

# THE MONGOLIAN WORLD EMPIRE

## Does It Matter?

By Lisa Haag-Kang

I teach a variety of Asian civilization courses, and when we come to the Mongol world empire, students invariably question my credibility.

“Pax Mongolica?” they say. “Mongolian Peace? Are you nuts?”

“Well, yes,” I am forced to admit, “but not right now and not about this.”

When I poll the students about their knowledge of Chinggis Khan (a.k.a Genghis Khan), without exception they report that he was the most irredeemably destructive conqueror of all time.

“That’s because all the other conquerors, like Hannibal and Alexander the Great, kissed babies and handed out free kittens,” I say.

Most students laugh rather tentatively, but the most diligent among them write even this down: “k-i-t-t-e-n-s.”

**W**hen we learn about other world conquerors, history books tend to focus on accomplishments. For example, Alexander the Great is credited with bringing the gift of Greek culture to the Asian hinterlands, and Hannibal is praised as a military tactician with a knack for finding the right pachyderm. Chinggis Khan, however, is noted mainly for extreme cruelty. Are we to believe that all of the other famous military leaders of world history accomplished their achievements with minimal loss of human life?

In reality, Chinggis Khan shared many positive characteristics of other great conquerors, such as tactical genius, personal charisma, and an astute ability to use propaganda. Moreover, Chinggis Khan instituted or expanded a number of innovative administrative and cultural practices that sound strangely modern: diplomatic immunity, a reliable and efficient mail service, free trade, religious tolerance, respect for women, and political rule guided by consensus.

In fact, the collective memory of Chinggis Khan’s military, political, and administrative accomplishments continues to inspire present-day Mongolians as they struggle to establish a strong modern democracy. While it is certainly true that the Great Khan would not have recognized democracy in its contemporary forms, the fact that many Mongolians today view him in these terms serves to underscore Chinggis Khan’s continued importance as a cultural icon inspiring Mongolian national identity and a shared vision of a democratic future. This being the case, why are Chinggis Khan’s numerous and remarkable achievements subsumed beneath estimated death tolls and descriptions of ruined cities? When considering the Mongol era, it’s important to bear in mind certain historiographical truths.

