

The Oirat Epic Cycle of *Jangar*

Chao Gejin

Introduction

It is difficult or impossible to specify the exact moment of the emergence of Mongolian epic. As far as we know, no convincing clues have ever been found about epic singing in surviving documents composed by historians, missionaries, and travelers over the past few centuries. The Russian historian B. Vladimirtsov points out that a predisposition toward epic and perhaps even epic narrative patterns existed among the North Asian hunters and herdsmen in earlier eras and developed during Chinggis Khan's time, which is also the period of the rise of Mongol nationality. Through the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, large epic songs, known as *byliny*, and epic cycles were created. Martial concerns, military achievements, and, most importantly, the steppe aristocratic class provided a supportive framework for the evolution of epic singing.

One piece of evidence is *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which is filled with epic motifs and characteristics even though it is a history of Chinggis Khan and his "golden family."¹ The earliest printed epic text was *The Beijing Geser Wooden Block*, which appeared in 1716. As for the epic

Author's note: I am aware that international scholars use different methods to transcribe the Mongolian language. To avoid confusion over different dialects, I follow the written spelling. Thus I do not differentiate masculine from feminine, as some scholars have in the past. For instance, I spell hand as *gar* and yurt as *ger*. To take an example from the literary context, the phrase *hüreng haljan hölög* (a sorrel horse with a white spot on its forehead) alliterates perfectly and would not cause any confusion, whereas spelling the same phrase as *küreng qaljan külüg* would. Furthermore, in a very few cases, I follow the most common usage, spelling Jangar and Hongor as Jangar and Hongor and *tegri* (heaven) as *tenger*.

¹ See Vladimirtsov 1983-84:6-7. *The Secret History of the Mongols* is dated to 1240 (Heissig 1964:28).

Jangar, scholars agree that the prominent Oirat² epic cycle matured in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries,³ the period during which the Oirat peoples moved to the Tian Shan Mountains, took shape as the “Four Allies of Oirat” (Torgud, Dörbed, and other tribes), and eventually appeared on the banks of the Volga in 1630.

We call *Jangar* an epic cycle because it is composed of many cantos with close mutual connections. The story as a whole concerns the khan Jangar and his twelve warriors’ heroic deeds: how they build up the khan’s palace, how they defeat threatening invaders, how they conquer others’ territories, and how they woo and marry beautiful maidens according to the dictates of destiny. Each canto is a somewhat independent story about one or more of those warriors’ adventures, yet it also shares the overall framework and the basic elements: an opening canto (*jangar un ehin bölög*) provides essential information about the kingdom, Khan Jangar’s palace, his incomparable deeds, his distinguished warriors, and his honorable lady. Besides the *Jangar* cycle, the Oirat people also possess other comparatively short epic songs that bear a close relation to *Jangar* in story-patterns and motifs. Some of them may have arisen earlier and thus had an influence on *Jangar*.

² Oirat, also spelled Oyrat, designates any of the peoples speaking western dialects of the Mongolian language group. Before entering the Mongol steppe, the Oirat were called “Forest Folks” and lived in Siberia. In the thirteenth century the Western Mongols were enemies of the Eastern Mongols of Chinggis Khan’s empire. During the following centuries the Western Mongols maintained a separate existence under a confederation known as the Dörben Oirat (Four Allies of Oirat); at times they were allies, at times enemies, of the descendants of Chinggis Khan. A part of the Western Mongol population remained in their homeland, northern Xinjiang, or Dzungaria, and western Mongolia. Another part of the Oirat confederation, including all or some of the Torgud, Khoshud, Dörbed, and other groups, moved across southern Siberia to the southern Urals at the beginning of the seventeenth century. From there they moved to the lower Volga, and for a century and a half, until 1771, they lived as nomads both to the east and to the west of the lower Volga; this part of the Oirat gained the name Kalmyk. During the course of the eighteenth century the Oirat were absorbed by the Russian Empire, which was then expanding to the south and east. In 1771 those on the left bank, to the east of the Volga, returned to China. The right-bank Kalmyk, comprising the contemporary Torgud, Dörbed, and Buzawa, remained in Russia.

³ See Rinchindorji 1999:195.

Texts

Among the Kalmyk in Russia, 25 cantos of *Jangar* have been collected, with exactly the same number discovered and printed in the Mongolian Republic; about half of the latter 25 cantos are only provisionally identified as belonging to the *Jangar* cycle. The Oirat Mongols in the Xinjiang area of northwest China have maintained the *Jangar* singing tradition up to the present time. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Xinjiang Jangar Office combed the Mongol area to collect and record epic. According to the office's reports, 106 *jangarchi* (singers) were recorded.⁴ As a major result, the twelve-volume publication entitled *Jangar Material*, with 124 cantos, was issued in successive installments.⁵

The author suggests classifying the various *Jangar* texts into five types: retold texts, dictated texts, manuscripts, transcriptions of audio recordings, and lithographed and modern printings.

Retold texts

The *Jangar* epic was first told to the outside world by the German traveler Benjamin Bergmann at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Bergmann 1804-05). He encountered the nomadic Kalmyks in the Astraxan government during the years 1802-03. In his publication of a few years later he retells two stories about the hero Jangar. In the 1940s a Chinese Han named Bian Yuan composed a story entitled *Hong Gu'er*. He described going to Xinjiang in 1935 to conduct revolutionary activities and being captured by Governor Sheng Shicai and put in jail. A Mongolian named Manjin, imprisoned along with him, sang the story of Hong Gu'er (or Hongor, one of Jangar's principal warriors) for the captives. Bian Yuan tried to keep the story in memory, and when he was released in 1942 he began to write it down in Chinese. As he commented later on, "I had a deep impression of this story . . . I did not make changes to its plot or structure" (1958:77). Through Bergmann's notes, the outside world first came to know that an epic called *Jangar* was prevalent among the Kalmyks in the Lower Reach of the Volga River, though Bergmann mentioned neither the singer's nor the interpreter's name (no evidence exists to show that he spoke

⁴ See *Jangar Manuscript* 1996:vol. 3.

⁵ *Jangar Material* 1985-96. These 124 stories are not independent; some of them are highly homologous. Thus the total number of independent cantos found in Xinjiang is considerably less than 124.

Kalmyk). Through Bian Yuan's retold story, people first realized that an epic story about a hero named Hong Gu'er circulated among the Oirat Mongols in Xinjiang. These retold texts reveal important information about the epic singing tradition.

Dictated texts

The Russian Mongologist A. Bobrovnikov published one of his two *Jangar* texts in Russian translation in 1857. The two texts had belonged to O. Kovalevskij and G. I. Mikhailov, respectively. Scholars believe that at least Mikhailov's text was a genuine dictated text, taken down with the help of a local Kalmyk amanuensis.⁶ Another Russian Mongologist, K. Golstunskij, conducted epic recording in 1862, once again with the aid of a Kalmyk assistant.⁷ Nomto Ochirov, a student of Golstunskij's epigonus W. L. Kotwicz, visited the great *jangarchi* Eela Ovlaa (1857-1920) in December 1908, and in two days managed to take down the singer's entire *Jangar* repertoire of nine cantos via dictation. The Finnish philologist Gustav John Ramstedt elicited a great many dictated texts—including some of the epic *Jangar*—during his several journeys to the Mongol regions. He described his field methods in this way: "I got girls, boys, and oldsters to relate epics. Like the Russian merchants who buy up different kinds of goods in the Mongolian countryside, I played the part of a merchant. I bought songs and epics, proverbs, riddles, and similar things. I let it be known about that I paid five copecks per page for transcriptions in a black-covered notebook, but if the text in my opinion was free of errors I would pay even up to ten copecks." (1978:78). Obviously, dictated texts require two participants: the person who takes down the dictation must have adequate knowledge of the language, and the person who narrates the story must have the patience to stay the course. Golstunskij apparently tried to elicit more dictated texts, but failed for an interesting reason—not because of a lack of singers, but because those he worked with were unaccustomed to being interrupted during performance to allow time for someone to copy the libretto into his notebook.⁸

⁶ *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:i, 235.

