A New Look at Mongol Contributions

The Mongol era in China is remembered chiefly for the rule of Khubilai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan. Khubilai patronized painting and the theater, which experienced a golden age during the Yuan dynasty, over which the Mongols ruled. Khubilai and his successors also recruited and employed Confucian scholars and Tibetan Buddhist monks as advisers, a policy that led to many innovative ideas and the construction of new temples and monasteries.

The Mongol Khans also funded advances in medicine and astronomy throughout their domains. And their construction projects – extension of the Grand Canal in the direction of Beijing, the building of a capital city in Daidu (present-day Beijing) and of summer palaces in Shangdu (“Xanadu”) and Takht-i-Sulaiman, and the construction of a sizable network of roads and postal stations throughout their lands – promoted developments in science and engineering. Perhaps most importantly, the Mongol empire inextricably linked Europe and Asia and ushered in an era of frequent and extended contacts between East and West. And once the Mongols had achieved relative stability and order in their newly acquired domains, they neither discouraged nor impeded relations with foreigners. Though they never abandoned their claims of universal rule, they were hospitable to foreign travelers, even those whose monarchs had not submitted to them.

The Mongols also expedited and encouraged travel in the sizable section of Asia that was under their rule, permitting European merchants, craftsmen, and envoys to journey as far as China for the first time. Asian goods reached Europe along the caravan trails (earlier known as the “Silk Roads”), and the ensuing European demand for these products eventually inspired the search for a sea route to Asia. Thus, it could be said that the Mongol invasions indirectly led to Europe’s “Age of Exploration” in the 15th century.
Support for Foreign Contact and Exchange

The Mongols’ receptiveness to foreigners was a critical factor in promoting cultural exchange and a truly “global” history. Their attitude of relative openness toward foreigners and foreign influence led to an extraordinary interchange of products, people’s, technology, and science throughout the Mongol domains.

So it is no accident that Marco Polo reached China during this era. And also no accident that Ibn Battuta, the great Islamic traveler from Morocco, also reached China during this time, and that Rabban Sauma, a Nestorian Christian from the area around Beijing, reached Europe and had audiences with the kings of England and France and the Pope.

From the Mongol period on, then, we can speak about a Eurasian – if not a global – history, in which developments in one part of Europe would have an impact not only in Europe but also in Asia, with the same being true for Asia. And if we remember that Christopher Columbus was actually looking for a new route to Asia when he landed in America – and that one of the few books he had with him was Marco Polo’s account of his travels in Asia – we could even say that global history begins with the Mongols and the bridge they built between the East and the West.
Missionaries from Rome: Bridging East and West

The Mongol Era brought about the first instances of direct contact between Europe and Mongol-ruled China. The Mongol attacks on Hungary and Poland in 1241 had alerted the Europeans to the power of the Mongols and so frightened them that, in 1245, the Pope in Rome called an Ecumenical Council to deliberate on a response to the Mongols. Two Franciscan missionaries were eventually dispatched to the East.

The first, who left Europe in 1245, was John of Plano Carpini, and the second was William of Rubruck, who traveled through the Mongol domains during 1253-1255. Both sought to achieve a kind of rapprochement with the Mongols, attempting to deter them from further attacks and invasions on Europe, as well as seeking to convert them to Christianity.

The Europeans had received information that the Mongols had a leader, named “Prester John,” who had converted to Christianity. They also assumed that many of the Mongols already were Christians. In fact, some Mongol women, including Chinggis Khan’s own mother, had converted to a heretical form of Christianity known as Nestorian Christianity. The Nestorian sect had been banned from Europe from around the 5th Century C.E., but had first spread to West Asia and then reached all the way to East Asia. But the idea that the Mongols could be converted to Christianity was an illusion at best.

Nonetheless, John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck were greeted cordially at the Mongol courts. Though they succeeded in neither their religious nor diplomatic missions, they were able to bring back the first accurate accounts of the Mongols.
Mongols Support Trade, Facilitating East-West Contacts

Along with Western missionaries, traders from the West (particularly from Genoa) began to arrive in the Mongol domains, mostly in Persia and eventually farther east. The Mongols were quite receptive to this. This attitude, which facilitated contacts with West Asia and Europe, contributed to the beginning of what we could call a “global history,” or at least a Eurasian history.

The Mongols always favored trade. Their nomadic way of life caused them to recognize the importance of trade from the very earliest times and, unlike the Chinese, they had a positive attitude toward merchants and commerce.

The Confucian Chinese professed to be disdainful of trade and merchants, whom they perceived to be a parasitical group that did not produce anything and were involved only in the exchange of goods. Mongols altered that attitude and in fact sought to facilitate international trade.

