

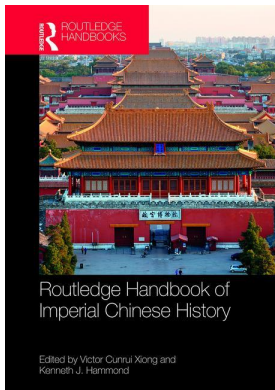
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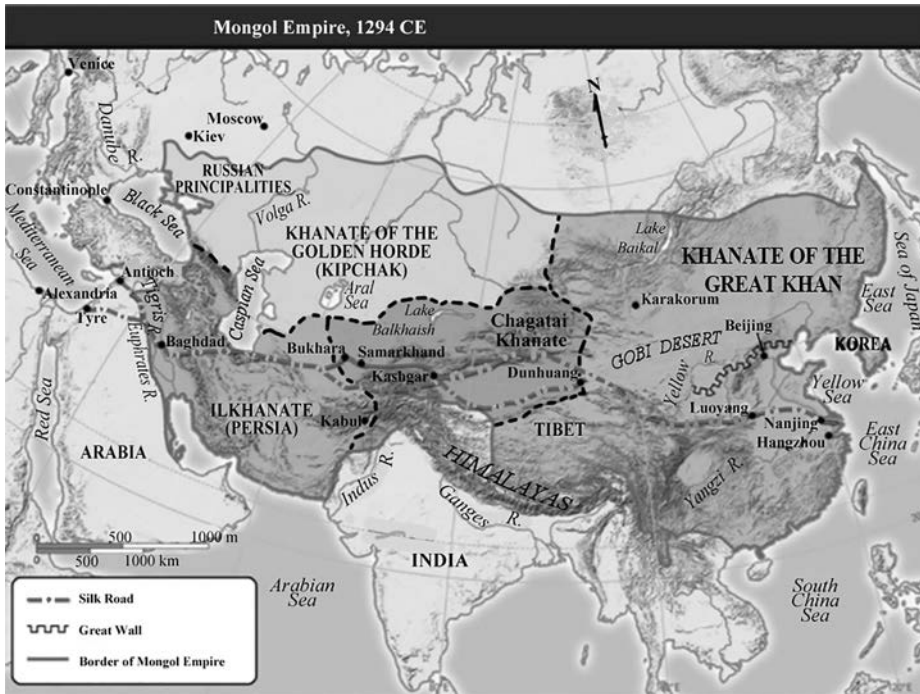
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14 THE YUAN DYNASTY

Michael C. Brose

The Yuan Dynasty is unique among Chinese dynasties because it was but part of a larger empire, and because it was the first time that non-Chinese ruled all of China. The hybrid state that the Mongols eventually constructed was not part of Chinggis's original plan of conquest, and it took the Mongols about sixty years to conquer all of China and make it, at least in theory, the center of their unified world empire. Yuan is often treated as a low point in Chinese imperial history, but the Mongols introduced many new institutions and practices that set the stage for the emergence of later states (Map 14.1).



Map 14.1 The Yuan Empire. (See Tan Qixiang, vol. 7, 5–6.)

Yuan China in the Mongol Empire

When Chinggis Khan first began his assault on northern China in the early thirteenth century, he did not plan to conquer all of China. Rather, he was focused on conquering the Jurchen Jin state (1115–1234). His enmity toward Jin came from the fact that Chinggis and the Mongol tribes were vassals who were obligated to pay annual tribute to the Jin court. Once he had unified the Mongol tribes under his leadership and had dealt with his tribal rivals, he turned naturally to subduing Jin. He did not attack Jin directly, but started with a campaign against the smaller Tangut state of Xixia in present-day Gansu in 1209. That provided a staging ground and the promise of additional military troops for his larger goal of defeating Jin. The initial campaigns went quickly, with control of the Jin capital and most of northern China by 1216. By that time Chinggis had turned his attention westward, and the smaller occupying force of Mongols left in North China never completely vanquished the Jin court, which retreated further south beyond immediate reach. The Mongols only consolidated their rule of North China in 1234 under Chinggis's son and successor Ögödei.

The Mongols were unlike earlier nomadic dynasties that ruled North China because they did not have any experience in ruling settled populations. Some Mongols wanted to turn northern China into grassland for their herds, and this made sense if they wanted to maintain their traditional ways of life as nomads. That suggestion was countered by the Jurchen advisor Yelu Chücai 耶律楚材 (1190–1244), who argued that the Mongols would reap far greater and longer benefits if they left the local farming communities intact, since they could extract taxes and manpower from them. By that time, Ögödei had replaced his father as Grand Khan. He agreed with Yelu's argument and revived Jin and Chinese administrative practices and local infrastructure.

