CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE JAM SYSTEM

The Mongol institution for communication and transportation

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The Mongols established an extensive postal relay system throughout their vast empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. During the time of the Mongol Empire, the Mongolian word *jam* denoted a fixed relay station staffed by relay station keepers (*jamuchin*) and post-horse keepers (*ula’achin*), from which official travelers were to obtain remounts, provisions, lodgings, and other necessities for their journeys. With the unprecedented expansion of the Mongol Empire, the *jam* system expanded to become the largest network of communication and transportation during the pre-modern era. For more than a century this system facilitated the exchange of people, materials, information, and culture between east and west, as well as north and south, during the era of the *Pax Mongolica*.

The Mongol *jam* system impressed many foreign visitors (e.g., John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone) as well as various subject peoples in China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Russia. For this reason, all the successor states of the Mongol Empire, such as the Ming Dynasty, Timurid Empire, Ottoman Empire, and Muscovy, which were all heavily influenced by Mongol rule, maintained similar post road systems bearing almost identical names derived from the Mongolian word *jam* (*zhan* 站 in Chinese, *yam* in Turkic and Persian, and *iam* in Russian).

THE ORIGINS OF THE JAM SYSTEM

Scholars have considered that the Mongolian term *jam* as well as the *jam* system originated from China. They regarded the Mongolian term as borrowed from the Chinese word *zhan* 站 or *yi* 驛, and the Mongol postal relay system was modeled on that of previous Chinese states. Recent research, however, emphasizes the Central Asian aspects of the Mongol *jam* system.

The term *jam* did not originate from Chinese. The Chinese character *zhan*, which previously had nothing to do with a postal relay system, was only chosen to
transcribe the Mongolian word *jam* during the Yuan period. Moreover, during the early Mongol period, Chinese texts often transcribed the term *jam* by using several different Chinese characters, all pronounced *zhan*. Some scholars claim that the Chinese word yi was transmitted to Turkic, thereby forming the term *yam*; then the Mongols inherited the Turkic word but pronounced it in their own way (*yam > jam*). However, the Turkic *yam* was derived from the Mongolian *jam* because the word *yam* is first attested in Middle Turkic of the fourteenth century.

The earliest cognate of the term *jam* is found in the Taghbach (Tuoba 拓跋) language in the form of “ɣyamčɪn,” meaning “people who use postal relay stations in all provinces.” Since Taghbach was one of the Middle Serbi languages of the Serbi-Mongolic language family, the Mongol postal relay system inherited its name as well as basic terminologies, such as *jam* and *jamuchin*, from the Taghbach state, namely, the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534). The Northern Wei Dynasty was not the only steppe-based state that built and utilized a postal relay system before the Mongol Empire. The Xiongnu, Rouran, Türk, Uyghur, and Khitan-Liao Empires in the Mongolian steppe and the West Uyghur Kingdom in modern Turfan and Jimsar area maintained postal relay systems within their territories. Thus, it is likely that the Mongols had numerous precedents of postal relay institutions from previous steppe states when they established their *jam* system.

**THE RISE OF THE *JAM* SYSTEM:**

**CHINGGIS KHAN AND ÖGÖDEI QA’AN**

A rudimentary form of the postal relay institution was already in operation during the time of Chinggis Khan. The Daoist master Changchun 長春眞人 and the Kitan official Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 were firsthand witnesses to this earliest version of the *jam* system, and the accounts of their travels unveil a couple of interesting aspects. First, the postal relay system was more developed in the steppe areas in and around today’s Mongolia than the settled regions in North China and Central Asia. In the settled areas, there was no well-organized network of relay stations. Thus, local rulers, officials, and residents in villages and towns were to offer official travelers post-horses, accommodation, provisions, and other necessities whenever necessary. Across the Mongolian steppe, nomadic campsites functioned as quasi-relay stations. Therefore, all authorized travelers could obtain remounts, lodgings, provisions, and other necessary items more easily and frequently from any nomadic encampments they came across.

