*Article by* **Liu Yingsheng, Peter Jackson**

*Published:* December 15, 1991
*Last Updated:* June 13, 2013

# CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS III. IN THE MONGOL PERIOD

**CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS**

iii. In the Mongol Period

The incorporation of Persia into a vast empire that extended as far as China, following the conquests of Čengīz (Chinggis) Khan (602-24/1206-27) and his grandson Hülegü (Hūlāgū; 654-63/1256-65), inaugurated an era of particularly intense contact between Persia and China. The great khan (*qaḡan*, *qāʾān*) initially ruled this empire from Karakorum in Mongolia, but from his accession in 1260 Qubilai Khan resided in China, first at Chung-tu (close to modern Peking), then after 1272 in the new city of Ta-tu (Daidu; Ḵānbalīḡ, Ḵānbaleḡ) built close by (Rašīd-al-Dīn, *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīḵ*, II, pp. 455-57; Pelliot, pp. 140-43, 843-45). Diplomatic relations between Persia and the *qaḡan*s, as well as other contacts between Persians and the Chinese, will be treated here, though the Chinese tendency to label all western Asians simply as *hui-hui* "westerners" frequently causes difficulties in distinguishing Persians from Central Asian Muslims or even non-Muslims from the west.

In the first phase of Mongol rule the conquered territories in Persia were under civil administration; in the time of the *qaḡan* Möngke (Mengü, Mangū; 649-57/1251-59), who was a son of Čengīz Khan's youngest son, Tolui (Tūlī), Chinese observers knew it as the "mobile secretariat installed in the area of

the Āmū Daryā and other places" (*A-mu He deng chu xing shang-shu sheng; Yuan shi*, p. 45). Hülegü initially represented his brother Möngke in western Asia, but after the latter's death in Šaʿbān 657/August 1259 he took advantage of the struggle for the succession between two other brothers, Qubilai and Arīg̃ Böke (Arīg̃ Būkā), and the resulting dissolution of the empire into a number of warring khanates to arrogate to himself the status of khan over a regional *ulus* (*ulūs*, *olūs*); he was then recognized by the victorious Qubilai (658-93/1260-94) as equal to the heads of the other branches of the imperial family (Jackson, pp. 230-35). He and his successors, who bore the title *il-khan* (lit. "subordinate khan"), maintained solidarity with their kinsman Qubilai in the Far East; for a time they were the only Mongol princes to acknowledge his supremacy. In his turn the *qaān*, who after 1271 reigned as Chinese emperor with the official dynastic title Yuan, regarded Hülegü and his successors as "prince of the western regions" (*xi yu zong wang*) and sent each new Il-khanid a diploma (*yarlīg̃*) confirming his title and position (Rašīd-al-Dīn, *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīḵ*, Baku, III, pp. 101-02, 139, 205). Even the claim of the Il-khan Ḡazan (Ḡāzān) Khan (694-703/1295-1304) to sovereignty in his own right does not seem to have had an adverse effect upon relations with Ḵānbalīg̃, for, after Qubilai's death, the Il-khanids continued to receive the share of revenues and produce in kind from China to which they had been entitled since 633/1236 (Bretschneider, II, pp. 11-13). Furthermore, the *qaān*'s personal representative at the Il-khanid court, Bolod Čīngsāng (Pūlād Jīnksānk, i.e., *cheng-xiang* "chancellor"), remained in Persia and was entrusted with important commissions until his death in 712/1313 (Qāšānī, pp. 42, 142, 147); he was one of Rašīd al-Dīn's principal informants on Mongol history (cf. Barthold, *Turkestan*[3], p. 45). The *qaān*s conferred the title *čīngsāng* on some of the more important Mongol amirs in Persia, like Buqa (Būqā) in the reign of Arḡun (683-90/1284-91; see arḡuᵛnkhan) and Čoban (Čūbīn; see also chobanids) under Abū Saʿīd (716-36/1316-35), maintaining the fiction of Il-khanid subordination until the end of the Yuan period (1280-1368).

