Qaraqorum's Afterlife: Centres and Peripheries in the late Yuan and early Ming Periods

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Abstract: The capital of the Mongol Empire, due to its favourable location, was not only the symbolic centre of power for the medieval Mongols, but also performed several key functions in the political, economic, and military administration of the empire. Throughout the thirteenth century, and even after the city's decline in the fourteenth century, its strategic and ideological value remained undisputed. Control of the region around Qaraqorum, therefore, became a prerogative for all those who wanted to dominate the Yuan territories and claim the legacy of the Mongol empire. By examining some Chinese sources of the period, the article shows how shaping a linkage with Mongolia, in terms of symbolic geography as well as words of power, remained a fundamental priority of the emperors ruling over East Asia well beyond the mid-fourteenth century and the end of the Yuan dynasty.

Keywords: Tuq Temür, Yuan Dynasty, principle of collegiality, Qaraqorum, Inner Asian frontier

Introduction

Among the few medieval sources on Qaraqorum, a notable commemoration of the city is to be found in the words of the Yuan scholar Xu Youren 許有任 (1286–1364), who had been commissioned to celebrate the city in a stele inscription dating from 1346:

> "As for the place where Our Dynasty arose, it towers above the myriad states. […] From the Han down there has been none comparable to us.' In establishing the capital at Helin 和林 [Qorum] the foundation for creating a state was set up."[1]

The stele in question not only retraces the history of the medieval capital since its foundation under Chinggis Qan (r. 1206-1227) in 1220 and fortification under Ögödei (r. 1229–1241), but also bears witness to the uninterrupted interest that the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368) took in this territory, even after the city was affected by various disputes in the context of intra-Mongol conflicts and struggles for power.[2]

[1] The text is recorded in three collections, for details see: F. W. Cleaves, "The Sino-Mongolian Inscription of 1346." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol. 15, 1/2 (June 1952), 1-123. The translation is a slightly modified version of Cleaves' translation: F. W. Cleaves, "Inscription of 1346", p. 31.

[2] For a recent overview of the structural development of the city across these various periods, see: S. Reichert, *A layered history of Karakorum: stratigraphy and periodization in the city center*, Bonn Contributions to Asian Archaeology 8 (Bonn: Vfgarch, 2019).

The capital, due to its favourable position, was the symbolic centre of power for the imperial Mongols, and also performed several fundamental functions in the framework of the political, economic and military administration of the empire. Accounts from the period of the United Mongol Empire (1206–1259) testify famously to Qaraqorum and its surrounding area as being a place for diplomatic encounters, and for the gathering of artisans and craftsmen from all over the empire.[3] Additionally, as Dardess has shown, the city served as a strategic point for revenue collection, and for managing military activities in the steppe region.[4] Qaraqorum, as well as other court towns across the empire, constituted in fact a specific layer in the tripartite division of the imperial space: a layer which served to facilitate communication between the conquered sedentary areas and the steppe region where the imperial elite and its military forces resided, as well as gathering and redistributing resources within the empire.[5]

The attention towards the administration of Qaraqorum remained an imperial prerogative throughout the course of the Yuan period. The *Yuanshi* 元史 (*History of the Yuan Dynasty*, presented in 1370) records that still in the 14th century, and especially after the Branch Central Secretariat for Qaraqorum and other areas (*Helin deng chu xing zhongshu sheng* 和林等處行中書省) was established in 1307,[6] high ranking officials were appointed to the supervision of the area as a reward for their meritorious services and due to the skill that they (and their ancestors) had shown in the service of the state.[7] Similarly, during the 14th century, several attempts to optimize the administration of the region were made, and this period also witnessed structural changes to the city.[8]

These measures show the imperial elite's constant attention toward this city and the surrounding region, something which didn't end with the Yuan dynasty, but remained a crucial feature also of Ming policies.

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[3] See, among others, the famous account by William of Rubruck (fl. 1248–1255) translated in: P. Jackson and D. Morgan (eds.): *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: his journey to the Great Khan Möngke*. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), p. 209-216. See also the "Notes on a Journey" (*jixing* 紀行) by Zhang Dehui 張德輝 (1195-1274), recently translated by Ch. Atwood, *The Rise of the Mongols: Five Chinese sources* (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing, 2021), p. 163-176.

