

TATIANA FRANK

(*Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest*)

Some Cases of Official Corruption in the Yuan Dynasty Based on Chinese Sources

Abstract

During the reign of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) in China, corruption played a significant role and had a serious impact on the stability of government and social life of the conquered. Corruption was widespread at all levels of administration, including among senior officials, high-ranking officials, and local authorities. This included both Mongol rulers and representatives of the *semu*, who were the core elements of the officialdom. Corruption exacerbated poverty among ordinary people, as funds allocated for public needs were often redirected to benefit corrupt officials, eroding public trust in the government and the legitimacy of authority. Such a phenomenon heightened anti-government sentiment and served as the main catalyst for social unrest and uprisings. Moreover, corruption resulted in the appointment and promotion of officials not based on their qualifications but rather on personal connections and bribes. This diminished the efficiency of governance, as it did not always ensure that the most qualified individuals occupied key positions. This article offers insight into the phenomenon of corruption during the Yuan dynasty. The author explores the unprecedented level of corruption among officials and its impact on the living conditions of ordinary people in China. The article delves into a considerable number of instances of high-ranking officials' malpractice taken from primary materials, providing a detailed analysis. This approach allows readers to gain an understanding of the social situation during Mongol rule in China and the role that corruption played in the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty. Social crisis was mostly caused by the employment of dishonest officials and the absence of the representative of the Chinese literati at the officialdom. It is worth mentioning that Kublai Khan (r. 1260–1294) managed to unite the vast expanses of China due to the assistance of Confucian scholars who served him as valuable allies in propagating Chinese values, traditions, as well vital elements of the civil administration.

Keywords: Yuan dynasty, corruption, moral decline, Ahmad Fanakati, Sangha, Kublai Khan, *Yuanshi*, *semu*

It goes without saying that the Mongol invasion altered the course of the centuries-old history of China. The conquest of *tianxia* 天下¹ was not an easy task for the Mongolian army. Over a span of nearly seven decades, from 1211 to 1279, the Mongolian rule in China unfolded, presenting a complex narrative that defies simplistic assessments. A considerable amount of scholars claim that the Mongols were the unifiers of the vast expanses of China, which led to the cultural integration of many nations. John Dardess,² Thomas Allsen,³ Morris Rossabi,⁴ and A.Sh Kadyrbaev⁵ all share this point of view. These scholars consider that the contributions of the Mongols to world history and particularly to the development of Chinese civilisation were enormous because they facilitated cross-cultural connections and exchange, the encouragement of maritime trade, and the flourishing of science, medicine, and literature (e.g., the genre *zaju* 雜劇 reached its peak under Mongol rule in China).⁶ Moreover, the conquerors were famous for their tolerant attitude towards various religions.

On the other hand, we cannot deny that the Mongol conquests led to the termination of some histories, the transformation of others, and the creation of new nations, most notably the Mongols' own.⁷ The Mongols, unfamiliar with governance management, had to seek assistance from *semuren* 色目人⁸

¹ Literally meaning '(all) under Heaven', *tianxia* 天下 is a Chinese term for a historical Chinese cultural concept that denoted either the entire geographical world or the metaphysical realm of mortals and later became associated with political sovereignty.

² Dardess 2003: 120.

³ Allsen 2001: 211–212.

⁴ Rossabi 2020: 27.

⁵ Bokschanin–Kadyrbaev 2016: 18–19.

⁶ *Zaju* 雜劇 is a synthetic genre of dramatic art, based on the coherent performance of arias (one after another), alternating with recitation and dancing. Bai Renfu 白仁甫 (1226–1306), Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (1210–1280), Ma Zhiyuan 馬致遠 (ca. 1250–1321), and Zheng Guangzu 鄭光祖 (1264–?) were the most prominent representatives of the *zaju* genre. Bokschanin et al. 2010: 175.

⁷ Mote 1994: 617.

⁸ During the reign of the Mongols in China, society was divided into four groups: the Mongols were at the pinnacle of the power, the *semu* 色目 belonged to the second group, *hanren* 漢人 (Northern Chinese) were in the third category, and *nanren* 南人 (Southern Chinese) were in the fourth. Elizabeth Endicott gives the following statistics regarding the number of the ethnic groups after the final subjugation of China: Mongolian and *semu* households (around 400,000) comprised 3% of the whole population, the Northern Chinese (*hanren*) households approximately 2 million (15%), and the Southern Chinese (*nanren*) households 11 million (82%). Endicott–West 1989: 86. The *semu* referred to a special social class composed of people from Central and Western Asia as well as other non-Mongol and non-Chinese ethnicities. Central Asians included Uighurs, Turks and many others who were brought into the Mongol administration for their expertise in various fields, such as finance, administration, and trade. Western Asians and Middle Easterners comprised Persians, Arabs, and other people from the Islamic world. They brought with them advanced knowledge in fields such as astronomy,

to make their rule more effective and long term. Such a strategic course left a huge imprint on the daily lives of the Chinese, who were in most cases denied participation in the political life of their motherland. Charles O. Hucker emphasises that the Mongols called the Chinese the ‘dregs of the social ladder’,⁹ which undeniably exacerbated popular discontent with the Mongols in the country. Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), a Chinese writer, negatively assessed the activities of the Mongols in China and condemned the unequal policy pursued in relation to various peoples living in the *tianxia* system. He also emphasised the support given by members of the *Guomindang* 國民黨 in the early 1930s for the activities of Genghis Khan (ca. 1162–1227), pointing out that ‘their ancestors were in slavery under the Mongol rule’.¹⁰

The collapse of the Yuan dynasty had several causes, such as various court intrigues, a disinterest in administration, weakening armies, natural disasters, and a deterioration of the court personnel. In my opinion, an unprecedented level of corruption in the country played a key role to overthrowing of the Mongol rule in 1368 by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398). The abolition of the examination system significantly worsened the quality of the government apparatus and led to an unstable economic situation in China. The officials were mostly interested in self-enrichment and promotion, often neglecting their duties, and taking bribes. In the framework of the current article, I aim to explore the rich and plentiful assortment of primary and secondary sources in Chinese, English, and Russian regarding the impact of the vicious cycle of corruption on society during the reign of the Yuan emperors: Kublai Khan (r. 1260–1294), Temür Khan (r. 1294–1307), Külüg Khan (r. 1308–1311), Ayurbarwada Buyantu Khan (r. 1311–1320), Shidibala or Gegeen Khan (r. 1321–1323), Yesün Temür (r. 1323–1328), Ragibagh Khan (r. 1328), Jayaatu Khan (r. 1328–1329 and 1329–1332), Khutughtu Khan Kusala (r. 1329), Rinchinbal Khan (r. 1332), and Toghon Temür (r. 1333–1370). Such an investigation will help us to better comprehend the probable reasons of the collapse of the Yuan dynasty in 1368.

medicine, and engineering, and were often employed in these capacities within the Yuan administration. Tibetans were another important group within the *semu*, especially influential in religious and administrative roles. The Mongols’ interest in Tibetan Buddhism elevated the status of Tibetans in the Yuan court. Atwood 2004: 494.

