

Mongolian-Turkic Epics: Typological Formation and Development

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The academic community has long noticed the resemblance between Mongolian and Turkic epics. Some believe that the Mongols and the Turkic people share a narrative tradition that accounts for their commonalities. Such a tradition arises from the period of time when ancestors of these two groups lived together in Central Asia and South Siberia (cf. Nekljudov 1981). One could also assert that Mongolian and Turkic heroic epics display common features in theme, plot, structure, motif, character, and formula.¹ This paper explores how the Mongol-Turkic epic typology formed and developed.

Mongol-Turkic Epic Typological Classification

Mongol-Turkic epics are both ancient and lengthy, eliciting the attention of epic specialists such as E. M. Meletinskij (1963), I. V. Pukhov (1975), and others, who locate the most ancient models for the study of Mongol-Turkic epics in Siberia. Scholars from different countries have recorded a total of well over 1,000 epics among the Mongolian and Turkic language families. In addition to the voluminous Mongolian epics *Jangar* and *Geser*, more than 550 Mongolian epics and variants of small and medium length have been recorded. These are mostly shorter performances that consist of several hundreds of lines, each telling a complete story. Medium-length epics number in the dozens, each with thousands of lines, and some with more than ten thousand.

Based on regional distributions, the Mongolian epics discovered in China amount to more than 60 with 110 variants. According to Narantuyaa (1988), medium- and small-volume epics collected in Mongolia number 80

¹ Cf. Rinchindorji 1987 and 1999.

with 241 variants. The Mongolian Buriat epics in Russia have at least 200 variants (Sharakhshinova 1987). Excluding the *Jangar* recorded by the Kalmyk in China, 200 volumes of relatively independent long poems, totaling as much as 200,000 lines, have been noted in Mongolia and Russia. There are more than ten handwritten and woodblock copies and librettos of Mongolian *Geser*, in both prosaic and rhyming style. The rhyming style has variants of more than 30,000 lines.

Similarly, the Siberian Turkic groups—the Altay, Tuva, Khakas, Shurtz, and Yakut—also possess a rich repertoire of epics. For example, the Siberian Institute of the Russian Academy of Science boasts an *Olonho* collection (*Olonho* is the Yakut term for epics) numbering over 200 handwritten copies (Surazhakov 1958-80). Currently there are 396 *Olonho* registered, among which *The Rapid Niurgonbaatar* contains as many as 36,600 lines (Pukhov 1962). The historian Surazhakov edited the ten-volume epic series of 73 Altaic heroic epics (1958-80); he cited 222 epics in his study of Altaic epic (1985). There remain hundreds of Siberian-Turkic and Central-Asian-Turkic epics awaiting further study.

Mongol-Turkic epics that originated in an earlier clan society still belong to a living tradition. Over 1,000 epics and epic variants are found even now among Mongolian and Turkic language groups in various countries. However, early epics have not been passed down to the present without change, and in the course of more than a millennium they have developed and varied. On the one hand their core sections gradually developed, and new elements and whole epics evolved out of the old; on the other hand, secondary or outmoded elements receded from the historical stage. Some ancient epics were forgotten. Within the living exemplars, differences in epoch, content, types, and patterns co-exist, constituting a varied landscape. This overall process leads to the preservation of features from various stages.

The typological formation and development of the plot structure of the Mongol-Turkic epics merits further description. Heroic epic is special in that there are many similar or shared elements in the plot structure of all Mongolian epic works. The renowned Mongologists W. Heissig,² Nikolaus Poppe,³ and others have classified the plot structure of the Mongolian epics on the basis of the motif-unit. Heissig has made detailed and comprehensive analyses of the hundred or so Mongolian epics that have been collected in

² Cf. Heissig 1979.

³ Cf. Poppe 1979.

China, Mongolia, and Russia and has identified 14 structural types and more than 300 motifs and events. In addition to the motif-unit, I have adopted a larger plot-unit—namely, the motif-series (the plot-frame of the early epics)—as an increment for classifying plot structures of the Mongolian epics.⁴

What is an epic motif-series? Lyric preludes and narrative stories usually form the constituent parts of the Mongolian epics. The preludes are not long and share common patterns and motifs. Basic narrative plots structure the main body of the epics; these are supplemented by secondary plots and episodes that were integrated into the epic as it developed⁵—as with folktales, it is difficult to discern the logical connections. The basic plots are the pillars of the epic, in which we can find the traditional narratives of Mongolian epics and their periodicity and logic. I have compared and analyzed more than 200 epics and their variants both at home and abroad, and concluded that, in addition to motifs, a larger periodic plot unit commonly exists. I call such units *epic motif-series*, and based on their content, have separated them into two types: the marriage-motif and the battle-motif. Each type has its own structural patterns with a set of basic motifs that are organically linked and ordered. In a word, these two motif-series originated from early epics. After comparing and analyzing various Mongolian epics, I suggest that there are two types of early Mongolian epics, one focusing on the hero's quest for a wife and the other on the hero's struggles against a demonic figure. The plot-frame of the hero's marriage expedition is the marriage-motif-series, which consists of the following basic motifs:

Time; place; the young hero and his relatives; his riding horse; home country; palace and tent; information about his future wife; the young hero's desire for marriage and the relatives' advice against it; catching the riding horse; preparing harnesses; arming with bows and arrows and swords and knives; events on the road (conquering a ferocious beast of the natural world and enemies in the human world); arrival at the future wife's home; rejection of his proposal by the future wife's family and the particular conditions they set; conquering or persuading her family through valorous struggles; and finally, holding wedding ceremonies and bringing his beautiful wife home.

