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Mongol loyalty networks: cultural transmission and Chinggisid innovation

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Citation

Jones, T. X. (2023, January 24). *Mongol loyalty networks: cultural transmission and Chinggisid innovation*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3513016>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

5. Conclusion

Every society, culture and state has its own set of norms, unspoken rules and laws which govern loyalty obligations. Some of these may be to people, others may be to ideas or the supernatural, while others may be to institutions or government bodies. This work set out to establish some of the loyalty networks which existed across the Mongol Empire and its successor states, with a specific focus on the Ilkhanate. Those the Mongols ruled over and who were a key part of maintaining loyalty networks at a regional level, such as the Persian administrators Juvainī and Rashīd al-Dīn, were involved in the project of both explaining Mongol custom to a Persian-speaking audience, as well as legitimating the rule of their employers. In this manner, they made use of Turco-Mongol terminology which described how the ruling classes understood, expected and performed loyalty obligations. The performative aspects of these rituals hammered home the political and societal cost of defiance, both for members of the Turco-Mongol elite and those they ruled over. The complexities of these cultural events show that Mongol loyalty networks were based in a highly ritualised society, where rank and precedence were strictly observed. Even when the Mongols adopted a new religion, such as Islam in the lands of the Ilkhanate, these rituals remained of vital importance in the display of power, submission and obedience.

These loyalty networks centred on nodes, or objects of loyalty, in the various roles and institutions which already existed on the Mongol steppes in the 12th century and which were agglomerated into the administration as the Mongol Empire grew over the course of the 13th century. The language of the customary law, or *törü*, was adopted and adapted by Chinggis and his successors to show his own right to obedience, long before he had in fact established himself as a khan on the steppe. Chinggis' legacy and his decisions during his lifetime had a powerful resonance through Mongol society, and they continued to affect how his descendants were viewed. This legacy became a sort of unwritten constitution to which Mongol political actors turned when they sought to explain their own loyalty decisions. The presence of long-standing societal roles which emphasised seniority, such as the *aqa*, clashed with newly established Chinggisid precedents, such as lineal succession. However, these disputes were almost always framed in terms of appeals to the Chinggisid *jasag*, or Chinggis' personnel decisions. The existence of a consultative body, the *quriltai*, was supposed to preserve these records and ensure compliance, but powerful figures could always

forge their own path, and the *quriltai*'s weightiness was lessened by non-attendance and geographical moves away from Mongolia, though localised versions continued to take place throughout the Mongol world. The regionalisation of power forced local actors to make loyalty decisions with far more basis in self-preservation than in any ideal factors.

As this regionalisation grew, qa'ans made power grabs within their own spheres of influence, causing a breakdown in the unity of the empire in the early 1260s. The emergence of *uluses* or khanates which no longer cooperated with each other and periodically sent strong messages of independence and separation occurred over the latter half of the 13th century. In one of these successor states, the Ilkhanate, a new concept of loyalty emerged. The rulers would no longer recognise the influence of the elder brothers of the Jochid line to the north, who were enemies who had allied with a non-Mongol state, the Mamluks. Their official loyalty as ilkhans, or submissive khans, was given to the great qa'an in Daidu. However, within the state, there were painful adjustments as once again the actors were regularly forced to choose between the ideas of seniority and the will of the previous ruler, and these loyalty decisions often were based on self-interest. The idealistic and charismatic loyalties of political decision-makers to the house of Hülegü were whittled away, as its scions brutally executed their own kin, as well as those who served them, at the slightest hint of sedition. This extreme violence transgressed Mongol custom, and put the amirs who served them in an unenviable position of choosing to follow out of fear. Eventually, these amirs had enough, and decided to risk exerting their own power without the support of the Chinggisid name.

In looking at Mongol loyalties, we have seen that, just as elsewhere in the world, there were push and pull factors which contributed to each individual loyalty decision. However, inertial loyalties in particular seem to have been less powerful in a society that had a great respect for strength and individual charisma. This explains to some extent why the united Mongol Empire disintegrated only a few decades after the death of its founder. The many claimants on loyalty also created tension for Mongol subjects, particularly high-level political actors, who would be judged on their choices. Those actors who were not Chinggisids often felt the brunt of their decisions in a way that members of the *altan urugh* did not, as they were usually protected by the sanctity of their blood. This began to change however, as the number of Chinggisid descendants grew, and their ability to destabilise the state became worrisome to rulers who needed to solidify their power. There were revivals in Chinggisid fortunes after the collapse of successor states like the Ilkhanate and Chaghadaid *ulus*, where the concept of loyalty to Chinggisid ideals restarted. The most notable of these was the rule of Temür, whose Turco-Mongol background gave him a familiarity with Chinggisid ideas of rulership,

which he used to show himself as a guardian of the legacy of Chinggis Khan.¹ This did not prevent him from killing the puppet khans he had no more use for however, and loyalty to the ideal of Chinggisid charisma was no longer the same force in the 14th and 15th centuries.

