

THE TRUE ORIGIN OF THE MONGOLS?*

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I was in north China in summer 2019, researching a book on Hulunbuir, a region that takes China surging up past Mongolia and into Siberia. Though virtually unknown in the west, this is a vast and empty mass of grasslands (in the west and south), which give way to the forested Xing'an mountains in the east. Vast and empty hardly do it justice. It is a fraction larger than my own homeland, the United Kingdom, yet has a population of only 2.5 million. Of these, almost 90% are Han Chinese, but 8.6% are Mongols. You would think there were more because their culture is ever-present—in the vertical script that adorns shops and official notices, in their shows which are major tourist attractions, and in their pride in their history, which focuses heavily on the region's connections with the greatest of all Mongols, Genghis Khan. Locals claim he often came here, because this was where his ancestors originated. I wanted to know if there was any evidence for this and—since Genghis's descendants conquered all China—why the Chinese were so keen to promote him.

With a Mongol-Chinese colleague, Alatan, professor of English at the Inner Mongolia University of Technology, we were driven north from the capital Hailar on a road roughly parallel with the Erguna River marking the Sino-Russian border—very roughly parallel because the river, named after the Mongolian word for “winding,” wriggles north for some 500 kilometres before joining the Amur. About 300 kilometres from Hailar, the road runs past an impressive gateway—a broad arch flanked by four buildings, each topped by a dome in the style of a Mongolian tent [Fig. 1]. Flags fly from the roof. Beyond the entrance forested hills rise in waves of green. A sign proclaims this to be Menggu Shiwei 蒙古室韦, or “Mongol Shiwei,” the name of the Mongols before they were truly Mongols. In a phrase, this claims to be the “origin of the Mongols.”

From today's perspective, that seems a little odd. As most people think they know, the Mongols are

people of the grassland, and their homeland is Mongolia. But this was not always so. Their famous foundation epic, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, says they came to their new homeland over the *tengis*—the sea or lake—probably in the 9th century. What an academic storm that word has produced. Which sea or lake does the word *tengis* refer to? There are several possibilities, because *tengis* designates any large body of water, such as the Caspian or Aral Seas. Some scholars argue that this *tengis* was Lake Baikal in Siberia. Others claim that the lake must be the only other large body of water in this part of the world—Lake Hulun. That's what everyone told me when I started my travels in Hulunbuir, named after this lake and its smaller sister, Buir.

There are good reasons for the claim. The *Secret History* was written only a few years after Genghis's death in 1227 (perhaps 1228-9, more probably 1252), and scholars agree that it records stories that were told at the time, many no doubt apocryphal, others backed by Chinese and Persian sources, and many with real-life details that confer verisimilitude. One story tells us how, when Temujin (the future Genghis) was nine, his father Yisugei decided to find a wife for his son. The Mongols did not marry within their own clan. By tradition, they

Fig. 1. Entrance to the “Origins of the Mongols.” All photographs by the author.



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chose their mates from a group known as Ongirat (or Qongirat, spellings vary), who lived south and east of Lake Hulun. His mother and his wife Hoelun (Genghis's mother) were of this tribe.

As it often does, the *Secret History* turns an event into a romantic tale with poetic additions. Yisugei is riding across Ongirat territory, aiming for his mother's original clan that lived further east, when he meets the Ongirat chief, Dei Setsen (the Wise). The *Secret History* says this occurred near two mountains called Chekhcher and Chikhurkhu, which are unidentified, but were somewhere west of the Orxan (Wuexun) River, which flows between lakes Hulun and Buir.

Offering hospitality to an old acquaintance, Dei, who by chance has a daughter of the right age, sees the political advantages of arranging a marriage and claims he had a dream. "A white gerfalcon clasp[ing] both the sun and moon in its claws flew to me and perched on my hand.... Just what sort of good thing does this show?"¹ It is a good omen, because the gerfalcon was the king of hunting birds, white the most auspicious colour, and it was the totem of Yisugei's clan. The sun and moon rule the skies. It means that Yisugei is destined for glory—if the two of them are linked through the marriage of their children. He reminds Yisugei of their traditional bond, emphasising that the Ongirat are peaceful, relying on alliances made with their women:

With us, the Ongirat people, from old days
To have the good looks of our granddaughters
And the beauty of our daughters is enough....
We lead them off to the khan
And seat them on the throne...
We live thanks to the good looks
Of our granddaughters
And the beauty of our daughters.

