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## Chinggis Khan's Syncretic Steppe: How Tradition and Innovation Combined to Form the World's Largest and Most Diverse Nomadic Empire

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Chinggis Khan's Syncretic Steppe:  
How Tradition and Innovation Combined to Form the World's Largest and Most Diverse  
Nomadic Empire

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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Dedicated to:

My professors and advisers,  
who guided me this far.

My family and loved ones,  
who put up with me for so long.

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## Introduction

The Mongol Empire had an incalculable but undeniably huge impact on the course of Eurasian history. It enacted multiple successful military campaigns and grew to be the largest contiguous land-based empire in recorded history, with a spectacularly diverse population of several millions. All of these were achieved in the span of little more than 150 years from the early 13<sup>th</sup> to mid-14<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. More notable still is that this empire was founded by a nomadic people who had only recently unified under the banner of a single political entity. The empire was led for the first twenty years of its existence by its founder, Chinggis Khan.

But why was Chinggis Khan able to found this empire? What allowed for him to rise to the station of khan to begin with, rather than remaining a circumstantially-disadvantaged man named Temüjin for his entire life? Rather than examining only the events of the lifetime of Chinggis Khan or attempting to separate his achievements from his mythologized character and inherent qualities, this paper will look further back into Inner Asian history to answer these questions of cause and effect. The last century of pre-imperial, pre-Temüjin Mongol history will be looked at through the lens of sociopolitical policies and trends of behavior which existed within settled states, nomadic peoples, and the fluctuating buffers and borderland populations which existed between them. The similarities or ruptures between these trends and policies and those of earlier centuries—as well as the logic behind those traditions or changes—will also be explored.

The question this project sets out to answer is divided into two major parts. The first is, what series of events or sociopolitical developments in medieval Inner Asia allowed for the rise of Chinggis Khan as a political leader, and for the formation of an imperial Mongol state? The

second is, to what extent was this state successfully consolidated out of its disparate and often tribal components? To approach both halves of this problem, I will examine the preeminent theories of steppe state formation as they apply to 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongolia, finding where they are reconcilable or where they disagree sharply. But this piece will not attempt to look at Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire exclusively through the lens of how previous or subsequent steppe empires are thought to have formed. Each nomadic empire throughout the history of the Eurasian steppes rose and fell due to a complex series of unique factors impressing upon independent actors, just as their sedentary, agrarian neighbors experienced. Chinggis Khan and the Mongol tribes shared in those challenges and privileges as well.

### **Overview**

The initial chapters of this project introduce and analyze several of the leading theories on state formation among nomadic tribal groups. The scholars which these theories are associated with include William H. McNeil, Thomas J. Barfield, Nicola Di Cosmo, and Owen Lattimore. With each major theory of steppe state formation an impression is given, and the attempt is made to apply the theory to either the Mongols or one of their contemporary semi-nomadic states. This is not done in order to choose one theory above all others for its applicability- each has its value, and none will be entirely discredited. The guiding logic behind this piece is that forming a single theory applicable to the development of most or all nomadic states over the course of Inner Asian history risks oversimplification of each polity's unique context. Instead, at the risk of becoming large and unwieldy, as many different facets of life from that period and the period before it must be taken into account. Thus where it is valuable I will attempt to draw flexibly from these

various theories and others as they present themselves. In doing so, I will show that within a backdrop of McNeillian global history, Nicola Di Cosmo's Crisis Response theory of steppe state formation can coexist with Thomas J. Barfield's charismatic steppe leader archetypes, and the both of those may play out across the system of socioeconomic borderlands of Owen Lattimore's settled/steppe frontier model.

After these considerations are made, the next several sections delve into different facets of the century leading up to the adulthood of Temüjin and his initial assumption of power. These topics include but are not limited to: the importance of lineage and constructed kinship among Mongol and other nomads on the steppe; the pluralism of the Inner Asian steppe and the precarious place of weakness in which the Mongols initially found themselves in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries; the early personal life of Chinggis Khan; the fledgling Mongol confederation's attempts to unify the interior of the steppe; the first approximate twenty years of expansion and political or military conquest by the Mongol Empire; and the continuities or ruptures which Mongol imperial administrative policies shared with those of their contemporaries.

With respect to lineage and kinship, we will find that the steppe nomadic political world was inextricably tied to the concepts of familial bonds which fostered cooperation and alliance, whether these bonds were blood-based or constructed by their constituent groups. Even following the consolidation of many tribes under Chinggis Khan's rule, kinship and the prestige of descent from extensive lineages remained crucial factors of the tribal and imperial political landscapes of Mongolia, both of which continued to exist side-by-side despite the frequent attempts by the latter to exert control over the former. The cultural/tribal pluralism of the Inner Asian steppe was another major factor in the empire's development despite measures taken to



incorporate many elements into a single “Mongol” people, and it emphasizes how far from being a single homogeneous body the steppe nomads or the states they created really were, much the same way that their sedentary neighbors held themselves as diverse and distinct from one another. The Mongol Empire was extremely diverse, and would only become more so as it expanded beyond the Inner Asian steppe.

Chinggis Khan, as much a product of his world as he was a dynamic and unique actor, had his later policies as a leader impacted by his formative years, as well as the policies of the states with which his empire had contact. These initial policies would control the administrative system and codified law of the Mongol Empire until well into the lifespan of the Yuan Dynasty, while also preserving or transforming the customs, social traditions, and religious practice among its subjects. Finally, in regards to consolidation of the steppe and expansion beyond it, we see an early logic of state-formation in which the eastern steppe is meant to be the sociopolitical heartland, while the agrarian empires of the south were the periphery. But this initial logic did not survive extensive contact and conflict with neighboring empires unscathed, and it was over the span of the last 20 years of Chinggis Khan's life that a greater emphasis was placed on conquest leading to the direct administration of those conquered territories as an end goal.

Ultimately this project strives for comprehensiveness of different approaches and angles, with respect to their differences and disagreements. The answer to the posed questions here does not lie entirely in the past (meaning the past even earlier than this past in question), nor the independent actions of leaders. I.e., Temüjin the man and the events of his personal life will be addressed in turn without making his name perfectly synonymous with the rise of the Mongol Empire. This project will examine his sometimes charismatic, sometimes aggressive form of

leadership without straying into the territory of the “Great Men” theory, while also preserving him and the Mongol peoples as independent actors who were not solely affected by external influences. As suggested by an emphasis on origins and a repetition of “Inner Asian steppe”, the scope of this project does not include the southern-or-westernmost avenues of conquest by the Mongol Empire which generally occurred later in the state's lifecycle than the lifetimes Chinggis or the other early Great Khans. These omitted facets of the Mongols' interactions with the rest of Eurasia include all of the campaigns westward into Russia and Europe, as well as those southward into Tibet, the Indian subcontinent, or Korea. Every one of these points of contact were historically significant and meaningful, but to include them all in this single piece would fail to do them justice, or distract from the core concerns.

### **A Note on Spelling/Transliteration**

By working with a range of sources which have often been translated and transliterated into English from multiple other languages, many variations on the spelling of a single name or word are inevitable. When it is possible to determine, the more phonetically faithful of two spellings to the original spoken language is chosen as the standard in this project, such as with *Chinggis* vs *Genghis* Khan. Where authenticity is not as big of a concern, or where a deduction like most vs. least authentic version of a name is impossible based off of the available sources, a single spelling is chosen and used throughout for the sake of consistency. When a word makes use of diacritics (such as *Temüjin*), they are generally included as well.

### **A note on using the *Secret History of the Mongols***

One recurring challenge to my research was the availability of sources and records in English, my only fluent language. Historical texts concerning the Mongol Empire use a wide variety of languages however, ranging from Persian, to Arabic, to Chinese, Tibetan, Uyghur, Korean, and Mongolian proper. These documents have been subjected to modern study and translation, often into modern Chinese or Russian, or other Eurasian Languages, but easy access to full English translations was not a luxury I was able to indulge in often. But the history of the Mongols need not be looked at purely through the lens of the Western scholar centuries after the events in question, thanks to one particular document which fortunately has been translated into English numerous times, alongside countless other languages. The Mongols were very keen to preserve and reflect upon their own history, and *The Secret History of the Mongols* is a prime example of the empire's post-Chinggis Khan interests in dynastic historiography. Because the *Secret History* is a mix of historical narrative and cultural epic, it is a text which exists somewhere in between the normal modes of primary and secondary source. As a result, it must be used very cautiously, but in return it offers a wealth of information and perspective. The first step toward proper use of such a source is to choose a proper translation into English, out of its native Middle Mongolian. In looking at *The Secret History of the Mongols* as a potential source for the history of the Mongols and the self-reflection on that history by the Mongols, I decided to look at several different translations of the text in order to find the most accessible and effective copy as English-language scholarship will allow.

The translation by Igor de Rachewiltz was, up until recently, apparently riddled with minor errors, omissions, and other various issues with the text which he was alerted to over the

years, culminating in 2014 with him publishing a 226-page companion to his 2004 translation of the *Secret History*, rather than an entirely new edition of it.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, the two pieces more-or-less have to be used together at once, making the translation as a whole a little less accessible than it could have been. Francis W. Cleaves wrote the oldest of the “current” translations, greatly delayed in its development and first published only in 1982. Emphasizing the literary aspect of the *Secret History*, Cleaves attempted a “King James Bible” style of English translation, using the Authorized Version of 1611 as a model for the language and style in his work.<sup>2</sup> This results in the frequent, occasionally distracting, additions of words in [brackets] to otherwise incomplete sentences written in a deliberately archaic style of English meant to evoke the poetry of the original Mongolian. His translation was also apparently meant to include a more full body of notes in a second volume of his finished work<sup>3</sup>, which was unfortunately never published. The 1980s translation, in development since at least the 60s, also wasn't able to benefit from the more recent wave of interest in Mongol history and literature closer to the turn of the century, which could have offered a greater range of data to work with and arguments to interact with. Paul Kahn produced an “adaptation” of Cleaves' translation in 1998 which changed and somewhat cleaned up his language while attempting to maintain the original meaning.<sup>4</sup> This does not address the challenge of missing notes found in the original, however.

The translation which I found most useful, and which figures prominently in this piece, is one by Urgunge Onon, published in 2001. He is a Da'ur Mongol, and thus he is an indigenous

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1 Adu-Frimpong, A 2013, 'The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century', *African & Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 444-445. Available from: 10.1163/15692108-12341279.

2 Francis Woodman Cleaves, *The Secret History of the Mongols* (London: Harvard University, 1982), ix.

3 Francis Woodman Cleaves, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, xii.

4 Paul Kahn and Francis Woodman. Cleaves, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chinghis Khan (Expanded Edition): An adaptation of the Yüan Ch'ao Pi Shih, based primarily on the English translation by Francis Woodman Cleaves* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui Co., 1998), x-xii.

scholar whose own native dialect of Mongolian is quite close to the one used to write the original *Secret History*.<sup>5</sup> This allows me a chance to read a perspective different from that of the usual Western scholar who has learned Mongolian as a secondary language. He offers a 36-page introduction which gives a brief history of Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire, responds to certain popular thoughts and misconceptions about them both, and provides an overview of how he handles the translation of complex concepts as well as the available sources for his work.<sup>6</sup>

Translations of other primary sources, such as the histories of Ata-Malik Juvaini and Rashid al-Din, or fragmentary reports on partly-or-wholly-lost information like the Yassa Law Code, offered similar challenges. In these cases, their contents are received in translation, mostly as excerpts, within the bodies of larger texts such as the Rossabi document reader, rather than being accessible in full as independent translations into English. Even with this limitation however, existing scholarship is robust enough that lack to the full literature did not significantly hinder the project as a whole.

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5 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 16.

6 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 1-35.

## Timeline<sup>7</sup>

To better situate this piece in time and space, a timeline of major events has been provided below. The start and end points were chosen as bookends for practicality and reader convenience, and do not represent hard breaking points where historical relevance to the paper begins or stops. The timeline covers three periods, the first and third being extremely broad, but the second bounded between the other two being concerned with the lifetime of Chinggis Khan himself. Where multiple sources cite multiple dates or names for the same event, the date generally accepted as more likely is provided in the entry. Where the time of an event is only known generally, the most agreed-upon scholarly approximation was chosen instead.

### Pre-Chinggisid Period

- $\leq 9^{\text{th}}$  Century CE: Proto-Mongol peoples and other nomads come to inhabit the large grassland area of the Inner Asian Steppe situated north of the Gobi Desert, west of Manchuria, east of Dzungaria, and south of Siberia.
- 840: The Uyghur Khaganate, last major, non-Sinified nomadic empire prior to the rise of the Mongols, is invaded by Yenisei Kyrgyz, its capital of Ordubaliq razed and its khagan killed, beginning its ultimate collapse.
- 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE: The Khamag Mongol tribal confederation forms. Reign of Khaidu Khan, ancestor of Chinggis Khan and member of the Borjigid lineage.
- ~1120: Khabul, great-grandson of Khaidu and great-grandfather of Temüjin, becomes Khan of the Khamag Mongols.
- 1140s: Mongols drawn into conflict between allied Khongirad tribe and the Tatars to the east.
- ~1146: Khabul Khan dies. Leadership of the Khamag confederacy passes over his sons to

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<sup>7</sup> Dates taken from the following sources: Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2004); Frederick Wade Mote, *Imperial China 900-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).; Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2010).

the Taichiud Mongol Ambaghai.

- 1156: Ambaghai is captured, tortured, and executed by the Tatars and their patrons in the Jurchen Jin. Khamag leadership defaults back to Borjigid Mongol lineage, causing resentment in the Taichiud lineage.

### Chinggisid Period

- 1162: Temüjin is born to Ho'elun and Yesugei Baghatur, leader of the Khamag Mongols.
- 1170: Assassination of Yesugei by rival Tatars. Temüjin, siblings, and mother exiled into the wilderness by the usurping Taichiud Mongols.
- 1184: Temüjin returns to tribal life, marries Börte of the Khongirad tribe. Börte is abducted by the Merkit tribe, and Temüjin allies with the Kherait Ong Khan. Merkits are defeated and Börte is rescued by a coalition between Ong Khan, Temüjin, and his blood-brother Jamukha.
- 1187: Mongol and Khongirad forces battle the Tatars together once more.
- 1196: Mongol, Kherait, and Jin Dynasty forces defeat and disperse the Tatar confederation.
- 1201: Temüjin's Mongols begin to desert him. Jamukha takes the title of *Gür-khan* in direct opposition to Temüjin's growing power.
- 1202: Temüjin and remaining followers defeat and subjugate or integrate last Tatar remnants.
- 1203: The alliance between Temüjin and Ong Khan breaks down over marriage disputes and insults. Temüjin and loyal Mongols war with and defeat Ong Khan and the Kherait tribe. Ong Khan is executed. Temüjin creates the first incarnation of the Mongol *kheshig* bodyguard.
- 1204: Mongols defeat the Naimans, Merkits, and the confederation led by Jamukha. Jamukha is executed.
- 1206: At a *kurultai* assembly, the shaman Teb Tenggeri names Temüjin Chinggis Khan. Chinggis becomes Great Khan of the Mongols and allied/subject tribes. Mongol invasion of the Tangut Kingdom/Western Xia begins.

- 1210: The Tangut Kingdom submits to the Mongols. A pro-Mongol administration runs the vassal state.
- 1211: Mongols begin invasion of the Jin Dynasty. Hostilities form between Mongols and the unstable Kara-Khitan Khanate as Uyghurs, Karluks, and other groups defect to the former.
- 1215: Kublai is born to Chinggis Khan's fourth son Tolui.
- 1216: Conquest of the Kara-Khitan Khanate completed, again with vassals instated as rulers.
- 1218: Hostilities flare up between the armies of Mongols and their western trade partner, the Khwarezmid Dynasty.
- 1221: The Khwarezmid Shah is killed. Mongols gradually sack, raze, or assume direct control of all Khwarezmian lands and cities.
- 1225/26: The Tangut Emperor, having ceased tribute and cooperation with the Mongols, is invaded in a punitive campaign.
- 1227: Chinggis Khan dies. Tolui becomes regent. The recalcitrant Tangut Kingdom is conquered and administered directly by the Mongols.

#### **Post-Chinggisid Period**

- 1229: Ogedei becomes second Great Khan following a 2 year interregnum.
- 1234: The long conflict with Jin ends in Mongol conquest of the Dynasty.
- 1235: Mongol invasion of the Southern Song Dynasty begins.
- 1259: Division of the Mongol Empire begins with the death of Mongke Khan.
- 1260: Kublai becomes fifth Great Khan of the Mongol Empire.
- 1271: Kublai founds the Yuan Dynasty.
- 1276: The Southern remnants of the Song Dynasty are defeated.
- 1294: The Mongol Empire becomes entirely divided into the Yuan Dynasty, Chagatai Khanate, Ilkhanate, and Golden Horde.
- 1368: The Yuan Dynasty is driven out of China by the newly-formed Ming Dynasty and retreats north into the Mongolian steppe.
- 1635: The Northern Yuan Dynasty is absorbed into the expanding Qing Dynasty.



### **Literature Overview**

In addition to a historical narrative with an occasional anthropological touch, this argument will be carried by the existing body of literature on the history and nature of the Mongol Empire, as well as of tribal nomad states originating from the Inner Asian steppe in general. Several different perspectives on steppe state formation will be taken into account, examined on their own merits, compared and contrasted, and finally synthesized in part to form a more comprehensive model of how the Mongol Empire formed. Once the question of how it was created is answered, the question of what it actually was may be addressed.

An emphasis on the diversity of this approach comes from an observation on a commonly recurring theme which can be found throughout the literature of steppe polities and nomad empires. Each author or set of authors, in formulating an argument for how and why steppe states form, tends to emphasize one particular avenue of explanation over others. This trend is present in the study of the Mongol Empire as well. It may take the form of emphasizing the accomplishments of the charismatic nomad leader, the political weakness or disarray of the steppe's sedentary neighbors on the eve of formation, a collective nomadic reaction to perceived crisis, a naturally recurring function of ecology or economics on the borderlands between steppe and arable land, etc. Each of these arguments, when well-reasoned and supported with evidence, is perfectly valid. This is not a paper of disproving, after all. But an over-emphasis on one rationale runs the risk of taking these theories out of conversation with one another, or worse, of placing them in a false dichotomy in which they are compared in order to find the more satisfactory of the two. Instead of this, these theories could be wedded together without coming into significant conflict with one another, forming a more complete picture of the Inner Asian

world on the cusp of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

This multidimensional approach guards against oversimplification of as complex a series of events as the formation of the Mongol Empire. It has the notable shortcoming of requiring far more time to formulate than a single-discipline approach does, but the potential gain in precision makes it a more than worthwhile pursuit during research. Because of that, this is as much a crash course attempt at the approach as it is an argument in favor of it. What follows is a series of observations and comparisons between the arguments of the authors whom this paper chiefly concerns itself with.

The primary theories on steppe politics which this piece draws upon come from the writings of Nicola Di Cosmo, Owen Lattimore, and Thomas J. Barfield. It should be understood that each author wrote in a period in which the study of global history had been significantly affected by the work of William H. McNeill. *The Global Condition*, one of McNeill's later books, offers a refined version of the early argument which he pioneered, in which steppe nomads were for the first time in the study of history independent actors with their own logic and needs. In his 1951 publication *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, Owen Lattimore attempts to explain the formation of nomadic states beginning with wealth and economic interest combined with the cyclical allure, consolidation, and fragmentation of borderlands located in between steppe and settled territory. Writing over thirty years after Lattimore, Thomas J. Barfield acknowledges this theory of state formation in *The Perilous Frontier*, in which he calls its accuracy into question by asserting that the well-documented example of Chinggis Khan was an *exception* rather than the norm of steppe empire founders, and that he had not been part of another iteration of the same cycle.<sup>8</sup> While chiefly concerned with the relationship between China and the Hsiung-nu far

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8 Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989),12.

earlier in Inner Asian history, Nicola Di Cosmo's *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* still addresses the necessary issue of how nomadic states in general are able to form, and what events or conditions are required.

Morris Rossabi is an acclaimed Mongolist and the author or editor of many books on the topic. While he is not the creator of an argument about steppe state formation which this piece will be examining, the conversation would be sorely lacking if some of his material were not present. *The Mongols and Global History* by Morris Rossabi is a document-driven reader which includes a genealogy of the khanates as well as excerpts concerning Chinggis Khan, his successors, the Mongol Empire, and the Yuan Dynasty. Most of the documents fit into the time period between his rise to noticeable power and the decline of the Empire into competing khanates, including excerpts from Rashid al-Din and *The Secret History of the Mongols* (specifically the translation by Paul Kahn, whom the reader also cites as emphasizing the literary quality of the *Secret History* and treating it as a poem). Rossabi, among other scholars too numerous to list outside of the bibliography, thus will provide the bulk of documents and secondary arguments relevant to the project.

### **McNeil's *The Global Condition***

Professor William H. McNeil, in an essay delivered at Baylor University in 1982, asserted that historical change (and the formation of civilizations and states which are facets of historical change) is generated by cultural differentiation, “whether within a civilized society, or across its borders”, and that these processes of differentiation are checked by climate and other limitations.<sup>9</sup> These acts of cultural interaction tended to occur slowly for much of history and

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9 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition: Conquerors, Catastrophes, and Community* (Princeton:

prehistory according to McNeil, with knowledge, skills, and ideas diffusing short distances in small amounts among groups of relatively equal standing and capacities.<sup>10</sup> The famous exception to this rule which he goes on to explain as being critically important to the historic development of the “Old World” was the distinct and longstanding differences between agricultural societies and pastoral nomads in Africa and especially the interiors of Eurasia.<sup>11</sup> Nomads, owing to their early mastery of horseback riding and mounted archery (dated at around 800 B.C.E.), were consistently able to apply concentrated military force at a much faster and easier rate than agriculturalists. This resulted in much of Eurasian history up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century C.E. including a recurring pattern of nomadic invasions of agricultural territories, conquest, acculturation to the conquered people or a rebellion of the conquered, and then another subsequent incursion from the steppes. Only in two parts of settled, agricultural Eurasia—Western Europe and Japan—was this trend unheard-of enough to count it as inconsequential to the historical development of those regions.<sup>12</sup> While their motives may not have included such foresight at the time, these nomads sped up the process of cultural interaction and were instrumental in the development of trade routes sufficient enough to ensure the exchange of information which would lead to settled civilizations flourishing for thousands of years to come.

This makes the formation of the Mongol Empire—as well as other steppe nomad states established both before and after it—almost inevitable in the grand scheme of Eurasian history. Rather than responding to specific crises related to the time and space in which tribes existed, or attributing tribal movements to the influence of charismatic leaders, steppe nomads mobilized and developed confederations or empires oriented around the extraction of wealth from other

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Princeton University Press, 1992), 13.

10 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition*, Ibid.

11 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition*, 14.