⁷ *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:ii, 146-47.

⁸ *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:ii, 150.

Manuscripts

Scholars have known that *Jangar* manuscripts were discovered in Russia and the Mongolian Republic, but we do not have further information about the discoveries. From the mid-1950s to the 1980s ten manuscripts were found in Xinjiang, China. As far as we know, a few of them are almost the same as the printed Kalmyk versions—which were transmitted in some areas in Xinjiang from the late 1940s onward—and the rest are in accord with some local singers' songs. Some scholars firmly believe that the tradition of making *Jangar* manuscripts began shortly after the Oirat “clear script” (*todo bichig*) was invented in 1648, and lasted until the 1950s.⁹ Rinchindorji contends that at least the manuscript *Hara Hinis*, stored in the library of the Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Sciences, is a copy of the Kalmyk version printed in Russian. According to Batunasan's report (1984), the princes and aristocrats in the Oirat area maintained the tradition of preserving *Jangar* manuscripts. It was the Cultural Revolution that destroyed the majority of those precious artifacts (Jamcha 1988:26).

In general, Oirat manuscripts were created when an aristocrat hired an amanuensis to record the singer's libretto; in rare cases, a literate singer would write down his own libretto. In a sense, such manuscripts are quite close to a dictated text. We suggest distinguishing between them by considering two factors: the *conductor* who arranges for the transcription, and the *purpose* of the text-creation. If a text is taken down by an outsider, and the purpose is scientific research or introduction to the outside world, then we call it a dictated text. If insiders write out the text for their own use, the product is, from this point of view, a manuscript.

Transcriptions of audio recordings

It is hard to slow down a singer's pace in order to make dictation feasible. The practical and convenient way to do so, of course, is to use an audio tape recorder, although we still lack a precise evaluation of how modern audio technology influences the singer's performance. Experienced fieldworkers readily recognize that an outsider with strange machines will always make a singer nervous, and that the singer will find that performing for a microphone is quite different from singing for his folk audience. In such artificial circumstances, interactions between singer and audience disappear. We are also aware that performance consists of more than the

⁹ *Jangar Manuscript* 1996:5.

libretto: gesture, voice, and musical instrumentation all converge in helping to convey epic meaning; audio recording cannot preserve all these elements. Still, transcription does encode a singer's libretto with reasonable precision, even if it does present a special challenge.

We should point out here that in China quite a few transcriptions are unreliable. This inaccuracy stems partly from transcribers and editors who consider their own knowledge of the traditional folk culture more authentic than the singers' (some of them do in fact come from the same culture). On that basis they believe they have the right and duty to emend a libretto.¹⁰ The twelve-volume *Jangar Material* in "clear script" is less heavily edited. One ideal transcription, made by the young native scholar D. Taya, was printed in Japan in 1999. Entitled *Jangar of Singer Arimpil: Heroic Epic of Oirat-Mongol in Xinjiang*, this is the first emendation-free corpus of one *jangarchi*'s libretto in China.

Lithographed and modern printings

Lithographed and modern printings started with Bergmann's notes, and *Jangar* has seen numerous printed versions over the past two hundred years. The Kalmyk script lithograph version appeared in 1864 in St. Petersburg, and the famous Eela Ovlaa's ten-canto *Jangar* was published in 1910 in Kalmyk as well. In China, the most important versions include "the fifteen-canto version," "the 70-canto version," "the 124-canto version," and the photocopy of the *Jangar* manuscript. But the avenue from oral libretto to publication is not a one-way street; we also found that the printed story influenced oral epic singing in some cases. In the 1940s, Bolod of the Mongol Hürüye went to Tashkent to take a training course. When he came back, he brought with him a twelve-canto printed version of *Jangar* from the former Soviet Union. Those stories then spread throughout the neighboring regions (Rinchindorji 1999:69). We also learned that the Beijing xylographic epic *Geser* (which appeared in Beijing in 1716) had a distinct influence on the oral singing of *Jangar* (Vladimirtsov 1983-84).

¹⁰ I cite one case to illustrate how emendation operates. In *Jangar Material* 1998:i, 739, we read the following note: "This canto (*dogsın hara hınıs un bölög*) is compiled and emended by A. Taibai, based on Arimpil's singing, with reference to the early manuscript and two variants from the singer Jawa of Mongol Hürüye and the singer Binba of Tekes."

Singers

According to various widespread legends, the earliest *jangarchi* can be traced back to the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century. Here is the story. It was claimed that *Jangar* had a total of 72 cantos, and that no singer had been able to master all of them. There was, however, an old couple, Tur Bayar and his wife Tübsinjirgal, who lived in Hobagsair (now Hobagsair County). Tur Bayar was in the habit of putting a piece of stone under his Mongolian gown every time he had mastered one canto. The stones kept increasing in number until they reached 70. The prince was very glad to hear of his capability: he conferred upon him the title of “seventy-canto pouch” (*dalan tobchi*) and announced the title to the 49 banners within the Four Allies of Oirat. This all took place before the horde of the Oirat moved to the Volga (Batunasun 1984:42). It is worth mentioning that Hobagsair is a region with a strong *Jangar* tradition; for example, the prominent *jangarchi* Sisina Bolor (mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century) and Holbar Bayar (?-1943) came from this region. The two best contemporary singers, Juunai (1926-) and Arimpil (1923-94) are also from this area.

Eela Ovlaa (1857-1920) is the single most famous *jangarchi*. His family was well known for its association with the epic tradition of *Jangar* singing. According to the Kalmyk scholar A. Kichikov’s research, Ovlaa’s family’s singing genealogy proceeds in this way:

- 1st generation: Jintemür 1690-1720
- 2nd generation: Jinceg 1720-60
- 3rd generation: Chagan Emegen 1760-1800
- 4th generation: Khusmu 1800-80
- 6th generation: Ovlaa 1880-1920¹¹

The time spans following the names indicate the years they performed the epic *Jangar*, not the years of their birth and death. Ovlaa’s father Oela was not an epic singer (thus the lack of a fifth generation), so Ovlaa learned the epic from his two uncles, Delter and Margasi. Ovlaa’s stammer meant that he had to expend great effort to become a singer, but he succeeded at last. Ovlaa started his performing career in the 1880s, and won great fame in later years.

Juunai was born in Hobagsair in 1926. His father Jaba was the prince’s toaster, and was thus in a position to foster his education. As a literate epic singer, he learned eight cantos from manuscripts. These

¹¹ Rinchindorji 1999:29.

manuscripts contained *jangarchi* Sira Nasun's libretto, written down by the singer himself, and presented to the prince's amanuensis Uljitu as a gift. Juunai was a pupil of Uljitu from the age of seven, and therefore had ready access to the manuscripts and the opportunity to master them. Yet Juunai also learned quite a few cantos directly from his father and from other qualified local singers, like Holbar Bayar and Sira Nasun; in other words, some of his repertoire stemmed from an oral source. With 26 cantos to his credit, Juunai is identified as the one who can sing the most units from the *Jangar* cycle. As it turns out, his family background helped him greatly in becoming a *jangarchi*. We now know that both his grandfather Erhetü and his father Jaba were excellent singers in the community. Like one of his epic teachers, he wrote his libretto down himself.

Arimpil was born three years earlier than his countryman Juunai. With 21 cantos of *Jangar* in his repertoire by the early 1990s, Arimpil is the most prominent illiterate *jangarchi* ever known. He was born to a family belonging to the Torgud tribe, now resident in the Hobagsair Mongolian Autonomous County of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. His father Purlai was Prince Erligjab's messenger. Their neighbors included Holbar Bayar, a very famous *jangarchi*. Since the singer and the messenger were close neighbors and friends, Arimpil enjoyed the privilege of listening to Bayar's *Jangar* singing from the time he was about seven or eight years of age. The majority of Arimpil's repertoire comes from this early experience.

