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Eurasian Influences on Yuan China

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Eurasian Influences on Yuan China

Edited by
Morris Rossabi



Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
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PREFACE

The essays in this volume derive from an International Research Workshop entitled “Eurasian Influences on Yuan China: Cross-Cultural Transmissions in the 13th and 14th Centuries” convened at Binghamton University on 20 and 21 November 2009. Professors John Chaffee (of Binghamton University), Ralph Kauz (now at Bonn University), Angela Schottenhammer (now of Ghent University), Tansen Sen (of Baruch College of the City University of New York), and Mathieu Torck (of Ghent University) had conceived of the need for such a workshop, and Professor Chaffee, with assistance from the Institute for Asia and Asian Diasporas, the Departments of Asian and American Studies and History, and the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Binghamton University and the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, organised the Workshop. The Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation provided financial support, for which the participants are grateful.

In addition to the essays in this book, Professors Bettine Birge (of the University of Southern California), Mau Chuan-hui (of the National Tsing-hua University), and Mathieu Torck and Dr. Linda Komaroff (of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) presented papers that they plan to publish elsewhere. Thanks are due to them for their contributions to the discussions, as well as to a number of observers who attended the meetings.

The workshop discussions about individual papers were lively and constructive. This pleasant atmosphere of give-and-take did not, of course, lead to unanimity. Disagreements about themes and conclusions persisted, although the participants concurred that all the papers were well-researched. Not all participants would necessarily agree with the conclusions in the revised and edited versions of these essays presented in this volume. This lack of lockstep agreement is, in fact, valuable in a book that is designed to stimulate additional

research on an understudied Chinese dynasty. I myself do not entirely agree with some of the views expressed, but I have used my editorial pen to help make the strongest case possible for each paper.

In this connection, I need to describe the editorial process. The editing did not consist simply of correcting typos or grammar. It was much more extensive. I have altered the styles of a number of the essays. Readability has been my main criterion. By readability, I mean that the general educated reader can read the work with ease and pleasure. I have not altered the arguments presented in the essays but merely attempted to make them more accessible. Thus, I have eliminated redundancies or documentary overkill, reduced philological asides, and limited the use of diacritical marks to the absolute minimum required for identification. I trust that such editing sharpens the arguments and, at the same time, generates a wider audience for the essays. In truth, both John Chaffee and Tansen Sen ought to be listed as Co-Editors. They have contributed enormously to the book's quality and are Confucian in their modesty about taking credit for their efforts.

Morris Rossabi

New York

February 2013

INTRODUCTION

Morris Rossabi

Like Cinderella, the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) has been treated as a step-sister in the study of China. The Song Dynasty (960–1279), with such luminaries as the reformer Wang Anshi (1021–1086), the historian Sima Guang (1019–1086), the philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200), the poet Su Shi (1036–1101), and the painter Fan Kuan (*ca.* 1023), has overshadowed the Mongolian-ruled Yuan. To be sure, the Song has rightfully received considerable attention. Its achievements in philosophy, the arts, technology, statecraft, historical writing, and literature compare favourably with Athenian Greece.¹ Its capital of Hangzhou, the most populous city in the world, boasted an elaborate canal system, a fire department, and fine restaurants, and theatre.² It was a center of culture and refinement and has attracted the interests of historians, art historians, and scholars of literature and philosophy, not to mention specialists on the history of science and technology.

Yet the Yuan also had considerable achievements to its credit and had greater global significance. The thirteenth-century Mongolian invasions had linked East Asia to Central and Western Asia and even to Europe. Eurasia became a reality, as developments from as far away as China influenced Iran and the Italian city states. Merchants, missionaries, entertainers, artists, and scientists travelled across the relatively peaceful routes stretching from Venice and Genoa to Tabriz and Samarkand and on to Hangzhou and Daidu (or Beijing). Circulation of people led to technological, religious, and artistic diffusion. The Mongols, requiring assistance in ruling the various domains they had subjugated, recruited advisers and officials of diverse ethnic backgrounds to govern their different realms, including China.

