

Between “Hobbled” (*Chödörtei*) and “Free” (*Chölöötei*): The Mongolian Literature in Transition

Tsetsentsolmon. B
(National University of Mongolia)

Товч утга: Монголын үндэсний чөлөөт зохиолчдын холбоо 1990 оны 9-р сарын 27-нд “анхны хурилдай”-гаа хийж, “мэргэжлийн уран бүтээлийн хуулийн эрх бүхий олон нийтийн байгууллага” болсноо мэдэгдсэн юм. Энэ нь социализмын үед улс төрийн үзэл суртал дэлгэрүүлэхэд чухал үүрэгтэй явж ирсэн Монголын Зохиолчдын ууган эвлэлээс зөвхөн зохион байгуулалтын хувьд тусгаарлах гэсэн төдийгүй намын үзэл суртлаас ангижрах, хэлмэгдсэн зохиолчдын үнэн мөнийг тодруулахыг шаардахын зэрэгцээ “олон ургальч үзэл”, уран бүтээлийн “эрх чөлөө”, чөлөөт өрсөлдөөн, “үндэсний утга зохиол”-ыг хөгжүүлэхэд чиглэсэн үзэл санааны бүрэн өөрчлөлт хийх гэсэн оролдлого байжээ. Үүнээс үүдэн зохиолчдын дунд хуучин эвлэлийнхнийг “чөдөртэй”, шинэ холбооныхыг “чөлөөтэй” хэмээн нэрлэх ёгт яриа бий болсон. Гэхдээ аль аль холбоо нь шинэ нийгмийн тогтолцоонд гавьтай нийцэн хөрвөж чадалгүй өнөө хэр хуучин бүтэц, зохион байгуулалт, гишүүнчлэл, шагнал урамшууллын тогтолцоотойгоо зууралдан, уран зохиолын салбарт үүрэг оролцоогоо хадгалах гэж оролдсоор явж ирлээ.

“Чөлөөтэй”, “чөдөртэй” хоёрын дунд: Монгол уран зохиолын шилжилтийн үе” хэмээх энэ өгүүлэлд нийгмийн хоёр тогтолцооны зааг дээр Монголын уран зохиолд гарсан олон янзын үзэл санаа, хүсэл зорилгыг баримт мэдээнд тулгуурлан шинжлэн дүгнэнэ. Түүнчлэн утга зохиолын хяналт, социалист уриа лоозон нийгмийн сэтгэлгээнд чухам хэрхэн үйлчлэн нөлөөлж байсныг нягтлахын сацуу социалист Монголын уран зохиол нь зөвхөн тогтсон бүтэц, зохион байгуулалт төдийгүй нутгархах үзэл, найз нөхөд, танил талын холбоо, атаа хорсол, албан тушаалын өрсөлдөөн зэрэг нийгмийн нарийн харилцаан дунд оршиж байсныг тодруулах болно. Монголын зохиолчдын илэрхийлсэн “эрх чөлөө” гэдэг нь “үндэсний ухамсар”, “үндэсний соёлын сэргэлт”-тэй илүү холбогдохоос өрнөдийн либерализм хэмээх ойлголттой төдийлөн холбоогүй байсан. Харин нийгмийн нөхцөл байдал хожим нь эдийн засгийн хувьд “либерал” (неолиберал), улс төрийн хувьд (этно-) националист болж хувирсан гэхэд болно.

Түлхүүр үгс: Монголын зохиолчдын эвлэл, Монголын үндэсний чөлөөт зохиолчдын хороо, “социалист реализм”, утга зохиолын хяналт, “үндэсний уран зохиол”

Introduction

On September 27, 1990, the National Mongolian Free Writers' Union¹ officially declared itself "a legal competent public organization for professional writers" during its first congress. The newly formed union clearly stated that its members "would fight for the sake of freedom of creation, pluralism, and free competition by depicting the national characteristics, habit and lifestyle of a Mongolian man solely in artistic ways and provide every writer with opportunities to develop his or her original style."² The founders were disgruntled with the leadership of the pre-existing Writers' Union, the officially recognized union founded on the basis of the group of revolutionary writers (*khuvisgalt uran zokhiolch naryn bülgem*) established under the Ideological Division of the Central Commission of the People's Revolutionary Party on January 9, 1929. From its start, the Writers' Union had a political implication to design a new society of state socialism. The tight involvement of the Writers' Union with the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) over six decades made it ideologically and economically dependent on the party's authority. Indeed, the Writers' Union functioned as a whole system with provincial branches, circles, groups, newspapers, in addition to having a dedicated fund, museum, and artist residency. Like the Soviet Writers' Union, it was an apparatus for production, censorship and artistic career development. Hence, claiming themselves as "victims" of the old system created by the Writers' Union, the Free Writers' Union was a strike against the party system and consolidation justified by the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights of the United Nations and the Constitution of the People's Republic of Mongolia.

The founders' aims were not only organizational separation but also ideological differentiation. For them, "being free" meant avoiding political control and censorship, freedom to create a "national literature" without any external instructions and creating opportunities for young writers. The ensuing conflict between the two organizations publically unfolded in newspapers such as Literature and Art (*Utga zokhiol, urlag*) and National Uplift (*Ündesnii devshil*). Writers spoke maliciously about each other referring to the older union as "hobbled" (*chödörtei*), referring to being controlled and constricted, whereas the new union was "free" (*chölöötei*). This break from the Writers' Union, one of the main ideological agents of state socialism, provides some remarkable insights into the post-socialist transition in Mongolian literature. After the collapse of the Soviet-style state socialism, Mongolia "not only embraced Western liberal democracy but also embarked on building a free market economy".³ The transition to a free market economy questioned the "modern Mongolian literature" that had been constructed both as an art form and as institution by the socialist government and challenged the economic potential of the old system. The newly formed union of "free" writers aimed at establishing a new way for young writers,

¹ The Free Writer's Union will be used as a short form in the following text.

² "The Statement Issued by the First Congress of the Mongolian National Free Writers' Union," *Ündesnii devshil* (National Advancement) newspaper, September 30, 1990, 19

³ Munkh-Erdene. "Mongolia's Post-Socialist Transition: A Great Neoliberal Transformation," 61

but it repeated the organizational structure of the old one and intended to share the “fund for literature” (*utga zokhiolyn fond*) of the old Writers’ Union. Neither of the unions flourished in the market economy once state subsidies stopped although both still exist operating in similar ways until now.

This paper draws upon ethnography and document analysis to explore the various layers, thoughts, views and ambitions in the Mongolian literature at the edge of the transition from communism to liberal democracy. I interviewed key actors in this process, including some of the first workers and directors of the Writers’ Union and the founders of the Free Writer’s Union. I conducted participant observation when attending activities of both unions, and collected newspaper materials from the 1990s. Consequently, I argue that the socialist literature was acclimated into the Mongolian social context as it was not a simple parody of the Soviet literature. The process of creating the socialist Mongolian literature remained not only within official institutional relations but complex social relations of “preference for local homeland” (*nutgarkhakh*), connection (*naiz nökhöd, tanil tal*), personal attitudes of vindictiveness, or the race for higher positions, in parallel. With the embrace of democracy in the 1990s, writers enjoyed the “freedom” to criticize the old system, create their own artistic styles, and express nationalist sentiments. However, remnants of the former system, although not very strong, still exist at both institutional and ideological levels in both the Writers’ Union and the Free Writer’s Union. In the following sections, I will first describe the historical context of the Writers’ Union and founding of the Free Writers’ Union. Finally, I provide insights into current workings of these unions in order to argue that the old state structure for the production and control of “culture” (literature and the arts) was left largely intact but it had been emptied of most of its old content in the post-socialist era. Apart from dispensing with the party-led control and gaining creative liberty, the earlier concept of “freedom” (*erkh chölöö*) celebrated the glories of the Mongolian literary history. The nationalist sentiments later became the dominant value system in the cultural sphere and the creative arts. Having no connection with the western concept of liberalism at the early stage of transition, the Mongolian literature remains in the ambivalent situation that is politically (ethno-) nationalist and economically “liberal” (or neoliberal).

