Chapter 49
The ethics and esthetics of Mongolian hip-hop

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Now an undisputed component of Ulaanbaatar’s musical scene, Mongolian hip-hop or rap (usually transcribed as хип-хоп and rap in Cyrillic script, but also found in Latin script) has started developing in the later part of the 1990s. Although it could be seen as a mere instance of post-socialist westernization, a side-effect of the country’s cultural opening after the peaceful democratic transition of 1990, Mongolian hip-hop is more than a transient and hollow cultural epiphenomenon. A “skillfully appropriated” musical genre (Marsh 2006: 128), it proposes a distinctive esthetic, as well as a multi-faceted discourse expressing some of the challenges posed to being a Mongol in Ulaanbaatar today. Although hip-hop culture originally spread in Mongolia through all of its three traditional media –rap music, graffiti, and breakdancing (Marsh 2006: 145-147)– the first has clearly spearheaded the movement. Rap music, in Mongolia as elsewhere (see Mitchell 2002 for an early overview of hip-hop cultures across the world) now tends to be performed and marketed independently of the other two.

A lot could be said about the esthetic of Mongolian hip-hop at its early stages: of course, pioneering artists such as Dain ba Enh (“War and Peace”), Ice Top or Lumino do not hide the inspiration they drew from the United States. It was not rare, in the early stages of hip-hop production, to hear Mongolian lyrics sung over well-known American instrumentals, in ways that leaned more toward cover versions than just samples. One of Lumino’s biggest hits, Hüniih (“[She’s] someone else’s”, 2004) features a remastered version of Busta Rhymes and Mariah Carey’s “I know what you want” (2003), while Ice Top’s Bi hend ch heregpii (“I’m useless”, c. 2001) uses Dr Dre’s “What’s the Difference” (1999). Interestingly enough, the lyrics of the Mongolian versions are in almost symmetrical opposition to the original American ones: a turned down declaration of love versus an affirmation of erotic craftsmanship in the first case; an expression of personal inadequacy versus dissing and competitive bragging in the second.

Surely, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dogg, The Wu-Tang Clan, and other leading figures of the “hardcore” or “gangsta rap” trend of hip-hop culture have had a major influence on Mongolian hip-hop since its beginning, and this continues today with the more than obvious
impact of Eminem on the most recent artists. Yet, it is not difficult to acknowledge that Mongolian hip-hop is esthetically far more than just a mimicry of the American icons in this business. For one thing, other influences are at play, such as French rap: songs from IAM and Suprême NTM found their way early to Ulaanbaatar, through routes that are still difficult to map. This occasioned an unlikely version of NTM’s “Ma Benz” (1998) by Mon Ta Rap (Minii Benz, c. 2002), and gave some bands their distinctive vocal style. Tatar for example, one of the most famous Mongol bands in the 2000s, created songs that played on an alternation between on the one hand a rough and low, at times guttural voice (Zaya) developed after NTM singer Joey Starr, and on the other hand a sharp, higher-pitched voice (Jagaa) somehow comparable to that of IAM’s charismatic leader Akhenaton (Interview 2005). Not to say anything, of course, of the Mongol influences on Mongolian hip-hop: singing and vocal arts have a long history in a country that is home to throat and overtone singing. The continuity between these techniques and rapping are willingly emphasized by practitioners on both sides, as shown in a recent movie by Benj Binks (Mongolian Bling, 2012).

Mongolian hip-hop, at its beginning, was amazingly experimental. Har Sarnai (“Black Rose”) is often credited with being the first hip-hop band in Mongolia, yet the songs they produced mixed up Electronic music, Rap and Pop, in a blend that surely sounded like nothing else before –or ever after for that matter (e.g. Has “Swastika”, n.d.). Ice Top started as a hip-hop band as early as 1996, and the songs they brought out around 2000 –Har gudamj (“Black street”), Jüülleh (short form of eriüüljüüleh gazar “sobering cell”, with Dain ba Enh), or Sanaa neg (“An idea”)– pushed the human voice to its limits. One has to hear Ice Top’s collective singing-as-barking in Har gudamj to measure how creative, how free from American or French influences Mongolian Hip-hop could be at the outset. There is no way to render here in words a musical experiment that takes language to its animal frontier – something neither they nor anyone else could quite recapture later, despite such honorable attempts as their 2005 Hün Chono (“Werewolf”).

