

# Cognitive Complements in Urgunge Onon's "The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan"

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**Abstract:** As a highly controversial book, "The Secret History of the Mongols", remains the only available account of the life of Chinggis Khan and plays an important role in studying Mongolian history and culture. Its original Uighurjin Mongol script has long been lost but it still has been translated into various languages including English, Japanese, French, etc. Passed down by word of mouth, the book is compiled with unavoidable narrative inaccuracies. However, Urgunge Onon, based on his Mongolian cultural background and overseas experience, investigated a variety of documents and then translated and edited his own version, "The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan". In his translation and interpretation, examples of cognitive complements can be found in every chapter to bridge cultural and cognitive gaps for target readers. As Onon expects to introduce his own Mongolian culture to the rest of the world, it's necessary for him to act as a "cultural interpreter". To achieve this goal, cognitive complements work effectively, which in his book mainly consist of interpretive translation of cultural memes of proper nouns, dynamically equivalent interpretation of culturally specific concepts and poetic reshaping of the narrative style. In this way, Onon reconstructs a Mongolian nomadic epic within the English-speaking world. This paper mainly illustrates how Onon applies cognitive complements with examples from his first three chapters.

**Keywords:** The Secret History of the Mongols; Urgunge Onon; Cognitive complements; Interpretive translation

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## 1. Introduction

"The Secret History of the Mongols", as a first-hand historical record of the life of Temüjin—Chinggis Khan, not only holds esteemed significance in Mongolian literature but also provides valuable materials for global study of Chinggis Khan and his clan. The book blends with chronicle affairs, legends, and historical records of how Chinggis' clan, the Borjigin, rose to a leader of an intercontinental empire, which makes it a great resource to learn about Chinggis' clan's origin, social institutions, and Mongolian customs. However, domestic academic research on the translation of this text remains inadequate. The author supposes two reasons working as major obstacles: the loss of the original script and linguistic barriers. The original Uighurjin Mongol script has long been lost and now the earliest version of the book is transliterated in Chinese with corresponding interpretation or interlinear notes. This unique textual preservation poses inherent obstacles to comparative translation research based on the original text. Besides, constrained by its oral tradition, researches of

literary rhetorical devices, which are common practices in translation research, are hard to realize. In addition, inaccurate accounts of some affairs and potential chronological inconsistencies also hinder its translation exploration to some extent.

However, with the application of interdisciplinary research methods in translation studies, scholars have increasingly recognized that translation research should break through the confine of single-discipline linguistics and move toward integration. Against this backdrop, it has become particularly important to move beyond a narrow focus on literary or linguistic features and instead concentrate on the value of content communication and cultural reconstruction. As early as 2004, Professor Wang Hongyin pointed out that ethnic literature, especially Chinese minority literature, serves as an important complement to the mainstream Chinese literature and Han culture, constituting an indispensable component of China's literary and cultural panorama <sup>[1]</sup>. Without it, Chinese literature would be incomplete. Since the literary development of ethnic minorities has generally followed a different path from that of Han literature, ethnic texts are distinguished by their unique ethnic characteristics. Therefore, researchers need to pay full attention to the communication of these distinctive ethnic features in translation studies.

## **2. Cognitive complements and “The Secret History of the Mongols: The life and times of Chinggis Khan”**

English translation of “The Secret History of the Mongols” has achieved remarkable success in international academia, making systematic research on its English versions particularly urgent. Among the three complete translations, Urgunge Onon's translation and interpretation, “The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan”, stands out for its distinctive cultural display. Onon's Mongolian ethnic background and overseas living and working experience have equipped him with both cultural genius and linguistic advantage. This paper takes Onon's English translation as its research object and introduces how Onon proactively communicates his cultural concepts to the English readers through cognitive complementing, which comes from interpretive theory, aiming to narrow the cultural and historical cognitive gap between the source text and target readers, thereby paving new pathways for the acceptance and spreading of “The Secret History of the Mongols” in the English-speaking world.

### **2.1. History of English translation of “The Secret History of the Mongols”**

“The Secret History of the Mongols” attracted international academic attention at an early stage, with English translations emerging successively since the 1950s. Among them, the first complete academic translation by Francois Woodman Cleaves, though not formally published until 1982, was actually completed as early as 1956. Another significant complete translation of Australian Mongolian scholar, Igor de Rachewiltz, was serialized in academic journals from 1971 to 1985. His revised version, “The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century”, was later published as a book in 2004. Although published later than Onon's complete translation, it is widely recognized as the second complete English version. Following the foundational work of F. W. Cleaves and Igor de Rachewiltz, Urgunge Onon's perspective witnessed an important shift in his complete version of “The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan” published in 2001, which was revised after a 1990 version. He gives the translation unprecedented depth in exploring the cultural connotations of his own ethnic group. This achievement is not accidental but deeply connected to its specific historical and cultural context. Since the late 1970s, with in-depth research done by numerous Mongolian scholars, discussions on the unique cultural elements in “The Secret History of the Mongols” have flourished. Onon's translation is firmly rooted in this rich academic foundation established by native Mongolian scholars.

