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The Quarrelling Sons in the *Secret History of the Mongols*

The *Secret History of the Mongols (SHM),* a 13th-century literary text, contains a variety of folklore types and motifs that have not as yet been systematically analyzed according to the type and motif indices used by folklorists. One of the most obvious of these types that occurs in the *SHM* is AT 910F: The Quarrelling Sons and the Bundle of Twigs.

Although of great importance to historians in the writing of Mongol history, the *SHM* is encrypted with a number of odd events, the sum of which calls into question the validity of much that passes for objective historiography. One such event, or type, that occurs in the *SHM* is the repetition of overt, brutal, and often fatal sibling rivalry across several generations. In form, these quarrels resemble a common folklore type found in many Asian and Mediterranean cultures.

The type is so common in folklore that its inclusion in the *SHM* must call into question several events that are vital to the interpretation of the life of Chinggis Khan[1] and his immediate successors. Type 910F is repeated four times in the text with variations in the number of characters involved and the exact sequence of actions taken, but still always recognizable in form and in motif inclusion.

The pattern of this type across Asia is essentially the same: a parental figure is distressed by the quarrelsome nature of the numerous sons of the family. The sons are summoned by the parent and admonished for their lack of sibling loyalty and family unity. The lesson is brought home to them by the lesson of the breaking of twigs. Each son is given a bundle of sticks or twigs to break, which each is unable to do. Each son is then given a single twig from the bundle and each is able to break the single twig with ease. The lesson of strength through unity is thus made clear, and the parental figure then often dies.

The number of sons involved varies from four to twelve, according to the tradition involved, and the dominant parental figure is usually the father rather than the mother of the sons. In the *SHM* the number of sons is first five, and then subsequently is reduced to four, but the parental

figure involved is always the mother or a collateral wife. The sequence of events is usually the same, but the Mongol version provides a brutal object lesson if siblings ignore the parable.

The most typical example of the Quarrelsome Sons type is from Aesop and reads as follows:

A very honest man happened to have a contentious brood of children. He called for a bundle of twigs, and bade them try one after another, with all their force, if they could break it. They tried, and could not. Well, says he, unbind it now, and take every twig of it apart, and see what you can do that way. They did so and with great ease, by one and one, they snapped it all to pieces. This, says he, is the true emblem of your condition: keep together, and you are safe; divide, and you are undone. [Daly 1961:115]

In Talmudic-Midrashic literature the type varies, but introduces the deathbed motif:

Jacob puts together 12 twigs on his deathbed before his 12 sons. Nobody can break them. Separately they are easily broken. [Neumann 1954:536]

In Indic literature, the type is much more inclusive of motifs, and might well be the source of the extended explication of the type among the pastoral nomadic peoples of Inner Asia.

An old man had four sons, but there was little harmony among them. When he was on his deathbed, he having called his sons caused them to sit beside him, and having ordered a bundle of thin sticks, told each of them to break it. But nobody could break it. Then the old man said, "now untie the bundle, and let each one of you break each stick apiece." When they did so, they could easily break all. The boys wondering thereat, asked the father the reason. Then he said, "when so many sticks were together, they were very strong, and so you could not break them. When they were separated from each other, they were easily broken to pieces. In like manner you will live in harmony, nobody will trouble you and you will live in happiness; but if you quarrel and are disunited, you will be weak like each separate stick." [Thompson and Roberts 1960:123]

This type is both hortatory and didactic, a point that is driven home in the *SHM* by constant repetition and by the onset of rapid punishment by outsiders if the lesson is ignored. Punishment takes the form of loss of family, exile, or capture and incarceration by enemies.

The first occurrence of the type in the *SHM* is in the legendary prehistory of the Mongols, far earlier than the verifiable events of Chinggis Khan's lifetime. According to the story, a widowed mother named Alan-qo'a was left with two sons after the death of her husband. In the course of her widowhood three more sons were born to her, although no man other than a servant lived with the family. Distressed by their mother's behavior, the two older brothers fell to quarrelling with the three younger siblings, their half-brothers.

Because the setting of the tale was the world of the Mongol steppe, there are certain variations in the way in which the confrontation was played out between the parent and the siblings. For example, arrows were substituted for twigs, as would be expected in a warrior society, where survival was dependent on skilled use of bows and arrows. In this first example of the type in the *SHM,* the study progresses as follows:

Belgunutei and Bugunutei, the two sons born earlier to Dobun-mergen, said to each other behind the back of their mother Alan-qo'a: "Our mother is without husband, brothers-in-law, and male relatives, and she has still borne these three sons. In the house there is only the man of the Ma'aliq'Baya'ut. Surely these three sons are his." Their mother Alan-qo'a knew what they had been saying behind her back.

