

ARTICLE

ON THE NAME “CHINGGIS”

Altansukh Ganbat *Head of the Department of Ancient History, Institute of History and Ethnology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences*Corresponding Author: altansukh_g@mas.ac.mn*The Chinggisid History and Heritage Journal* (2026), Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 1–11

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Abstract

The meaning and origin of the imperial title *Chinggis* have long remained among the most debated questions in Mongol studies. Previous scholarship has variously connected the name with the Mongolian word *tenggis* (“sea/ocean”), concepts of Heaven and divine mandate, Xiongnu imperial titulature, shamanic cosmology, and notions of strength or universal sovereignty. This article reexamines the problem through a comparative analysis of Mongolian, Persian, Turkic, Armenian, and Chinese historical sources, with particular attention to the semantic usage of the root *čing* in medieval Mongolian textual traditions. By analyzing lexical evidence preserved in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the *Dīwān Luġāt al-Turk*, liturgical texts, and related Middle Mongolian materials, the study argues that the term *čing* was primarily associated with meanings such as truthfulness, sincerity, fidelity, correctness, and steadfast reliability. Reconsidering Rashīd al-Dīn’s explanation of *Chinggis* in light of this broader semantic field, the article proposes that the imperial title should be understood not merely as an expression of strength or cosmological supremacy, but as an exalted moral-political designation signifying “the most faithful,” “the truly sincere,” or “the truest of the true.” In doing so, the study offers a new semantic and philological interpretation of the title *Chinggis* grounded in the linguistic and political vocabulary of the medieval Mongolian world.

Keywords: *Chinggis Khan; Middle Mongolian; Rashīd al-Dīn; Mongol Empire; philology; etymology; Inner Asian studies; medieval Mongolian language*

Introduction

Among the many questions surrounding the rise of the Mongol Empire, few have generated as much enduring debate as the meaning and origin of the title *Chinggis* bestowed upon Chinggis Khan in 1206. More than a personal name, the title carried profound political, ideological, and symbolic significance within the imperial culture of the Mongols. Medieval chroniclers, modern historians, linguists, and philologists have all attempted to explain its meaning, producing interpretations that connect it variously to ideas of oceanic vastness, heavenly mandate, sacred rulership, military strength, and moral authority. Despite centuries of discussion, however, the etymology and semantic content of the title remain unresolved.

Much of the earlier scholarship approached the problem through phonetic comparison or legendary traditions preserved in later historical narratives. Other studies emphasized cosmological symbolism, linking the title with Heaven, shamanic belief systems, or universal sovereignty. Yet comparatively less attention has been devoted to the actual semantic usage of the root *čing* within medieval Mongolian and related Inner Asian linguistic contexts. This issue is especially important because several of the earliest explanations—including that of Rashīd al-Dīn—attempt not merely to glorify Chinggis Khan, but to define the lexical meaning of the title itself.

The present study reconsiders the problem through a comparative reading of Mongolian, Persian, Turkic, Armenian, and Chinese historical materials, with particular focus on the usage of the root *čing* in Middle Mongolian textual traditions. By examining lexical evidence preserved in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the *Dīwān Luġāt al-Turk*, liturgical texts, and other medieval sources, this article argues that the semantic field of *čing* was closely associated with ideas of truthfulness, sincerity, correctness, fidelity, and steadfast reliability. In this context, the title *Chinggis* may best be understood not simply as an expression of strength or universal dominion, but as an exalted moral-political title.

1. Early Explanations and Legendary Traditions

The meaning and symbolism of the title-name “Chinggis” borne by the great khan, founder of the Great Mongol Empire, has long attracted the attention of many scholars and writers. Rashīd al-Dīn explained that “Chinggis” is the plural form of *ching*. *Čingzi* (چنگزی *Čingzi*) is equivalent to *čing* (چینگ *Čing*). The meaning of this word is “shah of shahs” or “king of kings.”¹ He further noted that *čing* (چینگ *Čing*) signifies “strong” and “firm,” and that *Chinggis* (چینگگیز *Činggiz*) is its plural form. In other words, much like the title *Gür Khan* of the Great Gur Khan of the Qara Khitai, it conveys the meaning of a powerful and exalted universal ruler.² The Chinese envoy Zhao Hong, meanwhile, recorded that “some say that Chinggis means ‘heaven-granted’.”³ Abū al-Ghāzī Bahadur Khan similarly explained that “Chinggis” is the plural form of *čink*, meaning “firm,” “hard,” or “strong.”⁴

Luvsandanzan Güüş offered a more legendary and symbolic explanation:

Seven days after Chinggis Khan was born, within a peninsula of the sea, a dark-colored bird circled three days around a great black stone in the direction of the sun’s course while crying out. Yesükhei Ba’atur said, “This is an auspicious bird.” When they split open the black stone, a golden seal appeared and flew up into the heavens. The stone then returned to its former state, and the bird continued its cry as before. When they split it open again, a silver seal appeared and entered the sea. Once more the stone restored itself, and the bird cried out again. Yesükhei Ba’atur declared: “Since this child has been born, this dark bird is indeed an auspicious sign.” When the stone was broken open a third time, a jade seal was found within. They brought it back, reverently purified it, and burned incense and lamps in veneration. Thereupon the dark bird perched upon the smoke-hole of the ger and cried out, “Chinggis, Chinggis.” Because of the sound uttered by that bird, he came to be named “Chinggis Khan.”⁵

