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Translation of Mongolian Shamanic Praises- A Study of most Frequent Errors

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the translation of Mongolian shamanic poetry into English. Many scholars, foreign and native alike, consider shamanic poems one of the early sources of Mongolian oral literature. Translating ancient poems presents linguistic and cultural challenges along with issues of varying poetic meters of source language and target language. Therefore, the study attempted to explore what the most frequent translation error types are in published works, and if those translations could convey uniqueness of original poems in lexical and lyrical competences. By analyzing eight published works and comparing the selected three translations of a Mongolian shamanic praise, attempt was done to hypothesize a methodology for translation of Mongolian shamanic poetry. Based on the findings, and in correspondence of the methodology drafted, the author's translation of the praise of Darhad shamaness Ch.Batbayar of Sharnuud clan is also presented.

Keywords: Mongolian shamanic poetry, head rhyme, cultural equivalence, oral literature, cultural challenges

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1. Introduction

The most important element of the Mongolian Shamanic rituals is shamanic poetry which is considered as an early tradition of nomadic culture and the origin of Mongolian oral literature. Mongolian shamans use different types of chants, prayers, phrases and sayings that vary from each other according to their meanings and purposes. As Bum-Erdene Dulam (2010) classified them, the Mongolian shamanic poetry comprises about 25 categories. The degrees of ritualization of these genres vary; some are less intentional and more ritualized than others. Among them

“Shaman’s Praise for Ancestral Spirits” and “Shaman’s Invocation for Particular Spirits” are the most ritualized poems and songs.

Shamanic praise is dedicated to Tengriⁱ, ancestral spirits, deities and spirits of nature. Ancient heroic epic of Mongols also begin with praising the Altai Hangai Mountains and spirits of mountains and waters to have them rejoice and invite them to the epic narrative. This is evidence of interaction with nature through power of words and stems from the same source of oral literary tradition. Understanding these concepts enhance shamanic poetry

translations greatly. The results of the contrastive analysis of the shamanic poetry translations are provided in the following sections.

2. Literary Review

A number of research works has been published on Mongolian shamanic rituals and poetry but translations of shamanic poetry are limited and reviews are nonexistent. Therefore, the corpus used in the study consisted of eight translation works of foreign and Mongolian scholars. The investigation included a thorough analysis of texts in terms of linguistic features in an attempt to identify linguistic errors, seemingly resulting from translation procedures.

Judith Hangartner included some shamanic poetry translations in her PhD dissertation (Hangartner, 2007). These translations reveal that lack of knowledge of shamanic concepts and misunderstanding of context of shamanic poems lead to poor quality translations. For example:

Hii hiisver biyetenguud min' gej hairhduud
My aerial-bodied benevolent ones
Hiisver uulen damjalgatanguud min' gej hairhduud
My aerial-transmitting benevolent ones
Hui salhi shig hiisverten min'
My tornado like aired beings
Serveej bureн haragtai
Of completely outstanding appearance
Sertiiј bureн chanartai
Of completely protruding capability

The word 'haragtai' means 'haragtun' in a Buryat dialect, which is an imperative verb 'look!', and it was translated incorrectly due to the misconception of the dialect. The word in the last line was recorded erroneously as 'chanartai', which should be 'chagnagtii', meaning 'listen!', and because of that misspelling it was translated incorrectly as well. Some similar errors are repeated in the next translations.

Elisabetta Chiodo's translation in "Songs of Khorchin Shamans to Jayagachi,

the Protector of Livestock and Property" also has some errors such as "the border and the collar of your garment were sewn by a girl" instead of saying: "the hem and collar of your garment"; "represented on a measure of cotton cloth", which does not express creating of the deity by consecrating. There are some descriptive translations like "He stands majestic on the peak of the ice-covered mountain" where it can be said as "He stands majestic on the summit" so that it matches the original poem with line-length and rhythm (Chiodo, 2009).

Agnes Birtalan translated "An Invocation to Dayan Derx" that has a few errors where misconception of words occurs and redundancy of words and lines also distorts the original poem (Birtalan, 2005).

I beg you
Bestow us to live in peace,
Guard and protect our whole hearth
Fore one year from now forward
Ensure living in health and many other things!

