CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

THE MONGOLS IN THE EYES OF THE UYGHURS

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UYGHURS AMONG THE EARLY MONGOLS

Chinggis Khan’s first direct encounter with the Uyghurs came in 1208, when he was pursuing two rival steppe tribes, the Merkit and the Naiman. By that time, the Uyghur state that spanned the eastern Tianshan Mountains and northern Tarim Basin had existed for almost three centuries, constructed by a diaspora group of Uyghur elites who had been driven south out of their steppe empire when they were conquered by Kirgiz tribes in 840. That new Uyghur kingdom melded the Uyghurs’ own steppe traditions with the indigenous Indo-Iranian population that lived in several important oasis cities across the region. Before long the Uyghurs themselves adopted that urban lifestyle, and their kingdom became a hub of international commerce, culture, and religion (Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity, and Buddhism). Drawing on their century of imperial management in the steppe, the Uyghurs of East Turkistan (present-day Xinjiang) developed an efficient and effective administrative system that operated out of two capital cities, Beshbaliq and Qara Qocho, and it was politically independent, with regular and productive diplomatic relations with states both west and east. That state, which we refer to as Uyghuristan, remained independent until the early 12th century, when it was forced to become a tributary to the new Qara Khitai state that was led by remnants of the Khitan Liao kingdom that controlled part of north China (907–1125).

When Chinggis Khan defeated the Merkit and Naiman tribes in 1208, the Uyghur king Barchuq el-Tegin (fl. 1200–1250s) saw his victory as a good opportunity to shake off the increasingly harsh demands made of the Uyghurs by the Qara Khitai and to align his fortunes with the emerging Mongol powerhouse. In consultation with his high ministers, Barchuq engineered the assassination of the Qara Khitai supervisor in residence in Beshbaliq. When Mongol messengers arrived there the following year, Barchuq offered his submission and sought protection from the Qara Khitai. Chinggis had undoubtedly already formed a positive view of the Uyghurs by this time since he had procured the help of a Uyghur scribe named Tatar Tongga...
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(fl. 1200) to adopt his native Uyghur script to write spoken Mongolian some three years earlier. Chinggis, for his part, may have had more in mind than simply pursuing his regional rivals when he entered Uyghuristan and was confronted with the perhaps unexpected voluntary submission of Barchuq in 1209. For one thing, the Uyghur kingdom was known across the region for its commercial and religious life. Moreover, since the Uyghurs had experience managing a state that included nomadic and sedentary populations, they provided him with much-needed managerial and linguistic expertise in his growing empire. Their allegiance to Chinggis Khan also burnished Chinggis Khan’s own credentials as someone interested in preserving, not destroying, cultural traditions and institutions. In return for Barchuq’s submission, Chinggis Khan adopted Barchuq as a “fifth son” and gave him the youngest of his daughters by his principal wife Börte in marriage. Barchuq and Al Altun were married in 1211, and that cemented the Uyghur imperial clan firmly into the Chinggisid orbit and provided the Mongols with important Uyghur troops and administrative personnel.

Barchuq’s submission was also important strategically since Uyghuristan provided access to Tibet and Central Asia and control of the lucrative overland trade routes. There was no need to station Mongol troops or overseers there since Barchuq was now trusted, and the Mongols could call on Uyghur help in future military campaigns. Barchuq personally led a force of some 18,000 Uyghur mounted troops in 1216 against the remaining Naiman tribes, who had by that time fled into the Qara Khitai realm. Barchuq and Uyghur troops also participated in Mongol campaigns against the Khwarazmshah and the Tanguts, Chinggis Khan’s last campaign. By 1225, many Uyghurs were dispersed throughout the Mongol military machine, and Barchuq successfully petitioned Chinggis that “all his people be returned home.” The fact that Chinggis Khan allowed the Uyghurs to return to Uyghuristan at that time is an indication of Barchuq’s high standing in Chinggis Khan’s eyes, as well as the autonomy Chinggis Khan granted to Barchuq in Uyghuristan.

