The Mongol World

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Yuan Chinese Attitudes toward the Mongols

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SECTION 3 INTRODUCTION

THE MONGOLS IN
WORLD HISTORY

Timothy May and Michael Hope

The Mongol conquests and the subsequent century and a half of Chinggisid rule across Eurasia was a watershed moment in world history, separating the Global Middle Ages from the early modern period. The destruction caused by the Mongol invasions swept aside old hierarchies, identities, and taxonomies and replaced them with new, more expansive, outward-looking approaches to government, religion, and trade. Like a wildfire burning through a forest, the Mongol Empire brought unprecedented destruction, but it also played a crucial role in building the new values and institutions that emerged from the ashes; any fair appraisal of the Mongol Empire must acknowledge both aspects. The world they left behind in the fourteenth century did not completely depart from the past, and in some instances the Mongols simply accelerated trends that were already well underway before their emergence – the rising popularity of Sufism and Neo-Confucianism as well as the growth of long-distance maritime trade being two examples. Yet the Mongols did stimulate a new wave of exchanges that would transform the social, intellectual, and political map of Eurasia for centuries to come. Even today, the Mongols have left an indelible mark upon the languages, culture, and history of those they ruled.

For most people, however, the initial experience of the Mongol Empire was violent and destructive. Any resistance to Mongol rule was met with disproportionate force on a scale not often recorded in history. This violence was meted out to all members of an enemy civilization – male or female, young or old, both the powerful and the meek. The conquest of the city of Zhongxingfu in the Xi Xia Empire (Wright), which included the systematic massacre of the population and the desecration of tombs, but also the buildings and habitations of the town, was mirrored in Khurasan, Korea, and the Pontic region. Entire cities seemed to be temporarily or permanently wiped off the map. The Persian historian Minhaj Juzjani sought to rationalise the great khan’s behaviour through a conversation he contrived between a captured imam and Chinggis Khan. Seeing the devastation wrought by the Mongol armies in Iran, the man of God said, “A name continues to endure where there are people, but how will a name endure when the Khan’s servants martyr all the people and massacre...
them, for who will remain to tell the tale?” The khan responded coldly that “I used
to consider thee a sagacious and prudent man, but, from this speech of thine, it
has become evident to me that thou dost not possess complete understanding, and
that thy comprehension is but small.” The imam, like the author, had difficulty in
making sense of the Mongols’ grand strategy and was therefore expelled from the
imperial court.

This destruction had a number of important consequences beyond the tragic
loss of life and infrastructure. It resulted in widespread displacement, causing many
hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of people to flee their homes in the face
of the conquering armies and the heavy taxes and duties required by Mongol gov-
ernors. Many of these refugees found shelter in the wilderness – mountains, deserts,
and forests – before returning to rebuild, but others found new homes along
the ever-shifting frontiers of the expanding Mongol Empire. In the Islamic Core
Territories, this saw the spread of Persian-speaking scholars, merchants, and officials
into Anatolia, Syria, and India, while in East Asia, many of the Southern Song lit-
erati migrated into Southeast Asia. Movements of similar magnitude were recorded
among the Turkic-speaking people of Inner Asia, such as the Qipchaqs (Cumans),
Qanglis, and Turkmen, who had opposed Mongol rule or had been driven from
their pastures. They found new seasonal camps in Anatolia, northern Iran, Eastern
Europe, and South Asia, leading to the gradual Turkification of much of modern-day
Russia, Turkey, Iran, and India.

The migration of people coincided with a shift of thinking. Those who were
forced to find a new home brought new ideas with them. In Syria and Egypt, the
influx of Islamic scholars and adepts contributed further to what has popularly
become known as the Sunni Revival, while the spread of Persian speakers to South
Asia coincided with a proliferation of Persian poetry and may have played a role in
the expansion of Islam to Southeast Asia. Irrespective of whether a population chose
to remain or leave, the Mongol invasion tested their beliefs in temporal institutions
as well as the cosmic order of the universe. The Mongol conquest of first the Jin
(1211–1234) and then the Southern Song (1254–1279) dynasties appeared to indi-
cate that the Mandate of Heaven had, at the very least, passed to a new power. This
was most likely the reason that Chinggis Khan summoned the Chinese bureaucrat
and astrologer Yelu Chucai after the capture of Zhongdu in 1215 and the Daoist
master Changchun in 1223. As we saw in the previous section, the Mongol invasion
of the Islamic and Christian worlds (both Eastern and Latin) was rationalised as a
form of divine punishment, perhaps even an augury of the End of Times. Religious
scholars, astrologers, and occultists alike looked to their charts and scriptures for
signs to explain what was happening and in most cases concluded that a new age
was on the horizon, though how long it would last was unclear.

The Mongols imposed order on the chaos engendered by their invasions. Rulers
who submitted were incorporated into the imperial hierarchy, while those who
resisted were purged and replaced by more amenable vassals. These subject princes
then assisted the Mongols in governing their empire. Indeed, it is hard to imagine
the Mongol Empire at all without the manpower and expertise provided by the
conquered people. Contrary to some of the historiography of the twentieth cen-
tury, the Mongols had no interest in ruling over a wasteland, and they needed
willing subjects to help them exploit the wealth of their newly acquired assets. In the
Middle East, this meant that a great number of dynasties survived the initial conquest; the Seljuqs, Artuqids, Salghurids, Kartids, Qutlughkhanids, Hethoumids, and Bagratids were just some who realised that they had more to lose by fighting against the Mongols. Those in lesser positions of authority— including, but not limited to, secretaries, merchants, soldiers of fortune, accountants, translators, tutors, and minor nobles—likewise found it advantageous to throw in their lot with the new conquerors. Hence, there were a number of Korean noble families who submitted to Mongol rule well before the Koryo king Kojong did so in 1258. Perhaps the most successful of these early supplicants was Hong Pok-won, who governed parts of North Korea under the Cho dictatorship when Mongol armies first made their appearance in Korea in 1219. Hong quickly threw in his lot with the Mongols and was rewarded with continued control over his own territory but also a place at the Mongol court. Indeed, his membership of the Mongol imperial elite opened up new possibilities for Hong, who was appointed pacification commissioner over Liaodong and much of the Bohai region north of the Yalu River (Lee Kang Hahn). Mongol rule could be quite lucrative for those who submitted to the qa'an in a timely fashion.