More importantly, the Mongols established at least two regional post roads in and around the Mongolian steppe during Chinggis Khan’s time. The first one was called the “Fish Lake Post Road 魚兒濼驛路” by Changchun and ran between Fish Lake and the loop of the upper Kerülen River. The Mongols built this post road to connect their main rear support base on the upper Kerülen River (today’s Avraga site in the Khentii province, Mongolia) to Fish Lake, which functioned as the frontline command center and logistics base during the campaign against the Jin Dynasty. The second post road stretched from Chinqai City down to the Irtysh and Öröngö Rivers via the Altai Mountains. The southern section of it was called the “Post Road on a Big River to the South of the Altai Mountains 金山南大河驛路” by Changchun. The Mongols constructed this post road to link their military support
base in western Mongolia (Chinqai City)\textsuperscript{15} to Central Asia during their campaign against the Khwarazmshah Sultanate. In both instances, Chinggis Khan built post roads to facilitate Mongol military expansion into China and Central Asia. In sum, the Mongols built their earliest postal relay system in and around their homeland to facilitate their military expansion.

Ögödei Qa’an substantially expanded and institutionalized the jam system, thereby acquiring the reputation as its founder. Ögödei augmented the jam system to expedite the state-building and military expansion of the Mongol Empire. The last showdown with the Jin Dynasty and the construction of the new imperial capital, Qaraqorum, both prompted Ögödei to significantly improve the jam system connecting Mongolia to North China.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, three post roads were built between the two regions. The eastern, central, and western routes were later known as the Tergen, Morin, and Narin Post Roads respectively. The itinerary of the Tergen Post Road went “Dadu – Shangdu – Fish Lake – the Gobi – the upper Kerulen River – the Tuul River – Lake Ögii – Qaraqorum.” The Morin Road passed through “Shangdu – Lilingtai – north of Datong – Fengzhou – Mt. Daqing – Jingzhou – Shajing – the Gobi – the Onggi River – Qaraqorum.” Lastly, the Narin Road spanned “Dadu – Datong – Dongsheng

Map 23.1 The Tergen, Morin, Narin Post Roads
Source: Created by Mapping Specialists, Ltd.
The Mongol campaign toward the Qipchaq steppe and Russian principalities also triggered Ögödei to expand the *jam* system further west. This post road bound the territories of the Mongol Empire horizontally through the Central Eurasian steppe. The itinerary of this post road went “Mongolia – the Altai Mountains – the Irtys and Öröngö Rivers – Qobaq – Emil – the Ala Köl valley – the Ili River – the Chu River – the Talas River – the northern banks of the Syrdarya River – the northern shore of the Aral Sea – the Ural River – the Volga River.” Fixed relay stations were installed at regular intervals only in the eastern half of the empire (the Mongolian steppe and its neighboring regions) during the reign of Ögödei. To the west of the Altai Mountains, *jams* were built on a regular basis only along the northwestern rim of today’s Zhungar Basin. These stations then came to be linked with those of the Chaghadaid and Jochid appanages. Across Batu’s and Chaghadai’s domains *jams* were rarely installed. Instead, nomadic encampments of the steppe as well as towns and villages of the settled region provided official travelers with necessary items and service.18

At this juncture, two points should be underscored. First, Ögödei did not create these post roads out of nothing. In other words, these post roads were expansions of the previous post roads or land routes. For instance, Ögödei substantially

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**Map 23.2 Central Asian Post Roads**

Source: Created by Mapping Specialists, Ltd.
expanded the Fish Lake Post Road of Chinggis Khan’s time to form the eastern (or the Tergen) post road. Likewise, the post road around the Altai Range was significantly extended to cover the entire northwestern fringe of the Zhungar Basin. The central and western post roads, to be known as the Morin and Narin Post Roads respectively, were constructed on the two land routes that had been frequently used even before Chinggis Khan’s time. Second, during Ögödei’s reign, the steppe regions, especially in and around Mongolia, retained a far better jam system than the settled areas in North China, Central Asia, and the Middle East, as all the post roads were constructed to supply and feed the Mongol heartland. For this reason, during that time, all roads led to Qaraqorum.