UYGHURS AND UYGHURISTAN IN THE EARLY MONGOL EMPIRE

The Uyghur king was allowed to govern his own state on behalf of the Mongols, without Mongol interference. Barchuq was even allowed to keep his imperial title, idiqut, and his sons continued to inherit that title long after they had been driven out of Uyghuristan to reside in exile in China. Barchuq’s authority, and the absence of Mongol minders at his capital, is interestingly confirmed in the travel account left by the Daoist monk Changchun, who went west to meet with Chinggis Khan in 1221. When Changchun arrived in the Uyghur capital Beshbaliq, he was welcomed by a grand procession that included members of Barchuq’s own family and Buddhist and Daoist priests (Barchuq was leading Uyghur troops in battle in Central Asia under the Mongol flag at the time). Many Uyghur aristocrats were drafted to serve members of the Mongol ruling clan soon after 1209, especially in Ögödei’s and Tolui’s ulus areas. The stories of those Uyghurs show that they and their new masters held each other in high esteem. The Mongols were quick to put their skilled new subjects to work in their domains, which expanded greatly as the Mongols conquered large
swaths of north China and Central Asia. After all, the Mongols needed people who knew how to read and write the Uyghur script because it was used as the official writing system across the empire since Tatar Tongga first introduced it to the Mongol ruling class, as described earlier.

The Uyghur vertical script was also important in conducting business across Central Asia, which gave the Uyghur personnel even more of an edge in securing powerful roles serving the Mongols over other Central Asian personnel who joined the growing empire. At the same time, since the Mongols did not try to impose the vertical Uyghur script on their growing number of subjects, many local writing systems continued to be used. This was especially true in China and, eventually, Persia, and there was griping among some Persian and Chinese officials who complained about the fact that Uyghurs dominated the higher ranks of the Mongol administration because they knew the official writing system. That competition was one factor that convinced Qubilai to commission the Tibetan monk Phagspa to develop a new phonetic writing system that could represent all the spoken languages in the Mongol Empire in 1269. It lasted until the Yuan dynasty collapsed in 1368, after which the Mongols interestingly reverted back to using the Uyghur vertical script.9

One example of Uyghur recruits into the early Mongol Empire is Sevinch Toghril (fl. 1200–1230s). An official in Barchuq’s court in 1209, he joined Barchuq to lead Uyghurs in the Mongol campaign against the Muslim Khwarazm state. Upon his return from that campaign, he was assigned to be a judge in Sorqoqtani Beki’s (d. 1252) appanage estate in north China. This wife of Tolui was a powerful political actor in her own right, especially after her husband died in 1232.10 Mongol judges held wide authority over legal issues, taxes, and the local population in the area they oversaw. We do not know many details about Sevinch’s career as an official for the Mongols, but he must have been successful since four generations of his descendants continued to be selected for high-level government positions in China, including five grandsons and ten great-grandsons who were appointed to positions in the Mongol civilian and military bureaus.

Other Uyghurs besides Barchuq also married into the Mongol imperial clan. One example is Mengsus (1206–1267). His father was a governor in Uyghuristan in 1209, and Mengsus was, like his countryman Sevinch, drafted into the position of tax administrator in Sorqoqtani Beki’s appanage estate. While there, he got to know Tolui’s extended family, and he eventually married Ketülün (fl. 1250s), the sister of Qubilai’s first wife, Chabui. Qubilai wanted to promote Mengsus to imperial chancellor, but he refused. When Mengsus died, Chabui herself donated funds for his tomb, something quite out of the ordinary. One of Mengsus’s sons, Ashiq Temür (1249–1309), eventually filled the position of imperial chancellor, after a stellar career as a secretary in the Central Military Affairs Bureau and then as an Uyghur language tutor to the imperial Prince Qaishan (r. 1308–1311).

UYGHURS AND UYGHURISTAN AFTER CHINGGIS KHAN

The unique level of autonomy the Uyghurs enjoyed in Uyghuristan after 1209 came to an end when Ögödei (r. 1229–1241) succeeded Chinggis Khan. In 1229, the Turkic-speaking native of Khwarazm Mahmud Yalavach (d. 1254) was put in charge of
the entire population of Central Asia, which included Uyghuristan, to rebuild the important cities that were destroyed in earlier Mongol campaigns so the residents could pay taxes to the Mongols. While the Uyghur capitals had not been damaged, important urban centers farther west, such as Samarqand and Bukhara, had been destroyed. Mahmud established an efficient system of resident commissioners who spearheaded reconstruction efforts and enacted a tax system that regularized payments and did away with the onerous ad hoc requests for payments imposed on the local population by individual Mongols. Mahmud was replaced in 1241 by his son, Mas’ud Beg (d. 1289), who was kept on by Möngke after 1251. The sources indicate that Uyghuristan had by that time been fully incorporated into the evolving Mongol imperium as a province headed by Mas’ud Beg.

