Qubilai Qa’an has been many things to many people. He was qa’an of the entire Chinggisid Ulus, emperor of the Yuan dynasty (r. 1279–1368), a great nomadic warrior who conquered South China and then a patron of Confucianism in the newly founded dynasty.¹ Qubilai’s achievements were significant and multifaceted, influencing not only the subsequent Yuan emperors but also the following rulers who usurped the throne from his Chinggisid descendants, in particular, the ruler of the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398, r. 1368–1398), who wished to build legitimacy for the new dynasty by reshaping the political image of Qubilai Qa’an.²

As previous scholars have demonstrated, the Ming court’s political discourse on Chinggisid legitimacy oscillated between Han ethnic-nationalism and Confucian universalism.³ Yet both types of Ming court discourse presented Qubilai Qa’an as an exception. From the perspective of the Ming court, Qubilai was unlike the first four qa’ans (i.e. Chinggis, Ögödei, Güyük and Möngke), who were regarded as alien dominators, or his successors, who were accused of being responsible for the collapse of the empire. On the contrary, Qubilai’s achievements and personality were praised by Ming emperors and their advisers.

Why did Qubilai Qa’an become an exception in the quasi-ethnic revolutionary atmosphere that prevailed and sometimes even turned radical during the early Ming era? Some previous researchers believed the Ming court’s discourse was, to a great extent, influenced by the intellectuals who had lived under Mongol rule and then served the Ming emperors.⁴ Thus, they held onto the official evaluation of Qubilai Qa’an presented by the Yuan government. If this was the case, how did the late Yuan intellectuals depict Qubilai’s image in a dynastic narrative? Meanwhile, being inspired by the late Yuan intellectuals, how and why did Ming emperors turn Qubilai Qa’an into a pivotal figure in their own newly constructed political discourse? Based on the official archives, chronicles and literary collected works, this article attempts to identify the evolution of Qubilai Qa’an’s image during the Yuan–Ming transition period and explain the motivations behind these changes.
The Ming court’s official historiography can be regarded as a conscious effort to control the memory of the Chinggisid past to build loyalty among their multi-ethnic subjects. Given that the Ming Empire regarded itself, symbolically and practically, as the successor to the “Qa’an Ulus” – that is to say, inheriting not only the territory of the Yuan dynasty, which covered Chinese and non-Chinese areas, but also the nominal suzerainty over all four divided Chinggisid states – the audience to which the Ming court’s official historiography was intended to appeal represented different successors who shared the common memory and history of the Mongol Empire. Therefore, this article will outline how political legitimacy and charisma were appropriated from the Mongol qa’an.

THE LEGACY OF QUBILAI

In the spring of 1260, when he ascended the throne in Kaiping, Qubilai announced himself as the qa’an of the Mongol Empire, shortly before his brother Ariq Böke’s enthronement. It was not only the beginning of the struggle for the throne but an overture to a systemic transformation in the political organization of the empire. Supported by his Chinese advisers, the new qa’an, Qubilai, personally led the transformation: he moved the capital from Qaraqorum to Daidu (i.e. today’s Beijing) and organized a dual administration, which would coordinate nomadic political organization and Chinese tradition and balance the influences from the Mongol military elites and Chinese intellectuals respectively. By adopting the style of a traditional Chinese emperor, Qubilai attracted the allegiance and collaboration of the Chinese intellectuals and local warlords. The latter’s meritorious services ensured Qubilai’s victory in the civil war and the subsequent conquests in southern China.

On the other hand, Qubilai also succeeded to the manifest destiny of Heaven’s Will, which mandated the Chinggisid family to conquer and rule the world. Mongol troops invaded the Southern Song (r. 1127–1279) and finally captured its capital, Lin’an, in 1276. The lengthy reign of Qubilai reached its pinnacle of prosperity after the conquest of Southern Song. The achievement of uniting “all within the seas” (hunyi haiyu, 混一海宇) undoubtedly gained him prestige and status beyond the famous ancient emperors, e.g. Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (Han Wudi, r. 141–87 BCE) and the Tang Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649 CE). Qubilai Qa’an’s policies of encouraging agriculture and facilitating economic growth were undoubtedly the outcome of consultation with his advisers, and to a certain extent seemed effective. Therefore, even in the recently occupied territory, Qubilai’s domination won the following compliment from a famous “remnant subject” (yimin, 遺民, i.e. Song loyalist), “under the peace of Great Yuan, all people and all things have taken on an entirely new look.”

In the first half of his reign, Qubilai did not show an obvious preference for his non-Chinese financial ministers. The latter were mainly promoted from the intimate attendants of the imperial family, like Ahmad Fanakati (d. 1282). The latter’s financial policies and imperious manner of working doubtlessly resulted in a schism between the qa’an, their main patron and his Chinese scholar-officials. Yet at least until 1279, Qubilai maintained his central government in good operation by preserving a delicate balance among his multi-cultural bureaucracy. For this reason Yuan intellectuals who lived under Qubilai’s successors agreed that the era from
Zhongtong (r. 1260–1264) to the early years of Zhiyuan (r. 1264–1294) were a Yuan Golden Age.

Qubilai’s prestige increased continuously even after his death. From the middle period of the Yuan dynasty, people described him as a unique creator of laws and regulations. Emperor Qaishan’s (i.e. Wuzong, r. 1307–1311) intimate eunuch, Li Bangning, admired Qubilai’s thrift and concluded that “all of Shizu’s words, without exception, set the example for posterity.” Furthermore, in his successor Temür Öljeitü Qa’an’s (i.e. Chengzong, r. 1294–1307) era, the formulaic phrase “Shizu’s [i.e. Qubilai] perfect example” started to frequently appear in imperial edicts and governmental documents. This phrase indicates that in the post-Qubilai era, his achievements and policies were deemed as a perfect example to follow for subsequent Yuan emperors. Almost all the subsequent Yuan emperors mentioned this phrase in their edicts announcing enthronements, appointing crown princes and proclaiming a new reign name. Likewise, Yuan ministers also frequently cited this phrase in their memorials addressed to the emperor, to emphasize the legitimacy of their suggestions or to stress the necessity of following Qubilai’s precedent.

