Comparative Study on Mongolian Version of Alexander Romance and Folktales About Alexander in Persian Language

Baohua\textsuperscript{a}, Oyun-Chimeg\textsuperscript{b}

Abstract

The origin of Mongolian version of Alexander Romance has long been a confused issue. Nicholas Poppe, Francis Cleaves, and T. Namjil wrote articles about this, and assumed the Mongolian version of Alexander Romance was translated from Central Asian countries, more likely, Persian or Arabic, did not come up with determinate conclusion, though. In this paper, the authors aim at: (1) comparing the Mongolian version of Alexander Romance with the folktales about Alexander the Great in Persian language, which two are supposed to be the nearest; (2) analyzing the story structure (quest for immortality—denying the desire; belief of living forever—the truth of one must die); and (3) explaining the background of Mongolian version of Alexander Romance, and as a result, arguing that the Mongolian version of Alexander Romance might not be a translated work; instead, it was edited and recreated in Buddhist thinking using the prevailing motif of Alexander’s quest for immortality.

Keywords

Mongolian, Alexander, deny, immortality, Buddhism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a German expedition team discovered quite a few documents from Turfan in Xinjiang, China. Among these documents, the one entitled “TID155” is very delicate remains of a book, part of which is written in Mongolian and the rest in Uyghur (at present, only pages from 7b to 16a are known in Mongolian). On pages 7b-13a of “TID155”, there is an anonymous fragmentary text, which reads as follows.

In ancient times, in the land of Qurasan (Khurasan), there was a man known as Sulqarnai who lived for three thousand years in the city of Misir. It seems someone told Sulqarnai that although he had been favored by the heaven to live for three thousand years, one day, sooner or later, he would have to die. Sulqarnai then assembled his noyad (officers) and expressed his wish to have nectar that would confer immortality. First of all, he assigned the job of bringing the nectar to someone, but after he failed to do so, Sulqarnai himself decided to perform the job. He started his journey with his 50 nöked (companions) and on the way even crossed a bridge, but in the end, he alone climbed the Mount Sumur from which he had a glance of the whole world. As he was trying to look

\textsuperscript{a}Inner Mongolia University, China
\textsuperscript{b}Hohhot College for Nationalities, China

Correspondent Author:
Baohua, College of Ethnology and Sociology, Inner Mongolia University, 24 Zhaojun Road, Yuquan District, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China 010070
E-mail: baohua1111@gmail.com
for nectar on the Mount Sumur or elsewhere while descending the mountain with the help of a strap, a Garuda bird stopped him from doing so.

 Sulqarnai then assembled his noyad for the second time and expressed his intention to descend into the bottom of the sea in the quest for attaining immortality. All his noyads tried to dissuade him due to potential dangers he might encounter, but he was fully determined to do whatever he planned. Sulqarnai built a qaraba (boat) which had net placed outside and was big enough to accommodate two persons. He sailed the qaraba loaded with food and other provisions deep into the sea. At some point, Sulqarnai met a person whom he disclosed the purpose of his journey to the Mount Sumur. But this person urged Sulqarnai to return back immediately. Sulqarnai could not say “no” to him and finally returned back to the surface of the sea in one month. He narrated the whole incidents that happened beneath the sea to his noyad.

For his third time venture, Sulqarnai informed his noyad that he would go with the Sun God to the land of darkness to see its near or far. Having discussed everything related to this new venture, he started his journey with the Sun. As they entered the land of darkness, they met somebody who told them since Sulqarnai’s noyad did not have so many years to live on the earth, he should not let them to take so much risk to travel within darkness, and advised them to go back. As Sulqarnai came closer to the entrance of the land of darkness, a person, who did not disclose his identity, gave him a cup full of nectar with assurances that after drinking, he would be conferred immortality and hence would live forever. Sulqarnai asked his officers whether he should drink the nectar or not. While some of his noyads advised him to take the nectar considering it as a favor of the heaven, others were not sure about what to do. Thereupon, a wise noyan told Sulqarnai that one day, he will be weary of immortality as nothing could exist alone in the world after all people die. These words of wisdom were heeded by Sulqarnai who poured down the nectar which fell upon the leaves of the cypress tree resulting it to be ever green.

