

BUDDHIST LOVE POETRY IN THE NEW MONGOLIA:  
THE WORK OF B ODGEREL AND T SODNOMNAMJIL

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The tantric tradition of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism has produced many poets, both monastic and lay, whose work has dealt directly with romantic and sexual love. Following the Tibetan tradition of writers such as Milarepa and Drukpa Kunlek, Buddhist poets occasionally wrote songs of devotion to the guru in the form of poems to an idealised lover. This was one of the principal ways in which the great nineteenth-century poet Danzanravjaa (1803-1856), a highly respected and controversial reincarnate lama, was able to attract laypeople as much as his students to the idea of devotion as part of the Buddhist path. We can see the ways in which Danzanravjaa was able to meld the ideas of religion, love and the Mongolian landscape in a poem such as “Gently”:

With gentle, gentle steps,  
my creamwhite horse with black eyes  
stays well away from  
the mass of geldings.

That one, my bright one,  
just standing amidst the crowd,  
just standing there, alert,  
its temperament so lovely.

The nightingale on the glacial lake  
sings in vain its strange songs.  
Why did the child of the man  
love in vain and too much?

What is this thing called love?  
It's a lovely, ancient benediction.  
Let us take the short cut by the southern slope  
and reach the distant land.

It's a pleasure to go meet

the one you desire -  
You'll need the riches of Dharma.  
Let's enter Abhidharma and enjoy eternity.

A poem about horses might not initially seem likely also to be a love poem. However, in Mongolia, the spiritual and social position of the horse allows it to be a cipher for many things for which it would not be a cipher in the west, and for a man such as danzanravjaa, brought up in the Gobi and educated within a monastic and nomadic society, the idea of the horse as being the link between the practitioner and enlightenment, and between the lover and his beloved, is very meaningful.

The conflation of amatory and religious fervor was popularised by Danzanravjaa in the nineteenth century, but after the Revolution in 1921, Mongolian letters entered into a gradual thirty-five year decline, during which religion was gradually replaced by socialist realism. It is really only since the first democratic elections were held in Mongolia in 1990, that Buddhism has become once more a focal theme within the literary community. Between the late 1950s and 1990, the principal drive towards greater literary openness, and freedom of expression initially led by B Yavuuhulan and his New Tendency group, had developed through the underground Fire movement and latterly to GUNU, which explicitly promoted a reevaluation and relearning of tradition and an acknowledgement of the spiritual in literature.

One of the younger members of GUNU during the early 1990s was the monk T Sodnomnamjil (1975-2006). His was a poetry influenced both by Buddhism and by the work of the members of Fire, and especially D Nyamsüren (1949-2002). Sodnomnamjil's poem "Every Day" shows how he was able to interweave love and lust with his spiritual practise:

As I gaze at that smiling girl,  
she is as lovely as the taste of dark wine, and  
as I watch such a sweet and shining girl,  
I am awkward and shy, but I hide my excitement, and  
as I take from the Buddha's hands the taste of sweet fruit,  
I see those women passing by, their eyes alive with joy.

This sensuous style is very reminiscent of the work of Nyamsüren, who drew in his own way from Danzanravjaa, but also of the poet-politician O Dashbalbar (1957-1999), with whose family Sodnomnamjil lived during his teens. Both of these poets use in their own work imagery drawn from shamanism and Buddhism, and both are acutely aware of the hazards of a complicated emotional life. As a monk, of course, Sodnomnamjil was technically debarred from both sexual love and from alcohol, but from what I understand he seems to have developed a taste for both in the last decade of his life.

Sodnomnamjil's friend B Odgerel (1967) is also a Buddhist practitioner, and over the last few years he has become something of a lay hermit in his apartment in Ulaanbaatar. His only book of poetry thus far, *The Unknown Guest*, includes a great number of poems about love and the difficulties of relationships. Odgerel prefers the metaphysics of existentialism to that of Buddhism, but there is clear an understanding of the ways in which Buddhist philosophy and praxis impact the heart:

Like a glass of cold water,  
tasted when dry and thirsty,  
the pretty girls passing by  
are pleasing to me.  
Like ambulances, they respond  
rapidly to my distress and my decline.  
They enjoy life, they endure it, stirring memories,  
shining, unnoticed, like lanterns on our lovers' lane.  
Lavishly they're quick to switch between  
remembrance and forgetting, between pleasure and pain, and,  
like religious images, dakinis in a temple,  
like sweet ideas about the girl you'll marry,  
these girls never promise pain, and so  
we never start with thoughts of suffering.

The work of both Sodnomnamjil and Odgerel show how Buddhism has been rediscovered and redeveloped by a new generation of writers. Both draw on the nineteenth century tradition of Danzanravjaa, but whereas Sodnomnamjil prefers to work with the romantic, nomadic and spiritual ideas of the New Tendency group, and the Fire and GUNU poets, Odgerel has chosen to align himself with the so-called "rock punk" poets, a group of postmodern writers

who, while acknowledging the influence of poets such as Nyamsüren and Dashbalbar, are more likely to look to contemporary (and sometimes experimental) American and European poets than to even the great early twentieth-century poet and short story writer D Natsagdorj (1906-1936). Nonetheless, both of these writers' treatment of these themes – of religion and love – is indicative of the trajectory along which Mongolian letters is travelling, led by more explicitly Buddhist writers such as T-Ö Erdenetsogt (b1971) and the cofounder of Fire and GUNU G Mend-Ooyo (b1952), and by the fiercely antitraditionalist journalist and leader of the “rock punk” writers, B Galsansuh (b1972).

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