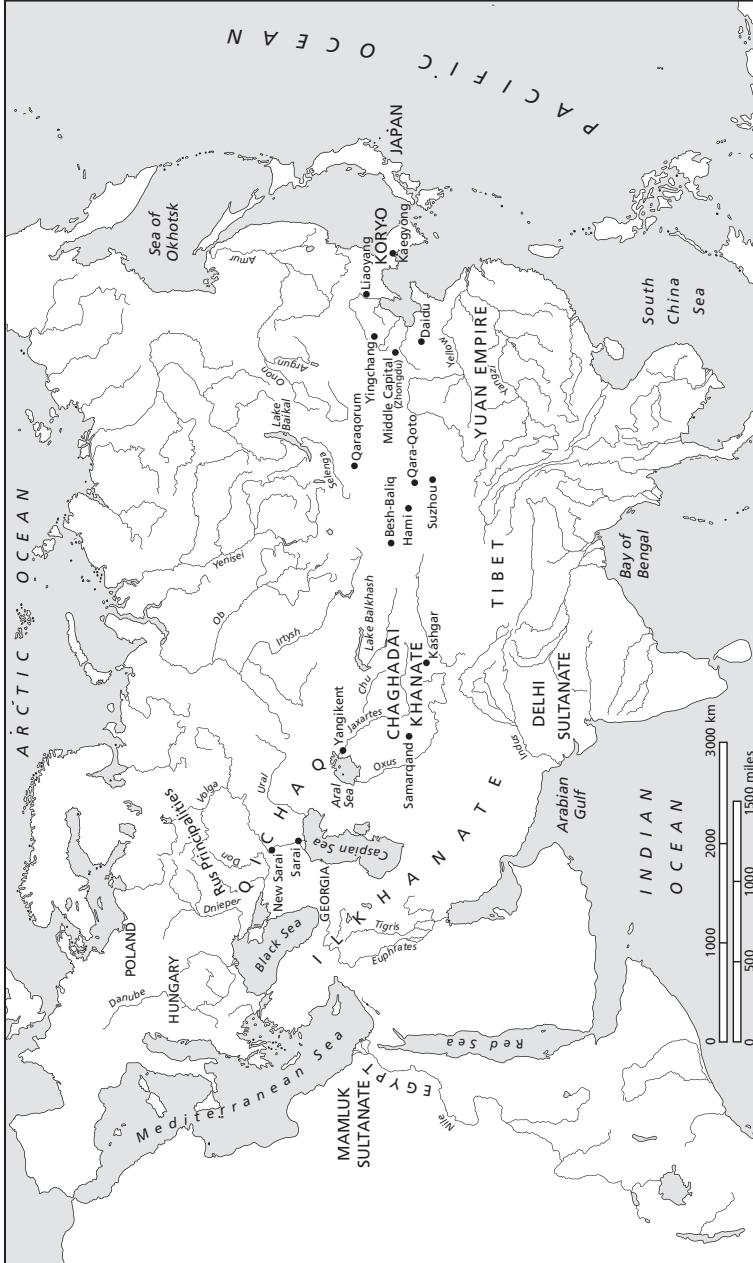


Introduction

This book explores how the world's most powerful court told the story of history's greatest empire. It traces how in the late fourteenth century the newly established Ming court (1368–1644) in China crafted a narrative of the fallen Mongol empire. The Ming court used this narrative to advance its military, political, and diplomatic objectives by shaping the perceptions and actions of audiences at home and abroad.

During the thirteenth century, the Mongols created the greatest empire in human history (Map I.1). Genghis Khan (or as he will appear here “Chinggis Khan,” 1162–1227) and his successors brought death and destruction to Eurasia on a horrific scale. The Mongols destroyed vital infrastructure, massacred whole cities, and exterminated entire peoples. They also created courts in China, Persia, and southern Russia famed throughout the world as centers of learning, religion, and lavish spectacle. The great Mongol houses established standards by which future rulers in Eurasia would measure themselves for centuries. Mongol rule quickened technological, personnel, and artistic exchanges across diverse fields. Chinese painting styles, Persian systems of taxation, Central Asian administrators, and Arabic medical traditions, to name just a few, spread widely across Eurasia, sparking innovation and appropriation.¹ When the Mongol empire fell, networks that facilitated such interaction deteriorated but did not vanish. Long after the Mongols' power faded, memory – in textual, material, visual, and oral form – of their rule continued to churn: ghastly violence, humiliating oppression, fabled wealth, cultural florescence, expanded horizons. Analogous issues of clashing perceptions and historical memory arose in the wake of the Assyrian, Persian, Roman, Carolingian, Habsburg, British, and other empires. Over the centuries, resolutions to such questions have affected historical understanding and shaped political landscapes.