[4] J. W. Dardess, "From Mongol Empire to Yüan Dynasty." Monumenta Serica 30 (1972–1973), 117–65, esp. p. 118.

[5] J. W. Dardess "From Mongol Empire", p. 121.

[6] Song Lian 宋濂, *Yuanshi* 元史 (repr. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), *juan* 58: 1383.

[7] Notable examples are the high officials Yochichar (*Yuechicha'er* 月赤察兒, 1249–1311), and Harqasun (*Halahasun* 哈剌哈孫, 1257–1308). The *Yuanshi* biography of Yochichar records that emperor Wuzong 武宗 (Qaishan, r. 1307-1311), on occasion of the establishment of the branch secretariat for Helin [Qorum] and other areas, appointed Yochichar as Right Minister, to reward his loyalty and meritorious service to the state. See: *Yuanshi* 119: 2952. The *Yuanshi* biography of Harghasun also provides some data on the economic aspects of this prestigious position: see *Yuanshi* 136: 3294.

[8] The *Yuanshi* (*juan* 16: 3909) testifies to the strong military relevance of Qaraqorum at the eve of Temür's (Emperor Chengzong 成宗, r. 1294-1307) reign. See also the relevant section on imperial geography in: *Yuanshi* 58: 1382-3, translated in: F.W. Cleaves, "Inscription of 1346", p. 25. For a recent study on the development of the city see: S. Reichert, *A layered history.*

The Early Ming

Given the military confrontations with the remnants of the Yuan dynasty, engagement with the steppe region and the area around Qaraqorum was a priority also for the early Ming emperors. The *Mingshi* 明史 (*History of the Ming Dynasty*, submitted 1739) records various measures adopted for a better control of the territory.[9] The interest toward the border region around Qaraqorum was only part of a general preoccupation of the Ming (1368–1644) with the legacy of the Yuan. Recent scholarship has in fact underlined how the Ming dynasty capitalized on Mongol Yuan ideology and imperial dynamics in establishing their rule over East Asia and seeking their place within broader Eurasian dynamics. This went from adopting Yuan administrative divisions and the famous postal system up to the inclusion of Mongolian and Inner Asian officials in the administrative elites of the Ming.[10] However, the context in which the Ming borrowed the most from the Mongols was in their display of royal ideology. It is specifically in the way that they portrayed their imperial mandate and legitimacy that the Ming declared themselves successors of the Mongols not only in East Asia, but also more generally in Eurasian terms. This profoundly shaped the diplomatic language and royal image of the Ming emperors.[11]

Recently Christopher Eirkson has brought forth the debate by showing how the Ming's efforts to portray themselves as successors of the Yuan influenced their representation of geography as well as their attitude towards the steppe region. [12] Not only did early Ming geographical representations, such as the *Amalgamated Map* (*Da Ming Hunyi Tu*大明混一圖, 1389), reflect an image of Eurasia that had been moulded on Yuan cartographic precedents – thus breaking with previous Song (960–1276) conventions – but they were peculiar also because they didn't show fortifications at the frontier with Inner Asia. This seems to contrast with the frequent military interactions of the Ming with the Northern Yuan dynasty in the steppe region, due to which fortifications would have been valuable information to display on a map.[13] Instead, the lack of defined boundaries in the representation of this space testifies, so

[9] Relevant passages are collected and analysed in: Dalizhabu 达力扎布, "*Bei Yuan chuqi de jiangyu he han wo'erduo diwang*北元初期的疆域和汗斡耳朵地望" [The Territorial Extent of the Early Northern Yuan and the Location of the Khan's Court], *Menggushi yanjiu*蒙古史研究, vol. 3 (1989), p. 88-107.

[10] Notable studies on the topic are by: M. Rossabi ed., *Eurasian Influences on Yuan China* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013); D. M. Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire: Ming China and Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Hosung Shim, "The Postal Roads of the Great Khans in Central Asia under the Mongol-Yuan Empire." *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 44 (2014), 405-69. For Inner Asian elites at the service of the Ming see, among others, J. S. Lotze, *Translation of Empire: Mongol Legacy, Language Policy, and the early Ming World Order, 1368-1453*, PhD Dissertation, University of Manchester, 2016.