Ögödei may have thought about continuing on south of the Yangzi River, but his attention was also drawn west to the evolving campaign by Mongols into the Rus area and Eastern Europe. The conquest of China was once again left in a holding pattern until the early 1250s when the Grand Khan Möngke returned to the mission of completing the conquest of all of China. By the 1250s, the Song court had been pushed south of the Yangzi by retreating Jin forces, and the natural next step for Möngke was to continue the momentum of conquests south, bringing all of China under Mongol dominion. Möngke also understood China's importance to his empire to provide new revenue and material resources. Thus, he took pains to rebuild the infrastructure in the north and revived old Jin and Chinese administrative systems and practices such as the census.

Möngke had ambitious plans to consolidate his rule across both China and Persia, and he engaged his younger brothers, Princes Khubilai and Hulegu, to help lead the campaigns. Khubilai went first south and west across the key province of Sichuan to gain control of the independent state of Dali (present-day Yunnan). He needed to control that frontier area to establish a jumping-off point for future military campaigns east against Song, and also south and southeast into Southeast Asia. Khubilai's campaign was quick and efficient. Unfortunately, his brother Möngke died in 1259 while on campaign, which set off a battle for succession between Khubilai and his younger brother Ariq Böke. Only after Khubilai was "elected" to succeed Möngke as Grand Khan in a dubious meeting of select members of the Mongol imperial clan did he resume the campaign to conquer Song. But that took another eighteen years.

Khubilai adopted a different attitude toward southern China than his predecessors had taken earlier in the north, such as forbidding all rapacious and violent actions against the

local population by his troops, and refusing to grant appanage estates to Mongols there. After all, if Khubilai were to rule China as a legitimate emperor, he needed the cooperation of officials who had served the Song as well as the loyalty of this large population, his new southern subjects. The differential status of South China *vis-à-vis* the north was in part a natural outcome of the long separation of the two parts of China until that time, and it was one of the defining features throughout the Yuan period.

Grand Khans and emperors

The divisions between north and south also provided a natural context for the evolution of the distinctly hybrid nature of Khubilai's new state and dynasty, visible at once in the identity of Khubilai and his successors as, simultaneously, Grand Khan of the united Mongol Empire and Chinese Emperor. Even though the notion of a united Mongol Empire had become something of a fiction even before Khubilai, he and all of his successors took that dual identity seriously. The hybrid nature of Yuan China is also visible in the back-and-forth debate between Mongol nativists and those who favored more accommodation to Chinese ways. The Yuan court after 1307 was riven by regular cycling between those two positions, and that ongoing dispute contributed in no small part to the rapid decline of Yuan a mere sixty years later.

Khubilai replaced his elder brother Möngke as Grand Khan in 1260 and immediately began to consolidate his identity as a Chinese emperor. Khubilai is sometimes portrayed as almost more Chinese than Mongol, but this is a misreading, since he never lost sight of his own culture and background as a Mongol. He always viewed China as the center of the Mongol Empire. But he also saw himself as the legitimate successor of the Mandate of Heaven which Song had lost.

One of Khubilai's first actions in 1260 to set the stage for his emergence as a legitimate emperor of China was to adopt a Chinese-style reign title "Zhongtong," ("pivotal succession" or "moderate rule"). Done almost two decades before he completed the conquest of Song China, it illustrates Khubilai's intention to complete what Möngke started, and build a reunited Chinese state around Mongol rule. Four years later, he followed with the even more radical step (in the eyes of some Mongols) of moving the Mongol central capital city from its first location in the steppe down into northeast China. He also changed his reign title in that same year, 1264, to "Zhiyuan" ("arriving at the origin or proper beginning"). Finally, in 1272, he took the final step in becoming a true Chinese-style emperor when he adopted the title "Great Yuan" for his new state. Khubilai also adopted Chinese imperial administrative practices when he created the six traditional bureaus or ministries in his government that focused on revenue collection, personnel management, imperial ritual practices, war, punishments, and public works. Khubilai naturally understood the importance of these acts to his identity as a Chinese emperor since he was taught by Chinese tutors from a young age, and he surrounded himself with Chinese advisors when he was a prince on his own landed estate in northern China.

Khubilai died in 1294, and since his son Jingim had predeceased him (one of the great misfortunes that colored Khubilai's last years of life), he selected his grandson Temür (r. 1294–1307; temple name Chengzong) to succeed him. Temür continued his grandfather's vision of the Yuan state. He is also considered by most historians to be the last effective Yuan emperor because of the infighting and violent swings between nativist Mongol and pro-Chinese camps that surfaced after his death. Temür was quite unlike his grandfather in two ways; first, he stopped military campaigns of conquest. This was an important decision

since the authority of all Grand Khans to lead the confederated Mongol tribes starting with Chinggis had rested on their ability to provide booty as a result of successful campaigns. Temür's decision acknowledged what had already become clear with Khubilai's series of failed campaigns against Japan and Southeast Asia, that the days of the expanding empire were past, even though sporadic attempts to reclaim lost territory in the western ends of the empire were made later. It also affirmed the reality of a divided empire. This did not mean, however, that Temür and his Yuan successors stopped claiming the identity as Grand Khans. Temür also concluded the long-running civil war between his branch of the imperial family and his cousins in the Ögödeid and Chaghadai lines that started with Khubilai's accession to power. Now Central Asia was clearly outside of the purview of the Grand Khan.

