"For the Land of All Mongols": Gada Meiren the Bandit, Hero, and Proto-Revolutionary

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On April 4, 1931, Old Gada (Lao Gada) and his guerilla troops were surrounded by the Fengtian (Manchurian) army on three sides and the Shar Mörön River on the fourth. With his brothers-in-arms falling before him, Gada lead his horse into the churning waters (Chen and Saiximang 1979: 100). Unwilling to surrender, Gada gave his life to the waters of his homeland instead of to his enemies. He is called Old Gada as a term of endearment; when he died he was not yet forty years old.

Once a meiren (commander) of the Darhan Banner militia in Jirim League (now Tongliao Municipality in eastern Inner Mongolia), Gada became a hero for his defiance of the corrupt authorities. He fought to regain the ancestral homeland of his Khorchin Mongol tribe, which the wang (prince) of Darhan sold to the Manchurian government in 1929 as the “Liaobei Wasteland” (Lu 1979: 564). The story of his struggle and ultimate defeat is immortalized in song, symphony, narrative poetry, and film. A television series was released in 2011. Gada Meiren (whose Mongolian given name is Naamed) is considered an Inner Mongolian hero, and as such is sometimes viewed warily as a potential symbol of separatist sentiment, a threat to Chinese sovereignty in the region (Bulag 2004: 105). Yet he may also be a powerful rhetorical tool of the Chinese state, a man who defied the Manchurian imperialists and the oppressive aristocrats in a “revolutionary fight” (geming zhandou) (Lu 1979: 565). Moreover, at the time of his struggle, Inner Mongolia had ceased to exist as a political entity; the territory of the fallen Qing Empire was divided into newly-drawn provinces, nominally controlled by the Republic of China but actually in the hands of various warlords. The significance of Gada Meiren’s fight has expanded far beyond its local and temporal situation, and has become a symbol of all of Inner Mongolia and their “revolutionary” spirit.

Little is written about Gada Meiren, and what is written leaves many questions unanswered. The narrative poem about Gada Meiren is said to have been composed sometime in the 1950s, but so far I have found no text which traces its exact origins, nor anything to clarify authorship. It is even unclear whether the poem is oral or written in origin. Its connection to the “facts” of the rebellion is also a bit murky, although certain “artful untruths” stand out: for instance, in a 1979 published version of the narrative poem, Gada Meiren faces the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin, even though Zhang was assassinated before the sale of the Darhan lands (Seal 1996: 185; Bonavia 1995: 84). I will argue later that Zhang serves as a political foil to the “proto-revolutionary” Gada. Nonetheless, the oral and written traditions which memorialize his rebellion clearly constitute “invented tradition” used to establish a “national memory” of this hero (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Bauman 1992: 128). Switching from prose to poetry and back in each episode, the poem gestures to the idiom of bensen üliger, a Khorchin narrative poetic genre. This study begins with historical background on the Khorchin, a once-powerful tribe intimately connected with the Qing government, and on the changes wrought in eastern Inner Mongolia through Han Chinese migration, the sale of land, and the ensuing bardly of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The poem is then analyzed through comparison with this historical backdrop. Connections are drawn with bensen üliger. The general absence of local specificity expands the poem’s appeal beyond the Khorchin, while the role of Gada’s wife Peony and Zhang Zuolin add complexity to the legend. The local, regional, and national significance of the poem is explored. Noyes and Abraham’s study of the formation of national memory (1999), as well as Seal’s work on outlaw narrative and its “convenience” for both marginal and official interests (1996), inform this analysis. Gada Meiren’s legend flourishes because of its malleability: it can at once represent a struggle to regain a by-gone era, and a harbinger of the communist revolution.
The Khorchin Mongols: Shifting Centers of Power