A “hobbled” system

The history of the Mongolian Writers’ Union formed out of the Group of Revolutionary Writers and then turned to the Mongolian Union for Revolutionary Writers (called as *MARZ* as the abbreviation of a clumsy mixed name of Russian and Mongolian, *Mongolyn Assotsiatsyn Revolutsionny Zokhiolchid*) by the decision of the Cabinet Secretariat Office on November 28, 1930. By the decision of the meeting on January 15 of 1931, *MARZ* shifted its name to *MARL* (abbreviation in Russian *Mongol’skaya Assotsiatsiya Revolyutsionnykh Literaturov*), or the Mongolian Association for Revolutionist Litterateurs. The main role of the Writer’s Union was “to organize campaigns of literature all over the country through specialists who

should be ideologically and artistically educated”.⁴ Under the control of the Central Committee of the MPRP and the attendance of Soviet writers, the Writers’ Union formed rather as a systematic institution spread all over the country than only an organization of writers. Although it was loosely organized at its earlier stages, the union became highly structured through a series of official resolutions, activities and events over the following decades. Without chronologically outlining the history of the Writers’ Union or development of “modern literature” in Mongolia, I now detail how state socialism realized its goals of national development in the context of literature, namely the formation of the Mongolian Writer’s Union. Using the memories, memoirs, and interviews of key actors, I argue that the whole process was not that simple as only followed the Party’s resolutions. Rather, it stayed within the complex social relations of “preference of local homeland” (*nutgarkhakh*), connection (*naiz nökhöd, tanil tal*), personal attitudes of vindictiveness, or the race for higher positions that sometimes functioned stronger than the official ones. Despite a strict system of censorship, experienced senior writers had their ways of expressing personal views or criticisms. The following paragraphs demonstrate my argument based on cases I documented.

The Writers’ Union was formed as an imitation of the Union of Soviet Writers and was a politically significant institution controlled by the Central Committee of the MPRP. The Party appointed the director and other leading officials of the Writers’ Union. These appointments were perceived as “party’s assignments” (*namyn daalgavar*) and were obligatory for anyone. They were seldom revised or changed based on individual request and complaint. Baast, one of the oldest members of the Writers’ Union, recalled his own “party assignment.”

“In early 1945, I left my study as a veterinarian because I wanted to become a writer. I was looking for a job and met Tseyenjav, who was the redactor of the Youth Truth (*Zaluuchuudyn Ünen*) newspaper. He prepared a desk and chair for me to work and gave me a bunch of recently published newspapers. While I was reading the newspapers, the phone of Tseyenjav rang. While talking on the phone, his face became a frown. Tseyenjav said to me that Dangaasüren, director of the Central Committee of the Youth Union had asked me to come.” (Interview, August 10, 2017)

After working for the Youth Truth newspaper for a half day, Baast was appointed as a responsible secretary of the Revolutionary Youth Union (*Khuvisgalt zaluuchuudyn evlel*) magazine and a publications officer for the Central Committee of the Union (*Evleliin töv khoroonь khevlel*). Baast had started writing earlier and had published his first poem in 1936. It had probably helped him to get a job at the *Youth Truth* newspaper as the newspapers and magazines seemed to lack of cadres and specialists. Baast continues:

⁴ Zagdsüren, *MAHN-aas urlag utga zokhiolyn talaar gargasan togtool shiidverüüd* (Resolutions and Decrees on Art and Literature Issued by People’s Revolutionary Party), 121

“I had worked for the Youth Union until August of 1945. One day, Dangaasüren showed me a resolution of the Central Committee of the Party with a stamp of the Central Committee and signature of Tsedenbal. It stated to transfer Baast from the Youth Union and Dechingungaa from the Red Star (*Ulaan od*) newspaper to the newly established Writers’ Temporary Committee (*Zokhiolchdyn tür khoroo*). At that time, there were very rare goods so that one could only get rationed goods like bread, lump sugar, or pipe tobacco. Those who worked for military institutions had sufficient supplies, which was a big support for living. Dechingungaa, a military journalist, met Tsedenbal who then combined two positions of the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Party and the head of the political department of the Ministry of Defence and expressed his willing to stay in his job. Dechingungaa complained that he had a poor life and it was helpful for him to work for the military newspaper. That is how he could stay.” (Interview, August 10, 2017)

Neither Baast nor Dangaasüren dared to protest the “party assignment” from the Central Committee and meet the first secretary of the Youth Union Ragchaasüren in order to keep his job. Once the assignment was already signed by Tsedenbal, Ragchaasüren had to send him to work for both the Writers’ Committee and the Youth Union for a half-day each. The salary was over 300 tugriks. Baast said that it was hard for him to work as the “Servant of Two Masters.”⁵ He worked there until the National Holiday in 1946 whereupon he started working only for the Writers’ Committee. Baas describes:

“The Writers’ Committee was miserable, alas. It was located in a one-bedroom apartment on the right of the Choijin Lama Temple. Before, it was the literature division of the Office for Art Affairs (*Urlagiin khereg erkhlekh gazryn utga zokhiolyn kheltes*) which was established after Buyannemekh and Yadamsüren were arrested. The union just nominally operated. No literary work was done there. There were very few people, such as Oidov, Lkhamsüren, Ulambayar, Tarvaa (part-time) and I.” (Interview, August 10, 2017)

Baast started his work with organizing literary circles in Secondary Schools Number One and Two, at the University for Teachers, the Institute of the Party, and the Ministry for Domestic Affairs. He gave lectures at these literary circles once a week. Now, he feels despicable for what he taught then. The Central Committee of the MPRP issued a Resolution to organize literary circles (*utga zokhiolyn бүлгэм*) and to intensify literature campaigns for the public on June 6, 1946.⁶ The Writers’ Committee aimed at establishing literary circles both in the city and in the countryside. The literary groups (*utga zokhiolyn бүлгемүүд*) were official organizations under

⁵ He referred to the famous play by the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni.

⁶ Zagdsüren, *MAHN-aas urlag utga zokhiolyn talaar gargasan togtool shiidverүүд* (Resolutions and Decrees on Art and Literature Issued by People’s Revolutionary Party), 81

the direct control of the Writers' Committee, which intended to expand and improve their activities. The aim to open literary circles based on either local newspapers or provincial clubs was "to unite efforts for literature, to draw out new writers and to assist the improvement of their creativity".⁷ The Office for Artistic Affairs was responsible for regularly sending writers and art workers out into the countryside to assist provincial writers.

During the 15th Meeting held on May 22, 1947, the Political Bureau of the MPRP issued a Resolution titled the Current Situation of the Mongolian Literature and Its Goals (*Mongolyn utga zokhiolyn odoogiin baidal ba түүний зорилтын тухай*). It intended to produce highly artistic and ideological literature depicting new culture, education, morality, and custom in higher forms such as novels, novelettes, plays, and poems. The Writers' Temporary Committee (then name of the Writers' Union) was obligated "to review and strengthen its organizational, ideological and artistic activities so that it could become a center for literary works in the country."⁸ In order to raise the ideological level and general education of writers, both the Office for Art Affairs and the Writers' Committee were assigned to run regular classes on theories of Marxism, Leninism, social evolution, world classic literature, and literary techniques. Thereby, the party took consequential steps to strengthen the Writers' Committee as an institution and to reinforce literature as justification for the new socialist cultural construction by multiplying the number of writers and literary works.