Ögödei also institutionalized the jam system. During Chinggis Khan’s time, the jam system only achieved a modest level of institutionalization and was operated on an ad hoc basis. Thus, whenever an envoy of a Mongol prince saw a fresh horse, he (and even his entire retinue) was entitled to exchange his own horse for it. Moreover, when messengers rode in haste, they were allowed to move freely among the population, often causing great disruptions. Ögödei regularized the operations of the jam system by introducing a government branch of households designated for running jams, namely the relay station household (jamuchin in Mongolian, zhanhu 站戶 in Chinese). Thus, Ögödei made envoys travel only through jams run by the relay households. To maintain this system across the steppe regions, each minggan (the administrative-cum-military unit of one thousand) was to build and administer a jam within its jurisdiction in lieu of other ordinary taxation and corvée paid by civilian households. In North China, the maintenance of stations was somewhat different. Each unit of one hundred managed a station with rice granaries and Chinese carts in it, and all necessary items for jams were jointly provided by relay station households and civilian households. The existence of the relay station household had been unknown before the Mongol Empire.

THE EXPANSION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE SYSTEM: MÖNGKE, QUBILAI, AND GHAZAN

The Mongol post road system considerably expanded over the course of the two massive military campaigns against South China and the Middle East during the reign of Mongke (1251–1259). Möngke dispatched his brother Qubilai with large forces to the Dali (大理) Kingdom in 1252. During the conquest of Dali, the Mongols constructed new roads along with relay stations in today’s Yunnan and Guizhou provinces of China. In addition, Möngke launched another campaign of enormous scale to the Middle East in 1254. He appointed his brother Hülegü as the commander-in-chief of this enterprise. Hülegü’s army utilized the jam system from Mongolia down to Khurasan via Mawarannahr. During the campaign, Hülegü and his army also considerably developed the system in Iran and Mawarannahr. As a result, Hülegü’s campaign created a standard route between Mongolia and western Iran, passing through Mawarannahr, Khurasan, and Mazandaran, though fixed relay stations were not installed yet along the entire route.

Möngke also institutionalized the jam system. For instance, he set a limit on the number of post-horses and provisions that emissaries could use en route to restrain their abuse of jams. He also prohibited merchants coming to Mongolia from
using post-horses. More importantly, Möngke implemented a fiscal reform that regularized the operation of jams. Specifically, he imposed the qubchiri tax, which was fixed annually according to a taxpayer’s wealth, in North China, Central Asia, and the Middle East to meet the expenses of forced levies, jams, and maintenance of ambassadors. By doing so, Möngke attempted to standardize the way that the empire-wide jam system was financed and maintained.

During Qubilai Qa’an’s reign (1260–1294), the Mongol jam system achieved its full maturity. Qubilai not only reinforced the existing post roads but also built new ones. Over the course of the construction of Shangdu and Daidu, he significantly extended the existing post roads connecting Mongolia to North China. As a result, the Tergen, Morin, and Narin Post Roads all became fully developed with standard names and routes during the first decade of Qubilai’s reign. As the importance of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhist monks increased in the Yuan court, Qubilai also built relay stations in Central Tibet in the 1260s. Moreover, due to the campaigns against the Song Dynasty, Qubilai constructed several new post roads in today’s Hebei, Henan, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces of China.

The Yuan court constructed many relay stations for waterways in South China along with horse stations, while in North China, it abolished substantial overland relay stations in 1289 as North China’s strategic importance diminished with the construction of the Grand Canal, which now connected South and North China. The Yuan court built many water relay stations along the Grand Canal in North China. Qubilai also expanded the jam system into Manchuria. By 1283, the Yuan government had already constructed many jams in this region. After the suppression of Nayan’s rebellion in 1288, Qubilai further strengthened the jam system in Manchuria by building a substantial number of relay stations, including fifteen dog-sled stations along the Amur River.

