



SAYYED AJALL

SAYYED(-E) AJALL, ŠAMS-AL-DIN ‘OMAR BOKĀRI (b. Bokhara, 1211; d. Šanšan [Kunming] in southwest China, 1279), governor of the Dali province in China during the Mongol period. Born into a prominent K̄vārazmi family, Sayyed Ajall (Chinese: Saidianchi) entered Mongol service as a youngster, after his grandfather and namesake, a cavalry commander in the army of K̄vārazmšāh, surrendered to the Mongols. His grandfather managed to ingratiate himself to the Mongol victors by offering them his services and those of his son and grandson, along with gifts including striped leopards and white falcons (Yuan Shi, in Armijo-Hussein, p. 17; Buell, p. 467). His grandfather’s act ensured the family’s security and Sayyed Ajall’s future as a member of Čengiz Khan’s elite bodyguard (*kesig*), in whose ranks he would receive specialist training and an education that would qualify him to assume the highest posts in a fast expanding global, multicultural, multiethnic state.

Military personnel along with artisans, technicians, and skilled workers had little choice but to accept the disruption and often irreversible upheaval to their lives that surrender to the Mongols involved, but for many the uprooting and dispersal to other unknown destinations within the expanding empire opened up unique opportunities. With traditional bonds of loyalty and service irrevocably broken, a new generation of loyal and highly skilled servants emerged to form the administrative backbone of the blossoming imperial state. This new corps, and in particular those who entered it as children or were born into Mongol service, owed unquestioning allegiance to their initially Mongol masters, and their aspirations were to rise through the ranks



and join the growing multi-ethnic elite. To those select who entered the Great Khan's bodyguard, his *kesig*, this sense of allegiance applied even more keenly, and all other sources of identity such as clan, religion, and province would have been secondary to the pride of belonging to such an illustrious corps.

The Yuan Shi biography of Sayyed Ajall (tr. in Armijo-Hussein, pp. 17-26, 245-51) confuses the early years of his life, as it was presumably his father, Kamāl-al-Din, who was taken as a “hostage” and forced to serve as a bodyguard to Čengiz Khan, rather than the nine-year-old Sayyed Ajall. It was also his father to whom the family nickname, Sai-tien-ch'ih Šan-ssu-ting, “Saiyid elëi,” or Sayyed the Envoy Šams din (i.e., Šams-al-Din) was first attached by his Mongol masters, who were as usual confused by Persian name strings.

Sayyed Ajall's first official position came in 1229, when he was appointed *yeke* (great or imperial) *darugači* (see [DĀRUĠA](#)) for the provinces of Feng, Čing, and Yün-nei under Ögedei Qā'ān and then a few years later *dāruġači* in T'ai-yuan and P'ing-yang. Though the title suggested a demotion, the reality was that the new position carried far more responsibility and that he was acting as a representative of two princely houses and the Qā'ān, rather than solely for Ögedei Qā'ān, which would have entitled him the addition of *yeke*. Within a few years the young Sayyed Ajall was awarded more powers and prestige when he was made a *yarquči* (judge or arbitrator) for the region of Čung-tu, the capital of the northern lands once held by the Čin. His duties at this time would have involved the registration of the population, the assessment and allocation of taxation, and the dispensation of justice. It was in this period of his career that the rising official encountered Maḥmud Yalavāj, one of the most influential and powerful of the new breed of administrators from Turkistan. It is likely that Sayyed Ajall also served under Qubilai Khan in some capacity during these early years since Rašid-al-Din Fażl-Allāh records Mōngke Khan asking permission from his brother, Qubilai, to employ Sayyed Ajall's services during the Sichwan campaign against the Song in 1253 (Rašid-al-Din, tr., p. 287). It is known that Sayyed Ajall arranged supplies and provisions for Qubilai's hungry and exhausted troops when they first arrived at Dali during the Yunnan campaign of the early 1250s, which made a very favorable impression on the future Great Khan. Whatever his position, he appears to have kept a low profile during the dangerous and turbulent years of Ögedei rule and emerged in 1251 associated with Qubilai's retainers, and as such he was again sent to Čang-tu as a *yarquči* to pacify and control the army



and the people, a position he retained for a further decade (Bell, p. 468).

After the death of Möngke Qā'ān in 1259, Qubilai appointed his loyal and increasingly trusted servant as viceroy of western China based in Čing-č'ao, heading a regional secretarial council for this important north-south trade route linking the Mongol heartlands with Sichwan, Yunnan, and beyond along a series of deep valleys and high ridges. As chief executive of the administration, Sayyed Ajall took over military responsibilities formerly controlled from Sichwan and conducted a population survey, initiating fiscal reform, and re-structuring the region's administration in order to place the entire area and all local authorities firmly under the control of the regional secretarial council (*Yuan Shi*, in Armijo-Hussein, p.18; Buell, p. 472).