Confirmation of earlier office holders did not mean that life continued as normal in the conquered territories. Once under Mongol rule, the fate of a noble family or local dynasty depended on the outcome of factional struggles at the Mongol ordu, in which vassal princes were often embroiled. The Uyghur monarchy, for example, had been among the first to submit to the Mongols in 1210 and had participated in Chinggis Khan’s campaigns against the Qara Khitai and the Khwarazmshah empire, among others. Moreover, the Uyghur idiqut had been granted one of Chinggis Khan’s daughters in marriage, giving him the nominal status of güregen (royal son-in-law). Yet the close proximity of the Uyghurs to the Ögödeid appanage and their ties with Güyük Khan and his sons saw the overthrow of the idiqut at the hands of Möngke in 1251 and the eventual collapse of Uyghur power when East Turkistan became a theatre of conflict between the Toluids and Ögödeids in the second half of the thirteenth century (Michael C. Brose). Picking the right side could, however, result in a rise in fortunes, as was the case for the Russian princes of Moscow. The city was of middling importance prior to the arrival of the Mongols and was granted to the third son of the ruling family of Vladimir. Yet a marriage alliance with the Jochid ruling house saw its ruler, Duke Yuri Danilovich (r. 1303–1325), given the right to collect taxes on behalf of the Mongol court, thereby enriching its rulers and laying the foundation for the rise of Muscovy in the second half of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Alexander V. Maiorov). The early accommodation reached between followers of the Sakya-pa monastic order in Tibet and the Yuan Dynasty of Qubilai Qa’an, likewise, saw their members assist Mongol governors in the region in addition to supplying the imperial preceptors to the house of the qa’an (Soyoung Choi). The Mongol expansion was, therefore, pushed by a process of accommodation and appeasement, in which local magnates and potentates were assimilated into the Mongol ruling structure.

This appeasement was often voiced through reference to earlier religious and political ideology. The Mongols had, it seems, always been amenable to using the language and semiotics of the conquered people to express their authority. This was most famously evidenced in the episode, described by ‘Ata Malik Juvayni, in which Chinggis Khan ascended the pulpit of the congregational mosque of Bukhara.
and told the assembled population that “I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.” Whether the Mongols shared Islamic conceptions of sin is highly dubious, and several historians have rightly assumed that this event was entirely apocryphal. Nevertheless, the description of this event, provided by a Muslim serving the Mongol Empire, shows that, at least by the middle of the thirteenth century, the Mongols were willing to express their conception of divine mandate by drawing on the more familiar language of their conquered people. The same premise may have underpinned Möngke Qa’an’s comment to William of Rubruck that

just as God gave different fingers to the hand so has He given different ways to men. . . . God has given you the Scriptures and you do not keep them; to us, on the other hand, He has given the soothsayers, and we do what they tell us, and live in peace.

The “Scriptures” that Möngke was referring to were unlikely to be from the Bible, but rather a more general adherence to the will of God, which had ordained the Chinggisids as universal rulers. The empire was the product of divine intervention, albeit European Christians and Mongols may have disagreed about the nature of the divinity and His purpose for calling forth the Mongols in the first place. There were, however, also areas of overlap between the Mongols and their subjects. One area the Mongols, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and others shared a mutual interest was in astrology. The Mongols, like most people of their time, had long seen the movements of the heavens as auguries of events on earth. We, therefore, have evidence of the Mongols consulting foreign astrologers for advice in the Chinese, Russian, and Persian source material as early as the reign of Chinggis Khan (1206–1227) and his son Ögödei (1229–1241). Albeit the measurements and terminology may have differed from region to region, the conclusions they arrived at were more or less the same – the Mongol conquests marked a new epoch.

The assimilation of the conquered experts into the Mongol hierarchy produced a convergence of interests, which blossomed into a greater ideological reconciliation in the second half of the thirteenth century. The compact created between the Mongol conquerors and local officials saw the proliferation of new literature, endowments, and artwork that not only sought to explain the rise of the Mongols to power but also justify their collaboration with local officials. This type of project was perhaps best exemplified by the Blessed History of Rashid al-Din, the Persian bureaucrat who served the Muslim Ilkhan, Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304). Stefan Kamola and Jonathan Brack have demonstrated that Rashid al-Din’s historical project was linked to other works being produced in the Ilkhanate at the time and was just as much an attempt to grow the profile of the Persian official, as it was to expand the power of his master. To that end, Rashid al-Din portrayed Ghazan as the fulfilment of God’s secret intent. Whereas Chinggis Khan had been sent by God to rid Islam of its impurities, Ghazan would oversee its revival in an almost messianic fashion. To what extent this project was initiated by Rashid al-Din or Ghazan remains an open question. Indeed, the admittedly hostile Hanbali jurist, Ibn Taymiyya was under no illusion that the Mongols had only the most superficial grasp of Islam, which led them to compare Chinggis Khan to the Prophet Muhammad and the Rashidun...
caliphs. As such, Ghazan’s conversion did not result in him abandoning the earlier Mongolian ideology of heavenly mandate, nor the primacy of the Chinggisid dynasty – the two most essential ingredients of Mongol imperial ideology.