During the military conflicts with Qaidu, Qubilai built several new post roads in Central Asia, particularly after Sirigi’s revolt in 1276, in which he lost the control over the post road that connected Mongolia with Central Asia via the Altai Range and the northwestern rim of the Zhungar Basin. To overcome the loss of this critical route, Qubilai constructed new jams several times in Uyghuristan and along the southern hem of the Tarim Basin between 1278 and 1285. Qaidu’s fierce attacks on Uyghuristan in 1285 and 1286, however, seriously hampered the Yuan court from maintaining the new post road in Uyghuristan. For this reason, Qubilai further expanded the post road along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin in 1286 to secure a passage to Central Asia and to the Ilkhanate. During the military rivalry with Qaidu, Qubilai reinforced post roads in southern Siberia. In 1291, he established six jams from the land of the Kirgiz to that of the Oirat.

Qubilai substantially enhanced the jam system within his jurisdiction by introducing a new institution to administer jams. Before Qubilai’s reign, there was no specialized governmental agency to deal with the affairs of the post road system, and local officials managed every jam. In 1270, Qubilai appointed “postal relay station inspectors (脫脫禾孫 todghasun)” in every route of the empire to oversee on-site operations of jams. At the same time, he also installed the “Office of Controller-general of Postal Relay Stations (諸站都統領使司)” that governed all todghasuns, thereby centralizing the management and control of the post road system. The Office of Controller-general of Postal Relay Stations was superseded by the Bureau
of Transmission (通政院) in 1276. This specialized governmental agency assumed various tasks regarding the jam system, such as appointment and supervision of postal relay station masters (站官), construction of new jams, reporting situations of local stations to the Central Secretariat, providing relief for impoverished jamuchins, issuance of official credentials, and managing provisions.

The Bureau of Transmission was quintessentially a “Mongol” institution in view of its personnel and jurisdiction. Most officials of the bureau were Mongols or semuren and belonged to hereditary office-holding families. Moreover, the majority of the officials of the bureau had once served as kesbig of the qa’an in their youth. Therefore, in terms of human resources, the Bureau of Transmission conspicuously preferred those of privileged ethnicity who had proven their loyalty to the qa’ans for generations. The Bureau of Transmission was to handle various affairs relevant to relay stations in the steppe and settled regions. In 1311, when Ayurbarwada Qa’an abolished the bureau and put all aspects concerning the jam system under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of War (兵部), the Grand Counselor Temüder insisted that the ministry should govern only jams in China proper, and Mongol jams along the Tergen, Narin, Morin, and other post roads should all be controlled by the Bureau of Transmission. As a result, about four months later, the Bureau of Transmission was resuscitated to manage Mongol jams. From this fact, it is confirmed that the Yuan court handled Mongol jams separately from, and probably more carefully than, Chinese relay stations and that the Bureau of Transmission had more intimate associations with the Mongol jams. In 1320, the Bureau of Transmission was fully restored and dealt with both Chinese and Mongol jams throughout the Yuan territories.

In the Ilkhanate, Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304) played a prominent role in the institutionalization of the jam system. To regularize the system, Ghazan came close to re-creating a new jam system by adopting various elements from the Yuan Dynasty. Before Ghazan’s reform, fixed relay stations were installed mostly in major cities in the Ilkhanate. Between the cities, villages and nomadic campsites (instead of jams) provided official travelers with post-horses and provisions. Thus, the operation of the jam system in the early Ilkhanate was very similar to the Jochid and Chaghadaid Khhanates. The Ilkhan jams were called the “jams of tümen (yamba-yi tuman),” which seems to correspond with Juvaini’s explanation that every two tümen (the biggest administrative-cum-military unit of ten thousand) had to supply one jam. As discussed earlier, in the eastern half of the empire, either a minggan or a unit of one hundred (not two tümens) installed and maintained a jam. Therefore, Juvaini’s statement likely depicts the construction of the jam system in the western half of the Mongol Empire, not the entire empire. Since a jam was managed by every two tümen in the Jochid, Chaghadaid, and Hülegüid realms, jams were not densely installed at regular intervals but only in major political and military centers in those regions.

