

## XUUČ YARIA: A SPECIFIC GENRE OF MONGOLIAN FOLKLORE

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The expression *xuuč yaria* can be translated as ‘story’ or ‘gossip’, and indeed, they are short stories about interesting, extraordinary or sometimes fearful events heard or seen by the storyteller. As far as their content is concerned, the stories are colourful and ramifying, and it is beyond doubt that the *xuuč yaria* has some connections with *domogs*, tales and even heroic epics. Unfortunately, research into this field has begun relatively recently, so these connections are far from being clear. Moreover, the *xuuč yaria* stories are interesting not only from the point of view of folklore, but they also shed light on the history of ideas, since the first ones were collected in the 1950s, and thus some of them reflect the political atmosphere of the socialist era. In this article an attempt is made to give the broader outlines of the *xuuč yaria* as a genre of Mongolian folklore, and establish a typology in the hope that it will be helpful for further research.

*Key words:* *xuuč yaria*, Mongolian folklore, genre typology, ghost stories, mythology.

The so-called *xuuč yaria* is a specific Mongolian folklore genre the meaning of which is “saying, narration about the past or the present”. It frequently includes elements of the local mythology and belief system. While the other well-known genres, like *domogs*, folktales or heroic epics are profoundly researched, this particular one seems to be neglected probably because it has few genre-specific features and characteristics. Moreover, it was not only neglected in recent years, but some scholars deny the very existence of the *xuuč yaria* as a separate genre. This debate is centred around the problem that the corpus designated as *xuuč yaria* lacks real guidelines to define what kind of narratives can be classified as such. There is no doubt that the *xuuč yaria* has some connections with *domogs* ‘aetiological myths’, tales (Mong. *üliger*) and even heroic epics (Mong. *tuuli*). But in respect of content these short stories are so colourful and ramifying that the clarification of these connections and even the systematisation of the recorded text corpus raise almost unsurmountable difficulties. The aim of this article is to give the broader outlines of the *xuuč yaria* as a genre of Mongolian folklore, and establish a typology in the hope that it will be a basis for further research.

It is worth mentioning that, in comparison to other Mongolian folklore genres, there are only a few scholarly works about this text corpus. Its research has begun only in the 1950s, and according to the Mongolian scholar X. Sampildendew the first researchers were two Russian scholars, I. E. Jarnevskij and N. I. Kravcova (Sampildendew 2003, p. 14). In the following decades C. Damdinsüren and X. Sampildendew continued the work, and the latter summarised his results in a book entitled *Mongol xuuc yarianii deej* (The best of Mongolian *khuuch yariya*) (Sampildendew 2003). The book contains a study on the peculiarities of the genre and numerous short stories collected during the fieldworks made by the authors. Although this book is still the best review of the subject, other Mongolian scholars involved in the research must be mentioned as well. The works of Č. Aryasüren, D. Baasanjaw and Č. Dašjeweg offer a supportive contribution to the research (Aryasüren 1992, Baasanjaw 2007, Dašjeweg 2007).

Unfortunately none of the above-mentioned scholars established a standard genre system. In order to establish a coherent typology, first I am going to summarise and determine the main features of the genre.

### **The Main Features of the *xuuč yaria***

Time, place and manner of narration are important factors in determining a genre. The narrator or storyteller puts the narrative into a “real” context. He/she tries to determine the exact place and time of the subject-matter and tries to present him/herself as an eyewitness of the events. In some cases the main character is a “good friend” of the narrator. Due to this motif, most of the narratives take place in the recent past. The manner of the narration is unusual or even bizarre. The storyteller uses special phrases and sometimes speaks in rhymes (Baasanjaw 2007, pp. 3–107). These short stories are told at meetings with friends or within the family circle with the aim of “impressing” the audience. In respect of truthfulness, the narratives are different: some of them are mostly fictions, but some have realistic grounds and can be treated as historical sources.

A further specific feature is connected to the performance of the texts by the storyteller. Basically anyone can tell a *xuuč yaria*, but according to the special conditions of Mongolia, drivers of long-range road transport services are the primary source of data. They connect the most remote and outlying regions of the country, and transport not only goods, but information and stories as well (Csornai Kovács 2005, p. 196). It is remarkable too that the main characters of stories that are traced back to older times are often caravan leaders. As we can see, the *xuuč yaria* can be linked to a specific occupation and this fact makes it unique among the genres of Mongolian folklore.

