

## A Brief Account of *Bensen Ülger* and *Ülgeren Bense*

Zhalгаа

### I

The Mongols have a long tradition of oral literature. About the first half of the nineteenth century, a new member came into the family of Mongolian oral tradition, namely *bensen ülger*. *Bensen ülger* first appeared in the southeastern Mongolian areas, where the influence from the Han culture has been stronger, and then spread to other areas of Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia.<sup>1</sup>

*Bensen ülger* are a variety of *huurchi*. *Huur* is synonymous with *huqin*, and a *hurchi* is a *huqin* player. *Hurchin ülger* means all kinds of stories narrated by the artist, who tells a story while playing the four-string *huur* with changeable melodic sounds, an instrument popular among the Mongols. *Hurchi ülger* mainly comprises epic (also known as Manggus stories), *bensen ülger*, and narrative stories that are based on real life in Inner Mongolia. *Bensen ülger* have enjoyed a prominent position among *hurchi ülger* in modern times.

*Bensen ülger* stories are usually long. Compared with traditional Mongolian oral epics, they have two distinctive points. First with respect to subject and content, *bensen ülger* stories describe events that took place in the heartland of China, for example the suppression of turmoil by successive dynasties and wars, struggles between devoted and deceitful ministers, magic competitions between gods and monsters, complicated legal cases, and love affairs and civil life. Exemplary war stories include *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *Shuotang Qianzhuan*, *Shuotang Houzhuan*, and *Shuotang Sanzhuan*. Exemplary magic competitions between gods and monsters are *Canonization of the Gods*, *Journey to the West*, and others, while heroic legends include the *Water Margin*. Complex legal cases are related in stories such as *Jigong Zhuan* and *Shigong An*; all have been very

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as Khalkha Mongol, that is, the present Mongolian Republic.

well received. Just as the word *bense* is at root a loan word, so the *bensen ülger* derive from other, non-Mongolian regions.

The *bensen ülger* also differ from Mongolian epic because they rely on *benzi*. The word *bensen* is a transcription of a Chinese word, *benzi*, that has two meanings. One refers to stacks of paper made into a book, the other to editions of books, including handwritten and printed copies. In Mongolian, the equivalent of the Chinese word *benzi* is *debter*, denoting both stacks of paper made into a book and handwritten copies and printed books. This term does not, however, include Buddhist scriptures and other important classics. For its special term *bensen ülger*, *ülger* can also mean the original written copy of a story, similar to the way the Chinese storytelling tradition claims that written texts by literary artists are the original versions. Therefore, the exact meaning of *bensen ülger* refers to stories originating from storybooks that were told by artists. Though *bensen ülger* are alive orally among artists, their contents are based on *benzi*. These *benzi* may consist of long stories (like the aforementioned *The Story of Three Kingdoms* and romances that have all been created in the heartland), or they may simply outline a story. Artists became familiar with the stories in *benzi* and developed them into orally performed and inherited stories. Of the cantos and contents known to us, many are widely available in Mongolian handwritten copies. The traditional Mongolian epics differ from stories describing local life and originating in the nineteenth century in that they came from artists' oral creations and did not rely on handwritten copies for dissemination; there were few handwritten copies before we started to collect them in the twentieth century.

So-called *bensen ülger* rely on *benzi* and demonstrate the properties of both relativity and universality. In fact, not all artists read *benzi*. Some artists are illiterate and some are blind. They have to rely on a teacher or ask others to read *benzi* for them in order to master the contents of the story.<sup>2</sup> Besides, there have been individual stories for which no original copies have been found, and that exist only orally. However, these works that deal with

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<sup>2</sup> In August of 1995 the author visited an artist by the name of Togtoga, then 61, from Fuxin in Liaoning province. He lost his eyesight at age three and started to learn storytelling. His father could read Mongolian and tell stories such as *Sizhuang*, *The Story of the East Han Dynasty*, *Liu Xiu Zouguo*, *Xue Rengui Went on an Eastern Expedition*, *Hua Mulan Conquered the North*, *The Story of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*, *Luotong Conquered the North*, and many others. Most of these stories he learned by listening to his father read them. Togtoga could usually remember a story after hearing it read three times, and after a month he could reorganize the story into rhyming verse and perform it for an audience. According to him, many artists in the past could not learn *benzi* by themselves.

stories about China's heartland are not fictions fabricated by Mongolian artists. They can only be copies of other popular *bensen ülger*, or created on the basis of knowledge of other works of a similar kind in this region of China.