¹ Related scholarship is voluminous and ever expanding. For brief review, see May, *Mongol Conquests*, pp. 232–56.



Map I.1 Mongol Empire

Scholars rightly stress the Mongol empire's lasting impact on later ages. They draw attention to the empire's contribution to ethnic identity, Islam's growth, firearms' spread, an emerging early modern global economy, Western Europe's rise, and other epochal developments.² Others have traced the Mongol empire's institutional and ideological legacy, through examination of the imperial bodyguard and the postal relay system, or the continuing relevance of Chinggisid charisma as seen in the law codes of the first-generation regimes that grew out of the empire's ashes, such as the Ming dynasty, Timurids, and Muscovite Rus, as well as down-stream polities like the Mughals, the Safavids, the Zünghars, and the Qing dynasty.³

Here I tell a different story. Rather than emphasize how the Mongol empire shaped those who followed in its wake, I trace how ambitious men and women throughout Eurasia confronted a common challenge: how to use the Mongol legacy. This legacy included memory, institutions, and personnel networks of the fallen empire. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Eurasian rulers and their courts selectively appropriated elements of the Mongol legacy to advance their interests.

My particular focus is how the early Ming court told the tale of the Mongol empire at home and abroad. Early Ming here refers to the three decades immediately following the Mongol withdrawal from China. From 1368 to 1398, the Ming founding emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98), ruled China from his capital in today's Nanjing. Zhu Yuanzhang was an exceptional ruler, even among the select company of Chinese founding emperors. His decisions deeply shaped the Ming dynasty's political culture and institutions; they also touched much of Eurasia. His voice figures prominently in this book. However, his personal views are inseparable from his age. Zhu Yuanzhang's perspectives and policies emerged through his experience of the last decades of Mongol rule in China and through interactions with senior advisors, military commanders, and family members. I use the term "Chinggisid narrative" to describe the early Ming court's story of the Mongol empire. In part this reflects verbal parsimony; "Chinggisid narrative" is shorter than "how the Ming court told the story of the Mongol empire." Narrative also highlights the idea of a story deliberately crafted to achieve certain ends. In a narrow sense, Chinggisid refers to Chinggis Khan and his descendants, most especially elite

² For points of entry, Weatherford, *Genghis Khan*; Allsen, "Circulation of Military Technology"; *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: Culture and Conquest*; "Technologies of Governance in the Mongolian Empire"; Findlay, "First Globalization Episode."

³ Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire*; Biran, *Chinggis Khan*; Mano Eiji, "Jūgo jūroku seiki"; Melville, "Keshig"; Millward, "Qing Formation"; Miyawaki, "Legitimacy"; Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*; Rossabi, "Mongol Influences"; May, *Mongol Conquests*, pp. 81–106.

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members who in the aggregate constituted the most powerful ruling house in Eurasia. In a broad sense, Chinggisid denotes the Mongol imperial enterprise.

I use Chinggisid narrative in two ways. First, it refers to explanations of the Mongol empire's origins, glories, and fall. This first and fuller sense usually also involves an elucidation of the relationship between the Mongol empire and the person or polity producing the Chinggisid narrative. For instance, during the period of empire, Chinggisid elites, allied supporters, and subjugated peoples developed stories – which could vary strikingly – about the Mongol empire's rise. Such narratives made clear how the Chinggisids came to power and how the narrator came to hold his particular place in the polity. The *Secret History of the Mongols* recounts Chinggis Khan's miraculous rise from obscurity to heroic conqueror. Written in the mid-thirteenth century, a time of rapid change, by a Mongolian noble for fellow elites,⁴ it addresses issues of a proper political order and, implicitly, Mongol aristocrats' place in that world. In the early fourteenth century, the Persian administrator Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318) directed a massive chronicle project that situated the Mongol empire in world history. Such works also made clear why service in the Mongol empire was a worthwhile, respectable calling.⁵ Persian and Chinese chroniclers worked hard to incorporate the Mongols into more familiar patterns of rulership and belief.⁶ In the post-empire period, the intended audience for such Chinggisid narratives was individuals, groups, or regimes that contested the Mongol empire's mantle, possessed firsthand personal experience of the empire, or both.