12 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition*, Ibid.

polities—especially agriculturalists—almost as a matter of course. This is in part because of McNeill's famous ecological approach to human history first seen in his book *Plagues and Peoples* (1976) which establishes human groups as populations of organisms in a world governed by the global forces of micro- and macro-parasitism.<sup>13</sup>

But this view also seems to be informed by the common modern notion that a nomadic pastoralist lifestyle is insufficient—or at least suboptimal—for human nutrition and survival. McNeill's iteration of this idea in a 1979 revised lecture at Clark University manages to transform the idea into more of a two-way street which encouraged symbiosis between nomads and agriculturalists, rather than food being an issue of purely nomadic insufficiency: While nomads greatly benefited from the inclusion of cheap carbohydrates and produce in their diets, agriculturalists likewise benefited from greater access to protein found in pastoralists' meats and dairy products. The Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khan marked a “climax” of the role of nomadic peoples in fostering the “symbiosis” of Eurasian grasslands and grain fields, through its political and military expressions.<sup>14</sup> One suggestion for a greater emphasis on trading over raiding over time is that a class of nomadic merchants and traders eventually formed among the Mongols due to the cultural influences of settled populations. They sought to fill in an available economic/ecological niche which had become apparent, seduced as they were, so to speak, by the charms and fine finished products of civilization.<sup>15</sup> This two-way street assumes a degree of peaceful coexistence and a willingness to trade, however, and according to McNeill that

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13 Microparasites are any tiny organisms such as viruses, bacteria, or multi-celled creatures which seek out a host and use it to maintain its own vital processes through a variety of means. Macroparasites on the other hand, are larger organisms such as predators which can either simply kill another being for sustenance, or use other means to benefit from a creature while it is kept alive indefinitely. Humans, as both hunters and herders of animals, as well as beings able to manipulate the land around them, fit into McNeill's language of macroparasitism.

William Hardy McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York, NY: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1976), 24.

14 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition*, 105.

15 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition*, 105.

circumstance only presented itself once nomads found that they could not raid with what he describes as “impunity”.<sup>16</sup> Only after steppe nomads had become thoroughly dependent upon cereals to support their increased population densities did their lifestyle become a case of raiding only as an emergency in the event of trade not being sufficient.<sup>17</sup>

This puts McNeill somewhat at odds with the model of nomad relations created concurrently by Lawrence Krader in *The Origin of the State among the Nomads of Asia*, also in 1979. While Krader's model also maintains that there was a certain interdependence between pastoralists and agriculturalists, his is a model in which war, raids, and pillaging are *from the start* abnormal conditions caused by an interruption in continued trade and other nonviolent exchange mechanisms.<sup>18</sup> Usually, this interruption was caused by a strong, organized state existing among the agriculturalists in question, which took greater control of the markets and made trading for goods unprofitable or otherwise unfavorable to the nomads. The two models also share the shortcoming of somewhat oversimplifying complicated historical trends in which it was periodically known for no raiding activities to accompany very tightly controlled borderland markets, or conversely for swift and brutal raiding expeditions immediately following the opening of lucrative and inclusive markets.<sup>19</sup> While some of the ideas developed by McNeill may not have aged so well, particularly in the last two decades of historical academia, he played a notable role in incorporating steppe nomads as actors and innovators into a Western view of global history. The idea that nomads faced frequent food supply issues by virtue of their lifestyle has shown to be a popular theory up into the modern day. With recent studies able to reconstruct

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16 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition*, 104.

17 William Hardy McNeill, *The Global Condition*, 105.

18 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 168.

19 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, *Ibid.*

the climate and environment of various points in the history of the Inner Asian steppe however, McNeil's point about food supplies and the perpetual concern for maintaining them can be reinforced. In particular, the dampness of northern China during the Medieval Warm Period may have influenced pastoralists.

### **Lattimore's *Inner Asian Frontiers of China***

Owen Lattimore, in his 1951 *Inner Asian Frontiers*, addresses for a portion of the text the way in which steppe empires such as the Mongol Empire were allowed to form. In his theory of state formation, political and military action become components of an economic model that is centered upon the pastoralist balance between wealth and mobility.<sup>20</sup> On the borderlands between the “hearts” of settled territories and steppe territory, there exists a cyclical system of sedentary and nomadic elements synthesizing, and border communities forming, which utilize qualities of both cultures. Oftentimes, these borderland communities are funded and otherwise vested with the interests of a nomadic strong-man who originally sought out new avenues of wealth with which to support his interdependent relationships with his men-at-arms and other followers.<sup>21</sup> These societies are said to inevitably break down into their constituent parts, as the inherent conflicts of interest between sedentary and pastoralist elements of different origins drive those elements apart and return the borderland to its first stage of the cycle. According to Lattimore:

“In such processes of cracking up and sorting out, the leading new political figures were likely to be men from the lower strata of the ruling class. Such men, while they

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20 Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: American Geographical Society, 1951), 76.

21 Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, 71.

understood the working of politics and war and the handling of the society and economy whose control they now set out to capture, had not been destroyed by the fall of their own vested interests, as had the upper strata of the same class.<sup>19</sup> Thus the decisive political agent was the man of the lesser nobility (like Chingghis Khan) ; but the geographical determinant, in such phases, was not the marginal terrain but the unmistakable steppe terrain, because in the poorer steppe nomadic society had been least affected during the period of temporary and illusory coalescence.” (Lattimore, 72).<sup>22</sup>

I find a few issues in this, as it pertains specifically to Chinggis Khan's life and times. As Thomas J. Barfield stated in *The Perilous Frontier*, Chinggis Khan was in no position to seize upon these opportunities due to his almost complete lack of power base, owing to the rivalry and divisions within his own clan which left him in extended exile as a youth.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, much of Chinggis Khan's early political involvement was in the deep interior steppe, away from those borderlands. Lattimore also seems to characterize the populations in this model as belonging to two groups: Chinese, and nomad, with nomad being further divided into inner steppe and borderland cohabitants. While this might be accurate when one or two particular instances of interaction around the steppe, it comes across as an oversimplification of the vast and varied populations which lived in and around the steppe at this time. The Song Dynasty was sharply

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<sup>22</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, 72.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 189.



distinct from the Liao, from the Jin, from the Xi Xia, and the same could and indeed *should* be said of Mongols, Tatars, Merkits, and other nomadic peoples with little similarity or unity.

Further, the marginal territories of the steppe were in no immediate danger of collapsing when Chinggis Khan did begin to cultivate a following in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. In fact the nomadic tribe which appeared to have the most power at the time was also one of the tribes most associated with a sedentary state. The Jin Dynasty was an erstwhile ally of the Tatars for several decades up until 1198 when they aided in the destruction of the Tatars.<sup>24</sup> But up to that point they had shared borders and experienced extensive contact and coordination between them. This relationship ended due to political machination rather than upheaval or decay in borderland communities, and this only happened after Chinggis Khan had begun to win numerous victories for the Mongols.

Lattimore does an excellent job of describing the economics of the steppe in a way which I feel many of our other scholars do not attempt, but to me it is too reductive to center an entire theory of statecraft on that alone. Ultimately I would not pursue his theory further without attempting to synthesize it with others, but his insights into social circumstances and economics help to fill in large gaps in context which might be left by other more bird's-eye views of steppe history. This supplemental detail would be most valuable to me as I try to fit together the statecraft theories of Di Cosmo and Barfield within the context of Chinggis Khan's rise. For the former I will supply Genghis-era evidence for each of his three steps of steppe state formation (Crisis, Militarization, Centralization) while working within the logic/confines of the latter's interpretation of Chinggis Khan (he was a nonstandard steppe leader from the start, and did not

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 190.

hold up to traditional standards, which Barfield also lays out as a sort of immediately disregarded theory).

### **Barfield's *The Perilous Frontier***

Thomas Barfield identifies three forms of steppe empire leaders, one of which Chinggis Khan fit the bill of: hereditary leaders of preexisting supratribal groups or confederacies; the salvager of a nomadic state which was in the process of fragmenting or falling into ruin; and the elected leader, chosen by vote in a confederation with a specific goal in mind. Chinggis Khan fit into none of these categories, and in fact led a very disadvantaged life prior to his rise to leadership as any sort of khan.<sup>25</sup> *The Perilous Frontier* holds that Chinggis Khan was an exceptional leader, both because of his achievements and his challenges, and that he had not been a typical tribal leader involved as part of another iteration of the same cycle.<sup>26</sup> Barfield included a direct response to Lattimore's "cultural ecology" (and disagreed with him) as a starting point for his own theory on the rise of Chinggis Khan. First he claims that the trends of all previous steppe nomad empire leaders tended to follow one of three archetypes: the heir of an existing tribal or dynastic elite; the inheritor of elements of a recently destabilized preexisting steppe state; and rulers elected by a confederation of groups. Barfield establishes this trend only to push it aside too, claiming that Chinggis Khan is an exception to this (otherwise true) model.<sup>27</sup> He lacked a base of power in any of the three forms above, and could not have relied upon the resources of most other steppe rulers in that model. What follows is a study of his individual qualities and achievements as they relate to his rise to power, in several parts emphasizing how his bitter

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25 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 187-89.

26 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 12.

27 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 188.

experiences in youth shaped Chinggis Khan's politics and strategies into something new and unique. Therefore the Mongols, called “underdogs of the steppe” elsewhere in Barfield's book, had Chinggis Khan the individual to thank for the beginnings of their organized state, and Chinggis Khan had himself and his comparatively unusual and aggressive form of leadership to thank.<sup>28</sup>

While Chinggis Khan's personal abilities as a political and military leader should not be in any way discounted (nor should those of any other more “standard” nomad leader), this leader-centric approach which Barfield offers (but doesn't swear by as the focus of his book) would be too easy and simplistic to fit the issue into, making the geopolitical event of the Mongol Empire a product of the story of Chinggis Khan, rather than both of them being the products of many factors reaching farther back and encompassing a much larger scale than a historical figure study. None of Barfield's archetypes account for socioeconomic trends or policies the way Lattimore tries to, nor is a rationale given for the foundation of the original steppe empires, with which Di Comso is chiefly concerned. But Barfield's leader archetypes do not necessarily exclude the cycle of borderland activity. They only alter which type of noble comes out on top in its aftermath. These states could still be born according to Di Cosmo's three stages of Crisis, Militarization, and Centralization in their inception, as well. I see at least a tenuous middle-ground which exists between all three of these authors where they might all be applied without contradiction, though not necessarily with much overlap or support either.

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28 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 188.

### **Di Cosmo's *Ancient China and its Enemies***

Using the Hsiung-nu and their leader Modu Chanyu as an archetype, Nicola Di Cosmo describes a three-part criteria of Crisis, Militarization, and Centralization.<sup>29</sup> Crisis need not be invasion by a neighboring power (such as China in this example), and can include internal strife as well as natural phenomena such as drought or severe winter.<sup>30</sup> This Crisis spurs groups to resolve it via the avenue of Militarization, which mobilizes as many groups available to these actors as possible, including but not limited to mass conscription of fighting-age men.<sup>31</sup> Centralization into a proper state occurs as a byproduct of the Militarized groups resolving their Crisis, in the event that a single individual has risen above all other members of tribal aristocracy to a position of respect and authority which is flocked to by those who approve of him, regardless of tribal lines- a “supra-tribal” leader.<sup>32</sup>

He offers this theory as an alternative to the existing theories which touch upon nomad relationships with settled populations such as China. In particular, he is skeptical of Krader's model in which nomads by the very nature of their society need to obtain the surplus of agricultural societies- namely cereals and specialized luxury items. To him, this permanent economic incentive presupposed too much.<sup>33</sup> He also disagrees with the “spurious” argument that a nomadic state cannot exist without adopting the political and bureaucratic apparatus of a neighboring settled state wholesale.<sup>34</sup> At the end of this address of such theories, he stresses that any framework which makes the relationship between nomad and central state the primary

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29 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 179.

30 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, 180.

31 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, 181-82.

32 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, 183.

33 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, 167-68.

34 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, 172-73.

motivator for the formation of a nomadic state first needs to substantiate with historical evidence how that relationship first came to be.<sup>35</sup>

Putting Di Cosmo's three-part criteria of nomadic state formation (Crisis, Militarization, and Centralization) in dialogue with Barfield's archetypes for steppe empire leaders (hereditary supratribal leaders, salvagers of an older nomadic state, and elected leaders voted in by a confederation), I seek to create a sort of microcosm of the project as a whole by testing the theories against the origin histories of three different polities with their origins in nomadic groups: the Liao, the Qara Khitai, and the Mongols who immediately succeeded them both. In the Cambridge History and Barfield, The Khitans who would form the Liao Dynasty had a clear Crisis step in place during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. They existed on the borders between Tang China and the Uyghur Khaganate, their status as tributary peoples of one or the other constantly switching back and forth as the power of one or the other state fluctuated.<sup>36</sup> There were repeated attempts by the Khitans to obtain independence, which were repeatedly crushed by either the dynasty or the steppe empire. At one point, the Uyghurs and Tang even paused their own war just to work together in halting a Khitan rebellion, so opposed were they to a new development on their borders.<sup>37</sup> Militarization came about when both states were destabilized and losing their power, allowing Yehlu Salati and then his son Abaoji to successfully rebel and carve out independent territory for themselves.<sup>38</sup> Abaochi went on to usurp the old tribal elective system and crown himself emperor thanks to a combination of appropriated Chinese administration and the wealth of military conquest, ending in Centralization.<sup>39</sup> As for Barfield, the means by which

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35 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, 173-74.

36 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 168.

37 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, Ibid.

38 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 169.

39 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 170.

Abaoji first rose to power fit squarely in the “voted in by a confederation” type.<sup>40</sup>

Barfield lacks a coherent chapter on the Qara Khitai, including only a few scattered references to the origins of the state throughout the middle of his book. The Qara Khitai formed from the remnants of the Liao Dynasty, which were systematically pushed out of their lands by the Chin Dynasty and then pushed from refuge to refuge as fewer and fewer states and tribes proved willing to take in enemies of a more powerful dynasty. Yehlu Taishi, descended from the same bloodline as Abaoji, meets the requirements of both the hereditary supratribal leader (though he had still been subordinate to the last Liao prince before his capture) and the salvager of his own state. The condition for Crisis is plainly visible, however Mobilization and Centralization are problematic because the Liao system of government had already been fairly well Sinicized prior to its fall, in addition to Yehlu Taishi possessing a large core of veteran troops as a former general of the Liao. While he did incorporate Uyghurs and other tribes in the west after a certain point, the time at which he crowned himself gurkhan was when he had an administrative center and allies who had been exactly that since before the end of the Liao.<sup>41</sup>

As Barfield had already tried to do in his book, he set the Mongol leader Chinggis Khan apart from all other steppe leaders on account of his unusual starting conditions as unfavored by bloodline, unable to benefit from another empire falling, and generally unelected. Genghis responded to this by performing in an atypical manner, pursuing large victories aggressively in order to keep the momentum of his success and popularity moving him forward.<sup>42</sup> In keeping with a theme of underdogs, the Mongols were at this time also an exceptionally divided and

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40 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, Ibid.

41 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*. [electronic resource]. n.p.: Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, c2008, 2008. Felix Catalog, EBSCOhost (accessed February 25, 2017), 151-152.

42 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 188.

weak people sandwiched between Naimans, Merkits, Tatars, and other inner steppe dwellers. They were perhaps the least likely to produce leadership for all of the other powers on the step before Chinggis Khan took the reins. Crisis was the fragmentary nature of the Mongols, which had directly and severely impacted his life and the lives of his family members after years of exile and imprisonment during his childhood and young adulthood. Militarization followed thanks to his hard-won and sometimes unlikely victories, more often than not forcing tribes into his own collection of followers.

Centralization is an interesting twist. According to Di Cosmo and supported by Barfield, the Mongols were unusual among steppe states in that they avoided adopting Chinese administrating techniques or the basic apparatus of the Chinese dynasty for as long as possible. When they were finally forced to reform internal government, they relied upon imported Uyghur administrators.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the Mongols initially tried to remain very hands-off with their conquered neighbors, being content to allow autonomy so long as tribute was provided. In the case of the destruction of the Chin Dynasty, it was due to its adamant refusal to submit to Mongol suzerainty rather than agree to the then-standard tribute system. By inadvertently forcing the Mongols' hand, they delivered a large area of northeast China to the steppe empire which it then had to govern directly.<sup>44</sup> The treatment of the Mongol's subject nations will be shown later to be more complicated than this impression of hands-off rule, and the policy will better be described as gradually changing over time due to external and internal factors.

Di Cosmo, focusing primarily on the much earlier Hsiung-nu, presents a trio of mechanisms for the formation of a steppe state, pulling back from the conditions of their leaders

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43 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*, 173.

44 Franke, Herbert, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 261-265.

to look at the conditions of the people(s) in general using his three-stage schema of Crisis, Militarization, and Centralization, as mentioned previously. Yet Di Cosmo *does* lay his theory out as relating to many states throughout Inner Asian history, indicating that he intended for it to be applicable to subsequent periods after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E., such as the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. The biggest possible shortcoming to this theory of steppe state formation put forth by Di Cosmo is that, while he treats the model as applicable to steppe states in general, his area of expertise appears to be limited to a point in time separate from the centuries of the Mongol Empire, focusing instead on the Hsiung-nu in particular.<sup>45</sup> The differences in cultures, political climate, population densities, and countless other factors would be significant in between these two time periods.

### **Conclusion**

Were this a matter of weeding out the most agreeable theory of the bunch, Di Cosmo's schema would work best to describe Chinggis Khan's state when forced to stand by itself, specifically because it is the most general and would allow for a wide range of events within its three broad "steps". The Crisis of Chinggis Khan's generation and those preceding his will be shown to be a long string of defeats and betrayals by their neighbors and kin groups in the decades leading up to the 1160s and 70s. But that is not the intent of this paper, which seeks to find value in multiple coexisting theories. It is precisely because it is so general that Di Cosmo's theory of steppe state formation may be true without satisfactorily explaining every facet of the creation of the Mongol state, and thus it would in fact benefit from other theories being placed alongside itself, regardless of any overlap which might be found.

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<sup>45</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies*, 2.



The selection of authors is not an exhaustive list, but it covers the broad areas of Eurasian steppe state formation theory as they are present in the literature. Each has its potential shortcomings, but all are able to stand on their own merits unless subsequent discoveries force them to be reevaluated or in some instances discredited. Taken together, they may be stronger still, but also more flexible and able to endure the change which almost inevitably comes with each passing decade in academia. As it applies to this topic in particular, each argument may now be addressed as needed, alone or together with others, as they become relevant in the material to be covered after this point. Taken together, they are as follows: McNeill offers a backdrop of the steppe nomadic experience in constant contact and dialogue with agrarian communities, establishing them as conscious actors with very real contributions to the course of world civilization. Many of these interactions played out on the borderlands and marginal areas detailed by Lattimore, where mutual economic interest and trade was the catalyst for constant social change and transformation within steppe communities just as often as raiding or warfare were. These changes were not cyclical however, and as Barfield demonstrates, exceptional circumstances like the Jin-backed Tatar khanate dominating the weakened Mongols alongside the rest of the steppe, or exceptional individuals such as Temüjin himself, could lead to great and sudden change in the political landscape of the steppe. Finally reinforcing McNeill's assertion that nomadic peoples were actors as groups in their own right, Di Cosmo offers that the occasionally chaotic hyper-fluidity of the steppe tribes allowed them to arrange and consolidate themselves quickly in order to deal with threats in or outside of the steppe.

Together, these arguments paint a broad portrait of the Inner Asian steppe, but it is a portrait that is fairly timeless and lacking in context at the moment. In order to properly engage

with each step in the development of the Mongol Empire specifically, the context of the Inner Asian steppe and the preceding centuries needs to be established first. In order to do that, we can turn now to the contents of *The Secret History*.

### **Cultural Context of the Mongols**

The overall tribal social structure of the Mongols and other Inner Asian steppe nomads of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries is of major significance to this paper. However, its importance to the development of the Mongol Empire in particular will be fleshed out in the chapter pertaining to the period of Internal Centralization and consolidation enacted by Chinggis Khan on the interior steppe. Likewise, the tribes which differentiated themselves culturally, linguistically, and/or politically from the Mongols will also be examined in greater depth when the most appropriate time comes. This section, in the meantime, focuses on the cultural context in which the Mongols lived during the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and into which Temüjin would be born. Whether he lived the norm in certain respects, or was subjected to abnormalities, he was a product of a vibrant and complex world of nomadic concerns and tribal interactions. Therefore this chapter is, at least in part, a chapter about Chinggis Khan's formative years. So as to avoid giving his personal chapter the texture of a “great man” theory, it will examine his own decisions as an individual actor alongside the external influences upon his life which shaped him to be able to exert political power on the steppe in the way in which he did. This chapter is also about the extreme importance of the institution of lineage to the Mongols, and it will set the stage for this social element to come up again and again over the course of this piece, as well as over the course of the Mongol Empire as a whole. To begin, there is no better place to look than the *Secret History*, which simultaneously responds to the Mongol preoccupation with lineage and reinforces it.

### **The Specifics of the *Secret History***

The *Secret History* is very concerned with bloodline from the outset. In the opening lines, in which Chinggis Khan are the very first words to appear, his descent from a pair of mythical ancestors is outlined in great detail. They are Börte Chino and Qo'ai-maral—Greyish Wolf and Beautiful Doe—respectively. These anthropomorphic figures settled down at the source of the Onon River high in the mountains, where Batachi-qan was born to them, who had the son Tamacha, who had the son Qorichar-mergen, who had the son A'ujam-boro'ul, who had the son Sali-qacha'u, who had the son Yeke-nidun, who had the son Sem-sochi, who had the son Qarchu, who had the son Borjigidai-mergen, who had the son Toroqoljin-bayan, who had the sons Duwasoqor and Dobun-mergen, the former allegedly having been a cyclopes with supernatural vision.<sup>46</sup>

Dobun-mergen's eventual widow Alan Qo'a gave birth, perhaps miraculously after his death, to Bodonchar-mungqaq, among other other sons. Bodonchar-mungqaq's great-great-grandson was Khaidu Khan, whose grandson was Khabul Khan, whose great-grandson was Temüjin.<sup>47</sup> Thus the *Secret History* asserts that there is a clear and mostly direct 21-generation line of descent between the mystical, totemic animal ancestors of the Mongols, and Temüjin himself. Temüjin's conception and birth are ascribed auspicious value as well, because his mother was found to be pregnant with him after his father Yesugei returned from raiding the Temüjin-uge Tatars, and thus he was to be named Temüjin.<sup>48</sup> Likewise Temüjin was born clutching a clot of blood in his fist, continuing the *Secret History's* trend of making Temüjin's greatness evident from the start.<sup>49</sup> This is not unique to him, however. He is just the latest in a line of miraculous

<sup>46</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 39-41.

<sup>47</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 41-57.

<sup>49</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, Ibid.

individuals according to the Mongol historical tradition.

As evidenced by this very long familial chain, lineage is a central component of Mongol history as well as historiography. It will be a recurring element of daily life between individuals, as well as political and diplomatic relation between groups, throughout this discussion. Lineage helps or fails to help various individuals over the course of the early chapters of the *Secret History*, with Temüjin and his brothers and mother most famously being left for dead as exiles by the Taichiuds who usurp their family from the tribe.<sup>50</sup> But just the same way lineage could be said to have failed Temüjin, it had succeeded Ambaghai Khan, or at least the memory of him, for whom revenge had reportedly been sworn by his Taichiud descendants all those generations ago.<sup>51</sup>

Bodonchar-mungqaq (founder of the Borjigid lineage) experienced a similar disenfranchisement to Temüjin generations earlier, when his four brothers divided up their mother's property without him because they saw him as dimwitted and not related to them.<sup>52</sup> But Temüjin is able to make use of constructed lineage very quickly after his return from exile, by addressing Ong Khan—Yesugei's former *anda* and therefore sworn blood-brother—as a father equal in his eyes to Yesugei. This previous bond of friendship transformed into relation (plus the gift of a very nice sable jacket) is what prompts Ong Khan to swear that he and the Kherait tribe would assist Temüjin in once more bringing together all of the peoples who abandoned him.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately this didn't stop Ong Khan from betraying Temüjin and allying with Jamukha against, however. That Jamukha was a sworn brother of Temüjin who later grew opposed to him is also important to note.

