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The Weaknesses of Song China and the Legacy of Mongol Conquest

Emily Potts

In 1234, the state of Jin finally succumbed to almost three decades of Mongol incursions. In “Crossing the Yellow River, June 12,” Yuan Haowen recounts the destruction in the wake of the fall of Kaifeng, the capital and last remaining province of Jin territory:

White bones scattered
like tangled hemp,
how soon before mulberry and catalpa
turn to dragon-sands?
I only know north of the river
there is no life:
crumbled houses, scattered chimney smoke
from a few homes.

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He describes the near-total destruction which was typical of Mongol conquests: “bones scattered” about the land and very few homes left standing. He writes how he only knows “north of the river,” referring to the title of the poem and demonstrating how the reality—his reality—of Jin dominance had been shattered. Further, he seems ready to surrender in despair, seeing as how “there is no life” for him now, or for the Jin Dynasty for that matter.

By the fourteenth century, the Mongols had established the largest contiguous land empire in history, an empire which included—for the first time—China.² The Jin state of Northern Song fell relatively early in the Mongol campaigns, and the Southern Song would fall soon after in 1279 in a campaign spearheaded by Khubilai Khan.³ How did a horde of “barbarian” steppe peoples conquer China—historically, the greatest political power in East Asia? Traditional models have portrayed the Mongol conquest as a series of successful invasions due to military superiority which were then followed by the adoption of local administrative

¹ Yuan Haowen, “Crossing the Yellow River, June 12,” in *Pre-Modern East Asia, to 1800: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*, Ebrey *et. al.*, 2nd ed. (USA: Cengage Learning, 2009), 196.

² Ebrey, Patricia, Anne Walthall, and James Palais, *Pre-Modern East Asia, to 1800: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*, 2nd ed. (USA: Cengage Learning, 2009), 160.

³ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 2nd ed., 197.

practices—a reflection of the Mongols’ nomadic-pastoralist lifeways and inexperience with centralized government.⁴ Instead, the Mongols were able to establish their empire primarily because of the political development of the Eurasian Steppe polities as well as their military prowess. Furthermore, both Northern and Southern Song China fell due to their political and military weakness resulting from both political factionalism and a flawed examination system.

Song China: Political Stagnation and Military Impotency

Despite the façade of social mobility and meritocracy of the Song civil examination system, it generated intense competition among the scholar-officials, leading to political factionalism and a weak political system.⁵ With the spread of printing, the educated class exploded as more people had wider access to cheaply-printed materials. The Song examination system generated four to five times more *jinshi* (scholar officials holding the highest examination degree) per year than the Tang system had. As a result, more hopeful *jinshi* eagerly competed in the civil service examination. Yet the number of available positions did not increase as rapidly as the pool of possible candidates. Consequently, the chances of a hopeful candidate’s passing the examination reached as low as 1 in 333 during the Song dynasty.⁶ Considering the low chances of actually ascending to the ranks of the esteemed scholar official class, one would think that the more selective examination system would have fostered a sense of solidarity among the *jinshi*. Instead, competition increased once candidates managed to pass the exams because there were too few positions available for the incoming officials. As such, promotions depended heavily on

⁴ William Honeychurch and Chunag Amartuvshin. “States on Horseback: The Rise of Inner Asian Confederations and Empires.” In *Archaeology of Asia* (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 275.

⁵ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 2nd ed., 136-137.

⁶ Ebrey, Patricia, Anne Walthall, and James Palais, *Pre-Modern East Asia, to 1800: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*, 3rd ed. (USA: Cengage Learning, 2014), 134-135.

recommendations and, in turn, favoritism. As a result, the *jinshi* fought more aggressively than in previous dynasties, leading inevitably to factionalism.⁷

The first steps toward administrative reform were taken by Fan Zhongyan, who tried to implement a ten-point program meant to eliminate entrenched bureaucrats, favoritism, and nepotism.⁸ (Higher officials had the privilege of nominating family members to civil service positions, bypassing the examination system altogether.⁹) Fan was defeated, but later reformers adopted his crusade.¹⁰ Cheng Yi, for example, presented this memorial in 1050 as a critique of the civil examination system:

In the selection of scholars for the civil service, though there are many categories under which men may qualify, yet there are only one or two persons who may be considered [under the category of] “wise, virtuous, square, and upright.” Instead, what the government obtains are scholars who possess no more than erudition and powerful memory. Those who qualify in [the examination on] understanding of the classics merely specialize in reciting from memory and do not understand their meaning. They are of little use in government.¹¹

According to Cheng Yi, the civil examination system fails to select “wise, virtuous, square, and upright” men because the exam itself only stresses memorization of the classics, which he believes to be the foundations of good governance. Instead, he argues, the exam should stress comprehension of the classics. He also goes on to criticize the exam’s emphasis on poetry:

The most prized and sought after is the category of *jinshi*, which involves composition of verse in the *ci* and *fu* form according to the prescribed rules of tone and rhythm. In the *ci* and *fu* there is nothing about the way to govern the empire. Men learn them in order to pass the examination, and after the passage of sufficient time, they finally attain to the posts of ministers and chancellors. How can they know anything of the bases of education and cultivation found in the Kingly Way?¹²

Because scholar-officials were meant to be men of letters, the civil examination tested applicants on their ability to write poetry. But as Cheng Yi argues, poetry is completely irrelevant to

⁷ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 3rd ed., 136-137.

⁸ *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, vol.1, 1st ed., Wm. Theodore de Bary, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 311-313.

⁹ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 3rd ed., 136-137.

¹⁰ *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, 311-313.

¹¹ Cheng Yi, “Memorial to Emperor Renzong,” in *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, vol.1, 1st ed., Wm. Theodore de Bary, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 315.

¹² Cheng Yi, “Memorial to Emperor Renzong,” 315.

governance. Why, then, would a civil examination system test applicants on poetry writing? Rather, *jinshi* must fully understand “the Kingly Way” in order to govern well. Together, these two passages by Cheng Yi demonstrate the rise of Neo-Confucianism in Song China. Believing that the examination system had drifted away from Confucian principles by recruiting men of rote memorization rather than virtue, reformers like Cheng Yi saw the need to return to these ideals.¹³ Thus, Cheng Yi argues that capable men of virtue can only be found if the examination system stresses comprehension of the classics while de-emphasizing the creation of *ci* and *fu* poetry which contributes nothing to the practical rule of the empire.

Wang Anshi, too, exemplifies Neo-Confucianism by citing the example of the sage-kings:

What is the way to select officials? The ancient kings selected men only from the local villages and through the local schools. The people were asked to recommend those they considered virtuous and able, sending up their nominations to the court, which investigated each one. Only if the men recommended proved truly virtuous and able would they be appointed to official posts commensurate with their individual virtue and ability.¹⁴

Wishing to return to the moral government of the sage-kings, Yao and Shun, he turns to their method of civil service recruitment as an inspiration for reform. Moreover, Wang Anshi agrees with Cheng Yi that the “most urgent need of the present time is to secure capable men.”¹⁵ For both Cheng Yi and Wang Anshi, capable men are virtuous men.

However, Wang Anshi differs from Cheng Yi in his suggestion for reform. He argues that the civil service examination not only stresses memorization over understanding of the classics; it actually prevents “those who can apply them to the government of the empire”¹⁶ from passing.

¹³ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 3rd ed., 140.

¹⁴ Wang Anshi, “Memorial to Emperor Renzong,” in *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, vol.1, 1st ed., Wm. Theodore de Bary, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 320.

¹⁵ Wang Anshi, “Memorial to Emperor Renzong,” 320.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

To correct for this systematic error, he proposes a system of recruitment more in line with the example of the sage-kings:

When we have investigated those whose conduct and ability are of the highest level, and have appointed them to high office, we should ask them in turn to select men of the same type, try them out for a time and test them, and then make recommendations to the ruler, whereupon ranks and salaries would be granted to them. This is the way to conduct the selection of officials.¹⁷

Here, Wang Anshi completely rejects any form of examination at all; instead, he advocates “test-driving” candidates before awarding a position. Also, Wang Anshi’s proposal to allow scholar-officials to recommend other possible candidates could have encouraged cooperation rather than the vicious, competitive factionalism which was typical of the Song bureaucracy. In addition, Wang Anshi’s “test-driving” policy would have served as a check to any favoritism or nepotism which might have resulted from recommendations. While a different approach than that of Cheng Yi, Wang Anshi’s proposal still aims to accomplish the same goal: to recruit capable men of virtue to the administration of the empire. In this case, he advocates “trial runs” to determine the virtue of possible candidates.