Come to my tent, he says. Take a look at my daughter, Börte. And of course, Yisugei sees that she is a beauty, with a strong character. In a stock phrase often used in Mongol stories, she's a girl

Who has light in her face,
Who has fire in her eyes.

Yisugei agrees. He leaves Temujin with Dei as a future son-in-law. Many dramatic events follow: Yisugei is murdered, Temujin survives as an out-

cast. Ten years later, Temujin returns to claim his bride. She becomes his first love, and a powerful influence on him. You could argue that without the Ongirats and Börte, the Mongol empire and China itself would not have turned out the way they did.

The Ongirat remained a force in later Mongol history. Besides Hoelun and Börte, Ongirat women who became empresses include Chabi, who became Kublai Khan's senior and much respected queen, and another 14 queens of later Yuan emperors. Marco Polo described how they were selected. They were checked by "certain elderly ladies, who make the girls sleep with them, in order to ascertain if they have sweet breath, and are sound in all their limbs."

A second connection with the area was made in 1201-3, when Temujin was in the midst of operations to defeat his enemies, before declaring himself khan with the name of Genghis in 1206 (I'll call him Genghis to keep things simple). His principal foe was his childhood friend and blood-brother, Jamukha, who was elected as alternate khan and head of an anti-Genghis alliance. The two fought it out in a decisive battle at a place the *Secret History* calls Khuiten ("Cold").

The *Secret History* says that the weather played a dramatic role in Genghis's victory, thanks to some inept witchcraft by two generals named Buyuk and Khudukha:

As they pressed on each other downhill and uphill, and reformed their ranks, those very same Buyuk Khan and Khudukha, knowing how to produce a rainstorm by magic, started to conjure it up, but the magic storm roiled back and it was right upon themselves that it fell. Unable to proceed, they tumbled into ravines. Saying to each other, "We are not loved by Heaven!" they scattered.

Supposedly, the battle site is on the north bank of the Kherlen River as it flows from Mongolia towards Lake Hulun. Archaeologists—notably Meng Songlin (a member of the Standing Committee and Minister of the Propaganda Department of Hulunbuir and author of *Genghis Khan and the Mongolian Plateau*)—have found many arrow-points here.² Other scholars point out that you can

find arrow-points almost anywhere. Wherever it happened, Mongols celebrate this as one of the most significant battles in Mongol and Chinese history. Twice a year, on June 15 and August 15, they gather in their thousands to walk up the 300-meter hill, Holy Mountain (Bogd Uul), 10 kilometers south of Lake Hulun, to honor the nearby battle-site. Just imagine the difference if Genghis had lost: no empire, no Kublai Khan, no Yuan dynasty, Chinese unification delayed or cancelled.

Other links between the 13th-century Mongols and Hulunbuir followed, with Genghis's brother Qasar playing a major role. When Genghis was at his lowest ebb, defeated and down to a hard core of followers, he fled to an unidentified lake or river usually transliterated as Baljuna. Here Genghis proved the strength of his leadership:

Upon arrival at the Baljuna, the provisions were used up. It happened that from the north a wild horse ran up. Qasar brought it down. From its skin they made a kettle, with a stone they got fire, and from the river, water. They boiled the flesh of the horse and ate it. Genghis Khan, raising his hand toward the sky, swore thus: "If I finish the great work [of creating an empire] then I shall share with you men the sweet and the bitter. If I break my word, then let me be as this water." Among the officers and men, there was not one who was not moved to tears.³

