearance of a snake in a box found in the ruins of a stūpa destroyed by the military. The latter story, though recalled by Mend-Ooyo himself, is told by an old man who had himself served in the army:

The military demolished our Sycamore Stūpa on Golden Hill. Large amounts of tea and offering scarves were thrown out. Finally, he showed me an iron box, saying that he had taken some things, and from the box there emerged a snake. This snake came out and slithered back beneath the ruins of the stūpa. We were frightened and reburied the iron box straightaway.

Stories such as this run throughout *Altan Ovoo* and create a patchwork of memory, and it is as though Mend-Ooyo's narrative, able to be read as a linear text or else as a collection of narratives subject to constant rearrangement and realignment, becomes a way through which his characters, and the landscape in which they live, can be understood on successively deeper levels of meaning.

On occasions, it is not immediately clear why Mend-Ooyo has chosen to include a particular story. For instance, the section entitled "Chattering about home consists of the following brief conversation:

"During the Second World War, the army, as they passed through Dariganga, saw a beautiful elegant white horse drinking the water of Dyyt. They didn't know what had happened."

"On the day when the soldiers came home from the war, they saw a small, badly-conditioned white horse drinking the water of Dyyt. They didn't know what had happened."

"Perhaps Altan Ovoo had followed its people and then returned?"⁴³³

Beyond the striking association between Altan Ovoo and the white horse, this passage tells us about how local people regard Altan Ovoo as a protector deity, and thus speaks directly

⁴³² GH, 128-129.

⁴³³ GH, 78.

to the biography, which they hold as a unified community. Indeed, this idea of a common biography is found frequently in *Altan Ovoo*, it functions as an overarching theme that brings together passages descriptive of the landscape, with personal reminiscences, with visionary narrative and with stories told throughout the community. This broader apprehension of biography is in keeping with Mend-Ooyo's overall perspective in compiling *Altan Ovoo*, in that it is his intention to tell the story of his own *nutag* of Dariganga, with Altan Ovoo at its literal and figurative center.

The precise nature of *Altan Ovoo's* treatment of auto/biography is, then, at once complex in its intention and in its schema and simple in its execution. Mend-Ooyo's use of memoir throughout the book is more a vehicle for his broader theme than as a means of telling the story of his life. By telling aspects of the life stories of figures such as Toroi Bandi, he offers his reader another way of looking at Mongol social history, in which popular and personal recollections reveal as much about the Mongol people's biography as they do the individual's.

As we explore Mongol sociohistory, moreover, through the auto/biographical material in *Altan Ovoo*, we should realise that, as I have sought to express throughout this detailed analysis of the text, it is impossible to understand an individual's life in Mongol nomadic society detached from the wider framework of spirituality, community and landscape. In this way, it becomes possible to read *Altan Ovoo* as a biography of Mongolia in general, and of nomadic Mongolia in particular, seen through the prism of a single hill, a single topographical focal point.

In its final pages, *Altan Ovoo* comes full circle, Mend-Ooyo meets with his father once again and, as though summarizing his own life by remembering those who have come before, those who are his ancestors, he enumerates those who have passed away, starting not with his parents but with his spiritual teacher:

Customs come and go around the wheel of time and many things disappear from the world. Inlai, the senior monk of Golden Hill, invited my teacher Duvsandagva to the land of Shambala. My father, the fiddle player of Golden Hill, is no longer here. My mother, an old grey pilgrim to Golden Hill, is no longer here. Ulaan-Sakhius Dashbalbar, whose family made an oath on Golden Hill, is no longer here. The young artist Naranbaatar, an eldest son in the prime of his youth, who led me by the hand onto Golden Hill, is no longer here. My elder brother, the lama of Orloi Majig, who created the great epic, a vehicle travelling the land, is no longer here...

The great scholar, the old abbot Damdinsüren, whom they knew as Danigai, who was familiar with the ten difficult things, is no longer here. My teacher the great poet Yavuukhulan, the son of Ogtontenger, who was devoted to singing songs on Golden Hill, is no longer here....⁴³⁴

This list continues, and Mend-Ooyo emphasises its continuity and constancy when he says, "there is no-one who has returned to drink the waters of life." The autobiographical list of important figures from his own life, combined with the broad and cyclical sweep of *Altan Ovoo's* biographical content, again places Mend-Ooyo at the center of the book, while rendering him but a single individual. It is this realisation, which, though not an original philosophy, constantly recurs in human life, which defines the extent of the nomad's position, a position more explicitly precarious than either our own western position, or even the position of the new urban population of Mongolia, and it is also this realisation which shows how a rock from Altan Ovoo can at once be just a rock, a symbol, a memory, while also being a place of power, inhabited by the ancestors in their present physical form, while also being the very universe itself, the universe at rest in the southeastern corner of Mongolia.

⁴³⁴ GH, 228.

PART IV

CHAPTER 12

The Influence of *Altan Ovoo* on Mend-Ooyo's Later Work and that of His Contemporaries

*Mend-Ooyo stoically puts up with many people droning on, knocking his poems and articles, and he is remarkable for the particular attention he pays to those finer points, which bring about clarity and brightness of thought. Altan Ovoo is his song of home. I know of no other work which offers, of its own accord, such pure, pantheist teaching.*⁴³⁵

This appraisal of *Altan Ovoo*, ten years after its initial publication, was chosen by Mend-Ooyo for the first page of his retrospective, two-volume edition, published in 2007, and it encapsulates some of the most significant aspects of his work, and his attitude to his constant and central theme, that of *nutag*, or homeland.

Erdene points out here that Mend-Ooyo has, for much of his professional life, been subject to criticism. During the Soviet period, this criticism tended to revolve around his perceived nationalism, his focus on Mongol culture and traditions, and upon his quietistic approach to politics. Following the introduction of democracy, he has been seen, not only as a nationalist, but also as a sentimental and romantic lyric poet, quite out of touch with the gritty urban world of Mongolia today.⁴³⁶

The pantheism and "clarity and brightness of thought" identified by Erdene are perhaps of greater significance in relation to *Altan Ovoo* and Mend-Ooyo's later work.

⁴³⁵ S.Erdene, Ödriin Sonin, April 25 1996 (cited in G.Mend-Ooyo, *Yaruu nairag shiidet dolgion*, [Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture 2007], 4).

⁴³⁶ Mend-Ooyo's close friendship with O.Dashbalbar, and support of the latter's controversial political career is, I suspect, the true source of the former view. As for the latter, this comes from the younger, more innovative and aggressive voices in Mongol literature, the likes of the poet and journalist B.Galsansuh, whose work is considered in Chapter 13.

Pantheism is a strange word perhaps for one Mongol to use of another,⁴³⁷ since in many ways, as we saw in Part I, the sociocultural worldview is built upon the idea of the spiritual and real presence of the ancestors and the Buddhas in the topography. Nonetheless, the particular idea of apprehending the divine in all things is certainly a way to understand Mend-Ooyo's contribution, in *Altan Ovoo*, to Mongol letters.

This chapter will explore the ways in which the themes of *Altan Ovoo* have been repeated in Mend-Ooyo's subsequent work, and how they have also influenced the work of his contemporaries. The principal interpretative problematic in this chapter and the next is in determining the extent to which this specific text can be said to have exercised an influence. After all, in *Altan Ovoo* Mend-Ooyo was also responding to the work of contemporary writers such as Yavuuhulan, Rinchen and Tsendendorj, as well as to earlier writers such as Injannashi, Danzanravjaa and Natsagdorj, and so to position it with any certainty in the onrushing stream of Mongol literature would necessarily be a task of approximation. Nonetheless, we can consider the impact upon the last quarter-century of literature of the ideas which Mend-Ooyo sought to develop through *Altan Ovoo*, and which I explored in Part III.

The first edition of *Altan Ovoo* was published in 1986, when Mend-Ooyo was thirty-four. The critical reception afforded to the book was positive, much in the same vein as Erdene's appraisal quoted above. In his long article in the newspaper *Ulaanbaatar Sonin*⁴³⁸, the critic and poet Sh.Uyanga describes *Altan Ovoo* as "in truth one of the books which shine in the darkness of this present period." This "present age," of course, was a time when, having overthrown the previous Soviet system, Mongolia was in thrall to free market economics, and Uyanga's point throughout his article was to show Mend-Ooyo's writing both

⁴³⁷ Erdene actually uses the word *panteist*, rather than a Mongol calque, suggesting perhaps that he himself does not recognise it as inherent to the Mongol worldview.

⁴³⁸ 1 July 1994, 4.

in terms of Mongol tradition but also I think in terms of viewing the worldview from which that tradition comes as a haven from the political and economic chaos. Indeed, he suggests that *Altan Ovoo* is both a place and a book, from which he might “stand and look out over the mountains, over the whole world.”

Such hyperbole is, like the dearth of serious critical writing in Uyanga’s article, endemic in Mongol literary criticism. However, we should be aware that, for Mend-Ooyo, the idea that *Altan Ovoo* might be a book which placed the present in some kind of sociohistorical context is of considerable importance. We have seen how he developed the ethos of the *Shine handlaga* with the intention of communicating Mongol nomadic culture to a contemporary readership, and so Uyanga’s comments were to him especially apposite.

The discussion in Part III has shown, I believe, that with *Altan Ovoo* Mend-Ooyo established himself as a writer whose vision encompassed the intersection of Mongol tradition with an outlook informed by Buddhist and shamanic spirituality and by the topographical immanence of the ancestors. The critic A.Mönh-Orgil notes how Mend-Ooyo’s work is driven by “the desire to convey the deep wisdom of tradition and its importance to the modern world,”⁴³⁹ and it is this desire which has consistently informed his approach over the past two decades.

Since the publication of *Altan Ovoo*, Mend-Ooyo’s work has constituted a set of variations on the themes there presented – nomadic society, the natural world, human spiritual development. Much of his work appears still to take place either in the darkness of night or in the gathering of mists,⁴⁴⁰ and in recent years, the power of the moon has been a guiding theme, as we read in this poem, “The Song of the Moon,” from 2008:

*I dropped into my ink the rays of the silver moon.
And their quality shone within the shining picture of eternity.*

⁴³⁹ A. Mönh-Orgil, *Shinechlegchdiin tuhai temdeglel*, (Ulaanbaatar: Ulaanbaatarin Ih Sargaal’ Mongol Sudlalin Töv, 2005), 57.

⁴⁴⁰ His latest book in English, in fact, is entitled *A Patch of White Mist*.

*I wove the rays of the storytelling moon onto the tip of my
vision.
And I sewed my poem-children with a perfect silken thread.*

*I struck the crystal of the nephrite moon onto my hardened
heart.
And, in the darkness, there streamed from my poetry rays of
jade.*

*I placed my song of grace before the mirror of the wise moon.
And my poem, with its shining soul, dwelt in the light of
Shambhala.⁴⁴¹*

There is a kind of hallucinatory quality to this poem created by repetition and parallelism, but which also acts like a prayer, like a mantra, entraining the mind somehow to step outside the quotidian world and into a transcendent world. This poem is in many ways a continuation of the vision of *Altan Ovoo*, albeit rather more fluid, rather less grounded in the nomadic experience.

That the “poem, with its shining soul, dwell[ing] in the light of Shambhala” ties in closely with Erdene’s idea of pantheism. Mend-Ooyo’s concern with expressing the topographical presence of the ancestors and of the Buddhas and of the shamanic spirits has been central to his literary oeuvre throughout his career. It is also possible, as with the poem quoted above, to see his “poem-children” as being “sewed...with [the] perfect silken thread” of continuity, of the constancy of this spiritual presence. In this way, “The Song of the Moon” functions as a summation in four couplets of his vision, of the interweaving of story and spirit and presence which defines the landscape of Mongolia, and thereby its inhabitants, and thereby its culture.

In 1990, he wrote what we might describe as a short piece of dream-vision narrative, in which the landscape where he was lying revealed the presence of his own teacher:

⁴⁴¹ Mend-Ooyo, *Nomadic Lyrics*, 48.

There was a great power in the lower slopes of Bogd Ochirvaan, youngest son of the skygod Hormast, and I fled into sleep. Between the lids of my closed eyes, the stars in the heavens were squeezed close. Between dozing and restlessness, the white mist of thought grew dense before my eyes and, as that thick white covering pushed outwards, the powerful gaze of a man I knew, who had appeared there clearly, was looking at me. I checked again...from the fog of times floated by, there was the noble form of Yavuuhulan, the god of fine melody.

Oh Yavuuhulan...how divine are you, who had discovered eternal holiness, raising your mighty head as though attentive to the moment of remembrance, piercing through the fog of the years! I sank again into the mist of dream...⁴⁴²

That he describes Yavuuhulan as “the god of fine melody” – a reference perhaps to the goddess Yangchenlhamo, or Sarasvati, to whom the opening poem of *Altan Ovoo* is dedicated – is an indication of how, for Mend-Ooyo, the ancestors are physically and visibly present as part of the landscape.

That these two poems, composed rather more recently than *Altan Ovoo* retain its central themes indicate the consistency with which Mend-Ooyo has treated his subject matter. It is as though he is engaged in the constant re/composition of but one work, concerned always to express his spiritual and cultural vision, the broader picture of Mongol nomadic society and the implicit need for a greater understanding of tradition and for a greater respect for the natural world.

Altan Ovoo itself is also in a constant state of flux, with pieces being extracted and replaced and improved, edition by edition, year by year.⁴⁴³ It is as though this book, which he himself has described as his most important,⁴⁴⁴ is a focal point for his thinking, a means

⁴⁴² G. Mend-Ooyo (trans. Simon Wickham-Smith), *A Patch of White Mist* (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture 2011), 58.

⁴⁴³ A second edition was published in 1993, a third in 2007 (the latter simultaneously with my English translation), and a fourth is under preparation, albeit without a fixed publication date.

⁴⁴⁴ G. Mend-Ooyo, email to the author, 2006.

by which he can continue to organise his ideas and his apprehension of Mongol culture and history.

In 1992, Mend-Ooyo composed a poem entitled "On the Night of the Winter's Final Round Full Moon, or Nyamsüren and Me," in which he tells how the two poets spent the night drinking together, and being visited by a goddess. The first four verses, just under half the poem, shows how Mend-Ooyo charges the intimacy of friendship with his customary qualities of dream and rapture:

*Two poets were singing, mistakenly they took the bright night
of the full moon in the last month of winter to be daytime.
Beneath the canopy of the night, with a single lantern
overhead,
nobody heard those two illustrious poets.*

*And Danzagiin Nyamsüren said that we were standing
like stones with ancient inscriptions, amid the shadow and the
light,
amid the rays of moonlight which, like a hat
let slip, bulged from of the grey clouds,*

*With shafts of white a goddess combed
his short blonde hair, like an artless monument.
And we saw her place upon his head the moon,
it was like a hat, artfully made from a fine and special felt.*

*The poet, in his moonhat, produced a small goblet of silver,
and placed it, warmed, upon the frostwhite stone.
Before I knew it, he'd filled the goblet with a jade liquor,
and with those spirits he toasted the world.⁴⁴⁵*

This summoning of images from Mongol history and culture, such as the "standing stones" or *chuluu hün* described in Part I, of Nyamsüren's interaction with the goddess (perhaps again Yangchenlhamo), and the essential spirituality of alcohol parallels similar passages in *Altan Owoo*, and equally in the work of Nyamsüren. For instance, in Chapter Five, Mend-Ooyo innovatively treats of the four seasons *topos* with the narrative of a

⁴⁴⁵ G. Mend-Ooyo, *Heseg tsagaan manan*, (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture 2010), 104.

horseman, riding through the seasons as through the course of a single day. Here is part of the section of winter, in which there is a melding of the literal and the figurative, of the physical and the metaphysical similar to his poem quoted above:

The world at night is soundless, the winter chill has bound up melody, even the mucus in the horse's nose is congealed, everything has taken on a silvery hue. But the snow-white horse carries the song of this man upon his precious back, among the stars.