Arimpil's father was a devout Buddhist; hence he sent his son to a lamasery, hoping to add one more lama to his family. But Arimpil was more fond of singing heroic stories than reciting the Buddhist lection, and the only thing he achieved during his lamasery experience was the acquisition of a modest amount of Tibetan. To force him to continue learning the Buddhist lection, his father then sent him to his uncle Dambi, the prince's augur, when the young man was seventeen years old. But once again the plan backfired: an elderly neighbor of his uncle Höhegünjen attracted Arimpil via his *Jangar* singing. In addition, he had the chance to learn from another *jangarchi*, Ijir Aliya, a poor singer who made a living through epic performance, and who used to drop in occasionally at Höhegünjen's. Within Arimpil's repertoire, the canto *Hündü Gartai Sabar in Bölög* was learned from Bayar, while *Hongor's Wedding* was learned from Aliya. His uncle chided him time and again for sinking into epic singing, and his father warned him that, since he was a Buddhist, he was not allowed to perform epics like *Jangar* and *Geser*, which were full of killing and other forms of violence. To perform those stories, he claimed, was to "commit a sin." But

his father's warning went unheeded; When Arimpil was eighteen he began singing *Jangar* for his neighborhood and at children's gatherings.¹²

With the advent of Communism in China, he became a People's Commune member, working as a coal miner and then as a farmer. He continued to sing *Jangar* for native audiences in his spare time through the 1950s and early 1960s. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), he was criticized for promoting old ideology through *Jangar* singing; he was even imprisoned for about two months. Other accusations centered around one of his uncles, who had been a chamberlain of a Living Buddha, and another uncle who used to perform *Cham* (the Buddhist exorcism ritual in which lama performers wear masks). By his own actions and those of his relatives, his accusers argued, Arimpil was surely the protector of the old national tradition and the "feudal trash." Specifically, he was charged as a "reactionary and silent resister" of "the revolutionary new ideology." His defense against these charges was that his singing was beneficial to the revolution, since he had entertained the revolutionary commune members in their spare time, helping them to recover after a day of demanding labor.

Good fortune came to him after 1980; the starting point was a visit by Choijinjab, a professor of linguistics at Inner Mongolia University. He made a recording of Arimpil's epic singing, and as a result the bard gained entry to more and more social activities. He was invited to *Jangar* singing pageants in various places.¹³ He also visited Urumchi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, several times in order to perform *Jangar* for domestic and foreign scholars. In 1989 he was summoned to Beijing to participate in the *Jangar* Exhibition: he performed the epic for an enthusiastic audience, and a brief biography, together with photographs, was exhibited during the show. Arimpil was nominated to the Chinese Folk Arts Society, Xinjiang Branch, and was elected his county's Committeeman of the Political Consultant Congress in 1984. He won the First Grade Award of the State Ministry of Culture in 1989 and of the Xinjiang *Jangar* Society in 1991. He died in Hobagsair County on May 20, 1994 (Chao 2000:120-24).

The lives and experiences of Juunai and Arimpil epitomize the destiny of *jangarchis* during the past century. What of the status of other singers? I offer here a brief sketch.

¹² He did not, however, learn any musical instruments to accompany his epic singing.

¹³ The Xinjiang *Jangar* Office organized many such pageants during the 1980s. By gathering *jangarchis* from neighboring areas and asking them to perform, they were able to record a large number of texts.

Long-term investigations of *Jangar* and of *jangarchis* in Xinjiang began in 1979 and have continued to the present day. According to different sources, 106 singers have been identified and their performances recorded. Compared to the entire Mongolian population of 120,000 scattered across this large space, the performers represent only a tiny group. The basic qualification for being considered a *jangarchi* was that the singer perform at least one complete canto of *Jangar*.

The ages of the singers (distributed according to date of birth) are as follows:

11 born between 1900-10
38 born between 1911-20
33 born between 1921-30
10 born between 1931-40
10 born between 1941-50
4 born between 1951-58

During this long-term investigation, a significant percentage of the elderly singers passed away. Their demise and our analysis of the surviving singers' ages show that the singing tradition has approached its very last stage. Generally speaking, this folk oral tradition no longer exists in the Oirat territory. My fieldwork reveals that some aged herdsmen—not to mention young people—have never even heard a *Jangar* performance! When asked about *Jangar* and *jangarchi* in Melchig summer camp in Wen Quan County in 1999, three old herdsmen told me they had some knowledge of the story and of people talking about it, but were personally unacquainted with its performance.

Consider this anecdote as a measure of the state of the tradition. A singer named Jongarab was sitting in his summer yurt on the bank of the Jambinama River, rolling a cigarette with a small piece of local newspaper when we dropped in. According to various reports, the Bayanbulag area in which he lived was a hotbed of *Jangar* tradition. But what the singer said took us by surprise: he calmly told us that his last performance took place over 20 years ago when a university professor visited him in 1979 to record his *Jangar*. Jongarab had not had a single chance to tell the old story to anyone until we arrived that afternoon. Four grandchildren lived with him, but none had learned a single line of the epic.

The tribal backgrounds of the singers show the following pattern:

62 singers from the Torgud
21 singers from the Ogeled
15 singers from the Chahar

7 singers from the Hoshod
1 singer from the Chinese

More than half of the singers were from the Torgud tribe, indicating that the Torgud people served as the major tradition-bearers among the “Four Allies of Oirat.” This breakdown provides circumstantial evidence for the rumor cited by Vladimirtsov that the Torgud regard *Jangar* as their own tribal heroic poetry (1983-84). The same hypothesis is also suggested by the long-term investigator Jamcha.¹⁴



The *Jangarchi* (*Jangar* singer) Jongarab performing the epic *Jangar* in 1999.
Photograph by the author.

¹⁴ “It is quite possible that *Jangar* first emerged among the Torgud, one of the “Four Allies of Oirat,” and then spread through the other Oirat tribes and became their common heritage” (Jamcha 1988:88).

The singers' repertoire is another indicator of the health and recent history of the singing tradition:

- 26 cantos: Juunai
- 21 cantos: Arimpil
- 6 cantos: T. Badma, Jawa
- 4 cantos: Badibazar, Harz'ha
- 2-3 cantos: 33 different singers
- 1 canto: 67 different singers

At least until the early decades of the twentieth century there were still professional singers. The top local singer would be awarded a title such as "the prince's *jangarchi*"; some of them were even retained in the prince's palace or yurt in order to please their master, earning their livelihood entirely by performing for him. Competitions were held among the princes to verify their singers' qualifications; these events offered the masters an opportunity to gain honor and respect through their singers' performance. Some Hobagsair singers recalled that their prince's *jangarchi*, Sisina Bolor, boasted a repertoire of about 30 cantos.

Of the 106 singers under consideration, 103 were male and only three were female. Sixty-two were illiterate and 44 were literate. Although no taboo prevents it, it is much harder and rarer for a woman to become a singer than for a man. Statistically, unlettered Torgud males are most likely to become singers.

According to field notes made by the staff of the Xinjiang Jangar Office, and my own experience, we now know that *jangarchis* who belong to a family tradition are called *yasun-u jangarchi*, meaning "singer with a family background." This designation also means their singing is normally more authentic. The training undergone by singers varies quite a lot; no single routine predominates; on the other hand, singers normally start learning the craft at an early age, and an excellent memory, passion, and inspiration are highly valued qualities for aspirants. As a special group in the community, singers enjoy respect from their audience, no matter their social class. The natural respect in which they are held differentiates them from epic bards in contiguous Chinese society, where folk artists (*yi ren*) have traditionally been looked down upon.



A Mongolian yurt in Southern Xinjiang. Photograph by the author.