After the mid-thirteenth century, more and more Mongol rule devolved to individual Chinggisid Houses, headed at least in name by Chinggis Khan's male successors. Perspectives shifted accordingly. Descriptions of “the empire” were increasingly descriptions of the territories and peoples governed by individual houses. We will return to this point later. The second, more limited sense of Chinggisid narrative is selective use of discrete episodes from the Mongols' story to make a specific point. For instance, the early Ming court reviewed the Mongols' abortive 1274 and 1281 invasions of Japan to drive home arguments about relations between the Ming dynasty and contemporary Japanese authorities.

⁴ Atwood, “Date of the ‘Secret History of the Mongols’.”

⁵ Kolbas, “Mongol Propaganda,” p. 167. Lane (“Persian Notables,” p. 183) notes that within a decade of Hülegü's establishment of the Ilkhanate, scholars such as Qāḍī Baydawī were depicting it as a “legitimate, entrenched Iranian dynasty.” Lane points out that Juwaynī described the Mongols “not so much as they wished to be seen but more how he and the Persian elite might wish them to be.”

⁶ Pfeiffer, “Canonization of Cultural Memory”; Melville, “History and Myth”; Jackson, “Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance”; *Mongols and the Islamic World*, pp. 326–27; Kumar, “Ignored”; “Courts, Capitals,” pp. 136–40.

In both their full and limited versions, Chinggisid narratives were tied to important issues and justified political, military, and diplomatic actions. For instance, in the period circa 1260–1360, Korean, Turkic, and Chinese literati celebrated Chinggis' grandson, Qubilai (1215–94, r. 1260–94), for his far-sighted rulership and embrace of Chinese culture. Such praise both justified foreign rule and rationalized loyalty to the Yuan dynasty, as the Mongols were known in East Asia.⁷ The early Timurid court's Chinggisid narrative highlighted the close ties between Tamerlane (1336–1405) and past Mongol glories to bolster his legitimacy and charisma, which in turn improved his ability to recruit followers.

This book explores Chinggisid narratives created after the collapse of most of the great Chinggisid houses that in the aggregate ruled much of Eurasia. By that time, as the examples above suggest, the practice of telling such stories was already a century or more old. In fact, the power of post-empire narratives depended on earlier precedents. Courts created narratives in the hope of influencing people's thoughts and actions. Far more effective than entirely new narratives were familiar stories that drew on easily understood language, ideas, and memories. More important than innovation was communication.⁸ Courts and their agents transmitted Chinggisid narratives through official written proclamations and edicts to audiences at home and abroad, as well as through more informal poems, essays, and prefaces.⁹ Less well documented, Chinggisid narratives also circulated in oral form, spread for instance through envoys dispatched to foreign courts or in face-to-face communications between rulers and their recently incorporated subjects.

My principal unit of analysis is the Ming court rather than Ming China, Ming society, Ming culture, or the Ming state. The focus is dictated in part by convenience. As the frequent site of policy debate and points of convergence of political, economic, and cultural power, courts generate rich source materials, including court chronicles, poems, imperial portraiture, and architectural monuments.¹⁰ To better extract resources from their hinterlands and beyond, courts not only used coercion but also developed modes of persuasion and representation. These centers produced documentary and nondocumentary materials to persuade fellow nobles, subject populations, and surrounding peoples and polities that the court and its ruling elite deserved the resources

⁷ Langlois, "Song Lian and Liu Ji," pp. 133–38.