*the song that men sing is not enough...
the steppe the stallion moves across is neverending...*

The stars are humming. The ridges of the steppe gleam as though bathed in oil, the horse's thundering hooves were featherlight and beat the frozen tundra like a drum.

The song of winter is polished and clear. The thickest hairs in the man's fur hat rise and fall in swells, it is as though the hoarfrost crystals were following the waves of his song.

He sings his song as he skirts the edge of the next hill. The spring has begun and its song continues without end. The rider of the resonant song travels once around the steppe on the back of his horse and once also the wheel of the four seasons revolves. The horseman skirts the edge of the following hill, everywhere he hears the voices of the watchdogs. And, right then, lit by the frozen lanterns outside in the yard, his horse grows silent, his song's melody grows faint. He dismounts at the hitching-post, shakes the hoarfrost from his fur hat, opens the wooden door of his ger and goes inside. He is greeted by the combined aroma of hot food and tea.

In the ger, they are singing a lullaby.

The vast steppe grows quiet silent and a gloom descends, and the voice upon each flake of snow and upon each blade of grass is indistinct as though with longing.⁴⁴⁶

Both pieces are defined by the winter, and by the impact of the nighttime and of the winter upon, in the first, the two poets and, in the second, the horseman and his horse. In one there is poetry, in the other song, a constant utterance projected into the cold and clear night, the alcohol in the first poem warming and revivifying as the company and the food and the warmth inside the ger revivifies in the second.

⁴⁴⁶ GH, 164-165.

For, despite the aspects of history, spirituality and nature in *Altan Ovoo*, there is also the importance of community for nomadic people. Mend-Ooyo's story of the great snowstorm in Chapter Five and his account of the career of Toroi bandi in Chapter Two are both fine examples of how he works into his narrative what appear to be common stories of nomadic life but which, on closer scrutiny, are seen as uncommon, socially significant expositions of the particular way in which nomadic cultures operate. These potent winter scenes, moreover, only hint at the dangers of cold on the steppe – where the temperature may drop to -50F – but such dangers, for the people who live there, are unspoken companions, to be treated with respect and care.

It is hard to establish how Yavuuhulan's three principal students directly influenced one another. We know that both Mend-Ooyo and Nyamsüren regarded Dashbalbar as a teacher, but, given the charisma that propelled him into politics and the boundless vigor with which he presented his poetry,⁴⁴⁷ this is unsurprising. A proper comparison of Mend-Ooyo's works with those of his two closest colleagues would require a volume of its own, but there are definitely parallels which can be drawn from even a cursory examination.

The harshness of winter in Mongolia focuses the mind, and we have already seen how Mend-Ooyo uses the clarity of the light and the sounds of snow and ice in his writing to paint a scene. Similarly, with Nyamsüren, who wrote the following poem in 1990:

*The river is flowing again,
pushing at the ice,
and the birds are returning.
You are combing my hair
and everything, my love,
is young again.
And again,
a gentle wind,
a southeasterly, is blowing,
and the larks are fluttering*

⁴⁴⁷ See the film made following his death, *Bodi Göröösanii Ögüülei*, in which Dashbalbar is seen speaking both in the Great Hural and presenting his poetry. The passion and energy is palpable.

*where it has blown through.
On a winter's day,
even one word
is swept away
and the branches bloom,
and I go out into the wind
with my son in his cradle.*⁴⁴⁸

In this poem, typical of Nyamsüren's style around this time, with its references to family and to liminal points (here, as in Mend-Ooyo's description of the horseman's journey, the juncture between winter and spring), he opposes the flow of nature⁴⁴⁹ with his lover's combing of his hair with the coming of spring. While his style plays out in a considerably lower key than does Mend-Ooyo's, still it is possible to observe how the intimacy of the goddess/lover's combing of Nyamsüren's hair in both poems mimics the movement in wave of the wind and the spring, and how Nyamsüren's placement of himself and his young child amid these natural forces repeats this most constant of Mongol cultural *topoi*.

In 1984, following the publication of his first book, *Havrin Ursgal (Spring's Flow)*, Nyamsüren presented a copy to Mend-Ooyo, inscribed with the following brief poem:

*My Mend-Ooyo,
my Spring's Flow
unites with you
and flows with you*

The ambiguity of the second line – the book itself, or simply the idea? – manages to link the book with Mend-Ooyo on a number of levels. Not only is there the idea of influence, but the idea too of deep friendship and the concomitant flow of nature. The parallelism of the language too (my translation is deliberately literal) brings the two men together, as poets in the publication of the book, and as two people moving through the world together.

⁴⁴⁸ D. Nyamsüren, *Setgeliin Baigal* (Ulaanbaatar, 1991), 87.

⁴⁴⁹ The title of the volume from which this is taken might be rendered either as *The Nature of the Mind* or, perhaps, *Nature in the Mind*.

At his death in 2002, Nyamsüren left an unpublished volume, which Mend-Ooyo finally published in 2010. These poems, mostly from the late 1990s, hint at a renewed focus in Nyamsüren's understanding of the world. There is more humor, subtle humor, and there is a dynamism of image and color, such as in the following brief poem, "The Grey Herons":

*Over at the blue water's edge,
the tall grey herons
thirstily thirstily
bob their heads.
Their bluegrey bodies
glisten like bottles.
Away over there,
yellow wasps come flying
in to rest upon them,
ostentatious
as Green Tārā.⁴⁵⁰*

Such a mixture of colors – bluegrey herons, yellow wasps and the apprehension of the Buddhist *vidam* Green Tārā – is uncommon to Mongol literature, with its generally more muted palette, and here, as elsewhere in Nyamsüren's later work, this vividness reflects an admixture of the spiritual world with the natural world as he observes it from his home in Ereentsav, on the Russian border to the northeast.

Nyamsüren's poetic development, during the late 1990s, might well have been as a result of the parallel economic and political development of Mongolia. Since the introduction of democracy in 1990. Mend-Ooyo's personal aesthetic and his commitment to nomadic culture might not have changed greatly since the publication of *Altan Ovoo*, but the popularity of that book had made an impression on other writers of his generation, and Nyamsüren, while choosing to remain somewhat outside the mainstream, nonetheless reflected such concerns in his own work.

⁴⁵⁰ Nyamsüren, Sarin Tsagaan Üüls, 75.

One of the more noticeable trends in Nyamsüren's later poetry – and this is especially true of his last published book⁴⁵¹ – is a greater concern for religious topics. Nyamsüren is more like Dashbalbar than Mend-Ooyo in his preference for explicitly Buddhist language and Buddhist references.

The opening poem, "Amitabha," is certainly one of his most popular and best-known. Moreover, it is an act of homage to the Buddha of Limitless Light⁴⁵². This poem, written for the Mongol new year in 1992, gives a clear indication as to the direction in which Nyamsüren's emotional and aesthetic life were now starting to move, as shown by the concluding verses:

*How should I like Amitabha, stay on this earth for aeons,
though it's covered with clouds and ice?
How should I, like Amitabha, feel death to be more meaningful
than life?
How should I, like Amitabha, remain indifferent when a
butterfly burns itself on a candle?
How should I, like Amitabha, not cry when my mother's passes
away?*

*How should I, like Amitabha, understand that a flower can
destroy a bee?
How should I, like Amitabha, understand that one verse can
destroy another?
How should I, like Amitabha, know that worlds exist in distant
emptiness...?
How should I, like Amitabha, realize space and time and my
own non-existence...?*

The sentiments here, and in the previous four verses of the poem, all conforming to the same pattern, are very much in keeping with the traditional Tibetan Buddhist poetic symbolism of meditation. To "be indifferent when a butterfly burns itself up on a candle/...when my mother's passed away" appears almost too callous for Buddhist sensibilities, but in writing these things, Nyamsüren is aspiring to a level of meditative

⁴⁵¹ Nyamsüren, Sarin Tsagaan Üüls.

⁴⁵² The Sanskrit name, and the corresponding Tibetan form 'Od dpag med, translate the term "limitless light").

absorption which is associated with the Buddhas. This fervor, then, is indicative not so much of true disassociation, but of an intention, a desire to be full, like Amitabha, of equanimity.

The thematic context of Nyamsüren's writings during the last few years of his life, then, reflect the burgeoning national and religious consciousness of post-Soviet Mongolia and its people. There is not only the explicit feeling of spirituality, as with "Amitabha," but there is also an opening up to ideas of prerevolutionary concerns, which had informed Yavuuhan's thinking in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In this way, Nyamsüren began to explore images of the landscape around Ereentsav – as with "The Grey Herons" – and how that landscape reflected not only his own spirituality but also the common experience of the Mongol people.

In the poem which gives Nyamsüren's final book its title, "From the Lonely Steppe," he draws a contrast between his life in Ereentsav, on the lonely steppe, and the life of Ulaanbaatar, and finds the latter somewhat lacking. Each verse repeats the same opening four lines, and then develops its theme. For instance,

*From the lonely steppe I come to town,
it is like something gentle.
I see people at the bus stop,
and the street shines, like a sunny valley.
So many of them are coming and going
through the beautiful city, like stars or hail,
fascinated, like a gazelle standing in a forest clearing,
and amazed at the world.
It's looking from among the trees at the cute girls,
their fine bodies, their legs and waists.
Please forgive my country ways,
my years of education are now complete.⁴⁵³*

Even in the implied contrast between the "gentleness" of the city and the alienation of the people with whom he travels the city streets there is at once the common topos of the

⁴⁵³ D.Nyamsüren, *Aglaghan Talaasaa* (Ulaanbaatar, 2001), 59-60.

contrast between town and country, but in this also there is the dislocation of the Mongol people – who, as I have shown elsewhere⁴⁵⁴, are associated in the minds of regarded by the writers of the *Shine handlaga* as directly with the Chinggisid lineage – from the nomadic heritage. With so simple a poem as this, Nyamsüren is able to discuss the contemporary condition of the Mongol people, and the development of Mongol society, both over the course of the previous few years of democracy but also, I believe, over a far longer time frame. Thus, with “From the Lonely Steppe” and with the poems published following his death, we can read of his own development as a spiritual person, but we can also notice he development of his historical consciousness, how the preponderance of love poetry and melancholic self-reflection in his previous volumes subsequently gave way to a broader view of the world and how he relates to it.

But this is not to deny Nyamsüren his deep emotional attachment to his family and to his friends. When Dashbalbar died in October 1999⁴⁵⁵, Nyamsüren was quick to write a requiem⁴⁵⁶ for his friend, a poem as personal as any he wrote, and which emphasizes the themes with which he had been exploring over the previous few years:

*In the elms upon the northern tundra,
the magpie is twittering.
My younger brother, gone to the north,
has not come back.*

*"On the ridge at Altan Bogd,
the swallows are singing."
Nothing is moved
by the swallows' voices.*

*Yellow rays touch
the door of Shambhala.
My pupil has not left
the springs upon the salt-marsh.*

⁴⁵⁴ Wickham-Smith, “Nomadic Influence in Contemporary Mongolian Poetry.”

⁴⁵⁵ See my introduction to Dashbalbar, *The River Runs Gently*, for an account of his death and the circumstances surrounding it.

⁴⁵⁶ “A Song of Loss,” Nyamsüren *Aglaghan Talaasaa*, 58.

*"A yellow rainbow arches
over the yellow rocks."
My younger brother, the gazelle,
was not shot down by arrowhead words.*

*A gazelle and a man, wounded or not wounded,
you are both our younger brothers...*

This poem, written of course in the initial shock at a dear friend's death, extends beyond the immediate emotional reaction to address not only Dashbalbar's own feeling for the natural world and for the landscape, but also the more general interaction of the human world and the spiritual world, in the form of the physical topography. Nyamsüren's reference to the north and to the mountain of Altan Bogd re echoes of death for the Mongol nomadic community, places associated with their geographical location and their topographical features, but also with their inner, spiritual import, as a kind of paradise. Moreover, it is here the birds and the animals who are witnesses to Dashbalbar's death, and the gazelle in particular, after (after which the film chronicling Dashbalbar's career was named [Dashbalbar San 2000]) is clearly in Nyamsüren's mind, and perhaps in the national psyche also, indicative of Dashbalbar himself.

The final couplet of the poem emphasises once again the way in which Nyamsüren sees the natural world as relating to the human world, and especially insofar as his relationship with Dashbalbar is concerned. The term "younger brother" (*düü* in Mongolian) is not only true – for Dashbalbar was nine years Nyamsüren's junior, but it is also a sign of affection, part of the kinship system which extends throughout Mongol society.

Dashbalbar's death had a profound effect on Mongol cultural and political life, and Nyamsüren's poem captures the emotion of this loss to the country as much as to himself. Like his other poems from this period, he is engaged in an exploration of the very themes – land, landscape, community, history, spiritual practise – with which *Altan Ovoo* is concerned, and it is in this way that, been a poet whose feeling for his home in Ereentsav

had thus far been confined to more accidental mentions in poems which had been more concerned with his family and his lovers, Nyamsüren was now, in what would turn out to be his final years but which he presumably felt with the second half of his career, beginning to compose poetry about the heritage and experience of the Mongol people, using the themes of Buddhism and, gradually, the spiritual immanence of the landscape to do so.

Nyamsüren's death, two years after Dashbalbar's appears to have been the result of a drunken brawl in Ereentsav. Dashbalbar's, on the other hand, appears to have been the price of political agitation throughout the 1990s, and especially against the government's proposal to allow the privatisation of land. Dashbalbar spoke for many people in pointing out, as he wrote in one of the more famous essays which he wrote for his fellow parliamentarians, that "Mongols have Never Owned The Land"⁴⁵⁷.

The controversy stirred by the nature of Dashbalbar's politics following the introduction of democracy was such that he was accused by some in the media and in public life of having become too nationalistic. But this was not the type of nationalistic quietism of which Mend-Ooyo has been accused. Dashbalbar was branded by one journalist as "a crazy psychotic Nazi"⁴⁵⁸ for one particular speech he delivered, and similar vitriol was forthcoming from other quarters.

Dashbalbar's politics were intimately tied in with his poetry, and in looking at his relationship with Mend-Ooyo in particular, it is necessary to understand how, while they were unified in their commitment to Mongol nomadic culture *in their poetry*, they had very different attitudes in terms of public service and their public personas.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁷ Dashbalbar, *The River Runs Gently*, 308.

⁴⁵⁸ There is an account of this particular incident in Dashbalbar's commentary to his poem "Bright Faith" (discussed below), Dashbalbar, *The River Runs Gently*, 53-58.

⁴⁵⁹ It would, in fact, be to misrepresent Mend-Ooyo to emphasize his apparently quietist attitude to the social aspects of Mongol cultural politics, but he is more concerned with the loss of traditional vocabulary in the language of young people, and the introduction of western values and western cultural phenomena, than with the action of the Mongol

That Dashbalbar chose to attach a long explanation of his political views, and the events which catalysed his entry into national politics, to a poem which seems, at first reading, to be a simple and bucolic lyric poem is clearly no a coincidence. "Bright Faith" is, while not one of his most famous poems, possibly the poem which best sums up the literary and political work which consumed him in his final years. "Bright Faith" was written on 10 February 1998, Dashbalbar's forty-first birthday:

*When the sky was vast,
that was my Mongolia.
When the earth was golden,
my Onon was flowing.*

*My queen, my mother Öülen,
is the water I've boiled for my tea.
My forefather Chingis
is the water I've given my horse.*

*The stag's call, out of the voice of autumn,
eight centuries unceasing.
He is not forgotten, who came to taste
the pure flow of the Onon.*

*My party-colored jewel
trots out, along the bank.
The autumn woods of my Onon
are a sacred place for a ger.*

*At the time of Altai and Hentii,
the golden lineage stood eternal.
At the time of my ancestors' homeland,
the Mongols, in their deeds, stood upon the world.*

*My queen, my mother Öülen,
is the homeland where my family has remained.
My forefather Chingis
is the land which has watched the fire.*

With their references to Mongol history and culture, with the invocation of mountains and rivers, and of Chinggis Haan, and most notably perhaps, and yet most subtly, of the

legislature in relation to the landscape. So it is more in the focus of their concerns than in their passion for these concerns that Mend-Ooyo and Dashbalbar differed.