The Mongols' negative and positive impacts on Chinese affairs were also significant. The destruction they caused is undeniable. China's

population declined, and the Mongol armies razed numerous towns and cities during their initial attacks. The Chinese were prevented from filling some of the most important government positions. The Yuan Court abolished the civil service examinations until 1315, undermining one of the pillars of Confucian civilisation. Confucians, in general, were not as esteemed as they were in previous dynasties, a considerable hardship for the elite or scholar-official class. The Court made repeated demands on the Chinese for taxes and labour service in support of its far-flung military campaigns, as well as for its domestic projects and its own luxurious lifestyle. Apart from its conquest of Southern China, which had been governed by the Southern Song (1127–1279) Dynasty, its military undertakings were at best indecisive, and its attempted invasions of Japan and Java were disastrous. Its failures imposed additional tax and corvée burdens on the Chinese population. The Court also paid for the military costs, as well as for such major infrastructure projects as construction of a capital city in Daidu, by inflation of paper currency, a disastrous policy which hastened its decline and fall. Its recruitment of non-Chinese officials, some of whom were accused of nepotism and corruption, also contributed to inequality and instability.

Only late in the twentieth century did the Yuan's positive contributions begin to be recognised. Art historians pioneered in the reevaluation of the Mongol-ruled dynasty. The 1968 exhibition of "Chinese Art under the Mongols" at the Cleveland Museum was a watershed. It showed that the Yuan was a period of remarkable artistic achievements. Chinese painting and calligraphy flourished; potters continued the Song Dynasty's traditions but also innovated in types of porcelains and motifs, and weavers found a steady market for their textiles in the Mongols.³ Exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the National Palace Museum in Taipei confirmed the Yuan's artistic efflorescence. At the same time, art historians studied, wrote about, and mounted exhibitions that showed Chinese influence on Persian porcelain and the use of Chinese motifs on Islamic tile work and illustrated manuscripts.⁴ The so-called *Pax Mongolica* imposed by the Mongol armies fostered considerable contacts between cultures and cross-pollination of artistic techniques and motifs. As ardent consumers of luxury products, the Mongols themselves influenced the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries' artistic diffusion throughout Asia.

Greater diversity in China's population accompanied these innovations in the Yuan's material culture and its increasing links with the outside world. Recognising the need for assistance in ruling the vast Chinese domains, the Mongols recruited officials from Central Asia, Iran, Tibet, and other regions of their recently subjugated domains. Foreigners contributed not only to knowledge of governance but also to concepts of medicine and astronomy. Mongol fascination in Tibetan Buddhism resulted in growing Chinese interest in the religion, which persisted into the Ming, the succeeding dynasty. Such religious and ethnic diversity benefited China, in part by keeping the Yuan in touch with the outside world.

The foreigners brought new ideas and practices that influenced China. The Mongol rulers of the Yuan themselves served as patrons, consumers, and supporters of or believers in these non-Chinese views and institutions. Thus, a consideration of these influences on the Yuan is warranted, but it is important to avoid exaggeration. The Chinese selected those new currents or practices that suited their civilization and adapted them to their own views and needs. They did not simply adopt these foreign conceptions or institutions in their original forms. Instead they integrated them into their existing culture, often altering them in the process. Moreover, they rejected some foreign influences to which they were exposed.

Keeping these caveats in mind, efforts to ascertain the specific foreign influences on China are difficult. For example, Chinese theatre flourished during the Yuan, and the Mongol Khans offered patronage to Chinese playwrights and built stages in the Imperial Palace compound to mount productions. The Mongols enjoyed the spectacles — the costumes, the action, the sets — but they probably were not sufficiently familiar with the Chinese language to understand the playwrights' intentions and the plays' nuances. What roles then did the Mongols and other foreigners play in this golden age of Chinese drama? Would this development of theatre have taken place without the patronage or influence of the Mongols and other foreigners? The answers to these questions remain elusive. Another example of this ambiguity is medicine during the Yuan. The Mongols' demanding lifestyles, as well as their alcoholic and dietary excesses once they took power, frequently resulted in debilitating ailments, which made them keenly aware of the importance of medicine.⁵ Indeed they