⁸ Blair ("Illustrating History," pp. 829–30) argues that incorporation of Chinese book illustration techniques into some versions of Rashīd al-Dīn's *Compilation of Chronicles* was intended to better drive home enduring moral themes. Here, a new communication technology is harnessed to better convey a familiar message.

⁹ Pictorial narratives could perform a similar role. See Hillenbrand, "Iskandar Cycle"; Blair, "Illustrating History."

¹⁰ Duindam, "Court as Meeting Point."

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they demanded. Even when these articulations seem forced or self-serving, they nonetheless often illumine the fears and aspirations, the perspectives and beliefs of the court at a level of detail seldom available for other segments of society. Courts' decisions often had wide-ranging consequences, putting people and materials into action.

My focus is also guided by an effort at truth in advertising. Given China's scale and complexity, discussions framed in such terms as Ming China, Ming society, Ming culture, or the Ming state quickly become increasingly grand generalizations resting on ever more modest empirical foundations. Generalizations are as essential to historical inquiry as they are to other disciplines. We just need to be clear about the bases of such generalizations and the analytical weight they are meant to bear. To talk about Ming views of the Mongol empire on the basis of the writings of a handful of highly educated men is misleading. Focus on the Ming court may be too narrow to answer questions about popular attitudes, regional culture, or gender identity. Nonetheless, the court, as the best documented and among the most influential actors in the Ming imperium, is a useful point of departure, an early step in the much longer journey toward a well-rounded understanding of perceptions, depictions, and appropriations of the Mongol legacy in China. Likewise, close studies of the Ming, Koryŏ, Chosŏn, Moghul, Timurid, Muscovite, and Mongolian courts are required before informed generalizations about Eurasian understanding of the Mongol legacy are possible.

Courts often serve as a metonym for the wider empire or kingdom, but they are a small subset of the larger polity. Courts do not necessarily represent the interests or perspectives of the people within a polity's borders or even its ruling elite. The Ming court's heart was the ruling Zhu family, just as the Koryŏ court was headed by the Wang family, the Timurid court by Tamerlane and his descendants, the Great Yuan court by Qubilai and his descendants. Around them at the center were family members related by blood, marriage, and adoption; beyond them were intimate servitors who attended the ruling house's personal needs. Depending on the historical particulars and how capacious our definition, court might also include royal secretaries, senior court ministers, royal secretaries, military commanders, religious specialists, court artisans, and performers.¹¹ Court members often had more in common with fellow members of foreign courts than they did with their ostensible compatriots. They shared highly developed protocols of status and distinction and a strong sense of social, cultural, and political privilege. Through ritual, diplomatic, and economic exchanges, courts interacted with other courts.

¹¹ Duindam, *Dynasties*, pp. 156–226.

“So What?”

The previous paragraphs have described this book’s brief. At this point the reader is no doubt wondering, “So what?” Why should we care how a Chinese ruler in the fourteenth century and his court told the story of the Mongol empire? What does it tell us about the Mongol empire, the Ming dynasty, or Eurasia? What insights does it offer about empire, memory, and historical narrative as a tool of power? In other words, what are this book’s stakes?

Mongol Empire

Let’s start with the Mongol empire. The early Ming court produced invaluable accounts of the Mongol empire, especially its development in eastern Eurasia. The aforementioned *Secret History of the Mongols* is an essential source for understanding how Mongol elites understood the rise of Chinggis and his family. The original was written in Mongolian in the mid-thirteenth century, but nearly all editions used today can be traced back to one compiled at the Ming court in the 1380s as part of its efforts to train translators in the Mongolian language to better pursue dynastic interests. The Ming court also compiled *The Official History of the Yuan Dynasty*.¹² In the most common typeset edition today, it exceeds 4,600 pages in fifteen volumes of Chinese text. It is by far the longest and most detailed surviving source on the Mongol empire, especially its eastern Eurasian branches. The *Secret History* and *Official History* were composed and in large part drafted under Mongol rule, respectively. The final versions, however, were completed under the Ming court’s auspices. Scholars industriously mine *Official History* for information about the Mongol empire, but they spare little time to consider how the Ming court shapes our perceptions of the Chinggisids. If we shift our focus forward in time, few Mongolian language sources survive from the late fourteenth to late sixteenth centuries. To reconstruct Mongolian history of that period, we rely most commonly on materials from the Ming court.

