East Asian History

Building Warrior Legitimacy in Medieval Kyoto

Japanese Art at the Columbian Exposition

North Korean Historiography
THE GENESIS OF THE NAME "YEKE MONGOLUL US"

Igor de Rachewiltz

In 1952, A. Mostaert and F.W. Cleaves conclusively demonstrated that the Mongol expression Yeke Mongol Ulus corresponds to the Chinese expression Ta Meng-ku uko 大蒙古國 which appears in the Chinese sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹ (We shall leave aside, for the time being, the question of whether Yeke Mongol Ulus means The Great Mongol Nation or The Nation of the Great Mongols.)

Modern Mongol scholars have reasonably assumed that even if this fact is not mentioned in any source (whether Mongol, Persian or Chinese), the name Yeke Mongol Ulus was given by Činggis Qan to his tribal confederation in 1206 when he was elected (or, rather, re-elected) qan at the great qurultai held at the sources of the Onon River. It was on this momentous occasion that he assumed, or was conferred also the epithet Činggis, as is well known.² At first sight, these events—election and assumption of a suitable appellation for himself and for the newly established nation—seem to go well together, and I too was of this opinion until ten years ago, but a subsequent closer investigation of the Mongol and Chinese sources has compelled me to reconsider the position.³

The designation Ta Meng-ku uko for the Mongol nation is found in the earliest Chinese detailed account of the Mongols, Chao Hung's 趙弘 Mong-Ta pei-lu 蒙鞑備録 [A Complete Account of the Mong Ta (= Mongol-]


¹ A. Mostaert, F.W. Cleaves, "Trois documents mongols des Archives Secrètes Vaticanes," Harvard Journal of Asiatic

In 1206, Temüjin was recognized as the supreme tribal leader in Mongolia, but we must not forget that he was still a vassal of the mighty Chin kingdom in the south. It is, therefore, most unlikely that still being in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the Chin, he would have named his tribal confederation Yeke Mongol Ulus, The Great Mongol Nation, on the very model of the name of the Chin state, called Ta Chin kuo 大金國, that is, The Great Chin Nation. That this was not, in fact, the case is indirectly confirmed by the Secret History of the Mongolia, which says in §202 that upon his election in 1206, Çinggis Qan “appointed the commanders of a thousand of the Mongol Ulus,”¹² and the Yekhe Mongol Ulus. However, things changed rapidly. Two years later, in 1208, when the Chin court sent an envoy to Çinggis Qan to exact tribute and receive obeisance, Çinggis refused to comply. In 1210, another envoy was sent to him to request that he acknowledge the customary kowtow the Chin ruler who had since been enthroned. Çinggis turned his face south, spat and dismissed the envoy with insulting words directed at the Chin sovereign.¹³ Çinggis


¹¹ See M. V. B. M. F. A. (1913), article "Meng-Ta pei-lu" in: J. H. L. V. (1913), article "Meng-Ta pei-lu" in: "Meng-Ta pei-lu" ("Meng-Ta pei-lu").

¹² See M. V. B. M. F. A. (1913), article "Meng-Ta pei-lu" in: J. H. L. V. (1913), article "Meng-Ta pei-lu" in: "Meng-Ta pei-lu" ("Meng-Ta pei-lu").

¹³ See M. V. B. M. F. A. (1913), article "Meng-Ta pei-lu" in: J. H. L. V. (1913), article "Meng-Ta pei-lu" in: "Meng-Ta pei-lu" ("Meng-Ta pei-lu").
Qan had, in fact, decided to expand southwards and, after the successful campaign against Hsi Hsia just concluded, was set to invade the Jurchen kingdom.

