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HOW TO DEFEAT A DEMON: THE FUNCTION OF THE OIRAT FOLK NARRATIVE ABOUT BURNING THE FEMALE DEVIL

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ABSTRACT
The paper introduces the results of a case study that attempts to uncover the functions and probable genesis of a group of satirical tales told by the Mongolian peoples. Based on the example of one of the stories, about Argachi, a Til Ulenspiegel-like rogue character, popular among the Oirat Mongols of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China, an assumption is made about the possible practical function of the narratives, which is that they served to broadcast traditional litigation strategies. A comparison of the Oirat story of Argachi's victory over the demon with a similar narrative recorded from the Halh Mongols showed that the strategy of behaviour described in the stories allows one to effectively get rid of a malicious, but not very intelligent, mythological character.

KEYWORDS: mythological narratives • anecdotes • Oirats • Xinjiang • traditional law

In the folklore of the Oirats who live in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the People's Republic of China (PRC), also known as Xinjiang, there is a corpus of stories united by a common character called Argachi. Mongolian researcher Balchigiyn Katuu (2002: 47) considered him an Oirat version of the *badarchi* known to all Mongols, a roguish wandering monk who gets into various funny altercations. Almost a hundred years ago, one of the founders of Russian Mongolian studies, Boris Vladimirtsov (1884–1931), underlined the existence in Oirat folklore of Til Ulenspiegel-like rogue characters. In the preface to the collection of folklore samples from the Oirat of north-western Mongolia, Vladimirtsov (1926: 85–90) especially noted the short story *Balm san* (Tibetan name Belen Senge). He suggested that the story was borrowed from Tibetan folklore by oral transmission (ibid.: X). This remark indicates that there was a serious mutual influence in the folklore traditions of the Oirats and neighbouring peoples.

Katuu (2002: 273–288) published a collection of 17 tales in which the protagonist is named Argachi. Among the informants from whom all the texts of satirical tales or anecdotes,[1] including those about Argachi, were recorded, Katuu names four Torguts (one of the Oirat peoples) from the Khovogsayr ethnic group, two from the Beeliyn group, one from the Vangiyn group, and one from the Khoshuud clan (ibid.: 288). Representatives of these branches of Torgut live in both Mongolia and Xinjiang.

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In 1990, in Urumqi, the capital of the XUAR of the PRC, a collection of tales under the title *Argachi* was published in the classical Mongolian (Old Mongolian) script. Acquaintance with the texts of both collections showed that 16 out of 17 tales about Argachi published by Katuu have parallels in the Xinjiang edition. At the same time, the differences between the texts are minimal (Nosov and Setsenbat 2020: 78–79). Therefore, the Xinjiang edition can be considered the most representative of the two collections of tales about Argachi.

The compilers of both the Xinjiang and Katuu editions marked the stories about Argachi as satirical tales or anecdotes. In this paper, I will make assumptions about the possible place and time of the genesis of the folklore image of Argachi and the possible pragmatic function of this corpus of stories.

Existing among the Mongolian population of Xinjiang, a highly polyethnic region, the corpus of tales about Argachi was influenced by another well-known folklore rogue, Khoja Nasr-ad-din or Afandi, as the Uighurs living in the PRC call him (Kharitonov 1978: 10). A significant number of the stories about Argachi (at least those published in Urumqi in 1990) have direct folktale-type parallels in Nasr-ad-din corpus. What distinguishes Argachi from Nasr-ad-din Afandi or *badarchi* is the ability to emerge victorious from any situation. He never acts like a loser.

Unfortunately, the 1990 edition does not have any folkloristic apparatus and uses neither specialised (Lörincz 1979) nor worldwide catalogues of fairy-tale types and motifs (Thompson 1955–1958; 1964). Therefore, it is not clear whether Argachi is a character from the local folklore tradition or is widespread outside of Xinjiang. The sociopolitical terminology found in the texts mainly refers to the Qing period (1644–1911). In some cases, the toponyms mentioned in the texts refer to Xinjiang. (It helps to put forward an assumption about the place of existence of a particular text.)

A character named Argachi, still in the same role of trickster, exists in the folklore of the Shors, a Turkic people living in the Russian Federation in the south-east of Western Siberia (Chudoyakov 2002: 99–103). The character is present in one fairy tale, which belongs to the widespread folktale type AT1535 The Rich and the Poor Peasant (Thompson 1964: 440–441). Argachi is also present in the folklore of the Altaians. Tamara Sadalova (2002: 364–377) published the story "Argachi" of the same AT1535 type. The researcher notes the existence of several variants of it (ibid.: 428–430). In the Altaic story Argachi acts as an antagonist.