A similar project was simultaneously underway in the east of the Mongol Empire, where Qubilai Qa’an enlisted his Buddhist preceptor, Phagspa Lama, to expound his new imperial ideology. Not only did Phagspa write a Mirror for Princes for Qubilai’s son and heir Jingim, he also authored a series of epistles, which spelled out Qubilai’s qualifications to rule as a universal Buddhist sovereign. Like his Islamic contemporaries, Phags-pa drew upon familiar millenarian ideas to portray Qubilai as a chakravartin king, a bodhisattva, and a living god as the reincarnation of Manjusri.

As was the case in the Ilkhanate, the assimilation of Buddhist ideas into the Mongol imperial ideology did not entail the abandonment of earlier ideas or the marginalization of other alternatives. The popularity of Tibetan tantric Buddhism at the Yuan court caused tension, especially among the Mongols’ Han Chinese subjects, who sought to compete for the qa’an’s affections by providing their own form of adulation. They were especially effulgent after Qubilai oversaw the successful reunification of China for the first time in over 300 years – evidence, if any were needed, that the Mongols retained the capacity to finesse their message to incorporate a diverse population (Morris Rossabi & Qiu Yihao).

Nevertheless, Mongol imperialism did not go unchallenged. Regimes that managed to resist the Mongols in Japan, Southeast Asia, India, and Egypt drew upon opposition to the Mongols to solidify their grasp on power. Both India and Egypt had undergone violent upheavals just prior to the arrival of Mongol forces on their frontiers, which had seen the installation of manumitted military slaves (mamluks) in control of the Ayyubid and Ghurid sultanates respectively. These former slaves sought to legitimate their seizure of power by claiming the mantle of defenders of the faith. Historians writing in the mamluk empires conceived of the Islamic world being threatened by pagan enemies (the Franks, Hindus, and Khitans) as well as internal enemies (heretical Shi’is as well as backsliders), whose infidelity put the Dar al-Islam in a precarious position (Josephine van den Bent). The size of the Mongol threat made them the perfect avatar for the challenges faced by the Muslims, necessitating the rise of new rulers, chosen by God to defend the true believers. Similarly, in Vietnam and Japan, the expulsion of Mongol troops was followed by the construction of historical narratives about divine intervention, which justified a concentration of power in the hands of new dynastic founders (Li Narangoa & James A. Anderson).

Of course, the clash of cultures between the Mongols and their external enemies was never as great as has been suggested by some historians. Although they were never incorporated into the Chinggisid imperium, Cairo and Delhi welcomed Mongol political refugees, slaves, and brides into their ranks. This Mongol diaspora population became a powerful faction within both sultanates, with some even rising to the highest offices of these regimes. Precisely what divided the Mongols of the Ilkhanate from those in Syria or the Gangetic Plains is, therefore, not always clear. A recent biographical study of one such defector, Qipchaq, suggests that even the Mongols themselves were not always sure where their loyalties lay. Having been born in the Ilkhanate, Qipchaq was captured by the Mamluks and was raised in the household of Qalawun, before falling out with the sultan Lachin and being forced
to flee back to the Ilkhanate. Qipchaq was, therefore, a political refugee, whose migration was forced, rather than chosen, and he quickly returned to the Mamluk Sultanate at the first opportunity. Not all defectors found the difference in court culture to be so jarring, and the shared pursuits of martial and equestrian sports, falconry, and drinking meant that elites from these rival empires often had more in common than may be assumed.

In many cases, the distinction between these diaspora communities and those who remained loyal to the Chinggisids seems to have been based more upon competing political interests than upon cultural differences. This was certainly true after the conversion of the Mongols in the Ilkhanate and the Chaghadaid Khanate to Islam, thereby allowing Ghazan Khan to call on the Mamluks to surrender to him, since faith no longer precluded them from doing so. Of course, Berke Khan (r. 1257–1266), the Jochid ruler of the Qipchaq Steppe, had converted to Islam well before Ghazan and had used shared faith as a means to build an alliance with Sultan Baybars against the Ilkhanate. Yet their mutual antipathy towards the Hülegüid rulers of the Ilkhanate was a much more durable foundation for friendship, as Berke’s immediate successor, Möngke-Temür, was not a Muslim but still managed to retain cordial relations with the Mamluks. Meanwhile, the purge of Mongol officials that took place in the Delhi Sultanate during the reign of Muhammad ibn Tughluq, appears to have been caused more by their initial reluctance to swear allegiance to him than any connection to their former Chaghadaid masters, who had already been toppled in Mawarannahr.

In any case, the notion that the Mongol Empire marked a new epoch in world history was not abandoned after the collapse of the empire, nor were the ideologies espoused by the respective Mongolian successor states following their disintegration in the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, the collapse of the pre-Mongol political order allowed for new political configurations, which combined earlier political traditions and religious symbolism with the universalism espoused by the Mongols to produce new constellations of power.