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50 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 65.

51 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 63-64.

52 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 45.

53 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 78-80.

These and other cases of lineage yet to be found and analyzed can be useful for arguing for or against the importance of constructed relation in the rise of Chinggis Khan. In this way the *Secret History* is like a secondary source, and a proper history. But it is also useful as a primary source document demonstrating the continued importance of lineage to the empire even after Chinggis Khan's death and the various changes he made (or didn't make) to Mongol tribal organization and systems of leadership. More immediately, the *Secret History* offers an insight into the life of Chinggis Khan before he was named grand khan. Prior to his maturation to adulthood, Temüjin was the subject, rather than the independent actor, of several important external events and occurrences which would in turn shape his life and worldview, and by extension the development of the Mongol Empire.

### **Women & Children**

As children, Mongols were (and sometimes still are today) taught to ride a horse starting from a very young age. Famous claims that the Mongols and other steppe nomads were “born in the saddle” or “learned to ride before learning to walk” are of course fanciful appellations, but they do have the grain of truth that the horse's practical and cultural significance to Mongols was apparent at a very young age. Both boys and girls would learn to ride from early childhood.<sup>54</sup> Boys would also be instructed from a young age on how to hunt, which remained a strong supplemental source of food for Mongol tribes despite their general emphasis on pastoralism. These hunts doubled as sources of combat training and tactics drilling, and the punishments for disobedience or fleeing from or shirking these duties could be quite severe.<sup>55</sup> In this way, young

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<sup>54</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40.

<sup>55</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction*, 39.

hunters were kept physically fit, made able to supply the community with some food, and turned into a more cohesive fighting force when the need arose- and it tended to, both before and after Chinggis Khan.

That women were expected to be able to ride as well as men seemed to have an interesting, if incidental, effect on the ability for Mongol tribes to field efficient military units. Because women could ride—and more rarely wield a bow—they could effectively take over the economic roles of men where this was necessary, such as in herding the camp's livestock.<sup>56</sup> This could be done during times of conflict when all able-bodied men were expected to be available for military service. This allowed the tribe to levy forces against threats while also providing the women with considerable experience and influence in the economic sphere of life. More rarely, they also held prominent political positions and could have the power to affect their own influence. This slight egalitarian bent would allow for a string of prominent Mongol women in their early recorded history, most importantly in this instance Temüjin's mother, Ho'elun.<sup>57</sup>

As stated in previous sections, Ho'elun was (according to the *Secret History*) the sole adult in the group of family members with whom Temüjin was exiled. She instilled lessons of cooperation and alliance-building in her sons while also showing them more practical means of survival in a harsh and unassisted environment, the same way in which Temüjin's ancestress Alan Qo'a alone raised and taught her five sons Belgünütei, Bügünütei, Buqu-qatagi, Buqatu-salji, and Bodonchar-mungqaq.<sup>58</sup> Unlike Alan Qo'a however, Ho'elun lived to witness treachery committed among her sons, when Temüjin murdered his half-brother Bekter with the assistance of his brother Bekter. Ho'elun's anger at this deed is clear, and she called Temüjin out on his actions (as

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<sup>56</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction*, 43-44.

<sup>58</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 44-45.

well as called him a number of insulting animal names).<sup>59</sup> She had authority and stood in the moral right, and the *History* supports her at the cost of blemishing the image of Chinggis Khan in his own dynasty's praise-history.<sup>60</sup>

Ho'elun would continue to offer guiding advice to her son even after he rose to his own prominent position, remaining an important adviser to the khan alongside his wife for years after his formation of the Mongol Empire. Importantly, the rest of the world recognized the importance of this woman to the family and the administration just as much as her family and the Empire did, and in one instance an (unsuccessful) attempt was even made on the life of her and the royal children under her protection by a vengeful Tatar assassin seeking to damage the Borjigid family.<sup>61</sup>

Of course the semi-mythical nature of the *History* means that these exact events cannot be assumed to have occurred exactly as described. But it still indicates that a tradition of prominent women with the ability to shape events in Mongol culture and history was still being respected down to that point in time. And they would continue, even after they had contributed to the conditions which would allow for the rise of Chinggis Khan. The daughters of Chinggis Khan and later Kublai Khan, as well as various khatuns and other prominent female figures, would influence the Mongol Empire and then its successor states into the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

## Marriage

Following up on the previous topic of Mongol women, the topic of marriage and its role in early Mongol politics is raised once again. Marriage had ruined the Mongol tribes once before

<sup>59</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 68-70.

<sup>60</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction*, 44.

<sup>61</sup> Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Chinggis Khan Rescued his Empire* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2010), 3.



under the confederation of Khabul Khan, when their marital relation to the Onggirads drew them into a destructive conflict with the Tatars in the 1140s.<sup>62</sup> This conflict would break the confederation apart, as well as contribute to the Borjigin-Taichiud rivalry which would remain a political obstacle for generations to come. Yesugei abducted the woman Ho'elun from her first betrothed in the Merkit tribe in order to be his own wife, earning him and the Borjigid bloodline the ire of the Merkits as well as Ho'elun's mother tribe, the Olkhonud. This act would be remembered by both tribes, and its effects would reverberate throughout Chinggis Khan's life.

First, the Merkits returned the favor after a fashion by abducting his wife Börte, forcing him into steppe politics after he had barely survived exile. The doubt cast on their first son's parentage by the abduction would be a source for some tension from that point onward.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, Ho'elun's relative Terge Emel, was the leader of the Olkhonud when Chinggis Khan, freshly beaten by his erstwhile ally the Ong Khan several years later, sought a desperate alliance with him. Terge Emel refused alliance and marriage at once, going so far as to insult them by calling the potential bride (Chinggis Khan's daughter) frog-faced.<sup>64</sup> This exchange ended in the death of Terge Emel in around 1204, leaving neither tribe any better off as a result. The *Secret History* makes a very big deal of how Chinggis Khan would nearly die in friendless obscurity at the muddy banks of a lake following this unsuccessful episode.<sup>65</sup>

The entire reason for Chinggis Khan's desperation at this stage was the fact that in 1201-1202, he attempted to make good of his ritual adoption by Ong Khan. His offer to marry his son Jochi and his daughter Khojin into the Khereit noble family to make the formal relation actual

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62 Franke, Herbert, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 332.

63 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2004), 278.

64 Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 18.

65 Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, Ibid.

was refused by Ong Khan and his heir Senggum, who were alarmed at the potential for Jochi to maneuver into a place of power from such a standing and easily usurp Senggum, bringing the Khereids under Mongol hegemony. But there may also have been a simple, more prejudiced opposition to the notion of the Mongols considering themselves equal to Khereids, especially after Ong Khan had witnessed and enjoyed so many years of vassal-like service from Chinggis Khan. Time and time again, the memory of insult relating to or set in motion by marriage would spell misfortune for an aspiring Borjigid leader and his followers.

But the use of marriage to form alliances and construct lineages between groups remained a normal institution for would-be leaders on the steppe, past and present, in Chinggis Khan's time, and would remain an important tool in his repertoire even after he had formed something resembling a Mongol Empire. Chinggis Khan's efforts to create a centralized, meritocratic government free of the centrality of bloodline are famously described in detail and repeated by historians, and with good reason. But later, more successful marriages arranged under Chinggis Khan (such as that of Jochi to one of the daughters of Ja'a Gambu, the brother of Temüjin's old friend and new enemy Ong Khan<sup>66</sup>, or the much later betrothal of his daughter Altani to the Uyghur *idiqu* Barchukh<sup>67</sup>) demonstrates that he still continued to make use of the political move of match-making.

It could be that Chinggis Khan was unable or unwilling to completely separate the Mongols from the prevalent “culture of diplomacy” for lack of a better term. This general belief of how diplomacy between tribes was conducted was present and seemingly deeply ingrained among steppe entities of the day, and so Chinggis Khan may have been attempting to

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66 Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 20.

67 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 199.

*counterbalance* or *supplement* diplomatic marriage and alliance with promotion and reward of loyalty based on merit, rather than attempting to entirely *replace* it.

### **Inheritance**

Unlike the tendency toward primogeniture practiced by Neo-Confucian Chinese and Chinese-influenced populations, or the complex set of inheritance rules followed by Himalayan peoples which sometimes resulted in fraternal polyandry to counteract partible inheritance, the Mongol tribes tended toward ultimogeniture in how they handled inheritance among multiple adult brothers in a family.<sup>68</sup> Though, they did this with one notable stipulation. In “ordinary” ultimogeniture a family's youngest son is set to inherit all of or the majority of his father's property after the death of the father. In Mongolian ultimogeniture, each son obtained a portion of his father's property (most importantly cattle, pasture, and servants or other bondsmen if there were any) upon marriage and their emancipation from the household.<sup>69</sup> This was to assist the man in making his own new household successful. The eldest sons could receive a larger inheritance of cattle, pasture, or other forms of property, than those of his younger brothers, but the portions of inheritance tended to remain roughly equal.<sup>70</sup> But the youngest son—who often remained with the family until the deaths of his parents—inherited whatever remained from his father's herds, which could be quite substantial, as well as the titles which were transferable to one's children.<sup>71</sup> Because of this, the youngest son was the one who tended to “carry on the family line”, by being the head of the clan or lineage. This included very old and at times prestigious lineages, such as

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68 Herbert Franke and Hok-lam Chan, *Studies on the Jurchens and the Chin Dynasty* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), Chapter V, 229-230.

69 Herbert Franke and Hok-lam Chan, *Studies on the Jurchens and the Chin Dynasty*, Chapter VI, 402.

70 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 174.

71 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 18.

the Borjigid and the Taichiuud.

Temüjin was one of six brothers when they and his mother Ho'elun were exiled following the death of his father Yesugei Khan. Three were his full-brothers Qasar, Jochi, and Temuge, and he was the eldest of them, whereas Temuge was the youngest of all.<sup>72</sup> But of his half-brothers Belgutei and Behter, Behter was the eldest of all of Yesugei's sons.<sup>73</sup> Behter and his brother Belgutei were both the sons of Yesugei by his junior wife, married to him sometime before he abducted and married Ho'elun, but replaced by her in prominence over subsequent years. Because of their respective ages, Temüjin was neither the youngest nor oldest of his father's sons. Up to the point before their exile, he would have not been in a position to obtain a large gift of wealth from his father upon reaching maturity and marrying his arranged bride Börte, nor would he have been in position to be able to inherit the formal seat of the Borjigin lineage.

In this way, the exile of the boys (and their sister and (step-)mother) may have been an equalizing force for all of them. It made their individual attributes and abilities more relevant because of the greater challenges to their survival, perhaps allowing charisma or prowess to overshadow lack of seniority in Temüjin's case. Even though Temüjin eventually murdered Behter and technically became the eldest surviving son during this period, the family had no wealth to speak of which he could have claimed in the traditional manner after marriage. Additionally, Temuge—heir to the Borjigids—was still a toddler when the family was exiled, and could not have exercised any form of power over the group at all, other than apparently being doted on as the “baby” of the family.

So it was that through exile, Temüjin avoided the norms of Mongol ultimogeniture, which

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<sup>72</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 58.

<sup>73</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 67.

potentially could have been harmful to his ability to gain prominence within his own family- let alone the Mongols at large. This is an instance of the unique circumstances of his life shaping him more than the established *status quo* of Mongol daily life did, and it ensured that by the time Temüjin and his family were reintegrated back into Mongol society, he had already secured a position for himself as the *de facto* leader of the family. He had been one of the most skilled hunters and warriors of the group, thereby providing for and protecting the family, and he had personally endured an even greater insult than Yesugei's other sons when he was later captured and enslaved by the Taichiuuds who had become wary of his growth and development. Temüjin was not only one of the most capable members of the original group, but perhaps the one most ambitious or predisposed to exacting revenge on the Taichiuuds, therefore catapulting him into the steppe politics which would make him Chinggis Khan.

### **Kurultai**

The process by which an individual such as Temüjin was chosen or made themselves chosen for a position or office in the political landscape of the Inner Asian steppe prior to the development of the Mongol Empire—as well as after it, in a different form—was the elective assembly known as the *kurultai*. When a kurultai is held, it is composed of the senior members and notables of a tribe or other associated group in question, plus their retinues. Because of the varied, modular form which lineage and alliance could take among steppe nomads, a wide range of individuals could compose the elective body in any given kurultai. It is important to note that a kurultai is not an election in a directly democratic sense. Rather, it is a ratifying process by which a single candidate determined by previous consensus was confirmed. Attendance of a

kurultai was tantamount to a vote in favor of the individual, therefore, while absence from it was a strong sign of disapproval. Enough voters absent from a kurultai meant a lack of legitimacy perceived to be held by the candidate, and a much greater likelihood that the prospective khan or other leader would have a much more difficult time consolidating power.<sup>74</sup>

The fluid, sometimes chaotic nature of tribal politics was well-represented in and around the institution of the kurultai. Elders, strongmen, or notables would pledge their favor and support only to take it back when a leader showed promise or demonstrated failure, respectively. A khan whose ascension was backed by unanimous consensus one year could easily find himself without supporters in the next. Temüjin found himself in this situation several times over the course of his political career prior to 1206. Oftentimes, those who allied with him at one point but rescinded their support or even outright betrayed him were members of his own extended family. It is true that Temüjin had, by his adulthood, secured the seat of the Borjigid lineage which had passed to him from his deceased father Yesugei (after a case of childhood fratricide and ignored ultimogeniture in the cases of Behter and Temuge). But Yesugei had brothers who survived him, and those brothers had their own sons. And so despite any technical legitimacy to Temüjin's claim to the Borjigid lineage, his uncles and cousins competed against him for dominance when they were able to do so.

Temüjin was able to survive each of his conflicts with these relatives, and ultimately gained the upper hand against them. Sacha Bekhi and Taichu, the senior-most members of the other patrilineal lines eventually set against Temüjin, rebelled against him within a few years of the kurultai of 1190 and then were executed. Buri-boko, less senior but still a significant trouble for Temüjin, was the first in a series of high-profile executions by back-breaking under Chinggis

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74 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 208-209.

Khan's order. Altan, son of one Khatula Khan, was too powerful to oppose for a time, but after the disintegration of the Naiman confederation he too was killed. Even Temüjin's uncle Dagharitai was on the verge of being executed, only for Temüjin's nokod to convince him otherwise, as it would be unnecessary and “unseemly”. This episode demonstrates how used to familial violence Temüjin had become by this point, and may suggest a reason why the meritocratic components of his empire were set in place, favoring outsiders in government and in the military over Chinggis Khan's own (perhaps untrustworthy) male relatives. Yet despite the kurultai nearly breaking Temüjin several times over his career, it ultimately made him as well. The ceremony was observed in 1206 after his near-final victory the Kherait confederation, and it resulted in him being invested with the position of Great Khan.

Somewhat surprisingly, the institution of kurultai continued to be used after the coronation of Chinggis Khan. As will be seen with his various pronouncements in the later *Yassa* Code, Chinggis Khan was willing to maintain traditional institutions, or was at least unable to overturn them, despite how unpredictable or vexing they had been to him during his formative years as both person and ruler. The kurultai did not go away, though details on how it was used throughout the smaller tribal groups within the heart of the empire seem to be poorly documented. However, it is known that it was used as a way to ratify the selection of subsequent Great Khans up until the beginning of the reign of Khublai Khan in 1260.<sup>75</sup> One significant change was that a candidate now had the esteem of being the previous Great Khan's appointed successor, as was the case with Chinggis Khan's son Ogedei. Ogedei was a sort of compromise choice, relatively well-liked by all of Chinggis Khan's other sons, even if they hated one another otherwise. On paper this would demonstrate a shift toward centralized, hereditary authority

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75 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 210-211.

within the empire and successful measures taken to institutionalize the peaceful and stable transference of power. But in practice, this appointment was rarely enough on its own to merit an individual's ratification.

Instead, the same sort of politicking and internal conflict as before the time of Chinggis Khan resumed, and it just so happened in the case of Ogedei that he succeeded in the struggle and made good of that heirdom. His confirming kurultai was in 1229 after a two-year interregnum following Chinggis Khan's death, during which time his brother Tolui, acting as regent, did his best to maintain the integrity of the empire's territory.<sup>76</sup> Many of these imperial kurultais were similarly drawn out, both due to the size of the empire from which to draw all needed representatives, and from the deliberate actions of some of them. Some kurultais were announced outside of the Mongol homeland as a matter of expedience, only to be deemed illegal by an excluded opposition group. Others languished as a small opposition group made an extremely slow and halfhearted attempt to reach the kurultai grounds without wanting to seem like they were explicitly refusing the candidate, such as with the kurultai to enthrone Mongke Khan which did not commence until 1251, three years after the death of his predecessor Guyug Khan.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Yassa Code & Lineage**

After becoming Chinggis Khan and at long last cementing his position, Temüjin would make many pronouncements or decrees over the next twenty years of his life. Over time, these decrees were put down in text and compiled into volumes of the wisdom and sayings of Chinggis

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<sup>76</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 211.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 216.



Khan Many of these decrees appear within *The Secret History*, such as his establishment of the Kheshig bodyguard force which will be the major subject of a later chapter. Starting with the ascension of his third son Ogedei to the office of Great Khan following his death in 1227, Chinggis Khan's sayings would be formed into the core of a body of law for the Mongol royal family. This law code would be greatly expanded over the years, and would be used through to the end of the Yuan Dynasty in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. This body of text is known as the *Yassa*.<sup>78</sup> Unlike other famous legal codes such as those of Hammurabi or Ashoka, the *Yassa* was intended to be used privately by the royal family of the Mongol Empire as a way to inform or legitimize later decrees, and so no copies of the text are known to exist today. What is known is drawn from secondary sources, such as the aforementioned *Secret History*, but also the chronicles or travelogues of foreign visitors to the Mongol Empire.<sup>79</sup> Both sources are quite fragmentary, and the latter sometimes included supposed decrees by Great Khans which were likely fantastical, and invented by those same foreign visitors, or recorded as believed truth by scholars receiving such information second, third, or fourth-hand. These unlikely laws include the idea which since became popular that the Mongols never bathed or washed their clothing.<sup>80</sup> But the more grounded fragments, as well as the *Secret History*, help to illuminate what matters of the time Chinggis Khan deemed important to weigh in on. Some of these issues related to inheritance and lineage, and compare interestingly with the realities of both of those institutions which Chinggis Khan faced as a young adult.

In “The Scope and Contents of Chingis Khan's *Yasa*” by George Vernadsky, the fragments on inheritance come primarily from medieval writers Gregory Bar Hebraeus, Juvaini, and Mir-

78 George Vernadsky. "The Scope and Contents of Chingis Khan's *Yasa*." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (Harvard: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1938): 337-60, 337.

79 George Vernadsky. "The Scope and Contents of Chingis Khan's *Yasa*.", 344.

80 George Vernadsky. "The Scope and Contents of Chingis Khan's *Yasa*.", 353.

Khvand, compiled and previously studied by Nicolas V. Riasanovsky. They indicate that Chinggis Khan chose to confirm the older customary laws of the Mongols within this new context, while delineating areas which had been ambiguous or providing space for change/nuance. Therefore, in a family consisting of several children by multiple wives, or by a wife and servants/concubines, all children have legal right as children of the father. Inheritance of property was weighted in favor of the sons with the most seniority (i.e. having the first or most favored wife), but the children of concubines were not exempt, and arbitration of the father's will could alter any of the former. Ultimogeniture was otherwise adhered to, with the eldest sons receiving larger shares but the youngest inheriting the family *ger* and lineage seat. The Borjigin lineage would continue to follow these guidelines as well. While Great Khans did come from the lines of his older son Ogedei immediately after Chinggis Khan's death, the line of his youngest son Tolui would inherit the Borjigin seat (as well as the office of Great Khan, eventually.) Despite the very nonstandard way in which he inherited his own lineage, as well as his countless aforementioned conflicts with brothers as well as uncles and cousins over the course of his ascendancy, Chinggis Khan saw fit to maintain and support the existing tribal laws.

Furthermore, it appears that he even put in place a check against the khan's (his own) power to influence or meddle in the inheritance of property and lineage among other families, supporting the notion that Chinggis Khan did not necessarily seek to do away with tribal structures and loyalties within the new Empire. Even where a lineage-holder had no surviving heirs and he'd conceivably have the power to assume control of prestige or property the khan could not interfere. Instead, "From the man who is dead and hath no heir, nothing shall be taken for the king, but his possessions shall be given to the man who ministered unto him".<sup>81</sup> This is all

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81 George Vernadsky. "The Scope and Contents of Chingis Khan's Yasa.", 358.

to say that Chinggis Khan respected and supported—or at the least, sought to utilize—the old tribal institutions related to inheritance of property, prestige, and lineage. Which makes it all the more significant that in his wake, a divergent new type of prestige-through-descent took form and existed parallel with the Borjigid lineage. This was the increasing importance over time of *Chinggisid* descent in general. Considering the number of children Chinggis Khan had over the course of his life, as well as the number of children who would go on to have their own, it comes as no surprise that there was a large Chinggis-descended group of Mongols even during his lifetime. The offspring who took advantage of the status afforded by this relation were men and women, though patrilineal descent from Chinggis Khan was generally preferred and considered more prestigious. One no longer had to be a holder of the Borjigin lineage or a member of the holder's immediate family to take advantage of ancestor prestige, and this trend became increasingly common all across the lands of the Mongol Empire and its successor states.

In this way, a somewhat more inclusive, less traditional form of lineage was created and reinforced over the centuries, though surprisingly not to the detriment of the original Borjigin line. Chinggisid princes and their descendants would be found across Central Asia and the Middle-East for centuries, even after credible family chronicles began to dry up after the 14<sup>th</sup>. As far away as the city-states of Russia, local princes of vastly different cultural and religious backgrounds (settled, Orthodox Slavic nobles) would accept and at times actively seek out marriages with the family of Chinggisid descendants among the Golden Horde (nomadic, Sunni Muslim Mongols and/or Tatars).<sup>82</sup> Even the Mughal Empire of India which was founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and survived into the 19<sup>th</sup> had a founding Turko-Mongolic admixture which could

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<sup>82</sup> Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 98.

trace is origins from Chinggis Khan's second son, Chagatai. This *Altan Urag* or Golden Family would leave an indelible mark upon the history of Eurasia, never mind the Mongol polity.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that Chinggis Khan was deliberately attempting to transform Mongolian lineage systems with the amount of children he had, but it was still a major incidental result of the actions of the Empire's founder. The creation of the *Altan Urag* and the continuation of the Borjigid lineage demonstrate at once the flexibility and the staying power of social and cultural traditions in Mongol society. More deliberate inclusions or omissions yet to be seen in this paper will reinforce, as this has, that the institutions which made up the Mongol Empire were in a perpetual state of change and transformation throughout its lifespan. The value and currency of the Golden Family throughout time and across cultural boundaries also attests, perhaps paradoxically, to the staying power of the institutions created by the Mongol Empire.