This was a turning point. Allies—including the Ongirat—came to him. Victory led to victory until one major enemy remained—the Naimans, now in alliance with Genghis's childhood friend Jamukha. In 1204, the two clashed. The *Secret History* has a superb poetic description of the build-up, with Jamukha giving his ally, Tayang, fearsome portraits of Genghis's generals. When it comes to Qasar, Jamukha paints a nightmarish image in verse, in which Qasar is a giant with superhuman powers. "Mother Hoelun raised him on human flesh," he says,

His body is three fathoms high,
And he dines on three-year-old cattle.
Wearing a three-layered armour,
He is pulled along in his cart by three bulls.
When he swallows a man complete with quiver,
It does not get stuck in his throat.
When he gulps down a whole man,

It does not fill his stomach.
When he is angry and draws his bow,
And releases a fork-tipped arrow,
He shoots and pierces ten or twenty men
Who are beyond a mountain....
Different from all other men,
He was born a writhing ogre.

At his coronation in 1206, Genghis gave Qasar the area between the Erguna and Hailar rivers. The result was that Qasar is still a presence in Hulunbuir and beyond. As my guide, Miss Bo, in Hailar's Nationalities Museum put it: "Qasar's later descendants, generation by generation, were scattered throughout Inner Mongolia."

Alatan, my Chinese-Mongol adviser, was listening, and added, "He was known as *khat*, a title meaning 'very strong'—fair enough, I thought, for someone who could swallow a man whole and shoot over mountains. "Even today, people in Inner Mongolia say they are descendants of Qasar, especially here in the north-east. He was a Borjigin, of course, like Genghis, but in Chinese the name is shortened to Bo. Her name"—he nodded to the guide—"is Bo."

Though links between the Mongols and Hulunbuir long predate the 13th century, this would not be regarded as "Mongol" territory half a millennium before. The link between the Mongols and Hulunbuir long predated the 13th century, the roots reaching back another half-millennium to a sub-group of a people known to the Chinese as Shiwei. According to 5th-century records, they dominated the forest of the north-east, across Manchuria. They were not herders, having few horses, but lived in huts made of bent branches covered by the skins of the animals they hunted. They paid tributes in furs to the Turkic empire that ruled Mongolia in the 6th century and to the Tang in China from the 7th to the 9th centuries. They were divided into anything up to 20 tribes, one of which lived in the western part of their range and was referred to as Menggu, or Mongol. It is all rather uncertain. They probably had links with the Xianbei, who established their own empire and ruled northern China as the Northern Wei (386-534). But the records are scanty, and no one is sure what combination of Mongol, Turkic, and Tungus they spoke. They only emerge from their shadowy past when the Menggu



Fig. 2. Looking toward the head of the valley.

Shiwei moved on to the steppe, learned the crucial art of working iron, and became the ancestors of the Mongols.

Having moved from the forested hills of the Khingan (Xing'an), the proto-Mongols seem to have settled along the Erguna River. As if to prove the point, the little town of Shiwei stands nearby. The name of the river suggests that this is true, since it derives from the Mongol *ergikh*, “to wind.”

Which brings us back to the arch near the town of Shiwei, the one proclaiming itself to be the “Origin of the Mongols.” The forested hills beyond the arch cover almost 400 square kilometers, the size of the place revealing the significance of the subject to the local government. With a guide, I drove up a road that wound through an infinity of trees and rolling hills, while the guide told me the following story:

There was a battle between the Mongols and the Turks. The Mongols were, he said, the ancestors of the Kiyad, the clan to which Genghis belonged. The Mongols were reduced to two couples, who fled into a hidden valley in the Erguna Kun, a mountain or mountain range that has not been identified, but—since the Erguna River ran not far away—it must have been around here. (On the other hand, the whole thing is a legend, so there may have been no Erguna Kun at all. Whether fact or fiction, here the Mongols lived for four or five centuries, growing in numbers.)

There comes a time when they want to get out.



Fig. 3. The tent of Genghis Khan.

They kill 70 oxen and cows and use the hides to make enormous bellows. With the bellows, they make a huge fire, so powerful that it melted part of the Erguna Kun, making a cleft through which they escape. (Yes, there are some obvious problems with this story, like how did they get into the valley if there was no exit? We are dealing with legends, so should not ask too many questions). Once free of the hidden valley, they cross the Tengis sea and migrate west, to the Khentii mountains, which become their new homeland.