The Mongol army that accompanied Čengīz Khan to Persia had included Chinese troops, and Hülegü had also brought with him Chinese generals and experts in the use of the ballista and the mangonel (Jovaynī, ed. Qazvīnī, III, pp. 92-93; Rašīd-al-Dīn, *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīḵ* (Baku), III, p. 22; *Yuan shi*, pp. 3523-25). Persians and Central Asian Muslims were equally useful to the Mongol rulers in the Far East. For example, Čengīz Khan took into his service a man—whether Persian or Turk is not known—called Sayyed-e Ajall (Sai Dian-chi) Šams-al-Dīn ʿOmar Boḵārī (d. 1279), who was later appointed governor of

Yun-nan by Qubilai and who, together with his son Nāṣer-al-Dīn (d. 1292), was responsible for the spread of Islam in China (Hartmann, pp. 846-47). In 670/1271 Hülegü's son Abaqa (Ābāqā; 663-80/1265-82) sent two catapult experts (*pao-jiang*), ʿAlāʾ-al-Dīn and Esmāʿīl, to assist Qubilai in his war with the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1278); "western catapults" (*Hui-hui pao*) were instrumental in bringing down the great city of Xiang-yang (*Yuan shi*, p. 4544; cf. Mathews, no. 4969), and the descendants of these two men were still serving the Mongol government in China in a similar capacity as late as 728/1329 (Moule, pp. 76-77; Pelliot, I, pp. 4-5).

The alliance between the Toluid rulers in east and west meant that envoys traveled between Persia and China virtually every year. One of the most distinguished was Bayan (Bāyān, d. 1295) of the Barin (Bārīn) tribe, whom Hülegü sent as envoy to Qubilai in about 662/1264. He was retained in the east by the *qaḡan* and rose to become commander-in-chief of the army that overwhelmed the Song in 1279; later he was in command of a large garrison stationed in Mongolia (Cleaves, 1956).

Nevertheless, diplomatic exchanges were hazardous throughout much of this period because of opposition to the Toluids among princes of the lines of Čengīz Khan's other sons Čaḡadai (Jaḡatāy) and Ögedei (Ögödei, Ūgtāy, Ūktāy) in Central Asia (see chaghatayid dynasty). Although in a letter to Philippe le Bel, king of France, in 704/1305 the Il-khanid Öljeitü (Ūljāytū; 703-16/1304-16) reported that a general reconciliation had taken place within the imperial family in the previous year, it seems to have brought only a temporary halt to the hostilities (see Boyle, p. 399). In 713/1312-13, for example, the Chaghatayid khan Esen-buqa (Īsen Būqā, ca. 709-18/1309-18), who was once more at war with the Il-khanid ruler and the *qaḡan*, intercepted no fewer than four separate embassies from China to Persia, imprisoning or slaughtering the envoys (Qāšānī, pp. 204-05, 208). Such dangers could he avoided by following the sea route, Ḡāzān (Ḡazan) Khan's envoy Faḵr-al-Dīn Aḥmad did in 698/1298-99 (*Tārīḵ-e Waṣṣāf*, pp. 505-07). In 690-92/1291-93 the party escorting the princess Kökejin (Kūkāčīn, Kūkājī) traveled by sea from Quan-zhou (Zaytūn; see ch'üan chou) to Hormoz; Marco Polo, who was on his return voyage to Europe, accompanied it (Pelliot, pp. 392-94; Cleaves, 1976). The princess was to marry the Il-khanid Arḡun, but, as he died before her arrival, she married Ḡāzān Khan instead (Rašīd-al-Dīn, *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīḵ*, Baku, III, p. 280).

Contacts between Persia and China during the Mongol period led to a significant increase in geographical knowledge. Chinese envoys crossing the

Indian Ocean used a Persian sea chart (*Hai dao hui-hui la-na-ma* [*rāh-nāma* "road book" or *rāhnemā* "guide"]), and it was on the basis of information from Muslim traders and travelers that the Chinese cartographer Zhu Si-ben drafted a map of the whole Mongol empire (*Jing shi da dian tu*) in about 732/1332; about thirty Persian cities appear on it (Fuchs). In Persia the minister and historian Rašīd-al-Dīn Fażl-Allāh (d. 718/1318) was able to incorporate in his voluminous *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīḵ* (Universal history) a relatively brief history of China, the information for which had been furnished by two Chinese scholars (see Blochet, pp. 100-2; Barthold, *Turkestan*[3], p. 45).