The 15th Meeting of the Political Bureau of the MPRP also committed the Writers' Temporary Committee to organize a nationwide "great meeting" (*ikh khural*) involving representatives of literary groups by the end of 1947.⁹ The Second Meeting of the Political Bureau then issued a Resolution to organize the First Congress of Mongolian Writers on January 13, 1948. The resolution included the agenda as follows: a) a report of the organizational committee of the writers' union; b) a report on the results of the 11th congress of the MPRP and the goals of Mongolian writers; c) approving the regulation of the writers' union; and d) selecting the directorship of the writers' union.¹⁰ Although the resolution stated the date of the First Congress to be held on March 15, 1948, it was realized on 2-3 April 1948.

Baast, who witnessed the preparation and organization of the First Congress, recalls the ambiguity and confusion that occurred during the Congress. Shirendev, who was the Director of the Department of Ideology of the Central Committee of the Party, initiated and organized the First Congress of Writers. Shirendev, together with Lodoidamba and Baldoo, went to Nükht taking along with them some recently published books, translations and other materials to prepare a report for the Congress. As soon as the report was ready, the Congress was announced without any organizational preparation, according to Baast. At that time, many senior members such

⁷ Ibid,

⁸ Ibid. 91-96

⁹ Ibid, 95

¹⁰ Ibid, 97

as Damdinsüren, Tsegmed, and Sengee were in Moscow and only Oidov, Tsedenjav, Sh.Natsagdorj, and Perlee were in Ulaanbaatar. Baast also noted that the attendance at the Congress was low because provinces could not send their representative due to insufficient budgeting. Only Arkhangai, Bayanölgii and Töv provinces sent their representatives. Young writers from literary circles (*utga zokhiolyn bülgem*) were selected as representatives. Sandag and Amindivaa represented the School of Military Officers. Baast recalls the First Congress:

“Initially, Shirendev was supposed to deliver a key-note speech. Unfortunately, he was released from his position of the Central Committee of the Party. Because he slapped an advisor of the Central Committee the day before the Congress, Tsedenbal dismissed him the following night. It was not clear who would then deliver the key-note speech. Dүгөрсүрен, the director of the Division of Persuasion and Education (*Ukhuulan bolovsruulakh kheltes*), was asked to replace Shirendev. Dүгөрсүрен did not know what “revolutionary realism” was or what was not. I did not know if he had read the text once in advance. Marshal Choibalsan and other officials from the Political Bureau and Soviet consultants of the Committee-in-Charge of Art Affairs took part. The Chairs of the Congress were mainly selected by members of the Political Bureau. Dүгөрсүрен hesitantly read the report. Marshal Choibalsan looked askew as he always did when he disliked something. Probably, he exploded... In the key-note speech, four writers, who were Rinchin, Tsedenjav, Oidov and Baast, were criticized for writing inappropriate works with legendary and historical themes. We were condemned for writing about feudal oppressors from the last century and about violence and grief. They deprecated *Tsogt taij* by Rinchin, which had been awarded with the State Prize by Choibalsan two years before. Tsedenjav and Baast evinced feudalism in their works, such as *Queen Mandukhai* and *Such a King*.” (Interview, August 10, 2017)

Baast claimed that the First Congress was not properly planned and well-prepared. According to him, Shirendev organized it for a personal motive: to overmatch Rinchin as there was a tension in their relationship. The First Congress of Writers seemed a long-planned event on consequent official documents. However, it was rife with personal disputes, unexpected incidents, and unserious attitudes.

To review the progress in Mongolian literature since the First Congress and to discuss tasks set by the MPRP to writers, the Political Bureau decided (Resolution no. 395, dated to November 28, 1956) to organize the Second Congress in April of 1957 in Ulaanbaatar.¹¹ In the assessment note for the Second Congress, the MPRP praised “the success in depicting the life and struggle of the people realistically under the leadership of the Party and with the guidelines and wonderful example of high ideology, artistic skills, and generosity of Soviet literature.”¹² Compared to the earlier

¹¹ Zagdsüren, *MAHN-aas urlag utga zokhiolyn talaar gargasan togtool shiidverүүд* (Resolutions and Decrees on Art and Literature Issued by People’s Revolutionary Party), 153-54

¹² *Ibid*, 189-192

discussions and resolutions, the MPRP was satisfied with the increased number of newly recruited young writers and literary works depicting the real life, struggles, and efforts of the people. Notwithstanding, there were needs to intensify the emergence of qualified literature to show the people building socialism. Moreover, the MPRP reminded the fields of agriculture and industry to be the priority themes for literature, and others were supplementary. The attitudes to write with “blank ideas” (*khooson sanaa*) and variety of styles were critical.

The Writers’ Committee was institutionally weak in its early years. The MPRP controlled not only its policies, but also its daily activities. Resolution no. 71/187 of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the MPRP, issued on 17 September 1953, criticizes the Writers’ Committee and its various branch institutions, such as literary circles and groups, for their insufficiency, formality, lack of principle, dishonesty, non-seriousness, and alcoholism.¹³

A series of documents and resolutions issued for the development of modern literature in Mongolia suggest that there were not only political implications, but also artistic ones at the same time. The Political Bureau ordered the Writer’s Union “to organize regular courses and seminars to improve the ideological-political knowledge and artistic skills of writers and to support the literary upbringing of junior writers, especially local writers.”¹⁴

Exchanges between writers in the central and peripheral regions were regulated as the Writer’s Union was directed to publish an anthology of local writers in 1954, a result of intensifying literary group activities, and to organize a Ten Days of Literature of Local Writers (*Oron nutgiin utga zokhiolchdyn arvan khonog*) to highlight local writers in 1955 in Ulaanbaatar.¹⁵ These festivals were also modeled after Soviet *dekada* and lasted literally for ten days. All the MPRP committees of the city and provinces were obliged to control literary groups in their regions.¹⁶ Newspapers and magazines were the main platforms to promote literature and to recruit new members. On July 10, 1955, a Resolution to start a newspaper *Utga zokhiol* (Literature) in preparation for the Second Congress was issued by the MPRP. The aim of the newspaper was “to become a platform for writers and readers, to eliminate errors in general literary activities by thriving creative self-criticism, to support junior and provincial writers, to promote practices of the Soviet writers, and to improve the Marxist-Leninist education of writers.”¹⁷

As a result of these decisions and activities, a nation-wide hierarchical structure to motivate young people to create or read literature and recruit new members to the Writers’ Committee was solidly established. From the first year of a public school, a student would get involved in local literary groups and aim at writing and

¹³ Ibid, 121

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid, 123

¹⁶ Ibid, 124

¹⁷ Ibid, 134

publishing. Those who were interested in writing literature and poetry had many opportunities to publish their works, for example, in newspapers like the Pioneers' Truth (*Pioneryn ünen*), Literature and Art (*Utga zokhiol, urlag*), or magazines like Successors (*Zalgamjlagch*) and Ember (*Tsog*). Different sections (*sefts*) for poetry, prosy, children's stories, and criticism as well as voluntary literary circles and groups were active.