“sacred place for a ger” at the center of the text, each of these verses speaks to Dashbalbar’s commitment to Mongol heritage, and in a broader sense, and considering that he had already been a member of the Great Hural for four years, to the importance of this heritage to the people for whom he was speaking.

In this poem, moreover, we have the physical association of the ancestors – represented by Chinggis and Öülen, “father” and “mother” – with the *nutag*, the Mongol homeland. This reinforcement of history, however, is here used as much for the purpose of reestablishing the Mongol people’s faith in Mongolia. Towards the end of his essay accompanying this poem, he quotes his spiritual teacher, Bakula Rinpoché, a Buddhist monk who was for many years the Indian ambassador to Mongolia:

My teacher Bakula said, “In the beginning, we needed to place our faith in the Buddha. If we had no faith, then the Buddha could not come to give you help.” This is true. And so, believing that my Mongolia will never perish, I wrote this poem called “Bright Faith.”⁴⁶⁰

This combination of religious and sociopolitical faith reflects the strength of Dashbalbar’s commitment to his cause, but it also reflects an understanding common to many writers of his generation – Mend-Ooyo and Nyamsüren being the most important of these – which is central to the revival of Yavuuhan’s Mongol nomadic tradition. For without faith, Dashbalbar seems to be saying, not only would Yavuuhan not have succeeded in establishing the *Shine handlaga* and in enthusing his own students with the traditions and the literature which drove him, but also the Mongol people themselves would not have been able to recover from the purges and censorship of the 1930s and 1940s, nor from the stagnation of the 1960s and 1970s, nor from the hardships of post-Soviet socioeconomics. So for Dashbalbar the ideas about which he writes in *Bright Faith*,⁴⁶⁰ are really the same ideas as he wrote about in his 1980 poem “Love On Another, My People” (see Chapter 5).

⁴⁶⁰ Dashbalbar, *The River Runs Gently*, 58.

Poetry of Spirit was published, following Dashbalbar's death, as much memorial as his final volume of poetry. Indeed, its principal themes are those described above, and which constitute much of the thematic material of Yavuuhulan's students. Of course, there was with Dashbalbar a more militant political message, of resistance against westernisation and against the specific policies of the Mongolian government concerning the partitioning of the land.⁴⁶¹ What links Dashbalbar's literary work to that of Mend-Ooyo is the consistent understanding of the Mongol people – and not simply the nomadic people, but the urban population also, united by the Chinggisid “golden thread” – as the protectors and stewards of the land on which they live, who through this stewardship pay honor and respect to the ancestors and to the Buddhas present within the land.

The loss of Dashbalbar at so young an age, and at the height of his political and literary powers, left Mongol literature without a strident and politically active voice. It is possible to equate Dashbalbar with writers such as R. Choinom (1936-1977), who used to do impromptu readings of his poetry in Ulaanbaatar's Suuhbaatar Square during the 1970s, or B. Rinchen (1905-1977), who used the travel privileges granted to him in the 1960s and 1970s as a scholar and writer to promote Mongol traditional culture. , but Dashbalbar's legacy is as much his faith in the people as in the cultural traditions which they represent. This loss of stridency has meant that the literature written by writers of Dashbalbar's and Mend-Ooyo's generation has tended now to cleave more to the latter's style than to the former's, and it is easier now to see a resurgence in the influence of Mend-Ooyo, and of works such as *Altan Ovoo*.

⁴⁶¹ When I came to translate *Poetry of Spirit*, Dashbalbar's son Gangabaatar requested that we publish it with a translation of his father's political essays, which the Dashbalbar Foundation had already published. It was a *dait accompli* that the book would not be called *Poetry of Spirit* but *The Battle For Our Land Has Begun*, which had been the title chosen by Dashbalbar for his political writing.

The work of D. Nyamaa (b1958), while neither so thematically expansive nor as intellectually broad as Mend-Ooyo's, nonetheless constitutes an excellent example of a writer whose vision, developed in the same nomadic tradition and during the same difficult political period, was informed by the work of *Shine handlaga* and subsequent literary groups.

Much of Nyamaa's writing is autobiographical. In contrast to Mend-Ooyo, however, Nyamaa deals specifically with his own life and does not extrapolate his experiences into those of the Mongol people in general. While in some ways this makes his work less rich, it does show the way in which the individual – in contrast to Mend-Ooyo's universal approach – can be seen to relate to Mongol cultural heritage.

Nyamaa's second book *Narni Alga (Insistent Sun)*⁴⁶² is a collection of brief prose pieces, none more than a couple of pages, all of them written from the writer's own point of view. It is an unashamedly romantic text, but Nyamaa's composition and the way he works the language bear similarities to Mend-Ooyo's prose writing. For example, here is the entire text of "In the Midday's Fiery Heat":⁴⁶³

I kept an ear open for the sunlight, which fell gently like rain. The light transfixed my entire body, it was as though I was bright crystal. Now I was looking at the sun, someone was holding me in their eyes, and I saw sparks of a thousand rainbow colors.

I was prismatic, like a glass. If only the snow had been fluttering now, if only everything had been fresh, with people and animals wandering randomly about, numb with the cold! Mother would warm me. I felt I was fated to send out rays of warm light.

One time, my father took a glass prism and put it on some horse dung, and it started steaming and burst into flames. I was like that now, and I yearned to plunge into the waters of Nariini Gol, amidst the white burdock. I went up onto the crest of the hill and dismounted. My heart was cleansed, a candle flame, blazed open like a lotus.

⁴⁶² D. Nyamaa, *Narnii Alga* (Ulaanbaatar: 1993).

⁴⁶³ Nyamaa, 9.

The flock of sheep, in threes, looked to me like swerving clouds. Nearby, my spirited horse was peacefully dozing. A wind was drawing us down the mountain.

The world was hazy in the sun and, in the golden melodies which were somewhere sounding, I caught fire.

This text shows well how Nyamaa, like mend-Ooyo, is able to mix reportage and memoir with an almost metaphysical discourse. It also reminds us, I think, that whereas the ideas that both writers are seeking to express – and especially the idea of interconnectedness between humans and nature – might appear in translation to be metaphysical, they are an aspect of reality for Mongol nomads.⁴⁶⁴

The ideas which drive the short texts of *Nrni Alga* – the author's childhood as a herder, his observation of the seasons, his relationship with his parents and with the larger community with which they moved – is not touched in any way by the political situation during that period, it is as though there is nothing outside the small mobile community of herders. Contrast this with *Altan Ovoo* – not dissimilar in its episodic structure and its resolute focus upon traditional culture – and the lack of breadth in the former book is clear, despite the apparent similarity of discourse.

Nyamaa has, more recently, begun to revisit his earlier, stylistically more complex, poems, and in his book of sonnets, *Minii Yertönts (My World)*⁴⁶⁵, he weaves a garland of sonnets – a technically difficult feat – through a deeper exposition of themes similar to those explored in *Narni Alga*. The final sonnet in the series, in being composed from the

⁴⁶⁴ This too might be worth considering in relation to the charge levelled at such writers, even from within the new urban Mongolia, of romanticism and nostalgia, for it is clearly neither nostalgia nor romanticism, but practical and sensible, for a herding community to observe the behavior of nature and the ways in which it impacts upon the community.

⁴⁶⁵ D. Nyamaa, *Minii Yertönts*, (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture, n.d.) This book, though not dated, was originally composed in 1986 (notably the publication year of *Altan Ovoo*) and subsequently revised and published, in conjunction with my translation, in 2009.

first lines of the previous fourteen sonnets, is also thereby a summation of the entire series, and so of Nyamaa's thematic material:

*Yes, I came then into the world...
I heard words of benediction, and I rejoiced.
Every moment of my life is meaningful,
I offer round the waters of eternity from a golden cup.
The golden pillars of the days stand erect, and
I meet with my gentle youth from long ago.
Time is the amazement of magic,
the skirts of snow rip apart, the flower petals are smiling.
The melody of flute and violin sound through the years,
the voice of destiny carols like an alarm-clock, and
my love flowers forth amid the mind's rain.
The blue mountains of legend beckon from afar,
the search for truth brings life's happiness, and
I will shine for others like a candle!*⁴⁶⁶

This being a summation of the whole garland, one misses out considerably on what is found in the body of the preceding sonnets. However, it is worth noticing here the movement between music, nature and Nyamaa's childlike apprehension of the world.⁴⁶⁷ In the extract from *Narni Alga*, his memories of his father closely parallel Mend-Ooyo's memories of his on father in *Altan Ovoo*, and it is not difficult to see, I think, how Nyamaa's approach to re/creating a world through language and image and sound reflects the approach taken by Mend-Ooyo throughout his work.

I would like to end this brief overview of the relationship between Mend-Ooyo's writing and that of his contemporaries with two slightly older writers, Ch. Galsan (b1943) and D. Uriahnai (b.1940). Galsan has spent a good part of his adult life living in Germany, in the DDR and subsequently in the reunified state, but he is now living again in

⁴⁶⁶ Nyamaa, *Minii yertönts*, .54. I fear that my translation makes this final sonnet sound awkward, but I would ask the reader to bear in mind that Nyamaa's text is remarkable for how he manages to combine these opening lines into a coherent new poem.

⁴⁶⁷ There is, in Nyamaa's writing, a feeling and an atmosphere similar to that in *The Centuries*, by the seventeenth century English prose writer Thomas Traherne (1636/37-1674). , where we read lines such as "I was a strange, which at my entrance into the world, was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys...my knowledge was divine. I think that there could be some understanding of both writers afforded by a comparative study.

Ulaanbaatar. His work is starkly divided into books written in German and Mongol, and there appears to be no overlap at present.⁴⁶⁸ He has won numerous prizes in Germany for his work, which has succeeded in opening Mongolia up to a European audience. Perhaps because he has spent so much of his time outside the country, his books are not as immediately popular, nor as well-known, in Mongolia. Galsan has also been trained in the shamanic tradition of the Mongol Tuvan people, and so has a particular interest in preserving both that tradition and the culture within which it developed.

Urianhai, who will also be discussed in the following chapter in connection with the BISHÜBI group of post-Soviet writers, also has a deep connection with shamanism. His grandfather, with whom he had a very close relationship, was a shaman before the revolution, and was heavily censored during the 1930s. Urianhai was also himself censored, albeit during the relatively easier post-Stalinist period. Urianhai chooses to dress exclusively in the traditional Mongol jacket, or *deel*, which is gradually being replaced by western-style jackets even among the older, and more traditional, Mongols.

Galsan and Urianhai came of age in the early 1960s, after the death of Stalin, and during a period of relative cultural freedom. While Galsan was sent to the DDR, Urianhai remained in Mongolia, both men writing literature in which the traditional concerns – of *nutag*, of spirituality, of lineage – were to the fore, albeit modulated by their own kind of self-censorship.

In a poem written during the 1990s, “Beneath the Protecting Sun,”⁴⁶⁹ Urianhai raises a similar group of themes to those found in much of the work which we have thus far

⁴⁶⁸ The translator of Galsan’s German books, Katharina Rout, has told me that he is not minded to have his German books translated into Mongol, but my experience is that he is happy to have books translated from both languages into English.

⁴⁶⁹ Despite being unfailingly precise on the date and place of his poems’ composition, Uruanhai has left this particular poem without annotation.

considered. However, there is an added level to his writing, a sense of pain and sadness perhaps:

*I, beneath the protecting sun,
sway and sway like the green grass.
I loom, I loom up like a sheer cliff,
I dessicate verities upon the elders' tongues.*

*I, beneath the protecting sun,
circle the ger and circle the world.
I repay the kindness of the fortunate,
and, in the place of honor, I gain the world's respect.*

*I, beneath the protecting sun,
write poems like the daytime stars.
My Mongolian poems, with their sunny words,
recall people and years, like the star of morning.⁴⁷⁰*

The pain manifests, I think, in the language of distance, of alienation. A "daytime star" for instance is a simile, taken from Tibetan religious literature, used to show the rarity of something, and while it is unclear as to whether Urianhai means that his poems are rare in their quality or in their strangeness, his feeling of otherness is clear.

The personal importance of "gain[ing] the world's respect" for one who has suffered for his political views is here also linked with the constancy of the sun's protection. Urianhai's use of the natural world is unusual insofar as he receives from it the power with which to bolster his own position within it. Thus, in another poem, "The Sky, Where Nothing is Fixed" (composed in 1992, and revised in 1996 and 2002), we can see how he apprehends the sky (*tenger*) as somehow preserving his philosophical position as well as his place within the universe:

*All things
in the sky, where nothing is fixed –
not I, but mine,
joined with the rejection of form,
exists!
Flowing – Fixed*

⁴⁷⁰ Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 86.

Fixed – Flowing
that Mine which I never see,
the Appearing which never appears!
All things
in the sky, from where nothing falls,
my I,
joined with the rejection of formlessness,
does not exist!
Purity – Creation
Creation – Purity
my undying I,
unformed Form!
All things
of mine
in the sky, where nothing is fixed,
from where nothing falls...
my not my,
the Unseparated from others,
the Unjoined with others...!⁴⁷¹

The philosophical framework that Urianhai uses in his poetry, as in his dense and complex prose, is one that reflects his own personal outlook, but it also shows the influence of his mentor, his shaman grandfather, as well as his deep commitment to the Mongol tradition. This commitment, though less sunny than mend-Ooyo's in disposition, is no less powerful for that, and in much of the poems he is currently writing – and the poem above, its composition stretching over a decade, covers a period during which he was able for the first time in his life, to speak openly and from the heart – his sense of melancholy and of alienation (exacerbated by the death of his son) has placed him, perhaps involuntarily, somewhat without the group of intellectual and lyrical Mongol writers with whom he feels most connected.

Galsan, having spent decades away from his homeland, and thus from his *nutag*, also exhibits a sense of alienation which is at odds with the general feeling of unity presented in the work of Mend-Ooyo and his colleagues. In his short story "The Goddess," Galsan tells of a young girl who appears one day in the narrator's encampment:

⁴⁷¹ Urianhai, 75.

One day, there was this girl, she was standing in the camp attached to the milking section. I don't know who saw her first, or what she was doing, but as we raced around, she was gaping like a rabbit trapped in a net at all the creatures round about. Apart from a rather old deel of animal skin and a fine belt of leather, her clothes were unlaundered, her brownish hair fell in a plait down her back, straggling her shoulders, but her face, legs and arms were not scratched or wounded or chapped like ours, she was soft and clear as though she had been in clotted cream all summer long and had just that moment emerged, majestic she was with her intense face and strong forehead, her wide and deep set eyes, her thick eyebrows and her broad nose. Maybe she knew how to speak, but she said nothing, she merely nodded and shook herself in response to questions. We did know one thing, however, that her name was Hasaa. No-one knew how she had let this information slip out. To hear the adults talking, there were feral children who had been secreted away in the mountains during the counterrevolutionary period, they had either died or were living like people among people, but in any case they had sent this one back.⁴⁷²

The story tells of the way in which this young girl, originally considered a feral child, silent and beautiful, but ultimately mysterious, is later considered to be a goddess. This idea comes from the fact that she had no ovog, or patronymic, and thus was without lineage, and when she is registered in school, her teacher becomes irritated that she cannot be properly registered:

And one mischievous fellow said to her, "It sure suits you that you fell from Heaven, right?" And she gave an inscrutable smile and nodded in agreement. And, as they looked at her, the angrier the teacher became, and the more mischievous the other man, and they said, "So, anyhow, since everyone knows about you and since your master himself wants it, let us simply call you Heaven, your father's name." And they really did register her as Hasaa Heaven.⁴⁷³

The importance of lineage, of course, of knowing the family from which one is descended, is of great importance within Mongol society, with its "golden thread" stretching

⁴⁷² Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 221.