At least initially, many of these formations appeared to distance themselves, at least superficially, from the earlier Mongol regime. The Russian chronicles, which describe the rise of the Duchy of Muscovy, for example, turned the Muslim Tatars into the main adversaries of the pious Christian tsars (Don Ostrowski). The earlier collaboration between the Muscovites and the Mongols was given short shrift in the narrative of Ivan IV’s successful expansion of Christendom to the Volga River and beyond. In China, likewise, the early years of the Ming dynasty were characterised by ambivalence towards the bloodied, but not yet destroyed, Yuan dynasty after 1368. Toghan-Temür, the last Yuan emperor, had been forced out of Daidu, but he continued to maintain control over Mongolia, while his commanders and relatives remained in the regions of Dali, Liaodong, and Manchuria. The ongoing danger posed by the Chinggisids in East Asia prompted the Hongwu emperor to seek a break with his predecessors, exemplified by the rather rapid compilation of the Yuan dynastic history. Yet earlier Chinggisid diplomatic conventions (including the use of Persian as an imperial lingua-franca) continued to shape the Ming’s interactions with its neighbours through to the reign of the Yongle emperor, and there were clear signs that the new regime aspired to rule the former territories of the Yuan, if not assume its leadership position in the former territories of the Mongol Empire (Qiu Yihao).
Of course, the connection between the Mongol Empire and its successors was often far more tangible. In fact, the descendants of Chinggis Khan continued to rule over a great deal of central Inner Asia up to the modern era. The assimilation of Islamic and Chinggisid ideology at the court of Özbeg Khan resulted in the Jochid Ulus being divided among a number of Chinggisid dynasties, many of which survived for several centuries, including the Crimean Khanate, the Shibanid Uzbek Empire, and the Kazakh Khanate. The same process saw Mongol rulers maintain control over the city-states of the Tarim Basin until the seventeenth century, when another Mongol Empire, the Zhungars, replaced them with Sufi shaykhs. In other parts of the former Mongol Empire, dynasties were formed by the families of Mongol commanders, like the Jalayirids in Iraq and Azerbaijan or, perhaps most sensation-ally, the Timurids of Mawarannahr (Patrick Wing & Evrim Binbaş). The popular appeal of Islamic piety, combined with the prestige of Chinggisid descent, provided these lineages with a formidable claim to rule until the nineteenth century, when a series of new, mostly European empires appeared with their own universal ideolo-
gies. Nevertheless, even in the face of this threat, the symbols of Chinggisid rule were invoked to preserve autonomy and protect old identity groups. This time the Mongol Empire was recounted, often in semi-mythical form, by bards, historians, and singers in epics like *Kartal Edigey* and in the national history building projects of the Soviet and post-Soviet era (Ippei Shimamura). Such stories have played a formative role in building and reinforcing the makeup of Eurasia to the present time.

**NOTES**

1 Dunnell 2010, 88.
2 TNR, 1040–1042.
5 Henthorn 1963, 61; Robinson 2009, 28.
6 *HWC*, 105.
7 For analysis of this quote, see Jackson 2009, 111; Atwood 2004, 254; May 2018, 32–57.
8 TMM, 195.
9 Baumann 2008, 94–97 & 296; Jackson 2005, 277; Elizabeth Endicott-West has drawn attention to the importance of diviners at the Yuan court; Endicott-West 1999, 224–239.
10 Brack 2016; Kamola 2019.
11 Lane 2013, 1–40; Atwood 2010, 105–108.
12 Brack 2016, 3; Calmard 1997, 281; Aigle 2007, 102 & 114.
14 Amitai-Preiss 1995, 2; Broadbridge 2008, 2; Jackson 1999, 119.
18 Halperin 2009, 54.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


HWC, See List of Abbreviations.


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TMM, See List of Abbreviations.

TNR, See List of Abbreviations.

TOA, See List of Abbreviations.
PART X

THE MONGOLS IN THE EYES OF THE CONQUERED
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

YUAN CHINESE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MONGOLS

Morris Rossabi

An assessment of the Mongols’ Chinese subjects’ attitudes toward their rulers faces considerable obstacles. The vast majority of the Chinese were illiterate, and nearly all contemporary written sources reflect elite views. Inference, however, offers a means of gauging the perceptions of the non-literate population. Many peasants benefited from the Mongols’ perceptions of agriculture; craftsmen were awarded a high status; and merchants, many of whom were literate, appreciated the Mongols’ stimuli to both short-distance and Silk Road trade. Only after the Mongols began to reverse these policies, for reasons that will be explained, did many Chinese subjects turn against them.

OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS AND THE MONGOLS

Merchants, in particular, benefited from Mongol rule. They did not encounter the same biased Confucian attitudes, which often portrayed merchants as parasites who profited from the exchange of goods but did not contribute anything of economic value. Various dynasties had imposed stiff taxes and sumptuary legislation on traders. On the other hand, the Mongols were not scornful of merchants and certainly valued them. Trade was profitable for the Mongol domains, which gave the merchants considerable status. Greater respect from the government and society must have influenced Chinese merchants’ attitudes toward the Mongols. Naturally, they appreciated the support and perks the Mongols provided.

Chinese artisans were another group that developed a positive attitude toward the Mongols. The Chinese elite prized the objects produced, but not so much the craftsmen. Artisans allegedly worked with their hands, not their minds, as the scholar-official class did, an inaccurate perception, but it shaped elite views. The Mongols, by contrast, admired beautiful objects and fine craftsmanship, prompting them to hold artisans in high esteem. Chinggis Khan’s instruction not to harm artisans when the Mongols conquered and occupied Samarqand confirms the value he and other khans accorded to such occupations. Chinese and Central Asian textiles, Iranian
illustrated manuscripts, and Russian metalwork, among other crafts, flourished under the Mongol Empire. The Mongols encouraged, supported, and patronized local crafts and elevated artisans in the social structure. The Mongol khans frequently reduced taxes and freed craftsmen of corvee labor. They also put potters, weavers, and metalworkers in touch with foreign markets for their goods. Such Mongol assistance made a favorable impression on artisans, who no doubt benefited from this craft revolution. More valued than in many of the Chinese dynasties, craftsmen gained enormously from Mongol rule.