The term *bensen ülger* is often used by people to refer to two phenomena that are both related and different, namely *bensen ülger* and *ülgeren bense*. So-called *ülgeren bense* are the original copies of the aforementioned stories that artists sing, but do not include the handwritten copies that outline the stories. Mongolian *ülgeren bense* can be classified into two large categories according to their different origins.<sup>3</sup> The first, for example, includes translated and adapted Mongolian versions of *Canonization of the Gods*, *Water Margin*, and others. The second category involves newly created works in Mongolian regions that deal with stories from the Chinese civil wars, works like *Wu Zhuan*, *Hanfeng Zhuan*, and so forth. As far as *ülgeren bense* discovered at present are concerned, whether they are translated and adapted versions of Chinese stories or new works in Mongolian, they are composed in prose and structured according to parts and subtitles of Chinese classic stories, with subtitles at the beginning of each canto. In form the subtitles mostly imitate the poetic parallels that are adopted by Chinese classics. *Ülgeren bense* belong to the category of romance in written literature, while *bensen ülger* to the category of oral traditions. In style *bensen ülger* combine prose with verse, adapting well to the way artists both sing and narrate them, a different vehicle from the prose style that *ülgeren bense* adopted.

Functionally, *bensen ülger* are a comprehensive art. During the performance, the audience will enjoy not only its complicated stories but also its rich and charming language, moving music and voices, and the drama of the performance. *Ülgeren bense*, however, can be enjoyed only by relying entirely on reading. They can involve the original copy and be directly appreciated by literati themselves, who can also read them to others. The latter scenario is called *bense dagudahu* ("reading books"). It is said that in the past in southeast Mongolia, *bense dagudahu* was very popular. What is special about *bense dagudahu* is that it can be read word by word

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<sup>3</sup> *Bensen ülger*, in its original sense, should also include the original stories in Chinese popular in Mongolian areas. Many masters of *bensen ülger* know Chinese and the stories they sing often come directly from the Chinese originals. Having said that, however, for most artists, the original copies they rely on are still *bensen ülger* in Mongolian. Therefore here we give emphasis to the handwritten *ülgeren bense* in Mongolian when we deal with the relationship between *ülgeren bense* and *bensen ülger*.

without either singing or musical accompaniment, a completely different mode from oral performances by folk artists.

In terms of dissemination, *bensen ülger* also differ from *ülgeren bense*. Until the mid-twentieth century, the printing industry was quite backward, which meant that most of the preservation and spread of *ülgeren bense* was dependent on handwritten copies. In fact, most extant copies have no authors' names. Quite a few of them, however, contain the names of their copyists and date of copying. The majority of copyists were adolescents, who might have used the opportunity to practice their handwriting. Another reason adolescents who were learning to write liked to copy *ülgeren bense* was that they could earn money in the process; handwritten copies sold quite readily. *Ülgeren bense* seldom experienced variation as a result of dissemination. Except for different translators, different copies of the same story usually remained basically stable.

*Bensen ülger*, however, inherited the distinctions of Mongolian story singing arts, largely depending on individual relationships between teacher and apprentice for broadening the scope of their dissemination. A future artist, before he starts to learn the craft, must acquire from his master the basic skills of story singing, a rich knowledge of music, and the ability to sing impromptu. The master should pass his best stories to his disciple. These stories often differ greatly from those that have been recorded in *ülgeren bense*, and could only be spread through apprenticeship. In order to raise the standard and tell more excellent stories, some artists also formally acknowledge several masters as teachers and learn their strong points. In fact, many excellent stories have continually been enriched in the process of spreading. Due to the fact that they were passed down from masters to disciples and sung by different artists, they are bound to have a great gap between versions. An artist with superior performing skills can sing more movingly. Even when the same person sings the story, there will inevitably be a difference between one version and another.

