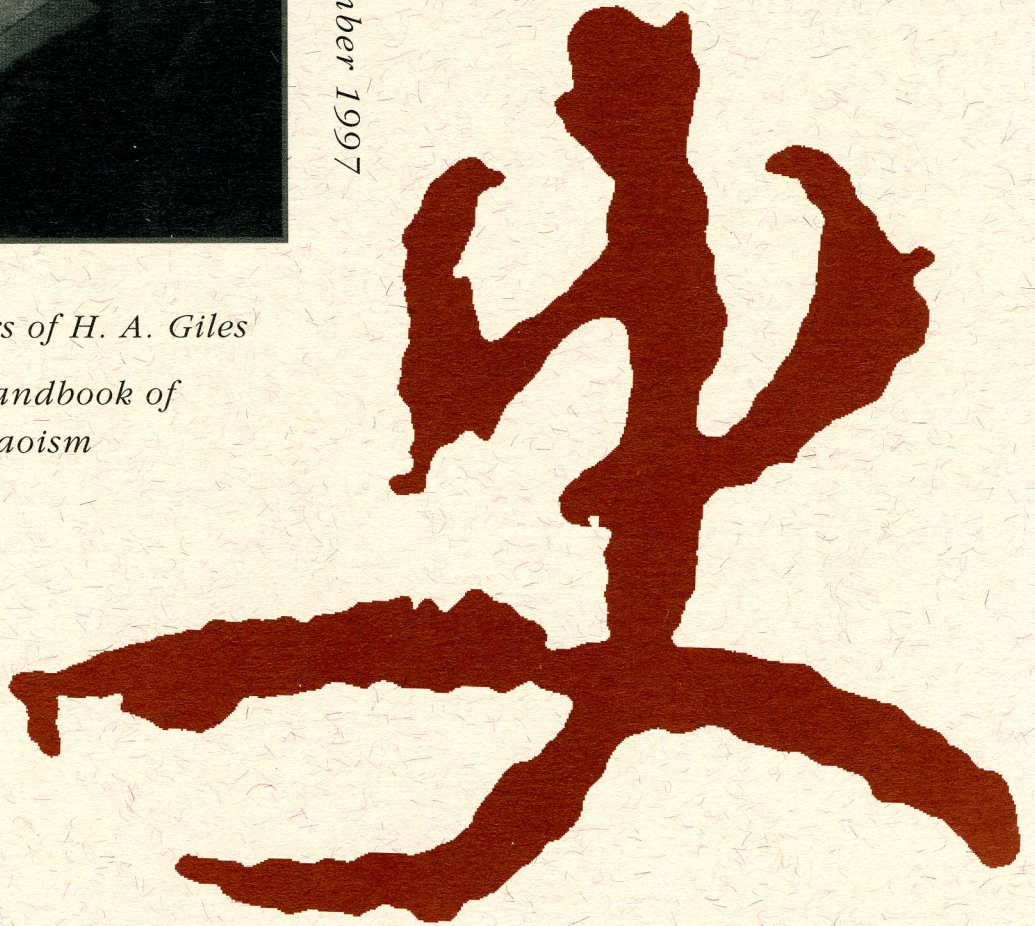


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# East Asian History

史 *The Memoirs of H. A. Giles*

史 *The First Handbook of  
Monastic Daoism*





## A NOTE ON THE WORD *BÖRTE* IN THE *SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS*

史 I. de Rachewiltz

The word *börte* occurs in the *Secret History of the Mongols* as a term qualifying the ancestral wolf (*börte činō*) and as the name of Činggis Qan's first wife (Börte Üjin).<sup>1</sup> The rendering of this term in the Chinese interlinear version and the sectional summary is *ts'ang-se* 蒼色<sup>2</sup> 'the colour of *ts'ang* (or *ts'ang*-coloured)', but the Chinese gloss is ambiguous. The term *ts'ang*, just as its synonym *ch'ing* 青, designates in fact a number of colours, or shades of colours, from 'sky-blue' to 'ash-grey' (hence its extended meaning of 'old'), to 'green' and 'black'.<sup>3</sup>

Our dictionaries of Written Mongolian register the word *börtü*, *börtö* with the meanings of 'speckled, spotted, mottled', and some of them make *börte* equivalent to *börtü*.<sup>4</sup> Cf. kh. *bört* 'white, pale white (whitish) with dark grey spots (said of an animal)'.<sup>5</sup>

In view of this, it is not surprising that the translators of the *Secret History* have differed from the beginning in their interpretation and rendering of *börte* in the combination *börte činō*, which some regarded (and a few still do) as a proper name. A number of scholars—the following list is only representative—translate it as 'blue' (Naka, Kozin, Murakami, Even & Pop), 'bluish' (Mostaert, Cleaves), 'blue-grey' (Ligeti, de Rachewiltz, Taube), 'grey' (Haenisch, Pankratov, Wei, Ozawa, Kałużyński), 'grey or grey-blue' (Grousset), 'brown'

