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C L A S S I C S

THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS

TRANSLATED BY CHRISTOPHER P. ATWOOD

PENGUIN  CLASSICS

THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS

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My mentor in reading Middle Mongolian was György Kara. I was very much hoping to get his feedback on this translation, but he passed away while it was still in progress. My mother, Nancy C. Atwood, was very enthusiastic about this translation, but she also passed away during the final months of copy-editing. I dedicate this translation to their memory.

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Introduction

The Mongol empire expanded faster and further than any other empire in world history. It was a measure of the scale of their conquest that it transformed Eurasia, creating the great countries we know there today. We often say that ‘the Mongols conquered China, Russia and Iran’, which is true – geographically. Yet before the Mongol conquests, China, Russia and Iran did not actually exist as unified countries, and the dominant tendency in their histories was to further disunity, not to unity. One could thus just as well say that the Mongol empire *created* China, Russia and Iran.

History views conquest ambivalently today. Not only is the cost to the conquered too often appalling, but telling the story of the conquerors is the kind of male-centred, ruling-class narrative that social history was intended to transcend. Yet it is conquest that has been the motor driving the connections between cultures and environments, transcending narrow national limits and generating globalization and hybridity. What would it be like to tell the story of conquest in a way that does not sugar-coat the violence and class dominance at its heart, but also locates that violence and class dominance in the domestic settings of the conquerors – not just the public personas of the male conquerors but also their private lives among their ladies and their children? Such is *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the pre-eminent story of Chinggis (‘Genghis’) Khan (1162?–1227),¹ his mother, his wives, his closest friends and his sons.

The Secret History of the Mongols (Mongǰol-un ni’uca tobciyan) is, as its first English translator, Frances W. Cleaves, said, ‘not only the capital monument of thirteenth-century Mongolian

literature', but also 'one of the great literary monuments of the world'. Its storyline begins with the distant genealogy and legendary past of the Mongol khans before their empire. It then gives a portrait of the young conqueror under his birth name Temujin, the sudden death of his father Yisukei, the dangers and hardships of his childhood and youth under his mother Ö'elun, and his gradual accumulation of friends and family. After alliances with a neighbouring khan, To'oril, and a sworn brother (*anda*) of his childhood named Jamuqa, Temujin eventually follows the advice of his wife Börte, strikes out on his own, gathers followers and is first elected as a petty khan, under the title Chinggis Khan.

What follows then are a series of battles with rivals in what is now eastern Mongolia and the adjacent parts of modern-day southern Siberia and China's Inner Mongolia. His rivals include the Yörkin house, headed by his cousins, the rival Tayici'ut princes, leading a more distantly related line of khans, and his old friend/rival Jamuqa. Backing him up in these conflicts, though, is To'oril, by this time known as Ong Khan, who rules the powerful Kereyit khanate, or kingdom, in central Mongolia.

Eventually, Chinggis Khan subdues his enemies in eastern Mongolia, finishing with a wholesale massacre of the Tatars who had killed his father and grandfathers. But as he rises to power, Jamuqa, who had also joined Ong Khan's entourage, begins to conspire with Ong Khan's son Ilqa Senggum and poisons the khan's mind against his eastern ally Chinggis Khan. In the end Ong Khan launches a treacherous attack on Chinggis Khan. The attack fails to kill or capture its target, but now Chinggis Khan is entirely on his own. After sending a lengthy indictment of Ong Khan's treachery, Chinggis Khan manages to catch Ong Khan feasting unawares, and drives him and his son Ilqa Senggum into exile, where Ong Khan is killed. The unification of the Mongolian plateau is concluded with two lengthy campaigns, first against the Naiman in western Mongolia, and then the Merkit in northern Mongolia. The last fugitive to be captured is Jamuqa; although Chinggis Khan offers to share the kingdom with him, Jamuqa knows it cannot be and accepts an honourable execution.

With that follows a lengthy description of the new regime.

Chinggis Khan organizes his people into the famous Central Eurasian 'decimal organization', assigning all the people into nested groups of tens, hundreds and thousands of households. To the thousands he appoints commanders from among those who assisted in his rise. He also designs a body of *kešikten*, a term meaning both 'fortunate ones' and 'those serving in shifts', as bodyguards. Around the borders of Mongolia, in Inner Mongolia, eastern Turkestan and the forests of Siberia, he marries his daughters to submissive rulers of nearby realms. Finally, he faces down a challenge from Teb-Tenggeri, a shaman who had initially announced Heaven and Earth's collaboration to enthrone Chinggis as the supreme Khan of all Mongolia, but who now seems to be aiming to replace Chinggis Khan's dynasty with his own. With Teb-Tenggeri killed, the unification of Mongolia and the stabilization of the new regime are complete.

Chinggis Khan now turns to the world beyond the Mongolian plateau. He first subdues the Golden Khan, the ruler of North China, who had previously conspired with the Tatars to hold down the early Mongol khans. The campaign begins in 1211 and concludes with the sacking of Zhongdu (present-day Beijing) in 1215. After that, Chinggis Khan responds in 1219 to a treacherous massacre of his merchants and envoys by attacking the Khwarazmian sultan of the Sarts (a general term for people of the Central Asian and Middle Eastern oases), campaigning as far as the Indus River. Finally, in 1226–7, he destroys the Tangut kingdom in what is now north-western China. In the midst of these campaigns, he makes his third son Ökdei his heir apparent, after a vicious family quarrel breaks out between his first son Joci and his second son Cağadai.

After Chinggis Khan dies during the last Tangut campaign, Ökdei is duly enthroned. With the help of his brother Cağadai (Joci had already passed away), Ökdei sets out to complete their father's legacy. First, he conquers the last Golden Khan in North China, who had fled south of the Yellow River. Then he dispatches Chinggis Khan's grandsons to conquer the western steppe as far as Hungary. But family troubles again intervene. During the campaign against the last Golden Khan, the spirits of North China's outraged Earth and Water had attacked the Mongol

khan; only the willingness of Chinggis Khan's fourth son, Tolui, to drink an enchanted potion as ransom saves the khan's life. And on the great western campaign, another vicious quarrel breaks out between the cousins, pitting Ökodei and Cağadai's sons against Joci's son Batu. Despite these family conflicts, Ökodei confirms his father's organization of the *kešikten*, and institutes new policies designed to stabilize the empire and ease the lives of his Mongol subjects. The history closes with a testament in which Ökodei Khan reviews his four achievements and four demerits.

This story is told mostly in prose, but with lengthy passages of alliterative verse, sometimes presented as direct speech, sometimes presented in the voice of the narrator. Intimate scenes from Chinggis Khan's childhood, violent quarrels and bloody steppe battles are all pictured as if the author had witnessed them personally. Dates are given in the twelve-animal cycle, with the first one corresponding to 1201 during Chinggis Khan's early campaigns. Chinggis Khan himself passed away in 1227, and the history covers the period up to, but not quite including, the death of his son Ökodei Khan in 1241.

1. THE INFLUENCE OF THE *SECRET HISTORY* AND ITS PRESERVATION

Once told, the *Secret History* became, despite its secrecy (on which more below), the hidden mainspring of the narratives of the Mongol empire's rise. Under Chinggis Khan's grandson Qubilai (Kublai) Khan, who reigned from 1260 to 1294, the Mongol empire's capital was moved from Mongolia to the new twin capitals of Daidu and Shangdu – one the modern Beijing and the other now in ruins in Inner Mongolia. At the same time, Qubilai Khan decided to take the available Mongolian sources and re-edit them in a fashion shaped by Chinese historical conventions into an 'Authentic Chronicle of Chinggis Khan'. This was a bilingual text, with Mongolian as the primary version and an interlinear Chinese translation. The basic narrative was taken from the *Secret History*, but all the family conflicts and squabbles were

purged to create a picture of Chinggis Khan as an uncomplicated and wise dynastic founder. Eventually, the Mongolian version was lost, but the Chinese text was combined with a similar 'Authentic Chronicle' of Chinggis's son Ökōdei around 1319 to form the text now known as the *Campaigns of Chinggis Khan*, or *Shengwu qinzheng lu* in Chinese.

Meanwhile, a Mongolian copy of the 'Authentic Chronicle of Chinggis Khan' was taken to the court of the Ilkhans, the Mongol rulers in the Middle East. There it was translated into Persian and made the core of the monumental *Compendium of Chronicles* by the Persian vizier and polymath Rashiduddin, supplemented by a vast number of other Mongolian and Persian sources. This history was completed in 1304 and then folded into an even vaster world history.² Much of the *Secret History*'s text was thus preserved in more or less verbatim citation in the Chinese of the *Campaigns of Chinggis Khan* and the Persian of the *Compendium of Chronicles*, both sponsored by Chinggis Khan's descendants.