Here "I beg you" is added on and that does not match with original, and "many other things" is redundant because of the misconception. There are other errors like "hawk" where it should say "backbone"; "tent" for "Mongolian ger"; "infants" where it should be "children"; "Let the cattle in the open-air Pasture without the danger of fear...", where fear concerns people not the cattle in the original poem; "Khans, hillock-protectors" and "Khangai territory", which are not correct translations; "Merciful spirits of Ur" where "ur" means child/offspring, and therefore, the translation is incomplete since the author did not identify the entity as a spirit protecting children. An idiomatic expression "Ogtorgön dolön Burxad" is translated as "The seven Buddhas of the Heaven!", where there is nothing related to the Buddhist religion or the saint of Buddha



in the original poem. Mongolians call the Big Dipper as the Seven Deities.

Kara Gyorgy's "Garbal: A western Buryat shaman song" is a meticulous translation of a shamanic incantation with a buryat dialect, nevertheless, the word *büte* in "exe *büte* garbal" means whole/complete, the same in "esege *büte* udxa", but the translation reads "Mother-like ancestry" and "Father-like descent". The actual meaning of this expression is complete lineage without interruption (Gyorgy, 2016).

John Hangin Gombojav translated "Invocation to Dayan Degerekiⁱⁱⁱ":
 Oh hoary Khan Darkhanⁱⁱⁱ, father of mine!
 You who have thirty-three bay-colored steeds
 Straddling Mt. Üürin Khairkhan^{iv},
 Making the Sacred Pass your throne,
 Drinking the water from the River Agar.
 You who come with your back-bow nocked
 And your front-bow drawn!
 Khan Darkhan, hoary father of mine,
 Deign to watch over and help us
 For our ten white merits

This translation is well done in terms of lexical choice, but in morphological terms there is an error where the subject "you" in the 2nd line is not properly connected with a verb, except defining gerunds in the following three lines, while the next subject "you" in the 6th line takes a verb "deign".

Degii Sodbaatar translated invocations of the shaman Byambadorj in the form of word-by-word translation that contains numbers of lexical and structural errors (Sodbaatar, 2014). E.g.:
 "...I'm singing your ninety-nine prayerful songs
 I'm lifting your ninety-nine float boats
 And I'm performing my ritual ..."

There is no boat mentioned in the original song, but presumably, printing errors as "sal" (boat) instead of "sačal" (oblation) caused his misinterpretation, thus, he translated it improperly. The correct version would have been:

"...By narrating 81 praises of life stories
 By oblation of 81 sacrifices and offerings ...
 We summon the safeguarding for us..."

Another example of wrong-word-choice: "...Fateful spirits guides with watery eyes
 Savior beings of red lives"

Because of word-by-word translation the idiomatic expressions are not genuinely delivered and it expresses opposite meanings from the original poem. His translation tends to borrow words from other religions (naga^v kings, heaven, hell, holy, relics, talisman etc.) to depict shamanic expressions and that alters the uniqueness of shamanic poetry.

Bum-Ochir Dulam included a short translation of shamanic poems in his book "Mongolian shamanic rituals", and the translation of two specific terms for worshipping entities are not consistent in that one of them "Hairhad" (a propitiatory title for revered mountains) was transcribed as it is with a footnote but the other one "Tenger" (the highest worshipping entity in Mongolian shamanic culture) was translated as "heavens", which is not a direct cultural or description equivalent (Dulam, 2010).

Purvee Gurbadar translated the book of Otgon Purev's "Mongolian Shamanism" that includes shamanic poems (Gurbadar, 2006). Through analysis of the translations the following lexical and phonetical errors were found:

When the Great Sun Ocean was a pool
 When the Great Sumer Mountain was a hill
 When the first tree was at its youngest,
 When the Adult Lord was a baby one
 When the Dayan Deerh was a monastery boy ...

In original text "Sün" was the legendary name of an ocean but transcribing it as "Sun" leads to the misconception of the Sun in the sky. Also "adult lord" and "baby one" are incorrect translations that do not match the original poem. The following expressions from his translations are also

faulty examples: To the up tended Fire-Father, The up side Eternal sky was as a trough, The down side Earth-Mother as a sole (p.78), a ghost's body silhouettes (p.108), whole of them from Leafy nice Earth (p.128), cosmos summit, lactate wine parts, Golden lus (lus – deities of water, land and animals) (p.130), seven stars of Great Bear (p.135) etc.