Performance

Thanks to field notes only recently accessed,¹⁵ we now know that the epic *Jangar* was performed in military camps, on long journeys of merchant caravans, in herdsman's yurts, and also, if not most often, in the steppe aristocrat's palace. It is hard to imagine that any large feast or important occasion for entertainment went without such a performance in the old days. The Oirat people were so fond of *Jangar* that they spent whole days and nights listening to a singer's story. Performance contexts varied from place to place: the epic could be sung in any season but was, generally speaking, more likely on a winter night. Sitting around a fire with tobacco and hot milk-tea, people were immersed in the narrative of the hero's glorious deeds. The nomadic campsite was normally rather small, consisting of only a few families, so it was natural that most of the performances took place in front of small audiences. On the other hand, during the *Jangar* competitions once organized by princes, and more recently by the *Jangar* Office, large groups

¹⁵ See *Jiang Ge'er Lunwen Ji* 1988 and *Jangar Manuscript* 1996:vol. 3.

of people tended to gather, some of them from afar. Such pageants are termed *jangar un danggar*, meaning a large performance or competition of *jangarchi*.

Some taboos connected with *Jangar* are reported, suggesting that people in different regions have different notions. What I have learned via my field trips are the following: in Wen Quan County people firmly believe that to sing *Jangar* during the daytime would offend the deities and thus cause disasters. In Bayanbolog in southern Xinjiang, the singer Jongarab claimed that performing at an hour other than nighttime would insure the singer's poverty. Most people are convinced that the only proper time is after dark. Some even stress that the door and window (a dormer on top of a yurt) should be shut tightly. Yet some singers dare to break the prohibition. One *Jangar* pageant was held at Salihintai Commune in Usu County in 1988. Since this was an extension of the international Jangar Symposium held in Urumchi, most of the famous *jangarchis* were gathered together there. After a large opening ceremony with a ritual conducted by a group of lamas, these singers performed *Jangar* to large audiences during the daytime; bursts of rifle fire ensured that their activities were protected.

A more common injunction prohibits learning all of the *Jangar* cantos; if a person ever were to accomplish this impossible feat, he would be in dire jeopardy. Daring to perform all the cantos of the cycle would shorten his life. Conversely, there is a strong prohibition against singing an incomplete canto, and such an action would also lead to one's doom. This is to say, during one performance a singer would sing neither all the cantos nor any incomplete canto; there is no record of anyone declaring mastery of all the cantos in the cycle. As for how many cantos the epic actually has, the answers are varied: in Hobagsair County legend prescribes 72, while in other regions 12 or 36 is the customary number (the belief in twelve cantos may stem from the tradition that *Jangar* has twelve warriors). *Jangar* is considered sacred and is thought to possess magical power. The bard Shokai, a 49-year-old Dörbed Mongolian herdsman, told us that in his experience singing it too frequently is harmful. He emphasized that his elder brother Badam lived only 42 years because he performed *Jangar* too frequently. Before we left, Shokai added that singing the epic too frequently would be harmful not only to the offending *jangarchi* but also to his offspring.

Some singers believe that the epic is genuine history, and that the central hero *Jangar* still has magical power, even though he lived long ago. This is the chief reason why one cannot shorten or modify the epic plots. The following dialogue reveals Arimpil's opinion of the epic and its hero (Chao 2000:286):

Interviewer: Some *jangarchis* make embellishments to the story, enlarge its plots; what do you think of this behavior?

Arimpil: I think this is not proper. First, *Jangar* is real history; second, *Jangar* himself has magical power. Thus, to add irrelevant things is blasphemous. What's more, it would really be ridiculous if [*Jangar*] survived a fifteen-headed monster but could not escape the *jangarchis*.

If nothing can be changed, are the songs that *jangarchis* have performed for generations always the same? The answer is surely negative. It is well known that the folk songs keep changing, and different historical layers—at both the lexical and plot levels—demonstrate the evolution of the cycle. Still, most of the singers insist that they follow the traditional way. One example of the discrepancy between singers' beliefs and actuality was Arimpil's frustration over the differences between his published libretto and his sense of how the song should go. When his niece read his libretto aloud, a version that had been subjected to editors' embellishments and then printed together with some other bards' songs from Xinjiang, he complained afterward that “it seems these are not my *Jangar* songs. They are mixed with other *jangarchis*' songs. These are not my *Jangar*” (Chao 2000:130). As we mentioned, there are at least two kinds of changes involved: lexical or phraseological emendation and story reorganization. Five cantos of his stories are printed under both his name and the names of one or two other singers.¹⁶

To perform something sacred and avoid unexpected harm, a singer needs “conducting rites,” often including animal sacrifice. Muta (a late *jangarchi*'s wife from Chagantongga village in Wen Quan County) told us that a live white sheep with a yellow head must be tied in front of the gate if all twelve cantos of *Jangar* are to be sung. As soon as the performance is over the sheep will die of a stomach malfunction. If the sheep does not die, then the singer's belly would become distended and he would die. From another family we heard that the animal bearing the punishment in front of the gate should be a white horse rather than a yellow-headed white sheep. But all agree that such a sacrifice is not necessary if one plans to sing only a few cantos. In Wen Quan County, we heard that burning incense and having a lama recite some lection is another rite. It illustrates how the people there understand *Jangar* singing as a serious event in their lives.

It is also said that performing *Jangar* exerts a strong influence on nature and human activity. For instance, to sing the epic before hunting

¹⁶ *Jangar of Singer Arimpil* 1999:453-58.

brings people good fortune; it elevates the Mongolian people's spirit (*himori*). We were also told that it nourishes mountains, meadows, and rivers. Possible negative effects of too frequent performance include shortening one's life, condemning one's offspring to misfortune, or lengthening a severe winter.

The main function of *Jangar* singing, however, is entertainment, as revealed most clearly through performances by the prince's *jangarchis*, which were intended to please the prince, his family, and his honored guests. A prince's *jangarchis* can be divided into two basic types: the wandering singer who is conferred a title by the prince and makes a living by singing publicly, and the bard with the same title who relies primarily on his master for his livelihood. Since this rank represented a great honor, it was highly treasured within the singers' circle. The usual arrangement was that a few families invited a *jangarchi* to assume such a position jointly; they would then share the related expenses, which included sheep, cows, and money. An animal sacrifice was also included if necessary. But a prince's reward was customarily much handsomer: after a first-rate show, a singer might be rewarded with a horse, a camel, silk, tea, or other valuable goods.

As for the singing melodies, the experienced investigator Jamcha reports that they can be grouped by regions; certain communities typically possess their own repertoires of melodies, marking discernible regional styles (Jamcha 1988:26). Arimpil observes that only renowned *jangarchis* had their own personal tunes, and that only they can create new melodies. In addition, certain cantos have specific musical patterns. As for his own melodies, Arimpil confirms that they are from his teacher Holbar Bayar.¹⁷

Investigators' reports¹⁸ reveal that musical instruments like the *hugur* (*huur*), horsehead fiddle (*morin huur*), *tobsigur* (*tobshur*), and lute (*pipa*) were used to accompany *Jangar* performance. Most common is the *tobshur*,¹⁹ played by the singers themselves when performing the epic.

¹⁷ The young researcher Taya found six types of melodies used in Arimpil's epic singing (*Jangar of Singer Arimpil* 1999).

¹⁸ See Vladimirtsov 1983-84, Jamcha 1996, and Batunasun 1988.

¹⁹ The *tobsigur* or *topshuur* (from the verb *tobsihu*, "to pluck") is a two-stringed plucked lute traditionally used to accompany heroic epics in some Mongol regions. It is also found among the Manchu people. Two-stringed lutes have been associated with the Mongols since Marco Polo's thirteenth-century description of instruments played before battle. *Tobsigur* bodies vary in shape according to ethnic and family traditions. The instruments of the Baits, Dörbeds, and Hotons may be small and round, and some Altai, Urianghais, and Torguds make necked-bowl *tobsigurs*. In any case, the skin covering the

Story-pattern

Like other Mongolian epics, and Turkic epic traditions as well,²⁰ *Jangar* is a nonhistorical cycle. Accordingly, its motifs and story-lines do not correlate with historical events or particular people's biographies; instead, they follow traditionally molded patterns. In his influential account of Mongolian epic structures Walther Heissig offered his insights on the "fourteen motif series"²¹; these have been widely applied in the past two decades by epic scholars in China, ever since the article was translated into Chinese in 1983.²² Because the *Jangar* cycle shares motif series with other Mongolian epics, I will not go into a lengthy explanation of how motifs are organized and stories are composed in the *Jangar* singing tradition. Instead, I will briefly discuss *Jangar*'s story-pattern. It quickly becomes apparent that the preponderant story-pattern is infighting; the secondary one is matrimony; lesser narrative sequences—e.g., the alignment between heroes or kingdoms, probably a reflex of the infighting type—also exist within the cycle. Matrimony is an independent type, relatively rare and very simple in plot and structure.

