

# Genghis Khan proud of globalization led by Mongol Empire

In fictional interview, the great emperor talks about tolerance, flexibility and openness that connected East and West



Elisabetta Ragagnin



Davide Rizzi

**G**enghis Khan (Mong. Činggis Qa'an), the founder of the Mongol Empire, was probably born in 1162 or 1167 - the year is debated - in today's Khentii region of northeastern Mongolia, where the Kerülen and Onon rivers originate.

The *Secret History of the Mongols* (Mongolian: *monggol-un ni'uča tobčiyān*), the



© Euihwan Cho

only source written by the Mongols themselves, narrates the genealogy and life of Genghis Khan and how he laid the foundations of the empire, later expanded by his successors. This masterpiece of world-literature is an epic chronicle, mixed with alliterated prose and poetry, where legend and history are intertwined. Originally, it was written in the so-called Mongolian-Uyghur script by an unknown author, most likely in 1228, soon after Genghis Khan's death. The original is, however, lost. There is a Mongolian language version written in Chinese phonetic transcription from the Ming period. Parts of the *Secret History* are also contained in the *Altan Tobči* (Golden Book), a 17th century Buddhist work.

Other important sources for the history of the Mongols, predominantly Chinese and Persian, include Rašīd-ud-dīn's *Jāmic al-tawārīkh* (The Collection of Histories), and the Chinese chronicles *Shengwu Qinzheng Lu* (The Campaigns of Genghis Khan) and *Yuan Shi* (History of the Yuan Dynasty).

Genghis Khan was the son of Yisügei Ba'atur, 'the Brave', of the Kiyat Borjigin clan, and of Hö'elün, belonging to the Olqunu'ut lineage, a subtribe of the Qonggirat. The marriage took place after Yisügei Ba'atur had kidnapped his future wife – a custom still widespread in the Mongolian-Turkic world—shortly before she was given in marriage to a chief of the Merkit tribe. Many future Mongolian Khans chose their wives from the Qonggirat clan, for instance Börte, Genghis Khan's first wife, and Čabi, the beloved second wife of Qubilai Qa'an.

Ancestors of the Borjigin clan were a blue-grey wolf (*Börte Činua*) and a fawn doe (*Qo'a Maral*), as we read in the first lines of the Secret History of the Mongols. The future Genghis Khan as a child was given the name Temüjin, literally 'black-

smith' (from *temür* 'iron', augmented by the suffix *-čün*). At birth, he held a lump of blood in his hand, a premonitory symbol of his tenacity, determination, and strength.

According to the traditions of the time, Temüjin was betrothed at the age of nine to Börte. Immediately after the engagement, on his way back to his camp, Temüjin's father, Yisügei Ba'atur, was poisoned by Tatars. As a consequence, all the clans that previously obeyed Yisügei Ba'atur abandoned the family of Temüjin, not wanting to recognize a nine-year-old young boy as their leader. According to the *Secret History*, the family was reduced to feeding on berries and roots to survive, but despite these hardships and their spartan lifestyle, Temüjin quickly managed to seize a prominent role. He was endowed with an extraordinary charisma and political and organizational skills, and also benefitted from an alliance with Toghril khan, the chief of the Kereite lineage and the most powerful khan of the steppes of his time and anda (blood brother) of his late father, Yisügei Ba'atur. Temüjin soon



began to attract young steppe warriors, many of whom later became his important generals. After consolidating the tribes of Mongolia, Genghis Khan turned to the conquest of the sedentary civilizations of Eurasia.

The title “Genghis Khan” was given to Temüjin in 1206, the year of the Tiger. On this date, as we read in the *Secret History of the Mongols* (paragraph 202) “the people of the felt-walled tents (yurts) gathered at the headwaters of the River Onon; the white nine-tailed banner (*tuq*) was raised and there was assigned (to Temujin) the title Genghis Khan”. According to the *Jāmi‘ al-tawārīkh*, the shaman Teb-Tenggeri Kököčü bestowed this title on Temüjin. Between 1218 and 1225 Genghis Khan seized

an immense territory extending from China to the Near East. Genghis Khan probably died in 1227, soon after his campaign against the Tanguts. Neither the cause of death nor the place of burial is known. Rašīd-ud-dīn describes his funeral procession to Mount Burqan Qaldun, where he would be buried according to Mongolian traditions, i.e. in a secret and forbidden place. Since Genghis Khan died in the month of August and Mongols did not practice embalming of corpses, it is also possible that the body was not transported to the sacred regions of Burqan Qaldun in the Khentii region.

Even today there are numerous archaeological expeditions that take place every year in an attempt to identify the geo-

© Euihwan Cho



graphical location of his tomb.

*Q: Genghis Khan, Your Majesty, may I ask you what do you think about globalization?*

A: Sure, my pleasure. Well, as you surely know, it was my Eurasian world empire that actually established the first form of globalization. The empire I founded was based on trade, tolerance between peoples and cultures, political flexibility, openness to religious plurality, and international diplomacy, thus establishing a real global network, connecting East and West. Our contribution to world history was ignored for centuries by much of the Western world. I am happy to see that the situation is changing.