Unfortunately, Temür died without an heir at age forty-one, and the third Yuan Emperor, Khaishan (r. 1307–11; temple name Wuzong 武宗), came to the throne only after a violent dispute between two factions of the imperial Mongol clan. Khaishan was supported by Mongol nativists who wanted him to reassert Mongol cultural values, and he took a much different view to ruling China than Khubilai and Temür. This may have been because he grew up in the saddle as a military man leading troops and did not put much faith in bureaucratic niceties.

Khaishan relied mainly on his close group of fellow military commanders as advisors during his reign. One problem was his custom, in good nomadic fashion, of distributing lots of honorary titles and positions to people loyal to him. Since these titles came with financial and material benefits, they cost the state huge sums. Unfortunately, he tried to address this problem by constantly raising tax rates and frequency of collections, and in the end he gained powerful enemies among the Mongols and the Chinese.

Khaishan's successor, the fourth Yuan Emperor, was his younger brother Ayurbarwada (r. 1311–20; temple name Renzong 仁宗) and he returned Yuan China to a pro-Chinese attitude. This is best seen in the fact that he restarted the Chinese civil service examination system, which also contributed to his mission to limit or counter the traditional Mongol method of appointing people to office based on heredity or recommendation. The civil service examinations never became routinized in Yuan the way they had been in earlier and later dynasties. They were also limited in their effectiveness as a means of equitable social mobility across the entire population because there were strict quotas that guaranteed spots for Mongols and Central Asian personnel, with different exams than their Chinese counterparts. But they did provide an avenue for more Chinese, especially from the south, to enter into the administration.

Ayurbarwada was less successful in reforming other parts of the Yuan bureaucracy, especially the rights and grants of titles to Mongol imperial princes that had been lavishly doled out by his predecessor Khaishan. And ironically, Ayurbarwada's dedication to Confucian economic principles contributed to the state's deteriorating financial health since his main plan to revive the economy was to lighten taxes and try to encourage better agricultural production. His reign was also marked by ongoing fighting between pro- and anti-Chinese factions, and he died at the young age of thirty-five without curbing the power of the Mongol and Central Asian elites.

Ayurbarwada was succeeded by his 18-year-old son, Shidebala, notable because it was the only peaceful and normal succession of Yuan emperors following the Chinese norm of primogeniture. Since Shidebala (r. 1321–23; temple name Yingzong 英宗) had been educated by Chinese tutors, he followed in his father's footsteps in promoting the Confucian agenda at the court. He appointed like-minded officials who carried out reforms aimed at curbing the power of the Mongol nobility. His Mongol countrymen most hated his cancellation of the annual stipends that the government paid to Mongol princes. Unfortunately for Shidebala, a

large cohort of discontented Mongol and Central Asians joined forces and assassinated him only three years into his reign. He was only twenty at the time, and it was the first act of regicide among the Mongols.

Yesun Temür (r. 1323–28; temple name Jinzong 晉宗) came to power at thirty-one, and, like Khaishan, grew up commanding Mongol troops in the steppe. He recruited and promoted many Muslims, and minimized Chinese influence at his court. But unlike Khaishan, Yesun was not interested in replacing Chinese bureaucratic systems with nomadic ones. He returned to the policy of awarding imperial titles and landed estates to large numbers of Mongol princes. He also revived some long-ignored Chinese ideological bureaus to the court, especially the imperial Colloquium of Classic Texts (*jingyan* 經筵) that was staffed by noted scholars who lectured the emperor on Confucian texts and how those ideas could be applied to governance. One interesting aspect of this bureau was the appointment of a number of Central Asian scholars as staff lecturers. Yesun also brought Muslims into his administration and sponsored the construction of several new mosques in important cities. He died from natural causes at age 35.

Yesun Temür was succeeded for a short time by his young son Arigibag (r. 1328), but a coup was in the making to restore Khaishan's line to the Yuan throne. As a result, Khaishan's eldest son, Khoshila (r. 1329, temple name Mingzong 明宗), reigned for a short six months before he was murdered in 1329. He was replaced by Khaishan's younger son, Tugh Temür (r. 1329–32; temple name Wenzong 文宗), who started his reign by promptly purging all of Yesun Temür's supporters. In order to gain legitimacy, he outdid his successors in granting privileges to Mongol princes. Even so, he was widely viewed as an illegitimate successor, and several Mongol princes and their collaborators plotted at least eight separate times to take him down. One notable accomplishment was his founding of a new imperial academy to train Mongols in Confucian culture (called the Academy of the Pavilion of the Star of Literature). Over one hundred noted Chinese and Central Asian writers, artists, calligraphers, and translators were appointed to this bureau, and its existence, while short-lived, was unprecedented both in Mongol and Chinese imperial history. Unfortunately, it was abolished shortly after Tugh Temür's early death in 1332 at 28.