### **2.2. The introduction of Urgunge Onon**

Urgunge Onon, as a native Mongolian scholar with great English proficiency and cultural background, works as a bilingual and bi-cultural translator in his work of “The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan”. Born in Inner Mongolia in 1913, he graduated from Toyo University in Japan. At the end of 1948, he relocated to the United

States and later taught at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. After his retirement, he co-founded Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit at the University of Cambridge. Onon has devoted his whole life to Mongolian studies, and his distinct ethnic identity has endowed him with exceptional interpretive authority. At the same time, his living and working experience in the West ensures his proficiency in both languages and scholarly expertise. As Xing Li pointed out, compared to other translators, Onon's unique advantage lies in his dual cultural heritages<sup>[2]</sup>. He has intimate understanding of his own culture and remains a cultural ambassador residing abroad. His identity ignites a strong sense of cultural belonging and a mission to disseminate his culture and knowledge about his root, leading him to consistently adhere to a cultural advocacy approach in his translation practice, striving to interpret and promote the text from an ethnic perspective.

To achieve this goal, Onon extensively employed "cognitive complementing" throughout the text. By means of interpretive translation, he provides cultural interpretations and expansions of complex and strange linguistic expressions, integrating explanatory content organically into the main text sometimes even without using brackets to mark it. This approach ensures fluency and accessibility of the translation, making it more convenient and friendly for readers.

### 2.3. The introduction of cognitive complementing

According to Lederer, "cognitive complements" are essential components in the process of translation<sup>[3]</sup>. She points out that meaning is not derived simply from the linguistic structure but is generated through the integration of the cognitive knowledge base, including encyclopedic and cultural knowledge, and the cognitive environment, including affective and emotional components, with the linguistic meaning. Her concept is fundamental to achieving "deverbalization" – the process of moving away from the structure of the source language to grasp and convey the underlying meaning. Although the initial application of Interpretive Theory focuses on interpreting, subsequent studies have witnessed its use in multiple domains. In China, Gao Mo has explored its crucial role in accurately conveying specific terms in political interpreting<sup>[4]</sup>. Fan Siyong highlights the necessity of professional knowledge as cognitive complements in avoiding inaccurate translation in business and trade contexts<sup>[5]</sup>. Peng Yihong has applied it to French poetry translation, proving its value in rebuilding literary emotions and artistic conception<sup>[6]</sup>. These studies collectively indicate that cognitive complements are key to ensuring communicative effectiveness across various types of translation practices. However, as Wang Hongyin cautioned, there still exists an obvious lack of translation of ethnic classics<sup>[1]</sup>. With the guidance of cognitive complementing, the author believes that more progress can be achieved in translating and communicating cultural essence of ethnic works.

In specific translation practices, different Chinese scholars have also contributed their thoughts on the importance of cognitive complementing. Most of them believe cognitive complements are used in the process of meaning reconstructing to supplement necessary setting knowledge. Wang Danyang illustrates the bonding role of cognitive complements between Interpretive Theory and translation practice<sup>[7]</sup>. Pei Wenjuan believes that the unit of sense should be used as the basic unit of translation instead of morphemes or phonemes<sup>[8]</sup>. Wu Weifang strengthens the role of cognitive complements in ensuring cognitive coherence in practical translation<sup>[9]</sup>. All these inspire translators to better handle the role of cognition in their working. In culture-oriented translations, cognitive complements are concretely manifested when translators proactively add explanations or background information to the target text, and reconstruct contexts to bridge distance between the source and target cultures. This goes far beyond simple textual processing. It more represents a reshaping process of knowledge systems and personal values. In practice, this involves providing essential background information and creating cultural correspondences for target readers, such as clarifying historical allusions or using culturally resonant analogues. Furthermore, the translator actively reconstructs contextual coherence to make implicit logical connections explicit and specifies ambiguous references to ensure clarity. More importantly, this process extends beyond the informational to encompass the affective, as the translator must convey the emotional and affective components of the text. Collectively, these interventions represent a strategic application of the translator's cognitive knowledge base and environment to deverbalize the source text and re-express its full meaning.