Throughout his life, Qubilai Qa’an was unswerving in his aspiration to become a universal and undisputed ruler of all the Chinggisid domains. Yet, his suzerainty was rejected by some of his relatives, who insisted on defending the Mongolian heritage, e.g. Ögödeid prince Qaidu. They displayed implacable enmity to Qubilai’s Sinicized transformation and meanwhile accused the latter of betraying the Mongol tradition. In 1304 a Great Rapprochement between the four main Chinggisid states marked a turning point. At the assembly the four main Chinggisid rulers finally solved the long-disputed problem, namely, which territory belonged to whom. Along with the recognition of each family’s territory and sovereignty the notion of Chinggisid unity was revived too. This notion emphasized that all the Chinggisid rulers belonged to the same family of Golden Kin, which could be traced back to Chinggis Khan. This shared kinship was deployed in an effort to solve internal disputes between the four Chinggisid states.

Henceforth Qubilai’s successors established nominal Yuan suzerainty over the whole Mongol world. In contemporary Islamic sources the Yuan emperor was titled the “Great Qa’an” (Qan al-kabir, or Qan al-a’zam), and in parallel with this, the territory of the Yuan dynasty was honoured with the name of “Great Qa’an’s state” (Per. ulus-i Qa’an, mamalik-i Qa’an; Arabic mamlikat al-Qan al-kabir). Given that the other three Chinggisid states were named as “state of Qaidu’s family”, “state of Batu (or Berke)’s family” and “state of Hülegü’s family” respectively, the notion of relating a certain territory to a certain Chinggisid family was widely prevalent from the beginning of the 14th century, both inside and outside the Mongol world. It is doubtless that the title “Great Qa’an”, namely, Qubilai and his descendants, was fixedly related to the territory under the domination of the Yuan dynasty.

Toghan Temür (i.e. Shundi, r. 1333–1368), the last emperor who ruled the Chinese territory of the Yuan dynasty, was the son of Qoshila (Mingzong, r. 1329). Shortly after his father’s murder Toghan Temür was exiled to an island off the coast of Korea at the age of ten, and then to Jingjiang (today’s Guilin, Guangxi Province), a remote place far from the court. Therefore, when he was recalled to the capital and finally installed as emperor in July 1333, his authority was very limited. Leveraging Qubilai’s high prestige to evoke memories of the past golden era among his subjects
and, more importantly, encouraging loyalty to the current regime unsurprisingly became a shared strategy between the new emperor and his main chancellors. An imperial edict issued in 1335 mentioned that, according to astrologers’ suggestions, Toghan Temür announced he would re-adopt Qubilai’s second reign title Zhiyuan. Just as the title Zhiyuan (“achieving the proper beginning”) indicates, the emperor aspired to revive the old norms and to make his empire prosper again. Toghan Temür and his advisers tried to correct the inadequacies of the bureaucratic system by frequently citing the “old statutes of Shizu”. Besides, during the whole of Toghan Temür’s reign, his advisers always attempted to emphasize the emperor’s tie to Qubilai by establishing political monuments and spreading propaganda to improve Toghan Temür’s prestige.

As time passed, Toghan Temür lost his enthusiasm for political reform. He condoned pervasive factionalism, which corrupted his inner court and administrative system, with a laissez-faire attitude. In this period, anecdotes about secret palace affairs spread widely among Chinese intellectuals. In these exaggerated stories, Toghan Temür was depicted as being surrounded by his non-Chinese courtiers, indulging himself in lascivious and exotic religious rituals (i.e. the rites of Tibetan Buddhist sects). All these things widened the schism between the emperor and his Chinese subjects. Discontented Chinese intellectuals sometimes expressed their nostalgia for Qubilai’s reign, thereby alluding to their disappointment towards Toghan Temür. For instance, when the famous poet Yuan Kai learned of the assassination of Bolad Temür, a domineering warlord who had arrogated power from the Yuan emperor by the threat of force, he wrote a poem on this event with a little satire. He described the assassination as “an epic success no less than Shizu’s [i.e. Qubilai’s] achievement and seemingly, the current Emperor’s [i.e. Toghan Temür’s] reverence grows by the day.”

Thus, we have every reason to believe that until the last years of the dynasty, Qubilai Qa’an was not merely an exemplary ruler but an icon synthesizing heavenly destiny, personal virtue and charisma. He was recognized as an inseparable symbol of dynastic legitimacy.

RECASTING THE IMAGE OF QUBILAI QA’AN: THE RED TURBANS UPRISING AND ANTI-MONGOL DISCOURSE

In 1351 the Red Turbans uprising erupted in Yingzhou (in present-day Northwestern Anhui Province), a centre of anti-dynastic agitation, and led to the disintegration of the Yuan Empire. The populace, which had been assembled to dredge the Grand Canal, rebelled under Liu Futong’s leadership. Liu took full advantage of nationalistic propaganda, especially the Chinese people’s memory of the former Southern Song dynasty, to attract more followers. Han Shandong, who was claimed as the eighth generation grandson of Emperor Song Huizong (r. 1100–1126), was installed on the throne by Liu. In their march northward to Shandong and Henan Provinces, the insurgents planted a banner with the following slogan: as “three thousand tiger-like soldiers are marching toward the regions of Youyan (i.e. You Zhou); ‘a flying dragon in the sky’ is [an omen] of reopening the Heaven of Great Song.” Liu’s Red Turbans seized the city of Bianliang (present-day Kaifeng, Henan Province) and established it as the capital of the Song dynasty.
In Southern China, Zou Pusheng and Xu Shouhui led another group of insurgents. They occupied Qishui (in present-day Hubei Province) and established a parallel Song regime (also called Tianwan) there. Aside from these two regimes, several independent local forces, e.g. the Zhang Shicheng brothers’ insurgency, acted in the coastal area of Taizhou (in today’s Jiangsu Province) Circuit. To evoke people’s memory of the last Han Chinese dynasty, the two main insurgent regimes coincidentally chose “Song” as the title of their regimes. Along with the dynastic title, they also revived the legitimacy of the Song dynasty as well as the Chinese nationalistic discourse.

However, these insurgent troops became entangled in long-standing and frequent struggles with the local defence forces. The latter were organized by the local elites who still maintained their loyalty, to varying degrees, to the Yuan emperor. In view of the situation, some intellectuals suggested that the insurgent leaders should utilize the Chinese nationalistic discourse, namely, the notion of the “distinction between Chinese and foreign”, to ease the hostility between the rebels and local defenders. In 1258, a local literati, Liu Xia, addressed a letter to Xu Shouhui from Ji’an (today’s Jiangxi Province), in which he pointed out,

> From ancient times, the destiny of the barbarian rulers never lasts over one hundred years. . . . The monarch and the ministers of our dynasty, with a deep insight on this [truth], therefore propagate the legitimacy of Great Song and get rid of barbarians’ illegitimate authority.