In China, for example, the Mongols increased the amount of paper money in circulation and guaranteed the value of that paper money in precious metals. They also built many roads – though this was only partly to promote trade – these roads were mainly used to facilitate the Mongols’ rule over China.
Merchants under Mongolian rule

Under Mongol rule, merchants had a higher status than they had in traditional China. During their travels they could rest and secure supplies through a postal-station system that the Mongols had established.

The postal-station system was, of course, originally devised to facilitate the transmission of official mail from one part of the empire to another. Set up approximately every 20 miles along the major trade routes and stocked with supplies of food, horses, and lodging, the stations were an incredible boon to all travelers, whether they were traveling for business or otherwise. Under the Mongols, merchants also had the benefit of not being faced with confiscatory taxation, as was the case during the rule of the traditional Chinese dynasties.

Support for trade characterized not only Mongol policy in China but their policy throughout their domains. In Persia the Mongols granted higher tax breaks and benefits to traders in an effort to promote commerce. The Mongols even tried to introduce paper money into Persia – though this would become merely a failed experiment. Nonetheless, the attempt indicates the desire of the Mongols to provide additional assistance to traders.

To further support trade and commerce, the Mongols established merchant associations, known as Ortogh, specifically to promote caravan trade over long distances. The Mongols recognized that the caravan trade across Eurasia was extraordinarily expensive for any single merchant. Often there would be as many as 70 to 100 men on each mission, and all had to be fed and paid and provided with supplies (including camels, horses, and so on) over a lengthy period of time.

Quite a number of the caravans simply did not make it, either because of natural disasters of one sort or another or plundering by bandit groups. Travelers, for example, mentioned coming across numerous skeletons, animal and human, on these routes. Because of the expense involved in such a disaster, just one such failed caravan could devastate an individual merchant’s holdings.

The Mongol solution to these concerns was the establishment of Ortogh – through which merchants could pool their resources to support a single caravan. If a caravan did not make it, no single merchant would be put out of business. The losses would be shared, as would any risks, and of course, profits when the caravans succeeded. The Mongols also provided loans to merchants at relatively low rates of interest, as long as they belonged to an Ortogh.
Mongol Support of Artisans

The Mongols did not have their own artisan class in traditional times because they migrated from place to place and could not carry with them the supplies needed by artisans. They were thus dependent upon the sedentary world for crafts, and they prized artisans highly. For example, during Chinggis Khan’s attack on Samarkand, he instructed his soldiers not to harm any artisans or craftsmen. Craftsmen throughout the Mongol domains were offered tax benefits and were freed from corvée labor (unpaid labor), and their products were highly prized by the Mongol elite.

The Mongol’s extraordinary construction projects required the services of artisans, architects, and technocrats. When Ögödei, Chinggis Khan’s third son and heir, directed the building of the capital city at Khara Khorum, the first Mongol capital, or when Khubilai Khan directed the building of Shangdu (also known as “Xanadu”), his summer capital, as well as the building of the city Daidu (the modern city of Beijing), all required tremendous recruitment of foreign craftsmen and artisans.

The Mongols’ favorable attitude toward artisans benefited the Mongols themselves, and also ultimately facilitated international contact and cultural exchange. The Mongols recruited artisans from all over the known world to travel to their domains in China and Persia. Three separate weaving communities, for example, were moved from Central Asia and Persia to China because they produced a specific kind of textile – a cloth of gold – which the Mongols cherished.

Apparently some Chinese painters – or perhaps their pattern books – were sent to Persia, where they had a tremendous impact on the development of Persian miniature paintings. The dragon and phoenix motifs from China first appear in Persian art during the Mongol era. The representation of clouds, trees, and landscapes in Persian painting also owes a great deal to Chinese art – all due to the cultural transmission supported by the Mongols.
The Mongols and Islam

The Mongol dynasty’s relation to Islam, in particular, had tremendous impact on China’s relations with the outside world. The Mongols recruited a number of Muslims to help in the rule of China, especially in the field of financial administration – Muslims often served as tax collectors and administrators. They were accorded extraordinary opportunities during the Mongol period because Khubilai Khan and the other Mongol rulers of China could not rely exclusively upon the subjugated Chinese to help in ruling China. They needed outsiders, and the Muslims were among those who assisted Khubilai.

The Mongols in China also recognized that Islamic scholars had made great leaps in the studies of astronomy and medicine, and they invited many specialists in those fields to come to China. Among those to make the trip was the Persian astronomer Jamal Al-din, who helped the Chinese set up an observatory. Bringing with him many diagrams and advanced astronomical instruments from Persia, Jamal Al-din assisted the Chinese in developing a new, more accurate calendar.

The Mongols were also impressed by the Persians’ advances in medicine. They recruited a number of Persian doctors to China to establish an Office for Muslim Medicine, and the result was even greater contact between West Asia and East Asia.