⁹ Hucker 1978: 4.

¹⁰ Tihvinskij 1977: 16.

Review of primary sources

Yuanshi 元史¹¹ (*History of the Yuan Dynasty*) serves as an influential primary source in terms of the chosen topic. It contains a considerable amount of information regarding the phenomenon of corruption throughout the reign of the Yuan dynasty in China. During the writing of the current article, chapters (*juan* 卷) 6, 7, 9, 10, 16, 18, 19, 21, 27, 28, 30, 35, and 205 were used, as they describe in detail the vicious cycle of corruption in China under the Mongol rule.

A valuable primary source *Caomuzi* 草木子¹² (*Master of Grass and Trees*) written by Ye Ziqi 葉子奇 (ca. 1327–1390), a scholar of the Yuan and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties played a crucial role in terms of analysing the phenomenon of corruption in China. The author, as an eyewitness to the events of the time, vividly describes the image of officials, as well as the social situation and ordinary people's vicissitudes of life during the reign of the Yuan dynasty.

Annals by historian Rashid al-Din Hamadani¹³ were also used when writing the current article. He describes the political activities of high court officials, such as Ahmad Fanakati 阿合馬 (1242–1282) and Sangha 桑哥 (?–1291).

Yuan Dianzhang 元典章¹⁴ (*Decrees and Regulations of the Yuan Dynasty*) contains unique information regarding the anti-corruption measures implemented by the Mongol rulers in China, especially the chapter 46.

Secondary sources

A monograph, *In the Service of the Khan: Eminent Personalities of the Early Mongol-Yuan Period (1200–1300)*, by Igor de Rachewiltz¹⁵ uniquely analyse the biographies of the high officials involved in taking bribes (e.g., Ahmad Fanakati and Sangha).

The works of Li Zhi'an,¹⁶ Elizabeth Endicott-West,¹⁷ A.Sh. Kadyrbaev,¹⁸ Morris Rossabi,¹⁹ and Christopher P. Atwood²⁰ are integral parts of the current

¹¹ Song Lian 1976: 105–124; 127–144; 175–193; 197–218; 333–354; 381–421; 447–472; 597–633; 667–687; 773–795; 4557–4588.

¹² Ye Ziqi: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=60418> last accessed: 30.12.2023.

¹³ Rashid-ad-din 1960: 187–192.

¹⁴ Chen Gaohua 2011: 1543–1578.

¹⁵ Rachewiltz 1993: 539–583.

¹⁶ Li Zhi'an 2006: 375–403.

¹⁷ Endicott-West 1989: 25–131.

¹⁸ Bokschanin–Kadyrbaev 2016: 28–340.

¹⁹ Rossabi 1988: 53–206. Rossabi 1994: 414–489.

²⁰ Atwood 2004: 4–5; 488.

article. These scholars provide a lot of interesting details on the devastating role of corruption on society during the Mongol reign in China.

The main aims of the article are: 1) to explore the phenomenon of corruption during the rule of the Mongols in China and 2) to provide examples of the high-ranking corrupted officials at court taken from primary sources.

Cases of corruption during the reign of Kublai Khan

The phenomenon of corruption was one of the striking features of Mongol rule in China. Dishonest officials, bribery, as well as the embezzlement of funds prevailed widely during the reign of Kublai Khan (r. 1260–1294). Wang Hui 王恽 (1227–1304), an official in charge of the discipline of public functionaries (*jiancha yushi* 監察御史), pointed out: ‘Corruption flourished in officialdom and officers were even not ashamed of taking bribes openly’.²¹

An interesting fact that should be mentioned is that the Mongol officials did not receive a salary for their services. They mainly lived on extorting the population before the ascension of the founder of the Yuan dynasty to the throne. The significant merit of Kublai Khan was the provision of paid salaries for the officials.²² The question is: how much were they paid? According to *Yuanshi*,

中書省：右丞相，俸一百四十貫，米一十五石；左丞相同。平章政事，俸一百二十八貫六錢六分六釐，米一十二石。郎中，俸四十二貫，米四石五斗。²³
Imperial Secretariat: the salary of *youchengxiang* (the grand councillor of the right) is 140 *guan*,²⁴ 15 *shi*²⁵ of rice; the same is for *zuochengxiang* (the grand councillor of the left). The salary of *pingzhang zhengshi* (the head of the Department of Political Affairs) was 128 *guan*, six *qian*,²⁶ six *fen*,²⁷ six *li*,²⁸ and 12 *shi* of rice. The salary of *langzhong*²⁹ was 42 *guan*, 4 *shi*, 5 *dou*³⁰ of rice.

²¹ Li Zhi’an 2006: 376.

²² Borovkova 1971: 14.

²³ Song Lian 1976: 2453.

²⁴ Chinese measurement: one *guan* 貫 was a string of 1,000 coins.

²⁵ Chinese measurement: one *shi* 石 was approximately 59,6816 kg.

²⁶ Chinese measurement: one *qian* 錢 was one tenth of a *liang* 兩. One *liang* was equal to 37.3 grams.

²⁷ Chinese measurement: one *fen* 分 was 0.5 grams.

²⁸ Chinese measurement: one *li* 釐 was 0.04 grams.

²⁹ *Langzhong* 郎中 was an imperial bodyguard.

³⁰ Chinese measurement: one *dou* 斗 was 9.49 litres.

Unfortunately, such a significant measure did not change the situation drastically, and corruption continued to flourish. Now it is crucial to focus our attention on testimonies of corruption taken from the primary source *Yuanshi*:

癸酉，山東廉訪使言：「真定路總管張宏，前在濟南，乘變盜用官物。」
詔以宏嘗告李亶反，免宏死罪，罷其職，征贓物償官。³¹

In the year of *guiyou* [21 January 1265], the Shandong inspector said: ‘The chief administrator Zhanghong of the Zhending circuit,³² who previously served as such in the circuit of Jinan,³³ took advantage of the unrest and embezzled government property’. It was ordered—in view of the fact that Hong had previously reported Li Tan’s betrayal,³⁴ to exempt Hong from the death penalty [for the capital crime], deprive him of his position, take back the stolen goods, and compensate the government [the losses].

戊戌，大名路達魯花赤愛魯、總管張弘範等盜用官錢，罷之。³⁵

In the year of *wuxu* [4 August 1267], *darughachi*³⁶ Ailu of Hubei’s Daming County, Chief Governor Zhang Hongfan, and others embezzled government funds, and they were dismissed [from the office].

戊寅，隆興府總管昔刺幹脫以盜用官錢罷。³⁷

In the year of *wuyin* [28 August 1270], the head of the Longxing residence, Xilawotou, embezzled government money and he was dismissed [from the office].

戊子，大名路達魯花赤小鈴部坐姦贓伏誅。³⁸

In the year of *wuzi* [8 February 1276], *darughachi* Xiaoqianbu of Daming County embezzled [government funds], and he was executed.