⁴ Cf. Rinchindorji 1989.

⁵ The author conceives of three stages in an epics' development: a period of origination, a period of development during which the epic reaches greater levels of sophistication, and a period of decline.

The epic frame for the hero's struggles against a demon belongs to the battle-motif-series, which, although different from the marriage-motif-series, also shares quite a few common motifs. The battle-motif-series consists of the following basic constituents:

Time; place; hero and his relatives; his riding horse; home country; palace and tent; the evil omen for the arrival of the *mangus* (demon); the riding hero's power; discovery of enemies; encounter with the *mangus*; declaration of names and intentions; fighting (using swords and daggers, bows and arrows, and hand-to-hand combat); defeating the *mangus*; begging for mercy; killing the enemy and burning its flesh and bones; and returning with honor.

Of course, we cannot say that these two motif-series always contain all the listed motifs, and there are of course cases with larger and smaller numbers. However, there is an indispensable core; the units organically link to each other to create the plot frames and plot patterns of the epics. To put it another way, the marriage-motif-series and the battle-motif-series form the basic plots of all Mongolian epics. Due to differences in content, number, and combination, however, the Mongolian epics can be divided into three plot types: single-plot epics, tandem-compound plot epics, and juxtaposition-compound plot epics.

Single-Plot Epics

Epics whose basic plot consists of only one type of motif-series are single-plot epics. This kind of epic itself falls into two types: the marriage epic, consisting of the marriage-motif-series (represented by the letter A in the figure below), and the battle epic, consisting of the battle-motif-series (B). The single-plot epics are the earliest, simplest, and the most basic type. Since the particularities of marriage and war differ at various stages of development of each tribe and ethnic group, these subjects are differently reflected in the epics. According to the content of the series, the marriage epics can be divided into three types: marriage by abduction (A_1), trial of son-in-law (A_2), and the arranged marriage (A_3). The battle epics can be of two types: clan revenge (B_1) and struggle for property (B_2).

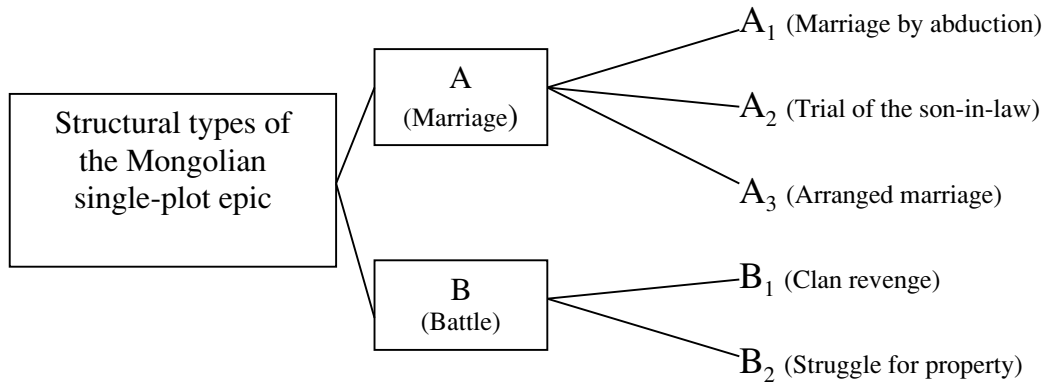


Figure 1: The Mongolian Single-Plot Epic

Tandem-Compound Plot Epics

Epics whose basic plots have in tension two or more motif-series are tandem-compound epics. They have two basic categories with combined motif-series serving as the core of the epic: one joins a marriage-motif-series and a battle-motif-series (typically A_2+B_2 , or the trial of the son-in-law and the struggle for property), while the other comprises the two types of battle-motif-series (B_1+B_2 , or clan revenge and the struggle for property).