Eventually, having recounted his experience, Sulqarnai told his noyad that no sovereign had ever been born who rejoiced as much as he could, and that he was the lone person who had lived so long and experienced so much. There was none whom he did not meet and there was no land that he did not conquer. He then made his wishes that after his death, his dead body was to be taken around the world once, so many things and persons to be offered and that his hands to be exposed.

Because of the leading character in the story, the text is normally named as Sulqarnai-in Tuuji (شورای عثمان) in Mongolian. And this is one of the few manuscripts left from the fourteenth century written in Uygur Mongolian script, and thus plays significant role in various fields, i.e., Mediaeval Mongolian language, Mongolian ancient literature, and ideological history of Mongols. May due to the reasons, the Sulqarnai-in Tuuji draws quite attention of scholars since the 1960s, and in particular, the origin of story has been the focus of researches.

**PREVIOUS STUDIES AND THEIR IMPERFECTION**

Professor Nikolaus Poppe (1957) first identified the story as a Mongolian version of the Alexander’s Romance, and announced the Sulqarnai refers to Arabic word “zul garmain” (ذول الغرمين, means “two horned”), indicating Alexander the Great. Undoubtedly, though this identification in itself is an important achievement of the first fragmentary text, his transcription, translation (into German) as well as annotation of the text is also of no less importance. He not only pays attention to the fragmentary text, but also contributes immensely to the comparative study of Alexander’s Romance in different languages. According to adventures of Sulqarnai as told in the story, he divided the whole content of the text into
four parts: (1) ascent to Mount Sumur; (2) descent to the bottom of the sea; (3) descent to the land of darkness; and (4) return to the city of Misir. And then, he refers to other episodes resembling Alexander’s Romance written in Latin, Syrian, Ethiopian, Greek, Arabic, and Persian language.

Another scholar Francis Woodman Cleaves (1959) wrote a long article about the Mongolian version of Alexander’s Romance, which compared the episodes appeared in this version with those appeared in other languages. From the character in the story and his deeds for the quest for immortality, we can understand that the story must have a strong relation with the Middle-Asian countries, and therefore a comparative study is urgently required which would be a great contribution to the study of the literary relationship between Mongols and the Middle-Asian countries. Unfortunately, Cleaves has excessively emphasized on the whole stories with so various motives, thus neglecting the central idea of the whole story. For instance, he is concerned only with whether a bird appears in the text and if so whether it appears before or after climbing the mountain. He does not analyze the role of the bird in the whole story. Although Cleaves could not come up with a positive conclusion about the derivation of Mongolian version of Alexander’s Romance, except from assuming that there was an undiscovered Uygur version which could possibly be the translated source of Mongolian Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, his study may enlighten us at least in methodology and also remind us the doubt posed by Academician Ts. Damdinsuren (Дадинсүрен 1954), which is especially pertinent: “Is this work translated from another language or is it originally composed in the Mongolian language?”.

Other scholars like Academician Ts. Damdinsurung (1982) and D. Tumurtogoo (2006) from Mongolia, Dobu (1983), Shonghur (Shonghur 1985; Shonghur 1996), and G. Namjil (2004) from China, also wrote articles about Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, and made their own contributions in Latin transcription and motif-comparisons. But they consider it as a translation work, pay more attention to its source, and ignore its in-depth structural analysis. In other words, former scholars try to find out from which language and which text Sulqarnai-in Tuuji was translated, through motif-comparisons, and pay little attention to what does it tell. And more importantly, the origin issue has not been solved yet.

In this case, we believe previous studies have been valuable and necessary in proving motif-comparison do not work in study of Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, and what we need to do on the basis of former researches is to focus on the main idea of the story, and to consider what the story-teller tries to tell people through Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, and if there are any differences between Mongolian version of Alexander Romance and that of Central Asian countries regarding the ideology hidden in the story structure, and therefore to explain the relationship of Sulqarnai-in Tuuji with Alexander Romance from Central Asia.