Foreign subjects and the Chinese who possessed necessary skills also enjoyed Mongol support. Agronomists, astronomers, siege engineers, and armaments makers, among others, received considerable patronage. The Mongols, who placed tremendous strains on their bodies through herding and in conflicts and wars, recruited doctors from all over their vast domains. To be sure, some of these skilled individuals were Arabs, Persians, Turks, Koreans, and Europeans. Yet the Mongols’ favorable attitudes toward these occupations also spread in Chinese society. The medical profession, in particular, gained new status in China. This group was comfortable with Mongol rule.

CHINESE ELITE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MONGOLS

Chinese elite attitudes toward the thirteenth-century Mongol invaders and rulers varied. Naomi Standen’s term “unbounded loyalty” explains why Chinese willingly served foreign rulers, such as the Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongols in North China. In those eras, boundaries were permeable, and the concept of unified nations did not shape behavior. A group that earlier considered another as an enemy might be willing to join and assist the victorious side. Chinggis Khan and his successors relied on such changes in loyalty to recruit officials, translators, financial administrators, and scientists. Chinese who filled these positions performed valuable functions and facilitated Mongol rule over China.

On the other hand, some Chinese perceived the Mongols as barbarians who killed countless Chinese and plundered numerous cities and sites. They portrayed the invaders from the north as antithetical to Chinese civilization. The Confucian scholar-official class, which had governed China for centuries, was no longer in power and constituted a group of dissatisfied and educated men. The Mongols’ initial abolition of the civil service examinations, which had been one of the cornerstones of Chinese civilization, created similar animosities. Even when the Mongols restored the examinations in 1315, they did not necessarily rely upon these tests in selection of officials. The Mongols’ general indifference and occasional opposition to Confucianism exacerbated hostility toward the invaders and rulers. Many Chinese whose careers were threatened by the lack of civil service examinations had a negative view of the Mongols. The foreign rulers’ veneration of the military also clashed with traditional Confucian beliefs.

Even prior to Qubilai Qa’an’s accession as Emperor of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), a few Chinese had exposure to the Mongols. Chinggis Khan invited the Daoist Changchun to accompany him on his military expedition to Central Asia. The Mongol ruler had been told that the Daoists had developed ways to prolong life. In his conversations with Chinggis, Changchun denied that he had such powers
but advised the Mongol ruler to lead a healthier life by avoiding hunting. He pleaded with Chinggis not to destroy any life, which was quite ironic in light of the massive killings during the Mongol campaigns. He also suggested that the khan eliminate Mongol injunctions prohibiting bathing in rivers and washing clothes. He appeared to have been appalled by what he perceived to be the Mongols’ lack of hygienic practices.

Yelü Chucai, another prominent figure, also attempted to “reform” Chinggis and other Mongols. Of Khitan lineage, he had been influenced by Chinese culture and became an ardent lobbyist, promoting the use of Chinese practices and institutions during the early Mongol rule of North China. A Buddhist, he was distressed that Changchun’s close relationship with Chinggis had permitted the Daoist to achieve a tax-exempt status for Daoists. Chinggis’ son and successor Ögödei also favored Daoism. With such support, the Daoists then expropriated Buddhist monasteries and carried off some of their wealth. Despite his disappointment over the Daoists’ apparent favored position, Yelü cooperated with the Mongols because he believed that the success that accompanied Cinggis Qan’s expedition against the state of Chin [Jin, which dominated North China] was granted by heaven. . . . Cinggis Qan had proved his right by victory, and Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai considered himself free from allegiance to Chin when he took up service with him.

He had convinced himself that the Mongols had proved worthy of obtaining the Mandate of Heaven to rule. To be sure, they needed to be “enlightened” in order to govern China, and it was his duty to educate Chinggis and his successors in the Confucian principles of government. He introduced ideas about institutions, taxes, and even the civil service examinations to Ögödei, who adopted some but not all of them.

Many Chinese actually assisted in defeating other dynasties in China. Shi Tianze (1202–1275) organized a Chinese army to attack the Jurchen Jin dynasty, which ruled North China in the 1220s and 1230s. Later, he participated in Möngke Qa’an’s attempt to subdue the Song, which was composed of ethnic Chinese, or his own people, in 1258–1259, and he supported Qubilai Qa’an in his struggle with his younger brother Ariq Böke from 1260 to 1264. He commanded a force of tens of thousands of Chinese soldiers, an indication of a positive Chinese view of the Mongols. Even more telling was the military support of Zhang Rou (1190–1268) against the Southern Song dynasty during Qubilai’s reign. He led several campaigns against his own people because he believed the Song had become corrupt and ineffective. The Mongols, on the other hand, appeared to be effective, powerful, and willing to abide by Chinese institutions.

Qubilai Qa’an was the ruler who attracted numerous Chinese. It was no accident that many Chinese had a favorable view of Qubilai. His mother, Sorqoqtani Beki, had received an appanage in North China and had ensured that Qubilai learn to speak Chinese. Qubilai’s ability to communicate allowed him to seek advice and assistance from Chinese and to ingratiate himself with them. The advisers, in turn, appreciated his openness to advice and his efforts to create a governmental system that the Chinese found familiar. Similarly, his openness to Chinese culture won the support of many in the Chinese elite.
Like Yelü Chucai, the Chinese advisers perceived themselves as having a civilizing mission. They thought they would truly Sinicize Qubilai and believed that he and other Mongols were receptive to changes in attitudes and beliefs. Qubilai would often accept their policy recommendations. It is important to note, however, that he selected from the recommendations submitted from his advisers. As critical, the Chinese sources would also be partial to Chinese actors, would often attribute successful policies to Chinese officials, and would downplay Qubilai’s role. They would, in short, offer more credit to Chinese officials than they merited.