⁴⁷³ Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 222-223.

back to Chinggis Haan. The name Hasaa Heaven⁴⁷⁴, then, emphasises the girl's otherness while, at the same time, it grants her an *ovog* and allows her to be "normal."

Galsan's story ends with a deliberately inconclusive denouement, in which, many years later, the narrator sets off to try to find Hasaa. He visits her ger and she gives him food and drink and sends him on his way. The final paragraph –

*I don't know how I got there or what happened, but at one point I had come round, I had been scrapping with someone beneath the sky upon the dung-scented, rocky slopes, the night lined with stars, and he whined, as though he were whispering an oath, "Yes, yes, yes...the Goddess, she was from heaven, she was my dream...she was your dream too..."*⁴⁷⁵

– is obscure like the flickering of a candle, in whose light something may or may not be seen clearly, but which is ultimately unknown and unknowable. The loneliness of the steppe, the vast distances, the dangerous weather patterns and the harsh conditions – notwithstanding the free consumption of alcohol – mean that such experiences as this are not uncommon. Galsan's narrative here has strong echoes of D. Natsagdorj's 1930 short story "Dark Cliffs," which takes place in much the same psychophysical space and which has an equally obscure ending involving a man and the confusion of her lover.⁴⁷⁶ Galsan's story was written, as far as I have been able to determine, during his period in Germany, during the 1990s, which strengthens the connection with Natsagdorj, who had spent several years in the late 1920s in Leipzig. The psychological sophistication of both stories is such that it is unlikely that the echoes of Natsagdorj are in Galsan's story by chance, and there is of course the further aspect of both men's having spent a considerable period of time outside Mongolia.

⁴⁷⁴ In the original Hasaa Tenger. Tenger, of course, indicates a nexus of concepts along the axis "heaven, weather, sky, god," and this should be borne in mind when reading this story.

⁴⁷⁵ Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 223.

⁴⁷⁶ It is not clear as to whether the narrator of Galsan's story is in love with the goddess, but it is definitely in keeping with this style of narrative for such an assumption to be made here.

The general themes of Galsan's writing, both in Mongolian and in German, are well represented by "The Goddess." He addresses frequently, as I have said, the psychological difficulties that come from physical disjuncture, and, like Urianhai, his writing holds an uncommon level sadness and melancholy. He also writes often from the point of view of the natural world, and especially of animals, and in this he has his training as a shaman, much as Yavuuhan's poems such as "Goat Peak" showed the influence of his father, who himself had been a hunter and a shaman.⁴⁷⁷

There are many other writers from Mend-Ooyo's generation who could have been included here, but I hope that this discussion has shown how, with the themes explored in *Altan Ovoo*, he has both influenced his contemporaries and, together with them, has investigated and translated these traditional ideas into a modern literary framework.

The final chapter will show the ways in which the subsequent generations of writers, including those born and educated in the post-Soviet period, are themselves exploring the same themes, and how they are beginning to position themselves in relation to Mend-Ooyo and his work – he being now the leading literary figure of his generation – with regard to their own future, as writers and as cultural personalities.

⁴⁷⁷ See the Appendix for a comparative discussion of *Altan Ovoo*, Galsan's *Der Wolf und die Hundin* and the works of the Kyrgyz writer Chingis Aytmatov, in which the use of animal characters will be addressed.

CHAPTER 13

**The Influence of *Altan Ovoo* on the
Work of the New Generation**

*quite
suddenly
bright
and soon
I will sleep
my screams
stored
my tears
hidden
my form
changed
my roots
will extend
my words
will remain
quite
suddenly*⁴⁷⁸

The generation that has grown up with Mongol independence and genuinely democratic elections has been forced, especially in recent years, and with the development of the internet and the possibility for some of foreign travel, to deal with many diverse and contradictory influences. The very youngest of Mongolia's literary elite, writers such as S. Biligsaihan (b1983) and Ch. Ösöibold (b1990) were not directly subject to the Soviet influence, and indeed have been formed by the forces, initially of free-market capitalism as promoted by Jeffrey Sachs⁴⁷⁹, and latterly by the growing influence of the country's enveloping neighbors, Russia and China.

⁴⁷⁸ B. Galsansuh, "My Metaphysic" (2005) (B. Galsansuh, *Burhand helsen zövlögöö: Postpunk shülgüüd*, [Ulaanbaatar 2007], 221).

⁴⁷⁹ There is a full and extremely insightful account of the fraught economic turnaround that emerged in the early 1990s in Morris Rossabi, *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

In this final chapter, it is my intention to examine the ways in which the themes of *Altan Ovoo* have been, and are still being, examined and developed within the Mongol literary scene. Mend-Ooyo without doubt is the country's preëminent writer⁴⁸⁰, and so the question as to *whether* his work is of significance to this generation is somewhat beside the point. What is less certain is to what extent, and how, the ideas which mend-Ooyo considers of greatest importance, both in Mongol cultural life and in literature in the new Mongolia, are being represented in the work of these young writers.

The place of the traditional ideas and forms in contemporary Mongol literature is difficult to characterise. The concerns and attitudes expressed by Mend-Ooyo in his work have many supporters, and I think it would not be unrealistic to say that almost every Mongol writer, of whatever sociopolitical hue, would give some credence to the ideas of landscape and spirituality and family. That said, there is a growing number of writers among the younger generation who are experimenting with styles and themes quite foreign to those found in *Altan Ovoo* and similar works of Mend-Ooyo and his contemporaries.

My intention here, then, is to use *Altan Ovoo* and the ideas developed in the preceding chapters as a prism through which the new Mongol literature can be observed. The result of such an exploration is, of course, reflexive, and the identification of similarities and differences between Mend-Ooyo's work and that of the writers here discussed will only serve to highlight Mend-Ooyo's continuing presence in the Mongol scene and the fracturing of that scene into cliques, of varying degrees of overlap. Moreover, as I discussed in the previous chapter, during the last quarter-century, Mend-Ooyo's work has naturally

⁴⁸⁰ It has been suggested to me that this honor is now held by G-A. Ayurzana (b1970), whose work I will consider later in this chapter. Ayurzana definitely has the highest profile outside Mongolia, having attended the Iowa Writer's Workshop, but I still think it is more accurate to say that, whereas Ayurzana is a focus for the younger writers, it is Mend-Ooyo who represents a wider and more generalised image of Mongol literature.

developed and expanded the ideas central to *Altan Ovoo*, and thus these final pages should be read as a consequence, rather than a secondary analysis, of, Mend-Ooyo's book.

The importance of tradition to Mongol society as a whole has meant that writers such as Mend-Ooyo have come to be regarded by their younger colleagues with a certain amount of deference, even when those colleagues are seeking to overturn the status quo. The deaths in 1982 of the senior writers Yavuuhulan and M. Tsedendorj left Mongol letters with significant lacunæ, a situation that repeated itself at the turn of the new century, with the demise of Mend-Ooyo's close friends Dashbalbar and Nyamsüren. With these deaths, Mend-Ooyo is now – with the possible exception of D. Urianhai – the nation's preëminent literary figure, at least from the pre-democratic generation.

Thus, it is that, deference and respect notwithstanding, Mend-Ooyo and his work tends to polarise intellectual opinion. The ideas presented in *Altan Ovoo*, and with which Part III was concerned, are being reconfigured in the new Mongolia. Buddhism is gaining popularity for sure, but evangelical Christianity is also becoming an important cultural force⁴⁸¹. Images of Chinggis Haan are everywhere, from hoardings to beer bottles to massive statuary, and the power that such historical figures command in the popular imagination is certainly different now from that which they commanded during the anti-nationalist Soviet times. Furthermore, the idea of *nutag* itself is coming under fire, firstly from those who support land privatization and ownership, and secondly from those who are seeking financial benefit – whether through manual labor or investment – through the development of mining in the Gobi.

This reconfiguration, then, of Mongol values has been underway from the calamitous push towards a free market economy during early nineties, but now that people are

⁴⁸¹ President Elbegdorj, while ostensibly Roman Catholic, has made great pains to connect with Buddhist practise, and has recently (late 2010) made offerings at Ulaanbaatar's Ganden monastery.

beginning to enter universities, who have no recollection of the Soviet period, and so not only the society at large, but also the intellectual community in particular, has begun to view its own religious make-up, historical contribution and current economic and political status in very different, and often, for the older generation, very challenging, ways.

Of those writers whose aesthetic is closest to Mend-Ooyo, by far the most important is Ts. Bavuudorj (b1969), a student not only of Mend-Ooyo himself, but also of Dashbalbar and Nyamsüren, and thus the *de facto* inheritor of Yavuuhulan's mantle. Bavuudorj has published seven books of poetry and in 2006 won the Natsagdorj Prize for poetry in recognition of his work.

In my opinion, Bavuudorj's principal contribution to contemporary Mongol literature is at once stylistic and thematic. There is a quiet surrealism in his work, not so much humorous as visionary, which calls to mind Mend-Ooyo's flying horses. He is also strongly influenced by the characteristic Mongol syncretism of Buddhism and shamanism, which emphasizes the visionary aspect of his work. For instance, this is how he begins the poem "At the Door of the Skytent:"

*At the door of the skytent,
holding a golden lantern,
by the light of my golden lantern, I can see
that the old ones are coming,
mounted on high upon white clouds.
A gentle creature, smelling still of milk
is coming, wading through the milky ocean.
Through tantric practise and endless recitation,
a monk has shrunk his body, small as an elbow, and
he's coming, flying cross-legged.
The door of the skytent
swings quietly open...⁴⁸²*

Although this poem follows clearly in the tradition of Yavuuhulan's *Shine handlaga*, there is a striking thematic use of nomadic and Buddhist material. Throughout his work, Bavuudorj

⁴⁸² Bavuudorj, 132.

plays upon his readers' expectations and offers them, not a straightforward treatment of his themes, but rather images emphasised, like the shrunken monk, through distortion and detail and exaggeration.

Bavuudorj's use of Buddhist imagery runs through his entire work, and he frequently melds it with images of the natural landscape. Like his teacher Dashbalbar, Bavuudorj reveals himself through his association with the grass. In "My Song to the Grass," Bavuudorj acknowledges "the golden secret transformation/of people into grass", as they pray to the Buddha:

*The sun-yellow grasses
bow down, as though gently
praying, We will come to you.
How will you meet with the Buddha?
Or will you grasp that great image,
the golden secret transformation
of people into grass...?
One thing we lack,
to sense your language.
One power we lack,
to create your land.
One day, one day...
We will live for just a while
with our simple understanding.*⁴⁸³

This vision of a "simple understanding" gives Bavuudorj's work, through its lexical and stylistic simplicity, a depth which Dashbalbar's also exhibited. Mend-Ooyo's arc in *Altan Ovoo*, moreover, emphasizes from the beginning his relationship with his father, his observations are those of a young man. The deep understanding of social relationship and kinship in Mongol culture means moreover that there is a dependence between the generations, which likewise cadences into the literature. So, Bavuudorj's relationship to Mend-Ooyo and to his other teachers is such that, while he uses their ideas and the ideas, more importantly, of the ancestral voices that in turn informed them, he also has gradually

⁴⁸³ Bavuudorj, 76.

developed his own understanding of how these ideas and images might work in the present world. Thus, Bavuudorj has become, through his association with the *Shine handlaga* poets, a powerful voice in the adaptation of Yavuuhulan's ideas for the twenty-first century.

The recurring images in Bavuudorj's poetry – flying monks, and grasses, and the ancestors, and intuitive communication between humans and animals – are treated with an oneiric quality which builds upon Mend-Ooyo's treatment in *Altan Ovoo* of the same ideas, creating a patina of mystery which in some way alters reality and brings the poet into a deep connection with the world in which he lives. We can see this in the short poem "Winter Music," in which Bavuudorj, though in the city, realises the depth of his link with the animals, running over the steppe, with the rivers and with the moon:

*A herd of deer, pursuing a wolf,
racing around on the icy river
until the sleeping fish awake.
One of them slips, falls
sliding onto his belly.
On the horns of the pale moon,
calling snow poet, oh snow poet, and
a frantic knocking at the window,
that I, dwelling in the city, might take flight.*⁴⁸⁴

Bavuudorj's understanding of poetry develops from what might be called a spiritual link with the natural world and with the mystical presence of the Buddha within that world. He has a strong relationship with Mend-Ooyo, and the latter's work has clearly influenced his own. Bavuudorj's commitment to developing the traditional forms and themes in modern ways continues the tradition established during the 1970s by the *Shine handlaga* poets, of whom Mend-Ooyo was one.

Towards the end of the 1980s, following the death of Yavuuhulan, the *Shine handlaga* underwent an expansion, a widening of its scope and its development along other, parallel lines. Certain writers who, not being directly affiliated with Yavuuhulan, chose to

⁴⁸⁴ Bavuudorj, 152.

form a new group, with the main intention, according to one of the founder-members T-Ö. Erdenetsogt (b1971) of “creating significant publications with a clear methodology.”⁴⁸⁵ Thus, it was that the poets working within the BISHÜBI⁴⁸⁶ framework were aiming to create work that had a thematic and conceptual style, rather than simply a technical or prosodic style. In this way, they were able to expand upon the ideas of such poets as Yavuuhulan and his students, whilst remaining independent of that group’s specific focus upon the Mongol nomadic tradition. One of the principal influences on BISHÜBI was the older poet D. Urianhai (b1940), whose work mixes the traditions of Mongol philosophic and spiritual literature – the latter being influenced both by Buddhism and by shamanism, and so retaining the nomad’s respect for and relationship with, the natural world – with a sensibility influenced by abstraction and modernism. While Urianhai is not an exemplar of the younger generation whose work I am here considering, I believe it is worth observing his highly rhetorical and dense style, so as to see the formal difference between his own and Mend-Ooyo’s rich and visionary prose. In his exposition of the BISHÜBI philosophy, he says,

*The truth of creative thought is not the physical truth of life, is not a non-local spiritual path, it is not a delusional vision, not a fantastic projection, rather it is the aim to clearly distort, to unclearly extend, the straight lines of the world’s truth and thus, in that unmeasured and unclear space, and with the secret magic powers of hyperbolic straight-thinking, exorcised lies are absorbed with exorcised truths through the apposite matching of valid lies and invalid truths – in other words, that which should not happen in life. Thus we understand that one unity, one solid body, is created, and thus a special depiction.*⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵ Email to the author, n.d.

⁴⁸⁶ The name BISHÜBI, created by Erdenetsogt’s teacher the poet and scholar D. Batbayar, is an acronym for *Bilgüüni shüten bishrehui*, loosely translated as “Worship of Wisdom,” or even as “Philosophy,” and we can see how this links in theoretically with the group’s wish for a “clear methodology.”

⁴⁸⁷ Urianhai, 7.

The complexity of this statement, as with most everything Urianhai writes, masks a set of clear and obvious truths, by which he and those whom he influences advance their ideas. These truths concern themselves with the “special depiction” that comes from the extension of “the straight lines of the world’s truth.” This, I would say, is really the same as Mend-Ooyo’s conception of Altan Owoo as being the world in miniature, and the stone from Altan Owoo as being the hill itself in miniature. In this way, the world becomes a true expression of itself, but only when that expression embodies the “unity” of thought and expression.⁴⁸⁸

In T-Ö. Erdenetsogt’s *Setgelin ogtorgui (Sky of Mind)*, there is a photograph of the author, praying at home, in front of a Buddhist altar⁴⁸⁹. This explicit acknowledgement of his Buddhist faith marks him out from his contemporaries⁴⁹⁰, but it is also a clear indication of his “methodology”. The title of the book recalls the idea in Buddhism that the mind is as infinite and capacious as the sky, and such central Buddhist experiences recur throughout the book. In “Nakedness,” for instance, he contrasts the natural world with human life, a technique used frequently in Buddhist expository and pedagogical literature⁴⁹¹. Here are the first and last stanzas:

1
*In the wind that blows and erodes,
 colors are naked.
 In the stream that flows and erodes,
 stones are naked.
 Against the lips that kiss and erode,
 lips are naked.
 In the palms that caress and erode,
 the body is naked.*

4
*In the truth of death,
 humans are naked.
 In the truth of being left behind,*

⁴⁸⁸ Personal communication, 2009.