[11] On this, see among others David Robinson's analysis of what he calls the Ming "Chinggisid Narrative" in: D. Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire*, p. 129-157.

[12] Ch. Erikson, "Early Ming Imperial Ambitions: The Legacy of the Mongol Yuan in Spatial Representations and Historical Judgements." *Frontiers of History in China* Vol. 12/3 (2017), 465-84.

[13] Ch. Erikson, "Early Ming Imperial Ambitions", p. 471.

Eirkson, to "a rhetorical desire for an extension of Ming authority over a strategically troublesome area."[14] This desire was framed rhetorically also in the traditional terms of orthodox succession (*zhengtong* 正统) at the inception of the Ming period. A relevant document in this regard is the proclamation of the Hongwu 洪武 Emperor (r. 1368–1398), stating that:

> "The Hu [胡] who established the Yuan arose from the desert and in a short time amalgamated China with the whole world (中國混一海內). At the founding of the country the assisting officials were nearly all illustrious and influential. Thus, government was harmonious and ordered. [But] petty men accumulated power and craftily competed for advancement; they selected relatives and friends for positions and produced cliques. Officials at home and abroad (中外百司) were avaricious and without shame. Because of this, moral standards became daily weaker and there was no more discipline (the legal code lacked vitality). Finally, as a result, [the dynasty] collapsed – soldiers could not save it."[15]

Beyond the common cliché on the Yuan dynasty originating from the steppe region,[16] two elements are noteworthy here, namely the representation of the empire in terms of "home and abroad" (*zhongwai* 中外), and the stress on administrative elites as important agents in shaping the destiny of the empire. Further, the spatial representation of the empire links, in a relation of complementarity, the affairs of China with the situation outside of the Middle Kingdom: here one could probably see a reference to Inner Asia and Inner Asian elites. These elements are strikingly reminiscent of the rhetoric appearing in Yuan edicts from the mid-Yuan period, and more specifically from the period of Tuq Temür (the Wenzong文宗 Emperor, r. 1328–1332), to which we shall now turn our attention.

Tuq Temür's Centers and Peripheries

Tuq Temür's ascension to the throne was famously one of the moments in Yuan history when the relation with Inner Asia played a fundamental role in legitimizing imperial decisions. The restoration of the line of Qaishan (Emperor Wuzong 武宗, r. 1307-1311) to the throne, following one of the bloodiest civil wars in Yuan history, had witnessed Inner Asian princes supporting the enthronement of Tuq Temür's brother,

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[14] Ch. Erikson, "Early Ming Imperial Ambitions", p. 473.

[15] 元本胡人起自沙漠一旦據有中國混一海內建國之初輔弼之臣率皆賢達進用者又皆君子. 是以政治翕然可觀及其後也小人擅權.奸邪競進舉用親舊結為朋黨中外百司貪婪無話.由是法度日弛紀綱不振至于土崩瓦解卒不可救. *Ming shilu* 明實錄 [Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty], Hongwu 洪武, *juan* 15: 211 (ed. Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo中央研究院 歷史語言研究所), (accessed via Scripta Sinica, August 2021 at: http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/mqlc/hanjishilu?25:1849185162:10:/raid/ihp_ebook2/hanji/ttsweb.ini:::@SPAWN#top). The English translation is by Ch. Erikson, "Early Ming Imperial Ambitions", p. 477.

[16] This same *topos* appears, for example, also in the "Memorial for submitting the *Yuanshi*" (*Jin Yuanshi biao* 進元史表), in: *Yuanshi* 15: 4673. It has been translated in: F. W. Cleaves, "The Memorial for Presenting the Yuan Shih." *Asia Major* 1 (1988), 59–69 at p. 61-62.

