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REGRET AS A POLITICAL INTERVENTION: AN ESSAY IN THE HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE EARLY MONGOLS*

Regret may seem an unlikely theme to pursue in relation to politics, and perhaps especially so when we consider the brutal and uncompromising reputation of the Mongols at the time of Chinggis Khan. We would therefore like to start this essay by explaining our theme as an anthropological endeavour. By 'regret' we refer not so much to laments about general states of affairs, but to what has been called 'agent regret':¹ that is, declarations of regret by a particular subject about action he or she has taken. For a contemporary anthropology, study of such expressions opens out the field, suggesting a new kind of insight into political life. This differs from approaches which use the accustomed categories of domination, resistance and cultural strategies, and from those inspired by Foucault's studies of discursive systems. In both of those kinds of analysis, though in different ways, the person who speaks is buried in a socio-cultural practice, or in the system of discourse of which their words form a part. To take regret as a theme, on the other hand, requires us to recentre the agent's judgement in history. Investigation of such expressions involves the attempt not only to account for subjectivities in the context of social moralities in politics but also to explain their 'play' — that is, their engagement and retreat — in respect of the symbolic order.

Studying regret necessitates contemplating both the singular, personal and labile quality of the moment of declaring it — for after all, it is possible not to regret the action — and to consider the social-moral quality of what it is about the act that is felt to

*We are grateful to Stephen Alford, Susan Bayly, John Dunn, Biancamaria Fontana, Martin Holbraad, Simon Keynes, James Laidlaw, and the participants in seminars at Belfast and Oxford Universities, for helpful suggestions and comments on an earlier draft.

¹Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'Agent Regret', in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley and London, 1980); Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980* (Cambridge, 1981), 27–31.

be regrettable. Regret is indubitably reflexive. The subject separates itself into two, seeing itself doing something at another time, and this vision of 'me doing it' is the object of reflection and evaluation. Of course, regret can be self-oriented, an unspoken painful reflection addressed dialogically to oneself alone; and sometimes the wrong that is thought to have been caused is a 'wrong' for that person alone. But when regret is expressed in public, the content of 'what is regrettable' must concern ideas and values that are shared, or at least communicable and understandable. When such regrets are recorded in the historical account of the rise of a dynasty, as in the Mongol case discussed here, we know they must be in some sense politically important too.

The conjuncture posed by regret, the interpenetration of singular reflection on 'what is done' with moral judgements prevailing in historically and culturally specific contexts, suggests interesting ways in which anthropology might contribute to theories of action that argue for the sociality of the subject.² This essay will advance some tentative ideas about early Mongol conceptualizations of action, but its main intention is to pursue certain issues arising in the relation between ethics and politics. Public expressions of regret are similar in some ways to other evaluative assertions such as public reprimand, approval, counsel or forgiveness — all of these enable us to think about what is ethical (indicative of how one ought to live) in situations of power relations.³ Yet regret is particularly significant from the point of view of ethics, though not necessarily simpler than the other situations mentioned, in that it places, albeit in a dialogical situation, the focus on one self-reflective subject.

Several theoretical issues arise when taking regret as a topic, but before discussing them we shall introduce the material that forms the subject of this article. Section I, which characterizes the document that provides the evidence, the thirteenth-century *Secret History of the Mongols*, will thus pose many questions.

² Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast (Cambridge, 1996).

³ In this article we use 'ethical' to refer to any deliberations on the Socratic question 'how ought one to live?', and 'moral' to refer to historically and culturally specific answers to that question: see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985), 174–96; James Laidlaw, 'For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom', *Jl Roy. Anthropological Inst.*, viii, 2 (2002), 317.

Nevertheless, such a sketch of an unfamiliar and complex subject matter is needed, we think, in order to provide some orientation to the reader as to why particular theoretical issues are relevant. The essay will argue that there were resources within early Mongol culture for 'thinking the self', and that the expression of painful reflections on action is one way we can access such reflection. Two central questions arise, which are discussed in the following sections. First, can we (should we) recognize regret in another culture, especially when, as is the case with the thirteenth-century Mongols, there is no indigenous term that corresponds exactly to the English word? And second, given that this article concerns regret in specifically political contexts rather than regret of any kind at all, how are we to think about the relation between the regretful person and historical-political change? The thirteenth century was a time of extraordinary transformation of Mongolian society — it saw the emergence of the centralized political institutions and extended empire of the Chinggisids. Also shifting over time were judgements of what constituted admirable or despicable conduct. In this light we can perceive a transformation of the historical subject as the bearer of these values. It is argued in the next part of the essay, however, that the person who regrets cannot be *identified* analytically with the socially legitimized historical subject, if only because public regret so often seems to have been a recognition of one's inability to live up to new ideals. We hope readers will bear with this somewhat lengthy discussion before reaching the main evidence in the next sections of the article, which analyse five episodes of regret in some detail. These case studies are intended to show the range and subtlety of Mongolian understandings of regret, and also to indicate how both the content and the style of such expressions changed between the pre-Chinggis period and the era after his death when the empire had been firmly established.

I

REGRET IN THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS

The anonymous thirteenth-century *Secret History of the Mongols* is the first, and only extant, lengthy Mongolian document of the period. It was composed soon after the death of Chinggis Khan and then added to later during the reign of his successor, the

Emperor Ögödei.⁴ At this period the Mongols had only recently acquired writing.⁵ The *Secret History* can be seen as an innovative and genuinely Mongolian work, not based on Tibetan, Chinese or Persian ways of writing history, although it was influenced in its language by the Turks, who were the Mongols' predecessors in domination of the steppes.⁶ It has often been praised as one of the great literary works of the world, yet it was not part of an established literary tradition. It was intended as history, that is, the Mongols' understanding of what had actually happened and their consciousness of past events as relevant to the present.⁷ It is therefore not to be seen just as a written version of an oral genre such as the legend, magical tale or heroic epic, though elements of such genres, called 'old sayings', are quoted by actors in the *Secret History*.⁸ Mostly written in bald and matter-of-fact prose first describing ancestors and genealogies, and then dealing with the attacks, defeats, marriage arrangements, alliances, defections, military orders and so forth that led to the establishment of the polity, the *Secret History* also contains reported speech between the main actors. These actors are Temüjin (enthroned as Chinggis Khan in 1206), his father, mother, brothers, wives and sons, his companions, generals and followers, and his enemies. Many of these interlocutions erupt at

⁴ There is a widespread, though not universal, agreement among historians that the urtext of the *Secret History of the Mongols* (*Mongqol-un ni'uca tobč'a'an*) was written down in 1228 by an author (or authors) unknown shortly after the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227. The version known to us and transcribed into Chinese included later additions and alterations, as well as further sections accounting for part of the reign of Chinggis's successor, Ögödei. See Igor de Rachewiltz, 'The Secret History of the Mongols: Some Fundamental Problems', *Bull. Internat. Assoc. Mongolian Studies*, xii, 2 / xiii, 1 (1993–4), 4–6. The *Secret History* (hereafter *SH*, for quotations from the text) consists of 281 sections plus a short colophon stating where it was written and giving a date in the twelve-year lunar cycle, leaving it unclear which cycle was intended. Igor de Rachewiltz's edition, *Index to the Secret History of the Mongols* (Bloomington, 1972), contains 12,011 lines of text.

⁵ The Mongols took over the Uighur script after their defeat in 1204 of the Naimans who used this script: David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, i, *Inner Asia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire* (Oxford, 1998), 398.

⁶ Igor de Rachewiltz, *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 2004), i, pp. xxv–xxvi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. lxix–lxx.

⁸ The opinion of certain earlier writers that the *Secret History* is similar to a heroic epic has been disproved by Veit, who notes the absence in it of the narrative structures, magical episodes and stylistic elements characteristic of the epic genre: Veronika Veit, 'The Secret History: Epic Tale or Early Example of Mongolian Historiography?', *Mongol Sudlalyn Ögüüleeüüd*, i (1998).

times into poetry,⁹ a Mongolian convention of emphasis. They often consist of what we can see as extended reflections on action (such as explanations of why certain acts were meritorious), accusations of treachery, advice about the best course to take, the reasons for a particular decision — and regrets. These regrets do not take the form of apologies, pleas to be forgiven, or vows to compensate or atone for wrongs committed. The righteousness of many modern expressions of apology is absent.¹⁰ Nor can these Mongolian regrets be seen simply as tactical manoeuvres in a game of political reconciliation.¹¹ They are, at one level at least, simple declarations of having got it wrong.

Let us continue to characterize the document in which the regrets are found. Curiously absent in it are what one might expect from a history written at the pinnacle of Mongolian success in conquering the peoples of the steppe and establishing a unified state.¹² Here there are no paeans to victory, no celebrations of war and no unequivocal eulogies of the emperor. The only speech about the wonderfully fearsome character of Temüjin/Chinggis is neither spoken by him nor addressed to him but used as a tactic by one of his allies to frighten off a potential attacker. In the *Secret History* enemies are not excoriated as a category, but are accorded fully human status as people who might otherwise be friends (were it not for certain mistaken decisions by their leaders). Expositions of an overt ideology are altogether absent. Thus, although the known version of the *Secret*

⁹ 'Poetry' here refers to rhymed or alliterative expressions, with frequent use of metaphor and sometimes also employing metre. Verses in Mongolian rhyme at the beginning of the line.

¹⁰ Marina Warner, 'Who's Sorry Now? What Apology Means in the Modern World', *Times Lit. Suppl.*, 1 Aug. 2003.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London, 2001).

¹² Historians disagree on the question of whether the institutions set up by Chinggis Khan should be termed a 'state'. Skrynnikova summarizes the opinion of certain Russian scholars, according to whom the defining characteristics of statehood (territoriality, a taxation system, an apparatus of government, and established rules for dealing with dissent, defection and succession to office) were absent during Chinggis's lifetime: T. D. Skrynnikova, *Kharizma i vlast' v epokhu Chingis-Khana* [Charisma and Power in the Epoch of Chinggis Khan] (Moscow, 1997), 29–41. The Mongolian historian Sh. Bira on the other hand argues that the institutions of the consultative assembly, the imperial guard, the use of writing, and the establishing of a written law code and specialized governmental posts did constitute statehood: Sh. Bira, '“The Secret History” of Chinggis Khan and his State', in his *Mongolyn Tüüh, Soyol, Tüüh Bichlegiin Sudalгаа* [Studies in Mongol History, Culture and Historiography] (Ulaanbaatar, 2001).