During the prosperous period of *bensen ülger*, many well-known artists appeared. It is said that they sang many wonderful stories. However, we cannot find any copies of *bensen ülger* that spread according to the style of folktale singing. Handwritten copies of *ülgeren bense*, however, have been preserved in large numbers, and the stories as told by artists are largely suitable for audio and visual appreciation of the story sung on the spot. Although we can read handwritten copies of the story, it would be more fascinating to read *ülgeren bense* in the style of prose.

*Bensen ülger* were popular, a status that on the one hand encouraged more artists to emerge and on the other hand increased the need for *benzi* that were more suitable for singing. This situation has promoted the

translation of Chinese stories by literati. Many stories were translated into Mongolian for *bensen ülger* singing, such as those that have been passed down to us: *Canonization of the Gods*, *Dongzhou Lieguozhi*, *Donghai Yanyi*, *Xihan Yanyi*, *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *Suitang Yanyi*, *Luotong Saobei*, *Xuerengui Zhengdong*, *Xiliang Zhuan* (*Shuotang Sanzhuan*), *The Water Margin*, *Jigong Zhuan*, *Shigong An*, and so on.

The singing activities of *bensen ülger* have also motivated some educated Mongols to create new *benzi* that deal with wars in the heartland. In this cultural atmosphere, the Five Stories of the Tang Dynasty—*Kuxi Zhuang*, *Quanjia Fu*, *Shangyao Zhuan*, *Qipi Zhuan*—and other new and long *benzi* such as *Pingbei Zhuan*, *Hanfeng Zhuan*, *Wanceng Lou*, *Shangshu Ji*, and *Zijin Zhuo* emerged in response to the times.

## II

Folk singers are the key factor for bridging *ülgeren bense* and *bensen ülger*. Without their creative work there would have been no oral *bensen ülger*. From the excerpts cited below from the *Water Margin* as sung by artist Pajai, we can appreciate the important role his talent played in the transition from *ülgeren bense* to *bensen ülger*.

Pajai (1902-62) was the most distinguished Mongolian *huurchi* in the twentieth century. People praise him as the master linguist of his generation for his outstanding contributions in unearthing the richness of Mongolian language and unfolding its artistic aesthetics. Pajai was born in Örgentala Gachaga, Modo Söme, Jarud Banner, Inner Mongolia. He had an extraordinary memory and was extremely talented. Even in childhood, after listening to the singing of the then-famous artist Choibang (1836-1928), he could repeat the whole performance; for this he was highly appreciated by Choibang. Pajai was chosen as a prodigy at age nine and sent to the Noyan Temple in the Banner to become a lama. While in the temple he showed outstanding talent in learning scriptures. However, he retained his love for the singing art and was punished many times by the lama-manager for pursuing it. At age 18 Pajai was finally able to leave the temple and become an artist who lived by singing. Pajai sang not only *bensen ülger* but also epics and stories that were based on Mongolian life. Among his repertoire of *bensen ülger*, the most influential were *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, *Suitang Yanyi*, and *Xihan Yanyi*. Pajai studied under Choibang, whose master was the great master of a generation, Dansannima (1836-89). Both Choibang and Dansannima were well known for singing *Water Margin*. For that reason, creative elements from the performances of

Choibang and Dansannima also turned up in Pajai's version of *Water Margin*. Pajai himself trained many artists, including such famous bards as Sampilnorbu and Choijigowa. Losor, who is still actively devoted to his singing art, was a disciple of Choijigowa.

We have translated below an excerpt from the twenty-second cycle, "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death," in Pajai's *Water Margin*. *Water Margin*, a Chinese romance that emerged in the fourteenth century, describes a group of heroes during the Song Dynasty of China who joined together and revolted against corrupt officials on Liang Mountain. The novel speaks highly of devotion between friends, and unfolds many scenes of acrobatic fighting and war. Because of the similarities between it and the Mongolian epic, the novel was suitable for artists' singing and well received by the masses. In the Qing Dynasty, *Water Margin* was translated several times into Mongolian. Here the author's reference came from a version of late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century, and is the earliest known translation. The handwritten copy is now preserved in the Library of Inner Mongolia University, and was printed and circulated by the Institute of Inner Mongolian Language, Literature, and History in 1977.