Gada Meiren’s ancestors were once among the most powerful people of East Asia. They rose to power, however, through a sort of “devil’s pact.” After the Ming expelled the Mongol Yuan government from China in 1368, the Mongol tribes splintered and fell into warfare. The disunited eastern tribes, ruled nominally by the Northern Yuan government, were later threatened by the Zhungar empire of the western Qirat tribes. The rise of the Manchu offered a chance for peace and stability. In 1624 the Khorchin made an alliance with the Manchu. Later, Ejei Khan of the Northern Yuan submitted to the Manchu, thus dissolving his empire. The Manchu divided Mongol territory into Inner and Outer regions, and integrated the Mongols into their military system of banners, which organized locales and families (Atwood 2004: 451). These banners were organized into leagues, equivalent in size to a county in a Chinese province. The Outer Mongols, who were mostly of the Khalkha tribe and under looser control from the Manchu Qing government, grew apart from the numerous tribes of Inner Mongolia. The Inner Mongol tribes were in turn isolated from each other by the boundaries of their respective banners. The borders also confined the livelihood of the Mongols, who as pastoral nomads could no longer move camp wherever they pleased. Still, the Mongols were privileged as bannermen, the Khorchin particularly so. The Kangxi Emperor (1662-1722), one of the greatest leaders of the Qing, was quite close with his Khorchin grandmother (Atwood 2004: 309).

Geography and government policy changed the Khorchin way of life dramatically. Jirim League, the traditional Khorchin territory, is in present-day eastern Inner Mongolia and neighboring Liaoning Province. Nestled along the Hinggan mountain range, the region receives much more rainfall than the Mongolian heartland. The inhabitants of the Jirim region have practiced agricultural for at least centuries, if not millennia (Hürelbaatar 1999: 192). In the mid-nineteenth century, the Qing reversed centuries of protectionism and allowed Han Chinese farmers to migrate north of the Great Wall into Inner Mongolia and Manchuria. Eastern Inner Mongolia experienced a particularly high influx of migrants. The Khorchin thus evolved into a semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral lifestyle and a sinicized folk culture (ibid.).

By the turn of the century, the Han Chinese migrant population in Inner Mongolia had expanded enormously. The sedentary agriculture of the Chinese permitted denser populations than Mongol nomadic pastoralism. The Chinese thus overtook the Mongol population; by the mid-nineteen-forties, the Mongols were an absolute minority in the region (Hürelbaatar 1999: 195). The Han Chinese were not always unwelcome, however; in the late nineteenth century, the migrants worked as tenant farmers, working for the banner wang (princes).

The greatest source of interethnic strife in Jirim and other eastern banners before the communist era seems to have come from the sale of Mongol land to the Qing government and, after the fall of the empire, to northern warlords. Many wang in the region squandered taxes and personal wealth on luxury. When they had lost all other sources of income, the wang sold their land. These sales displaced the native Mongol farmers and herders as military personnel “reclaimed” these “wastelands” for their own use (Lu 1979: 564). The Mongol inhabitants lost their land and with it, their means of survival. Some Mongol men chose to fight the reclamation personnel, forming bandit gangs in the Hinggan mountains and forests. The first prominent gang, led by the former herder Bayindalai, turned Suluke Banner into “mounted brigand” territory. Bayindalai waged a successful guerilla campaign in the region from 1904 to 1907. An erstwhile farmer, Taoketao, lodged his own campaign in Khorchin and Zhalait territories in 1906-1907 (Yiduhexige 2002: 183).

Zhang Zuolin, an ethnic Manchu from Liaoning Province and the anachronistic villain of the Gada Meiren poem, was himself involved in banditry as a youth. In 1900, four years after Zhang began his career of outlawry, the gang joined the imperial army in its fight against the Boxer Rebels. After the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Zhang served the Qing “on border patrol and bandit-suppression duties” (Bonavia 1995: 63). It was in fact Zhang who put down Bayindalai and Taoketao (Yiduhexige 2002: 185). Parlaying himself to Yuan Shikai, the first president of the Republic of China and antagonist of the Kuomingtang (KMT), Zhang eventually controlled all of Manchuria, including the former Inner Mongolian territory Chahar and Suiyuan provinces (Bonavia 1995: 61). Zhang’s Manchuria flourished from 1917 to the mid-nineteen-twenties, but succumbed to crop failures and inflation around 1927. When Zhang failed to wrest control of Beijing from the Zhili government, the Japanese Kwantung Army planted a bomb on the railroad tracks along his route home to Mukden. Except for Zhang’s death in the June 4, 1928 explosion, he serves as the perfect foil to Gada Meiren: instead of fighting injustice, Zhang capitalized on it. Gada Meiren went from military officer to outlaw; Zhang turned against the very people he may have once fought alongside. In Anglophone outlaw narrative, the outlaw breaks the laws of man when the laws of men break higher moral codes (Seal 1996: 184). The same ethical theory applies to Gada Meiren: he fought a corrupt wang who had undermined his legitimacy with his own tribal kin, and a state which exiled Mongol farmers and pastoralists off of their “barren” land and into penury and starvation.