According to Fang Zhenhua’s study, the nationalistic statement that the “non-Han (hu) regimes’ fortune can never last over one hundred years” initially appeared in the later period of the Southern Song. When confronted with foreign invasions, Chinese intellectuals would make this statement to emphasize that the Southern Song was the exclusive legitimate regime. Although a few Song loyalists occasionally used this statement to reveal an uncooperative attitude towards the Yuan, as a political slogan it no longer had any practical significance under the Yuan. However, in the last years of the Yuan dynasty, negative sentiments towards the Mongol ruler and the court prevailed among the intellectuals of southern China, especially when they found themselves legally excluded from high-level offices in the government. The following words accurately depicted such negative sentiments: “Rulers of the Yuan dynasty, after the State was united, generally regarded the Northern State as internal and regarded [the] Central State as external, and treated Northern people with confidence but kept Southern people at a distance.” Therefore, amid the mid-14th century’s uprisings, the statement that “non-Han regimes never last over one hundred years” was an effective device of self-consolation and a sharp weapon to win the hearts of sympathizers.

**ZHU YUANZHANG’S LEGITIMATE PROPAGANDA**

The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, started his career as a corporal in the guard squad of Guo Zixing, a military commander of the Red Turban Army, and later became his son-in-law. The year 1356 marked a watershed of Zhu’s political career. In July, his troops seized the city of Jiqing (Nanjing). Because of his merits,
Zhu was “acclaimed Duke of Wu (wuguogong) by his generals and he established the Jiangnan Branch Central Secretariat at Nanjing. He assumed personal control of it.” According to the Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty (ming shilu, hereafter cited as MSL), the system of this branch of the Central Secretariat copied the administrative structure of the Yuan.

Now Zhu Yuanzhang was a semi-independent warlord, despite nominally showing his respect for the sovereign of the Song regime. He continued the nationalistic discourse, denying the Mongols’ legitimacy. It is said that he had people plant a banner in front of the office of the Central Secretariat with the words “Mountains, rivers, all the territory of China; Sun and Moon unfold again the Heaven of the Great Song.” This kind of policy, aiming to revive Chinese tradition, was not just propaganda but was actually implemented. For instance, in Zhu’s territory, the name of the local administrative unit “Circuit” (lu) was adapted to the “Superior prefecture” (fu) because the latter was a typical name of local administration prevalent in the pre-Mongol era. Likewise, from the 1360s Zhu Yuanzhang ordered the restoration of the toponyms and official titles of the Song dynasty. Nevertheless, compared to the other branches of the insurgency, Zhu’s policies seemed more moderate. His critique mainly focused on the last Yuan emperor, who was accused of debauchery and failure to overcome the turbulence. At the same time, Zhu tried to keep a good relationship with the intellectuals who remained loyal to the Yuan.

From 1361 to 1367 Zhu’s troops annihilated several of his main contenders in Southern China, i.e. Chen Youliang, Zhang Shichen and Fang Guozhen. At the beginning of 1367 the nominal Song emperor Han Lin’er, Zhu’s overlord, was murdered in a deliberate boating accident. After renouncing his loyalty to the Song, Zhu was enthroned as the emperor of the Ming dynasty at the end of 1367. In the meantime, the northern arm of the Ming army advanced speedily. In the following year, they marched northward along the Grand Canal to Shandong Province and conquered a series of the strategic cities on their itinerary, e.g. Bianliang and Luoyang. In the Taiyuan battle, the Ming army finally defeated the last main force of the Yuan. By then, there was no way the Yuan dynasty could escape collapse. Toghan Temür, his princes and a few loyal attendants escaped just before the arrival of the Ming army and left the capital, Daidu, to the rebels.

With the military victory an apparent change took place in Zhu Yuanzhang’s political discourse, as reflected in the imperial edicts issued by him from 1366 to 1368. The contents of the edicts were similar. In them Zhu repeatedly emphasized that the Mongols had lost heaven’s support because they had “lost the virtue” (shide, 失德); they had been doomed by the principle that “non-Han (hu) regimes’ fortunes can never last over one hundred years.” Finally, Zhu attributed his success to the “favour and blessing of Heaven above”. In the meantime, there was an upsurge of nationalist statements in the Ming official documents. Zhu’s ministers claimed that he was “a new sage ruler” to “expel the barbarians and restore Chinese civilization”. Given the fierce conflicts between the Ming army and the Yuan loyalists along the north-western border of China (e.g. Xian’xi, Lintao, the fringe of Tibet), the changes in Zhu’s political propaganda might reflect the military pressure he faced.

When Zhu talked about the Yuan emperor’s ancestors he depicted them ambiguously as the “Tatar tribe which rose in the desert”, but avoided mentioning any particular emperor’s name. Obviously Zhu used the term...
“desert” (or “northern desert”) as a propaganda tactic to emphasize their alien origin and steppe background, especially when compared with the Ming territory, which had been defined by Zhu as “the old territory of us the Chinese.” It is apparent that during this period Zhu had not yet singled Qubilai out from his nomadic predecessors.

RESCUING THE IMAGE OF QUBILAI FROM THE NOMADIC TRADITION

Soon after his enthronement, Zhu Yuanzhang was keen to cut off the relationship between the newly founded dynasty and the former Song. The “Song” here referred to both the Southern Song and the Song-Tianwan to which Zhu personally pledged allegiance. In doing so, Zhu singled himself out from the “flock of the hero” and hence redeemed the newly founded dynasty from its disreputable origin, i.e. the rebels against the Yuan dynasty.

Another crucial reason the Ming court had to adjust the anti-Mongol policy was the change of situation. When Zhu Yuanzhang established his dominion over Northern China after 1368 he and his ministers had to administer a multi-ethnic population and contest with various non-Chinese opponents. Therefore, it was reasonable to replace the Han-ethnic discourse with Confucian universalism.