History is not a transparent document — it is an edited version of a previous text, now lost,¹³ it omits certain events known from Chinese and other histories to have been important to the Mongols, and it takes an emollient line towards certain of Chinggis's actions¹⁴ — it is nevertheless far from the type of dynastic history that provides a univocal legitimizing account of the rise of the state. With its unreliable chronology, disparate story lines, many inconsistencies, and inclusion of countless sharp and strange (because seemingly irrelevant) details, the *Secret History* is close to, even implicated in, the events it describes. It provides, in effect, space for the expression of heterogeneous ideas. Its lack of closure as the discursive document of a settled language of politics¹⁵ is indicated by the fact that its vocabulary changes in significant ways as it progresses. Above all, it is not an unequivocal hagiography. Even the great founder, Temüjin/Chinggis, is not excepted from the tendency of the authors to record blameworthy acts, and he is depicted as often afraid, sometimes committing wrongful actions, making mistakes, accepting criticism and changing his mind. This characteristic of the chronicle is widely accepted as one central reason why it was called the *secret* history and was kept for the eyes of the Mongol elite alone.¹⁶ The very last paragraph consists of the

¹³ The *Secret History* is in the Mongolian language but the only extant version was transcribed sometime in the fourteenth century into Chinese characters, with Chinese interlinear glosses. What happened to the original in the Uighur script is not known, but it must have survived for some time since much of it is incorporated word for word in Mongolian chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. C. R. Bawden, *Mongolian Traditional Literature: An Anthology* (London, 2003), p. xvi.

¹⁴ This is known through comparison with Chinese histories and because the Persian historian Rashid al-Din seems to have used the lost, undoctored, Uighur script version when writing his history of the Mongols: de Rachewiltz, 'Secret History of the Mongols', 4–6; Bawden, *Mongolian Traditional Literature*, pp. xvi–xix; de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, ii, 757; Rashid-Ad-Din, *Sbornik letopisei* [Collection of Chronicles], i, bk 2, ed. A. A. Semenov, trans. O. I. Smirnova (Moscow and Leningrad, 1952).

¹⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London, 1971).

¹⁶ Besides the linguistic hindrance (Chinese) to easy reading, suggesting that the *Secret History* was not intended to convince large numbers of people, it seems that access to the text was restricted for decades. For example, Yü Chi, a high scholar-official and personal adviser to several Mongolian emperors in the early fourteenth century, requested permission — unsuccessfully because he was Chinese — to see the *Mongghul-un tobchiyan* ('History of the Mongols', presumably the *Secret History*). This was despite the fact that the reason he wished to consult the history was that he was engaged in compiling the *Great Canon for Governing the World* on behalf of the last

regrets of Ögödei Khan, Chinggis's successor, for four wrongs he had committed during his reign.

The Mongols at the time of the rise of Temüjin were a relatively small group among the peoples of the steppe. They were acquainted with Daoism, Confucianist thought, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity and Islam, but they adhered to none of these religions. Their own beliefs included the idea of 'souls' of humans and animals, which would persist after death as ancestral and other spirits. A complex concept of the Sky (*tenggeri*) is particularly important in the *Secret History*, appearing as the atmospheric sky, as a cosmic consciousness regulating the destinies of all beings, and as a deity-like male principle paired with the Earth as female and mother. But Sky-given destiny was not advanced by the Mongols at this period as the sole, or even the primary, cause of their success.¹⁷ *Tenggeri* is regularly mentioned by Chinggis as merely 'increasing my strength'¹⁸ — an expression also used for the peoples who submitted and joined his side. Chinggis's empire was seen primarily as a human achievement. When he had conquered the major polities of the steppe and was enthroned as emperor, Chinggis did not thank

(n. 16 cont.)

Mongol emperor of the Yuan Dynasty, Togon Temür. See John D. Langlois, 'Yü Chi and his Mongol Sovereign: The Scholar as Apologist', *Jl Asian Studies*, xxxvii, 1 (1978), 109.

¹⁷ Beffa and Hamayon provide a detailed argument against the idea that the Mongols from the start saw themselves as decreed by a supreme god (Heaven) to rule the world: see M.-L. Beffa and R. Hamayon, 'The Concept of *tänggäri* in the *Secret History of the Mongols*', in Sh. Bira (ed.), *'Mongolyn Nuuts Tovchoo'-ny 750 jilin oid zoriulsan olon ulsyn бага hural* [International Conference Dedicated to the 750th Anniversary of the *Secret History of the Mongols*], i (Ulaanbaatar, 1995). 'Heaven', the authors point out, is in any case a misleading translation. *Tenggeri* is far from the only cosmic/spiritual entity given worship in the *Secret History*, and crucially is not involved in either the attainment of khanship or in succession to the throne. Beffa and Hamayon point to an evolution of use of the idea of *tenggeri* in the *Secret History*, the formula 'eternal sky' as distinct from 'sky and earth' taking on more influence as the empire was consolidated (*ibid.*, 190). Cf. de Rachewiltz, who argues that Chinese political notions (for example the 'son of Heaven') were well known to the earliest Mongols. Thus, 'when Temüjin as a tribal leader aspired to become a world ruler he was bound to adopt a political doctrine that could explain and at the same time foster his aspiration to world leadership'. Igor de Rachewiltz, 'Some Remarks on the Ideological Foundations of Chinggis Khan's Empire', *Papers on Far Eastern History*, vii (1973), 31; see also Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, ed. and trans. Thomas Nivison Haining (Oxford, 1991), 159. What is clear is that the Mongols' claim to world supremacy evolved and became a standard formula only later, during the reign of Guyuk Khan (1242–8).

¹⁸ *SH*, §199, §208, §260, §267.

tenggeri. Instead he said he wished to bestow favours on 'those of you who have served together in establishing this nation',¹⁹ and then gave a long list of all those individuals, in some cases with elaborate citations of their devotion and loyalty. In the light of this human, relational understanding of the polity it would be mistaken for us to perceive people's acknowledgement of their wrong actions only in terms of religiously defined 'sins' (unlike, for example, the case of the early medieval Carolingian rulers who sought pardon in imitation of Christ's humility).²⁰ The regrets we describe refer almost exclusively to failures in human relationships.

Of course, studying regret in a historical context introduces limitations and complexities that would not occur in an anthropological field situation. In the *Secret History* we have access only to representations of regret, not to actual declarations in living contexts. Nevertheless, this study is worthwhile because it can throw light on something that is still somewhat mysterious: *Mongolian* reflections on political morality. Whatever its evident defects as factual history, it is only in this curious historical work, written by Mongols for Mongols, that we can gain some understanding — patchy, it is true — of what were internally plausible depictions of psychology at important moments of political life.

The *Secret History* contains at least ten episodes that depict what we can understand as regret. The persons expressing regret include Temüjin/Chinggis himself, his ancestor Ambaqai Khan, his erstwhile close allies Ong Khan and Jamuqa, his enemy Chilger, and his sons Cha'adai and Ögödei. The declarations of regret by Chilger, Ong Khan and Jamuqa are in the form of long speeches containing poeticized passages, and they provide some of the main material for analysis later in this article. Here we provide one initial example that illustrates some of the important points about how regret is depicted. Regret proceeds from the actions of individual persons, it concerns social relationships, and it refers to general moral values, from which no one, even the supreme ruler, is exempt. In this particular example, regret is made apparent not so much by speech as by its

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §202.

²⁰ Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca and London, 1992), 168–9.

physical effects, when Chinggis is reduced to tears on being forced to realize the immorality of his attack on his father's brother, Da'arитай.

Chinggis ordered the killing of Da'arитай for having joined the enemy Kereit. But when he did this he was strongly criticized by three of his commanders. To quote the *Secret History*, they said that this action would be:

'Like extinguishing one's own hearth-fire

Like destroying one's own family

As a legacy of your good father, only your paternal uncle is left. How can you make away with him? He did not understand, so do not do it. Allow the youngest brother of your good father, together with his people, to have the smoke of their camp swirl up'. And they spoke with him like this until

He sobbed so much it was as if

He had smoke in his nose.

'Let it be', he said, and mindful of his good father, he became quiet.²¹

This episode is the culmination of a number of other interactions between Chinggis and Da'arитай, when the uncle had disobeyed the khan's instructions on booty, conspired against him, and was disbarred from the great council. Although Da'arитай had then supported Chinggis in another war, this latest joining up with the enemy Kereit was unbearable. In the light of such disobedience and treachery Chinggis's judgement of his action (the order to kill Da'arитай) is intended to be understood as a devastating clash of values. His change of mind and his regret are explained by a countervailing set of memories and emotions — those concerned with his father, who died when Temüjin/Chinggis was still a boy. It may well be that this episode was intended by the author to depict the ruler's magnanimity,²² yet the psychology had to be convincing to Mongolian readers. Even in this briefest of episodes we see that regret involved the individual's engagement with his recollections and his sense of what would (now, for him) be worthy conduct.

²¹ *SH*, §242; de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, i, 167; Urgunge Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan (The Secret History of the Mongols)* (Leiden, 1990), 135. We have used the Mongolian text for all translations given in this article. References are given to other translations that have influenced the rendering we provide. In this passage we have translated *ger* (lit. 'tent', 'yurt') in its extended meaning as 'family'.

²² The episode may not even have happened. According to Rashid al-Din, Chinggis executed his uncle Da'arитай in 1204 (Rashid-Ad-Din, *Sbornik letopisei*, ed. Semenov, 47-8); for discussion, see de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, ii, 652.

Let us now outline something of the discursive context in which regret is made apparent. The *Secret History* also contains episodes depicting intense shame, but in the end no regret. Chinggis had been informed that his younger brother Qasar had designs on the throne. Angry, he went to Qasar's camp to confront him. But alerted to the attack, their mother Hö'elun arrived in a fury. Chinggis was frightened of her. Mother Hö'elun released Qasar and sat cross-legged before her sons. She took out both her breasts, laid them over her knees and said: 'Have you seen them? These are the breasts that gave you suck'. After a harangue about the complementary prowess of the two sons and making liberal use of old sayings, she mocked Chinggis for being able to finish off all his enemies but unable to bear the sight of his own brother. Chinggis was reduced to replying, 'I am afraid, I am ashamed. Let us withdraw'. But when he returned home, unknown to Mother Hö'elun, he covertly removed most of Qasar's subjects, leaving him with only 1,400 people. When she found out about this she went into a premature decline.²³

Then there is an episode that depicts the forced admission of fault. Going to the hostile confederation of the Qongqotan to retrieve his defecting subjects, another of Chinggis's younger brothers is threatened and made to kneel down, admit he was in the wrong, and 'repent' (*namanchilan*). He returns early next morning to Chinggis's tent, where the ruler and his wife are still in bed, and weeps as he describes his humiliation. It is evident from the context, and the outraged response of Chinggis's wife Börte, that *namanchilan*²⁴ here represents a ritual response, not subjectively felt contrition. The point here, as will be discussed further later, is that regret as it is depicted in the *Secret History* is not a ritual (that is, an action that may be performed adequately whatever one's emotions), but a declaration of a perceived compunction.