Since the lack of well-organized networks of jams caused serious problems, the first action Ghazan took for his reform was to establish new post roads for express couriers, separate from the previous jam system. These new post roads were meant to be used only on important state matters. To this end, jams were established on major highways at three-league intervals, each with three fattened horses. Only envoys carrying a letter in the khan’s handwriting and with the khan’s golden seal could receive post-horses. Great amirs assumed the responsibility of managing these
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jams at the provincial level, whilst the central government provided the great amirs with lavish funds so that there would be no shortcoming in maintaining jams.47

Second, Ghazan issued the amirs in the borderlands a certain number of official letters, with his own customary sign and seal on them, so that the amirs could give the letters to their envoys who, by carrying the credentials, could travel through the jams.48 When an urgent situation arose, the frontier amirs could send a letter directly to the khan through the jams. Post-horse keepers (ulaghchiyan) could cover sixty leagues in a day and night. Ghazan also gave every frontier amir “a horseman seal (tamgha-yi savari)” to stamp on such letters with the superscription “from X place to Y place.” Two footmen messengers (peykan) were posted at every jam to convey letters about important provincial affairs. Provincial amirs were to stamp “a footman seal (tamgha-yi peyki)” at the top of a letter with the same superscription. These footmen messengers could cover thirty leagues in a day and night by relay.49

Lastly, Ghazan strictly confined the use of the post roads to official envoys dispatched from the khan’s court for governmental affairs. Any official envoys assigned to a province received funds from the treasury to cover their provisions. When the envoys arrived at their destination, they were to be fed from a designated property (far’i moayyan) of the province.50 It is worth emphasizing that all the measures Ghazan implemented to reform the Ilkhanid jam system had already been executed in the east during the reign of Qubilai.51 There is little doubt that Ghazan’s reform was modeled upon the Yuan jam system. Therefore, Ghazan’s reform of the jam system is one of the most revealing examples indicating the active interaction between the Yuan and the Ilkhanate.52

CRISIS, RESUSCITATION, HEYDAY, AND DECLINE OF THE JAM SYSTEM

The Mongol jam system achieved impressively comprehensive coverage across the Eurasian continent as well as a remarkable level of institutionalization by the time of Qubilai and Ghazan. Although the jam system came close to its full maturity at the end of the thirteenth century, the political and military turmoil in Central Asia thwarted further development of the empire-wide system. Despite Qubilai’s efforts to maintain the post roads connecting the Yuan territories with Central Asia and, ultimately, with the Ilkhanate, the jam system stopped working in Central Asia by 1289 due to the intensified conflict between Qaidu and the qa’an.53

In 1304, the Mongol uluses reached the Great Rapprochement on the initiative of Temür Öljeitü Qa’an and Du’a of the Chaghadaid Khanate. With the great reconciliation between the Mongol khanates, the jam system resumed operation across the entire Mongol territory. The Ilkhan Öljeitü’s letter to Philip the Fair of France states, “from the land of South China where the sun rises to the horizon that limits the whole Mongol realms, [all the Mongol] uluses became united and connected their jams together.”54 From this epistle, it is certain that all the Mongol rulers agreed to revive a unified jam system.

Mongolia and Central Asia were the key regions where jams needed to be reconstructed. The post road in western Mongolia, which had been devastated by the battles between the forces of Qaidu and the qa’ans, recovered during the negotiation for the Great Rapprochement. As a result, the jam system was fully reestablished from
Daidu up to the Altai Range during the first decade of the fourteenth century. The Mongols also restored the post road running between Uyghuristan and North China at about the same time. The situation regarding the jamas along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin remains unclear due to the paucity of relevant sources. Although it cannot be proven whether the jamas recovered in this area, the route linking the Hexi Corridor with Khotan was utilized after the Great Reconciliation. The post road connecting Mongolia with Central Asia via the northwestern fringe of the Zhungar Basin was also restored between 1306 and 1310. Specifically, jamas along the route began to be reconstructed with the successful advancement of the Yuan army led by Qaishan to Central Asia. The reestablishment of the post road must have been completed by 1310 given the fact that a few princes and their entourages used this post road in that year. In sum, after the Great Rapprochement, all the major post roads in Mongolia and Central Asia were fully restored.