2. The “Tenggis” (Ocean/Sea) Theory

The proposal to interpret the title *Chinggis* in connection with the Altaic word *tenggis* (“sea” or “ocean”) emerged relatively early in scholarship. In the travel account of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who journeyed through Central Asia and the Middle East for nearly thirty years between 1325 and 1353, it is stated that “Tinkiz Khan had been a blacksmith in the land of Cathay. He was an honest, powerful, and warlike

¹ Reşidüddīn Fazlullāh Hemedanī, *Cāmi’ut-Tevārīh [Compendium of Chronicles]*, vol. 1, ed. Muhammed Rüşen and Mustafa Müsevî (Enteşerat-i Elborz, 1373), 571.

² Reşidüddīn Fazlullāh Hemedanī, *Cāmi’ut-Tevārīh [Compendium of Chronicles]*, 1:421.

³ J. Bayasakh, *Их Монгол Улсын Түүхэнд Холбогдох Хятад Хоёр Сурвалж [Two Chinese Sources Relating to the History of the Great Mongol State]* (Ulaanbaatar, 2006), 158.

⁴ Ebu’l-Gazi Bahadır Han, *Türk’ün Soyagaci Türk Şeceresi Türk’ün Soy Ağacı [The Genealogy of the Turks]*, ed. Rıza Nur and Yunus Yiğit (İstanbul, 2009), 74.

⁵ Luvsandanzan, *Алтан Товч [Altan Tobchi: Golden Summary]*, ed. Sh. Bira (Ulaanbaatar, 1990), 12–13.

man,” thus rendering the name Chinggis as *Tinkiz*. Edward Gibbon, in a work published in 1789, wrote: “Abul Ghazi Khan ought to have known the true name of his ancestors. He gives an etymological explanation: *Zin* in the Mongol language means ‘great,’ while *gis* is an intensifying suffix. By the same reasoning, the sea was also called *Zingis*.”⁶

In his 1905 study of the language of the Moghols of Afghanistan, G. J. Ramstedt similarly proposed that “the name Chinggis means ‘ocean,’ just as the title ‘Dalai’ in Dalai Lama means ocean.” Paul Pelliot, writing in 1923, observed that even before the title Dalai Lama came into use, the chief lamas of Lhasa already employed the Tibetan title *rgya mtsho* (“ocean”). He therefore argued that such a term could plausibly have appeared among the titles and names of the Chinggisids in the thirteenth century. Pelliot further noted that the alternation of *t* and *č* is common in Turkic and Mongolian written languages. As examples, he pointed to the name of Chinggis Khan’s eldest son Jochi, which appears in Turkic as *Tushi* or *Toshi*. He added that, before learning that Ramstedt had already advanced the theory connecting *Chinggis* with *Tenggis*, he himself had independently explained it in the same way in several lectures. In his view, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s rendering of the name as *Tenggis* was therefore not accidental. Expanding this argument further in a 1959 study, Pelliot concluded that “the word *Činggis* may well derive from the Turkic *tāngiz* (‘sea,’ ‘ocean’).”⁷

Osman Turan, in his 1941 article “On the Name Chinggis,” likewise supported the interpretation linking the name with *tenggis*. Referring to the *Jāmi‘ al-Tawārīkh*, he noted that *Chinggis* was explained there as equivalent in meaning to the Khitan title *Gür Khan*. Yet, according to Turan, the element *gür* in *Gür Khan* corresponds to the Turkic and Uyghur title element *köl*, meaning “lake” or “sea,” as found in titles such as *Köl Bilge* and *Köl Irkin*. On this basis, he reasoned that *Chinggis* may likewise have carried the meaning of “sea” or “ocean.”⁸

Among Mongolian scholars, Ts. Damdinsüren accepted this interpretation and, in his 1947 translation of *The Secret History of the Mongols*, remarked that “Chinggis Khan probably means Oceanic Khan or Sea Khan.” Sh. Gaadamba similarly regarded Damdinsüren’s explanation as the most convincing, arguing that the initial *t* could have shifted to *č*, while the vowel *e* transformed into *i*. He further suggested that the later title “Dalai Khan,” applied to the Great Khans of the Mongol Empire, may indicate that the original meaning of *Chinggis* as “sea/ocean” had faded, leading to its replacement with the more transparent term *dalai* (“ocean”).⁹ The Inner Mongolian scholar Shonkhor also endorsed this view, stating that the name *Chinggis Khan* meant “Oceanic Khan” or “Lord of the Ocean,” corresponding precisely with the inscription found upon the state jade seal used by Chinggis Khan and later transmitted to Ögedei and Güyük: “Decree of the Oceanic Khan of the Great Mongol State.”¹⁰

More recently, in 2022, Ts. Önörbayar revisited the issue in a conference presentation examining whether *Chinggis* was originally a personal name or a title. He explored the interrelationship between the words *tenger* (“heaven”), *tenggis* (“ocean”), and *Chinggis* from the perspectives of etymology and nomadic cosmology. According to his interpretation, the name *Chinggis* emerged through phonetic transformation and euphonization from an archaic root connected to *tenger*. He concluded that the name embodied symbolic meanings associated with “the supreme power of Heaven” and “the vast and profound nature of the Ocean.”¹¹

Although many scholars have supported the *Chinggis* ~ *Tenggis* interpretation, others have expressed considerable skepticism. B. Ya. Vladimirtsov criticized the theory on the grounds that *The Secret History of the Mongols* uses the words *Chinggis* and *tenggis* side by side, which in his view casts

⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1789), 7:3.