The epic story-patterns are in some sense the embodiment of the Mongolian epic ideology. The core of that ideology is conflict: infighting between good and evil represented by the hero versus his opponent. In the infighting story-type, a hero conducting a war or a duel naturally constitutes the central plot. Astonishingly, fighting is the fundamental plot in the matrimony type pattern. The hero either has to pass successfully through one or a series of duels against other suitors, or must take part in the "three manly games," which include archery, wrestling, and horseracing, so as to win the bride's hand. To make the matrimony epic more warlike, a

instrument should be as thin as possible and is therefore often taken from the groin of an animal such as a horse, sheep, or goat. Among Baits and Dörberds, strings are made from sheep intestines that, after being cleaned and washed several times, are stretched and twisted clockwise and counterclockwise, and then dried. Strings are tuned to an interval of one-fourth.

²⁰ See Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:142-59.

²¹ See Heissig 1979. The fourteen motif-series consists of (1) time, (2) the hero's birth, (3) the hero's locality, (4) the hero himself, (5) the hero's steed, (6) the expedition, (7) the sworn brother and aide, (8) threats, (9) the enemy, (10) fighting the enemy, (11) the hero's stratagem, (12) courtship, (13) wedding, and (14) return to the homeland.

²² *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:i, 352-75.

sequence of vital tests or challenges set by the bride's father is usually added; these involve conquering dangerous beasts or monsters, winning precious objects, and so on. Bravery is necessary for the hero-suitor, and the competitions reveal his fighting nature. Even in a minor story-pattern, such as facing down a warrior and converting him into a sworn brother, infighting is still the core plot. In a word, heroes are idealized while monsters are demonized, creating a great contrast between the two parties in most *Jangar* cantos.

The majority of the cantos share the same beginning and ending: Jangar and his twelve warriors and his eight thousand soldiers (in Ovlaa's cantos, there are six thousand and twelve warriors instead of eight thousand) are feasting in the palace. This is a special framework that structurally aligns the majority of the song-units; the exceptions are a couple of cantos that deal with the infant Jangar and the beginning stages of the Bumba kingdom. What happens between these regular "bookends" remains flexible. To create internal coherence within this large cycle, *Jangar* also depends on a lengthy protasis to lay the groundwork—telling about Jangar's heroic deeds from an early age, his lady, his palace, his kingdom, his warriors, his steed, and so on. We see these features clearly in Arimpil's seventeen-canto collection, three cantos of which retell stories of the early deeds of the hero Jangar and the establishment of his Bumba kingdom. These units, together with the closing canto, exhibit the same beginning motifs mentioned above. Of the remaining thirteen cantos, ten open with the same scene: in the fifteen-story palace, Jangar and his warriors are busy feasting. Furthermore, seven begin with exactly the same sentence—*Arban tabun dabhur / altan charlig bambalai dotora* ("inside the golden, shining fifteen-story palace"). The other three cantos start with large passages dozens of lines long depicting the Bumba kingdom solely from the protasis. After these similar lead-ins, which provide a general background for the story, the feast motif appears again—together with its fixed verses and identical function—to start the story.

Language

Until recently, *Jangar* was still a living tradition. But is the epic language the same as the singers' and their audience's everyday language? An answer to this question is given in an interview between the singer Jongarab and myself in 1999:

Chao Gejin: Is the epic language different from our daily language?

Jongarab: [They are] different.

C: What are the differences?

J: [laugh] In the old days Mongols used to *haila** *Jangar* in that way.

C: With melody?

J: Yes, sing it with melody. And now they narrate it.

(**hailahu*, a word created by the Oirat people and used in reference to epic singing, means to perform in verse and melody)

Obviously, this is more than a concern with performing the story with or without melody. Present-day bards “tell” *Jangar*, while in the past *jangarchis* used to *haila Jangar*. *Haila* means to perform in traditional epic language—that is, in verse, with certain melodies and specific styles characterized by fixed phrases and ornaments. Jongarab clearly knew that the traditional epic language differs from his usual, unmarked language. Most contemporary singers, however, do not possess that specialized language; they can tell the epic only in a register close to their everyday language. People talk a lot about how the singing tradition has declined, and that is undoubtedly true. The loss of the epic language is one of the symptoms of that decline.

The epic language, or epic register, can be identified by at least these features: archaic and foreign words and phrases, a rhythmic dynamic (words and phrases created for the purpose of matching the rhythm), and a high density of formulaic diction.

In *Jangar* and the entire Mongolian epic tradition, listeners and readers encounter “rare” words. For example, I heard the eastern Mongolian singer (*huurchi*) Jana use many Chinese idioms to adorn the story in his *Feng Shen Yan Yi*. One impressive idiom is *yi shou zhe yian*, “to cover the sky with one’s palm,” meaning to hide the truth from the masses. He follows this idiom with a parallel sentence in Mongolian that serves as a gloss or explanation. Correspondingly, one finds Turkic, Tibetan, or Sanskrit words and expressions in western Mongolian epic, just as the geographical proximity of these language groups would suggest. For instance, the derivation of *Jangar*’s kingdom *Bumba* remains unclear. In the Oirat dialect, *Bumba* means “spring water container”; others, however, believe it stems from Buddhism.²³ *Jangar*’s flag is “a *galbar* red flag” (*galbar ulagan tug*): the word *galbar* comes from the Sanskrit *Galbarwasun*

²³ *The Mongolian Dictionary* (1999:1038) defines *bumba* as “a rotund bottle with a high neck, used in the third part of the Buddhist eight-part sacrifice.”

or *Galbaragcha*, the name of a tree king who has ten functions and is in charge of satisfying desires.

Archaic words are also used in *Jangar*. The word *alta* is an archaism designating a unit of measurement equal to an adult's outstretched arms. Another archaism is *bere*, a distance of about two kilometers. In short, we do have some epic words that are no longer used in Oirat people's daily life, and which have become unusual words—their derivation and meaning blurred over time, and due to other factors as well. Compared to editions of other folk genres, the epic text always glosses difficult "rare" words.

Many of the epic expressions are very well organized, picturesque, meaningful, and rhythmically melodic. As the English scholar Charles Bawden points out, some Mongolian epic formulae have a long tradition. One example is a couplet—"with embers in the eyes, with fire on the cheeks"—that appears in different epics such as *Han Harangui*, *Egel Mergen Haan*, and *Gants Modon Honogtoi*, with almost exactly the same form (1980:268-99; Bawden's transcription follows colloquial pronunciation, and thus differs from our literal spelling):

Nüdüendee tsogtoi,
Nüürendee galtai.
or
Nüürendee galtai,
Nüdüendee tsogtoi.

In Arimpil's *Jangar*, sung in 1991, the phrase has exactly the same meaning and almost the same wording (the singer uses different prepositions, and we follow the colloquial pronunciation to agree with Bawden's example):²⁴

Nüür tal-an galtai,
Nüden tal-an tsogtoi.

This couplet formula is also found in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which was composed in the mid-thirteenth century. We should emphasize that this is not the only longstanding formula in present-day *Jangar* singing. In Arimpil's *Jangar un Ehin Bölög (Protasis of Jangar)*, another couplet formula captures our notice:

²⁴ *Jangar of Singer Arimpil* 1999.

Önöchin hübegün
 Ölogchin nohai üledegel ügei ²⁵

This phrase means to wipe out every single enemy, leaving not even an “orphan-boy, bitch-dog.” It can also be traced back to *The Secret History of the Mongols*.

