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Home Alone...

Historical and political contexts and the shared sense as a nation under those circumstances influence a nation's arts and literature far beyond what we can imagine. If we look back on Mongolian literature, we will see the vivid traces of our history and political progress as we experienced them. To give you a specific framework for my talk today, I will highlight some historical milestones of Mongolia and how these milestones are reflected in our national literature.

At its beginning, Mongolian literature was just about our kings: about their glorious victories, their wisdom, their bravery, their grace when they were most powerful (in the 13th century). During that period of time, all literary works were written in favor of the rulers and under the influence of their power. Perspectives of ordinary folks were almost invisible in our ancient literature.

Then, the Mongol Empire scattered because of centuries of fighting internally for state power. The Mongol Empire began to lose its dominance to the neighboring Manchu Dynasty. During the 17th century, Mongolia became a semi-colonial country under Qing Dynasty—at the same time, it embraced Buddhism as its main religion. National intellectuals became religious leaders and began to write religious literature mainly in Tibetan rather than writing in Mongolian. Meanwhile, when we were losing our state power to an extrinsic influence and our national intellects to another foreign religious impact, the voice of suffering ordinary people began to be heard in the abandoned field of Mongolian literature. The main themes of the works written by ordinary folks were resistance against Manchu dynasty; anxiety over losing their freedom, their own kings; and nostalgia for the times they were powerful as a nation.

Another important milestone of our history was at the beginning of the 19th century, when our people started to fight for independence. Military commanders with civilian roots took state power and purged political and religious feudalists completely, which resulted in the executions of thousands of Buddhist monks, national intellectuals, and leaders. In 1924, Mongolia declared its independence and under the direct influence of USSR, the Soviet Union, it embraced Socialism as its path of development. During the Soviet regime, Mongolian literature lost its freedom again and fell into a rigidly disciplined state censorship. The literary movement which rose up in search of freedom and independence ended up becoming a weapon of political propaganda.

After being strictly controlled by the Soviet Union for 70 years, in 1990, Mongolia became a democratic country for the first time in its history. In this revolutionary reformation, centuries of lost pride, fragmented identity as a nation, hidden anxiety and all the political pressure could be shed at last. With the newly obtained freedom, could we feel ourselves as individuals, not a part of mechanism? Could we

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Buzarovska (Macedonia), Batsuuri (Mongolia), Oddang (Indonesia), Echeto (Venezuela)

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express our true selves, tell the naked truths of our own lives without the covered layers of political prejudices? Share our true feelings as human beings which were pressured to be hidden from the start, under the power of glorious kings, under the pressure of extrinsic vandalism, under the chaos of revolutionary periods and under the control of borrowed ideology? We could have...could have...but, strangely enough, our contemporary literature was abandoned, again. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed and we released ourselves from their control, all the people hurried back to the glorious periods of their history to restore their lost pride as a nation. Instead of embracing new ideologies of freedom, they took a long trip back to our history, back to their old values, which were prohibited during the Socialist era. Nowadays, almost seventy percent of the national bestsellers and award-winning books are historical novels or fiction works set in history. However, the values these works of art re-explore from the past are at odds with the values of our newly-enjoyed democracy. For most of these writers, democracy was never a true democracy, but just a chance to go back to searching for the lost identity of the nation in our history.

Maybe, after the centuries of extrinsic pressure, we lack the confidence to consider ourselves as people whose personal feelings are worth to telling, people whose own lives matter. Maybe, we are trying to rebuild that confidence in ourselves by wielding the ancestral pride from our history. Maybe...

Sometimes, in this cultural climate, I feel like I am a kid left in home alone, cooking some soup on the electronic stove while my parents have gone to the forest to collect firewood, never to return. But I do know that the kid has to survive, and her story is worth telling.

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