A typical example of such attributions relates to Yao Shu (1203–1280), one of Qubilai’s earliest advisers. Möngke Qa’an, Qubilai’s older brother, had commanded him to subdue the mostly non-Chinese population in the Dali Kingdom in the modern province of Yunnan. The Chinese sources assert that Yao was instrumental in Qubilai’s success and in preventing a major conflagration in Dali. He allegedly persuaded Qubilai to send envoys to the Dali King, persuading him to accept Mongol overlordship. The sources praise Yao for averting bloodshed. This apparently misleading version ignores the Mongol practice of “orders of submission.” Chinggis and his successors, including Qubilai, had repeatedly dispatched envoys with offers to avoid damage or killings if foreigners submitted. Qubilai therefore modeled his policy regarding Dali on that of his Mongol predecessors and did not require Yao’s recommendation.¹¹

Yao continued to be a counselor to Qubilai throughout his life. He provided Qubilai with an assistant well-versed with Confucianism and the ways it would translate into a stable and harmonious society. One product of this attempt was a set of instructions for Qubilai, based on Confucian principles. These moral injunctions, which included such sentiments as affection for the family, benevolence toward the people, and devotion to learning, appear to be bromides, with limited practical application, but Yao subsequently transmitted a group of more pragmatic injunctions for Qubilai’s domain in North China. He advocated proper ways of recruiting officials, reduction of taxes, fostering agriculture, restoration of functional ministries to implement policies, and promotion of education.¹²

It is hard to believe that Qubilai needed to be told that he was required to perform these tasks. Here again, Chinese sources portray a Chinese, Yao Shu, as the civilizer of the Mongol Qubilai Qa’an. The one proposal Yao transmitted and that Qubilai had probably not considered was the founding of tuntian, military farms, especially on strategic borders. Soldiers would farm the land and supply themselves, reducing government expenditures. By adopting this institution, Qubilai acquired combat forces that were self-sufficient.

The Chinese sources also credit Yao with saving Qubilai’s life and career. Before Qubilai became the qa’an and the emperor of China in 1260, his success in governing his territory in North China had generated considerable hostility toward him at court. In fact, Möngke had dispatched two supervisors to investigate government operations in Qubilai’s territory. They discovered that local officials had apparently retained tax revenues designated for the court. They executed the officials and thereby posed a political threat to Qubilai. Yao advised Qubilai to travel, with his family, to the court to demonstrate his allegiance to his older brother.¹³ Impressed by his brother’s gesture, Möngke did not punish him but instead offered him greater responsibility to resolve political difficulties. Would Qubilai have needed advice to
reassure his brother of his loyalty? This condescending attitude toward the Mongols shaped Chinese attitudes toward their former steppe neighbors and their current rulers.

Hao Jing (1223–1275), another Confucian scholar, was even willing to risk his life to serve the Mongols. Qubilai had recruited him in 1256 and had commanded him to accompany the Mongol troops on their invasion of South China in 1259. Mongke Qa’an’s death ended the campaign against the Song, but Hao Jing would shortly be given another significant assignment. He had allegedly impressed Qubilai with a sixteen-point memorandum that described the proper methods for ruling. These recommendations consisted of generalizations about governance and then more specific suggestions. The fundamental recommendations consisted of a plea for the establishment of a government with assistance from scholars and officials. In short, they instructed the qa’an to avoid monopolizing authority, be honest, punish the guilty, and reward the meritorious.14 Mongol rulers since Chinggis Khan were aware of the need for a government in the territories they had conquered and for recruitment of officials who would help administer their vast domains. They also saw the utility in establishing a set of regulations (such as Chinggis’s Jasaq) that would outline proper behavior, with honors and gifts for those who deserved them.

Hao’s specific recommendations were crucial, although the Qa’an himself may have also conceived of these policies. The first was establishment of a capital city in North China to replace Qaraqorum in Mongolia, which remained distant from the center of Qubilai’s domain and required considerable supplies that had to be transported from distant locations. The second was naming one of Qubilai’s sons as his successor to ensure the dynasty’s foundation. Another was promotion of the economy through the wider use of paper money and the reduction of taxes on ordinary people. These recommendations were valuable because they offered new and important information for Qubilai, who had never used paper money and had never devised a regular system of taxation. The Mongol system of succession centered on election by the Mongol leaders in a quriltai (or meeting). Hao proposed a stabler approach through the Chinese system of imperial designation.

Guo Shoujing (1231–1316) was a favorite of Qubilai’s because he offered practical advice. Counselors who sought to “enlighten” Qubilai about Confucian principles scarcely gained his attention. Guo, a scientist, presented Qubilai with specific projects that benefited China. At their first meeting, Guo provided Qubilai with suggestions for improvements in waterways and irrigation works. Later, he helped devise a new and more accurate calendar and built a number of astronomical instruments, which allowed him to chart the motions of the moon and the times of sunrise and sunset. Qubilai trusted him and provided him with equipment, resources, and time for his projects. Guo certainly had a positive attitude toward Qubilai and the Mongols.15

The painter and calligrapher Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) was an especially valuable supporter for the Yuan court. Descended from the Song imperial family, his acceptance and support of Qubilai bolstered the Mongols’ legitimacy. In 1286, Qubilai appointed him to a position in the Ministry of War, where Zhao apparently had considerable free time for his artistic production. He was repeatedly promoted until he received the rank of president of the Hanlin Academy, the most important organization of scholars in the country. Several painters and scholars criticized him for shifting his loyalty to the foreign rulers of China, but he defended himself by
stating that each individual had to choose between serving the Mongols or retiring from government and that he should not be lambasted for his choice. He devoted his public career to eliminating abuses in the postal station system and reducing taxes on ordinary people. Yet his prime interest was painting, and even here he tried to accommodate the Mongols. He depicted horses, sheep, and goats, among other subjects, which appealed to the traditionally pastoral Mongols. He remained loyal to the Yuan court, despite critiques from other Chinese scholars.