As authors such as Barfield, Lattimore, and Di Cosmo have all observed to some degree their writings, one of the most commonly-shared traits between steppe polities, to the point that it could be considered inherent to them, is their ephemerality: the inevitability of their collapse or assimilation after the death of the charismatic leader, or the passing of a few short generations, respectively. But something like the Chinggisid lineage system having a lifespan of over six hundred years and an intimate place within the courts and political systems of vast swaths of Eurasia arguably represents one of the most enduring contributions to medieval civilization by *any* state of the time, let alone a nomadic one. Moving forward in time, it will be seen that many political and military policies or decisions made by Chinggis Khan or his immediate successors would have long-lasting effects upon the Inner Asian world, even beyond the division of the Mongol Empire into constituent khanates.<sup>83</sup>

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83 I want to emphasize here that the political division of the Mongol Empire does not necessarily mean the

## Mongol Religion

A policy which Chinggis Khan had far more direct control of during his own lifetime than the shaping of law or Chinggisid lineage was the treatment of different religious groups in an increasingly pluralistic society which the Mongols would find themselves in control of.

Traditionally, the Mongol tribes practiced (and in some capacity still practice) an animistic faith deriving from the broader Siberian/North Asian traditions of shamanism shared by other groups including but not limited to the Tungus, Jurchens, etc. In general, these traditions share common belief in a world of spirits which exists alongside and in constant interaction with the material world. These spirits inhabit living beings as well as natural landmarks, and may influence the world according to their relationship to humans. Certain humans, referred to as shamans, may engage with these spirits to heal or harm through various rituals sometimes involving music, dance, or ecstatic trance. The exact details of belief and practice vary significantly from geographic region to region, as well as from ethnic group to ethnic group, with each tradition having its own particular interpretation or take on the general trends of the shamanic tradition. Individual ancestor spirits or natural landmarks important to one tradition may not have the same or any relevance to the worldview of another. Because of this, Mongolian shamanism was highly decentralized and without anything resembling a universally accepted clergy or canon.

Because of these inherent ties to location and group, one possible explanation for the religious tolerance noted in the Mongol Empire is the acknowledgment of that fact by the ruling group (ethnic Mongols). They had little to no desire or even ability to “proselytize” for lack of a better word, among foreign peoples who would not have access to the substance of the logic

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complete cessation of the empire's existence. It could be argued that by those various points in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century when each geographic region became autonomous, an enduring sphere of Mongol Imperial civilization which was already established would keep them interconnected for generations to come.

behind the traditions which they practiced back home on the steppe. Another explanation is more pragmatic, pointing out that encouraging the religious harmony of the Empire reduced unrest and made trade, taxation, and other areas of governance that much easier to handle when were no requirements of religious affiliation among administrators (except perhaps in very high, dynastic roles later on in the Empire's life cycle). A result of this may be seen in the very high positions obtained by peoples of disparate religious backgrounds in the Mongol Empire, including shamanists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Confucians, etc.<sup>84</sup> Both of these theories have there merit, and there is no reason that they both could not be right. But there is another possible origin for the later administrative choice of religious tolerance, directly relating to the early life and personal experiences of Chinggis Khan.

When Temüjin had only just escaped the poverty of exile imposed upon him and his family by the Tachiuud lineage, one of his first means of ensuring himself protection and a livelihood was by swearing himself into the service of the Kherait leader Ong Khan.<sup>85</sup> The Kheraits were at this time largely “Nestorian” Christians belonging to the Church of the East, and had been for several centuries prior. Yet there seemed not to be any issue with a shamanist (Temüjin) entering into and greatly benefiting from Ong Khan's service, suggesting that religious affiliation was not cause for conflict among the Kheraits, even within the adoptive “family” of the Ong Khan himself, into which Temüjin had been welcomed as the son of his former anda blood-brother Yesugei. At the very least, Temüjin's renewal of those old loyalties overrode any religious sensitivities. Though the relationship between the two eventually turned sour and ended in the death of Ong Khan, this dearly-needed assistance may have left enough of an impression

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84 Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2012), 69.

85 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 425.

upon Temüjin regarding proper conduct of a leader that he would later cultivate such impartiality while in the position of a ruler himself.

Conversely, Chinggis Khan's own experiences with Mongol shamans was ambivalent enough that it may have merited caution on his part when it came to showing favor to Mongol shamanism- or any religion for that matter. The head male shaman of a tribe, called the *bekhi*, was often a political leader or chieftain in his own right.<sup>86</sup> Two prominent Borjigid *bekhis* of Temüjin's earlier life were named Quchar and Sacha. They each assisted Temüjin in the initial stages of his political career, but following the increasingly common trend exemplified by such men as Ong Khan and Jamukha, in time both of the shamans realigned themselves against him and became his political rivals.<sup>87</sup> The title of *bekhi* evidently was not limited to inheritance or any sort of electoral process, because Temüjin chose and was able to replace both of the above with a more loyal follower named “Old Man” Usun in 1206<sup>88</sup>.

Later still was a prominent shaman of the Qungqotan lineage who, despite not being a *bekhi* himself, amassed a great deal of power and influence over the years by being an early and consistent supporter of Temüjin. This shaman, Teb Tenggeri, was in fact the man who, during the *khuriltai* of the same year as Usun's appointment, conferred upon Temüjin his much more famous title of Chinggis- a word of unclear meaning which may indicate the vastness of the “ocean” or alternatively his nature as a “hard” or “severe” ruler.<sup>89</sup> By doing this, Teb Tenggeri also proclaimed the divine nature of Chinggis Khan's mission of expansion and conquest, lending the prestige of a heavenly mandate to the legitimacy of Temüjin as a leader of the Mongols. But Teb Tenggeri too became a rival of Temüjin before long. *The Secret History* claims that by 1210 he

86 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 495.

87 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, Ibid.

88 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, Ibid.

89 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 99.

was conspiring against the khan, openly attacking his younger brothers, and threatening that he may lose his heavenly mandate- i.e. that Teb Tenggeri could or would revoke the khan's title and denounce him as the leader proper of the Mongols.<sup>90</sup> He and other members of the Qungqotan lineage apparently had enough followers and political clout that Chinggis took pause in taking action against him, and did not order a response until he was urged to do so by his mother and first wife, Ho'elun and Börte. Much like Brui-boko of the previous round of political casualties, Chinggis had Teb Tenggeri executed by having his back broken. This particular execution was disguised in a rigged wrestling match held between he and Qasar (or perhaps young Temuge, as sources differ on the brother who killed him). Then, Chinggis proceeded to absorb Teb Tenggeri's function of communing with the Eternal Heaven through ritual.<sup>91</sup> He effectively took shamanistic practice into his own hands and eliminated his need for there to be such a prominent figure capable of threatening his power from within his own court.

Perhaps then, after experiencing a lifetime of nominal or unspoken religious tolerance punctuated by moments of highly politicized controversy, Chinggis Khan had first-hand knowledge that the political power of *any* one religion's leaders or institutions outside of his direct control could potentially undermine or seek to usurp his rule or the rule of the dynasty he was establishing. To give charismatic and politically savvy shamans any favor was to invite the possibility of rifts in Mongol power, and to do so with the heads of more foreign religions would be to court with rebellion or avoidable international hostilities. His game may have been to encourage a precarious balance of powers across the empire through tolerance. This religious tolerance would serve not only to ensure that none were treated poorly, but also that none were

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90 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 531.

91 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 100.



treated too *well*.

The severe treatment and atrocities committed against the predominantly Islamic populations of Central and West Asia during Chinggis Khan's later campaigns appear to be glaring exceptions to this code of conduct at first, though it stands to be emphasized that these massacres and the destruction of religiously significant architecture in such cities as Samarkand and Urgench—in addition to likely having their figures and death tolls exaggerated over the centuries—followed common and by then quite standard Mongol war tactics of mercilessness following a refused offering of peace. Additionally, none of them appeared to be religiously *motivated*, given the wartime conditions in which they were committed. Similar acts had been perpetrated quite early on in the history of Mongol Empire conquests, against much more closely related peoples, including their own fellow shamanists at times. The practice of full-fledged religious tolerance would be a gradual development however. As it will be explained more fully in the External Centralization of the empire, the practice would not be officially incorporated into the policies of the Mongol Empire until after it had conquered and absorbed the religiously diverse lands of the Kara-Khitans, which also employed such practices.

### **Conclusion**

A long and sometimes unlikely series of events throughout Temüjin's early life would repeatedly come close to disempowering or even killing him, but never managed to do so outright. The institutions and customs of Mongol life were often fluid and easily changing even before they were part of an empire seeking to adapt and expand its power and influence beyond the heartland of the steppe. With a combination of luck, competence, and gaming the system,

Chinggis Khan was able to find himself as the undisputed ruler of the Mongol tribes in the first decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. But there were many more tribes on the Inner Asian steppe than his own at that time, and he would have to deal with each in turn as he attempted to consolidate and then expand his power beyond the abbreviated area of influence into which the Mongols had been placed over the past century of endemic warfare and divided or intermittent leadership.

### **The Early Years: Efforts to Centralize the Interior of the Mongol Empire**

“Internal” Centralization of the Mongol tribes and other related ethnic groups was a gradual process which started long before any of the other territorial or political conquests which the Empire made. It was also an ongoing process which did not end completely until long after the period of time in which Chinggis Khan ruled. In this respect, the policy of centralization wasn't entirely a success or a failure, but something which was prevalent to different degrees in different years of the Mongol Empire's first twenty years. The process began before any of the conquests described under “External” Centralization were made, but some of the later inter-tribal conflicts of the Mongol Empire did occur contemporaneously with outward expansion of the Mongol polity, so this chapter is not organized along strictly chronological lines. Rather, it is meant to address the early and perpetual awareness and perhaps concern which the Mongols had for the possible political volatility of the steppe which was, in the lifetime of Chinggis Khan at least, the heartland of the Mongol Empire.

The reason for desiring a more centralized political structure in the “core” lands of the Empire can be fairly simple to understand. Up to the time of the Mongol Empire, virtually every nomadic steppe polity or empire was comprised of several tribal groups bound together by a strong leader. In the absence of such a leader, had he been unsuccessful in creating his own dynasty, the empire was at increased risk of breaking back up into its constituent groups soon after. By eliminating those traditional tribal loyalties however, a steppe leader would potentially be able to craft a lasting state with a central political apparatus capable of withstanding time and the death of the original charismatic ruler. This was one goal of Chinggis Khan's, who endeavored to place the Mongols at the top of a central hierarchy, as well as to ensure that he

remained the sole ruler of the Mongols. To attempt this, other nomadic tribes which were defeated by the Mongols were either integrated into the structure of the Mongol peoples, or their extant tribes were made beholden to them. While it likely was not compatible with modern notions of nationalism, a shared Mongol identity forged among several peoples during this time would have served to improve the cohesion of the Mongol state and prevent its disruption due to internal tribal strife.

They are not perfect parallels, but there is an appreciable similarity between the starting point of the Mongol tribes in creating the Mongol Empire, and the Beylik of Osman in creating the Ottoman Empire. Both were small, semi-nomadic polities in a highly fractured patchwork landscape of similar confederations, in a very violent and chaotic time for that location (Anatolia and the Inner Asian steppe, respectively). Both had to negotiate and work with, or fight to expand against each of these competing factions, while also being wary of the much larger, older, and much more powerful sedentary states looming close to their borders: the Byzantine Empire for the Ottomans, and the Song or perhaps Jin Dynasties for the Mongols. Their political and administrative apparatuses would take very different turns in the future, but the two fledgling empires would continue to face the same challenges within. Even after military victory against their nearest foes, both nascent empires would have to deal with periodic revolts or internal unrest caused by endemic tribal strife.

The Mongols under Chinggis Khan were the newest in a long series of nomadic empires and confederations which had each disintegrated into their constituent groups for exactly that same reason. The Mongols probably did not have a comprehensive history of Inner Asia at their disposal, but Chinggis Khan's appreciation of the achievements of the old Uyghur Khaganate

suggests some historical awareness of tribal states among the Mongols, and a desire to avoid the most common pitfalls of nomadic empires. Chinggis Khan's own great-grandfather and later father were both khans of the Khamag Mongol Confederation, after all. Because of these and other figures, the Borjigid lineage to which Chinggis Khan was heir had a certain amount of prestige attached to it, as well as the knowledge that each of those figures had been deposed in some way. With this in mind, the question of the centralization of the Mongolian steppe is not “whether” it was attempted or not, but rather “how” was it attempted, and to what degree it succeeded. This question of centralization may be answered with special consideration given to the change vs. continuation of nomadic band organization, lifestyles and lineages, as well as the success or failure of cultural “Mongolization” of tribes such as the Kheriats, Naimans, Merkits, and Tatars, over the course of Chinggis Khan's lifetime. But before the Mongols' conquests or other dealings with each tribal group can be accounted for, a clearer idea of what these tribal structures were and how they operated is needed.

### **Section 1: Tribal Structure**

The basic social unit of the Mongols during the 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. was the nomadic camp or band called an *ayil*. It consisted of a single extended family and all of its property and livestock, and thus it was also the basic economic unit of the Mongol peoples. Several *ayil* sharing a common founding ancestor or other connection by descent would comprise a lineage, or *obogh*. Under ideal conditions, the lineage was headed by a lord or lords of the family, called *tus*, who could organize and lead the community, as well as decide upon cooperation with other groups or the formation of a formal confederation (such as in the time of Temüjin's great

grandfather Khabul Khan). But as the case was time and time again, the position of familial lord didn't necessarily ensure power and security, and without a personal following and other forms of power a *tus* could be superseded or deposed.<sup>92</sup> Such was the case for Yesugei's sons after his assassination by the Tatars.

This is in part because the families of the lineage do not necessarily have to have literal, biological relation to one another or the ancestor of the lineage in question. Rather, the genealogy is an extension of common social and political interest described in language of kinship. Because of this, individuals and even entire families could join or be removed from lineages with surprising fluidity depending on the events and context of the region in which they live. This was done by adding or erasing some form of fictive link to the progenitor and thus the majority of the lineage. Lineages could subdivide through these fluid, dynamic shifts in political association, and even those sub-lineages could branch further off as they gained their own power and following, and new *tus* became prominent enough to assert themselves.

Ostensibly, the tribe was the next, higher level of political organization in which multiple lineages could exist together, divided between semi-rigid social classes of nobility, “black hair” commoners, and *bo'ol* slaves/servants/bondsmen/dependents/etc. The word *bo'ol* is most commonly translated simply as slave, but the form which this servitude took was unlike the concept of chattel slavery which might be more easily imagined by readers in parts of the Western World. Despite the three “tiers” of hierarchy within a tribe—elites, commoners, and bondspeople—the fluidity of the lineage coupled with the ability of outsiders to be inducted into one means that the hard differences between a lineage and a tribe were quite vague at this time. In many ways they were interchangeable, and carefully separating the two institutions may

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<sup>92</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 192.

become more of a semantic debate than anything. How the title of *tus* would interact with the office of *khan* is an issue all on its own, as well. That vagueness of definition and fluidity of action is enlightening on its own, however. There was a precedent—dare it be said there was something of a norm—for sudden political divisiveness within tribes, lineages, and even individual families among the Mongols, prior to (as well as during and after) the lifetime of Chinggis Khan. Familial loyalty wasn't necessarily sufficient for the wielders of tribal power (often because it wasn't actually familial in nature), and those without another base of power could quickly find the authority of their family erode. Such was the case with Temüjin and his unprepared relatives following the death of his father Yesugei in 1171. This is not to say that most of these groups were inherently prone to betrayal, however. Instead, it indicates that maintaining loyalty and relations was a very public and constant ordeal between leaders and followers, and that it was no secret what steps might be taken in order to support or advance one's own *ayil* and its constituents.

The solution to this problem of shaky lineage power was found by many leaders in the *nokor*. A *nokor* was a companion who was personally loyal to a leader in question, without need for blood relation, and without the relationship which was expected between relatives. A leader and their *nokor* established a sort of patron-retainer bond of mutually beneficial gift-giving and service, in which the *nokor* served their benefactor as a retainer and soldier. In return, the *nokor* was paid and honored through the giving of gifts by their patron. The distribution of spoils of war and the prestige of being praised as a fine warrior by one's patron are the most obvious examples of this relationship, but the system did not revolve around raiding or warfare by any means. A *nokor* was a leader's bodyguard and soldier, but also assistant or political agent.<sup>93</sup>

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93 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 192.

Several companions made up a *nokod*, which could be a very powerful retinue in its own right. The companions could be drawn from any level of steppe society, whether they were noble, commoner, or one of the dependents of a tribe. As the Mongol Empire expanded over time, instances of a *nokor* being drawn from non-Mongol peoples began to arise as well. It was a direct social contract between individuals, separate from—but still interacting with—the institutions of tribe and lineage.

In fact, the institution of taking on companions *problematized* the idea of tribes or lineages being defined, self-contained units because it allowed the introduction of outsiders into the social group. By having far more political clout with the backing of companions, the leader of a *nokod* would also be able to exert greater central control over that group. Thus, when Yesugei's family was usurped and the remnants of his tribe taken over by the Taichiuuds, it may have been that those among the acting Taichiuuds were charismatic leaders in their own right, in addition to holding the loyalty of a portion of the tribe thanks to lineage or other perceived connection to the old khan Ambaghai. This is supported by the *Secret History*, which names four Taichiuuds total- the “ladies” (probably widowed wives) of Ambaghai, Orbei and Soqatai, as well as the men Targutai-kiriltuq and Todo'en-girte.<sup>94</sup> The idea that many of those tribespeople following the Taichiuuds after this point were doing so based off of what the new potential leaders had to offer them can be supported by the exact way in which the *Secret History* describes the event of the desertion. Reproachful of the Taichiuuds, the shaman Charaqa was struck in the back with a spear by Targutai-kiriltuq and Todo'en-girte, and as he laid dying recounted the events to Temüjin: “All our people gathered together by your good father have

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<sup>94</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 63-64.



been taken on a journey. When I chided [those who took them], they did this to me.”<sup>95</sup> As this played out, Temüjin's mother Ho'elun took direct action: “Lady Hö'elün, who had been left behind when they set off, raised the flag and set out on horseback. She herself fetched back half the people. Those who had been persuaded to return, however, did not remain but set off again after the Taichiuuds.

And so the Tayichi'ut brethren set out and left behind in  
the camp the widowed Lady Hö'elün, her little ones, and  
the mothers and their children.”<sup>96</sup>

This passage serves two functions. One is to demonstrate Ho'elun's proactive nature and leadership skills, which would shortly be instrumental in ensuring the survival of Temüjin and his brothers into adulthood during their exile. The other shows that a huge portion of the tribe —“half the people”—was made to turn back and follow after Ho'elun, albeit briefly. The Taichiuud hold on the confederation was not absolute, yet it was still too strong for the lone, female representative of the Borjigid lineage to counteract. There was a tug-of-war between people of various forms of power, but the Mongol peoples attaching themselves to leading figures ultimately decided, as actors, who would come out of that episode of a power vacuum on top. In this can be seen the *nokor* leader-follower institution—or at least the same mentality—but on a much larger scale.

An even more direct point of intersection between the spheres of free association and familial bonds than the formation of a *nokod* was the *anda* tradition. *Anda*, meaning sworn brother or blood-brother, was a deeper, more personal bond between two people than the

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<sup>95</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 65.

<sup>96</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, Ibid.

somewhat more professional relationship with a *nokor*. For the *anda*, it is a far more lateral friendship between equals or near-equals, and indeed the crafted familial tie could be strong enough to span a generation or more. One of Temüjin's earliest political allies was Toghrul, more commonly known by his title Ong Khan. Ong Khan had been an *anda* to Temüjin's late father Yesugei in life, and with an appeal to that old link of constructed brotherhood (as well as the gift of military service and an expensive black sable coat), Temüjin was able to tap into the *anda* bond in order to create a new relationship. This relationship mimicked, for a time at least, the link between father and son rather than brother and brother of a more traditional *anda* bond. A more direct example of the bond can be seen between Temüjin and Jamukha, friends from young adulthood- although it is interesting to note that the *Secret History* is silent on the details of how exactly their brotherhood was developed. He is referenced by name as part of the larger Jandaran lineage initially<sup>97</sup>, and then visited next by the narrative as Temüjin's "younger brother".<sup>98</sup>

### Section 1 Conclusion

Following the turmoil on the steppe which resulted in the vassalage or assimilation of the above-mentioned tribes in this section, Ong Khan and Jamukha were both dead by the hand of Temüjin-turned-Chinggis-Khan, their power struggle and alliance against Temüjin unsuccessful. Through these events, the structures of tribe and lineage remained mostly unchanged. Several tribes were forcibly broken up, their people dispersed, but others, most obviously the Mongols, maintained a tribal formation while at the head of this confederation which was becoming an empire. Likewise, lineage remained as important as ever, with instances of it rising or falling,

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97 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 49.

98 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 86.

rather than the institution itself. The Taichiuuds were cast down, but the Borjigids remained strong. Extra-lineal forms of association persisted as well. Although mercy was not shown to the *nokod* of Jamukha during wartime, Chinggis Khan executed those followers of Jamukha who ultimately betrayed him into the khan's own hands. Practical considerations of dealing with traitors aside, Chinggis Khan was indirectly supporting the institution of the *nokor* by severely punishing those who violated the mutual trust implicit in the relationship. At the same time, albeit reluctantly, Chinggis Khan diminished the standing of the role of *anda* by killing his own. Thomas J. Barfield argues that this turn of events caused the *anda* relationship to “all but disappear” on the Inner Asian steppe.<sup>99</sup>

I would say that the use of constructed lineage remained strong elsewhere, such as in the ties between Chinggis Khan and Barchukh. This was a distinctly father/son oriented relationship, with the type of power imbalance between them which could be expected. But when the most prominent example of the *anda* relationship in the literature was one between “younger” brother Jamukha and “older” brother Temüjin, I would argue that the bond of blood-brotherhood was never perfectly lateral to begin with, and that there was a range of possible applications and outcomes to the institution. In any event, the institution of the *nokod* continued to exist in Mongol society past this point, eventually giving rise to a specialized form within the newly-formed Mongol Empire. This was the *Kheshig* bodyguard, which would have its origins in the *nokod* of Chinggis Khan himself. The *Kheshig* of Chinggis Khan was not founded until after he was proclaimed great khan in 1206 however, leaving much ground, time, and conquest to cover first.

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99 Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 192.