Since Tugh Temür's son had predeceased him, the throne next went to Khoshila's second son, Irinjibal (r. 1332; temple name Ningzong 寧宗). Only six years old when enthroned, he reigned a short fifty-three days before dying unexpectedly. That paved the way for the long reign of his elder brother, Toghön Temür (r. 1333–70; temple name Huizong 惠宗), who proved to be the last Yuan emperor. He assumed the throne at age thirteen, and continued his rule from Mongolia two years after the overthrow of the Yuan Dynasty in China. His long reign was characterized by a seesawing of pro- and anti-Chinese policies about every five years that were led by his chief ministers of state. The central court's authority eroded in that period, exacerbated by a series of unusually cold winters, floods, droughts, and resulting famines. The court was simply powerless to tamp down the sharp rise in local disturbances and banditry across China, and Toghön was driven out of Dadu 大都 in 1368 by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, who founded the new Ming Dynasty.

Political institutions

One of the most important features of the Yuan state was the high level of administrative duplication at both the central court and in the provinces. The other feature that distinguishes Yuan from other Chinese dynasties was the relatively high level of decentralization between the central court and the provinces, both ascribed to the ongoing vitality of Mongol

nomadic views of property and inheritance patterns in China. Those values and institutions created a unique situation in China whose influence can be seen even today in the system of the provinces as the largest administrative unit. Even more interesting, the growth of Beijing and other super-urban areas into their own administrative regions separate from the provinces in present-day China could be seen as a return to the system the Mongols instituted across the China that they ruled.

All of Mongol China was considered to be part of the Grand Khan's *ulus* (patrimony or inheritance) that was passed on to Khubilai when he became Grand Khan. But this also meant that, technically, all princes in Chinggis's extended clan had a share in China and could demand to be represented in the government because it was part of the larger Mongol Empire. The Yuan administrative bureaucracy was thus a hybrid affair that incorporated some Mongol elements into the otherwise largely Chinese system, such as the practice of granting landed estates already mentioned. We also see this nomadic imprint in two new institutions that were created in the Yuan administration, the Bureau of Imperial Clan Administration (*Da zongzheng fu* 大宗正府) and the system of "moving" provinces (*xingsheng* 行省). The first included officials who controlled the award of titles and appointments in the Yuan government, and revenue streams, especially taxation.

The second was actually a holdover from the earlier Jurchen mode of administering the southern part of their steppe empire. Yuan China was divided into a central province (*zhongshu sheng* 中書省) at the capital, and eleven subsidiary provinces (*xingsheng*). The province was originally instituted across northern China by the Jurchens, who needed local representatives of the central court that were viewed as temporary and who were expected to accompany the emperor and his retinue on his annual trek moving among his several capital cities (seen in the first part of its name "xing" to "go or travel"). When Ögödei consolidated his rule of North China, they became permanent bureaus based in specific strategic locations and ruled by officials who were assigned from the center.

The other unique aspect of Yuan governance was the routine supervision of officials by Mongols. The overseer (*darughachi*) system began after the Mongols conquered northern China, when they appointed special military agents to maintain control over newly conquered cities and territories. The *darughachi* position is illustrative of the larger lack of differentiation in the early Mongol empire between civilian and military duties and authority. Khubilai changed that after his enthronement; all *darughachi* became salaried members of the administration in 1261, and they were appointed at all levels, from the circuit, prefecture, and subprefecture down to the level of the county. At each level they were paired with the regular administrator and shared administrative duties. Neither the regular administrator nor the *darughachi* official could act independently, and both had to apply their seal to any order, decision, or report. Khubilai's goal was that Mongols or Central Asians would staff the *darughachi* office at each level, while the regular administrators at each level would be staffed by northern Chinese, Khitans, Jurchens, and other people who had lived in northern China at the time of the conquest.

All this might give the impression that the Mongols had centralized power into their own hands. In fact, several nomadic customs, especially the practice of giving land grants to members of the Mongol imperial clan, limited any centralizing of power in the court's hands. None of the Yuan rulers could afford to disenfranchise the Mongol princes by breaking up landed estates or stopping the practice of giving annual gifts. The decentralized nature of Yuan China is best seen in the gap between the central court and the provinces. The provinces related to the central government somewhat as vassals or subject territories that surrounded and were loyal to the emperor's domain, which was exactly how a typical

nomadic khan related to subordinate tribes and grazing areas. Provinces had their own administrative structures, called Branch Secretariats that mirrored the Central Secretariat at the imperial capital. They operated relatively autonomously, and only a few key court bureaus such as the Censorate transcended that gap down to the local level. In addition, not all provinces were treated the same way by the court; the provinces in the most distant frontier zones in the northeast (Korea), northwest (Gansu), and southwest (Yunnan) were treated almost as separate states, much more autonomous than provinces located in central China. By way of example, in Yunnan, the Mongols gave a lot of power to local chieftains (*tusi* 土司) to maintain control of their own tribes for the Mongols. The court settled a large number of Central Asian troops into permanent military garrisons, and the provincial center was staffed mainly by Muslims.