Unlike the Mongols of Xinjiang, who have at least 61 stories about Argachi, the Shors and Altaians have many fewer. This can be explained from a historical point of view. The territories of compact residence of the Shors, Altaians, as well as the territory of the XUAR in the 17th and 18th centuries were part of the Dzungar Khanate, where the Oirats were the leading ethnic group. The Turkic peoples, Shors and Altaians among them, were less involved in the implementation of bureaucracy. Since it was among the Oirats that the tales about Argachi became widespread, we formulate a proposal according to which the folklore character Argachi arose in the 17th and 18th centuries among the peoples subjected to the Dzungar Khanate.

Argachi is perceived by the Oirats as an attorney helping commoners resist the power and might of presumptuous aristocrats. This confrontation is clearly highlighted in the narratives, for example, at the beginning of the tale "Non-freezing Traditional Robe":

> Argachi began to fester and ridicule the disgusting deeds of the rich and the nobility. For this, the rich and the nobility hated him fiercely. And then one day, some cruel rich man grabbed Argachi, imprisoned him in a dank cold house, and said: "Let's see how you die by tomorrow morning", so they say. (*Argachi* 1990: 8; here and hereafter translated by the author.)

There are also direct indications of Argachi's position as a judge or an attorney. The basis of "The Wolf Does not Eat Sheep" story (ibid.: 59–60) is the election of the civil authority (*tüshmel*) in litigation, which Argachi wins thanks to his worldly wisdom. This feature allowed us to put forward an assumption regarding the historical basis of Argachi. Usually, officials of the Dzungar Khanate (*zaysan*) were appointed by khans from among the clan nobility or hereditary officials. But at a certain point these positions began to attract people from 'lower' origins. Russian officials and travellers discovered the same practice among the Kalmyk khans. According to statesman and ethnographer Vasiliy Bakunin (1700–1766), Khan Donduk-Ombo (1737–1741) practiced appointing "ordinary Kalmyks" as *zaysan*, and that 'natural' *zaysan* "considered themselves extremely offended" (Pochekayev 2021: 53). The presence of a possible historical prototype serves as another confirmation of the above-mentioned hypothesis about the genesis of the image of Argachi in the 17th and 18th centuries within the Dzungar Khanate socio-cultural space.

In most of the stories published in 1990, Argachi acts as a common people's lawyer or judge. He confronts the injustice of the upper classes and is rewarded for his skill in litigation. The collection includes one story in which the antagonist is the mythological character – a female demon – *shulmas* (*Argachi* 1990: 86–87). This is one of the many stories about the use of ruses to defeat unintelligent demonological creatures, narratives that are popular among the Mongolian peoples. Let me present a full translation of this short story.

> **How Argachi Burned a *Shulmas***
> Since it was believed that there were many devils on the Hargata mountain pass, people did not go there at night. Argachi, who travelled around helping the people, having a cauldron, a tripod and some food, spent the night in a cave on that pass. Argachi kindled a fire and boiled tea. Putting a cup of oil and a cup of water next to him, he wet his head with water and began to dry over the fire. At that time, a *shulmas* girl came and asked:
> – What is your name?
> – My name is Myself, Argachi answered indifferently and continued wetting his head with water from the cup.
> Seeing this, the *shulmas* girl asked:
> – What are you doing?
> – I blacken my hair, he replied.
> The *shulmas* girl stood next to Argachi and said:
> – I want to blacken my hair too.
>
> She poured oil from the other cup thickly on her hair and bent over the fire. Flames immediately engulfed her head. The *shulmas* girl squealed, ran, and soon burned and died.

Since then, they say, devils are no longer to be found on the Hargata mountain pass. (*Argachi* 1990: 86–87)

Argachi's answer to the antagonist's question about his name: "My name is Myself" allows us to consider this story as a variant of tale type AT1135 Eye Remedy, and its variant AT1136, widely spread around the world. A more detailed description is given in the Catalogue of Eastern Slavic folktale types (SUS 1979) for types SUS1136 I Myself and SUS1135 Blinding.

