

An Anthology of Mongolian Literature

In *An Anthology of Mongolian Literature*, C.R. Bawden presents a rich and diverse collection of Mongolian literary genres, from translations of historic manuscript to modern poetry. Presenting a historical study of Mongolian literature, this anthology offers a beautifully translated, valuable selection of Mongolian poetry and narratives.

Review >

Central Asia

By Matthea van Staden

Bawden, Emeritus Professor of Mongolian at the University of London, was the first to chronicle Mongolian history from the early Manchu period to modern times. Although first published in 1968, his *Modern History of Mongolia* is probably still the text most relied upon in Mongolian

Studies. In his present *Anthology*, Bawden, having since contributed a massive oeuvre to the field, explores the definition and boundaries of literature. The prayers and rituals, shamanistic incantations, and ceremonial verse included in the *Anthology* are presented as specific genres, divided into myths, historical narratives, legends, epics, didactic literature, and the works of several authors known by name. The comparison of these various genres, according to their specific use and purposes and its related rhyme structure and content, is a valuable way of learning to appreciate the intention of the chosen piece. Likewise, Bawden successfully demonstrates how each text can tell us about the time in which it was created, and in which ways it is bestowed with evidence of contemporary historical circumstances. This can be gleaned from use of rhyme, structure, the choice of words and images, and historical backdrop. The book also emphasizes the strong connection of modern Mongolian literature with much older genres. The extensive variation of genres is put into context alongside a fixed chronology, which is dictated by an estimate of when the original versions of the translated manuscripts first appeared and covers literature from the early thirteenth century to the twentieth century. Each story or excerpt of poetry poses its own questions and expresses its own puzzlement and joy.

My sons, you are birds of prey striking at a cliff
You are like black dogs biting your own placenta
You are like grey wolves plunging into rainy day
You are like camel-stallions biting the narrow-bones of
their own foals,
You are like dogs attacking the darkness
You are like tigers unable to seize anything
What have I made of my sons
(From 'The Secret History')

Manuscripts dating from some three centuries later have a more magical style, introducing mythical figures and supernatural interventions. They represent a new phase of historical writing and are, in the words of the historian Bawden, more attributable to folklore than history:

The holy lord said: 'Tell me about the transformations of your Khagan. Tell me the truth of it.' The boar said: 'In the morning he turns into a poisonous, crawling yellow snake, and in that form he cannot be caught. At noon he turns into a tiger with dark-brown stripes, and he cannot be caught. In the evening and at night he turns into a beautiful yellow boy and plays with the queen. In that form he can be caught.'
(From 'The Precious Summary')

cial work for anyone interested in the development of contemporary media in China. ◀

– Lee, Chin-Chuan (ed.), *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, London: RoutledgeCurzon (2003), pp. 275, ISBN 0-415-30334-6

Lokman TSUI, MA is a researcher at the Leiden University Centre for Law in the Information Society. His research interests include the socio-political impact of the internet and cultural globalization, in specific for China.
lokman@lokman.org

Finally, the anthology contains examples of Indian and Buddhist influences on Mongolian literature, and nineteenth-century Mongol attempts to imitate the Chinese classical novels of the Qing dynasty. In these novels the Mongol language is lifted to another level of sophistication and is far-removed from the traditional epic style.

Qin Mo asked him: 'What did you see of interest on your journey?' Pu Yu said: 'There was one strange spectacle I observed, which was quite unusual as far as we are concerned.' Realizing that he was being serious they asked him: 'What was the strange spectacle? We want to hear about it.' Pu Yu said: 'That strange spectacle was something out of the ordinary run of things. People used to say: "A gentleman on the roof-beam". This has become: "Scholars in the gap". Shi Qing did not understand what he meant and kept asking him about it. Pu Yu told how they encountered the robbers at the village of Jiu Lian Shan, which made their hair stand on end.
(From: *Injanashi*, 1837-1892)

Facts and myths

Despite the breadth of the anthology, Bawden generally refrains from extensively commenting on the texts or their translations and does not overanalyse any particular meaning conveyed by them. He restricts himself to providing a historical context, introducing specific genres in the introduction, in the short interludes between each translation and, occasionally, in a note attached to the translation itself. All in all, the collection has an unpretentious, open presentation, to be explored at will, without the distractions that endless commentary sometimes causes. The drawback is that while the stories and verses are expected to speak for themselves, at times they do not. Thus the literature presented is not always intelligible. To fully grasp the meaning and purpose of what we read is, despite the beauty of the words, sometimes a hazardous undertaking, which calls for some guidance.