### Abbreviations :

bur. = Buriat  
chin. = Chinese  
kh. = Khalkha  
mo. = Written (Script) Mongolian  
tu. = Old Turkic

*français* (Kasan, 1844–49); several repr., p.1261a; *Mongyol Kitad toli. Meng Han tz'u-tien* 蒙漢辭典 (Kökeqota, 1976), p.516c; F. D. Lessing, gen. ed., *Mongolian-English dictionary*, corr. repr. (Bloomington, 1982), p.128a. Lessing gives also the meaning of 'grey', but I think that this is taken directly from Kowalewski (*op.cit.*, p.1260b). Lessing also equates *börtü* with *börte*, following Kowalewski (*loc.cit.*) and K. F. Golstunskii, *Mongol'sko-russkii slovar'* (St. Petersburg, 1893–1901), vol.II, p.283c. However, the equivalence *börte* = *börtü* is due to Kowalewski himself, who assumed that the word *börte* in the names Börte Činu-a and Börte Jüsin of Sayang Sečen's *Erdeni-yin tobči* corresponded to mo. *börtü*, witness his entry *s.v.* *börte*, *börtü* 'bigarré, bariolé, tacheté, tigré': *börte činu-a loup bigarré, gris*.<sup>2</sup> Burté-tchino, l'un des ancêtres de Tchinguis-khan'. See below, n.16.

<sup>5</sup> See Ya. Ceval, *Mongol xelniñ tovč taiľbar tol'* (Ulan Bator, 1966), p.100a. On the etymology, rather unsound, of *börtü*, *börtö*, see Sečenčoytu, ed., *Mongyol üges-ün ijayur-un toli* (Chang-chia k'ou [Kalgan], 1988), pp.819a, 681b–2a.

<sup>1</sup> See I. de Rachewiltz, *Index to the Secret History of the Mongols*, Uralic & Altaic Series 121 (Bloomington, 1972), p.13, l.502 (§ 1); p.26, l.1326 (§ 66) *et passim* (see *ibid.*, p.200a).

<sup>2</sup> *Yüan-ch'ao pi-shih* 元朝秘史 (*Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'uan* 四部叢刊 ed., 3rd ser.) 1, 1a–b.

<sup>3</sup> See Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次, *Dai kanwa jiten* 大漢和辭典 (Tokyo, 1955–60; repr. 1968), vol.IX, no.31627; Lin Yutang, *Chinese-English dictionary of modern usage* (Hong Kong, 1972), p.269a–b.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the *Qorin nigetü tayilburi toli* (Chang-chia-k'ou [Kalgan], 1979), p.278a; J. E. Kowalewski, *Dictionnaire mongol-russe-*

<sup>6</sup> I assume the reader is acquainted with the well-known works of these authors, most of which are listed in the *Bibliography and survey of studies on the Secret History of the Mongols* compiled by D. Cerenpil and B. Seržav (Ulan Bator, 1990). The following are not cited in the above bibliography: M.-D. Even and R. Pop, tr., *Histoire secrète des Mongols. Chronique mongole du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1994); M. Taube, tr., *Geheime Geschichte der Mongolen. Herkunft, Leben und Aufstieg Činggis Qans* (Leipzig & Weimar, 1989); B. I. Pankratov, "Obrazcy perevodov iz 'Yuan'-čao bi-ši' (podgotovka k pečati i predislovie Yu. L. Krolya)," in V. M. Solncev, gen. ed., *Mongolica . K 750-lettyu "Sokrovennogo skazaniya"* (Moscow, 1993), pp.103–24; Š. Gaadamba (Gaadamba), *Mongyol-un niyuča tobčiyān* (Ulan Bator, 1990); H.-P. Vietze, "The title of the 'Secret History of the Mongols'," *Central Asiatic Journal* 39 (1995): 303–9 (see p.306 and n.37). "Grousset" refers to R. Grousset, *Conqueror of the world. The life of Čhingis-Khan*, tr. by D. Sinor and M. MacKellar (Edinburgh–London, 1967), p.4. The various renderings of the term *börte* appear in the translations (or in the commentaries to the translations) of § 1 of the *Secret History*. I should add that I. J. Schmidt in his *Geschichte der Ost-Mongolen und ihres Fürstenhauses, verfasst von Šsanang Ssetsen Čungtaidschi der Ordus* (St. Petersburg–Leipzig, 1829) (several repr.), p.372, n.1, renders *börte* as 'bluish' (*bläulicher*); and that N. P. Šastina, in her book *Lubsan Danzan. Altan tobči ("Zolotoe skazanie")* (Moscow, 1973), pp.193, 358, n.62, renders it as 'grey, piebald' (*šeryi, pegiŋ*). Thus, Vietze's rendering 'piebald' had already been proposed by Šastina, but on different grounds.