In China, the Mongol Yuan dynasty was overthrown by Chinese rebels and the Mongol court fled back into Mongolia in 1368. The new Ming dynasty gathered the materials on the former Mongol rulers and completed the *Yuanshi*, or 'History of the Yuan Dynasty', in 1370. This work was another monumental encyclopedia; the chapter on Chinggis Khan followed the 'Authentic Chronicle of Chinggis Khan' very closely and hence preserved at third hand much of the *Secret History*'s narrative line.³ When Europe's Enlightenment thinkers like Gibbon and Voltaire became aware of Chinggis Khan in the eighteenth century, it was Rashiduddin's *Compendium of Chronicles* and the Ming dynasty's *Yuanshi* that were the sources of their knowledge, directly or indirectly – but behind both of them lay, unacknowledged, the *Secret History*.

Finally, in the nineteenth century, the once-secret *Secret History of the Mongols* began to emerge into the light of scholarship. The basis was a version of the text which in the Ming dynasty had been transcribed syllable by syllable into Chinese characters chosen solely for their sound value, and then glossed word by word into Chinese. This version of the text, the Hanlin recension,

thus preserved the Mongolian-language text with a complete Chinese translation. It had been prepared in the 1380s as a tool to help Ming-dynasty interpreters communicate with the Mongols they had just expelled from China. Early in the fifteenth century it was published in twelve-*juan* and fifteen-*juan* versions (a *juan* is a Chinese textual division, longer than a chapter, shorter than a volume). These editions no longer survive, but before they were lost they were copied carefully in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Chinese scholars; hence the text of the Hanlin recension was preserved to the present. First Chinese, then Russian, Japanese, Mongolian, German, French and American scholars began to use it to reconstruct the original Mongolian.

In the twentieth century, another version of the *Secret History* surfaced in Mongolia itself, less complete but still very useful. As the new government of the Mongolian People's Republic began collecting manuscripts for its fledgling national library, scholars found a copy of the c.1651 *Altan tobci* or 'Golden Chronicle', compiled by the monk Lubsang-Danzin, which incorporated verbatim about two-thirds of the *Secret History*. The text was interlarded among other legendary and apocryphal materials and frequently miscopied the now archaic *Secret History* language, but it still proved invaluable for reconstructing the text. The Lubsang-Danzin *Altan tobci* or *LAT* recension thus joined the Hanlin recension as the second main resource for reconstructing the Mongolian text of the *Secret History*, followed by the parallel passages in the *Campaigns of Chinggis Khan*, the *Compendium of Chronicles* and the *Yuanshi*.⁴

In the English language, three previous translators have defined how the *Secret History* was read:

1. Francis Woodman Cleaves, whose translation was completed in 1956, but for personal reasons not published until 1982;
2. Igor de Rachewiltz, whose translation was first published in serial form from 1971 to 1985 and issued as a book with a massive commentary in 2004;
3. and Urgunge Onon, a Daur Mongol from Manchuria working in the tradition of his fellow Daur scholars

Duke Tsengde and his successors Eldengtai and Ardajab (2001).

Along with the invaluable reference works produced by Hitoshi Kuribayashi at Tohoku University in Sendai, these have been my constant companions throughout this translation. The transmission, recovery and translation of the text constitute one of the great stories of modern scholarship; I have told this story in the Afterword.

2. THE WORLD OF THE *SECRET HISTORY*

The *Secret History* gives us an insider view of a ‘mobile country’ unparalleled in its immediacy. But the Secret Historian was not an ethnographer and took for granted the material, social, political and spiritual background of Chinggis Khan’s youth and the early Mongol empire. Fortunately, many medieval travellers, Chinese, French, Italian and Arab, visited this exotic world and left us their impressions of this already thousand-year-old civilization. A tour of how other Afro-Eurasian writers saw the Secret Historian’s world will orient the reader to the unfamiliar lifeways of Central Eurasia’s mobile pastoralists and the institutions they built to live, thrive and succeed in it.

Gers, hordes and *esuk*: dwellings and food

The fundamental technology for living in the steppe was the mobile home made of felt coverings over a wooden trellis network. In the *Secret History*, living in dwellings with walls of felt defined the Mongolian people much more than the nomadism that outsiders often fixed on. The *Secret History* describes the people of Chinggis Khan as ‘the felt-walled people’ (*śisgei tu’urğa-tan*), in contrast to the ‘plank-door people’ (*qabdasun e’ude-ten*) of the conquered lands.⁵ The Mongols at this time did not label themselves as ‘nomads’ but they did view the Tanguts and others as being stuck in place with their ‘ponderous

possessions and pounded-wall cities' (*nunji nuntuq-tan nödüksen balaḡasu-tan*).

This felt-covered trellis mobile home is called in its various forms 'yurt' in Russian and other European languages, but *ger* in Mongolian, pronounced roughly like English 'gear' but with a clipped 'ea' and a rolled 'r'. It is often described in other languages as a 'felt tent', but the Mongolian word *ger* contains none of the connotations of precarity and flimsiness that the word 'tent' brings up in English. Instead it was the regular, permanent residence which was supplemented by a wide variety of temporary, less solid dwellings, many of which are mentioned in the *Secret History*: the *nembüle* or grass-thatched hut, the *qoš* or *qošiliq*, a felt-covered tent made in the tepee shape widely used in Siberian and American boreal climates, and the cotton *cacir* or woollen *terme*, both much larger pavilion- or marquee-style tents used for grand political assemblies. To distinguish the *ger* from these more temporary structures, I use the Mongolian term.

Mobile felt dwellings have had a long history in the Central Eurasian steppe and have changed considerably since their first appearance, around 750 BC. Over time, the tendency has been to move from rectangular dwellings with a vaulted roof permanently fixed on wagons to ones with a perfectly round plan placed on the ground which can be disassembled, moved to a new location and reassembled. The modern *ger* as found in Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere is the culmination of this trend; it is never placed on wheels and is moved only by disassembly.

During the Mongol empire, however, this process was only halfway completed, and most people dwelled in non-disassemblable *gers* that were transported whole from place to place on wagons. Both a Chinese envoy, Xu Ting, and a Papal envoy, John of Plano Carpini, observed two types of felt dwellings. Some were round and disassemblable; these are the modern *gers* used today in Central Eurasia. The other type Xu described thus: 'The style on the steppe interweaves willow-wood to form a stiff and permanent enclosure, across which felt is beaten into place. This type cannot be folded up or opened out and must be loaded on to carts.'⁶ These were the *gers* found in the empire's heartland and the ones known to

the *Secret History*. The first type, the round, disassemblable *gers*, were common on the frontiers of the empire and appear to have originally been a kind of special *ger* for campaigning.

Based on descriptions and surviving examples used in the shrine dedicated to the worship of the spirit of Chinggis Khan into the twentieth century, the non-disassemblable *gers* had not a round plan but were formed in a rounded-off square with a projecting chimney-like neck for a smoke hole. Ibn Battutah, an Arabic jurist and traveller who visited the khanate ruled by the family of Chinggis Khan's eldest son Joci in 1332, described such wagons on the move:

They [have] wagons with four large wheels, some of them drawn by two horses, and some drawn by more than two, and they are drawn also by oxen and camels, according to the weight or lightness of the wagon . . . There is placed upon the wagon a kind of cupola made of wooden laths tied together with thin strips of hide; this is light to carry, and covered with felt or blanket-cloth, and in it there are grilled windows. The person who is inside the tent can see [other] persons without their seeing him, and he can employ himself in it as he likes, sleeping or eating or reading or writing, while he is still journeying.⁷

The size of these *gers* and their wagons differed greatly. William of Rubruck, a Flemish missionary who travelled the empire from 1253 to 1255, said he saw one such *ger* about thirty feet wide, placed on a cart twenty feet wide. Since modern *gers* even for ordinary herders are 15 to 20 feet in diameter, such a size for an imperial *ger* is hardly surprising. But the vast majority of *gers* were rather smaller.⁸

Within these *gers*, whether of the round disassemblable type or the squarish fixed type, space was distributed by status and gender. William of Rubruck writes:

After pitching the dwellings with the doorway towards the south, they place the master's couch at the northern end. The women's place is always on the eastern side, that is, to the left of the master of the house as he sits on his couch facing south; while the

men's place is on the western side, namely to his right. On entering the dwelling, the men would not in any circumstances hang up their quivers on the women's side.⁹

Thus, status was determined by whether one was close to the door (low) or opposite it (high), and gender by right (male) or left (female). Right and left are always oriented as seen from the high-status position looking towards the door.

William of Rubruck's first audience with Chinggis Khan's grandson, Möngke Khan, on 4 January 1254 shows what the inside of a large *ger* looked like to those entering. The guards first told the missionary's party to wait 'in front of the door of the residence'. The khan's steward 'lift[ed] up the felt which hung before it' and had the missionary and his companions searched.