Put simply, much of what we know about the Mongols comes to us through the Ming court, which as I will show shortly, was far from a neutral observer. A cardinal principle of history is consideration of sources. How, when, and why were they created? Answering these questions is impossible without a close look at the early Ming court. Finally, from the late 1360s to the late 1390s, the Ming court profoundly influenced the fortunes of the Great Yuan, whose military and political policies often directly responded to Zhu Yuanzhang’s actions and announcements. Thus, exploration of the early Ming

¹² See Chapter 5.

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court's Chinggisid narrative sharpens understanding of the Mongol empire, especially the history of the Great Yuan.

Close consideration of the early Ming court's Chinggisid narrative also sheds light on a simple but enduring question – “What was the Mongol empire?” A simplified version of the most common answer can be explained as follows. Chinggis Khan conquered and ruled much of Eurasia until he died in 1227. His descendants expanded and ruled an even greater empire. This unitary empire ruled by a single man dissolved circa 1251. That year Möngke, one of Chinggis's grandsons, came to power in a consensus-shattering struggle. The empire broke into four khanates, the Golden Horde, the Ilkhanate, the Chaghataid khanate, and the Yuan dynasty.¹³ Thereafter, relations among the four khanates varied from loose allegiance to open hostility. In this interpretation, the four khanates were separate, independent regimes. No one person ruled all Chinggisid lands. Put in other words, as an empire, the Mongol polity ended when a single leader ceased to rule the entire Chinggisid realm.¹⁴

Others scholars, in contrast, highlight the underlying unity of the Chinggisid polity long after 1251. Yes, they concede, the heads of individual polities (*uluses*) such as the Golden Horde, Ilkhanate, and so on enjoyed significant autonomy. However, an interlocking set of administrative structures, shared revenues, and an enduring corporate identity as fellow descendants of Chinggis Khan constituted an integrated empire. The most forceful version of this argument holds that the Great Khan of the Great Yuan remained the entire Mongol empire's ruler.¹⁵

Resolution of this question exceeds my abilities, but the early Ming case does bring into focus the question of perceptions. In one sense, “Mongol empire” is a product of our analytical categories and historical judgments. It is a handy social science term intended to facilitate comparative understanding of a particular genus of political organization. Alternatively, we might use Mongol empire to mean how people of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries understood the Chinggisid polity. Although some perceived the Chinggisid polity as a single integrated whole, the majority likely viewed it through a more local lens. Even before the dissolution of the “united empire,” most people experienced Chinggisid rule in narrower, more limited ways. A small proportion of the population might travel to distant lands as military, artisanal,

¹³ Jackson (“Dissolution of the Mongol Empire”) offers learned and clear articulation. Elsewhere (“From Ulus”), he shows that the four khanates evolved over time rather than at a single moment.

¹⁴ Munkh-Erdene (“Where Did the Mongol Empire Come From?,” p. 228) argues, “the idea that the people of Mongolian plateau were to constitute a single realm under a sole rule was widely held by the aristocracies of the Mongolic people before the establishment of the Chinggisid state.”

¹⁵ Kim Hodong, “Mong'gol che'guk”; “Unity of the Mongol Empire”; “Was Da Yuan.”

administrative, or religious labor, but the majority did not. Most people's contributions to far-flung campaigns of conquest or revenue portfolios of nobles located on the other side of Asia were delivered to local tax collectors and other state agents. During the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Chinggisid narratives often talked about Chinggis Khan and his immediate successors. However, those narrative were most detailed in their depictions of the local khanate or great house, whether it was the Golden Horde, the Ilkhanate, or the Yuan dynasty.

