



## Report

# The flags of Genghis Khan

Zhao Xinfeng

### Abstract

*Genghis Khan is renowned as a conqueror of the world. He and his descendants led the Mongolian cavalry in a whirlwind across the Eurasian continent, acquiring a territory of 34 million square kilometres. As recorded in The Secret History of the Mongols, Genghis Khan assembled the feudatory kings and ministers in Mongolia, erected a white national flag with nine ribbons and proclaimed himself emperor at the Onon River. He was addressed respectfully as 'King Genghis'. The flags of Genghis Khan represented the glory of his era, incomparably formidable and influential. Three types of flags remain to this day, namely the Chagaan Sulde, Hari Sulde and Alag Sulde. Grand and solemn sacrificial ceremonies for the suldes are still held annually at the Mausoleum of Genghis Khan, in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and in the region of Wushen Banner.*

Genghis Khan is renowned as a conqueror of the world. He and his descendants led the Mongolian cavalry in a whirlwind across the Eurasian continent, acquiring a territory of 34 million square kilometres.



*At its height the Mongol Empire ran from Turkey and Poland to the Korean peninsula, including all of modern China*

His flags – suldes – represent the glory of his era, incomparably formidable and influential.

In the year 1162, a baby boy was born on the steppe where the Kiyad tribe lived. He was said to have been born grasping a blood clot shaped like the top of a trident. Later generations said that he was a saviour bestowed by heaven to save the Mongols. At the time of his birth, his father Yesügei – leader of the



Kiyad tribe – defeated the Tatars and captured their leader Temüjin-üge. The boy was named Temüjin ('iron-willed') after the enemy chief, and he did indeed turn out to be a courageous young man.



*Flanked by two suldes, a golden statue of Genghis Khan seated before a map of his conquests*

When he was nine years old, his father was killed, poisoned by an enemy tribe. As a result, the Kiyad fell apart in an instant and everyone began leaving to join the stronger enemy tribe. Temüjin's mother Hoelun chased after the departing Kiyad herdsmen with a black sulde in her hands, and succeeded in halting some of them. However, without a tribal leader, they eventually left once again. Temüjin and Hoelun went from being the head of a tribe to having to earn their own livelihood. All they had was eight horses, and Temüjin and his half-brothers were constantly fighting over food. Finally, Temüjin and his younger brother killed his half-brother Begter. Despite of being scolded by his mother, Temüjin thus began his life of killing and battle.

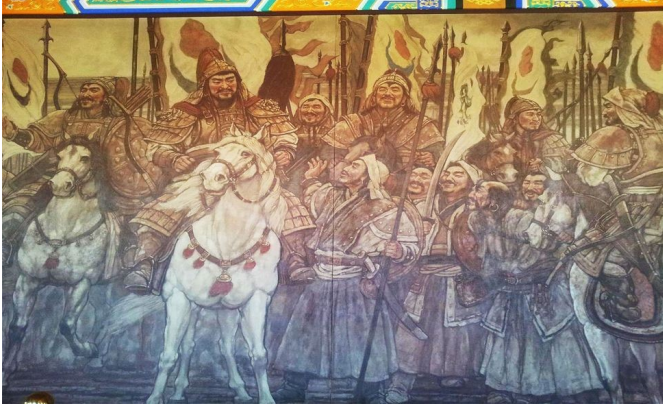


*Statue depicting the life of Genghis Khan, City Square, Ordos*

With the help of his brothers and friends, the brave and intelligent Temüjin went through fire and water to defeat and consolidate the various steppe tribes. In 1206, he summoned all the tribal chiefs and ministers to meet by the Onon river and founded the Mongol Empire. According to the records in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, chiefs and ministers referred to Temüjin respectfully as Emperor, 'Genghis', which means an emperor that owns the world. Genghis Khan raised a white flag with nine ribbons as a symbol of the new country. The national flag is white because white is the noblest colour in Mongolian culture. However, there has never been an exact illustration of the



nine-ribbon flag, and historians could only recreate the flag on the basis of written descriptions. Flags with nine ribbons emerged as early as the Zhou Dynasty during the eleventh century BC. The use of flags was already strictly regulated when the First Emperor of Qin unified China [c.221 BC]. In the past, Chinese emperors often awarded flags to tribes to demonstrate pacification and ownership.