Juxtaposition-Compound Plot Epic

The long epic *Jangar* is regarded as a juxtaposition-compound epic. The plot structure of such a work differs from that of the Hellenic and Hindu epics. There are two kinds of plot structure: the general structure and the structure for each part (or canto). The general plot structure is of the juxtaposition-compound type that consists of over 200 long poems with independent plots. The basic plots of each of its constituent parts can be classified into four large sections (A, B, A_2+B_2 , B_1+B_2). These sections are consistent with the types mentioned above, being the two types of the single-part epic (A, B) plus the two types of tandem-compound epic (A_2+B_2 , B_1+B_2). The following figure presents a scheme for the various plot types of Mongolian epic:

- 1) single-plot epic $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} (1) A \\ (2) B \end{array} \right.$
- 2) tandem-compound epic $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} (1) A_2 + B_2 \\ (2) B_1 + B_2 \end{array} \right.$
- 3) juxtaposition-compound epic $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} A \\ B \\ A_2 + B_2 \\ B_1 + B_2 \end{array} \right.$
 (includes all of the above, ex. *Jangar*)

Figure 2: Structural Types of the Basic Plots of Mongolian Epic

The earliest basic plots in the medium- and small-volume epics among the Turkic groups in Xinjiang are similar to those in the Mongolian single-plot and tandem-compound epics. In comparison with Mongolian epics, Turkic epics in Xinjiang and Central Asia are more historically and realistically oriented, reflecting the complex ethnic and religious strife in those areas—many depicting struggles against the Kalmyk rulers. However, as early as seven to eight hundred years ago, the basic plots in the *Ugus Naman* and the *Book of the Kurkot Grandpa* are similar to those in the early Mongolian single-plot and the tandem-compound epics. *The Book of the Kurkot Grandpa* is believed to be a work of the seventh or eighth century, with the present written version appearing around the twelfth century in twelve volumes. Many of its cantos depict the battles and marriage struggles of the Ugus heroes. For example, Canto 6 presents a marriage epic (A_2) in which Kangle's son, Kantulal, travels to the regions ruled by heathens. Kantulal passes through three dangerous trials—killing with his bare hands a ferocious wild bull, a lion, and a male camel—and obtains his beautiful future wife, defeating the enemy that followed him. Canto 3 is similar to the first type of tandem-compound epic ($A_2 + B_2$, or the trial of the son-in-law and the struggle for property). After facing three competitions—namely, horse racing, archery, and wrestling—the hero Bamus, son of Baibor, wins the love of his future wife. What occurs next is fairly intriguing: Bamus is attacked and taken prisoner on his wedding night. After 16 years of imprisonment, he returns home and finds his hometown plundered. Bamus retaliates, killing the head of his enemies, who had wanted to possess his wife, and defeating the host of offending enemies. This canto consists of

two parts, that of the hero's marriage and that of his battles. Other cantos, such as "On Beger's son Aimole" and "On the Attack of Salarkazan Aur," focus solely on the hero's one or two battles. In the first instance, Beger's enemy seizes the chance to launch an attack when he is badly wounded hunting. Beger's son Aimole goes to battle on his father's behalf and defeats the aggressors (B_1). In the latter case, Salarkazan routs the enemy with the help of a shepherd and rescues his mother, son, and the soldiers who were abducted, thus winning back his property (B_2).

In telling the life story of its named hero, the famous epic *Ugus* simultaneously recounts several hundred years of oral history. Its plot consists of four parts focusing on the life of Ugus: his childhood; his marriage and children; his many battles; and the transmission of his power as Khan to an heir. *Ugus* is a rare instance of Altaic epic that was passed down in written form. Unlike other Altaic epics that adopt extended descriptions, it uses a simplified language to summarize the hero's marriage and heroic exploits. Though its plot consists of the four parts described above, the depiction of Ugus' heroic deeds centers on his battles and marriage. From this emphasis it could be surmised that battle and marriage served as the traditional subjects and plot frames for Turkic epic as early as five to six hundred years ago.

Another famous epic, *Alpamis*, recounts the story of its hero's life and the events before his birth with rich description and intriguing stories. Its basic plot, however, can be classified into four parts. First, Alpamis' parents pray for a son, make a pilgrimage, and experience the miraculous pregnancy of Alpamis' mother. Alpamis is eventually born and grows up. Second, Alpamis marries the beauty Gulibairsen after a heroic battle. Third, after returning home with his wife, Alpamis fights his enemy Taishik Khan, who has ransacked his herds and property; Alpamis kills him and recovers everything that was lost. Fourth, after returning home again, Alpamis conquers Urtan—a very destructive demon and son of the charwoman of Alpamis' family—who attempted to possess his wife Gulibairsen. This plot is similar to those of the Mongolian epics, in that the second and third parts most fundamentally reflect and highlight the heroism of Alpamis.

Epics among the Siberian Altay, Tuva, and Khakas are closer to those of the Mongols. S. Surazhakov (1958-80 and 1985) has classified 222 Altaic epics according to their relationship to early feudalism and the age of feudal patriarchies. He again subdivided the epics of clan society into works of five subjects, but, generally speaking, these reflect the two great events of marriage and battle. "The Story of the Hero's Marriage" employs the marriage motif. The hero's struggles with monsters, the lower world, and plunderers, and the relationship between the hero's immediate family and