sought assistance from Korean, Central and Western Asian and other foreign physicians, but the foreign impact on Chinese medicine remains somewhat uncertain. The most recent assessment concludes that “by promoting cultural interactions and rendering support to men with a working knowledge of medicine, Mongols and Semu [foreigners, especially Muslims] collaborated with Chinese in creating the most hospitable dynasty for elite physicians in pre-modern Chinese history...As a result, some Yuan Dynasty physicians... enjoyed greater power and prestige in the bureaucracy than had their Song counterparts. They reestablished and developed local medical schools...and incorporated [some] temples into the medical school system.”⁶ This conclusion is a strong statement, which is in part supported by Angela Schottenhammer’s essay in this volume, but the definitive or last word on the Eurasian influence on Chinese medical theory and practice may not yet be determined.

It is even more difficult to assess the long-range Eurasian influences on China. What was their impact on the Ming (1368–1644), the succeeding native Chinese dynasty? Several specialists on the Ming have begun to write on this subject, and in this volume, I try to tackle the issue. However, the reader will be aware that I title my essay “Notes on...” The themes which I address and the conclusions I arrive at are tentative. They may require revision, but I am comfortable with that because the essay is designed to stimulate additional research and thinking.

The contributors to this volume concur that their essays, though based on sound research and considerable attempt to define general themes, are preliminary. The models of the books *Chinese Government in Ming Times* (New York, 1968) edited by Charles Hucker and *From Ming to Ch’ing* (New Haven, 1979) edited by Jonathan Spence and John Wills have inspired us. Both offered preliminary studies that stimulated substantial scholarly interest and led to additional research and publication. The Spence and Wills book contributed to major reconsiderations of the Qing (1644–1911) and to a plethora of works re-assessing the last dynasty of China. We trust that this volume will lead to similar reassessments of the Yuan Dynasty and its impact.

This work concerns two distinct types of influence. One is the Mongol impact on the Yuan. What specifically did the Mongols introduce into Yuan China? Did such practices, customs, or

institutions linger into and affect the Ming Dynasty? A second theme deals with the influence of foreigners, specifically Western Asians, most of whom were Muslims. Mongol rulers appointed Muslims to prominent positions in government. Sayyid 'Ajall Shams al-Din, the governor of the newly-conquered area of Yunnan, and Ahmad, the Administrator of the Central Secretariat during Khubilai Khan's reign, were the most renowned such foreigners who owed their positions to the Mongols. Yuan rulers also recruited Muslims for government offices dealing with astronomy, medicine, and trade, among other fields. Most of the essays in this volume focus on Western Asian influences, although my essay emphasises the Mongols, and several others tangentially deal with them as well.

In the first essay, George Lane shows the initial links between the Muslim world and the Mongols. He describes the astonishing embrace of the Mongols by the elite of the Persian city of Qazvin. Dismayed by the corruption and decline of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, which had ruled much of the Islamic world since 750 and by the exploitation and rampages of the uncontrolled Mongol governors in northern Iran, they called upon the Great Khan Möngke to launch an assault on Western Asia. They had learned about the favoured position of Muslims in the eastern regions of the Mongol empire and did not fear Mongol discrimination. Indeed, Islam was not an impediment to success in Eastern Asia. The elite of Qazvin began to believe that the Mongols were the scourge of God and perceived of them as saviours from the threats posed by the Ismailis (or Order of the Assassins) and other Muslim orders. Many Persians would greet the Mongol assaults with delight. In his *History of the World Conqueror*, the historian and statesman Juwayni helped to legitimise the Mongols by associating them with the Iranian past and as friends of Islam. These benevolent attitudes set the stage for extensive commercial and cultural contacts between the Mongol-dominated regions of Iran and China. Arabic and Persian tombstones in Hangzhou attest to the increased interactions between the Muslim world and China during the Yuan period.