⁷ Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo* (Paris, 1959), 1:301.

⁸ Osman Turan, “Çingiz Adı Hakkında [on the Name Chinggis],” *Belleten [Bulletin of the Turkish Historical Society]* (Ankara) 19 (1941): 267–76.

⁹ Sh. Gaadamba, *Монголын Нууц Товчоон [The Secret History of the Mongols]* (Ulaanbaatar, 1990), 222.

¹⁰ Shonkhor, “‘Чингис’ Хэмээх Нэрийн Тухай [On the Name ‘Chinggis’],” in *Чингис Хааны Тухай Судалсан Өгүүллийн Түүвэр [Collection of Studies on Chinggis Khan]*, ed. P. Tumurbuu (Ordos, 2005), 517.

¹¹ Ts. Unurbayan, “Чингис Нэрийн Судлалд Нэмэрлэх Санал [Proposals Contributing to the Study of the Name Chinggis],” in *Чингис Хааны Ертөнц Ба Монгол Судлал: Олон Улсын Эрдэм Шинжилгээний Хурлын Эмхэтгэл [The World of Chinggis Khan and Mongol Studies: Proceedings of the International Academic Conference]* (Ulaanbaatar, 2022), 2:112–17.

doubt on their equivalence, a criticism noted by Pelliot.¹² The Hungarian scholar L. Ligeti likewise raised several objections. If *Chinggis* truly derived from *tenggis*, he asked, why do the famous lakes appearing in early Mongol origin legends already contain the word *tenggis* in their names? Why does chapter 63 of the *Yuan Shi*, the official dynastic history of the Mongols, render the Caspian Sea as *K'uan-tengiz*? Ligeti further observed that forms such as *tengez* already appear in Kirakos from the thirteenth century onward. Moreover, if *činggis* represented a Mongolian form derived from *tengiz* through a *t-č* sound shift, why should one not also posit a *z-r* alternation, connecting it instead with the Hungarian word *tenger* (“sea”)? Without satisfactory answers to these questions, Ligeti argued, the derivation could not be regarded as convincing.¹³

Indeed, the existence of the ordinary Mongolian word *tenggis* raises an important problem: if such a word already existed, why would there have been any need to create or adopt another form, *Chinggis*, carrying essentially the same meaning? Furthermore, in the extant corpus of Mongolian historical sources familiar to us today, the word *chinggis* itself never appears independently with the meaning “sea” or “ocean.” This absence further underscores the uncertainty surrounding the theory.

3. Heavenly and Shamanic Interpretations

The Buryat scholar D. Banzarov proposed an interpretation linking the name *Chinggis* to both the title of the ancient Xiongnu *shan-yu* and the shamanic heavenly spirit known as “Khajir Chinggis Tengri.” He wrote:

I believe that Temüjin restored the title *Tchen-yu* borne by the great rulers of the Xiongnu according to its Northern Chinese pronunciation *shan-yu* (the rulers who governed all Mongolia between 214 BCE and 93 CE). Chinese official histories explain this title as being equivalent in meaning to “khan,” while also specifically describing the Xiongnu rulers as *tengri-qubu*, that is, “sons of Heaven.” However, among the heavenly beings of Mongolian shamanism I have discovered “Khajir Chinggis Tengri” (“Son of Heaven”). Since the Chinese sources interpret the title *Tchen-yu* (Chinggis) through the Mongolian expression *tengri-qubun*, it is possible, without pursuing the etymology of the word *Chinggis* itself, to regard it simply as equivalent to the title “Son of Heaven” or “Emperor”.¹⁴

Concerning this explanation and especially the reference to “Khajir Chinggis Tengri,” Paul Pelliot quite reasonably observed that “it is exceedingly difficult to examine critically a name encountered only ambiguously in a manuscript of uncertain date and origin.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, the proposal connecting the name with shamanic heavenly spirits received considerable support among Inner Mongolian scholars. In a 1981 article, the researcher G. Buyanbat argued that the word *Chinggis* originally conveyed meanings such as “truthful,” “faithful,” and “orderly,” and that it ultimately derived from ancient Mongolian shamanic religion.¹⁶ In a 1985 study, J. Vanjil suggested that the term *Chinggis* had once functioned as a general designation for all heavenly beings, but that, as shamanic worship later differentiated the many heavens, it eventually became associated specifically with the supreme “Eternal Heaven.” According to his interpretation, the term carried the meaning of a divine “Heaven” possessing the power to govern, command, and order all things.¹⁷

The Inner Mongolian scholar Seedennamjil likewise connected the name *Chinggis* with Heaven, proposing that “Chinggis Khan” could be understood either as a ruler belonging to the celestial order of

¹² Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, 1:299.

¹³ Turan, “Çingiz Adı Hakkında [on the Name Chinggis],” 271.