Seal describes the “convenience” of outlaw narratives not only for the marginalized, but also for
groups antagonistic to the one represented by the outlaw. Ned Kelly, a nineteenth-century Australian bank robber and "bushranger", has become a national hero. His story resonates for many Aborigines in Western Australia and the Northern Territories, who "see Kelly as an appropriate representative of their own grievances and struggle" against the state (Seal 1996: 179). This may seem improbable when Kelly’s Anglo-Celtic ancestors were the cause of so much of that grief. Kelly appears in books, films, television series, and even on a government-issued postage stamp (Seal 1996: 177, 148).

Parallels also exist between Gada Meiren and Owain Glyndŵr, a 15th-century Welsh nobleman who lead a years-long fight against British rule from 1401-1415. He is at once a "redeemer-hero" of the Welsh nation, a "social bandit" hiding in the mountains and on the margins, and in more recent times a "national hero" of the Welsh people (Henken 1996: 20, 160). Beginning in the nineteenth century, Glyndŵr’s localized rebellion morphed into a more generalized "revolt against unjust treatment and the struggle for freedom (168). As will be shown later, the local particulars of Gada Meiren’s uprising have also been subsumed into a narrative with broader appeal to Mongolians across China, and to Han Chinese as well.

The outlaw narrative supports the state’s self-portrayal as an authority sensitive to a higher moral code and the needs of its citizens. This again points to the necessity of pitting Zhang against Gada Meiren, for Zhang was a staunch anti-communist. Although Gada never speaks of the class struggle in the 1979 poem, he does not have to. He opposed the reactionaries, anti-communists, and feudalists; his is, by association, a revolutionary.

Khorchin Narrative Poetry in the 1979 Gada Meiren Poet

The 1979 Gada Meiren poem is traditionalized through genre, style, and imagery. The poem is divided into episodes, including an opening song (xuge ). Each episode begins with prose, then shifts between prose and poetry. Speech is always in verse. This prosimetric format is common in bensen üliger (“book-based epic”), a Khorchin oral tradition of retelling Chinese serial fiction (Heissig 1996: 90). Chinese novels circulated in manuscript form and became popular among educated Khorchin. These novels were then oralized and performed by huurch’, storytellers who accompanied themselves with a fiddle or huur (Wurenqimuge 1988: 22-23). In the performance of bensen üliger, the huurch’ speaks the prose and sings the verse while accompanying himself, in a style akin to the tanci tradition of Chinese chantefable (Bender 2003: 3). The format of the 1979 poem invokes a uniquely Khorchin oral tradition which grew out of close cultural exchange with the Chinese.

While the format of the poem may be localized, the contents appeal to a non-local audience. Images and lines from the folksong "Gada Meiren" appear throughout the 1979 edition of the poem. The song says nothing of Gada Meiren’s actions, but rather analogizes them with the migration of wild swans: just as they must always rest at the Shar Mörön River, so too Gada Meiren fought for all Mongols:

The wild swans flying from the south
Must rest on the Yangtze River
Gada Meiren’s revolt
Is for the land of all Mongols

Both the Mongolian version of the song and the 1979 poem name the Shar Mörön, not the Yangtze. Still, the idea of a major river should resonate for most readers. The image of the Shar Mörön and the migrating swans appears in the opening song and the final episode of the poem, and sporadically in other episodes.