The findings indicate that more errors are in terms of lexical choice and semantic value than syntactic structure. Thorough study of shamanic philosophy and distinctive features of shamanic poems are crucial for translation works.

3. Analysis and Discussion

According to Robert Frost, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation". Poetry translation has issues which are mainly on three levels:

- 1- Linguistic Issues
- 2- Literary or Aesthetic Issues
- 3- Cultural Issues

The aesthetic values are dependent on the poetic structure and sound. Poetic structure includes the plan of the original poem as a whole, the shape and the balance of individual sentence in each line. While sound is anything connected with sound cultivation including alliteration or rhyme, rhythm, assonance, onomatopoeia, etc. a translator cannot ignore any of them although he/she may order them depending on the nature of the poem (Newmark, 1981, p.65).

Words or expressions that contain culturally bound words create certain problems. In translating culturally-bound expressions, a translator may apply one or more of these procedures: Literal translation, transference, naturalization, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, description equivalent, classifier, componential analysis, deletion, couplets, note addition, glosses, reduction, and

synonymy. In literal translation, a translator does unit-to-unit translation. The translation unit may vary from word to larger units such as phrase or clause (Varsha, 1983).

The analysis of the published translations of shamanic poetry reveals that the word choice in general seemed to be problematic. The following example shows the difference in word choices.

Source text: Hüh müngün tengeriin yaġguurtan bolson Hairhaduud

Hörst altan delhiin tulguur bolson Hairhaduud

Translations:

1. My blue silver heavenly-become-master benevolent ones

My terrestrial golden-become-earth-protecting benevolent ones (*Judith Hangartner's trans.*)

2. Hairhads who are the lords of silver blue heaven Hairhads who are the supports of golden earth with fertile soil (*Bum-Ochir Dulam's trans.*)

3. Hairhads who become nobles of Eternal Blue Tengri

Haihads who become pillars for Golden Earth (*Author's translation*)

Analyzing these translations for word choices leads to the following comparison:

Source text	trans. 1	trans. 2	trans. 3
Hüh müngün	silver blue	blue silver	eternal blue
Tengeriin	heavenly	heaven	Tengri
yaġguurtan bolson	become-master	who are the lords	who become nobles
Hairhaduud	benevolent ones	Hairhads	Hairhads
Hörst altan delhiin	terrestrial golden	golden earth with fertile soil	Golden Earth
tulguur bolson	become-earth-protecting	who are the supports	who become pillars
Hairhaduud	benevolent ones	Hairhads	Hairhads

Tenger (Tengri, Tngri) is the backbone concept of shamanic worship as the primary, chief deity of Tengriism.^{vi} Thus, it should be transcribed as a proper noun. Using synonyms like Heaven or God blurs the distinction between other religions and shamanism, which is undesirable and needs to be avoided.

Hairhan/Hairhad is an epithet or propitiatory term for Sacred Mountains (Bawden, 419), but in this context it represents Enlightened Spirits of the Higher Realm. It also has another meaning as a substitute word to avoid calling something



directly by its name, like “long hairhan” for snake, which belongs to the Lus, spirit of water and land. So, it should be considered as a distinctive shamanic term and use footnotes to avoid explanatory translations. Any lengthy descriptive translations lessen the rhythmic sound of a poem.

Another issue of translating poetry is keeping the form of poems. Even the literal shape that a poem takes on a paper can matter when it comes to poetry forms. The line length, number of syllables in a given line, content, the rhyme scheme, the meter, and the rhythm of the lines in a poem are all important parts of poetic form.

Traditional poems are known for typically following particular rhyme schemes and metrical patterns vs. contemporary poems favoring free verse, which employs no rhyme or poetic meter. Rhyme scheme is used to manage flow, create and relieve tension and balance, and to highlight important ideas. Classic English poems have alliteration and rhyme schemes of verses like enclosed rhyme (a-b-b-a), alternative rhyme (a-b-a-b) and so on (Raffel, 1988, p.68).

