

THESIS BOOKLET

to the PhD dissertation

HEROES, EXEMPLARS AND MEDIATORS

**The concept of patriotism in the Mongolian
historical novel of the socialist era**

by

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Research goals

The aim of this research was, drawing from the Mongolian example, to add another contribution to the debate on the mechanisms at work in the production and reproduction of representations of the self. This field of research which brings together a number of disciplinary traditions - anthropology and history, to mention only the most obvious - is a huge, as the abundance of work devoted to the theories of nationalism and ethnicity show it. Indeed, when it comes to the notions of "identity" and "ethnicity", as well as "nationalism", "patriotism" and even "State" and "Nation", one is easily overwhelmed by the sheer number and diversity of sources available. But this profusion is also the mark of a certain confusion, to the extent that Brubaker and Frederick Cooper have not hesitated to speak of an "identity crisis" in the social sciences. Therefore, to enter this debate is always a slippery slope and most of this lay behind the whole of our reflection. Yet one has to admit that it is also difficult to escape in today. Our study can be presented as an attempt to add a modest contribution to it based on a case study limited in time and space, departing from the idea that each case study can shed new and complementary light on the others.

Methodology and findings

The discussion begins with a few words on the question of the personal relationship of the researcher to his subject, which is all neither an external nor a secondary aspect of the research and, hence, of the dissertation. The intimacy and personal involvement are particularly beneficial in humanities, where researchers work predominantly with ineffable data. Moreover, the personal attitude towards the examined topic, is of particular interest, as the interpreter's personality is unavoidably involved in the analysis: the very instrument with which the anthropologist researches and measures is his moral standard and sensitivity, these latter being nurtured by his experience of the world, his history. Anthropological epistemology oscillates between scientism - which emphasizes the analysis of empirical data and argues with the reproducibility and verifiability of anthropological research - and the hermeneutic approach which focuses on the interpretation process and makes no secret of the interpreter's role. This is this hermeneutic approach that we adopted, a choice that will be presented in an opening part.

A brief overview of the so-called “theories of nationalism” follows since in the course of the discussion we could not escape the use of the terms “nationalism” and “patriotism”, the inverted commas being here a way to indicate that we are referring to elements of discourse, and this requires cautiousness and reservation.

Then we present a few recent research on Mongolian representation of the self, works that have been decisive in structuring our own reflection.

The first part of the dissertation is devoted to the presentation of the “terrain”, first of all the corpus of novels we consulted with a particular focus on *Tungalag Tamir* and *Üüriin Tuya* which are commented at large in the course of the work and the sources we used for literary criticism and historical analysis; and then the “terrain”, with a chapter on Mongolia that will explore the relationship of the Mongols to their motherland (a debate that lay beyond the scope of our studies but that should be mentioned and taken into account) and its history.

The second part is dedicated to the relation between history and literature during the socialist era, with a chapter on the writing context and another on its content, followed by a reflection on the construction of the “national hero” and its role in the construction of social memory and of the representation of the self. This fifth chapter allows us to explore the notions of “exemplars” and “mediators”, a reflection which owes a lot to works by Caroline Humphrey, René Girard but also Boglárka Mácsai. The last chapter goes a little further in questioning the ability of authors to circumvent censorship in order to express something other than what they have been charged with by the regime, their ability to propose a dissident discourse but also to produce literary works and not just propaganda instruments.

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This study, which focuses on an expression of Mongolian patriotism in twentieth-century Mongolian literature, combines literature and history in two ways. It is intended to be both a study of the history of Mongolian literature of the last century and a questioning of historical literature. This double goal indeed promised to be very fruitful due to the specific features of this literature, and more specifically of the historical novel. Needless to say, that we are therefore venturing into a never-ending debate, that is, this of the tenuous and complex relationship between fiction and reality.

Once the terms of the problem have been defined, even a superficial knowledge of the history of Mongolia in the twentieth century immediately raises the question of propaganda and censorship, indoctrination, a certain amount of denial and distortion of the facts.

As soon as it was set up, the People's Government and the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, which ran it, vigorously asserted the role assigned to the "new" literature: that of educating the people but also of shaping their minds to make them the active architects of the new society it promised them. When one is used to the virulent denunciation to which any form of censorship or propaganda is subjected in the West today, officially that is, the "transparency" with which this policy was exposed is surprising. It can nevertheless be understood - and this is apparent from this literature - through the prism of the Marxist perspective of "nationalism", which sees nationalist "consciousness" as nothing more than a false consciousness "forged by the circles of power to hide economic interests while serving as a support for exploitation and class domination". Conversely, if "nationalist consciousness" can be consciously exploited by the "class enemy", using its own weapons, it can be opposed by another collective consciousness, partisan, socialist, patriotic but also internationalist.