Because the number of open positions did not increase as rapidly as the pool of possible candidates, *jinshi* tended to fight more viciously among themselves than in previous dynasties. Often, these personal and philosophical disputes were portrayed as a struggle between men of virtue, concerned with the common good, and corrupt, nefarious men who could not see past their own interests. Each side, of course, thought themselves the superior, virtuous men and their enemies, the corrupted men.¹⁸ For example in a critique of Wang Anshi’s New Policies, Sima Guang writes

Whatever this man wanted to do could neither be held up by the ruler nor changed by the people. Those who agreed with him were given his help in rising to the sky, while those who differed with

¹⁷ Ibid., 320.

¹⁸ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 2nd ed., 135-136.

him were thrown out and cast down into the ditch. All he wanted was to satisfy his own ambitions, without regard to the best interests of the nation.¹⁹

Sima Guang describes how Wang Anshi was able to pass his New Policies by creating a coalition of like-minded officials and maligning those who disagreed with him. Although Sima Guang portrays him as an unscrupulous, selfish, scheming official, Wang Anshi was simply doing what was necessary to pass his proposal. To Wang Anshi, however, Sima Guang's criticisms and dissent would have seemed obstructionist.

The political atmosphere of the Song bureaucracy was one of stagnation in which, in order to accomplish any objectives, officials with proposals had to form coalitions to gain the ear of the emperor. This coalition-building was directly contrary to Confucian ideas because the scholar-officials were meant to serve as advisors to the emperor. They were not meant to build coalitions to gain an audience; rather, it was the emperor's decision whether to heed their advice.²⁰ But the explosion of the scholar-official class effectively silenced individual *jinshi* who had to resort to factionalism to accomplish anything at all.²¹ But in resorting to factionalism, as Wang Anshi had done, individual *jinshi* further perpetuated the polarization of the political system, inciting the criticisms of their opponents. Thus, the Song political process was crippled by a polarizing factionalism which resulted from a disproportionate lack of new positions coupled with the explosion of the scholar-official class.

This political factionalism and stagnation would have devastating implications for the Song military. Contrasting the Song military system with that of the sage-kings, Wang Anshi writes

[Of old]... those scholars who had learned the way of the ancient kings and whose behavior and character had won the approval of their village communities were the ones entrusted with the duty

¹⁹ Sima Guang, "A Petition to Do Away with the Most Harmful of the New Laws," in *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, vol.1, 1st ed., Wm. Theodore de Bary, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 324-325.

²⁰ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 3rd ed., 140.

²¹ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 2nd ed., 136.

of guarding the frontiers and the palace in accordance with their respective abilities... Today this most important responsibility in the empire... is given to those corrupt, ruthless, and unreliable men whose ability and behavior are not such that they can maintain themselves in their local villages... But as long as military training is not given, and men of a higher type are not selected for military service, there is no wonder that scholars regard the carrying of weapons as a disgrace and that none of them is able to ride, or shoot, or has any familiarity with military maneuvers.²²

Because civil servants were selected via local recommendation in ancient times, the men selected for those positions were held to a certain level of accountability by their local community in regards to both political issues and military defense. In Song China, however, there was no accountability. As a result, military strength declined to such an extent that officials could not even ride a horse and viewed possession of weapons as somehow below themselves. To combat this military impotency in the face of “the constant threat of the barbarians,”²³ Wang Anshi proposed a policy of reform whereby local communities would be placed in charge of their own defense and policing. Wang Anshi imitated the example of the sage-kings by creating a system of collective safety as well as collective responsibility wherein families were organized into units of ten, a hundred, and thousand. Within this stratified structure, the responsibility of providing able-bodied men was rotated within the community, thereby lessening the burden placed on individual families.²⁴