Evidence for this shift comes from the title of the state, Ming. As Du Hongtao has noted, the title Ming as well as the title Yuan were drawn from the same section of the Book of Changes. The two terms (Yuan and Ming) share equal nobility and represent the beginning of the universe and its regular cycles respectively. Thus, when Zhu Yuanzhang adopted the term “Ming” for his state in 1368 it was equivalent to proclaiming that his new founding state inherited its legitimacy from the Yuan dynasty.

Another measure was the compilation of the Yuan shi (Official History of the Yuan Dynasty). The compilation started in 1369 and ended merely one year later (1370), several months after Toghan Temür’s death. In April 1370 the Ming cavalry under the command of Li Wenzhong, Zhu’s nephew, attacked Toghan Temür’s government-in-exile stationed near Yingchang. The resistance of the Yuan refugees was dissolved in no time. Toghan Temür passed away whilst trying to escape, and his grandson Maidelibala was captured. This event reversed Zhu Yuanzhang’s opinion on the legitimacy of the Yuan dynasty. He publicly proclaimed that Yuan was a legitimate Chinese dynasty and, in accordance with earlier political tradition, he ordered all the former Yuan officials to pledge their personal respect and loyalty to the former dynasty and their old rule.

In a 1370 edict issued two months after Toghan Temür’s death Zhu Yuanzhang described the rise and decline of the Yuan dynasty as:

[Song emperor’s] descendants became weak and the territory shrank by the day. Therefore Heaven ordered your Shizu [i.e. Qubilai] of the Yuan to replace them. Till Toghan Temür’s reign, [the ruler] was debauched and fatuous, and had no interest in governmental affairs, nor sympathy with the people’s misery. Therefore, the villains and bandits arose together, the world fell into confusion, and the people lost their monarch.
This was the first reference to Qubilai (i.e. Shizu) in the Ming court’s historical narrative, and contrary to the accusation against Toghan Temür, Qubilai was portrayed as an ideal ruler, a perfect embodiment of virtue.

It is worth noting that just two years before (1368), Zhu Yuanzhang openly criticized Qubilai because “he substituted the system of the Middle Kingdom with foreign customs.” These words might reflect the general opinion of Zhu and his advisors at that time. Liang Yin, a famous literati who served in the office compiling the *Official History of the Yuan Dynasty*, supplied a comprehensive judgement of Qubilai’s political construction:

Shizu (Qubilai) established a ruling system that was based on lenience and benevolence and was furthermore comprehensive and detailed. To the extent that this much of his system was transmitted intact to his successors, it should have produced no flaws. However, the essence of good rule lies in employing worthies whatever their origins; in making the study of antiquity a prerequisite for entering officialdom; and in using decorum, righteousness, probity, and sense of shame as the four mainstays of the state. Shizu (Qubilai), however, determined that no Chinese could become prime minister, and so all the prime ministers were ethnic Mongols. He did not set up remonstrating officials, and so the avenue of loyal and frank advice was blocked.47

However, in the “Memorial of submitting the *Yuanshi*”, Qubilai was praised: “(He) enlightened the barbarians by Chinese ceremony; hence he expanded his domain to the remotest place and laid the foundation of the Grand Unity.”48 The memorial totally reversed the earlier evaluation of Qubilai by the Ming court. The reversal aimed to isolate his ideal image from the failure of the Yuan dynasty.

In stark contrast to the idealization of Qubilai’s image, Chinggis Khan’s name was scornfully mentioned as “Your ancestor [who] rose from poverty and obscurity in the steppe” in Zhu Yuanzhang’s eulogy for Ayushiridara.49 These words intentionally belittled Chinggis Khan by emphasizing his humble origin, and in the meantime broke the bond between Qubilai and his ancestors.

According to the MSL, from 1370 to 1382 there were several conversations between Zhu Yuanzhang and his advisors on the following question: which excellent qualities of Qubilai made it possible for him to accomplish such a great achievement, i.e. that he conquered the vast territories and ruled his nomadic and sedentary subjects successfully? Zhu’s advisers listed several merits of Qubilai, like valiance, the ability to employ worthies and thriftiness.

Among the aforesaid qualities, Qubilai’s thriftiness seems to have left a deep impression on the Ming emperor. In subsequent years, Zhu Yuanzhang brought it up on multiple occasions to educate his ministers and attendants. As the MSL recorded, Zhu once ordered two palace commissioners to be beaten because he saw them running in the rain in dry leather boots. Zhu criticized them for damaging the boots and quoted a story in which Qubilai had criticized an attendant who dressed in ornamental leather boots for wasting the materials.50

In May 1376 Zhu again explained the rise and collapse of the Yuan dynasty to his attendants. He concluded,
Shizu of the Yuan personally practiced thrifty and simple [life] during his reign, and thus was able to achieve the feat of grand unity. However, Genshen Emperor [i.e. Togan Temür] triggered both Heavenly and human resentment because he indulged his extravagant and dissipated habit, and even fed the dogs and pigs with rich-tasting foods. Therefore, his overindulgence could not be continued and his defeat was like this.51

Zhu Yuanzhang even encouraged his wife, Empress Ma, to follow the example of Qubilai’s wife Chabui Khatun, by boiling the strings of bows to collect materials for clothing.52 Additionally Zhu used these stories of virtue to teach his princes and royal sons-in-law.

These stories of Qubilai’s virtues are, to a certain degree, supported by the historical accounts. Wang Yun, a contemporary of Qubilai’s reign, in his memorial praised the latter, saying, “after enthronement, [Qubilai] was as thrifty as a pioneer.” For instance, Wang Yun illustrated that Qubilai refused to dress in exquisite silk clothes but replaced them with rough textile ones.53 Likewise, a late Yuan author, Ye Ziqi supplied an anecdote about Qubilai’s thriftiness,

Emperor Yuan Shizu once remembered the hardship of Taizu’s pioneering work; thus he took a blade of grass and transplanted it in the imperial palace, in front of the scarlet staircase, and called it the “grass of [marking] the oath of thrift”, in order to let his descendants know the virtue of thriftiness.54

Yet there is also a certain amount of counter-examples recorded by Yuan authors. Qubilai obviously abandoned his restraint in the later period of his reign. Some Chinese advisers strictly criticized his extravagance and waste, which were considered the cause of a financial crisis.55 As for the later historians, Zhao Yi’s critique is one of the most typical. He claimed that Qubilai’s “avarice and militarism were rooted in his nature, and never changed throughout his life.”56

It is, however, ironic that in late Yuan accounts, Toghan Temür, who was labelled by Zhu Yuanzhang as a dissolute and dissipated ruler, instead was a paragon of virtue. According to Yang Yü, it was Toghan Temür who refused his vice supervisor of the Court for the Palace Revenues’s suggestion of decorating the emperor’s boots with gold and ordered that they be decorated with copper wire instead.57 The plot of this anecdote is similar to Qubilai’s story, probably sharing the same prototype.