For culturally intensive ethnic classics such as "The Secret History of the Mongols", the translator's cognitive complementing strategy directly determines the presentation of the psychological Mongolian world that target readers

can construct. As a bilingual and bi-cultural translator, Onon's core translation philosophy lies in employing systematic cognitive complements to restore "The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan" as an epic belonging to the nomadic people themselves, thereby constructing an "internal perspective" for English readers and achieving an immersive cultural experience.

### 3. Cognitive complements in Onon's translation

Onon's translation is from the 1980 edition of "The Secret History of the Mongols", revised and annotated by Eldengtei and Ardajab. His second main source of material was "The Selected Translation of the Vocabulary of The Secret History of the Mongols", by Eldengtei, Oyuundalai and Asaraltu. In his translation of "The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan", Urgunge Onon systematically employs cognitive complementing strategies to bridge the cognitive and cultural gap between the source culture and the target readers. Based on his profound Mongolian cultural background, he conducts in-depth and explanatory cultural interpretation across three key areas to introduce distinctively Mongolian culture and history: interpretive translation of cultural memes of proper nouns, dynamically equivalent conversion of culturally specific concepts, and poetic reshaping of narrating style.

#### 3.1. Interpretive translation of cultural memes of proper nouns

When dealing with such proper nouns as names, places and tribes, Onon goes beyond simple transliteration. By exploring etymologies and illustrating symbolic meanings, he implants rich cultural connotations into the translated terms, guiding readers to understand the text from a Mongolian cultural perspective. The following are typical examples to show this conversion from Chapter 1 to Chapter 3, most of which are representative application of cognitive complementing strategy.

- (a) Börte Chino, whose name means "greyish white wolf".
- (b) Qo'ai-maral, the wolf's spouse, whose name means "beautiful doe".
- (c) He was descended from Börte Chino...and Qo'ai-maral... who crossed the lake and settled at the source of the Onon River.
- (d) They split into four clans that became the Four Peoples.
- (e) Thus, the Jadaran clan came into being.
- (f) From Bodonchar came the Borjigins.
- (g) His name was Jirgo'adai, but because he shot at the nape of my yellow war-horse with the white mouth, he shall be called Jebe and I shall use him as an arrow.

In above-mentioned translation practice, Onon systematically achieves cultural cognitive complementing in three aspects: totem culture, ancestral rooting and hunting culture. In the examples, he has adopted different ways of translation. In examples "(a)" and "(b)", he transliterates the names of the two ancestors, but complementing the connotations of the two names in the target text, which otherwise is completed in the notes or interlinear notes by some other translators. In this way, he tries to display complete and vivid images of the two ancestors and explain the root of "Deer Culture" of Chinggis Khan's tribe, which contributes to less obstacles in the following reading and more understanding of concrete culture of Mongols. While for examples of "(c), (d), (e) and (f)", he clearly explains the tribe's root and settlement in the sentences, which are originally loose and lack of coherence in the source text. Thus, target readers have a clarified clue of how Chinggis Khan's tribe has developed its clans and achieve a comprehensive picture of the whole storyline. For example, "(g)", it tells part of the story that how Chinggis Khan assembles his loyal companions on his journey to greater power. The name "Jebe", meaning "arrowhead", reveals the influence of Mongols' hunting culture on their daily life, even on naming as well as showing their personal abilities and traits.

In Onon's version, most implicit and buried details are explained with more acceptable connection. This makes readers easily get new names and better mastery of Mongols' culture and involves them in the process of Chinggis Khan's final success. In Onon's understanding, Chinggis Khan is considered as one of the three great men in the east, of whom

the rest two are Sakyamuni and Confucius <sup>[10]</sup>. The more explicit translation also carries Onon's respect for the greatest Mongolian leader his race has ever seen and his expectation to promote this great history and culture to the rest of the world.

### 3.2. Dynamically equivalent interpretation of culturally specific concepts

For culturally specific concepts of institutions, customs, and artifacts, Onon used footnotes for detailed description and explanation to limit the word count of a sentence. The examples are as follows.