In his essay, John Chaffee describes the mechanics of seaborne trade between Western Asia and China. He acknowledges that this commerce preceded the Yuan Dynasty but notes that the pace of commerce increased during the Mongol era. Some Arab or Persian Muslims, as well as Indians and Koreans, settled in Guangzhou and

Quanzhou and, joining with Chinese Muslims, created elaborate trade networks. The Mongol court encouraged these merchants to develop merchant associations, known as *ortogh*, which consisted mostly of Muslim traders, many of whom made substantial profits. According to Chaffee, the Mongols recognised that the commerce was lucrative, but whether the government profited from it is unclear. However, it benefited from the knowledge it obtained from sailors, merchants, and envoys who travelled to Western Asia. Because these groups did not write memoirs or travel accounts, their contributions to cultural and artistic transmission remain uncertain. Yet they certainly increased the geographic knowledge of Mongols and Chinese, which also resulted in substantial interest in astronomy. As to the Islamic merchants residing on China's southeastern coast, Chaffee suggests that they constituted a semi-colonial society. Relatively autonomous, able to govern themselves through Islamic traditions and law, building substantial mosques and grand cemeteries, and wielding at least some political power, they enjoyed the luxurious lifestyles that accompanied the considerable wealth derived from commerce. Chaffee proposes that by living in their own communities separate from the larger majority community, they limited their influence on Chinese society.

Ma Juan reminds us that such cultural and commercial interchanges did not always proceed smoothly. Focusing on the Muslims who secured prominent positions in the Yuan bureaucracy, she depicts a clash of Confucian and Islamic values and ideologies. She also emphasises that lack of knowledge, as well as mis-understandings, contributed to the conflicts. Chinese ignorance of basic practices, such as abstention from pork, combined with condescension toward commerce and Islamic merchants, exacerbated tensions between Muslims and Confucian scholar-officials. On the other hand, notorious Muslim officials, in the service of the Khans, imposed excessive taxes and exploited the Chinese, contributing to tensions between the two communities. Ma Juan innovates by consulting Yuan drama to reveal popular attitudes toward Muslims. She discovers that in these plays Muslims are portrayed as sexual predators and Chinese women, including prostitutes, are depicted as fearful. She attributes the general tensions to differing Islamic and Confucian views and values.

Despite these tensions, considerable interchanges characterised relations between the Islamic world and the Yuan during the Mongol

era, as described in Angela Schottenhammer's essay. Her essay provides details about the transmission of Islamic medicinal drugs to China. She admits that Sino-Iranian exchanges in medicines preceded the Yuan and indeed stretch back to the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220). As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Berthold Laufer's book *Sino-Iranica* had described such botanical and medicinal interchanges.⁷ However, Professor Schottenhammer writes that the strong links between Il-Khanate Iran and the Yuan prompted a dramatic growth in the medicinal drugs introduced into China. Cataloguing the most significant and popular of these drugs, she also finds a distinction between earlier Chinese dynasties and the Yuan: during the latter period, the drugs reached the masses and were used by a large segment of the population, not merely the elites.

Nancy S. Steinhardt continues in this vein, by highlighting the introduction of Iranian astronomy into China. Construction of observatories and development of new astronomical instruments had resulted in important discoveries in Western Asia. Mongol rulers in East Asia, who rapidly learned about these significant discoveries, invited Persian astronomers to China to build astronomical instruments and to help devise a new and more accurate calendar. With Persian assistance, the Yuan constructed observatories in Beijing and other sites in China. The Beijing observatory has not survived. Professor Steinhardt, an architectural historian, examines the architecture of the observatory at Haocheng and notes Islamic touches but is uncertain about the Eurasian influences on the site. To be sure, Islamic astronomical instruments had an impact on Chinese astronomy, although the Islamic influence on Chinese theories of astronomy and on architecture ought not to be exaggerated.

On the other hand, Hyunhee Park and Ralph Kauz link Western Asia and Yuan China in transmission of geographic information and maps. Muslim merchants, envoys, and craftsmen no doubt added immeasurably to China's knowledge of the outside world, and Western Asian cartographers and their maps reached China. The resulting Yuan Dynasty maps, which have not survived but were cited in contemporaneous texts, were more complete and accurate than earlier depictions of towns and natural phenomena in other regions of Asia. For the first time, they also revealed knowledge of latitude and longitude, concepts borrowed from Western Asian maps. Kauz also

provides useful information on the links between astronomy and cartography. In short, Mongol China displayed greater interest than earlier dynasties in geography and maps.

