**An Anthology of Mongolian Literature**

In *An Anthology of Mongolian Literature*, C.R. Bawden presents a rich and diverse collection of Mongolian literary genres, from translations of historic manuscript to modern poetry. Presenting a historical study of Mongolian literature, this anthology offers a beautifully translated, valuable selection of Mongolian poetry and narratives.

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**By Matthew van Staden**

Bawden, Emeritus Professor of Mongolian at the University of London, was the first to chronicle Mongolian history from the early Manchu period to modern times. Although first published in 1968, his Modern History of Mongolia is probably still the text most relied upon in Mongolian Studies. In his present Anthology, Bawden, having since contributed a massive oeuvre to the field, explores the definition and boundaries of literature. The prayers and rituals, shamanistic incantations, and ceremonial verse included in the Anthology are presented as specific genres, divided into myths, historical narratives, legends, epic, didactic literature, and the works of several authors known by name. The comparison of these various genres, according to their specific use and purposes and its related rhyme structure and content, is a valuable way of learning to appreciate the intention of the chosen piece. Likewise, Bawden successfully demonstrates how each text can tell us about the time in which it was created, and in which ways it is bestowed with evidence of contemporary historical circumstances. This can be gleaned from use of rhyme, structure, the choice of words and images, and historical backdrop. The book also emphasizes the strong connection of modern Mongolian literature with much older genres. The extensive variation of genres is put into context alongside a fixed chronology, which is dictated by an estimate of when the original versions of the translated manuscripts first appeared and covers literature from the early thirteenth century to the twentieth century. Each story or excerpt of poetry poses its own questions and expresses its own puzzlement and joy.

**Facts and myths**

Despite the breadth of the anthology, Bawden generally refrains from extensively commenting on the texts or their translations and does not overanalyze any particular meaning conveyed by them. He restricts himself to providing a historical context, introducing specific authors in their socio-political situation, in the short interludes between each translation and, occasionally, in a note attached to the translated text itself. All in all, the collection has an unpretentious, open presentation, to be explored at will, without the distractions that endless commentary sometimes causes. The drawback is that while the stories and verses are expected to speak for themselves, at times they do not. Thus the literature presented is not always intelligible. To fully grasp the meaning and purpose of what we read is, despite the beauty of the words, sometimes a hazardous undertaking, which calls for some guidance.

The lack of such guidance is all the more surprising in view of the fact that Bawden gives the impression to have compiled this anthology for a general audience. While providing some general introduction to contemporary Mongolian daily life, he refrains from answering more demanding questions. How, for example, are we to value the mythical, magical, and even spiritual thinking displayed in the literature? Reading the texts with a modern mindset, used to dividing the material world from the immaterial (or supernatural), and accustomed to the symbolism of Western psychology, our interpretations and imaginative reactions may be misleading. Apart from probing some historical, characteristic cultural influences, Bawden does not compare the modes of thinking represented by the literature, a comparison which is necessary for the reader to be able to judge the literature on its own merits and in the context of its original intentions. The author is apparently more concerned with judging the literature in a historical perspective. He generally separates reality (that is, historical facts) from the imagination, and only questions what the texts tell us about the Mongols’ view of themselves and their past. In itself, Bawden’s fascination certainly inspires intriguing questions and captures the reader’s interest in what we or she has just read. However, it also leaves the reader with a bundle of facts and a bundle of myths and magic, without understanding the magic of the literature as a whole or the relationship between facts and myths. His methods of categorization reflects, above all, the Euro-Asian tendency to separate religion from science, the material from the immaterial world.

Bearing in mind these restrictions, and the fact that many answers to questions concerning mythical, magical, and spiritual experiences remain unanswered, the anthology can be appreciated as more than simply literature, rather as a source for further cultural and historical analyses. This book ought to be kept safe for continuous delight and renewed exploration.

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**Notes**


**Maye-Matthea van Staden** is writing her Master’s thesis in cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam on composed music and indigenous notions of nature in Mongolia. She works as a project manager and film-maker and is affiliated as Mongolia specialist to the North Asia Institute Tengri, in the Netherlands.

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**References**


**Bibliography**


- Lokman TSUI, MA is a researcher at the Leiden University Centre for Law in the Information Society. His research interests include the socio-political impact of the internet and cultural globalization, in specific for China. lokman@lokman.org

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**The cedar tree with its nuts**

Enhances sun and moon

Good behaviour, and honest mind

Enhances one’s own self.

That young, lovely creature

Enhances my own heart

The tree with all its leaves

Enhances sun and moon

If one studies when young,

It enhances one’s own self.

That young, happy creature

Enhances my own heart

Within my hopeful body

From ‘Traditional Verse’

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The nature of the topic calls for a multidisciplinary approach as indeed is presented in the book. The articles are founded on insightful research and set within solid theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The exceptional collection of articles is written by a team of well-respected authors. It is slightly unfortunate, however, that in this collection of authors, whom are either US or Hong Kong based, no European scholar has been included, which would have further strengthened the balance of this book. The second suggestion is that, while the main scope of the book is the impact of globalization on media in China, it would have been interesting to analyse the other, even less researched, side of the two-way interaction of globalization: the impact China is making on the world and its media. For example, further examining how the internet impacts on China, might not be interesting to look into the ways in which the development of the internet in China impacts the internet worldwide? A first sign of things to come can be seen in the problems arising due to China’s developing its own standards, which clash with international ones.

Despite these minor suggestions, *China Media, Global Contexts* further cements the outstanding reputation of the collection of books edited by Lee. *China Media, Global Contexts* is a crucial work for anyone interested in the development of contemporary media in China.