"The Story of Wu Song Beating to Death the Tiger," sung by Pajai, was recorded, compiled, and subsequently included in *One Hundred Works of Mongolian Classic Literature*. In his postscript, Ts. Damdinsüren highly praised Pajai's "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death," commenting that its "'feature of combining prose with verse' is quite similar to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, and has had a long tradition" (1979:1694-95). He also said, "artists who sing and play *huur* always have the threefold task of drama, music, and reading everywhere in the Mongolian region. When they sing the Chinese stories, they would add or deduct and turn them into pieces of prose and verse, making them a newly created work suitable for the Mongolian audience" (*idem*). For "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death" sung by Pajai, there are more than ninety pages of rhymed text with over 1,500 lines, and more than ten pages of prose with over 160 lines, totaling 100 pages in large script. In the present letter-printed version of *Water Margin* that was translated into Mongolian during the Qing Dynasty the relevant story comprises only twelve pages in small script.<sup>4</sup> The modern Mongolian translation, based on the original and published by Inner Mongolia Publishing House, contains only sixteen pages in large script. Therefore Pajai's "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death" is not only far more lengthy than the Mongolian version from the Qing Dynasty, but also considerably longer

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<sup>4</sup> This translated version makes quite a few cuts to the original and is much shorter.

than the modern Mongolian translation; it exceeds the Chinese original. Like the Mongolian version from the Qing Dynasty, the contents that did not suit the Mongolian audience were left out when he performed; however, when it came to length, Pajai's version still doubled that of the original, due largely to the addition of many details during singing.

As far as the major development of the story is concerned, Pajai's "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death" is roughly similar to the Chinese original and the version of the Qing Dynasty. Wu Song, seeking his elder brother, came to an inn in front of Mount Jingyanggang, where he had a brawl with the owner and drank too much; without listening to the owner's advice he continued over the mountain, where he ran into a ferocious tiger and beat it to death; he met a hunter who proved that the ferocious tiger was beaten to death by Wu Song and reported it to the county magistrate and accompanied him down the mountain; they came to the county town where Wu Song was rewarded, favorably spoken of by the townspeople, and so on. Here we translate, as sung by Pajai, an excerpt describing the scene in which Wu Song arrives at Mount Jingyanggang and enters the inn. In the Chinese version of *Water Margin* the telling of this event uses fewer than 100 Chinese characters (Shi 1990:165-66):

It was midday that day; [he] trekked and felt hungry and thirsty, and saw an inn in front of him, where a sign with five characters read: "No one should pass over the mountain if three bowls of wine are drunk." Wu Song went inside and sat down, leaning his stick against the wall, and yelled out: "Master, get some wine to drink and quickly!"

The aforementioned Mongolian version of *Water Margin* goes like this in an approximate translation (Qing Dynasty 1977):

That day [he] traveled far and felt hungry when [he] saw a shop in front of him, where a sign was hung in front of the door that read: "No one should pass over the mountain if three bowls of wine are drunk." Wu Song went into the shop, put down his *buluu*, and sat on the stool, calling out: "Owner of the house, come with the wine and quickly!"

Comparing the two versions, we notice some changes: 1) "It was midday that day" versus "That day (he) traveled far," 2) the stick, used for fighting in the remote regions of China, versus the *buluu*, used by the Mongols for hunting, and 3) "Master" mistranslated as "Owner of the house." Their lengths, however, are roughly the same.

This same scene in *Water Margin* has been developed into a very long passage that combines prose and verse styles in Pajai's performance. In translation it proceeds like this (Damdinsüren 1979:1596-1607):