癸巳，順德府總管張文煥、太原府達魯花赤太不花，以按察司發其姦贓。³⁹

In the year of *guisi* [2 February 1278], Zhang Wenhuan, a governor of the Shunde Prefecture (Guangdong Province), and Taibuhua, *darughachi* of the Taiyuan Prefecture (Shanxi Province), were both impeached by the Department of Investigation for embezzlement.

³¹ Song Lian 1976: 105.

³² Zhending was in Hebei Province.

³³ Jinan is a sub provincial city and the capital of Shandong Province in northeast China.

³⁴ Li Tan’s rebellion was in 1262 aimed at overthrowing the rule of the Mongols in China.

³⁵ Song Lian 1976: 115.

³⁶ *Darughachis* (Mong. *daruyachi*) were appointed officials in the Mongol dynasty, whose responsibilities were included the collection of taxes and administration in the conquered territories.

³⁷ Song Lian 1976: 130.

³⁸ Song Lian 1976: 177.

³⁹ Song Lian 1976: 197.

乙卯, 趙炳言陝西運司郭同知、王相府郎中令郭叔雲盜用官錢。⁴⁰

In the year of *yimao* [16 December 1279], Zhao Bingyan, salt business emissary of Shaanxi Province Guo Tongzhi, *langzhonglin*⁴¹ of Wangxiang residence, and Guo Shuyun embezzled government money.

These examples vividly illustrate that corruption had a tendency to flourish during that historical time period. The people involved in corruption were mostly representatives of the Mongols and *semu*. Another interesting fact that should be considered is that some Chinese adopted Mongolian names to get a promotion and become a core element in the government apparatus. Elizabeth Endicott-West gives the following example: only the Mongols or *semu* could be appointed to the position of *darughachi*; for the Chinese, especially the southerners, the path to this position was closed. Due to changing his name to the Mongolian 'Bayan', Huang Chucai, who was from Southern China, managed to take the position of *darughachi* in Nancheng County (located in Jiangxi Province). However, the ruse was exposed—after a thorough investigation, he was deprived of the post due to his ethnicity. In 1309, an edict was issued, according to which Chinese who assumed Mongolian names to become *darughachi* would be dismissed from their positions. From that point on, only Mongols could become *darughachi*. If there were none, representatives of *semu* (with aristocratic origins) could be appointed.⁴² Their duties were mostly to control provincial or district administration and to ensure that the proper amount of taxes would be provided to the Mongolian court. This situation clearly characterises the lowest social status of the conquered—in many cases the appointment was based on ethnicity.

After the conquest of the Southern Song in 1279, a considerable number of Mongols, *semu*, as well as Northern Chinese were sent to the southern part of China. It is important to emphasise that Northern Chinese officials acted as assistants of the Mongols in the administration of the dynasty (in many cases they were appointed to the secondary positions in the central institutions). This meant that these officials were closely associated with the Mongol rulers. Consequently, all these people were directly dependent upon 'the conquerors'. Why did the Mongols give privileges to Northern Chinese? In my opinion, it was because during the conquest of Northern China, the lands of the local landowners were confiscated by the Mongols, leaving the possession only to those who accepted the Yuan administration as legal and fair. The Chinese landowners acting as patriots escaped to the southern part of China, leaving their land and property. Some Chinese decided to stay in Northern China and help the Mongols

⁴⁰ Song Lian 1976: 217.

⁴¹ *Langzhonglin* 郎中令 was a head of the order for the protection of the palace gates in China.

⁴² Endicott-West 1989: 82–83.

to conquer Southern China. For such a devoted service, these Chinese earned new rulers' trust, and therefore they held more privileged positions in the established hierarchical ladder.

The Mongols, *semu*, as well as Northern Chinese were appointed as local officials in the southern part of China. In many articles these officials are described as thieves and robbers. For instance, Paul Smith states that the intentions of *semu* were insincere—they treated China, especially an abundant territory of Jiangnan,⁴³ like a colony for rape and plunder.⁴⁴ Paul Smith points out that in Jiangnan the level of corruption was extremely high—at every local post seven or eight positions were sold as bribes to 'butchers and wine peddlers, brokers and marketplace riffraff'.⁴⁵ Such incompetent officials were mostly interested in accruing personal wealth. It is worth mentioning that they were indifferent to the sufferings of the ordinary people, who were forced to give all they possessed to please the 'gargantuan appetites' of the officials.

Elizabeth Endicott-West indicates the following historical example in her monograph *Mongolian Rule in China. Local Administration in the Yuan Dynasty*: Hu Zhiyu 胡祗遹 (1225–1293) emphasised the prevailing tendency of corruption that had a devastating effect on the quality of government personnel, with subsequent moral decline among the ruling elite:

Even if officials were subjected to physical punishment in the form of flogging every day, they would still not perform their duties properly. The question arises why? They were not afraid of being cursed, they would not object to being punished. As long as they received bribes, they were pleased. This was a common phenomenon among the local officials.⁴⁶

Taking into consideration the above mentioned, it is clear that corruption was one of the integral parts during the reign of Kublai Khan. To eradicate corruption in China, after his accession to the throne, the founder of the Yuan dynasty established an official salary, but after analysing the primary sources, we can conclude that this measure did not contribute a lot to the fight against corruption in the country. Now it is important to focus our attention on two cases of high-officials' corruption during the rule of Kublai Khan, those of Ahmad Fanakati and Sangha.

⁴³ The region of Jiangnan in modern day includes the city of Shanghai, the southern part of Jiangsu Province, the south-eastern part of Anhui Province, the northern part of Jiangxi Province and the northern part of Zhejiang Province.

⁴⁴ Smith 1998: 5.

⁴⁵ Smith 1998: 11.

⁴⁶ Endicott-West 1989: 108.

The case of Ahmad Fanakati

As we already found out in the previous sub-chapter, the embezzlement of public funds was a widespread phenomenon among high-ranking officials during the reign of Kublai Khan. Many *semu* took an active part in stealing government funds, including Ahmad Fanakati, a close associate of Kublai Khan who dominated in the state apparatus until his assassination in 1282. Why was the assistance of Ahmad Fanakati so important to Kublai Khan? The founder of the Yuan dynasty faced a lack of funds in the state treasury due to the financing of construction projects, annual rewards to his relatives, as well as various assaults. For the Mongol khans China was an abundant resource for maintaining their military campaigns aimed at establishing dominion over Japan, Burma, Indonesia, and Vietnam (most of which were unsuccessful and caused a serious depletion of the imperial treasury).⁴⁷ To solve such a significant problem and make expenditures more reasonable, Kublai Khan sought assistance from Ahmad Fanakati who was familiar with these issues.