Despite the seeming effectiveness of Wang Anshi’s militia reform, Sima Guang ridiculed his policies, emphasizing the economic stress they placed on the poorest of society while overlooking the long-term benefits and the looming threat of the barbarians:

Besides, officials who liked to create new schemes that they might take advantage of to advance themselves suggested setting up the collective security militia system (*baojia*), horse-raising system, and the horse-care system as a means of providing for the military establishment. They changed the regulations governing the tea, salt, iron, and other monopolies and increased the taxes on family property, on [buildings] encroaching on the street, on business and so forth, in order to meet military expenses. The result was to cause the people of the nine provinces to lose their livelihood and suffer extreme distress, as if they had been cast into hot water and fire. All this happened because the great body of officials were so eager to advance themselves. They misled

²² Wang Anshi, “Memorial to Emperor Renzong,” 321.

²³ *Ibid.*, 319.

²⁴ *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, 317.

the emperor and saw to it that they themselves derived all the profit from these schemes while the emperor incurred all the resentment.²⁵

Sima Guang clearly sees the strengthening of the military and the threat of the barbarians to be an illegitimate concern—certainly not one immediate and severe enough to warrant undue taxation on lower classes. Thus, he chooses to emphasize these burdens at the expense of Song military fortitude. Worse, still, he portrays Wang Anshi’s sincere attempts at economic and military reform as a devious scheme to advance himself, to increase his own wealth, and to smear the “paternal affection”²⁶ of the emperor. With the death of Emperor Shenzong, Wang Anshi’s patron (named in the documents as Emperor Renzong), Sima Guang abolished many of his reform policies.²⁷ Clearly, the civil service examination produced no Sun Tzus, much less men capable of riding a horse. Worse still, political factionalism hindered any chance of military reform. Thus, political impotency resulted in military impotency.

This military impotency would prove fatal to Song China. In 1118, Emperor Huizong’s most revered general, Tong Guan, proposed that the Song seek a military alliance with the Jin against the northern state of Liao. After seeing the Song army’s pitiable performance in the campaign against Liao, Jin realized that Song could be easily conquered. In 1127, Jin besieged Kaifeng and took thousands captive, including Emperor Huizong. Gaozong, one of Emperor Huizong’s sons who was not in Kaifeng at the time of the siege, retreated to the south, which had never been held by forces from the steppe—until the Mongols. There, he set up a capital at Hangzhou, well south of the Yangzi, and proclaimed himself Emperor of the Southern Song.²⁸

²⁵ Sima Guang, “A Petition to Do Away with the Most Harmful of the New Laws,” 325.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, 324.

²⁸ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 2nd ed., 137-139.

Despite the warning offered by the fall of Northern Song, Southern Song could not repair its political division and military impotency in time to defend against the coming onslaught of the Mongols. The Southern Song was well aware of the Mongols' conquests of the Northern Song in 1234 and began raising revenues and preparing its armies for war.²⁹ Yet the same problems which had plagued Song bureaucracy before the fall of the Northern Song seemed to be affecting the Southern Song just prior to Mongol conquest. For instance, Song generals were willing to fight until the very end, but they lacked capable leadership. The emperor was merely a child. And the advisors to the empress dowager wasted their energy opposing each other's plans, reflecting the political factionalism and obstructionism present in Song bureaucracy some two centuries before. By the time the Mongol forces had crossed the Yangzi, the empress dowager resorted to calling upon the people to raise arms—but they were no match for the expert Mongol soldiers.³⁰

The Mongols: Pastoralist-Nomads-Turned-Empire-Builders?

In this vivid account, Marco Polo describes the military prowess and nearly inhuman endurance of the Mongols:

They are brave in battle, almost to desperation, setting little value upon their lives, and exposing themselves without hesitation to all manner of danger. Their disposition is cruel. They are capable of supporting every kind of privation, and when there is a necessity for it, can live for a month on the milk of their mares, and upon such wild animals as they may chance to catch. The men are habituated to remain on horseback during two days and two nights, without dismounting, sleeping in that situation whilst their horses graze. No people on earth can surpass them in fortitude under difficulties, nor show greater patience under wants of every kind.³¹

When juxtaposed with Wang Anshi's account of the eleventh century Song military, the stark contrast between Song military impotency and Mongol military prowess is almost comical.