Then we went in. At the entrance there was a bench with some *comos* [*esuk* or fermented mare's milk], near which they made the interpreter stand, but we were told to sit on a bench in front of the ladies [i.e. on the eastern side]. The interior of the dwelling was completely covered in cloth of gold, and in a little hearth in the middle there was a fire burning, made from twigs and the roots of wormwood . . . and also from cattle-dung.

The khan was seated on a couch or bed at the rear of the *ger* with one of his wives beside him, and his children on a couch behind the khan and his lady.¹⁰

Accompanying all such *gers* were wagons to, as Ibn Battutah said, 'carry the baggage, the provisions and the chests of eatables' inside a felt-covered box on top 'with a lock on it' to guard the provisions.¹¹ These wagons usually appear in the *Secret History* as 'covered wagons' (*qara'utai terge[n]*). William of Rubruck described the make of such locker-topped vehicles:

this chest or miniature house is covered with black felt smeared with fat or ewe's milk, to render it rain-proof . . . In these chests they put all their bedding and their valuables, lashing them tightly on to high wagons which are drawn by camels, to enable them to ford rivers. These chests are never removed from the wagons.¹²

The contrast of these black-felt-covered wagons with the white-felt *gers* struck the imagination of the Daoist sage Changchun, who described the steppe as ‘nothing but black carts and white tents, herders following the grass and water to pasture their animals’.¹³ The ‘ chests or miniature houses’, as Rubruck calls them, on top of the covered wagons were usually used for goods,¹⁴ but they were big enough to hide a person in or to ride in. Both the young Temujin and later his wife Börte hid in such a wagon (§§ 85–6, §§ 100–101) and Mother Ö’elun rode through the night to the rescue of Temujin’s brother Qasar in one (§ 244). In fact, these covered wagons seem to be the original form of Central Eurasian mobile residences, only later replaced by the *gers* placed on wagons, and finally by the round, disassemblable *ger* of today.

Another type of vehicle was the *qasaq* cart, with a single axle and two high wheels, pulled as a rule by a single horse or camel. Such carts were also used to load *gers*, both in medieval times and into modern times among the western Noğay Turkic nomads of the northern Caucasus and in the shrine dedicated to Chinggis Khan in Ordos.¹⁵ In the *Secret History*, a *ger* mounted on such a wagon appears as the favoured conveyance to deliver a bride to her new family in style and comfort (§ 64). As John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck noticed, women were the usual ones driving these as well as other carts.¹⁶ From the *Secret History* we can see that a ‘girl on the front seat of a wagon’ was as much a stock motif of medieval Mongol romance as the ‘girl on a tractor’ was in socialist-realist fiction.¹⁷

In modern Mongolia, nomad camps are as a rule fairly small – usually two to five *gers*, fifteen at most, with some associated carts. Each married couple would normally have its own *ger*. At least in modern times, camps are formed among family by diverse ties of birth, marriage or friendship.¹⁸ The *gers* camp in a line facing roughly south to south-east, with the leader on the right as one faces south. Such small camps were probably always common in the steppe; the *Secret History* pictures Mother Ö’elun living in such a small camp after her husband Yisukei Ba’atur’s death, together with Yisukei’s other widow, an old servant named Granny Qo’aqcin, the two widows’ children, and Temujin’s wife and his two friends.

Once the empire was founded, however, Mongolian *gers* would travel in vast groups. William of Rubruck describes how one major khan or prince might have up to a score of wives and each of his ladies had one main wagon-borne *ger*, many smaller *ger*-wagons for members of her entourage to sleep in, and one hundred or two hundred covered wagons for possessions. Ibn Battutah numbered the minor *gers* behind a khan's lady's main *ger* at one hundred, each inhabited by four maids, and the covered wagons at three hundred, each also attended by a male slave.¹⁹ Each chief lady would place her *ger* in the front rank, all facing south in order of seniority, from the senior right or west to the junior left or east, with her entourage stretching out in a line behind her and her covered wagons in rows between the *gers*.

When moving on level ground, each lady in her main *ger*, placed on its wagon, would go first, with the lesser *gers* and the covered wagons tied to each other in a line behind. A Chinese envoy, Peng Daya, says such columns of *ger*-wagons with their 'victual carts', as he called the covered wagons, 'look[ed] like columns of ants as they wind along, extending out for five miles, with the distance horizontally from left to right reaching half of that length'.²⁰

To others these cities on the move gave a much grander impression. To William of Rubruck it was almost terrifying:

On sighting Batu's camp, I was struck with awe. His own dwellings had the appearance of a large city stretching far out lengthways and with inhabitants scattered around in every direction for a distance of three or four leagues. And just as every one of the people of Israel knew on which side of the Tabernacle to pitch their tent, so these people know on what side of the residence to station themselves when they are unloading the dwellings.²¹

Arriving among the Islamized Mongols of the fourteenth-century khanate of Joci, Ibn Battutah was likewise impressed:

Then the *maballa* [camp] came up – they call it the *ordo* – and we saw a vast city on the move with its inhabitants, with mosques and bazaars in it, the smoke of the kitchens rising in the air (for

they cook while on the march), and horse-drawn wagons transporting the people. On reaching the camping place they took down the tents [i.e. *gers*] from the wagons and set them on the ground, for they are light to carry, and so likewise they did with the mosques and shops.²²

At the centre of this great portable city was the horde. This word is actually one of the few Mongolian words in English, derived from Mongolian *ordo*, which has a number of variant forms, such as *orda* or *hordu*. Far from being the chaotic rabble of the modern English ‘horde’, however, the true Mongol horde was the tightly organized nerve centre of the entire vast camp. As Peng Daya writes,

Wherever the Tatar ruler’s hunting tents are located is always called ‘the *ordo*’. His Golden Tent (its pillars are made of gold, hence the name), where the . . . imperial ladies are amassed with the resident populace, is alone called ‘the great *ordo*’.²³

This particular Golden Tent, or Golden Horde, mentioned by Peng Daya is actually the same Golden Tent or *Altan terme* which in the *Secret History* Chinggis Khan seized from Ong Khan (§§184–5, 187) with its attached ‘gold liquor services, bowls, and vessels’ and staff.²⁴ Even larger was the Yellow Horde (*Śira Ordo*), with a dais and three grand entryways.²⁵

This Yellow Horde, like others of the very largest tents used by the Mongols, were not *gers* for residence but pavilions for assemblies. Since horde was a social term – the horde was wherever a khan or head of one of the branches of the imperial family dwelled with his staff and court – not an architectural one, the term was equally applicable to such pavilions. One prince, Batu, in the middle of the frontmost southern line of his camp ‘had a large pavilion set up, since his dwelling could not accommodate the number of men and women who had assembled’.²⁶ Only the most formal audiences would be held in such pavilions, with high thrones in place of couches, and their airy spaces able to seat several hundred people.²⁷ Apart from these formal occasions, emperors would spend more of their time in the *gers* of

one or another of their ladies.²⁸ The Secret Historian's eye had relatively little interest in the great pavilions, seeing them only from the outside as sites of inopportune feasting (§§184–5) or quarrels (§275). Inside views, by contrast, are always of the khans' and their ladies' *ger*-wagons. Still less was the writer interested in the brick-and-wood palaces which the khans from Ökodei onwards began to build in their favourite spots to pitch camp; they appear only as storehouses for things (§279).

Such vast cities spread out in the steppe were obviously indefensible against armed attack. Yet even in the chaotic days before the unification of the empire and before the accumulation of colossal wealth, large assemblies took place. In troubled times, then, the *gers* of minor rulers and their followers assembled not in an open line formation but in a circle. Such circles, called *küre'en* or *küriyen*, made the camp a mobile fortress, defensible on all sides. This practice of using wagons and *gers* as mobile wooden palisades was a natural adaptation to warfare in steppe conditions. In southern Africa they were called 'laagers', on Europe's steppe frontier 'tabors', and in the North American prairie settlers would 'circle their wagons' to form 'corrals'. The Hanlin recension translators mostly render *küre'en*~*küriyen* as *juanzi*, 'corral; livestock pen', which identifies one aspect of the *küre'en*, the enclosure of livestock, but ignores the more important military aspect. Other medieval Chinese writings on the Mongol empire translate it, however, as *yi*, 'wing' (of a military formation), which highlights the military aspect but is somewhat misleading as to the form. In my translation, I have called these mobile fortified camps 'wagon-forts'.