In order to become a member of the Writers' Union, one had to have his or her work officially approved and published by a Committee. Tsedev is a key figure in the history of the Writers' Union as he worked as the director for thirteen years from 1977 to 1990. Tsedev started writing verses about race horses when he was thirteen in 1953. Upon his arrival in the city, he got involved in the Writer's Union's literary circles and groups. Tsedev recollected his entry into the Writers' Committee by early 1960s:

“The Writers Committee was located in the four-story building of the government house. There was a small white building out back where one need to get a written pass (*propusk*) and then show it to a police at the entrance to enter. When you entered the government house, I remember there were doors on the first floor that had the names of the director Sengee, editor of the newspaper *Literature and Art* Dashdendev, and secretary Baast on them. There was one big hall on the fourth floor where meetings were held... Every Wednesday, junior writers gathered to learn from senior ones. When I entered, there were senior writers Rinchinsambuu and Lkhamsüren. I had my poem titled To My Motherland (*Minii ekh oron*) approved by Lkhamsüren. Poems that had a stamp of the Writers Union were eligible to be published. One could hardly publish without it.” (Interview, September 15-16, 2016)

After his active involvement in activities of the Writers' Union for years, Tsedev turned to the director in 1977. Before Tsedev, there were several directors who were Sengee (1954-1959), Udval (1961-1974), Tüdev (1974-1975) and Navaansüren (1975-1977). When Tsedev was working as the director of the Party's Committee of the Ministry of Culture, the then-director of the Office for Cadres and the deputy director of the Central Committee informed him that the Central Committee of the Party proposed him to become the Director of the Writers' Union.

“I hesitated and admitted that I was interested in scientific research. They said that it was a “party assignment” (*namyn daalgavar*). They also did their job not because they wanted to but because they were carrying out the “party's assignment”... I was called to a meeting of the Political Bureau. There were Tsedenbal, Batmönkh, Jagvaral, and Molomjamts, whose images I saw during parades on the square. Tsedenbal asked my age and I was over thirty then. They asked questions in Russian from me for about one hour. I was worried if I said the ending of sentences correctly or not. Everyone congratulated me after the meeting. Then Tsedenbal reminded me not to tell others that I was approved by the Political Bureau because writers might have sent a letter against my assignment.” (Interview, September 15-16, 2016)

Tsedev's appointment was introduced by the second secretary of the Ideology Division (*Üzel surtlyn kheltes*) to eight secretaries, namely Jamsranjav, Udval, Navaansüren, and Oyun, of the Writers' Committee. Since then, Tsedev worked as the director of the committee during the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Congresses of Writers, which were organized every five years. Provinces organized their own congresses and they were among the most influential events being organized by the Writers' Union was Literary Days (*Utga zokhiolyn ödrüüd*) at the level of higher administration of provinces. Övörkhангай and Ömnögovi were the first provinces to hold the Literature Days in 1978 after which it was annually organized in different provinces. It was a significant event as involving prestigious writers and representatives of the People's Deputies (*Ardyn deputat*), who were originally from the given province and living in Ulaanbaatar, joined the event. For example, writers such as Gaitav, Pürevdorj, Pürev, and Khorloo joined the trip to Övörkhангай. Thus, it was not only an opportunity to read and listen to literature but it was also a significant medium for provincial development. Local manufacturers and farmers (*uls ardyn aj akhuitan*) competed to initiate something new such as paving a road or setting up a provincial theater during those days.

The Writers' Committee of Mongolia reflected the Writers' Union of the Soviet Union and had a tight relationship with Soviet writers' establishment. It was an obligation for the Writers' Committee to translate and study materials from the Congresses of the Soviet Writers. The Political Bureau gave permission to organize the Second Congress "in order to discuss important issues of Mongolian literature with participation of Soviet representatives."¹⁸ Furthermore, the Political Bureau issued a resolution to send two to three writers to the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute annually from 1954. The translation of Russian literature into Mongolian started as early as Tseveen Jamsrano's time. Some Soviet sources give figures regarding the number of works translated into Mongolian "between 1925 and 1948, 227 literary works were translated into Mongolian, including 104 works written by Soviet authors, 80 by pre-Revolutionary writers and poets, and 43 by authors of all other nations." Others state that: "In 1950, about 70 works of Soviet and Russian classical literature were translated into Mongolian."¹⁹ At earlier stage of the Writers' Union, most literature translation was from Russian into Mongolian, but not vice versa. The translation of native literature to Russian started only with the appearance of a national literature and professional writers in the second half of the 20th century. Furthermore, there could be influences of a new wave of nationalist movements raised by writers of "national minorities" of the USSR. The slight relaxation of the communist ideological pressure, after 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party (1956), allowed scholars and writers to propose new approaches. During the 1959 Soviet Writer's Congress, representatives of the national republics criticized

¹⁸ Zagdsüren, *MAHN-aas urlag utga zokhiolyn talaar gargasan togtool shiidverüüd* (Resolutions and Decrees on Art and Literature Issued by People's Revolutionary Party), 124

¹⁹ Demidov, *Mongol'skaya narodnaya respublika* (The People's Republic of Mongolia), 53

the neglect of the literatures of the national republics and the underscore of their literary heritage. As the novelist Mikhail Sholokhov and poet Alexander Tvardovskiy claimed at that time, “It appears that translations from the Russian into the languages of the “fraternal” peoples are quite plentiful, but that the exchange works only in one-direction.”²⁰ This new wave of nationalism in the USSR, particularly among the peoples of Central Asia had impacts on intellectual life in Mongolia. Along with the breathing space to celebrate “national culture” and the matured professional writers, the translation of Mongolian literature to Russian and other languages of the Soviet bloc countries had been intensified. During his time, Tsedev published 16 volumes of Mongolian writers included from senior ones such as Buyannemekh and Rinchin to junior ones such as Ayurzana, in the Soviet Union in Russian language.

The Writer’s Union institutionally strengthened and regulated provincial branches and sub-organizations, such as the “Literature Fund” (*utga zokhiolyn san*), the newspaper *Literature and Art* (*Utga zokhiol, urlag*), the journal *Ember* (*Tsog*), in addition to a summer camp, a museum named after Natsagdorj, artistic groups, and even a farm. The Literature Fund aimed at supporting creative activities of litterateurs, literary critics, researchers and translators, and was established as a public organization under the Writers’ Union by the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the MPR no. 497 on November 16, 1955.²¹ The bylaw of the literary fund, attached to the resolution stated that “the main goal of the fund was to provide assistance with the “cultural-household” (*soyol-akhuin*) conditions of members of the Writers’ Union as well as of promising writers.”²² The members and deputies of the Writers’ Union had to be members of the Literature Fund. Those who were not members of the former, but who were active in literature and literary criticism, could become members of the Literature Fund. The Literature Fund was controlled and guided by the General Committee of the Writers’ Union. The fund was collected from various taxes and commissions imposed on member writers and institutions, publications, publishing houses, and performances at central theatres and provincial cultural centers and clubs. Generally, most cultural institutions except cinemas and the circus were subjects to pay a certain percentage (from 0, 5% to 1%) of every stage performances such as operas and plays used the works with the copyright. The literary fund worked in connection with the state tax system so that the literary fund and its affiliated offices and institutions were exempted from all sorts of state taxes and commissions.²³

The Writer’s Union employed some writers in permanent positions of “professional litterateurs” (*mergejliin uran zokhiolch*), made contracts with assignments and paid them monthly fixed salary of 800 *tögrög*. Writers were given specific periods to

²⁰ Friedberg, “Socialist Realism: Twenty-Five Years Later,” 76-28

²¹ *Soyol-gegeerliin baiguullaguudyn ajlyn talaar kholbogdotoi zarlig, togtool, zaavruudyn system-chilsen emkhetgel* (The Systematic Compilation of Orders, Resolutions, and Guidelines related to organizations of culture-enlightenment). 249.