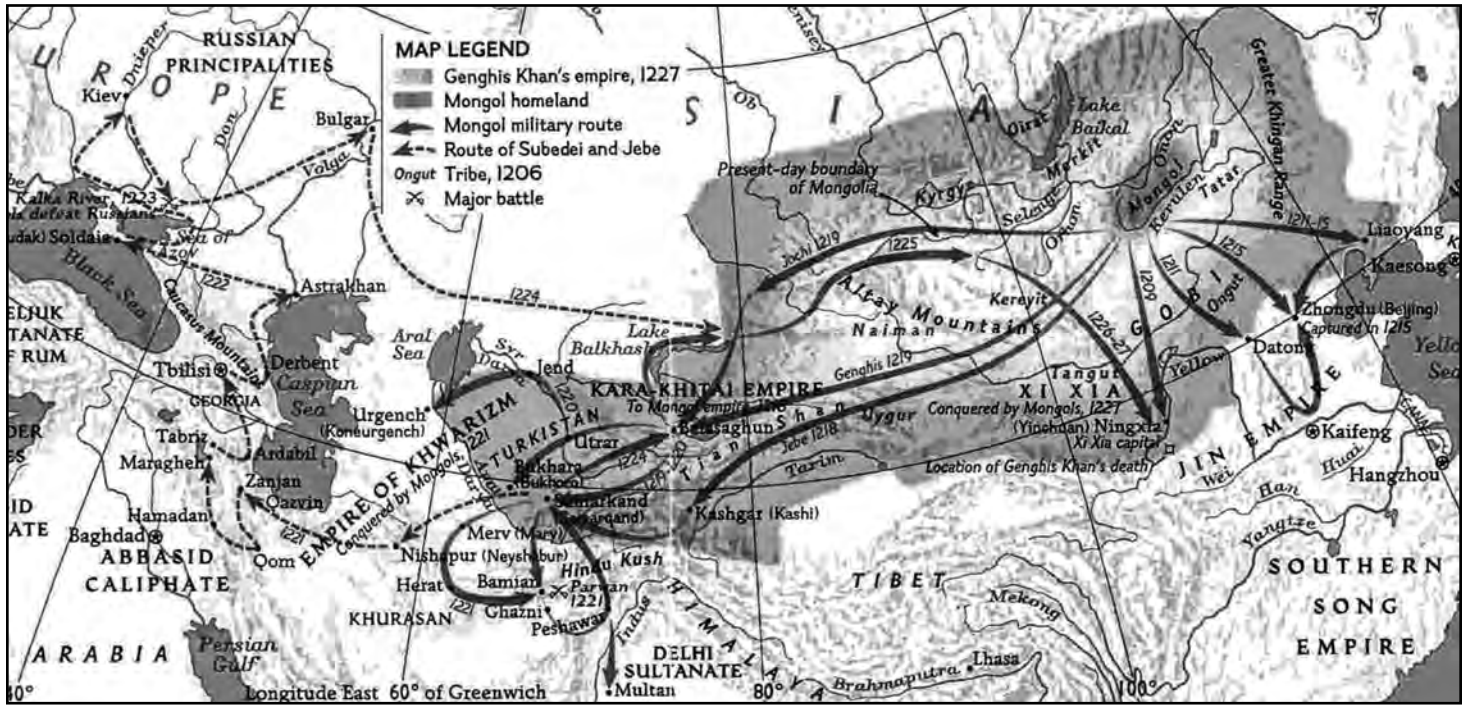
First, in most places, the victors have had the privilege of preserving historical events in writing. It’s sort of a “might makes right” historical principle. Unfortunately, despite the remarkable breadth of the Mongol Empire, there is a lack of Mongolian primary sources concerning its inception. This may be a result of the speed of the Mongol conquest; the Mongols conquered more real estate in twenty years than the Romans did in 200. Also, the Mongols initially had no written language—no doubt because carrying libraries around on horseback is somewhat inconvenient. Thus, most primary sources about the Mongols were written by conquered

peoples. In an American context, this would be comparable to the history of westward expansion presented solely from the perspective of Native American sources.

Ironically, the single Mongolian source about the rise of Chinggis Khan, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, makes no effort to sanitize his image. *The Secret History* describes the precarious life of Temujin, the hungry, fatherless outcast who would eventually become Chinggis Khan. The family’s struggle to survive ultimately pitted brother against brother, with deadly results. Temujin and his full brother, Khasar, killed their eldest half-brother. Given the usual historical conventions, one might expect *The Secret History* to justify the fratricide. Instead, we learn that the young men received a severe tongue lashing from their incensed mother, who made a number of unflattering comparisons to illustrate her point:

*She looked at her two sons,  
then pointing first at Temujin said to them, ‘Killers, both of you!’  
When he came out screaming from the heat of my womb  
this one was born holding a clot of black blood in his hand.  
and now you’ve both destroyed without thinking,  
like the khasar dog who eats its own afterbirth,  
like the panther that heedlessly leaps from a cliff,  
like the lion who can’t control his own fury,  
like the python that thinks: “I’ll swallow my prey alive,”  
like the falcon that foolishly dives at its own shadow . . .”<sup>1</sup>*

To say the least, it’s unusual to find a history where the mightiest of all generals gets a severe dressing-down from his mother. There are at least two reasons for this. First, Mongolian women enjoyed more respect and independence than women of other world cultures at the time. Second, it is clear that the Mongols were not predisposed to whitewash the truth. In fact, Chinggis Khan often deliberately cultivated a negative image. When preparing to attack a large city, for example, the Mongol armies would first devastate the surrounding countryside, sending panicked peasants inside the city walls for refuge. This tactic served a threefold purpose: First, it gave the Mongol armies an unimpeded escape route; second, it stressed the city’s limited resources; and third, it was a kind of psychological warfare.<sup>2</sup> Typically, having prepared the groundwork, the Mongols would dispatch an envoy with the following terms: surrender and be welcomed into the empire or resist and be