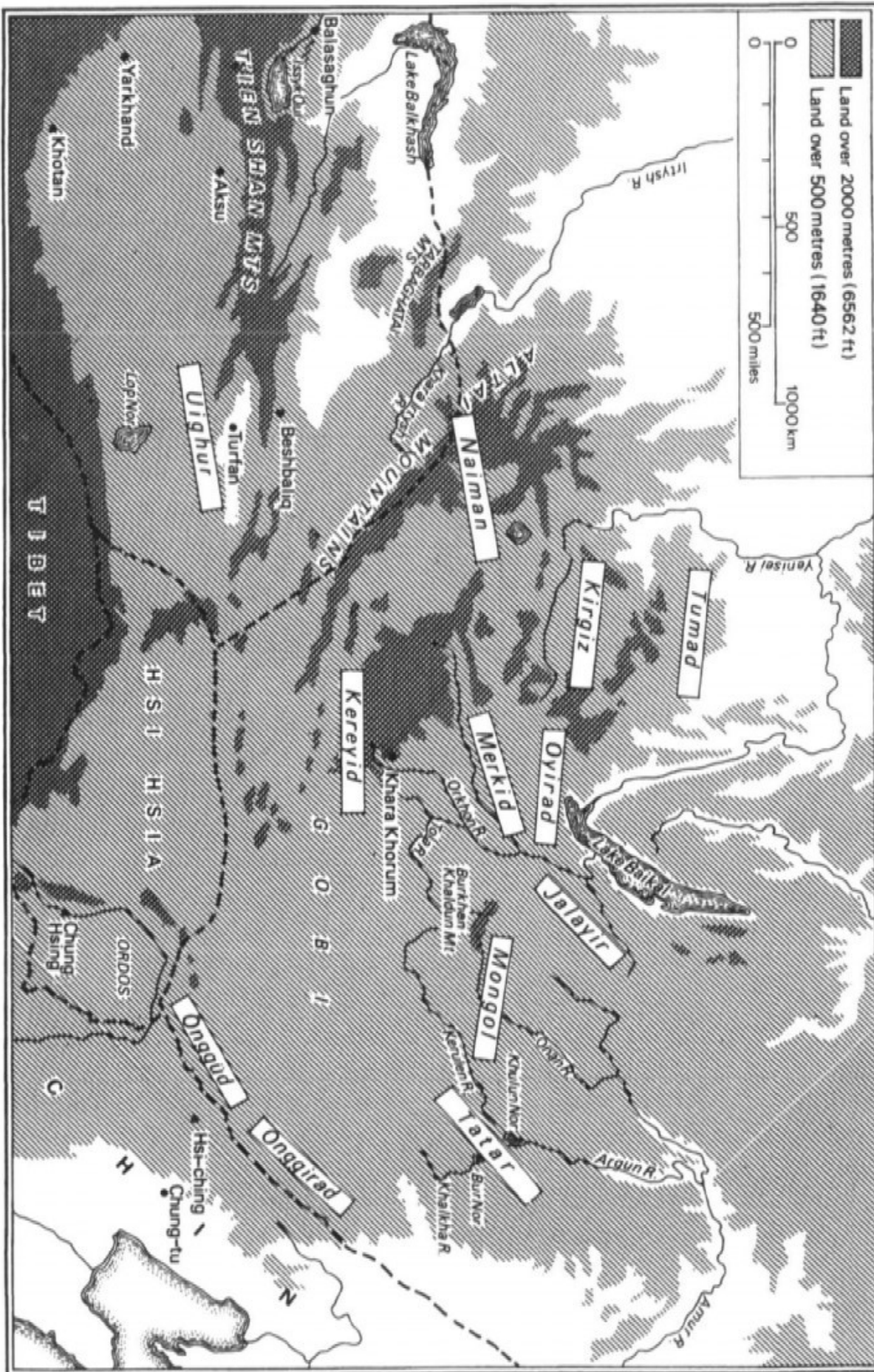
## Section 2: Conquest of the Mongols' Neighbors

See [Figure 1]<sup>100</sup> for a visual map of the below-mentioned names and groups in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Regarding the makeup of the Inner Asian steppe at the time of Chinggis Khan's early life in the 1160s, it seems every bit as crowded and complicated as alluded to. The Mongols themselves were limited to the region in between the Onan and Kerulen rivers, immediately north of the largest and potentially most dangerous group on the eastern steppe, the Tatars. A Chin Dynastic policy of playing the steppe nomads against one another caused the Tatars to war with many neighboring groups at the instigation of the Chin state they bordered on.<sup>101</sup>

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100 Fig 1. *The steppe world, 1190*. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*. Cambridge Histories Online © Cambridge University Press, 2008. Map 24.

101 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, Ibid.



The Mongols were among these groups, though they were less like rivals and more like easy targets due to the lack of Mongol internal cohesion. The Onggud and Khonggirad/Onggirad peoples to the southeast also had ties with the Chin dynasty, though their relationships were more nominal. To the southwest, closer to the Gobi desert, was the Khereid/Kherait tribe noted for its practice of Nestorian Christianity. To the west and north of the Mongols were the Merkit and Oirat peoples who lived along the forest belt and similarly lacked unity. Of all of these groups, none of them were noted as allies of the Mongols, though the Onggirads did trade wives with them often both before and after the Mongol empire began. Chin diplomatic policy seems extremely important in the geopolitics of the steppe, or at least its eastern terminus where the Mongols were limited. In the far west, the Uyghurs seemed to have more prominence, and had an extensive relationship with the nomadic Naimans, who practiced Nestorian Christianity like the Kheraits, but also alongside Buddhism.<sup>102</sup>

The Kherait tribe ruled by Ong Khan was defeated by the Mongols in or around 1203 C.E. following mounting hostilities between Ong Khan and Chinggis Khan. This confrontation ended in the abdication, flight into exile, and subsequent death of Ong Khan, the scattering of his sons in the west, and the subjugation but continued survival of the tribe. It persisted as an identity thanks in part to the actions of Jakha Gambu, the younger brother of Ong Khan who threw his lot in with Chinggis Khan and supported him during the war. As the *Secret History* records the Kheraits' initial fate,

“[And so] the Kereyit people were brought down. [Chinggis Qahan] distributed them here and there [as booty]. He gave Taqai-ba’atur of the Söldüds one hundred Jirgins in return for his services. Chinggis Qahan

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<sup>102</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 321-324.

issued another decree. The Ong Qan's younger brother, Jaqagambu, had two daughters. Chinggis Qahan took his elder daughter, Ibaqa-beki, for himself. The younger daughter, Sorqaqtanibeki, he gave to Tolui. As a result, the people belonging to Jaqa-gambu were not split up. [Chinggis Qahan] said: '[Jaqagambu] is [my] second cart-shaft.' He [therefore] favoured him, and did not [distribute his people] as war spoils."<sup>103</sup>

Thus the Kheraits were split up following the war, with those who were Jakha Gambu's "people" remaining as they had been, but those who were merely Kheraits in general being divided up likepart of the spoils. In this state, the bulk of the Kheraits were a subject tribe of the Mongols, ironic considering the severe anti-Mongol sentiment which had taken root in the Kherait court following Ong Khan's split with Chinggis Khan. Jakha Gambu remained in power among the Kheraits following this arrangement, thanks to the favor shown to him by Chinggis Khan. Alternatively, the Kheraits remained a cohesive group not because of Jakha Gambu specifically, but because of the marriage of his daughters to Chinggis and Tuloi. As stayed later on in the history, "With the Merkits and the Naimans thus scattered, Jaqa-gambu of the Kereyits had, on account of his two daughters, remained together with his subjects as an intact people."<sup>104</sup> Jakha Gambu still possessed a leadership quality of his own, or perhaps a greater rapport with the surviving Kheraits than the Mongols did, because he possessed the ability to rally some of the remaining Kheraits in the following year so that they could revolt against the Mongols and join the remnants of the Naiman confederation, which had been embroiled in war with the Mongols for a time.<sup>105</sup> This ended poorly for the rebelling Kheraits, who were defeated while their

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103 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 165.

104 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 197.

105 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 296.

erstwhile leader was strangled to death by Jurchedai, one of Chinggis Khan's foremost retainers. The immediate aftermath is recorded in Chinggis Khan's own words, “Then we killed and plundered Jaqa-gambu’s people for a second time. This was Jürchedei’s second service.”<sup>106</sup>

The defeat of the Naimans and Jakha Gambu resulted in the dispersal of the Kherait tribe as a cohesive tribal entity.<sup>107</sup> Kheraits as a group effectively ceased to play a role in the Empire, but Kherait individuals would play significant roles in the shaping of the state. Most notably, the Kherait princesses married into the Borjigid line—especially Sorghaghtani Bekhi—integrated various elements of Kherait culture into the Mongol social elite, as well as a continued practice and protection of Nestorian Christian beliefs among the nomads.<sup>108</sup>

It is significant that within the ethnic categories which placed peoples in tiers according to their perceived reliability and “Mongolness” (and therefore afforded them correspondingly preferential treatment) established during the later Yuan Dynasty period of the Empire, Kheraits and people of Kherait descent counted as Mongols and were thus at the top level of imperial society.<sup>109</sup> This reveals the Mongols' willingness to make or allow other groups to become more “Mongol”, so long as they were similar enough and agreeable enough with the aims of the Mongols. It also speaks of a desire by the administration during *and* after the reign of Chinggis Khan to create a centralized social hierarchy for the emerging empire. This hierarchy was intended to be far more clear cut than the many complicated inter-tribal relationships which were the norm up until that point in time. Naturally, the hierarchy would place the Mongols at the top, and in the center of those whom they held to be their peers.

The Naimans who were defeated alongside the above-mentioned Kheraits did not receive

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106 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 197.

107 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 296.

108 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, *Ibid.*

109 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, *Ibid.*



such preferential treatment following their decline, however. In the same chapter as the above, the *Secret History* gives a suggestion of what happened to the Naimans after the Kheraits defeated. “With the [most] important nation thus razed, the countenance of the Naimans and the Merkits was dashed. [Lacking the confidence] to fight, they scattered.”<sup>110</sup> They had once been perhaps the most stable and formidable nomad polity on the steppe besides the Jin-backed Tatars, possessing frontier garrisons, a literate court with a single royal family whose head was khan, and other trappings of prestigious rulers such as a royal seal and an actual, physical throne.<sup>111</sup> Like certain Kherait royals whom they were historically in rivalry with, the Naiman tribal elite looked down upon the Mongols as a comparatively primitive tribe for lacking the above features. As reported by the *Secret History* Gurbesu, the former wife of the slain Naiman Tanang Khan stereotyped the Mongols as being savages with a “bad smell”.<sup>112</sup> After their final defeat at about 1206 C.E. by the Mongols, those Naimans who did not flee west into the Kara-Khitai Khanate became members of the Mongol Empire, as well as something akin to second-class citizens among incorporated steppe tribes. The Naimans who reached and usurped the rulers of Kara-Khitai fared better until 1218 C.E., when they were deposed by the Mongols and put into the same state as their eastern fellows.

The same hierarchy of peoples which made Kheraits “Mongols” would also relegate Naimans to the second tier of *Semu*—literally meaning “various sorts”—and a blanket term for the various non-Mongol, non-Chinese peoples of Eastern and Central Asia.<sup>113</sup> It is not immediately clear why the Naimans were set lower than the other conquered nomad tribes. It is an appealing possibility that the marital links between the Mongols and the Kheraits through the

<sup>110</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 197.

<sup>111</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 397.

<sup>112</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 179.

<sup>113</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 398.

Kherait princesses was enough to keep the two tribal groups in closer proximity to one another, hierarchically speaking. But it must also be noted that a marital link existed between the Mongols and the Naimans when Chinggis Khan took Tanang Khan's wife as his own<sup>114</sup>, with nothing seeming to come of this arrangement. It is also important to note that the *Semu* system was not officially instated until the reign of Kublai Khan. An even sharper deterioration in relations between the two groups than what was already noted may have occurred in between the time of Chinggis Khan and he, bridging the gap between the Mongols' early attempts to integrate the Naimans, and their later efforts to exclude them. While in the eyes of the imperial hierarchy this still placed the Naimans above the Chinese peoples (who occupied the third tier of *Han* regardless of their actual ethnic group), it shows clear intention on the part of the Mongols to reject a group from assimilation into the growing identity which they seemed to be cultivating among other steppe nomad tribes. And in the long run, this harmed imperial unity. The descendents of Naimans, unassimilated and closer in identity to their ancestors than to the Mongols, would move west *en masse* and come to make up a large population of the Blue Horde wing of the Golden Horde.<sup>115</sup> The Kazakhs, Bashkirs, and Kyrgyz people who descended from those Naimans would each in turn rebel against the fracturing Mongol Empire in later years.

The Merkits who once bore the onus of stealing Börte from Temüjin fared even worse than the Naimans, with respect to how well they maintained their identity or enjoyed the benefits of assimilating to the Mongols. Curiously, they are absent from the events of the *Secret History* beyond mention of their defeat in the same time span as the Kheraits and Naimans. But it is known from elsewhere that they followed a similar pattern of resistance, initial defeat,

vassalization, rebellion, and finally near-total defeat by the Mongols as the Naimans had, with

<sup>114</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 179.

<sup>115</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 398.

their decline happening over the course of 1204 to 1218 C.E. These conflicts saw the death of Toqto'a Bekhi, the Merkit leader, and the flight west of his sons, who took shelter among the Qangli and Qipchaq peoples. But again, like the Naimans, these survivors-in-exile were hunted down by the Mongols, this time led by the preeminent general Subutai. The survivors of this final confrontation were then divided up among the Mongol lineages as slaves.<sup>116</sup> While returning to the fact that that *bo'ol*—the word translated here as “slaves”—may also translate as bondsmen or servants, the Merkits were still placed into a much lower and more explicitly subservient role than many of the other tribes brought under the control of the Mongols. It was not only political subservience, because the nature of the relationship between servant and master was one of constant day-to-day, face-to-face interaction.

Even more prone to conflict with the Mongols than the Merkits had been, the Tatars of the eastern edge of the steppe had previously been responsible for the assassination of Chinggis Khan's father Yesugei. Before that, the two tribes had been rivals for several generations, with the Tatars and their periodic Jin allies remaining on top. After 1196 resulted in the Jin Dynasty tiring of its Tatar buffer, a three-part alliance between Mongols, Kheraits, and Jin broke the power of this wolf of the steppe. The Mongols went on the offensive against the Tatars from this point onward, seeming more intent on the destruction of the Tatar bands than on conquering or assimilating them. The legacy of mutual hostility came to an end in 1202 when a last coalition between fractured Tatar tribes was defeated and Chinggis Khan called a council of his tribal constituents to decide what would be done with the survivors. In an act of aggression similar in nature to what would be done to the survivors of the siege of Bukhara nearly two decades later, Chinggis Khan decreed that

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<sup>116</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 347.

“We will measure them against a linchpin and kill off [those who are taller than the linchpin] until all have died. We will make slaves of the survivors. We will divide them among ourselves, some here, some there.”<sup>117</sup>

Despite a desperate attempt to barricade themselves into their encampment and resist, the massacre of Tatars was carried out successfully. The Tatars ceased to exist as a tribal entity, although some of their descendants in bondage would live on in the Mongol Empire and appear as notables during or after the time of the Yuan Dynasty, and the name Tatar itself would continue to be used to refer to steppe tribes, particularly in Eastern Europe.<sup>118</sup> This deviation from the Mongol policy of at least initially trying to vassalize a tribe in question seems to have been caused by the much greater level of antagonism between them and the Tatars. It is also possible that the decision was more calculated than that, because a large amount of booty was then able to be taken from the former Tatars, and a relationship between the tribes would have been far more difficult to foster than in the case of other tribes mentioned here. But the *Secret History* models the massacre as an act of just vengeance, and it is not unreasonable to believe that this was how it was perceived and carried out at the time.

## Section 2 Conclusion

Among these early tribal rivals in the history of the Mongol Empire we see different outcomes to the Mongol question of what to do with their immediate neighbors in relation to their own nascent polity and empire. With the Kheraits, the Mongols under Chinggis Khan initially demonstrated something much like the traditional mode of association through lineage.

<sup>117</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 188.

<sup>118</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 529.

Here, the women Sorghaghtani Bekhi and Ibaqa Bekhi were sufficient familial connections to the Mongols that the Kheraits were not forcibly displaced or scattered, and the personal alliance between Chinggis Khan and Jakha-Gambu, to whom he was now loosely related, initially cemented a working, lineally networked relationship between the two tribal groups. It was only after Jakha-Gambu's rebellion that the Kheraits were broken up by the Mongols, in possibly the first instance of what would become a long-held Mongol tradition of swiftly and severely cracking down on a group which has betrayed their clemency. Still, recognizable Kheraits would be present and play significant parts in the Empire for centuries to come. The Merkits, though initially given the same opportunities (and experiencing the same pitfalls) as the Kheraits, were given a punishment of greater severity than that of the Kheraits, being reduced to explicit bondage and/or servitude. That "Merkit" exists as a family name in several regions of modern-day Mongolia and is treated as a Mongolian name can attest to how thoroughly they were incorporated into Mongol society. The same attempt seems to have been made with the Naimans as with the Kheraits and Merkits, but an unintended consequence was that they retained their tribal identity, if not autonomy, and they were quick to reclaim that in turn during the earliest centuries when they were able to move west.

End-results aside, the aftermath of each of these three tribal conquests demonstrates an initial Mongol willingness to abide by the old forms of tribal relations for a time. The Tatars were a glaring exception to this rule, being dealt with harshly without an obvious period of clemency beforehand. They were also somewhat of an isolated incident, and the case could be made that the unique history between Mongols and Tatars makes this end more understandable. These developments were followed soon after by an apparent lesson learned on the matter of tribal

integration: when the Mongols faced similar circumstances of defiance by a previously defeated and vassalized polity during their later years of expansion beyond the central steppe, retribution would be more severe and the aftermath more directly controlled by the Mongol administrative apparatus. Thus it was a lack of ability to put down all tribal resistance on the steppe, rather than a lack of trying, which caused the interior steppe regions of the Empire to look at all decentralized during and after Chinggis Khan's reign. A development often cited as far more successful in the creation of a centralized state was the creation of Chinggis Khan's *Kheshig*.

### **Section 3: The Kheshig**

The Kheshig was a military force which was distinct from, yet had several similarities to the nokod. Literally meaning “blessed” or “favored”, the Kheshig was a body of guards, retainers, and servants who were made to be personally loyal to Chinggis Khan. They had their roots in the 70 day guards and 80 night guards who protected the Khan's camp, and who acted as his personal body guards going back to the years when he was only Temüjin. The original Kheshig guards were essentially the nokor of Temüjin, being personally loyal companions to the charismatic leader. But over time the expansion of their numbers—first into the hundreds in 1203, and then into the tens of thousands in 1206 corresponding with the proclamation of Temüjin as Chinggis Khan and as the leader of all Mongols—required that men be recruited into the Kheshig far beyond that original scope. The Kheshig became a royal guard of the Mongol Empire, sworn to the protection of the Khan as well as his family. The recruits were drawn from all applicable tribal bodies within the Empire, as well as all classes and social strata found therein.<sup>119</sup> Thus the members of the broken-up Kherait or Merkit tribes could find their way into

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<sup>119</sup> Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 196.

it, forced to work alongside diverse groups of their fellows as the case also was in the military at large under Chinggis. The *Secret History* carefully records the entire process of recruitment and organization as decreed by Chinggis Khan himself as follows:

‘Enrol (*sic*) guards to serve us. Enrol the sons of the commanders of the ten thousands, the thousands, and the hundreds and the sons of the junior free people. Let those who are skilful, strong, handsome, and fit to serve at our side enrol to serve [us]. Enrol the sons of the commanders of the thousands. Let [each] bring ten companions [and let each companion] bring one younger brother. Enrol the sons of the commanders of the hundreds. Let [each] bring five companions [and let each companion] bring one younger brother. Enrol the sons of the commanders of the tens and the sons of the common people. Let [each] bring three companions [and let each companion] bring one younger brother. Let each come from [his] original [unit] with a mount made ready, to reinforce [those] serving at our side. The ten companions [of] the sons of the commanders of one thousand shall be assembled [for them from] their original thousands and hundreds. Apart from [whatever] they may already own or have received [from] their fathers, and any men or geldings that they may have established [as their

own], all [beasts and men] should be levied at a rate determined by us; once such a measure has been set, let it be applied. In the same way, apart from their personal possessions, give a levy of five companions [each] to the sons of the commanders of the hundreds and three companions [each] to the sons of the commanders of tens and to the sons of the common people.<sup>120</sup>

To clarify, the decree states that the sons of the commanders of military units and armies (hundreds, thousands, and ten thousands each being separate forces) as well as of the free common folk could enroll to serve in the Kheshig, so long as they demonstrated the necessary skills and abilities to serve. The bulk of the decree then specifies how and with what assortment of equipment and retainers each man was expected to enroll, according to a kind of equity based off of his family background. Those whose fathers were of higher station were expected to bring more, and for those coming from less, less was expected. It also required that men from higher standing have greater access to their own network of alliances or loyalties to begin with, because the a of “companions” was needed to make entry possible. It is unclear from this decree, but these companions attached to a single proper recruit may have formed the basis for squad or unit organization within the Kheshig.

The ranks of the Kheshig were thus formed from a wide variety of people, but the commanders of the guard were all the male blood relatives—either younger brothers or sons—of the commanders and generals in Chinggis Khan's growing army. This resulted in an interesting power dynamic; on one hand, the young talent of many families could demonstrate their abilities

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<sup>120</sup> Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 211.



and be rewarded for it based on merit, but on the other hand these young men were dependent upon the Khan, and on some level they were akin to hostages ensuring the loyalty of the elite military families from which they hailed.<sup>121</sup> It also may have discouraged a general from grooming a son or younger brother in order to become his successor with an army whose loyalty was potentially personal, though there is no clear evidence to say that recruitment into the Kheshig was compulsory for anyone. This, plus the diversified nature of the recruits, leads Thomas Barfield to argue that the Kheshig was a major step forward in Chinggis Khan's program to reduce the importance of the traditional tribal organization in the emergent Mongol Empire. This is in keeping with his book's argument that Chinggis Khan consciously endeavored not only to reform, but to specifically centralize his steppe polity as he ruled in hindsight of an earlier political career in which he possessed an unstable and unreliable tribal base, and had to face enormous challenges as a result. As he describes it, "Mongolian political organization was not, therefore, the culmination of a long evolving steppe tradition, but a deviation from it."<sup>122</sup> I would like to push back on this idea somewhat.

It is true that, much the same way the Mongol Empire's larger military force was organized, the Kheshig broke up or crossed tribal lines as a matter of course, resulting in a large body of manpower which was directly loyal to Chinggis Khan. But, they were loyal to Chinggis Khan specifically. Barfield himself notes that while breaking up the tribal structure, Chinggis Khan also sought to separate his family from offices of political power. The Kheshig was tasked with protecting the Khan's family, but their loyalty laid only in the Khan himself while he lived.<sup>123</sup> And when he died, the Kheshig was nontransferable to his successors- this resulted in the

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121 Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 196.

122 Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 197.

123 Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 192.

sizable military force being broken up and made to occupy other positions such as indefinite guardianship of his former households. The Kheshig guard was not a cohesive, contiguous institution like what one would expect to be a part of the imperial system, and in the case of tribes who had remained loyal to Chinggis Khan for the entirety of their relationship with one another since 1190, exceptions were made to the usual breaking-up process of tribal groups, meaning that centralization had clear exceptions related to incentive.<sup>124</sup>

### Section 3 Conclusion

It is true that each of Chinggis Khan's successors after 1207 formed their own Kheshig, but they were starting from scratch each time, with the only exception being the reign of Guyuk Khan in the 1240s, in which he managed to hold onto half of his father Ogedei's Kheshig guards following his enthronement.<sup>125</sup> A Great Khan drawing talented individuals toward himself to be placed in a direct relationship of loyalty and service is not very different from the very traditional, tried-and-true nokod system, if only on a much larger scale than had existed previously. Additionally, there is a word repeated throughout the *Secret History* excerpt which merits pointing out: companions. According to familial military rank, each prospective recruit into Chinggis Khan's Kheshig was to bring a certain number of “companions” as well as a sibling if possible. While I lack direct access to the original Mongolian, repeat use of the word in this context suggests to me that each prospective Kheshig leader was expected to have their very own retinue of personally loyal companions accompanying them, alongside a blood relative of equal if not even greater potential loyalty. There are no stipulations present as to who these companions had to be, meaning it may have been very easy for each recruit to enter prestigious military

<sup>124</sup> Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 192.