relatives all draw on the battle motif. The plot structure of the long epic *Manas* is similar to that of *Jangar*. The first volume of *Manas* contains many poetic cantos that detail the legendary origin of the hero Manas and his ethnic group, his miraculous birth, his childhood, and the sacrificial rite held in the name of Koktoy—all plots that are rare in the Mongolian epics. However, according to Lang Ying's study (1991), *Manas*'s primary plots involve battles, as well as some stories about weddings and abduction. In the first part of *Manas*, the Kirghiz wage many wars against surrounding ethnic groups; each expedition is treated with a relatively independent long poem. Some individual plots interrelate, but many of the expeditions are relatively independent from each other, no single episode being more important than the others. Rather, the various plots in *Manas* are juxtaposed, each acting as an equally important facet of the epic. Thus, we can say that *Manas* is also a tandem-compound epic. However, while "Saymaytaic," "Saytek," "Qigetay," and other tales belonging to the *Manas* epic series reveal parallel plot-structures, they do not function as horizontal tandem-compound types. Each epic part is connected with the Manas family tree, resulting in a series of epics depicting the first generation of Manas' genealogy down to the eighth generation. The plot of the first volume of *Manas*, titled "Manas," serves as a prototype for the seven subsequent volumes. In all likelihood, the eight volumes of *Manas* were formed by periodic repetition of the fundamental plot structure.



Mongolian *jangarchis*, L. Purbe, Kanara, Purbujab, and Arimpil with the author second from right (1982). Photograph by the author.

An epic that takes shape via periodic recurrences of the plot structure may be characterized as a chain-type epic. This kind of epic seems to be relatively rare worldwide and a special type in Central Asia. In addition to *Manas*, the *Abai Geser* among the Buriat is also a chain-type epic. It consists of nine long poems, all interrelated in a fashion similar to the way *Manas* vertically and genetically develops from volumes 1-8. The first volume of *Abai Geser*, called “Abai Geser Khubogun,” is largely similar in content to the Mongolian *Geser*, but the next eight volumes, created by the Buriat as the continuation of *Geser*, derive from their own ancient epics. The second volume, “Oshir Bokhdo Khubogun,” describes the life of Abai Geser’s eldest son; the third, “Khulin Alai Khubogun,” tells the story of Abai Geser’s second son; the fourth, “Wengshen Khar,” is about the son of Oshir Bokhdo Khubogun, and so on. This overall process resembles many streams converging into a vast river that widens and deepens as it flows; in the same way, an influential epic can incorporate many other epics.

The Tibetan *Gesar* is a grand and voluminous epic belonging to the juxtaposition-compound epic series. Like *Jangar* and the first volume of *Manas*, it recounts the adventures of heroes, piecing together cantos with independent plots in tandem. The plot structures of various ethnic epics in Mongolia are extremely complicated, with each having its own local features. In addition to the basic plots described above, there are also many derived plots and scenarios with marriage (the ritual abduction of beautiful women) and battle at their core.

The Origin of Early Epics

Mongol-Turkic epics could be described as living patterns that have enjoyed a long and complicated process of formation and development. They may have passed through a series of stages, developing from legends to stories, from shorter genres of verbal art to linked narratives, from prose to poetry. The epics then continuously consolidated and developed, reflecting and incorporating societal changes in a manner that affected their motifs, narratives, and characters. This process brought about a gradual widening of plots, structure, and motifs, and an ever greater increase in volume, number, and type. Over time, epics have grown more and more artistically mature.

Epics Formed in the Context of Tribal Wars

The ethnic groups in Mongolia have emerged from primitive clan societies where inter-clan blood feuds were common, sometimes resulting in one clan exterminating another. With the emergence of private property and class divisions, clan society has gradually dissolved; ransacking property, the theft of animals, and the abduction of women and slaves were once widespread. For example, among the Mongol-Turkic nomads in Northern China divisions among grassland nobles, commoners, and family slaves have appeared. During a period of over a thousand years, some tribes established small and large khanate states, leading to the appearance of famous khans and generals. However, as proved by *Historical Collection*⁶ and *The Secret History of the Mongols*,⁷ the “heroic epoch” of clans and tribal warfare lasted into the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Even at this late date, battles over horses, herds, slaves, and women still occurred and the acquisition of trophies was for men the highest honor. With regard to marriage customs, conjugal and exogamous marriage was the practice. There were both paid marriages and free marriages, but the primitive custom of marriage by abduction had not completely disappeared from the historical stage.

Respected scholars worldwide have noted that the most ancient epic subjects are of two types: the quest for a wife and children and battle against a demon. The epics that focus on an expedition for a wife and children appear to reflect the custom of exogamy in patriarchal clans. This kind of epic praises the heroic deeds of the main character, who on his expeditions overcomes the natural obstructions and the evil designs of those he meets en route to a remote clan where he defeats his competitor, removes his future parent-in-law’s obstacles to marriage, and wins his future wife. The German scholar W. Heissig (1979) has pointed out that the Mongolian epics tell typical courting stories in which the hero goes on a quest to win his future wife. Typical courting scenes often appear in the Mongolian epics: the hero, alone or with his brothers, sets forth, climbs over steep mountain peaks,

⁶ Rashidal-Din 1983. *Historical Collection* (or *Jami’ al-Tawarikh*) is a voluminous world history composed in Persian at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It consists of three parts: a Mongolian history, a world history, and a world topography.