²⁹ Ebrey *et al.*, *Pre-Modern East Asia*, 2nd ed., 196.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

³¹ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, in *Pre-Modern East Asia, to 1800: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*, Ebrey *et al.*, 2nd ed. (USA: Cengage Learning, 2009), 163.

Whereas Song officials are incapable of riding a horse, the Mongols are accustomed to staying mounted for two consecutive days. Moreover, the Mongols are more accustomed to living off the land, and as a result, can endure longer on fewer supplies than the feeble Song armies. In addition, the Mongols utilized psychological warfare by terrorizing their victims with their “cruel” dispositions and leaving a trail of complete destruction in their wake, as described in Yuan Haowen’s “Crossing of the Yellow River, June 12.”³²

While some historians have long considered the Mongols “more effective conquerors than governors”³³ due to their rather “uncivilized” nomadic-pastoralist lifeways, archaeologists William Honeychurch and Chunag Amartuvshin argue that it was precisely those lifeways which made them effective governors over a vast empire.³⁴ Because the Mongols were “natural soldiers,” a result of their nomadic lifeways which allowed them to develop individual combat skills early in life, social organization was inherently connected to military organization. Since the Xiongnu, the steppes peoples had utilized a decimal system of organizing armies which were connected to tribal units. In the thirteenth century, Chinggis Khan revolutionized these military units by disconnecting them from the tribal units, thus creating a Mongol army that was loyal solely to him.³⁵

Horse-riding not only made the Mongols formidable militarily; it also served as the basis of their nomadic lifestyle, which in turn transformed them into deft coordinators of people and resources over vast distances.³⁶ For instance, Marco Polo describes the highways and more than ten thousand postal stations established by the Mongol Khans for travel and communication. The

³² Yuan Haowen, “Crossing the Yellow River, June 12,” 196.

³³ Paul Jakov Smith, “Eurasian Transformations of the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: The View from Song China, 960-1279.” *Medieval Encounters* 10, no. 1-3 (2004): 303.

³⁴ Honeychurch and Amartuvshin, “States on Horseback,” 275.

³⁵ Michal Biran, “The Mongol Transformation: From the Steppe to Eurasian Empire,” 341-342, 346.

³⁶ Honeychurch and Amartuvshin, “States on Horseback,” 262.

stations were arranged every twenty-five to thirty miles, and together, they maintained more than 300,000 horses for the sole use of the messengers. The Khan also employed foot messengers, who wore a wide belt and jingling bells to signal their arrival. Each foot messenger ran three miles to the next post, and relayed his message to the next runner, and so on and so forth. Thus, “in this way the Emperor, who has an immense number of these runners, receives despatches with news from places ten days’ journey off in one day and night; or, if need be, news from a hundred days off in ten days and nights; and that is no small matter!”³⁷ In a time before cell phones, email, and telegram, the speed of communication across a vast empire translated into formidable political and military power. Marco Polo’s astonishment at the efficiency of Mongol postal stations reveals their superiority to contemporary European communication networks—an efficiency developed, naturally, by nomads.

Marco Polo’s account of Khubilai Khan’s palace also provides an excellent example of the Mongol’s ability to organize resources over vast distances. The palace, expansive, grandiose, and “the greatest palace that ever was,”³⁸ stands as a testament to the Mongols’ ability to assemble materials and workers, particularly artisans who no doubt colored the roof “with vermilion and yellow and green and blue and other hues, which are fixed with a varnish so fine and exquisite that they shine like crystal, and lend a resplendent lustre to the Palace as seen for a great way round.”³⁹ The palace also had a peculiar featured called the Green Mount:

This hill is entirely covered with trees that never lose their leaves, but remain ever green. And I assure you that wherever a beautiful tree may exist, and the Emperor gets news of it, he sends for it and has it transported bodily with all its roots and the earth attached to them, and planted on that hill of his. No matter how big the tree may be, he gets it carried by his elephants; and in this way he has got together the most beautiful collection of trees in all the world.⁴⁰

³⁷ Marco Polo, “How the Kaan’s Posts and Runners are Spread through Many Lands and Provinces,” in *The Mongols in World History: Asia for Educators*. Translated by Colonel Sir Henry Yule, (Columbia University, 2004).

