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† The Memoirs of H. A. Giles
‡ The First Handbook of Monastic Daoism
A NOTE ON THE WORD BÖRTE IN THE
SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS

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The word börtse occurs in the Secret History of the Mongols as a term qualifying the ancestral wolf (börte činö) and as the name of Činggis Qan's first wife (Börte Üjin). The rendering of this term in the Chinese interlinear version and the sectional summary is ts’ang-se 赤色 2 'the colour of ts’ang (or ts’ang-coloured)', but the Chinese gloss is ambiguous. The term ts’ang, just as its synonym cb’ing 赤, 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'.

Our dictionaries of Written Mongolian register the word börte, börtse with the meanings of 'speckled, spotted, mottled', and some of them make börtse equivalent to börte. 3 Ct. kh. bórt 'white, pale white (whitish) with dark grey spots (said of an animal)' 3.

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 činö, which some regarded (and a few still do) as a proper name. The following list is only representative—translate it as 'blue' (Naka, Kozi, Murakami, Even & Pop), 'bluish' (Motaert, Cleaves), 'blue-grey' (Ligeti, de Rachewiltz, Taube), 'grey' (Haenisch, Pankratov, Wei, Ozawa, Kaluzhiský), 'grey or grey-blue' (Grousset), 'brown'

Abbreviations:
bur. = Burut
chim. = Chinese
kh. = Khalkha
mo. = Written (Script) Mongolian
nu. = Old Turkic

1 See I. de Rachewiltz, Index to the Secret History of the Mongols, Uralic & Altaic Series 121 (Bloomington, 1972), p.13, 1502 (§ 1); p. 26, 11526 (§ 66) et passim (see ibid., p.200a).
2 Yuan ch’ao pi-shib 元朝秘史 (Sue-pu ts’ung-kian 四部類刊 ed., 3rd ser.) 1, 1a–b.
4 Ct. the Qenin nigel tuyltar tol (Chang-chia-k’ou [Kalvan], 1979), p.278a; J. E. Kowalewski, Dictionnaire mongol-russe-

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7 See E er-tengc‘ai 鄂爾登泰, Wu yin-lai 烏雲達來, Aa-sa-la‘u 阿薩拉圖, "Mong kulsh shib tu‘hu buhsoyish shih 蒙古秘史總譯釋" (Ulan Bator, 1980), p.159 (cf. Eldengtey, Oyundalai, Aasratu, "Mongol-un nityuča tobčiyan"-u jirin üges-un tobčlurin (Kökequta, 1991), p.279); D. Cering- sodnam, "Mongol-un nityuča tobčiyan"-u ortčuluqsha tobčlurin (Peking, 1993), p.272; U. Oman, tr., The history and the life of Chinggis 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. bört ‘wolf’ which has been adopted by a number of Mongol scholars (Palladii (Kafarov), ‘grey-speckled blue’ (Gaadamba), and ‘piebald’ (Vietze). Other scholars, especially from Mongolia and China, have correlated the term börte with other Mongol and Turkic forms, obtaining definitions such as ‘spotted, speckled, motbled’ (Eldengtey, Oyundalai & Asratlu, Cering-sodnam), and even ‘wolf’ (most recently Onon). 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 at the other extreme, we have Vietze who extends the meaning of ‘grey, ashy’ of ts’ang to ‘piebald’.

Discussing the correspondence börte = börti ‘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 börti = bor tolbot ‘having grey-brown spots’. Modern Mongolian bor is a colour between grey and brown. 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 腦, it means ‘grey, ashy’ and is glossed bnhái 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 Michiyoshi, 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 xoix ṇono ‘blue wolf’, and not simply as ṇono ‘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. 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 by the fact that it is a word that has already been used in Chinese, and therefore has a long history of use.

ars, chief among them C. Daminleriin. See his Mongoldyn uran zavdoyin toimin (Ulan Bator, 1997), p.71. Cf. Vietze, op. cit., pp.306–7. 8 See P. Pelliot, Histoire secrète des Mongols. Réstitution du texte mongol et traduction française des chapitres I à VI (Paris, 1949), p.121. 9 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 Moroashi, 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-se-lang 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, börö (as Ġästina has indeed done), but this meaning of börtü, börö 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 Oughbouz-name, épopeé turque, Pelliot commented on the expression kök börtü, which Radloff 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 börtü par 'loup gris' et non par 'loup bleu'; kök s'applique aux deux couleurs, et kök börtü 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 pois et de la 'crinière' de l'animal.\(^1\) And, in a later passage of the same review, Pelliot translates kök as 'gris' when referring to the wolf's hair and 'crinière'.\(^2\) Turkic kök does indeed mean 'blue' and 'grey', as well as 'blue-grey' and 'green', just as chin. ts'ang and ch'ing.\(^3\)

Mostaert, for his part, noted with regard to börtü. "Pour la qualification 'bleuâtre' donnée au loup, cf. l'expression Gö'kkö'n oxu'4 'chien bleu', qui est un des nombreux termes désignant le loup chez les Ordos (Dict. ord., p.495b).\(^5\) Cf. also kh. xo'a noxoi 'wolf (sing.)'; bur. xaxe noxoi 'grey dog'.

In view of the above, and the close affinity, if not outright identity, of the kök börtü of the Turks and the börtü čınö 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 börtü. Therefore, I am of the opinion that 'blue-grey' is still the best and most accurate rendering of börtü. Does that mean that börtü and mo. börtü, börö are not related? On the contrary, I think that börtü > börö through progressive assimilation,\(^6\) 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.\(^7\) If this is so, the reading börtü should be discarded in favour of börö, as it has already been done by the compilers of the excellent Mongol 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.

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