⁴⁸⁹ Erdenetsogt. This picture is not reproduced in the English translation, however.

⁴⁹⁰ I cannot think of another writer in the new Mongolia who associates so strongly and so explicitly with any one religion.

⁴⁹¹ And also in the work of Danzanravjaa, among others.

*the one alone is naked.
In the truth of destiny,
traces are naked.*⁴⁹²

For Erdenetsogt, the natural world is not only something to be celebrated for itself⁴⁹³, it is also an exemplar, whose meaning we can contemplate and thus incorporate into our lives. Indeed, I would suggest that much of Erdenetsogt's output can be read as spiritual teaching, not from an enlightened teacher, but from one practitioner to another.

Setgelin ogtorgui contains a large number of poems, then, which are in style reminiscent of the work of Danzanravjaa and earlier Buddhist poets, both Tibetan and Mongol. Titles such as "Prayerful Wishes," "Obeisance," "The Doors of the Celestial Temple" and "Spreading a Hundred Million Mantras" clearly indicate a thematic style, and Erdenetsogt even includes a Tibetan prayer in another poem, "The Servants are Kneeling."⁴⁹⁴ Reading these poems, and many of his other poems inspired by Buddhism and by previous Buddhist writers, it becomes clear that Erdenetsogt's is an unusual relationship with the tradition of Mongol literature. In the poem "Clear Skies," dedicated to, and inspired by, Danzanravjaa, we read of the frustration of seeking enlightenment, and the peaceful realisation that comes with finding it. This is conveyed through a meditation upon the landscape around Danzanravjaa's monastery at Hamriin Hiid in the southern Gobi, and especially by the Shambhala complex⁴⁹⁵ nearby, where the poem was written.

*Daybreak, shining
under the blue eastern skies.
You, my holy genius,
who loved the fruits of action.*

⁴⁹² Erdenetsogt, 18-19.

⁴⁹³ Although he does this too, in poems such as "Shilin Bogd" and "Shargin Govi" (respectively 28 and 42 in the original, 37 and 54 in the translation).

⁴⁹⁴ The five poems mentioned here are, respectively, found on the following pages in Erdenetsogt, 95, 80, 94, 98 and 103 (translation on Erdenetsogt, 116, 98, 115, 120 and 128). The Tibetan text is transliterated phonetically into Mongol Cyrillic.

⁴⁹⁵ Shambhala is a patch of land, about the size of a football field, where Danzanravjaa promised to return to his students following his death.

*As wide as the world may be,
 where will we find paradise?
 As deep as the sky may be,
 what is there is but shallow
 in the waters of the ocean.
 We imagine how our future life is far away,
 but past and future are flying
 nearby, like the swallows.
 We live, we cross from tract to tract of earth.
 We think our future days are long,
 but they are all around us, like the north wind.*⁴⁹⁶

This excerpt from "Clear Skies" shows how Erdenetsogt melds his contemplation of the natural world around him with a prayer to Danzanravjaa (and, thereby, to the local deity) and a further meditation upon the human condition. To read this alongside some of Danzanravjaa's own verse, in fact, shows that a similar tone is being used to address very similar themes⁴⁹⁷.

Erdenetsogt forged very strong links with Yavuuhulan's three students Nyamsüren, Dashbalbar and Mend-Ooyo, and it is possible to see the development of BISHÜBI as running parallel to that of *Shine handlaga*. Moreover, as is also the case with Bavuudorj, Mend-Ooyo has become something of a poetic mentor to him, and financially supported the publication of my translation of his book.

Erdenetsogt's spiritual practise greatly informs his poetry, as I have sought here to show, but it would be wrong to infer from the discussion of Danzanravjaa that his vision is dependent upon Mongolia's literary past. Rather, as with *Altan Ovoo*, the focus of his work in *Ogtorguin Setgel* is upon understanding all aspects of the world, both with the commitment to truth promoted by BISHÜBI and also with the constant reinvigorating of tradition which we find throughout Mend-Ooyo's work. Indeed, it could be argued that, with

⁴⁹⁶ Erdenetsogt, 98-100.

⁴⁹⁷ For instance in Danzanravjaa's poem "The Clear Broad Sky," (Danzanravjaa, 128) which Erdenetsogt appears here to be referencing.

his interest in early religious literature, Erdenetsogt is doing for Buddhism what Mend-Ooyo is doing for nomadic culture as a whole.

Another writer whose work straddles the *Shine handlaga* tradition and the spiritual modernism of BISHÜBI is Ch. Ösöibold (b1990). Ösöibold, of course, is of the generation raised in the new period of democracy, and so his perspective on the kind of social and cultural concerns with which we are here dealing is quite different from that of all the other writers.

Ösöibold has told me that, over the past three years, he has become interested especially in philosophical ideas, and that he has developed a particular affinity for the works of Bavuudorj and Urianhai, in addition to that of his teacher and mentor S. Erdenesolongo.⁴⁹⁸ He also said that he had read *Altan Ovoo* as a young teenager and had found it a beautiful book, but a book also lacking in philosophical rigor.

This latter critique, often couched in attacks against his quietistic relationship with nationalism, is one frequently directed at Mend-Ooyo. As I have sought to express throughout Part III, *Altan Ovoo* is not a commentary upon Mongol nomadic culture, but it is rather a direct expression of that culture, and as such is a skillful presentation, through varying levels of discourse and various genres, of the experience of nomadism as it is lived, and as Mend-Ooyo himself lived it as a young man.

Ösöibold's critique, then, speaks more to his own work than to Mend-Ooyo's. In the three years since I have known him, he has gone from writing poems in which his primary thematic medium was nature to poems that deal starkly with issues of self and philosophy. This poem, for instance, was written in June 2008:

Slowly I sit,

⁴⁹⁸ Personal communication, 2010. Erdenesolongo, who is not discussed here, is a poet whose work develops the ideas of experimentation and variation within repeated patterns. He represents a similar, albeit far less confrontatory, trend to that of B. Galsansuh, whose work is described below.

*listening to the sad stories
of ancient leaves,
floating and fallen...
Tomorrow certainly, the forests of autumn
will find joy in the sound of leaves.
When joy comes, I will be sad.
When I am sad, leaves will fall
from my eyes...
and you will step out sadly
over the leaves, fallen from me,
and my leaves will silently
swallow your sadness...
However,
the leaves are never sad, and
I and the autumn are still empty.⁴⁹⁹*

Such ideas as those expressed here, of course, are common in the work of the *Shine handlaga* writers. Indeed, Yavuuhulan's poem "Autumn Leaves"⁵⁰⁰ expresses much the same feelings of loss, and it is possible to trace further connections in the work of Mend-Ooyo and Nyamsüren in particular, and back into Mongol literary history too, for example in some of Danzanravjaa's *surguuli*, or teaching poems, in which we find meditations on impermanence and the human reaction to impermanence.

Ösöhbald's recent development, as I have said, is towards a more philosophical abstraction, clearly influenced by Erdenesolongo and Urianhai. In May 2010, he wrote the following poem, framed by Buddhist ideas of transcendence are tinged nonetheless with the loss and sadness found in earlier works such as that cited above:

*I really want to live,
so strong is my desire,
I place it on the bar
and sit in peace...
I can hardly bare to look
upon this wretched thing,
I would break it apart,
it seems, when I speak of love.*

⁴⁹⁹ None of Ösöhbald's poems has been published in English. The texts cited here are not included in his only volume of poetry to date (Ch. Ösöhbald, *Biireh Tsenher Yargui* [Ulaanbaatar, 2007]).

⁵⁰⁰ Yavuuhulan, *Mongolian Verse*, 110.

*If the Buddha, in anger, should
 dispatch a flight of crickets to me,
 I might say
 a few choice words:
 "Once I have broken apart
 my desire for life,
 how does life appear?
 As you said, I
 love my life...
 But the Buddha, though,
 regrets his love of life."*

This poem, and many of Ösöbold's current works also, show not only the philosophical influence of BISHÜBI, but also a refiguring of the conceptual framework of much of the *Shine handlaga* writers. The contemplative approach shown by this poem is perhaps more in keeping with Nyamsüren's work than with Mend-Ooyo's, but nonetheless, there remains here a questioning framework that was a significant part of Mongol literature as a whole during the late 1980s.⁵⁰¹ Ösöbold's use of this framework, then, might be reactive, but it nonetheless shows aspects of how he, as one of the leading poets of the democratic generation, is working with, and relating to, the influence of writers of the stature of Mend-Ooyo.

Thus far, in considering the work of Bavuudorj, Erdenenetsogt and Ösöbold, I have sought to show, not so much how *Altan Owoo* has itself influenced the younger generation, but perhaps how the literature and literary scene from which the book⁵⁰² emerged has managed to provoke in these young writers a new understanding of the traditional themes. But, while the traditional nomadic ideas have been very much the central concern of the majority of poets over the last twenty years, there are also poets whose intention has been

⁵⁰¹ In passing, I would hazard that this questioning resulted as much from the Yavuuhulan's death as from any personal urge on the part of his students.

⁵⁰² I would also say that Dashbalbar's *The River Flows Gently* (1986) provided a different, although equally strong, influence on the *Shine handlaga*, and thus on the subsequent generation. This was even more the case following Dashbalbar's election to the Great Hural and his subsequent, and mysterious, death in 1999. See my introduction to Dashbalbar (2007 and 2008) for background on Dashbalbar's poetry and political career.

to transform and subvert Mongol literature, to bring it into an urban setting and to apply to it the ideas of modernism and postmodernism. The second half of this chapter will address the work of these poets, showing both how they continue, albeit from their own perspective, the themes of *Altan Ovoo* and the other writings of Yavuuhulan's closest students, but also how they are seeking an alternative way of writing and understanding poetry.

In his essay "The UB Boys,"⁵⁰³ the poet and critic, P. Bathuyag (b1975) writes about how a few young Ulaanbaatar men came together to write poetry during the years immediately following the introduction of democratic government. He explains the basic position of the group in relation to other writers and critics and tells of the first book that the group – Bathuyag, D. Enhboldbaatar, D. Dashmönh and G. Nyam-Ochir⁵⁰⁴ – published:

Ten years ago. A book had been published, The UB Boys Are On Their Way, with a blue silk cover and a swastika⁵⁰⁵ on the front. It was this blue silk which my mother had bought in order to make, unsuccessfully as it would turn out, a deel⁵⁰⁶ for my father while he was alive. I asked her whether I could take the material, rolled up in the family chest, for the cover of the book. It was right that the silk should be on the front of the book rather than among my father's effects. In what ways could his destiny be preserved in this silk? The success or failure of my book was – it still is - uncertain to me at that point, and anyhow our slogan was, "We are not old, nor do we want to be new". Even now I'd say that this slogan of ours is still very much relevant to our work. So, again I say, so as not to be old, we do not discuss being old. If you speak, then open your lungs; then, without any bad thoughts, you open your lungs, which have already been somewhat poisoned by

⁵⁰³ "Tsag hugatsaand 'hölbörch' bichsen tuuh buyuu Hüree Hövgүүд" in Bathuyag, 45-56. "The UB Boys" is the group's own translation of their Mongol name, Hüree Hövgүүд. Hüree was the name of the Mongol capital between 1706 and 1924, when it was renamed Ülaanbaatar (Red Hero) to honor the revolutionary leader Sühbaatar. UB is the common abbreviation for Ulaanbaatar.

⁵⁰⁴ I have tried unsuccessfully to locate poetry by both Dashmönh and Nyam-Ochir. Nyam-Ochir – who wrote in 1996 a paper entitled (in English translation: I have not seen the Mongol version) "What is Lumpen-Pastoralist Literature?" [sic] – apparently became a Buddhist monk, but I could not discover what became of Dashmönh.

⁵⁰⁵ Here used as a cultural, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist, symbol.

⁵⁰⁶ The traditional Mongol knee-length jacket.

*nicotine; in this way this book constituted the fate of all the UB Boys.*⁵⁰⁷

Bathuyag had been a pupil of Dashbalbar and is a winner of the Mongol Writers' Union Golden Feather award. This long quotation illustrates the idea that the UB Boys were neither old nor young: the blue silk represents the blue of the sky (the god Tenger) and is used in Mongol Buddhist worship for making offerings, while the jacket which his mother wanted to make for his father is the traditional dress. That this material was to be incorporated into the design of their new book is a stark indication of the mixture of old and new that their work promoted.

Furthermore, we could understand this idea of being neither old nor new as the group seeking to position itself, paradoxically, in the vanguard of Mongol literature, much in the way that Yavuuhulan and his students had positioned their *Shine handlage* in the vanguard during the 1960s and 1970s. Theirs was a powerful stance within the intellectual politics of the immediate post-Soviet period, a stance that promoted the apprehension of tradition through the prism of contemporary urban culture. In many ways, then, the UB Boys' philosophy runs parallel to that of writers such as Bavuudorj, insofar as both groups, despite their varying commitment to stylistic and thematic innovation, regard it as poets necessary to acknowledge the traditions upon which Mongol culture remained – and still remains – founded, the very traditions and aspects of cultural history which, as I have shown, form the backbone of *Altan Ovoo*.

As far as Bathuyag's own poetry is concerned, its style is modernist and imagistic, although he retains the kind of prosodics and thematic conceits used by nineteenth century writers like Danzanravjaa. Indeed, he uses an ironic tone that recalls not only many of Danzanravjaa's poems criticizing the Manchu establishment, but also Dashbalbar's highly

⁵⁰⁷ This is a translation of an unpublished account by Bathuyag of the development of the UB Boys.

scathing political critiques. In his triptych of poems "A Letter to My Wife about Mongolia," he offers an overview of Mongolia and its society. The first poem presents the country as a place where the poet is without his wife and where industry and lethargy abound:

*In this land where you are not,
a rush of sparrows
brushes past my hat.
Time, like an old car,
heaves out black smoke,
But it's like it's stopped right here,
and no-one's hurrying anywhere.*⁵⁰⁸

Thus, the atmosphere and the feeling of the country are polluted by history, and the poem goes on to talk about the wanton and drunken partying which the author notices around him. But this is not simply opprobrium and, like many of the nineteenth century writers such as Danzanravjaa, Sandag and Injannashi, Bathuyag chooses to observe rather than to condemn. He is, after all, trained as a journalist as much as a poet, and this is how he conceives of his role as a poet. In this way, moreover, he stands at odds to Mend-Ooyo, who remains consistently apolitical.

The second poem in the triptych is taken up by more observation, this time of the *nouveau riche* who had, with the capitalist push during the early 1990s, appropriated a certain type of power within Ulaanbaatar society. Bathuyag writes,

*And they hold wisdom to be less than
wealth, than silver and gold.
There's a lot of ignorance here.
In fact, they seem way too like girls,
sitting there, talking about socks and shoes.
The clever young men are way too vain,
sitting there, talking about money.
They'll smile, then knife you in the back -
a pleasant custom from the past,
which, today is widespread.*

⁵⁰⁸ None of Bathuyag's poems has yet been published in English translation.

In this poem, we hear very much the tradition among Mongol and Tibetan Buddhist teachers of criticising a common trait among certain groups of people without resorting to *ad hominem* attacks. There are examples of such criticisms throughout the nineteenth century, such as Danzanravjaa's famous poem "Shame, Shame,"⁵⁰⁹ many of the short fables in the *üge* tradition and the novels of Injannashi. The final verse, in fact, shows a type of understanding on the poet's part that mirrors that of the greatest of these premodern writers, and, perplexed and saddened by the situation he sees around him, he writes the following:

*All life is spent in vain.
Never have I seen such a strange people.
And, my love, way over yonder,
Does winter cease without the wish for spring?*

Bathuyag's triptych, though, is more than a social criticism, for he is also separated from the wife to whom he is writing. His love poems, again like those of many previous Mongol writers, hold a melancholy that expresses itself in the realisation of emotional separation and yearning.