The day was fine, the sun was bright.  
Wu Song, who was traveling on foot,  
was looking at the boundless universe,  
looking for his elder brother  
without knowing he was about,  
looked pitiful and helpless.  
[Wu Song] took time off during his travel,  
looking around while walking  
at those towering mountains,  
those vast plains.  
He traveled the whole day,  
could not help feeling  
in his stomach  
both thirsty and hungry.  
Only a fully fledged bird  
can fly high;  
food should be enough,  
tea should be enough  
for the distinguished youth  
to be full of energy.  
Out of nourishment,  
short of tea,  
now Wu Song  
was going around to look for food and tea.  
The moment [he] entered those  
vast and beautiful  
great mountains and plains  
where towering peaks  
were hidden [by fog],  
he saw right in front of him  
heavy with clouds and fog,  
observing carefully,  
though early October  
it was a winter scene:  
at the foot of the cliff  
a faint sight could be seen—  
dry trees lying here and there  
withered and broken.  
Young Wu Song,  
stalking forward  
toward the cliff,  
observed carefully

over the mountain  
 facing the hollow  
 out in the sunny place of the great plains  
 heavy with smoke and fog  
 there were houses and families.  
 The man was thirsty and needed water,  
 the man was hungry and wanted food.  
 The scene in front of you,  
 there should at least be one family here.  
 Wu Song saw this  
 and went up there,  
 crossed many plains  
 came close  
 watching carefully again;  
 it was such a big house.  
 After careful observations  
 he continued forward.  
 A big shop  
 came in sight again.

A hungry man thinks of food, and a dead man thinks of rest; a poor man thinks of owning. In order to find his elder brother, Wu Song was walking along, feeling both hungry and thirsty; he ran into a larger inn. He went up and observed carefully again; what he saw was:

In front of the door  
 a sign was raised high up.  
 He looked at it repeatedly and carefully,  
 at those words and his surroundings,  
 beside the door  
 a sign hung.  
 He looked at it carefully;  
 there were words on it.  
 Wu Song came from afar  
 stared at it  
 and observed repeatedly.  
 On the sign  
 it was clearly written  
 that people who pass by  
 and all others  
 who stay in the inn,  
 walk into the restaurant  
 though the best wines are available  
 as good as honey,  
 one should never drink too much;  
 if three bowls were drunk,  
 it would be impossible to climb over

the towering Mount Jingyanggang in front.  
 Wu Song read it,  
 observed carefully,  
 walked up  
 close to the door.  
 The owner of the inn  
 was called Zhu Fu.

At that time, traveling people came to have a rest here; they either ate and drank and left, or stayed for the night. The inn was located on a big plain at the foot of the mountain. Zhu Fu, the owner, received travelers passing by, providing accommodation and making money for his livelihood. That day he was looking around and saw a person come up. As for his appearance, he was wearing a straw hat, carrying a stick, with brightness in the face, sharpness in the eye, a strong build, and was tall and broad in the back and waist. He did not look common, but was special instead. He was really a big fellow with a back like a tiger, a waist like a leopard, and a head like a lion. When he was observing, the boy-waiter rushed out to serve him, with a broad smile, and invited him to come inside. You could see

The diligent boy-waiter  
 came up warm-heartedly;  
 looking at the man of large build  
 he invited him to come inside.

Many waiters  
 clustered around him,  
 observed [him] carefully,  
 he seemed to be a nice man.

His face and appearance  
 looked like sculpted white jade,  
 his ability and power  
 like those inborn to a tiger.

People from that side  
 peeped at him out of curiosity.  
 Even white-headed Zhu Fu  
 looked at him out of instinct.

Wu Song from this side  
 looked at them with a smile.  
 Just because he was hungry  
 he had no heart to enjoy other things.  
 This inn  
 looked safe.

Wu Song went inside.  
 The boy-waiter came up to him  
 to greet him with respect,  
 asked him to sit in seats for distinguished guests,  
 with kind words  
 and all smiles:  
 “Our distinguished guest,  
 what would you like,  
 our honorable guest came from afar  
 and arrived here tired?  
 What would you like now?  
 What meal do you prefer?  
 The distance is great.  
 You came here tired.  
 Could I ask you  
 what you want to eat?  
 With a basin  
 I bring water  
 with a white towel and soap,  
 I put them down and invite you to wash  
 with kind words,  
 here Wu Song.”  
 Quickly boy-waiters  
 ran here and there.  
 In the water that was brought up  
 [Wu Song] washed his burly-looking face,  
 wiped off sweat,  
 used the soap,  
 sat back again  
 on the stool behind him.  
 The light-paced  
 and quick-tongued  
 boy-waiter in the inn  
 came up immediately,

wanted to serve  
 this invited guest,  
 wiping the purple sandalwood table  
 clean and shining.

