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The Four-Class System (sideng renzhi 四等人制) of Administration During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) in China

Abstract

Mongol rule in China stands as a remarkable example of the amalgamation of two distinct cultures—one sedentary and one agricultural. The progression of the Mongol conquest in both northern and southern China warrants special attention. Initially, the Mongol campaigns in northern China (1211–1234) were marked by excessive cruelty, city destruction, the conversion of lands into pastures, and the displacement of the conquered population. However, this strategy proved to be unproductive, yielding minimal benefits for the Mongols. The strategic proposal presented by Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (1189–1243), an adviser to Genghis Khan (Mong. Činggis qaγan, Temüjin 1162–1227) and Ögedei Khan (Mong. Ögedei qaγan, 1186–1241), compelled the conquerors to reassess their subsequent plans. During the reign of the Mongols in China, the population was divided into four groups: the Mongols, the *semu* 色目, the northern Chinese, and the southern Chinese. The ethnic hierarchy during the Yuan Dynasty was a structured system that categorised the population into distinct classes, primarily to facilitate governance and maintain social order within the diverse and vast empire. This hierarchy had significant implications for the social, political, and economic life of the people under the Mongol rule. Moreover, the Mongols created their own centralised administrative system, which mostly excluded the Chinese from key government positions. The Chinese were often assigned to minor positions or given fewer opportunities for promotion. This study delves into the traits of the four-class system and the Mongol administrative system in China. The ethnic policy implemented by the Mongols against the conquered people during the Yuan dynasty had a significant impact on social relations, economic activity, and political stability in China, which partially contributed to the dynasty's later downfall.

Keywords: Yuan dynasty, *Yuanshi*, four-class system (*sideng renzhi* 四等人制), *semu*, *hanren*, *nanren*

Introduction

The era of the Mongol conquests, in particular, the large-scale activities of Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan (Mong. Qubilai qaγan, 1215–1294, r. 1271–1294), deserves special attention. Not only did Kublai Khan unite all parts of China, but he also laid a foundation for the functioning of the administrative apparatus, social sphere, and interactions between many different nations. For almost a century, the Mongols retained dominance over numerous peoples, distinguished by cultural aspects, linguistic characteristics, and forms of social organisation.

During the writing of the present article, a wide assortment of primary and secondary sources was used. These materials helped to restore the historical picture of that time. Below is a list of the most influential sources pivotal for analysing the chosen topic.

The *Yuanshi* 元史 (History of the Yuan dynasty)¹ helps researchers to plunge into various events that took place during the Mongol rule in China; it serves as an encyclopaedia of the life of the Chinese and provides a lot of unique information regarding the Mongol administration and treatment of the conquered people.

Works by Igor de Rachewiltz² and Christopher Atwood³ reveal a lot of interesting facts about influential political figures throughout the Mongol conquests, for instance the role of Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (1189–1243) at the Mongol court, Li Tan's rebellion in 1262 through the prism of the division of society into four classes,⁴ the preference for accepting the *semu* 色目 for government positions, and so on.

¹ Song Lian 1976: 1–4670. *Yuanshi* is a Chinese official chronicle compiled in 1368–1369. The chronicle covers the entire period of the Yuan dynasty's rule; it presents events in chronological order without detailed descriptions of the internal connections between them. The chronicle also includes chronological and genealogical tables; descriptions of rituals and customs; the state of administration, trade, science, and art; and biographies of all prominent figures of the time. The structure of *Yuanshi* includes four sections: 'Main Records', 'Treatises', 'Tables', and 'Biographies'. There are 210 *juan* 卷 (chapters) in the *Yuanshi*.

² Rachewiltz 1983: 281–312. Rachewiltz 1993: 136–175, 500–519, 539–583.

³ Atwood 2004: 1–678.

⁴ 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, northern Chinese (*hanren* 漢人) were in the third category, and southern Chinese (*nanren* 南人) 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, Kipchaks, 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

Works by Michael Brose served as crucial materials to analyse the influence of one of the most pivotal *semu* groups (the Uyghurs) at the Mongol court. He points out the main contribution of the Uyghurs in the development of the state apparatus, for example in the upbringing of the Mongol heirs as well as their cultural heritage.⁵ These materials help researchers to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of the ethnic policy established by the Mongols in China.

Monographs and articles by John Dardess, Morris Rossabi, Frederick Mote, and Thomas Allsen⁶ are of paramount importance, because the authors describe the administration system during the Yuan dynasty, the anti-Chinese policies conducted by the chancellor Bayan of the Merkid (?–1340),⁷ and the main reasons of the decline of the Mongol influence in China in the second half of the 14th century.

The main aims of the article are: 1) to delve into the intricacies of China's four-class system; 2) to outline its nuanced characteristics; and 3) to thoroughly analyse the primary sources.

A list of the Yuan emperors is as follows: Kublai Khan 元世祖 (Mong. Qubilai qaγan, r. 1260–1294), Öljeiyitü Khan 元成宗 (Mong. Öljeiyitü qaγan, r. 1294–1307), Külüg Khan 元武宗 (Mong. Qayisang Külüg qaγan, r. 1308–1311), Buyantu Khan 元仁宗 (Mong. Ayuur balbad Buyan-tu qaγan, r. 1311–1320), Shidibala or Gegeen Khan 元英宗 (Mong. Sidibala Gegegen qaγan, r. 1321–1323), Yesün Temür 元泰定帝 (Mong. Yisün temür qaγan, r. 1323–1328), Ragibagh Khan 元天順帝 (Mong. Rajibay qaγan, r. 1328), Jayaatu Khan 元文宗 (Mong. Jayayatu qaγan, r. 1328–1329 and 1329–1332), Khutughtu Khan 元明宗 (Mong. Qutuy-tu qaγan, r. 1329), Rinchinbal Khan 元寧宗 (Mong. Rinčinbala qaγan, r. 1332), and Toghon Temür 元順帝 (Mong. Toyon temür qaγan, r. 1333–1370).⁸ The capital of the Yuan Dynasty was Dadu 大都, also known as Khanbaliq (present-day Beijing).

people from the Islamic world. They brought with them advanced knowledge in various fields, such as astronomy, medicine, and engineering, and they 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.

⁵ Brose 2002: 267–289. Brose 2005: 396–435.

⁶ Dardess 1973: 1–245; Dardess 1994: 561–586; Rossabi 1994: 414–489; Mote 1994: 616–664; Allsen 1983: 243–280; Allsen 1994: 321–413.

⁷ The Merkids were one of many tribes that in the mid-12th century resided along the lower Selenge River, spanning the area between its confluence with the Orkhon River and the Khilok River. Like other nomadic tribes, they had a pastoral lifestyle, herding livestock and living in portable dwellings known as yurts. The Merkids were often involved in conflicts and alliances with other nomadic groups, such as the Mongols and the Keraites. They were eventually defeated and absorbed by the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan in the early 13th century. Atwood 2004: 347.

⁸ *Shishanfu baishice* 2000: 142–143.

Kublai Khan and his political orientation at the beginning of his rule in China

The conquest of China was one of the most important components of the expansion of the Mongol Empire's territories. This aim was set during the lifetime of the first Mongol Khans Genghis Khan (Mong. Činggis qaγan, Temüjin 1162–1227) and Ögedei Khan (Mong. Ögedei qaγan, 1186–1241),⁹ but they were not able to achieve the complete conquest of *Tianxia* 天下¹⁰ due to various reasons (for instance, climate, terrain, lack of military techniques, and inexperience in sea warfare, as well as tensions among the princes of blood).¹¹ Only in 1279 did the grandson of Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, finally accomplish the goal of his ancestors—the whole of China was subdued and unified by the Mongols.¹² In the framework of this article, we focus our attention on the political and administrative policies of the founder of the Yuan dynasty that altered the course of Chinese history, such as *sideng renzhi* 四等人制 (the four-class system).

Kublai Khan was not only the founder of the Yuan dynasty; he also made a huge contribution to the unification of southern and northern China¹³ under Mongol rule. It is worth mentioning that from childhood Kublai was tolerant of the Chinese—it was mainly the merit of his mother Sorghaghtani Beki (Mong. Sorqaqtani Beki, 1190–1252), who played a key role in his upbringing.¹⁴ She always pointed out that maintaining good relations with the Chinese, as well as being respectful to the various religions, would help Kublai to win the trust of the conquered people, as well as to establish a powerful and stable empire in the world.¹⁵ Following his mother's advice, Kublai relied on Chinese advisers, the most influential of whom were Yao Shu 姚樞 (1203–1280), Hai Yun

⁹ The first Mongol Khans, including Genghis Khan and Ögedei Khan, lived in the central Mongolian steppes. The heartland of the early Mongol Khans was in the region around the Onon and Kherlen rivers, which are located in present-day north-eastern Mongolia. The establishment of the capital city of Karakorum (Mong. Qaraqorum) by Genghis Khan's successor, Ögedei Khan, further solidified the significance of this region in the history of the Mongol Empire.

