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The Tuvan Legend of Genghis Khan, Using the Xinjing Tuvans as an Example

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China's Tuvan people live in Boorajin County, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. The Kanas Lake region is the only gathering place for Tuvan people in our country. Tuva Village is located in Kanas valley, which is 2–3 kilometers away from the south shore of Kanas Lake. It is 1,390 meters above sea level and the landscape is splendid. There are many legends of Genghis Khan among the Xinjiang Tuvan people. Some of Tuvan people call themselves the descendants of brave injured soldiers of Genghis Khan, and almost every household is dedicated to Genghis Khan's portrait.

Key words: Xinjiang Tuva, Genghis Khan, legend

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1. A historical and cultural overview of Tuva

The historic region of Tannu Uriankhai, of which Tuva is a part, was controlled by the Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Turks at different times. In the 7th century (from 647 to 648), it was dominated by the Tang Dynasty; in the 8th century, it was controlled by Uighurs, and in the 9th century, it belonged to the Kirghiz. Some scholars believe that the Chinese historical documents called *Wei Shu* provide the earliest record of the Tuba Xianbei. However, no conclusive evidence proves that the Tuba of those documents are today's Tuva. Accordingly, the earliest documented Tuva is *Sui Shu* • Tiele Zhuan, recorded as having lived in the Lake Baikal area called 都播.¹⁾ According to the *Jiu Tang Shu* • Beidi Lie Zhuan (in 199 volumes), the Tiele has fifteen family names, and one of them is 都播. Scholars believe that the 都播 refers to today's Tuva. The *Xin Tang Shu* • Uighur Zhuan records one of the Trojan Three Turks, Dufu, as also being a Tiele 都播, ancestor to the Tuva.

In the 13th century, Tannu Uriankhai was under rule. In 1207, the Oirat prince Quduqa-Beki led Mongol detachments under Jochi to a tributary of the Kaa-Khem river, where they encountered the Tuvan Keshdims, Baits, and Teleks; this is recorded in the Secret History of the Mongols.²⁾ It is therefore evident that the Tuvan and Oirat people have long had close geographic and cultural ties. During the Ming Dynasty, when the Oirat had grown strong, the Tuva belonged to them; in the Qing Dynasty, although the Tuva were part of the Khalkha, they were actually part of the Oirat. On August 14, 1921, the Bolsheviks established a Tuvan People's Republic, popularly called the Tannu-Tuva. In 1926, Tuva changed its name to the Republic of Tuva, which belonged to the Russian Federation.

Today, outside the Tuva Republic, Tuvan people live in Chenggel Hairhan Sumu and Bayan Ulugei Aimag, in Mongolia, as well as in China's Xinjiang Altai Region. Mongolia is home to about 30,000 Tuvan people, with Chenggel Harihan Sumu as their cultural center. Since 1990, they have had an 8-year Tuvan language school.³⁾

Most Xinjiang Tuvan people live in the Altai Region, in Boorajin County's Hvm Hanasu Xiang and Hab Gol County's Qagan Hab Xiang. A few also live in other counties. There are about 2,500 Xinjiang Tuvan people (though some scholars claim there are more than 4,000). In addition to the Tuvan language, Boorajin County's Tuvan people can speak Mongolian and Kazakh. The Tuvan language belongs to the Altai language family's Turkic branch. Forty percent of Tuvan is similar to Oirat Mongolian.⁴⁾ Qagan Hab Xiang's Tuvan people in Hab Gol County all use the Tuvan language, but their children speak and learn Mongolian at school, and some also learn Kazakh.

