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PART I

Background

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ONE

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

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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.

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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.

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Table 1 *Personnel exchanges*

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

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(*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.

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TWO

Before the Mongols

By the time of the Mongolian Empire, China and Iran had been in political, cultural, and commercial contact for more than a millennium. In fact, to a large extent China and Iran anchored the exchange of spiritual and material culture between East and West in the premodern era, arguably the longest sustained example of intercultural communication in world history.[1] So extensive were these relations in the past that they have been invoked in recent times as a solid basis for closer diplomatic and cultural cooperation between their modern governments.[2]

To the ancient Iranians, the Middle Kingdom was Chēnastān and its inhabitants, Chēnīk. In Chinese, Iran was initially known as An-hsi, after the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia (ca. 247 BC to AD 227), and later, with the rise of the Sasanians (ca. 222–651), as Po-ssu, Persia.[3] The Chinese, it seems clear, had no direct knowledge of the Far West before the second century BC, the period of the Former Han (202 BC to AD 9). In the reign of Wu-ti (140–87 BC), the Chinese official Chang Ch'ien was sent west to seek an alliance with the Yueh-chih (Tokharians) against the Hsiung-nu, the dominant power in the eastern steppe. When he returned to court in 126 BC he brought the first concrete information on Bactria (Ta-hsia) and Parthia. Following the consolidation of their position in central Asia, the Han in 106 BC sent an embassy to the East Roman Empire (Ta-ch'in) and Parthia which reached the Persian Gulf. The Later Han (AD 25–220), however, progressively lost its influence in the Tarim Basin and official contacts with the West were terminated.[4]

[1] For an overview of cultural and political contacts between East and West, see Needham, *SCC*, vol. I, pp. 150–248. For a succinct account of some of the controversies generated by the scholarly study of the exchange, see Lionel Casson, *Ancient Trade and Society* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), pp. 247–72.

[2] See the article by Shen Chin-ting, the Taiwan ambassador to Iran in the 1960s, "Introduction to Ancient Cultural Exchange between Iran and China," *Chinese Culture* 8 (1967), 49–61.

[3] H. W. Bailey, "Iranian Studies," *BSOAS* 6 (1932), 945 and 948, and Paul Wheatley, "Geographical Notes on Some Commodities Involved in Sung Maritime Trade," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32/2 (1961), 14–15.

[4] William Watson, "Iran and China," in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), vol. III/1, pp. 537–58.

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In the following two centuries there is no evidence of any diplomatic exchanges between China and Iran. Only in the course of the fifth century, when first the Kidarites and then the Hephthalites pressured the Sasanians' northeastern frontiers, was the relationship renewed. Prompted by these threats, the Persian court sought allies in the East and made contact with the Northern Wei (386–535) in 455. Thereafter, regular embassies were sent east, nine more to the Wei, one to its successor state, the Western Wei (535–57), and two to the Liang (502–57) in the south. Indirect evidence suggests that for the most part the envoys traveled overland.[5] These ties continued into the early T'ang (618–906), which played an active role in the affairs of the Western Regions (Hsi-yü). It is well known that Pēroz, the son of Yazdagird III (632–51), the last Sasanian emperor, driven from his homeland by the advancing Arab–Muslim armies, took refuge at the Chinese court. In 662 he was recognized as "King of Persia" but given no effective support in his efforts to regain his throne and kingdom. Remnants of the deposed dynasty consequently stayed on at the T'ang court as political exiles and are noted in the Chinese records down to 737.[6]

The T'ang position in central Asia was eroded in the early decades of the eighth century, first by Tibetan expansion into the Tarim Basin and later by the Arabs' defeat of a Chinese army along the Talas River in 751. But despite these setbacks the T'ang court still received envoys from the local Persian dynasty of Ṭabaristān in the 740s and 750s.[7] In subsequent decades the T'ang, weakened by internal revolts and pressured by the Uighur qaghanate, the successors of the Türk, became less a factor in central Asian affairs. When it finally disintegrated, it was replaced in the extreme north by the Liao dynasty (907–1125), whose rulers, the Qitans, took an interest in the Western Regions. In 923 the Liao received "tribute" from Po-ssu, most certainly the Sāmānids (875–999) who ruled Khurāsān and Transoxania, and a year later there arrived an embassy from "Ta-shih," that is, the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate of Baghdad. In 1027 the Qitans sent an envoy to the court of Maḥmūd (r. 998–1030), the ruler of the Ghaznavids of Khurāsān and Afghanistan.[8]

The Qitans' near neighbor, the Chinese dynasty of the Northern Sung (960–1126), also had quite regular intercourse with the governments of the

[5] I. Ecsedy, "Early Persian Envoys in the Chinese Courts (5th–6th Centuries AD)," in J. Harmatta, ed., *Studies in the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kaidó, 1979), pp. 153–62.

[6] J. Harmatta, "Sino-Iranica," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 19 (1971), 135–43.

[7] Edouard Chavannes, *Documents sur les Tou-kiue (Turks) occidentaux*, repr. (Taipei: Ch'eng wen, 1969), pp. 70, 71, 91–92, and 173.

[8] Karl A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng, *History of Chinese Society, Liao (907–1125)* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s., vol. XXXVI; Philadelphia, 1949), p. 347, and Marvazī, *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marvazī on China, the Turks and India*, trans. by V. Minorsky (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), pp. 19–21 and 76–80.