Compared to dwellings, a rather less prominent position is occupied by food in the *Secret History*, particularly of the festive sort.²⁹ According to all accounts, feasting was an essential Mongolian political activity, with complex ritual rules.³⁰ As in many epic and saga traditions, these feasts commonly degenerated into quarrels, brawls and murder.³¹

The most distinctive and valued food among the Central Eurasian pastoralists at this time was fermented mare's milk. This drink, widely known in European languages as 'koumiss', from the Turkic version *qumiz*, is called *arag* or *cegee* in Mongolian

today, but in the *Secret History* was known as *esuk*, the term I use in this translation. William of Rubruck, who grew to prefer it to even the best Georgian wine, calls it *comos* and describes how it was made: mares were milked and the milk placed in skin sacks (*ituge* or *tüsurge*), where they were churned with broad plungers (*bile'ur*) until the fermentation made a lightly alcoholic drink.³² Since alcohol played such a fundamental role in Mongol feasting culture, great skin sacks (*yeke tüsurge*) were prominently displayed in the *gers*, serving the princes and commanders. Placed, as seen in a previous quotation, on a bench at the 'foot' of the *ger*, that is, in the low-status area near the door, the great skin sacks were handled by attendants who sat on the doorward side of the bench facing the master and mistress. Later, in the empire, other liquors were added to the menu: grape wine, rice wine and mead.

Mongolian food, then as now, observed a seasonal distinction of a summer dairy-heavy diet and a winter meat-heavy diet. This distinction is alluded to in a poetic couplet referring to the inability to appreciate food, literally 'choke on the cheese and gag on the grease' (§167). 'Cheese' here stands for the 'white' or dairy foods, and grease for the 'black' or meat foods. Mongolian herders make an enormous variety of dairy products: the *Secret History* mentions *taraq* or a kind of kefir (§145) and *tosun* or clarified butter (§254). As William of Rubruck observed, 'In the summer . . . as long as their *comos* (that is, mare's milk) holds out, they care for no other food.'³³ During the winter, however, only the wealthy could have *esuk* at all, and even they ate primarily meat. Mutton was then the staple meat of the Mongols; horses were slaughtered only on special occasions, and beef was eaten just as rarely.³⁴ Mutton was usually boiled, hence the repeated references in the *Secret History* to the khan's 'soup' (*šülen*) as a way of saying food in general. Porridges (*buda'a*) of boiled millet, with or without mutton, were also part of the daily meal, but were deemed worthy only of a single reference in the *Secret History* (§46).³⁵

Although we think of the Mongols of the empire as being primarily pastoralists like today, in those days hunting supplied much of their food in winter. As can be seen in the vows

of loyalty made to Chinggis Khan at his first coronation (§§ 123, 179), serving the khan in the great ring hunts was just as essential a duty as serving him in war. The best illustration of these passages is the description by Ala'uddin Juvaini, the Persian historian and official in Mongol service. According to him, hunts were prepared for like campaigns, following initial reconnaissance of the state of game in each district. Then in the beginning of the winter season,

[the khan] issues orders that the troops stationed around his headquarters and in the neighbourhood of the *ordus* shall make preparations for the chase, mounting several men from each company of ten . . . and distributing . . . arms . . . The right wing, left wing and centre of the army are drawn up and entrusted to the great emirs [commanders].³⁶

And when all was ready, the khan and his ladies and court proceeded to hunt. The hunters were arranged in a vast circle and their beating the game lasted one to three months:

they form a hunting ring and drive the game slowly and gradually before them, taking care lest any escape from the ring . . . Finally, when the ring has been contracted to a diameter of two or three parasangs [six to ten miles], they bind ropes together and cast felts over them; while the troops come to a halt all around the ring, standing shoulder to shoulder. The ring is now filled with the cries and commotion of every manner of game . . . When the ring has been so much contracted that the wild beasts are unable to stir, first the Khan rides in together with some of his retinue . . .³⁷

Then the actual killing would commence, proceeding down the ranks from the khan to the common soldiers. The colossal amounts of game meat so gathered and frozen in the cold of the Mongolian winter were distributed as spoils of this war on the kingdom of beasts.

A very different way of securing food from the natural world is described in the *Secret History* as it praised Mother Ö'elun and her sons for their resourcefulness in making a living after they

were abandoned by their retinue. Mother Ö'elun gathered wild crab apples and bird cherries and wild root crops: silverweed, great burnet, garlic, onion, scarlet lily bulbs – all foods which are still collected today in Mongolia for seasoning or medicinal purposes. Her sons also fed her by fishing and hunting marmots and jerboas. By the nineteenth century Mongols refused to eat fish, but in the empire period observers noted they enjoyed the flesh of the larger fish: hucho, or taimen salmon, and sturgeon.³⁸ Mother Ö'elun's children fished, but they had to settle for smaller catches like white fish and dace. Muslim and Christian travellers at the time were repulsed by the Mongols' enjoyment of rodents, but marmot meat is still considered a delicacy. The sons' hunting of it was an example of *ang*, individual hunting, very different from the *ab* or ring hunting described above, just as their small camp of three to five *gers* differed from the vast camps of the imperial hordes.

Mongolia in the rise of Chinggis Khan: a storyline and its illusions

The narrative arc of the *Secret History* traces how a single couple becomes a lineage, and how a lineage becomes first a kingdom and then an empire. In this regard, the work is analogous to the 'Primary History' in the Hebrew Bible – the narrative that begins with the primeval couple in Genesis, continues through the growth of Israel from Abraham, through Moses, David and Solomon, down to the fall of the kingdom and the exile.³⁹ And as with the Primary History, the *Secret History's* narrative structure of genealogy to empire has been taken as a confirmation of social evolutionary schemes that posit humanity evolving from family to band to tribe to chiefdom to state.⁴⁰ However, in the *Secret History*, as in the Primary History, this genealogical story takes place in a country where states and empires had already existed for centuries, if not millennia, and continued to exist throughout the period of the story being told. Whatever we might make of the historicity of Chinggis Khan's distant ancestors, such as Alan the Fair and Bodoncar the Simple, it is crucial to realize that the impression

that they lived in a world with no states is an illusion created by the narrative structure of the work.

Historically, we know that a series of dynastic states and empires rose and fell in Mongolia for a thousand years before Chinggis Khan. The many institutions which the *Secret History* ascribes to Chinggis Khan's state-building – the decimal organization of the army into tens, hundreds and thousands, the horde system and the *kešikten* or imperial bodyguard structure that went with it, and the division into imperial and consort lineages – all of these find precedent in one or another of these earlier dynasties. Even the lineage myth of a wolf ancestor is well attested in earlier dynasties. In other words, what the *Secret History* presents as Chinggis Khan creating a state after a long period of familial incubation was historically a conquest and assimilation of a pre-existing dynastic state tradition by an outlying clan on the periphery of that dynastic world.

It is unclear how much the new Mongol dynasts after Chinggis Khan were aware of the earlier history of steppe empires. Inscriptions and other written monuments left by previous empires in Sogdian, Brahmi, Chinese, Runiform Turkish, Uyghur, Kitan and other languages and scripts were scattered around Mongolia, but the tradition of reading them had been lost. Uyghur scribes among the oases in eastern Turkestan did maintain a living memory of the more recent of these steppe empires and would join the Mongol entourage after 1204. But the primary conduits of institutional memory were the Kereyit and Naiman kingdoms, dynastic states that ruled over central and western Mongolia respectively, as young Temujin was growing up to become Chinggis Khan. The Naiman kingdom, at least, was already using Uyghur-script Turkic as its court language.

Although little is directly known about these kingdoms or khanates, from the accounts of the rise of the Mongols we can see that they were miniature prototypes for the kind of state that Chinggis Khan would later build. To take the Kereyit kingdom in particular:

- The khanate had been ruled by a single, albeit fractious, dynasty for several generations.

- The khan's horde, or political centre, and his core army followed separate but parallel tracks of nomadization from the southern Gobi or semi-desert in the winter to the northern Khangai or wooded forest in the summer.
- His Golden Tent or *Altan terme* was a vast mobile structure able to seat hundreds.
- The khan was advised by four chief commanders.
- His military core or centre (*gool*) was organized around vanguard units numbering as many as a *tümen*, the Turco-Mongolian term for a unit nominally numbering ten thousand men and their families.
- When princesses of the ruling family married, they were accompanied to their new home by an *inje* or human dowry of up to two hundred Kereyit subjects so that her *ger* would become a kind of embassy of Kereyit dynastic power in her new husband's realm.

All of these institutions would be adopted by Chinggis Khan's new empire. (For a schematic representation of Chinggis Khan's new ruling class, see the tables in Appendix C.)

Despite being organized around single dynasties, the Kereyit and Naiman khanates were frequently split into separate courts by disagreement within the family. The Naiman khanate had similar institutions to the Kereyit, but while the Kereyit kingdom recovered its unity during Temujin's youth, the Naiman had split, seemingly permanently, into a Betegin, or more Mongolian-influenced eastern half in western Mongolia, and a purely Turkic Kücugut half in the Altai Mountains at the intersection of present-day Mongolia, Xinjiang, Kazakhstan and Russia. Two brothers, Tayang Khan in the Betegin east and Buyruq Khan in the Kücugut west, battled each other for supremacy. Buyruq Khan continued the Naiman's traditional anti-Kereyit policy, while Tayang Khan sought to tame his dynasty's traditional anti-Kereyit feelings in return for their assistance against his stronger, western brother.