The loss of Uyghur autonomy and their full absorption into the growing empire may also be reflected in the fact that Möngke’s government referred to the Uyghurs by a new term; they are described from that point as “Weiwuer,” not “Huihu,” which was used in earlier periods. The term “Weiwuer” was first used by the Khitans in a list of tribes who paid annual tribute to the Khitan Liao state. Uyghur loss of autonomy over affairs in their own land was cemented in the civil war between Qubilai and his brother Ariq Böke that began in 1260. Although Qubilai won a temporary victory in that protracted battle when Ariq Böke surrendered, it was taken up around 1280 by Qaidu. As a result, the Uyghur idiqut at the time, Qochgar Tegin (r. 1266–1280), was forced to defend his capital against Qaidu’s forces. Qubilai tried several tactics to retain his hold over Uyghuristan during those years, such as establishing a Court of Justice for Uyghurs at Beshbaliq and circulating paper currency that was issued in China. In desperation, Qubilai set up a Pacification Bureau to coordinate the defense of Uyghuristan against Qaidu. Qubilai gave up in 1295, which also ended any pretensions of the Uyghur idiqut in Uyghuristan. The idiqut Ne’üril Tegin (r. 1280–1318) died in Gansu in 1318 and was the last member of Barchuq’s line to actually live in and act as an idiqut in Uyghuristan.

Ne’üril Tegin was also the first member of his family awarded another honorific title, Prince of Gaochang (Gaochang wang) that was made up by the Mongol court in 1316. His son, Temür Buqa (fl. 1327–1337) set the pattern for the rest of this family in Mongol China; male descendants lived in China, and some received the title idiqut and Prince of Gaochang, which carried small stipends but no real power. Most of the males of this family were appointed to leadership positions such as provincial governorships, the Bureau of Military Affairs (shumi yuan), the Censorate (yushi tai), and other court and provincial offices.

UYGHUR ADMINISTRATORS IN MONGOL CHINA

Persian sources have scattered references to Uyghur personnel who remained in Uyghuristan under Chaghadaid rule, but we have far more information on Uyghurs who moved to China from this point. Many Uyghurs were integrated into the Mongol government in career paths similar to Barchuq’s descendants. Their stories reveal a high degree of trust by the Mongol imperial elite in their Uyghur subjects. The Uyghurs were also invested in the state they were constructing in China, one measure of which is their record of service as high ministers in the central Yuan court. No fewer than 15 different Uyghurs held the 3 highest offices in the Yuan Central
Secretariat, serving for a total of 51 years between the start of Qubilai’s reign in 1260 through the end of the Yuan state in China in 1368. These were the most powerful and important officials in Yuan government, and the men selected oversaw the entire state, from revenue to legal affairs, public works, ritual matters, and managing the imperial clan. The Central Secretariat also mediated communications between the emperor and all provincial-level government agencies. It is thus noteworthy that Uyghurs were appointed to the three most important offices in the central Yuan court for almost half of the life of the Yuan state! No other group of subjects had this same record of consistent appointment to those offices. Uyghurs also featured prominently in provincial-level management; some 29 Uyghurs were appointed as provincial governors, at least 97 Uyghurs were appointed to ranks just below that of governor, and 54 Uyghurs were appointed as overseers at various levels in provincial governments.

A good example of Uyghurs who climbed the ladder of success in China under the Mongols is the well-known Lian Xixian (1231–1280). Lian Xixian’s father, Buyruq Qaya (1197–1265), came from a Uyghur aristocratic family and served in north China under four Mongol rulers, from Ögödei through Qubilai. In 1231, he adopted the Chinese-style surname Lian to celebrate his promotion as a surveillance commissioner in north China. He had 13 sons and 53 grandsons, and many of them followed Buyruq’s career pattern of service in the Yuan administration. His second son, originally named Hindu, was the most outstanding of that group. Hindu (1231–1280) and all but one of his 12 siblings continued to use Lian as their family name. He was inducted into Qubilai’s personal bodyguard at age 12 and gained his first experience as a young military officer in Qubilai’s 1253 campaign across Sichuan and south to conquer the Dali state. A year later, he was appointed to the Pacification Commission in charge of Qubilai’s appanage estate in Shanxi, and it was there that Lian Xixian gained his appreciation of Chinese culture.

