Editorial Introduction

Our issue starts with Li Narangoa’s wonderful tribute to the eminent Mongolist, Igor De Rachewiltz. In an extended appreciation, she tells us about the background to De Rachewiltz’s greatest achievement, his translation, with a second volume of historical notes and explanations, of The Secret History of the Mongols. Further, Li Narangoa also gives us generous insights into De Rachewiltz’s character as a scholar and philologist, the debates he was engaged in, and his own family upbringing and early career.

The first two scholarly articles of the issue are innovative historical studies concerning the Mongols in early – mid 20th century China. Deng Yannan’s paper, ‘The Manchukuo Mongolian Army: Military Collaboration and the Disillusioned Nationalism’, details a critical period in Inner Mongolian history that remains under-investigated. Mongols played a far greater role in the army of the Manchukuo client state than their population numbers warranted. The Mongol members of the Xing’an Division, having first allied with the Japanese occupiers later rebelled against them and then became early leaders of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. The article brings to light many events that have not previously been analysed. A particularly valuable aspect is that, rather than follow the nationalist approach that highlights the roles of Merse or Yun Ze, it focuses on the more ambivalent roles of Ganjuurjab, Jengjuurjab and Hafungga and others. It thus reveals the complexity of collaboration and the fluctuating motivations of the Mongols involved during the Manchukuo period, especially with regard to long term aims for Mongol autonomy.

Peng Hai’s article, ‘Parameters of ethnic minorhood: Inner Mongolia and the Cinematic Production of ethnic hierarchy in the early PRC’ moves to the following historical period when the first parameters of ‘autonomy’ were being established. The paper investigates how a rigid ethnic hierarchy based on a majority-minority binarism was visually constructed through film during the formative decade of the socialist era (1949–1959). The early promise and public politics of friendship was belied even at this time by the cultural production of binary images that raised ‘majority’ over a dependent ‘minority.’ Peng Hai describes how Han superiority was constructed by visually representing the Chinese as ethnic guardians overlooking the ethnic minors, whose given task was to attain likeness to the Han. The Mongols were discursively left with restrictive parameters for any alternative agency. A significant feature of this
theoretically ambitious article is that Peng Hai places his thought-provoking arguments in dialogue with U.E. Bulag’s ‘collaborative nationalism’, querying the collaborative element and pointing to how Han-centric epistemological assumptions repeatedly re-asserted themselves visually. He argues that this one-sided ‘minoritising of the minor’, in effect the ethnicisation of Maoist governmentality in frontier regions, was the precursor to the oppressive ethnic situation in present-day China.

With the next paper, we change theme from politics to religion and move north to the Buryat region in Russia. Ayur Zhanaev’s ‘A Heap of Leaves or Fellow Travellers. Kinship and Family Life in the Buddhist Texts for the Buryat Laity (XIX early XX century)’ is a masterly examination of how family and kinship is represented in Buddhist texts taught to, and circulated among, Buryat laity. The key antimony here is one that has existed in Buddhism since its earlier days up to the present: on the one hand, Buddhism is avowedly a world-renouncing religion for which earthly attachments, perhaps chief of all kinship, are hindrances on the path to renunciation and enlightenment. On the other hand, the Mongol peoples, and the Buryats in particular, have given extraordinary value to kinship, with countless practices supporting its practical and symbolic importance among all classes. Zhanaev’s paper deals with the several ways that the Buryat Buddhist texts dealt with this situation. One, of course, was to separate the higher path of the non-married lama from the lifestyle appropriate for the married, family-based laity, who were morally obliged to supply the sangha with both material and human resources. Families were encouraged, via these homilies, to send their sons to become ordained monks and to make general donations to monasteries. Another more theological response was to emphasise the priority of the ‘soul’ and the psychic inclination of the individual over the physical ‘body’ given by the parents. The ‘soul’ is these texts is disconnected from kinship and has its own line of transmission; it wanders and enters different bodies according to the law of karma. Along with these discussions, Zhanaev’s article shows how the Buddhist texts approved their own version of kinship centred on the notion of filial piety, in which the parents and the lama-teachers appear as parallel objects of veneration. Introducing vivid examples from the texts, Zhanaev takes the reader through the attitudes adopted with regard to many aspects of kinship, from marriage and sexuality to daughters-in-law, affines, and disagreements between relatives.

The final two articles in the issue turns to epic and drama in the Mongolian and Buryat cultural area. Inner Asian heroic epics have been well studied, particularly in the Russian scholarly literature, but they are much less known or analysed in English. Jonathan Ratcliffe’s article on ‘The Epic Legacy of Shono Baatar’ introduces readers to one of the most interesting Western Buryat epics. Rather than viewing the epic as timeless culture, Ratcliffe’s describes its
relatively recent historical basis in 18th century Dzungar history. And unlike most of the previous studies of folkore, he details the epic's fate in the changing political-cultural environment of the 20th–21st centuries. Ratcliffe explains how and by whom ‘Shono Baatar’ was first recorded in 1936, then after many years was re-published in 2015 in a dual language Russian-Buryat version, and finally was acclaimed as an important item of Buryat national cultural heritage. Readers will find in this article not only the outlines of Shono’s heroic exploits and some of the vivid epic poetry employed, but also the background in the historical evidence, as well as in stories and folklore, concerning the historical prototype for Shono, the Dzungar warrior Louzang Shunu. This illuminates the extraordinary geographical extent of Dzungar/Oirat wanderings, political negotiations, and dispersals. Another particularly valuable aspect of this article is that it reminds us that there is no ‘pure version’ of an epic: both performers and ideologically motivated ethnographers add to, or subtract from, texts in accordance with political circumstances or national agendas. In the Soviet period and later, ‘Shono Baatar’ was revisited several times and clearly subject to a constant process of revision and reinterpretation.

The final article of this issue is Veronika Kapišovská’s ‘A Prince in the Body of a Parrot (Cuckoo): Literary Transmission and Transformation between India, Inner Asia and beyond’.

The article concerns an 18th century Tibetan narrative, The Tale of the Moon Cuckoo, and its adaptation as a Mongolian opera. Situating the study in the interface of Tibetan – Mongolian cultural transmission, Kapišovská focuses on the migration of one motif, a prince who is tricked by his companion into entering the body of a dead cuckoo. Providing many new materials, she shows how it was transformed in the 19th century by Danzanravjaa, the Fifth Noyon Khutugtu of Mergen Wang Banner in the Gobi into his own operatic masterpiece. What is especially interesting in this account is the detail of the Buddhist aura in which Danzanravjaa worked, where ‘singing the song of Moon Cuckoo in our own homeland’ was an act of religious worship. More broadly, the article is a thoroughly researched study of the originally Indian theme of the prince who transformed into the body of a parrot, describing its spread to the Middle East, Central Asia and Tibet, its modifications, including the substitution of cuckoo for the parrot, and its translations into Mongolian-family languages. Towards the end of the article Kapišovská provides an explanation of the fascination this theme held for Mongolian audiences.

Caroline Humphrey
Professor Emeritus, Department of Social Anthropology,
University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
ch10001@cam.ac.uk