It is impossible in a short essay to examine all the episodes in the *Secret History* that relate to our theme. But we hope to have conveyed a flavour of the text, and also to have shown that it contains a diverse range of episodes within which one may discern

²³ SH, §244; Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan*, 136–7.

²⁴ SH, §245. The root of this word, *nam*, means 'lowness' and 'silence', which suggests that the ritual was intended to demonstrate subjugation as well as culpability.

the ways whereby the authors intended to convey the idea we call 'regret'.

II

STUDYING REGRET

Taking an example very distant in culture, time and place has many disadvantages in terms of our ability, with limited materials, correctly to interpret what is going on. But such a case does cast into very strong relief two issues that have to be addressed in taking regret as a topic. Put baldly: can we recognize 'regret', and if we do, how should we conceptualize the agent or subject who does the regretting? Very broadly, philosophers who have written on this sort of idea (as different from one another as Montaigne, Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum) have assumed that to regret is human and that we (anyone) can recognize its appearances in different times and places. On the other hand, many anthropologists have accepted the message of Foucault's earlier writings that the very orders of truth or domains of knowledge operated by the subject are the same political environments that constitute this subject. In this world of pervasive power relations, the 'subject' appears only as a historical construct of discourse understood as a set of strategies that are part of social practices. Regret on the part of any such subject would be one part of situated discourse, subject to the ebb and flow of power relations in a particular culture, and only illusionarily seen as a product of independent ethical reflection. Seen as the rhetoric of a socially conditional 'self',²⁵ regret would not be understandable through any general philosophical reasoning.

It is true that 'regret' is a word in European vocabularies and that in western cultures it is closely related to terms like repentance, confession, mortification, penitence or remorse, all of which have been formed in the varied history of Christianity. Some might argue that regret is so tied into this complex that it cannot be recognized outside a Christian context. And further, if regret is an emotion, are not emotions so differently structured in other cultures that the whole attempt to discuss it in other arenas is doomed to failure? So, has the work of philosophers

²⁵ Debbora Battaglia, 'Problematising the Self', in Debbora Battaglia (ed.), *Rhetorics of Self-Making* (Berkeley, 1995).

been unwittingly limited in its application? Or is it, on the other hand, useful to an anthropology that does not shrink from at least the attempt to say something about ethics more generally? Let us begin by trying to give an affirmative answer to the last question.

For a start, it is evident that agent-regret as a theme in philosophy does not just involve a somewhat painful emotion arising from the thought 'how much better if it had been otherwise'.²⁶ Both philosophers such as Nussbaum²⁷ and anthropologists like Catherine Lutz²⁸ have argued convincingly that emotions in general are not natural energies that have no connection with thoughts, evaluations or plans. They are not invasive chaotic surges before which we can only be passive. Nussbaum argues to the contrary that emotions are cognitive and judgemental: they always involve thought of an object together with awareness of that object's importance for one's self, and in that sense they always involve appraisal.²⁹ We understand regret in this light, and suggest that, while the degree and kind of emotion associated with it may be variable, at least five mental activities would normally be involved. These can be summarized as follows: identifying in the general flow of happenings acts or events particularly significant for oneself; having a sense of personal identity over time such that one (now) is conscious of having been involved in those acts; reflecting on them; feeling a sense of responsibility with regard to their costs; and having moral values in terms of which one wishes their outcome might have been otherwise. If regret is declared rather than kept to oneself, this act further requires willingness for self-disclosure and some intention concerning the performative effect of one's words. In other words, we see here a number of capacities, or ways people may think and feel, and when taken together they are identified as regret.

It is true that philosophers' interests in regret tend to be different from those of anthropologists, concerned as they often are with normative questions like whether regret is dangerously addictive or self-deceiving,³⁰ or even whether we should be feeling

²⁶ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 27.

²⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001), 27–33.

²⁸ Catherine A. Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago, 1988).

²⁹ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 27.

³⁰ Rorty, 'Agent Regret', 501.

regret at all.³¹ But even if the issue is the different, anthropological one of how we acknowledge ethics in different cultures, the philosophical work remains important. It enables us to see that there are a number of elements (capacities) to 'regret' which, in different cultures, might or might not commonly be actualized together. We can see this could be the case, if only because we know it is also true of the different people in our acquaintance. Some people, for example, hardly ever relate knowing what they have done with reflection on it, and even if they do engage in reflection they may be more (or less) inclined to feel responsible for the outcome of those acts. Just as we can conceive of the absence or disconnection of the elements of regret in another culture we can also conceive of their combining in different ways, subtly different from 'regret' as we understand it. And yet in some places or times (why not?) a combination of thoughts and feelings that looks very like what we call 'regret' might present itself — as we think is the case in early Mongol chronicles. This is to suggest that it is a mistake to start with the English word regret, as if the point is to find 'it' in historical-ethnographical material. On the contrary, if what interests us is interventions that link painful reflection on one's action with social morality, then 'regret' can be seen as merely the word we happen to have, a guide to the kind of nexus of thoughts and feelings we have in mind.

Formulating matters this way means we can recognize such a nexus even in situations where there is no indigenous word translatable as regret, as seems to be the case for the early Mongols.³² We do not have to accept the idea that an emotional-cognitive nexus can be identified only through vocabularies, though the lack of a term does suggest that it is not consciously emphasized in

³¹ For opposed replies to this last question, see Michel de Montaigne, 'On Repenting', in Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London, 1991), 907–22; Rudiger Bittner, 'Is It Reasonable to Regret Things One Did?', *Jl Philosophy*, lxxix, 5 (1992).

³² The *Secret History* is practically the only source for early Mongol vocabulary, and no single word translatable as 'regret' occurs in it. In later chronicles we find the words *gemshi-* (a verb formed on the root *gem*, 'sin', 'mistake', 'defect', 'disease'). *Gemshi-* implies a view 'from inside': it is the active acceptance of one's own fault, and it is the closest word in modern Mongolian which renders the idea of regret. Another word *xaramsa-* (a verb formed on the root *xaram*, 'possessiveness', 'jealousy', 'pity', 'feeling of loss') is also translatable as 'regret' in certain contexts. The idea here is the feeling of sadness, loss, or regret at not having or attaining something that is desired but out of one's control.

that culture.³³ Studying the terms that do exist for emotions can certainly provide a geography of cultural constructions,³⁴ and it is essential if we are to understand the connotations of what people are saying. But it does not exhaust the possibilities of perceiving a recognizable nexus of feelings and thoughts through their roundabout appearance in language available to actors.

Finally, the approach we are advocating with regard to regret claims nothing for the *content* of acts that give rise to misgivings. Even actions that are often taken as universally regrettable turn out not to be so. Here, however, it is necessary to be careful to distinguish between having and displaying an emotion. There is much evidence that the Mongols had a dread of death, killing and spilling blood — they used euphemisms for such events and designated special ritualized methods of ending life for respected people and animals. But the *Secret History* is full of killing. It is difficult here to distinguish what was regarded as morally wrong from what was basically dangerous. Killing created vengeful enemies and, even more frightening, the spirits of the dead, which might take revenge in unforeseen ways. We can only guess inferentially what Mongolian people actually felt about this (and it must have varied). But we do have access to what they said, or are held to have said, in the *Secret History*. Here it is evident that public regret is not declared for killing or cruelty in general, only for killing certain people in certain circumstances. Most of the regrets do not concern killing at all. What the khans do regret turns out to be quite unexpected.

III

REGRET AND THE HISTORICAL SUBJECT

Where does such an approach leave us with regard to the person who does the regretting? Let me address this question by returning again to Foucault. As James Laidlaw has ably pointed out,³⁵ Foucault came to insist that the domain of ethics is wider than the following of socially sanctioned rules. In his later work Foucault attempted to think himself out of his earlier radical displacement of the subject and to retrieve a space for ethical

³³ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 160–1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 139–65; for discussion, see Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*, 5–13.

³⁵ Laidlaw, 'For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom', 321.

freedom.³⁶ In particular, his idea of 'techniques of the self' was a concept of self-fashioning, the making of oneself into a certain kind of person, and this is described by Foucault as a practice of freedom. Foucault describes these practices of the self as historically situated moralities, models which the subject 'finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed on him by his culture, his society, his social group'.³⁷ As Laidlaw observes, 'This does not mean that his doing so is not an exercise of freedom, but that the freedom he exercises is of a definite, historically produced kind. There is no other kind'.³⁸ Agent-regret, however, cannot be equated with a 'technique of the self', even though it must appear in culturally specific modes. In the historical accounts of the Mongols, where declarations of regret appear not only in the *Secret History* but also in many later chronicles, declaring regret does appear as some kind of culturally accepted way of behaving in political life. But even so, we argue that regret as such is not necessarily a social *practice* — even though it may appear sometimes in this guise.

It is possible to understand this point both as a matter of principle and from the particular Mongolian materials at hand. In the *Secret History*, as has been mentioned, spontaneous regret is differentiated linguistically, by the absence of any particular word for it, from the socially enforced admission of fault (*namanchilan*). Now this term, occurring in only one incident in the *Secret History*, came to be employed later, in the sixteenth century when the Mongols in general had converted to Buddhism, for what indeed was a technique — ritualized confession in a religious context. By contrast, the declarations in the *Secret History* that we recognize as agent-regret are never depicted as anything other than someone's one-off reaction to a particular action in which he feels implicated — like Chinggis's decision not to kill his uncle. There is nothing generic about them, no specified time or place for them. In this way, paradoxically through its *singularity*, it can be seen that regret regains its character as a human capacity. To our minds, a certain kind of freedom is involved at this point too. Even in a culture where 'regret' is a socially respectable option, some people might not

³⁶ For example, see *Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, i, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London, 2000), 87.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 291.

³⁸ Laidlaw, 'For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom', 323.

engage in it, and those who do may be conscious of the implications of regretting one thing rather than another and doing so publicly. In the *Secret History* several of the major actors are depicted as committing wrongful deeds which they do not regret. Thus, if, as has been argued, regret involves reflection on one's actions, then it is a symptom of the same condition that allows for the 'freedom' discussed in later Foucault. In effect, the person who chooses to declare regret is analytically separable from 'the subject' located in history. The non-institutionalized character of regret at the time of the rise of Chinggis is significant, in that it discloses a space in which this separation can be pondered. An *anterior* capacity for ethical reflection on one's actions is also implied by any project of 'techniques of the self', or in Christian cultures in social practices such as confession, atonement, or begging for forgiveness. Thus regret may occur on its own, not socialized into an established moral practice (as we argue is the case among the early Mongols); however, it is not antiphonal to, but continuous or parallel with, such techniques when they do appear.