Other painters followed his lead in serving the Mongols. Qubilai appointed Li Kan (1245–1310), a painter of bamboo, as the minister of personnel; Gao Kegong (1248–1310) served in the Ministry of Works and eventually became the minister of justice; and Ren Renfa (1254–1327) a painter of horses, worked in a water-conservation bureau.

Why were these Chinese willing to serve the Mongols? Some were ambitious and sought appointment in government offices, while others may have had no other sources of revenue. Still others prized the Yuan for finally unifying China after four centuries of division. The Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) had lost part of North China to the Khitans and much of the northwest to the Tanguts, and the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) did not control the Chinese territory north of the Yangzi River. By 1279, the Mongols had brought China under one government, a matter of great pride for patriotic Chinese. Some Chinese, with valuable skills, were thus more willing to collaborate with and serve the Mongols.

**CHINESE OPPOSITION TO THE MONGOLS**

Yet other Chinese adamantly refused to deal with the Mongols. They viewed the Mongols as barbarians who subverted the basic features of Confucian civilization – morality, focus on the family, and rule by scholar-official civilians. Military rulership was abhorrent to many Chinese Confucians. They therefore believed that they could not participate in public life under Mongol rule. Public service under those circumstances appeared to them a betrayal of their loyalty to Chinese culture. Future generations might regard them as traitors if they accepted positions at the Yuan court.

One group, known as the *yinyi*, or recluses, withdrew from public service and rejected government employment. A few led hedonistic lives, but most sought solace in other solutions. Some joined Buddhist or Daoist monasteries or became lay leaders in the two religions and lived a meditative existence. They painted or wrote poems or essays, and a few among the Daoists became involved with scientific or magical pursuits. Others became retired scholars and dabbled in the arts and were “less cut off from the normal pattern of life in society than the Buddhist or Taoist [Daoist].”

Leftover subjects (*yimin*) were another category of recluses. They were figures who had political differences with the Mongols. Their political allegiances remained with the Song dynasty. Most could not and did not express their discontent with Mongol rule for fear of punishments, but they would never serve the Mongols. Even when the Yuan court offered them prestigious positions in government, they flatly rejected such entreaties. Chinese in the creative arts used their works covertly to criticize the foreign rulers. Painters had sophisticated means of showing their disdain and disapproval for the Mongols. The painter Zheng Sixiao (1241–1318)
despised the Mongols and rejected any cooperation with them. His paintings reveal his distaste for “foreign barbarians.” Known for his depictions of the Chinese orchid, Zheng “was asked why he depicted it without earth around its roots, he replied that the earth had been stolen by the barbarians.” The artist Gong Kai (1222–after 1304) painted a lean and emaciated horse that may have symbolized the Song dynasty that the Mongols had conquered. By using their dramas, some Chinese playwrights made subtle and indirect critiques of the Mongols. Since the Yuan was a golden age for theater, such critiques influenced the perceptions of many Chinese toward the Mongols.

Wen Tianxiang (1236–1283) was perhaps the most famous dissenter who scorned and rejected employment with the Mongols. A scholar-official without an illustrious family background, Wen placed first in the civil service examinations of 1252, four years before Qubilai’s accession to power. According to the Song dynastic history, as a staunch and honest official, he proposed the dismissal and execution of a prominent eunuch, which led to his expulsion or withdrawal from government service on several occasions. He reappeared in 1275, right as Mongol invaders approached the Song capital of Linan (or modern Hangzhou). He raised an army but found himself at odds with other Song commanders. Several tried to kill him, but he managed to escape and reached Fuzhou, where the Song emperor had fled. In 1279, a Chinese commander captured Wen and sent him to Qubilai’s court in Daidu. He remained imprisoned at court for three years, and Qubilai considered releasing him, but his Chinese officials dissuaded him. In an interview, Wen stated that if Qubilai allowed him to return to his birthplace “as a Taoist, in the future, in an unofficial capacity, I could give some counsel.” Otherwise, he could not serve Qubilai. Officials persuaded Qubilai that he should abide by Wen’s wishes to be executed if the emperor chose not to release him. At the execution grounds, Wen said, “Death is merely death; what else is there to say?”

NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN CHINESE REACTIONS TO THE MONGOLS

Wen was a Chinese from the south, and North China and South China appear, in general, to have had different perceptions of the Mongols due to historical and geographical reasons. The Khitans, who ruled in Inner Mongolia and parts of North China, and the Tanguts, who governed much of Northwest China, had signed treaties and made agreements with the Northern Song dynasty in the eleventh century, which prevented clashes and regulated trade and tribute. The Jurchens had ruled North China for more than a century before the Mongol invasions, and many Chinese had collaborated with the Jurchens to develop a government. They found that the Jurchens established a system that scarcely deviated from those of the traditional Chinese dynasties. The scholar-official class survived, the Chinese offered the Jurchen dynasty skilled administrators, and the economy maintained its equilibrium. North China thus accommodated foreign rule and did not perceive Mongol control as extraordinarily negative.