Mongol Empire, 1227. Source: edmaps.com at <http://tiny.cc/the3yw>.

obliterated. Not surprisingly, many cities chose the former. When a city was unwise enough to fight, the Mongols always let some people escape to encourage the next city to make a more pragmatic choice. It's important to note that, while Chinggis Khan did not shrink from killing his enemies, neither did he kill indiscriminately. He was a deliberate man who required that violent actions serve a practical purpose.<sup>3</sup> For example, the official history of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China reports that Chinggis Khan refused to allow the wholesale massacre of people in northern China.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Chinggis Khan did not condone torture.<sup>5</sup>

The Mongols recognized the value of human resources. When a population was subjugated, typically only military men and aristocrats, people who were, respectively, potentially dangerous and relatively useless, were killed. The remainder were moved outside the city walls to facilitate orderly looting. Meanwhile, the Mongols took stock of what skills each captured person possessed. Those deemed valuable were often relocated to places where the Mongols felt they could benefit the empire. During the Mongol era, vast groups of skilled artisans, miners, engineers, literati, physicians, astronomers, and other individuals with practical knowledge crossed Eurasia.<sup>6</sup>

The Mongols possessed a voracious appetite for useful knowledge in all forms. For example, although the Mongols originally had no written language, Chinggis Khan clearly recognized the administrative benefits of acquiring one. In 1204, he discovered that a defeated Naiman ruler used a Uighur scribe to preserve and certify all royal pronouncements and quickly adopted a modified Uighur script for the purpose of preserving his laws.<sup>7</sup>

The rule of law was a significant political change for the Mongols, who had been living in a state of social flux and political chaos.<sup>8</sup> It is important to remember that the *yasa*, or laws, of Chinggis Khan were not recorded in a systematic way and were not intended to force conquered peoples to



Portrait of Chinggis Khan said to be commissioned by his grandson, Kublai Khan, long after his death. Source: The China History Forum at <http://tiny.cc/mwf3yw>.

*The official history of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China reports that Chinggis Khan refused to allow the wholesale massacre of people in northern China.*

adopt Mongolian ways. Generally, conquered peoples retained their own cultural and legal practices. The *yasa* of Chinggis Khan were an ad hoc collection of pronouncements giving guidance for specific issues, such as contract negotiation; taxation; inheritance; other property concerns; and, occasionally, social services (special taxes were occasionally levied to aid the impoverished). In this way, the Mongols allowed cultural preservation in conquered territories while at the same time facilitating commerce.

Trade was a crucial concern for the Mongols due to the harsh ecology of the Eurasian steppe and the limitations it placed on Mongolian society. Animal products such as meat and milk were abundant, but handicrafts, agricultural products, and all luxuries were scarce. The Mongols required free commerce to acquire the items they needed. Free trade, in turn, required efficient communication and safe travel. Therefore, the Mongols instituted two important systems. The first was the *yam*, a mail service similar to the Pony Express in the American West. Mail stations were established along communication routes so that correspondence could take place quickly. In addition, the Mongols instituted diplomatic immunity

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Chinggis Khan Monument: Hohhot, Inner Mongolia. Source: <http://tiny.cc/7xb3yw>. Photo: Fanghong of the Creative Commons.

wherein envoys and other official emissaries carried proto-passports to guarantee safe passage. Molesting an official envoy in any way was punishable by death.