³⁸ Marco Polo, “Concerning the Palace of the Great Kaan,” in *The Mongols in World History: Asia for Educators*. Translated by Colonel Sir Henry Yule, (Columbia University, 2004).

³⁹ Marco Polo, “Concerning the Palace of the Great Kaan.”

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Here, Marco Polo himself is astounded at the Mongols' ability to wrest materials from the furthest reaches of the empire, such that Khubilai Khan could, supposedly, assemble his own nursery of exotic trees and transport them no matter their size.

Furthermore, the ability to engage in long-distance interactions and exchanges necessitated that the Mongols become adept at managing diverse peoples, languages, and cultures.⁴¹ For example, in his "Letter to the Minister General of the Friars Minor in Rome," John of Monte Corvino explains how he presented a letter from the Pope to the Khan and

invited him to adopt the Catholic faith of our Lord Jesus Christ; but he had grown too old in idolatry. However, he bestows many kindnesses upon the Christians, and these two years past I am abiding with him. I have built a church in the city of Peking, in which the king has his chief residence. This I completed six years ago; and I have built a bell-tower to it and put three bells in it. I have baptized there, as well as I can estimate, up to this time some six thousand persons.⁴²

Not only was John of Monte Corvino tolerated by the Khan, but he was even permitted to proselytize and build a church in Peking. Furthermore, his conversion of six thousand people, as he claimed, demonstrates that the Mongol Empire was both open to different faiths and provided a reservoir of possible converts to the major world religions, allowing missionaries like Corvino to travel through Inner and East Asia.

The Mongols were able to follow and exploit the example of previous empires like the Xiongnu which had developed methods of legitimization for the creation and endurance of super-tribal confederations despite the tendency towards factionalism. The belief in *Tengi*, the supreme sky god of the steppe who was able to grant the right to rule to one clan, formed the basis of super-tribal unity (similarly to China's concept of *tianming*).⁴³ The concern for legitimization also influenced the placement of the Mongol capital, Kharkhorum, in the Orkhon

⁴¹ Honeychurch and Amartuvshin, "States on Horseback," 262.

⁴² John of Monte Corvino, "Letter to the Minister General of the Friars Minor in Rome," in *Internet Medieval Source Book*, Jerome S. Arkenberg, (Fordham University, 1998).

⁴³ Michal Biran, "The Mongol Transformation: From the Steppe to Eurasian Empire," 340.

river valley of central Mongolia. The river valley itself provided key access to trade routes throughout Mongolia. More importantly, the valley had been the site of many Turkic monuments as well as the Uigher capital, Ordu Balik.⁴⁴ Historical documents recount the great lengths to which Mongol advisors researched the geography of the river valley in selecting a site for Kharkhorum. In fact, the Turkic elite once declared that the Orkhon river valley was the only place from which the steppes peoples could be consolidated.⁴⁵ Thus, constructing the capital there appropriated the traditional authority associated with previous polities and exploited the nexus of long-distance routes throughout northeastern Mongolia.

While some scholars have contended that Kharkhorum was a dependent capital, due to its low infrastructure and productivity, archaeologists have argued that its large population and significant investment in infrastructure necessitated massive transportation of resources from the periphery of the empire to the core—a process that could only be effectively executed by nomads with considerable experience in mobility.⁴⁶ For an analogous example, Marco Polo describes the city of Cambaluc, or modern Beijing and the capital of the Yuan Dynasty, as having “such a multitude of houses, and such a vast population inside the walls and outside, that it seems quite past all possibility.”⁴⁷ Besides the booming population, the city housed many “foreign merchants and travellers, of whom there are always great numbers who have come to bring presents to the Emperor, or to sell articles at Court, or because the city affords so good a mart to attract traders.”⁴⁸ In describing the thriving trade at Cambaluc, Marco Polo writes

To this city also are brought articles of greater cost and rarity, and in greater abundance of all kinds, than to any other city in the world. For people of every description, and from every region,

⁴⁴ Honeychurch and Amartuvshin, “States on Horseback,” 270.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁴⁷ Marco Polo, “Concerning the City of Cambaluc and its Great Traffic and Population,” in *The Mongols in World History: Asia for Educators*. Translated by Colonel Sir Henry Yule, (Columbia University, 2004).

