

Children's Literature in Mongolia Needs Renovation

Jambyn Dashdondog

The flowering of Mongolian children's literature during the 20th century emerged from the fertile soil of our oral traditions. These traditions had been fostered over countless generations. They led to the growth of a new profession: the children's writer. During the socialist era, children's books bloomed in numerous colours like a thousand steppe flowers. However, they have all but wilted during the transition to a market economy. Why did this happen? I would like to address that question here.

In my opinion, there are two reasons. The first one relates to commerce. In the past, despite normal production costs, children's books were sold to the public at a very low price. This aimed to make the books available to the widest possible audience. Literature was seen as a vital part of education. Any financial loss was absorbed by the state. When this benevolent policy was discarded ten years ago, children's books became much less accessible. New works were not being produced. Older works became more expensive. Struggling families spent their money on food, clothes and shelter instead. No business was willing to take on this market because it was simply not profitable.

The other reason relates to time. In the past there was a moment when colourful books bloomed in abundance in urban and rural areas. Many of these works still stand proudly today as crowning achievements in the intellectual culture of mankind. They still have value, they are still relevant, they are still necessary in one's educational development. Others have withered and blown away with the winds of change. They have lost their value, they are no longer relevant. For whatever reason, they have not stood the test of time. With the immense social changes of the last ten years, we now read books with different eyes. We are filtering those works from the past. Some may last, some may not. And besides, perhaps the time has come to look for new creative possibilities in children's books.

Many works from the past century still stand as some of the best examples of children's literature. They include *My Troublesome Childhood* by Sh. Gaadamba, *Solongo* by Ch. Lodoidamba, *A Foal* by L. Badarch, *Aly and Mongo* by P. Khorloo, *How I Recognised the World* by L. Tudev, *Jigmed and Togmid* by D. Sodnomdorj, *Water Whirl-pool or Troublesome Borzoon* by P. Luvsantseren, *Funny Stories* by D. Garmaa, and *Toodoi and Tsookhondoi* by S. Nadmid.

But even the best works were affected by the ideology of the one-party political system. A king was always described as tyrannical, a lama as one with poisonous thoughts, a wealthy person as greedy and a poor person as honest. Similarly, positive roles were often played by Russians, for example, Seryoja in *Serj and Servoj*, Ivanog in *The World's Beautiful Sunderye*, Sasha in *My Happiness*, Petrov in *The Latin Teacher* and many others. Russians characters were always drawn as good, honest people. Conversely, Chinese or Japanese people were inevitably depicted as dishonest, stupid or hostile. A rare exception to this xenophobia was the popular song *Multicultural Children Live Forever with a Common Thought*. In any case, the classification of ethnic or social groups as good or bad, clever or stupid, friend or enemy, is an outdated ideological concept. It is quite inappropriate during these times of globalisation.

There was also a common tendency for children's books to overstep their educational function. Literature often re-

minded students to keep their hair tidy, to wear clean clothes and shoes and to maintain good grades at school. Books carried slogans and warnings such as "Read Books", "Respect Nature", "Let's Build a Nest for the Birds". This is no longer considered a primary function of literature. However, in the last ten years, I have also noticed that children's books appear more uniform than before. As always, these books should encourage independent thought. Children should be encouraged to write their own poetry before they memorise the poetry of another. More importantly, young readers must be able to freely choose whatever they want to read.

For many years we were exposed to the belief that literature should be an instrument of education. However, the value of the world's greatest children's books lies in the way they foster intellectual and creative development. This value can't be explained through theories or instructions. These books are made to be read, not dissected. In this way, children's books are quite unlike adults' books. They should capture the imagination; they should be intensely visual. How many children's books meet these requirements today? The time has come to produce literature that inspires children, that encourages them to think freely.

Although the number of Mongolian printing houses producing colourful, quality books has increased, there is still a dearth of good children's books for Mongolian children. Today we need renovators of Mongolian children's literature. As a starting point, the Mongolian Children's Cultural Foundation has established a study group at the Mongolian Children's Palace. The group will learn from international classics in the field of children's literature.

What should children read? This has become a dilemma in post-communist Mongolia. The challenge lies before Mongolian writers and publishers: to turn away from the old-fashioned school of thought and to forge ahead with a new way of thinking.

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Mongolian children with books (photo courtesy of the author)