Experienced listeners and readers are aware that in Mongolian epics some words should be understood as poetic language. In the epic context, they provide a rhyming partner rather than conveying literal meaning. Here is one example:

Emnig gool un modo bar	[with] Emnig River’s wood
Elige higsen	making the Elige [side parts of a saddle]
Hanggal gool un modo bar	[with] Hanggal River’s wood
Habcha higsen	making the Habcha [parts on a saddle]

The two rivers’ names, Emnig and Hanggal, seem only to match the two words *elige* and *habcha* and create the head-rhyming pattern AABB,²⁶ thus making this four-line formula a very well organized instance of parallelism. The parallelism here is describing the unique construction of the wooden saddle. Similar words with the same function—to fill rhyming slots—exist everywhere in the epic tradition.

The central feature of the epic language is the use of ready-made formulae adopted and adjusted by singers from generation to generation. Without the formulae, the epic could no longer exist. A comparison to a closely related genre provides a clear illustration. While the Oirat hero-tale is similar in story-pattern, plot, and even motif to epic poetry, there are differences, some of which are shown via this brief tabulation:

Epic	Hero-tale
Sung often in melody and accompanied with a musical instrument	Narrated without melody and without a musical instrument
Singers either professionals or amateurs	Amateur narrators

²⁵ *Idem.*

²⁶ In the terminology we suggested for Mongolian poetry, alliteration takes the form A-A-A- in one and the same stich, while head-rhyme denotes the repetition of a sound at the beginning of successive stichs to form a group of lines with the same initial sound. For further explanation, see Chao 2000.

Mostly in rhyme, highly formulaic; epic register	Prosaic, everyday language
Molded framework; concerns the whole world	Snippet; concerns specific event

In practice, an experienced audience can quickly and easily distinguish a hero-tale from an epic on the basis of their respective register. Epic language employs specialized formulaic expression, while the hero-tale is more likely to use everyday language.

Formulae

Since *Jangar* consists of lengthy cantos, drawing examples from the entire cycle is impractical: apart from the sheer bulk of material, it would be difficult or impossible to gain an overall sense of how formulae work in a certain canto. Thus, we choose one canto, entitled *Hündü gartai Sabar-un Bölög* and sung by Arimpil in 1991. In this canto we find a large number of repeated phrases, stichs, and stanzas. Repeated units employed as ready-made blocks for composing the epic story in performance are readily identified, since they recur in other cantos sung by both Arimpil himself and by other Oirat singers. Some of the formulae even belong to the Mongolian oral tradition as a whole.

There are at least two types of formulae connected to characters in the poem, namely epithets and characters' ornaments. Epithets combine primarily or only with certain personages, while ornaments can be used as independent units, normally several lines long, to fit various compositional situations. Epithets are also comparatively more stable in form and wording. The following phrases are epithets used in our text:

(1) Aldar bogda noyan Jangar	Great-famed saint, governor Jangar
(2) Dogsin sira mangus hagan	Atrocious yellow monster king
(3) Asar ulagan Hongor	Giant red Hongor
(4) Hündü Gartai Sabar	Mighty-armed Sabar
(5) Dogsin Hara Sanal	Atrocious black Sanal
(6) Altan chegeji Babai Abaga	Gold-chested Babai Abaga
(7) Agai Shabdala Gerel hatun	Agai Shabdala Gerel Lady

Among singers in this tradition, rhetorical skills are highly regarded and single-stich epithets are not always satisfactory to either singer or audience. To meet the challenge of demonstrating a high degree of verbal skill, more melodic and refined couplet-epithets are pressed into service:

Aguu yehe hūchūtei Asar ulagan Hongor	With great strength Giant red Hongor
Hümüm nü nachin Hündü gartai Sabar	Eagle among the mass Mighty-armed Sabar
Bolinggar un hūbegün Dogsin hara Sanal	The son of Bolinggar Atrocious black Sanal

It is almost an iron-clad rule that Arimpil resorts to an epithet every time he introduces an epic character. There is also a formula associated with assembling Jangar's army: "araja in naiman minggan bagatur ud" ("araja eight thousand warriors"). This is a highly productive fixed phrase as well; it is used in all Arimpil's cantos as an epithet for the collective troops. In fact, in the canto under examination it occurs in most cases with another line to form a couplet:

Aldar noyan Jangar ni tologailagad Araja in naiman minggan bagatur ud	Great-famed governor Jangar headed Araja eight thousand warriors
Asar ulagan Hongor mini Araja in naiman minggan bagatur ud mini	[My] giant red Hongor [My] Araja eight thousand warriors

Unlike epithets, which combine only with certain characters, personal ornaments normally consist of several lines and are more likely to involve parallelism. Here are some examples:

Irehü yeren yisün jil i Ailadchu mededeg Önggeregsen yeren yisün jil i Tagaju mededeg	The upcoming 99 years [things] He knows by forecast The past 99 years [things] He knows by retrospect
Ama tai hümün Amalaju bolosi ügei Hele tei yaguma Helejü bolosi ügei	People who have mouths Dare not to gossip [about him] Creatures that have tongues Dare not to talk [about him]
Utalhula Ulagan chilagun boldag Chabchihula Chagan chilagun boldag	When they cut him He turns into red rock When they cleave him He turns into white rock

The first example above is used principally to depict the hero Altan Chegeji Babai Abaga, first among Khan Jangar's twelve-warrior team. He serves as their brain trust, a man of incomparable intelligence who knows events of the past 99 years as well as what will happen in the upcoming 99 years. This formulaic increment is so common that Eela Ovlaa used it in the Astraxan region of Russia in 1908 and Arimpil employed it in the Xinjiang region of China 83 years later, in 1991. In fact, almost all the *jangarchis* summon this formulaic unit when they introduce Altan Chegeji Babai Abaga to their audience, always resorting to nearly the same wording. Nevertheless, I would argue that it belongs to the category of ornament rather than epithet, since it is used as an independent, ready-made unit. For instance, we found that other singers press it into service to stress a lady's wisdom (Chao 2000:148).

The second ornament supports an exaggeration conveying Sabar's atrocity: people dare not even mention him, never mind offend him to his face. This unit is widely used in similar contexts. The third example plays exactly the same role. In our poem it applies to the hero Aliya Shonghor, but wherever it occurs this formula implies that the person described is extraordinarily tough, that one cannot hurt him at all. He becomes a red or white rock when cut or cleaved.

It is understandable that singers always try their best to show off their language skills while describing epic characters. What about other images in the epic? Since horses play such a special role in Mongolian epic tradition, let us consider the phraseology associated with them. Here the horse is not a domestic animal but a Mongolian herdsman's companion. Generally speaking, the horse has never been a nonessential narrative convenience: in many cases, it proves much more powerful than its master, playing the decisive role in fighting against a dangerous enemy or in competing against other suitors. It has the shape and physical characteristics of an animal, but can think and speak like a human, and possesses magical powers normally wielded only by deities. In a word, the horse is a triple combination of animal, human, and god.²⁷ This composite function is reminiscent of the horse's role in neighboring Turkic peoples' epic poetry.²⁸

Now let us see how our singer introduces his hero Sabar's steed:

²⁷ Cf. Bürinbeki 1997.

²⁸ "It is a noticeable feature of the Turkic poems, as of the Russian *byliny*, that while the hero may, and often does, forget his heroic quest in the pleasures of eating and drinking, the horse is never at fault, and invariably recalls him to his senses" (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:15).