*Genghis Khan and his army depart on campaign*

The nine white banners represent nine suldes, with the main sulde in the middle surrounded by eight accompanying suldes. This format remains to this day. Judging by the fact that the steppe tribes still lacked the ability to create characters, or to weave or dye flags. I believe the 'nine white banners' means nine suldes.



*Three types of flags in the era of Genghis Khan:  
the Qagaan Sulde, Hara Sulde and Alag Sulde*

The Mongolian flags that shine to this day exhibit the characteristics of the peoples of the steppe. The trident-shaped top is inspired by the pitchfork, the flagpole is made of pine and decorated with a horse's mane, all very easily accessible materials. In Mongolian, flags are called suldes, and the appearance of black suldes can even be traced back to a time before Genghis Khan established the country. Three main types of flags were used between the foundation of the country by Genghis Khan and the end of the Yuan Dynasty [1368 AD].



*The distinctive shape of the sulde originated in farming equipment*

The first is the Qagaan Sulde; qagaan means 'white' in Mongolian. The flag has a trident top; below is a disk pierced with 81 holes, through which are fastened the manes of white stallions, all borne on a pine flagpole. The Qagaan Sulde is the national flag, used during important events and ceremonies connected with Genghis Khan.

Second is the Hara Sulde, the military flag; hara means 'black' in Mongolian, which is why the flag is decorated with black manes. It is used during wartime to give instructions and lead the way.

The third is the Alag Sulde, which means 'mixed-colour flag'. It has both white and black manes, and is often shaped like a spear or trident, with a disk attached to it. The Alag Sulde is the flag that was awarded to feudatory kings who rendered outstanding services. Genghis Khan and his followers raised their suldes and swept across the Eurasian continent, acquiring 34 million square kilometres of territory. That is when the glory of the suldes reached its peak and nothing since has surpassed it.



*Three suldes in front of the Genghis Khan Temple*



*Genghis Khan's mausoleum: the sulde altar*



Although the Yuan Dynasty ended in 1368 AD, the tradition of worshipping Genghis Khan and the suldes remains. At Genghis Khan’s Mausoleum in Ordos, China, stands an enormous altar that enshrines the ancient Hara Sulde. According to Mongolian traditions, women cannot approach the suldes, and that still remains the case. Qagaan Suldes are enshrined on the steppe of Uxin Banner, Ordos. The sacrificial ceremonies include daily, monthly and seasonal ceremonies. The mausoleum is guarded by the Darkhad people, who have continually upheld this responsibility for 800 years. Even when the Japanese army invaded the steppe, the Darkhad transferred the holy relics of the Khan to Xinglong mountain in Lanzhou and maintained their guard.



*The tradition that women cannot approach the sulde altar continues*



*Genghis Khan's mausoleum, built by the Chinese Government in 1945*

The ceremony starts with the chanting of 81 Darkhad guards, which celebrates the accomplishments of the Khan and the suldes. Then four strong Darkhad men respectfully remove the Hara Sulde from the altar and march forward while shaking the sulde. After that, the Hara Sulde will be returned to the altar; this is known as 'Yehe Tahlilga'. During the Year of the Tiger or the Year of the Dragon [next in 2022 and 2024 respectively], the ceremonies are even more solemn and magnificent, and the manes and other decorations on the suldes are also refreshed.



*Rituals at the Hara Sulde sacrificial ceremony*



*Left, the Darkhad people have guarded the mausoleum for over 800 years; right, despite the passage of time the passion for and worship of Genghis Khan and the suldes will never fade*



*To bring peace and good fortune,  
Sulde decorations are now set up in  
front of the houses of ordinary  
Mongolian herdsmen*



*I look forward to the 29th International Congress of Vexillology  
in Beijing in 2024*

**Author biography**

Zhao Xinfeng: initiator of Chinese flag culture undertaking, founder of chinaflag.org.cn, chief instructor of nationwide flag raisers in schools, founder of Beijing Xinfeng Center of Flag Culture Communication.