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The Epic of *Jangar*: a Reason for Studying the Decline of the Oral Tradition

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Abstract. While observing the research history of epics, we would find researchers have paid close attention to the origin, development and changes of epics, and paid little attention to the decline of epics. In the article, the author argues the study of decline of *Jangar* has theoretical and practical importance to understand the vanishing history of dead epics, to understand the necessity of cherishing and spreading the existing oral tradition. Previous studies on the life-cycle history of *Jangar* mainly concentrated on the its origin and formation, and neglected the issue of its decline and extinction. Therefore, the decline and extinction issue of the *Jangar* oral tradition should become an important part of *Jangar* studies, which is as important as the origin and formation issue, and is theoretically significant in preservation of the *Jangar* oral tradition. The study deals with the decline and extinction of oral traditions of minorities in China, and plays an important role in the preservation and inheritance of living oral traditions as well. It would provide valuable reference materials to understand the life-cycle history of already extinct epics including Greek ones.

Keywords: *Jangar*, oral tradition, decline, research

Epic is one of the worldwide spread oral traditions. And the epic traditions of various ethnic groups differ from each other. While oral traditions of epics in many places including Europe had perished long ago, the epic traditions of some other places, like Asia, have survived till the present day. When those epics including Slavic ones have digressed off people's everyday life and turned to coffee shop and other entertainment occasions, some other epics, like Mongolian ones, still exist as a popular folk culture. And when it comes to epics had perished hundreds of years ago, it is impossible to study their history due to the lack of materials from that time. Therefore, the Mongolian epic tradition could provide favorable conditions for the study of life-cycle history of living oral epics. In other words, an important contribution of Mongolian epic studies to the

world epic study is to clarify some regular patterns in inheritance of living oral epics in traditional socio-cultural environment, and then to reconstruct some life-cycle history of dead epics, like that of Homer's epic [D. Taya 2013]. And it could become a reference to prevent, develop and spread the living oral traditions in the current globalization context.

Epic is a comprehensive art genre which combines storyteller's looks, facial expression, body language, voice, tone, language and musical instrument. That is to say, epic is consisted of language culture, performance culture, customary and social culture. Consequently, epic studies should also include studies of storytellers, texts, performance techniques, inheritance customs, social-cultural context as well as life-cycle history of epics. Concerning the life-cycle history of epics, the origin, development, trans-

formation, decline and digression of epic would also be involved naturally. Current studies of epics mainly concern the origin and formation of epics influenced by studies of Homer issue. That is to study the birth and development of epics based on its written text, taking the Greek epic as a model [Мелетинский 1963, 1979, 1986; Чагдуров 1980; 梅列金斯基著 2007; 立石久雄著 1998; 坂井弘紀著 2002]. As to the decline and digression of epics, scholars adhere to Marx's viewpoints, specifically, 'some arts, for instance epics, are accepted by everyone, in this regard, when art production appears as art production, it would not be created same as the ancient classical format which has significant of time in world history' [马克思恩格斯选集 1975], and consider epics were created in the age of barbarism, and would decline naturally in civilized society. Especially, Engels' theory of 'we could be aware of basic background in later stage of barbarous society from Homer's Epics, particularly, the *Iliad* or Homer's epics and all myths are the main heritage Greeks inherited from barbarous society to civilized one' [恩格斯著 1975] are cited quite often. As a result, some scholars believe that epics were created at a certain social evolution stage (an earlier stage of barbarous society), and vanish at a certain stage (a later stage of barbarous society or an earlier stage of civilized society), same as other social phenomena. That is to say, formation and digression of epics are historical phenomena, and the 'natural development rule' of human society. As a matter of fact, Marx and Engels did not specialize on epics, instead, cited materials on European epics and related studies, while discussing the evolution of human society. On the other hand, 'Marx and Engels said *Iliad*, *Odyssey* were created in a later stage of barbarous society or earlier stage of civilized society, they never said worldwide epics were created in that stage' [Buyankheshig, Tegüsbayar 1990]. For example, Mongolian epics were still prevailing until early 20th century, and some new contents were added then. Then, were Mongols still living in barbarous society even in the early 20th century? Of course, they were not. Mongols had civilized long time ago, and made civilized history of hundreds of years. Some scholars consider epics as the product of 'a people's uncivilized stage' or 'undeveloped era of art'. However, any people or ethnic groups could not express their ideas and thought clearly, let alone creating heroic epics, the summit of oral art, in their uncivilized stage or undeveloped era of art. In fact, 'not even a hundred years have passed since Mongol epics