¹⁴ D. Banzarov, *Черная Вера Или Шаманство У Монголов И Другие Статьи Дорджи Банзарова [The Black Faith or Shamanism among the Mongols and Other Articles by Dorji Banzarov]* (St. Petersburg, 1891), 78.

¹⁵ Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, 1:302.

¹⁶ G. Buyanbat, “‘Чингис’ Гэдэг Үгийн Учир [On the Meaning of the Word ‘Chinggis’],” in *Чингис Хааны Тухай Судалсан Өгүүллийн Түүвэр [Collection of Studies on Chinggis Khan]* (Ordos, 2005), 159.

¹⁷ Vanjil, “‘Чингис’ Гэдэг Үгийн Тухай [On the Word ‘Chinggis’],” *Bulletin* (Ulaanbaatar) 2, no. 24 (1999): 34.

the Eternal Blue Heaven or as a khan appointed by the Blue Heaven itself.¹⁸ In a 2022 conference presentation, A. Ochir further argued that place names containing *Chinggis* were associated with shamanic traditions and asserted the existence of a shamanic deity bearing the name “Chinggis.” Thus, interpretations linking the name *Chinggis* with one or another heavenly being of Mongolian shamanism have continued to appear.¹⁹

Yet there remains a significant difficulty with such explanations. After the passing of the Chinggis Khan, the descendants of the Golden Lineage began to venerate him through heavenly rites, and over time formal systems of ritual offering, liturgical recitation, and sacrificial practice developed into what may be termed a distinct “Cult of Chinggis.” It is therefore highly probable that names such as “Khajir Chinggis Tengri” or “Chinggis Tengri,” encountered in later shamanic literature, emerged only after 1227 in connection with this Chinggisid cultic tradition. Consequently, such names cannot reliably serve as primary evidence for explaining the original meaning or etymology of the name *Chinggis*.

4. Alternative Philological Interpretations

Building upon D. Banzarov’s proposal that the titles *shan-yu* and *Chinggis* were related, J. Ganbold later developed the argument further. He noted that the title of the Xiongnu rulers was recorded in Chinese dictionaries not with the pronunciation *shan-yu*, but rather closer to *chan-yu*. Referring to the reconstructed pronunciations of ancient Chinese characters in the dictionary of Bernhard Karlgren, Ganbold observed that the relevant character during the Han period—that is, in the era of the Xiongnu—was pronounced *Tangiwo*. According to him, this pronunciation bears a certain resemblance to the ancient form of the word *Chinggis*. After examining both the usage and semantic meaning of the title *shan-yu*, he concluded that “the word *shan-yu*, both in terms of pronunciation and in the meanings associated with its historical usage, may well have been the same word as *Chinggis*.”²⁰

In 1990, B. Dorj advanced another noteworthy interpretation, arguing that *Chinggis* was a Mongolian word meaning “faithful lord” or “truthful man”.²¹ He divided the term into the components *čin* + *gis*. According to his explanation, the root *čin* survives across Mongolic, Manchu, and Turkic languages with meanings such as “true,” “correct,” “noble,” “central,” and “pure.” For example, in Mongolian, *čin* conveys the sense of “true” or “genuine”; in Manchu, the word *kin* or *čin* similarly means “true” and “noble.” In Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tuvan, and Old Turkic, forms such as *šin*, *čin*, and *şyn* are likewise pronounced *čin* and carry meanings including “truth,” “nobility,” “purity,” “essential,” “important,” “firm,” and “strong.”

While this aspect of his argument is persuasive, his explanation of the suffix *-gis* is more problematic. Dorj argued that *gis* or *kis* was an ancient Mongolian word meaning “person,” which had gradually disappeared over the course of linguistic development and had fallen out of the modern Mongolian lexicon. On this basis, he interpreted the name *Chinggis* as meaning “true man,” “genuine man,” “noble man,” “rare and precious man,” “faithful man,” or “upright man.”

D. Tserensodnom proposed another interpretation linking the name *Chinggis* with the words *chingil*, *chinggis*, and *chingir* found in fire-offering liturgies, epic traditions, and other monuments of Mongolian oral literature. According to him, the terms “*Chingil–Chingin–Chingir–Chengker–Chinggis*” occurring in Mongolian oral and written traditions share a common root with the Classical Written Mongolian word *čilagu* (“stone”) and represent an ancient lineage of honorific and exalted *erkhin* titles.²² This proposal deserves more extensive and careful examination. Yet, since the roots of

¹⁸ Seedennamjil, “‘Чингис’ Гэдэг Цолын Тухай Шинэ Үзэлт [A New Perspective on the Title ‘Chinggis’],” in *Чингис Хааны Тухай Судалсан Өгүүллийн Түүвэр* [Collection of Studies on Chinggis Khan], ed. P. Tumurbuu (Ordos, 2005), 526.

¹⁹ A. Ochir, “Чингис Нэрийн Учирт [On the Meaning of the Name Chinggis],” in *Чингис Хааны Ертөнц Ба Монгол Судлал: Олон Улсын Эрдэм Шинжилгээний Хурлын Эмхэтгэл* [The World of Chinggis Khan and Mongol Studies: Proceedings of the International Academic Conference] (Ulaanbaatar, 2022), 2:102–4.