The essays by Professors Schottenhammer, Steinhardt, and Park attest to diffusion from Western Asia to China. Because the Mongol rulers emphasised pragmatic pursuits in adopting ideas from other cultures, it is no accident that what they borrowed had practical applications. Medicinal drugs yielded purported cures for their ailments. Astronomy offered benefits in predicting climatic and weather patterns, information which could prove vital to the economy. Because Mongols often tied astrology to astronomy, they prized the predictive value provided by more sophisticated astronomical instruments. Greater geographic knowledge and more precise maps contributed to safer travel and an expansion of trade throughout Asia. These practical effects spilled over to the Mongols' Chinese subjects as well, who benefited from the institutions and practices they borrowed from foreign, mostly Muslim, communities.

Liu Yingsheng's essay shows that foreigners not only influenced Yuan culture but also shaped political developments. It details the vital roles the Qipčaq, a Turkic group from Central Asia, played in fourteenth-century Court succession struggles. Their support for specific candidates, on occasion, proved crucial. Their well-trained and loyal troops offered advantages for candidates who needed a dedicated and effective armed force. As the Yuan declined, Mongol rulers prized them. Several Qipčaq commanders were remarkably competent in a time of growing corruption and demoralisation in the military. The Ming rulers, who overthrew the Yuan, also prized the Qipčaq who continued to be influential in the early reigns of the new dynasty.

Michael Brose pursues the same theme of political influence – in this case, of a non-Chinese Uyghur family. He demonstrates that this family influenced a society as far east as Korea. Fleeing from Yuan China in its declining years, the Xie family wound up in Korea and served the Korean reform kings and survived the dynastic change from Koryŏ to Yi in 1392. Its literary and administrative skills proved to be invaluable for the Korean courts, and its members' sophistication as Neo-Confucian erudites provided legitimacy for the Korean kings. They produced important texts that buttressed Yi Dynasty ideology and maintained a position of prominence into the middle of the fifteenth

century. However, their non-Korean heritage finally caught up with them, and their influence and prominence eroded by the late fifteenth century. Nonetheless, their role in Korea attests to the significance of Western and Central Asians not only in China but also in as distant place as Korea.

In the final essay, I attempt to chart the specific influences of the Yuan on the Ming, the succeeding dynasty. By Yuan, I mean the Western and Central Asian impact as well as that of the Mongols. I try to refrain from exaggeration, partly because of recent popular but vulgarised and false claims about the Mongols' influences on global history. The Mongols' impact on early Ming military organisation and politics is undeniable, but I question their influence on cultural patterns and on Ming conceptions toward universal rule. However, Professor David Robinson, a distinguished scholar at Colgate University, has a more expansive view than mine and believes that the Mongols influenced the Ming. He asserts that the emperors' view of Tibetan Buddhism, their own perceptions of themselves as universal rulers, and their attempts, through participation in hunts and commissioning of portraits of themselves, to link themselves to the Mongol universal rulers reveal Yuan influences. Professor Robinson's perceptions must be seriously considered and, if he produces additional evidence, I may revise the judgments I make in this essay.

In conclusion, suffice it to say that this volume challenges some traditional perceptions about the Yuan. It suggests that the Western and Central Asian influences on China and, to an extent, on Korea were much more significant than assumed earlier. We trust that this book will lead to greater engagement and additional research on the Yuan, which will make it less of a step-sister in the study of Chinese history.

NOTES

1. The latest assessment is Denis Twitchett and Paul Jakov Smith, *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 5, Part One, The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors, 907-1279* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
2. See Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250-1276*, trans. H. M. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962) for a study of Song Dynasty Hangzhou.

3. Sherman Lee and Wai-kam Ho, *Chinese Art under the Mongols: The Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1968).
4. See Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002).
5. See John Masson Smith, "Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire," *Journal of Asian History* 34 (2000): 35–52.
6. Reiko Shinno, "Medical Schools and Temples for the Three Progenitors in Yuan China: A Case of Cross-Cultural Interactions," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 67, no.1 (June, 2007): 95, 131.
7. Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1909).

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