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West. In 1081 and 1091 they received envoys from Fu-lin, the Seljuqs of Rūm. More frequent were their contacts with Ta-shih, the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate, which sent fifty or so missions to the Sung between 966 and 1116.[9] In some cases the "embassies" might have been merchants falsely assuming diplomatic status but none the less exchanges with the eastern Islamic world were intense and fairly regular. Following their defeat at the hands of the Jürchens in 1126, the Sung court moved to the south and thereafter its contacts with the West decreased dramatically: the ʿAbbāsids sent missions in 1086 and 1094 and then no more until 1205–8. The Southern Sung, which survived until the Mongolian conquest of 1279, was simply more isolated, cut off from the routes through central Asia, a fact well recognized by traditional Chinese historiography.[10]

While official diplomatic relations between Iran and China were intermittent, cultural and commercial contacts were far more constant; there were, to be sure, peaks and valleys but few complete or extended interruptions once regular communication was established. Exactly when such relations began is, however, open to interpretation. Millennia before the movement of Chinese silk to the West, there was certainly a long-distance trade in prestige goods, principally semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli, nephrite, and turquoise.[11] Whether this constituted a Bronze Age "world system," an extended network of interactive economic exchange, is now being debated.[12] More conventionally, scholars have argued that regular exchange came much later, with Alexander the Great's campaigns or with Chang Ch'ien's mission to the Yueh-chih. Most would agree, however, that the so-called "Silk Route" was in operation by the century before Christ and that it reached an early peak during the period from 50–150, when the Roman, Parthian, Kushan, and Han empires dominated the political landscape of Eurasia.[13]

In addition to the commercial goods, mainly silk, coming west, many cultural wares, from folklore motifs to alphabets and religions, moved eastward.[14]

[9] Robert M. Hartwell, *Tribute Missions to China, 960–1126* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1983), pp. 71, 72, and 195–202.

[10] Chau Ju-kua, *His Work on Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, entitled Chu-fan-chi*, trans. by Friedrich Hirth and W. W. Rockhill, repr. (Taipei: Literature House, 1965), pp. 117–19, and Mary Ferenczy, "Chinese Historiographers' Views on Barbarian–Chinese Relations," *AOASH* 21 (1968), 354 and 357.

[11] V. I. Sarianidi, "The Lapis Lazuli Route in the Ancient East," *Archaeology* 24/1 (1971), 12–15.

[12] André Gunder Frank, "Bronze Age World System Cycles," *Current Anthropology* 34 (1993), 383–429 with invited commentary.

[13] Osamu Sudzuki, "The Silk Road and Alexander's Eastern Campaign," *Orient*: *Report of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 11 (1975), 67–92, and J. Thorley, "The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at its Height, circa AD 90–130," *Greece and Rome*, 2nd series, 18 (1971), 71–80. On the historical geography of these routes, see Huzayyin, *Arabia and the Far East*, pp. 87–110.

[14] Paul Pelliot, "Les influences iraniennes en Asie centrale et en Extrême Orient," *Revue Indochinois* 18 (1912), 1–15, and Donald Daniel Leslie, "Moses, the Bamboo King," *East Asian History* 6 (1993), 75–90.

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Almost all of the major religious movements originating in the Middle East – Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeanism, and Islam – reached China, while Chinese ideological systems made no inroads in the West. This intriguing and persistent pattern, which has never been explained, was apparently established quite early. It has been argued recently that by the eighth century BC there were itinerant ritual specialists, the Iranian Magi, dispensing their services in Chou China.[15]

Naturally, the movements of religions and commercial goods across Eurasia brought a growing awareness and appreciation of distant, and initially quite alien, artistic traditions. For many in the medieval Middle East, any foreign object expertly made was automatically called "Chinese" whatever its real origin.[16] The extensive exchanges in ceramics, metal work, architectural decoration, and textiles between China and Iran resulted in the acceptance and adaptation of new materials, styles, and manufacturing techniques. In the T'ang, for instance, "Sasanian" silks were imported from the West, and imitated by the Chinese. In some cases, textiles of this period reveal extensive syncretism in which Chinese and Iranian motifs were fully integrated.[17]

Among the Chinese and Persians there was a general expansion in the knowledge of each other's history and geography. While early Persian sources are fragmentary and vague, the Armenians, very much in Iran's cultural orbit, make some explicit and informative references to China (Chenats'n) and the Chinese (Siwnik) in the seventh and eighth centuries.[18] Clearly, the Armenian knowledge of China was one shared by their Sasanian overlords. The Chinese, on the other hand, were much more systematic, acquiring and preserving considerable data on the places, peoples, and products of West Asia, those of Iran in particular.[19]

This growing familiarity can also be seen in the cultural sphere. By the T'ang, the Iranian world had contributed much to Chinese entertainments, especially music and dance. And in this same period Chinese customs,

15 Victor H. Mair, "Old Sinitic *Myag, Old Persian Maguš and English Magician," *Early China* 15 (1990), 27–47.

16 Thaʿālibī, *The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information*: *The Laṭāʾif al-Maʿārif of Thaʿālibī*, trans. by C. E. Bosworth (Edinburgh University Press, 1968), p. 141.

17 Jane Gaston Mahler, "Art of the Silk Route," in Theodore Bowie, ed., *East–West in Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 70–83; Dorothy G. Shepherd, "Iran between East and West," in *ibid.*, pp. 84–105; Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament*: *The Lotus and the Dragon* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984), pp. 33–62; and Aurel Stein, *Innermost Asia*: *Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia, Kan-su and Eastern Iran* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), pp. 675–78.

18 Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. by Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 229–31, and Ananias of Širak, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak*, trans. by Robert H. Hewsen (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1992), p. 76A.

19 See Donald Daniel Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner, "Chinese Knowledge of Western Asia during the Han," *TP* 68 (1982), 254–308, and Chavannes, *Documents*, pp. 170–74 which translates the chapter on Persia (Po-ssu) in the *Hsin T'ang-shu* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1986), ch. 221B, pp. 6258–60.

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