Qoshila (Emperor Mingzong 明宗, r. 1329), something on which the future emperor Wenzong wanted to capitalize after his own enthronement.[17] His political manifesto is recorded in the edict known as the "Pacification of Dawlat Shah" (*ping Daolasha* 平倒剌沙), which states:

> "Our Great Ancestor [Taizu 太祖, i.e. Chinggis Qan], the Emperor, initiated the Empire. The Generation Founder (*Shizu*世祖, i.e. Qubilai), the Emperor, unified everything within the oceans, thereupon he established the practices which served as the threads of the Great Unity（混一海宇爰立定制以一統緒）. […] The powerful ministers Dawlat Shah and Ubaydullah usurped authority for their own interests, drifted apart from the old Mongol families（疏遠勳舊）, discarded the loyal and virtuous [i.e. Han officials]（廢棄忠良）, brought chaos into the laws of the ancestors（變亂祖宗法度）, emptied the government repositories for the benefit of their own kind [⋯] These are the crimes of Dawlat Shah. Inside and outside the administration, a similar rage, a common intention（於縣宇中外同心）: to withstand the enemy with courage and determination [⋯], to return to the institutions of the sacred ancestors, and to pacify everything within the Four Seas（安四海）.[18]

This edict shares some similarities with the words of the Hongwu Emperor mentioned above. The claims of universality (in reference to Qubilai's enterprise) are here expressed likewise in terms of "inside and outside (the administration)" (*zhongwai* 中外), indicating that the affairs of the Yuan empire were connected to and influenced by the dynamics of Inner Asia. Another example of this is to be found in a further edict of Tuq Temür, stating that:

> "And you, my local and foreign, high- and low-ranking subjects, investigate, each of you, your heart, and you will find my intention."[19]

These passages show how the imperial enterprise of the Yuan dynasty is perceived as a joint effort of the emperor with the support of elite members and officials from China and from outside. The intentions of high- and low-ranking subjects are not only the reason why dynasties may decay, but they are called upon, in this instance, as the necessary force to build Tuq Temür's new reign. Further, in this passage, the "outside" (*wai* 外) can be variously interpreted: on the one hand it might be a nod to the military elites headed by the Qipchaq general El Temür (d. 1333) and the Mongol Bayan of the Merkid (d. 1340), masterminds behind the coup leading to

[17] Further details in: Hsiao Ch'i-Ch'ing "Mid-Yüan China.", in *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 6. Alien Regimes and Border States 907-1386*, eds. D. Twitchett and J. K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 490-560, p.545-547.

[18] Zhao Shiyan 趙世延 and Yu Ji 虞集 (auth.), Zhou Shaochuan 周少川,Wei Xuntian, 魏訓田, Xie Hui 謝輝 (eds.), *Jingshi dadian jijiao* 經世大典輯校 [*Critical edition of the Compendium for Governing the World*], (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), vol. 2, p. 331-332.

[19] 亦惟爾中外大小之臣，各究乃心，以稱朕意，*Yuanshi* 33: 738.

Tuq Temür's enthronement.[20] On the other hand, it might be a nod to those members of the Mongol imperial house who ruled over Central Asia, and who supported the restoration on the imperial throne of the line of Qaishan. In any case, it is evident that Yuan emperors looked at Inner Asian dynamics as a determining factor in Chinese affairs and considered the two territories as two facets of the same imperial mandate. The shared responsibility of emperor and officials in shaping the destiny of the state is an idea which reminds us of the "principle of collegiality", a leading decision-making principle in the political and legal history of the medieval Mongols.[21] A similar notion is traceable in Yuan edicts already from the period of Qubilai (r. 1260-1294). One example is his edict directed at the kingdom of Annam in 1261:

> "We recall that You had already submitted under the previous ruler and sent local products as tribute. Therefore We issued an imperial decree, and We sent the Director of the Ministry of Rites in the capacity of special appointee for the South, Meng Jia 孟甲, and the Vice-director of the Ministry of Rites Li Wenjun 李文俊 as his deputy, to proclaim to the scholars, officials and common people of Your reign (本國官僚士庶) that in the matter of uniforms and caps, ceremonies and customs everything will remain as before, there will be no change."[22]

It is clear from Qubilai's words that acknowledging the imperial mandate of the Mongols - and contributing to their imperial project - is a collective responsibility of all subjects of the empire: not only rulers have to submit, but also the various individuals and communities under them are called to actively contribute to the Mongol imperial enterprise.