All kinds of sweets  
 were put on the table;  
 strong flavored  
 tea was poured ready,  
 and he was asking in time  
 “what do you want to eat?”

Now let's return to Wu Song. Though he was born into a poor family, he had some good points. First, he was not a womanizer; second, he was not deviant and observed social customs; third, he was strong but not proud, and could get along well with friends. Therefore [seeing the owner come to greet him] Wu Song also smiled and spoke:

“I came from afar and for some time now walked in the wild with an empty stomach, so please get me something to eat. Is there agreeable wine in this inn? If so, get it and quickly.”

What required more than 100 words in both the original and the Mongolian translation from the Qing Dynasty has become a very long scene in Pajai's version, enlarged to more than ten times its length. It is said that when they sang such stories as *Canonization of the Gods*, *Zhongguo Qu*, and *Water Margin* many excellent artists could continue for several months. Comparing Pajai's passages with those from the original offers evidence for this statement.

Pajai enlarged the original mainly by the additions of contents to a roughly outlined narration. Such plot factors as the time setting (noon), Wu Song's hunger and thirst, his seeing an inn, the sign hanging in front of the inn and the words written on it, Wu Song's entry into the inn, putting down his stick, and calling for the owner to come with wine are all still pictures that appeared only momentarily; there were almost no detailed descriptions. In Pajai's version the scene followed the original narrative frame, except that he changed “midday” into “early winter in October.” His major innovations consist of adding more detailed descriptions to each plot factor. For example, when it came to the description of Wu Song's journey, he incorporated such details as “those towering mountains,” “those vast plains” and “dry trees lying here and there.” When Wu Song felt hungry and thirsty, Pajai used the metaphor of “only a fully fledged bird / can fly high,” referring to the importance of tea and food for such a “distinguished youth” as Wu Song. Likewise, he employed the narrative style of “drawing near” to describe the moment when Wu Song saw the inn. First he spoke of the air “heavy with clouds and fog,” then of sighting a household, which he went up and observed; when he came closer, he finally saw clearly that it was an inn. Following that is the phrase “a dead man thinks of rest, a poor man thinks of owning,” used to describe the psyche of Wu Song, who was in a hurry to find a place to eat because he was hungry. When he approached the inn, Pajai's version again notes that he saw the sign and the words written on it, and finally walked in front of the inn's door. After such enrichment, each still picture, which had passed by instantly in the original, has become a set of animated galleries in a spatio-temporal continuum. The roughly outlined story of the original has become a much richer and more complex story.

## III

However, mere length is not the crucial consideration. An outstanding artist would not for the sake of simple expansion make his piece tediously long and frustrate his audience. The core issue is why he should add to or adapt the story's contents. What do such changes mean to the artist? Herein lies one of the meaningful distinctions between *bensen ülger* and *ülgeren bense*.

*Ülgeren bense* belongs to written literature. When a reader reads *ülgeren bense*, he or she can control the process and has the time to think over the contents, independently bridging the distance between him- or herself and the work. *Bensen ülger*, however, are a singing art. The audience connects with the work through the artist's performance. An audience member follows the artist's singing closely to control his or her own thinking. Someone listening to an oral performance has no time to think back over the contents of the story. This situation requires that the artist actively adapt to the audience's speed of comprehension, making the sung story richer in real life and more concrete in feeling. Furthermore, *bensen ülger* are also works that are based on stories from hinterland China. In the past, the cultural differences between the Mongol and Han people have increased the difficulty of communication, so that the singing artist needed to reform *ülgeren bense* on a larger scale when performing.

We can find these important features in Pajai's singing. In the translated passages above, Pajai has increased the density of details in the following aspects. First, he repeatedly sang about the natural environment with phrases such as "The day was fine, the sun was bright," "those towering mountains," "those vast plains," "dry trees lying here and there," "heavy with clouds and fog," "towering peaks," "vast and beautiful" great plains, and so on. The nomadic way of Mongolian life relies on nature: the Mongols cherish a unique love for nature, feel a deep connection with it, and observe it with special care. Pajai repeatedly sang about how Wu Song gazed at the surrounding mountains and their peaks on his journey, portraying a man who loves nature. Such moments betray the feelings of both singer and audience.