²² *Ibid*, 251

²³ *Ibid*, 252

produce a work depending on the genre. A professional writer was granted a year for a novel, six months for a novella, and six months for a fiction film script with Resolution no. 51 of the Council of Ministers of the MPR dated to January 29, 1957. It also enabled writers, based on their willingness, to spend one working day on a selected topic and receive normal payment. Tsedev says,

“If they are paid, they have to write. They write voluntarily but not under pressure. The Union provided writers with opportunities. Once, the Union sent three professional writers with consultation of the Central Committee of the Youth Union: Püevsuren to Baganuur, Jamilkha to Bayanölgii and Dorjgotov to Arkhangai (which were their hometowns). As a result, they wrote novels.” (Interview, September 15-16, 2016)

By the 1980s the Writers’ Union was completely institutionalized and stabilized as the state socialist body for professionals in the literary arts. As discussed in this part, socialist authorities formed an official institution designed to both represent writers’ interests with respect to the state and to promote partisan cohesion within literary circles to shape public opinion in approved directions. In doing so, the Party underscored both ideological and artistic approaches in order to create “modern Mongolian literature”. The Writers’ Union, with its provincial branches, circles, groups, newspapers, fund, museum, artist residency, as well as various events and activities, functioned as a system all over the country.

Strict, but stealthy, censorship

There was no other institution that controlled more books, journals, and newspapers before being published than the General Authority for Censorship of Literature and Publishing (*Utga zokhiol ba khevlel khyanakh gazar*), or “Glavlit,” for short. Notably, the “Glavlit” is the abbreviation of the name of the same agency of the Soviet Union, the Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs (*Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literaturi i izdatel'stv*). As an agency under the Council of Ministers, it was established by a resolution from the Political Bureau of the MPRP on March 4, 1947. Before its establishment, the Office for Artistic Affairs made decisions and selections for publication based on political ideology and artistic quality. During the 29th Meeting of Chairs of the Central Committee of the MPRP on April 8, 1943 to review the activities of writers, the Office for Art Affairs was criticized for approving unqualified works for publication.²⁴ The ruling of the meeting highlighted that only thirteen poems were published out of the sixty-two approved by the Office for Art Affairs. These thirteen poems were sent to the office of the *Ünen* newspaper the year before the meeting. The rest were artistically clumsy and politically incorrect. It further noted that the poem titled “The Hell of Hitler” (*Gitleriin tam*) by Darjaa was an example of politically incorrect writing. The party blamed the Office of Artistic Affairs that they permitted to publish works in the *Ünen* newspaper without reviewing and improving literary. Furthermore, it highlighted

²⁴ Zagdsüren, *MAHN-aas urlag utga zokhiolyn talaar gargasan togtool shiüverüüd* (Resolutions and Decrees on Art and Literature Issued by People’s Revolutionary Party), 77-80

that the criteria for publication was the quality of the literature, but not subjective criticism.

Nothing would be published without a stamp from “the Glavlit”. However, whether to be banned or not heavily depended on a person who edited. Tsedev claims that there were good and bad things about editors who had knowledge of literature and art: “The good side is that they really understood how a literary work should be. The bad side is that they were too discerning. There were tough editors like Baramsai, known for his critical and satirical stories, and Nyamdorj who often banned writers. Less-competent editors were easy to deal with by convincing and manipulating them in different ways.” (Interview, September 15-16, 2016) Sometimes, the Glavlit had to reexamine works which had been banned previously from publication. A commission to review banned songs, dramas and books was established by Resolution no.251 of the Political Bureau on July 13, 1959.²⁵ The Resolution seemed to be issued within a relaxation of the post-Stalinist political climate of the *Khrushchovskaya Ottepel* (Khrushchev Thaw) that saw the rehabilitation of some of the intellectuals condemned in the 1930s and 1940s.²⁶

Although the Glavlit had a strict censorship practice, its motives were not always political or ideological, as was widely claimed by late socialist elites after the 1990s. It also had to do with personal view, creativity, aesthetics and ethics. Editors carefully checked writers that were already in question for approved or disapproved specific themes or subject matters. Those who were already in trouble, such as Rinchin and Damdinsüren, were on the radars of editors. For example, the Political Bureau of the MPRP issued a Resolution no. 127 About Some Hostile Views in Dr. Rinchin’s Recent Works (*Doktor Rinchingiin süüliin üyin zokhioluud dakh’ zarim kharsh üzel sanaany tukhai*) on April 15, 1960.²⁷ Tsedev recalls the experience of publishing his monograph on tradition and creativity in the Mongolian poetry censored. The editor directly asked Tsedev to omit an analysis of “The Flower of the Bride” (*Ber tsetseg*) by Rinchin. Although Tsedev explained that the poem was a protest against war, the editor decided that it reflected Chinggis Khaan, whose discussion had been banned in a resolution. The topic about of Chinggis Khaan was always in consideration both for officials and writers. As he was the “culmination of the Mongolia’s pride” (*Mongolyn bakharkhalyn deed tseg*), to use Tsedev’s (Interview, September 15-16, 2016) words, many writers such as Pürevdorj, Sürenjav, Choinom, and Tsedev intended to publish their works about Chinggis Khaan for the memorialization of the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khaan in 1962. When Tsedev showed his poem *Chinggis* to the secretary of the *Tsog* journal Ögödei to publish, he said that the decision to publish Pürevdorj’s poem was already made. Pürevdorj succeeded publishing his poem *Chinggis* because he was close to Tömör-Ochir, then secretary of the MPRP who handled the celebration

²⁵ Ibid, 287

²⁶ Tsetsentsolmon, “The gong beat” against the “uncultured”: contested notions of culture and civilization in Mongolia,” 424

²⁷ Zagdsüren, *MAHN-aas urlag utga zokhiolyn talaar gargasan togtool shiidverüüd* (Resolutions and Decrees on Art and Literature Issued by People’s Revolutionary Party), 288

as they were from the same locality (*neg nutgiinkh*), Övörkhангай province. However, Pürevdorj admitted that it was his mistake not completely understanding the “party-spirited” and “class-oriented” principles after Tömör-Ochir was dismissed for his nationalist leanings.

Along with the strict policy and censorship, experienced writers had tricks to avoid being banned. In one of Damdinsuren’s works, titled “A Story How Four Students Argued” (*Dörvön oyutny margasan түүkh*) prepared in 1959 and edited by Gaadamba, he depicted one Mongolian and one Central Asian student. When one is praising Chinggis Khan while the other declines. Thus, Damdinsüren used the trick to express his view through the opposite character and then to deny it by the positive one. Those who did not know the tricks of getting published would have been banned. Rinchin also published a short story “The Last Dream of the Mangaa Do” (*Mangaa Doogiin etssiin зүүд*) (1969), also known as “The Guard of a Store” (*Delgүүriin manaach*) where he depicts a fierce clerk of the Manchu period who tortured many innocent people. In fact, Rinchin was secretly referring the officer of the Ministry of Domestic Affairs Dorj, nicknamed as “monster” (*mangas*), who tortured Rinchin when he was prisoned.²⁸ These texts “that are ambiguous and thus readable in such a manner that it is possible to recover oppositional as well as official meanings”²⁹ are called as “evocative transcripts”³⁰ or “hidden transcripts.”³¹ Kaplonski argues that “it was certain key forms of evocative transcripts, to be found in official, approved narratives that helped propagate and preserve unofficial histories.”³²

Censorship was well-institutionalized with hierarchical phases for not only literature but also any other genres of art to pass through. Films, for example, were overseen beginning with the first draft of the script to the last public presentation. They were premiered only after approval from the General Administration for Literature and Publishing, the Artistic Board of the Screening Industry (*Kino үйлдвэрийн уран саikhны зөвлөл*), the External Artistic Board of the Ministry of Culture, and the Department of Ideology of the Central Committee of the MPRP. Senior artists who experienced such censorship recall how officials did not have enough artistic education or concern. Nagnaidorj, a State-Honored film director who has worked in the film industry since 1963, described the General Administration for Literature and Publishing as a place that only cared about anti-Party or “indecent” content. He recalls:

A scene showing a Chinese vacuum bottle for tea was banned although every family had it at home. It was broadly used and even given as an award [in government ceremonies] back then...