It is unclear if writing was used at the Kereyit court, but we know that literate ambassadors from the Tangut Xi Xia, or Western Xia, kingdom in north-west China and the Jurchen Jin empire with its capital at Zhongdu attended regularly, rubbing

shoulders with ambitious client commanders from the kingdom's lawless eastern fringe like Temujin and Jamuqa. The court language of both Naiman khanates, however, was Turkic; a Uyghur scribe in Tayang Khan's Betegin Naiman kingdom, Tatar-Tong'a, later introduced writing to Chinggis Khan's court when he was captured by Chinggis in 1204. It was these two khanates, and above all the Kereyit, which served as the main institutional vectors for the transmission of Central Eurasian traditions of statehood to Chinggis Khan. This transmission began when Chinggis Khan seized the Kereyit throne and drove into exile the last Kereyit ruler, Ong Khan, in autumn 1203. Although the Secret Historian dates the unification of Mongolia from 1206, earlier Mongol historians tended to see 1203 as the empire's founding date.

In sharp contrast to these two relatively large-scale, stable dynastic kingdoms in central and western Mongolia, the eastern area of the plateau where the young Temujin grew up was divided between scores of petty warlords. Corresponding to the present-day areas of eastern Mongolia, Transbaikalia in Russia, and the Hulun Buir and Üjumucin districts of Inner Mongolia, these areas were a kind of troubled water in which the Jurchen Jin empire in North China, the Kereyit kingdom in central Mongolia and even the Kücugut Naiman all fished.

Retrospectively, historians of the Mongol empire, including the Secret Historian, divided the people of this broad area into Tatars, Merkit and Mongols. In reality, these groups were all shifting coalitions of practically autonomous petty ruling houses, whose ideas of consanguinity were determined more by their outside allegiances than by unchanging genealogical writ. Chinese records from the Jurchen Jin dynasty contemporary with the rise of Chinggis Khan make little mention of these larger categories, instead referring to various subgroups by name such as the Qonggirat, Bosqur, Jalayir, Salji'ut, Qatagin, Yörkin, Me'uden and Küiden. The labels of later Mongolian historians seem to be partly a reification of the particular coalition structure that attended Temujin's rise to become Chinggis Khan, and partly a broad geographical shorthand. Here is how the broader terms appear to have been understood:

- Merkit: This group, often seen as three allied houses, occupied the fertile valley of the lower Selenge River where it flowed through northern Mongolia and the southern part of Russia's Buryat Republic before emptying into Lake Baikal.
- Tatar: Before the rise of Chinggis Khan, this was actually the general term for all the Mongolic-speaking pastoralists of the plateau. After the rise of Chinggis Khan and the adoption of the term 'Mongol' for Mongolic-speaking pastoralists, the term Tatar was limited to those closest to the frontier with the Jurchen Jin dynasty. These Tatars were some of Chinggis Khan's most implacable enemies. They dwelled in south-eastern Mongolia and in south-western Hulun Buir and present-day Üjümcin districts in Inner Mongolia.⁴¹
- Mongol: The term 'Mongol' in the *Secret History* usually meant all those east of the Kereyit kingdom who were not Merkit or Tatars. Geographically, it thus included those in the Onon and Kherlen valleys and in the Hulun Buir area. One can see traces, however, of the much narrower usage that must have prevailed during Chinggis Khan's childhood: just those of the upper Onon and Kherlen valleys, near the sacred Burgan-Qaldun mountains (modern Khentii). Other groups alongside these 'Mongols' (in the narrow sense) were the Tayici'ut of the middle and lower Onon, the Yörkin of the middle Kherlen, the Jadaran of the Ergune (Argun') River valley, and the even more remote Qonggirat, Dörben, Salji'ut and Qatagin of the Hulun Buir area to the east.

It is in this context that the *Secret History*'s lengthy opening genealogy, with the division into groups 'with such and such surname', is to be understood. This genealogy has often been taken as the charter for a 'clan-patriarchal' or 'tribal' society, in which all were ranked within a hierarchy of senior and junior corporate clans and genealogies determined how these corporate clans

behaved.⁴² However, the genealogies we have are all retrospective and show major divergences about who is related to whom and how. In the Chinese summary of Jürcedei's Mongolian biography, for example, his own Uru'ut house is said to be one of the five sons of Nacin Ba'atur, along with the Manggüt, the Jalayir, the Qonggirat and the Ikires.⁴³ In the *Secret History* genealogy, however, the Jalayir, Qonggirat and Ikires do not even appear, being seen as completely unrelated, and instead the Uru'ut and Manggüt are paired with the Siju'ut and Doğulat.

As is well known from other societies, then, the genealogical connections were an idiom to talk about relationships. Houses that were politically and socially allied would be 'brothers'; those that were closely allied but of subordinate status might still be 'brothers', but with the lower-status ones being born from the common ancestor's lower-status wife. One way to undermine the reputation of a rival warlord would be to spread a story that his claimed ancestry in a high-status lineage was actually fake. Over time, as new political alliances were made, new stories would appear to justify them, making the genealogy a kind of palimpsest of turbulent political actions. All of these devices appear in the *Secret History*'s genealogies, which were only written down after the rise of Chinggis Khan had completely reset the genealogical structure and made such alliances of merely antiquarian interest. (See Appendix B for a late, schematic representation of the ranking of the Mongol clans.)

Nor must it be thought that all those of the 'such and such' surname were in fact of common ancestry – even in theory. For example, the *Secret History* writes that 'The sons of Caraqai Lingqu became Senggum-Bilge, Hambagai, and so on, the ones with the Tayici'ut surname' (§47). But the Tayici'ut were a political group, not a kinship group. The leaders may have claimed common ancestry, but they led a diverse conglomeration of people. Those of the Besut surname fought with them; they were reckoned as Caraqai Lingqu's descendants by a junior wife. Other sources tell us that the Je'uriyet were also attached to the Tayici'ut, again with the idea that they were sons of a minor wife. And in the *Secret History*'s story itself, we learn that the Tayici'ut princes had many commoner subjects of the Suldus and

Hü'uşin surnames, who were too lowly to appear anywhere at all in the genealogy. In fact, the names listed in the *Secret History's* genealogy did not include all in society, only those who were contenders for political power in the area that eventually gave rise to Chinggis Khan, and thus claimed their share in the 'heavenly-destined' pedigree.

Indeed, throughout the *Secret History's* genealogical prologue, as a *yin* to the genealogical *yang*, is the ruling lineage's accumulation of unrelated subjects. Inequality was a fact of life, inherent in birth and ignored at one's peril. This fact is inculcated through formal didactic means: Grey Wolf is 'born with a destiny from Heaven above' (§1) and Alan the Fair's later three sons were born from a supernatural yellow dog (likely here a euphemism for a wolf) that entered 'with the beams of the sun and moon' (§21). But, as always, the *Secret History* inculcates a hard, realist lesson as well. One of these 'sons of Heaven', Bodoncar the Simple, eggs his brothers on to conquer a nameless, non-hierarchical people that had shared their food with him. 'They have no big or little, no bad or good, no head or hoof. They are all on a level. They would be easy folks to handle. Let's capture them,' he says, and so the brothers plundered them and 'got to live with herds and food, subjects and servants' (§§35, 39). Thus was illustrated the folly of equality.

Although they camped in ever-vigilant wagon-forts and had none of the panoply of monarchy deployed by the Kereyit and Naiman khans, the various Merkit, Mongols and Tatars of this eastern part of the Mongolian plateau had their own aspirations to rulership. One title held by those who claimed genealogical seniority and the priestly-shamanic functions that came with it was *beki*. This was the title of Toqto'a Beki among the Merkit, as well as Sece Beki among the Mongol kin of the later Chinggis Khan.

However, three or four generations before Chinggis Khan, a group of houses in the valley of the Onon and Kherlen Rivers, which run parallel through eastern Mongolia and the Transbaikalian steppe, elevated one of their number as khan. The Secret Historian believed Qabul was the first khan in this Onon-Kherlen region, but most other Mongol empire histories accord his father

Tumbinai that title as well. Unlike among the Kereyit and Naiman, however, this title remained elective, not hereditary; after Qabul's death the title of 'khan' passed to a distantly related cousin named Hambagai, of the Tayici'ut confederation.