¹⁰ Literally meaning '(all) under Heaven', *Tianxia* is a Chinese term for a historical Chinese cultural concept that denoted either the entire geographical world or the metaphysical realm of mortals, and it later became associated with political sovereignty.

¹¹ Allsen 1994: 388. Rossabi 1994: 430.

¹² Rachewiltz 1983: 288.

¹³ Northern China under the reign of the Mongols included the following territories: Beijing, Hebei Province, Shanxi Province, Shaanxi Province, parts of Shandong and Henan Provinces, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang.

¹⁴ Rachewiltz 1983: 287.

¹⁵ Rossabi 1994: 415.

海雲 (1205–1257), Liu Bingzhong 劉秉忠¹⁶ (1216–1274), Xu Heng 許衡 (1209–1281), Wang E 王鶚 (1190–1273), and Dou Mo 竄默 (1196–1280). They contributed a lot to Kublai Khan's worldview and political orientation; he also spent a considerable amount of time learning the most important Chinese books, mostly the *Wujing* 五經 (The Five Classics).¹⁷

To win the trust of the conquered population, Kublai insisted on the translation of Chinese works, such as *Xiaojing* 孝經 (Classic of Filial Piety) and *Shujing* 書經, into Mongolian. Moreover, the future founder of the Yuan dynasty attached great importance to the upbringing of his second son, Zhenjin 真金 (1243–1285), designated as heir apparent. His education was based on Chinese values and canons.¹⁸ In my opinion, Kublai Khan's strategy was wise. By taking such measures, he probably wanted to strengthen his political dominance in China and demonstrate to the population that the Mongol rule in China would not bring any harm. Another interesting point is the origin of the name of the future successor on the throne. Haiyun, a close associate of Kublai Khan, played a key role in choosing the name of the heir—the second son of Kublai Khan was named Zhenjin, which means 'pure gold'.¹⁹ Drogön Chogyal Phagpa (1235–1280)²⁰ was a pivotal figure in the education of the Mongol khans' descendants. He provided them with a comprehensive education that included Buddhist philosophy, history, and administrative skills. Under his guidance, the young princes were groomed for leadership roles within the empire, ensuring the continuation of Mongol rule and the stability of the Yuan Dynasty.

It is worth pointing out that Kublai Khan's governance strategy was different from the actions of Mongol Khans during the invasion of the Tangut Empire (1038–1227) and the Jin dynasty (1115–1234). As it was mentioned above, the first conquerors acted with extreme violence—massacres and the policy of ter-

¹⁶ Liu Bingzhong recommended Kublai Khan to choose the name of the empire based on a phrase written in the *Book of Changes*: 'dazai qianyuan 大哉乾元'. Hung Hing Ming 2016: 13. The meaning of *dazai qianyuan* is '(How) great is the originating (power) indicated by *Qian*!'

¹⁷ The *Wujing* consists of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Poetry), *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents), *Lijing* 禮經 (Book of Rites), *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), and *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals).

¹⁸ Rossabi 1994: 458.

¹⁹ Bokschanin-Kadyrbaev 2016: 142.

²⁰ Drogön Chogyal Phagpa served as the imperial preceptor to Kublai Khan. This position made him one of the highest religious authorities in the Mongol Empire. He played a crucial role in promoting Tibetan Buddhism within the Mongol court and securing its patronage. Moreover, he was recognised for his spiritual leadership, his role in consolidating Tibet under Mongol governance, and his cultural achievements, notably the development of the 'Phags-pa script'. Rossabi 1994: 461.

ror prevailed widely in their actions.²¹ To get more benefits from the conquered and make the Mongol rule more stable and long-lasting, the following order was issued by Kublai Khan on 24 May 1261:

命宣撫司官勸農桑，抑遊惰，禮高年，問民疾苦，舉文學才識可以從政及茂才異等，列名上聞，以聽擢用；其職官污濫及民不孝悌者，量輕重議罰。²²

[Kublai Khan] gave the order to the officials of the Pacification Office to encourage farming and sericulture, to restrict lazing about [without doing anything productive], to show respect to the elderly, to inquire about the ordinary people's suffering and hardships, to promote those with literary talent, knowledge, and those with exceptional abilities who are capable [suitable] for government service, and to make lists of honoured workers and provide them to the imperial court, [thereby] promoting [such people] to [higher] positions. As for officials who are corrupt or abusive, and ordinary people who are unfilial and lacking in brotherly respect, the severity of their actions should be assessed, and [appropriate] punishments should be imposed.

Such an order shows that Kublai Khan, instead of showing cruelty towards the conquered, decided to choose a different strategy, which was to attract qualified specialists to the government apparatus, as well as to pay attention to agriculture in the country.²³ In my opinion, it was the merit of Yelü Chucai who contributed greatly to the transformation of the Mongol Khans' worldview—the usage of human resources and fertile lands for their own interests could provide more income to the conquerors than the policy of destruction. According to the *Yuanshi*,

世祖即位之初，首詔天下，國以民為本，民以衣食為本，衣食以農桑為本。²⁴

At his ascension to the throne, Shizu [Kublai Khan] first gave an imperial edict to *Tianxia* that said: 'The country is based on the people, the people rely on food and clothing as their foundation, food and clothing depend on farming and sericulture as their foundation'.

Kublai Khan was an opponent of the annihilation of the conquered population:

²¹ *Mengda beilu* 1975: 67. Allsen 1994: 362. Mote 1994: 617. Borovkova 1971: 5.

²² Song Lian 1976: 69–70.

²³ Zhang Xianchuan 1984: 54.

²⁴ Song Lian 1976: 2354.

昔我國家出征，所獲城邑，即委而去之，未嘗置兵戍守，以此連年征伐不息。夫爭國家者，取其土地人民而已，雖得其地而無民，其誰與居？今欲保守新附城壁，使百姓安業力農，蒙古人未之知也。爾熟知其事，宜加勉旃。湖南州郡皆汝舊部曲，未歸附者何以招懷，生民何以安業，聽汝為之。²⁵

In the past, when our country went on military campaigns, the cities and towns that were captured were promptly abandoned without establishing garrisons [for defense]. As a result, the military campaigns continued unceasingly for many consecutive years. Indeed, those who fight for control of a country merely seek to take its land and people. If we acquire the land without its people, with whom would one live there? Now, the intention is to protect and maintain the newly acquired cities and fortifications, ensuring that the ordinary people can have stable livelihoods and work hard in farming. The Mongols are not yet aware of it. As you are well-versed in these matters, please exert every effort. The subprefectures and counties of Hunan are all under your former command. How can we attract those who have not yet submitted [surrendered], and how can we ensure their stable livelihoods? I entrust this task to you.

It is important to emphasise that Kublai Khan paid great attention to the living conditions of people who suffered from various natural disasters. To lighten the heavy burden of the conquered, Kublai Khan ordered the cancellation of some taxes for certain periods for the ordinary people and some financial and food aid. There are many examples in the *Yuanshi*, several of which are given below:

庚戌，發粟三十萬石賑濟南饑民。²⁶

In the year of *gengxu* [10 November 1262], 300,000 *shi* of grain were distributed to relieve the starving people in Jinan [Shandong province].

彰德路及洺、磁二州旱，免彰德今歲田租之半，洺、磁十之六。²⁷

In the year of *renzi* [8 September 1263], there was a drought along the Zhangde route [Henan Province], as well as in two subprefectures of Mingzhou [Hebei Province] and Cizhou [Hebei Province], [Kublai Khan] exempted the Zhangde route from half of the land tax of this year, and Mingzhou and Cizhou from 60 per cent.

²⁵ Song Lian 1976: 166.

²⁶ Song Lian 1976: 87.

²⁷ Song Lian 1976: 94.

乙未，遼東饑，發粟萬石、鈔百錠賑之。²⁸

In the year of *yimei* [13 April 1265], there was a famine in Liaodong. [Kublai] gave 10,000 *shi* of grain and 100 *ding* of paper money to provide relief for the [people].

秋七月辛酉，益都大蝗饑，命減價糶官粟以賑。²⁹

In the year of *xinyou*, in the 7th month in autumn [6 September 1265], there was a severe locust infestation and famine in Yidu [Shandong Province]. It was ordered to reduce the price of government grain for relief [purposes].

己丑，益都路饑，以米三十一萬八千石賑之。³⁰

In the year of *jichou* [17 November 1268], there was a famine along the Yidu route. [Kublai] ordered 318,000 *shi* of rice to be provided as aid.

癸卯，東昌路饑，賑米二萬七千五百九十石。³¹

In the year of *guimao* [29 July 1269], there was a famine along the Dongchang route [Jilin province], 27,590 *shi* of rice were given as aid.

壬戌，豐州、雲內、東勝旱，免其租賦。³²

In the year of *renxu* [16 October 1269], when there was drought in Fengzhou [its location near the modern-day city of Hohhot], Yunnei [near the modern-day city of Hohhot], and Dongsheng [in the area near present-day Ordos City in Inner Mongolia] [Kublai] freed them from land tax.