The first thing that should be mentioned is that Ahmad Fanakati was a representative of the *semu* group (he was of Saracen origin).⁴⁸ In 1262 Ahmad Fanakati was appointed to the Central Secretariat.⁴⁹ According to the Italian merchant, explorer, and writer, Marco Polo (1254–1324), Kublai Khan was bewitched by Ahmad's black magic, and that is why he always went unpunished for his unrighteous deeds.⁵⁰ Many innocent lives were ruined by Ahmad, and as a result, he is described in many sources as a 'villainous character'.⁵¹

Ahmad also served as an expert in fiscal management—his duties included increasing the revenues of Kublai Khan's treasury.⁵² Mostly, he was responsible for trade promotion with Central Asia. Ahmad dramatically increased the government's income by tightening control over taxable households, tracking down Chinese who had escaped prior registration and increasing their number from 1,418,499 in 1261 to 1,967,898 in 1274.⁵³ Having seen such a devoted service, in the 1270s Kublai Khan did not control the activities of his close associate, entrusting him with important affairs of the state. Thus, Ahmad reached the peak of his power and had a complete control over the finances of China. John D. Langlois points out that the Mongolian emperors were mostly concentrated on not only the honesty but also the moral quality of their officials. For the

⁴⁷ Rachewiltz 1993: 548.

⁴⁸ Polo 1938: 215.

⁴⁹ Song Lian 1976: 100.

⁵⁰ Polo 1938: 215.

⁵¹ Rachewiltz 1993: 539. Polo 1938: 214–215. Rossabi 1994: 473.

⁵² Rachewiltz 1993: 539.

⁵³ Rossabi 1994: 474.

emperors, the most important indicator of effective work was an increase in treasury revenues.⁵⁴ Enjoying such a favourable attitude of Kublai Khan, Ahmad decided to take some measures to strengthen his position at court, giving his family members, as well as his allies, high positions in officialdom. According to *Yuanshi*:

杭州地大，委寄非輕，阿合馬溺於私愛，乃以不肖子抹速忽充達魯花赤。⁵⁵
The lands of Hangzhou are large, and the commission of duties is not an easy [task]. Ahema [Ahmad] was addicted to love and appointed his unworthy son Mosuhu *darughachi* [of Hangzhou].

又以其子忽辛為大都路總管，兼大興府尹。⁵⁶
He [Ahmad] also appointed his son Huxin the governor of Dadu (in modern-day Beijing, the capital of the Yuan dynasty) and concurrently the governor of Daxing Prefecture.

After the conquest of the Southern Song by a general, Bayan of the Baarin (1236–1295),⁵⁷ many reforms were carried out by Ahmad Fanakati. As we already found out, his son took the position of *darughachi* in the south and kept his father informed about the general situation there. Moreover, Ahmad Fanakati insisted on implementing the Yuan currency in the southern parts of China, where an extremely high exchange rate was established—50 notes of Song dynasty money were declared equivalent to one note of Yuan money of the same denomination.⁵⁸ It goes without saying that such an economic reform had a negative influence on the Chinese economy, causing resentment among the conquered people.

Another interesting point is that Ahmad Fanakati was also concentrated on the elimination of his political rivals, often slandering many court officials in front of Kublai Khan. For instance, he had a very complicated relationship with the Chinese Cui Bin 崔斌 (1225–1280). Being a witness to the innumerable crimes of Ahmad, including corruption and nepotism, Cui Bin tried to convey the truth about Ahmad's atrocities to the khan. Unfortunately, his attempts failed. Ahmad decided to investigate Cui Bin, and it was concluded that he and two other conspirators had stolen state grain—they were sentenced to death in 1280.⁵⁹ Of all his opponents, Ahmad was afraid only of Zhenjin 真金 (1243–1286), a son of Kublai Khan and a designated heir.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Endicott-West 1989: 110.

⁵⁵ Song Lian 1976: 4559.

⁵⁶ Song Lian 1976: 4561.

⁵⁷ Cleaves 1956: 186. Wilkinson 2013: 777.

⁵⁸ Atwood 2004: 5.

⁵⁹ Rossabi 1988: 182.

⁶⁰ Rashid-ad-din 1960: 189.

Zhenjin was hostile to Ahmad Fanakati.⁶¹ In order to better understand what caused this kind of hatred, it is essential to give a brief historical overview. Zhenjin had been brought up according to Chinese customs and traditions, and prominent Chinese scholars greatly contributed to his education—he could speak Chinese fluently. Zhenjin was passionate about Confucianism and its values.⁶² Having seen Ahmad's embezzlement, lawlessness, and nepotism, Zhenjin and his Chinese associates criticised his political activities. They sought Ahmad's dismissal from the state apparatus. Cui Bin was a close ally of Zhenjin and was highly esteemed by Kublai Khan's son. Having heard the news of Ahmad's conspiracy against Cui Bin, Zhenjin sent officials to save his friend from execution, but it was too late—the sentence had already been carried out. After this event, the relations between Ahmad and Zhenjin became increasingly worse.

Ahmad Fanakati was eventually punished for his innumerable atrocities—he was assassinated in 1282.⁶³ After Ahmad's death, Kublai Khan ordered an investigation into how honest his ally was. The results were overwhelming: a considerable amount of stolen wealth was confiscated, such as cattle, a luxurious residence, as well as a precious jade bowl from Kublai Khan's treasury.⁶⁴ According to *Yuanshi*:

乃命發墓剖棺，戮尸于通玄門外，縱犬啗其肉。⁶⁵

'[The emperor] ordered to open the grave of Ahmad, to dig up Ahmad's body from the it, to decapitate the corpse and to give it to the dogs to be eaten'.

Rashid al-Din Hamadani mentioned that Ahmad Fanakati's two sons, Mosuhu and Huxin, were skinned alive for their innumerable crimes.⁶⁶

In conclusion, the political and financial activity of Ahmad Fanakati lasted for 20 approximately years. He was well known for his unprecedented level of corruption and his promotion of relatives who were incompetent in matters of governance. Thus, it is obvious that the phenomenon of corruption was widespread not only among petty officials but also among influential officials in Kublai Khan's court administration.

⁶¹ Atwood 2004: 5.

⁶² Rossabi 1994: 478.

⁶³ Tsai 2011: 91.

⁶⁴ Rossabi 1988: 183.

⁶⁵ Song Lian 1976: 4564.

⁶⁶ Rashid-ad-din 1960: 190.

The case of Sangha

Another example of corruption among high officials was that of Sangha who occupied a dominant position in the government apparatus. Chinese sources do not mention the nationality of Sangha. Rashid Al-din points out that he was of Uighur origin,⁶⁷ and Morris Rossabi and Christopher Atwood claim that he was Tibetan.⁶⁸ Sangha was extremely good at languages, including Chinese, Tibetan, Uighur, and Mongolian. This talent attracted the attention of Kublai Khan, who was searching for people being proficient in various languages. Consequently, Sangha became a government member, where he was mostly responsible for Tibetan and Buddhist affairs. Thus, we can conclude that Sangha's excellent abilities in foreign languages opened a new chapter in his life.