I had heard a similar tale before, in one of the museums when another guide was speaking about Mongol origins. In this story, bellows had been used to make a forge, and the Mongols had discovered how to produce iron. That made sense to me, because the Mongol word for “iron” (*temur*) was often part of a name, as in Temujin or his younger sister Temulun. It recalls the story of England’s King Arthur, who had been confronted by a stone set in rock, and had magically pulled it out, showing that he knew how to get iron from the ground and so deserved to be king. Like many great advances, the forging of iron seems to be something discovered in several totally unrelated places. Certainly, for people venturing out on to the grasslands as herders, iron was essential for swords, stirrups, pots, arrow-points, and armor.

We arrived at the head of the valley, a beautiful amphitheatre [Fig. 2] of grass and scattered trees looking like a picture postcard in the slanting afternoon light. Ahead, on the hillside, was a tent



Fig. 4. Genghis and his queen, Börte.

[Fig. 3]. A rough approach over tree-trunks led up to the entrance. Inside were a dozen or more statues, all wonderfully lifelike: Genghis holding court, displaying his international credentials with envoys of many nationalities—Genghis himself [Fig. 4] on a carved wooden throne, full-bearded with a big fur hat, impressively good-looking, sitting alongside his beautiful queen Börte with a Mongolian head-band, a shaman chanting a blessing, a Tungus from Siberia, a Persian merchant, and a Chinese envoy.

Down from Genghis's tent was a shaman's hut, guarded by a triangular passageway of tree-trunks draped with black ropes, a division between this world and someone who has contact with the

Fig. 6. Lake Baljuna, named in Russian, English, Mongolian, and Chinese.



Fig. 5. Inside the shaman's hut.

world of spirits. From loudspeakers came the ominous beat of a shaman's drum. Inside a shadowy tent [Fig. 5], a chair and desk were covered with carpets decorated with swans. Above hung a face-mask of black ropes beneath a cap covered with doll-like figures, like the spirit images (*ongon*) used by shamans in divination.

We walked on. Further down the valley was a muddy pond, labelled Lake Baljuna [Fig. 6], as if this was the actual place where Genghis drank the "muddy waters" with his few remaining companions.

On the other side of the path, on top of a steep little hill, loomed the statue [Fig. 7] of a man on horseback—

Bodonchar, the ancestor of Genghis's family, the Borjigins. In the *Secret History*, Bodonchar is the hero of his own mini-epic, which took place—if indeed there is any truth to the

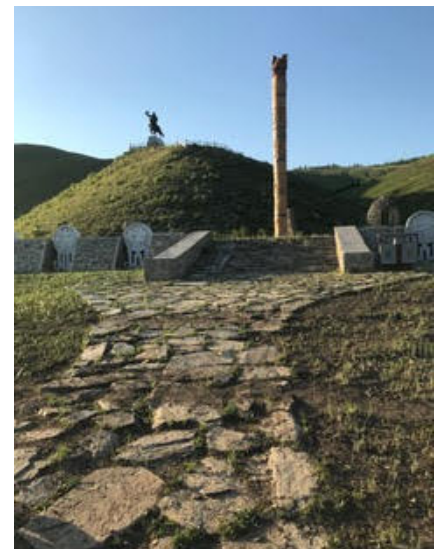


Fig. 7. Bodonchar, on horseback, behind commemorative pillar.



Fig. 8. Yesugei returning with Tartar prisoners.

legend—before the year 1000. He is the youngest of five boys born to the legendary Alan Qoa. She has two sons by her husband, who dies. Then she bears three more sons. When the first two want to know who the father is, she replies “a resplendent yellow man” entered through the smoke-hole of the tent, impregnated her and “crept out on a moonbeam or a ray of sun in the guise of a yellow dog.” In other words, they are divinely conceived and destined for greatness. Bodonchar is left with nothing when the livestock is divided, and storms off in a fit of pique. After a series of adventures, he is found by his brothers, and together they steal enough livestock to found lineages. From Bodonchar springs the Borjigin, the Golden Family. Twelve generations later, Genghis is born, ready to fulfil his destiny.