Although the Shar Mörön, Erlong Mountain, and other landmarks are mentioned, the land is always described as pasture land (muchang ) and grassland (caoyuan ). Perhaps the inhabitants of Darhan Banner were exclusively pastoralists. Given its location, however, one suspects that a mixed economy of agriculture and pastoralism was practiced. Gada Meiren may indeed have been fighting to regain farmland. That possibility, however, has less appeal to Inner Mongols to the west, where the drier climate almost totally precludes agriculture. The picture of farming Khorchin Mongols would also strike most Han Chinese as odd, as they are accustomed to the image of Inner Mongolia as a vast nomadic grassland. If the prosimetric format of Gada Meiren constitutes traditionalization, then the insistence on the imagined pastoralism of Darhan Banner constitutes invented tradition. The reality of the Khorchin mixed economy would simply not make sense to anyone outside that particular locality.
While the prosimetric format authenticates the Khorchin voice and the invocation of the grasslands reaches out to non-Khorchin readers, the story of Gada’s wife Peony marries Khorchin bensen üliger with communist narrative. Peony was in fact Gada’s third wife, but the other two are not mentioned in the poem (Lu 1979: 563). According to the poem’s telling, Gada would have accomplished nothing without his wife. It is Peony who urges him to confront the wang about the plight of their people. When Gada is stripped of his title, she tells him this is just the opportunity he needs to truly devote himself to his cause. With her encouragement, Gada and a group of supporters travel to the capital, Mukden, to have an audience with Zhang Zuolin himself. The evil Zhang throws the men in prison and has them sent back to Darhan, where they will await execution. As Peony prepares to rescue her husband and his friends, she realizes the futility of her situation. She knows that she and her people are up against forces more powerful than their own. Assuming she will lose everything in the fight, and so chooses to give up her possessions before the army can take them from her. She sells all her livestock and as much of her possessions as she can. She begs Zhuri Lama to take her three-year-old daughter, Tianjiliang, and raise her as his own. But, beholden to the wang and his own backwardness, the lama refuses:

My ancestors were loyal servants of the people.
To oppose His Highness would disgrace my forebears.
Old Gada is already an unfilial traitor,
you must not join him in his misdeeds.
I will happy take care of your livestock,
but I cannot accept Tianjiliang.
It is not that I am heartless,
I just cannot commit treason (62-63).

Without the lama’s help, Peony is sure her daughter will eventually fall into the hands of her enemies. She has only one other option to save her daughter from orphanhood and capture. After hesitation and tears, Peony finally manages to shoot Tianjiliang. After the child is dead, she sets her house on fire. Now nothing remains to hold her back.

The Mongols converted to Tibetan Buddhism in the seventeenth century. Mongol intellectuals and Western scholars alike have long held that this conversion pacified and weakened the Mongols (see Elverskog 2006). By the nineteenth century, approximately one third of all Mongol men became lamas, contributing to population decline (Hangin 1973: 1). The corruption of lamas was also no secret (Hangin 1973: 76). Indeed, in Khorchin versions of the Gesar epic, which spread from Tibet along with Buddhism, pit the pious hero Gesar against evil lamas. In bensen üliger, lamas become manggus, monsters with magical powers who face shamans in battle (Wurenqimuge 1988: 25). Zhuri Lama is a modern version of the lama manggus. He has no magical powers; instead, his evil lies in his refusal to contribute to the rebellion. Earlier bensen üliger criticized the lamas for, among other crimes, usurping the power of the Mongols’ native shamanism. In the poem, the lama is not an enemy of the shamans, but of the people. Zhuri Lama is bound to his feudal commitments, unwilling to lose face for his ancestors, the wang, or himself. The compilers of the poem had no need to inject Communist rhetoric into the story; the Party message of clergy as feudal reactionaries can be read in between the lines.