<sup>125</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 212.

service while immersed in the traditional *nokod* or even *anda* systems of association and power relations. While Chinggis Khan may have succeeded in untangling political power from certain tribal groups or his most threatening family members (at least until shortly after his death), he did so by utilizing existing facets of tribal power relations, altered for a new context. Chinggis Khan could thus be less of a revolutionary and a force for rupture with the past, and more of an innovator of existing systems.

Other forms of centralization beside political organization may have come into play and been just as relevant to the continued resistance of steppe tribes to a centralized Mongol rule. Economically, each tribal group was independent prior to the formation of the Mongol Empire. They possessed their own economies with varying degrees of independence from other groups depending on how well they could subsist upon their own herds and handicrafts. As stated previously, the *ayil* or tribal camp composed of a single extended family is considered a sort of basic or “standard” economic unit of the Mongol peoples. While the chieftains of each tribe were subservient to the Khan following their defeat or integration by him, it seems that each tribe retained this economic independence during and after the formation of the empire. This economic self-interest may have been one contributing factor for the combination of tribes, in that they could work together in order to obtain greater external sources of income than what each was independently capable of. But this also served to keep the state structurally unstable as each tribal economy continued to look after number one so to speak, despite actions taken by the central authority.<sup>126</sup>

Kradin & Skrynnikova even refer to this “economic autarchy” characteristic of the

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126 Nikolay Kradin, and Tatyana Skrynnikova. 2006. "WHY DO WE CALL CHINGGIS KHAN'S POLITY "AN EMPIRE"?" *Ab Imperio* no. 1: 89-118. Historical Abstracts with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed August 15, 2017), 117.

armament of all steppe nomads which made their supervision difficult throughout history.<sup>127</sup>

It is in circumstances like this where the processes of Chinggis Khan's centralization become problematic, and perhaps incomplete or intended to only be partial. This is in stark contrast to the more popular narrative of Chinggis Khan's centralizing influence and the breaking-up of the tribal social structure in favor of relatively more lateral relations between individuals in the Mongol Empire (within the hierarchy which they helped maintain, at least). It also re-contextualizes the violent feuds which plagued steppe society for centuries, such as that between the Borjigin and Taichuud lineages. They were each a product of a system of fluid yet unstable power which was very difficult to completely get rid of. This all hinders the apparent strength of the lineage, but it is evident from history both prior to and following Chinggis Khan that the institution of lineages and their leaders remained a central part of Mongol and other steppe societies. Even explicitly foreign powers could be welcomed into this same narrative of lineage, as seen in a later case of the Uyghurs and especially Uyghur administrative workers for the Mongol Empire.

#### **Section 4: The unique case of the Uyghurs**

It is true that the Uyghurs, being Turkic people far to the west of the Mongolian steppe region, seem to have little in common with the early Mongol polity. Many were settled by the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and more familiar with lifestyles centered around desert oases. Thus it is all the more important to understand how and why this group was better-integrated into the core of the Empire than many of the Mongols' immediate neighbor tribes. It is also important to the characterization of the outlook of the Mongol Empire's founders and their

<sup>127</sup> Nikolay Kradin, and Tatyana Skrynnikova. 2006. "WHY DO WE CALL CHINGGIS KHAN'S POLITY "AN EMPIRE"?", 116.

influences to find a reason behind the adoption of Uyghur administrative personnel/techniques by the Mongol Empire following its genuine conquest of territory in China and other parts of the steppe. What I found was very little explanation, and a lot of stating or restating that it had indeed been the case. But I did draw my own conclusion out of the evidence each of the texts offered. The common thread between every description of the early relationship between Uyghurs and imperial Mongols is an Uyghur leader or *idugut* named Barchukh. He was the first sovereign leader to willingly submit to Chinggis Khan without any conflict in around 1211 C.E. They began a close working relationship and Barchukh was named Chinggis Khan's "fifth son" as well as given one of his daughters as a bride to cement an alliance along family lines. Barchukh accompanied the Mongols on campaign, distinguishing himself during the overthrow of the Tangut Kingdom following the latter's abandonment of treaty stipulations.

It is this strong working relationship between Uyghur and Mongol elites from the very beginning of contact between the two peoples which may have contributed to the Mongol adoption of Uyghur administrators and administration when the time did come- it may have been a logical choice after both became so familiar to the Mongols after years of exposure to it, which did not exist for the Mongols under Chinggis Khan with relation to the Chinese bureaucratic or diplomatic systems. Likewise, the Mongols adopted the Uyghur script to the Mongolian language rather than using any other existing writing system, and this choice would remain in place until well into the reign of Kublai Khan when a new script was devised for a new Yuan Dynastic context by the Tibetan monk Drogon Chogyal Phagpa.<sup>128</sup> Another reason for the elevation of the Uyghurs or facets of Uyghur culture may have been to tap into the memory of the old Uyghur Khaganate as a source of legitimacy. The Uyghur Khaganate was the previous

<sup>128</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History: A Norton Documents Reader*. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2011), 144.

nomad empire of significance on the Inner Asian steppe, existing from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and dominating a territory which stretched from the Tarim Basin to Manchuria. A historical awareness on the part of Chinggis Khan could be seen in the eventual placement of the old Mongol capital city of Karakorum in very close proximity to the site of the former Uyghur capital of Ordubalik. In a way, the gap between the Mongolic steppe nomads and their new Turkic oasis subjects was being deliberately lessened by Chinggis Khan.

The story of Barchukh's symbolic adoption by Chinggis Khan shows that explicit nonMongols could be fit into the lineage of a tribe or confederation with little difficulty should the need have arisen. In this way it seems that the role of *nokor* could simply be bypassed, which is a very curious turn of events considering Chinggis Khan's apprehension to orient his new government around lineal ties rather than practical or meritocratic considerations. But then again, was there normally much which prevented the *nokor* from becoming full-fledged members of a lineage? Was there ever a very sharp difference between the *de facto* use of these two institutions to begin with, or might they have had looser rules the same way tribes and lineages had when compared to one another? I hypothesize that if Chinggis Khan didn't begin the use them both liberally and pragmatically to solidify bonds in whichever way seemed the most appealing to the out-group or individual in question, then the precedent already existed somewhere in recent Mongol history of the period, perhaps thanks to the confederations which had dominated Mongol political life long before any cohesive empire formed.

### **Early Years Conclusions**

From these conflicts and transformations of social constructs, it can be seen that the Mongols did have at least a rough rubric established during the life of Chinggis Khan of how they wanted to organize their conquered tribal subjects around themselves, and this policy included both inclusivity and exclusivity. The politics of ethnic relations became increasingly more complex as the Empire grew and the Yuan Dynasty was formally established, but the culturally and linguistically “Mongolian” people always remained the center or top of this arrangement of subject peoples. This speaks of the attempted reorientation which Chinggis Khan was putting his state through, and could support the idea that he was trying to establish a more centralized system of government and administration. But it is important to bear in mind that these peoples were being oriented around the Mongol tribes in a way which is very similar to the old, lineage-based system of social relation and stratification which Chinggis Khan is so often noted in modern scholarship for doing away with during his reign.

In the case of Thomas Barfield, the event that “nomadic leaders became part of the new imperium and were no longer autonomous actors”<sup>129</sup> may have been an ideal to be pursued, but was not a reality at any one point in Chinggis Khan's life. As with the Kheraits, Naimans, and Merkits, tribes independently incorporated into the fledgling Empire often rebelled against it, led by those tribal leaders like Jakha-Gambu who had supported Chinggis Khan over their kinsmen initially. Even in cases where rival nomadic leaders were all eliminated, their tribes would often retain enough independence or resistance to Mongol hegemony that they could resume a role as independent actors years or even decades after their defeat, as with the Naimans. To Barfield's own admission, exceptions to the idea of members of the military structure being mixed into an

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 192.

army with a multi-tribal background existed for those tribes or clans “whose leaders had continually supported Temüjin since his first election to khan around 1190, or who accepted his rule voluntarily after he had united the Mongols and entered into alliances to become “brothers-in-law” (guregen).”<sup>130</sup> This reflects both a warrior-patron relationship in which retainers were rewarded for service rendered for their chieftain, and a constructed familial link relationship by marriage- two of the key forms of social organization in the traditional tribal fashion. While they were gifts for *loyalty*, these military units often consisted of one thousand or more, sometimes three to five thousand, men. Such independent military forces would have complicated, rather than simplified, any efforts for political centralization.

The inability to prevent multiple tribal uprisings against the Mongol state (no matter how handily or severely they were put down, for they were still common) speaks of an undesired state of decentralization among the tribal groups within the “core” of the Mongol Empire. It shows an inability of Chinggis Khan's fledgling administration and military to supervise all tribal facets of their interior steppe territories and adequately prevent any clandestine maneuvers against Chinggis Khan's authority which rose from that region. But it is somewhat understandable that the Mongols would not be able to adequately deal with their internal frontier, both for reasons stated above, and for those pertaining to their outward expansion and conquests. Because during and after the later stages of inter-tribal conflict on the steppe, the Mongol Empire was already dividing its attention between internal affairs and the extension of political or military power and suzerainty (or later, direct rule) abroad.

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130 Thomas J Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 192.



## Interlude

(An Ecological Continuation in Response to McNeil)

### The Mongol Empire & The Little Ice Age

At the cusp of outward expansion of the fledgling Mongol Empire, it is helpful to reflect upon a fact that seems perhaps obvious. The Mongols and their subject tribes were, by and large, nomadic peoples from the steppe. This meant that while they were dependent upon the land just as much as sedentary populations, they not as beholden to specific areas of land. Their livelihood was pastoral in nature, as has been previously stated. And it just so happens to be that, during the time period when Chinggis Khan and the Mongols were about to make large advances into the marginal “civilized” territories around their homeland, certain environmental factors were slanted in favor of the spread of pastoralists such as themselves. Much of the interior of Asia today is exceptionally dry, with deserts abounding across Central Asia, the Tarim Basin, and the Gobi region. But in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, the climate was more hospitable, and more open to the movements of nomads thanks to the presence of the grasslands on which they relied. The difference in climate and ecology was great enough that they arguably encouraged, or even allowed to begin with, the expansion of the Mongol Empire.

Aaron E Putnam *et al.* argue in “Little Ice Age wetting of interior Asian deserts and the rise of the Mongol Empire” that converse to the modern increase in global temperature causing a northward expansion of Asia's desert bioms, the global cooling period which followed the Medieval Warm Period and eventually became the Little Ice Age caused a more moist climate to prevail in continental Asia. This moist environment allowed the southward expansion of grassland across the Mongolian steppe throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>131</sup> This time period

<sup>131</sup> Aaron E. Putnam, et al. "Little Ice Age wetting of interior Asian deserts and the rise of the Mongol Empire." *Quaternary Science Reviews* 131, no. Part A (January 1, 2016): 33-50. ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost (accessed

encompasses the formation of the Mongol Empire and the largest territorial gains which it enjoyed under and immediately after the rule of Chinggis Khan between, 1206 C.E. and 1241 C.E. They were able to provide evidence to back these theories by excavating and studying the contents of sediment layers in the Lop Desert of the eastern Tarim Basin, Central Asia. These layers indicate the Inner Asian hydroclimate and relative levels of groundwater, dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>132</sup>

Their argument as it pertains to this project then, is that the sudden shift in climate to a colder, wetter one both allowed for the southward spread of pastoral nomads and forced them to do so- a simultaneous “pull” and “push”.<sup>133</sup> They were made able to do this because the grasslands became substantial enough to support the herds of the animals most vital to Mongolic, Turkic, and Tungusic nomads- horses, cattle/yaks, camels, sheep, and goats.<sup>134</sup> They were forced to do this because the dropping temperatures meant that the winters in the north were becoming increasingly severe in an already highly variable continental climate.<sup>135</sup> To illustrate this, they use modern Mongolian nomads as an example of sustainability: 20-50 animals per person are needed to ensure adequate coverage of needs, thus a nomadic group of 100 would need over 2,000 animals well tended-to in an environment where which would be experiencing colder winters with much more snow and ice coverage than in previous decades.<sup>136</sup>

Beyond self-sufficient nomads, they point out that historically, cavalrymen of the Mongol Empire took three or more mounts with them each while on campaign, to enable remounting and

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September 13, 2017). 33.

132 Aaron E. Putnam *et al.*, “Little Ice Age wetting of interior Asian deserts and the rise of the Mongol Empire”, 34-36.

133 Aaron E. Putnam *et al.*, “Little Ice Age wetting of interior Asian deserts and the rise of the Mongol Empire”, 39.

134 This traditional list of *tavan khoshuu mal* or “the five snouts” (the most important animals known to nomadic society) is occasionally joined by a sixth “snout” in the form of reindeer occasionally herded by peoples of the northern Mongolian/southern Siberian taiga regions such as the Dukha or Buryats. Aaron E. Putnam *et al.*, 39.

135 Aaron E. Putnam *et al.*, “Little Ice Age wetting of interior Asian deserts and the rise of the Mongol Empire”, 40.

136 Aaron E. Putnam *et al.*, “Little Ice Age wetting of interior Asian deserts and the rise of the Mongol Empire”, 40.

rest without a slow in pace. 20,000 Mongol mounted soldiers, not an unusual size for an army, would have over 60,000 horses in need of sufficient grazing land daily.<sup>137</sup> Thus, the southward expansion of the Mongol Empire would have been just as much a case of avoiding starvation as it had been conquest and the acquisition of loot or lucrative tribute/vassal treaties. To hearken back to the three-step theory of state formation put forth by Nicola Di Cosmo, this environmental shift and a need for different territory in which to winter could have been the Mongol tribes' "Crisis" event, from which its Mobilization and (possible) Centralization were derived.

This is not a new argument, as evidenced by McNeil's and others' notes, though it has not received as much verifiable data nor a hydrological approach before now. E. Huntington theorized in 1907 that there had been a "pulse" of nomadic and sedentary populations across the ecological divide between the steppe and China spurred by climate, preceding Owen Lattimore's deeper argument surrounding borderland by several decades. But Lattimore himself weighed in on this historical theory and shared the sentiments of one A.J. Tonybee in 1938 and 1934 respectively, criticizing the climate model as being too weak when taken "unmodified and accepted as all-explanatory".<sup>138</sup> More recently, G. Jenkins noted how the advancing of glaciers was "coeval" with nomadic irruptions throughout history, and proposed that the two were linked.<sup>139</sup> Since the spirit of this project is to incorporate as many viable theories into a coherent and holistic whole, it is not unreasonable to accept these theories as possible conditions for the development of the Mongol state, even while agreeing with Lattimore's hesitation to accept the argument as a solution to all questions of cause and effect.

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137 Aaron E. Putnam *et al.*, "Little Ice Age wetting of interior Asian deserts and the rise of the Mongol Empire", 39.

138 Owen Lattimore, "The Geographical Factor in Mongol History" *Geographic Journal.*, 91 (1938), 1-16.

139 G. Jenkins, "A note on climatic cycles and the rise of Chinggis Khan" *Central Asiatic Journal.*, 18 (1974), 217-226.

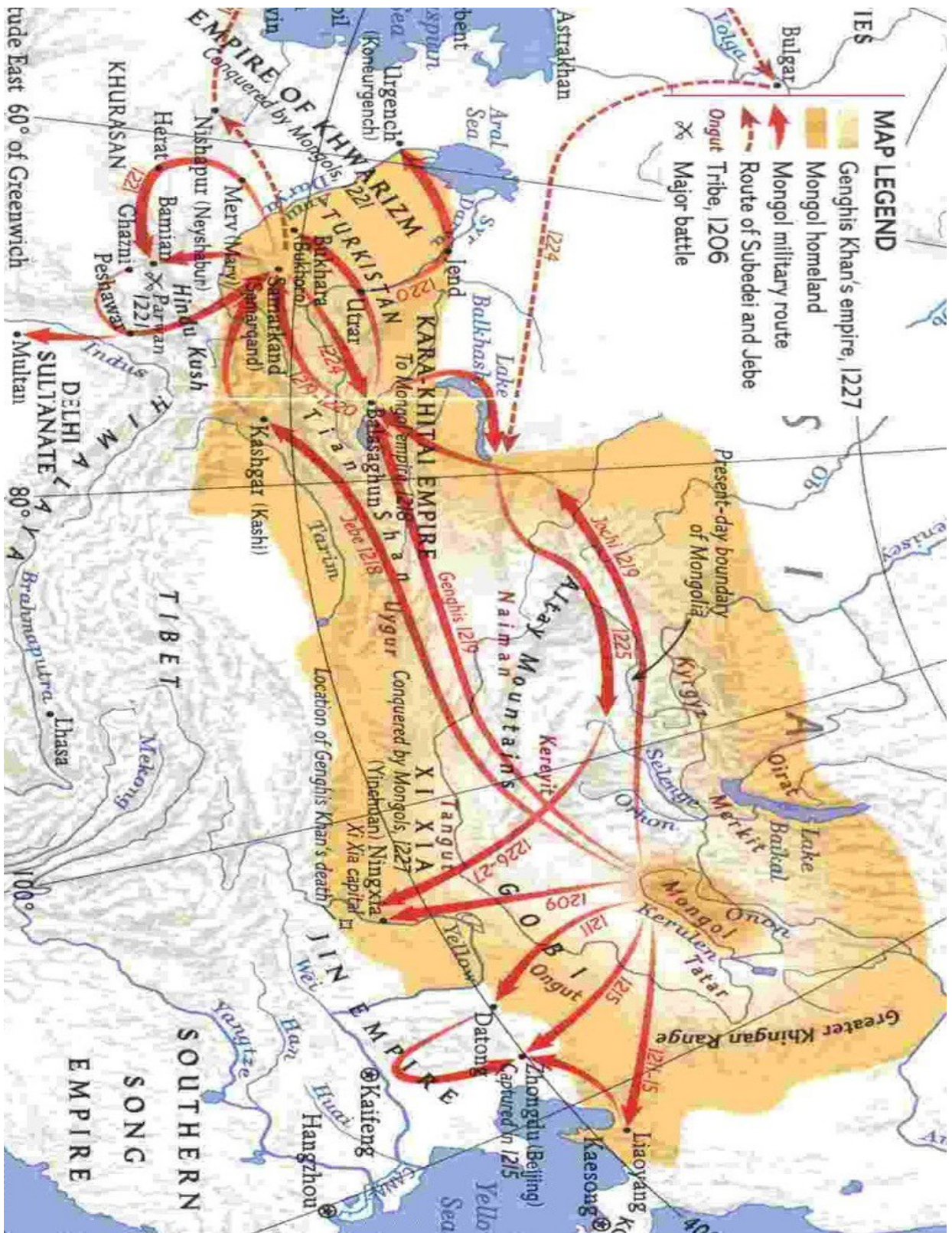
### **The Later Years: Efforts to Expand the Mongol Empire**

“External” Centralization—that is to say, the consolidation of power by the Mongol Empire through its military and diplomatic dealings with the sedentary states of China and Central Asia up to the year 1227 CE—is a period of much more wide scale movement and action than at any point prior, when other tribes of the interior steppe were the Mongols' primary concern. But this period is not at all to be considered chronologically divorced from the earlier, more formative years of the Empire. This is because tribal politicking would remain a consideration of Chinggis Khan and his successor khans for centuries to come. Rather, this period should be acknowledged as having some overlap with the Internal period of steppe consolidation. Yet it remains distinguished from it by the fact that it added on top of the existing political climate the much larger ambitions of the Mongol Empire on the continent of Asia as a whole.

In roughly chronological order, this chapter deals with the following: Mongol conquest and establishment of hegemony over the Tangut Kingdom (aka Xi Xia) from the years 1206-1210; Hostilities with the Jurchen Jin Dynasty beginning in 1209 through to 1227 (not to be concluded until 1234); The incorporation of the usurped Kara-Khitans (aka Western Liao Dynasty) in 1216; Conquest of the Khwarezmid Dynasty from approx. 1218-1224; Destruction of the rebelling Tangut Kingdom in 1225-1227. See [Figure 2]<sup>140</sup> for a map of Mongol military movements and conquests between 1206 and 1227. The pledging of Uyghur loyalty in 1211 by the Idiqt Barchukh is treated independently and out of chronological order because of its uniqueness up to that point, in the way in which another ruler peacefully reacted to Chinggis Khan.

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<sup>140</sup> Mike Edwards, and James L. Stanfield. 1997. "The great Khans." *National Geographic* 191, no. 2: 2. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed October 2, 2017).



The policy of conquest used by the Mongols under Chinggis Khan seemed at first to encourage the protected, *de facto* independence of states and cities which willingly submitted to the Empire instead of resisting, rather than the Mongols seeking to take over direct control of the region's administration. The benefit to the Mongols despite this greater freedom among vassals was that regular tributes kept an inflow of wealth, and that they still wielded political power and prestige over their “allies” by virtue of their continued military superiority. This pursuit of unequal treaties and alliances between steppe empire and sedentary state was not a new development in the history of Inner Asia. Since the earliest days of the Xiongnu confederations, such arrangements for the extraction of wealth from settled lands were consistently used by nomadic polities. The last most notable power to do so before the rise of the Mongol Empire was the Uyghur Khaganate, but even smaller tribes such as the Naimans and Tatars engaged in this activity as well. It is this particular means of exerting control over one's neighbors which gives so much weight to Owen Lattimore's argument that the periphery between steppe and farmland was so vital to the formation (and later disintegration) of nomad states. Historically, this series of hegemonic relationships ended with either the division of the tribal polity back into its components, or the acculturation and integration of the nomadic ruling class into the sedentary lifestyle of their subjects.

Exceptions to this “standard” of nomadic/sedentary imperial relations arose fairly early in the history of the Mongol Empire's expansion during Chinggis Khan's rule, when the norm of conduct could not be maintained. The reasons for a disruption of the treaty-hegemony system included situations such as when a state was adamantly resistant to the attempts at peace and treaty-making by the Mongols after extensive conflict; when a polity lacked a ruling family

which the Mongols could elevate and manipulate into suzerainty; or when the infrastructure of a region was so badly damaged that Mongol campaign efforts would be fruitless unless more direct measures were taken. But as the exception became the norm and the Mongols assumed much greater control of the regions which they conquered, Chinggis Khan seemed to become more and more accepting of this, such that by the 1220s CE, the Mongols were assuming direct control of regions overall, and instead affording occasional privilege or partial autonomy to individual *cities*, rather than to kings and their entire states. As it will be seen, Chinggis Khan's logic for what his empire was and how it should operate transformed over the course of its earlier conquests in Asia, setting a precedent for a more lasting foreign policy as it would be seen in later stages of the Mongol Empire's life cycle.