Society

Social order

The ordering of society was a more acute problem for the Mongols than most other Chinese dynasties faced. Not only did a non-Chinese people now rule all of China, but their conquest also brought large numbers of other foreigners into China in unprecedented numbers.

To keep everyone sorted out, if not “in their place,” the Mongols organized people based on the order and nature of their inclusion into the new empire. As early as 1229, the first year of Ögödei’s reign, the basic annals record his concern over how to tax three specific groups of people, Mongols (*Menggu ren* 蒙古人), the people who lived in northern China (called Hebei Hanmin 河北漢民), and people from west of China (*Xiyu ren* 西域人). By 1247, the sources reveal the existence of another category of people all from the west (*semuren* 色目人). This term was a catch-all, meaning “various kinds of people,” but really applied to all of the people from central and western Asia who had joined the Mongols, willingly or by force. Most of them were steppe-dwelling Turkic groups such as the Uyghurs, but also included long-settled populations from Persia, among others. They ranked just below the Mongols in terms of real power. Once Khubilai concluded the conquest of southern China he added a fourth category, “Southerners” (*nanren* 南人), that included all people who lived under the southern Song. This group occupied the lowest level in the social scheme and enjoyed the least amount of real power under the Mongol administration. While this scheme appears on its face to have been ethnically driven, it was primarily an administrative scheme based on relative proximity to the Mongol cause, the people of southern China thus being the least trustworthy because they held out the longest and joined the growing empire late, and only after an extended campaign of conquest.

Law

Law in Yuan China, like other aspects of that society, was a hybrid that combined nomadic and Chinese customs and practices. Most innovations in law were the result of the effects of Mongol customary law on existing Chinese legal codes and practices. In the north, the old Jin law code was retained until 1271, although Khubilai had already requested his Chinese advisors to prepare a new legal code back in 1262. After Shidebala was appointed emperor in 1321, he requested another compilation of ordinances, which was titled the “Comprehensive Institutions of the Great Yuan (*Da Yuan tongzhi* 大元通制). It was praised by Chinese scholars across the land because it included many important Chinese customs such as the five

degrees of mourning. The third extant Yuan legal code also comes from Shidebala's reign, the *Yuan dianzhang* 元典章. This large corpus is divided into ten sections, and includes many entries transcribed directly from earlier Mongol texts in vernacular style alongside more formal Chinese codes. Finally, a documentary survey of various institutions that followed earlier Chinese *huiyao* 會要 pattern was completed in 1331, the *Jingshi dadian* 經世大典.

Technology and material culture

The Mongols were responsible for introducing or fostering the development of many new material and technological advances in China, including such things as the extensive use of a circulating paper currency and banking system; Western astronomical, medical, and dietary techniques and customs; and writing systems, to name but a few. First, printing and circulation of paper currency had been introduced into China by the Song state, so this was not an altogether new institution. The Mongols' signal contribution here was to its wide adoption by the state as the monetary system across China and the backing of that currency by silver. This interest in the economy is not surprising since the Mongols were intensely interested in promoting international trade (see later). Of course, the Yuan system was also prone to the same kinds of problems that modern monetary systems suffer, especially inflation, and the temptation to print more currency.

Diet, medicine, astronomy

The Mongols who settled in China were also clearly interested in expanding their diet and material life beyond their own customary nomadic ways. An interesting example is a dietary manual that was compiled by a Central Asian man who presented it to the Yuan emperor Tugh Temür in 1330. The book, *Proper and Essential Things for the Emperor's Food and Drink*, includes a lively mixture of traditional Mongol, Chinese, and Western food and medicinal recipes, especially Persian. It is clear from this compilation that the Mongol elite wanted to live the good life in China, including staying healthy. If the recipes are any indication of how the Mongol elite lived, then they also illustrate an extensive trade network across their empire, since many of the formulas relied on ingredients found outside of China. As masters of an empire that stretched across Eurasia, this should not surprise us.

Mongol preference for Western science is especially evident in the Muslim astronomical, medical, and pharmaceutical bureaus and personnel at the Yuan court. These bureaus operated in conjunction with traditional Chinese imperial bureaus of astronomy, pharmacy, and medicine, but they had large independent staffs of professionals and clerical support, and catered almost exclusively to the Mongol ruling elite. But Chinese astronomers, physicians, and pharmacists were also sponsored by the court, with separate bureaus and personnel. Chinese medical and pharmaceutical knowledge was taught in private academies, mainly in southern China, and handed down within families in traditional custom.