Over the next few generations, into the time of Temujin of the Borjigin and Jamuqa of the Jadaran, the title of khan would be assumed by many of these Onon-Kherlen warlords, including several not mentioned in the *Secret History*. But the title never became hereditary, and none of the Onon-Kherlen leaders organized anything but the most rudimentary court in their wagon-forts. Judging from the career of Temujin and Jamuqa, the key issue blocking the formation of a hereditary dynasty was the power and attraction of two poles: the immensely wealthy Jurchen Jin dynasty to the south in North China, and the less wealthy but closer Kereyit khanate to the west. In fact, for Temujin, and quite possibly others as well, the title khan was at first less an assertion of independence and more the expression of an aspiration to be a viceroy for the Kereyit khans. The *Secret History* cites extensively from an earlier source, the 'Indictment of Ong Khan', but that source also had a telling passage which the Secret Historian chose to delete. In it, Temujin as Chinggis Khan compares himself to a falcon cast by the Kereyit ruler Ong Khan and views his early campaigns as being undertaken solely at the Kereyit khan's behest:

Father Ong Khan, like a grey fledgling gyrfalcon I was once cast from Chigurqi Mountain past the lake of Buir and took cranes with mottled feet to bring back to you, my lord. Who is this talking about? These are the Dörben and Tatar folk. Again, like a gyrfalcon on its first hunt I was once cast beyond the lake of Hulun and seized cranes with blue feet to bring back to you, my lord. Who is this talking about? These are the Qatagin, the Salji'ut and the Qonggirat folk.

Aspiring petty leaders in eastern Mongolia were subject to attack and speedy replacement by ever-ready rivals if they should outgrow the subordinate role planned for them by their patrons. Such would-be 'khans' were mere falcons on the wrists of Jurchen

Jin or Kereyit rulers – until Chinggis Khan turned against his handler, seized the throne of the Kereyit and eventually shattered the power of the Jurchen Jin.

The world beyond Mongolia

The author of the *Secret History* had no experience outside Mongolia, and hence the work's account of the foreign conquests after 1209 is confused and inaccurate. However, an understanding of the world around Mongolia during the time of Chinggis Khan and his son Ökodei Khan is necessary both to understand the narrative and to understand its elisions and illusions. Such a survey is all the more necessary because the kingdoms surrounding the Mongols were so remade by the Mongol empire that pre-Mongol Eurasia is very strange to those approaching it from the perspective of modern nation-states. Familiar countries like 'China', 'Russia' and 'Iran' were created out of the break-up of the Mongol empire and did not exist in anything like their post-Mongol form during its rise. The following section will thus sketch out what states and dynasties did exist during the rise of Chinggis Khan, in place of the ones we are more familiar with. For a detailed chronology of the foreign conquests see Appendix D.

The Jurchen Jin

The leading power in the world of Chinggis Khan's childhood was the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115–1234) in North China. This was one of the many dynasties founded over the centuries by non-Chinese peoples from Mongolia, Manchuria or the Tibetan plateau but centred in traditionally Chinese territory. The Jin or 'Golden' dynasty was founded by the Jurchen people from the forest lands of Manchuria. The Jurchen forces were commanded by Aqudai (Chinese Aguda), who gave his name to the ruling family, at least in Mongolian usage. The Jurchens in turn had risen by overthrowing another ethnically non-Chinese 'conquest dynasty', the Liao dynasty (907–1125), founded by the Kitans from the steppe lands of south-eastern Inner Mongolia. From their homeland, the Kitans had conquered the Jurchen lands in Manchuria, the cities of present-day Beijing and Datong in

North China, and Mongolia. Kitan commanders held the upper hand in their relations with Korea, China's Song dynasty and the Tangut kingdom; their diplomatic influence extended to Central Asia and Afghanistan. After overthrowing their former Kitan overlords, the new Jurchen rulers quarrelled with the Song dynasty in central and southern China and in the ensuing war seized all of North China as well.

This meteoric rise of the Jurchen Jin dynasty had set the stage for the world of Chinggis Khan's youth. The Kitan Liao, themselves a nomadic people speaking a language fairly similar to Mongolian, had ruled central and eastern Mongolia, leaving behind inscriptions, cities, stupas and border walls, ruins of which have lasted to the present. The Kereyit and Naiman dynasties had already existed as tributaries on the frontier of the Kitan Liao territory; with the fall of the Kitan Liao dynasty in 1125, they then became the independent khanates that we see in the world of Chinggis Khan's rise.

Once stabilized, the Jurchen Jin dynasty set their capital in Zhongdu, present-day Beijing. Taking their dynastic name from Chinese *jin* for 'gold', the Jurchen Jin ruler was known in the Turco-Mongolian world as the *Altan Khan* or 'Golden Khan'. At its height, during the childhood of Chinggis Khan, the Golden Khan's Jin dynasty ruled over a population of more than 48 million. The vast majority of these people were Han or ethnic Chinese, but the Jurchens still formed the core of the army and the ruling dynasty's most reliable population; the Kitans of Inner Mongolia were the main cavalry force.

But when the Mongols looked south, they still named the country they saw there as the land of the *Kitat*, the Mongolian plural of the singular 'Kitan'. This term, which is still the Mongolian term for 'Chinese', was also used in Turkic and Persian in the form of *Khitay*, which became the 'Cathay' of Marco Polo. Another term that appears in the *Secret History* for China as a region or place is *Jauqut*. Both terms, however, included only China north of the Yellow River. The Song dynasty south of the Yellow River was seen as a different country.

The Mongols were well aware of the multi-ethnic nature of

the Golden Khan's armies. In the *Secret History*, the 'Chinese [Kitat] soldiers' are divided into several different groups:

- Ethnic Kitans, literally 'Black Kitans' (*Qara-Kitat*): Black was the colour associated with the ethnic Kitans, for whom it symbolized the direction north and the topographic element of rivers. 'Black Kitans' was thus used by the Mongols to designate ethnic Kitans wherever they lived. Most ethnic Kitans lived on the frontier in Inner Mongolia, where they also managed the Jin army's stud farms. Kitan soldiers were crack cavalry forces that the Golden Khan had to rely on, despite their frequent rebellions against the Jurchen ruler, inspired by memories of their own previous dynasty.
- The Jurchens: They were the ruling people of the dynasty, most of whom at this time lived in military communities attached to garrisons across the empire. Jurchens and Kitans in such communities, together with their slaves and dependants, numbered a little over six million, or about 15 per cent of the empire's total population.
- The Jüin or Jiün: With a name derived from the Kitan word *tiw-* or *diw-*, 'to collect, assemble',⁴⁴ the Jüin or Jiün is a Kitan term meaning the 'assembled ones'. The term designated mostly those Turco-Mongolian pastoralists along the frontier who served the Golden Khan as auxiliaries, policing their fellow Turco-Mongolian herders across the frontier on behalf of the emperor in Zhongdu. In fact, most of the Jüin/Jiün were the same people who were later referred to as Kitans or Tatars. Jin-dynasty figures give their total number, men, women, children and attached slaves, at about 137,000, but their military significance for the Jin border was far out of proportion to their numbers.
- The Öng'ut: They were often known as 'White Tatars', in contrast to the 'Black Tatars' to the north of the Gobi. Although the *Secret History* does not treat them

as part of the Jüin folk, they were one of the Jin dynasty's key forces guarding the frontier. Of mixed Turco-Sogdian ancestry, they were also distinctive in having converted en masse to East Syriac Christianity in 1007.

Although the *Secret History* told many secrets, there was one secret it did not tell – that Chinggis Khan was enrolled, until around 1210, among the tributaries of the Golden Khan. Every year he would go to the Jurchen Jin's Inner Mongolian frontier post at Jingzhou and bow towards the capital in Zhongdu as he presented tribute. Nor was he alone: virtually all of the leaders from the Kereyit, Mongols and Tatars had a history of paying tribute to the Jin. Indeed, the rise of Chinggis Khan was connected not just to serving Ong Khan, but beyond that to a major restructuring of Jin frontier policy. The Mongolian historians were happy to vent their grievances against the Jin dynasty's frontier policing and their hatred of that policing's Tatar/Jüin agents; but they remained quiet about the many years when they docilely bent the knee to those very agents' masters.

The Golden Khan appears only twice in the stories in the *Secret History* of the time before the Mongol invasion of 1211. In both cases, we get a glimpse of what it meant to be on the receiving end of the famous 'using barbarians to control barbarians' policy. In §53, the Tayici'ut khan Hambağai went to a marriage arranged with some Tatar/Jüin allies, and in retaliation for past opposition his hosts handed him over to the Golden Khan, who had him painfully put to death. In §§132–3, the tables were turned and young Temujin and the Kereyit ruler To'oril, soon to be titled Ong Khan, participated in a punitive campaign against the Tatars undertaken at the behest of the Golden Khan. In return, they were rewarded with new titles and a share of the booty. This campaign is historically documented both in a Sino-Jurchen inscription recently discovered in Mongolia and in the biography of the commanding general, Wongian Xiang; it took place in the spring and summer of 1196.

These examples illustrate how the Jin dynasty originally dealt with the frontier. Unable to administer Mongolia as the Kitan

Liao had, they managed the turbulent Tatars and Mongols by granting titles and the right to pay tribute to many petty rulers along their frontier. But they would also use punitive expeditions and spur on attacks from their rivals to take down any of these petty rulers who seemed to be accumulating too much power.