²⁰ J. Ganbold, “Чингис, Шаньюй Нэрийн Тухайд [On the Names Chinggis and Shanyu],” *Түүхийн Судлал* [Historical Studies] 26 (1992): 94.

²¹ B. Dorj, “‘Чингис’ хэмээх цолын утгыг тодруулах нь [Clarifying the Meaning of the Title ‘Chinggis’],” *Mongolica: An International Annual of Mongol Studies* 1 (22) (1990): 47.

²² D. Tserensodnom, *Монголын Нууц Товчоон* [The Secret History of the Mongols] (Ulaanbaatar, 2000), 246–54; D. Tserensodnom, “‘Чингис’ Нэрийн Тухай [On the Name ‘Chinggis’],” in *Чингис Хааны Тухай Судалсан Өгүүллийн Түүвэр* [Collection of Studies on Chinggis Khan] (Ordos, 2005), 876–79.

the words *chingil*, *chinggis*, and *chingir* are likewise connected with the term *čin*, carrying meanings such as “firm,” “steadfast,” and “true,” the general semantic sense ultimately remains close to the interpretation already suggested by Rashīd al-Dīn.

The Inner Mongolian scholar Bayankhishig argued that the name was composed of two elements: *Ching* + *is*. In Oirat oral dialects, strongly fermented airag is reportedly called *Chinggis tsegee* or *Chinggis airag*; a river descending from the mountains with a powerful current is termed *Chinggis us* (“Chinggis water”); iron repeatedly heated and hammered in blazing fire is referred to as *Chinggis tumur* (“Chinggis iron”); and a shaman possessing extraordinary spiritual depth and ability is called a *Chinggis böö* (“Chinggis shaman”). On the basis of these examples, Bayankhishig interpreted the name *Chinggis* as meaning “hardened,” “strengthened,” or “empowered.”²³

S. Ölziibayar, meanwhile, connected the name with the Mongolian word *chigin*, proposing the derivation *chigin* + *s* = *chigings* /*Chinggis*/. Ölziibayar argued that such a form could naturally have simplified phonetically into *Chinggis*. Semantically, he interpreted the term as signifying “the whitest among the white, the highest among the highest,” or alternatively “the supreme prince among khans.”²⁴

S. Mönkhsaikhān analyzed the title structurally as *čing* + *gi* + *s*, arguing that the name *Chinggis* derived from the word *chingir* appearing in the concluding section of the scripture *Banzragch*.²⁵ The word *chingir*, according to her interpretation, may itself be divided into *čing* + *gi* + *r*. She further associated the root *čin-* with the expression *chinggültügt šaa* found in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, interpreting it as carrying the meaning “bronze” or “bronze-colored.” The suffix *-gi*, in her analysis, functions as a derivational ending forming adjectives denoting possession of a particular quality. Thus, *chingir* would mean “bronze-like.” Referring to the concluding commentary of the *Banzragch* scripture, Mönkhsaikhān argued that the text describes how one who overcame “strong men firm as bronze cliffs” came to bear the name *Chinggis*—that is, because he defeated the mighty and became the strongest among them, he was given the title *Chinggis*.²⁶

The scholar I. J. Schmidt supported the opinion of Antoine Gaubil—one of the earliest European missionaries to reside in Qing China—that “this word does not express any meaning in the Mongolian language.” At the same time, Schmidt maintained that although *Tsching* was indeed a Mongolian word, it did not mean “powerful,” but rather “firm,” “steadfast,” or “immovable.” As an example, he cited the expression *tsching bischirel* (“true faith” or “steadfast devotion”).²⁷ Antoine Gaubil himself had lived in Beijing between 1722 and 1759 as a European religious envoy.

Gaubil’s suggestion that *Chinggis* carried no inherent meaning in Mongolian was later supported by J. Gerelbadrakh, who argued that “in many historical sources of Mongolia, the title Chinggis is said to have been bestowed according to the cry of a bird, and thus Schmidt’s view that it bore no specific semantic meaning may well contain an element of truth.” He further suggested that “the Mongols symbolically transformed the sound uttered by a heavenly messenger bird descending to the earth—‘ching gis, ching gis’—into a royal title; therefore, all attempts to explain the semantic meaning of the word ultimately remain unconvincing.”²⁸

²³ Bayankhishig, “‘Чингис’ Гэх Үгийн Учир [On the Meaning of the Word ‘Chinggis’],” in *Чингис Хааны Тухай Судалсан Өгүүллийн Түүвэр [Collection of Studies on Chinggis Khan]*, ed. P. Tumurbuu (Ordos, 2005), 814–15.

²⁴ S. Ölziibayar, “Чигин хийгээд Чингис нэрийн учир [On the names Chigin and Chinggis],” *Түүхийн Судлал [Historical Studies]* (Ulaanbaatar) 43, no. 5 (2015): 85.

²⁵ Having brought low the foremost among those who stood equal, firm as bronze cliffs
And having made one kneel at his feet through sheer force
After causing them to be worshipped through that same power
His glory became known throughout the world as Chinggis Khan.