戊戌，以去歲東平及西京等州縣旱蝗水潦，免其租賦。³³

In the year of *wuxu* [3 October 1272], due to last year's drought, locust infestation, and flooding in Dongping [Shandong province], Xijing [the area around present-day Xi'an], and other subprefectures and counties, [Kublai] exempted them from land tax.

庚寅，河南水，發粟賑民饑，仍免今年田租。³⁴

In the year of *gengyin* [24 August 1273], due to flooding in Henan, grain was distributed to provide relief to the starving people, and [they were exempted from] this year's land tax.

²⁸ Song Lian 1976: 106.

²⁹ Song Lian 1976: 108.

³⁰ Song Lian 1976: 119.

³¹ Song Lian 1976: 122.

³² Song Lian 1976: 123.

³³ Song Lian 1976: 140.

³⁴ Song Lian 1976: 150.

This evidence taken from the *Yuanshi* illustrates that Kublai Khan provided great assistance to ordinary people from different parts of China who suffered from natural disasters. In my opinion, by implementing such measures, he likely aimed to win the trust of the conquered people, prevent large-scale discontent, and address issues arising from the Mongolian nomadic mindset. Drought and harsh winter weather in Mongolia often caused significant livestock losses, leading to similar problems for the people.

Having analysed these policies, we can draw the following conclusions. Firstly, from a Chinese perspective, Kublai Khan's main achievement was unifying various regions of the vast territories of China into one state. From a Mongolian perspective, he was the leader who conquered China, administered the Mongol Empire, and introduced Tibetan Buddhism to the Mongolian elite. Another crucial point is his religious tolerance. Kublai Khan endorsed a variety of faiths, such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and traditional Mongol shamanism. This acceptance facilitated the integration of the empire's diverse populations and fostered social cohesion. Moreover, under Kublai Khan's rule, the Silk Road flourished, facilitating trade and cultural exchange between the East and the West, contributing to global cultural and economic interactions. Secondly, he supported Yelü Chuc'ai's political strategy, which emphasised cooperation with the conquered peoples, maximising the benefits of the subjugated territories. As stated, at the beginning of his reign, Kublai Khan was benevolent towards the Chinese literati, actively involving them in various state affairs, and they were even responsible for the education of his future heir. This, however, changed. What contributed to the change in attitude towards the Chinese? Why, after the 1260s, did Kublai Khan mostly rely on the *semu* in the civil service? From my point of view, the main reason was a rebellion organised by Li Tan in 1262. Below is presented a historical overview of the above-mentioned historical figure and his influence on the subsequent politics of Kublai Khan in China.

Rebellion of Li Tan and its consequences

To begin with, Li Tan 李壇 (?–1262)³⁵ was a close associate of the Mongol Khans. He helped Möngke Khan (Mong. Möngke qaγan 1209–1259, r. 1251–1259) and later Kublai Khan in their attempts to conquer the Southern Song dynasty.³⁶ Besides that, he participated in a considerable number of punitive campaigns that were successful for the Mongol Khans. For such devotion and

³⁵ Li Tan was born in Weifang 潍坊, a prefecture-level city in Shandong Province.

³⁶ Rossabi 1994: 424.

meritorious service, Li Tan was appointed the chief of the Regional Secretariat for a district under the reigning periods of Möngke Khan and Kublai Khan.

On 22 February 1262, Li Tan unexpectedly started a rebellion against the reign of the Mongols, betraying Kublai Khan.³⁷ Li Tan's rebellion, which took place in 1262 in Shandong province, involved an army primarily composed of local Chinese forces. What was the main reason for it? As mentioned above, Li Tan was highly esteemed by Möngke Khan and Kublai Khan due to his assistance in the punitive campaigns aimed at overthrowing the Southern Song dynasty. Having enjoyed the favourable attitude from the Mongol Khans, he was bestowed the rank of High Military Administrator of the Jianghuai region 江淮.³⁸ Based on these historical facts, I assume that Li Tan did not have any enmity to the people who treated him with respect. From my point of view, Li Tan started the rebellion because of his desire to become an independent warlord—he thought that the conditions for accomplishing his goal were quite favourable at the beginning of the 1260s.

According to the Chinese primary sources, being a witness of a serious conflict between Kublai Khan and Ariq Böke (Mong. Ariq böke/Arigböke 1219–1266),³⁹ Li Tan decided to seize the opportunity to become the ruler of Shandong. Furthermore, Li Tan counted on the help of his close associate Wang Wentong 王文統 (?–1262), the head of the Central Secretariat, who actively supported Li Tan's plans regarding the expulsion of the Mongols from China. It can be assumed that Li Tan also relied on the assistance of the Southern Song dynasty, to which the future Mongol conquest could bring great harm with a subsequent overthrow of the dynasty. However, circumstances were not in favour of Li Tan—he was caught and executed by Mongol troops. Thus, the rebellion lasted almost five months. According to the *Yuanshi*,

甲戌，李亶窮蹙，入大明湖，投水中不即死，獲之，併蒙古軍囊家伏誅，體解以徇。⁴⁰

³⁷ Song Lian 1976: 4595.

³⁸ Rachewiltz 1993: 507. Jianghuai 江淮 was the plain between the Yangtze and Huai Rivers. Nowadays it is in the provinces of Anhui and Jiangsu.

³⁹ The Toluid Civil War was a serious conflict within the Mongol Empire that occurred from 1260 to 1264. It was a power struggle between Kublai Khan and his younger brother Ariq Böke over the succession to the throne of the Mongol Empire after the death of their brother Möngke Khan. Kublai Khan, based in China, sought to consolidate his power and claim the title of Great Khan, while Ariq Böke, supported by traditionalist factions, contested Kublai's claim from his base in Central Asia. The conflict escalated into a full-scale civil war, with both sides gathering allies and engaging in military campaigns across the empire. Kublai Khan emerged victorious, defeating Ariq Böke's forces and consolidating his control over the Mongol Empire. Atwood 2004: 21–22.

⁴⁰ Song Lian 1976: 86.

In the year of *jiaxu* [6 August 1262], Li Tan, being desperate, entered Lake Daming [Shandong Province] and jumped into the water [to drown], but he did not die immediately. He was captured and executed along with a Mongol soldier named Nangjia;⁴¹ their bodies were dismembered, and [their parts] were put on display [as a warning].

Why was the rebellion unsuccessful for Li Tan? The first thing that should be pointed out is that Kublai Khan had won a victory over Ariq Böke. Secondly, the military commanders did not betray Kublai Khan. From my perspective, they thought that Li Tan would not be able to win and wanted to preserve their future privileges under the Mongols. Thirdly, the ruling elite of the Southern Song dynasty refused to give any support to Li Tan, as his victory over the Mongols was quite questionable. Fourthly, Wang Wentong was sentenced to death as a close associate after the outbreak of the uprising.⁴²

However, the consequences of Li Tan's rebellion were wide ranging. Firstly, Kublai Khan made significant changes to the organisation of the civil and military administrations. After the outbreak of the rebellion, he organised an extensive investigation to detect disloyalties of Chinese advisors, as well as of government officials. Some Chinese advisors were dismissed from offices, and some were sent into retirement. It meant that after this, the way to high government positions was mostly closed to the Chinese. Secondly, Kublai Khan became more dependent on the *semu*. They were appointed to high positions in the Mongol court and were the main parts of the government apparatus. The *semu* were valuable for the Mongol Khans for several reasons, such as their familiarity with financial matters and government affairs, as well as with their sedentary lifestyle. For instance, Ahmad Fanakati 阿合馬 (1242–1282) and Sangha (Sangge) 桑哥 (12??–1291) were influential officials during the reign of Kublai Khan. Both were responsible for fiscal administration at the Mongol court. They significantly increased the revenue of the founder of the Yuan dynasty; however, both were involved in unprecedented levels of corruption, and their inappropriate conduct was widely condemned by the ordinary people.⁴³

The rebellion of Li Tan was a turning point in Kublai Khan's rule. It became clear that reliance mostly on the Chinese could bring a lot of instability and harm to the established system. To prevent the dominance of Chinese advisors in the government apparatus, it was decided to implement a special ethnic sys-

⁴¹ Nanjia 囊家, a Mongol warrior, defected to Li Tan and thereby was executed along with the leader of the uprising. Such a brutal execution was demonstrative; Kublai Khan wanted to show to his subordinates the consequences of treason and defecting to the enemy's side.

⁴² Song Lian 1976: 82.

⁴³ Frank 2024: 39–44.

tem, based on the distinction between the Mongols and the conquered. The main characteristics of this system are described below.

The four-class system in China

The numerical superiority of the Chinese over the Mongols was one of the most important problems of that time for the new rulers. How could they manage the vast territories of China without an effective administrative system? Since very few of the Mongol's estimated population of 700,000 were literate and familiar with the sedentary life, hiring knowledgeable men was a crucial step to profit from the abundant natural resources of China.⁴⁴ In my opinion, a unique trait of the Mongol reign in China was the four-class system, which served as a core element of the Mongol administration in China.