⁷ *The Secret History of the Mongols* was compiled in Uihur Mongolia during the thirteenth century and describes how the Mongol kingdom formed, focusing primarily on Chinggis Khan (1162-1227) and his family. The original text vanished; the work being cited derives from an early Ming Dynasty translation (1368-1644).

crosses the wild sea, and defeats ferocious beasts and demons; the travelers reach a remote clan, where with courage and power they overcome the future father-in-law's objections to the marriage of his daughter; and they successfully return with the newlyweds. Such epics belong to the marriage-by-abduction type (denoted A_1 above).

Early marriage-by-abduction plots have long been popular among commoners and have influenced later epics. For example, in the Dai epic *Li Feng*, which came into being in late clan society, several wars are fought for women. The hero, Feng Gai, has abducted the wives of Hai Han and King Sang Luo. He also captures other women.⁸ The traditional marriage-by-abduction plots have also influenced the later longer epics *Jangar* and *Geser*. In the descriptions of the wedding of Jangar's father, Uzon Aldar Khan, and that of Manas with Kanikai, we can spot traces of this motif. In fact, the same pattern is prevalent internationally. Stories that describe obtaining beautiful women by means of abduction in the Greek and Indian epics may have originated from the actual social custom of marriage by abduction.

The second major theme, the hero's struggle against a demon, derives from heroic legends. There are many kinds of demons in various ethnic epics, such as the snake-monster, the cyclops, and the many-headed demon. Many-headed monsters, known as Mangus, Mangni, Delbegen, and Ker-Diutpa, often appear in Mongolian epics and are full of symbolic meaning. At first they seem to have represented the ferocious beasts found in nature; later they become a symbol of the hero's enemy clan, reflecting the practice of blood feud in primitive society. With the emergence of private ownership and class divisions, these demons become symbolic of bandits and oppressors. In Mongolian-Turkic epics they are characterized by their many heads, their acts of cannibalism, and a separate power source that may be hidden in one or several animal bodies.⁹ They despise human beings and often attack the hero's home country. In early epics, the demon's primary motivation is to abduct the hero's wife or sisters; in response, the hero kills his adversary, exterminates the latter's family (his wife, children, and parents), and rescues his wife or sisters. In this case, the contest represents the collective force of one clan against another, with the struggle resulting in

⁸ Cf. Qing Jiahua 1985.

⁹ In the epics both heroes and enemies can have a separate power source (sometimes translated as "anima") hidden in the body of an animal or object. For example, while the hero Geser and his enemy fight, their power sources battle as well in the forms of a white bull and a black bull. In order for Geser to conquer his enemy, he has to destroy its power source first.

the symbolic extermination of one whole clan. For this reason we call them clan-feud-type epics (denoted as B₁ above).

The Influence of Varieties of Verbal Art on Epic Content

Epics depend not only on a culture's social organization, but also on its various forms of verbal art. Before the emergence of epics, there existed prose-style versions of myth, legends, and other stories, along with the rhythmic style of verbal art employed in sacrificial rites, shamanistic poems, blessings, ballads, and folk sayings. Epics are an early style of narrative that took shape by combining narrative traditions with lyric and rhythmic features. Across the spectrum of folk oral creative works, epics are the largest comprehensive form. The Mongolian epics furnish an example: within their prelude and body, the elements of time, place, the hero and his wife (or future wife), home country, tent, horse, and weapons are introduced and praised. All varieties of lyric are employed, borrowing from the ancient poetic forms of Mongolian shamanistic sacrificial poems, blessings, and praise songs. Myths and shamanistic poems contributed demons, harmful falcons, ferocious beasts, personified natural phenomena, various mythological figures, fairies, and spirits. In comparison to these eastern epics, those of the West appear to have an even stronger relationship with myths and legends, being full of representations and metaphors and making use of ancient totemic myths, heroic legends, and short narrative poems. For example, the epic *Moyi Dawang* of the Zhuang people appears to draw on the myth of a totemic ox and legends about the Bamboo King and the Flying Head (Ya 1996). The *War between Black and White* among the Bai people symbolically represents the struggles between two different belief systems.

Heroic tales bear a close relationship with epics. The content of the former is similar to that of the latter, both representing the hero's struggles to obtain a wife and his campaigns against demons or other heroes. Of course, some epics also become heroic tales during their dispersal. In a word, however, the majority of heroic tales have roots in the ancient past. It is most likely that heroic tales and epics are different branches with the same origin, and they use the two artistic styles that evolved and took shape on the basis of the earliest short heroic tales.