*Q: Genghis Khan, Your Majesty, I heard several stories on the legendary bravery and strength of Mongol women. Last week, for instance, I read a very fascinating story on the Mongolian wrestling uniform. I finally understood why the upper body piece is an open chest collarless jacket! Legends narrate that the chest covering is missing because in the past a woman wrestler outperformed all other*

*wrestlers, becoming champion. As a consequence of this and in order to prevent women from competing in male wrestling tournaments, the chest part of the vest was removed. Can you tell us more about Mongol women?*

A: Ah, yes, the strong ladies of our lineage: our ancestress Alan Qo'a; my mother Hö'elün; my first wife Börte; Sorqatani Beki – the mother of my nephew Qubilai; Qutulun – the daughter of Qaidu; Manduqai; and many more. Without them Mongol history would not have been the same! I'd like to recite you the story of our ancestor Alan Qo'a as it is narrated in our epic poem that came down to you as the Secret History of the Mongols. We used to call it differently at our times.

*Before long, Dobun Mergen died. After his death, Alan Qo'a, although she had no husband, bore three sons who were named Buqu Qatagi, Buqatu Salji, and Bodončar Mungqaq.*

*Belgүнүtei and Bүgүнүtei, the two sons born earlier to Dobun Mergen, said to each other, behind the back of their mother Alan Qo'a, "Although this moth-*



*er of ours is without brothers-in-law and male relatives, and without a husband, she has borne these three sons. In the house there is only the man of the Ma'al-iq Baya'ut. Surely these three sons are his." Their mother Alan Qo'a knew what they had been saying to each other behind her back. One day in spring, while she was cooking some dried lamb, she had her five sons – Belgүнүtei, Bүгүнүtei, Buqu Qatagi, Buqatu Salji and Bodončar Mungqaq – sit in a row. She gave an arrowshaft to each of them and said, "Break it!" One by one they immediately broke the single arrowshafts and threw them away. Then she tied five arrowshafts into a bundle and gave it to them saying, "Break it!" The five sons each took the five bound arrowshafts in turn, but they were unable to break them. Then their mother Alan Qo'a said, "You, my sons Belgүнүtei and Bүгүнүtei, are suspicious of me and said to each other, "These three sons that she has borne, of whom, of what clan, are they the sons?" And it is right for you to be suspicious. Every night, a resplendent yellow man entered by the light of the*



© Euihwan Cho

*smoke-hole or the door top of the tent, he rubbed my belly and his radiance penetrated my womb. When he departed, he*

*crept out on a moonbeam or a ray of sun  
in the guise of a yellow dog.*

*How can you speak so rashly?*

*When one understands that, the sign is  
clear:*

*They are the sons of Heaven.*

*How can you speak, comparing them*

*To ordinary black-headed men?*

*When they become the rulers of all,*

*Then the common people will under-  
stand!”*

*Further, Alan Qo’a addressed these  
words of admonition to her five sons:  
“You, my five sons, were born of one  
womb. If, like the five arrowshafts just  
now, each of you keeps to himself, then,  
like those single arrowshafts, anybody  
will easily break you. If, like the bound  
arrowshafts, you remain together and of  
one mind, how can anyone deal with you  
so easily?” Some time went by and their  
mother Alan Qo’a died.*

*Q: Genghis Khan, Your Majesty, may I  
ask you a very direct question?*

*A: Sure, my pleasure. I have always been  
a very curious person and pretty bold, as*

you know from history. I have always listened to foreigners.

*Q: Where is your tomb located? Generations of archaeologists have been busy – spending fortunes - in trying to find out where your tomb is. Many scholars think that it may be located somewhere in the holy Burqan Qaldun mountain. They photographed it from all possible angles.... but to no avail...We know that your grandson Hülegüwas buried onŠāhī Island, once the biggest island of Lake Urmia in Iran, with all his wealth. However, his tomb too has not been uncovered yet.Could your tomb also be on a secret island or at the bottom of a lake? Could you give us some light? We are totally in the dark.....*

A: hahahaha....tenggeri minu.....once you will get to know where my tomb is, you will also disclose many other important secrets of world history. There are sooo many precious items preserved there. The same is true for the tombs of my successors. I am very sorry, I cannot help you for the time being. Time is not ripe yet. You still need to work by yourselves. Next time

we meet, I will give you some hints as a remuneration for all the great work mongolists are carrying out on epigraphy, history, and culture.

*Q: Genghis Khan, may I ask you a last question?*

A: I am sorry, I am running out of time. I have an important appointment in the Celestial City at our special club. Alex(ander the Great), Confucius, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Tamerlane, Avicenna, Mozart, just to mention a few, are waiting for me. Rašīd-ud-dīn has just written me a message via WhatsApp not to be too late and not to forget to take a nice wineskin of fresh koumiss. You surely know it, don't you? Our fermented mare's milk; all my friends in the Celestial City love it. Tonight we have a very important lecture:our dear friend Igor de Rachewiltz, who has lately joined our club, will read us some chapters of the Secret History of the Mongols... His translation is so delicate. I always get goosebumps when I listen to him.Bye, see you next time, saikhan amraarai, as people say in modern khalkha Mongolian. Our language has changed sooo much in the

last centuries! Luckily, Rinchen - Byambyn RinchenI mean - is giving me private lessons on the evolution of Mongolic languages. Such a fascinating topic!

**Elisabetta Ragagnin** is Associate Professor of Turkic and Mongolic studies at the Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her research fields include linguistics, philology, cultural studies and literature of Turkic and Mongolic languages and peoples, as well as Silk Road Studies.

**Davide Rizzi** earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Language, Culture and Society of Eastern Asia in 2013 and a Master Degree in Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa (Majoring in Chinese Studies) in 2018 from the Ca' Foscari University of Venice.