⁴⁸ Marco Polo, “Concerning the City of Cambaluc and its Great Traffic and Population.”

bring things (including all the costly wares of India, as well as the fine and precious goods of Cathay itself with its provinces)...⁴⁹

Thus, Cambaluc is an excellent example of both the Mongols' appreciation for merchants and commercial trade and their skills of encouraging and maintaining long-distance trade networks. Certainly, Cambaluc does not reflect a dependent political or economic center governed by inept pastoralists. Instead, it demonstrates how the Mongols were able to draw on their experiences as nomads and organize a flourishing trade network which linked the periphery of the empire to the core. And while the Mongols designed their capitals using sedentary models of urban and political centers, they did not manage their capitals in the same way as sedentary societies. In contrast to sedentary civilizations which had to learn to manage space as they expanded, the Mongols already had an intimate understanding of space, distance, and mobility. Thus, they used their capitals not as political centers but as tethering points for the mobile court.⁵⁰

In addition to political centers, the Mongols also established ceremonial centers wherein the Mongol khans ritually legitimized their power and subverted the tendency towards factionalism. An excellent example is the site of Avargyn Balgas. Radio-carbon dating shows that the site was in use from the twelfth through the fourteenth century, and historical documents indicate that it was one of the earliest settlements of the Mongols. Excavations conducted in 2003 revealed evidence for a shift in faunal assemblages from largely subsistence-based to consisting primarily of ritual horse bones, indicating a shift from an administrative center to a ceremonial center. This material evidence seems to parallel historical documents describing ritual offerings which Mongol khans would conduct annually at important sites in their ancestral

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Honeychurch and Amartuvshin, "States on Horseback," 271.

homeland.⁵¹ Marco Polo provides a textual example of such rituals which served to unify the Mongols under the leadership of the khan:

It has been an invariable custom that all the grand khans and chiefs of the race of Chingis-khan should be carried for internment to a certain lofty mountain named Altai, and in whatever place they may happen to die, even if it should be at the distance of a hundred days' journey, they are nevertheless conveyed there. It is likewise the custom, during the progress of removing the bodies of these princes, for those who form the escort to sacrifice such persons as they chance to meet on the road, saying to them, "Depart for the next world, and there attend upon your deceased master," believing that all they kill do actually become his servants in the next life. They do the same also with respect to horses, killing the best of the stud, in order that he may have the use of them.⁵²

The Altai Mountains no doubt had ritual significance to the steppes people, which the Mongols appropriated to lend themselves a degree of ritual power and political legitimacy. Also, the tremendous effort necessary to transport the body of the deceased khan to the Altai and to perform the sacrifices would have required a significant organization of labor and served to unify the people, further exercising the Mongols' ability to organize human and material resources across vast distances. Moreover, the ritual would have served to reinforce and legitimize the line of Chinggis Khan, who was himself buried in the Altai Mountains.⁵³ It is interesting to note, too, that Marco Polo's description of the sacrificial horses seems to correspond nicely to the material evidence of ritual horse bones excavated at Avargyn Balgas. The importance of horses to the Mongols' nomadic-pastoralist lifeways would have served to elevate them as ritual symbols.

In describing Chinggis Khan, the infamous unifier of the Mongol people, Marco Polo writes that he was

one of approved integrity, great wisdom, commanding eloquence, and eminent for his valor. He began his reign with so much justice and moderation, that he was beloved and revered as their deity rather than their sovereign; and as the fame of his great and good qualities spread over that part of the world, all the Tartars, however dispersed, placed themselves under his command.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 269-270.