The Inseparability of Oral Poets and the Emergence of Epic

At present, there are epic ballads under various names among the relevant ethnic groups in Mongolia and neighboring countries: *tuulchi*

(Mongols and Tuva), *ülgerchi* (Mongols and Buriat), *chorchi* (Eastern Mongols), *jangarchi* (Oirad and Kalmyk), *zhongken* (Tibetans), *zanha* (the Dai), *jirshi* (Kazak), *aken* (Kizghiz and Kazak), *manaschi* (Kirghiz), *kayichi* (Altay), and *olonkhosuti* (Yakut). These epic ballads grew out of early artistic traditions. In all likelihood, before the emergence of epics among various ethnic groups and before the existence of priests and shamans, there appeared many talented poets, who were not only eloquent enough to fluently recite poems in praise of their gods and ancestors, but also created many sacrificial poems, blessings, praises, and old ballads of various kinds. They accomplished the creative task of transforming tales into epics, weaving together bits and pieces to form a complete set and skillfully reworking prose into verse. They connected their received heroic tales to the social reality of their own times and revised them, giving divinity to the heroes by endowing them with shamanistic or spiritual features. Abduction and clan-feud epics were created in this way. Even the earliest epics were understood as having a sacred function, and the ancestors appreciated and revered them. As singers continued reciting them, the growing audiences among various clans encouraged the spread of epic performances.



Mongolian epic singer Rinchin performing an epic in 1991. Photograph by the author.

Development of Types of Small- and Medium-size Epics

Abduction and clan-feud are no doubt the earliest epic themes. The plot-frame or motif-series of abduction-type epics (A_1) became the basis and prototype for the development of the marriage-type epic (A). In the same way, the plot-frame or motif-series of clan-feud epics (B_1) is the basis for battle-type epics (B). As mentioned above, these two kinds of epic motif-series served as the frame, pattern, and unit for the further development of epics.

First, on the basis of the plot-frame of the marriage-by-abduction type (A_1), the trial of the son-in-law type (A_2) took shape. Due to changes in ancient society, the primitive custom of marriage by abduction became anachronistic, and a new social consciousness and revisionist views on marriage emerged, resulting in all kinds of marriages based on bride-price and other conditions. The “trial of the son-in-law” epics reflect this new social practice. For example, the hero would destroy various evils—including demons, monsters, and ferocious birds and beasts—for the father-in-law as the price for his daughter. In the Mongolian epic *Hairtu Hara*, the hero kills seven wild wolves and five *mangus* for his father-in-law. In *The Four-Year Old Hulugbatur*, the hero kills nine *mangus*. The warriors in the Daur people’s *Chokaimergen* capture the *mangus*, Yeldengker, and a vicious lion in order to win their future wives. When the hero saves a maiden from the monster who abducted her, he is rewarded with her hand in marriage. The Buriat epic *Altainai Hu on the Golden Horse* and the Mongolian epic *Erdeni Habuhsoya*, performed by the Ewenki, all follow this pattern of loss and recovery. In the epics *Ejin Tengeri* and *Tugalchinhuu*, the heroes rescue golden and silver foals; and in *Chokai Mergen*, the hero recovers 70 white foals. In the *Wedding of Hongor*, performed by Li Purbai and others, the hero captures and tames a murderous wild camel, a dark blue bull, and a white-breasted black dog before he wins the consent of his father-in-law to marry his daughter.

In many epics, dangerous trials are set three times in succession, according to the future father-in-law’s requirements, which stem from the father-in-law’s dual aim of a suitable price for marrying his daughter and strengthening his own clan by recruiting a good son-in-law. Because he imposes daunting conditions for the suitor without any concern for his life, many young men die fighting ferocious beasts and only the most outstanding hero can win the fight and secure a wife. The description of these adventures and trials probably reveals vestiges of the practice of trading marriage for service or of rites of passage into adulthood. In the history of many ethnic groups in China, the phenomenon of service marriage has been

popular. According to this arrangement, a man had to work in a potential bride's clan to compensate for the loss of her contribution of labor. Under such a system, the young woman's family tests the suitor, in the hope of securing a worthy son-in-law. This same desire could also explain the behavior of the father-in-law in some epics *after* the daughter's marriage, since after the wedding the father causes more difficulty for his son-in-law, using all kinds of strategies and excuses to prevent him from returning to his own home country with his new wife. In other epics, when the hero returns with his wife to his own clan, the father-in-law, together with his family, herds, and property, follows him and settles down close by. These actions can be explained by interpreting them as a test: in the interest of his own clan, the father-in-law prevents the son-in-law's return in order to use his strength for the protection of the clan; later, he follows his son-in-law to establish a confederacy of clans and strengthen the power of his own clan. Of course, by this time, marriage has become a way to achieve clan and tribal confederacy.

There is also another common way of testing the son-in-law in epics: the father-in-law raises three conditions for marrying his daughter—namely, mastery in horse racing, archery, and wrestling. The winner of these three competitions is qualified to marry his daughter; should a suitor fail in even one of the competitions, he is disqualified. In many cases, two suitors vie for the daughter's hand. The three competitions are the traditional folk recreational activities among northern nomadic peoples. This "triathlon" has traditionally served as a means to confirm and reward the most skillful men and the swiftest horses, and, historically at least, has not been employed as a procedure for selecting a son-in-law. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how the social custom could have been transferred to epic to serve a new purpose, with the result that a new type of pattern formed (A_2).