The Mongol era created an unprecedented direct connection between the extremes of the Eurasian steppe. It is true that trade and cultural exchange took place along the so-called Silk Roads as early as 200 BCE, as Mediterranean Europe exchanged products such as glass and lead-glazed pottery for Chinese silk. However, until the Mongol era, such trade took place mainly through intermediaries, each of whom traveled just a short section of the Silk Roads at a time. In other words, although products traversed the Eurasian continent, people for the most part did not. During the Mongol era, however, free trade and diplomatic immunity fostered the first direct contacts between people living at the extremes of Eurasia. For example, John of Plano Carpini (1182–1252), a papal envoy sent by Innocent IV to make direct contact with the Mongols, commented on the remarkable speed and safety of travel in Mongol lands. Because the Mongols simplified travel and commerce and tended to preserve local cultures, conquered peoples derived some benefit from Mongol rule. Thus, it was not difficult to recruit civil servants from among conquered peoples.<sup>9</sup> This greatly facilitated Mongol administration (and taxation) of conquered sedentary peoples.

Chinggis Khan valued peace and order to promote trade and taxation and enrich his Mongol subjects. The laws and practices he established were pragmatic, not ideological. The Mongols had their own religion, based on the worship of *Tengri*, the Eternal Blue Sky. Chinggis Khan was an adherent to this religion, and he ascribed his success to heaven's will. At the same time, the Mongolian steppe, a vast crossroads, had witnessed the practice of many religions over time. Therefore, it's not surprising that Chinggis Khan took a pragmatic approach to religious issues and decreed freedom of religion for all. His descendants also upheld this principle. Möngke Khan, Chinggis Khan's grandson, said, "Just as God gave different fingers to the hand, so

has He given different ways to men."<sup>10</sup> The Mongol rulers frequently sponsored and avidly followed spirited debates between adherents of various faiths.<sup>11</sup> Although we often see religious tolerance as a contemporary development, it was practiced on the Eurasian steppe over 700 years ago.

The way the Mongols established political authority also had modern overtones. The *khuriltai*, or great assembly, was a traditional way to demonstrate solidarity among disparate tribes for military or political action. Temujin was given the title of Chinggis Khan (Great Khan) at just such an

assembly. *Khuriltais* were critically important because the peripatetic nature of pastoral nomadism engendered a cultural tendency toward independence. Unlike their sedentary counterparts, nomads did not have to accept a leader or participate in a military action they did not support. Rather than acquiescing to an unacceptable authority, the nomads would simply decamp and move away. Therefore, before calling a *khuriltai*, would-be leaders had to build support by demonstrating their abilities and making political alliances. This process ultimately allowed an impoverished outcast, the young Temujin, to become the Great Khan of "all the people in felt tents." From this practice, it's clear that early Mongolian culture incorporated some degree of decision-making through consensus. While this process stopped well short of modern democracy, it demonstrates the fundamental importance of consensus-building in Mongolian culture.

Similarly, positions of power and authority within the Great Khan's army were awarded on the basis of proven ability rather than aristocratic birth. One of the precepts ascribed to Chinggis Khan says, "He who is able to command ten men in battle formation will be able to command a thousand or ten thousand in battle formation, and he deserves such a command."<sup>12</sup> Another semi-democratic element of Mongolian culture under Chinggis Khan was the system of shares that governed the distribution of plunder. Two of the factors in Chinggis Khan's unprecedented rise to power were his generosity to his people and his humble avoidance of imperial trappings. A Chinese Daoist priest, Chang Chun, quoted Chinggis Khan, saying:

*Heaven grew weary of the excessive pride and luxury in China . . . I am from the barbaric North . . . I wear the same clothing and eat the same food as the cowherds and horse herders. We make the same sacrifices and we share our riches. I look upon the nation as a newborn child and I care for my soldiers as if they were my brothers.*<sup>13</sup>