South China had remained independent until the Mongol invasions of 1279. Foreigners had not conquered the South, even during the so-called Ten Kingdoms period from 907 to 960. This tenth-century era also witnessed a vibrant economy.
in the south, with maritime trade along the southeast coast providing considerable wealth. Refugees from the north to the more fertile south fostered land reclamation, irrigation networks, and greater agricultural production. Market towns flourished because of increased production of crops. Regional trade grew, and cultural life benefited from developments in Buddhist and Confucian thought and in the arts.

This economic and cultural efflorescence in the south continued into the Northern Song period and became even more incandescent by the Southern Song period. The capital city of Hangzhou was the most populated city in the world. Situated on the West Lake, it had excellent housing for the elite, well-maintained canals and streets, as well as fine transport and communications. Its restaurants, teahouses, bathing establishments, and shops with an extraordinary array of goods not readily available in other parts of the world made a great impression on Marco Polo. When the Mongols approached the city, many of the residents were “prepared to die rather than flee.” They did not welcome the Mongols.

This resplendent culture in the south appeared to militate against Southerners valuing the Mongols or even cooperating with them. The Northern Chinese were less reluctant to accept the Mongols because they had managed to maintain their identities during the rule of the Jurchens. The Southern Chinese, who had developed a remarkable culture, were more suspicious of and condescending toward the Mongols.

### CHINESE LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE MONGOLS

After Qubilai Qa’an’s death, many Chinese began to sour on their Mongol rulers. Poor policy decisions, struggles among the Mongols, mismanagement, and financial problems not only caused the decline of the Yuan dynasty but also altered Chinese attitudes toward them. The disastrous policies included naval expeditions against Japan and Java and land-based assaults on Southeast Asian countries, which entailed considerable expenditures and offered no rewards or gains. Conflicts among the Mongols had plagued them after the first succession to the throne. As early as 1241, succession issues divided Chinggis Khan’s descendants, but it was Möngke Qa’an’s purge of his opponents in 1251 that revealed the rifts within the ruling elite. Struggles for power persisted throughout the Mongols’ domination of China. Fratricidal strife within the Yuan weakened the Mongols and showed their vulnerability. The conflicts and the ensuing instability contributed to Chinese disaffection. Wars between the Yuan dynasty and other regions in the Mongol domains, particularly the Chaghadai Khanate in Central Asia persisted and harmed trade. Sporadic wars continued throughout Qubilai’s reign and beyond. Such instability harmed Chinese merchants who engaged in long-distance commerce because the trade routes needed to pass through the Chaghadai Khanate.

Misgovernment also prevailed in the latter stages of the dynasty. Maintenance of irrigation projects on the major rivers and their tributaries faltered, leading to disastrous floods, which killed tens of thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands or perhaps even millions. Then the qa’ans appointed some foreigners as finance ministers, who frequently alienated many Chinese by excessive demands. Financial problems plagued the Yuan, partly due to expenses for such infrastructure projects as expansion of the Grand Canal or construction of the capital city. It was also
due to the expenses incurred in abortive invasions of Japan and Java and in the
Yuan dynasty’s wars with other Mongol leaders in Central Asia and Manchuria.
Annual government stipends to the Mongol elite or princes added to the costs and
burdens of the state. The ministers of finance chose to resolve these fiscal problems
by adopting policies that generated more dilemmas. They imposed additional taxes
on the Chinese population but not on the Mongol princes.

Chinese merchants who had earlier profited from the Mongols’ favorable
attitudes and policies toward commerce now faced higher taxes and other govern-
ment demands. Government shortfalls of revenues also impinged upon the peasants
who had benefited from Mongol support. Now the state did not have the resources
to maintain such infrastructure as irrigation and flood-control projects. It was no
accident that floods and changes in the course of the Huanghe River in the 1340s
led to numerous deaths from flooding and the spread of infectious and parasitic
diseases that ensued. The floods and the diversion of the Huanghe River divided
North China from South China and prevented the transport of grain from the South
to the North. The government built a channel from the South to the province of
Shandong, and the construction consumed vast expenditures and relied on consid-
erable corvee labor. Peasants who comprised the main group that served as forced
laborers began to perceive the Mongols as oppressors. In sum, by the mid-fourteenth
century, the Mongols had lost much of the Chinese support they had attracted when
they first occupied China.

Despite the Mongols’ failures, they influenced China and earned some plaudits
from the Chinese. As noted earlier, the Mongols supported trade, which permitted
the Chinese to have access to a wide array of Asian and Middle Eastern products.
They fostered the sciences, via Iranian discoveries and techniques, in China, including
cartography, astronomy, pharmacology, and medicine. The succeeding dynasty,
the Ming, learned much about military strategy, armaments, and tactics from the
Mongols.25

NOTES

1 HWC, 122.
3 Hymes 1987, 9–76; Shinno 2016.
4 Standen 2006.
5 TOA, 115 & 117.
6 de Rachewiltz 1981, 52.
7 de Rachewiltz 1960, 208–209.
8 Hsiao 1993a, 27–45.
11 YS 59–60.
13 YS 3075; Yao 1976, 223–225.
14 Schlegel 1968, 38–43.
16 Mote 1960, 236–238.
17 Cahill 1976, 47–49 and 159–160.
18 Mote 1960, 205.
19 Cahill 1976, 17.
23 For relations among these groups, see Rossabi 1983.
24 Gernet 1962, 247.
25 For additional details on the Mongol legacy in China, see Rossabi 2020, 25–50.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

HWC, See List of Abbreviations.
TOA, See List of Abbreviations.
YS, See List of Abbreviations.