After the death of Ahmad Fanakati in 1282, Sangha started to play a crucial role at the khan's court. Sangha was well known for a rigid control of financial management as well as for the prosecution of officials suspected of committing various crimes.⁶⁹ It is important to point out that Sangha, after obtaining high positions at court, was involved in a vicious circle of corruption. A clerk in the Censorate, Wang Liangbi 王良弼, was aware of Sangha's crimes and was planning to inform the khan about the serious violations. Having known about it, Sangha decided to take drastic measures to eliminate his political rival. Wang Liangbi was executed, and his family was enslaved. Another man—Uighur Tore—who was hostile to Sangha, tried to prevent the flourishing tendency of corruption and to convey the truth to the founder of the Yuan dynasty. He was also unjustly sentenced to death.⁷⁰

Below is an important testimony taken from *Yuanshi*, characterising the court activities of Sangha in detail:

甲辰，中書省臣麥術丁、崔彧言：「桑哥當國四年，諸臣多以賄進，親舊皆授要官，唯以欺蔽九重、朘削百姓為事，宜令兩省嚴加考核，並除名為民。」從之。要束木以桑哥妻黨為湖廣行省平章，至是坐不法者數十事，詔械致湖廣省誅之。⁷¹

In the year of *jiachen* [5 June 1291] the officials of the Imperial Secretariat Maizhuding and Cui Yu reported to [Kublai Khan]: 'Sangge [Sangha] held reins of government for four years, and most of the officials received [positions/promotions] by means of bribes. All relatives and old acquaintances were appointed officials [received influential posts], although this is such a thing when

⁶⁷ Rashid-ad-din 1960: 190.

⁶⁸ Rossabi 1994: 478. Atwood 2004: 488.

⁶⁹ Rachewiltz 1993: 563.

⁷⁰ Rachewiltz 1993: 574.

⁷¹ Song Lian 1976: 347.

the higher spheres are misled by deception. Both secretariats [Central Imperial and Supreme Council] should be ordered to conduct an additional and strict investigation, and the guilty ones should be equally excluded from the lists (of the bureaucracy), making them common people. [Kublai Khan] accepted this. Yao Shumu, being a relative of Sangge's wife, became a *pingzhang* [the head] of Hubei and Hunan Provinces, and by now had been arrested for several dozen cases that were illegal, followed by the highest decree to put in shackles (in stocks) and delivered under escort to Hubei and Hunan Provinces to execute him [Yao Shumu].

This evidence vividly characterises the political activities of Sangha, the core element of which was focused on a prevailing tendency of corruption, as well as the appointment of his close allies to the government apparatus.

Many Chinese did not like the court activities of Sangha because of his close supporter, the Buddhist monk Yanglian Zhenjia 杨琏真珈, who was a supervisor of Buddhist teachings in Southern China. His actions had a devastating effect on the preservation of the unique Confucian and Taoist temples. Yanglian Zhenjia was responsible for the renovation of many temples and monasteries in the southern part of China. In reality, he was mainly focused on the conversion of some Confucian and Taoist temples into Buddhist ones.⁷² His most humiliating action was the looting of the tomb of the Song royal family and desecration of their corpses. The looted valuables were mostly used for the construction of Buddhist temples, as well as for the purpose of gaining personal wealth. Such behaviour and the destruction of cultural relics became reasons for the hatred of the Chinese for Sangha and his close allies.

The management of key personnel was strictly monitored by Sangha. Neither promotion nor appointment could have been done without his approval. Moreover, obtaining high positions at court could only be received by means of purchase.⁷³ For example, the clerk Xiao attained a position as a district assistant in the Office of General Administration in Dadu, and he was caught taking bribes. Kublai Khan ordered the execution of the irresponsible official. However, Sangha provided assistance to the clerk, declaring to the khan that he possessed outstanding abilities and had successfully conducted an audit in the Imperial Treasury.⁷⁴ The khan agreed to forego the death penalty for a dismissal from office.

In 1291 justice prevailed. Many officials accused Sangha of taking bribes, and they informed the emperor of his atrocities. Sangha was executed in 1291.⁷⁵

⁷² Rossabi 1994: 479.

⁷³ Atwood 2004: 488.

⁷⁴ Rachewiltz 1993: 572.

⁷⁵ Atwood 2004: 459.

After an investigation, it was found out that there were many of Sangha's family members at the court who were also engaged in illicit activities. For instance, Sangha's brother-in-law was also sentenced to death. Many of his supporters were accused of corruption, including Yasmut, who had 4,000 *liang* of gold at his property.⁷⁶ He was executed in the same year. Nasr al-Din, a close associate of Sangha, was accused of stealing more than 130,000 notes of paper money from ordinary citizens. He was also sentenced to death. Fearing the death penalty, Sangha's younger brother, a pacification commissioner in Gansu Province, committed suicide.

After Sangha's execution, Yanglian Zhenjia lost his main protection. He was accused of bribery. According to Igor de Rachewiltz, there were 116,200 notes of paper money, 1,700 *liang* of gold, 6,800 *liang* of silver, and many more valuables at his estate.⁷⁷ Based on the above-mentioned cases, we can conclude that the level of corruption was overwhelming throughout the reign of Kublai Khan.

Cases during the reigns of Kublai Khan's descendants Throughout the reign of Temür Khan (1294–1307)

After the death of Kublai Khan in 1294, the Yuan dynasty faced high level of corruption and fell deep into a political and economic crisis. Confucian scholar Zhang Yanhao 張養浩 (1270–1329) mentioned:

During the reign of Kublai Khan, the officials were appointed according to their merits, but nowadays the situation has deteriorated—people are given high ranks and titles in violation of the law. During the rule of the founder of the Yuan dynasty, paper money was issued for fixed amounts, but now they are issued at any time and as much as required.⁷⁸

Such an eyewitness description of the Yuan empire characterises the weakest parts of the Mongol rule. Moreover, Zhang Yanhao emphasises the presence of incompetent officials at court who gained their positions by means of bribery.

Throughout the reign of Temür Khan (1294–1307), to eliminate the problem of corruption, the Imperial Inspection was established as a temporary anti-corruption measure to punish officials involved in corruption.⁷⁹ The main goals of this anticorruption campaign were mainly to conduct a clear investigation in China as well as to take punitive measures towards malicious violators. During

⁷⁶ Rachewiltz 1993: 576.

⁷⁷ Rachewiltz 1993: 577.

⁷⁸ Bokschanin–Kadyrbaev 2016: 300.

⁷⁹ Li Zhi'an 2006: 392.

the reign of the Yuan emperors, such imperial inspections were commissioned only six times.⁸⁰ In *Yuan Dianzhang*, there is an important edict regarding the measures aimed at eradicating corruption in the country:

諸職官及有出身人等，今後因事受財，依條斷罪。枉法者，除名不叙；不枉法（官）〔者〕，須殿三年，再犯不叙。無祿（官）〔者〕減一等。以至元鈔為則。⁸¹
 Officials and clerks of all levels from now on will receive guilty verdicts for taking bribes according to the clause (of law). Those who circumvent the law will be dismissed from the [office] and [they] will not be reappointed; [officials] who do not break the law [those] should be demoted to low positions for three years. If they repeat the crime again, [such officials] should be dismissed. Non-salary officials should be demoted to one grade lower. The amount of money involved [in such a fraud] should be evaluated according to the value of the paper currency of Zhiyuan.