were recorded in written form for the first time. And some are still alive among the people, and some new epics are found till recent days. Mongols have changed and updated the epics with new awareness in various historical stages, instead of once remembered ancient version (reproduced) without any changes' [Козин 1998]. Therefore, heroic epics are products of ancient and modern times at the same time.

Epic tradition is not 'an art for art's sake', just like present-day arts, but is a type of traditional culture which was created on the basis of socio-cultural needs and has become a part of local people's life, therefore to meet various needs of them. As a consequence, it does not vanish with the birth of 'art for art's sake' immediately, instead to coexist with stage arts due to the needs of different social groups. It is necessary to note that Mongolian epics have coexisted with 'art for art's sake', like *Saran Höhögiin Namtar*, a modern drama produced by Danzanrabjai. In fact, regardless of extinct or living epics, studies about their origin and early development are all imaginaries, as there are few real materials survived. Therefore, those living or declining oral epics including Mongolian ones could provide true materials and valuable conditions for studying the decline and vanish of epics. Which means it's possible to study the conditions in which epics change, decline, and even vanish, although it's hard to study in which conditions epics started to take shape.

Taking *Jangar*, the summit of Mongolian epics for example, previous studies concerned its origin and early developments. Outside China, A. Kozin [1998], A. Sh. Kichikov [1976, 1997] and N. Ts. Bitkeev [1990] wrote articles or monographs on the origin of *Jangar*. Chinese scholars' study mainly focused on origin, formation, development and changes as well. For instance, Buyankheshig's 'Where and When Were Epic *Jangar* Formed' [Buyankheshig 1981], A. Taibai's 'A Primary Discussion on the Origin of Epic *Jangar*' [Taibai 1982], T. Jamtsa's 'A Discussion of Place and Time Epic *Jangar* Formed' [Jamtsa 1983] and 'A Trial Discussion of the Formation Date and Place of *Jangariin Tuuji*' [特·贾木查 试论 1983], G. Buyanbatu's 'About the Origin of *Jangar*' [Buyanbatu 1984], Oiradbayar's 'A New Discussion of the Formation Time of *Jangar*' [Oiradbayar. 1986], O. Bayi's 'About the Formation Time of Epic *Jangar*' [Bayi 1987], Üjüme's 'My Opinion about the Formation Time of *Jangar*' [Üjüme 1987], J. Rinchindorji's 'About the Origin Time of *Jan-*