Generally speaking, and in this work in particular, if I admit that concerted and rational action can be exerted on the mind, I also think that the human mind is subject to complex and contradictory influences, and that there remains in the individual a great deal of irrationality. Is history irremediably a heterotely (a philosophical concept to theorize divergence in intentions and realizations)? This is the point of view I shall try to defend.

The novels we have read, two of which having been the subject of indepth study - *Tungalag Tamir* and *Üüriin Tuya* -, were all produced in this particular writing context by authors charged with representing and illustrating the new state of mind and, at the same time, applying it.

The anthropological figure of the "mediator" intervenes here in parallel on two levels. This anthropological model of the "mediator" has emerged naturally in this work as part of a reflection on the production of the representations that make up history. The concept of the "mediator of desire" was first proposed by the anthropologist René Girard as a way of thinking about the violence of human interactions, in a study based on a corpus of several major literary works, including Cervantés' *Don Quixote*, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Flaubert's *Mme Bovary*, works by Proust and by Dostoyevsky. For the anthropologist, these works illustrate particularly well a mechanism that he believes is inherent in all human relationships, combining desire, admiration, and resentment, resulting in a need to absorb the person we want to imitate at the same time. Violence therefore arises from the intrinsically destructive nature of a quest for self based on the desire, not so much to

possess what the other has, but rather to possess what the other desires. From this perspective, the mediator is an “other” whom the individual both admires and envies, and whose essence he tries to capture by appropriating his this model’s desires. The Girardian model has a convincing practical application in ethnology, as demonstrated in particular by Sergio Dalla Bernardina, who has developed it throughout his work. In the context of twentieth-century Mongolian literature, the mediator is the “new man”, whose portrait is drawn through the hero of the socialist novel – historical, initiatory - a hero who must serve as a model for the reader and who, through his journey, shows him the path that he himself must follow, pointing out the society to which he must aspire.

It should be noted that these heroes often model their own aspirations on those of “guides” most of those that appear in the novels being characters of historical figures who have been elevated to the status of myths (in the sense of Roland Barthes, i.e. signs emptied of their substance in order to convey a message). This is the case with the figure of Sükhbaatar, Damdinsüren or Magsarzhav, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the novel: the man is obscured by the image that society has forged of him (it is interesting to note in this respect that there are no real photographs of Sükhbaatar, only film images in which he is portrayed by an actor, or painted or drawn portraits stripped of all expressivity). But the model is also, to a large extent, the author who, in obeying party orders and taking on the role assigned to him, acts as a good patriot. The schema thus presented is immediately readable and corresponds to the educational and cultural policy set out by the ruling party from the outset. Looking back over the years, we can (1) wonder what impact this literature has had on the way the Mongols define themselves and their relationship with others, (2) question how faithful the description of the ideal society towards which the heroes of these stories strive is to the reality of the Mongols during the socialist period, and (3) question the posterity of the model thus forged. In 1990, the change in politics and ideological policy changed completely overnight - a “transition without a transition” as we can regularly read-. However, researchers such as Kaplonski and Tsetsentsolmon question the radical nature of this change, preferring to read this transition as the emergence, or even the re-emergence, on the surface of currents acting in depth, preventing us from seeing the socialist period as a parenthesis in a long history. This analysis is in line with the general thinking of the anthropologist Maurice Godelier, who in the 1980s wrote a Marxist-oriented essay on the production and reproduction of their “material conditions of

existence" by societies, and in particular the social relations that govern them, which, in his view, are inseparable from the representations attached to them.