Yet the person who regrets is also always located in history. Regret, when it concerns actions in the past, implies the possibility of negating (or somehow dealing with) one's historicity, and this makes it a particularly significant object of study at times of rapid social-ideological change. As Annabel Brett has pointed out,³⁹ the full-blown Foucauldian idea of the 'episteme' is unable to explain discursive change except in terms of 'rupture' or discontinuity. Regret, on the other hand, suggests a plurality of 'languages' and a degree of painful self-awareness about their use. One form of regret is to acquire new values, in the light of which one's earlier actions seem shabby or wrong. It is equally possible to regret one's inability to take action in accordance with the new ideas. And someone might just as well lament the deleterious effect in terms of the old values of something one has done as a historically new subject. In each of these situations regret appears as a bridge, that is, as an intervention located relationally between one position and another. What is significant here is that while 'the person' who regrets retains a continuous subjectivity capable of reflection and com-

³⁹ Annabel Brett, 'What Is Intellectual History Now?', in David Cannadine (ed.), *What Is History Now?* (New York, 2002), 122.

parison, the historical 'subject' may change along with social, political and language shifts. Thus one person can be more than one subject over time, as we show later in discussing the mutating relations between Chinggis and his erstwhile companion Jamuqa.

IV

POLITICAL SUBJECTS IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

In the main period covered by the *Secret History*, the lifetime of Temüjin/Chinggis Khan, Mongolian society was transformed from a loose and constantly warring collection of tribes to a great centralized and militarized confederation with a nascent state organization around its leader. This centralization and verticalization of relations was achieved by military means (conquest, strategy, deceit, terrorizing enemies into subjection, and so forth). But the 'military means' themselves could not have been as successful as they were without simultaneous changes in possible kinds of loyalty.⁴⁰ How would declarations of regret appear in these radically changing circumstances? The prominence of regret in the *Secret History*, and the way it is tied to dire consequences in several key incidents, indicates that Mongols were aware of clashes between irreconcilable choices.

After the sacral investiture in 1206 of Chinggis as supreme sovereign (*qagan*) over other leaders (*qan*), he instituted a series of innovations. These were as much conceptual as practical. He reordered the entirety of the previously tribal society according to numerical military units (of 10,000, 1,000, 100 and 10 households) which could not be abandoned on pain of death. He decreed the centralized allocation of apanages (polities) to commanders throughout this hierarchy, ordered the writing down of laws and edicts, the regularization of the *Quriltai* (consultative council for matters of state), the setting up of the *Keshigten* (elite imperial guards, specialized administrators), and the designation of punishments. Chinggis also instituted a system of appointed regional prefects, a supreme judge and administrative secretaries, and he designated certain categories of people, mostly religious officiants, as exempt from state dues.⁴¹ It is

⁴⁰ See C. A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (Delhi, 1998), 768.

⁴¹ *SH*, §224; Bira, '“The Secret History” of Chinggis Khan and his State', 359; Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*, 175–86.

true, as has been pointed out by Nicola Di Cosmo,⁴² that almost all these institutions were resurrections of governmental practices found in earlier steppe empires such as those of the Xiongnu (second to first century BC), the Türks (sixth to eighth centuries) and the Uighur (eighth to ninth centuries). Certain of them may well have been present at the time of the rise of Chinggis among the peoples, like the Kereit or Tatars, whose polities were larger and more powerful than that of the Mongols.⁴³ Di Cosmo therefore argues for the existence of an 'ideology in reserve' of centralized imperial unity.⁴⁴ This may well have been the case, but it does not alter the fact that a social entity ruled down to its constituent households by a centralized government was *different* from the shifting, constantly warring, disaggregated and cellular groups that immediately preceded it in the Mongol steppe. Indeed these two kinds of organization were not just different, they were in many ways antithetical. This was true even when, as in the case of the Mongols, centralized government arose within nomadic society, using its conceptual resources at least to begin with, and was not a transformation wrought from the cultural periphery of an existing empire such as China.⁴⁵

The antithesis of two different types of organization has been pointed out in a number of disparate modes of analysis. These include: the sociological-Marxist approach of Lawrence Krader, who stresses the opposition between collegial tribal relations and the class differentiation that appeared with the birth of the state;⁴⁶ the theoretical-philosophical antithesis of the 'nomadic war machine' to the rigid, territorialized 'Oriental state' hypothesized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari;⁴⁷ and more conventional history emphasizing economic incompatibilities, notably the necessity of nomadic dispersal and the poverty of pastoral surplus as impediments to the centralization of a revenue-hungry

⁴² Nicola Di Cosmo, 'State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History', *Jl World Hist.*, x, 1 (1999).

⁴³ Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*, 4.

⁴⁴ Di Cosmo, 'State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History', 20–1.

⁴⁵ Herbert Franke, 'From Tribal Chieftain to Universal Emperor and God: The Legitimation of the Yüan Dynasty', in his *China under Mongol Rule: Collected Essays* (Aldershot, 1994).

⁴⁶ Lawrence Krader, 'The Origin of the State among the Nomads of Asia', in Henri J. M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik (eds.), *The Early State* (The Hague, 1978).

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London, 1988).

state.⁴⁸ What is common in all these analyses is the point that Chinggis succeeded in creating a kind of polity that, to achieve its own organizational logic, had to suppress or negate the very social relations that initially helped it emerge.

A different understanding is provided by the Buryat philosopher Z. P. Morokhoeva, who sees the Chinggisid empire as a continuum with nomadic tribal society. Indeed she writes of a 'tribal imperium'.⁴⁹ Morokhoeva notes, however, that the principle of *leadership* did not coincide with the genealogical principle of clan seniority. The warrior chief only rarely coincided with the elder (the genealogical senior). He was chosen, or thrust himself forward, by virtue of his strength, ferocity, intelligence and wealth. This type of leadership, she comments, can be characterized as 'aggressive power' (*vlast' zakhvatnicheskaia*), where the verb *zakhvatit'* means 'to seize' or 'to capture'.⁵⁰ Early in the *Secret History* we find the idea that tribes should have leaders and that those which do not are legitimate objects of attack and appropriation of their people and livestock. Indeed, just such a looting of the harmless people living on the Tünggelik stream (who 'have no big or small, good or bad, head or hooves — everybody's equal. They are simple people — let's plunder them!') was to provide the initial prosperity of Chinggis's ancestors of the great Borjigin clan.⁵¹ Several other examples indicate that from the earliest times Mongolian society sustained a notion of political-military leadership different from that of clan relatedness. This does not, however, imply that these different 'life-ordering concepts' were in harmony, nor that the relations between them were constant over time. What we see with the rise of Chinggis was the monstrous escalation of aggressive leadership, and,

⁴⁸ For discussion, see Di Cosmo, 'State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History', 8–15. Di Cosmo argues that the crucial factor was 'crisis', a general, often abrupt, worsening of economic, political and social conditions, bringing with it depredation and violence. A key consequence of such a 'crisis' is the pervasive militarization of pastoral society, followed by the subordination of defeated enemies into the victorious khan's group, the establishment of ranks, and centralization of command. Di Cosmo stresses the *qualitative* difference in the type of military participation that arose with this transition. *Ibid.*, 15–19.

⁴⁹ Z. P. Morokhoeva, 'Problema individual'nogo v traditsionnoi buriatskoi kul'ture' [The Problem of the Individual in Traditional Buryat Culture], in Z. P. Morokhoeva (ed.), *Filosofiia i istoriia kul'tury: natsional'nyi aspekt* [The Philosophy and History of Culture: The National Aspect] (Ulan-Ude, 1992), 101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *SH*, §§33–9.

with the creation of the numerical military system, the virtual elimination of clanship as an organizing principle in politics. Kin relations came to be in conflict with loyalty to military leaders. The same conflict boiled within the ruling Borjigin clan, where succession to the throne was contested between seniors and men of ability (the latter almost invariably winning).

It should be clarified that in advancing a set of cultural ideas concerning the historical subject we are not arguing, in a conventional anthropological manner, that such ideas can explain how people decide to act. In the *Secret History* people are depicted as taking action wilfully, often in contravention of the various relations they are tied up in. They just do things. Bo'orchu, for example, made friends with Temüjin as a boy the first time they met, when Temüjin came across Bo'orchu milking some mares. Bo'orchu decided to accompany him as a follower (*nökör*) without even going home first. As the *Secret History* also describes the father weeping at having lost his son, we know that the action was not meant to be taken lightly. Later, Bo'orchu returned to his wealthy father's camp, but when Temüjin sent for him, he immediately quit for good, without telling his father, simply

Jumping on a chestnut horse with a hunched back
Tying his grey woollen cloak across [the saddle].⁵²

This can be seen as one of the more parable-like episodes in the *Secret History*. The author at this point upholds the virtue of leadership, as opposed to kin loyalty, and there is no hint of regret as far as Bo'orchu, who was to become one of Chinggis's great generals, is concerned. Yet what is presented in the text is not a didactic fait accompli but a number of serious alternatives, and Bo'orchu makes his choice.

The same is true concerning the wider, more cosmological values that retain their salience right through the *Secret History*. Another theme developed by Morokhoeva is the idea that 'the person' (*lichnost*) in early Mongol society was conceptualized not as an autonomous isolate but in relational terms, and furthermore not separated from or elevated above nature. We find some support for this in other scholarly works. Peter Jackson notes for example that political authority and property were not individualized. He quotes the Persian historian Juwaini writing

⁵² *Ibid.*, §§91–5.

in c.1260: 'Although authority and dominion ostensibly belong to one man, namely whoever is nominated khan, yet in reality all the children, descendants and uncles partake of kingship and property'.⁵³ The *Secret History*, furthermore, makes abundant use of the concepts *ejen* ('master', pl. *ejed*) and *qan* ('khan', 'ruler', pl. *qat*), which conflate domination in the human world with that pertaining in nature. Thus *ejen* appears as leader of a tribe, ruler of a whole people, owner of property, master of servants, as part of a title 'ruling emperor of the people', and as 'spirit-master' of a natural feature or territory. *Ejen* (sometimes combined with *qan*) is thus a concept that works 'fractally', operating in the same way at different levels of society, while at the same time it aligns human ruling to the phenomenal and cosmological order. This order, especially the Sky, confers destinies on living beings and sometimes vouchsafes omens to enable them to know what their destinies are. This does imply that it would be mistaken for us to separate off a realm of 'political' morality from a wider 'cosmic' morality. But in comparison with the later more magical and religious Mongolian chronicles of the Buddhist period, the *Secret History* gives little space to such cosmological causality. Perhaps indeed we could venture the thought that a culture which gives prominence to regret, that is to personal responsibility, is not likely also to emphasize destiny, and vice versa. At any rate, among the early Mongols the capacity for regret seems to have the edge. The following example is intended to illustrate the point that even in one of its most 'cosmological' passages the *Secret History* depicts people not as following a set of customary norms but as taking decisions, negotiating the dangers of the symbolic order, bearing with their outcome, and alluding to their own faulty actions.