As mentioned above, after Li Tan's rebellion in 1262, Kublai Khan became increasingly suspicious towards the Chinese advisors. He recognised that over-reliance on the Chinese could potentially have a detrimental effect on his rule. Therefore, to bolster military dominance, establish a stable government apparatus, and ensure the continued profits from the conquered lands and population, a decision was made to stratify society into four distinct groups. This system influenced all matters of people's lives, including taxation, hiring conditions, and unequal treatment in adjudicating civil and criminal cases. Now, we focus our attention on the classification of the four-class system with its subsequent detailed analysis.

The Mongols were placed at the pinnacle of the four-class system,⁴⁵ the *semu* belonged to the second group, the northern Chinese (*hanren*) were put into the third category, and the southern Chinese (*nanren*) into the fourth.⁴⁶ In 1290, the population of the Mongols in the Yuan dynasty was around 1 million people, and the *semu* population was about the same; the northern Chinese comprised a population of 10 million, and the southern Chinese constituted approximately

⁴⁴ Allsen 1983: 245.

⁴⁵ Throughout the reign of the Yuan dynasty, the Mongol khans lived across various parts of China, with major concentrations in Dadu and Shangdu (the summer capital in present-day Inner Mongolia, used by the Yuan emperors as a retreat). The education of Mongol princes was a mix of Mongolian and Chinese traditions. They learned Mongolian customs, language, and horse-riding skills, while also being familiar to Chinese literature, philosophy, and Confucian principles. Tengrism is the original belief of the Mongols. Then, they merged it with shamanism. They are tolerant with other (foreign) religious. Buddhism, Islam, Christianity (both Nestorian Christianity and Catholicism), Daoism, and Confucianism were widespread among the vast territories of the Mongol Empire.

⁴⁶ Hansen 2000: 352. Smith 1998: 5. Wilkinson 2013: 777.

60 million.⁴⁷ These figures illustrate that the Mongols and *semu* were significantly inferior in number to the other two strata of society at that time.

As mentioned above, the most privileged class was the Mongols.⁴⁸ The highest positions, such as the command of troops and leadership of almost all administrative departments, were bestowed upon them.⁴⁹ They controlled the life of the conquered population, always emphasising their lower position in the established hierarchical ladder. Being unfamiliar with the intricacies of managing sedentary civilisations, the Mongols relied more on the help and advice of *semu*, which had a huge influence in establishing effective political machinery in the country.

Semu

The second class was that of the *semu*. The Mongols, before the overthrow of the Jin dynasty in 1234, conquered Khorezm and other states of Central Asia. The inhabitants of those countries were called *semuren*, and they were used to control the northern Chinese but were later subjugated. Why were they called as such? Sometimes the definition of *semuren* is misunderstood. Many scholars interpret this term as ‘people with coloured eyes’, but in fact, it is incorrect. This word means people of various nations (categories). Many scholars share this interpretation, including Frederick Mote, Endymion Porter Wilkinson, Stephen G. Haw, Michael Brose,⁵⁰ and many others. Igor de Rachewiltz gives the follow-

⁴⁷ Barfield 1989: 220. Langlois 1981: 15.

⁴⁸ The Mongolian strategy of conquests and government apparatus was similar to the strategies of many nomadic empires in Asia, such as the Xiongnu (3rd century BC–1st century CE), Xianbei (3rd century BC–3rd century CE), and Manchu (1644–1912). Firstly, their expertise in horseback riding enabled swift travel over large areas, allowing for rapid raids and long-distance movements for both combat and commerce. Secondly, their displays of brutality and strategic cunning often intimidated enemies into surrendering without much resistance. Thirdly, all of them had a governing elite and conquered nations. Another crucial point is a presence of a charismatic leader in nomadic empires, for example, Modu Chanyu (r. ca. 209–174 BC), Tanshihuai (r. ca. 156–181), Genghis Khan, Nurhaci (r. 1616–1626), and many others. In addition to possessing significant personal charisma, a pretender must have been familiar with politics and warfare. He should be an exceptional leader capable of reasserting control over the tribes and chiefdoms of pastoralists that had been loyal to his predecessor. He must compel their absolute submission in battle and demonstrate generosity and magnanimity when distributing spoils and gifts. Fourthly, the introduction and propagation of a unified religious and cultural ideology also played a pivotal role in strengthening imperial unity. For instance, the Mongols actively utilised Buddhism and Islam in their empire. Tibetan Buddhism became the state religion during the Qing Dynasty. Kradin 2008: 98–124.

⁴⁹ Bokschanin-Kadyrbaev 2016: 149.

⁵⁰ Hansen 2000: 352. Haw 2013: 40. Mote 1994: 630. Wilkinson 2013: 777. Brose 2002: 273.

ing statistics regarding the *semu* in the service of the Mongol Khans (the figures in parentheses refer to the amount of people who held positions of *darughachi* [Mong. *Daruyāčī*]).⁵¹

Semu in Service of Mongols

	Ca. 1200–1259	1260– 1294	? (1280– 1330	1295– 1368	In total	No data	In total
Uyghurs	37(12)	73 (21)	32 (9)	169 (47)	311 (89)	158	469
Karluks	7 (1)	10 (3)	5 (1)	19(3)	41 (8)	20	61
Kanglys	7	12 (3)	11 (2)	36 (8)	66 (13)	26	92
Kipchaks	4 (1)	12 (3)	13 (4)	15 (8)	44 (16)	16	60
Onguds	12	30 (6)	3 (2)	43 (6)	88 (14)	42	130
Keraites	13 (2)	14 (2)	3 (2)	22 (3)	52 (9)	11	63
Naimans	5 (1)	12 (5)	2	25 (8)	44 (14)	26	70
In total	85 (17)	163 (43)	69 (20)	329 (83)	646 (163)	299	945

The Mongol Khans understood that military power alone could not be an effective tool to maintain a long-term domination over multi-ethnic areas. Therefore, employing experienced advisors was useful to them. *Semu* performed various tasks in the administration, government apparatus, and military system, and were also advisors to the Mongol Khans. It is worth mentioning that the *semu* were a revered elite of the society and enjoyed a favourable attitude from the conquerors. For the Mongols, who were unfamiliar with sedentary, urban customs, and the local administration, *semu* served as important tools of stable government and further prosperity of China. In the following sections, I present a historical overview of the two most respected elite groups among the *semu*.

⁵¹ Rachewiltz 1983: 285. It is worth pointing out two important positions, *darughachi* and *bas-kaks*, in the Mongol Empire. They were distributed across different regions of the Mongol Empire based on their roles and the administrative needs of the empire. *Darughachi* were prominently placed in northern China, in Central Asia (for instance, Samarkand and Bukhara), and in the Ilkhanate (regions including modern-day Iran and Iraq). Their main duties were to oversee administration and governance, to manage local affairs and, to ensure the integration of these regions into the Mongol administrative framework. *Bas-kaks* were mostly present in the territories of the Russian principalities, including areas such as Vladimir-Suzdal, Novgorod, and Kiev, and in the territories of Eastern Europe. Their role was crucial in tax collection and maintaining Mongol control through military presence and monitoring the activities of the local rulers. Maslova 2014: 23–36.

The Uyghurs

The most respected people among the *semu* were the Uyghurs. Why were these people highly esteemed by the Mongols?

To begin with, ruler of the Kara-Khoja⁵² Barchuq Art Tegin (Idikut Baurchuk) exchanged embassies with Genghis Khan's court, which led to the establishment of good relations between these nations.⁵³ The Uyghur leaders gained the favour of the Mongols in 1209 by voluntarily declaring themselves vassals, even before Genghis Khan imposed any form of coercion upon them.⁵⁴ As a result of this alliance, the Uyghurs took dominant positions under the Mongols.

Why were the Uyghurs of paramount importance to the Mongols? The Uyghurs created one of the most prosperous nomadic states in the 8th and 9th centuries, but in 840 it was destroyed by the Kyrgyzs.⁵⁵ In the middle of the 9th century, they were driven west into Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang),⁵⁶ while trying to find a refuge and adapt to new living conditions. Most of them became sedentary people, and farming and trade were their main occupations. A significant number of the Uyghurs possessed expertise in Chinese administrative procedures, owing to their prior service in the Kara Khitai (Qara Khitai, Western

⁵² The Uyghur Khaganate was a Turkic state that thrived from 744 to 840 in Central Asia. It emerged following the fall of the Second Turkic Khaganate and was centered in what is today Mongolia. The Uyghurs were renowned for their exceptional horsemanship and their pivotal role in facilitating Silk Road trade. Under the rule of Kutlug I Bilge Boyla Khagan (r. 744–747), the Uyghur Khaganate reached its zenith, controlling an extensive territory and maintaining diplomatic and commercial ties with Tang China. The Uyghurs embraced Manichaeism and later Buddhism as state religions, significantly shaping their cultural and artistic practices. The empire eventually waned due to internal conflicts, economic challenges, and external threats from the Kyrgyz and other nomadic groups. In 840, the Kyrgyz defeated the Uyghurs, leading to the collapse of the Khaganate and the dispersion of the considerable number of the Uyghurs to various regions, including present-day Xinjiang. Soucek 2000: 81. The Kara-Khoja was a Uyghur state that existed from the 9th to the 14th centuries in the region around the city of Turpan in present-day Xinjiang. Following the collapse of the Uyghur Khaganate in 840, a considerable number of the Uyghurs moved to this region and founded the kingdom. Kara-Khoja was considered as a vital cultural and commercial centre along the Silk Road. The Uyghurs in Kara-Khoja embraced Buddhism, turning the kingdom into a hub for Buddhist scholarship and art. Despite maintaining significant autonomy, the kingdom paid tribute to the Tang dynasty (618–907), the Kara-Khanid Khanate (840–1212), and the Mongol Empire. Owing to its strategic position on the Silk Road, the Kara-Khoja was instrumental in facilitating cultural exchange between the East and West. The kingdom endured until the Mongol Empire absorbed it in the 13th century, after which it came under the rule of the Chagatai Khanate. Soucek 2000: 77–82.