A priori, propaganda literature rarely produces great works and has little future. According to Morson, socialist realism is a literary genre whose priority is not aesthetics. If we look at the history of Mongolian literature in the twentieth century, we see that in the 1930s and 1940s in particular, the fact that many authors suffered the consequences of censorship had the effect of inhibiting any creative daring among those who remained (Kh. Sampildendev quoted by B. Mönkhbayar: 23-24). Literary dogmatism inevitably tends to favour the production of calibrated, stylistically heavy, artificial stories that are not credible neither inspiring. And yet a number of literary works written during this period are still held in high esteem today and are even much appreciated by most of the Mongols. How can this success be explained? We have concentrated here on two examples, *Tungalag Tamir* and *Üüriin Tuya*. In the case of *Tungalag Tamir*, the model with which today Mongols like those of previous decades are likely to identify is provided by the novel's heroes, heroes who, while remaining good revolutionaries and good socialists, have a psychological depth that enables them to escape the stereotype and transcend the requirements of the genre. Lodoidamba's aim was to explore the human soul, to tell his readers about inner conflicts that could speak to anyone. He has done so, but by anchoring his story in a historical and cultural context that brings them back to their Mongolian identity. The fact that the novel has been adapted for the screen has undoubtedly played a part. It can be said that characters like Erdene, Tömör and Itgelt are much more than paper heroes who die when you close the book: they have a life that has largely escaped the author, and that critics and readers alike have made their own, to the point of making them evolve with the times. For proof of this, we need only look at the number of works, studies and research devoted to these characters, and the passions that the debate is likely to unleash. It is particularly interesting to note the unexpected fate of Itgelt, whom Mongolian critics now agree is the most accomplished of the novels. Yet Itgelt is not the main protagonist, nor the one who should arouse empathy. But Itgelt's character is perhaps more in tune with today's aspirations than Erdene's is. With capitalism no longer the *bête noire* of Mongolian society, it is hardly surprising that the representative of the capitalist class in Lodoidamba's novel is now being rehabilitated. To rehabilitate Itgelt is to rehabilitate the individualism and profit-seeking that characterise today's society. It also means flattering certain traits of his character that are commonly claimed by the Mongols: his taste for alcohol (see Billé for

example), his hold on women and his freedom of morals in this respect. By associating them with a character who does not immediately set an example to be followed, Lodoidamba obeys the party's instructions, and yet the attempt to "rescue" Itgelt today shows that the novel lends itself to several readings. Tömör, Erdene's brother, is a hero with whom we can easily identify, but he is not a true socialist. If he finally decides to join the cooperatives, it's only because he's been ostracised by society. Tömör has not dedicated his struggle to the community, he remains an individualist, and the society to which Erdene has totally devoted himself, he adheres to only insofar as it allows him to hope to live with Dulmaa the family happiness to which they have both aspired since they met. If Tömör dies in the end, it is perhaps partly because he has no place in the society that is taking shape. Let's not push our conjectures too far, but the novel suggests that it is out of spite rather than conviction that Erdene becomes the typical hero of the genre, a spite caused by the betrayal of Itgelt and Dolgor, and by the coldness she shows him when he is ready to forgive her. By depicting a love that has become impossible because Erdene has changed so much by espousing the party cause that he has become unrecognisable to Dolgor, Lodoidamba tells a story that would not necessarily encourage everyone to model their actions on those of the "good socialist hero". Therefore we can as much identify with other figures of "heroism" proposed by the novel: Tömör, Dulmaa, Gerel, all three of whom take part in the revolution, but for the sake of love. Let us listen to what Gerel says to Erdene when she agrees to steal the secret documents he has undertaken to pass on to the party:

"She sighed:

- If Dovchin finds out that you're from the People's Party, you're dead.
 - I know. But, you, couldn't you help?
 - But how?
 - Dovchin has a very important document. If you could find it and give it to us, you'd be helping us enormously!
 - How do I know which one it is? There are so many of them.
 - We can look together.
- Gerel waited a long time before standing up:
- There is nothing I wouldn't do for you.
 - Gerel, my Gerel, it is not just me, it is our country, our Mongolia. It has suffered far too much.
 - I would do it for you. What you do it for is your business.

A few moments later, Gerel's husband, Dovchin, who is in collusion with the White Russians, enters and has her arrested. She is accused of spying for the Reds and executed. But as this dialogue clearly shows, it is for love that she sacrifices herself, not for the party

or the country. Similarly, when Dolgor tries to warn Erdene that counter-revolutionary forces are preparing to rise up, it is to save him, because she has heard that they are planning to kill him and realizes but too late that she still loves him. And finally, in the last scene of the novel, it is Dulmaa who neutralises Tsamba and Tügzhil, who represent the same counter-revolutionaries of 1932, but she does so to avenge Tömör's death. It should be noted that these three episodes, which feature the intervention of three women in the revolutionary struggle, do not appear in the film. This can be understood as follows: in the film, the propagandistic nature of the story clearly takes precedence. The dramas of passion that play such a key role in the novel and make it so rich have been obscured. To sum up what can be said about *Tungalag Tamir*, if the novel is considered to be the flagship novel (*manlai roman*) of the twentieth century and if it has survived the transition to another model of society so well, it is because it is not just about revolutionary commitment in the name of socialism of an Erdene or a Bat, but also because, through its many heroes, it presents so many facets of a complex and diverse Mongolian identity with which the Mongols of today, as well as those of yesterday, can identify.

