



Cover of an edition of *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Source: Creative Commons at <http://tiny.cc/ipaaq5w>.

The Secret History of the Mongols

By Phillip P. Marzluf

Four English translations are now available of *The Secret History of the Mongols*, a thirteenth-century Mongolian epic that recounts the biography of Genghis Khan.¹ Beginning with his mythological ancestors, it narrates his miraculous birth, the assassination of his father, his humble childhood and adoles-

cent adventures, the gradual unification of the Mongolian tribes, his recognition as their supreme leader, and his death. A short section, more than likely added later to the end of the “original” *Secret History*, narrates the reign of Ogodei, Genghis Khan’s son and chosen successor.

Having examined the different versions of *The Secret History*, I have contemplated this text’s relevance and accessibility to a North American student audience. Can *The Secret History* be taught outside of specialized Mongolian history and literature courses? Can it be taught outside its specific Mongolian historical and cultural context? Can it be included in a “humanities” or non-Western “traditions” curriculum or taught alongside *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and *Beowulf*? And if the answers to these questions are “yes”—and I hope they are—then what challenges await teachers and students?

The first encounter with *The Secret History* can be a bewildering experience. The title itself is confusing. It did not serve as the title of the original epic and was changed by Chinese scribes in the following century, who by using “secret” in their title indicated that it was a history intended for an elite group of Mongolian leaders and not, in other words, for thirteenth-century Chinese administrators; common Mongolians; or, for that matter, twenty-first-century students in North America. This is what makes *The Secret History* difficult: It was meant for a narrow, insider audience that could place itself in its rich linguistic world of approximately 900 geographical and other proper names.²

The form of *The Secret History* is difficult to grapple with. It doesn’t always read like an epic and does not possess the coherence of the Homeric epics. Instead, *The Secret History* includes various types of writing, such as folklore, genealogy lists, religious poetry, proverbs, dramatic dialogue, military discussions, legal codes, and ceremonial speeches. Additionally, the basic questions of who wrote *The Secret History* and when are difficult to answer and have stimulated a great deal of academic debate among specialists. A final complication is the fact that an original manuscript of *The Secret History*, which was first written down in the Uighur script early in the thirteenth century, no longer exists. Instead, Russian, Mongolian, and other Western philologists have painstakingly recreated this epic from copies that have been written in Chinese characters to render the sound of Mongolian syllables. Mistakes were undoubtedly made during this process of transcribing the Mongolian language into a different script. There is no pure “original” text to which readers and scholars can refer.

Despite these challenges, *The Secret History* offers a great deal to students, enabling them to experience an epic that is much more immediate to the people and events that it describes and, because of its “secret”

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Genghis Khan equestrian statue, Erdene, Töv Province, Mongolia. Designed by sculptor D. Erdenebileg and architect J. Enkhjargal, the statue is 131 feet tall and was erected in 2008. The statue faces east toward his birthplace. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tiny.cc/6m8p5w>.

background and “insider” purpose, appears more raw and less revised and rehearsed. Similar to the better-known Greek Homeric epics, *The Secret History* features a hero who endures across time as an exemplary figure in the collective memory of Mongolians (and their enemies). Genghis Khan demonstrates the typical heroic characteristics. Most importantly, he is favored by Eternal Heaven and destined to rule, possessing a “fire in his eyes” and a “light in his face”³ that reflect the intelligence and charisma necessary for attracting followers who will help build his military and organize his new state. He closely follows the masculine, pastoral values and morality of his ancestors, respecting, for example, the master-subject relationship, honesty, and loyalty. If enemy warriors betray their own leaders in order to gain the favor of Genghis, he responds to their disloyalty by having them executed, regardless of how useful their actions were for his own military planning. Genghis’s many flaws—again, making him similar to Homer’s Achilles and Odysseus—are also fascinating, showing that *The Secret History* is no mere piece of propaganda showcasing an ideal leader. *The Secret History* describes Genghis’s impulsive decisions and his inability to control his anger. This is an epic hero, after all, who murdered his younger half-brother. In addition to this, Genghis has to keep on being reminded by his mother and wives that he has a destiny to fulfill.

Another consequence of the inclusive audience and inner-directed purpose of *The Secret History* is that it provides students with a glimpse of a nomadic society undergoing dramatic social change. Genghis Khan’s unification of the Mongolian nation was a culmination of extreme violence, legal precedents, modifications to military policies and strategies, and his cultivation and exploitation of traditional relationships. It is surprising how much *The Secret History* documents the network of relationships that surround Genghis Khan. A strategy for students hoping to create order out of the chaos of the many names that are probably difficult and alien to them—Bodonchar, Jamukha, Teb Tengri, among many others—is by defining how they are related to Genghis. Are they ancestors or close relatives, including brothers, sons, and wives? Are they members of a special class of ritual friends and fathers, whose symbolic relationships bound them more strongly together than biological ties? Are they “friends” or “followers,” men who willingly placed themselves under the khan’s



Ovoo worship still links contemporary Mongolians to the religious practices of Genghis Khan.
Source: Author.

authority? Are they members of a class of servants or slaves who could not act independently? Or are they enemies?

The Secret History itself as a written document indicates the transformation of the Mongolian nation and the authority of Genghis Khan. The khan himself emphasizes the importance of writing in one of many speeches commemorating his coronation ceremony. As a reward for his service, Genghis Khan grants a younger adopted brother the authority to make legal decisions and to codify them in writing. Genghis Khan follows this reward with an early example of language legislation, declaring it illegal to alter the language of any of the legal precedents: “Until the offspring of my offspring, let no one alter any of the blue writing that Šigi Qutuqu [the adopted brother], after deciding in accordance with me, shall make into a book with white paper. Anyone who alters it shall be guilty and liable to punishment.”⁴ Though Genghis Khan more than likely did not sponsor the composing of *The Secret History*, he certainly would have acknowledged its power to make these stories about warfare and the changing nature of the Mongolian social structure permanent and sacred.

More translations of *The Secret History* are necessary—translations that profit from the important philological work of scholars such as Francis Woodman Cleaves and Igor de Rachewiltz, and yet envision new, diverse, and future readers. Currently, Paul Kahn’s adaptation of Cleaves’s translation or Urgunge Onon’s translation is the most accessible for students and casual readers, as well as teachers and professors who are interested in this classic Central Asian epic for their survey courses. Rachewiltz’s translation and commentary are invaluable for researchers, yet the heft and price of these two volumes are daunting. ■

NOTES

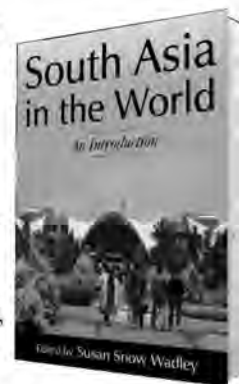
1. The four translations are Francis Woodman Cleaves, *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Igor de Rachewiltz, *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004); and two translations by Urgunge Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990) and *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan* (Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2001). Paul Kahn’s adaptation, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 1998), rewrites the epic completely in verse.
2. Rachewiltz, lxi.
3. Rachewiltz, 14.
4. Rachewiltz, 135-136.

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