⁵³ Allsen 1994: 350.

⁵⁴ Mote 1994: 630.

⁵⁵ Brose 2005: 403.

⁵⁶ Atwood 2021: 27.

Liao, 1124–1218) as specialists in finance, trade, and civil governance. Such an experience was crucial to the Mongols, as they were interested in employing people who knew Chinese society and who could significantly contribute to the success of future conquests through effective administration.

As the first sedentary nation to willingly submit to Genghis Khan, the Uyghurs not only played a pivotal role in shaping the state apparatus but also exerted significant influence on the worldview of the Mongols. Moreover, the Uyghurs served as interpreters and translators due to their fluency in foreign languages. This dependence on the qualified Uyghurs played a substantial role in bolstering Mongol authority and influence across the vast regions of China.

What kind of contribution did the Uyghurs make to the prosperity of Mongol rule? The first thing to mention is that the Mongols did not have their own writing system. Before the introduction of ‘Phags-pa script’,⁵⁷ the Mongols used the Uyghur alphabet.⁵⁸ The Uyghur Tata-tonga 塔塔統阿 (12th–13th centuries) contributed a lot to its adaptation to write the Mongolian language.⁵⁹ Its introduction into the emerging Mongol administrative system was a natural process in terms of the establishment of a powerful empire with a strong government apparatus, as well as the elimination of linguistic barriers to understanding the decrees of the Mongol Khans. Moreover, Genghis Khan’s descendants were obliged to learn the Uyghur script to be able to use the national language for issuing their regulations and orders. Such an effective reform led to the spread of literacy among the Mongolian elite. The use of the Uyghur alphabet had a huge impact on the development of cultural life as well as on the evolution

⁵⁷ Kara 1972: 27–32. Daniels-Bright 1996: 437. ‘Phags-pa script’, developed by Drogön Chögyal Phagpa in the 13th century, was commissioned by Kublai Khan to function as a standardized writing system for the various languages within the Mongol Empire. Originating from the Tibetan script, it was modified to accommodate the linguistic needs of Mongolian, Chinese, Tibetan and Uyghur. This script exemplified the Mongol Empire’s initiative to unify the different cultures under its dominion through a common writing system. While the ‘Phags-pa script’ did not see long-term widespread use, it remains historically significant as one of the early efforts to establish a universal script for a multi-ethnic empire. Herbert Franke points out that the only parts written in this script (a Buddhist text) were found in Turpan. Franke 1994: 32–35.

⁵⁸ Daniels-Bright 1996: 545. Brose 2005: 397. The Uyghur alphabet is a unique writing system used historically by the Turkic-speaking Uyghur people and other Central Asian ethnic groups from around the 9th century onward. It originated as an adaptation of the Sogdian script, an Iranian script itself derived from the Aramaic alphabet, part of the Semitic script family. The Sogdian cursive script was modified for the Turkic language of the Uyghur Empire during the 8th to 9th centuries. Some Uyghur communities in Gansu, in north-western China, continued using it until the 17th century. The Uyghur script is characterised by its vertical writing direction, cursive nature, alphabetic system, and adaptability to different languages. Daniels-Bright 1996: 539. Kara 1972: 18.

⁵⁹ Allsen 1994: 345. Bokschanin-Kadyrbaev 2016: 42, 280.

of the Mongolian nomadic society—the predominance of written language played a significant role in the interaction between the conquerors and the conquered. The new written language served as the main tool for all diplomatic and imperial correspondence in the empire. *Tata-tonga* was also well-known for the introduction of the seal to the Mongols and its importance in governance affairs.⁶⁰ Such inventions (the seal and written language) were core elements in the establishment of an efficient bureaucracy and empire that would help to maintain the rule of the Mongols over the great sedentary civilisations that they had conquered and in foreign affairs, for instance, with Popes.⁶¹

Why did Genghis Khan give preference to the Uyghur alphabet as the official imperial script? Michael Brose points out that such a decision was made due to strategic calculations to strengthen the power of the Mongols—the foreign merchants were familiar with it, and this essential aspect would be useful during communication.⁶² The importance of learning the Uyghur alphabet was due to the influence of the Uyghur advisors at the Mongol court. Such officials were in high demand by the Mongols, so that is why the adoption of the above-mentioned script was a crucial step for the conquerors. Moreover, a considerable amount of the Uyghurs were interpreters and translators,⁶³ serving as mediators between the conquerors and the conquered.

According to the statistics, by the end of the Yuan dynasty, the number of influential Uyghur advisors significantly increased and comprised around 170 people. Many of them were appointed *darughachi*, including Bayan Toghril (Mong. Bayan Toyuril; in Shicheng County, located in the south-eastern part of Jiangxi Province), Bullat Temür (Mong. Bolod Temür; in Xiangyang city, Hubei Province), and Ilchey (Mong. Ilçi), who held the position of the head of the personal guard of Buyantu Khan (1285–1320).⁶⁴ Another prominent repre-

⁶⁰ Song Lian 1976: 3048. Atwood 2004: 530. Kychanov 1995: 139–140.

⁶¹ As a shining example, the inscription of Güyük Khan's seal is famous worldwide: 'God in Heaven and Güyük Khan over the Earth, the Power of God, the Seal of the Emperor of all Men'. It was used in the letter from Güyük Khan (Mong. Güyüg qayan, 1206–1248) to Pope Innocent IV. Carpine 1996: 85–86. As the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Innocent IV sought to restore the Church's authority through a robust international policy, aiming to achieve mutual understanding with the Mongols by converting them to Christianity. To accomplish this goal and to gather some information about the Mongols, the papal throne dispatched missions to the Mongols, the most crucial of which was led by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine. Carpine 1996: 15–19.

⁶² Brose 2005: 424.

⁶³ Endicott-West 1994: 611.

⁶⁴ Bokschanin-Kadyrbaev 2016: 182. Buyantu Khan (1285–1320, r. 1311–1320) was the seventh emperor of the Yuan dynasty in China. His education was based on the Confucian classics, which influenced his governance style. During his reign, he initiated several reforms to reduce corruption and improve the efficiency of the government. He restored the examination system for recruiting officials, which had been abolished under previous rulers. Hansen 2000: 357.

representative of *semu* was Saiyid Ajall Shams al-Din 賽典赤瞻思丁, from Bukhara, who managed to take the position of governor of the south-western province of Yunnan.⁶⁵ Hala Yihachi Beilu 哈剌亦哈赤北魯⁶⁶ and Toluochu took active parts in the education of the Mongol princes.⁶⁷ Alihaiya 阿里海牙 was famous for his help in the military campaigns of the Mongols, and he was appointed as a general.⁶⁸

Taking into consideration all these factors, we can conclude that the Uyghurs became an integral part of the Mongol administrative apparatus due to their excellent abilities, such as their knowledge of the Uyghur script, intelligence, and experience in the administrative apparatus of sedentary civilisations. It is worth mentioning that the Uyghur Khaganate's capital was in Karabalghasun (near Karakorum, Mong. Qara balygasun).

The Kipchaks

The Kipchaks were also representatives of the *semu* group. They took an active part in many punitive campaigns that had been successful for the Mongol Khans, such as the overthrow of the Tangut Empire (1038–1227), the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), and the Southern Song (1127–1279). Many of the Kipchaks held high positions in the Mongolian court, such as *darughachi*, imperial guards, and so on. For example, Hasan was famous for his help in the suppression of Ariq Böke's uprising (1260–1264) and later showed himself as a courageous warrior in the conquest of the Southern Song.⁶⁹ He was highly esteemed by Kublai Khan. Another prominent Kipchak was Tutuha 土土哈 (1237–1297). He had participated in many military campaigns that were aimed at strengthening Kublai Khan's power (such as in the suppression of the Ariq Böke uprising and the Nayan rebellion⁷⁰ against Kaidu⁷¹). Tutuha was promoted to commander of

⁶⁵ Song Lian 1976: 3063–3070.

⁶⁶ Song Lian 1976: 3046–3048.