The resuscitation of the post roads in Central Asia encouraged lively interactions between all the Mongol uluses during the first half of the fourteenth century. Inter-ulus exchanges of envoys were especially frequent during the 1310s and the 1320s, which can be regarded as the heyday of the Mongol jam system. From the 1330s, however, the post roads in Central Asia began to decline because of the outbreak of the Black Death, which not only devastated inhabited areas in Central Asia but also threw the political situation into chaos. The jam system in Central Asia did not collapse completely at that time. The post roads in Central Asia were still working, although their foundation was weakened compared to the 1320s. By 1347, Central Asia witnessed widespread turmoil due to the collapse of the Chaghadaid Khanate, which eventually led to the destruction of the jam system in Central Asia.

By the mid-fourteenth century, all other parts of the Mongol Empire were also suffering various crises, which led to the disintegration of the jam system. In South China, for example, numerous anti-Yuan rebellions broke out during the 1350s and the 1360s. As a result, post roads in Central and South China were frequently cut off. Yuan officials suffered hardships in communication and transportation and sometimes had no other options but to use detouring maritime routes. With the collapse of the Mongol Empire by the mid-fourteenth century, the jam system also broke down in China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Russia. The jam institution, however, left a significant legacy in the territories of its successor states across Central Eurasia during the periods that followed.

NOTES

1 SHM §279.
2 Regarding the Chinese etymology of the Mongol word, see Doerfer 1975, 110–118; Chen 2003, 73; Dang 2006, 28. When it comes to the Chinese origin of the jam system, see Olbracht and Pinks 1954, 39; Morgan 2000, 379; Morgan 2007, 93–94; Silverstein 2007, 141–143.
3 Vér 2016, 227–239.
4 Dang 2006, 28.
6 Shimunek 2017, 343.
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11 Li 1985, 6–9, 24–25; Yelü 2006, 1.
12 Li 1985, 7; Hu and Xie 2009, 560. Fish Lake is today’s Lake Khöl Tsagaan in Abaga Banner of Shiliin Gol League, Inner Mongolia (Shiraishi 2012, 23–38).
14 Li 1985, 8–9, 23. The ruin of Chinqai City is in Sharga Sum of Gobi-Altai province, Mongolia (EMME, 103).
15 Oba 1982, 87.
16 YS 153/3610; Hu and Yao 2009a, 367–368, 378; RDT, 328–329.
17 Chen 2005, 4–13, Zhou 1992, 28–29; Dang 2006, 283–288. There is a possibility that the Narin Post Road also stretched from Zhongxing to near Hami.
19 Hu and Yao 2009b, 355.
20 SHM §279.
21 SHM §279–280.
22 SHM §279–280; Hu and Yao 2009a, 378.
24 SHM §124.
25 RDT, 478–482.
26 In this regard, the travels of Körgüz, Het’um, Hülegü’s army, Mas’ud Beg, and Changde to Iran are worth consulting (HWC, 500; Shim 2014, 409–418; Gandzakets'i 1986, 304–306; Boyle 1977, 175–189; RDT, 482–485, 519; Liu 1936, 1–2).
27 RDT, 411.
30 Chen 2005, 6; Shim 2014, 429; Zhanchi 1977, 2/8(1).
31 Dang 2006, 298.
33 Dang 2006, 322, 327.
37 Zhanchi 1977, 4/3(1)–3(2).
38 Zhanchi 1977, 1/3(1?); YS 7/132.
39 Zhanchi 1977, 1/3(2).
40 Dang 2006, 77.
42 Zhanchi 1977, 1/5(2)–6(1); 5/7(2); 6/11(2).
43 The Yuan court frequently succored jams across the empire because jamuchins were often impoverished, to the extent that they could no longer carry out their duties, for various reasons including natural disaster and abuse of jams (Dang 2006, 147–158).
44 RDT, 714–718.
45 RDRM, II, 1451.
46 HWC, 33.
47 RDT, 716–717; RDRM, II, 1449–1450.
48 RDT, 717; RDRM, II, 1450.
49 RDT, 717; RDRM, II, 1450.
50 RDT, 717–718; RDRM, II, 1451.
51 Kim 2010, 16–21.
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EMME, See List of Abbreviations.


HWC, See List of Abbreviations.


RDRM, See List of Abbreviations.

RDT, See List of Abbreviations.


SHM, See List of Abbreviations.


YS, See List of Abbreviations.