Emperor Ögödei has successfully more or less obliterated the armies of the Kitad empire in North China ('slaughtering them till they piled up like rotten logs').⁵⁴ He is then stricken with a serious illness. His shamans divine and attribute this sickness to the spirit-master rulers (*ejed-qat*) of the Kitad lands and waters, who are enraged with the conqueror for harming these very lands and waters and plundering the people. The spirits, the

⁵³ Peter Jackson, 'From Ulus to Khanate: The Making of the Mongol States, c.1220–1290', in Reuven Amitai-Preiss and David O. Morgan (eds.), *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy* (Leiden, 1999), 12.

⁵⁴ SH, §272.

shamans declare, are not satisfied with compensatory offerings of people, silver and livestock, but demand the life of a family member as their price for withdrawing the sickness and allowing the emperor to live. 'Now we leave it to your decree', they tell the emperor. Ögödei responds: 'Who among the princes is at my side?' At this, his younger brother Tolui, being one of those alongside, volunteers to be the sacrifice. He declares that he is suitable for two reasons: because he has committed wrongful/dangerous acts (killing innocent living beings) and also because he would find favour with the spirits, being tall and handsome:

I have cleft the back of the trout,
 I have sliced the sturgeon's back [standing for helpless victims]
 I have conquered those [enemies] in the fore
 I have impaled those at the back.
 And I have a handsome face,
 I am tall of stature.⁵⁵

The emperor survives and Tolui, having drunk a magic potion, shortly dies.

Now it can be seen from the pathos with which Tolui's act is treated that this episode is meant to be understood as tragic. Yet regret is not appropriate from Ögödei. *His* responsibility was to accomplish successfully the campaign in North China, which had been left unfinished by Chinggis, and had been started generations earlier, according to Mongol explanations, by hostile acts of the Kitad towards the Mongol ancestors. Indeed, at the end of the *Secret History* Ögödei cites the victory in North China as one of his main achievements. In the logic of war, and given the existence of partisan enemy spirits, his illness and his brother's death were part of the price to be paid. Tolui, on the other hand, has to find his own personal reasons for his act, which he does in remarkably laconic fashion. One might perhaps have expected a speech of regret at this point, but there are two good reasons why this would be inappropriate. First, the intention is clearly to depict this as a noble act of saving the emperor's life. Second, several sources indicate that Tolui was an exceptionally cruel man and a drunkard (which the *Secret History* does indirectly refer to) for whom regret would have been out of character. It seems unlikely that this drama could

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan*, 163–4; de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, ii, 999.

have happened quite as depicted,⁵⁶ but this is nevertheless what the authors intended as a plausible account. This shows that it is not the entanglement in an inescapable cosmological interrelatedness in itself that gives rise to regret. Rather, we suggest, regret occurs within this order when particular people, with their own pasts and dispositions, are unable to be a certain kind of political subject.

What happened during the great leader's lifetime was a massive mutation in the values of the relations available for people to choose from, shifting 'vertically' to focus on obedience, political obligation, respect and awe. Highly significant in indicating this transformation is the occasional appearance, as the *Secret History* progresses, of the mysterious term *törü*. In later centuries, *törü/tör* became the term used for the state, national law, regime and sovereignty. In the *Secret History* it crops up almost incidentally, however, as if it had not yet acquired a definite meaning or role in political rhetoric. *Törü* was a term taken over from the earlier Turkic states,⁵⁷ where it meant customary law, but among the early Mongols it did not refer to practical customary laws or rulers' edicts, for which there were other words.⁵⁸ *Törü* seems to indicate rather a number of sacred political-moral principles imminent in the new order. They include giving due reward for brave service, unwavering loyalty to one's rightful master (even if the master is an enemy), honesty in acknowledging what one has done, and cleaving to — not abandoning — the ideal of political centralism. In at least one paragraph,⁵⁹ *törü* seems to refer to the right to supreme rule. As P. Iu. Pochekaev has written, '*Törü* has a double character: on the one hand it is the aggregate of norms regulating the activity of society and relations within it; on the other, it is a kind of sacral indication of rule, a criterion of the lawfulness and truth of the ruler'.⁶⁰ It is notable that the

⁵⁶ For discussion, see de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, ii, 999.

⁵⁷ Mattai Haltod et al. (comp.), *Mongolian-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Bloomington, 1982), 835.

⁵⁸ The word *yosu(n)* was used for the customary law of the people, *jasag* for the laws instituted after the establishment of central government, and *jarlig* for the edicts of rulers: P. Iu. Pochekaev, 'Evoliutsiia töre v sisteme mongol'skogo srednevekovogo prava' [The Evolution of *törü* in the System of Mongolian Medieval Law], in B. V. Bazarov, N. N. Kradin and T. D. Skrynnikova (eds.), *Mongol'skaia Imperiia i kochevoi mir* [The Mongolian Empire and the Nomadic World] (Ulan-Ude, 2004), 531.

⁵⁹ SH, §121.

⁶⁰ Pochekaev, 'Evoliutsiia töre v sisteme mongol'skogo srednevekovogo prava', 532–3.

term only occurs in the later parts of the *Secret History* and always in connection with centralized power. Although some of these principles are declared or explained by Chinggis, he is not their fount. *Törü* are not created by any one person but are external, located, as it were, above or beyond human society (and may have been seen as emanating from the Sky).⁶¹ They are principles to be mindful of, to carry out, to point out, or to know and teach. They can also be neglected or abandoned — and by the very greatest of khans. (Indeed, in seventeenth-century chronicles, Chinggis himself is attributed with a stupendous speech of regret for having abandoned his *törü*, now meaning central government, in Mongolia while enjoying himself campaigning in Korea.)⁶²

With so few references to *törü* in the *Secret History* it is evident that not all lauded qualities of the new order are tied to this particular term. Nevertheless, it is important that it exists, since it shows that the people involved in rule not only had political ideals but also had an abstract concept of 'principle' itself. An interesting fact, even though anachronistic with regard to the *Secret History*, is that *törü* was the word used to translate *dharma* among the Buddhist Turks of the ninth century.⁶³ This suggests that buried in Di Cosmo's 'ideology in reserve', if we are to accept this idea, there was a notion of a sacral law that applied both to the macrocosmos and to microrelations in the world. Even without this link, we are entitled from the references to *törü* in the *Secret History* alone to conclude that the great new polity was beginning to be envisaged as a moral community.

This, then, was the changing context in which the actors of the *Secret History* declare regrets. Although most of such declarations do not refer to the terms for 'principles' or 'duties', it is the case that the depiction of reflections on regrettable acts took place in the world where such notions were beginning to be used. Now, as we have argued, the existence of principles, whatever we can deduce about their content, does not tell us about practical ethics. It indicates only that ideas of ideal behaviour were around. To discover how particular people actually felt about the tangle of possible actions open to them (or, more exactly, the historical

⁶¹ Skrynnikova, *Kharizma i vlast'*, 46–7.

⁶² For example in the *Altan Tobci*: see Charles Bawden, *The Mongol Chronicle Altan Tobci* (Wiesbaden, 1955), §30.

⁶³ Skrynnikova, *Kharizma i vlast'*, 47.

description thereof) we must examine the regrets themselves. In the following sections we discuss five such incidents. We attempt to elucidate not only the content of *what* the actor is regretting — in the *Secret History* this is never explained, it being assumed that a Mongol reader would understand. We also try to characterize the declarations as examples of 'regret' in order to gain some sense of what this nexus may comprise as a political intervention. To this end the regrets are grouped by historical period. We first discuss regrets declared in 'tribal times', well before the establishment of the central government in 1206–7. Thus, to provide a contrast, we jump forward to 'imperial times' and the regrets (c.1260s) of Ögödei Khan, who was Chinggis's successor to the throne. Finally, we discuss the most interesting (and certainly the most elaborate) cases: those which occurred in the intervening period, while people were struggling to come to terms with the ideas of the new polity.

V

AMBAQAI KHAN AND AWARENESS OF POLITICAL POSITION

Some five generations before Chinggis, the Mongol tribes were briefly united by Qabul Khan. Qabul, by-passing his own sons, handed the rule over to the able Ambaqai Khan. Now Ambaqai decided to accompany his daughter in person when he gave her in marriage to a distant Tatar tribe. On the way, he was captured by another Tatar group, which handed him over in captivity to the Altan Khan, ruler of the Kitad empire. Before he died a shameful death Ambaqai contrived to get a short message of regret to Qutula, the son of Qabul, and to his own son Qada'an:

When you become emperor of all and lord of the people (*qamug-un qan, ulus-un ejen*), learn from me [i.e. my mistake] — I took my daughter in person [to her betrothed] and I have been seized by the Tatar people!

Until the nails of your five fingers are ground away,

Until your ten fingers are worn off,

Strive to avenge the debt (*haci*) I have caused.⁶⁴

Ambaqai here sees his rash act as a failure to 'himself' (himself in the role of khan). Having become lord of all the people, he should not have carelessly disregarded his crucial political

⁶⁴ SH, §53.

position. Affection for kin should not be allowed to get in the way. This reading of the text is supported by the fact that this brief passage has become an exemplar for generations of Mongols. Among many groups of Mongols to this day, it is forbidden for fathers to accompany their daughters on the marriage journey. In Shine Barga this prohibition is related to the dignity of the father and justified by the vague saying that, ages ago, some khan was captured and killed when accompanying his daughter.

This brief passage of regret works at two levels. It is a political intervention aimed to designate two possible successors and order them to take vengeance (the Mongols subsequently gathered and made Qutula their ruler and Qada'an his general, and then proceeded to make thirteen unsuccessful attacks on the Tatars). At the same time, it is a lesson. The authors of the *Secret History* probably intended Ambaqai's message of regret ('learn from my mistake') to apply not only to ruling circles but also throughout the new social organization. At any rate, that is how these regrets have been understood by later generations.