Even further down the valley, more statues portray the campsite of Genghis’s father Yisugei. It is a moment of high drama. Yisugei is returning [Fig. 8] from a campaign in which he has caught a Tartar chieftain. Actually, there are two of them, being led by a chain attached to Yisugei’s saddle, but we are only interested in one, because his name is Temujin, which is the name Yisugei is about to give his new-born son. Servant girls dance a welcome. In front of the main *ger* (yurt), Börte holds little Temujin-to-be [Fig. 9]. The statues are of bronze, heavy and life-size, set out on grassland and surrounded by forest. In the low evening light, they made a striking pageant.

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What are we to make of all this? The first thing to say is that it is certainly not the place where the



Fig. 9. Yesugei’s family welcomes him home.

Mongols originated. Nor is it a museum. There is no archaeological evidence here. It is totally artificial, with no connection between this valley and the Mongols or their ancestors the Shiwei. And it does not present a narrative. Whichever order you choose to walk, the displays are mixed up. These items have a chronological order—the 900s for Bodonchar, 1162 for the campsite, 1203 for Baljuna, 1206 or some time thereafter for the royal tent—but no such order on the ground.

But that’s not the point. There is an authenticity and power in the scenes designed to create a belief that the whole of Mongol history belongs as much, perhaps more to Hulunbuir, and thus to China, than to Mongolia. Never mind that the Mongols migrated away from here to Mongolia, that Genghis was born, raised, and buried there. His connections were close enough for his story to be part of Chinese history. Politically, this is important. Genghis’s grandson, Kublai Khan, conquered all China, united it, and ruled all China and Mongolia as the Yuan Dynasty. He could rule this vast estate (and claim authority over much of Asia through his relatives) only by becoming a Chinese emperor, with a dynasty of his own. Hence, it is logical in Chinese eyes to claim that all Mongols are in fact Chinese, back to Genghis, and beyond.

This is not just a matter of history. It is important right now, because China’s present and future position on the edge of Siberia depends on it. Once upon a time this region was very un-Chinese, dominated by various steppe cultures. Then it was disputed with Russia and Japan, but in 1949 it became

part of the revolutionary, resurgent China, and by claiming the past the site makes clear to visitors that the Mongols, Genghis, and his empire are part of China. It is this thinking that explains the recent decision to promote Chinese language teaching and diminish Mongolian, a move that in 2020 led to violent protests, many arrests, and at least one suicide. The fact that Mongolia itself is an independent nation would seem to negate this belief, but in China's long-term view this may turn out to be a brief hiatus. If so—if Mongolia should ever fall back under Chinese control, an outcome of which many Mongolians are extremely nervous—it would for China be a return to the way things once were and ought to be again.

There is unfinished business. Nearby is a new museum, which was not yet open, awaiting archaeological evidence and more diorama. The Shiwei site itself is in the process of development. Captions to the displays are in Chinese, Mongol (both Uighur and Cyrillic scripts), Russian, and English, in preparation for an influx of tourists. When it is all ready, and tourists come by the bus-load, folklore will be marketed as history and who will doubt that this is indeed the place where the Mongols originated?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

¹ All quotations from the *Secret History* are from Igor de Rachewiltz, trans. and ed., *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, 2 vols (Leiden, Boston and Cologne: Brill, 2004).

² For the original Chinese version, see Meng Songlin 孟松林, *Chengjisihan yu Menggu gaoyuan* 成吉思汗与蒙古高原 (Beijing: Xin shijie chubanshe, 2009).

³ This version is adapted from the biography in the *Yuan shi* ("Official history of the Yuan") of the Mongolian general Jabar (Cha-pa-erh), quoted by the great American Mongolist Francis Woodman Cleaves in his magisterial article, "The Historicity of the Baljuna Covenant," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 18, no. 3/4 (December 1955): 357-421.