Communications

The rulers of Yuan China faced a unique problem of written and spoken communications: how to communicate imperial decrees and keep order among the various cultural and linguistic groups that lived in their empire. Chinggis understood the need for a written form of spoken Mongol if he was going to extend his rule over peoples outside of the steppe zone. He addressed this issue early when he asked a Uyghur administrator to create the first written

form of Mongol using the Uyghur writing system. Khubilai eventually adopted Tibetan writing to replace the first script, and the Mongols routinely issued written orders in several different languages (see the example of Arghun's letter). Khubilai's court included a very large bureau of translators and interpreters.

The other important development in communications infrastructure was the postal relay system. Earlier Chinese states had had postal relay systems, but the Mongols expanded and improved it. Of course, they needed it because their empire spanned such a large expanse of territory. By the end of Khubilai's reign, there were more than 1,400 postal stations in China alone, and the system was designed for the rapid communication of imperial orders and transit of officials on business. Merchants were initially expressly forbidden to use the system, but they nonetheless came to dominate it, which benefited international trade and commerce across the empire and linked China in new, more efficient ways with the rest of Eurasia as never before.

High culture

Painting, poetry, calligraphy

The intersection of nomadic and Chinese values is particularly evident in the three core art forms of traditional Chinese high culture: painting, poetry, and calligraphy. One of the most innovative contributions to Chinese literature in the Yuan was dramatic literature (*zaju* 雜劇), which actually first appeared in the late Jin period. Yuan dramas were often written in a vernacular style that would never have been tolerated in earlier periods. The performative aspect of dramas also generated a new poetic style (*qu* or *sanqu* 散曲), originally arias that were sung during a dramatic performance. Many Yuan poets continued to use styles that reached back to the Tang Dynasty, especially standard verse (*shi* 詩) and lyric poetry (*ci* 詞). Many non-Chinese people became highly regarded poets and writers in the Yuan, with reputations equaling the most talented Chinese artists of the time. The Mongols' taste for realistic depictions of life, especially horse culture, brought about a new trend in painting that was executed by Chinese and non-Chinese artists alike. These paintings are also important because they provide a rare glimpse into real life at the time.

Material arts

The Mongols also greatly loved gold and silk and other luxury items. Gold, in particular, was one of the most important markers of status among the Mongols. Khubilai's capital cities are reported to have had lavish use of gold as a major decorative element in the imperial complex. Gold even found its way into royal clothing, in the special silk brocade that the Mongols prized for special royal occasions called *nasīj*. That cloth had gold thread woven into the weft, and often also featured pearls basted onto it. The Mongols also supported ceramic production across their empire, and Chinese production benefited by their introduction, from Persia, of cobalt blue as a new underglaze style. Jingdezhen became the center of ceramic production.

History writing

One of the greatest accomplishments of the Mongols in China was their compilation of the standard histories of the Song, Liao, and Jin dynasties. The fact that they produced all three histories in three years (1343–45) was, in itself, remarkable and unprecedented in Chinese history. Even more remarkable, however, was the fact that the Mongols had no literary

culture or tradition at all before they conquered China, and their interest in this project illustrates their genuine interest in Chinese cultural tradition, but also the fact that they wanted to secure a place for themselves in China's long dynastic history as legitimate rulers of China. The last point is obvious when you consider that the main reason that any dynasty compiled the standard history of its predecessor was to confirm its own legitimacy as the inheritor of the Mandate of Heaven. The Chinese concept of Heaven's Mandate has a curious overlap with Mongol notions of political legitimacy as springing from Tengri (Heaven).

Religion and thought

The Mongols were highly religious people who practiced and were influenced by a shamanistic tradition that emphasized the role of nature in life, along with Heaven's guidance. But they were also pragmatic, and with the exception of some late figures all of the Mongol Grand Khans not only allowed people to practice their native religion but encouraged it, as long as loyalty to the Mongols was maintained. Yuan China is noteworthy in terms of religious history in China for several trends such as the marked multiplicity of religions practiced, the importation of Islam as a religious system into China for the first time on a wide scale, and the active cooperation of prominent Chinese Confucian thinkers with religious Daoists to promote a distinct form of Daoist belief, practice, and culture in China.

Daoism

The story of the sponsorship of the southern religious Daoist movement (*Xuanjiao* 玄教) by the Mongol ruling elite is especially interesting because it developed entirely in the Yuan, and was part of the larger trend of the elevation of Daoist religion in Yuan China compared to earlier periods. This southern Daoist religious movement was, in effect, seen as a way for southern Chinese literati to preserve their culture in the face of the Mongol conquest of the south. It is also interesting because this was a rare conjoining of efforts by Confucianists and Daoists; the normal position of Han Chinese Confucianists was to look down on Daoism as a type of heterodox teaching. It is also interesting because Khubilai had weighed in on the side of Buddhism in a debate he sponsored in 1258 between Buddhists and Daoists. Yet, Khubilai's conquest of the south caused him to look anew at the religion, and from that time on, religious Daoism, especially proponents of the *Xuanjiao* sect, enjoyed high status among the Mongol elite. This was by no means the only school of Daoism that thrived in Yuan China, and the larger social and cultural division between the north and south that we have described for Yuan China was also manifested in religious Daoism, which was divided into a northern and southern branch. While their specific teachings differed, all had close ties with Chinese Confucian literati throughout the Dynasty.