In Mongolian version of Alexander’s Romance, there is a very confused sentence about Alexander’s charges, i.e., “my hands to be exposed”. The same wordings appeared only in Persian version of Alexander’s Romance. Thus, we could know that there must be some relation between Mongolian version and Persian version of Alexander’s Romance, if it is a translated work. But many scholars who studied the Mongolian version of Alexander’s Romance, including Poppe and Cleaves, could not read Persian, and that they just referred to other’s translation. And secondly, very little attention has been paid on the context of the Mongolian version of Alexander’s Romance. The Sulqarnai-in Tuuji was found in a book of Uygur and Uygur Mongolian writings and following Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, there were three pages of Uygur Mongolian text, the correlation between the three pages and Sulqarnai-in Tuuji might be helpful for us to better understand the text. So in this paper, the authors would like to: (1) compare Mongolian Sulqarnai-in Tuuji with folklores about
Alexander in Persian language, which they read directly; (2) analyze the story structure; and (3) explain the background of *Sulqarnai-in Tuuji* in its context.

**COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SULQARNAI-IN TUUJI AND FOLKTALES ABOUT ALEXANDER IN PERSIAN LANGUAGE**

In this part, the authors would just try to compare three key elements of the stories, and to avoid repeating motif-comparisons which had already been done widely by former scholars.

Firstly, it is the place of containing immortality. On Alexander’s quest for immortality, there are numerous folklores in Persian also, and in these stories, the place where one can attain immortality is fixed in the darkness.

After conquering the whole world, Alexander thought of death could not help crying out. A wise man told him that “In face of death, one is helpless, unless you could have nectar”. Then, Alexander asked again “where to get it”. The wise man replied: “(Get it) from darkness…” (Said Hossain Sophie 1964: 54).

In another Persian folktale, it also says. “Alexander the Great went to a village in Western Haruum, and people there were all tall and healthy, they were red-faced and wearing yellow hairs. They surrounded to Alexander. And an elder told Alexander the Great the Nectar could be found from darkness” (Said Hossain Sophie 1964: 182).

It indicates that one who wants to attain immortality must go to darkness. Alexander the Great was quite sure about this before starting his journey in search of nectar. Thus, the quest for immortality in Persian is the conflict between light and darkness, life and death. In order to get nectar, Alexander the Great went to land of darkness directly, neither to high mountain, nor to deep sea.

However, in Mongolian *Sulqarnai-in Tuuji*, the place where to find immortality is not clear, whether it is after ascent to the Mount *Sumur* or the descent to the bottom of the sea or to the land of darkness. This is why *Sulqarnai* takes three times of risks, just like what always appears in other Mongolian folktales, to look for immortality in *Sulqarnai-in Tuuji*. And if *Sulqarnai* was knowing the place to find nectar, *Sulqarnai-in Tuuji* could not be an independent story, while the plot of Alexander’s search for immortality in Central Asia mostly is only an episode of other stories. Even the person who offered nectar to *Sulqarnai* does not reveal his identity. Although *Sulqarnai* was given “a cup full of nectar” in darkness at last, there is no clear conflict between light and darkness, or life and death in the story. This is one of the reasons why former scholars could not find the origin of *Sulqarnai-in Tuuji* through motif-comparisons, the logics of story line in *Sulqarnai-in Tuuji* and Persian folktales are different due to the place of nectar, although some of the motifs are the same.

The second key element is how to find nectar. In Persian folktales concerning nectar, one can find immortality with the help of a fish or a jewel which shines at the time of approaching to the nectar.

Alexander gave Haider a jewel, which would shine upon approaching to the nectar. Alexander and Haider went lost from each other in darkness. Suddenly, the jewel in Haider’s hand shines with a colorful light, and invites him to a spring. After having shower with the water, Haider and his horse drank from the glittering spring water. Alexander was not able to get the nectar, though (Said Hossain Sophie 1964: 54).

In another story, it tells:

Ilyas and Haider went together in search of nectar. Approaching a spring, they wanted to take rest and have some solid food. To their surprise, a dried fish dropped from their hands, and revived and started swimming in the water. Then they realized it was the nectar and got immortality after drinking it. Haider went to desert to direct those who lost, and Ilyas to sea to save who submersed. As to Alexander, who went back with great disappointment of not getting the nectar after 40 days of search. (Said Hossain Sophie 1964: 55)
And we consider the help of jewel or fish indicates that one must have the capital or intelligence to identify the immortality. Only such a human being who has the ability to recognize would get it. At this juncture, immortality is considered to be one kind of test for the humankind’s capacity.