One day in spring, while she was cooking some dried lamb, she had her five sons Belgunutei, Bugunutei, Buqu-qatagi, Buqatu-salji, and Bodonchar mungqaq sit in a row. She gave to each of them an arrowstick and said: "Break it." One by one they broke the single arrowsticks without difficulty and threw them away. Then she tied five arrowsticks into a bundle and gave this to them saying: "Break it." Each of the five sons in turn took the five bound arrowsticks, but they were unable to break them. . . .

Further, Alan-qo'a addressed to her five sons these words of warning: "You, my five sons, were born of one womb. If, like the five arrowsticks just now, each of you keeps to himself, then like these single arrowsticks anybody will easily crush you. If, like the bound arrowsticks, 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. [de Rachewiltz 1971:119]

The lesson of unity was lost on the five sons and at their mother's death they divided, with the youngest going into exile for a time before the five brothers were reunited. Because of their belated recognition of the strength that came with unity, the brothers were able to conquer a weaker tribe. Through the medium of the women captured in the conquest they began the procreation of the ancestral line that eventually produced Chinggis Khan (de Rachewiltz 1971:124).

Not until many generations later did the quarrelsome type occur again. By then Chinggis Khan had entered the storyline. As the eldest of four brothers he had seen his father killed, and his mother, Ho'elun, sent into exile with her five children who ranged downward in age from Chinggis at nine to a female babe in the cradle. In exile, two additional boys appeared, half-brothers named Bekter and Belgutei. Again the brothers fell into disunity, although only four of the six male siblings were involved in the quarrel.

Chinggis, his full brother Qasar, and the two half-brothers quarreled over the sharing of food and over the patrimony of the family. The story of the twigs or arrows was not repeated in full but only recalled as:

On this, the noble mother said: "What shall I do with you? Why do you, older and younger brothers, behave in this way to each other?

Our shadows are our only friends,
Our horses' tails our only whips.

How can you be at odds with each other, like the five sons of Mother Alan of old, just when we are asking ourselves how to take vengeance for the outrage committed by our Tayichi'ut relatives? . . ."

We ask ourselves who will take vengeance on them, and how shall we manage? So she spoke, and
Choosing old sayings,
Quoting the words of the elders,
Mightily she rebuked her sons.

[de Rachewiltz 1971:136–138]

Again the lesson of unit was not comprehended by the sons. Chinggis slew his half-brother Bekter, resulting in his being taken prisoner by his tribal enemies, the Tayichi'ut.[2] As in the earlier incident, there was a punishment resulting from the escalation of sibling rivalry to open hostility. His captivity by his Tayichi'ut enemies almost resulted in his death.

Perhaps as a recognition of the lesson of unity Chinggis worked closely with his half-brother Belgutei after escaping his enemies. But it was not to be a lasting lesson.

Much later in his career, in 1206 when Chinggis was 40 years of age, the theme of unity was again repeated. At the time of his greatest triumph—the unification of the people of the steppe under his rule—Chinggis was suddenly faced with a potential rebellion led by his brother Qasar, abetted by an even younger brother, Temuge. In this confrontation the half-brother Belgutei sided with Chinggis against the two younger brothers, making the number of sons involved equal four. Again, the lesson of the arrows was not repeated but only cited:

On her arrival at sunrise, Chinggis-qahan had tied up the opening of Qasar's sleeves, removed his hat and belt, and was interrogating him. Chinggis-qahan, surprised by Mother's descending upon him, became afraid of her.

Mother was furious. As soon as she got there and dismounted from the cart, she herself untied and loosened Qasar's sleeves, the opening of which had been fastened, and gave back to Qasar his hat and belt. Mother was

so angered that she was unable to contain her fury. She sat cross-legged, took out both her breasts, laid them over her knees and said,

"Have you seen them?
These are the breasts that give you suck, and
Those [= you two]—she stressed quoting
ancient words—are
The ones who have bitten their own afterbirth,
The ones who have cut their own birth cord. . . ."

After Chinggis-qahan had at last calmed Mother, he said, "I was afraid of Mother getting angry and really got frightened; and I felt shame and was really abashed." And saying, "let us withdraw," he withdrew and returned home. But, without letting his mother know, he secretly took away the people [= subjects] of Qasar and let Qasar have only one thousand four hundred people. That is how, when Mother learned this, the thought of it made her go quickly into decline. [de Rachewiltz 1982:50–51]

In this example the type is not as apparent, but important elements are clearly present, including the supposed death of Mother Ho'elun. Her death forced a shift in motif in the second half of this story, bringing Chinggis' wife Borte into the tale as the dominant female intercessor. Temuge here is referred to by his family title, Otchigin (hearth-prince),[3] rather than by his given name:

Before Chinggis-qa'an could utter a sound, Lady Borte sat up in bed, covering her breasts with the edge of the blanket. Seeing Otchigin weep, she herself shed tears and said, "What are these Qongqotan doing? They recently ganged up and beat Qasar. And now, why do they make this Otchigin kneel down behind them? What kind of behaviour is this? Thus they covertly injure even these younger brothers of yours who are like cypresses and pines. And truly, later

When your body, like a great old tree,
Falls down,
Whom will they let govern your people. . . .