In 1259 or early 1260, Lian Xixian traveled into the steppe to assess the strength of Ariq Böke’s forces and returned and persuaded Qubilai to take the field against his rival. Harnessing his military skills, Lian Xixian then personally led troops against Ariq Böke and defeated those forces in Gansu. He also secured the surrender of Song forces that had been fighting the Mongols in Sichuan. Lian Xixian emerged as a loyal and effective minister in Qubilai’s administration and is a good example of the careers that many other Uyghur aristocrats enjoyed in China.

UYGHUR INTELLECTUALS AND ARTISTS IN MONGOL AND CHINESE SOCIETY

The society the Mongols constructed and supported in China was a hybrid affair that mixed traditional Mongol and Chinese elements. This was particularly the case starting with Qubilai, who developed an early interest in Chinese culture and lifestyle and saw himself inhabiting both the position of Mongol grand khan and Chinese emperor. Many Uyghurs were appointed as officials in imperial advisory, ideological, and service bureaus at the new capital of Dadu, mainly due to their scholarly proclivities because they became experts in Confucian doctrine. One of the best examples of Uyghurs in those bureaus were several generations of the large
Uyghur family who adopted the surname Xie. At least four generations of Xie men served in Yuan intellectual and advisory bureaus. One Xie family member became well known for the strict Confucian-inspired regulations he imposed on his immediate family. The story of that man, Xie Zhedu (fl. 1315–1340) and his family illustrate the ways in which Uyghurs functioned as intellectual elites in Mongol China. He was the first of five Xie family men who achieved the highest exam degree, the “presented scholar” (jinshi) in the same generation. He also established his own private academy in his home, where he taught students.

Other Uyghurs drew on their heritage as members of highly literate and multilingual families and became well-known visual or literary artists. For example, several Uyghurs became famous calligraphers, such as Lian Xixian’s younger brother Lian Xigong (fl. 1340s), who was known and feted as an expert in the calligraphy of large-sized Chinese characters. His skills were undoubtedly part of the reason for his eventual appointment as an official in the Jixian Academy, which supervised the Chinese National Institute and College at the capital. Other Uyghurs drew on their Uyghur heritage as highly literate multilingual people more directly in their careers. Prominent Uyghurs were assigned to teach Uyghur language to members of the Mongol imperial clan, such as the aforementioned Ashiq Temür. He was able to do that because he, like many fellow Uyghurs in China, was taught to speak and write Uyghur from childhood. We know this because it is specifically mentioned in many posthumous epitaph biographies of well-known Uyghurs. Proficiency in Uyghur and other non-Chinese languages must have been common among Uyghur families in China because many Uyghurs served as translators and interpreters at the court. Other career tracks held by Uyghurs, such as in the Imperial Library Directorate (mishu jian), would have also required a high degree of fluency in western technical writing because that bureau prepared compilations of important works for the Yuan emperor that included translations of foreign astronomical, medical, and geographic works.

As these examples show, Uyghurs were perhaps uniquely prepared to thrive in the unique hybrid society the Mongols constructed in China because of their heritage and skills. Did they experience any conflict or tension in their lives as elites in exile? We get glimpses of possible tension only in the stories of Uyghurs who left an unusually large and detailed paper trail that document their public and private lives in Mongol China, and even then only by carefully reading and comparing different sources. One example is the Uyghur Guan Yunshi (a.k.a. Sevinch Qaya, 1286–1324), whose life is documented in some 20 separate official and private sources. His father began his career as a Uyghur language tutor but rose in rank as a military commander who gained fame in the Mongol campaigns against Song China. Guan’s first appointments were as a police commissioner and military garrison commander, but he is mainly known as a writer.