But in Mongolian version, the nectar is given to only Sulqarnai who “had been favored by the heaven to live for three thousand years”. That means it is the heaven which determines who will be conferred immortality, who will live for how many years and also one’s age and destiny which has nothing to do with his or her ability. When the time of death comes, one must die, no matter how strong he or she is. Immortality is something beyond one’s ability, intelligence, or effort itself. And it is not an objective existence needs to be realized. To the extent, the immortality what Sulqarnai or Alexander looking for was not the exact same thing. The former was expecting the bestowing of heaven, which might be available to himself only, while the later went in quest of something that could be accessed to anyone who is wise enough to recognize it.

The third key element is the access to immortality. As opposed to the Mongolian version, Persian version describes that Alexander could not attain immortality all the while (Said Hossain Sophie 1964; Nazami 1964); rather his consultant was the one who attained this first. It indicates that Alexander the Great lacks the power or ability to defeat the darkness and that he cannot be called the conqueror of the world as he asserts.

The Mongolian version reveals that it was Alexander who himself gets the nectar but after hearing wise words from one of his officers, he does not drink it and instead pours it down.

Thereupon, a wise noyan told Sulqarnai that one day he will be weary of immortality as nothing could exist alone in the world after all people die. These words of wisdom were heeded by Sulqarnai who poured down the nectar which fell upon the leaves of the cypress tree resulting it to be ever green.

From those differences in three aspects of story contents, we would suggest that Mongolian Sulqarnai-in Tuuji might not be a direct translation work from Central Asia, which is why previous comparative studies of similar motifs have not come out with a clear and assured result and could not find out the origin of Sulqarnai-in Tuuji. But we are not totally denying the relationship between Sulqarnai-in Tuuji and Central Asian folktales. One has to admit in spite of the differences in the descriptions of Mongolian and Persian version of Alexander’s Romance, one thing still remains in common, that is, Sulqarnai or Alexander is not as clever as his officer, as finally he is described as a defeated man. While in Persian version, Alexander has not been considered as enjoying the position of a ruler, in Mongolian version, he has not been regarded as being intelligent to the extent of resorting to live forever. Furthermore, the confused wording of “my hands to be exposed” appeared in both Mongolian Sulqarnai-in Tuuji and Persian version of Alexander’s Romance, as we mentioned earlier. Nazami (1964) explained this sentence by “having no desire or taking nothing from the world upon one’s death”. Then, how about the meaning of Sulqarnai-in Tuuji? We must analyze the story structure to better understand it.

**IN-DEPTH STRUCTURE OF SULQARNAI-IN TUUJI**

Little attention was paid on the story structure of Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, and to be more exactly, the manuscript was never taken as a Mongolian story.

*Sulqarnai-in Tuuji* starts with leading character’s “dissatisfaction”, which is he must die, just like others. Sulqarnai still feels “discontented” with his life of three thousand years, and wants to be alive “forever”. In order to “fulfill” this wish, he ascents to Mount Sumur, descents to the bottom of the sea, and goes to the land of darkness. The whole story was built up because of this “regret” and its “reparation”. Finally,
Sulqarnai is given nectar, as he wishes. However, he himself after hearing his consultant’s advice, “denies” his wish of getting “immortality”, pours the nectar out, and accepts death. One could see the story-line of “desire (of living forever)-realization of dream (getting nectar)-recognition of truth (immortality would become suffering)-denying the immortality” in Sulqarnai-in Tuuji. And the main conflict is not defused by the bestowed nectar, but by Sulqarnai’s acceptance of truth and life discipline. It indicates what Sulqarnai really lacks is intelligence, instead of eternal life.

And wherever Sulqarnai goes in search for immortality, he finds either a person or a bird (garuda) to alarm him of the potential danger during such adventure. That is to say, the boundary between “his” world and “other” world is really the boundary between safety and danger. Just like one’s age, there is a limitation in one’s life. Beyond a certain limit of life, there would be disaster. “One will be weary of immortality as nothing could exist alone in the world after all people die”. The life within natural discipline is safe and happy, and the “unnatural” and “abnormal” immortality would become the barrier to death.