VI

CHILGER BÖKÖ AND SUBORDINATE SUBJECTIVITY

Chilger was one of the leaders of the Merkit people, from whom Temüjin's father had abducted a wife (Mother Hö'elun) a generation before. The Merkits decided on revenge. Warned of the impending attack, Mother Hö'elun, together with Temüjin and her other sons, fled on horseback. But there was no horse for Temüjin's young wife, Börte. She was left in the abandoned camp hiding in a covered cart. The marauding Merkits found her and bore her off. Meanwhile, Temüjin was left fleeing for his life. He eventually escaped from the encircling Merkits and appealed to his father's sworn ally Ong Khan and his own sworn companion Jamuqa for help to get his wife back. The three leaders met, attacked the Merkits, put them to flight and rescued Börte. Meanwhile, Börte had been given to Chilger, who was a younger brother of the man from whom Hö'elun had been stolen a generation earlier. This was fair and right, according to the norms of tribal vengeance. But after

keeping her for some time, Chilger abandoned her, saying the following words of regret:

'The black crow
 Though destined to eat scraps of skin
 Aspired to eat goose and crane.
 I, brutal and base Chilger,
 Touched the noble queen
 And brought calamity on all the Merkits.
 Ignoble and bad Chilger
 My black head will be cut off.
 To save my life, my only life,
 I wish to creep into a dark gorge.
 But who will act as a shield for me?
 That vile bird, the buzzard,
 Though fated to eat rats and mice,
 Aspired to eat swan and crane.
 I, thieving and base Chilger, who took away
 The holy and fortunate queen,
 I have brought disaster on all the Merkits.
 Boastful, base Chilger,
 I shall lose my head shrivelled to bone.
 My life is worth no more than sheep's dung.
 To save it I will creep into the darkest part of a dark gorge.
 Who will gather in my life
 Which is worth but a sheep's dropping?'
 Thus he spoke and turned his back and escaped.⁶⁵

If Ambaqai simply regrets the consequences of his rash act, with Chilger we are presented with someone who also 'sees himself doing it' and reviles the self that he was. The words seem addressed dialogically primarily to himself. As a political intervention in the text this speech registers a new revelation, the idea of destined social station. What Chilger has done is to 'touch' the 'noble queen', an act designated as illegitimate by analogy with the infringements of their lowly fate by the crow and the buzzard. In earlier times, BÖrte would have been regarded as legitimate booty. Now she is referred to as *qutugtai sudai*, which could be translated as 'blessed, spiritually powerful', terms which are also used for Temüjin in the *Secret History*. But this is not just a retrospective move by the authors to ennoble the couple who later were to rule the Mongols. In Chilger's speech the sense is conveyed that the whole cosmological order which his act has violated is a hierarchical one. He feels he has no alternative but to flee from society; no one will shield him or

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, §111; Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan*, 40; de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, i, 41-2.

'gather him in'. The political message here is unequivocal. It is not just that social equality is unmentioned, but respect for destined higher position is the positive moral value that Chilger has violated.

VII

ÖGÖDEI KHAN AND THE REGRETS OF AN EMPEROR

In the first two examples, the perspective is that of people whose actions have caused their banishment from political life. Implicit in the regrets of these two actors is the idea of there being a sovereign position (Ambaqai) or a destined hierarchy (Chilger) from which they have cut themselves off. Essentially, their regret is recognition that by acting with respect to other kinds of relations and obligations, they did not pay due regard to political values they later saw to be far more important. We would now like to contrast this kind of regret — situated on the excluded sidelines — with those of *the* centrally located actor, the Emperor Ögödei. At the time of Ambaqai the Mongol polity was evanescent and at the time of Chilger it had long since disintegrated; the rise of Temüjin was something that could only be divined by fortune-tellers and shamans. By Ögödei's reign, on the other hand, the imperial polity was both conceptually and practically established. Sovereignty (denoted in the *Secret History* by the word *oron*, 'throne', literally 'central place' or 'seat') was something that was to be handed on, administered, preserved and expanded.

In this period, for the first time we find that the ordinary subjects are not seen primarily as recruits to armies. The context of Ögödei's regrets is an audience with his princes and generals, and they occur as the culmination of a lengthy series of practical orders for the management of the empire. He speaks of his intention to reorganize the various guards, regularize and limit duties, allocate pastures and waters to the entire nation, and set up a levy in each district to aid the poor.

I shall not let suffer the nation (*ulus*) that my father Chinggis Khan established through his suffering. Instead I shall rest

 Their feet on the earth

 Their hands on the ground

And let them rejoice.⁶⁶

In other words, the people may cease their restless pursuit of war.

⁶⁶ *SH*, §279.

Ögödei's declaration of regrets has an even-tempered symmetrical quality to it that is quite different from the agonized self-recrimination of Chilger or the revengeful anger of Ambaqai. For a start, Ögödei's regrets are numbered (there are four of them) and they are prefaced by his list of the four good deeds of which he is proud. His regrets thus appear as the balancing half of his overall summary of his reign. Ögödei's four positive achievements (*üiles*) are: (1) finishing off the Jaqut, the people of North China mentioned earlier;⁶⁷ (2) establishing post-stations and the horse-relay system; (3) digging wells in places without water and thus providing the people with useful pastures; and (4) posting scouts and garrisons in the cities of all quarters, permitting the people to live at ease.⁶⁸

The term used for 'achievement' (*üile*) is significant, as it indicates a changing conceptualization of action. In most of the *Secret History* the terms most frequently used for act and event derive from the verb *yaba-* ('to walk' or 'to go'), while the word for 'fault' (*buru'u*) is the same as 'wrong direction'. The physicality and inherent movement implied seem appropriate for a people who lived by highly mobile herding and hunting. *Üile*, which appears later in the text, means an action undertaken in respect of some higher or more abstract idea (so in modern Mongolian it can mean 'service', 'deed', 'fate', 'crime', 'sin' and 'destiny'). Like *törü* ('principle'), *üile* is therefore an important marker of political attitude. Indeed in our next example *üile* occurs in parallel with *törü* as 'duty', something Ong Khan deeply regrets abandoning.

Let us move now to Ögödei's regrets, which we quote in full.

'However, since being placed on the throne by my father the *qagan* and taking on the burden of [responsibility for] his many people, my first fault (*buru'u*) was to be conquered by wine. This indeed was one fault of mine. My second fault was to listen to the words of an immoral (*yos-üger*) woman, and to have the girls of my uncle Otchigin's people brought to me was surely a mistake. To participate in immoral actions even though I was the emperor of the nation (*ulus-un ejen qagan*) was indeed a fault of mine. Another of my wrongs was secretly to harm Doqolqu. Why was it wrong? Because he had striven fiercely in the service of his rightful ruler, my father the *qan*, and to harm him was a fault. Who will now strive so fiercely in my service? Therefore, I acknowledge the fault of having secretly injured a person who diligently adhered to principle (*törü*) in the service of my father and of all [Mongols] and of

⁶⁷ De Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, ii, 1032–3.

⁶⁸ *SH*, §281.

failing to appreciate him. Furthermore, being covetous, and saying to myself, "What if the wild animals born with their destiny preordained by the Sky were to move into the lands of my brothers?" I had barriers and walls built of beaten earth to prevent the animals from straying. As I was thus confining them, I heard resentful words from my brothers. This, too, was a fault of mine. After my father the *qagan*, I have added four [good] deeds (*üiles*) to his and I have done four deeds wrongly'. Thus he spoke.⁶⁹

Ögödei's first two regrets concern not being able to live up to the dignified and respectable person an emperor should be (his addiction to drink and excessive sexual pleasure are described in numerous sources besides the *Secret History*).⁷⁰ Then, he regrets his action in injuring someone who should have been rewarded, a failure in recognition of true service to the empire. Here the importance of principle (*törü*) is explicitly acknowledged. It is at first sight puzzling that Ögödei's final regret should concern the fencing in of game animals. But angering his brother rulers is not the only, or even the main, reason for his regret. His covetous act was a contravention of the relational order of the world. Wild animals are properly destined to run hither and thither and should not be turned into property. Building fences and walls is thus an offence against cosmological destiny. We can thus see that this action, seeming at first to furnish a trivial note on which to end the *History*, is in fact a serious fault of the emperor.

The symmetrical arrangement of deeds is not accidental. Ögödei as a person locates himself centrally between his four beneficial deeds and his four wrongful acts. This centrality is analogous to the position of the Mongolian military commander, with his Right Wing and his Left Wing armies. The number four occurs frequently in the *Secret History* as a set of units to be deployed by the ruler. Chinggis has four warrior-leaders for attack ('my four hounds'), and four others to stand beside him on guard ('my four war horses'); and he approvingly cites four further fighters as men who bravely concealed nothing from him. Chinggis's main guard army has four shifts, each to serve for rigidly enforced periods of time. And before he dies Chinggis oversees the organization of his empire into the four constituent apanages of his sons. That these 'fours' were clearly notional rather than actual is an indication of their ideological

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*, 126-8.

character.⁷¹ Ögödei Khan, deploying again the language of fours, concerned for the well-being of the entire people, acknowledging his fault with regard to the wild creatures, was already beginning to envisage himself as a *universal* king, the central pinnacle responsible for everything in his vast domain.

VIII

ONG KHAN AND NEGLECT OF PRINCIPLE

With the final two examples we are faced with the struggles of actors to come to terms with such ideas. A certain amount of storytelling is necessary as context for these two linked declarations of regret. This is to acknowledge that regrets are parts of dialogical narratives, disclosed within changing relationships, and having consequential effects. Discussing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Marina Warner suggested that admissions of fault invoke four different kinds of truth.⁷² Along with factual truth, there is 'dialogue truth' (established through discussion and debate), 'narrative truth' (victims' recitations, subjective perceptions, stories and myths) and 'healing truth' (what words can achieve within relationships). Of course the whole intentional situation of the regrets considered here is completely different — for example, there being victims is not central to the Mongol regrets — but Warner's points about dialogue and narrative are helpful. They aid in understanding the historical regimes of truth in respect of which persons interpret their own actions.

When Chinggis⁷³ was nearing success in conquering all the peoples of the steppe he was still faced with the powerful Kereit confederation. The ruler of the Kereit was To'ul (Ong Khan), and the problem was that he had earlier established a sworn-companion (*anda*) relationship with Chinggis's father. This relationship, based on a ritualized oath of loyalty, was perhaps unique in Mongol society in its assumption of equality between the two companions. Isono rightly comments that the usual translation of *anda* ('sworn-brother', 'blood-brother') is

⁷¹ Jackson, 'From Ulus to Khanate', 35–6.

⁷² Warner, 'Who's Sorry Now?', 12.

⁷³ At this point he was still Temüjin, but the *Secret History* anachronistically calls him Chinggis and we follow the usage of the text here.

incorrect, as Mongolian brothers were never equal, only senior and junior.⁷⁴ The *anda* relationship was an agreement of alliance, and significantly it entailed the freedom of either partner to choose other allies, since neither had the right to give orders to the other. Inheriting this relationship from his father, Chinggis conceptualizes Ong Khan as equivalent to his father (and hence addresses him 'father'). Early in his career he had several times called on Ong Khan for support, for example in retrieving his stolen wife Börte. Now, after his defeat of the Tatars, Chinggis was keen to strengthen his ties to the Kereit by a marriage exchange. His son would receive one of Ong Khan's daughters and he would promise one of his daughters in exchange to the khan's son, Senggüm. But here Kereit fear of the inequality posed by the Chinggisid conception of society intervenes. The marriage proposal was rejected by Ong Khan's son Senggüm on the grounds that: 'If a girl of our clan joins them she will stand by the door looking up [to the seat of honour]. If a girl from their clan joins us, she will sit at the back of the tent looking [down] to the door'. Chinggis was displeased with these words.⁷⁵

Senggüm sensed Chinggis's anger and feared he might be intending to take over the Kereit polity. He plotted with Jamuqa, who was Chinggis's own main sworn companion. Jamuqa had recently been elected as Gur Khan of another confederation, and in a notable act of betrayal he now tried repeatedly to get Ong Khan to arm against Chinggis.⁷⁶ Ong Khan vacillates. Referring to the *anda* relationship, he replies, 'How can I forsake my child, my son? Up to now he has been our prop. Is it right to plot against him? We shall be unloved by the Sky'.⁷⁷

According to Ratchnevsky the impending struggle represented a crucial confrontation.⁷⁸ The old steppe order hung in the balance and the tribal princes, concerned to preserve their independence, were solid in opposition to Chinggis. His position became critical as the confederation against him (attached

⁷⁴ Fujiko Isono, 'A Few Reflections on the *anda* Relationship', in Larry V. Clark and Paul Alexander Draghi (eds.), *Aspects of Altaic Civilization II: Proceedings of the XVIII PLAC* [Permanent International Altaic Conference], Bloomington, June 29 - July 5, 1975 (Bloomington, 1978), 81-7.