Another decree written in *Yuanshi* states:

諸職官犯贓，生前贓狀明白，雖死猶責家屬納贓。⁸²
 All the officials who took bribes, during their lifetime committed bribery and theft [such crimes were clear], and even though they are dead, their families should give back the stolen goods.

From these two edicts, it is obvious that the measures taken by the state to eradicate corruption in the country were serious. However, this was not enough; official corruption continued to flourish. The following examples illustrate the prevailing tendency of corruption in the country:

庚戌，京師犯贓罪者三百人。⁸³
 In the year of *gengxu* [22 November 1294], there were 300 officials who committed corruption crimes in Jingshi.⁸⁴

庚辰，札魯忽赤脫而速受賂，為其奴所告，毒殺其奴，坐棄市。⁸⁵
 In the year of *gengchen* [4 October 1297], Zhaluhuchi took bribes; his slave reported about it, [and the slave] was poisoned. A public execution was carried out [of Zhaluhuchi].

乙巳，行御史臺劾平章教化受財三萬餘錠，教化復言平章的里不花領財賦時盜鈔三十萬錠。⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Chen Gaohua 2011: 1544.

⁸² Song Lian 1976: 2612.

⁸³ Song Lian 1976: 388.

⁸⁴ Jingshi refers to Dadu, the capital of the Yuan dynasty.

⁸⁵ Song Lian 1976: 410.

⁸⁶ Song Lian 1976: 427.

In the year of *yisi* [5 April 1299], the Imperial Censorate accused the Grand Preceptor Jiaohua of accepting bribes totalling over 30,000 *ding*,⁸⁷ and Jiaohua further said that the Grand Preceptor Deli Buhualing was in charge of managing finances in his jurisdiction; he embezzled 300,000 *ding*.

On 18 February 1301, the minister of the censorship mentioned:

官吏犯贓及盜官錢，事覺避罪逃匿者，宜同獄成。雖經原免，亦加降黜，庶奸偽可中書平章伯顏、梁德珪、段真、阿里渾撒里，右丞八都馬辛，左丞月古不花，參政迷而火者、張斯立等，受朱清、張瑄賄賂。⁸⁸

Officials who take bribes and embezzle government funds, and those who think that they will be able to escape from punishment and hide should be sentenced to the same prison. Even if they were amnestied, they should be dismissed [from the office]. Those involved in fraud were political administrator Boyan, Liang Degui, Duan Zhen, Ali Hunsali, the official who was in charge of receiving petitions and issuing loans in money and grain (*youcheng*) Ma Xin, and Senior Assistant to the First Minister Yue Gubuhua and advisor and Assistant to the First Minister eunuch Mier, Zhang Silideng, were bribed by Zhu Qing and Zhang Xuan.

庚子，法忽魯丁輸運和林軍糧，其負欠計二十五萬餘石，近監察御史亦言其侵匿官錢十三萬餘錠。⁸⁹

In the year of *gengzi* [26 September 1303], Fahuluding transported army provisions to Helin. His debt amounted to more than 25,000 *shi* of grain. Recently an official in charge of the discipline of public functionaries said that Fahuluding embezzled government funds of more than 130,000 *ding*.

癸未，甘肅行省平章合散等侵盜官錢十六萬三千餘錠。⁹⁰

In the year of *guiwei* [11 July 1303], over 163,000 *ding* of official money were stolen by *pingzhang* Hesan and others in Gansu Province.

丁未，七道奉使宣撫所罷贓污官吏凡一萬八千四百七十三人，贓四萬五千八百六十五錠。⁹¹

In the year of *dingwei* [21 January 1304], 18,473 corrupt officials were dismissed by pacification commissioners in seven circuits; [their] bribes were 45,865 *ding*.

The provided testimonies from the primary source show only the recorded figures of corruption in the country. Presumably, these figures could have been several times higher than official statistics indicate. Elizabeth Endicott-West

⁸⁷ Chinese measurement: one *ding* 錠 was equal to 50 *liang* of silver.

⁸⁸ Song Lian 1976: 433.

⁸⁹ Song Lian 1976: 454.

⁹⁰ Song Lian 1976: 452.

⁹¹ Song Lian 1976: 456.

points out that favouritism and bribery were the main elements of the loss of virtue by the court officials.⁹²

Another significant problem, in my opinion, was the clemency of officials who committed corruption crimes. According to *Yuanshi*:

辛丑，浙西道提刑按察使弘吉烈帶阿魯灰受賂，遇赦免，復以為河西隴北道肅政廉訪。⁹³

In the year of *xinchou* [16 July 1294], the judge and inspector of the Zhexi circuit Gongjileidai Aluhui took bribes. He was pardoned and reappointed to the position of inspector in the Hexi Longbei circuit.

丁丑，大都路總管沙的坐贓當罷，帝以故臣子，特減其罪，俾仍舊職。⁹⁴

In the year of *dingchou* [3 December 1297], the governor of Dadu Shade took bribes and was dismissed from office. The emperor, considering [Shade's] past loyalty, leniently reduced his charges, allowing [Shade] to resume his previous position.

乙未，以洪君祥為中書右丞，監察御史言其曩居宥密，以貪賄罷黜，乞別選賢能代之，不報。⁹⁵

In the year of *yiwei* [25 March 1303], Hong Junxiang was appointed as *youxiang* of the Imperial Secretariat. Officials in charge of the discipline of public functionaries noted that before [Hong Junxiang] took bribes, which led to his dismissal from office. [Officials in charge of the discipline of public functionaries] requested the replacement of Hong Junxiang by a talented and virtuous person but received no response.

壬戌，前河間路達魯花赤忽賽因、轉運使術甲德壽皆坐贓罷。今忽賽因以獻鷹犬，復除大寧路達魯花赤。⁹⁶

In the year of *renxu* [19 August 1303], *ex-darughachi* of Hejian Husaiyin, and an official in charge of transportation Shujia Deshou committed corruption and were dismissed from office. Recently Husaiyin gave presents [to the authorities], falcons and dogs, and he was reappointed as *darughachi* of Daning.

壬寅，野理牙舊以贓罪除名，近復命為太醫使，臣等不敢奉詔。⁹⁷

In the year of *renyin* [15 November 1328], Yeliyajiu was dismissed from office for taking bribes. His name was removed from the list, but right after that he was reappointed as imperial doctor. Officials dare not [refuse to obey] the decree.

⁹² Endicott-West 1989: 106.

⁹³ Song Lian 1976: 385.

⁹⁴ Song Lian 1976: 414.

⁹⁵ Song Lian 1976: 449.

⁹⁶ Song Lian 1976: 453.

⁹⁷ Song Lian 1976: 715.

甲申，遼陽行省平章哈刺鐵木兒，嘗坐贓被杖罪，今復任以宰執，控制東藩。⁹⁸

In the year of *jiashen* [18 October 1330], *pingzhang* of Liaoyang Hala Tiemur took bribes, [for which he was] flogged, but right after that he was reinstated as a governor and controlled Dongfan.

