CHAPTER 3

“Everything and Its Contrary”
Between Morality and Ethics, Equilibrium and Excess, Humanity and Animality, What Is a Wolf?

The Fox’s Black Footprints

At the outset of my rural fieldwork, I spent several weeks looking for a family of herders to live with. The first weeks were spent with a family whose father turned out to be both moody and alcoholic. This period was quite difficult and I had no other choice than to leave and try to find another family. A friend of mine living in the provincial centre helped me get in touch with Nadmid. On our way to Nadmid’s yurt, we had the occasion to talk about foxes. I told him that one day, coming from the countryside to the provincial centre with the moody herder, we had seen a fox crossing the road. My friend said that that was a very bad sign because the fox is a very sly (zal’tai) animal. It is a muu sanaatai am’tan, an animal with bad intentions. I was asked whether, after seeing the fox, the car had broken down. I said no – but the next day the hunter accused me of having damaged his car. I also mentioned how difficult our relationship was because of his alcoholism and moody character. There was no doubt in my friend’s mind that the distressing situation was due to the fox we had seen one day on the road. “This animal is hiimorgüi, it carries misfortune.”

Nadmid explained that, if you run across a fox, your work will be fruitless, whereas if you run across a wolf, even if you don’t kill it, your work will be fruitful. In order to explain the fox’s bad character he gave me an example: “If you lose your horse and see a fox you’ll go the wrong way and get lost, while if you see a hare or a marmot, it doesn’t matter as those animals are simple [žirün], they are neither cagaan mörtoi nor hap mörtoi.” Those terms mean respectively ‘with white footprints’ and ‘with black footprints’. It was the first time I had come across those notions. Interestingly they only apply to the wolf, which has white footprints, and to the fox, which has black footprints. Other animals are never considered as having black or white footprints. But most of the time Nadmid, used the terms hiimortoi and hiimorgüi in talking about the wolf and the fox.

Why is the fox the especially hiimorgüi animal? And what does being without hiimor’ mean in relation to the fox? There is a difference between applying the term hiimorgüi to a person and applying it to the fox. Whereas a person who has been repeatedly unsuccessful in his/her undertakings is described as hiimorgüi, a fox is said to be hiimorgüi whether it is successful or not. The fox is
in fact considered hümortoi for its ability to escape the hunter and hümorgüü for its capacity to transmit misfortune. So unlike the person's absence of hümor', which refers to a lack of success, the fox's general and constant absence of hümor' refers to its contaminating potential for misfortune. Whereas a person's hümor' characterizes a temporary state of affairs (successful or not), which refers to a temporary condition (close to or far from moral norms), the wolf's and the fox's hümor' remain constantly stable, since they refer to permanent and antagonist ways of being. Both the wolf and the fox are paradigmatic signs, metaphorically referring to the contradictory and ideal aspects of the individual's changing moral condition, which is in turn determined by fluctuations of hümor'. While the wolf stands for respect of the moral norm, the fox stands for its negation. It might well be said that a person's hümor' fluctuates in accordance with their wolf- and fox-like actions and intentions. The hümor' of the wolf and the fox are positive and negative powers, or reversed potentials, which can be transmitted. The fox has the power to make people hümorgüü and the wolf has the power to make them hümortoi.

The misfortune carried by the fox is only transmitted by sight. If a hunter kills a fox his hümor' does not decrease whereas, if he kills a wolf, it increases. Seeing a fox does not have the same temporal implications as seeing a wolf. We have seen that only people who have hümor' can see a wolf. In the fox's case, seeing it or crossing its path is a random occurrence. It does not depend on the person's moral state, his/her high or low level of hümor'. Even a morally good person may see a fox. Seeing a fox does not have an 'evenemental' dimension as strong as seeing or killing a wolf. As a friend of mine expresses it, seeing a fox has nothing to do with your hümor'; it's an inauspicious hazard. "When you see a fox, you are azgūi [unlucky]." The sighting of a wolf and of a fox refers to different causalities. However, seeing a fox influences the viewer's success for a short time. The fox's presence is important in a hunting context. Some hunters said:

Beginning a hunt, if an animal crosses in front of you from right to left, in the sense of opening the deel, you have to kill it as it opens the door to the hunt. If you fail to kill it you close the door and won't be able to hunt or do anything else that day. If you see a fox coming from right or the left, you have to kill it because it's a bad animal, closing all doors and bringing misfortune.

I went snow cock (hoilog) hunting in the mountains, in late winter, with Doržoo and Batsüh. On the way, we saw a fox cross our path from left to right. Batsüh clapped his hands and the fox froze. He got off his horse and said: "Let's kill this hümorgüü animal." He tried to shoot it but the fox got away. We tried to reassure