Conclusion

The few documents addressed here are useful to reframe some aspects of Mongol Yuan and East Asian history. First of all, they show that Mongol political traditions and symbols remained fundamental tools of legitimation also in the mid- and late Yuan periods. Tuq Temür acted very much like a Eurasian ruler rather than simply as a "Confucian" or "confucianised" one, as scholarship traditionally tended to portray him.[23]

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[20] For details see: Hsiao Ch'i-Ch'ing "Mid-Yüan China.", p. 541-545.

[21] For the "principle of collegiality" see: F. Hodous, "The *Quriltai* as a Legal Institution in the Mongol Empire." Central Asiatic Journal 56 (2012/2013), 87-102. Endicott-West phrases it as "consultative tradition", see E. Endicott-West, *Mongolian rule in China: Local Administration in the Yuan Dynasty* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 54.

[22] 及念卿在先朝已歸款臣附，遠貢方物，故頒詔旨，遣禮部郎中孟甲充安南宣諭使，禮部員外郎李文俊充副使，諭本國官僚、士庶：凡衣冠、典禮、風俗百事，一依本國舊例，不須更改. Lê Tắc 黎崱, *Annan zhilüe* 安南志略 [*Concise Records of Annam*], ed. by Wu Shangqing; 武尚清, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), *juan* 2: 46.

[23] See for example J. W. Dardess, *Conquerors and Confucians: Aspects of Political Change in Late Yüan China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973). p. 31-51.

Moreover, Mongol rule in China linked the destiny of the Middle Kingdom to Inner Asian dynamics, conventions, and ideology in an unprecedented way, and one that shaped imperial rhetoric and policies for centuries. Since the foundation of the Yuan dynasty, in fact, the way in which the imperial space and the imperial project were spoken about changed. As China became an integral part of Eurasia, new formulations of the idea of universal empire entered Yuan edicts and imperial propaganda. The founder of the dynasty, Qubilai, referred to his government using metaphors of universality and equality: his edicts portray an empire in which "near and distant [subjects] are looked upon with equal benevolence" (*yishi tongren* 一视同仁).[24] After decades of intra-Mongol conflicts across Eurasia, however, the image of the empire started to be expressed in terms of complementarity, of "inside and outside" (*zhongwai* 中外). This rhetoric was then adopted by the Ming, together with the idea and principle of a collective duty towards shaping the imperial destiny. The Mongol principle of collegiality, which had been integrated in the administrative system for decades throughout the Yuan period, remained a functional device for the Ming rulers too, as they strove to build their empire by including various Mongol and Central Asian elites in the administrative ranks of China.

Thus, from the Yuan period onwards, the emperors of the Middle Kingdom were never ever solely emperors of China: they had inevitably to come to terms with their position as the successors of the Mongol rulers of Eurasia. Qaraqorum is the symbol of this ideological shift and of a heritage which shaped further centuries of East Asian history after the Mongol period and the destruction of their imperial capital. The Qing scholar Li Wentian 李文田 (1834–1895), writing more than five hundred years after Xu Youren's compilation of the commemorative stele of 1346, testifies to that in one of his poems:

> Broken stelae cover the ground and there is no one to pick [them] up.
>
> I sigh deeply for the *hanlin*, Xu of Guitang.[25]

The traces of the place where the medieval Mongols built, hosted, and displayed the many elements of their universal empire might have quickly disappeared after the 14th century. Yet, even after Qaraqorum's decay, even after the stones broke and the inscriptions disappeared, their words remained to convey the symbolic heritage of the Mongol Empire, to build the foundation of a new understanding of the world, which shaped Eurasia for centuries to come.

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[24] See on this F. Fiaschetti, "Tradition, Innovation and the construction of Qubilai's diplomatic rhetoric", *Ming Qing Yanjiu* 18 (2014), 65-96.

[25] 殘 碑满地無 人拾，太 息圭塘評 翰林. Li Wentian 李文田, *Ti E'ren Helin tu yinben*題 俄 人 和林 圓 印 本 ["Superscribing a Printed Copy of the Russian's Helin Plates "] Text and translation in F. Cleaves, "Inscription of 1346", p. 6.