The lack of such guidance is all the more surprising in view of the fact that Bawden gives the impression to have compiled this anthology for a general audience. While providing some general introduction to contemporary Mongolian daily life, he refrains from answering more demanding questions. How, for example, are we to value the mythical, magical, and even spiritual thinking displayed in the literature? Reading the texts with a modern mindset, used to dividing the material world from the immaterial (or supernatural), and accustomed to the symbolism of Western psychology, our interpretations and imaginative reactions may be misleading. Apart from probing some historical, characteristic cultural influences, Bawden does not compare the modes of thinking represented by the literature, a comparison which is necessary for the reader to be able to judge the literature on its own merits and in the context of its original intentions. The author is apparently more concerned with judging the literature in a historical perspective. He generally separates reality (that is, historical facts) from the imagination, and only questions what the texts tell us about the Mongols' view of themselves and their past. In itself, Bawden's fascination certainly inspires intriguing questions and captures the reader's interest in what he or she has just read. However, it also leaves the reader with a bundle of facts and a bundle of myths and magic, without understanding the magic of the literature as a whole or the relationship between facts and myths. His methods of categorization reflects, above all, the European tendency to separate religion from science, the material from the immaterial world.

Bearing in mind these restrictions, and the fact that many answers to questions concerning mythical, magical, and spiritual experiences remain unanswered, the anthology can be appreciated as more than simply literature, rather as a source for further cultural and historical analyses. This book ought to be kept safe for continuous delight and renewed exploration. ◀

– Bawden C.R., *An Anthology of Mongolian Literature*, London and New York: Kegan Paul (2003), pp.816, ISBN 0-7103-0654-7

Matthea van Staden is writing her Master's thesis in cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam on composed music and indigenous notions of nature in Mongolia. She works as a project manager and film-maker and is affiliated as Mongolia specialist to the North Asia Institute Tengri, in the Netherlands.
vanstaden@tengri.nl

the Cedar tree

The cedar tree with its nuts

Enhances sun and moon

Good behaviour, and honest mind

Enhances one's own self.

That young, lovely creature

Enhances my own heart

The tree with all its leaves

Enhances sun and moon

If one studies when young,

It enhances one's own self.

That young, happy creature

Enhances my own heart

Within my hopeful body

From 'Traditional Verse'

can be tweaked as much as is deemed necessary, so as to construct an image of China exactly as they see fit. Chang (pp.132-136) shows us that this is not an exclusive trait of Chinese media, as it equally pertains to US media during the coverage of presidential summits of 1997 and 1998.

The nature of the topic calls for a multidisciplinary approach as indeed is presented in the book. The articles are founded on insightful research and set within solid theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The exceptional collection of articles is written by a team of well-respected authors. It is slightly unfortunate, however, that in this collection of authors, whom are either US or Hong Kong based, no European scholar has been included, which would have further strengthened the balance of this book. The second suggestion is that, while the main scope of the book is the impact of globalization on media in China, it would have been interesting to analyse the other, even less researched, side of the two-way inter-

action of globalization: the impact China is making on the world and its media. For example, further to examining how the internet impacts on China, might it not be interesting to look into the ways in which the development of the internet in China impacts the internet worldwide? A first sign of things to come can be seen in the problems arising due to China's developing its own standards, which clash with international ones.²

Despite these minor suggestions, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts* further cements the outstanding reputation of the collection of books edited by Lee. *Chinese Media, Global Contexts* is a cru-

Notes >

- 1 The book under review forms a series with *Voices of China: The Interplay of Politics and Journalism*, New York: Guilford Press (1990); *China's Media, Media's China*, Boulder (CO): Westview Press (1994); and *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China*, Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press (2000), all edited by Chin-Chuan Lee.
- 2 Lohr, Steve, 'China Poses Trade Worry as it gains in Technology', *New York Times*, 13 January 2004. www.nytimes.com/2004/01/13/technology/13china.html