

PHILOSOPHY

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**The Traditional Mongolian Doctrine Arga Bilig:
Its Sense and Application to Culture Studies**

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Abstract

This article is devoted to one of the unstudied topics in modern culture science – philosophical and world view system of Mongolians. The doctrine arga bilig represents the unique structure of nomadic world view which was established in the Middle Ages and has been conserved until now. Arga bilig (translated from Mongolian as “action” and “wisdom”) means collaboration of two polar categories which finally form harmony in the world. Arga bilig has some common features with the Chinese Dao doctrine, as well as European dialectics but it also has many peculiarities connected with traditional culture and way of life of Mongolians. Arga bilig is widely used as a working method in different spheres of peoples’ life: education, medicine, arts, etc. Nowadays it is also used as a method of scientific research. The authors make an effort to reveal the potential of arga bilig by analyzing the main points of Mongolian culture reflected in the heroic epics.

Keywords: story-telling, narrator, heroic epics, doctrine arga bilig, Western Mongolians

Introduction

The problem of interpreting different cultural phenomena is one of the most complicated topics in cultural studies and philosophy of culture. It concerns especially the cultural phenomena of nomadic peoples, for example, Mongolians. The traditional culture of Mongolia, brightly reflected in epic, applied arts, rituals, has its own restrictions and means which are different from the European culture. The heroic epic of the Western Mongols (Oirads) is a unique spiritual and cultural heritage of the Mongols, and many Russian scientists such as G.N. Potanin, B.Ya. Vladimirtsov, S.Yu. Neklyudov, as well as modern Mongolian authors such as B. Katu, M. Ganbold, who published a number of large studies were involved in collecting, interpreting, and translating it. They found that the epics not only reflect the real and sacred history of the people, but elements of hierophany and theophany, anthropomorphogenesis and cosmogenesis are reflected in them, as well as ethno-ethic submissions. However, in spite of a rich empirical material on folklore and culture of the western Mongols, important semantic layers of texts

remain open; these can be researched within philosophical reflection and interpretation. The problem is in choosing the appropriate methods of research. In our opinion the most effective of them is the original Mongolian doctrine *arga bilig*, used as a pattern for analysis of nomadic culture.

The doctrine of *arga bilig*

The essence of *Arga bilig* is as follows. The literal translation from Mongolian sounds like "way" and "talent" or "action" and "wisdom", i.e. two opposite categories. At the heart of *Arga bilig* is an understanding that Harmony in the world is determined by the struggle and the unity of two opposites. Outside of this law the world can not exist, just as there can be no night without day and vice versa.

In terms of the doctrine all the relationships in the world are classified on the basis of *Arga bilig*. This also applies to such things as the structure of the human body, the nature of various diseases, a person's birth, and astrological calculations, literature, and many other objects, phenomena, and science. "*Arga*" defines the external influence of a phenomenon, "*bilig*" – internal, which ultimately form a complete system of the universe. The scheme of the *Arga bilig* ratio is as follows. "*Bilig*" always exists and develops in "*Arga*", while "*Arga*", being a form, protects "*bilig*", hence the "*Arga*" contains "*arga*" and "*bilig*" and "*bilig*" again contains "*Arga*" and "*bilig*." Thus, the whole world, sharing in two (opposite) poles to infinity, retains its pairing shape. All phenomena in the world, one way or another, can be divided into two categories according to the degree of gravity to one or another pole.

Most often is *Arga bilig* fully associated with the Chinese Yin and Yang. However, according to E. Munch-Ochir, this is not entirely appropriate. Categorical correlation of *Arga* with the male and *bilig* with the female leads to the so-called "Strengthening vices." For example, *bilig*, one way or another, relates to women's nature: symbolizes softness and flexibility, focuses on inward rather than outward, sensitivity, and absolutization of these qualities leads to selfishness, isolation, authoritativeness. In turn, absolutization of *arga* leads to the activation of the destructive qualities of the male entity¹.

On the other hand, despite the similarity between *Arga bilig* and the European dialectics, according to researcher J. Buren-Olzii, dialectical principle focuses mainly on the fight, and *Arga bilig* on the unity of opposites².

It is also wrong to say that the *arga* and *bilig* – are good and bad; in fact they are two ways to spread the energy in the world, two related variables. Collaboration of *Arga* and *bilig* is not just a mechanism, but an explanation of the inner essence of the world through a very precise pattern. Mongols, operating on the basis of *Arga bilig* explain not only the essence of the universe, nature, world of man and animals, the relationship between man and nature, but in general any law. In this regard, the principle of *Arga bilig* becomes the foundation for the formation of the ideological basis for the different areas of human life: medicine, pedagogy, etc. We suppose that it can be used to analyze heroic epics, too.