⁵² Marco Polo, *On the Tartars*, in *Internet Medieval Source Book*, Paul Falsall, (Fordham University, 1996).

⁵³ Marco Polo, *On the Tartars*.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Relying on the accounts of the Mongol elite during the reign of Khubilai Khan, Marco Polo exalts and even deifies the Great Khan, portraying him as a benevolent conqueror, whose subjects were pleased and even eager to be ruled by him. In reality, the centralizing campaign pursued by Chinggis Khan was much more difficult given that the steppes peoples were prone to factionalism, a tendency resulting from both their wide geographic dispersal as well as their capability for forceful resistance.⁵⁵ Even so, Chinggis Khan was able to draw on the precedents of the Eurasian steppes polities before him to overcome this tendency towards factionalism and establish the largest contiguous land-based empire in history.

A Consequence of Timing

Although the Mongols are often portrayed as the scourge of the earth (usually by the sedentary societies they conquered), their empire had many lasting achievements, the most important of which was the intensified integration between East and West. The Mongols themselves were certainly not passive in this regard and actively encouraged intercultural exchange. Due to their low population density, human capital was just as important in Mongol conquests as territorial expansion. Finding themselves wanting of specialists and artisans, they redistributed these individuals all over the empire, generating proliferous intercultural exchanges.⁵⁶ Just as prosperous was the Mongols' encouragement of international trade, which they facilitated by developing infrastructure along important trade routes and funding early joint-stock companies called *ortogh*.⁵⁷ In the field of religion, too, the Mongols promoted integration, and even provided a reservoir of possible converts to the major world religions.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ William Honeychurch and Chunag Amartuvshin. "States on Horseback," 261.

⁵⁶ Michal Biran, "The Mongol Transformation: From the Steppe to Eurasian Empire," 341

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

But most significantly, the Mongols developed efficient methods of ruling an empire.⁵⁹ While this insight was not overlooked by their successors, somehow it was lost by recent scholarship, which tends to view the Mongols as an historical anomaly. How else could scholars explain this surprising success story of nomadic-pastoralists-turned-empire-builders? Unfortunately, history is often written from the perspective of sedentary agriculturalists who tend to demean less centralized societies. Thankfully, current scholarship is attempting to investigate alternate models of empire-building which include mobility and lack established urban centers. And though their empire may have only lasted a few centuries, the astounding accomplishments of the Mongols should not be overlooked.

But what of Song China? Although impressive, the Mongol method of empire building does not explain by itself how Song China fell to the Mongols. For that, one must turn to Song China itself. The picture that emerges of Song China from the eleventh through the thirteenth century is one of mounting pressures produced by a flawed examination system which incited and exacerbated political factionalism. In turn, this political factionalism stagnated the political process, effectively impeding any chance of meaningful reform. Unable to reform the military system, Song China remained militarily impotent. Even after the invasion of the Jurchens in 1127 which split the empire into Northern and Southern halves, the stagnant Southern Song political situation was apparently too far gone to strengthen its military and to fortify its borders. Militarily vulnerable and in dire need of a political overhaul, the Southern Song fell to the Mongols in 1279. Indeed, this conquest may have been the overhaul that Song China so desperately needed, and perhaps it was not—over the long-term—the disaster which “Crossing the Yellow River, June 12” initially portrays it to be.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 360.

⁶⁰ Yuan Haowen, “Crossing the Yellow River, June 12,” 196.

Most basically, the Mongol conquest of Song China was a consequence of timing. Just as the Mongols were building a astonishingly successful empire based on the models of Eurasian Steppe polities and their nomadic mastery of distance, Song China was growing ever weaker, both politically and militarily. What the Mongols conquered in 1279 was not a thriving state of Southern Song; one could hardly even consider it “surviving.” Instead, what they conquered was the shadow of a state that had ceased to function effectively two centuries before but which had continued to exist in a stagnant political straightjacket. Unable—or unwilling—to initiate meaningful reform, Song China sat like the proverbial duck, hands tied, awaiting conquest by the next military power which could claim it. Who could have suspected that this power would be a confederation of “barbarian” nomads from the steppes?

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