There are about 80 Tuvan students in 9 classes at Hvm Hanasu Xiang's Middle School. Most teachers are local Tuvans, but 7 are Mongolian. There is also a primary school in Hvm Hanasu. In Qagan Hab County a 6-year primary school with 15 teachers and more than 30 students. One of my students, Tuya, is a teacher there and has seen many orphans and single-parent households. Inbreeding has also caused poor physical and mental health.⁵⁾

Although Tuva has its own language, it has no written language. Tuvans once used Mongolian as their written language: the Tuva People's Republic used Mongolian officially until 1940. After that, they used Latin, and since 1943, they have used Kiril. Some information suggests that Tuvans used Todu from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, but there is no conclusive evidence for this (such as a text in Todu). Tuvans in Russia and Mongolia use Kiril, but Tuvans in Xinjiang use Classic Mongolian. Ethnically, they are Mongolian, for there is no Tuva ethnicity among the 56 ethnicities in China, and Tuvans are considered a subgroup called "Tuvan Mongol." Their clothes and food resemble those of local Oirat Mongols.

Tuvan economics and lifestyles are also identical or similar to those of the Oirats and Kazakhs. Tuvans engage mainly in a livestock economy. Those in Boorajin County of the Altai Region have even mixed with the local Oirat Mongols as both groups depend on the livestock economy. Some Tuvans in Qagan Hab County raise deer and do some hunting, but these are peripheral activities.

Tuvans live in Russian-style wooden houses. In recent years, increasing numbers of Tuvan and Oirat people have intermarried. Scholars have said that the Tuvans in Qagan Hab County suffer due to various social and environmental factors and a long history of consanguineous marriages that have led to physical fitness problems.⁶⁾ One of my students, Bianbie

Tuya, a middle school teacher in Hvm Hanasu Xiang since August 2011, said, “I was hoping to try my best to teach children, to help them become educated children, but children here are not very smart, and some are even mentally handicapped, reportedly because of inbreeding.”⁷⁷

The Xinjiang Tuvan religion is very distinctive. The people used to believe in shamanism, just like the Mongols, but due to Oirat influence they now embrace Buddhism. Nevertheless, they have not lost their traditional shamanistic faith in sacrificing Aobao, nature, and the blue sky. As Professor Sumiya says, “Tuvans believe in Buddhism now, but the root of their belief is shamanism.”⁷⁸ They believe in the shaman from the bottom of their hearts. Until the 1980s, they still had shamans and believed in the “Har Bagsh” and “Gurdeng” types of shaman.

British scholar Douglas Carruthers describes the social and environmental situation of the Altai region’s Uriankhais in his book *Unknown Mongolia*. The photos in Appendix 168 are very valuable for understanding the Uriankhai and Tuvan people, their natural environment, and their clothing and adornments.

2. The legend of Genghis Khan

Many legends about Genghis Khan exist among the Xinjiang Tuvan people. It is said that when Genghis Khan went on an expedition to the west, his injured soldiers could not move. When they saw the splendid landscape with its abundant water, grass, and prey, his troops decided to leave the injured soldiers to stay and be healed, and they all recovered and stayed. The Tuvans therefore call themselves the descendants of Genghis Khan’s brave injured soldiers. Of course some of the Tuvan people came later from the Tuva Republic. According to elders, the Russian Revolution of the last century tried to destroy their religion and suppress the Lama and shaman, so about forty households crossed the mountain and escaped to Xinjiang.⁹⁾

The Tuvan people have a legend about their beautiful hometown of Hanasu: Hanasu Lake was called “Haan nu usu”—an abbreviation of “the King’s water”—because Genghis Khan stopped there to rest and water his horses. The Xinjiang Tuvan people worship Genghis Khan and consider him their own ancestor; almost every household among them sacrifices to Genghis Khan’s portrait.

There is also a legend of Genghis Khan linking him to the formation of the universe. Long ago, it is said, the world was flooded and the universe became empty. Geser Genghis created landscapes, trees, forests, and humans, then taught the humans wisdom and led them to establish a country with him as their king.¹⁰⁾ The Tuvan people have a rich tradition of orally transmitted epics, including the *Geser*, in which the epic hero Geser is Genghis Khan, referred to as the “Geser Genghis.”