From this point of view, *Üüriin Tuya* differs almost radically. Rinchen's positive heroes are not torn by their contradictions, Batbayar, Nasanbat or Shirchin perfectly embody the prototype of the hero advocated by "socialist realism". And it is precisely because they lack the contradictions and imperfections that give rise to empathy for Lodoidamba's characters. His "negative" heroes are generally much more profound, the best example probably being the Bogd who, having just agreed to return to the throne but with very limited powers, praises the People's Government, Sükhbaatar and his policies at the same time as blaming himself for all the misdeeds of which he has been guilty, manipulated by foreign powers. It is a judgement that can be challenged, but this Bogd is far more human, far more likely to arouse empathy than the characters of Batbayar or Nasanbat, who are too smooth. The reader learns of Nasanbat's death long after the fact and understands by allusion what may have happened. But presented as an accomplished fact that doesn't even need to be detailed (when the reader knows how much Rinchen can linger on descriptions or episodes when he deems it useful), this death generates little emotion. The characters and their psychology are what make Lodoidamba's novel so rich; *Üüriin Tuya's* richness is elsewhere.

But then, we might ask, did Rinchen remain a prisoner of propaganda and censorship in this novel, did he write a work that fits so well with the criteria of socialist realism that he did not seek to denounce its shortcomings? There is something suspicious about the ideal

school described in the last book, with its exemplary teachers, its model pupils and that strange inspector whose verbose, bombastic speech spans several pages and ends up literally putting the assembly to sleep. Readers of Orwell might be tempted to see this as satire. It is the ideal advocated by the regime that is being described, and Rinchen is fulfilling the role assigned to him by the party. He does this with a naturalistic realism, pushing the detail to the point of making the audience yawn or even fall asleep before waking up for the applause... The light of dawn in *Üüriin Tuya* is, to my mind, chilling. And I would be tempted to see in this work a dystopia that denounces what it pretends to praise. While the heroes of *Tungalag Tamir* can in many ways be seen today as models in which the Mongols can recognise what makes them Mongolian, the heroes of *Üüriin Tuya* seem more trapped in their socialist straitjacket. If the heroes here no longer provide a relevant model, does that mean that we shouldn't look for one in *Üüriin Tuya*? I think the answer lies with the author. As much as Erdene and Itgelt have acquired a place in the hearts of Mongolians that makes it impossible to reduce them to mere "paper heroes", in the case of Rinchen, the fieldwork forces me to note how much respect there is for the man and the author. He is seen as an ardent defender of Mongolian culture, a nationalist in the noblest sense of the word. He may not have achieved the status of myth to the same extent as Sükhbaatar. However, for a section of the intelligentsia at least, he tends to approach it.

Closing remarks

The core of the matter is the question of Mongolian feeling of a belonging together, how it is expressed, apprehended, and constructed by those primarily concerned, and hence how it is staged. Focusing on the notion of "ekh oronch üzel" as the ideal that was supposed to provide this feeling of belonging together during the socialist era, it is therefore a certain way of conceiving and representing patriotism that we have described, through its narration in the socialist twentieth century novel. The claims of this literature, which was clearly situated in space and time, brought a double dimension to the problem: the authors, indeed, were charged with illustrating patriotism, for the people and by the regime, and at the same time they were acting patriotically.

One essential point that can be drawn from this discussion is the fundamental role played here by the regime's voluntarist policy of shaping a common culture oriented towards the "progressive" socialist ideal – needless to repeat that we are quoting the term used at the time, the matter is not to debate its relevance – but which does not, however,

trample on centuries of literary composition. This heritage was probably the bearer of a diffuse sense of cultural community, and thus perhaps already the seeds of modern nationalism. The critical writings of the time express an ambivalent feeling towards this national culture. On the one hand, there is an exacerbated pride expressed in the form of emphatic panegyrics typical of authoritarian regimes, which, seen from the outside and perhaps especially with hindsight, may seem surprisingly naïve: who do they hope to mystify with such crude language? One might ask. But on the other hand, there is also a seemingly deep-rooted sense of inferiority and a tendency to self-deprecation. The whole thing has a rather confusing effect.

These two faces of the expression of Mongolian identity also both appear in literature. The novel of the socialist twentieth century provides a particularly telling example, insofar as progress – following a Marxist-Leninist pattern – is one of the main themes, if not the theme par excellence. We saw this with *Üüriin Tuya* but it is also very clear in *Tungalag Tamir*. The very title, in both cases, announces it from the outset in a metaphorical form. *Üüriin Tuya* is the sun rising, the light that illuminates the world in contrast to the darkness of the night which stands for the obscurantism embodied by the Church and the feudal system. And in the same vein, *tungalag* in Mongolian means “clear”, “limpid”, “pure”, it is also the truth that is supposed to triumph, calm succeeding to disorder.