“I worked as an assistant director for the film “The Blessing from the Vast Steppe” (*Saruul talyn yörөөл*) about Natsagdorj, which was directed

²⁸ Rinchin, *Khuurambaa*, 41

²⁹ Kaplonski, *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia: The Memory of Heroes*, 11

³⁰ Humphrey, “Remembering an ‘enemy’: the Bogd Khaan in twentieth-century Mongolia,” 22

³¹ *Ibid*, 25

³² Kaplonski, *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia: The Memory of Heroes*, 11

by Dorjpalam and written by Dashdoorov. I have never seen any other film that caused such trouble. It was censored and edited eight times and was approved only on the ninth time. In fact, the life of Natsagdorj was a real artist's life with rises and falls, love and passion. Officials behaved as if they personally knew Natsagdorj. They cut the parts showing a Russian woman and a "green-hat" (*nogoon malgaitan*)." (Interview, December 11, 2016)

Nagnaidorj condemned those who were censored for such trifles claiming today that they were beaten for their highly artistic works. Sharavdorj, a State-Honored cinematographer reveals that the peak of politicization of trifles for censoring was by the 1970s and 1980s. He recalls his experience of the film "The First Step" (*Ankhny alkam*) that depicted a relationship of youth and eldership through a student doing practice among senior farmers. The first title "A Swan to Overwinter" (*Övöljikh khun*), which was artistic and meaningful, was forcefully changed for the epithet of human as a meta-being to a bird. Sharavdorj further recalls:

"They politicized nothings, such as showing an old scythe man spitting to the ground (as it was polluting nature) and wiping a churn with grass. It was much harder for documentaries. Everything should be shown rich and nice. Dairy-maids had to wear silk garment while milking. Nobody could say bad words about the Soviet Union." (Interview, December 14, 2016)

A whole cadre was hierarchically institutionalized functioned to control and shape the arts. However, it was perfunctory and inconsistent, as the example of the revised criticism discussed above shows. Although the censorship was officially well-institutionalized with hierarchical phases to pass through, one could unofficially gain the permission to publish through personal connection and acquaintance. Writers manipulated the censorship with their skilled writing of "evocative transcripts" hidden in approved narratives.

Slogan just as slogan?

Communist ideologies and concepts such as "revolutionary realism", "socialist realism", and "nationalist in form, socialist in content" were more like abstract slogans than a real artistic style. Despite of some general interpretations to advocate and promote socialist construction in "realistic" ways in art works, those slogans were "forgotten" or "not remembered"³³ in social memory as an art style. They are either "not remembered" or "intentionally disregarded" by former socialist writers today.

"Revolutionary realism" was perceived as a previous stage of "socialist realism". Soviet writers constructed socialism and created "socialist realism" whereas Mongolians stayed at the "revolutionary" stage. The First Congress of Mongolian Writers of 1948 aimed at learning from Soviet writers in order to advance to the next stage. During the Second Congress, held on 25-27 April, 1957, the term "socialist realism" was first introduced. Tsedev states:

³³ Kaplonski, *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia: The Memory of Heroes*, 13

“The key-note speech was on the situation at that time and further goals of Mongolian literature by Sengee, the then-director of the Writers’ Committee. Rinchin presented the supplementary report on literature of the Soviet Union and other People’s Democratic Countries. Here, “socialist realism” was mentioned for the first time. There is evidence for this. Since then it was broadly used in official reports and documents. Many researchers such as Khasbaatar and Luvsanvandan wrote about it as a methodology. One wrote about “revolutionary realism” and the other “socialist realism” and combined into one article and published in a journal called *Voprosi Literaturi (Issues of Literature)*. Principally, there was not a big difference between the two.” (Interview, September 15-16, 2016)

In general, Tsedev doesn’t seem to have been anti “socialist realism” as a style, but he was unsatisfied with the ways it was realized in literature. For him, the important side was realism whether “revolutionary” or “socialist.” The Second Congress defined “socialist realism” as “a method which requires depicting reality within true history and revolutionary development.”³⁴ The “socialist realism” was underscored as the only method that one should not withdraw. The Congress assumed that it would enable writers to improve their talents and skills and write in a form that they liked while not eliminating individual character and style. Tsedev protectively claims that no Mongolian writer consciously thought, “Well, I would write in a style of socialist realism (*sotsialist realizmaar*)”. “One could either criticize or praise the society” (Interview, September 15-16, 2016), he continues. However, criticism of state socialism in literature was restricted and so Mongolian literature effectively ignored reality with its constant praise, proclamation, abstraction, and artificial optimism. Among Soviet writers, from whom Mongolian writers learnt, the first time the term “socialist realism” was officially used was in 1932. The term was settled upon in meetings that included politicians of the highest level, including Stalin himself. Maxim Gorky, a proponent of literary socialist realism, published a famous article titled “Socialist Realism” in 1933.³⁵ During the Congress of 1934, four guidelines were laid out for socialist realism. The work must be: 1. proletarian: art relevant to the workers and understandable to them; 2. typical: scenes of everyday life of the people; 3. realistic: in the representational sense; and 4. partisan: supportive of the aims of the State and the Party.³⁶ Tsedev was not sure what the difference between “revolutionary realism” and “socialist realism” was, although Mongolian literature switched from the former to the latter. However, Natsagdorj, known as the founder of the modern Mongolian literature, was writing his work during the time of “revolutionary realism” and he cannot be said to be the founder of “socialist realism” as it appeared only in the 50s, according to Tsedev.

³⁴ Zagdsüren, *MAHN-aas urlag utga zokhiolyn talaar gargasan togtool shiidverüüd* (Resolutions and Decrees on Art and Literature Issued by People’s Revolutionary Party), 191

³⁵ Ellis, Andrew, *Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting 1920–1970*, 37

³⁶ Juraga and Booker, *Socialist Cultures East and West. A Post-Cold War Assessment*, 68

In general, Tsedev describes “socialist realism” as a loose and abstract that one would not realistically obey in their literary works. However, Dulam, a poet and scholar known for his research on mythology and symbolism, sees it more strict and concrete method of writing. Dulam states:

“The socialist aesthetic, to me, was more like classicism where the subject matter and way of writing was pre-identified and scheduled. One should write about the working classes and the herders. It reminded me of classicist artworks with standards and norms... The main principles that the Party urged were Marxism, Leninism, and Proletarian Internationalism. One could not deviate from these three. There were many novels such as “The Crop” (*Taria budaa*) by Garmaa and “The Echo of the Chimney” (*Yandangiin tsuurai*) by Chojjilsüren which were all about the working class. Ignoring nuances of life, socialist writers mainly wrote about newly built institutions and they were evaluated for that. The reviewers and critics only saw if they followed these principles. However, there were very few attempts to express feelings and psychological issues for example in short stories by Luvsantseren and Erdene.” (Interview, September 15, 2015)

“Socialist realism”, recognized as the main method of literature in 1957, was practiced and realized in literary works through the activities of the Writers’ Union. Dulam claims that the system was so strict that there was a little space for artistic freedom. Regardless, Tsedev claims that he, as a writer and researcher, never intended to write his works following “socialist realism”. Tsedev, for example, claims that he did not even mention this phrase “socialist realism” in his dissertation in 1974. It is also quite common among socialist-era elites, following the transition to democracy, to distance themselves from socialist ideology and portray themselves as having resisted socialism.