#### Chinggis Khan's Legacy Today

In 1990, a new, democratic Mongolia was born, following many years of social, political, and cultural changes that began in 1911 with the fall of the Qing dynasty in China. To escape Chinese political and cultural domination, Mongolia accepted Soviet aid and in 1921 became the second communist country in world history.<sup>14</sup> Mongolia remained a Soviet satellite state until 1989. During this time, Mongolia benefitted in some ways; infrastructure was improved, and a social "safety net" existed.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Mongolia's unique culture and knowledge of its triumphant history were brutally suppressed. In the late 1980s, Mongolia began a process of democratic change that was accelerated by the fall of the Soviet Union. Unlike many places, the change from communism to democracy in Mongolia was peaceful; in 1992, Mongolians voted for a new constitution, creating an independent nation organized on democratic principles.<sup>16</sup>



The sand dunes of Gobi Gurdvansaikhan National Park. Source: <http://tiny.cc/7xb3yw>. Photo: Zoharby of the Creative Commons.

Still, the road forward was, and continues to be, difficult. The lack of Russian aid caused severe social dislocation. Although many western governments and private agencies stepped in to help, these organizations often required abrupt and relatively stringent adherence to free market practices. For many people, this resulted in severe economic hardship.<sup>17</sup> Another economic issue has been Mongolia's proximity to China's partially centrally planned economy, which causes unfair competition. For example, it's difficult for Mongolia's cashmere industry to compete with the heavily subsidized Chinese cashmere industry.<sup>18</sup> Ecological changes are also problematic. The Gobi is expanding, and Mongolia has experienced several cycles of drought and harsh winters, resulting in the deaths of millions of animals. Without the communist "safety net," many Mongolian herders have been forced into poverty.<sup>19</sup> Finally, there have been many political challenges in recent years, including violent protests, charges of electoral irregularities, and corruption scandals.

In the face of all of these problems, some have wondered if Mongolia can actually be considered a democracy.<sup>20</sup> It's an interesting question with few simple answers. Since the polarizing effects of the Cold War have waned, the analysis of democracy has become less ideological and more nuanced, with nations placed on a spectrum between developed democracies and authoritarian regimes. For example, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has an analytical framework based on four criteria: Citizenship, Law, and Rights; Representative and Accountable Government; Civil Society and Popular Participation; and Democracy Beyond the State.<sup>21</sup> In 2005, Dr. Todd Landman and his colleagues at the University of Essex's Human Rights Centre used this system to analyze democracy in Mongolia; they came to the conclusion that Mongolia was, in fact, a democracy, albeit a flawed one.<sup>22</sup> The *Economist Intelligence Unit* (EIU) came to a similar conclusion in its 2012 Democracy Index.<sup>23</sup> Each year, the EIU ranks nations and places them into four main categories: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes. The EIU uses sixty specific indicators to score nations according to five basic criteria: electoral process and

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pluralism, functioning government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.<sup>24</sup> The EIU ranked Mongolia at 65, placing it in the category of flawed democracies with Hong Kong (63) and Taiwan (35).<sup>25</sup>

Although this may sound like a backhanded compliment, it is interesting to compare Mongolia to its neighbors. Mongolia is sandwiched between China (142) and the Russian Federation (122), both of which are classified as authoritarian nations by the EIU. Nearby Uzbekistan (-161), Tajikistan (151), Kazakhstan (143), and Turkmenistan (-161) are also classified as authoritarian regimes. The Kyrgyz Republic, at 106, is ranked closer to Mongolia, but it is considered a hybrid regime, only partially democratic.<sup>26</sup>

How has Mongolia managed to create a democracy when nearby nations have not? Despite numerous political, economic, and social challenges, Mongolians have continued to embrace democracy and capitalism, in part due to a "rediscovery" of Chinggis Khan and his legacy.<sup>27</sup> A majority of Mongolians feel that the present democratic system is a natural outgrowth of Mongolian cultural heritage. As Dr. Paula L.W. Sabloff explains, "Nine years before the signing of the Magna Carta in England, Genghis Khan brought Mongolians the gifts of independence, nationhood, and the basic principles from which they would one day build a modern democratic state."<sup>28</sup> A brief review of the life and vision of Chinggis Khan



The Ukhaa Khudag (UKG) section of Tavan Tolgoi in the South Gobi Desert. Source: Screen capture from *The Big Dig* on the ABC News Australia website at <http://tiny.cc/4np3yw>.

has revealed many social, political, and economic ideals that can be seen as precursors to a modern democratic society, including respect for women, diplomatic immunity, an efficient mail service, free trade, religious tolerance, emphasis on political consensus, respect for the rule of law, and the fair division of resources and opportunity.