Love is of course one of the principal themes running through Mongol, as well as world, literature. The UB Boys' manifesto, "We are not old, nor do we want to be new," is exemplified by the way in which they couch the poetry of love within a contemporary emotional framework. "To a Woman," by D. Enhboldbaatar (b1974) consists of eight verses (seven quatrains and one couplet), in which the poet consoles the woman (his lover?) and urges her to choose happiness over sadness, while excoriating himself for his own shortcomings:

*No thing called love,
no sadness in what is seen.
What you know is your breath, and
yes, that's what I know too.*

⁵⁰⁹ Danzanravjaa, 238

*Listen to the stories of the sun and sky, and free your mind!
I'll not blame you if you weep tears upon your pillow.
Please pity me, forgive me my crimes!
Show me no mercy if I sin again!*⁵¹⁰

Throughout this poem, Enhboldbaatar weaves his own psychological guilt and angst with the behavior he observes in the woman to whom he is speaking. This quasi-Freudian combination is found but rarely within Mongol literature, although even here it is somewhat assuaged by Enhboldbaatar's tone, which appears to have been influenced by the stoicism of Buddhist practise.

Enhboldbaatar has also written a novel, *The Ballad of Great Power*⁵¹¹, which tells the story of the seventeenth century Galdan Boshigt Haan. This novel, which deals with its subject matter in an unusual way, mixing epic narrative with psychological insights, drawing upon early fiction such as Injannashi's late nineteenth century work *The Blue Annals*, is a good example of how the UB Boys' outlook has managed to encompass both the splendor of Mongol epic and the psychological intimacy of love poetry as influenced by writers such as Natsagdorj, Ser-Od and Yavuuhulan.

In addressing issues of Mongol history through fiction, Enhboldbaatar is clearly aware of the tradition, begun with the *Secret History*, and which runs through Injannashi's work, of looking at the past as a narrative trajectory. Mend-Ooyo's treatment of the various aspects history in *Altan Ovoo*, as we saw in Part III, was more to couch his discussion in the intimate details, such as the exploits of Toroi Bandi or the difficulties faced by the funeral cortège of Chinggis Haan. Enhboldbaatar, following Injannashi, offers more of a broad sweep, presenting the statecraft and military campaigns of Galdan Boshigt Haan rather than the minutiae of his personal or public life.

⁵¹⁰ None of Enhboldbaatar's poems has yet been published in English translation.

⁵¹¹

While it can be said that throughout the work of both Bathuyag and Enhboldbaatar there run the threads of societal comment – whether in general critical terms (as with Bathuyag) or in historical terms (as with Enhboldbaatar) – the UB Boys were still extremely interested in the way in which literature can benefit the people as a whole. Nyam-Ochir’s paper (see above) was only one of many through which they intended to open literature up to the general public. In this way, it could be said that they were promoting the wish of writers such as Mend-Ooyo to develop Mongol poetry as part of world poetry – that is, for the people of Mongolia and for the people of the world – and that they brought to the literary scene of the 1990s a social conscience which was lacking from the other contemporary movements here described.

We have seen how writers such as Erdenetsogt and Bavuudorj have employed Buddhist discourse and Buddhist ideas to convey a sense of the religious or spiritual, and in my analysis of *Altan Ovoo* I have suggested that Buddhism at once plays an important structural but a minor thematic role. In this latter sense, the writings of the monk T. Sodnomnamjil (1975-2006) bear a strong relationship to both Mend-Ooyo’s poetry, and also to much of Danzanravjaa’s work, insofar as they present spiritual practise as a practical and overarching approach to life rather than as an explicitly metaphysical pursuit.

Sodnomnamjil was a student of Dashbalbar, with whose family he lived for some years as a teenager.⁵¹² He subsequently became a Buddhist monk and, at his death, was abbot of Erdene Zuu monastery, to the west of Ulaanbaatar. As a student of Dashbalbar’s, he was closely exposed also to the work of Mend-Ooyo and Nyamsüren, and, from reading his work, we could in fact imagine that Sodnomnamjil presents an excellent synthesis of Yavuuhan’s three principle students. For instance, here is “In the Pure Land of Grass”:

I am lying down in the pure land of grass.

⁵¹² What I know of Sodnomnamjil’s life comes from speaking with Dashbalbar’s son D. Gangabaatar and from an exchange of email with Sodnomnamjil’s close friend B. Odgerel.

*To the south, the River Herlen flows eternally.
As the dancing girls cool their feet, decorating the evening,
the season's first moon rises to fill the southern skies.*

*Before extinguising the candle, I think to write a poem.
I cannot catch the sweet birds waiting for my thoughts.
The girls pass three nights, flickering like candles,
and, conchwhite and bright, would fly away.⁵¹³*

The intimacy of the experience described here recalls Nyamsüren, but the imagery of birds and the shifting of focus between those birds and the dancers is very much in keeping with one of Mend-Ooyo's central ideas, the "birds of thought" which gave the title to his first volume. We should also be aware of the Buddhist symbolism here, since conchshells and the pure land are traditional images used to indicate the purity of the enlightened mind.

Sodnomnamjil's principal focus, much like Danzanravjaa's, was evidently on seeking to present Buddhist discourse in poetic terms, and his book *Ogtorguin Uchir (Thunderbolt)* contains a number of Buddhist teachings written in prose. As far as his poetry is concerned, however, a work such as his dyptich "Version A/Version B" reveals an understanding of the world, the universe indeed, as a manifestation of the Buddha's enlightened mind, but also – as in the previous poem – as the site from which Sodnomnamjil himself, both as a poet and as a spiritual practitioner, writes.

VERSION A

*As though blessed by Buddha,
the lotus flowers
vigorously open
beneath the blue peace of the sky.
The cool bright sphere
has a deep pink glow,
and the beautiful face of my lover
shines with gold.*

VERSION B

The bodhisattva's compassion

⁵¹³ T. Sodnomnamjil, *Ogtorguin ochir*, (Ulaanbaatar, 2006), 132.

*is equal with the sky, and
 mental peace
 transcends belief.
 Having no doubt, for sure, about
 the blue garden of the universe,
 my lover, her beauty
 is pure joy, bows down to it.*⁵¹⁴

It is useful, I believe, to see Sodnomnamjil's work in connection with that of his friend B. Odgerel (b1967). Odgerel's poetry is commonly seen as an example of the more experimental style of writing championed by the likes of B. Galsansuh (b1972, discussed below) and G-A. Ayurzana (b1970), but I suggest that Odgerel's work, like Sodnomnamjil's, is far closer to the negotiation between tradition and innovation central to BISHÜBI and the UB Boys. In this way then we can see both of these poets as expanding on the aesthetic and thematic concerns of Mend-Ooyo and the other writers of the *Shine handlaga*, while continuing to preserve their personal understanding of Mongolia's nomadic cultural and spiritual heritage.

Odgerel's, in contrast to Sodnomnamjil's, is a darker and more melancholy voice, his expression, though equally informed by Buddhist practise⁵¹⁵, focusing on spiritual emptiness, and bordering sometimes on nihilism. But there is also the concatenation, as we have seen with other poets, of the play between Buddhist spirituality, in the form of impermanence, and the love poetry that is so much a staple of Mongol poetry. Consider the following poem, written in February of 1991:

*The pale moon of the seventeenth day
 was shining like a girl of seventeen,
 round and full and bright.
 I am a little sad to think about that moment; she,
 like my bright youth, vanishing away.*

⁵¹⁴ None of Odgerel's poems has yet been published in English translation.

⁵¹⁵ Odgerel has written to me about his daily practise, and it appears that he keeps an almost retreat-like schedule in his apartment in Ulaanbaatar. Whether it was Buddhism that drew Sodnomnamjil and him together I do not know, but they clearly had a common spiritual outlook, to complement their other shared interests.

*The full moon is frayed and blurred
like a girl who is come to seventeen, lovely
and so aware, sweet melancholy.*

There are echoes in the opening tercet of classical Tibetan verse, in which the face of the poet's beloved is compared with the full moon of the fifteenth day. Odgerel's creative twist on this, to make the moon a couple of days later to match the girl's age, also adds the idea of the full moon's slipping away once more, emphasising the beginning of the moon's decay, and of the decay of youth.

This is not the kind of poetry that we find in the work of Mend-Ooyo's generation. That this situation most probably was a reflection of the anti-Buddhist policies of the Mongol government during the Soviet period did not prevent such writers writing, since the introduction of democracy, about Buddhist themes. However, such direct echoes of classical literature, and Odgerel's apprehension of the fading of youth, function as elsewhere to render traditional literary themes in a modern style.

Three years later, in 1994, Odgerel wrote "The Wind":

*A spring evening, and a dry wind stands, howling
in the corner of the courtyard,
like the suffering of a tied dog,
like a missed meeting,
astray, melancholy, inconsistent, unruly,
it stands as it did before.
A clear morning of shining sun and,
quietly, from the corner of the courtyard,
like a dog untied,
like a happy meeting,
the vagrant wind is gone without a trace,
vanished towards the horizon.*

Here we have an image, mediated by the natural world, much in the style of Mend-Oyoo and his teacher Yavuuhulan. This is a recollection, then, as though of a poem from the past, it is like poems by other mid-20th century writers such as M. Tsendorj and R. Choinom, and it uses the bright and vibrant topoi of the sun and the spring to contrast with

the “vagrant wind” and the happy, and the unfulfilled, meetings. The structural simplicity of Odgerel’s poem belies the imagistic complexity hidden in its parallelism. For in nomadic society – as we have seen in the discussion of Mend-Ooyo’s poem “The Storm” in Chapter 9 – the wind (and, there especially, snow borne upon the wind) can play a crucial role in people’s life, and equally in that society the vagaries of meetings and departures, of the presence of dogs or their absence to indication the presence or absence of humans, such details as are here expressed carry a notable power and weight.

The work of Odgerel and Sodnomnamjil, similar in their embracing of Buddhism and yet the one looking back to the *Shine handlaga* and the other to Danzanravjaa in the nineteenth century, at once polarize and unite the forces of contemporary Mongol literature, and its response to tradition. The friendship between these two writers is also significant because, whereas Sodnomnamjil – through his especially association with Dashbalbar and his circle – was closely related to the inheritors of the traditional literature, so Odgerel is allied with the innovative and experimental writers, who labor furthest from Yavuuhulan’s vision and the influence of works such as *Altan Ovoo*, and to whom, finally, I will now turn.

The emphasis on tradition in contemporary Mongol literature that the small minority of poets who look explicitly towards Europe and the United States for their inspiration tend to group themselves, and to be grouped by others, in terms of a single movement. Whereas none of the poets thus far discussed have courted a wholesale break with the past, the prosody and subject matter of much of the writing of this final collection of poets appears in many cases to have arisen from their having read foreign, primarily modernist and postmodernist, literature.

Probably the most radical of these writers, and the one who has caused the greatest consternation among the more traditional writers, is B Galsansuh (b1972). I have written elsewhere about his more experimental work, and how it addresses social issues (sex, drug

ab/use, politics, religion, but here I wish to show the challenge which his work extends in relation to Mongol literary tradition.

One of the interesting parallels between Galsansuh's poems and those of Mend-Ooyo's teacher Yavuuhulan is that both poets have written versions, based upon Japanese haiku, of the traditional "four seasons" sequence (1967 and 2005 respectively). If we compare the two poets' versions of spring and autumn, there appear some interesting connections⁵¹⁶:

*in the enclosures, noisy
flocks of rooks rush,
tearing the frozen dung*

*powdered snow
scattered around the ger,
and my son playing outside*

*in the pool, where the willow-
lined river turned aside,
the return of a yellow leaf orphan*

*on the ancient mountain,
the forests grow older,
this autumn evening*

Note how both Yavuuhulan and Galsansuh use the same themes, of snow and the transformation of autumn. While neither of these is unusual, it is interesting that, over a span of almost forty years, notwithstanding Galsansuh's wish to change Mongol poetry⁵¹⁷, still the thematic treatment remains the same. It seems perhaps that, even when poets use the styles of other cultures, as with Yavuuhulan's introduction during the 1950s of the

⁵¹⁶ Yavuuhulan (Yavuuhula, *Mongolian Verse*, 112) to left, Galsansuh (unpublished translation) to right. For reasons of space, I am including just the first of the three haiku in each of Galsansuh's seasons.

⁵¹⁷ One of Galsansuh's early books was called *The Hundred Years War to Revolutionise Poetry* (*Yaruu nairgiin shinechleliin tölөөh zuun jiliin dain* Ulaanbaatar, 2003), which is collected in Galsansuh, 2007.

haiku⁵¹⁸ form, there may be no way of addressing the “four seasons” topos without referencing the early Mongol literary tradition.⁵¹⁹

Galsansuh’s treatment of the ideas central to the traditional literature can also be seen in his more experimental work. In “Op-Art,” for instance, he offers an alternative version of nomadic culture:

*The stone men were left behind by the nomads,
they have stopped moving and sit in the library.
The Russians have made translations from
the Chinese, studying when and where they were moved.
One has a red face, one has a pale appearance,
their eyes alarmingly large, their cheeks pulsing,
they don’t speak lies, they don’t tell the truth.
Nibbling at their fingers, their fingers taste of curds.*⁵²⁰

The connection with the Op-Art movement of the 1960s and 1970s is lost on me, but, while the poem itself is almost journalistic in tone⁵²¹, its theme of displaced, objectified cultural heritage can be seen as an alternative approach to the preservation of the traditions of the nomadic society. That the first word in the original text is “nomads” and the final idea is the sharp taste of *aaRuul*, or dried curds, points – as do many of Galsansuh’s poems – to a traditional theme being observed in a different way, rather than being dismissed or ignored.

⁵¹⁸ The poet S. Biligsaihan (b1983) has spent much of his career writing haiku, and in his work we can see the way in which that form has been incorporated into Mongol literature. See Wickham-Smith and Tsog, 109-120.

⁵¹⁹ Mend-Ooyo’s sequence “Riding out of the Brightness” (GH, 160-165) addresses the passage of the seasons in a series of four poetic prose texts. This sequence addresses similar themes of weather, of the sounds of the seasons, and of the slow transformation of the natural world seen through the eyes of a man mounted on a horse, riding through the seasons. While Mend-Ooyo’s treatment of the seasons is stylistically innovative – insofar as the “four seasons” topos is traditionally explored in poetry – it relies for its development and its feeling, as do the haiku sequences of Yavuuhulan and Galsansuh, squarely upon the tradition.

⁵²⁰ None of Galsansuh’s poems has yet been published in English translation.

⁵²¹ Galsansuh’s day job is as a journalist working for a tabloid newspaper in Ulaanbaatar.

Another poet who works with traditional themes from an innovative viewpoint is Emüjin⁵²². Her style has clearly been influenced by writers such as Urianhai and the BISHÜBI group, and frequently she treats her conventional subject matter with a rawness and emotional intensity which recalls the romantic, almost saccharine, diction of Danzanravjaa and Injannashi.

*Birds fly in strings, moving the sky with them.
Warm droplets pearl from the sky,
occasionally hitting my lips.
I taste tears.
Fluttering leaves are migrating, the earth migrates with them.
Parched grasses mutter in pain, occasionally
beneath the heels of my shoes.
My soul hurts.
Is that what they call autumn?*

Here the familiar autumn themes – falling leaves, migration and change, birds in flight, and poetic melancholy – are but the precursors of the poet’s psychic pain. However, beyond the melodrama there is the association with the grasses and the changing autumn landscape, familiar from the earliest works of Yavuuhulan and his students, and from the Mongol literary tradition.

It is also possible to see the influence of Danzanravjaa’s love poetry and moral advice in Emüjin’s work. The realisation of cause and effect, which appears continually in much of what Danzanravjaa writes, is also a central aspect of Emüjin’s poems. In the following poem, she takes the part of (presumably) a man, and not that of his lover. We are also reminded here of Natsagdorj’s famous story “A Venerable Monk’s Tears,” about a monk’s lust for a woman and her cynical treatment of him, and which also takes place “along the dark streets”:

*O, crazy girl, because of this kiss,
you will be left with nothing.
With no necklace, with no shoes,*

⁵²² Born R. Enhtuya. I have not thus far been able to find biographical details for this writer.