Soon after the 1196 expedition, however, Wongian Xiang concluded that the Jin needed a different policy. The constant low-level conflict was too expensive, so he advocated building a long border moat and wall, keeping Jin armies behind it. The wall was built far out into the Inner Mongolian steppe, along the present-day border of Mongolia and China, so the lands of the more tractable Jüin were south of it, behind its defensive screen. With the wall in place, the Jin would not need to undertake so active a management of the jostling petty rulers north of it.

Left unstated in the Chinese sources, quite possibly because the Mongols purged any such records when they later edited the Jin dynasty history, is that control of the frontier north of the wall was left to the Golden Khan's client ruler To'oril. He was the one who had received the title *Ong*, or 'King', Khan from the Jin and whose 'falcon' was Temujin, the young Chinggis Khan. Thus, Chinggis Khan's various campaigns from 1201 to 1202 against the coalition of the Qonggirat, Dörben, Salji'ut and Qatagin, against Jamuqa and against the Tatars, were undertaken not only under the overall command of Ong Khan, but were ultimately intended to make Ong Khan the regional protector of the Jin dynasty's peace. Even after Chinggis Khan had overthrown Ong Khan, the Jin dynasty continued to allow him to present tribute in Ong Khan's place. Not until he had already won over many of the Jüin and Öng'ut border people and was ready to attack North China did Chinggis Khan break off paying tribute to the Golden Khan.⁴⁵

The Tangut

On the western border of the Jurchen Jin empire, in what is now the Gansu, Ningxia and south-western Inner Mongolian areas of China, was another hybrid 'conquest' dynasty, the Tangut Xia (982–1227). The Tangut people were originally from the Tibetan plateau, although their language is only very distantly

related to Tibetan. Having migrated from there to the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia centuries earlier, they gradually rose to power and founded a new dynasty, titled the Xia, or Western Xia (also known as Xixia). Although the Tanguts were neither Turkic nor Mongolian in speech, they had much in common with Turco-Mongolian dynasties, and writers in the Mongol empire such as Rashiduddin treated them as just another Turco-Mongolian kingdom. Their land was mostly west of the Yellow River, so Chinese often called their kingdom Hexi; in the form of Qaśin, with the plural *-n*, this term is found in the *Secret History* as another word for the Tanguts. Since the Gansu-Ningxia area of China was only sparsely inhabited, the Tanguts were a much larger percentage of the population than Jurchens were in the Jin lands, maybe even a majority.⁴⁶

The Tanguts had particularly close relations with the Kereyit khanate. Kereyit princes in trouble, whether due to Naiman or Mongol attacks, or due to court quarrels, were assured of a welcome in the Tangut kingdom. As a result, when Ong Khan and his son Ilqa Senggum were overthrown by Chinggis Khan, Ilqa Senggum fled to the Tangut kingdom. Harboursing him eventually made the Tangut kingdom a target for the Mongols, even after Ilqa Senggum moved on to Kucha, an oasis town in eastern Turkestan. There the local ruler executed him and sent his head to the Mongols.

The Tangut rulers were major patrons of Buddhism, first of Chinese-style Buddhism and then of Tibetan-style Buddhism. Tibetan gurus (lamas) were invited to the Tangut court and honoured as Dynastic and Imperial Preceptors. In turn, the Tangut ruler was glorified, in the words of an ode to the ruler, as a 'humane emperor-bodhisattva' and a 'Buddha Son of Heaven'.⁴⁷ The Tangut ruler appears in the *Secret History* as the 'Buddha Khan' (*Burqan Qan*) and 'the Victorious Buddha' (*Ilūgu Burqan*) – 'Victorious' is a translation of the Sanskrit *Jina*, commonly used as an epithet of the Buddha to denote his victory over all limitations. This 'Victorious Buddha' is in fact the only appearance of terminology associated with a scripture-based world religion anywhere in the *Secret History*.

Siberia's Forest Folk

To the north of Mongolia were the vast taiga forests of Siberia that stretched to the tundra along the Arctic Ocean. The line between forest and steppe was not sharp; there were islands of taiga forest in the uplands of northern Mongolia and islands of steppe in the valleys of southern Siberia. The forest lands produced valuable commodities: sable and squirrel peltry, white gyrfalcons and, in one of those islands of steppe in the midst of the forest, the Minusa Basin, fine white geldings. Historically, both the ancient Turkic speakers and the immediate precursors of the Mongols have been thought to have migrated from forest lands into the Mongolian steppe – the former from the forests north and north-west of Mongolia in the second and third centuries AD, and the latter from the forests in the Amur River valley during the era of the Kitan Liao in the tenth to eleventh centuries.

These migrations from forest to steppe may be the historical background for the stories in the beginning of the *Secret History*, about Grey Wolf and Fallow Doe crossing ‘the sea’ (presumably Lake Baikal) to the headwaters of the Onon, and about the people who came up the Tüngkelik Stream: Bargu, Qori-Tumat, Uriyangqai (or Uriyangqan) and Baya’ut, all names associated with the forests. In the later, historical, sections of the work, forest peoples appear under generic names as Forest Folk (*Hoi-yin Irgen*) or Uriyangqai, as well as under particular ethnic designations. Of those distinct ethnonyms it was Oyirats under their ruler Qutuğa Beki who played the largest role in the politics of Chinggis Khan’s rise.

To the Secret Historian, as to other steppe Mongols, forests were inhospitable lands. In describing the young Temujin taking refuge on the wooded Khentii, the author describes the ‘clinging sands and tangled woods’ with an image attested elsewhere: ‘so tangled a gluttoned snake could not slither into them’ (§102).⁴⁸ When a coalition hostile to Chinggis Khan and Ong Khan is defeated, we see the Oyirat ruler ‘cutting his way through the forests’ as he returns to his home in the taiga around Lake Khöwsgöl in the northernmost province of modern Mongolia

(§144). And when the Tumat rebel, the armies campaigning against them struggle to make their way ‘by trails blindly in a thick forest’ until Dörbei set them to ‘hack and saw down the trees standing in the trails’ made by bison (§240). The word for trail here, *horum*, is only used of trails made by forest animals – elk, moose and bison (see §§103, 240) – as opposed to the word *mör*, used for paths in the steppe made by people (see e.g. §§82–3, 90). The Forest Folk were conquered early on in the empire’s expansion, but steppe Mongols still found their country an alien and even frightening one.

Qara-Khitai

When the Jurchens of Manchuria overthrew the Kitan Liao dynasty in 1125, not all the Kitans submitted. In line with their nomadic background and their distant kinship with the Mongols, one prince of the imperial line, Daiši Lemya (Kitan for ‘Daiši the Scribe’), fled to Mongolia with a large band of Kitans. There he proclaimed himself the *Gür Khan*, a Kitan title meaning ‘Universal Sovereign’ (or possibly ‘Sovereign of the Realm’), and tried to rally Qonggirats, Jadaran, Merkit, Tatars and many others to attack the Jurchens and restore Kitan rule. The attempt failed and eventually Daiši Lemya moved west to Central Asia, where in 1141 he defeated the rulers of the local Turkic Muslim dynasty. As a result of that victory, he created an empire that eventually ruled directly or indirectly the whole of oasis Central Asia from Samarkand and Bukhara in the west to the Uyghur kingdom in the east.

As was mentioned, Mongols called ethnic Kitans ‘Black Kitans’ (*Qara-Kitat*). This term followed a tradition of colour symbolism that paired northern river people, associated with military prowess and the colour black, with southern mountain people, associated with white and civilian culture.⁴⁹ Central Asian Turks pronounced the Mongolian *Qara-Kitat* or ‘Black Kitans’ as ‘Qara-Khitai’, and that is how the empire is known to history. But it is important to note that the term ‘Black Kitans’, whether pronounced *Qara-Kitat* or *Qara-Khitai*, designated ethnic Kitans everywhere, in the old homeland in eastern Inner Mongolia as well as in their new western empire. It was not, at

least in origin, a special term for the Kitan realm built up in Central Asia, although that is how it is often used today.

The Qara-Khitai empire was a loose conglomeration of tributary kingdoms ruled by a core of Kitans, Tatars and other mostly Mongolic-speaking nomads brought from the east in Daiši Lemya's entourage. Like the later Mongol empire, they maintained a capital area that integrated walled cities with seasonal movements of armies which herded and hunted. The centre for the Qara-Khitai was the valley of the Chüy River in present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan; within the Chüy valley, their movements centred on the city known as Balasaghun or Quz-Orda. In terms of their foreign policy, the Qara-Khitai maintained good relations with the Tangut Xia and through them with the Kereyit; for that reason, when driven off the throne by the Naiman ruler, the Kereyit monarch Ong Khan fled first to the Tangut kingdom, then to the Uyghur kingdom, and finally to the *Gür Khan* in the Chüy valley.