We can, therefore, assume that the depiction of Qubilai as an ideal model in the Ming court’s discourse was based upon traditional Confucian morals, despite drawing upon some factual accounts. Zhu Yuanzhang and his advisers reshaped Qubilai’s image to single Qubilai out from other Mongol rulers. As a key point of establishing his new legitimacy Zhu combined Qubilai’s personal image with Chinese notions of political morality.58 By emphasizing Qubilai’s virtues and by following his example, Zhu deliberately proved that heavenly destiny would favour and bless the founding emperor who possessed them.

Another reason for reshaping Qubilai’s image is related to the theory of legitimate authority. The Ming court’s discourse on legitimate authority was influenced by Yang Weizhen’s opinion that the Yuan dynasty was first established in 1276, after the conquest of the Southern Song. He believed the qualification for founding
a new dynasty was the realization of the “Grand Unity” (dayiton, 大一統), a term derived from the Confucian concept that all the [Chinese] territories were united under a superior emperor. Although snubbed by the Yuan Court, Yang Weizhen’s opinion subsequently won the support of Chinese intellectuals from the Ming court. Some editors in the office compiling the official history of the Yuan – e.g. Wang Hui and Xu Yikui – were enthusiastic supporters of Yang Weizhen’s theory of legitimate authority.

The duration of the Yuan dynasty in Ming official documents was also adjusted to meet the new theory of legitimate authority. From 1356 to 1369 “the fortune of the Yuan lasted more than a hundred years” was a standard expression that appeared ten times in the MSL. According to this expression we can conclude that the beginning of the Yuan dynasty was dated to around 1260, the year of Qubilai’s enthronement. But after 1370 Zhu Yuanzhang clearly defined the duration of the Yuan dynasty as 93 years, namely, from the year of 1276. Additionally the duration of the Yuan dynasty, after adjustment, perfectly matched the notion that “non-Han regimes’ fortune can never last over one hundred years.”

Likewise, the phrase “unity of all under Heaven” gradually replaced the former nationalistic “distinction between the Chinese and barbarians” in Ming official documents. In the Yuan dynasty, Qubilai’s legitimacy was based on his achievement of “uniting all within the seas”, and now the secretaries serving in the Ming court started to define the new emperor’s legitimacy in the same way. Song Lian announced, “the Emperor had [been] enthroned for three years and united the Chinese and foreigners of the civilized world.” The concept of “Grand Unity” prompted Zhu Yuanzhang to continue his war against the remaining Yuan forces on the steppe to regain all Qubilai’s territory. Moreover, enthusiasm for realizing “Grand Unity” speedily infected everyone within the literati circle who served at the Ming court. In 1369–1370 the poet Gao Qi, who worked as an editor of the Yuanshi in Nanjing, wrote one of his most famous poems:

I live in a fortunate time to witness a Sage arising from South Country,
Soon after having pacified disastrous turbulences, recuperation ensued.
I now eternally make my home within Four Oceans and no longer
Let Grand River delimit a north-south boundary of our motherland.

Zhu Yuanzhang recomposed the historical narrative of the Yuan dynasty by reshaping the image of Qubilai Qa’an. The final version, written in Chinese and Mongolian, was included in several diplomatic letters addressed to different Mongol warlords in 1388–1389. The text is as follows:

In the past, [the] Chinese Great Emperor of the Song dynasty ruled the world in excess of three hundred and ten years and then, his descendants did not respect Heaven nor care for the people. Therefore, Emperor Taizu [i.e. Chinggis Khan] who was born and, on Heaven’s behalf, rose from the North desert and pacified all the foreign rulers of Tatar and Muslim people. The grandson of Taizu was Emperor Shizu [i.e. Qubilai], who was famous for his mercy and virtue. He united the various non-Chinese peoples all under Heaven and brought the foreign countries all overseas back to a grand unity. In one hundred years, which
people did not yearn for his grace and virtue? Which people dared to disrespect his laws and orders? At that time, there was safety in all directions, people lived in peace and products were rich. After Emperor Toghan Temür was enthroned, the powerful ministers took authority; laws and orders were not respected. In consequence, Heaven threw the realm into chaos. The people were plunged into misery on the wild field and military uprisings occurred at the same time. I was in the Huai District at that time. In view of the people’s suffering, I thus collected the military force with the townsmen and heroes and pacified the flock of the insurgents in the following four-five years.66

Chinggis Khan’s personal career in this version is abstracted as “pacified all the foreign rulers of Tatar and Muslim people.” According to the parallel Mongolian version, this sentence was translated as: “(Chinggis Khan), who had subjected all the princes who were on the Mongolian land, also subjugated the princes in the Muslim countries.”67 The term referring to the foreign rulers in the Mongolian translation is qari (pl. qaris, qaritan). Professor Wulan defined the word qari in classic Mongolian (from Yuan to mid-Ming era) as “foreign country” (waibang, 外邦) and “foreign enemy” (waidi, 外敌).68 This word was usually applied to emphasize people of a different ethnic identity. Thus, in the previous context Zhu tried to underline that Chinggis Khan united all the non-Chinese people during his reign. By contrast, the previous text described Qubilai’s achievement as “united non-Chinese people all under Heaven.” In the parallel Mongolian version this sentence is: “the people of the interior and the people regardless [of] where they were, he [Sečen Qaɣan, i.e. Qubilai] subdued them all.”69 In the Mongolian context, the term irgen corresponded to the meaning of “subject” or “subject people”, an antonym of qari (foreigner).