These and other unique challenges ensured that the Mongols, much like their contemporaries in the Song Dynasty, had to deal with each kingdom, empire, or tribal polity with which it engaged on a very attentive and individual level. It also meant that the Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khan was in a changing and self-adjusting state during this period, initially being a relatively interconnected tribal confederation which lacked direct possession of imperialized lands, but which would act accordingly once its stake in directly controlling those lands became apparent. The early expansion of the Mongol Empire was a time of constant transformation, just like the periods of time which preceded it, and which would come after it.

### Section 1: The Tangut Kingdom

The Tangut Kingdom of Xi Xia displayed a very independent, separate style of self-governance up until a sharp interruption in the destabilized ruling family's line. The Tanguts are suggested in the *Cambridge History* to have (like other sedentary states of the time and area) already entered into the network of alliance marriages with neighboring steppe tribes by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Several Kheraits, for example, were known to have fled into Xi Xia territory due to conflicts back at home as early as the 1170s. Many of them were welcomed in and even given positions of respect. One of these adopted Kheraits was Jakha Gambu, brother of Ong Khan and ally of convenience to Chinggis Khan.<sup>141</sup> In 1206, the same year that Temüjin was being named Chinggis Khan, the Emperor of Xi Xia was deposed by his cousin. This, coupled with Xia-Jin diplomatic relations being botched by both sides, resulted in the Tangut state being completely without allies when the Mongols were at last in a position to begin raiding and invading them. By 1210, the Xia Emperor submitted to Mongol rule, giving Chinggis Khan one of his daughters as well as a large tribute of silks, camels, and falcons.<sup>142</sup>

While the resulting relationship between the Tanguts and the Mongols remained strained at best, the Tangut Kingdom did seem to maintain its independence in many ways. Most prominently, the Emperor and his court remained the central bodies of authority in the state. They retained control of their own administration, markets, and diplomatic ties insofar as they did not directly conflict with their new obligations with the Mongol Empire. This is shown by how the Xia Emperor Shen-tsung pursued diplomatic relations with the Sung Dynasty in 1214 as a way of gaining an ally against the Jin, whom they had gone to war with since the deterioration of

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<sup>141</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 206.

<sup>142</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 208.



their relationship in the face of Mongol imperial expansion.<sup>143</sup> The alliance never amounted to anything more than one “abortive joint-action” in 1220, but it is enough to show clear Xia control of their own foreign policy while under Mongol suzerainty.

Weiming Tewang (who eventually inherited the throne from his abdicating father Shentsung the deposer) also sent repeated peace missions to the Jin Dynasty in 1223-25 in an effort to end their decades-long war. These attempts succeeded where the others had failed, with the Xia and Jin finally entering the famously common social arrangement among Chinese or Sinicized states in which the head of one state being the “older brother” (the Jin) and the other being the “younger brother” (the Xia), allowing both to pursue an almost-equal friendship in which the important ritual use of one another's titles remained. Xia-Jin border disputes were resolved, as were new questions of ritual and new economic opportunities to be found between their states at various markets.<sup>144</sup> The success would be a short-lived one, but it was a very significant development in that historical moment.

Even their military remained under direct control of the Tangut leadership, evidenced by the manner in which the Mongols requisitioned Tangut soldiers for the campaigns in Khrawezm. Rather than having direct control of their vassal's forces, the Mongols requested Tangut reinforcement for their Central Asian campaign to work in concert with them. The Tanguts were clearly given a notable amount of freedom in their arrangement, though it was an inherently unequal one which placed them in a subservient position. For when the Xia Emperor denied Chinggis Khan his soldiers in 1217-18, the khan took it as a grave insult and began to orchestrate the eventual punishment of the Tanguts for what was seen as a betrayal, or at the very least a breaking of their treaty.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>143</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 210.

Thus, as hinted at previously, the eventual conquest of the Tangut Kingdom by the Mongol Empire was an unexpected development and an outcome which had not been desired initially by the conquerors. This is a trend which would continue, forcing the Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khan to adapt and change how they managed their subjects, and what they extracted from them. Soldiers and tributes *had* been preferable to direct administration, but direct rule had to begin once the Mongols had destroyed several cities and executed the remaining Xia royal family in numerous sieges from 1225 to 1227.<sup>145</sup> Tangut generals fighting for the Mongols participated in these sieges, as did defectors from the rank-and-file military of the Tangut Kingdom which had been accumulating for years prior to the start of hostilities. This, combined with hundreds if not thousands of Tangut men entering the government through Yuan state exams due to the Tanguts' eventual placement within the *Semu* ethnic classification, suggested some level of continued Mongol appreciation for them despite the massacres which occurred in Xi Xia during the penal campaign. Perhaps ironically, the Mongols succeeded in pacifying and then taking direct control of a foreign power even as they failed to do so with regards to the nomad tribes of their interior. From the 1230s and onward they seemed to slowly assimilate to the Mongols and then the Chinese after the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, existing across Inner Asia in ethnically-distinct pockets using their own language and script as late as the end of the Ming period.<sup>146</sup>

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145 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 210-213.

146 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 214.

## Section 2: The Jin Dynasty

The Jurchen Jin Dynasty, which the Tanguts had such a rocky relationship with for the last few decades of their Kingdom's existence, is somewhat unique among the foreign powers who coexisted for a time with the Mongol Empire. The Jurchen state apparently had dealings with the Mongol peoples since long before the birth of Temüjin. Sung Dynasty accounts of diplomatic missions conducted by and between foreign powers, in addition to demonstrating once again the incredibly detail and effectiveness of the Sung diplomatic machine, also illuminate a treaty which was made between the Jin and a group of nomads to their northwest identified as the “Meng”, aka the Mongols. In this record, the Jin and the Meng were initially at war, until finally peace was made and the Meng leader was given the honorary title “Ao-lo Po-chi-lieh”, which may have been a composite title of Mongolian and Jurchen words meaning “chieftain of the camp”.<sup>147</sup> Given this treaty's time period and the suggestion that this Meng/Mongol representative was in fact the leader of the whole tribe, it is possible that this figure was Khabul Khan himself. This is supported by the known existence of his tribal confederation at the time, as well as the *Secret History's* assertion that Khabul Khan “ruled over all the Mongols.”<sup>148</sup>

It is notable however that since the Jin Emperor was bestowing this title, the power balance between the two peoples was heavily weighted toward Jin superiority- perhaps even the vassalage of the Mongols. The *Cambridge History* points out that the normally very in-depth *Secret History*, written during the height of the Yuan Dynasty, is entirely silent on anything resembling Mongol vassalage to a foreign power such as this.<sup>149</sup> Regardless of the exact nature of this early diplomatic relationship, as pointed out in an earlier chapter, Khabul Khan evidently

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147 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 235-238.

148 Urgunge Onon, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 53.

149 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 238.

caused a diplomatic fiasco in the court of the Jin Emperor in the 1140s which ended this agreement. He was also dead by the end of the decade and his confederation was facing severe setbacks and internal conflicts as well, making these first hints of peaceful diplomatic relations between Mongols and the Jurchen Jin less of an early point of continuity and transformation, and more of an isolated footnote ruptured from the later developments of the political climate of 13<sup>th</sup> century Inner Asia.

Relations did not immediately end between the Mongols and the Jin. They just remained cool and distrustful for long periods of time interrupted by acts of aggression and violence. It is important to remember, after all, that the Jin Dynasty was the settled state which used the highly organized Tatars tribes like a super-weapon and power-regulator out on the steppe. The sponsorship of the longtime enemies of the Mongols contributed to the capture and torturous execution of Khabul Khan's successor Ambaghai Khan, as well as to the climate of endemic tribal warfare which saw Temüjin's father Yesugei assassinated by rival Tatars. Despite the brief 1196 C.E. alliance between the Mongols, Kheraits, and Jin which broke the organization of the Tatars (who had grown a bit too powerful for the liking of their former ally, the Jin), the Jin remained in a position of authority over the Mongol tribes, and punitive missions or slave raids into the steppe were common. It was not until 1209 that Temüjin, just recently crowned Chinggis Khan, ceased all tribute missions to the Jin. That the 1209 usurper of the Jin Dynastic throne was one Wanyan Yongji, who was known for his military service against the steppe tribes on the frontier and was despised by Chinggis Khan himself, likely did not help matters either.<sup>150</sup>

The Jin Dynasty also had a long and sometimes sordid relationship with the Sung Dynasty to its south, and the most recent example of hostility bubbling up to the surface once

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<sup>150</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 275.

again in the early 1200s was the 1206-1208 Sung invasion of Jin lands. The Sung had seen the Jin as weakened at this time, and thought that the invasion would be a quick and easy means of reclaiming some of the disputed territory which would add to the Sung's legitimacy as *the* government for all of China. The invasion, led by one Chief Councilor Han T'o-chou, was a spectacular failure which led to the destruction of the army, the execution of Han, and the deep damaging of Sung international prestige as well as self-image. The Jin were, relatively speaking, no worse for wear after these events, and had the upper hand in the resulting peace agreements.<sup>151</sup> Yet the dynasty was still weakened enough or seen as an easy enough target that the Mongols, having recently dealt with the Tanguts and dealing almost simultaneously with the Kara-Khitans, invaded the Jin in 1211 C.E. Sung diplomatic records look upon this invasion with what has been described as a combination of caution and schadenfreude, for it was both concerning that the Mongols would attack such a prominent state (and potentially remove the Sung's buffer against the steppe), and relieving that the Sung would not have to deal with the threat of Jin hostilities. By 1214, Sung-Jin diplomatic missions nearly ground to a halt, and the Jin were also dealing with open revolts by the eastern Khitans and their south-central Chinese subjects.<sup>152</sup>

This disintegration of central Jin power, coupled with the historic animosity between the Mongols, Jin, and their leadership, meant that the war would result in Jin decline, or even outright defeat. But it would be a long, slow burn before Jin resistance faltered. Though many groups were in open revolt throughout the North China region, they were often just as hostile to the Mongol outsiders as they could be toward their Jurchen overlords- perhaps a negative side effect of the policy of targeted terror used by the Mongols, which served instead to galvanize the

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151 Morris Rossabi, *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries*. (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1983), 205.

152 Morris Rossabi, *China Among Equals*, 205.

locals in this case. Likewise, the turn westward by the bulk of Chinggis Khan's armies in order to counter several Central Asian threats after 1219 significantly reduced the manpower being used to invade the Jurchen dynasty. And though battles and sieges continued to be pitched across Jin territory under the Mongol general Mukhali, earnest attempts at peace were made at first.

Twice in 1220, the Jin emperor Hsuan-Tsung sent envoys to the court of Chinggis Khan in Transoxania where he was busy with his open war against the Khwarezm state. Both times, the emperor offered to recognize Chinggis Khan as his older brother, thereby establishing an asymmetrical familial relationship which would favor the Mongols and draw them into the filial-dynastic system which had been at use in China for the past three centuries. Both times, the Khan refused the offer. His own offer was sent back in its stead, demanding that instead of promoting Chinggis in rank, the Jin emperor would renounce his own imperial title and demote himself to *king* of the Hunan region. This too was refused, and so by 1222 Mongol-Jin negotiations had completely broken down. By 1223, Hsuan-Tsung was dead, and his successors fared no better than him. In 1224 through 1225, relations with the Tangut Kingdom were restored after they deteriorated in the face of Hsi Hsia's conquest by the Mongols and the Tanguts' subsequent reprisal raids into Jin territory for failing to aid them.

A peace treaty even came of this, but as we know from the tumultuous events in Central Asia during this period, the Tanguts were also soon to be completely defeated, making the possibly ally a moot point for the Jin.<sup>153</sup> Many Chinese and Jurchens alike defected from the Dynasty, but many more remained very loyal to the state until the capital of Kaifeng and the remaining outlying fortresses were taken. It would take a grinding 23 years of warfare total before the Jin Dynasty were defeated for certain in 1234.<sup>154</sup> Chinggis Khan was of course several

<sup>153</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 261.

<sup>154</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 259.

years dead by this point in time, but there is still value in seeing how the policies followed by the Mongol Empire concerning the Jin Dynasty changed or remained the same before and after the transition away from the rule of the first Great Khan. Like the Tanguts, the Jin territory's most obvious contribution to the Mongol Empire was the territory and its resources of wealth and people, as well as the strategic location of those territories between Mongol lands and the land still controlled by the Song Dynasty, with which it would remain in conflict for decades to come.

Through the reign of Ogedei Khan and into the office of Kublai Khan, a deep and simmering hatred of the Jin Dynasty and everything unique to it seemed to linger in the generations of generals and soldiers who had struggled against it. But there was some admiration for the longtime defiant foe, eventually championed by Kublai Khan himself when he accepted into his service the many Jurchens who had been repatriated by their Chinese countrymen in the years of Kaifeng's fall. These Jurchen officials would eventually do what the envoys of HsuanTsung could not, integrating their own as well as Chinese policies toward military and administration into the makeup of the Yuan Dynasty for decades to come.<sup>155</sup>

This demonstrates that while the Jin royal family was stamped out in its entirety, the dynasty's Jurchen subjects were not faced with the degree of violence or repression which had been shown to other enemies of the Mongol Empire in the past, otherwise there would have been far fewer Jurchens remaining in that area of China by the time of Kublai Khan. They were not massacred or enslaved in the thousands during or after the chaotic fall of their cities and last strongholds in the south, and it is notable that following the fall of Kaifeng, Ogedei Khan's forces traded food to the starving populace for their wealth, rather than simply looting.<sup>156</sup> These people were subjects of the Mongol Empire now, even if elements of both sides did not like that fact.

<sup>155</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 278.

<sup>156</sup> Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 264.

### Section 3: The Kara-Khitans Khanate

The Kara-Khitans Khanate, though it was invaded by the Mongols within the same time period as the Jin Dynasty, did not last for nearly as long as the Jurchen state to the east did. The Kara-Khitans state existed independently from approximately 1131 C.E. to 1213 C.E., though this end date is of the native Khitan dynasty proper, and not of the state itself. But Khitan-Mongol relations begin several years before 1213, and though they were opposed quite early on, the likelihood of Mongol invasion was not always assured until a rather unlikely turn of events undermined the Khitan state's security both within and without.

The Kara-Khitans, though speaking a language less clearly related to the Mongolic or Turkic languages of the Inner Asian steppe, were traditionally tribal nomads, and the nobility of the state which they formed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century carried descent from several important survivors of the fallen Liao Dynasty- indeed, Kara-Khitai is just as often referred to as the “Western Liao”. This synthesis of Chinese and nomad traditions persisted throughout the time of Kara-Khitai, articulated well in the fact that the monarch of Khitan state was the Gurkhan, literally meaning “universal khan”, yet he also functioned as an emperor within the traditional Chinese political climate.<sup>157</sup> Among other peoples, the Uyghurs and their *idiquts* of the 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries were semi-autonomous subjects of the Kara-Khitans up until Barchukh's rebellion against Khitai and his subsequent joining with the family of Chinggis Khan.

According to author Michal Biran in his text *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, the Kara-Khitans may have been aware of the existence and activities of the Mongols as early as the 1190s, when Ong Khan fled to the Gurkhan's court as a result of a severe power struggle he was trapped in with his brother(s). His requests for political backing and military

<sup>157</sup> Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 1.



assistance resulted in little, possibly because of the concurrent uprisings by Uyghurs, or the concern that rendering assistance would cause Kara-Khitai to appear weak before their rival, the Jin Dynasty. This rebuff had the effect of ultimately forcing Ong Khan back east to the only other major figure whom he could rely upon; Temüjin, the son of his late blood-brother Yesugei.<sup>158</sup> As reported later by Rashid al-Din, Ong Khan's supporters and wealth had been drained so completely by his usurpation and subsequent flights west and east that he and his few surviving followers had to sustain themselves by “milking his five goats and bleeding his camels”.<sup>159</sup> Returning briefly to the messy results of the Mongol efforts for internal centralization and the assimilation of the nomad tribes on the steppe, we'll remember that a number of Naiman refugees fled into the west after the Naiman-Kheraite confederation was defeated by the Mongols. One among these individuals was Kuchulug, son of the former Naiman khan.<sup>51</sup>

Kuchulug initially hid with his uncle Buyirugh Khan, but Buyirugh too was defeated by pursuing Mongols during a battle at the Irtish River.<sup>160</sup> Kuchulug and any remaining free Naimans then fled west into the borders of the Kara-Khitai Khanate. By 1208, the Khitans had offered Kuchulug and his followers asylum within their polity, possibly because of their mutual opposition to Chinggis Khan by this point, but also notably due to the past ties which the Naimans and Kara-Khitans once shared.<sup>161</sup> What the Kara-Khitans had not counted on however, was that Kuchulug had apparently fostered a relationship with a prominent figure even farther west than the Khitai polity, in the form of Muhammad Shah of Khwarezm.

This Persianate dynasty located in what is today considered the geopolitical region of Western Turkestan had been in a working relationship with the Kara-Khitans since the 1190s,

<sup>158</sup> Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 64

<sup>159</sup> Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 65.

<sup>160</sup> Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 75-76.

<sup>161</sup> Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 76.

when then-reigning Shah Tekish enlisted the aid of the Khitans in defeating their mutual enemy, the Ghurids of the Khorasan region.<sup>162</sup> As a result of these services rendered, in addition to both states gaining territory and other spoils from the halting of the Ghurids, Khwarezm proceeded to pay tribute to their eastern neighbors the Khitans. When Tekish Shah died in 1200 his son Muhammad ascended and remained a tributary of Kara-Khitai, with his loyalties apparently not at all suspect.<sup>163</sup> The Ghurids renewed their hostilities with the death of Tekish Shah however, attempting to reclaim territory taken from them in the late 1190s. Over the next six years or so Khwarezm and the Kara-Khitans proceeded to carve up Ghurid territories between themselves, during which a competition for land claimed began to develop. When the joint siege of the city of Tirmidh ended in Muhammad Shah gaining but then ceding the city to Kara-Khitai, the predominantly Muslim population of the city was dismayed at the transfer to a non-Muslim state. But in return for Tirmidh, the Khitans acknowledged Khwarezmian suzerainty throughout Khorasan. Whether Muhammad had been expecting the Khitans to accept such terms or not is unclear, but to him the fact that they did told the Shah that the Kara-Khitans were weak, and that the time to take advantage of them in turn was coming.<sup>164</sup>

Thus hostilities were flaring up between Khwarezm and Kara-Khitai by 1210, and a tacit alliance between Muhammad Shah and Kuchulug resulted in Kuchulug taking leave from the Gurkhan's court claiming that he would travel east to collect his supporters, the Naimans, and the other nomads scattered by the Mongols, who were at that time invested more heavily in the Jurchen and North Chinese states. The Gurkhan gave Kuchulug his blessing and a fair deal of wealth for this undertaking, only for Kuchulug to proceed to take his men and resources on a

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162 Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 65.

163 Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 66-67.

164 Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 70-71.

raiding and pillaging spree across eastern Khitan lands, capturing the treasury in Uzgand and amassing local soldiers and rural populations who were allowed to share in the looting as they went. This weakened the Khitans in their campaign against the Shah, and in an effort to maintain their western front they left Kuchulug almost completely unopposed for these early stages. The Kara-Khitans won several battles on both fronts before the end, even capturing Kuchulug for a time and reclaiming some of the treasury, only to have it divided up among Khitan generals rather than properly returned. In the end, economically drained and politically alienated, the Gurkhan Zhilugu was captured by Kuchulug (and Muhammad Shah) in 1210.<sup>165</sup> Virtually all of his power, roles, and titles were transferred to Kuchulug, but the Gurkhan was kept alive and functioned as something of a figurehead after that point. By 1213 with Zhilugu's death, Kuchulug's succession to the seat of emperor was made complete and final.

Historical observations on the end of the Gurkhan's dynasty paint a very negative image of Kuchulug in all his triumph. The *Liao shi*, the closest to an official dynastic history of the Liao (and Kara-Khitai), explicitly states that “When Zhilugu died, Liao ceased to exist.”<sup>166</sup> The *Liao shi* was written by the Yuan royal historian Toqto'a, however, and it could be that the Mongols would have wanted Kuchulug's victory to be cast in a disgraceful, usurping light. Ata-Malik—better known to history as Juvaini—continued a trend in his writing, of which more will be seen, in which he showed subdued sympathy to a people soon-to-be conquered by the Mongols in his own historical narrative, but ultimately had to fit the overall pro-Mongol stipulations of his Ilkhanate employers, and so shared the view that it was Kuchulug, not Chinggis, who

“annihilated” Khitai.<sup>167</sup> Accounts of his severe and systematic repression of Islam in the subject

<sup>165</sup> Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 79-80.

<sup>166</sup> Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 80.

<sup>167</sup> ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, John Andrew Boyle, and David Morgan. 1997. *Genghis Khan : The History of the World Conqueror*. (Seattle : University of Washington Press, 1997), 361.

peoples of the Kara-Khitans are also long-standing and vivid, but perhaps not entirely factual.<sup>168</sup> It is difficult to say with certainty what Kuchulug himself intended to do, as with most historical figures. But I agree with the theory first set forth by Denis Sinor (who was later agreed with by Michal Binan) that Kuchulug had not wanted Kara-Khitai destroyed.<sup>169</sup> It is significant that he'd taken to Khitan language, customs, and dress, married a woman from the Gurkhan's court, and even accepted Buddhism when she personally converted him away from the Naiman traditional religion of Nestorian Christianity, all well in advance of his rebellion against the state.<sup>170</sup> It is more likely, especially considering his efforts at policy-making following his ascension, that the opportunistic Kuchulug wished for the Kara-Khitan Khanate to survive and flourish under him, perhaps as a staging ground from which he could strike out against or check the Mongols who had sent him into exile to begin with.

All of this emphasis on events prior to Mongol interest in the region is to emphasize the destabilized nature of the Kara-Khitan state leading up to the 1210s. No matter how triumphant Kuchulug's plans had been, he was hard-pressed to maintain order in his new empire once frequent rebellions started.<sup>171</sup> Additionally, his act of gathering around himself Mongolic nomads and then succeeding as Gurkhan (in function, if not in formality) effectively placed a giant target over his head for Chinggis Khan, who had taken notice of him by now and perceived him as both an old enemy and a new threat. Chinggis Khan mobilized the Mongols to expand west in response, and in 1216 soon after the conclusion of the drawn-out Chin campaign, the Mongols invaded Kara-Khitai. Muslims, Qarluks, and in particular the Uyghurs banded together with the

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168 Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 82.

169 Denis Sinor. "Western Information on the Kitans and Some Related Questions." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 2 (1995), 262.

170 Denis Sinor. "Western Information on the Kitans and Some Related Questions.", 262.

171 Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 81.

Mongols in overthrowing Kuchulug, and following a siege of his *de facto* capital of Kashgar, the wayward Naiman prince was captured and decapitated, his head presented publicly to discourage the continuing fight elsewhere in the khanate.<sup>172</sup>

The Khitans of Kara-Khitai became subjects of the Mongol Empire, having little desire to continue fighting after Kuchulug's death and remaining fairly loyal until the disintegration of the Empire into smaller khanates, of which they would become subjects of the Jochid Blue Horde.<sup>173</sup> Initially they supplied Chinggis Khan's developing state with administrators and other trained individuals, but over time their position as a privileged group declined. By the reign of Kublai Khan, they were ranked equally with Jurchens, Koreans, and Chinese ethnic groups by the Yuan Dynasty's social hierarchy.<sup>174</sup> This suggests that the hierarchy of the empire revolved around not only acculturation to the Mongols, but a usefulness of some form to the ruling class. The Mongol Empire's administration would have been quite well developed by the time of the Yuan Dynasty, reducing its need to rely upon Khitans to fill the roles required. And so the imperial hierarchy begins to look like a fluid rather than static arrangement, with favor falling or potentially rising over the decades.