According to these examples, it is clear that anti-corruption measures were not efficient at all—corrupted officials after dismissal were reappointed again. Such a situation shows that high positions in officialdom were occupied by people interested only in self-enrichment.

Cases during the reign of Külüg Khan

When Külüg Khan ascended the throne in 1307, he granted 3.5 million *jin* to the officials, which comprised 75% of the amount of money received by the treasury during the year, and the action consequently aggravated the economic crisis in the country.⁹⁹ Moreover, important government positions became the subject of trade. During Külüg Khan's reign, over 880 people rose to high positions in one year, which seriously exacerbated social inequality in China.¹⁰⁰ People completely unfamiliar with government administration were easily appointed as high officials by means of bribery. They committed violations towards ordinary people, for instance collecting unlimited taxes. Wu Cheng mentioned that the court officials were used to the bribes; they were not different from robbers and thieves. There were only very few officials, probably one or two for every thousand, who performed their duties honestly.¹⁰¹

Another important point is that inflation was a popular phenomenon during the reign of Külüg Khan. Because of the innumerable gifts awarded to devoted court officials, the amount of paper currency was significantly increased. For instance, in 1261–1262 the total number of printed currency was 39,139 notes, in 1271–1272 it was 47,000, and in 1310–1311 it was 1,450,368.¹⁰² As we can see, the volume of printed paper money grew 37 times in 50 years, which had disastrous consequences for the economy of China.

⁹⁸ Song Lian 1976: 765–766.

⁹⁹ Bokschanin–Kadyrbaev 2016: 305.

¹⁰⁰ Bokschanin–Kadyrbaev 2016: 307.

¹⁰¹ Li Zhi'an 2006: 376.

¹⁰² Schurmann 1956: 142.

Other cases during the reigns of descendants of Kublai Khan

Another significant cause of the emptying of the state treasury was the giving of innumerable gifts to meritorious court officials and to relatives of the khans. According to the statistics in 1294, when Temür Khan ascended the throne that year, the members of his family got 120,000 *liang* of silver.¹⁰³ When Ayurbarwada became emperor in 1311, he also allocated significant sums for the coronation procedure as well as gifts for relatives, including 39,650 *liang* of gold, 1,849,050 *liang* of silver, and 223,279 paper notes, and relatives and princes got 472,488 lengths of silk.¹⁰⁴ Such generosity on the part of the Mongol emperors was due to the desire to gain the support of the Mongolian nobility as well as to strengthen their position. However, the giving of such an amount of gifts had a devastating effect on the economy of the Yuan dynasty and undoubtedly led to a financial crisis.

Temüder (?–1322), a grand councillor during the reign of Ayurbarwada Buyantu Khan (r. 1311–1320), was accused of corruption and he was dismissed from his post.¹⁰⁵ It is important to point out that when Shidibala Khan ascended the throne in 1320, Temüder was reappointed as a grand councillor (mostly due to the help of Dagi Khatun (ca. 1262–1322)).¹⁰⁶ Firstly, he took drastic measures towards his political foes: Yang Doerji, Xiao Baiju, and Huo Sheng were sentenced to death because of their help in revealing his arbitrariness during the reign of Ayurbarwada Buyantu Khan, which subsequently led to his dismissal from office. Secondly, the corruption problem deteriorated. The members of Temüder's family were given positions at court, and his close allies got high-ranking positions, such as assistant administrators of the right and the left of the secretariat. Temüder died in 1322, and his allies were accused of taking bribes as well as of official malfeasance.

Moreover, Shidibala Khan abolished the payment of annual awards to the princes; the khan wanted to avoid the depletion of the treasury due to such luxurious annual gift giving. Thus, in 1323, the supporters of Temüder, thirsty for revenge, and the princes deprived of annual gifts, assassinated the khan. From my point of view, the main reason for such a tragedy was the Sinification of Ayurbarwada and Shidibala, whose political courses were aimed at the eradication of corruption, the establishment of rule, and an administration system based on Confucian values and norms. It goes without saying that the interests of Dagi Khatun and her allies, the most vivid of whom was Temüder, were insincere and

¹⁰³ Hsiao 1994: 500.

¹⁰⁴ Hsiao 1994: 521.

¹⁰⁵ Hsiao 1994: 525.

¹⁰⁶ Dagi Khatun was a mother of Külüg Khan and Ayurbarwada Buyantu Khan.

were aimed at gaining personal wealth. They tried to prevent the Sinification process of the Mongolian nobility, because such a ‘Chinese political course’ could have been a real threat to their influence and their hereditary political and financial privileges.

In *Yuanshi* there are many examples of a prevailing tendency towards corruption during the rule of Kublai Khan’s descendants:

壬辰，中書平章政事塔失海牙坐受贓杖免。¹⁰⁷

In the year of *renchen* [13 October 1321], the Head of the Department of Political Affairs of the Imperial Secretariat Tashi Haiya accepted stolen goods; beatings with a stick [as punishment] and dismissal [were implemented towards him].

庚子，刑部尚書烏馬兒坐贓杖免。¹⁰⁸

In the year of *gengzi* [13 February 1323], the minister of Punishments Wumaer took bribes, and he was flogged with sticks and dismissed [from office].

辛丑，戶部尚書郭良坐贓免。¹⁰⁹

In the year of *xinchou* [26 September 1326], Minister of Revenue Guo Liang took bribes, and he was dismissed [from office].

己亥，中書平章朵兒只，職任台衡，不思報效，銓選之際，紊亂綱紀，貪污著聞，恬不知恥，黜罷為宜。¹¹⁰

In the year of *jihai* [7 March 1330], *Pingzhang* of Imperial Secretariat Duozhizhi, who held a position of authority, neglected thoughts of contributing, causing disorder and confusion during the process of appointments and selections and disrupting the order and regulations. He was known for corruption; he did not have any sense of shame [due to embezzlement]. He should be dismissed from office.

甲申，遼陽行省平章哈刺鐵木兒，嘗坐贓被杖罪。¹¹¹

In the year of *jiashen* [18 October 1330], Hala Tiemu'er, *pingzhang* of Liaoyang Province, was prosecuted for taking bribes; he was punished with flogging with sticks.

辛巳，燕南廉訪使卜咱兒，前為閩海廉訪使，受贓計鈔二萬二千餘錠、金五百餘兩、銀三千餘兩、男女生口二十二人及它寶貨無算，雖遇赦原，乞追奪制命，籍沒流竄。¹¹²

In the year of *xinsi* [13 April 1331], Inspector of Yannan Bu Zhaner, visiting envoy of Yannan Lian, who was formerly an inspector of Minhai [Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces], accepted stolen goods consisting of more than 22,000 *ding*, more

¹⁰⁷ Song Lian 1976: 614.

¹⁰⁸ Song Lian 1976: 627.

¹⁰⁹ Song Lian 1976: 627.

¹¹⁰ Song Lian 1976: 752.