*with not a penny.
 When I smell your smell absorbed into my ponytail,
 I will forget my way home,
 run back along the dark streets
 to leave my innocence at your door,
 just like a dog.
 O, crazy girl, because of this kiss
 you will be knocking one day at this man's door,
 undressed...⁵²³*

In just a few lines, this poem expresses much of the ethics and morality found in nineteenth century Buddhist writings – such as the *üge* tradition – and does so in a way that emphasizes, by the poet's deliberate confusion of her own gender with the (supposed) gender of the speaker, the complexity of such behavior. As with these earlier writings – although not with Natsagdorj's story – Emüjin chooses not to moralize outright, but opts rather for a descriptive and predictive approach, thus allowing the reader to make his or her own choice.

A third of the more innovative poets, and one whose work still bears the hallmarks of the traditional Mongol literary style, is L. Ölziitögs, who also writes short fiction. As with Emüjin, Ölziitögs is a writer of raw emotion, and her texts are full of references to passion and, again, to the common threads running through the literature. The references here to Mongolia's divine blue sky and to the everchanging nature of the landscape create within the image of devotion, which she describes a strange kind of eternity, suggesting perhaps, the boundless nature of the mind⁵²⁴:

*Being the bluest of blue
 and a point, a point and a point
 more cloud than the cloud, more water than the water
 and untouchable
 the body of the wind, the flight of a bird
 the chill of the winter
 being the limitless fulfillment of love*

⁵²³ None of Emüjin's poems has yet been published in English translation.

⁵²⁴ A common theme in Buddhist literature, and associated specifically with the constancy and boundlessness of the sky.

*bearing the whole world in my body
 having eyes full of skies
 and alone knowing where time rests
 being able to name every snow drop
 not frightened by a life of depth and mystery
 and, putting my hand into a fire,
 why do I glance up and shade my light in front of you
 and bow like a rose in your hand?⁵²⁵*

From this brief overview of three of the more innovative young Mongol poets, it should be clear that, far from rejecting the tradition and literary style of writers such as Mend-Ooyo, and which is promoted by many of their contemporaries, their engagement in fact is in a creative subversion of the tradition. This approach is in no way a threat to the more conventional writers, although it treats with more abandon and with more experimentation the ideas upon which the contemporary literature has been built. What it certainly does do is to offer a new way of reading and writing about, and engaging with, Mongolia in terms of its being as much a traditional nomadic society as a developing democracy.

I would like to end with another poem by Ölziitögs, in which she expresses what we have seen expressed by writers throughout the centuries, and what stood as the very lynchpin of Mend-Ooyo's vision in *Altan Ovoo*. Ölziitögs writes here about her presence in the natural world, and this reminds us of the constant presence of the ancestors within the landscape, the apprehension of the ancestors in Mongol topography, and especially in the present context in the Dariganga region around Altan Ovoo, and in the transformative experiences of Mongol cultural and spiritual traditions. In all these ways, this poem offers us a return to the very source of Mend-Ooyo's vision, to the animistic origins and shamanic practises of the Mongol people, to the very concept of *nutag* with which I began Chapter 1.

*When I look at mountains, I am a MOUNTAIN.
 When I look at mist and haze, I am a CLOUD.*

⁵²⁵ None of Ölziitögs' poems has yet been published in English translation.

*After the rain has fallen, I am GRASS, and
When sparrows start to sing, I am the MORNING.*

I am not human.

*When stars flare up, I am the DARKNESS
When girls shed their clothes, I am the SPRING
When I smell the desire of everyone in this world,
I realise how my quiet heart is like a FISH.*

I am not human.

POSTSCRIPT

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of *Altan Ovoo*, and of G. Mend-Ooyo, to the development of contemporary Mongolian literature. Following the death of his two close friends and colleagues, Dashbalbar in 1999 and Nyamsüren three years later, Mend-Ooyo's position as the country's most influential writer was assured, and his continued refining of *Altan Ovoo* illustrates the place occupied by this work in his oeuvre.

As I suggested in my introductory remarks, the lack of critical writing on Mongolian literature, whether in Mongolia or elsewhere, necessitated that this dissertation be an exposition of the literature, observed through the prism of *Altan Ovoo*. While the appendix presents some comparative material from other cultures, the intention of this dissertation has been to present Mongolian literature in the context of Mongolian culture, thereby opening up to scrutiny, both in my own future work and in the work of future scholars, both the literature itself and the culture as it is found, expressed in the literature.

While Mend-Ooyo's aesthetic, moreover, is focused on the traditional Mongolian nomadic culture, we can see in *Altan Ovoo* an explicit attempt on his part to continue the project begun by his teacher Yavuuhulan and to show how nomadic culture even today defines Mongolia, and how for the culture to be in any way sidelined would do immeasurable damage to the psyche and the independence of the people. In doing this, Mend-Ooyo stands foursquare in the tradition of writers such as Danzanravjaa, Buyannemeh, Rinchen and, latterly, Yavuuhulan, Choinom and Dashbalbar, who have definitively resisted outside pressure – whether from the Manchu, the Soviets or the capitalist freemarketeers – so as to retain the Mongol way of life and its cultural expression.

Younger writers today in Mongolia – such as Ayurzana, Ölziitögs, Odgerel and Galsansuh, moving towards middle-age, or those, such as Ch. Ösöibold and S. Baigalsaihan, who may not have any memory of the Soviet period – are starting to look

towards the west, to ask that their work be translated, not only into English, but also into French and German and Spanish, and Russian and Chinese and Japanese. The increasing interaction between Mongolia and the outside world will be felt, I believe, as much in the cultural, as in the socioeconomic, sphere, and thus culturally-charged works such as *Altan Owoo*, and the poems of politically-active writers such as Dashbalbar, will come to be engaged, as the entire thrust of *Altan Owoo*, and consequently this dissertation also, seeks to reveal, in the preservation of Mongolian culture most assuredly, but also in its renewal as a modern and progressive approach to Mongolia's cultural self-awareness, and thus its future democratic governance.

APPENDIX

Echoes of *Altan Ovoo* beyond Mongolia

My translation of *Altan Ovoo* was the first translation to be published in any language.⁵²⁶ Not even a Russian translation was prepared, and I can only assume that this decision had something to do with the changes that were happening in the Soviet Union at the time of the book's publication. Consequently, the influence of this highly significant example of Mend-Ooyo's work has been limited – as I sought to show in Part IV – to writers in Mongolia.

My intention in this appendix is to discuss thematic similarities between *Altan Ovoo* and the work of two writers outside Mongolia, the Kyrgyz Chingis Aitmatov (1928-2008) and Ch. Galsan, whose Mongolian-language work has already been discussed in Part IV, but whose German-language books, written whilst he was resident in Germany, will be discussed here. By looking at some of the themes taken up by these authors, I hope to show that, while it might be unlikely that Mend-Ooyo in general, and *Altan Ovoo* in particular, exercised a direct influence, it is nonetheless certain that the non-Mongolian public – not only in Kyrgyzstan and Germany, but in Soviet Russia and, latterly, in Europe and the United States – have for some time been exposed to literary treatments of Central Asian nomadic culture.

As I pointed out in my introduction, the fact that Mend-Ooyo's work has not yet been the subject of critical study, whether in Mongolia or elsewhere, indicates the need for any comparative work to be carried out tentatively, and with due emphasis, as I have given in the present study, given to explicating and introducing to the reader the cultural framework within which a book such as *Altan Ovoo* stands. With this in mind, it should be pointed out

⁵²⁶ Mend-Ooyo (2007). I have since heard that a French translation of my translation is being prepared.

that full-length studies have been made of both Aitmatov and Galsan, in addition to a paper on the latter's German poetry,⁵²⁷ and that my comments here will be directed specifically towards the reciprocal light which Aitmatov, Galsan and Mend-Ooyo cast upon one another.

The primary connection between Chingis Aitmatov and Mend-Ooyo can be seen in their understanding of the natural world, and the lives and behavior of animals in particular. Aitmatov was initially trained as a veterinarian, and Mend-Ooyo grew up herding livestock on the steppe, and animals play an important part in the thinking, as well as in the work, of both writers.

I want here to focus on two works of Aitmatov's, *Farewell Gyulsary!* and *The Place of the Skull*, written in 1966 and 1987 respectively.⁵²⁸ What is immediately clear in a comparison with *Altan Ovoo* is that Aitmatov's style is novelistic, whereas Mend-Ooyo's is, as we have seen, is disjointed and episodic and relies upon a kind of journalistic, poetic impressionism rather than upon the development of narrative and character. But an analysis of Aitmatov's treatment, in both stories, of his animal characters – of Gyulsary in the first, and of Akbara and Tash-Chainar in the second – is instructive for an understanding of Mend-Ooyo's treatment of animals, and by extension nature in general, throughout *Altan Ovoo*.

The relationship between Gyulsary and his owner Tanabai is, as Mozur makes plain,⁵²⁹ very clear from the start of the novella. Moreover, this kind of deep association between man and horse is seen also in *Altan Ovoo*, although at no point in the text does Mend-Ooyo express a "unity" of the kind described by Mozur. Indeed, while there is a very clear relationship between, for example, the horseman in the sequence "Riding out of the

⁵²⁷ These three texts are, respectively, *Mozur* (1994), *Prinzing* (2010) and *Hacken* (2004).

⁵²⁸ Aitmatov (1973) and Aitmatov (2000) respectively.

⁵²⁹ Mozur, *op.cit.*, pp.48-49.

Brightness"⁵³⁰ and both his horse and the natural world around him, we do not find here the level of intimacy in Aitmatov's novella, as when Tanabai is speaking his heart to his dying horse:

The pacer Gyulsary lay motionlessly by the campfire, his head on the ground. Life was slowly leaving his body. Something was gurgling and wheezing in his throat, his eyes widened and dimmed as he stared unblinkingly at the flames, his legs, straight as poles, were becoming stiff.

Tanabai was bidding his pacer farewell, it was the last time he would be talking to him. "You were a great stallion, Gyulsary. You were my friend, Gyulsary. When you go you will carry away the best years of my life, Gyulsary. I will never forget you, Gyulsary. You're still alive now, but I'm thinking of you as of one dead already, because you are dying, my wonderful horse Gyulsary. Some day we'll meet in the hereafter. But I won't hear the sound of your hoofbeats. There are no roads there, no earth, no grass, there is no life there. But as long as I live you will never die, because I will always remember you, Gyulsary. To me the sound of your pacing gait will always be the song I love best."

Such were old Tanabai's thoughts. He was sad, for time had sped by like a cantering pacer, they had both become old so quickly. Perhaps it was too soon for Tanabai to think of himself as an old man. And yet, it is not the weight of his years that makes a man old quite as much as the realisation that he is old, that his time has passed, that he is living out his days.⁵³¹

Such, indeed, is the intimacy here, the parallels which Tanabai feels, which Aitmatov indicates, which link the old man's life, his progress through that life, with the experiences of Gyulsary's own life, that any comparison with Mend-Ooyo's approach to similar relationships are found wanting. Indeed, more often than not, horses in *Altan Ovoo* are either explicitly alone or else they are a means by which a human is moved from one place to another, such as Mend-Ooyo's leaving home in the early part of the book to take up his teaching position in a nearby town.⁵³²

⁵³⁰ GH pp.160-165.

⁵³¹ Aitmatov (1973) pp.273-274

⁵³² GH pp.42-43.

I would argue that Mend-Ooyo's vision in *Altan Ovoo* is quite other than Aitmatov's, and that his intention, as I have attempted to show, is to present the depth and breadth of Mongol nomadic culture rather than to develop the conventional novelistic concerns. The kind of narrative development as we see in the close bond of trust between Gyulsary and Tanabai, so poignantly shown in the passage reproduced above, is not something that appears to concern Mend-Ooyo. He is, moreover, a poet primarily and not a storyteller, and so his work has a different focus and his literary life has followed a different trajectory.

That said, however, we can draw parallels between the way in which Mend-Ooyo and Aitmatov present the feelings of animals about humans. For instance, in his poem *The Cranes*,⁵³³ Mend-Ooyo initially presents the birds of the title as innocent creatures, establishing their nest in a place apparently free from danger:

*When they came to the gentle steppe,
it was to a place without evil.
When they laid their eggs on the bare gravel,
they gave not a thought to misfortune,
they got dirty, protecting
the unsuckled birds within the eggs.*

The intervention, however, of "an inquisitive fellow," who steals the eggs contrary to "local wisdom," and thereby steals the birds' children, has dire consequences for his own little son. The final lines of the poem –

*The cranes' melancholy song
is tethered above the ger.
Is it a shadow or a tear?
The milk in the pan has turned.*

– illustrate the sadness and horror of the situation in explicit, though understated, language. In this way, Mend-Ooyo's poem holds an Aesopian moral, as well as focusing on the father's lack of concern for tribal knowledge. Whereas this story exists out of time, in a

⁵³³ GH pp.110-113.

disjointed and apolitical state, Aitmatov's stories are clearly set within the oppressive Soviet political system, his Kyrgyz characters subject directly to the rule of Moscow.

Thus, if we compare the narrative of *The Cranes* with both *Farewell Gyulsary!* and *The Place of the Skull*, we can see how these two writers are dealing in their works with the natural world, its relationship with the world of humans, and the place of traditional culture, as well as with the problems associated with the writing of fiction. Mend-Ooyo's work offers a far less nuanced narrative – one simple drama and its consequences – whereas Aitmatov's narratives, being longer and constructed according to Russian and European models, tend to weave secondary and tertiary layers of narrative into the primary layer. This is especially true of *Farewell Gyulsary!*, in which the horse's final journey catalyses a series of reminiscences in the mind of the central human figure, Tanabai.

It could be argued, of course, that the entire text of *Altan Ovoo* is also such a story, with Mend-Ooyo's memories of his own nomadic life as the central strut around which all the other poems and narratives are interwoven, but that is to miss the difference between his text, which is essentially a collage, and Aitmatov's texts (and, as we shall see, Galsan's also), which are coherent and elegantly-constructed narrative stories.⁵³⁴

Mend-Ooyo has spoken about his own political views, and the ways in which they relate to his work with Mongolian culture. In a recent interview, he contrasts himself with his friend, the poet and politician O. Dashbalbar, who died in mysterious circumstances in 1999:

The poet O. Dashbalbar had the idea that I should go with him into the harsh struggle of the political sphere. I struggle in other ways, I would never go onto that political platform, but I do stand firm on the idea of protecting my homeland, my language and its culture, my people's script, and nature. This is my politics. I think that my choice has been to light a fire in the mind of the people, for the revival and protection of the

⁵³⁴ See Mozur, op.cit, for a comprehensive study of Aitmatov's sociocultural and literary achievements.

*Mongol written, cultural and historical heritage, which gives such pleasure, and to realise that role within Mongol society.*⁵³⁵

His intention, "to light a fire in the mind of the people," is an approach far more understated than Aitmatov's, which included diplomatic appointments in Europe following the fall of the Soviet Union and the development of the international politico-cultural Issyk Kul forum. We can see in his writings too how keenly Aitmatov felt the social and political situation in Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet period, an approach diametrically opposed to that of Mend-Ooyo's.