S. Munkhsaikhān, “Банзрагч”-ийн Төгсгөлийн Үг [*The Colophon of the “Banzragch Sutra”*] (Ulaanbaatar, 2011), 105.

²⁶ S. Munkhsaikhān, “Монголын Нууц Товчоо”-ны утга зүй, соёл, сэтгэлгээ [*The Meaning, Culture, and Cognitive Thinking of the Secret History of the Mongols*] (Ulaanbaatar, 2023), 139.

²⁷ I. J. Schmidt, *Geschichte Der Ost-Mongolen Und Ihres Fürstenhauses [History of the Eastern Mongols and Their Royal House]* (Petersburg, 1829), 379.

²⁸ J. Gerelbadrakh, *Дунд Үеийн Монголчуудын нэр, хоч, цол [Names, Nicknames, and Titles of Medieval Mongolians]* (Ulaanbaatar, 2020), 136.

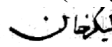
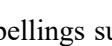
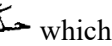
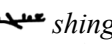
Yet such an interpretation raises significant difficulties. Neither among the Mongols nor within the broader political traditions of the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia did there exist a custom of bestowing royal names or titles solely on the basis of omens, sounds, or accidental occurrences. On the contrary, historical evidence demonstrates that rulers customarily received exalted names and titles endowed with clear symbolic and political meaning rooted in established state traditions. *Chinggis* was not only an ancient traditional name, but also an honorific title preserved and reused by later Mongols. In Mongolian history there were, in fact, four rulers who bore the title “Chinggis Khan”:

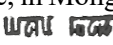
1. Bodonchar Chinggis Khan
2. Temüjin Chinggis Khan
3. Ligdan Chinggis Khan
4. Lkhavsan Chinggis Khan²⁹

For this reason, the imperial title *Chinggis* must undoubtedly be understood as a meaningful and semantically significant term within the Mongolian language.

5. The Medieval Usage of the Root *Čing*

It was a titular name bestowed upon Temüjin when he was elevated as ruler of the Mongol state. *The Secret History of the Mongols* states: *temüjin-i cinggis-qahan ke'en nereyi[t]cū qan bolqaba*³⁰ — “They named Temüjin ‘Chinggis Khan’ and enthroned him as khan.” Let us therefore attempt to examine the usage of the root *čing* in medieval sources and, on that basis, propose our own interpretation.

In the inscription on the Chinggis Stone, the title is written as  *Činggis*,³¹ while in *The Secret History of the Mongols* it appears in Chinese transcription as 成吉思 (*Činggis*). In the *Altan Tobchi* of Lubsangdanzan, it is written in Mongolian script as  (*Činggis*).³² Persian sources record the name in forms such as  *Činggis Han* and  *Jinggiz Han*, while many manuscripts also preserve spellings such as  and  which lack distinguishing diacritical marks.³³ Armenian-language sources render the title as  *shingiz khan*.³⁴ In the genealogical work *Shu'ab-i Panjgāna*, the name appears in Mongolian script as 

Činggis Qan, while in Arabic script it is written  *Jinggiz Han* (شعاب پنجگانه *Šu'āb Pancgane*, Kazan, 2016). Meanwhile, in Mongolian monuments written in the 'Phags-pa script, the name frequently appears in forms such as  *Jin-gis*.³⁵

As noted earlier, the clearest explanation of the name *Činggis* was preserved by Rashīd al-Dīn. He provided two separate discussions concerning both the structure and meaning of the title. These read as follows:

خدای تعالی فرموده است که لقب تو چینگیز خان باشد، چه چینگیز جمع چینگ است و چنگیزی ثنای مبالغه چینگ. پس مراد از لفظ، شهنشاه، شاه شاهان باشد

“The Exalted God decreed that your title should be Chinggis Khan (چینگیز خان *Činggis Han*), for

²⁹ B. Natsagdorj, “Монголын түүхэнд хэдэн Чингис Хаан байсан бэ? [How many Chinggis Khans were there in mongolian history?],” in *Монголын Нууц Товчоон Судлал [Studies on the Secret History of the Mongols]* (Ulaanbaatar, 2020), 196.

³⁰ Igor de Rachewiltz, *Index to the Secret History of the Mongols* (Bloomington, 1972), 52.

³¹ B. Tuvshintugs, *Чингисийн чулууны бичгийн судалгаа [Studies on the Stone Inscription of Chinggis]* (Ulaanbaatar, 2021).

³² Luvsandanzan, *Алтан Товч [Altan Tobchi: Golden Summary]*, 13.

³³ Reşidüddin Fazlullāh Hemedānī, *Cāmi'ut-Tevārih [Compendium of Chronicles]*, 1:287. Судрын чуулганы Истанбулын уг эхэд тус нэрийг хэдэн янзаар бичсэн боловч тодорхойгоор *Činggiz hān* хэмээн бичсэн байдаг бол Судрын чуулганы Парисын эхэд ихэвчлэн *Jinggiz hān* хэмээн бичсэн байдаг.

³⁴ E. Khaliun, *Абу'л Фараж Бар Эброеогийн Сири Он Дарааллын Бичиг-т Монголчуудын Тухай [On the Mongols in the Syriac Chronicle of Abu'l Faraj Bar Hebraeus]* (Ulaanbaatar, 2020), 91.