¹ Munch-Ochir, D. *Tradition of Mongolian zurhai (zodiac)* [in Mongolian], Ulaan-Baatar, 1997, p.17

² Buren-Olzii, J. *Mongolian proverbs and their world-view sense* [in Mongolian], Ulaan-Baatar, 2009, p.158

Mongolian epic as a special form of philosophizing

The heroic epic may be seen as a special form of philosophizing. The philosophy of culture determined such approach, when some of the phenomena of the national culture can act as form-making for all cultures, maintain and recreate national culture after severe shocks. The text of epic stories in the Oirad culture plays a key role in this life-giving spring of nomadic culture. They are akin to the Vedas, and Kalevala epic, which have a high philosophical capacity. Furthermore, the Russian philosopher E.N. Trubetsky had convincingly shown that the icon can be viewed as a special kind of meditation — meditation in paints³. And if meditation in color is possible, meditation in sound is also possible.

We emphasize here the fundamental difference between such kind of "philosophizing" and real philosophy. They are distinguished not only by the fact that the artistic philosophizing reflects a syncretism of archaic culture, its language and methods, but the fact that the classical myth and symbol are just a means to a better presentation of ideas for classical philosophy (for example, the "Myth of the Cave" by Plato), and storytellers have nothing but myth. Plato argued that the poet is not a "wise man". Being in ecstasy, with the help of intuition he receives knowledge, better said super-knowledge, but he cannot interpret it rationally⁴.

Common features and differences between these two forms of philosophizing were noted by the Russian philosopher P.A. Florensky. He wrote: "The difference is just in the fact that philosopher is more abstract than ordinary people. If the magic world-view refers to the straight facts and experiences, the philosopher wants to argue logically"⁵.

Singing of the heroic epic by Mongolian narrators — *tuulchi* — is not just an element of folklore. In the artistic form the fundamental concepts of the universe are reflected. It can be argued that from the ontological point of view, a narrator is in the act of speculation (a special form of a cognitive act), having a mystical intuition, "captures" and passes in the artistic form the phenomena of unreal world, extremely common and objectively real for him. This is a kind of eidetic reality that requires a deep research, and from all sides scientists, thinkers and artists rush to it. We do not intend to give further consideration to this issue in the article, only state that for the narrator the true reality is what he speculates and this fact should be considered in rational reconstructions.

Analysis of the Mongolian epic stories, comments given by story-tellers show that during the performance the narrator begins to see another legendary, eidetic reality. The intuition enables him to achieve a high level of creativity, but also endows him with special cognitive abilities, which can be shown in everyday life. Storytellers often act as healers and very accurately predicted many events in the real world. Epic legend reflects the basic spiritual values of the people, and we can say that the narrator and the stories themselves are the actual embodiment of these values.

³ Trubetsky, E. N. *The essence of life* [in Russian], Moscow, 1994, p. 225

⁴ Plato, *Apology of Socrates* [in Russian], Collected works of 4 volumes, Vol.1, Moscow, 1994, p.75

⁵ Florenskiy, P.A. *Universal foundations of idealism* [in Russian], Collected works of 4 volumes, Vol. 3(2), Moscow, 2000, pp.145-169

Arga bilig as method of interpretation of the heroic epic

Firstly, based on the principles of Arga bilig given above, we can analyze the role of the narrator. A narrator is a transmitter, the person connecting the ideal and the real world. The problem of mediation is very significant in traditional cultures. The heroes of the epics are endowed with mediating functions; they are capable of transformations (so-called trickster). Taking a different look, the hero gets into a different world. This is a very simple understanding of the mediation. A more complex subsistence is related to the personalities of mediators. They are, above all, shamans and storytellers. In contrast to the shamans, who can be "white" and "black", the *tuulchi* always works with the "plus" sign, because he contacts not so much with the spirit world, but with an axial text, reflecting the higher eidetic reality. The *tuulchi* during the singing of the epic reproduces the events of true, "sacred" history of the people and makes others witness these events. However, if the epic is a creative act, the audience is present not only during playing, but also during creating the eidetic reality and this is the act of creation — the main plot of cosmogonic mythology. The main feature of the *tuulchi*-mediator (and his counterparts in other traditional cultures) is that he is a representative of the syncretic art. His work involves the word (the text of the epic), the music (support by *tovshuure*), vocal (throat singing), and a kind of theatrical performance (well-defined structure of listeners, night-time performance). Syncretism is a necessary condition for the sacralization of the *tuulchi* individually, that is empowering him by highest value categories, on the one hand, and the perception of *tuulchi* as a translator of the most important philosophical foundations, on the other. From this position it is appropriate to appeal to the leading position of the Mongolian philosophy for the analysis of the narrator as a phenomenon of traditional Mongolian culture.