Islam

We also need to mention the influx of Islam into China along with the Mongol conquests as one of the important long-term impacts of the Yuan period, for it was indeed at that time that it became situated within China's larger religious landscape as one of the major religions. This was due to the move into China of many Muslims in service to the state. We have already noted the problems that Muslim merchants caused in their early service as tax farmers in the north. The seesawing of politics that rent the last decades of Yuan emperors was also caused, in part, by their alternating defense or castigation of Muslim personnel at the high

levels of the court. But many Muslims settled into communities across China, and some Yuan emperors built or rehabilitated important mosques. The strong presence of Chinese Muslims across China today is one of the enduring legacies of that time.

Buddhism

Finally, Tibetan Buddhism became closely associated with the Mongol elite starting with Khubilai, who had been interested in Tibetan teachings from his period when he lived as a prince on his imperial appanage estate in the north. Khubilai invited the renowned Phags-pa lama (1235–80) to come to his appanage and advise him. After he built his new capital, Khubilai invited the lama to live permanently at Dadu. This was certainly out of genuine interest in Tibetan Buddhist teachings, but Khubilai's sponsorship of that group was also a convenient way for him to control the Tibetan political scene without having to commit lots of Mongol troops there. Tibetan Buddhism was favored by the Mongols, but the Chinese population practiced Chan, and there was a heightened emphasis on temple building and an overall increase in the numbers of Buddhist monks and nuns in China.

Western religions

The other new aspect of Yuan China was the proliferation of Western religions, especially forms of Christianity. One of the most famous tales of communication going from China to the West is the story of the Nestorian Christian monk Rabban Sauma (c. 1220–94). His story provides an interesting window onto the flourishing Nestorian community that existed across northern China, especially at the Yuan capital Dadu. Of course, Nestorians had lived for many centuries earlier west in the area known today as Xinjiang, where they had fled in exile after being labeled as heretics.

Confucianism

Confucian doctrine had been reenergized in the Song period by Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who emphasized attaining harmony with the underlying principle of the universe; nature and phenomena as well as human relations were now equally important as subjects of study. His school, Daoxue, or the Learning of the Way, often known in the West as Neo-Confucianism, gained enormous popularity in the Yuan. When the civil service exams were restarted in 1315, Zhu Xi's teachings and central texts were designated as the official line that all examinees needed to know. One of the interesting social aspects of Yuan China was the fact that a good many non-Chinese also became learned Neo-Confucian masters, and served in ideological bureaus at the Yuan court as well as teaching students in their own private academies.

Economy

Land

One of the most important changes that the Mongols brought to China was the practice of giving landed estates (appanages) to members of the Mongol imperial clan and other loyal retainers. The appanage estates included the land and the people who lived there, and the grantee was awarded full control of the estate, including the right to administer the land and gather taxes from the residents. This system has been described as nomadic-feudal, and over

time it created a big economic problem for the Yuan state by the diversion of tax revenue into the hands of the appanage holders. Once Khubilai conquered the south, he forbade the granting of appanages there, with the exception of former Song government land.

The Mongols created four categories of land in China: government lands, appanage lands, temple lands, and private lands, and each had its own set of laws and practices for taxation. Yuan, like Song, saw the rise of large landowners over time, and the concomitant rise in tenancy, gradual impoverishment of farmers, and overall decline in the standard of living of the peasantry. Yuan emperors tried, from time to time, to reverse those trends, but they never really succeeded.

Taxes

The other institution that the early Mongols introduced into northern China was tax farming by Muslim merchants. Chinggis had used Central Asian Muslims to trade on his behalf, and Ögödei engaged them in a partnership (*ortogh*) to collect taxes and silver tribute that they would either use to purchase luxury goods for the Mongol elite or lend back to the local taxpaying population at exorbitant rates. They also loaned money to the Mongols. While Ögödei retained the old Jin tax rates and schedules, the Mongols also collected all kinds of irregular taxes on the population of North China, based on ad hoc needs fueled by their military campaigns and outright greed. After Khubilai was enthroned, he put many measures in place to limit the rapacious system, including regularizing the tax system in the provinces to annual grain and head taxes and volunteer labor for state projects. Most important, he ended the practice of tax farming. At the same time, Khubilai doubled down on the role of the Muslim merchants as the official agents conducting international trade on behalf of the court.

One very practical reason for Khubilai's need to conquer South China was because it was China's breadbasket, and the Mongol raids across the north before his time had brought agricultural productivity in the north to historic lows. Khubilai addressed that problem early in his reign by creating peasant communities (*she* 社) that were placed under the control of the Bureau of Agriculture. The community head supervised taxation, local policing, local education, and planning and planting of crops and land reclamation. This was an especially important initiative in the north, and it did a lot to cement Khubilai's status as a benevolent ruler.