In both novels, this is the main plot, the one that is explicitly proposed to the reader and which forms the trunk of the story. But in both cases, and although in quite different styles, multiple ramifications, subplots, are grafted onto it, opening up so many spaces to suggest other possible readings and interpretations. With *Tungalag Tamir*, we have a realistic novel that tells the story of the war of national liberation, the revolution, the beginnings of collectivisation and the difficult establishment of a modern education system in a rural and traditionalist society, but around the character of Tömör, or the complexity of the relations between Erdene, Dolgor and Itgelt, other influences are condensed, allowing many Mongolian researchers to take it as an example so as to touch the question of the “renewal of tradition” in literature.

The contingencies of the research led me to limit my ambitions with regard to the initial project by concentrating on these two novels while I would have liked to analyse all the works forming the corpus in equal measure. This constraint did not prevent me from reading them and integrating into the reflection what these readings inspired me. I can therefore safely say that they do not invalidate the argument I am defending here, even if I

must admit that not all these authors exploit to the same degree the possibilities opened up by fictional discourse in its relationship to history.

This reflection leads me to consider that the literature of the socialist period deserves to be studied as a moment in a long history with which it maintains relationships of change but also of continuity. In other words, it seems difficult to reduce it to a categorisation in terms of “socialist realism” – with all what this implies – even if this was the term used by the authors themselves to describe their works. From the historian’s point of view, it is valuable material in more ways than one. As far as this period is concerned, it bears the double testimony of events described by the narrative itself and that of the context of writing.

History is rarely, if ever, a matter of leaps from one system to another, and the evolution of mentalities may precede or follow moments of rupture, but it is very unlikely that it will be able to follow them completely. For three decades, however, contacts with the outside world have multiplied at the same time as a long process of re-reading the past. Numerous resources have been unearthed from formal and informal archives and made accessible to the public, and even more so to researchers. This new configuration seems at first sight promising for the historian. In reality, is it as satisfactory as it seems? In 1968, Bawden wrote the following:

“We must also remember that only the winning side has a voice in contemporary Mongolia, and that all accounts of the revolution present it as the necessary and right conclusion of a process whose outcome was never in doubt, and the justice of whose cause is not subject to argument”.

The same mistake could be made again, even though the “winning side” is supposed to be open to criticism and debate, to differences of opinion, and to be free of ideological constraints. Liberal democracy cannot be compared to the totalitarian regimes that marked the history of the twentieth century, but this should not prevent us from welcoming with circumspection any proposal that claims to be ideologically virgin. Ethnology comes in support of history to remind us that any discourse must be linked to the subjective representations of which it is the product, and that it cannot completely avoid projecting onto what it describes the value system that corresponds to the issues of the moment. Another problem is the dialogue between Mongolia and the West in the field of scientific

research. On paper, everything seems to be in favour of exchanges and the enrichment of the debate through the confrontation of the views of specialists in Mongolian studies from all over the world. Indeed, there are countless conferences, congresses and other “international” gatherings organised in Mongolia, as well as partnerships and cooperation agreements signed with foreign research institutes and organisations. There are many specialists in Mongolian studies throughout the world and in some countries they have productive and powerful research centres. But what do we see in practice? Although research in Mongolia is prolific, it is almost exclusively written and communicated in Mongolian, with a very hesitant command of English as far as I can tell. However, even though there are many Mongolian speakers among all the researchers interested in the study of the country and the region, how many actually take the trouble to read and comment on the work of their Mongolian colleagues when it is written in that language? The question is not rhetorical, it is a genuine question on our part, but the challenge is less to answer it than to advocate for the use of these sources, for their discussion and for a truly constructive critique. Experience in the field suggests that such interaction, which would be mutually beneficial, is largely lacking. There is a pressing demand for clarification of the concepts and theories developed in the West.

I am aware that my analysis is open to debate. And it is based on a literary culture that differs from that of Mongolian critics, which may lack certain keys but which can also, by operating under a new prism, open up new perspectives of interpretation. Although it is a cautious approach, it does not seem to me to be illegitimate, and if I propose it, it is also in order to submit it to the criticism that will perhaps enable me to revise my judgement in a constructive way. This calls for a remark on the vigilance required when exploring disciplinary boundaries as I have done. If we want to take a step back from the Mongolian example studied here, this research is also a more general reflection on the borrowings that a discipline can make from others (in this case history, ethnology, anthropology, literature and literary criticism) while preserving its specificity and autonomy.