gar' [Rinchindorji 1988], Liu Hu's 'A Study of the Formation Time of Epics like *Jangar*' [柳湖 瀟 关于 1988], Sh. Norbu's 'Some Issues on the Formation Time, Material Art Culture and Locality of Epic *Jangar*' [Norbu 1988], Gereljab's 'The Prerequisite and historical cultural factor of *Jangar* Formation' [格日勒扎布 1990], E. Badmara's 'A Study of the Tribe and Time in Which *Jangar* Formed' [Badmara 1990], Altan-Orgil's 'A Trial Discussion of Time and Place *Jangar* Formed' [Altan-Orgil 1991], Bao Jinshan's 'A Brief Study on the Formation Date of *Jangar*' [Bao Jinshan 1991], Rinchindorji's 'Re-discussion of the Formation Time of *Jangar*' [仁钦道尔吉 瀟 再论 1991; Rinchindorji 1991], B. Mönkhe's 'An Analysis of the Formation Time of *Jangar* in Relation with the Social Features Described in' [Mönkhe 1991], B. Nyamjab's 'A Discussion of the Origination Time of *Jangar* and some Related Issues' [Nyamjab 1993], D. Naidai's 'An Observation of *Jangar*'s Formation Time from Its Ideological Tendency' [Naidai 1993], Gereljab's 'Two Issues Related with the Origination Time of *Jangar*' [Gereljab 1993], O. Bayi's 'On the Formation Time of *Jangar* Epics' [Bayi 1994], B. Nyamjab's 'To Study the Origination Time of Epic *Jangar* from Various Oirat Customs Described' [Nyamjab 1995], Bayar's 'The Issue of the Formation Time of *Jangar*'s Basic Story' [巴雅尔 瀟 关于 1997], all these articles paid attention to the formation time of *Jangar*. H. Tserenbal's 'The Fixture Time of *Geser* and *Jangar*' [Tserenbal 1983], Aradhü's 'A Primary Study of the Formation and Fixture Time of *Jangar*' [阿尔丁夫 瀟 1985] and 'A Primary Study of the Formation and Fixture Time of *Jangar*: Concurrent Discussion of the Authorship of *Jangar*' [阿尔丁夫 瀟 1986], Ch. Erentsei's 'The Origination and Fixture Process of *Jangar*' [Erentsei 1987], Gereljab's 'On the Time of *Jangar* Were Formed and Fixed' [Gereljab 1988] and 'The Method of Confirming the Formation and Fixture Time of *Jangar*' [Gereljab 1996], N. Naranbatu's 'An Elementary Discussion of the Formation and Fixture Date of *Jangar* from Perspective of History' [Naranbatu 1996], Jogdarma's 'A Discussion of Formation and Fixture Time of Epic *Jangar*' [Jogdarma 1998] and B. Mönkhe's 'To Ascertain the Formation and Fixture Place and Time of *Jangar* from Its Distribution' [孟克：从 2001] articles all mainly discussed both the formation and fixture issue of *Jangar*. Jagar's 'A Study of the Time *Jangar* Originated and Developed' [Jagar 1990-01, 1990-03], B. Pürebdeshi's 'To Study

the Formation and Development Time of *Jangar* from Geographic Location' [Pürebdeshi 1991], Rinchindorji's 'About the Formation and Development of *Jangar*' [仁钦道尔吉 瀟 关于 1996], T. Jamtsa's 'On the Origination and Development of *Jangar*' [Jamtsa 2004] focused on the origination and development issue of *Jangar*. In addition, R. Narantuya, a scholar from Mongolia, whose article 'The development and Transmission Issues of Epic *Jangar*' concerns the development and transmission of *Jangar* [Narantuya 1990]. As to academic monographs, the Second Part of '*Jangar* Study' written by Rinchindorji consists of chapters concerning cultural origin, social prototype, formation date, development and changes, expansion of storyline, development of personalities, and studies the origination and development issue of *Jangar* from various aspects [仁钦道尔吉著 1994]. 'The Four Yellow States of *Jangar*' by Altan-Orgil links *Jangar* with the history of the Four Oirats, and aims to clarify the date and place *Jangar* originated from [Altan-Orgil 1995]. T. Jamtsa's 'The Issue of *Jangar*' monograph believes the leading character *Jangar* indicates Genghis Khan, so the whole epic is supposed to reflect the historical events of the 13th century [Jamtsa 1997]. 'The Geographic Condition and Socio-historic Origin of *Jangar*' by B. Mönkhe studies the date and place where epic *Jangar* originated and formed, and argues it reflects the history of the Torghut Khanate in the 17th-18th centuries [Mönkhe 2007]. The above-mentioned publications focus on the origin and formation of *Jangar*, and attempt to find out the date, place, and tribe *Jangar* originated from, its formation and development process. As for the publication dates, those works were published in the early 1980s to the late 1990s, and few works were published thereafter.

Basically, previous studies on the life-cycle history of *Jangar* mainly concentrated on the its origin and formation, and neglected the issue of its decline and extinction. Therefore, the decline and extinction issue of the *Jangar* oral tradition should become an important part of *Jangar* studies, which is as important as the origin and formation issue, and is theoretically significant in preservation of the *Jangar* oral tradition. The study deals with the decline and extinction of oral traditions of minorities in China, and plays an important role in the preservation and inheritance of living oral traditions as well. It would provide valuable reference materials to understand the life-cycle history of already extinct epics including Greek ones.

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