The analysis shows that the figure of the storyteller has a few image-incarnations, which correlate well with the concept of Arga bilig. The narrator during the performance of the epic is immanent to the profane world (i.e. a world where the audience sits, the space-time coordinates are determined, and where the performance takes place), and the ideal world, which he sees in the act of creativity and translates it to the audience. From another point of view the image of the narrator is also very complicated. Equally regarding to stories the *tuulchi* is both a creator and a direct participant of the plot. On the one hand, he acts as a narrator. On the other hand, being a master of the syncretic art of traditional culture, he is an actor; he appears to the audience in the role of a hero, then — his enemies, or friends. Such a disclosure of the narrator's functions — outside and inside — allows us to say that they are disclosed in accordance with the principles of Arga bilig.

However, the doctrine of Arga bilig is applicable for the treatment of the heroic epic. As an example we can take an image of a warrior in the Oirad epics. As a rule, he has a miraculous birth, he is endowed with magical qualities and leaves home to defeat the monsters and earn a bride. And in either case, his actions are predetermined, and the hero acts according to a predetermined trajectory. He has a mentor, who defines the trajectory (parent, uncle); he chooses the horse for the hero and equips it for the war. It is interesting that, when the hero is sent to carry out his deeds, there is no any immediate threat to his country. The enemy is the enemy just because he belongs to another world — not sacralized, chaos. The hero himself is not a self-sufficient figure: making his way, he moves out by inertia. In the context of Arga bilig we can regard the warrior as a direct incarnation of Arga: it is the embodiment of strength, action, steadfastness. But this explains its lack of independence. He is constantly in need of helpers. At

the early stage it is the herdsman — Ak-Sakhal, then the horse and the second hero. They give advice to the hero, they help him to overcome his way, and accomplish feats.

We analyzed six epic tales ("Boom-Erdene, the best of heroes, the son of Burhan Khan and Buram-Hansha," "Dine-Kyuryul", "Kigiyn-Kiytyun-Keke-Temyur-Zeve", "Egil- Mergen" "Ergil-Tyurgyul", "Shara-Bodon")⁶, there is no one where the hero was completely independent and alone, where he makes his decisions by himself. In other words, the "helpers" provide the hero with a necessary part — bilig for the implementation of complete harmony of the image. They make up for that lack of wisdom, emotional warmth, emotion and internal flexibility, which the main character lacks. A striking example of this is a fragment from the epic "Boom-Erdene", amazing for its artistic strength, which tells that during the fight of two knights, the horse of the main character asks him to spare the vanquished and threatens to withdraw from his master, if he kills the enemy⁷. Another interesting image is the second hero (heroes) — brother of the protagonist. B.Ya. Vladimirtsov notes that "this particular figure of an epic — a friend of the protagonist — appears just to set off all the inflexibility of the protagonist, to emphasize great will to achieve his own purposes. These "second heroes" have ... greater mental flexibility, greater sophistication of nature"⁸. "Imperfection" of the hero, the need to complement his image can be solved in terms of the doctrine of Arga bilig. Firstly, the imperfection of the image, which has all the basic features of this warrior-defender of the homeland, has also a kind of dynamics: it is with such qualities heroic deeds can be performed and the award can be received. This means that the plot of a legend will not be violated, and will not go in a different direction. Secondly, the appearance of the assistants on the way of a hero represents another side of the soul — bilig, demonstrating how much more perfect, more correct, will be any decision of the hero, if he considers the advice of the "assistant," or whether he will work with him. The fact that each of the Oirad epics has a happy ending is a symbol of the absolute and the harmonious unity of all sides of life.

Conclusion

We can determine that the doctrine of Arga bilig has undeniable advantages in interpreting the heroic epic. Both the epic construction (main images, story lines) and the figure of tuulchi itself, are fully disclosing the principle of relationship and unity between two opposites.



⁶ Vladimirtsov, B.Ya. *Works on the literature of Mongolians* [in Russian], Moscow, 2003, 607p.

⁷ Ibid, p.380

⁸ Ibid, p.362