In 1270 Sayyed Ajall was moved to Sichwan proper, where he took personal control of operations against the Song as Qubilai Khan renewed military pressure on the Chinese regime for a final confrontation. He participated in a crucial land and river battle in support of the Mongol siege of Hsiang-yang, which figures so prominently in Chinese sources. Central to this successful siege were two Persian military engineers, 'Alā'-al-Din from Ma-fa-li (Mayyāfāreqin) and Esmā'il (I-ssū-ma-yin) possibly from Shiraz, whose contributions earned them entries in the *Yuan Shi* and who exemplify the crucial contributions made by westerners' to the growth of the Toluid global state (see Moule, 1956, pp. 70-78).

In 1273 Sayyed Ajall was appointed to establish another regional secretarial council in Dali, Yunnan Province, which had been under nominal Mongol control since 1253, when it had figured in a broad military strategy to encircle the southern Song forces. However, that campaign had ended in disaster when Mongol troops had invaded Vietnam and had succumbed to disease and guerrilla tactics from local Viet forces, leading to an ignominious retreat and the first major imperial defeat (Warder, pp. 86-105).

The only resistance he that Sayyed Ajall foresaw in his appointment as governor of the province was from Prince Toqur, the local Mongol overseer in command of the military garrison at Dali. Prince Toqur was alarmed when news reached him that Sayyed Ajall had been dispatched in his direction with an army that he interpreted as a threat to his authority and he prepared himself for a military confrontation. Sayyed Ajall managed to defuse the situation by sending his son, Nāṣer-al-Din, as his personal representative to announce his arrival and suggest the convening of a regional council to which



the prince's representatives would be invited to participate. He subsequently established his regional secretariat, in which Nāṣer-al-Din participated and to which Prince Toqur appointed two of his own retainers as *yarqučis*. and the volatile situation was successfully diffused (Yuan Shi, in Armijo-Hussein, p. 21; Buell, p. 476).

Faced with a province effectively under military rule, Sayyed Ajall had to establish his administration not only at the top replacing the rudimentary government by garrison of his predecessor but also at the grass roots where he aimed to create direct links and encourage both participation and support. He conducted a census and re-organized the fiscal administration while at the same time instigated civil administrative units to replace the mixture of military and tribal units that had operated under Toqur. The introduction of the postal system (*yam* > Pers. *yām*) throughout the province and adjacent areas facilitated the flow of communication, intelligence, and directives and consolidated the links with Qubilai Khan's court, hastening Yunnan's integration into the empire with all the benefits that it brought about. The establishment of the *yam* also ensured that Sayyed Ajall's directives were implemented and that he had a means of gauging reaction and the level of success (Buell, p. 476).

Sayyed Ajall did not implement one institution that was in operation in most parts of the lands under Qubilai's control, after correctly assessing local reaction to what proved to be an unpopular and impractical measure. It had been proposed to replace the local currency of cowrie shells along with precious metals with Yuan paper notes that were widely in use in most other parts of Yuan territory. A similar experiment was forced on the people of the Il-khanate (q.v.) in the west with disastrous results and near financial collapse nationally before the experiment was abandoned. Sayyed Ajall had enough foresight and courage to resist pressure from the central court to impose such a system so alien to the people of the province, and his petition to Qubilai Khan was eventually accepted (Buell, p. 476; Lane, pp. 30-31; Armijo-Hussein, p. 176).

Sayyed Ajall, however, was far more than an able and sensitive administrator and his reputation and legacy owe more to his work in other fields such as education, agronomy, and his encouragement of religious institutions. His work in developing a system of irrigation and canals, still in evidence today, along with more controlled and efficient land drainage, allowed wet-field rice cultivation, increased the amount of land under cultivation, and generally



enhanced food production. One immediate effect of this boost to agricultural output was crop diversification and the migration of Chinese farmers and workers to a province long considered backward and inhabited by barbarians. Both these developments had a positive effect on the economy and culture of Yunnan, bringing increasing prosperity and the benefits, which also entailed access to wider markets and the capital (Buell, pp. 476-77; Lane, p. 30).

The development of the local economy was a priority that he set before his freshly established administration. One famous anecdote records him arguing with locals over the level of taxation that he should impose on the farmers. What is special though is that Sayyed Ajall argued that taxes should be lowered as an incentive for the producers. In addition he proposed a system of loans and investment for local people and businesses and the implementation of ambitious, though very practical, agricultural and industrial projects including the exploitation of the regions' mineral resources through mining, development of the irrigation and hydraulic engineering systems, and the introduction of new crops and methods of farming. To underpin all these innovations, the communications system was crucial and, as governor, he oversaw the extension and improvement of the *yam* network. In all, during the Yuan period seventy-eight post-relay stations, four of which were water based, were established. Aware that implementing these various ambitious projects could well lead to large scale immigration of Han Chinese, Sayyed Ajall made the introduction of an effective and practical educational program an immediate priority, and he set out to ensure that educational opportunities should be opened to all classes, not only to the children of the local elite and notables. The proof of his success was in the fact that his policies were continued after his death by his successors. One institution that he initiated was the *xuetian*, similar to the Islamic *waqf*, which was arable land especially set aside to support the running of schools. Starting in Dali, a network of schools quickly spread throughout the province deliberately targeting the local population to lessen the dependency on the immigrant Han Chinese community. He personally set up *xuetian* with his own salary to support fifty-five schools, hoping by his own example to convince others of the importance of education, and his success encouraged others to follow his example (Lane, pp.32-33; Armijo-Hussein, pp. 205-8; Yuan Shi, in Armijo-Hussein, pp. 22-23).