In the fields of astronomy and astrology Chinese scholars are known to have assisted Naṣīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī (597-672/1201-74) at the observatory that he built for Hülegü at Marāḡa in 657/1261 (see Blochet, pp. 100-02). A Persian astronomer named Jamāl-al-Dīn Boḵārī, who had already visited China in the time of Möngke, returned there in 1267, carrying diagrams of astronomical instruments as gifts for the *qaḡan* and presenting a new calendar, the *Wan nian li*, to the Yuan court (see Kennedy, p. 678 with refs.). In 1271 Qubilai founded the Hui-hui Si Tian Jian (Institute of Muslim astronomy). Muslim scholars also introduced into China Arabic and Persian alchemy, mathematics, medicine, pharmacology, and even Euclidean geometry (*Yuan shi*, pp. 998-99; Wang, chap. 7, pp. 14b-16a). Muslim physicians and drugs were highly regarded at Qubilai's court; on the other hand, Rašīd-al-Dīn, in his *Tangsūq-nāma-ye Īl-ḵān dar fonūn-e ʿolūm-e ḵetāʾī*, provided a Persian abridgment of four Chinese anatomical and pharmaceutical works. "Moḥammadan blue" played a part in the production of Chinese porcelain (see cobalt), and Chinese artistic ideas in turn exercised a powerful influence on the development of Persian miniature painting and ceramics (see xi and xii, below; *Survey of Persian Art*, pp. 2042-61; see also čīnī, cintāmanī). Printing may have been imported into Persia and elsewhere in the Middle East from China at this period (see čāp); certainly the ill-fated experiment with printed paper currency, or *chao* (*čāv*), by the Il-khanid Gaiḵatu (Geyḵātū; 690-94/1291-95) in 693/1294 was inspired by Chinese example (Carter and Goodrich, pp. 172-73, 175).

Under the Mongols a significant number of Muslims settled in China, where they were grouped in the second of the four classes into which the population was divided, that of the *se-mu*, or various non-Chinese ethnics in the western provinces (cf. Huang, p. 84); many served as government officials (compare the story of the Muslim "*Maij-al-Dīn" in the late 13th century; see Huang, pp. 88-90). A large proportion must have been Persians, and indeed Persian was

one of the languages in official use under the Yuan (see Huang, passim; and viii, below). Ebn Baṭṭūṭa (IV, pp. 289-90), who was in China in the mid-8th/14th century, mentioned the son of a Mongol amir in China who was especially fond of Persian singing; on one occasion he ordered his court musicians to sing several times a poem by Saʿdī, which they had set to music (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, tr. Mowaḥḥed, II, p. 750 n. 2). The employment of Muslims in the Chinese administration was in keeping with the Mongols' policy of relying on outsiders (and representatives of minority or subject groups) to lead their conquests; such foreigners would have every incentive to serve their masters loyally and could also be used as scapegoats in the event of a crisis caused by Chinese resentment (cf. Rossabi). Many of the Muslims in the fiscal administration were merchants, members of an *ortaq* (*ūrtāq*), or commercial association; they frequently acted as tax farmers and made loans to the government or to high-ranking Mongols. In the larger cities along the coast Muslim communities were governed by their own leaders, often with the rank of *šayḵ al-Eslām* (*she-Si-lian*; Mathews, nos. 5710, 5580, 4003), for example, Borhān-al-Dīn Kāzerūnī (Bu-lu-han Ding, Mathews, nos. 5379, 4176, 2033? 6381), who had come to China with an embassy from Öljeitü and held this office at Zaytūn (Liu, 1984, pp. 176-80; cf. Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, IV, pp. 270-71). For a time after 1280 Muslims in the *qaḡan*'s dominions suffered from regulations against certain religious observances; these restrictions appear to have caused a slackening of the traffic carried on by Muslim merchants until Qubilai relaxed the policy in 1287 (Rašīd-al-Dīn, ed. Blochet, pp. 521-23; tr. Boyle, pp. 293-94; cf. Pelliot, pp. 77-78). In the 8th/14th century, the *qaḡan*s came to depend more on Chinese personnel, and after the Mongols' expulsion from China in 1368 and the advent of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) the Muslim role in the financial administration of the country was terminated (cf. Rossabi, pp. 294-95).