In Tsedev’s case, he might be more sensitive on socialist concepts as he has been criticized and condemned for producing literary works of “*communist subbotnik*”³⁷ in his time of being the director of the Writers’ Union. The style of “socialist realism” was reviewed only in the Eighth Congress of Mongolian Writers in 1989. According to Tsedev, the reports revealed that “socialist realism” had been perceived as artificial optimism, embellishment and beautifying, not exposing, reality. However, the writers still seemed stayed within the framework of “socialist realism” and attempted to improve it by exploring new aspects. The role of “a new man” was to be an active socialist leader. Those who depicted the negative sides of life would easily be banned. The trilogy titled “The Color of the World” (*Khorvoogiin öngö*) by Byambaa showed realistically the dark sides of life under socialism. Literary critics, such as Khasbaatar and others criticized Bymbaaa for being unable to see the real “color” of life and society and for misrepresenting it. Others such as “The Liana” (*Chödör övs*)

³⁷ *Subbotnik*, rooted from Russian word *subбота* or Saturday, is a volunteer community services such as cleaning done on weekends in the communist time. Literary works with themes dedicated to those communist activities were ironically referred as “*communist subbotnik*” here.

by Gaadamba and “The Guard of a Store” (*Delgüüriin manaach*) were condemned for defaming “modern intellectuals”. In general, those who depicted the “dark side” (*khar baraan*) or harsh realities of socialist life were always critical because it was against the successful construction of state socialism.

Alongside “socialist realism”, the regime also promoted the slogan “Buddhist in form, socialist in content”. But in reality, there was seemingly no clear-cut distinction between “form” and “content” in art works. Both “socialist realism” and the slogan “national in content and socialist in form” were abstract concepts that artists could not easily apply or practice. Dulam admits that one could hardly see the “national form” realized in literature as writers mainly used forms such as poem, verses, novels, and stories that were not national but common worldwide. “Styles were also mainly adopted or translated from foreign literatures so that one could not identify the “national form.” Very few works such as “The Story How a Truly Brave Hero Bold Defeated Big Swallower Black Monster” (*Eriin sain erelkheg Boldbaatar khamgiig zalgigch khar mangasyg darsany ülger*) by Lkhamsüren, some plays by Namdag, novellas by Rinchin and poems by Badraa could be identified as “national in form””, Dulam (Interview, September 15, 2015) continues. According to him, “socialist in content”, which effectively meant praising but not criticizing socialist institutions, was much definite than “national in form”, if there was such a thing.

Tsedev has a similar view but he also differs in some significant ways from Dulam. Tsedev says that the slogan was only stated in official documents but was not implemented in literature policies. Some writers did not even know what the forms of their works were. According to Tsedev, common phrases used back then were “Mongolian literature” (rather “national literature”), “ancient literature”, “modern literature” and the role of “a new (socialist) man”. Tsedev named “The Secret History of the Mongols” (*Mongolyn nuuts товчоо*), “The Turmoil of Time and Power” (*Tsag töriin үйеен*), and “The Crystal Clear Tamir River” (*Tungalag tamir*) as masterpieces of “national literature”. The Writers’ Union organized trips and events in newly built towns such as Erdenet, Darkhan, Baganuur and Khötöl doing research on real role models among factory workers, “labor heroes” (*khödölmөriin baatar*), excavator drivers, and herdsmen. Tsedev (Interview, September 15-16, 2016) described this type of activities as “documentary literature” (*barimtat uran zokhiol*) in contrast to “*communist subbotnik*”, a phrase that he did not self-associate with. He further denies the direct interference of the Union in choosing or shaping the subject matter of literary works. After collecting proposals for planned publications from literary sections, the session of secretaries made decisions by considering orders from the Publishing Committee with the involvement of senior and junior writers. Only for some special cases, such as the construction of the towns of Erdenet and Baganuur or for special anniversaries of towns and institutions, the Union directly made decision for publications, but not getting proposals from branch literary circles. They were two books on Baganuur and two on Darkhan.

Unlike Tsedev, Baast thinks it is not necessary to talk about “socialist content” now. He exemplifies “national form” with Mongolian language, customs, costumes, yurts, saddles, and the horse-head fiddle, as well as styles that have “national characteristics to contribute to world literature.” (Interview, August 10 2017) In the recollections of three senior writers concerning socialist literature, neither “socialist realism” as a style nor “national in form, socialist in content” as a slogan, were hard and fast rules to follow. Rather, they were abstractions with which the institutions and officials could manipulate or censor creators.

The split between “free” and “hobbled” writers

In 1989, a group of writers who regretted the leadership of the father Writers’ Union, its tight involvement with the People’s Revolutionary Party and who claimed themselves to be “victims” of the old system then formed the Mongolian National Free Writers’ Union (*Mongolyn үндэсний чөлөөт зоххиолчдын холбоо*). They tried to differentiate themselves from the former by emphasizing their “free” views. In their view, the former consisted of people who repressed others while the latter consisted of their victims. The Free Writers Union took an explicitly non-socialist stance, introducing the term “free” (*chölөөт*) to indicate their commitment to freedom of expression, from Party-centered ideology and “socialist realist” style.

The Free Writers’ Union officially declared its establishment as “a legal competent public organization for professional writers” during its first congress on September 27, 1990. The newly formed union clearly stated that “they would fight for the sake of freedom of creation, pluralism, and free competition by depicting the national characteristics, habits and lifestyles of Mongolian people solely in artistic ways and providing every writer with opportunities to develop his/her original style”.³⁸ The “free writers” included Gaadamba, Badraa, Sürenjav, Byambaa, and Dashbalbar who had been in trouble either being dismissed or exiled under the socialist authority and young writers Dulam, Dashnyam and others. A part of their protest was against the Congress of the Writers’ Union, which was quickly announced and organized by Erdene, Pürevdorj, and Maam, to dismiss Tsedev, who led the Union nearly two decades and to appoint Maam as the new director. Tsedev (Interview, September 15-16, 2016) states: “until now some say that supporters of Tsedev formed the Free Writers’ Union but I did not take part in their meetings. I am still a member of the old Writers’ Union”. The two unions were ironically differentiated as the “hobbled” (*chödörtei*) and “free” (*chölөөт*): the former term implies party-led political conformity while the latter refers to freedom of artistic expression. Tsedev further recalls:

“Udval was going to a meeting of the “free” as she was interested to see what was happening there. On the way, she met Gaadamba. Gaadamba said to her that the meeting was for the ones who were repressed but not for repressors like her. Then, Udval returned. They claimed themselves as the

³⁸ “The Statement Issued by the First Congress of the Mongolian National Free Writers’ Union,” *Ündэсний devshil* (National Uplift) newspaper, September 30, 1990, 19

suppressed and that those who were praised in the old system stayed in the old union.” (Interview, September 15-16, 2016)