³⁵ N. N. Poppe, *Дөрвөлжин Бичиг [The Phags-Pa Script]*, trans. Kh. Luvsanvandan (Ulaanbaatar, 2019), 62–72.

Chinggis is the plural form of *ching*. *Čingzi* (چنگزی Čingzi) is an intensive form of *čing* (چینگ Čing). Thus, the intended meaning of the word is ‘Shah of Shahs’ or ‘King of Kings.’³⁶

و معنی چینگ قوی و سخت باشد، و چینگیز جمع آن است، مانند گور خان که لقب پادشاهان بزرگ قرا ختای بوده، یعنی پادشاه قوی و معظم

“The meaning of *Čing* (چینگ Čing) is ‘strong’ and ‘firm,’ and *Činggiz* (چینگیز Činggiz) is its plural form. In other words, like the title *Gür Khan* borne by the great rulers of the Qara Khitai, it signifies a powerful.”³⁷

In these passages, the title *Chinggis* is analyzed as consisting of the elements چینگ (*čing*) + گیز (*giz/gis*), and its meaning is explained accordingly. In the first account, the expressions شهنشاه (*šahanshah*), meaning “Great Khan” or “King of Kings,” and شاه شاهان (*šah-i šahan*), “Shah of Shahs,” are used to interpret the title. The second explanation, however, is more precise. In addition to comparing the title with the Qara Khitai appellation *Gür Khan*, Rashīd al-Dīn further defines the semantic range of the root *čing* through several key terms:

1. قوی (*qavī*) — an Arabic word meaning “strong” or “powerful.”
2. سخت (*sakht*) — a Persian word meaning “hard,” “difficult,” “strong,” “firm,” or “unbreakable.”
3. معظم (*mu‘azzam*) — an Arabic word meaning “great,” “grand,” or “magnificent.”

In order to convey the meaning of this title as accurately as possible, Rashīd al-Dīn deliberately juxtaposed both Persian and Arabic terms and further employed comparison with the Qara Khitai title *Gür Khan*. In other words, he was consciously attempting to express the semantic force of the name with precision. From these explanations, it becomes apparent that the Mongolian root *čin-* carried meanings such as “powerful” and “firm.” Since *Chinggis* was understood as a plural or intensified form derived from this root, the title may be interpreted as signifying “the exceedingly powerful,” “the unbreakable and eternal,” or “the great sovereign.”

At the same time, however, it may be observed that Rashīd al-Dīn’s interpretation tends to emphasize the grandeur and magnificence of Chinggis Khan himself, and therefore may not fully preserve the original semantic nuance of the title. For this reason, it is necessary to examine how the word *čing* was actually used in medieval Mongolian sources.

The word *čing* appears once in *The Secret History of the Mongols* with the meaning “faithful,” “trustworthy,” or “reliable,” in the phrase:

*siltesütei ger minu horcin jirin (?) ülü kin bayiju jirüge amu’uluqsan cing setkilten kebte’ül minu*³⁸
“My faithful-hearted companions, who remained with my scattered and endangered household and brought peace to my heart.”

The *Dīwān Luġāt al-Turk* likewise records the word as چن (*čin*) and glosses it as “true” or “correct.” It further provides examples such as چن سوزلار (*čin sözler*) — “true words” or “correct words,” and چن آیدینگ (*čin ayding*) — “you have spoken truly” or “you have spoken correctly.”³⁹ Additional examples include چن کیشی (*čin kiši*) meaning “a truthful person” or “a trustworthy man,”⁴⁰ and چن بütün کیشی (*čin bütün kiši*) meaning “a completely faithful person.”⁴¹ From these usages, one may derive the broader semantic range of “truthful,” “correct,” and “trustworthy.”

³⁶ Reşidüddin Fazlullâh Hemedanî, *Câmi’ut-Tevârih [Compendium of Chronicles]*, 1:571.

³⁷ Reşidüddin Fazlullâh Hemedanî, *Câmi’ut-Tevârih [Compendium of Chronicles]*, 1:421.

³⁸ Rachewiltz, *Index to the Secret History of the Mongols*, 133.

³⁹ Besim Atalay, *Divanü Lûgat-It-Türk Tercümesi [Translation of the Compendium of the Turkic Languages]* (Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1985), 1:339.

⁴⁰ Besim Atalay, *Divanü Lûgat-It-Türk Tercümesi [Translation of the Compendium of the Turkic Languages]* (Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1985), 3:138.

⁴¹ Atalay, *Divanü Lûgat-It-Türk Tercümesi [Translation of the Compendium of the Turkic Languages]*, 1:398.

However, in other surviving monuments of medieval Mongolian, instances where this word appears independently are exceedingly rare. Upon closer examination:

Examples where *čing* appears together with the word “truth” (*ünen*) include:

1. *dege:düs-e oron-u čing ünen-iyē:r küčü öggügsen jerge-yi uqaba:su* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 28).
2. *kümü:n-e čing ünen-iyē:r küčü ögkü* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 61).
3. *suryan čiqulalaqui-a:ča ulam čing ünen-iyē:r taya:laqu-yi suryan ajuyu:i* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 68).