At the beginning and even in the whole process of the story, special attention has been paid on the position of Sulqarnai: He is favored by heaven and lived for three thousand years; only he himself ascend to the Mount Sumur; only he is given the nectar. This is to strengthen the power of his word, i.e., “one must die after birth, even if he has lived for three thousand years”. Let Sulqarnai himself to pour out the nectar in order to bid good-bye to the quest for immortality to refute his lust for delight of life.

With the result that Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, in fact, is not about quest for immortality, but about denying immortality. Following the Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, aforementioned text, there are also three pages of manuscript in Uygur Mongolian, which instructs one to control his/her desire, not to tell lie and steal, which is obviously the part of Buddhist teachings. And at the end, it said, “If one is stupid, even he has lived for 10 thousand years, he/she is of no use. If one is clever and well-educated, no matter whether he/she lives for long or short, death is not the matter of serious concern for him/her”. The main idea of the text is similar to the Sulqarnai-in Tuuji. Shonhor (1996) wrote that the following three pages were cited from Buddhist writing Anggida Tonilyayçi Sudur (《別解脫戒經》), while other scholars did not pay attention to them.

We consider that there is a close relation between Sulqarnai-in Tuuji and following three pages, and both are trying to say that one’s life-span does not matter, what really matters is intelligence, to realize the world is not an eternal existence, one must die with “two hands exposed” taking nothing.

CONCLUSIONS

One can imagine Mongols had close economic and cultural relations with Central Asian countries during medieval age (Bira 2005). However, this is also the least studied area of Mongolian studies in China. The Alexander Romance has widely spread in many countries (Boyle 1975; Boyle 1979) including Mongol area, and it could reveal the cultural relations between various countries in some extent.

The previous research had been focused on the origin of Sulqarnai-in Tuuji, and little attention was paid to its main idea. In this paper, the authors compared its content with folktale about Alexander the Great in Persian, and found that they differ in various key elements; and also realized both Sulqarnai-in Tuuji and following three pages are narrating the importance of living within life discipline and of realizing life is vacant.

Therefore, the authors’ opinion is that the Mongolian version of Alexander’s Romance may not be a direct translation from Central Asia, but a recomposed and localized text. It applies the theme of quest for immortality, to against the notion of
immortality, which believes that the life is full of amusement and that one should live long on the earth and enjoy the life, with Buddhist teachings. In the story, Sulqarnai is the advocate of hedonism, whose purpose is to live as long as possible. His wise officer is one who understands Buddhist teachings: “One must die after birth, even if he has lived for three thousand years”. And finally, Sulqarnai’s acceptance of his officer’s words of wisdom means who always wanted immortality and enjoyment is now inclined toward Buddhism, and that he has little option but to obey the truth.

At the moment, we believe that Sulqarnai’s wish of having his hands exposed is the expression of Buddhist teaching. In other words, Sulqarnai realized that one must leave the world with nothing in hand, just like he/she is born. The world is vacant, what one needs to do is to study hard, to learn to be a good person during his/her life time.

As a result, we may infer that Mongols localized some cultural elements in cultural exchanges with other countries in medieval age, and received Buddhism in wider range than just in official in the fourteenth century.

As to the sentence of “two hands to be exposed” in Persian, if the Persian writers or story-tellers of Alexander Romance also had some relations to Buddhist teachings needs to be further studied.

Funding

The research is supported by Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences (12CZW087), and the research work is part of “The Cultural Context of Mongolian Sulqarnai-in Tuuji” Project (12CZW087) supported by National Social Science Foundation of China.

References


Алтангэрэл, Ч. и Д. Цэрэнсоднам. 1967. “Түрфанды пүүлулүүгө ТМ8, ТИТ62” (The TM8 and TIT 662...


**Bios**

*Baohua*, Ph.D., lecturer, College of Ethnology and Sociology, Inner Mongolia University; research fields: ethnology, folklore, and Mongolian studies.

*Oyun-Chimeg*, M.A., lecturer, Department of Mongolian Language and Literature, Huhhot College for Nationalities; research fields: Mongolian literature and children’s literature.