⁶⁷ Rachewiltz 1983: 284, 286.

⁶⁸ Song Lian 1976: 3124–3128.

⁶⁹ Pylypchuk 2014: 224.

⁷⁰ Nayan's rebellion (1287) was against Kublai Khan and his Sinicisation policy. The Mongolian Nayan highly supported the policy of preservation of Mongolian values and traditions and criticised Kublai Khan and his governing methods. It was suppressed by the emperor in 1287. Nayan was executed in the same year. Bayan of the Merkid, El Temür, and many other prominent generals participated in it on the side of Kublai Khan. Atwood 2004: 401.

⁷¹ Kaidu (Mong. Qaidu, ca.1230–1301) was a grandson of Ögedei Khan (1186–1241). He actively advocated for Mongolian traditional values and a Mongolian way of life and actively condemned the Sinicisation of the Mongol Khans.

the imperial guard for such a meritorious service.⁷² Being ordered to establish the Kipchak guard, Tutuha purchased a considerable amount of the captured slaves (of Kipchak descent), emancipated them from slavery, and formed them into the guard that had previously consisted of free individuals.⁷³

El Temür 燕鐵木兒 (11??–1333), of Kipchak origin, took a leading position at the Mongol court. Being a grandson of Tutuha, El Temür also received recognition from the Mongols. He played a crucial role in the successful ascension to the throne of Külüg Khan (r. 1307–1311), and for such assistance, he was bestowed high-ranking posts in the government and the army.⁷⁴ When Külüg Khan passed away in 1311, his brother Buyantu Khan (r. 1312–1320) became emperor, followed by Buyantu Khan's son Shidebala (Gegeen Khan, r. 1321–1323) in 1321, and Shidebala's cousin Yesün Temür (r. 1324–1328) in 1324. When Yesün Temür died in 1328, rivalry between the lines of Buyantu Khan and Külüg Khan broke out with a renewed fierceness. El Temür assisted greatly in the ascension to the throne of Külüg Khan's descendants. Jayaatu Khan (r. 1328–1329), the son of Külüg Khan, arrived in Dadu well ahead of his elder brother Kuśala. Jayaatu Khan temporarily assumed the throne with the intention of abdicating as soon as his elder brother Kuśala reached Dadu from the Mongolian steppes.⁷⁵ However, Kuśala's reign (Khutughtu Khan) was too short—he passed away in 1329, the same year that he had become emperor. His death was not natural—some sources mention that it was caused by violence⁷⁶ and another that he was poisoned.⁷⁷ After Kuśala's death, his brother became emperor of the Yuan dynasty. Having received favourable treatment from Jayaatu Khan, by 1330 El Temür was given the position of the sole chancellor, who was considered as the second most influential person after the emperor.⁷⁸ To strengthen his power, in 1333 El Temür's daughter Boyawu 伯牙吾 (Danashiri 答納失裡 1320–1335) became a wife of Toghon Temür and assumed the title of empress.⁷⁹

To sum up, the Kipchaks occupied leading positions in the Mongolian army, as well as at court, due to their military victories and merits. Military power was a significant source of long-term rule for the Mongols in China. Therefore, the assistance of the Kipchaks was crucial to the conquerors. It is worth emphasizing that Kublai Khan made a deliberate effort to seek dependable allies from the *semu* group. This decision was influenced by the fact that a significant number

⁷² Song Lian 1976: 3131–3138.

⁷³ Biran 2021: 96.

⁷⁴ Dardess 1973: 10–11.

⁷⁵ Dardess 1973: 39.

⁷⁶ Song Lian 1976: 701.

⁷⁷ Dardess 1973: 27.

⁷⁸ Rachewiltz 1983: 291.

⁷⁹ Song Lian 1976: 817.

of the Mongols opposed Kublai Khan's political orientation and cooperation with the Chinese. Many of these Mongols rallied behind figures like Ariq Böke and Kaidu.

Merchants of Muslim descent also occupied influential positions within the Yuan state administration. Their contribution was particularly notable during the military campaigns aimed at subduing the Jin dynasty. They played a pivotal role by acting as informants for the Mongol army, providing valuable intelligence. For instance, Zha Ba'er Huozhe (Jafar Hozha) 札八兒火者, acting as an ambassador to the Jin emperor, conducted a thorough investigation of the Jin fortifications and subsequently relayed crucial information to Genghis Khan. According to the *Yuanshi*,

汪罕既滅，西域諸部次第亦平。乃遣札八兒使金，金不為禮而歸。金人恃居庸之塞，冶鐵鑄關門，布鐵蒺藜百餘里，守以精銳。札八兒既還報，太祖遂進師，距關百里不能前，召札八兒問計。對曰：「從此而北，黑樹林中有間道，騎行可一人，臣向嘗過之。若勒兵銜枚以出，終夕可至。」太祖乃令札八兒輕騎前導。日暮入谷，黎明，諸軍已在平地，疾趨南口，金鼓之聲若自天下，金人猶睡未知也。比驚起，已莫能支吾，鋒鏑所及，流血被野。關既破，中都大震。已而金人遷汴。⁸⁰

After Wang Khan⁸¹ was defeated, the various tribes in the Western Regions were also subdued one after another, and after this [Genghis Khan] sent Zha Ba'er as envoy to the Jin. The Jin [ruler] did not show proper courtesy and [Zha Ba'er] returned. The Jin people relied on the pass of Juyong,⁸² [they used] smelted iron to fortify the gate, [they] spread iron caltrops over more than a hundred *li*, and defended the area with the most capable forces. Zha Ba'er reported [about these matters] immediately after his return. Taizu [Genghis Khan] then moved the troops forward, [but they were] stopped a hundred *li* from the pass, unable to advance. [Genghis Khan] called Zha Ba'er and asked about the plan [of further action]. [Zha Ba'er] replied: 'If you go north from here, there is an untrodden road in the black forest. A single person can ride [the army will be able to pass one by one]. I, your servant, have previously passed through it. If the troops were to march silently, with their mouthpieces clenched [to avoid noise], then they could arrive by evening.' Taizu ordered Zha Ba'er with light cavalry to lead the way. By sunset, they entered the valley, and at dawn, the entire army was already on the flat terrain and was rapidly moved towards Nankou.⁸³ The sounds of gongs and drums seemed to come from all over the Celestial Empire, and the

⁸⁰ Song Lian 1976: 2960.

⁸¹ Wang Khan or Toghrul (Mong. Toyuril, 11??–1203) was a Khan of the Keraites.

⁸² Juyong was a mountain in Changping County, Beijing.

⁸³ Nankou was in the west of Changping County, Beijing.

Jin people were still sleeping and did not know about [such an attack]. When [the Jin people] were startled awake, they could no longer resist, spearhead and arrowhead overtook [the Jin people], and the fields were flooded with blood. The pass was already broken, and the middle capital [at that time it was Beijing] was greatly shaken.

This intelligence proved to be a key factor in the ultimate victory of the Mongols over the Jin dynasty. Zha Ba'er Huozhe (Jafar Hozha) was appointed a high position—he became *darughachi* in northern China.⁸⁴ That makes it clear that the *semu* played a multifaceted role, serving as valuable partners in trade, assuming key positions within the government, and acting as both diplomatic envoys and covert spies.

To sum up, several key aspects determine the significance of *semu*. Firstly, they maintained a notable distinction from the local Chinese population. Secondly, they proved to be highly efficient members of the apparatus for carrying out a wide range of orders issued by the Mongols. Thirdly, the *semu* possessed a good understanding of the settled way of life, combined with proficiency in military matters, effective governance, financial affairs, and various other spheres. Fourthly, their proficiency in foreign languages held great importance to the Mongol rulers, who entrusted them with crucial responsibilities, such as preparing future heirs and providing translations of essential documents from Mongolian into various required languages. In their pursuit of global conquest and the governance of newly acquired territories, the Khans recognised that relying solely on the human and intellectual resources within their Mongol ranks was insufficient. Consequently, it was no coincidence that their courts, armies, and the administration of conquered lands included a substantial number of *semu*. Furthermore, the *semu* actively introduced their experience of Tibet, India, and Muslim and Christian countries into the management practices in China.

Another pivotal factor contributing to the profound respect shown to the *semu* was as follows. As previously mentioned, the *semu* occupied influential positions in the Mongol court. This was greatly facilitated by their crucial role in supporting the Yuan emperors in their efforts to counter the separatist ambitions of the Mongolian appanage nobility, who disputed their legitimacy on the throne. The confrontation between Kublai Khan and Ariq Böke played a significant role in it. An important point of contention in the political stances of the two brothers lay in the clash of two entirely contrasting approaches to governing the conquered territories. Ariq Böke and numerous Mongol nobles openly voiced their criticism of Kublai Khan, who, in their view, had drifted

⁸⁴ Song Lian 1976: 2961.

away from the steppe's traditions and had undergone a process of Sinicisation. Another reason was the *kurultai* (Mong. *qurultai*),⁸⁵ which was considered by many Mongols as a means of illegitimate seizure of power by Kublai.