The *Secret History*'s account is very fragmentary, but other sources detail how Chinggis Khan's unification of Mongolia created shock waves that shattered the Qara-Khitai empire. Refugees from his conquests, Küculug Khan of the Naiman and Ilqa Senggum of the Kereyit, both ended up in Qara-Khitai territory with large bands of their followers. Küculug eventually married the *Gür Khan*'s daughter, usurped his father-in-law's throne and ruled the Qara-Khitai until he was killed by an expedition under the Mongol commander Jebe in 1218.

Even before the fall of the empire, two of the *Gür Khan*'s tributary kings had broken away and submitted directly to Chinggis Khan. As a result, their royal families received a princess and favour as an 'imperial son-in-law' family. One was the ruler of the Uyghurs, titled the İduqut or 'Holy Glory', and the other was the ruler of the Qarluqs, titled Arslan Khan or 'Lion Khan'. Both were Turkic-speaking dynasties with a long history – indeed, the first time the Qarluqs are mentioned, they are called *Ui'urtai Qarlu'ud*, 'the Uyghur-like Qarluqs' (§198). Despite the similarity of language, however, they differed in many other ways.

The Uyghur İduqut reckoned their ancestry back to the khans of the great Uyghur empire that had ruled Mongolia from

centuries earlier. After the fall of that empire in 840, they fled to the Turpan and Besh-Baliq oases in eastern Turkestan (modern Xinjiang), where they settled down and became sedentary rulers of a Buddhist kingdom. The Qarluq rulers too had a long history, going back centuries; they lived to the north-west of the Uyghurs and had converted to Islam in the ninth century. They ruled over many sedentary Muslim and Christian farmers and city dwellers, but unlike the Uyghur İduqut, Arslan Khan and his Qarluqs still practised nomadism.

The Sarts and the Khwarazmian sultan

The Qara-Khitai realm and the Chüy River were the effective limits to the south-west of the young Chinggis Khan's world. Beyond it, the Khwarazmian empire had begun a meteoric rise only a few years earlier than that of Chinggis Khan, after a previous century of slow and steady growth. Eventually, as the Qara-Khitai empire fell apart, the Khwarazmian empire under its sultan Ala'uddin Muhammad (r. 1200–1220) joined with Kücülug Khan of the Naiman to partition the Qara-Khitai lands in 1213. And in 1218, when Jebe captured Kücülug Khan, the two new empires, Khwarazmian and Mongol, finally acquired a common frontier, roughly on a line from the Pamir Mountains north to Lake Balkhash.

But although the sultan's empire was new to the Mongols, the Sart people he ruled were not. Sarts, or *Sarta'ul* in the Mongolian plural form, was the Turco-Mongolian term for all the sedentary people of the Central Asian and Middle Eastern oases and cities. Derived from the ancient Sogdian word for 'caravan-
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As oasis dwellers, the Sarts were well known to the Mongols as the subject people of the Qara-Khitai and as caravaneers. Such caravaneers regularly travelled through the Muslim oases to the Uyghur kingdom, and on to the Öng'uts of Inner Mongolia before heading into Mongolia proper. Chinggis Khan met one such Muslim caravaneer named Hasan 'driving a thousand wethers with a white camel down along the Ergune River in order to buy sables and squirrels' (§182). When Chinggis Khan acquired a border with the sultan's great empire, he naturally opened trade relations. These trade relations were, however, brutally interrupted when the sultan killed the merchants, seized their goods, and then killed the Mongol envoys sent to demand justice (§254). This famous Otrar massacre led to Chinggis Khan's equally famous expedition to crush the sultan.

Despite the use of identifiable written sources, the Secret Historian's account of this campaign is tremendously confused. But the Secret Historian's confusion was aided by some broader confusions common to all known Mongolian accounts of the campaign. One key confusion was that no known source of Mongolian origin shows awareness of the actual sultan who was in power at the time of the Otrar massacre and Chinggis Khan's first invasion, named Ala'uddin Muhammad. They all mention not him but his son Jalaluddin Mengburni, who picked up the flag of resistance and at the big battle at Parvan won fame by temporarily driving back the Mongol advance. But before then, right after the first campaign season, Chinggis Khan had dispatched an expedition under Jebe, Sübe'edei and Toqucar to hunt down Sultan Muhammad. (He died on an island in the Caspian Sea, and the expedition of Jebe and company was repurposed into a general attack on the far west.) But, unaware of Sultan Muhammad's existence, the Secret Historian, who was no military expert, assumed a different purpose for the expedition, one of circling around the whole Khwarazmian empire and then starting off the campaign by attacking it from the west.

But where did this assumption come from? Apparently from knowledge among the Mongols of one of Chinggis Khan's failed strategies. Surveying those Mongolian sources known from Persian and Chinese summaries, we can see that in addition to

ignoring Sultan Ala'uddin Muhammad, they also ascribe a tremendous importance to a certain military governor in the Khwarazmian empire, Khan-Malik (also known as Malik Khan or Yamin Malik). This importance was related to a cleavage in the social structure of the Khwarazmian empire – a cleavage which Chinggis Khan attempted unsuccessfully to exploit.

The Khwarazmian empire was based in the oasis of Khwarazm and its main city of Urgench, territory today shared between north-west Uzbekistan and northern Turkmenistan. As such, its civilian base population was Turkic-speaking Muslim Sarts, that is, oasis-dwelling farmers and urbanites. This urban and agricultural civilian base vastly expanded as the empire conquered Persian-speaking Sart cities in eastern Iran and north-western Afghanistan. But the core of the empire's army was non-Muslim Turkic-speaking Qangli nomads from the area of modern Kazakhstan, recruited into Khwarazmian service in the entourage of Qangli princesses who married into the Khwarazmian dynasty. As one Persian historian who had been Jalaluddin Mengburni's personal secretary wrote, these Qangli were 'Turks . . . people of the same race [as the Mongols], polytheists as they are'.⁵⁰

Khan-Malik was one of these Qangli commanders, a nephew of Jalaluddin's Qangli mother, and the commander of a purely Qangli force. He was stationed as military governor of the city of Herat in present-day Afghanistan, and Chinggis Khan's early battle plan in fighting the Khwarazmian empire appears to have been to use cultural affinity to try to peel off him and other Qangli commanders from the Sart base of the Khwarazmian dynasty. This strategy of appealing to nomadic cultural affinity he had used successfully against the Jurchen Jin dynasty, winning over many ethnic Kitans in the Jin army and getting them to desert to his standard. This time the strategy failed miserably, probably for reasons larger than just Toqucar's opportunistic sacking of some of the towns in the area of Herat (§257). But the Secret Historian seems to have been aware of this idea of rallying Khan-Malik to the Mongol cause, and since Herat was in the south-western part of the Khwarazmian realm, guessed (plausibly, but incorrectly) that joining up with him was somehow connected with the original plan of Jebe, Sube'edei and Toqucar's expedition.

The margins of the Secret Historian's world: Song China, the caliph and the far-western steppe

Around these empires which were well known to the Secret Historian, either through their previous interference in the Mongol steppe or through Chinggis Khan's campaigns, were shadowy realms which the Secret Historian appears to have known only by name.

About the time of Möngke Khan's coronation in 1251, when the *Secret History* was being first conceived, the kingdom of Hungary in the far west, the caliph of Baghdad in the south-west and the Song dynasty in South China were all still in opposition to Mongol power. In the *Secret History*, however, all three are presented as if they had either been satisfactorily subdued (Hungary and Baghdad) or else had never been hostile to the Mongol empire (Song China). In the latter case, how the Secret Historian misrepresented the death of the ambassador Jubqan is very telling. In reality, Jubqan's disappearance while on a mission from Ökdei Khan to the Song dynasty was one of the justifications for the Mongol declaration of war on the Song in 1234. In the *Secret History*, however, Jubqan is turned into a Mongol ambassador who was molested by the Jin on his way to the Song! Evidently the Secret Historian preferred to see the Song as a friendly power and was hoping that no further conquests would be needed.

A final aspect of the *Secret History*'s geographical viewpoint is the surprisingly limited knowledge of the Qipchaq and Qangli nomads of the Kazakhstan, Caspian and Pontic (Black Sea) steppes. These Qipchaq and Qangli were Turkic-speaking mobile pastoralists – indeed, they were often considered the best practitioners of the arts of pastoralism. Later on, in Qubilai Khan's reign, Qipchaqs who had been deported to the east were organized into a special guards unit, one of whose tasks was to produce a kind of clarified *esuk* or clear fermented mare's milk for the khan's table. In the era of Chinggis Khan, neither the Qipchaqs nor the Qangli had a unified state. Instead, like the Tatars, Merkit and Mongols of eastern Mongolia during Chinggis Khan's time, they formed a large number