Though Sayyed Ajall was a Muslim and many members of his entourage and



army were also Muslims, he was very aware of his role as a chief minister of a regime that professed the greatest respect for Confucius and Chinese culture. He was therefore active in propagating Confucian ideals and practices, which included temple building in the major population centers and the introduction of the ritualistic and formal aspects of Confucian tradition along with Chinese marriage and funeral rites (Buell, p. 477). His role in establishing Islam permanently in Yunnan has probably been overstated, and it is generally accepted that there was already a Muslim presence when he first arrived and that the Mongol armies that would have been garrisoned in the province would have had a Muslim contingent. However, Sayyed Ajall certainly nurtured the Muslim community that began to settle in increasing numbers after his arrival, and he is known to have built at least two mosques (Buell, p. 477; Lane, pp. 3-4). He saw Islam as well as Confucianism and Buddhism as positive forces for civilizing what was considered a backward and barbarian region and, therefore, was very willing to act as patron for these spiritual institutions. Since Confucianism was essentially political rather than religious, Sayyed Ajall found them in practice to be far from incompatible. Strangely, his enlightened tolerance, a long-time characteristic of the Mongol elite, awoke skepticism in modern historians such as Ch'en Yuan (p. 59) and Carrington Goodrich (p. 8), who questioned the sincerity of his Islamic faith. His greatest strength usually proved to be the respect and courtesy that he offered to all that he encountered.

As soon as Sayyed Ajall alighted from his carriage [took up his post], he was continuously receiving guests, never seeing the light of day. Even when accepting a gift of [something as simple as] a pot of porridge, he would always receive it with a smile, and reciprocate with a very generous gift. Thereafter, they all came, from near and far, to submit peacefully (Zhang Hong, *Nanyi Ši*, cited by Armijo-Hussein, p. 189).

While the new minister's zeal and belief in his role and his genuine desire to bring the fruits and advantages of the empire to this remote area found admirers and a great deal of cooperative support, a resistance continued from those whose interests he upset. Prince Toqur had joined the new model administration reluctantly while other local officials had launched a campaign of defamation seeking to have the governor recalled to court to answer their slanderous charges. However, after a lifetime's faithful service, Qubilai had complete faith in his appointment and all attempts at slander and undermining Sayyed Ajall situation were unsuccessful.



More serious were some local rebellions and resistance to the new authority, which were exercised by some local tribes in the more remote and inaccessible regions of the province. Two episodes cited in his “official” biography in the Yuan Shi aptly serve to illustrate his preferred method of conflict resolution by employing brain rather than brawn. In Jiaozhi (i.e., Hanoi) a long series of violent encounters had apparently soured relations irrevocably. However, persuaded to attend in person a meeting in Yunnan as guest of the new governor, the prince of Jiaozhi was so impressed with his reception and the honor bestowed on him that he ordered the immediate cessation of all hostilities upon his return and pledged loyalty to the Kānbaleq (Pekin, the capital of the Mongol empire) regime. A similar result was achieved with the rebellious leaders of Luopan Dian, 100 miles south-southwest of present-day Kunming, despite several previous diplomatic attempts at reconciliation. After the rebels witnessed how Sayyed Ajall dealt with insubordination amongst his own troops angered at the prolonged and frustrating pace of the negotiations, they decided they were dealing with an honorable and principled man who could be trusted (Yuan Shi, in Armijo-Hussein, p. 25).

Sayyed Ajall died in 1279 at the age of sixty-eight after five years of living and working in Yunnan, and his funeral was the occasion for widespread displays of public mourning as he was buried outside the north gate of Šanšan [Kunming]. Even the king of Jiaozhu, a one-time fierce enemy, sent a delegation of twelve fully attired mourners, who delivered this elegy: “He gave birth to us, and educated us, and we mourn him as our father and as our mother,” which was followed by uncontrollable wailing and weeping (Armijo-Hussein, p. 27). In recognition of his achievements, Qubilai Khan ordered that his policies and projects should be continued without modification. His five sons were all in executive positions in the administration and they ensured that his legacy and policies continued. Qubilai appointed the eldest son, Nāṣer-al-Din, who had been army commander under his father, as his successor.

Sayyed Ajall’s descendants turn up in various places and unexpected positions. In Hangzhou, a tombstone in the Phoenix Mosque, (rebuilt in 1281), attests to the influential role of one descendant, while another tombstone in Zayton suggests a similar role in that port as well. The Safavid historian, Ġiāt-al-Din K^vandamir (tr. Thackston, intro., p. ix), claims descent on his mother’s side. Rašid-al-Din (tr., p. 288) records the compassion of a grandson, Bayan



Finjan Abu Bakr, and his recognition and reward from the Great Qā'ān. In Yunnan to this day the Muslim community looks back with pride and affection to Sayyed Ajall. Though overstated, there is no doubt that Sayyed Ajall was responsible for the peaceful establishment and assimilation of a considerable Muslim community in Yunnan.

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