⁷⁵ *SH*, §165.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, §166.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, §167.

⁷⁸ Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*, 62-71.

to Senggüm and Jamuqa) grew. Such general historical observations are never made in the *Secret History*, however. The Mongol text focuses first on strategic matters and then on moral issues. After a plot to deceive Chinggis has been uncovered, it is clear that there will be war, and the disposition of troops, loyalty of various tribes, the allocation of rearguards and volunteering of brave warriors to be front-line fighters is described in detail. Deciding on a temporary retreat, hiding out at the swampy river Baljuna, Chinggis persuades some other tribes to join him.

He now feels strong enough to send a message of reproach to Ong Khan. Significantly, Chinggis accuses Ong Khan of trying to 'teach' him and put him down: 'We are living here in peace, [yet] you make our bed lower, you disrupt the upward flow of smoke from the hearth fire. Why do you teach me in this way?'⁷⁹ He also accuses him in highly moralistic terms of forgetting Chinggis's services, of listening to slander, and of cutting off relations so the two men no longer understand one another.

Ong Khan responds with his declaration of regret.

'Ai! Soyilug! [wrong that I am!]

I have not only separated from my son [Chinggis],

I have separated myself from the principle (*törü*).

In cutting myself off from him,

I have parted from [my] obligation (*üile*)'.

Despairingly [lit. 'losing desire'], he said, 'If when I see my son, I think badly of him, let my blood flow thus'. With this vow, he pierced the ball of his little finger with his arrow-trimming knife and let the blood flow into a small birch-bark container. 'Give this [container] to my son', he said, and sent it off.⁸⁰

As a political intervention, Ong Khan's regrets were ineffective. The *Secret History* does not record Chinggis receiving the container. The subsequent paragraphs describe first Chinggis's message to Jamuqa accusing him of forsaking him, second his insulting reply to Ong Khan saying that he (Chinggis) is now calling him 'younger brother' — not 'father' — because the khan's ancestors were slaves, and third his message to Senggüm ordering him to send emissaries with a declaration renouncing the ambition to be khan. All this enrages Senggüm: 'When did he ever call me *anda* (sworn companion)? I understand the tricks his words perform — they are the first words of war'.⁸¹

⁷⁹ SH, §177.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, §178.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, §181.

Ineffective they may have been, but Ong Khan's regrets have a 'narrative truth'. The khan is of an older generation than Chinggis and cannot bring himself to give up the language of companionship. We may recall Williams's observation about regret, that 'the sort of life one leads conditions one's later desires and judgements. The standpoint of that retrospective judge who will be my later self will be the product of my earlier choices'.⁸² Ong Khan has been reminded by Chinggis of all their shared tribulations. He also knows that he has cut himself off from the new principles and obligations. But the ritual of cutting his finger is not just a vow to think well of Chinggis. Sending the blood is like a desperate attempt to revive the companionship by re-enacting one half of the compact. This fails. Chinggis, though not above pretending otherwise, has given up the idea of equal relations with anyone.

IX

JAMUQA, MEMORY AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF BEING A COMPLIANT SUBJECT

With Jamuqa's regrets we gain some insight into the complex of self-recrimination and self-justification of someone facing the impossibility of friendship with Chinggis. Having conquered the Kereit, Chinggis distributed Ong Khan's women, subjects and valuable property among his followers. He then waged a campaign against the powerful and wealthy Naiman. Jamuqa joined the Naiman but tried to frighten their leader off war with the Mongols by describing Chinggis's immense ferocity. On the eve of battle, Jamuqa deserted the Naiman. Chinggis then defeated the Naiman and in the autumn of the same year made another plundering attack on the Merkits. Jamuqa, however, having escaped with only a few men, is left wretchedly living by hunting in the mountains. His five followers then capture him and take him to Chinggis.

Face to face with his sworn companion, Chinggis sets Jamuqa free and kills the five men for their disloyalty to their rightful commander. Now Chinggis elaborately offers 'friendship' (*nököceya*) to Jamuqa, saying:

⁸² Williams, *Moral Luck*, 34.

Now we are joined together we should
 Remind each other
 Of [things] we have forgotten,
 Wake each other
 When one has fallen asleep.
 Even when you went away and lived apart from me
 You were still my fortunate and blessed sworn companion (*qutuqtu anda*)
 On the day one kills and is killed
 Surely your heart was aching for me.
 Although you separated from me
 And went a different way
 In the days of slaying and being slain
 Your lungs and heart were aching for me.⁸³

Jamuqa replies with his famous words of regret:

In earlier days when we were young I made a compact with the khan, my *anda*, and we swore companionship in the Qorqonag forest.

Together we ate food that is not [just] to be digested
 To each other we spoke words that are not to be forgotten.

We slept under a single quilt.

[But] we were provoked

By an outside person standing to the side

And we parted for good.

Saying to myself that we had exchanged weighty words

The skin of my black face peeled off [in shame]

And so I have been living.

Unable to come near you.

Unable to see the warm face

Of my sworn companion the khan.

Saying to myself that we had exchanged unforgettable words,

The skin of my red face

Came off [in shame].

And so I have been living

Unable to look upon the sincere face

Of my sworn companion with a long memory (*urtu sedkiltü*).

Now my *anda* the khan shows favour to me and says, 'Let us be friends!' But when it was the time for being friends, I was not one.

Now, my *anda*,

You have pacified our entire people

You have united all the foreign peoples.

The throne is ready for you. Now that the world is at your disposal, of what use would I be as a friend to you? I would only disturb your dreams in the dark night, I would trouble your thoughts in the bright day.

I would be the louse in your collar

The thorn in the inner lapel of your coat.

I was brought up by many old women. When I became disloyal to my sworn companion I made a mistake (*aji'as*). Now in this life, with regard to the two of us, my fame has passed from sunrise to sunset. You, my *anda*, had a wise mother. You were born fortunate. You had

⁸³ SH, §200; Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan*, 186.

younger brothers, valiant followers and seventy-three geldings. I was excelled by you, my sworn companion. As for me, I lost my father and mother when I was small and I had no younger brothers. My wife is a prattler, my followers untrustworthy. As a result I was overwhelmed by you, my *anda*, whose destiny was ordained by the Sky. If you favour me, sworn companion, put a quick end to me and then your heart will be at ease. If you condescend to put me to death, let them kill me without shedding blood. Kill me and lay my bones on a high place on the earth, and I will protect you, to the offspring of your offspring, for ever. My origins are different from yours. I was crushed by the spiritual majesty (*sülde*) of my sworn companion, my superior by birth. Do not forget the words I have spoken. Remember them at night and in the morning. Remind each other of them. Now kill me quickly.⁸⁴

Here, it is evident that Jamuqa knows that an equal companionship with Chinggis is no longer possible. What Chinggis now offers in fact is 'to make friends' (*nököcejü*), an ambivalent and incipiently demeaning term, for the word *nökör* was also used for a follower, not an equal. Jamuqa, however, as he repeatedly says, is a sworn companion. For all his evidently resentful and complaining character, he cannot abandon this conception of himself and its moral implications of trust and mutual honesty. Yet partly through his own fault, and partly because of his new recognition of Chinggis's born difference from himself, this role is no longer open and the only way out for this proud man is to die. Chinggis, as the authors of the *Secret History* describe the encounter, knows this too. He replies saying that Jamuqa is a man who should learn from experience, but who is unwilling to comply. Chinggis deliberates about killing Jamuqa, saying that if he performed a divination the omens would not predict it and that it would be wrong to put him to death without good cause. But Chinggis soon finds a reason among Jamuqa's many betrayals. With a show of respect to the earlier *anda* relationship, he has Jamuqa put to death in the honourable manner requested.⁸⁵

Notable in this passage is the repeated reference to memory. In fact, to recall our earlier discussion of theories of emotion, the Mongolian words *umartu-* (forgetting) and *sedkil* (thought, mood,

⁸⁴ SH, §201; Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan*, 187–9; de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, i, 130–2.

⁸⁵ The account in the *Secret History* known to us seems to be a sanitized version. Rashid al-Din, using other information, writes that, since Chinggis could not himself kill someone he had formerly called *anda*, he gave Jamuqa to a nephew, who had him cruelly executed: see Rashid-Ad-Din, *Sbornik letopisei*, ed. Semenov, 277; and discussion in de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, ii, 757.

conscience, memory, feeling) do not distinguish between thought and emotion. These concepts are aligned with the psychological-physiological idea, still present among Mongols until recently, that emotion-thought is located in the heart, the centre of being, while the head was the location only of the senses (sight, smell, etc.).⁸⁶ A cultural emphasis on memory involving physically felt emotion is a ground on which 'regret' could easily arise. At the same time we should note that emotion is not foreign to politics. *Sedki-* is the verb used in respect of the sacred political principles (*törü*) that the new political subjects should cherish and keep in mind.

Let us recall also our earlier discussion of the person who regrets and the historical subject. Both Jamuqa and Chinggis appear here as persons — men who vividly remember their past together — and as diverging historical subjects. We can say that the 'narrative logic' of the text depicts both men as regretful. Readers of the *Secret History* would remember early episodes where as boys they had exchanged arrow-heads and knuckle-bones as a sign of their bond,⁸⁷ had slept under one quilt, and had promised to love one another when they ritually renewed their covenant a few years later.⁸⁸ But as historical subjects their paths diverged: Jamuqa was to become the epitome of the tribal leader — independent-minded, liable to split away at any moment, an ally-enemy in the retaliatory logic of tribal competition. Temüjin on the other hand was to operate with the different rationale of due status, accretion of subordinates, and punitive centric management, legitimized by the idea of his destiny having been willed by the Sky. It is the 'dialogical truth' of this section⁸⁹ that defines the two men as having become different kinds of historical subject, and in this dialogue they agree that Jamuqa must die.