Mongolian shamanic poetry is classic Mongolian poems with head rhyme, parallelism and repetition. Its translation is better suited in the similar form of traditional English poems rather than contemporary poems. Following translation attempts to prove that head rhyme or verse-rhyme of shamanic poems can be kept in translation.

Praise of Darhad Shamaness Ch.Batbayar of Sharnuud Clan

Hüh müngün tengeriin yaǰguurtan bolson
Hairhaduud
Hörst altan delhiin tulguur bolson Hairhaduud
Baga gert mini bagana bolson tenger mini
Balchir huuhded mini ölgii bolson tenger mini
Hii tenger bairtanguud
Hiisgelen üülen nüüdelteṅgüüd
Salhiar elchee hürgeechingüüd

Saaršgui ih hüchtengüüd
Ogtorgui tengereer bairlaachid
Odod michdeer dohiotonguud
Olon tümnee haraachingüüd
Ončgoi ih hüchtengüüd
Qarangyuin ornoor tenүүлchingüüd
Qaraatail yum šig üzeečingüüd
Qaraj üzej yavaachingüüd
Handaj manan sahiačingüüd
Hamba torgon deeltengüüd
Haliu bulgan emjeertengüüd
Haj torgon deeltengüüd
Hadag yandar čimegtengüüd
Toonon deer mini tuyaragtangüüd
Tosoj iren uuljaachinguud
Tulgat galiin mini manaachinguud
Tulaj avan түseechingüüd
Šoog šoog Hairhaan!
Deed ih tengereese buun buun zalrahtii
Devjid ih čuulgandaa huran huran zalrahtii
Šoog šoog Hairhaan!

Hairhads who become Nobles of Eternal Blue Tengri

Hairhads who become Pillars for Golden Earth,

My Tengri who protects our homes

My Tengri who cradles our children,

Resides above the horizon

Relays messages via the wind

Roams invisibly in the air,

Extreme Higher Powers!

Inhabit whole Universe

Entice through the stars

Safeguard his people,

Supreme High Powers!

Seers without barriers

Roamers without limits,

Guides in Dark Worlds,

Guard us and watch all!

Dressed in silky patterned velvets,

Decorated with otter and sable,

Attired in fine silk gowns,

Ornate with silks and tassels,

Glow the top of our dwelling

Greet us and speak to us

Protect our hearth-fire

Provide us when we need

SHAWG SHAWG^{vii}, My Hairhaan!

Welcome down from the Higher Realm,

Welcome to the Assembly of Deities,

SHAWG SHAWG, My Hairhaan!

4. Conclusion

In the process of translating shamanic poems the main purpose of

translators is delivering messages through a poetic form and sound that are identical to the original poems. Ancient Mongolian shamanic poems have distinct features with culturally bound terms and keeping those aspects in translation is significant.

The study shows that common translation error types are lexical and semantic errors that resulted from lack of understanding of the shamanic phenomena. Therefore, misinterpreted poems hinder the proper comprehension for readers and lessen the uniqueness of Mongolian shamanic poetry.

ⁱ The Main worshipping Deity by Mongolian shamanism

ⁱⁱ Dayan Degereki, the most sacred shamanist shrine in Mongolia, is located in the Khovsgol area.

ⁱⁱⁱ While Khan means “king” or “emperor” in Mongolian, it also frequently serves as an epithet for a sacred mountain. Darkhan is an honored title conferred by the emperor and makes the bearer free from corvée and other government duties and taxes. When applied to a topographic feature, it has the meaning of “sacred” or “forbidden”.

^{iv} Khaikhan is a reverential reference for a high mountain.

^v Indian word for snake/cobra

^{vi}

<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tengri>

^{vii} Chanting for Mongolian shamanic spirits

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Although further work is required for reviewing translations of this category, the results of this research indicate that proper methods of translation should consist of the following: specific terms of shamanic worshipping are not translated but transliterated with added notes, shamanic concepts are not replaced with cultural-equivalent words that identify certain religious beliefs and avoiding lengthy explanatory translations and keeping features of Mongolian poetry rhythm and verse-rhyme.

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