Now we turn our attention to the third and fourth classes in the social ladder established by the Mongols.

Northern Chinese (*hanren*) and southern Chinese (*nanren*)

The citizens of the former Jin dynasty (1115–1234) founded by the Jurchens were named the northern Chinese or *hanren* 漢人, which included the Chinese, Koreans, and probably Khitans and Jurchens.⁸⁶ A considerable number of northern Chinese officials acted as the assistants of the Mongols in the administration; in many cases, they were appointed to secondary positions in the central institutions. This meant that these officials were closely associated with the Mongol rulers. The question is: why did the Mongols give privileges to the northern Chinese? In my view, this can be attributed to the circumstances surrounding the conquest of northern China. The Mongols confiscated the lands of local *dizhu* 地主 (landowners),⁸⁷ granting possession solely to those who embraced the Mongol rule as legitimate. Many Chinese landowners who held strong patriotic sentiments chose to flee to the southern regions of China, relinquishing their properties. However, some Chinese decided to remain in northern China and actively assist the Mongols in their efforts to subdue the southern part of the country. Through their unwavering dedication and valuable service, these Chinese individuals earned the trust of their new rulers, thus securing more privileged positions within the established hierarchical structure.

As mentioned above, translators and interpreters were of paramount importance to the Mongols. After the conquest of the whole of China, it was not forbidden for the conquered to learn Mongolian.⁸⁸ Mongolian language schools (in various *lu* 路)⁸⁹ and in *Menggu guozijian* 蒙古國子監 (Mongolian National Academy) in Dadu were established in 1269 and 1271 respectively.⁹⁰ Naturally, knowledge of Mongolian could open many opportunities for the northern Chi-

⁸⁵ A *kurultai* is a grand assembly in the history of Mongol and Turkic peoples, during which the ruling class would come together to make important decisions, discuss policies, and choose leaders or Khans. Atwood 2004: 462.

⁸⁶ Atwood 2004: 507. Brose 2002: 273. Smith 1998: 5.

⁸⁷ *Dizhu* throughout the reign of the Mongols in China came from diverse backgrounds, including Mongol aristocracy, *semu*, Chinese elite, Buddhist monasteries, and local chieftains.

⁸⁸ Endicott-West 1989: 84.

⁸⁹ *Lu* 路 was primarily a territorial and administrative division below the level of the province.

⁹⁰ Endicott-West 1989: 84.

nese to be appointed an official in the government office. Mostly Mongols, *semu*, the northern Chinese, and members of the imperial guard were given priority in being enrolled in these educational organisations. The advantage of studying Mongolian in language schools was given to literate sons, grandchildren, nephews of *darughachi*, and general administrators. After successfully fulfilling the requirements, the graduates were appointed as interpreters, translators, and clerks in the government apparatus—such positions were crucial in terms of being to the higher offices. Mongolian language schools played an important role in the promotion of Mongolian script. Such schools served as a social ladder for obtaining ranks. For example, if a preceptor performed his duties for one term in the schools of the *fu* 府 (prefectures) or the *zhou* 州 (subprefectures), he could have been given the secondary eighth in rank.⁹¹ After working one more term as a preceptor in the *lu*, he could have obtained the position of a principal eighth in rank. The only obstacle was the lineage. These privileges were given to the relatives of the Mongolian nobility, *semu*, and northern Chinese.

The citizens of the previous southern Song territories were placed at the bottom of the four-class hierarchical ladder, and they were called *nanren* (southern Chinese). The conquest of the Southern Song dynasty turned out to be not an easy task for the Mongols, lasting for almost 45 years (1235–1279). Climate, natural conditions, and the struggle of the Mongol princes for the throne were the main obstacles in terms of the conquest of the Southern Song dynasty. Why were these territories so crucial to the Mongols? The southern part of China possessed abundant lands, rich natural resources, fertile soils, and a prosperous economy, and these made it a place of paramount importance for the Mongols. The ethnic Mongol general Bayan of the Baarin (Mong. Bayan Bayarin, 1236–1295) was of great help in the conquest of the Southern Song dynasty, and under his leadership and wise military strategy, the Southern Song dynasty was subdued by the Mongols.⁹²

Another interesting fact that should be pointed out is that, according to statistics, during the entire period of the Mongol rule in China, only one Chinese, Shi Tianjie 史天澤, became the *youchengxiang* 右丞相 (Right Chancellor) in 1261, before the foundation of the Yuan dynasty; only one Chinese was bestowed the head of the Censorate (*yushitai* 禦史台) position; and of representatives of the *semu*, only five were appointed *youchengxiang* and eight were appointed head of the Censorate.⁹³ Ye Ziqi, an eyewitness of that historical time, mentioned:

⁹¹ Lam 2008: 344.

⁹² Cleaves 1956: 258.

⁹³ Meng Siming 2006: 48.

天下治平之時，台省要官皆北人為之。漢人南人萬中無一二，其得為者不過州縣卑秩。⁹⁴

When *Tianxia* was in stability and peace [pacified], all the important officials in central government offices [or administrative departments] [were occupied by] the northern people [the Mongols]. Among the *hanren* and *nanren*, you could hardly find one or two among tens of thousands. Those who managed to be appointed were no more than low-ranking officials in subprefectures and counties.

The next important factor that should be mentioned is the hostility on the part of the Mongols towards the Chinese. Open disdain towards the Chinese by the Mongols was a common phenomenon. A good illustration of that is the activities of Bayan of the Merkid 伯顏 (?–1340),⁹⁵ who was a pivotal political figure during the reign of Toghon Temür (r. 1333–1368), the last emperor of the Yuan dynasty. Toghon Temür ascended the throne at age 12. Therefore, until his coming of age, power had been mostly concentrated in the hands of Mongol officials, with the most influential of them being Bayan.

Bayan became well known due to his assistance to Khayisan (Qayisang later Külüg Khan) against Kaidu in 1299.⁹⁶ During that period, the ethnic Mongol (Merkid) Bayan showed himself as a reliable and brave ally. When Külüg Khan ascended the throne in 1307, he did not forget about Bayan's help. During his rule, Bayan was appointed president of the Board of Civil Office, vice-censor-in-chief, and *darughachi* of the newly organised right Asud (Alan) Guards.⁹⁷ The next turning point of Bayan's life was in 1333, when he supported Toghon Temür's ascension to the throne. In 1335, he was appointed *chengxiang* 丞相 (grand chancellor). Bayan's objectives were twofold: firstly, to consolidate the Mongols' position in China, and secondly, to reinstate the fundamental principles of governance from Kublai Khan's era. During this period, ethnic representation held paramount importance within the state structures, and methods of Chinese governance, rooted in Confucian teachings, were subject to rigorous oversight by the Mongol rulers. Bayan was against the Sinicisation of the Mongol emperors and officials, and he did not support the interest of Toghon Temür towards Chinese culture and way of thinking, considering that it could eliminate

⁹⁴ Ye Ziqi: *Caomuzi juan* 3/73.

⁹⁵ Song Lian 1976: 3335.

⁹⁶ Dardess 1973: 10.

⁹⁷ The Asud Guards were primarily composed of Alans, an Iranian-speaking group originally from the North Caucasus region. The Asud Guards served as an elite guard unit for the Mongol rulers. Their primary role was to protect the emperor and other high-ranking officials of the Yuan Dynasty. In addition to their duties as guards, the Asud also participated in military campaigns, leveraging their skills in battle. Dardess 1973: 17.

Mongol values and traditions. Thus, to shield the Mongol court from ‘foreign influence’, in 1335 and 1339 Bayan cancelled the examination procedure, which caused discontent among the population.⁹⁸

One of the most striking features of the Mongol rule in China was the implementation of unfair regulations towards the conquered. Bayan was an active supporter of laws that had been issued during the reign of Kublai Khan. Some of them are presented below:

詔：「諸路置局造軍器，私造者處死；民間所有，不輸官者，與私造同。」⁹⁹

Imperial order [24 March 1263]: Offices are established in various routes to manufacture military equipment, and those who produce [military equipment] privately are put to death. If among the ordinary people, there are ones who do not inform the government [about such production], [they should be] treated the same as those who privately manufacture.

三月丙寅，禁民間兵器，犯者驗多寡定罪。¹⁰⁰

On the third moon of the year *bingyin* [28 April 1268], [Kublai Khan] prohibited the possession of weapons for the ordinary people. As for those who violate [this law], the punishment will be based on the quantity of weapons found.

二月己亥，敕中外，凡漢民持鐵尺、手搥及杖之藏刃者，悉輸于官。¹⁰¹

On the second moon of the year *jihai* [26 February 1286], an imperial order [was issued] inside and outside [both the internal and external areas or regions under the jurisdiction]. All those *han* ordinary people who possess iron sticks, or hand-held bludgeons, as well as those who conceal blades within canes, must deliver them all to the officials [authorities].