While the “free” writers perceive themselves as democrats and the others old-fashioned, Baast, a senior writer who has been a member of the old union for over sixty years defined them as “unformed” (*galbirgui*), “contentious” (*hel amtai*), and “anarchic” (*duraaraa*). “They did not fit into the activities that the Writers’ Union runs and want to work by their will. However, we have an ethos of working with the line”, Baast states (Interview, August 10, 2017). The “free” writers might have influences from the Soviet writers who protested against the Writers’ Union in Moscow. A group of poets such as Evgenii Evtushenko, Andrei Voznesenskii, Robert Rozhdestvenskii, and Anna Akhmatova came to prominence at the time of the Khrushchev Thaw. They identified strongly with the politics of de-Stalinization. These *estrada*³⁹ (poets), as they were called, reached a wide audience through mass public readings and achieved fame and notoriety with works that were published in the wake of the Thaw. Hence, they were identified as the Thaw Generation Poets.⁴⁰

Dulam gave a key-note speech titled “Analysing Literature from the Viewpoint of Yin Yang” (*Uran zokhiolyg arga bilgiin үүдnees шүүн тунгаakhui*) of the First Congress of Free Writers’ Union.⁴¹ Although they wanted to publish the report and speech of their first congress in the newspaper Literature and Art, just as the old union did for their congresses, it was not allowed to. In response, the “free” writers produced a booklet titled “Documents Striven to Hide from the Public” (*Tümnees nuukh gesen bichig*) and also in the newspaper *Ündesnii devshil* (National Uplift). In his speech, Dulam strongly criticized the Party-led control and ideology that made literature a “weapon” and writers “soldiers” of the Party ideology. Dulam was against classifying literature according to the historical phases of the MPRP, versus as an aesthetic form. These phases were “the revolutionary democracy” (1921-1940), “the fight for the socialist building (1961-1980), and the “establishment of material and technical bases of socialism” (1961-1980). Dulam explains what “free writers” understood behind the notion of freedom then:

“To be free meant for us was to be independent from the state or any other organizations and to freely exercise creative expressions. The purpose of this freedom was to choose one’s style of creation, unlike the previous system with its one official style of socialism. The idea was that one could write in different styles and nobody would blame them for that... In terms of finances, it was really hard for us because we left [the Writer’s Union] by choice. We could earn money only by publishing a newspaper and organizing events. However, we could not be economically motivated. The honored director of the union did not get a salary. Those who were paid were the vice-director,

³⁹ The term *estrada* refers to stage performances mainly popular and entertaining. Here, it refers to popular podium poets.

⁴⁰ Lygo, “The Thaw Generation Poets in the Post-Soviet Periods,” 14

⁴¹ “Analysing Literature from the Viewpoint of Yin Yang” (*Uran zokhiolyg arga bilgiin үүдnees shun тунгаakhui*), “*Ündesnii devshil*” (National Uplift) newspaper, September 30, 1990, 19

editor of the newspaper and typewriter. Although the Free Writers Union survived for some time, it could not stay there.” (Interview, September 15, 2015)

For the “free” writers, the notion of freedom meant “getting free” from party-centered socialist ideology but had no connection to the western concept of liberalism. It also implied nationalism by emphasizing the national characteristics of Mongolian literature and restoring pre-revolutionary classical literature. For them, the celebration of the nation was an expression of cultural identity more than an action-oriented political credo. They were against taking modern literature, what was referred to the “new literature” and “Mongolian modern literature,” as if it was a new phenomenon occurring in Mongolian culture only in the socialist time. “Free” writers complained that the pre-revolutionary literature had been imagined only with the epics of Geser, Jangar, and the Secret History of the Mongols for seventy years. Moreover, they raised issues of the repression under Stalin by late 1930s and named writers who were killed but were not recalled anymore. They call religious topics to be “sensitive issues” (*emzeg asuudal*) that needed to be clarified and justified in further studies of the Mongolian literature.⁴²

In their pursuit of pluralism, freedom of expressions and the rights new enacted in the Democratic Constitution, the Free Writers’ Union sought to develop national literature by promoting creative competition and opportunities for young writers.⁴³ Apart from the seeking freedom and expressing national sentiment, there was an ambition towards the race for the leader of the Writers’ Union, complaint of the “suppressed” writers, and the interest to share the Literature Fund. The Free Writers’ Union did not succeed in getting a share of the existing material resources of the old union and its literature fund. The new union echoed the organizational structure of the old one and founded a newspaper *Zokhist ayalguu* (Harmonious Melody), adopting a Buddhist term for the five minor fields of knowledge. They had an office in a small wooden building of the Elders’ Committee beside the present Drama Theatre. Since 1992, the Free Writers’ Union has organized a poetry festival called “Silver Cup” (*Möngön tsom*), which resembles the old union’s “Crystal Cup” (*Bolor tsom*) poetry festival, organized since 1983. In this way, the newly formed union copied the organization and activities of the old union, although it strongly declared its stance of alteration. For the financial side, none of the unions succeeded as the state subsidy stopped in the market eras. Now they only run poetry festivals, hand awards, and publish books that are not commercially viable or even widely available in the market. The distinction between the two unions has been flattened out. Both became silent, as they have no funding and no foreign relations. Instead, freelance and self-employed artists define their own positions and market their own work, largely independently.

⁴² “Analysing Literature from the Viewpoint of Yin Yang (*Uran zokhiolyg arga bilgiin üüdnées shun tungaakhui*),” *Ündesnii devshil* (National Uplift) newspaper, September 30, 1990, 19

⁴³ “The Statement Issued by the First Congress of the Mongolian National Free Writers’ Union” (*Mon-golyn ündesnii chölööt zokhiolchdyn ankhdugaar khuraldaigaas gargasan medegdel*), *Ündesnii devshil*(National Uplift) newspaper, September 30, 1990, 19

Conclusion

The Writers' Union, as a professional art organization was an important institution to shape public opinion in controlled directions. Through a series of acts taken by the MPRP, it became financially and ideologically fixed systems. However, unofficial social relations and agendas such as locality (*nutgarkhakh*) and connection (*tanil tal*) and personnel attitudes of vindictiveness functioned in parallel with official relations of state socialism.

The current imagination of the socialist literature is generally about the strict control and predominance of “socialist realism” and the slogan “national in form, socialist in content”. However, these notions were rather abstract so that one could not really substantialize them in their works or locate them in a certain art style. At least, they are “not remembered” in social memory as a considerable style that writers fixed into it. The socialist slogans were rather abstractions with which institutions and officials could manipulate or censor creators.

Yet Party-led cohesion and censorship was not always political, but equally aesthetic. In post-socialist times, socialist-era elites active in film, literature or music harbor nostalgic sentiments towards the censorship institution, or the “Glavlit”. They tend to regard the current creative situation in Mongolia to be a chaotic mess because the “Glavlit” is no longer active. For them, the “Glavlit” was important as a selector of good quality art. A whole apparatus of censorship functioned to control and shape the arts. However, it was perfunctory and inconsistent. Apart from approved directions, there was a space for “evocative transcripts” that readable to recover oppositional as well as official meanings.

A group of writers who did not benefit from the Writers' Union challenged the notion of the “modern Mongolian literature” and claimed for “freedom” with their establishment of the Free Writers' Union. For them, freedom was linked to nationalism and they greatly concerned with “national cultural revival”. Although their concept of freedom had no connection to the western concept of liberalism, it is quite possible that the situation turned out to be economically “liberal” (or neoliberal) and politically (ethno-) nationalist.

The form of the old state structure for the production and control of “culture” (literature and the arts) was left largely intact, but it had been emptied of most of its old content – the artists whom they could no longer support and the work they could no longer produce. The post-socialist creative arts is produced for commercial and personal goals, rather than public ones, and yet the old structure of unions, titles, awards and cultural centers continued to try and channel the arts within its remit.

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