- (a) Chinggis Qahan was born with his destiny ordained by heaven above. (This phrase is not exclusively used of Chinggis Qahan and could apply to any person and even to animals. It is based on the Shamanist notion that every individual carries a heavenly spirit in his or her head.)
- (b) This mother of ours has produced three sons, without [our father's] older brother, younger brother, or cousins or any husband. (Literally, 'third cousins (on the father's side)'. The brothers refer here to the practice of levirate, whereby a widow is passed on to her husband's younger brother or some other male relative so that her offspring remains within the descent group.)
- (c) As the people left the feast, he pulled away the [rope of the] cangue from the weak boy, struck him on the head, and ran. (Buqa'u ('cangue') was a wooden board, sometimes clamped around the neck, with fetters or holes to restrain the hands. When Temujin's cangue is later removed, the verb used (chuchalju) shows that the cangue was fastened with ropes.
- (d) In earlier days, [their] father Yisugei Qan and the Ong Qan of the Kereyit people had agreed to swear brotherhood together. (Anda, 'sworn brotherhood', is one of the two main relationships in the History, the other being nököör.)

The above examples are made up of the translated text and the footnotes, the bracketed sentences. Just like other translations, Onon offers detailed information of culturally specific concepts, including general religious practice and its significance (example "(a)"), marital custom (example "(b)"), the use of artifacts (example "(c)") and social bonding practice (example "(d)"). But there still exists distinctions between Onon's version and others. Among these, example "(d)" especially needs more attention as in the translated text, the original Mongolian word "Anda" only makes its appearance in the footnote not in the translated text, in which a more comprehensible word "brotherhood" is used. This choice reflects Onon's decision to reduce strangeness in explaining and spreading culture.

No matter how the cultural elements are shown in the target language, it's obvious that Onon devotes to building up an understandable meaning network by converting mystical concepts into an acceptable belief system, by enabling English readers to grasp tribal bonding pact and historical rationale behind Mongols' marital custom which contrasts with modern ethics. As for those descriptions of common artifacts, Onon manages to build concrete images and cultural contexts as cognitive complements for the readers.

### 3.3. Poetic reshaping of narrative style

Onon consciously reshapes the originally straightforward and annalistic lines into an epic characterized by rhythm and imagery. In this way, he manages to form textual coherence in his short verses and appeal to the English speakers' taste for poems. The following are some examples from Onon's book.

- (a) Why do you talk unwisely?  
Evidently it is a sign  
that they are sons of Heaven.  
Why do you compare them  
to the black-haired commoners?  
When they become lords of all,  
the common people must understand.
- (b) bad odors rose

from every withered tree,  
dank smells  
from every dried-up tree.

(c) whose hair has never blown  
in the wind,  
whose belly has never hungered  
in the wild land.

(d) We make our fair-faced daughters  
sit in the two-wheeled cart,  
harnessed to a black camel,  
for you who become qahans,  
and send them off at a trot.  
On the qatan throne  
we make them sit together with you.

In his translation, Onon deliberately pursues higher literary quality through shaping a form of oral epic with cadences. In the above examples, repetitions of same phrases and sentence patterns are frequently used to create parallel structures, which can be noticed in examples “(a), (b), (c) and (d)” with clear paragraphing. Meanwhile, poetic sections are distinctly set apart from other narratives and arranged in a form of verses. He also employs language with a stronger sense of rhythm and fluency to recreate the simplicity and power of the source text. With Onon’s painstaking efforts, he establishes vivid and sensory imagery and immerses readers in a Mongolian context with gradual imperceptible acceptance of the target text and source culture. In this way, Onon realizes his own cognitive complementing and shifting in a textual dimension. His translation conveys an important message to the readers that the book is not only a historical document but also a heroic epic of Chinggis Khan.

## 4. Conclusion

As a combination of chronicle, heroic epic and myths, “The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan” marks a model of interpretive translation with multiple and rich examples of cognitive complementing in three ways: interpretive translation of cultural memes of proper nouns, dynamically equivalent interpretation of culturally specific concepts and poetic reshaping of narrative style. Through his intentional and careful construction, Onon successfully presents English readers with a vibrant epic and narrative of Mongolian nomadic life. He accurately predicts the cultural, historical, and cognitive distance between the source text and readers in the English-speaking world and proactively narrow the distance. In order to enlighten readers about Mongolian cultural concepts, he merges the original proper nouns with their cultural connotations. To familiarize foreign readers with necessary background information to access meaningful reading, he supplements religious practice, marital customs and the use of artifacts in footnotes. Last, to achieve better literary effectiveness, he takes the form of poetic verse as a complement to appeal to readers’ taste for epic. Onon’s practice demonstrates how important it is for a translator to fully mobilize his own cognitive knowledge and affection in translating ethnic classics. This not only broadens the field of research on the translation of Mongolian’s historic records but also provides a methodological reference for the translation and communication of other “marginalized” ethnic classics, both within China and globally.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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