Examples where it occurs together with the word “mind/heart” (*sedkil/setkil*) include:

1. *jirüge amu’uluqsan cing setkilten kehte’ül minu* (Rachewiltz, 1972, p. 133).
2. *Ying sui köbegü:n minü čing sedkil-iyē:r kičiyē:ge:jü* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 16).
3. *Ene metü nadur čing sedkil-iyē:r taqin küčü ögügsen-i* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 16).
4. *Način noyan-a čing sedkil-iyē:r küčü ögčü yabuqsan ajuyu* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 18).
5. *čing sedkil-i inü temdeg-e medejügü* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 19).
6. *kičige:n qatayu:jiju čing sedkil-iyē:r küčü ögügsebe:r* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 19).
7. *tegüs čing aya:li aburi-tu bolju engke sayi:n čay-tur učirajuju:* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 19).

Examples where it appears together with the expression “true heart/mind” (*čing ünen sedkil*) include:

1. *Aburi inu usqal jibqulang čing ünen sedkil-tü böge:tele* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 15).
2. *tabiylaqu taqimdayu: bolqu-yi:n čing ünen sedkil-iyē:n abču qan-daya:n küčü ögtekü* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 71).
3. *Uridus-taya:n čing ünen kündülemtegü: sedkil-iyē:r taqiba:su* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 74).
4. *Sengge aq-a-dača törügsen-ü tula Jütung-ün čing ünen sedkil-tü bükü-yi* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 17).
5. *čing ünen sedkil-[iyē:r] sayi:n üyi:le üyi:ledügsen-ü tula* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 18).
6. *Mön ejen-yüge:n tula čing ünen sedkil-iyē:r ači qariyu:lqu-yi sedkikü inü* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 19).
7. *küčü ögbe:sü čing ünen sedkil bolu kündülekü* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 63).
8. *Čing ünen sedkil joqiday qoyar-i ülü enden* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 64).
9. *čing ünen sedkil-iyē:n üjügü:letele sedkigdekü* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 74).

Examples where it appears together with the word “resolve/will/brave” (*joriy*) include:

1. *čing joriy-[iya:ra:n] beyebe:n ariyu:n-a saqiju sayu:n ajiya:i* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 22).

Examples where it occurs with the expression “true resolve/bravery” (*čing ünen joriy*) include:

1. *čing ünen joriy-iyā:r dege:düs-e ačılan küčü ögküibe:n* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 30).
2. *egenegte čing ünen joriy-iyā:n beye-yi ača:n bolyan erkilejü yabuqu-yi:n tula* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 30).
3. *iregsen-e:če čing ünen joriy üjegdebei* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 158).
4. *čing ünen joriy kü kiy-a jorin soyurqu* (Tumurtogoo, 2006, p. 268).

From these examples, it is evident that in medieval Mongolian the word *čing* was generally used with meanings such as “truthful,” “correct,” and “faithful,” with its primary semantic sense being “true” or “genuine.” Thus, if one follows Rashīd al-Dīn’s structural explanation of the title, the exalted name *Chinggis* bestowed upon the Great Khan may be understood as signifying “most faithful,” “truly sincere,” or “the truest of the true.”

Conclusion: Reconsidering the Meaning of “Chinggis”

When the interpretations surveyed above are considered together, several broader patterns become apparent. Many earlier explanations of the title *Chinggis* relied primarily upon phonetic resemblance or later symbolic traditions. Interpretations connecting the name with *tenggis*, Heaven, shamanic divinities, or the Xiongnu title *shan-yu* each preserve important aspects of the ideological and cosmological world surrounding Mongol rulership. Such theories demonstrate that the title was consistently understood as carrying meanings associated with sacred authority, universal sovereignty, strength, or divine legitimacy. At the same time, however, many of these explanations encounter philological difficulties, particularly when tested against the actual lexical usage of medieval Mongolian sources.

The textual evidence examined in this study suggests that the semantic field of the root *čing* was fundamentally associated with ideas of truthfulness, correctness, sincerity, fidelity, and steadfastness. In both Mongolian and Turkic materials, the word repeatedly appears in ethical and relational contexts rather than as a designation for physical power alone. Expressions such as *čing ünen* (“true and correct”), *čing sedkil* (“faithful heart/mind”), and *čing ünen joriγ* (“true resolve”) consistently point toward moral reliability, sincerity, and constancy as the primary semantic qualities attached to the term.

Within this context, Rashīd al-Dīn’s explanation becomes especially significant. Although his interpretation clearly elevates the grandeur of Chinggis Khan through comparisons such as “King of Kings” and *Gür Khan*, his derivation nevertheless preserves an important underlying semantic tradition. His explanation of *Chinggis* as an intensified or pluralized form of *čing* corresponds closely with the broader lexical evidence found in medieval Inner Asian sources. Rather than signifying merely a “powerful ruler,” the title appears to have denoted a sovereign distinguished by supreme fidelity, sincerity, moral legitimacy, and steadfast reliability.

Accordingly, the exalted name *Chinggis* bestowed upon the Great Khan may be understood as signifying “most faithful,” “truly sincere,” or “the truest of the true.” In this sense, the title expressed not only supreme political authority, but also an ideal of ethical rulership grounded in truth, loyalty, and constancy. The name *Chinggis Khan* therefore functioned not simply as a personal designation, but as an exalted imperial title embodying the moral and ideological qualities expected of universal sovereignty in the medieval Mongol world.

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