How will people covertly injuring like this your younger brothers, who are like cypresses and pines, ever allow my three or four little "naughty ones" [= my sons] to govern while they are still growing up? What are these Qongqotan doing? Now that you have let them ill-treat your younger brothers in this fashion, how do you view all this?" So spoke Lady Borte and shed tears. . . . [de Rachewiltz 1982:36–37]

Curiously, the wife of Chinggis, Lady Borte, disappeared from the *SHM* after this event, although her death did not occur in reality until 1227, some twenty years after this confrontation. Her disappearance from the story conforms to the conventions of the quarrelling sons tale type but does not agree with the histories of the era.

The final use of the type in the *SHM* is long and complex. It concerns events that occurred in the fiftieth year of the life of Chinggis Khan, on the eve of his first invasion of the western world down through Turkestan. Here the primary actors are the four sons of Chinggis and one of his later wives, the Tatar lady Yisui, acting as the adjudicator of the quarrel rather than the true mother of the sons, the Lady Borte.

The quarrel involved is of great significance, as it concerns the designation of the son who will be chosen as the successor to Chinggis at his death. The order of birth of the four sons, Jochi, Chagatai, Ogodei, and finally Tolui, would suggest that the eldest son Jochi would be the chosen one. The latter three brothers objected vehemently to the designation of Jochi as heir, citing his questionable provenance. Earlier evidence in the *SHM* seemingly proved that Jochi was the product of a Merkit warrior and was not, therefore, the legitimate son of Chinggis.

To that point in time, 1218, the question of Jochi's legitimacy had never been raised publicly. Once the problem was brought out it became most doubtful that Jochi could be designated heir apparent or that he, in turn, would accept his disinheritance and disgrace without fighting his

sibling rivals. Given the gravity of the situation, the firm hand of Chinggis Khan would be expected to intervene to quiet his troublesome sons. It was instead, the Tatar woman Yisui who intruded between the sons, and most astonishingly, provided the formula that resolved the quarrel, and set the stage for a century of family political quarrels.

Yisui, who had been of Tatar royalty, was captured in 1202 at the time of the Mongol destruction of the Tatar tribes. Smitten by her beauty, Chinggis took her as a wife, his fourth, and elevated her to the first rank of his women. By 1218, her influence was such with the Khan that she had become his principal advisor and confidante. Her advice on the problem of succession thus came from the lips of a woman of a destroyed tribe, but there is no indication that her intentions were other than honest.

Her advice again was based on "ancient words and old sayings" and ran as follows:

When he was about to set out, there and then
Yisui-qatun respectfully gave the following
advice to Chinggis-qa'an: "The qahan has thought of
  Establishing order over his many people,
  Climbing high passes,
  Crossing wide rivers
  And waging a long campaign.
But living beings born to this world are not eternal:
  When your body, like a great old tree,
  Falls down,
  To whom will you bequeath your people
  Which is like tangled hemp?
  When your body, like the stone base of a pillar,
  Collapses,
  To whom will you bequeath your people
  Which is like a flock of birds?
  Of your four heroic sons whom you have begotten which one will you designate as your successor? I have given you this advice on what, thinking about it, we—the sons, younger brothers, the many common people and my bad self—understood to be an important question. Your order [= word] shall decide."
  So she advised him and Chinggis-qahan declared: "Even though she is only a lady [i.e., a woman] Yisui's words are more right than right. No matter who—younger brothers and sons, and you Bo-orchu, Muqali and others—no one has advised me like this. And also
  I forgot,
  As if I would not follow the forefathers;
  I slept,
  As if I would not be caught by death."
[de Rachewiltz 1984:88–89]

After a great deal of discussion, the advice of Yisui was followed, an heir was designated in the person of the third son Ogodei, and the Mongol conquest of Turkestan was begun.

These four examples of the Quarrelling Sons type in the *SHM* vary by motif, but they are clearly part of a folktale tradition common to the peoples of the Mongol steppe in the 13th century. The motifs within the type of arrows as object lessons, a female as adjudicator, and the death or disappearance of the female are apparently Mongol motifs rather than elements borrowed along with the type itself. Regardless of the origin of the tale, the fact of its repeated inclusion in a historical text must give caution to those who would use that text as a valid source for the events of the period.

Notes

[1]The spelling used in this paper for the name of the Mongol conqueror is closer to the original Mongolian than is the more recognizable form, Genghis Khan.

[2]The Tayichi'ut were a closely related clan of Chinggis Khan's Borjigit clan. The conflict between the two clans in the 12th century had to do with a struggle to see which would provide the leadership for the Mongol tribe. Prior to the lifetime of Chinggis Khan, the holder of the position of Khan had been drawn randomly from either clan with no apparent tradition or pattern other than an obscure electoral process.

[3]The title *otchigin* or hearth-prince was always held by the youngest son of a family.

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