

The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century by Igor de Rachewiltz
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Reviews of Books

The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century. Two volumes. By IGOR DE RACHEWILTZ. Brill's Inner Asian Library, vols. 7.1 and 7.2. Leiden: BRILL, 2004. Pp. cxxvii + 1347. $214.

For those interested in Mongolian language, history, and culture, this is a landmark publication. It is the culmination of thirty-five years of research by a specialist in Sino-Mongolian studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, a scholar of extraordinary abilities and remarkable persistence in pursuing his investigations of an extremely important but problematic text.

The thirteenth-century text known as the Secret History of the Mongols (*Mongγol-un niγuča tobčiyan*, Ch. *Yüan ch'ao pi-shih*; hereinafter "SH") is the longest early record of the Mongolian language, and quite correctly called by de Rachewiltz (p. xxv) the "most important literary monument of the Mongolian-speaking peoples." In effect a rambling account of the life of Chinggis Qan by some contemporary who knew him well, it is a fascinating work of art, containing epic, poetic, and dramatic passages; the style sometimes rich and dignified, sometimes vigorous and colloquial. The work is, despite a certain amount of Turkic influence, "a true and original Mongol product, unique of its kind[:] for no other nomadic or semi-nomadic people has ever created a literary masterpiece like it, in which epic poetry and narrative are so skillfully and indeed artistically blended with fictional and historical accounts" (p. xxvi).

The earliest and most complete SH text that has come down to us offers special problems, many stemming from the fact that it was written not in the vertical Uighur script which the Mongols began to use in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, but in an elaborate phonological transcription in Chinese characters produced more than a century and a half after the text's initial composition. Each word and suffixal morpheme was given an independent gloss, and each of the 282 "sections" into which the text is arbitrarily divided was provided with a free translation into Chinese. Spacing between transcription characters originally represented a sort of punctuation, but this was largely lost during copying of the text. De Rachewiltz rightly points out (p. lxv) that the Chinese transcription "gives us only the phonetic representation of how the Ming transcribers read the [then-extant] manuscript of the *Secret History* in Uighur script in the second half of the 14th century," but "does not reflect the *spoken* language at the time of composition." Further, the lexicon and grammar of this early Middle Mongolian inevitably differ somewhat from later, better documented stages of the language. The linguistic problems are legion, as are those of relating specific narrative episodes to historical fact.

These volumes contain five main parts: Introduction (pp. xxv–cxiii), Translation (pp. 1–218), Commentary (pp. 221–1044), Bibliography and Abbreviations (pp. 1081–94), and Indexes (pp. 1195–342). The introduction is informative even for a reader already familiar with the SH text. In addition to sections dealing with the contents of the SH, the place and date of its composition, and its possible authorship, there is discussion of previous transcriptions, translations, and editions of the text, as well as brief remarks on recent scholarly research. Sandwiched around and between these five major parts of the books are two excellent maps, seven brief appendices, twelve plates (eight of them in color, including a portrait of Chinggis Qan himself), and several other brief sections including a genealogical table that shows the origins of early Mongol clans mentioned in the text, as well as displaying the ancestry of the boy Temüjin who became Chinggis Qan.

The translation—the best to date—is based on the author's earlier efforts published in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 4–33 (1971–1986; see *Ra* on p. 1169). But slight differences between the two make it clear that de Rachewiltz has spent considerable time rethinking and polishing his earlier translation, section by section and sentence by sentence. (See, for example, §63, or the poetic lines of §78 or §§123–24.) As a result, we have in English for the first time a fluid, accurate, and comprehensible translation of this difficult text. One regrets only that the Mongolian text is not printed on pages

facing the translation, as in volumes of the Loeb Classical Library; but clearly that would have made the entire work simply too complex and expensive to print. As it is, we must make do with the text in de Rachewiltz's 1972 *Index to the Secret History of the Mongols*, as corrected on pp. 1064–76 of the present work. We still need a full critical edition of the SH text, incorporating variant readings from all pertinent manuscripts and parallel texts, and all the emendations suggested by scholars over the years. Many such variants and emendations are mentioned in the de Rachewiltz commentary (cf. pp. 413–14 for the addition of *ja'ura* 'between' in one line, on the basis of the *Altan Tobči*), but these are nowhere indexed as such.

The historical and philological commentary is comprehensive and wide-ranging, indeed sometimes overwhelming in its breadth and detail. In effect it summarizes more than a century of research by dozens of scholars, writing in at least eleven different languages. The SH contains many hapax legomena, questionable transcriptions, and problematic lexical items; the author discusses each, with exhaustive citation of the pertinent scholarly literature. For example, discussion of the rare word *bütün* 'one's own, proper' in §200 takes up nearly two pages, with some thirty-six references to seventeen sources in seven languages (pp. 745–56). The social, cultural, and historical contexts of events reflected in the text are pursued with similar vigor. The phrase *caqa'an šingγor* 'white gerfalcon' in §63, for example, elicits (with regard to "white as an auspicious color, and white animals [in general]") no fewer than twenty-three bibliographical references (p. 328). Historical, geographical, and personal names are likewise given thorough consideration. Further, it is most helpful to be able to find many of the SH's place names on the fold-out map following p. xvii, and many of the most important personal names on the genealogical table at the end of the second volume. Throughout the commentary, the author's wide reading (especially in Chinese sources) has allowed him to suggest well-reasoned and sometimes novel solutions to many of the problems in the text.

The bibliography contains well over a thousand items. In general, articles are cited by an author's surname plus date (e.g., Poppe 1967); editions and translations of the SH are referred to by the first letter or two of the editor's or translator's surname (e.g., *H* is Erich Haenisch's edition of the SH text, *Ha* his translation); and monographs are given in all-caps letter-sequence reflecting their title (*GWM* is Nicholas Poppe's *Grammar of Written Mongolian*). All this can be a bit confusing for the reader at first, especially since all-caps sequences are also used for periodicals, collections and reference works, which are separately alphabetized: *UAJ* = *Ural-Altaische Jahrbücher*; *MS* = either *Monumenta Serica* (p. 1084) or "L. Ligeti, ed., *Mongolian Studies*, Amsterdam 1970" (p. 1154). In practice, however, the system works quite well.

When it comes to the indexes, we find that de Rachewiltz has once again pulled out all the stops. There are indexes of proper and place names (pp. 1195–245), subjects (pp. 1246–314), and grammar and lexis (pp. 1315–42): in each case the wealth of detail is astonishing. Entries for the name *Ong Qan* and the text *Yüan-shih*, for example, each occupy a column and a half of small type; one for *chronology* twice that amount. If the reader is curious about the phrase *epic chronicle* in de Rachewiltz's title, an entry in the subject index (p. 1266) leads him at once to an explanation on p. lxi: the term is one used of the SH by Paul Pelliot—whose name (like those of other scholars who have contributed to SH studies)—is of course included in the index of names.

A few of us in the field have been hopefully anticipating something like the present work for fifty years. In 1954 Professor Francis Cleaves of Harvard lent to me, then a mere graduate student at Yale, page proofs for a portion of his new translation of the SH, a translation that was to be followed by a volume of commentary. For complex reasons (see n. 312 on pp. cv–cvi) his translation remained unpublished until 1982; and plans for the companion volume were eventually abandoned. Now at least our hopes have been realized in the present publication, and we can see the full fruits of twentieth-century research on this fascinating and difficult text. These volumes will surely remain the standard work on the *Secret History* for decades to come.

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