Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia

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Introduction

The goals and themes of this work have undergone substantial change in the course of the basic research. As originally conceived, this monograph was to explore the political and diplomatic relationship between the Mongolian courts of China, the Yuan, and Iran, the Il-qans/Il-khāns. I was particularly interested in their joint efforts to stave off the military challenge of their rivals and cousins in central Asia, the lines of Chaghadai and Ögödei, and the western steppe, the line of Jochi, in the last half of the thirteenth century and the early decades of the fourteenth century. To sustain one another against their mutual enemies, the regimes in China and Iran shared economic resources, troops, and war matériel. As time passed, I became increasingly aware that this exchange was far more wide-ranging and diverse, embracing as it did an extensive traffic in specialist personnel, scholarly works, material culture, and technology. My interest in these issues grew and I soon came to the conclusion that these cultural exchanges were perhaps the most consequential facet of their relationship.

This, however, was only the first phase of the work's transformation. Having settled on the issue of cultural exchange as the central theme, I naively assumed that I would proceed by identifying specific exchanges and then assess their "influence": for example, the impact of Chinese physicians in Iran on Islamic medicine. This, I quickly discovered, posed formidable problems of method, interpretation, and evidence. The most obvious difficulty is that any attempt to establish such influence requires a detailed knowledge of Chinese and Islamic medicine before, during, and after the Mongolian conquests. The same stricture, of course, applies to all other areas of contact, such as agronomy, astronomy, etc. And, beyond the intimidating range of topics, I came to realize that I simply lacked the formal training and experience to make meaningful evaluations of these complex issues, most of which are highly technical.

This realization led to one further modification of the goals and themes of the work: in this monograph I will speak primarily to the question of the nature and conditions of the transmission of cultural wares between China and Iran, not the vexed issues of receptivity or rejection of new elements on the part of subject peoples. In other words, I am mainly concerned with how

these two courts utilized the cultural resources of their respective domains, Iran and China, in their efforts to succor and support one another.

This reorientation means that early sections on the diplomatic, ideological, and economic relations between the Chinese and Iranian courts, while interesting in themselves, are presented here to provide the political and institutional context in which the Mongolian-inspired cultural exchange took place. A full-scale diplomatic history of Yuan China and Il-qan Iran, sensitive to the changing power relations between the Mongolian, Christian, and Muslim polities of medieval Eurasia, is certainly desirable but not the objective of this study. In fact, it is the overall range, frequency, and intensity of the contacts that are of primary interest here, not the diplomatic goals of specific embassies – a kind of information that in any event is rarely supplied in the sources.

The core of the work, then, is devoted to the movement of specific cultural wares between China and Iran. In each case, I will seek to provide full information on given exchanges, some of which, like astronomy, have been previously studied, while others, such as agronomy, have yet to be investigated. These sections will be for the most part descriptive, with an occasional suggestion, opinion, or hypothesis on the more problematical issue of long- and short-term influences. This, it is hoped, will profitably serve as a guide to specialists interested in tracing contacts and influences between East and West.

The final sections will be devoted to questions of agency and motivation, and here the Mongols, their cultural priorities, political interests, and social norms take center stage. Indeed, the overarching thesis of this work is the centrality of the nomads to East–West exchange.

The nomads of Inner Asia made some notable contributions to world culture, horse riding and felting to name just two, and this, to be sure, has been duly acknowledged.[1] More commonly, however, studies of the cultural traffic across Eurasia have focused on the extremities: the desire and receptivity of the great sedentary societies for one another's products and ideas.[2] When the nomads are brought into the picture their influence on the course of events is usually addressed under the twin rubrics of "communication" and "destruction."[3] In the former, the nomads create a *pax* which secures and facilitates long-distance travel and commerce, encouraging representatives of sedentary civilizations, the Polos for example, to move across the various cultural zones of Eurasia and thereby take on the role of the primary agents of diffusion. In

[1] William Montgomery McGovern, *The Early Empires of Central Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), pp. 1–6.

[2] S. A. Huzayyin, *Arabia and the Far East*: *Their Commercial and Cultural Relations in Graeco-Roman and Irano-Arabian Times* (Cairo: Publications de la société royale de géographie d'Egypte, 1942), pp. 18–19 and 39.

[3] John A. Boyle, "The Last Barbarian Invaders: The Impact of the Mongolian Conquests upon East and West," *Memoirs and Proceedings of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society* 112 (1970), 1–15. Reprinted in his *The Mongolian World Empire, 1206–1370* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1977), art. no. I.

the latter, the nomads, conversely, and perversely, impede contact and destroy culture by their ferocity and military might. For some nationalist historians, nomadic conquest, especially that of the Mongols, was a regressive force in human history accounting for their country's "backwardness" in modern times.[4]

These two visions of nomadic history, as Bernard Lewis points out, are not mutually exclusive alternatives; the nomads destroyed some cultural resources and at the same time created conditions in which long-distance cultural exchange flourished.[5] There was, in fact, both a Pax Mongolica and a Tartar Yoke, inhering and coexisting in the very same polity. But such a formulation, while true so far as it goes, leaves out too much and has limited explanatory power. For a fuller understanding of the place of the nomads in transcontinental exchanges we must look more deeply at the nomads' political culture and social norms which functioned as initial filters in the complex process of sorting and selecting the goods and ideas that passed between East and West.