Less blatant is Peony’s feminism. She does not simply act to help her husband in his righteous cause. Rather, the revolt is her own cause, which she initiates through her husband. Women and other marginal peoples sometimes make their way into the folklore of revolt as strong, courageous heroes. There is a certain democracy to folklore, albeit not total equality (Beiner 2007: 1997). Her bravery suits not only the Khorchin folklore, but also the communist lore, which gives women a more active role in the revolution.
The government suppressed the story of Gada Meiren during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), fearing it would spread “ethnic separatism” (minzu fenlie) (Wu 1979: 566). After Mao’s death and the conviction of the Gang of Four, Gada Meiren was rehabilitated as a revolutionary hero (ibid.). He is a “convenient” outlaw figure for the communist Chinese state, which itself began as a band of outlaws rejected by the KMT. Taken at face-value, Gada Meiren’s struggle was simply for the repossession of land. He did not seek to overthrow the class system or communalize all private property. Perhaps he simply lead a movement of social banditry, a peasant revolt designed to return the Khorchin world to its traditional order, not to create “a new and perfect world” for all Mongols (within the context of a new China) (Hobsbawm 1959: 5). We do not know if Gada Meiren supported the Inner Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party, nor if he would have applauded the founding of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1947 by the Chinese Communist Party (two years before the Party wrested control from the KMT) (Atwood 2004: 247). Yet the folklore surrounding him, as that surrounding other outlaw heroes, has been imbued with political meaning (Seal 1996: 197). In order to maintain its status quo, the Chinese Communist Party harks back to its early days as an outlawed entity. This casts the Party not as a stodgy hegemon, but as a youthful underdog, fighting other hegemons in order to bring justice to the Chinese people. “National memory” is built most solidly on folk tradition, in dialogue between the periphery and the center (Noyes and Abrahams 1999: 92). Since the Party could not suppress Gada Meiren’s story—just as it failed to suppress most folklore in its purgative of the “four olds”—it wisely allowed scholars to revisit the narrative, and read into it a story of incipient communist revolution.

Further Research

Many questions of the Gada Meiren legend’s origins and development are left unanswered here. To fully explore the meanings of Gada Meiren to various Mongolian groups and to the Chinese state, research is needed on the authorship and historiography of the narrative poem, song, and other extant texts concerning Gada Meiren, as well as their variation, evolution, and interpretation by different ethnic and political groups. For example, is Zhang Zuolin the villain in all versions of the Gada Meiren poem, or do the wang and other characters receive more of the blame? How did Zhang become such a central figure? Also, what, if any, connection is there between the Gada Meiren story and the Inner Mongolian independence movement? I am also curious as to the performance of the Gada Meiren poem. Is it ever told in the story-song format of bensen üliger? Just as the interpretation of the present it does as about the past itself, so too the 1979 poem analyzed here speaks to the concerns of Inner Mongols emerging from the Cultural Revolution as much, if not more so, than to concerns of the Darhans of the 1920s (Vansina 1985: xii, 119). The 2002 film adds another presentistic twist: director Feng Xiaoning has moved the story forward to World War II and pitted Gada against the Japanese. A thorough study of all print and manuscript materials, as well as ethnographic fieldwork, are necessary to answer the many questions surrounding Gada Meiren and his many symbolisms. This study offers a beginning look into the complexity surrounding the Gada Meiren legend.

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WORKS CITED


Gada Meiren and others were imprisoned, and the land continued to be sold. The continued land sales, but also more general discontent and desperation lead to open rebellion. Gada Meiren was freed from prison and quickly rallied about 200 fighters. They targeted both the Darkhan Wang's (i.e. the banner prince's) property and Chinese trading companies and money lenders. However, these bandits weakened the discipline of Gada's troops. The rebels managed to stop the banner's further colonization, but in the autumn of 1930 troops from the surrounding cities encircled Gada Meiren's rebels. In spring 1931, Gada Meiren fell, and the insurgents dispersed.[2] In popular culture. The 2002 movie Gada Meilin. Gada Meiren (whose Mongolian given name is Naadmed) is considered an Inner Mongolian hero, and as such is sometimes viewed warily as a potential symbol of separatist sentiment, a threat to Chinese sovereignty in the region (Bulag 2004: 105). Yet he may also be a powerful rhetorical tool of the Chinese state, a man who defied the Manchurian imperialists and the oppressive aristocrats in a revolutionary fight (geming zhandou ©å'½æˆ˜æ–—) (Lu 1979: 565). Moreover, at the time of his struggle, Inner Mongolia had ceased to exist as a political entity; the territory of the fallen Qing Empire was divided The Mongolian Revolution of 1921 (Outer Mongolian Revolution of 1921, or People's Revolution of 1921) was a military and political event by which Mongolian revolutionaries, with the assistance of the Soviet Red Army, expelled Russian White Guards from the country, and founded the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924. Although nominally independent, the Mongolian People's Republic was a satellite state of the Soviet Union until a third Mongolian revolution in January 1990. The revolution also ended.