According to its plot structure, the trial type of epic (A_2) has taken shape on the basis of the marriage-by-abduction type of epic (A_1). With a few exceptions, the basic motifs are similar in content and sequence:

time; place; the growth of the hero; information about the future wife; the hero expresses his desire to marry; discouragement by his family; determination to set out on an expedition; preparation of the riding horse, armature, and weapons; setting out on the expedition and occurrences along the way; encountering the future father-in-law; the father's rejection of the suitor's proposal (marriage-by-abduction type); harsh conditions prescribed by the father (trial type); defeating the future father-in-law (marriage-by-abduction type); fulfillment of conditions (trial type); the father forced to agree to the marriage; the wedding ceremony; and returning home with a wife.

By comparing the two marriage types, one may see the line of development from the marriage-by-abduction—unconditional and with no bride-price—to the trial type that involved a bride-price and one or more conditions. Similarly, by comparing the direct and heated struggle between the suitor and the father-in-law to the indirect struggle among several gentle suitors, one may glimpse evolving social models.

The plot frame of the clan-feud type (B_1) is the basis for another battle epic—the bandit type (B_2). In late clan society, due to the greater prevalence of private property and class divisions, competition for herds, property, and domestic slaves intensified. This social reality was reflected in the epic and developed into the bandit type on the basis of the framework of clan-feud epics. In the bandit epic, the hero's enemies include demons and warriors, who not only abduct women but also ransack herds and other property and force the hero's parents and clan members into slavery. The difference between these two types is not the matter of whether the enemy is a demon or not. A demon who appears as an abductor in the clan-feud type will possess the features of a plunderer and oppressor in the bandit type. In the clan-feud type, herds and property are rarely ransacked and the hero's parents and clan members do not become slaves. Nonetheless, other elements of these plots are similar. The basic motif-series of the clan-feud and bandit types is as follows:

Time; place; hero; an attack by the enemy—either the feud is motivated or a chance act of banditry occurs; preparation of horses, armature, and weapons; expedition and occurrences along the way; encounter with the enemy; informing each other of names and the desire to battle; fighting (with swords and daggers, bows and arrows, and wrestling); the defeat of the enemy; asking for pardon; extermination of the enemies and their clan; rescuing the lost wife (and in the bandit type the lost herds, property, and the captured family members); and returning with success.

In summation, the motif-series of the marriage-by-abduction type and the trial of the son-in-law type share many of the same motifs, diverging where marriage customs differ. Likewise, the motif-series of the clan-feud type and the bandit type differ only in regard to the enemy's object. In addition, the motif-series of the two marriage types and those of the two battle types as a whole share common motifs, suggesting the fundamental unity of the epics and a traditional model behind their variety. The four types of epics are similar in that they all describe one valorous deed by the hero (the struggle for marriage or in battle), and their frames are all comprise a single motif-series. Thus, they are single-plot (or single-canto) epics. The

single-plot type seems to be the primary genus of epic and serves as a foundation for various other types. It is short and effective, usually consisting of several hundred lines, but however short it may be, each one describes a complete story. Some call this kind of epic an epic-fragment, but actually they are early forms of epics that preserve the most basic features.

Besides the single-plot type there are also several kinds of compound-structure epics. Due to differences in the way the motif-series compounded, there are two large types—the tandem-compound epics and juxtaposition-compound epics. Two or more epic motif-series form the compound-structure type, while the tandem-compound developed according to social and historical factors. With the emergence of a laboring class and an increased focus on private property, class divisions appeared. Heads of clans and tribes launched endless wars for property and slaves. In this severe and complicated social struggle, a hero typically faced more than one battle. For example, in the tandem-compound epic, other warriors, noticing that the hero is away seeking a wife or was leaving home to go hunting or fighting, will often devastate the hero's home country, drive away his herds, and force his parents and subjects into slavery. Even when the hero returns successfully from a distant war, he has to go to battle again. Though epics had a cultural responsibility to reflect these struggles, single-canto epics could not include all of them. Bards made use of existent single-plot structures and the original motif-series of marriage-type epics and of battle-type epics, editing and linking them to create tandem-compound epics that reflected the hero's second set of struggles.

The common tandem-compound type combines the motif-series of the trial of son-in-law epics and the bandit epics (A_2+B_2). For example, the Mongolian epic about Khan Tegus' son Shiretu Mergen Khan, *Jugaimijidehu*, and the Kazak epic *Alepamis* describe the hero's weddings (trial of son-in-law type) and his battles; *Alepamis* adds to these basic plots the narrative of the hero's growth and his struggles within the family. *Ugus* is similarly composed of battle and marriage motifs. However, this is not the sole combination of motif-series possible—for example, a tandem-compound epic may employ two different battle motif-series (B_1+B_2). Both of the Mongolian epics *Altan Galu* and *Gunagan Ulanbataar* describe a hero who conquers two different bandits. According to the plot-structure of the Mongolian epics, the latter parts of these two tandem-compound epics are basically similar, both relying on the single-plot bandit pattern (B_2). Thus, as has been shown, there are many small- to medium-size epics among the Mongolian ethnic groups with rich content and various forms, bearing marks of different stages of social development.