Second, Pajai sang repeatedly about how Wu Song walked closer to the inn step by step, observing it. For example, he notices that "out in the sunny place of the great plains / heavy with smoke and fog / there are houses and families," and he "came close / watching carefully again / it was such a big house." This description embodies the singer's as well as the Mongols'

common life experiences. The population in Inner Mongolia has been sparse since ancient times. When people traveled the Mongolian region either on horseback or on foot, they would feel extremely pleased to run into a household, and would keep watching it from afar with a particular feeling. In the past, singing artists had to travel extensively in order to earn their livelihood; when they found signs of human habitations on their long journey, they would be most impressed.

Third, Pajai concentrated on Wu Song's entry into the inn, his and the owner's mutual observation, and the waiter's warm reception. For example, in the eyes of Zhu Fu, the owner, Wu Song appeared to have "a back like a tiger, and a waist like a leopard," while "his head looked like a lion."<sup>5</sup> To the boy-waiter, the new arrival "seemed to be a nice man," and in Wu Song's mind "this inn / looked safe." The waiter also expressed an interest in Wu Song's journey, asked him what he wanted to have, brought water and soap, and wiped the table on which he laid sweets. On the one hand, such detailed descriptions reflect the fact that, due to the sparse population in Inner Mongolia, people would closely observe the strangers they met; on the other hand, it also imaged their hospitality.

If we explore further, there will be many similar instances, of course. From the few examples we have cited we can already get a sense of the massive addition of details by Pajai, details he introduced to make his stories closer to the life experiences of his Mongolian audience and rich in Mongolian cultural flavor and aesthetics. It would also be correct to infer that this enlarged passage reflects a singing artist's expression of his own feelings during his long journey.

In the original Chinese text, Wu Song's story also started with his leaving Song Jiang and going to Yanggu County on foot in search of his elder brother. Before that point there is little description of him. However, after he drank wine in the inn, he was soon thrown into the plot of beating the tiger. This sudden development would seem improper to the ear of the Mongols, who are used to the slow pace of epic singing. Thus, in order to let the audience evolve some concrete ideas before Wu Song fought the ferocious tiger, it was necessary to add the above details.

Both Pajai's libretto and the Mongolian translation from the Qing Dynasty have eliminated the mention of midday in the original. In the

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<sup>5</sup> "With a back like a tiger, and a waist like a leopard"—such descriptions should bear the influence of Han culture. In Chinese there is the description: "with a back like a tiger and a waist like a bear," which is used to describe the strong body of a hero. The Mongols seldom use "bear" to describe the hero and therefore it was replaced by "leopard."

Mongolian translation it was replaced by the phrase “that day [he] traveled far.” Pajai’s libretto does not use these actual words, but describes how Wu Song climbs over mountain peaks, which amounts to describing how he “traveled far.” In the original work, “it was midday that day” was followed by “[he] trekked and felt hungry and thirsty”—the reason why he entered the inn. In both Pajai’s libretto and the Mongolian translation, the cause of Wu Song’s feeling hungry and thirsty was “traveling far.” Though the change is not a great one, it mirrors the different customs of the Han plowing culture and the Mongolian nomadic culture. For peasants plowing in the central plains the work was very intense, and they made lunch the most important meal of the day; they were accustomed to this schedule and felt hungry at noon. On the other hand, the nomadic Mongols enjoyed less intense labor, herding their animals in remote pasturelands; they often ate only breakfast and supper, supper being the more important meal. This difference in customs is probably the reason why both Pajai’s libretto and the Mongolian translation have eliminated “it was midday that day” from the original: they both trace the cause for Wu Song’s hunger and thirst to “traveling far.”

Singing *bensen ülger*, like singing traditional Mongolian epic, demands great linguistic talent on the part of the artist. The bard will make use of this talent to adapt the prose style of *ülgeren bense* to the prose-and-verse combination that characterizes *bensen*. Eloquence and improvisation are basic for a distinguished artist. In Pajai’s libretto the genre of verse has taken up more space, and even the prose constituent has the flavor of verse. The language is simple, fluent, and natural, revealing the linguistic charm of a master story-singer of a generation.

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