<sup>7</sup> See E-erh-teng-r'ai 額爾登泰, Wu-yün-ta-lai 烏雲達賚, A-sa-la-t'u 阿薩拉圖, *"Meng-kupi-shib" tz'u-hui-süan-shib* 蒙古秘史詞匯選釋 (Huhehot, 1980), p.159 (cf. Eldengtei, Oyundalai, Asaraltu, "Mongyol-un niyuča tobčiyān"-u jarim üges-ün tayilburi [Kökeqota, 1991], p.279); D. Čering-sodnam, "Mongyol-un niyuča tobčiyān"-u orčiyulya tayilburi (Peking, 1993), p.272; U. Onon, tr., *The history and the life of Činggis Khan (the Secret History of the Mongols)* (Leiden, 1990), p.2, n.4. The interpretation of *börte* as 'wolf' derives from the false equivalence *börte* = tu. *böri* 'wolf' which has been adopted by a number of Mongol schol-

(Palladii [Kafarov]), 'grey-speckled blue' (Gaadamba), and 'piebald' (Vietze).<sup>6</sup> Other scholars, especially from Mongolia and China, have correlated the term *börte* with *börtü* and with other Mongol and Turkic forms, obtaining definitions such as 'spotted, speckled, mottled' (Eldengtei, Oyundalai & Asaraltu, Čeringsodnam), and even 'wolf' (most recently Onon).<sup>7</sup>

It is always risky, however, to try to interpret a twelfth- to thirteenth-century word with modern or contemporary forms of the same or of a similar word, as words undergo semantic changes and, in any event, they are often used differently in different dialects, as everybody knows. Always cautious in these matters, Pelliot refrained from translating *börte*<sup>8</sup>; at the other extreme, we have Vietze who extends the meaning of 'grey, ashy' of *ts'ang* to 'piebald'.

Discussing the correspondence *börte* = *börtü* 'having dark spots on a fair skin', Vietze (*op. cit.*, p.306) is of the opinion that "it makes more sense than a translation 'blue-grey'. So translated by Š. Gaadamba *börttei* = *bor tolbot* 'having grey-brown spots'.<sup>36</sup> Modern Mongolian *bor* is a colour between grey and brown.<sup>37</sup>" In n.37 on the same page, Vietze writes: "When this paper was read at the 34th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies in Hong Kong 1993, Professor Hidehiro Okada contributed about the Chinese gloss *cangse* [= *ts'ang-se*—I.R.] or *cang-colored* on the Mongolian word *börte*, that *cang*, when used singly, means either 'dark green' or 'blue'. But when combined with a character meaning 'hair' *fa* 髮 or 'beard' *ran* 髯, it means 'grey, ashy' and is glossed *banbai* 斑白, literally 'spotted with white'. Since *cangse* in this passage refers to the fur of the wolf, the Chinese translator must have correctly understood the combination *bo-r-te ci-no* as meaning 'piebald wolf'. Anyway, all modern translators since Naka Michiyo, who give a 'blue-grey wolf' in their texts, have been misled by their insufficient knowledge of the Chinese language."

I think that Vietze's conclusion is somewhat hasty. To begin with, he fails to mention that, in the passage in question, Gaadamba refers to the wolf as *xöx čono* 'blue wolf', and not simply as *čono* 'wolf'. I think that Gaadamba has done so on purpose, indicating that the animal had a grey-speckled 'blue' coat, which is not the same as a wolf 'having grey-brown spots'. Secondly, any person with an elementary knowledge of Chinese, i.e. enough to use a Chinese dictionary, can find out that *ts'ang* (*cang*) in combination with hair, beard, temples and age has the meaning of 'grey' (> 'old') which is what 'spotted with white' really means.<sup>9</sup> The reason why some translators have opted for 'blue-grey' rather than 'grey' is because a) the semantic spectrum of the expression *ts'ang-se* allows for it; and b) such a rendering is justified

ars, chief among them C. Damdinsüren. See his *Mongolyn uran zoxiölyn toim* (Ulan Bator, 1957), p.71. Cf. Vietze, *op.cit.*, pp.306–7.

<sup>8</sup> See P. Pelliot, *Histoire secrète des Mongols. Restitution du texte mongol et traduction française des chapitres I à VI* (Paris, 1949), p.121.