### **Typology**

In the light of the main features it is easier to decide which narratives can be classified as belonging to this genre. To systematise them, it is indispensable to establish a con-

sistent typology. The following categories and their subgroups were created by the folklorist X. Sampildendew (2003, p. 347):

1. Historical *xuuč yaria* (*tüüxen xuuč yaria*)
  - 1.1. Historical *xuuč yaria* (*tüüxen xuuč yaria*)
  - 1.2. Stories about famous wrestlers (*aldart böxcüüdiin tuxai*)
2. Stories about the way of life (*až baidliin xuuč yaria*)
  - 2.1. Stories about the way of life (*až baidliin xuuč yaria*)
  - 2.2. Stories about outlaws (*sain ersin tuxai*)
  - 2.3. Stories about people with magical abilities (*uwidast xümiüüsiiin tuxai*)
  - 2.4. Stories about animals (*amitad, an awiin tuxai*)
  - 2.5. Stories about the *almas* (*almas, xün xar göröösniin tuxai*)
3. Narratives (*tuurilag xuuč yaria*).

Although this typology is well established, it has some arguable aspects to be dealt with below.

## **1. Historical *xuuč yaria* (*tüüxen xuuč yaria*)**

The stories belonging to this thematic group are about the famous and significant figures of Mongolian history in the 20th century.

**1.1.** In the first subgroup we can find narratives about religious leaders like the VIII. Bogd gegeen<sup>1</sup> and the Dalai Lama as well as leaders of the socialist era like Čoibalsan and Süxbaatar (Sampildendew 2003, pp. 32–102). Although these stories are firmly rooted in historical events, it should be noted that the data were collected in the 1950s and are influenced by socialist ideology. In some cases Čoibalsan and Süxbaatar appear as heroes of the people, while in others the aim is to “debase” the Bogd gegeen. In parallel, there are narratives less influenced by contemporary views and can be treated as real historical sources. Thus, the first subgroup is interesting not only for folklorists but for historians as well.

**1.2.** The protagonists of the second subgroup are famous wrestlers, highly respected in Mongolian society. Although the main characters were real historical persons, the narrators often include folklore elements in the plot. The story of a wrestling in Xöwsgöl (Sampildendew 2003, pp. 105–130) is a good example: according to the narration, the two encountering champions were supported by Buddhist lamas and shamans and in the imagination of the story-teller the fight became transcendental.

## **2. Stories about the Way of Life (*až baidliin xuuč yaria*)**

Among the three main categories, this is the most ramifying one.

**2.1.** The first subgroup is about particularly fortunate events, or neat and smart characters.

<sup>1</sup> For further information see Szilágyi (2010, pp. 1–138).

**2.2.** The second is about people with magical abilities. They are healers, fortune-tellers or interpreters of dreams (oneirocritics) and omens. Some of them are able to imprecate or remove curses (Sampildendew 2003, pp. 165–201).

**2.3.** The third subgroup comprises “stories about animals”. They are mostly hunting stories about wolves or bears, the most significant animals of the Mongolian folklore and belief system. Less frequently camels or snakes also appear in these stories (Aryasüren 1992, p. 28).

In my opinion Sampildendew listed two arguable subgroups in this category. The “stories about outlaws (or bandits)” the main characters of which are real historical persons,<sup>2</sup> Robin Hood-like heroes who lived in the era of the Manchu rule. They are very similar to the wrestler-*xuuč yaria*, so I would sort this subgroup into 1.1.

Another debatable point is the group named “stories about the *almas*”. The word *almas* is the Mongolian name for the ‘bigfoot’ or ‘yeti’. Although it is a fictional character, in earlier times (in the 18th–19th-century works on nature comprehension) the *almas* was regarded as part of the fauna. For this reason the group of stories concerning the *almas* was classified into another category of folklore genres, e.g. into the tales or aetiological myths about animals. As will be demonstrated below, the third category is much more suitable for the *almas* narratives. Especially because they exhibit some similarities with tales and even with heroic epics. Sometimes this creature and its behaviour is very similar to the so-called *mangas* (Mong. *mangyus*) of the epics: meet with an *almas* is always a “bad omen” (Dašjeweg 2007, p. 174) and the way in which a female *almas* “gets” a husband for herself<sup>3</sup> is very similar to the *mangas*’s abduction of women.