Commerce

Yuan China enjoyed healthy domestic and international trade, due both to its connections to other parts of the larger empire but also to foreign trade outside that realm. Khubilai created a new bureau, the Directorate General of Merchant Corporations, that employed trusted Muslims as state agents of international trade. The state loaned Muslim merchants funds at low interest, and the merchants invested the funds in trade caravans that yielded handsome profits for the Mongols as well as a regular influx of luxury goods for consumption by the court. The same system applied to maritime commerce; the state provided merchants with capital and ships, and profits were split 7:3 between the state and merchants. A lot of that international trade consisted of staples, rather than luxury goods, going both in and out of China. For example, sources record ships carrying loads of grain in the amount of 8,000 *shi* (approximately 1,200 tons). The fleet of thirteen ships that Marco Polo took from southeast China to Persia each carried 5,000–6,000 *shi* of pepper and up to 200 passengers.

Military

We must not lose sight of the fact that Yuan was a conquest society, and all of the Mongols who ruled China thought primarily in terms of military power. They maintained the original Mongol organizational structure, and their practices set patterns that were followed later, especially in the system of hereditary military families and the decimal and banner systems. The multi-ethnic nature of the Yuan military is one unique feature of the time, as was the large and regular gifting of landed estates to members of the Mongol nobility and important affiliated tribes from the steppe and the west. The other important feature of the Mongol military was its organization into a decimally based command structure, with the ideal highest level unit comprising 10,000.

The imperial guard (*kesig*) was the core of the Yuan military establishment. Earlier Chinese dynasties had imperial guard systems, but this one reflected its nomadic origins in that it remained the most important career route into the Yuan administration, and it continued to operate under the principle of personal dependence on the Grand Khan. The other important feature of the Yuan military was the extensive system of permanent military garrisons throughout the country. Mongol troops were concentrated in North China, while South China was garrisoned mainly by Han Chinese and other tribal armies (denoted as “newly adhered troops”). These garrisons were controlled by a series of Pacification Bureau offices at regional levels. As in the system of Branch Provinces (discussed earlier), decentralization of military control was the norm.

Disintegration of the Yuan

As should be clear from the brief history of Yuan’s emperors, there were critical fissures embedded in the Yuan state from the start, including, but not limited to, the highly inefficient dual administrative structure, the drain on the economy from ongoing demands by members of the Mongol elite, and the disruptive pattern of contesting factions at the court over the value of Mongol nativism versus Chinese values. In fact, disruption and growing ineffectiveness of rule was the norm for half a century starting in the 1330s. Social order started to break down with the revolts of local Yuan military units and rebellions of state laborers on big public works projects. Banditry became more common and open in the 1340s, especially attacks on large towns that were repulsed by locals who organized for self-protection. By 1350, spiraling inflation and adverse weather combined with the court’s shrinking authority. Conditions were ripe for larger rebellions, as, for example, with the White Lotus-led movement of some 150,000 state tax laborers and 20,000 imperial troops in Hebei who were rerouting the Yellow River. This was but the largest of several millenarian-inspired rebellions that occurred in several parts of China. By the late 1350s, anti-Yuan power was concentrated in three large, rival groups located along the lower Yangzi River. At the same time, infighting among rival Mongol princes in northern China broke out. The emperor’s chief minister at the time, Toghto, had that rebellion under control when he was dismissed in 1355 as a result of intrigue by his enemies at court. He was the one man able to organize and coordinate resistance by the remaining imperial army. When he was forced out of power, most of his staff officers in the field and their troops defected to rebel forces.

Zhu Yuanzhang was based at present-day Nanjing where he led the sectarian Red Turban rebels, an offshoot of the earlier White Lotus sect. As he gradually consolidated his power over his rivals, he started to think about building his own dynasty. To accomplish that, he brought in several leading Confucian thinkers to advise him. As a result, he

gradually eschewed the Red Turban program and violence. He chose his new dynastic name, Ming, some argue, as a way to hold onto his erstwhile followers who were still devoted to millenarian ideology.

Meanwhile, the last Yuan emperor Toghon Temür continued to rule from the steppe after he fled Dadu in 1368 for two more years until his death in 1370. The Yuan took a bit longer on its northeast and southwestern frontiers to die. The Mongol prince Naqachu (d. 1388) was captured by Zhu Yuanzhang in 1355, but was released in the hope of gaining the goodwill of the Mongols. He ruled Liaodong for some 20 years. Another Mongol imperial prince, Basalawarmi (d. 1382), was a viceroy of Yunnan in the 1350s. After Dadu fell, Basalawarmi stayed in Yunnan as a Yuan loyalist until the 1380s when it was brought under Ming control. The Yuan Dynasty had a number of critical fault lines that prevented it from lasting longer than it did. But it also brought about many new changes to China, some of which established patterns and precedents that shaped all subsequent Chinese states down to the present. What some see as a low point in China's imperial past was, in fact, one of the most innovative, creative periods of that long history.