Evolution of Long Epics

The law of development of long epics throughout the world is similar. The process of formation of *Jangar* and *Manas* is similar to that of the world-famous Greek and Indian epics, which may have first taken shape as great and voluminous works on the basis of many smaller narratives and poems in the oral tradition.

Before *Jangar* and *Manas* became long epics, the Mongolian and Turkic peoples already shared hundreds of small- and medium-size epics, most limited to several hundred lines. Later, however, epics of between several thousand and three hundred thousand lines appeared. Current versions of *Jangar* and *Manas*, which each have over 200,000 lines, were formed on the basis of the subjects, styles, structures, characters, and artistic treatment of the original small- and medium-length epics, and especially on their plot frames.

The plot structures of the three great epics of Mongolia—*Geser*, *Jangar*, and *Manas*—differ from those of the *Iliad* and *Mahabharata*, which focus on the roles of many heroic characters in the unraveling of one major heroic event. The *Iliad* describes the war between two great military powers, with its plot centering on the struggle between the Greeks and the Trojans in their fight for the city of Troy. The *Mahabharata* is all-inclusive, focusing, however, on the struggle for kingship between two military camps, namely Bandu and Julu within the Harata; this war has become the core plot of the epic. The three great Mongolian epics do not follow a single war between two huge military camps; they concentrate instead on the heroes Geser, Jangar, and Manas, charting their lives and describing their campaigns against various enemies in different volumes and cantos. Take *Jangar*, for example, which contains more than 200 relatively independent cantos, most of them battles and marriage struggles. All these cantos are based on short- and medium-length epics and employ their motif-series. As mentioned above, there are four types of short- and medium-length epics, among which *Jangar* appears to be the fourth type. The first volume of *Manas* sounds similar to *Jangar* since it has many independent cantos, most of which describe battles. Although the heroic expeditions in *Manas* are more complicated than those in *Jangar*, its core has also formed on the basis of the motif-series of short- and medium-length epics about the historical warrior Manas.¹⁰

¹⁰ As Lang Ying has pointed out (1991:263-69), the long historical poem *Manas* has a relationship to the epic *Alap Manash* of the Altay, an ethnic group among the Siberian Turkic peoples, in terms of hero's name, representation of characters, and plot

In addition to drawing upon the form and content of short- and medium-length historical poems, the long historical poems absorbed features of myths, legends, folktales, sacrificial prayers, shamanistic poems, incantations, blessings, praises, narrative poems, and folk sayings from the larger oral tradition. For example, when performing the epic *Jangar*, singers will represent the orphaned heroes Jangar and Satar by drawing upon legends in which orphans kill monsters, such as the “Legendary Origin of Cholos Tribe,” “The Extermination of the Mangus by the Orphan,” “Lonely Nutai,” “Lonely Yirgai of the North,” and “Hangel Kuk Batur.” The representation of Jangar has also made use of such legends as “The Sharp Arrow Shooter,” “The Giant,” “The Fast Runner,” “The Mighty Mountain Lifter,” “The Three Heavenly Maidens,” “The Swan Girl,” “The Beauty Turned Spirit,” “The Copper-Mouthed and Gazette-Legged Witch,” “Descent to the Underworld in Search of Someone,” “The Underground Kuk-Darhan (Blue Blacksmith),” “The Cultural Hero who Raises Wild Life,” and others. The influence of the Altaic legend *Alap Manash* upon the epic *Manas* is also apparent: not only did the central figure inherit his name from Manash, but these two heroes also share similar characteristics of gigantic appearance, magic power, resistance to spears and swords, and the ability to sleep soundly.

What is more, *Manas* has absorbed myths and legends from the Kirgiz and ancient Turkic peoples. For example, “The Forty Maidens,” which is popular among the Kirgiz, Karakalpak, and others, was woven into the first part of *Manas*, providing Manas with noble origins by depicting him as the son of a princess. Kaypushan myth may be heard in the narration of the lives of several generations of the Manas family. In addition, *Manas* draws upon the legends of “The Giant” and “The Crippled Blacksmith,” (Lang 1991:163). In brief, small- and medium-size epics and folk oral traditions were the artistic basis and cultural precondition for the formation of longer epics. The transition from shorter historical poems to voluminous epics required a major shift in the process of development.

The process of epic evolution is extremely complicated. After a long epic has achieved its most basic shape, it builds upon this, developing and changing continually during its oral dissemination. In addition, other long sister epics may evolve from one long epic, just as seven long sister poems, “Saymaytay” and others, have evolved on the basis of the pattern and plot

structures. She has observed that “regarding Manash’s life history, *Alap Manash* consists of large sections depicting the miraculous birth of the hero, his marriage, his heroic quest, the threat to his life, and the hero’s death and resurrection. It is basically similar to the narrative frames of the epic *Manas* and ancient Turkic epics” (*ibid.*:266-67).

frame of the first volume of *Manas*, and as the eight long epics of *Oshir Bogod Hübegun* and others appeared as a continuation of *Abai Geser Hübegun*. These epics followed a new type of pattern with a chain plot structure, narrating the life of a hero and his descendants.

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