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Epic Themes in the Secret History of the Mongols

LARRY W. MOSES

SINCE its discovery by Western scholars in the nineteenth century, the *Secret History of the Mongols* (hereafter *SH*) has been questioned as a source of valid history. Scholars have variously seen it as a legend,[1] a summary of tales,[2] an heroic epic,[3] an epic poem,[4] and, as well, as literal history.[5] Although some of these characterizations are demonstrably false, others are supportable enough to merit further examination and, if valid, to call into question much that has passed for historical fact down to the present time.

Although it is dangerous to put aside entirely the many categories of problems that are found in the *SH*—those having to do with its provenance, its philology, its translation, and so on—there yet seems to be an obvious truth about it: the text contains and combines both historical fact and epic legend. The problem, of course, in such a combination is to demonstrate what is fact and what is legend.

In mechanical terms, the *SH* is a work of about 200 folio pages, originally undivided and largely unpunctuated, but later divided by Chinese copyists into 12 chapters and 282 paragraphs. In it, there is a wealth of information on clans and tribes, marriage customs, politics and history. But in it, as well, is a wealth of intrigue, of betrayal, of love and romance, fratricide, and epic bravery.

But it is above all else the biography of the man Genghis Khan (Chinggis Qahan in the text). The provenance of the text is troubling; the time of its composition is not. It was composed, probably recited, at the Great Quriltai of 1229 called to elect a successor to the Conqueror Chinggis after his death.[6] Additions were probably made to the text after that date, but the bulk of it most certainly dates from the years immediate to his death.[7]

The nature of the story and the framework in which certain events are staged suggests that the teller of the tale was comfortable with an epic genre typical of the horse nomads of Inner Asia.

There are many methodological frameworks within the literature on the epic genre but most differ only slightly in their basic definitions. I have chosen Gertrude Levy's framework, for no other reason than convenience.[8] She suggests that there are many categories of epics; two of which are the epic as quest, and the epic as heroic warfare. Each category contains certain identifiable features.

In a *quest epic* there are four basic elements:

1. A voyage of discovery.
2. A search for a lost friend, wife, or home.
3. Ancestors who are supernatural beings.
4. A journey must take place; a journey that in some way represents an imitation of some divine journey.

By constrast, the epic as *heroic warfare* contains somewhat different conventions:

1. The antagonists in the warfare are fellow-men, often kinsmen.
2. The main character must exhibit some quality of heroism.
3. Episodes of the *defeat* of the hero must occur, and must form the dramatic component of the epic.
4. There must be an indication of divine intervention, but interaction between the hero and divinities is minimal and indirect.

Levy, Orrin Klapp, W.P.Ker, and others, further suggest that to cast doubt on a document and justify its description as heroic epic, four major conditions should form the basis of the text.[9]. They are:

1. Dramatic action which is influenced by destiny, or, put another way, heroic warfare on a human plane.
2. Warfare must take place between equals; if one character is cast as an epic hero his opposite must be of the same stature.
3. The link between the hero or heroes and mythological ancestors must carry the implication that the hero is divinely ordained.
4. Divine ordination is generally indicated through the presence or occurence of omens.

Of the four elements representative of an epic quest, two are amply illustrated throughtout the *SH:* ancestors who are supernatural beings and the search for a lost friend, wife or home. Supernatural beings range from the blue-grey wolf progenitor, whose destiny was preordained by Heaven above, to the three sons of Alan qo'a, born of a golden man, who 'entered by the light of the smoke hole of the yurt—and crept out on a moonbeam in the guise of a yellow-dog,' (Paragraph 21).[10]

The second common element of a quest, a search for a wife, friend or home, or some other element, falls somewhat short of an ideal quest. There is no Holy Grail in the *SH,* nor is there an epic voyage of discovery. There is a quest of sorts, however, which seems divinely ordained from its inception: the quest of Chinggis for rule over the Mongol lands. From the beginning of his life, according to the *SH,* there were omens to be read that promised future greatness. In paragraph 59 of the *SH,* Chinggis was born with a clot of blood the size of a knucklebone in his right hand. In paragraphs 62 and 63, Dai-Sechen, the Onggirat, had a dream of a white falcon, which he foretold was 'a herald of good fortune for the Kiyat people,'[11]and, perhaps the most portentous omen of all, the heavenly sign which Qorchi of the Ba'arin reported:

'We would not have left Jamuqa—but a heavenly sign came, appearing before my eyes. There came a fallow cow, she went around Jamuqa and struck *his* tent-cart with her horns; then she butted him, too, breaking one of the two horns. Being thus left with uneven horns, she kept bellowing at Jamuqa, "Give me my horn," pawing up the ground and raising the dust. *Then* a hornless and fallow ox lifted the lower shaft of the great tent, harnessed it to himself and pulled the tent after him. As he proceeded following Chinggis on the broad road, he kept bellowing:

"Together Heaven and Earth have agreed: Chinggis shall be lord of the land: Therefore—laden with the land I bring it to him."'

Then Qorchi concludes,'These heavenly signs appeared before my eyes, then revealed the future to me' (Paragraph 121).[12]

The quest thus revealed to Chinggis is not a voyage of discovery or a search for the Grail, but rather the taking of a proferred mandate. But the taking was not easy, and the obstacles in the path of success illustrate the conventions of epic warfare: clan warfare, severe defeat, heroism, epic boast—and so on.