First-generation Chinggisid narratives of the “post-imperial” period have strikingly little to say about “the Mongol empire” as a whole. They regularly (but not always) refer to Chinggis and his conquests but lavish greater attention on the immediately preceding great house, for instance, the Ilkhanate, Chaghadaid, or Yuan. What does this relative silence mean? Perhaps successors feared that discussion of the Mongol empire might invite invidious comparisons. Who, after all, could match the territorial expanse of Chinggis and his immediate successors? At least equally likely, “the Mongol empire” did not resonate powerfully with contemporary audiences who were more invested in the story of their local Chinggisid house. One might conclude that such narratives reflect the circumscribed perspectives of subjugated local populations, for instance scholars deeply wedded to classical traditions and cultural identities that predated the Mongols' arrival.¹⁶ However, at least in the case of the early Ming court, communications to the Great Khan, his commanders, and Yuan nobles invoked the Great Yuan ruling house more than the entire Mongol empire. If Zhu Yuanzhang and his advisors read their audiences right – certainly a big if – this suggests that in the last third of the fourteenth century, Chinggisids and their close allies in eastern Eurasia were thinking less of the Mongol empire and more of their particular patch of the Chinggisid polity. This may reflect the locus of memory of the past and prospects for the future.

Early Ming Court

The way we approach the past is almost always mediated by previous generations of scholars. Their questions, perspectives, and interpretations shape our understanding of history in ways both obvious and subtle. Perceptions of the early Ming court are no different. They are embedded in a series of assumptions about the course of Chinese history over the last six hundred years and more. Let's begin with something specific. The founding Ming emperor ordered the compilation of the history of the Yuan dynasty almost as soon as he came to power. Writing an official account of the preceding dynasty was a long-

¹⁶ Jackson (*Mongols and the Islamic World*, p. 327) explains the “identification of the Ilkhans with Iran” as “a reaction to the sundering of the unitary Mongol empire.”

established political and scholarly convention that predated Zhu Yuanzhang's seizure of power by a millennium or more. *Official History* is regularly criticized for its slipshod editing, which is explained in part by its speed of compilation (little more than a year). Inaccurate and incomplete information is also often attributed to the early Ming court's poor understanding of the Mongols, their culture, their language, and their empire. This ignorance is commonly assumed to reflect a lack of interest of the Mongols in particular and the wider world in general. This interpretation in turn grows from what we "know" about the early Ming dynasty. It was dedicated to the revival of Chinese tradition, which involved the repudiation of "barbarian" influences introduced under Mongol rule. Such an understanding fits seamlessly with an even broader and more common story of an isolated or closed China, which was not "opened" to the world until the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century, or late twentieth century (that is, by the West's arrival in the late nineteenth century, the fall of the late imperial dynasty in the early twentieth century, or Deng Xiaoping's reforms of the 1970s and 1980s), depending on one's perspective.

Specialists are well aware that such assumptions and generalizations are flawed. In recent decades much work has been dedicated to overturning the closed China narrative, which grew from eighteenth- and especially nineteenth-century views of "the West" as the natural agent of change and civilizational advancement around the world.¹⁷ Scholars have uncovered vast and often illicit networks of trade, migration, and cultural exchange that linked China to neighbors near and far.¹⁸ Thriving trade in musk, furs, porcelains, tea, and more came to encompass ever more of the globe.¹⁹ Trade and diaspora studies have done much to dispel the image of a closed China during the Ming and Qing periods, that is, from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries.²⁰ Understanding of what was once considered an unassailable bastion of closed China – the imperial court – is also undergoing reevaluation. The most developed studies have focused on the Qing period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.²¹ Such studies have brought to light deep and sustained ties among the Qing throne and Mongolian, Tibetan, Manchurian, and Muslim leaders.²² They also show broad engagement with Chinese society. The Qing throne not only cultivated close ties to landed elites that staffed the Qing's bureaucracy; it also developed connections to popular religious life, moral codes, material culture, artisanship, cuisine, and

¹⁷ Waley-Cohen, *Sextants*. ¹⁸ Hansen, *Open Empire*.

¹⁹ Borschberg, "European Musk"; Schlesinger, *Trimmed*.

²⁰ For literature review, see Mosca, "Qing Empire."

²¹ For points of departure, see Mosca, "Qing Empire."

²² Atwood, "Worshipping Grace"; Benard, "Qianlong Emperor"; Berger, *Empire*; Grupper, "Manchu Patronage"; Li, "State-Building," pp. 18–19, 30–31, 67; Newby, *The Empire and the Khanate*; Schwieger, *Dalai Lama*.