But perhaps the most important and long-lasting contribution of the Kara-Khitans to the Mongol Empire was something more conceptual. The Khitan khanate was formed by a culturally distinct nomadic elite, ruled diverse groups of people in a decentralized fashion, and respected the cultural and religious traditions of all subject peoples equally (with the exception of later anti-Islamic trends spearheaded by Kuchulug).<sup>175</sup> All of these qualities could also be said to have been characteristic of the Mongol Empire, admixed with the administrative techniques and

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172 Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 83.

173 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 446.

174 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 319.

175 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 446.

institutions adapted from the Uyghurs. The Kara-Khitan Khanate may have been seen as the model for a successful nomadic empire, from which the leaders of the Mongol Empire took lessons in later decades.

#### **Section 4: Khwarezm**

The Khwarezmid Dynasty which outlived its eastern Khitan neighbor as an independent state appears to be the odd one out as far as major conquests by the Mongol Empire are concerned. By 1214 C.E., diplomatic ties had been established between Khwarezm and the Mongol Empire- and little more. There were exchanges of envoys and merchants, but there had not yet been any pursuit of an alliance between the two powers, nor of any plans of invasion on the part of the Mongols. But an international incident finally occurred in or around the same year, when the Mongols were pursuing business unrelated to the Khwarezmid. One account claims that the armies of Jochi and Subetei, while pursuing the Merkit Toqto'a of all people, unwittingly violated Khwarezm's borders. The Shah-turned-Sultan Ala'ud-Din Muhammad, former co-conspirator with Kuchulug the Naiman, retaliated by allowing his subordinate Qadir Khan to attack the soldiers as well as capture and then execute a large group of Mongol merchants and other caravaneers present in Khwarezm. Chinggis Khan sent an embassy to the Shah, demanding justice and the death of the perpetrator, Qadir. These emissaries were also killed, allegedly prompting Chinggis Khan to make the declaration of war mutual and invade Khwarezm in order to avenge the insult.<sup>176</sup> Thus the international relationship changed from one of slight cooperation to one of conflict for complete defeat of one side, with no visible plans for the use of vassalage, tribute-taking, or forcing of favorable peace treaties in the Mongol war strategy.

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<sup>176</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 306.

The Central Asian campaigns against the Sultan and his people became legendarily brutal, with the large-scale destruction of cities and the massacre of their populations (such as at Samarkand and Urgench, mentioned many pages before) leaving a lasting impression and setback in the people and culture of the region. The damage was so severe that Chinggis Khan's eldest son Jochi was reportedly very dissatisfied with the lasting economic, infrastructural, and cultural weakness of Urgench, which had been given to him to rule after the end of the war.<sup>177</sup> The level of disregard for the long-term which seemed to have been employed by the Mongols in their military strategies suggests that they had not given very deep consideration to the long-term results of their invasion, or at least that they had placed those concerns below the goal of ruining the insolent Sultan. But at the same time, the cities such as Urgench and Bukhara had promptly been divided up between the relatives and generals of Chinggis Khan, suggesting that—instances of gross mismanagement aside—the Mongols had intended to absorb the lands of the Khwarezmid Dynasty directly, rather than entertain any ideas of future vassalage for the leaders of the defeated. Both the Sultan and his sole heir and successor Jalal ud-Din were run out of the region and killed by 1224, thereby ending the royal line.<sup>178</sup> Some communities willingly submitted to the Mongols without any resistance, often in the wake of horror stories being spread about a successful siege and sack. But it is telling that these villages, towns, and at times cities were rewarded by being left merely “unmolested” by the Mongol hosts<sup>179</sup>, rather than being promised any sort of autonomy in the administration to come.

The events which followed up the devastation and partition of the lands and cities of Khwarezm also support the idea that the Mongols were interested in setting up a direct and

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177 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 308.

178 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 308.

179 Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*, 79.

permanent administration in the region. Chinggis attempted, apparently unsuccessfully, to win over the survivors of the conquest, particularly the commanders of forces which had defected from the Shah in the wake of the severe sieges which met most cities of Central Asia. There are no Khwarezmian generals noted for their success or careers after the Mongol conquest, suggesting that the Khan wasn't able to mobilize them the same way he had done with the defectors of the dynasties in North China or the technical loyalists of the Tangut Kingdom. The populations of cities such as Samarkand may have continued to suffer from poverty and starvation despite any relief efforts by the Mongols, suggested (at least in anecdotal form) by the frequent donation of rice and grain to the urban poor by one Daoist Master Changchun during his stay in Samarkand with Chinggis Khan in 1222.<sup>180</sup>

The donations were said to save a “great number of lives” and may imply the failure of Mongol civil administration of the Central Asian cities immediately succeeding their conquest, though given that the *Xiyuji*, the chronicle of Changchun, was written by his disciple Li Zhijang, this may simply have been a case of a young man finding more emphatic ways in which to praise his mentor and spiritual leader. Still, it is the thought that counts in this context, because a conscious effort was made by the Mongols to ingratiate themselves to the remaining locals. This trend extended into the policies of the later western khanates, including the Il-Khanate which would employ indigenous Central Asian Muslims in its government. One such local was the chronicle of both local and world history named Juvaini, whom we have already seen material from referencing Kara-Khitai. Juvaini was born the same year as Chinggis Khan's death, and ha eventually came to work under Il-Khan

Hulegu as the governor of Baghdad.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>180</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*, 91.

<sup>181</sup> Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*, 70.



Juvaini is most notable as being the chronicler who wrote much of what we know today about the Mongol conquest of Khwarezm, for he was the one to compile a coherent narrative, mostly from eye-witness accounts, nearly a generation after the events which had transpired.<sup>182</sup> That he was a local writing about the fall of his own homeland to outsiders gives him a very unique voice in all of this. Though his *History of the World Conqueror* praises the religious tolerance—particularly that of Islam—as well as the ingenuity and prowess of the Mongol army as much as a state-sponsored history could be expected to, Juvaini had actually started writing the history prior to his employment by the government, apparently out of personal interest. He did not shy away from detailing the brutality of the Mongol invasion and the massacres which were committed during the Central Asian campaigns. Famously, in his words regarding the fall of Bukhara and the fate of the Qangli<sup>183</sup>, Juvaini stated that “no male was spared who stood higher than the butt of a whip and more than thirty thousand were counted amongst the slain; whilst their small children, the children of their nobles and their womenfolk, slender as the cypress, were reduced to slavery.”<sup>184</sup>

Because of his ambivalence we have perhaps one of the most credible works from this time and period, which is remarkable in and of itself. It is interesting to consider that perhaps because the successor khanates followed the policy of cooperation and integration begun (or perhaps continued) by Chinggis Khan, Juvaini's voice was able to be heard in such a capacity to begin with. After the destruction which Juvaini described was completed, and the new Mongol overlords of the region began to participate actively in administration of the government, it

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182 Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*, Ibid.

183 The Qangli were the Turkic tribes and dedicated military forces who complimented the more urban and administratively-inclined Tajiks whom they shared the land with, forming a sort of symbiotic ruling class of Khwarezm. Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 306.

184 Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*, 78.

seems that the largest contribution to the Mongol Empire by the conquest of Khwarezm was the land and its people, as the case was with the Tangut Kingdom, and would be with the Jin in several years.

### **Section 5: An Alternate Angle on the Uyghurs**

The Uyghur Idiqt Barchukh and his personal submission to Chinggis Khan is somewhat ambiguous in terms of whether it resulted in fact in the autonomous existence of the Uyghurs versus direct rule of the Uyghurs by the Mongols, which is why the Uyghurs occupy both the Internal and External chapters in this respect. After becoming Gurkhan, the usurper Kuchulug forced more severe measures and taxes upon not only Muslims throughout the Khanate, but the Uyghurs of the Tarim Basin as well. Barchukh rose up in rebellion in 1209, and by 1211 had sent emissaries on an important diplomatic mission to Chinggis Khan. Later in the year 1211, Barchukh was named the “5<sup>th</sup> son” of Chinggis Khan and given his illustrious daughter Altani as a bride, and it is inferred that Barchukh remained the Idiqt and leader of the Uyghurs from that point onward. As described in Internal Centralization, this made the Turkic Uyghur Barchukh privy to the systems of constructed familial lineage used so thoroughly by the Mongolic steppe tribes. Were he and his people then honorary Mongols? Unlikely, because there were no subsequent attempts at assimilation. But this almost intimate proximity between the two peoples represented by the addition of Barchukh to the family certainly complicates the hitherto reliable picture of the Mongols attempting remain apart from (if not necessarily *above*) their selfgoverning subject peoples. This also made Barchukh the first sovereign ruler to willingly and peacefully submit to Chinggis Khan, let alone one who deliberately sought out his assistance

beforehand. Other smaller tribal groups welcomed the Mongols during the fall of the Khitans, particularly Muslim subjects such as the Qarluks, yet Barchukh and his Uyghurs would remain the most prominent willing allies of the Mongols for some time.

But it is because of the actions and policies which he undertook from that point onward—marrying a daughter of Chinggis Khan, going on campaign with him, providing the Mongol army with Uyghur soldiers, furnishing the early Mongol government with Uyghur advisers and administrators desired by Chinggis Khan, etc—it would seem that Barchukh's actions as Idikut became more closely dictated by his relationship with and the needs of Chinggis Khan- the charismatic central ruler to whom he owed personal loyalty. It is somewhat unclear whether this was a reduced amount of autonomy enjoyed by the Uyghur leader compared to other leaders who collaborated with the Mongols, or if it was a matter of choice and opportunity for him. By becoming his “son”, Barchukh seemingly also became one of Chinggis Khan's governors, generals, and perhaps even an *anda* to him. But it is clear that in general despite their Idikut's attachment to Chinggis Khan, the Uyghurs—who were culturally Turkic rather than Mongolic like the steppe tribes whom the Mongols had taken great pains to assimilate or neutralize (and who were able to *remain* Turkic, never being forced by their benefactors to become culturally “Mongol”)—retained their identity and their independent society despite effectively becoming almost-direct subjects of the Mongol Empire in day-to-day practice.

### Later Years Conclusion

The policies used by Chinggis Khan and his subordinates and successors to deal with the world outside of the Empire illustrate a gradual shift in the interests and end-goals of the emerging polity. On the Inner Asian steppe proper, there appeared to be an early attempt by the Mongol tribes to thoroughly defeat, subjugate, or assimilate the neighboring nomad tribes which posed a threat to Chinggis Khan's confederacy both before and after his naming as Great Khan. These efforts varied in success, with some tribes assimilating or becoming Mongolized, while others avoided full integration into the Empire. A rare few even continued to be thorns in the side of the Mongols for years to come, being exiles and refugees pushed outward from the inner steppe region toward the territories of sedentary neighbors. Thus the “internal” centralization of the Empire and of the Mongols' fellow steppe nomads was a real and deliberate attempt early on, but one which was met with limited success.

Conversely, the Mongols seemed far less interested in fully integrating the external and very different sedentary states which they came into contact with and then conquered in war. Chinggis Khan seemed content not to innovate in this respect, instead falling back on the tried-and-true system of treaties and tribute-paying from which he could extract the wealth of the lands south of the steppe. But Barchukh's submission, as well as other noted examples of more direct rule by the Mongols throughout the chapter, would bridge the gap between the hands-off systems of the past and the more expansionist goals of the Empire. Chinggis Khan's logic of empire was therefore gradually adjusted, and the execution of it augmented by the useful qualities of the states and groups which his empire came to encompass. These include the conscious inclusion of Kara-Khitan religious tolerance, of Uyghur administrative techniques, and of usable territory

taken directly from the Jin, Tanguts, or Khwarezmids which could not longer be maintained by a vassal state.

It is clear that the Mongols wanted to avoid the common end of disbanding and returning to a divided state out on the steppe, but it is important to note that Chinggis Khan also took steps to avoid the other common end, in which the nomadic rulers became integrated into the culture of their subjects. When Chinggis Khan integrated Uyghur administrators into his government, he was incorporating the ideas and expertise of fellow nomads (or at least semi-nomads) who owed him loyalty, rather than using the more common model of government and diplomatic relations which defined and linked together the Chinese and Sinified states of the day. While it may seem minor, this would keep the Mongols very politically distinct from their neighbors and future subjects. Likewise, the adaptation of Uyghur script to the Mongol language instead of some other writing system helped to assert the Mongols' cultural separation. A practical outcome of adopting the Khara-Khitan practice of religious tolerance and pluralism was that Chinggis Khan ensured no single religious entity would become too persecuted *or* too predominant. For years to come, well into the reign of Kublai Khan, the Mongols would remain shamanists in general, rather than accepting one of the belief systems of their neighbors, such as Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism, or Neo-Confucianism which was so deeply intertwined with the Chinese styles of diplomacy and administration noted above. Chinggis Khan seemed to want to create and maintain a stronger Mongol identity as they gradually came to control a huge and diverse population which spanned from Manchuria to the east coast of the Caspian Sea going east-to-west, and from Siberia to the edge of the Tibetan Plateau going north-to-south.

These transformations of policy and identity would become more visible later in the

history of the Mongol Empire, particularly during the Yuan Dynasty which eventually saw the conquest of the whole of the Song Dynasty in the south, and by extension almost all of East and Central Asia. By this time, the Mongols were reflecting the realities and histories of their relationships with various subject peoples in the form of their *Semu* hierarchy system which further differentiated ruler from subject, while also categorizing and evaluating different subjects. At its simplest, the *Semu* system afforded greater prestige and opportunities to those peoples who were most able and willing to aid the Mongol ruling class, and conversely limited the rights of peoples with a more negative relationship to the Mongols. Even when they became the direct, sometimes sedentary rulers of unexpectedly large territories, the Mongols followed the policies of Chinggis Khan and earlier steppe rulers by trying to extract the greatest benefit from their asymmetrical social relations and contracts at all times. These rankings could also change over time as those writing them constantly reevaluated the state of the Empire. It is hard to tell whether this created—or was the result of—competition between these subject groups, but perhaps both cases are true in part.

### Epilogue: Looking Ahead

The Song Dynasty would at last come into direct conflict with the Mongol Empire, which continued to expand in the east and west despite the eventual death of the empire's charismatic leader. After the buffer states between the Song and the Inner Asian steppe were stripped away or incorporated into the new nomad-ruled polity one by one, the Song found itself to be next. The last Chinese dynasty to pose a significant threat or barrier to the Mongol state was driven back from all of its northern territories including its capital city of Kaifeng by 1127, the same year as Chinggis Khan's death.<sup>185</sup> The dynasty endured in the south however, and this Southern Song Dynasty would flourish until 1279, even building up its new capital at Hangzhou to rival the Mongol Empire's metropolis of Khanbaliq, modern Beijing.<sup>186</sup> In 1260, Kublai Khan became the fifth Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, but by 1271 he had formally created the Yuan Dynasty, with his grandfather Chinggis Khan retroactively named as the dynasty's founder. This marked perhaps the greatest point of division of the Mongol Empire, because now a dynasty increasingly styled on the old Chinese imperial system held only nominal influence over the other khanates which had similarly differentiated themselves from the rest of the Mongol Empire over time.

The Yuan Dynasty itself would exist with relatively stable borders until the 1360s, at which point a confluence of crises and rebellions, as well as the rise of a tenant farmer turned charismatic general named Zhu Yuanzhang caused large areas of China to change hands away from its Mongols rulers. In an interesting parallel with the Yuan's longest-lasting rival, the Song, the Yuan Dynasty retreated into the north, and so became the Northern Yuan Dynasty at the same time that Zhu Yuanzhang proclaimed the beginning of a new dynasty, the Ming.<sup>187</sup> Still claiming

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185 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, 17.

186 Herbert Franke, and Denis Crispin Twitchett. 2008. *The Cambridge History of China*, Ibid.

187 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 354-355.

legitimacy as well as the Mandate of Heaven, just as the Southern Song had, the Northern Yuan existed for nearly three hundred more years until its absorption into the emerging Qing Dynasty in 1635.<sup>188</sup> The other khanates had all dissolved or transformed into states of a less Mongol nature with fewer nomadic groups of much less prominence, with the exception of some eastern elements of the Chagatai Khanate, which would be incorporated into other states in the 17<sup>th</sup> century like the Northern Yuan.<sup>189</sup>

As this paper has demonstrated, at almost no point in the early years had the Mongol Empire been well and truly “centralized”, with strong control over all of its constituents, other nomad tribes in particular. And, while the overthrow of royal families and the direct seizing of territory did become a common tool of the Mongols in later decades of its expansion, such as in the case of the lands formerly belonging to the Chin Dynasty and Khwarezmia, the allowance of autonomy and *de facto* self-rule by the Mongols for their subjects never vanished entirely. In this way, the division of the Mongol Empire into the Golden Horde, Chagatai Khanate, Ilkanate, and Yuan Dynasty could instead be seen as a formal and official acceptance of the forms of political decentralization which had been present in the nomad state from the start.

The *division* of the Mongol Empire into constituent khanates need not be seen as the immediate *end* of the Mongol Empire, either. What I mean by this is that each successor state to the more-or-less unified Empire was the product of the newly-created “Post-Mongol Imperial World”, if you will. This is not an attempt to weigh in on the idea of Abu-Lughod’s “world systems” at the last minute, mind you. To do so and bring such a complicated set of ideas so late into the discussion would be to over-simplify them and not give them the critical analysis which

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188 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 449.

189 B. K. Gills, “Janet Abu-Lughod and the World System: The History of World System Development and the Development of World System History.” *Journal Of World-Systems Research*, 20 (2014), 176.



they deserve. Rather, this idea of a created Mongol “world” is the impression which I gained over the course of this project, and the idea that there was a sphere of social, political, and economic influence in and around the lands dominated by the Mongols.

This sphere existed as a facet of the consolidated empire, but it also persisted after the point that the empire divided and transformed, due to the deep influences it had on the social and political fabric of Eurasia. Each khanate, even if its ruling elite became progressively more sedentary, acculturated to the locals, or converted to new religions such as Islam or Buddhism, worked to maintain its status as a legitimate successor to the khanate under Chinggis Khan. As was emphasized already, the new phenomenon of Chinggisid lineage was in full force at this time, and would continue to shape politics inside and outside of the Inner Asian steppe almost to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in various places such as the Moghul Empire, or the city-states of Central Asia. It was one of the longest and most consistent periods of steppe nomadic influence on civilization and history. This sphere of influence, though it did often conflict, did not usurp other previous systems, such as the Chinese imperial system, nor did it necessarily integrate with them, despite how arguably Sinified the early Yuan could be said to be. Instead, these worlds existed in parallel and overlapped with one another.

Even in areas where the Mongols or their successors were militarily defeated and made directly politically beholden to another power, their influence as a group persisted. The Yongle Emperor, third ruler of the Ming Dynasty, was so successful in his early military endeavors against the Yuan and his relatives and rivals in the court thanks in part to Mongol auxiliaries whom he was able to treat with and incorporate into his army. A rumor, though baseless, even caught on in the steppe that the Yongle Emperor was a son of the khan Toghon-Temur, and

therefore Mongol himself.<sup>190</sup> Later still, the Mongol tribes were incorporated into the their very own division of the Eight Banner System devised by the Manchus of the Qing Dynasty in recognition of their continued importance and impact.<sup>191</sup> This was a process of reorienting military pluralism which was not terribly different from the Tümen military regiments or Kheshig Royal Guard of Chinggis Khan's reign, though doubtless the Manchus had their own independent reasoning for the arrangement.

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190 Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, 355.

191 Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 73-74.

## Conclusion

The Mongol Empire started from humble origins. It feels cliched to say that, given that most states and empires, having had to start somewhere, came from humble origins. But in this case it is particularly appropriate to say so, given the precarious position in which the Mongol tribes found themselves during the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Surrounded on all sides by larger confederations of tribes who were at best cool to their presence or at worst overtly hostile to them, there was as clear a Di Cosmo-esque “Crisis” Step of state formation as there could have been. They and their first imperial leader Chinggis subverted many of the trends found in past steppe nomad polities, as Barfield and others sensitive to exceptions and ruptures pointed out. But that resilience (or perhaps flexibility) came with its own new challenges and difficulties for the fledgling state. Chinggis Khan and his constituents saw the Inner Asian steppe as the heartland which formed the core of the empire, with the outside world acting as a periphery, in stark contrast to the model founded on more agrarian sensibilities in which the settled land and its wealth were the focus and an end-goal.

Despite this, the empire's borders expanded decade after decade, first encompassing the marginal borderlands where interactions between nomads and settlers normally happened on a much smaller scale, and then enveloping entire sedentary hinterlands. Just as the steppe biome grasslands literally expanded across stretches of desert of the time thanks to a more moist climate, so too did the steppe expand in a metaphorical sense, as the Mongols and their subject tribes migrated through them. In a way, the expansion of the Mongol state broadened and diversified this belt of Lattimore's mixed frontier land, putting nomads in direct contact with farmers across a much larger geographical area than what was previously typical. True to

McNeill's emphasis on their importance to world history, the steppe nomadic movement spearheaded by the Mongols caused a great symbiosis of cultures and systems, and extracted and transported an immense amount of wealth and resources as a result. And though it did not entirely break the supposed cycle of consolidation and disintegration of nomad states, the Mongol Empire defied historical precedent by enduring for far longer and changing its composition part by part over that period of time rather than suddenly and unilaterally dispersing back onto the steppe.

Over this respectable lifespan, the Mongol Empire became highly syncretic, both by incident and by design of its rulers. Minor tribes, cities, and groups vigorously retained their previous identities despite or perhaps because of the extent of Mongol suzerainty, while a plurality of religions and a tolerance for each was mandated by law. An initial resistance to Chinese dynastic and governing systems, possibly due to a fear of Mongol assimilation to Chinese culture, led to a unique Uyghuro-Mongol administration. Yet when Chinese models were accepted more and more, a unique Mongol identity endured, and Borjigid as well as Chinggisid lineage politics continued to play out in a wonderfully complicated court culture. Rather than existing in a state of paradox, elaborate alliance-building and diplomatic relationships existed alongside tactics of startling brutality simply as different manifestations of the same driving force of practicality and pragmatism. Tradition and innovation were constantly pitted against one another and wedded together, and the result was one of the largest and most important empires of the world and its history.

Despite the lengthy process by which this project was completed, it is only a small step toward understanding the beast that is the Mongol Empire, or any other past state, in a manner

not limited by one or two theories or approaches. Perfect holism or reconciliation of all included angles need not be the end goal, and in fact that act of homogenization may lead to oversimplification, which was avoided at all costs in the writing of this. To name just a few of the topics which were heavily considered but ultimately left out of this particular set of approaches in the interest of time and scope, there is much more to be said about the formation of the Mongol Empire in the context of the Song Dynasty diplomatic apparatus and court intrigue, the nature of the breakdown in relations and alliance between the Chin Dynasty and the Tatar confederation, and the full list of robust and sometimes unlikely achievements in politics by Mongol royal women such as Ho'elun, Börte, Altani, and Sorghaghtani Bekhi.

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