In his life Chinggis was, of course, beset by enemies from all corners of eastern Inner Asia, but in the beginning most were kinsmen, as with the Tayichigut who first exiled him and then later plotted to kill him. Then later, his kinsmen the Jurkin betrayed him, and finally, at the climactic battle of 1204, almost all the clans and kinsmen of the Mongols were ranged against him, under the generalship of Jamuqa, his sworn-brother. Throughout the early life of the would-be world-conqueror, according to the *SH,* defeat piled upon defeat, testing not only the mettle of Chinggis, but the credulity of the reader as well. It is with some surprise, then, that after 1204, with an initial force of only 2600 men, Chinggis emerged truly as 'lord of the land.'[13] Although this sequence of great defeat, with a sudden reversal of fortune, does not quite fit the usual understanding of an epic trial or ordeal, it is clearly within the epic genre of a quest, which is definable as a prolonged ordeal towards a high goal, usually involving a series of feats, contests and tests, before final attainment.

Through all this, Jamuqa, the sworn-brother of Chinggis, remains a relatively shadowy figure, an anti-hero in some ways, who appears almost on cue when needed: to aid Chinggis in the rescue of Borte from the Merkit; to serve as the antagonist who precipitates the division of clans into hostile camps; and, in 1201, to serve as the *gur-gan* of the forces united against Chinggis. Finally, he becomes, in Chinggis' words, 'a snake with venomous fangs,' who incites Toghril of the Kereiyit and ruler of the steppe, against Chinggis (Paragraph 164).[14]

With the exception of these and a few other events, Jamuqa appears rarely in the *SH,* despite his obvious importance in the events of the time. Why else would the grand alliance of tribes in opposition to Chinggis have elected him *gur-gan* in 1201? The careers of the two men span almost the entirety of the SH, and yet the appearance of Jamuqa only at the most critical points in Chinggis' life makes him appear little more than a semi-fictional antagonist who serves as counterpoint to the quarrrel between Chingis and Toghril.

In examining these and a vast array of other events it seems obvious that the teller of the tale intended far more than the recapitulation of the history of his people. The recitation before the great host assembled in 1229 was intended to serve as a motive force for the vast conquest army that was soon to reach far beyond the lands of Chinggis into South China, Persia and Russia. The singer further intended to deify Chinggis by proclaiming the supernatural forces that had produced his lineage and guided the destinies of him and his family in their times of trouble. The cult thus established has continued into the present century.

The two-fold task of the teller was to etch in didactic and alliterative verse the campaigns of the conqueror first, and then to lend to those campaigns a messianic fervour that would inspire his descendants.

There is thus a duality in the story between the real events of actual campaigns, and the supernatural forces that foreshadowed those events. Therefore, the *SH* is divided into two parts, a secondary section that simply describes the campaigns after 1201, and a primary section that deals with largely unsubstantiated events before 1201. This primary section stands separate from the historical section; it contains no dates, its chronology of events is often confused, and its cast of characters may be fictional to some extent, and are clearly superhuman in other cases. What then in the *SH* is epic, legend, and what is historical fact? If indeed there are elements which clearly pre-date the lifetime of Chinggis, such as the story of the five arrows,and if there are entire

passages which are clearly taken from other worlds, and if the *SH*, as a text, fits so precisely within the convention of epic genre, then there are obvious problems with using it as an objective historical text. Where is the point at which epic legend ends, and fact begins? What elements are truly historical, but coloured, *either* by the epic legends known to the composer of the text, or by the singer's apparent goal of aggrandizement of the early career of the conqueror?

It is not certain that there are answers to these questions, but it seems to me that what is needed is an analysis, perhaps based on the Stith-Thompson Index, of all the major themes and individuals in the *SH*, to determine which elements are common to Inner Asian legend, and thus clearly pre-date the lifetime of Chinggis, and are therefore of dubious historical value. Only in that way will it be possible to separate fact from epic.

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NOTES

1. Nicholas Poppe, *The Heroic Epic of the Khalkha Mongols*. Translated from the Russian by John R. Krueger and others, (Bloomington: The Mongolia Society: Occasional Papers, Number 11, 1979), p.9.
2. *Ibid.*, p.10.
3. V.V.Bartold, 'Obrazovanie imperii Chingiz-Khanaj,' *Zapiski Vostochnogo Otdelenija*, Vol. 10, p.107.
4. Poppe, *op.cit.*, p.11.
5. Tamura Jitsuzo, 'The Legend of the Origin of the Mongols and the Problem Concerning Their Migration,' *Acta Asiatica*, N.XXIX, 1973, p.7.
6. Hidehiro Okada, 'The Secret History of the Mongols, A Pseudo-Historical Novel,' Third East Asian Altaistic conference, Taipei, Taiwan, August, 1969, p.6.
7. Gerhard Doefer, 'Zur Datierung der Geheimen Geschichte der Mongolen,' ZDMG, Vol.113, 1963, p.87.
8. Gertrude Rachel Levy, *The Sword From the Rock*, (Grove Press: New York, 1953), p.13.
9. Orrin F. Klapp, 'The Folk Hero,' *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol.62, 1949, p.17.
10. Igor de Rachewiltz, 'The Secret History of the Mongols,' *Papers on Far Eastern History*, (PFFH), 4 (September, 1971) p.121.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.129-130.
12. Igor de Rachewiltz, *PFFH*, 5, (March, 1972) p.162.
13. *Ibid.*, *PFFH*, 16 (September 1977) p.33
14. *Ibid.*, p.53.