Therefore, we can conclude that the Ming emperor carefully distinguished the careers of Chinggis Khan and Qubilai. From Zhu Yuanzhang’s perspective Chinggis Khan was the conqueror of all non-Chinese people, despite his conquests of Northern China under Jurchen rule. By contrast, Qubilai united and dominated the Chinese people as well as various ethnic groups. This view probably reveals Zhu Yuanzhang’s intention to rewrite the history of the Yuan dynasty to reject the notion that the Mongol Empire was solely the achievement of Chinggis Khan.70 In his new historical narrative of the Yuan dynasty, the conquest of the Southern Song was identified as a milestone, and Qubilai was installed as the most prominent figure. Accordingly, the career and image of Qubilai were isolated from his ancestors, the Eurasian nomadic conquerors. In this way Zhu Yuanzhang successfully transferred the charismatic authority from Qubilai to himself whilst keeping his distance from the latter’s nomadic background.

QUBILAI’S ULUS IN THE WORLD OF THE GREAT MING

The strategy of appropriating the legitimacy of the Yuan dynasty provided Zhu Yuanzhang with the legal basis for claiming sovereignty in the areas that were located outside the traditional Chinese territory (e.g. Yunnan and Liaodong). Considering that the heavenly destiny that had chosen Qubilai, as the Ming court repeatedly proclaimed, already transferred its fortune to Zhu Yuanzhang, he ruled not only the Chinese people but also all the non-Chinese subjects as a universal emperor. This
concept also appeared in Zhu Yuanzhang’s announcement, “I had already been the ruler of all-under-Heaven, and Chinese and foreigners had been closely united. [I] would take care of all the peoples no matter what family names they had.”71 After 1370, in the imperial decrees of the Ming, the Sino-centric expression “Chinese/China” (huaxia, 華夏) was gradually replaced by the term “Chinese and foreign” (huayi, 華夷).

For the Ming emperor, another crucial question was how to situate his state in a world where different regional regimes were linked by ties of Chinggisid kinship. The concept of the Mongol Empire still held currency with the rulers of the later 14th century. As Manz pointed out, “an ambitious man might rise to power within one Mongol successor state, but the stage on which he acted and the audience to which he appealed represented the whole of the Mongol heritage.”72 Therefore, although the Ming Court tried to revive the Chinese tributary system, Qubilai’s image served as a link between the legacy of the Mongol Empire and the Chinese concept of “All-under-Heaven”. When Zhu Yuanzhang proclaimed the transfer of the heavenly destiny from the Yuan emperor to himself, he also inherited an extensive worldview of the Mongol Empire and its diplomatic policies towards foreign countries.

The Ming Emperor also continued to claim dominion over a number of autonomous kingdoms in East Asia, following Yuan precedent. In a decree of 1370 Zhu Yuanzhang ordered an examination of his new empire, given that “I have united the Chinese and foreigners and [have] started to enjoy the rule of great peace with all the subjects.” He also dispatched envoys to Korea, Annam (i.e. Dai Viet or modern northern Vietnam) and Champa (zhancheng, southern Vietnam) with his decrees in order to carry out examinations in those countries as well.73 A Korean candidate, Jin Tao (or Gim Do), passed the examination of 1371 and was accepted as the fifth member of the Associate Metropolitan Graduates. After that, Jin Tao was appointed as a local official in the Ming, as the assistant magistrate of An’qiu County (Shandong Province).74

Further evidence that the Ming emperors inherited the world view of the Mongol Empire is provided by the official sacrifices to mountains and rivers. From the Han dynasty (r. 202 BCE–220 CE) onwards the sacrificial ritual to mountains and rivers, usually in the Chinese territory, was displayed as a symbol of supreme kingship and was therefore monopolized by the Chinese emperor.75 Yet during Zhu Yuanzhang’s reign, the list of official sacrifices included the mountains and rivers in foreign countries. In 1369 Zhu Yuanzhang consulted the ritual officials about which holy mountains and rivers in Korea and Annam would be fit for sacrifice; one year later, he dispatched two groups of envoys to Korea, Annam and Champa to hold the sacrificial rituals there.76 Emperor Yongle (Zhu Di, r. 1403–1424) expanded the scope of this sacrifice to the mountains located in Japan, Boni (Brunei), Bengal and Kezhi (Cochin, in south-western India) respectively.77

Likewise, the Ming court converted the ritual of celebrating the emperor’s birthday, which was originally applied in the Yuan court and provincial administrations, to the Guest Ritual of Foreign Rulers. In other words, the Ming court continued the rite system of the Yuan dynasty and applied the domestic ritual principles of the Yuan on diplomatic occasions.78 This indicates that, despite the Ming court’s claim to have revived the ancient Chinese rite system, they actually coloured their practices with Mongol protocols.
The world view and practice of the Mongol Empire also clearly appeared in the Ming court’s arrangements of the captive Yuan princes. For instance, in 1388 Zhu Yuanzhang asked to escort the late Yuan emperor Ayushiridara’s son Dibaonu to his residence on Ryukyu Island. In the next year Prince Pai-pai’s (i.e. “Baba”) son Liushinu and the eunuch Khwaja Nibu, who were captured by the Ming army during their conquest of Yunnan, were exiled to Jeju Island in Korea; in the meantime he exiled a Tatar prince and another 80 households to Tamna (also Tamra, ancient name of Jeju). These arrangements obviously followed the precedent of Qubilai, who in 1289 exiled the rebellious prince Shiregi, the fourth son of Great Qa’an Möngke, to Renwu, an island off the southern coastline of Korea with extremely foul air.

The previous cases exemplify the fact that Zhu Yuanzhang, unlike the emperors of the Tang and Song dynasties whom he claimed to emulate, did not regard Korea and Annam as independent tributary countries, but rather, following the precedent of the Yuan emperors, regarded them as the property of the empire.

When the Ming court turned its attention to the Western Regions of China and Central Asia, the Mongolian world view also prevailed in both practical and ideological ways. The MSL states: “after Taizu conquered the Western Regions, the princes and royal sons-in-law were all appointed as [local] rulers” and lists the places Mongol princes dominated, such as Beshbaliq, Anding, Shazhou and Qamil (Hami), as well as territories like Xifan and Oirat controlled by Chinggisid sons-in-law.

Clearly the Ming court tried to mirror the landscape of the Mongol Empire to help them deal with foreign rulers – most of them Chaghadaid and Timurid princes, who occupied positions in the hierarchy of Chinggisid kinship. This concept influenced the geographical knowledge and diplomatic practices of the Ming era.