¹¹¹ Song Lian 1976: 765–766.

¹¹² Song Lian 1976: 778.

than 500 *liang* of gold, more than 3,000 *liang* of silver, and 22 captured men and women and their numerous valuables. Although he was amnestied and dismissed [from office], his property was registered and confiscated; [Bu Zaner] fled.

癸卯，御史臺臣劾奏工部尚書蘇炳性行貪邪，詔罷之。¹¹³

In the year of *guimao* [5 May 1331], the censor informed that the Minister of Public Works Subing was greedy and vicious; it was ordered to dismiss Subing from office.

壬辰，福建宣慰副使哈只，前為廣東廉訪副使，貪污狼籍，宜罷黜。¹¹⁴

In the year of *renchen* [20 December 1331], an assistant commissioner for the pacification of Fujian Hazhi, who was a deputy auditor of Guangdong Province before, should be dismissed for corruption and embezzlement.

As we already found out, the *semu* and the Mongols were swamped with unprecedented levels of corruption, and that is why majority of the Chinese were suspicious of the representatives of the first and second classes. This fact is vividly confirmed by an eyewitness of that time. Ye Ziqi stated, ‘In the last years of the Yuan dynasty, officials are corrupted. It is because the Mongols and *semu* people don’t know what shame is’ 元朝末年，官貪吏污，始因蒙古色目人罔然不知廉恥之為何物。¹¹⁵ Ye Ziqi also mentioned:

上下賄賂，公行如市，蕩然無復紀綱矣。肅政廉訪司官，所至州縣，各帶庫子檢鈔秤銀，殆同市道矣。¹¹⁶

At all levels [of officialdom] there was bribery, openly behaving like in a market. The country’s legal system vanished from the face of the earth [it was in decline]. In the subprefectures and counties to which the officials travelled, the heads of the department of inspectors [to ensure morally] clean management each brought along a treasurer who checked the paper money and weighed the silver, very similar to in a marketplace.

Another key reason for the rise of corruption was the sale of positions. Kong Qi reports that in 1345 the level of government positions being sold reached its peak—it was twice as high as it had been in previous years. The following historical situation vividly characterises this fact: Jalair Dorjibal, a chief administrator of Huguang Province,¹¹⁷ actively contributed to the distribution of ranks

¹¹³ Song Lian 1976: 781.

¹¹⁴ Song Lian 1976: 774.

¹¹⁵ Ye Ziqi: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=443067#p6> (last accessed: 11.12.2023.).

¹¹⁶ Ye Ziqi: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=443067#p6> (last accessed: 11.12.2023.).

¹¹⁷ Huguang Province was established in 1274 and existed during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Currently its location is in the territories of modern Hubei south of the Yangtze River and Hunan, Guizhou, and Guangxi Provinces.

to those who voluntarily provided grain.¹¹⁸ Most often, posts were bought by the wealthy houses of Jiangnan for grain. In 1355, the purchase of state ranks was also in high demand among the population. The uprising of the Red Turban troops, which was broken up in 1351, inflicted deep damage to the Mongol conquerors—supplying its army with provisions was vital to the government. Almost any resident of China could afford a position at court if they possessed an abundant harvest. Consequently, the number of incompetent officials in the state apparatus actively flourished. For instance, for 20,000 *shi* of grain it was possible to buy a position at court.¹¹⁹

Moreover, during the reign of Toghon Temür (1333–1368), the situation became worse. Corruption continued to flourish. The following touching folksongs vividly describes the vicissitudes of life of ordinary people:

九重丹語頒恩至，萬兩黃金奉使回。奉使來時，驚天動地；奉使去時，烏天黑地。官吏都懼天喜地，百姓卻啼天哭天。官吏黑漆皮燈籠，奉使來時添一重。¹²⁰

Coming with the Emperor's favour in a nine-folded red imperial edict, the imperial inspector returned with 10,000 *liang* of gold. When the imperial inspector comes, it frightens heaven and moves the earth. When the imperial inspector leaves, it is dark all over Heaven and Earth. All officials are highly delighted with Heaven and Earth, but ordinary people are crying and wailing at Heaven and Earth. Officials are like lanterns painted in black colour; it is gets darker when the imperial inspector comes.

Based on this folksong, we can feel the mood and vicissitudes of the lives of the ordinary people, who were hostile to the court officials. It was pointed out that people were afraid of meeting the inspectors—they knew that robbery was inevitable.

堂堂大元，姦佞專權，開河變鈔禍根源。惹紅巾萬千。官法濫，刑法重，黎民發怨。人吃人，鈔買鈔，何曾見？賊做官，官做賊，混愚賢。哀哉可憐。¹²¹
Oh, the Great Yuan. Under you, crafty and fawning people monopolised power. Rivers flooding and financial disasters were the root causes that provoked the rise of a myriad Red Turbans. Laws of government are inefficient and corporal punishments are severe. The common people are in resentment! People eat people. Paper money buys paper money. Never has been seen [such phenomena before]!

¹¹⁸ Dardess 1973: 112.

¹¹⁹ Smith 1998: 81.

¹²⁰ Tao Zongyi: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=488988&remap=gb#p6> (last accessed: 17.11.2023.). Li Zhi'an 2006: 392-393 (Li's translation was slightly modified by the author).

¹²¹ Tao Zongyi: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=654703&remap=gb#p16> (last accessed: 17.11.2023.).

Thieves became officials; officials became thieves! Wisdom and stupidity are mixed! How pitiful!

This passage also indicates a heavy burden on the ordinary people—corruption prevailed widely. In the middle of 1340s, severe famine swept across the territory of China; two out of three people had died by the 1350s. In these days of chaos, Yuan emperor Togon Temür embarked on the construction of a ship-dragon in the palace park, which required a considerable amount of money.¹²² Such a decision caused popular discontent and provided a solid basis for the Red Turban Rebellion, which officially swept across China in 1351. Local people could not continue being speechless, seeing injustice and the devastation of *tianxia*, and they decided to take drastic measures towards the ruling elite.

Conclusion

To sum up, from Chinese sources it seems that corruption was a prevailing tendency throughout the reign of the Mongols in China. As a part of this article, it was found out that many high-ranking officials during the reign of the Yuan dynasty were corrupt, including Ahmad Fanakati, Sangha, Temüder, and many *darughachi*, which mainly consisted of Mongols and *semu*. The purchase of ranks and the arbitrariness of officials prevailed widely during that historical period. As we found out, some of the officials were even not familiar with the procedure of the legal cases and the administrative work that significantly worsened the quality of the government apparatus. The unwillingness of the Mongol emperors, in particular, Toghon Temür, to improve the social situation led to the exacerbation of popular discontent in China. From my point of view, such a phenomenon became one of the main reasons for the decline of the Mongol ruling elite in the eyes of ordinary people, and presumably it led to the breakout of the Red Turban Rebellion in 1351 with the subsequent overthrow of the Yuan dynasty in 1368.

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¹²² Bokschanin–Kadyrbaev 2016: 330.

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