Hüreng haljan hölög Sorrel haljan horse*

(**haljan* means “with a white spot on its forehead”)

This phrase appears seven times in this poem, and is also used by Arimpil in other cantos. There is thus no doubt that it functions as a fixed formula. An experienced listener would also perceive the melodic phrase in the line, where all three words alliterate in “h.” I would emphasize that—in both the singer’s and the audience’s minds—the horse conventionally deserves a refined and detailed description. Just like the ornaments that depict a hero’s bravery or his worldwide fame, such phrases celebrate the hero’s powerful animal companion. Here are additional examples of the tradition’s regard for horses:

(1) Tonjir ud un üre	Accipiter’s offspring
(2) Tonggag gegüü ni unagan	Mare’s first colt
(3) Naiman minggan aranjal jegerde	Eight thousand <i>aranjal</i> reddish-brown horses
(4) Adugun dотора yabugsan	Had joined [the herd]
(5) Agula bügdüreme manggus	This <i>manggus</i> is able to carry a mountain
(6) Ugchi gi ergime hurdun	Swiftly round a hill, his eyes blinking
(7) Ochin höhe jaljan hölög	Mars grayer haljan horse

The following ornament exhibits head-rhyme in the pattern AABB. It informs the audience of how unique the steed is as it eludes a pursuing horde, carefully protecting its master from any wound:

Bum agta hügebe gejü	[When] one hundred thousand horses [with riders] chase from behind
Burugu jöb ügei daldiradag	[It] dodges to the left and right
Ejen degen mese hürgejü	Has never let its master be touched
üjged ügei	by [enemy’s] sharp edge
Eb tei bugurul haljan hölög tei	In fine appearance the gray <i>haljan</i> horse

Similar ornaments are very common in the epic tradition. In my experience, not a single epic is ever performed without formulaic expressions describing horses. We cannot list all the typical formulae here, but I would like to stress that they cover a wide variety of aspects and situations: the horse’s mystical birth, its great size (usually like a mountain), rites for summoning it (burning incense, e.g.), the detailed process of saddling it, the exaggeration of its speed, its magical ability to fly in the sky and travel under the ground, and so forth.

While a generic horse is called *mori*, *agta*, *adugu*, or *hölög* in Mongolian, important ones, like Khan Jangar's horse, customarily possess their own distinct names. For example, the name of Jangar's steed is Aranjal. When referring to normal, generic horses within the epic diction, our singer employs the phrase *agta hülüg*, a specialized folk poetic designation typical of the epic register and different from everyday language use.

Our overall aim is to offer a close-range observation on the epic formula from different perspectives. However, it is not easy to limit the number of examples and still fashion a clear explanation of how the formula works in its phraseological routine. One practical method is to select representative samples that indicate the differing morphology of formulaic expression. We will look at the treatment of common utensils first. The following example is a fixed formula depicting an army banner; the phraseology is highly patterned, with typical head-rhyme:

Dugtui dotora baihula	When in the container
Dolbing sira-in önggetei	The banner has a yellowish color
Dugtui eche-ban garhula	When out of the container
Dologan naran nu gereltei	It shines like seven suns

Notice that the aural concord is doubled: ABAB in end-rhyme and AAAA in head-rhyme. This kind of strictly rhythmic and acoustically patterned formula is usually easily identified as a traditional and commonly used unit of diction. It would not be surprising to learn that the Kalmyk *jangarchi* Eela Ovlaa employed the same unit about a hundred years ago. It is a rule that widespread formulae are more likely to have such melodic sounds, strict rhythm, and perfect parallelism; these features help to preserve them over a broad variety of usage by different singers in different times and places. As for the implications of this expression, some may see it as simply a descriptive formula, emphasizing the nonpareil nature of Jangar Khan's army banner. But I would argue for something beyond a merely material connotation. From a traditional perspective the banner unit serves iconically as a symbol of the Khan's army, especially the troop's position on the battlefield. This kind of formula is thus both expressively thrifty and powerfully visual: when the scene turns to the battle array, the singer calls forth an army banner rather than rehearsing the details of the entire troop.

A similar formula stands symbolically for Khan Jangar's palace:

Arban tabun dabhur	Fifteen-storied
Altan charlig bambalai dotora	Golden, shining palace

This two-line phrase appears most often at the beginning and end of virtually every *Jangar* canto. It is associated with a typical scene: the Khan and his warriors feast here, threatening messages from dangerous enemies arrive here, vital decisions concerning the kingdom usually are made here, grand expeditions set off from here, and quarrels and clashes among various heroes occur here. In short, the khan's palace is not simply a grand building and shelter, but also the arena in which storylines are begun and solutions are reached.

The next formula is also a fixed phrase about location. It appears several times in our song, and recurs countless times in Arimpil's other poems. Not surprisingly, we find this descriptive unit in other singers' libretti as well.

Ermen chagan hödege
Ejegüi chagan büürüg
Elesün sira tohoi du

Far-reaching white wasteland
Masterless white desert
Yellowish sand-sinus

These three lines suit all the similar contexts that answer the general definition of open country. A hero customarily pauses in such a sand-sinus to take a rest from his expedition, but it turns out to be a battlefield as well (in both our sample and in other cantos such as *Aliya Monholai-in Bölög*, for instance). When this formula occurs, it idiomatically prefigures a change in the hero's fate. In our story, the enemy Sabar would have come to the monster's aid if Jangar and his army had not stopped him at this sand-sinus. It is also the place where Sabar fights against Hongor, Jangar Khan's primary warrior.

Numerals and directions are highly formulaic, and thus worth mentioning as a special type. In most cases, they do not imply any specific quantity, but rather a generic amount like "some," "many," and so on. The following numerals are used very often: 3, 7, 10, 13, 15, 21, 33, 81, and 99. When singer says *gurba dahin* (three times), for example, it always means "a few times." The numbers 15 and 21 connote "quite a lot," while 33, 81, and 99 have the sense of "uncountable." Within the epic register, when the singer portrays a hero as having crossed 33 rivers and 99 mountains, he is employing traditional language to indicate an extremely long way. This is typical poetic expression inasmuch as it avoids abstract terms like "many," "a large amount," and the like.

The same rule applies to directions. Statistically, the left or east side and right or west side are used unequally. In Mongolian shamanism (*böge mörgöl*), the 99 heavenly deities (*tenger*) are divided between east and west,

representing evil and good, respectively. It is thus quite understandable that the west is more frequently mentioned by our singer.

The epic formulae deal not only with static scenes but also with dynamic actions: for instance, *dagulaldun nairlahu* (“singing at a get-together”), or *hüנגginen helen baiba* (“to say in a loud voice”). Or, when a hero gets angry, he will conventionally “gnash his thirteen canine teeth, his large black eyes blinking”; and when epic characters start out on a journey, “their horses’ mouths are released [from halters] to set out.” Some formulae simply describe a single action, while others help to narrate a group of actions, that is, to build up a scene like an escape or duel. In short, the frequent formulae in Oirat epic tradition cover every aspect of narration and exhibit a high density of recurrence.

Epilogue

The epic *Jangar* cycle is the unique heritage of the Oirat people. Clues about related traditions reveal that *Jangar* cantos have been found in other Mongolian regions. They are nevertheless fundamentally Oirat epic. Such non-Oirat *Jangar* cantos bear a close connection to the original singing tradition in one of two ways: the performers either belong to the Oirat population or learned the songs directly from Oirat singers. In our opinion, a few cantos or fragments scattered here and there, lacking both any comprehensive repertoire and a qualified audience, can hardly be called an independent tradition.

From a broader perspective, the *Jangar* cycle shares many characteristics with other Mongolian epic traditions. Stated telegraphically, they include:

1. Same story-patterns: fighting, matrimony, and so on
2. Same motif-series and sequences—starts with hero’s birth, ends with return home and feast
3. Same versification—includes head-rhyme and parallelism
4. Specialized epic language or register, dense with formulae
5. Nonhistorical nature
6. The hero’s major opponent is a monster called Manggus
7. The horse usually plays an important role in the story
8. Singers are both professional and amateur
9. Epic singing has multiple practical functions
10. Epic performance is accompanied by certain rites
11. Mainly oral transmission; may involve manuscripts and other forms
12. A strong singing tradition that may arouse folk legends about epic

heroes or epic singers

13. Alien cultures and religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, are influential

Obviously, Turkic epics manifest some of the same features. As neighboring peoples through many centuries, Mongols and Turks share similar cultural elements. As Victor Zhirmunsky points out, “Kirghiz and Kazakh folklore give many examples of the heroic folklore (*Heldenmärchen*), with the plot limited by the family and tribal relations of a patriarchal society and the action laid against a fabulous background; but their origin, their ideological and artistic content, their motifs and imagery, can be more clearly traced in the more archaic folk-tales of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples of southern and eastern Siberia” (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:312).