Today, Mongolia is on the cusp of a new era of economic development based on the recent discovery of vast deposits of natural resources. For example, the second-largest coalfield in the world can be found in Mongolia at a site called Tavan Tolgoi. It has been estimated that in the next five to ten years the Mongolian economy could grow at a rate of 20 to 30 percent.<sup>29</sup> Besides coal, Mongolia has untapped reserves of copper, gold, iron ore, coal, zinc, nickel, silver, and tin.

Unfortunately, these discoveries have exacerbated social, economic, and political tensions; stressed Mongolia's democratic institutions; and shaken the public's confidence. Still, drawing on its unique heritage, Mongolia has a plan to address these issues. In the tradition of Chinggis Khan's system of shares, Erdenes Tavan Tolgoi LLC, Mongolia's largest coal company, "gave the Mongolian government about \$310 million as part of a state-initiated program to distribute the nation's mining wealth to all citizens."<sup>30</sup> Given the industrialized world's hunger for natural resources, there's no doubt that Mongolia will soon again be a focus of global attention. This should not be surprising. As Morris Rossabi, a historian of the Mongol era has asserted, "The Mongol period was the onset of global history."<sup>31</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 21.
2. Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), 92–94.
3. Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 160–161, 167–169, and 189. See also Weatherford, 115 and 164.
4. Ratchnevsky, 189.
5. Weatherford, 115. See also Ratchnevsky, 160–161.
6. Weatherford, 110–114. See also Ratchnevsky, 167.
7. Weatherford, 68–70. See also Ratchnevsky, 95.
8. Ratchnevsky, 187.
9. Ratchnevsky, 184–185, 188–189, and 196.
10. William Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253–1255*, Translated by Peter Jackson, Introduction by David Morgan, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990). See <http://tiny.cc/jqozyw>.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Ratchnevsky, 171.
13. E. Bretschneider, *Medieval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1888), 37–108, <http://tiny.cc/erozyw>. See also Ratchnevsky, 149.
14. Morris Rossabi, *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 30–31.
15. *Ibid.*, 31–35.
16. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

17. *Ibid.*, 49–53.
18. *Ibid.*, 123–124.
19. *Ibid.*, 122–124.
20. For example, see Doug Schoen. "Mongolia's Democracy Continues To Be In Question." *Forbes*, last modified August 13, 2012, <http://tiny.cc/ahga0w>.
21. The IDEA system of analysis is much more complex, but to explain it comprehensively is beyond the scope of this piece. For more information, see Dr. Todd Landman et al., "The State of Democracy in Mongolia: A Desk Study" (presentation, Democracy Development in Mongolia: Challenges and Opportunities National Conference, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, June 30 to July 1 2005).
22. "State of Democracy: A Desk Study," 48.
23. The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2012: Democracy at a Standstill," *The Economist* (2013): 5, accessed July 29, 2013, <http://tiny.cc/fsozyw>.
24. *Ibid.*, 26–39.
25. *Ibid.*, 3–8.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Paula L.W. Sabloff, *Modern Mongolia: Reclaiming Genghis Khan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2001). See <http://tiny.cc/lzhh1w> and <http://tiny.cc/11hb1w>.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Melissa Chan, "Mineral-Rich Mongolia Sells Fields," *Al Jazeera English*, last modified July 6, 2011, <http://tiny.cc/83hb1w>.
30. Michael Kohn, "Mongolia Loan May Help Tavan Tolgoi Exit Chalco Deal, CEO Says," *Bloomberg*, last modified January 24, 2013, <http://tiny.cc/ktozyw>.
31. Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60.

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