Indeed, such possibilities of cultural transmission were embedded in the very structure of Mongolian rule and in the basic ecological requirements of nomadism. Because of the need to distribute large numbers of herd animals and small numbers of people over sizable expanses of territory, the Mongols' demographic base was quite limited compared to their sedentary neighbors. In Chinggis Qan's day the population of the eastern steppe, modern Mongolia, was somewhere between 700,000 and 1,000,000.[6] Moreover, as pastoralists, they could hardly provide specialists from their own ranks to administer and exploit the sedentary population that fell under their military control. This critical issue was soon recognized and squarely faced: immediately after the conquest of West Turkestan, ca. 1221, Chinggis Qan sought the advice of Muslim subjects with commercial and/or administrative backgrounds who, in the words of the *Secret History*, were "skillful in the laws and customs of cities [*balaqasun-u törö yasun*]."[7]

As a decided minority in their own state, the Mongols made extensive use of foreigners, without local political ties, to help them rule their vast domains. This technique received its most elaborate development in China, where the Mongols, for purposes of official recruitment and promotion, divided the Yuan population into four categories: Mongols, Central and Western Asians

[4] For the conflicting Russian and Chinese views, see Paul Hyer, "The Re-evaluation of Chinggis Khan: Its Role in the Sino-Soviet Dispute," *Asian Survey* 6 (1966), 696–705. For the Mongols' views, see Igor de Rachewiltz, "The Mongols Rethink Their Early History," in *The East and the Meaning of History* (Rome: Bardi Editore, 1994), pp. 357–80.

[5] Bernard Lewis, "The Mongols, the Turks and the Muslim Polity," in his *Islam in History*: *Ideas, Men and Events in the Middle East* (New York: Library Press, 1973), pp. 179–98.

[6] On population densities, see N. Ts. Munkuev, "Zametki o drevnikh mongolakh," in S. L. Tikhvinskii, ed., *Tataro-Mongoly v Azii i Evrope*, 2nd edn (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), p. 394; Bat-Ochir Bold, "The Quantity of Livestock Owned by the Mongols in the Thirteenth Century," *JRAS* 8 (1998), 237–46; and A. M. Khazanov, "The Origins of the [sic] Genghiz Khan's State: An Anthropological Approach," *Ethnografia Polska* 24 (1980), 31–33.

[7] *SH*/Cleaves, sect 263, p. 203, and *SH*/de Rachewiltz, sect. 263, p. 157.

Table 1 *Personnel exchanges*

"Westerners" in the East		"Easterners" in the West
Italians		Ongguts
merchants	physicians	clerics
envoys	musicians	
clerics	administrators	Khitans
		soldiers
French and Flemings		administrators
clerics	envoys	
goldsmiths	servants	Uighurs
		soldiers
Greeks		administrators
soldiers		court merchants
		physicians
Germans		scribes
miners	artillerymen	translators
Scandinavians		Tibetans and Tanguts
merchants	soldiers	soldiers
		clerics
Russians		physicians
princes	goldsmiths	
envoys	clerics	Mongols
soldiers	carpenters	soldiers
		envoys
Hungarians		administrators
household servants		scribes
		translators
Alans		wrestlers
soldiers	envoys	
armorers	princes	Chinese
		soldiers
Armenians		envoys
clerics	princes	physicians
merchants	envoys	astronomers
		administrators
Georgians		"scholars"
envoys	princes	cooks
		wetnurses
Nestorians of Iraq and Syria		wives
merchants	translators	carpenters
physicians	textile workers	stonemasons
astronomers	lemonade makers	"fire makers" (gunpowder makers?)
administrators		artillerymen
		accountants
Arabs and Persians		engineers
wrestlers	administrators	agriculturalists
musicians	translators	
singers	scribes	
merchants	textile workers	
envoys	accountants	
astronomers	architects	
physicians	sugar makers	
soldiers	"leopard" keepers	
clerics	geographers	
artillerymen	historians	
valets	carpet makers	

(*se-mu-jen*), North Chinese, and South Chinese.[8] Moreover, quotas were established so that the Mongols and West Asians were assured "equal" representation with those selected from the two Chinese personnel pools. Those so appointed were in turn served by a large number of assistants and secretaries of equally diverse social and cultural origins.[9] Further, there was a decided tendency in the Yuan to promote these low-level officials – clerks, gatekeepers, scribes, and, most particularly, translators and interpreters – to high positions in the government and court.[10] Thus, the Mongolian rulers of China systematically placed peoples of different ethnic, communal, and linguistic backgrounds side by side in the Yuan bureaucracy. There were, in other words, quite literally thousands of agents of cultural transmission and change dispersed throughout the Yuan realm.

Some idea of the extent to which these specialists were transported from one cultural zone of the empire to another can be conveyed graphically. In table 1 "Easterners" are defined for our purposes as subject peoples of the Yuan serving or traveling in the Islamic and Christian lands, the "West," while "Westerners" are Christians and Muslims who took up residence anywhere within the Yuan regime, the "East."

Even a cursory examination of the raw data reveals the extraordinary geographical mobility and ethnic-occupational diversity of the servitors of the Empire of the Great Mongols. How the Mongols, in the furtherance of their imperial enterprise, went about the business of selecting and appropriating the vast cultural resources of their sedentary subjects and why they initiated the transference of cultural wares and cultural specialists across Eurasia forms the subject of this work.

[8] Meng Ssu-ming, *Yuan-tai she-hui chieh-chi chih-tu* (Hong Kong: Lung-men shu-tien, 1967), pp. 25–36. This system was operational by 1278.

[9] This diversity was first noted by Erich Haenisch, "Kulturbilder aus Chinas Mongolenzeit," *Historische Zeitschrift* 164 (1941), 46.

[10] This, at least, was the complaint of Confucian scholars. See *YS*, ch. 142, p. 3405. On the elevated position of language specialists at the Mongol court, see Thomas T. Allsen, "The *Rasūlid Hexaglot* in its Eurasian Cultural Context," in Golden, *Hexaglot*, pp. 30–40.