Mongol and Turkic epic share similar story-patterns. Through the work of Turkic epic scholars,²⁹ we now know that this tradition has numerous instances of the matrimony type, the quest for a far-off bride who is destined for the hero. On his journey the hero must overcome various obstacles, including battles against monsters or hostile heroes who also have some claim to his bride. Sometimes the hero must enter three military contests (wrestling, archery, and horseracing, exactly the same triad as the Mongolian Three Manly Games). In addition, the future father-in-law may send the prospective bridegroom to conquer monsters or perform other deeds of bravery. Although certain details may differ, the reader or listener would be aware that this Turkic epic story replicates the Mongolian matrimony pattern. Fighting, which recounts a blood feud, is another epic type. If we investigate the analogy between Turkic and Mongolian fighting epics, we will find that they are organized in the same order and share common traditional elements.

Turning our attention from structural to cultural and story-based factors, we find other concordant phenomena in the two traditions that reveal their close connections. In the Turkic epics, for example, the main hero is often described as having a legendary birth and childhood, with predictions of future heroism or even kingship. According to this paradigm the boy grows up in poverty, as a shepherd, but eventually attracts the attention of a nobleman or the khan himself. In the Oirat *Jangar*, our hero Jangar has an unusual birth, then becomes an orphan when a monster attacks his homeland and kills his parents. Subsequently he is adopted by a nobleman and works for his family. Remarkably, his adoptive parent discovers that the young

²⁹ See Reichl 1992:spec. 143-70; also Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:271-339.

boy is destined to become a khan. In Central Asian versions of *Gorogli*, the hero has forty warriors at his command.

In the Kirghiz *Manas*, the warriors (*qyrq coro*) all have a consistent place in the epic cycle, and are often portrayed in full, each with his own biography. This organization is reminiscent of Jangar's twelve warriors, each boasting his own epithet and title, playing his hard-won role, and taking his assigned position under Khan Jangar's "left hand" or "right hand." Some *Jangar* cantos are allocated to them individually (not a common factor in other Mongol epics).

In the Uzbek *Gorogli*, the hero is portrayed as a wise and powerful sovereign: a protector of his people against alien invaders. He is also the embodiment of the popular ideal of patriarchal authority, as imaged in his looking after the good of the people and, in particular, his care of the oppressed and unfortunate. The legendary Age of Gorogli and his state Chambil come in the epic to resemble a popular utopia—a land where, under the authority of a wise ruler, the eternal dream of social justice comes true. Jangar's kingdom Bumba is that same utopia. Here the poor become wealthy, the sick regain their health. People remain twenty-five years old perpetually, and the four seasons all resemble a gentle spring.

In the Turkic tradition, the epic cycles sometimes tell not only the hero's story, but also the tales of a second or even a third generation. This narrative strategy can be seen in the *Jangar* cycle as well. Not only Jangar's second generation but also Hongor's and other heroes' offspring appear in the epic arena. Scholars have found this scheme in the eastern Mongolian *bensen üliger* (text-tale), but it occurs only rarely in Mongolian epic poetry from other regions.

On another topic, the following statement seems descriptive of Mongolian in general: "The horse is the hero's main, often his only, helper: it understands human speech and answers in human words, warns the hero of impending danger and saves him from death, travels over forest, water and mountains at fabulous speed" (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:313-14). In fact, the description aptly characterizes the role played by horses in Turkic epic tradition. Other folk narrative elements shared by Turk and Mongol attract special interest, for example when the young hero fights against dragons or many-headed giants (*devs*), old witches, and so on in Uzbek *dastans*. We cannot know whether the image of the many-headed monster entered the Turkish tradition from the Mongol or vice versa.



A Mongolian *Obo* in southern Xinjiang. An *Obo* serves as a site for various forms of worship. Photograph by the author.

Comparing different epic traditions among Altaic peoples is a challenging project. Mongols and the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia—the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Kirghiz, and others—have been linked ethnically and culturally for centuries. These diverse peoples also share a similar historical development. Scholars have made us familiar with the predatory raids conducted into Central Asia by the “pagan Kalmyks” during the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries that won them a negative reputation and portrayed them as the most threatening enemies of the Central Asian Muslims. Thus it is logical and understandable that in some Turkic epics the hero’s enemy is a Kalmyk khan or warrior. Correspondingly, in a few *Jangar* cantos a Turkic khan and his property become their enemies’ booty.

Jangar studies in China began in the 1950s with a few papers printed in journals and newspapers; academic scholarship stems from the 1980s. Today hundreds of papers appear each year in Mongolian, Oirat clear script, and Chinese all over the country. A handful of editions and translations

have appeared as well, revealing the comprehensive and systematic research now underway.³⁰

*Institute of Ethnic Literature
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

³⁰ A quick review of relevant publications may help scholars without either Mongolian or Chinese to gain a sense of research developments in China: (1) Rinchindorji 1999 is a revised edition of his previous work (*The Heroic Epic Jangar*, Chinese, Zhejiang Education Press, Hangzhou, 1990 and *On Jangar*, Chinese, Inner Mongolia University Press, Hohhot, 1994). Rinchindorji has studied epic *Jangar* for many years; he has conducted extensive fieldwork in Mongolian regions and assembled a large archive of tape recordings. His writing concentrates on epic themes and structure as well as its distribution and artistic accomplishments. (2) *Jagar's Studies on Epic Jangar* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia Education Press, Hohhot, 1993) consists of five chapters. The first two cover publications and research concerning *Jangar*, while the following chapters deal with such topics as plot, theme, structure, rhetoric, character, and folk life. This is an introductory work. (3) *The Aesthetics of the 13-Canto Jangar* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia Education Press, Hohhot, 1995) proceeds from an aesthetic perspective. The author, Gerel, tries to probe into the Mongolian people's idea of beauty through an analysis of their epic creativity. Deficient knowledge about international aesthetics and academic rigor weaken the book's theoretical proposals. (4) As a native scholar's work, Jamcha's *Jangar*, based on personal observations, brings us a vivid and detailed account of the epic tradition. His *The Source of Epic Jangar* appeared both in his native language, clear script Mongolian, and in Chinese (Xinjiang People's Publishing House, Urumchi, 1996 and 1997). A hard-working investigator of *Jangar*, this amateur scholar raises some now outdated concerns; the attempt to combine the epic hero and Chinggis Khan is but one example. Moreover, his exclusive focus on own people's epic accomplishments constrains his judgment and renders some of his hypotheses simplistic. (5) Jin Feng's *Jangar: Yellow Four States* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia Culture and Arts Press, Hailar, 1996) is a questionable work. A professor of Mongolian history, especially the western Mongols, he tries to draw a direct connection between *Jangar* and real history. Some of his linguistic explanations are unconvincing. An oral traditional composition, *Jangar* contains different historical layers and boundless imagination. (6) *Epic Jangar and the Mongolian Culture* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, Hohhot, 1998), by Sarangerel, sets out to demonstrate how well the epic cycle reflects Mongolian culture but is ultimately unpersuasive. (7) *Jangar and the Mongolian Religious Culture* (Chinese, Inner Mongolia University Press, Hohhot, 1999), composed by Sechinbatu, treats religious elements and meaning in *Jangar*. The conclusion that shamanistic incantation was the predecessor of Mongolian epic singing bears further examination. (8) Chao Gejin's *Oral Poetics: Formulaic Diction of Arimpil's Jangar Singing* (Chinese, Guangxi People's Publishing House, Nanning, 2000) is the first work to concentrate on a certain canto from one singer; its aim is to explain the core feature of Mongolian traditional oral poetics, namely, formulaic diction. The Oral-Formulaic Theory is applied in the book.

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