Considering the wide variety of styles exhibited at its beginning, Mongolian hip-hop cannot but appear somehow homogenized now. In a way, it could be argued that hip-hop has become more Americanized as it developed on the Mongolian scene, with its stylistic spectrum dangerously narrowing down around the Eminem model. Yet, singers who are in the spotlight nowadays could be seen as collectively performing a stabilized Mongol hip-hop esthetic, probably best impersonated by the current star singer Gee. His even and steady flow delivered in a rough yet clear voice illustrates how Mongolian hip-hop evolved toward a style
that is obviously less varied and randomly creative as before, and yet still innovative in its use of language, as brilliantly illustrated by Rokit Bay in his breakthrough hit Neg ödriin haan (“King for a day”, 2010). Indeed, even a Mongol artist like TulgaT who lives in Los Angeles and sings in American English still does not end up resembling a gangsta rapper (e.g. Microphony ard “Behind the microphone”, 2010, with Gee and Rokit Bay or even Patient, 2010).

Something Mongol hip-hop does share with American hip-hop however, is a critical concern for authenticity. Not to say that all of Mongolian artists only speak about this in their songs: on the contrary, Mongolian rappers say a lot of different things, and their songs broach a wide variety of issues. Romantic love, for one, is probably the most pervasive topic of Mongolian hip-hop, making up for a good proportion of any rapper’s production –with the notable yet recent exception of Gee. From Tatar’s Hairiin duu (“Love Song”, 2004) and Nulims dussan hair (“Love in tears”, 2004) to Lumino’s Ireed butssan hair (“The love that came back”, 2002), Digital’s Chamdaa (“To you”, 2002), Ice Top’s Ene minii hair (“This is my love”, c. 2001) –despite its ubiquity, love is certainly not the subject matter where Mongolian hip-hop is at its deepest and most varied. Among other topics that have inspired lyrics to Mongolian rappers, one can find sexual attraction and casual romance (e.g. Tatar’s 2004 Sak guuniya “Hot chick”, and 2007 Messej “Text message”, or Ice Top’s 2005 Dalan Hudalch “70 liars”); celebrations of youth and partying (Lumino’s 2003 Namaig dagaad tsende “Come have fun with me”, Ice Top’s 2001 Baasan garig “Friday”); declarations of principles (Tatar’s 2004 Hip hop hün “Hip-hop man”, Lumino’s c. 2000 Zam “[My] way”); or the city of Ulaanbaatar itself (e.g. Ice Top’s c. 2001 Minii muu niislel hot “My poor capital city”, Tatar’s 2007 Ulaanbaatar), etc.

Throughout the variety of the topics they broach, however, some of these songs and several others actually raise concerns that revolve around a central question. This question is a question of ethics: it has to do with authenticity, with being what is commonly called an “authentic Mongol” (jinhene Mongol), in a way that is somehow reminiscent of the ethic of “realness” pervasive to American hip-hop (Rose 1994, Judy 1994, Ogbar 2007). This concern for Mongolian authenticity is not limited to hip-hop, far from it, as it seems to permeate all areas of today’s society in more or less extremist forms. Since the beginning of the 1990s, nationalism is on the rise, and Mongolian identity is more and more linked with the possession of a “pure blood” –something that is denied to children of mixed descent and to ethnic “minorities” in the Western provinces or in Inner Mongolia, who are disqualified as “Mongols” in the full sense of the term (see Bulag 1999 for an early account). In this general
view, blood is thicker than culture, its “lack” or “possession” trumps any process of learning or acculturation. The transmission of blood across generations is deemed an epitome of cultural preservation, the materiality of “tradition” in a broad sense.

This nationalistic and eugenic ideology is strikingly illustrated in one of Ice Top’s latest videos, called Iluu (“Superior”, 2009). Next to a shaman performing a ritual at a cairn (ovoo), the first singer declares “Ok ok let me show the way / […] Let me warm up the hot blood of our few Mongolian nationals / We, we are superior / The Mongolian man is superior / Mongolian blood is superior [follows a long list of what is “superior” in Mongolia: among which manliness, horses and… mothers]”. Yet, in relation to this general discourse of authenticity in Mongolia today, hip-hop is interesting on two accounts at least. First, the songs that tackle this topic are less concerned with the definition of Mongolian identity per se, than with obstacles preventing its practical application in the city of Ulaanbaatar. In other words, Mongolian rappers do not really ponder on what it is to be a Mongol in the city today (although they could have, considering that Mongolian identity has been consistently defined around rural references, and that Mongolian culture is suffused with foreign influences, including precisely hip-hop).

The question brought about in hip-hop songs is a bit different and in a way more interesting: it could be paraphrased as “how to be Mongolian today”, or rather “what is preventing us from being Mongolian nowadays” (as we used to be in the distant past). In other words, and still paraphrasing, “if Mongolian identity is embodied by definition by any (‘pure’) Mongol, if it literally flows in the veins of every descendant of Chinggis Haan, then what is it that prevents us from fulfilling our Mongolianness, and thus from achieving our potential as a nation?” The second thing that is interesting in the way Mongolian hip-hop poses this ethical question is that different rappers propose different answers. The ethics of Mongolian hip-hop is far from being univocal, and even on the particular topic of authenticity several opinions are expressed. Unfortunately, it is impossible here to review in detail the variety of ethical options proposed by Mongolian artists in their songs. I can merely sketch very roughly three positions that have been taken in hip-hop concerning this issue.