In the very next paragraph Chinggis is enthroned as emperor. 'All the people of the felt-walled tents having being brought into allegiance, they assembled at the source of the Onon River in the Year of the Tiger, hoisted a white banner with nine

⁸⁶ Caroline Humphrey with Urgunge Onon, *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge and Power among the Daur Mongols* (Oxford, 1996), 213–14.

⁸⁷ *SH*, §116.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, §117.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, §201.

pennants, and bestowed the title of *qan* on Chinggis Qa'an'.⁹⁰ The textual place of Jamuqa's regrets just before the enthronement of Chinggis shows that the episode is crucial — it represents the demise of the idea of human equivalence and mutuality. What Jamuqa tells the Mongols to remember and constantly remind themselves of is something disputed in the thirteenth century, the idea of intrinsic ranked difference.

X

CONCLUSION

This article has endeavoured to make a contribution on three fronts. First, we have tried to show how examining declarations of regret in a key historical text enables us to acquire a deeper understanding of the evolution of Mongolian political ideas at an important period of their history. Secondly, we have examined how regrets reveal the relation between individual persons and 'subjects' in history. Thirdly, this has been an attempt to explore the idea of regret as an anthropological and historical theme by revealing its character in a particular context.

The regrets recorded in the *Secret History*, we have argued, concern actions that contravene, or fall short of, emerging ideas of moral-political behaviour. They provide clues to a set of ideas in the process of formation. Just as the 'principles' and 'duties' of a new order only appear piecemeal as the text progresses, the conceptualization of the actions that give rise to regret also undergoes an evolution. Right up to the regrets of Jamuqa,⁹¹ these actions are either not named at all or are called 'mistakes' or 'lapses',⁹² but by Ögödei's imperial times there is another word for them, 'wrongs' (*buru'u*), which are contrasted with rightful tasks (*üiles*). The earlier regrettable incidents have the appearance of accidents in a world of heterogeneity and becoming; here flux and inconstancy are reality itself — the consistency of this world.⁹³ The lapses here are the outcome of the way people generally used to behave, and they therefore

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, §202. The Mongols use *qan* for a political leader in general and *qa'an* for the emperor. The *Secret History* is inconsistent in these usages, as in this case, but we have retained the actual spelling used in §202.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, §201.

⁹² *Aldjas*, from the verb *alda-*, 'to lose'.

⁹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 281.

appear more as careless or unlucky than as bad. The resolutions of these regrettable incidents — the capture of Ambaqai Khan and the successful raid of Temüjin to get his wife back — are also somehow fortuitous, the product of speed and secrecy, and are not presented as models exemplifying an essence of right action. By the time of Ögödei we see, by contrast, a milieu of relative openness and stability, an arena where regrets may be calmly declared, a world where 'right' and 'wrong' are laid out as morally clear judgements. The 'infinite succession of local operations' of the nomadic tribal society⁹⁴ has been replaced by a unitary space, in which a symmetrical disposition of morally coded acts is possible. Between these two kinds of time, in the confused period of 'gathering in' and subordination to the focal energy of Chinggis, declarations of regret reveal the difficult or impossible choices to be made by individual persons around him. The dilemmas hinge, we have argued, on the *bouleversement* of values — from the point of view of the independent, tricky, revenge-seekers of the steppe — represented by the morality of subordinate loyalty.

In some ways, declarations of loyalty in the *Secret History* recall Badiou's theories on the generation of new subjectivities by the Event.⁹⁵ The *événement* is a pivotal event such as the October Revolution or the conversion of St Paul, one that makes evident a new truth. Badiou's chief concern is with the transformative power of radical commitment. What defines the subject is his *fidelity* to the Event, and in this sense the Badiouian subject 'comes after' the Event and then persists in discerning its traces in his situation.⁹⁶ The Truth-Event elicits the conviction of certain individuals who develop the revolutionary implications of the event and by doing so constitute themselves as subjects of its truth.⁹⁷ It is not necessary to enter into the fundamental problematic of Badiou's philosophy to see that his idea, sketched above, can be helpful in trying to understand the reflections of political actors involved in great historical transformations. The *Secret History*, though without saying so in so many words,

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁹⁵ Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris, 1988).

⁹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London, 1999), 130.

⁹⁷ For discussion, see Peter Hallward, *Alain Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, 2002).

establishes the Chinggisid victory as a revolution. If not a Truth-making event, it is certainly a morality-making event. Here too the person declaring his fidelity to the cause at the same time transforms his subject status.

One cannot take Badiou too far here. He is concerned with a European, above all religious and Christian, notion of the character of truth. It is the case that the revelatory character of the acknowledgement of Chinggis has a flavour of cosmological awe. He is eulogized by one hitherto independent prince, upon submitting and offering to become his 'fifth son', as:

Like the clouds parting to reveal Mother Sun
Like the ice clearing to reveal the river water.⁹⁸

But the new status of the follower, the image of the 'fifth son' when Chinggis was surrounded by many such 'sons', is devoid of the notion of transcendence found in so many Christian equivalents. Chinggis tells this 'fifth son' to pay up in silks and damasks in order to be taken on. Badiou's subject, on the other hand — for example, the follower of St Paul — serves a Truth that transcends him; he is never fully adequate to it.⁹⁹ Now Chinggis in the later sections of the *Secret History* certainly represents more than the historical man (in future generations the emperor/ancestor was to become the focus of a religious cult). But 'truth' at this period, including the *törü* of the *Secret History*, is the varied truth of right actions and relationships. Principles are revealed by actions, not the other way around. The people of the *Secret History* are not depicted as intrinsically flawed. They *can* sign up for Chinggis and be fully adequate to (indeed embody) these right ways of acting. On the other hand, they may choose not to.

In mentioning Badiou's ideas on subjectivity and the event, we have already broached the second theme of this paper. It is clear that we have not been able to deal with regret in general among the early Mongols but only those events evidenced in the text of a historical chronicle. Still, what we have at hand is not *merely* the result of an authorial tactic: that is, demonstrating a political value by showing someone regretting not having followed it. The *Secret History* provides ample evidence of the

⁹⁸ *SH*, §238.

⁹⁹ Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 130.

Mongols' attentiveness to singular personality and the way individuals go on taking characteristic action in different contexts and over time. At the same time, it reveals the Mongols' understanding of subjectivity in a broad sense, in the form of recollection and memory, self-consciousness in relation to the opinions of others, reflections on the self by analogy with creatures in the world, or imaginative projections into the future. It is true, of course, that even this relatively rich material falls far short — being limited to a succinct text that aims mainly to tell a historical story — of an adequate description of the labile quality of actual regret. We all know that people in fact may regret something and then wonder whether they were right to do so, or that even the importance of a memory may change from day to day. Nevertheless, it is clear that the *Secret History* contains its own quite sharply observed psychology that conceptualizes people as particular 'selves' or 'persons', as well as types or exemplars. We have argued that this duality of representation allows us to distinguish the person, as a singular consciousness existing through a lifetime, from the changing historical subject characterizing earlier and later political arrangements.

The *Secret History* is a document that indicates consciousness of history in several ways. It charts over decades the interactions between individuals that lead to pivotal denouements. It also provides Mongolian understandings of longer-term causality, such as the execution of Ambaqai by the Kitad, which was the 'reason' for the attacks generations later by Chinggis and Ögödei on North China. And then, use of the Turkic term *törü* and the ancient expression 'destined by the Sky' may indicate a glimmering retrospective aspiration in relation to great earlier steppe empires.¹⁰⁰ Finally, the text shows a clear awareness of there being different epochs in living memory, as when the elderly warrior Kōkō Chos invokes unity among Chinggis's sons by characterizing the chaotic time before the empire. In a long poetic passage we have had to shorten, he says:

Before you were born
The starry sky turned over,
The many people were in turmoil:

¹⁰⁰ Pochekaev, 'Evoliutsiia töre v sisteme mongol'skogo srednevekovogo prava', 535; see also n. 17 above.

Without pausing to enter their beds,
 They took advantage of one another . . .
 People were forced to fight one another without wishing to . . .¹⁰¹

This multi-layered representation of history is another feature that entitles us, we think, to present the separation of the person and the changing historical subject not just as a theoretical idea but also as something the Mongols were incipiently aware of themselves. The reflexivity inherent in even the briefest regrets implies this. At one point Chinggis, preoccupied with campaigning, is reminded that he is now an emperor who should plan his succession. He admits:

I forgot, having failed to follow the forefathers,
 I slept, as if I would not be caught by death.¹⁰²

Studying regret enables us to penetrate to some extent the early Mongolian imagination. Amélie Rorty, using a line of thought continued by Nussbaum, has written that emotions like shame and regret are distinguished by their related characteristic thoughts. 'Shame tends to involve obsessive imagistic replays of the moment of exposure, to be expressed in the focused remembering of the event, as if time were arrested. In regret, the imagination has freer play: the action's long-range consequences are explored, the possible preventive alternatives investigated'.¹⁰³ We see just such a speculative exploration in Jamuqa's images of what it would be like if he were indeed to accept Chinggis's offer of 'friendship'. In trying to explain understandings at times of political change we need to have a generously broad idea of how people might instantiate a new truth, or why they hold themselves back from it. Declarations of regret provide exactly such a bridge.

It has been suggested in this essay that for anthropologists, while it is a *sine qua non* to work through local categories, we may be crippled if we attempt (in any case it is always an impossible attempt) *only* to work through them. Discerning a complex of thoughts and feelings that could in principle be available to any human being, like 'regret', is not to revert to an unthinking Eurocentrism but to make a stab at fuller understanding of

¹⁰¹ SH, §254; Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan*, 243–4.

¹⁰² SH, §254; Onon, *The History and the Life of Chinggis Khan*, 147; de Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, i, 182.

¹⁰³ Rorty, 'Agent Regret', 498.

what it was like to live in a distant time and place. The Mongols of the thirteenth century perhaps especially require this effort, since the effect of their conquests has been so widely stigmatized in the past and yet their own language and scholarship is hardly known at all. More important for contemporary studies, though, is how such an analysis relates to the tendency to discuss the people of early or distant cultures as if they were only users of a language, bearers of 'the culture' or implementers of a discourse. With respect to regret, we gain a sense of the dimensions of imaginative possibilities for individual people. Declaring regret always involves consciousness of what one has done or should do, but implicitly it always says also: 'I retain my freedom from my act'. Regretting makes its judgements out of the standpoint *from here* — the agent's present sense of what is important in their life.¹⁰⁴ Yet in separating from their act and disengaging from an earlier decision, the person knows that in their understanding they have moved on. This sense of there being space, of one being at large to evaluate one's actions this way or that, cannot be taken for granted, as we know from the evidence of forced confessions under Stalin or Chinese 'struggle sessions' during the Cultural Revolution. But we may discover it in the most unlikely places.

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¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 35–6.