Aitmatov's discussion of politics, however, was powerfully integrated with his broader concern for the natural world. For instance, in *Farewell Gyulsary*, Tanabai's expulsion from the Party for physically attacking a state prosecutor mirrors Gyulsary's castration for throwing his new rider, the new chairman of the collective farm, Jorokul Aldanovich. Mozur makes the case⁵³⁶ that much of the language used to describe Gyulsary's new situation – the language of incarceration – has echoes of the way in which the Party dealt at the time with human dissenters. But what is most significant, I think, about the politics of this story is that, while Aitmatov, unsurprisingly, uses freedom as a metaphor, he also speaks directly to Gyulsary's feelings as an individual, expressing the horse's desire for the freedom to follow his natural urges. Aitmatov links the narrative present with a point shortly after Gyulsary's castration, and connects the horse's misery with the nighttime sky and with the moon:

Now, as then, Gyulsary could not break his shackles, he could not run. He wanted to move his legs freely, his hooves burning from the chase, he wanted to speed across the earth, inhaling lustily, he wanted to reach the pasture quickly, to whinny loudly, summoning the herd, he wanted the mares and colts to run along with him across the vast absinthe-drenched steppe,

⁵³⁵ Unpublished interview conducted by email with Ruth O'Callaghan, Spring 2011. My translation.

⁵³⁶ Mozur, op.cit., pp51-52.

*but his shackles held him back. He hobbled along to the clanging of the chain like an escaped convict, a jump at a time, all alone, a jump at a time. Everything was dark, deserted, lonely. The moon appeared, then disappeared on high in the wind-swept sky. It appeared when the pacer threw back his head as he jumped and came tumbling down when he dropped his head.*⁵³⁷

There is a telling parallel to this in Altan Ovoo, "The Story of a Strong, Light Bay Horse." A comparison of these stories shows how Mend-Ooyo prefers to have his characters transcend the physical world and travel into what we might call an "alternate reality."

A light bay horse who could not be tamed because of his willful and aggressive nature found himself driven away from a herd of more amenable horses. One day, he stumbled over a long pole into an enclosure surrounded by barbed-wire. He would frequently leap the high fence, with its sharp barbs, to get away from the herders, but there were many people driving him and pushing him this way and that and they forced him back into this enclosure. He wondered whether he would ever again leap about on the broad steppe, he charged around, terrified at being in so restricted a space, a strong, thick rope was placed around his neck and he twitched his two ears aggressively. But they managed to tie him up, the twist of his ears grew tender, he stood there, unable to move, foursquare.

He felt that the wild pastures of the steppe were too far away, but he wanted to run headlong across the hills. He couldn't run and run, though, he was broken and powerless among all these herds. But wait - what did he mean he couldn't run?! He dashed out, cutting through a thousand horses like a blade, the tip of the rider's lasso didn't even brush him. He was the white lion of the snowy mountains, he would no longer be dominated by others.

A heavy iron hammer smashed into the bay's head, it felled him, he was disoriented, he felt the cold iron as it shot through to his clavicle. He put the last drops of his energy into stretching his four legs, and broke through the net of leather ropes. His body relaxed and, as his strength finally drained away, he stood up again. But the world was not the world, the people around him were not people, he just gazed, openmouthed, like the ogre Atgaaljin Har Mangas. The horse was amazed, he stood there, his legs fixed like stakes upon the ground, his bright eyes cradled in their sockets like shards of

⁵³⁷ Aitmatov, op.cit., pp193-194.

*heaven. And while his eyes remained, his soul moved away, away from this shortsighted time.*⁵³⁸

So, while Gyulsary remains very much in the physical world, and very much unliberated, Mend-Ooyo's bay is released from his suffering, albeit through extreme violence, and his soul, his essence, travels away.

As we saw in Part III, there are parallels of this story throughout *Altan Ovoo*, concerning the topos of the flying horse, but what is noteworthy here is that the choices made by Aitmatov and Mend-Ooyo in the denouement of their stories end with Gyulsary's corpse and the bay's soul flying upwards. That Aitmatov uses the metaphor of the grey goose flying to catch up with its flock does not detract from the Gyulsary's death, whereas the fact that Mend-Ooyo fails to describe the physical death of the bay in his story points to the Buddhological understanding of the body as merely a vehicle for the soul.⁵³⁹

It is not my intention to analyse Aitmatov's 1983 novel *The Place of the Skull* in any detail, rather I wish to use it as a pivot between *Farewell Gyulsary!* and the German-language work of the contemporary Mongolian writer Ch. Galsan. The story of Akbara and Tashchainar which runs throughout Aitmatov's novel, how they seek to avoid the onslaught of human aggression and human destruction of the environment, finds many parallels and similarities in the story of the unnamed wolf and bitch in Galsan's novella *Der Wolf und die Hündin*.

The Place of the Skull, though a complex interweaving of political, religious and spiritual narratives, begins and ends with a meditation on the wolves' experience of life in the Kyrgyz mountains. These passages deal with the individual wolves as characters in the

⁵³⁸ GH pp.72-73.

⁵³⁹ I should probably better translate this word, in Buddhological terms, as something like "mental continuum," but Mend-Ooyo uses the word *süns* (AO p82), which more fits a shamanic idea of the soul.

book, but they also deal with one of Aitmatov's principal concerns in his fiction, the community of animals and its treatment at the hands of humans.

Indeed, it is the intervention of a helicopter, startling the wolves, which opens the novel. We are very soon given both the bare facts of the helicopter's perilous flight and Akbara's instinctive reaction:

*Here, a helicopter was no threat: up in the mountains, the threat was to the helicopter itself. But the fear was an instinctive one, reinforced by experience. At the helicopter's approach, Akbara whined loudly and crouched back into a ball, shoulders up; then suddenly her nerve broke and she howled at the top of her voice, seized with a blind, impotent fear, before crawling shivering towards the [cave] opening, her teeth chattering in anger and despair, ready for a show of strength as though she hoped to put to flight the metal monster that clattered through the ravines and tumbled the very stones...*⁵⁴⁰

Such remarkable affinity, which Aitmatov shows with his animal subjects – seen also in *Farewell, Gyulsary!* and elsewhere in his oeuvre – is reminiscent of that shown by Mongolian nomads, such as Mend-Ooyo's teacher B. Yavuuhulan in his poem "Goat Peak."⁵⁴¹ In Mend-Ooyo's story "Quickwit the Camel,"⁵⁴² there is a passage similar to Aitmatov's, in which the camel is assailed by warfare, in which he is as unknowing as is Akbara:

The yellow Gobi, covered in tamarisk, was a perfect land of Shambhala to which the Enshöö clan had become accustomed. It was blessed by Heaven with thrones like carved sandalwood, placed atop precious red camels. Others were jolted by the voice of Heaven and crawled, seemingly unthreatened, from their miserable lair. And so, one night, robbers entered a hole opened by darkness in the clouds and, snatching their booty - along with girls and women, screaming alarm - they ran away. The Enshöö were well enough armed to give chase and, for many days, they pursued the robbers to exhaustion deep into their country. Their weapons were blunted, their bullets spent, and they were sent into exile. An order was sent out that Quickwit was to be loaded up with the weapons and bullets and dispatched. At first, Quickwit went some way north, and he did

⁵⁴⁰ Aitmatov (2000) p.4.

⁵⁴¹ See Chapter 4.

⁵⁴² GH pp.121-128.

not feel tired. He sailed past a couple of valleys, some brightly colored hillocks, the rubble of a steep cliff, saxaul and poplar trees, and, from time to time, he would speed past a herd of cattle who would take notice only of the weapons. As one half of his load slipped from his back onto the road, he would occasionally come upon the stinking remains of a dead camel. And this was a bad omen.

Thus it is that Quickwit comes under the influence of manmade warfare, his innocence is lost, and he is introduced to the fear of, and also perhaps to the inevitability of, death

Aitmatov's treatment of animals is, like Mend-Ooyo's, a strangely Wordsworthian combination of the factual and the romantic. The description of Akbara's maternal instinct is an excellent example, and can be contrasted with Mend-Ooyo's descriptions of interrelationships of animals, and of human understanding of those relationships:

As she concentrated upon the independent movement within her quickened womb, Akbara was filled with foreboding. The she-wolf's heart beat faster, with courage and resolve to foster and cherish at all costs the cubs she bore within her belly. She would attack anything that lay in her way. She was in the grip of Nature's great instinct to preserve her issue. Suddenly, Akbara felt herself engulfed by a great surge of tenderness, by the need to touch and warm the unborn cubs, and to give them her milk, as though they had already arrived. It was a foretaste of the happiness to come.⁵⁴³

Nothing in Mend-Ooyo's writing comes close to this in its narrative power or in its development of character. Indeed, as I have already suggested, one of Aitmatov's gifts is his ability to express the characters of animals, whereas Mend-Ooyo's gift is poetic and descriptive. However, I would say that the way in which animals are presented in *Altan Owoo* shows a feeling for the natural world that bears strong similarities with Aitmatov's sensibilities.

Aitmatov's description of the impact of human beings on his animal characters is similar to that found in the Mongolian writer Ch. Galsan's German-language prose and

⁵⁴³ Aitmatov, op.cit., p5.

poetry. In his novella *Der Wolf und die Hündin*, while we see a similar characterisation of the bitch, caring for her wounded mate, to that in Aitmatov's characterisation of Akbara, Galsan's language is closer to that of Mend-Ooyo's:

She had had no experience of motherhood, but now the mother grew within her. She fussed over the wolf as over a puppy. Sometimes she chased or dragged an animal back, still alive, and savaged into lameness, but more often she came with her maw stuffed full, she brought the meat for the wolf, and ran off again, in order not to eat the food herself. The wolf kept quiet through all of this. With time his wounds healed, and he became stronger.⁵⁴⁴

Galsan's story of the wolf and the bitch, like Aitmatov's story of Akbara and Tashchainar, cannot be discussed fully in a brief exposition such as this, but there are clear similarities in this passage with Mend-Ooyo's description of, for instance, Quickwit in "Quickwit the Camel." There is a tenderness of description, which bespeaks the authors' deep understanding of nature, and of animals in particular, but there is also what seems to be a realisation of the animal's individuality:

As the sky traced out its path overhead, the skin on his two erect humps sagged down, weak and emaciated. He stood with his legs apart and slapped at the swarms of black flies with his tail, but even the grasses irritated him. Tears flowed from his eyes, like pearls of spring water and, in his watery eyes, the sky stretched a deep blue to its furthest edges and there rose a pale blue mountain, which seemed to him to be in the way. Behind this mountain ran a great red-colored pass, where soil tumbled down and where the water was sucked dry. In the skirts of the fine sand, he practiced walking ten paces at a time and, with the sun's help, he crept forward, meter after meter. And the further he moved, the more the place lost its sting and grew attractive to him.⁵⁴⁵

As we have seen throughout, descriptions of the movement and character of natural world are common in Mongolian literature. This passage, while speaking to the knowledge

⁵⁴⁴ Tschinag (1999), p.70. Passages from this book are all my translation.

⁵⁴⁵ GH p.121

of camels that Mend-Ooyo has brought to the page from his childhood, also of course contains stark and anthropomorphic descriptions of the Mongolian desert. And Galsan, too, uses such descriptions, both to express the changing scene against which his narrative develops, and for its own sake. We can further see how the constancy of the sky and the landscape in Mend-Ooyo's work is represented in that of other writers. For instance, here is Galsan's description of the landscape towards the end of winter, and the response of the nomadic herders:

*The sun wandered quickly across the day. So it seemed to the herders, who had dwelt in the winter for many months, and who had waited for its end. Now finally the sun, for which they had yearned, seemed to have come, and so was its movement in haste. Long it hung at the western edge of the earth, deeper and deeper it sank.*⁵⁴⁶

The interrelationships of the natural world, which we have seen played out in *Altan Owoo*, are central to Galsan's worldview, and there are also similarities with Chingis Aitmatov's specific approach to the animal world. In a speech given in 1999, he explicitly expressed the importance of this connection, and of his training as a Tuvan shaman, in his own life and, by implication, in the lives of his characters and his texts:

*Since my early childhood my Self has been shaped by shamanism. My first verses were shamanic chants, praises and pleas to the spirits of the rocks and trees and water that surrounded me....This is a simple image: man is part of a complete whole fully pervaded by life, and as such he is kindred with all creatures; that is why he is equal in status with the smallest as well as the greatest before Father Sky and Mother Earth.*⁵⁴⁷

The experience of Tuvan Mongolian shamanism runs throughout Galsan's work, both in German and Mongolian, both in prose and in poetry, and we have already seen an

⁵⁴⁶ Tschinag, op.cit., p28.

⁵⁴⁷ Tschinag, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster," trans. Kathrin Lang. Available online at <http://www.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/18458>.

example, in the story of the wolf and the bitch, of his understanding of animals, of how “man...is kindred with all creatures.”

Much of Galsan’s extensive poetic output in German deals directly with shamanism and his Mongolian homeland, as though he would educate his German audience about Mongolia while, at the same time, somehow retain in his heart his own cultural traditions. For instance, in his poem “The Great Wind of the World,” he writes of horses and the wind in a style that recalls the work of poets such as Mend-Ooyo and Dashbalbar:

*The great wind of the world
Lives in my Altai
Hunting in a herd
Of swirling wind-
Horses*

*Morning after morning
Riders splinter off
From the group
To sweep across grass and stone
And slit the steppe open
At numerous horizons*

*Threads of dust
Pull wind-foals after them
Whinnying and thundering
As they grow to
Lightning mares and storm stallions⁵⁴⁸*

Even clearer as an influence on Galsan is the association, which we have seen in the work of contemporary writers such as Dashbalbar and Bavuudorj as much as in Mend-Ooyo, of human beings – and, by implication, the ancestors – with the grass on the steppe. In “A Blade of Grass,” we read of the independence of a blade of grass, which contrasts with the commonality found in Dashbalbar’s “Grass” triptych, an example of which (from “A Second Song of Grass”) follows:

A blade of grass

⁵⁴⁸ From *Wolkenhunde* (1998). Translated by Richard Hacken, available online at <http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/tschinag/wolkenhunde.htm>.

*On your steppe
 I rebel against the storm winds
 Searching for something solid
 The blade
 That must grow next to me
 I reach and reach
 Into emptiness
 Until I realize
 I will have to stand
 By myself⁵⁴⁹*

*Grasses grow and completely cover the world.
 They struggle upwards like a green flame,
 with all their relatives they meet with the sunlight.
 Grasses grow, as though itching my whole body.
 By day, human beings make noise like animals,
 by night they dream like children,
 they grow amid the sleep which grants eternity.
 At dawn the grasses awaken to play like boys and girls.
 The young shoots grow, shrieking over the broad and peaceful
 earth.
 The invincible signs of this world dissolve into the grasses,
 They grow straight up and, though crushed by cartwheels, they
 rise again.⁵⁵⁰*

The expression of individuality in Galsan's poetry is complemented by the expression of community in Dashbalbar's. On what is perhaps a somewhat crass level, we could say that Galsan is not only a shaman, and thus accorded a special position among his society, but also – when writing in German (and in Germany) – an alien, a traveller in a strange land, whereas Dashbalbar's life, even before he entered politics, was as an organiser and a social catalyst, and that these traits are expressed in their work. Mend-Ooyo, I would argue, stands between the two, for he writes frequently of individual animals and people in his stories, even while celebrating – and this is the deep theme at work throughout *Altan Owoo* – his own family and the extended Mongolian ancestral lineage, the “golden thread” which stretches back to Chinggis Haan.

⁵⁴⁹ From *Nimmer Werde Ich Dich Zämen Können* (1996). Translated by Richard Hacken, available online at <http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/tschinag/unzahn.htm>.

⁵⁵⁰ Dashbalbar (2007) p.79.

In conclusion, we might extend the ideas found in *Altan Ovoo* and discussed throughout this study, ideas dealing with the interrelationship of human beings with the landscape which they inhabit, and say that there is a profound understanding among the Türkic peoples – Kyrgyz and Mongolian, but also throughout the wider society – of the ways in which the landscape and its inhabitants impact upon one another. Even in this cursory analysis of elements in the literary work of Chingis Aitmatov and Ch. Galsan, the depth of feeling expressed by these writers about the natural world, and (as indicated by Galsan in the speech cited above) about their place within it, is clear and explicit. The concerns and interests explored in Mend-Ooyo's work reveal one individual Mongolian's experience, but further exploration of the work of other Türkic writers will undoubtedly assist in deepening our understanding of how these writers deal, from their own viewpoints and from the viewpoints of different cultures and societies, with similar themes.

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