A similar story, in which the protagonist cunningly burns the antagonist, but without the core of AT1135, was found among the archival materials of unnamed Soviet researchers in Mongolia and published by Vera Klyuyeva (1894–1964), who from 1944 to 1950 chaired the Russian language department at the Mongolian State University (Ulaanbaatar) (Porshnev and Shmakov 1959: 15–16). This story tells of the victory of a young woman over a Mongolian mythological character, the yeti known as *hun-hara*. I established that the original text, significantly revised by Klyuyeva, was recorded by Vladimir Kazakevich (1896–1937) presumably between June 20 and 23, 1925 on the territory of modern Matad or Khalkh-gol district of Dornod province:

Once upon a time in these lands there lived a young husband and wife. The husband obtained means of subsistence by hunting, and the wife was always at home alone. One day, while working near the yurt, she suddenly saw a *hun-hara* approaching. Remembering all the stories about him and realising the impossibility of fleeing, the woman ran into the yurt and hastily began to prepare to meet this terrible guest. On the left/male side of the yurt she placed a bowl of oil, and on the right, where she sat, a bowl of water. *Hun-hara*, not knowing how to open the door, broke it down and entered, sat down on the left side, opposite the woman, grinning at her affably. She offered him a cup of tea, which he drank with pleasure. After a while, the smart woman put her hands in the water and began to smooth her hair. *Hun-hara*, acting like a monkey, dipped his paws in a bowl of oil that stood beside him and began to oil his mane. Having done this several times, the hostess took a wand and, putting it into the fire, brought it lit to her hair. *Hun-hara* also lit a torch and set fire to its skin, which is why it burned. (AO IOM RAS, F. 63, Inventory 1, item 1: 28b–29)

This mythological story mirrors "How Argachi Burned a *Shulmas*" (*Argachi* 1990: 86–87) (although the gender markers of the antagonist and the protagonist are changed and the scene is transferred from the cave to a yurt). The researcher cited it not just as a document of folklore, but also as an example of the interaction of a real person with a mythological character, preceding the story with the following description of *hun-hara*:

By the way, with particular pleasure, they talk about the legendary beast "*hun-hara*", and the narrators manage to leave the listener at a loss as to whether or not to believe in the reality of these tales. *Hun-hara* is said to be of enormous growth, something between a man and a bear. His hair is long and falls right over his eyes. Therefore, he has the habit of always walking against the wind, which blows his hair from his face, and with a fair wind he sees nothing. His main food is [Siberian] marmots. Using his enormous strength, the *hun-hara* puts his paw into a marmot's

> hole and turns out huge blocks of earth, after which he grabs his prey. After killing the marmot, he puts it under his arm and moves on. Having caught a new marmot, he puts it again under his arm, not noticing how the first one falls from there and hunts all day like that. By evening, left with only one marmot, the *hun-hara* becomes furious, breaks trees and roars, but quickly calms down. If a person meets him, then any flight is useless, he will still catch up and kill him out of anger, it is better to stand still. Then the good-natured beast will take the man by the arm and will walk with him. In this case, it is worth putting something into his paws with the other hand, as he forgets about the human hand and puts the object in its place, not noticing that he released the prisoner, who takes the opportunity to run away. (AO IOM RAS, F. 63, Inventory 1, item 1: 28)

The story of how a young woman outwitted the *hun-hara* is incorporated by Kazakevich within the text of the expedition report and is not marked as a separate item of folklore. Since there is no folklore data about the place and time of transcribing the text, as well as about the informant, they can only be reconstructed approximately, based on common data given in the source.

The inclusion of this narrative directly in the narration of the report, compiled in Russian, may indicate the nature of the performance of the original Mongolian text and its genre affiliation. This is a mythological story, the folklore speech act of which was not marked as entertaining. Its purpose was to demonstrate to the listener, in this case a foreign researcher, the traditional strategy for dealing with a dangerous but not very intelligent mythological character. This is also evidenced by Kazakevich's remark about the impossibility of characterising the stories about *hun-hara* on the basis of reliability/unreliability.

Narratives about Argachi were labelled by the compilers as satirical tales or anecdotes (*Argachi* 1990: I). From the point of view of the classification of Kalmyk folklore proposed by Vladimir Sarangov (1950–2021), they correspond to all four features of so-called everyday fairy tales (Rus. *bytoviye skazki*) (Sarangov 2010: 94–97). This is an indirect indication of the entertaining function of these folklore texts edited for readers of the end of the 20th century.

In the same short introductory text that precedes the collection, the compilers point out that Argachi "praises the triumph of the true traditions of right behaviour" (*Argachi* 1990: I). Through the examples of stories about Argachi, traditional strategies of behaviour in the implementation of litigation were broadcast. Consequently, this corpus also includes 'instructions' or strategies for interacting with mythological characters, allowing someone to escape unscathed in the event of an undesirable encounter with them. It is interesting that the same strategy was recorded at different ends of the area of residence of the Mongolian peoples from Xinjiang in the west to the border of Halha and Barga in the east. My final suggestion is that the corpus of tales about Argachi not only entertained the listener but also conveyed knowledge about effective strategies of behaviour in litigation, as well as in interaction with a representative of authority or a demonological creature.

NOTES

1 Mong. *Hoshin shog ülger*; Old Mong. *šoq qošong üliger*.

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