In their c. 2003 political pamphlet, Ice Top and Dain ba Enh unambiguously point at the government as the main obstacle preventing the Mongolian people from realizing its potential. Their song, called 76 in direct reference to the number of Members of Parliament, blames them for holding back the country through corruption and unabashed self-interest (“They are associates who keep sitting in assembly / They share between themselves what they embezzled and scatter away / Then they go home with a peaceful mind / Because the 76
are like that Mongolia perishes”). A similar stance is taken by Dain ba Enh in another song called Erönhiilögchid bichsen zahidal (“A Letter to our President”, 2002): “The government spends four years doing nothing. They never do the things they promised. I have seen your smiling face on television and read what you’ve written, but there is little that you have implemented. Do you run the country from your black glassed windowed cars? From behind the window, the poor Mongolians won’t be seen” (quoted in Marsh 2006: 149).

Unsurprisingly, another designated obstacle preventing the development of Mongolia is Chinese immigration. Echoing rampant anti-Chinese feelings in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolian hip-hop has produced its share of anti-Chinese slur (see Lim 2009). Thus a young band called 4 Züg (“Four directions”) has made a name for itself with a song called Buu davar hujaa nar (“Don’t overstep the limits you chinks”, 2006) that bluntly calls for murder (“Call the Chinese call call call / And kill them all all all”) after accusing them of sucking out Mongolia’s riches. Gee, probably the most prominent rapper today, is known for his violent allegations against Chinese people – e.g. Buruu gazar zöv tsagt (“Wrong place, right time”, as a member of Click Click Boom, 2008) and Hujaa (“Chink”, 2011) in which he tastefully poses as a butcher surrounded by sheep carcasses (see also Knapp 2012). Gee describes his country as saturated with Chinese presence to the point of suffocation: “this place is filled with prints of crooked-[legged Chinese] slippers / Lord Chinggis’ pride disappears in ruins / While we watch ourselves becoming Chinese citizens” (Buruu gazar zöv tsagt, 2008).

References to a shared blood, and to a national identity supposedly inherited from Chinggis Haan, are pervasive in these songs also (“We are the Mongols […] This blood is Mongol blood, it originated long ago / The famous Halh blood, vailiant and powerful” Ice Top 76, 2003). Thus politicians and Chinese people are not only accused of threatening the social fabric, or holding back the economy: they are accused of preventing the Mongols from being themselves, from achieving their blood. In this respect, Mongolian hip-hop offers an interesting twist to the American hip-hop ethic of “keeping it real”: rather than the oppositional subculture of a minority, Mongol rappers claim to voice a consensual expression of Mongol culture and identity as a whole. It is what they oppose, politicians or Chinese illegal immigrants, which are deemed an illegitimate minority (despite the fear that Chinese people actually become the majority in Mongolia): Mongol rappers, on their part, claim to be the voice of the majority.

Finally, there is a third ethical discourse developed within Mongolian hip-hop that does not quite fit with the first two. According to this stance, what prevents Mongolians from achieving their potential as a nation is… Mongolians themselves. Just before the year 2000, at
barely 18 years old, Tatar reached an early yet long-lasting fame on the hip-hop scene with a song called *Hün hüneereee bai*, “Be your own person”, an expression that became their motto from then on. “Be your own person” means do not “bullshit” (*tom baah*, literally “to shit big”), that is “do not pretend to be someone else in order to succeed”. After the shattering of values caused by the post-socialist transition, they contend, people try to take advantage of one another through deceit (*Busdyn hairig hündel*, “Respect the others’ love”, 2004) while the vulnerable ones waste their life in foolish dreams and make-belief (e.g. *Ene hüü* “This boy”, 2004). It transpires from Tatar songs that Mongolia would only overcome its difficulties with its population taking responsibility, by stopping to tell lies and by starting to “be their own person” (*Sanadag l sanaa* “A thought I think” 2004, *Nergüi* “No name”, 2005). Indeed, shifting the issue of authenticity from Mongolian identity to personal integrity, Tatar proposes an ethics of “keeping it real” that promotes social order through the esthetic codes of gangsta rap. No wonder then if a policeman once came up to the lead singer in the street, as the band confessed to me in 2007, patted him on the back and said: “you’re doing a great job son, keep it up”.

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