Based on the aforementioned world view, Ming emperors envisioned themselves enjoying the status of a Great Qa’an. This tactic was successful in a sense. We can evaluate their efforts according to the diplomatic epistles exchanged between the Ming and Timurid rulers. One of Timur’s letters addressed to Zhu Yuanzhang referred to him as “Great Emperor of the Great Ming” – “Great Emperor” apparently deriving from the literal translation of “Great Qa’an” (Qan al-kabir). In response, the Ming emperor treated Timur as an “imperial son-in-law” (fuma, i.e. Güregen), based on a perspective similar to the Yuan emperor. The title “Great Qa’an” also appeared in Timur’s great-grandson ‘Ala’ al-Dawla Bahadur’s letter addressed to Ming Yingzong (r. 1436–1449, 1457–1464). In this letter ‘Ala’ al-Dawla Bahadur entitled the Ming emperor as Day Mink Qa’an and Qa’an-i buzurg-i ‘ali miqdar (great qa’an of superior authority). According to the previous discussion, “Great Qa’an” (Qan al-kabir) exclusively referred to the emperor during the Yuan era.

Coincidentally, in Sultan Shahrukh’s letter to Zhu Di, he suggested the Ming emperor follow Muhammad’s example. To make his suggestion more convincing, he listed the Chinggisid rulers who had converted to the Islamic faith, e.g. the Jochid khans in the Qipchaq Steppe and the Ilkhans in Iran and Iraq. Shahrukh did not mention Chinggis Khan’s second son, Chaghadai. Yet by referring to Timur Güregen and the territory of Mawarannahr, the fief of the Chaghadaid, he implied that the Chaghadaid territory had become a part of the Dar al-Islam as well. According to Shahrukh’s letter only Qubilai’s successors had failed to convert to Islam. Therefore,
it is reasonable to believe that Shahrukh treated the Ming Empire as the successor of Qubilai’s Ulus (i.e. the Yuan dynasty).

As for the local intellectuals living in Timurid Central Asia, the fame of Qubilai caused them to invoke his name in reference to Ming China. A famous Naqshbandi shaykh in 15th-century Samarqand, Khwaja 'Ubayd Allah Ahrar (1404–1490), in his letter to a friend, mentioned:

It is reported that some of the “people of Qubilay” (mardum-i Qubilay), because of events of the time, have emigrated from their homelands (auṭan) and have come to that country (wilayat). In this country they have close relations and children who are burned by the fire of separation and drowned in the sea of longing.  

Given that Khwaja Ahrar emphasized these “people of Qubilay” were infidels and therefore separate from the local Muslims, this phrase most likely referred to the refugees who had escaped from China or the territory of the former Yuan dynasty. We have limited information to trace these people and their migration. Yet according to the accounts of a Timurid chronicle, the “events” (hawadith) and the subsequent migration might relate to the short-term turbulence that occurred in China after Zhu Yuanzhang’s death. In Khwaja Ahrar’s view, Qubilai’s name appeared as an echo of the past Yuan dynasty.

The northern steppe, centred around Qaraqorum, which was the core of the Mongol Empire, now became a fringe area on the landscape of the Ming Empire. Along with the declining importance of the steppe regions, the political status of the last lineal descendants of the Yuan emperor holding out against the Ming emperor had fallen as well.

In 1388 Toquz Temür was assassinated by Ariq Böke’s offspring, Yesüder, and his Oirat allies. This event made the Ming court believe that the exiled Yuan emperor, who came from Qubilai’s lineal descendants, had been interrupted, and in the meantime it resulted in changes to the Ming court’s Chinggisid discourse. In Ming Chinese documents, Toquz Temür was the last emperor entitled “master” (zhu, 主) or “emperor” (di, 帝). After his death the subsequent emperors in contact with the Ming court, e.g. Gün-Temür and Guilichi, were entitled as “Ke-han of Tatars” (dada kehan) by Ming officials in the governmental documents. “Ke-han” is a Chinese transliteration of the ancient Turkic ruler’s title “Khaqan”. During the entire Yuan dynasty this archaic word was occasionally used as a literary idiom and the personal title of pre-Chinggisid tribal chiefs but never appeared as a title of Yuan emperors. In the early Ming era, Zhu Yuanzhang’s adviser, Hu Han, once criticized the Tang emperor Taizong because he “adopted the title of Heavenly Ke-han [Khaqan] and carved [this title] on the imperial seal; by doing so, he was setting himself up as a barbarian.” Use of the term in the Ming court’s discourse therefore implied the failure of the exiled Yuan government – they were doomed to break into many hostile tribes. Their condition would inevitably deteriorate to the level of their nomadic ancestors. In this context, reusing the title “Ke-han” reflected a de facto decline in their political status. The Mongol emperor was no longer treated as an equal monarch on the steppe but a steppe nomadic ruler, occupying a much lower degree in the cosmic hierarchy.
CONCLUSION: APPROACHES TO QUBILAI’S CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY

In the political environment of post-Mongol Eurasia, authority, power and kingship were personal. Sharing charismatic authority was, therefore, also a personal attachment forged between the followers and the individual of the former ruler. In other words, in the political narrative, fictive personality was more important than the historical reality. The context surrounding a specific figure was changeable. The Ming emperor thus attached his dynastic legitimacy to Qubilai, by re-inventing or, rather, partly Sinicizing his image according to the Confucian principle. Moreover, in the Ming court’s discourse Qubilai’s personal virtues and merits were appropriated as the Ming emperor’s precedent.

The Muscovite tsar and Timurid sultans accepted Chinggis Khan as a unique founder of the grand Mongol legacy when they borrowed from the charismatic political attachment belonging to a certain Chinggisid branch. The Ming emperor was exceptional in this respect, as he cut off all associations between himself and Chinggis Khan but nevertheless traced the legitimacy of the Ming back to Qubilai’s achievement of unifying “all within the seas”. They built the image of Qubilai into a conjunction of Chinese tradition and Mongol legacy and excluded all other Mongol-Yuan rulers from the legitimate narrative.

Inheriting legitimacy through ties of kinship had little potency during the reign of Zhu Yuanzhang. Nevertheless, this approach was never denied completely. From the 17th century a legendary anecdote that Ming emperor Zhu Di (1360–1423, r. 1403–1424, Taizong) was Toghan Temür’s posthumous son started to spread in both Chinese and Mongolian sources. This story indicated a personal appeal towards Qubilai’s charismatic authority was still effective. Additionally, it showed that even 200 years after the collapse of the Yuan dynasty, the image of Qubilai continued to guide both his Chinese and steppe successors to play their own roles on an old arena.