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

E. Blochet, *Introduction à l'histoire des Mongols de Fadl Allah Rashid ed-Din*, GMS 12, Leiden and London, 1910.

J. A. Boyle, "Dynastic and Political History of the Il-khans," in *Camb. Hist. Iran*

V. *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, pp. 303-421.

E. Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources*, London, 1888.

T. F. Carter and L. C. Goodrich, *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward*, 2nd ed., New York, 1955.

Ch'en Yüan, *Western and Central Asians in China under the Mongols*, tr. Ch'ien Hsing-hai and L. C. Goodrich, Los Angeles, 1966.

F. W. Cleaves, "The Biography of Bayan of the Bārin in the *Yüan Shih*," *HJAS* 19, 1956, pp. 185-303.

Idem, "A Chinese Source Bearing on Marco Polo's Departure from China and a Persian Source on His Arrival in Persia," *HJAS* 36, 1976, pp. 181-203.

Abū ʿAbd-Allāh Moḥammad Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, *Toḥfat al-noẓẓār fī ḡarāʾeb al-amṣār wa ʿajāʾeb al-asfār*, tr. M.-ʿA. Mowaḥḥed as *Safar-nāma-ye Ebn Baṭṭūṭa*, 2 vols., Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

W. Fuchs, *The Mongol Atlas of China by Chu Ssu-pen*, Peiping, 1948. M. Hartmann, "China," in *EI*[1], I, pp. 839-54.

Huang Shijian, "The Persian Language in China during the Yuan Dynasty," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 34, 1986, pp. 83-95.

P. Jackson, "The Dissolution of the Mongol Empire," *Central Asiatic Journal* 22, 1978, pp. 186-244.

K. Jahn, "Wissenschaftliche Kontakte zwischen Iran und China in der Mongolenzeit," *Anz. der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 106, 1969, pp. 199-211.

Idem, "Rashīd al-Dīn and Chinese Culture," *Central Asiatic Journal* 14, 1970, pp. 134-47.

E. S. Kennedy, "The Exact Sciences in Iran under the Saljuqs and Mongols," in *Camb. Hist. Iran* V. *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, pp. 659-79.

Liu Yingsheng, "Yuan dai She-si-lian Yi-mian Mo-ta-wan-li ji Mo-a-ji-deng si Hui-hui jiao-zhi kao" (Studies on the four Muslim titles *šayḵ-al-Eslām*, *amīn*,

*motawallī*, and *moʾaḏḏen* in Yuan China), in *Xi-bei min zu wen cong* (Research in northwestern national minorities) II, Lanzhou, 1984.

Idem, "Xu-lie-wu shi-dai Han di yu Bo-si shi-chen wang-lai kao-lüe" (Studies on the exchange of embassies between China and Iran in the time of Hülegü) in *Meng-gu shi yan jiu* (Studies on the history of the Mongols), II, Huhe Haote, 1986.

A. C. Moule, *Quinsai, with Other Notes on Marco Polo*, Cambridge, 1957.

Šehāb-al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Fażl-Allāh ʿOmarī, *Masālek al-abṣār fī mamālek al-amṣār*, ed. and tr. K. Lech as *Das mongolische Weltreich*, Wiesbaden, 1968.

P. Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, 3 vols., Paris, 1959-73.

Abu'l-Qāsem Qāšānī, *Tārīḵ-e Ūljāytū Solṭān*, ed. M. Hambly, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

Rašīd-al-Dīn Fażl-Allāh, *Jāmeʿ al-tawārīḵ* II, ed. E. Blochet, GMS 18/2, Leiden and London, 1911; tr. J. A. Boyle as *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, London and New York, 1971.

Idem, *Die Chinageschichte des Rašīd al-dīn*, facs. ed. and tr. K. Jahn, Vienna, 1971.

M. Rossabi, "The Muslims in the Early Yüan dynasty," in J. D. Langlois, ed., *China under Mongol Rule*, Princeton, N.J., 1981, pp. 257-95.

Wang Shidian, "Mi shu jian- zhi" (Description of the general secretariat), *Guang cang xue jun zong shu* I. Yu Dajun, "Meng-gu Duo-er-bian shi Bu-luo shi-ji" (Studies on the activities of Bolod of the Mongolian Dörben clan), in *Yuan shi lun-cong* (Studies on the history of the Yuan dynasty) I, Beijing, 1982.

*Yuan shi*, Beijing, 1976.