<sup>9</sup> It is also inaccurate to say that "*cang*, when used singly, means either 'dark green' or 'blue'." These meanings are regularly found in combinations of *cang* (*ts'ang*) with other words, many examples of which are given in Morohashi, *op. cit.*, s.v. (no. 31627).

by other considerations—historical and symbolic—to which I shall return presently. Thirdly, the rendering of *ts'ang-se* as 'piebald' is not correct, since this term properly applies to an animal that has a fur of two colours irregularly arranged, i.e. in patches (especially black and white) as in the case of a horse. When the Chinese translators wrote *ts'ang-selang* 蒼色狼, they certainly did not mean 'a piebald wolf', for this is not the meaning conveyed by *ts'ang-se*. The term 'piebald' in the extended figurative sense of 'motley' may render mo. *börtü*, *börtö* (as Šastina has indeed done), but this meaning of *börtü*, *börtö* cannot be reconciled with that of *ts'ang-se*, a gloss which, until proof of the contrary is adduced, we must accept as essentially correct. The solution to this problem must, therefore, be searched for elsewhere.

I think that certain remarks by Pelliot and by Mostaert can help us substantially to elucidate the problem of interpretation.

In his review of Riza Nour's work *Oughouz-namé, épopée turque*, Pelliot commented on the expression *kök böri*, which Radlov<sup>10</sup> had translated as 'der blaue Wolf', and Riza Nour as 'loup gris', as follows: "M.R.N. a raison, à mon avis, de traduire *kök böri* par 'loup gris' et non par 'loup bleu'; *kök* s'applique aux deux couleurs, et *kök böri* est encore aujourd'hui le nom usuel du loup gris au Turkestan chinois; mais en même temps, la traduction par 'gris' fait disparaître l'uniformité de la désignation pour cette couleur presque sacrée et consacrée; M.R.N. reviendra au 'bleu' quand il s'agira plus loin des poils et de la 'crinière' de l'animal."<sup>11</sup> And, in a later passage of the same review, Pelliot translates *kök* as 'gris' when referring to the wolf's hair and 'crinière'.<sup>12</sup> Turkic *kök* does indeed mean 'blue' and 'grey', as well as 'blue-grey' and 'green', just as chin. *ts'ang* and *ch'ing*.<sup>13</sup>

Mostaert, for his part, noted with regard to *börte*: "Pour la qualification 'bleuâtre' donnée au loup, cf. l'expression *Gö'kχō noχ<sup>5</sup>* 'chien bleu', qui est un des nombreux termes désignant le loup chez les Ordos (*Dict. ord.*, p.495b)."<sup>14</sup> Cf. also kh. *xōx noxoï* 'wolf (*euph.*)'; bur. *xūxe noxoï* 'grey dog'.

In view of the above, and the close affinity, if not outright identity, of the *kök böri* of the Turks and the *börte činō* of the Mongols, it seems to me that *both* the meanings of 'grey' and 'blue'—as descriptive of the bluish-tinged ash-grey of animal furs—are definitely present in the word *börte*. Therefore, I am of the opinion that 'blue-grey' is still the best and most accurate rendering of *börte*. Does that mean that *börte* and mo. *börtü*, *börtö* are not related? On the contrary, I think that *börte* > *börtö* through progressive assimilation,<sup>15</sup> and that in the course of time the word underwent a semantic shift, from 'blue-grey' to 'particoloured, variegated'. The definition 'blue-grey'—as indeed plain 'grey'—implicitly contains a duality and so the germ of a multiplicity of colours, hence the semantic change.<sup>16</sup> If this is so, the reading *börtü* should be discarded in favour of *börtö*, as it has already been done by the compilers of the excellent *Mongyol Kitad toli*.

And, returning to Činggis Qan's wife, I would suggest that, *faute de mieux*, the nearest equivalent of her name in a Western language is probably Céleste.

<sup>10</sup> W. Radloff, *Das Kudatku Bilik des Jusuf Chass-badschib aus Bälasagun*, Theil I (St. Petersburg, 1891).

<sup>11</sup> P. Pelliot, "Sur la légende d'Uyuz-khan en écriture ouïgoure," *Toung Pao* 27 (1930): 288.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.309.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Clauson, *An etymological dictionary of pre-thirteenth century Turkish* (Oxford, 1982), pp.708b–9a; V. M. Nadelyaev, D. M. Nasilov, É. R. Tenišev, A. M. Ščerbak, *Drevnetjurkskii slovar'* (Leningrad, 1969), p.312b.

<sup>14</sup> A. Mostaert, *Sur quelques passages de l'Histoire secrète des Mongols* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p.xiv.

<sup>15</sup> See N. Poppe, *Introduction to Mongolian Comparative Studies* (Helsinki, 1955), p.55.

<sup>16</sup> One must, therefore, credit Kowalewski for being the first scholar to have perceived the correlation between the two forms, both phonetically and semantically.

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