Mongolia’s Tuvans, meanwhile, have a legend of their own: “We are descendants of Tuva Sohor, who is the ancestor of Genghis Khan.”¹¹⁾ We are not sure whether these legends are historically accurate, but oral histories comprise the Tuvan people’s collective ancestral memory and are inherited by successive generations. Their common national consciousness has a remote historical origin. From Lake Baikal to Altai Mountain, this vast land was home to an ancient “forest people” who, until 1207 and under the leadership of Genghis Khan’s son Jochi, were attached to the great Mongolian empire.



Photo 1 Kok Monchaks of Kanas. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Xinjiang province of China.



Photo 2 Kok Monchak's folklore specialist from Kanas. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Xinjiang province of China.



Photo 3 The village Khom. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Xinjang province of China.



Photo 4 Kanas river. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, Since 2012, Xinjang province of China.



Photo 5 Kok Monchak's ovoos, altar of area's "owner," seen as of today. Photo by I. Lkhagvasuren, 2012, Xinjiang province of China.



Photo 6 Tourists visiting Kanas from the central China. Photo by Y. Konagaya, 2012, Xinjiang province of China.

3. The influence of Oirat language and culture on the Tuvan language

The Xinjiang Tuvan people not only share Oirat Mongol names such as Seqinguwa, Baatar, Bat'oqir, Badmara, and Jigjid but also names like Harhas, Dalanghai, and Sainmaiti.

Some Tuvan nouns have characteristics of the Oirat dialect. For example, the Mongolian "Shulum" is "Shulumus" in the Oirat dialect and in the Tuvan language as well. The Oirat people call the sky sacrifice the "Deer Murguh," as do the Tuvan people.

The epic Geser is called the Geser Genghis by the Tuvan people, and many place names, such as "Geser Genghis Ditch" and "Geser Genghis Dam," use the phrase "Lord Genghis." The Tuvans called "God" the "Kezir"; with the spread of the Geser, though, "Kezir" turned into "Geser," and Tuvans see Geser and Genghis as the same person.¹²⁾

The word "Jiangger" means the top of a mountain, though one cannot reach the ideal top in the Tuvan language. "Jiangger Khan" thus means "ideal king" or "only king." It is said that Genghis Khan is the Jiangger Khan: he is matchless, the wisest king in the world. These are some influences of Oirat language and culture.

Notes

- 1) "Wei Shu Tiele Zhuan," Volume 84.
- 2) Eldengtai, Ardajab collated "Secret History of Mongols," Inner Mongolian Education Press, 1986, P770.
- 3) Record of interview with Professor Sumiya on 10/08/2011. Prof. Sumiya is a researcher with the Institute of Language and Literature, Mongolian Academy of Social Sciences.
- 4) Record of interview with Qing Geli on 10/13/2011. Qing Geli is a researcher with the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- 5) Record of interview with Bianbie Tuya by mail.
- 6) Record of interview with Damrijab on 10/08/2011. Damrijab is a researcher with the Institute of Ethnic Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and was the first to do field research among the Oirats and Tuvans. He began his fieldwork in Xinjiang in the 1980s.
- 7) Record of interview with Bianbie Tuya by mail.
- 8) Record of interview with Professor Sumiya on 10/08/2011. Prof. Sumiya is a researcher with the Institute of Language and Literature, Mongolian Academy of Social Sciences.
- 9) Record of interview with Damrijab on 10/08/2011. Damrijab is a researcher with the Institute of Ethnic Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and was the first to do field research among the Oirats and Tuvans. He began his fieldwork in Xinjiang in the 1980s.
- 10) Se Qinbatu: Mongolian translation and comparative study of the Tuvan epic *Geser*, Minzu Press, 2008, P92.
- 11) Record of interview with Professor Sumiya on 10/08/2011. Prof. Sumiya is a researcher with the Institute of Language and Literature, Mongolian Academy of Social Sciences.
- 12) Se Qinbatu: Mongolian translation and comparative study of the Tuvan epic *Geser*, Minzu Press, 2008, P92.