### 3. Narratives (*tuurilag xuuč yaria*)

This is perhaps one of the most interesting categories from the three thematic groups. Sampildendew did not divide it into more subgroups. To my mind, the main reason for that is the content of these narratives. They give an account of about fearful events heard or seen by the storyteller. The aim is to thrill the audience, so the main characters are demons, ghosts and spirits. The most interesting feature is that the majority of these characters appear also in the Mongolian *domogs*, folktales and epics. Although the structure of the stories is very similar, the most important difference is that they usually end with the unavoidable death of the main character.

In order to make the systematisation of the collected data easier I suggest a few new subgroups.

**3.1.** Reincarnated souls. These stories are strongly influenced by Buddhism (the concept of reincarnation) and Chinese ghost stories. The main character is reborn and

<sup>2</sup> For further information see Seres (2001, pp. 183–201).

<sup>3</sup> Source: Interview with B. Gombosüren, a 58-year-old man, in Erdenebüren, Xowd aimag, tape-recording made by Ádám Halász in 2007.

takes revenge on somebody for an offense suffered in a former life (Sampildendew 2003, p. 27).

**3.2.** Famous lamas and shamans. These narratives are about struggles of lamas and shamans against evil spirits, and their attempts to purify cursed places (Sampildendew 2003, p. 302). In some cases the shaman and the lama make a joint effort to vanquish the ghost or spirit (Unknown Author 2003, *Bug čötgörtei*, p. 179).

**3.3.** The soul-eater bird. The main characters are people with special abilities: they can see the creature with the body of a human and the head of a bird who might grasp and take away the souls of a dying person. It is an important feature that the witness cannot interfere in the event (Damdinsüren 1996, p. 314).

**3.4.** “Death-bringer” spirits. These creatures are mostly called as *čötgör* what seems to be a shapeshifter spirit. It can appear as a human (mostly as a young woman or a “black rider”) or as an animal (cow, snake or cat). After the encounter with a spirit of that type the witness falls ill and unavoidably dies (Baasanjaw 2007, p. 22; Sampildendew 2003, pp. 231–316).

**3.5.** Ghosts and spirits. The narratives usually take place in abandoned buildings (cf. Chinese ghost stories), houses or caves. In some cases the former owner of these places was a Chinese man. It demonstrates the cultural differences between the Mongolian nomadic way of thinking and the settled lifestyle of the Chinese. Sometimes the appearing ghosts are very similar to the female form of the *čötgör*, but in these cases illness and death are avoidable (Sampildendew 2003, pp. 240–244).

#### 4. Typology on the Basis of my Research

In the light of what has been said above I try to establish a modified typology:

- 4.1. Historical *xuuč yaria* (*tüüxen xuuč yaria*)
  - a. Historical *xuuč yaria* (*tüüxen xuuč yaria*)
  - b. Stories about famous wrestlers (*aldart böxčüüdiin tuxai*)
  - c. Stories about outlaws (*sain ersiin tuxai*)
- 4.2. Stories about the way of life (*aj baidliin xuuč yaria*)
  - a. Stories about the way of life (*aj baidliin xuuč yaria*)
  - b. Stories about people with magical abilities (*uwidast xüümüüsiin tuxai*)
  - c. Stories about animals (*amitad, an awiin tuxai*)
- 4.3. Narratives (*tuurilag xuuč yaria*)
  - a. Stories about the *almas* (*almas, xün xar göröösni tuxai*)
  - b. Stories about reincarnated souls
  - c. Stories about famous lamas and shamans
  - d. Stories about the soul-eater bird
  - e. Stories about “death-bringer” spirits
  - f. Stories about ghosts and spirits

The main purpose of this systematisation was to demonstrate the “transitional nature” of the genre. The *xuuč yaria* is somewhere between the *domogs* (aetiological

myths, stories) and the tales. The first category contains narratives with real historical background so they stand closer to the *domogs*. The third category is much more fictional, so it stands closer to the tales. Thus the *xuuč yaria* represents a transitional genre between the above-mentioned two genres. I hope that the new typology presented above may remove the doubts concerning the *xuuč yaria* as a separate genre and contributes to further research in this field of the Mongolian folklore.

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*Field records:* Interview with B. Gombosüren, a 58-year-old man, in Erdenebüren, Xowd aimag, tape-recording made by Ádám Halász in 2007.