Based on these passages from the *Yuanshi*, in my opinion, Kublai Khan was suspicious towards the conquered, and that is why possession of weapons was strictly forbidden for them. Presumably, purchasing and selling bamboo was also prohibited for the Chinese, because this valuable material could have been used to produce bows and arrows.¹⁰² Furthermore, the Mongols monopolised bamboo production to prevent resistance from the conquered.

⁹⁸ Dardess 1973: 60

⁹⁹ Song Lian 1976: 91.

¹⁰⁰ Song Lian 1976: 118.

¹⁰¹ Song Lian 1976: 286.

¹⁰² Rossabi 1994: 453.

The imperial edicts concerning penalties for acts of violence, intentional harm, or murder vividly illustrate the unjust nature of the sentencing process. According to the *Yuanshi*,

午庚，禁漢人聚眾與蒙古人鬥毆。¹⁰³

In the year of *wugeng* [10 June 1272], [Kublai Khan] forbade the *Han* people to gather in crowds for fight and hit [brawl with] the Mongols.

In the *Tongzhi tiaoge* 通製條格 (Legislative Articles from the Comprehensive Regulations), it is said:

如蒙古人毆打漢兒人，不得還報，指立証見，於所在官司陳訴。如有違犯之人，嚴行斷罪。¹⁰⁴

For example, if the Mongols beat the *Han* people, they are not allowed to hit back. Witnesses should be identified [to testify the fact of beating] and such a case [should be] reported to the government office. Anyone who violates [this law] will be severely punished.

Another important point is the punishment for murder. If a Chinese killed a Mongol, he was sentenced to death. If the situation was the opposite, a Mongol had to pay a fine for the funeral, and then he was usually sent to a punitive expedition with the army.¹⁰⁵ In addition, Chinese faces were tattooed for theft and robbery, while the Mongols and *semu* were exempt from such a punishment.¹⁰⁶

As we can see, for the committing of the same crimes, the Chinese were subjected to more severe punishments, while the Mongols could escape retribution, or the retribution was much lighter. Undoubtedly, this gave rise to a huge wave of indignation in the ranks of the conquered people. However, resistance was actively suppressed by the Mongol army. For instance, in 1282 there were more than 200 uprisings against the Mongols in Jiangnan 江南.¹⁰⁷

Bayan highly supported the above-mentioned regulations against the conquered, such as the prohibition of the Chinese from having weapons, crowd gatherings, and resisting attacks of the Mongols. It is worth mentioning that Bayan valued the policy of ethnic separatism. Therefore, a favourable attitude towards the Chinese could play a negative role in one's career and personal

¹⁰³ Song Lian 1976: 141.

¹⁰⁴ *Tongzhi tiaoge*: juan 28/75.

¹⁰⁵ Shang Yue 1959: 366.

¹⁰⁶ Haw 2013: 44, Shang Yue 1959: 366.

¹⁰⁷ Shang Yue 1959: 378. 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.

relationships. For instance, A Rong 阿榮 (d. ca. 1335), of Mongol descent, was a civil and military administrator. He was interested in Chinese history and cultural values, and he maintained good relations with Chinese literati.¹⁰⁸ Bayan was suspicious of A Rong—he did not share his attitude towards the conquered and pointed out that Sinicisation would have a devastating effect on the Mongol reign in China.¹⁰⁹ In May 1337 Bayan issued a decree:

省、院、臺、部、宣慰司、廉訪司及部府幕官之長，並用蒙古、色目人。禁漢人、南人不得習學蒙古、色目文字。¹¹⁰

Positions such as the heads of provinces, courts, supervisory offices, ministries, the Pacification Commission, the Surveillance Commission, and the government offices must all be filled [held] by Mongols and *semu*. *Hanren* and *Nanren* are prohibited from learning Mongolian and *semu* scripts.

Another decree was as follows:

癸酉，禁漢人、南人、高麗人不得執持軍器，凡有馬者拘入官。¹¹¹

In the year of *guiyou* [3 May 1337], *hanren*, *nanren*, *gaoliren* [Koreans] are prohibited from holding weapons, and if anyone [from *hanren*, *nanren*, *gaoliren*] possesses a horse, they are obliged to hand over it to the officials [authorities].

According to the *Xu zizhi tongjian* 續資治通鑑 (The Continuation of the Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government):

己酉，申漢人、南人、高麗人不得執軍器、弓矢之禁。¹¹²

In the year of *jiyou* [29 May 1339], it is stated that *hanren*, *nanren*, and *gaoliren* [Koreans] are prohibited from carrying weapons, bows, and arrows.

Due to these regulations of bureaucratic control, only the Mongols and *semu* could maintain their dominant positions in court. Another event that made Bayan hostile toward the Chinese was the takeover of Henan's provincial capital by a clerk Fan Meng 範孟. Nine of the chief Mongol and *semu* provincial officials were killed by the conspirators. Having heard of such a betrayal, Bayan and his supporters took drastic measures towards the rebels. Bayan tried to accuse as many Chinese as it was possible—unfortunately, it is not known how many peo-

¹⁰⁸ Song Lian 1976: 3420–3421.

¹⁰⁹ Dardess 1994: 569.

¹¹⁰ Song Lian 1976: 839.

¹¹¹ Song Lian 1976: 839.

¹¹² *Xu Zizhi tongjian*: juan 208/8.

ple were punished. The data about the condemned are different; some sources provide the amount of 30 men, while other sources mention hundreds or thousands.¹¹³ Bayan's further actions, in my opinion, aimed to use the momentum for the removal of all Chinese from their posts in the provincial *jianchasi* 監察司 (Surveillance Offices). The attempt to seize the power by Fan Meng served only as a pretext for tightening measures for the conquered. Moreover, to intimidate the Chinese, Bayan suggested taking the following measures:

伯顏請殺張、王、劉、李、趙五姓漢人，帝不從。¹¹⁴

Boyan asked to kill the *Han* people with five [most common] surnames, [such as] Zhang, Wang, Liu, Li, and Zhao, but the emperor [Toghon Temür] did not follow [Boyan's suggestion].

This suggestion undoubtedly casts a negative light on Bayan's political activities while highlighting the emperor's decision-making abilities.

Having seen Bayan's obsession with power, Emperor Toghon Temür and Bayan's nephew Toqto'a (Dayong, Tuotuo, 1314–1356) decided to dismiss him—the chancellor was sent into exile in 1340.¹¹⁵ From my perspective, the loss of Bayan's influence in court was caused by several factors: 1) a series of differential decrees and regulations towards the four ethnic groups; 2) a desire to dominate the politics of the state on his own; 3) the abolition of the examination procedure scheduled in 1335 and 1339; and 4) an enmity towards the Confucian values as well as a lack of loyal supporters. From my perspective, the enmity towards the Confucian values was the main mistake of Bayan—in the middle of the 14th century, most of the Mongolian nobility as well as Emperor Toghon Temür were Sinicised to some extent, so nomadic values were not in high demand at that time.

Conclusion

Within the framework of this article, an attempt was made to provide a detailed analysis of the policy of the Mongol Khans towards the conquered people during the reign of the Yuan dynasty. It was found that at the beginning of his reign, Kublai Khan relied largely on the advice of and strategy proposed by the Chinese advisers, actively involving them in raising the future heir. However, the uprising that broke out in 1262 by one of Kublai's close associates, Li Tan, forced the future founder of the Yuan dynasty to radically reconsider his attitude

¹¹³ Dardess 1973: 72.

¹¹⁴ Song Lian 1976: 843.

¹¹⁵ Atwood 2004: 37.

towards the Chinese. Kublai Khan realised that for an effective government it was necessary to rely on neutral officials, namely representatives of the *semu*, who would provide great assistance in governance. It should be noted that Kublai Khan was also wary of the Mongols and questioned their loyalty, since the political course he had chosen was harshly criticised by many representatives of the Mongol nobility.

The division of society into four groups was one of the striking characteristics of Mongol rule in China. Such a system served as a regulator of social life, and it was a constant reminder of the dominant position of the conquerors to the Chinese.

The Mongols, as conquerors, had more rights. The *semu* was a respected class throughout the reign of the Mongols in China. *Semu* officials played a key role in the development of the state apparatus due to their erudition and experience, and many of them were given wide-ranging authority in state matters. Moreover, they were familiar with the customs and traditions of sedentary civilisations, which was essential to the Mongols for securing the prosperity of the Mongol Empire and acquiring the spoils of the conquered. As it was mentioned above, the *semu* were considered pivotal personnel for the Mongols, because they were fluent in various foreign languages and served as translators for the Mongol rulers, as well as tutors to the Mongol heirs. From my perspective, the *semu* served as mediators between the Chinese and the ruling elite—they made a huge contribution to the interaction between two different civilisations.

The position of the Chinese was unstable during the Mongol rule. The political attitudes of some Mongol high-ranking officials were manifested in the introduction of various laws and regulations towards the conquered. This situation greatly aggravated social contradictions, causing an outbreak of local uprisings in the country. In my opinion, social inequality laid the main foundation for the Red Turban Rebellion (1351–1368), which brought an end to the Yuan dynasty.

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