We focus here on two important sources that document Guan’s life: his official biography in the Yuan shi and a biography written for his gravesite by a personal friend. The official biography sketches out Guan’s career as an official, emphasizing his stints in the Hanlin Academy and his life as a writer known for his poetry and prose. Guan’s status as a poet is affirmed by his own known literary output and the large number of essays, poems, and forwards in his honor written by other contemporaneous Chinese and Uyghur writers. Curiously, that body of works...
omits mention of Guan’s other, possibly competing identity as a devout Buddhist. That side of Guan is only revealed in his posthumous spirit-way inscription, which paints a vivid picture of a man who retired from his career in officialdom early in order to spend his time itinerating across China, visiting important monasteries and respected monks and going into seclusion in his country home to meditate every summer.18

Guan’s interest in Buddhism is consistent with his Uyghur heritage since Uyghuristan was a center of Buddhist monastic life and activity from the late 10th century when the Uyghur aristocracy shifted from supporting Manichaeism to Buddhism. Broad support for Buddhism among the Uyghurs is seen, for example, in the record of the Song envoy to Uyghuristan, Wang Yande, who traveled there in 982. He was surprised to find 50 Buddhist monasteries and a separate library of Chinese Buddhist literature just in the Uyghur city Qocho.19 The Uyghur court sponsored the first translation of Buddhist scriptures into Uyghur around that time, and it evolved into a massive translation project that lasted at least 300 years.

The first translations were devoted to scriptures written in the local Tokharian language used across the Tarim Basin. Then, between the 11th and 13th centuries, translators turned their attention to scriptures written in Chinese. In the last phase, during the Mongol period, translators focused on Tibetan Tantric works. That last phase, in the 13th and 14th centuries, also featured block printed texts. When they lived in the Tarim Basin one of the most important Buddhist schools among the Uyghur elite was the Pure Land school, which continued to be preferred in the translated corpus until the Mongol period, when Tibetan texts took over.

CONCLUSION

So how did the Uyghurs and Mongols view each other? The Uyghurs of Barchuq’s generation clearly benefitted from their early and voluntary submission to Chinggis Khan. The Uyghur aristocracy was able to remain in their homeland for about a century after their leader submitted to Chinggis Khan, with remarkably little direct oversight or intervention from their new masters. The Mongols obtained valuable additional military and managerial assets that helped them continue their momentum of conquest and rule. That situation was based on a good amount of mutual respect and, from the Uyghurs, a willingness to view their new political situation as an opportunity more than an insult forced down their throats.

That situation of mutual respect continued after the Uyghur elite were driven out of Uyghuristan. While some Uyghurs remained in Uyghuristan, we can comment most fully on those who chose or were forced to migrate to China due to the nature of the extant sources, which paint a picture of overwhelming success for the Uyghurs there. In fact, many Uyghurs chose to remain in China after 1368, when Mongol rule ended, where their descendants can still be found today. The wide range of those primary sources clearly show that Uyghurs maintained the respect and trust of the Mongol ruling elite in China and that those sentiments were returned by the Mongols to the Uyghurs in full measure. The Mongols created a much more diverse society and state in China than had previously been the case, and the Uyghur diaspora were an important part of that historical development that laid the foundations for China today.
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NOTES

1 See Mackerras 1972 and Sinor 1997 for the Uyghur steppe empire. A convenient chronological study of the Uyghurs from their steppe empire to the end of the Mongol Yuan state is provided by Feng and Wu 1992.


3 See Biran 2005.

4 See Barchuq’s official biography in YS 124: 3046–3048 and discussed in Brose 2007, ch. 2 and Bretschneider 1888, I, 236–263.

5 See Hambis 1954, 130–137 and Table 11 for descriptions of Barchuq’s family and their marriage partners; also discussion by Broadbridge 2018, 119–120 and 186–192.

6 Allsen 1983, 248 citing the Persian historian Juvaini.

7 Qian 1955, 8333 lists the titles bestowed on or inherited by Barchuq and his descendants.

8 TOA, 80–84.

9 Kara 2005 provides the best description of the history of Mongolian writing available.

10 Rossabi 1979, 158–166.

11 See Allsen 1993, 122–131, for Mahmud’s life and career.

12 YS 3: 45. See Allsen 1983, 252–253 for Masud Beg’s career and discussion of Uyghuristan at that time.

13 See Farquhar 1990 for Mongol administrative terms.

14 Hsiao 1993, 480–499 provides a sketch of this man’s life and family.

15 See Brose 2007 for a study of the Xie clan.

16 Ch’en 1966, 187.

17 Lynn 1980. See Lynn for the titles of Guan’s biographical sources.

18 Ch’en 1966, 81–85, citing Guan’s spirit-way inscription written by the famous Chinese literatus Ouyang Xuan (1273–1357).

19 Elverskog 1997, 7–11.

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TOA, See List of Abbreviations.

YS, See List of Abbreviations.