NOTES

* I thank Pr. David Robinson, Pr. Li Guo, and the editors for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
1 Rossabi 1988; Li 2004.
5 Robinson 2008; Robinson 2019b.
7 YS 99: 2538.
8 Xie Fangde 1922–, 4: 1a.
9 The Cambridge History marks the year 1279 as a watershed in Qubilai’s reign. Franke and Twitchett eds. 1994, 473.
10 YS 22: 498.
11 Legge 1846, 175.
12 The edict of announcing Temür Qa’an’s (Chengzong, r. 1295–1307) enthronement; The edict of Ayurbarvada’s (Renzong, r. 1311–1320) enthronement; edict of Shidebala’s (Yingzong, r. 1320–23) enthronement; Tuq Temür’s (Wenzong, r. 1328–1332) enthronement, YS 18: 381; 22: 479; 27: 599; 32: 709.
13 YS 175: 4079.
14 Rossabi 1988, 172.
15 Vassaf 1959–60, 454.
17 Umari, 111–114.
19 RDRM, I, 73, II, 909, 911; Umari, 26.
21 The reign title was quoted from Zhouyi (The Book of Changes), as “至哉坤元，萬物資生”, meaning “Complete is the ‘great and originating (capacity)’ indicated by Khwân! All things owe to it their birth.” See, Legge 1964, 214.
22 Evidence is the multi-lingual epigraph carved on the Juyong Pass in which Toghan Temür was entitled as “wheel-turning rule” (cakravartin). Robinson 2009, 285. I thank Robinson for reminding me of this material.
23 Quan Heng 1991, 89.
24 Yuan Kai 2015, 164. The second sentence is cited from the Shijing (The Book of Poetry).
25 YS 42: 891.
26 Tao Zongyi 2004, 342.
27 YS, 42: 893; Song Lian 1999, I, 383.
28 YS 47: 909.
29 Liu Xia 2013, VIII, 602.
31 Ye Ziqi 1959, 40.
33 Qian Qianyi 1982, I, 25.
34 Li Xinfei 2010, 25.
35 Zha Jizuo (查繼佐, 1601–1676) collected a series of Yuan loyalists’ biographies in his historical work. See, Zha Jizuo 1986, 1340.
36 Yü Ben, Jishilu jianzheng, 264.
37 These official letters and decrees include: 1) The letter to Yuan Emperor (written in 1367, TZSL, 25: 374–375, translation see Robinson 2019b, 193–194); 2) Sacrificial announcements to God (TZSL, 28: 439); 3) The letter to the ministers of Central Secretariat (TZSL, 28: 471); 4) A Call to Arms for the Central Plains (TZSL, 26: 10–11); 5) Statement of enthronement (TZSL, 29: 482–483); a similar version recorded in Yü Ben’s Chronicle entitled “Decree of adapting the title of State”, Yü Ben, Jishilu jianzheng, 242–243; 6) Decree on reviving the cloth (TZSL, 30: 525, translation see, Yuan Zujie 2002, 46); 7) The Letters to Yunnan, King of Korea Kingdom, Japan and Java (TZSL, 37: 749, 39: 786, 39: 787).
38 TZSL, 29: 482–483.
40 Yü Ben, Jishilu jianzheng, 282–299.
41 TZSL, 25: 374.
42 TZSL, 37: 749–750.
44 TZSL, 53: 1040.
45 TZSL, 53: 1046–1048.
46 TZSL, 30: 525.
47 Liang Yin 2013, 550; Dardess 1983, 104.
48 TZSL, 44: 862–864.
49 Zhu Yuanzhang 2014, 408.
50 TZSL, 57: 1116.
51 TZSL, 106: 1767.
52 TZSL, 147: 2310–2311. For Chabui’s story see, YS 144: 2871.
53 Wang Yun 1985, 484.
54 Ye Ziqi 1959, IV, 72.
56 Zhao Yi 1984, 684.
58 The evidence is: at 1 November 1373, Zhu Yuanzhang ordered to build the temple of the ancient Chinese emperors and the Temple Yuan Shizu located in Beiping (i.e. Beijing). TZSL, 86: 1427.
59 Tao Zongyi 2004, III, 32–38; Bei 2010, 42.
64 Gao Qi 1985, 451.
65 (a) “Letter addressed to Prince Gunashiri”; TZSL, 198: 2977–2978; (b) “Letter addressed to Ajashiri”. Both Mongolian and Chinese texts were included in Mostaert 1977, I-II, 15–17.
67 Mostaert 1977, VII, 22.
68 Wulan 2016, 75–86.
69 Mostaert 1977, VII, 23.
70 Robinson 2019b, 213.
71 TZSL, 53: 1046–1048.
72 Manz 2000, 135.
75 The tradition of the sacrifices to “Five Mountains and Four Rivers” (五嶽四濤) derived from the Fengshan (封禪) offerings, which were sacrifices brought to heaven and Earth. Si Maqian 1982, 28: 1371; Ban Gu 1962, 25: 1247–1249.
78 Guo Jiahui 2020, 1–34.
79 TZSL, 192, 2886; Chŏng Inji 1972, 137: 760.
80 Chŏng Inji 1972, 45: 666–667; TZSL, 144: 2263.
81 Chŏng Inji 1972, 30: 472; RDT, 438; Mao Haiming 2017, 117–120.
82 Zhang Tingyü 1974, 332: 8617–8618. The brief introduction of the Mingshi was based on Yan Congjian 2009, 412, 432, 466, 470, 494.
83 TZSL, 234: 3420.
84 Nawa’i 1977, 279.
86 Ahrar 2002, 235–236.
87 Shami said, “In the Chin, Machin and Khitay”, after the death of Emperor “Tunghuz Khan” (“Wild-boar Khan”, i.e. Zhu Yuanzhang), his state slipped into the chaos (harj wa marj bi-il wa ulus-i u rah yaft). Shami 1937, I, 213.
89 Taizong shilu, 6: 56, 8: 105.
90 Hu Han 2013, IV, 445.
91 The discussion based on the Chinese sources, see Zhou Qingshu 2001, 495–525. For parallel research based on the Mongolian historical accounts see Elverskog 2008, 211–243.

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YS, See List of Abbreviations.