The invasion, as we know, was launched early the following year (1211) and within three years the position was totally reversed, with the Chin court offering a princess, 500 slaves and precious gifts to Činggis Qan to buy peace, or at least time.14

Činggis's open rebellion in 1210–11 had freed him of any remaining ties of subordination (even if nominal), and from then on he could legitimately challenge Chin suzerainty. It was, no doubt, following the advice of the Chin defectors who had been joining his camp since 120615 that Činggis only them—and all the evidence points to it—assumed for his "nation" the same terminology employed by the Jurchens (and, before them, by the Khitans) for their nation. It is from 1211 on that in his dealings with China Činggis Qan referred to his tribal confederation as Ta Meng-ku kuo. Thus, Yeke Mongol Ulus must no longer be regarded as an original Mongol expression, but as the Mongol literal translation of a Chinese expression calqued on the official name of the Chin state. (Mutatis mutandis, the process is the same as the one later applied to the book title Mongol n'i'uča tobča'an, which is the Mongol rendering of the Chinese title Yiüan-ch'ao pi-shib (The Secret History of the Yiüan Dynasty), and not the reverse.)16 Chao Hung, writing in 1221, was well aware of this. Describing the "National Designation and Year Title" (Kuo-hao nien-bao 国號年號) of the Mongols, he says that they—the Mongols—regarding their nation as a powerful one, designated it as Ta Meng-ku kuo, and "that too is something the fugitive officials of the Jurchen taught them".17 There is nothing surprising in this, of course, since we know that in 1217/18 Činggis personally conferred on Muqlali (1170–1223), his commander-in-chief in North China, not one but two Chinese titles—kuo-wang 國王 (Prince of State: mong. gut-ong) and t'ai-shib 太師 (Grand Preceptor or Instructor: mong. taisă)—not in order to increase his prestige in Mongolia but to enhance his authority in China.18

The fact that the name Yeke Mongol Ulus does not appear anywhere in the Secret History19 indicates in my view that although such a designation was undoubtedly employed in diplomatic and government business with China, it was not in current use among the Mongols in Činggis Qan's time, possibly because Činggis and his entourage were still in a tribal mind-frame and had no real sense of nationhood. The term ulus for them still meant "people", that is "tribe", understood as a rather loose nomadic tribal complex, rather than an organic settled state or nation, a concept traditionally alien and, indeed, unattractive to them. The situation changed dramatically with Ögödei and his successors: the Mongols adopted, albeit selectively, forms and modes of governance from China, Central and West-
20 See also “Trois documents” (see above, n.1), pp.488–50. As I pointed out in the SFA p.760, the expression Yeke Mongol “The Great Mongols” is, in my opinion, simply an extrapolation from Yeke Mongol ulus; in other words, the members of the ruling ethnic group—the Mongol élite, as it were—became known as “The Great Mongols”. (I shall discuss this question in a forthcoming paper.) With regard to the fundamental changes that occurred within the fabric of Mongol society and in their political outlook, my earlier contribution, “The Ideological Foundations of Chinggis Khan’s Empire,” in Papers on Far Eastern History 7 (1973): 21–36, requires thorough revision and updating. For the way some of these changes are reflected in post-Chinggis Qan official terminology, see my paper “Qan, Qur'an and the Seal of Gygig,” in Documenta Barbarorum: Festchrift für Walther Heissig zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. K. Sagaster and M. Weiers (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983), pp.272-81. At present I do not wish to adduce the evidence from the famous “Stone of Chinggis” in view of the fact that we do not know whether the text of the inscription was composed c. 1224 or c. 1270, which is more likely. See I. de Rachewiltz, “Some Remarks on the Seal of Yüséngge,” in Tractata Altaica: Denis Stinor, Sesquicentario Optime de Rhetas Altaciscis Merito Dedicata, ed. W. Heissig et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976), pp.487–508, esp. p. 491 ff. As stated in my article “Qan, Qur'an and the Seal of Gygig,” p.279, n.21, the expression qan uylas ‘Mongol ulus’ in the second line of the inscription must be rendered “the entire Mongol Nation” however, I am not certain now whether “Nation” should be capitalized—in other words, whether Mongol ulus is a proper name or not.

In conclusion, I wish to say that while we are fully entitled to celebrate in 2006 the 800th anniversary of the unification of Mongolia by Chinggis Qan, we should perhaps also hold a celebration in 2011 for the anniversary of the genesis of the Yeke Mongol Ulus.

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