The speedy rise of the Mongol Empire and the necessary creation of administrative positions to govern it led to problems of jurisdiction and control. Many of these problems were famously actively sponsored by the Mongols, who worried about officials and commanders in far-flung regions becoming too powerful, and thus doubled roles in many areas.² This forced Mongol servitors to keep each other accountable, and ensured that their loyalty remained with the centre. While the situation in the provinces is well-known, it is questionable to what extent the Mongols created a similar system at the very heart of their empire. The clashes in authority between the regent, the *aqā*, and the heir presumptive may cause us to wonder if the lack of planning for the ruler's death was an oversight or not. Almost all of the actions by the early regents and Batu as *aqā* seem very ad hoc, based on a nebulous idea of custom. The role of the regent in particular seems a response to a potentially dangerous situation, which the previous rulers were unwilling or unable to prepare for. Rashīd al-Dīn and the Chinese sources are adamant about the presence and priority of wills of Chinggis and Ögödei at least, but as we have seen in Chapter 4, the *Akhbār-i Mughulān*, a source for Rashīd al-Dīn's work, claimed that the will as a concept had no basis in Mongol law.³ The Mongols' great respect for strength and the proof of divine favour certainly applied to pretenders to the throne, but it also may have applied to these 'temporary' positions as well. They were what the holders of the title could make of them. Naturally however, the existence of these roles simultaneously, and a whole set of customs which could be employed to lend them weight, led to difficult choices for Mongol political actors.

¹ B.F. Manz, 'Temür and the problem of a conqueror's legacy', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 8, (1998), pp. 21-41. All across the former Mongol world, dynasties emerged which paid lip-service to Chinggisid heritage, or were ruled by Chinggisids, but where the real power was in the hands of powerful non-Chinggisid amirs. In Mongolia, the Northern Yuán dynasty struggled with the Oirats for control during the 15th century, with the Oirat ruler Esen Taishi using Chinggisid puppets, P. Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 102; I. Togan, *Flexibility and Limitations in Steppe Formations: The Kerait Khanate and Chinggis Khan*, (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 8; May, *Mongol Empire*, pp. 26-8. Edigü did something similar in the Jochid ulus, DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion*, pp. 340-1. In Moghulistan, the eastern half of the former Chaghadaid ulus, Chaghadaid khans still ruled in the 16th century, but they were in regular conflict with the powerful Dughlāt family, whose amirs were at times independent, or decided Chaghadaid succession, see *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia, being the Tarikh-i Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar, Dughlat* (ed.) N. Elias, (trans.) E. Denison Ross, (London, 1972).

² Ostrowski, 'The *tamma*', p. 277; Ravalde, 'Shams al-Dīn Juwaynī', p. 58; Birge, *Marriage and the Law*, p. 42.

³ See p. 151. The question of the will has been put forward in Krawulsky, *Mongol Ilkhans*, pp. 23-7; Favereau, *The Horde*, pp. 61-2 goes even further, stating that after Jochi, Chinggis' original heir, had fallen out of favour, 'Chinggis appointed no heir; the question of his succession was to remain open'.

Perhaps it is justifiable to state that some of these loyalty conflicts were by design then. If the whole Mongol political system rested on who had the favour of Tengri, other customary positions could be subsumed by this. Chinggis himself broke down many systems, reordered hierarchies, and established new precedents, but he seemingly had no desire to create a fully centralised state, as we might expect a founding ruler to do. He permitted his lateral relatives to choose their own leaders, he gave legal standing to the *quriltai*, and created the *güregen* class, which maintained standing and power in the hands of groups like the Oirat and Qonggirat. His successors were obliged not only to respect Chinggis' legacy, but also had to work within the same systems that he had. Though small scale changes could be enacted, as we have seen with the transfer of the Suldus troops, both Chinggisids and their amirs reacted strongly against amendments of the status quo. The creation of several nodes of loyalty obligations may have strengthened the Chinggisid family as a whole vis-à-vis the substrata of the ruling classes: officials, amirs etc. but it also allowed Chinggisid actors to make their own luck, showing their possession of *qut*. Innovators like Batu and Töregene played on existing customs and enlarged the scope of their own roles, which by and large impressed the Mongol ruling classes and external observers.

The appreciation of power did not eliminate a deep respect for custom and tradition. In the pre-imperial Mongol steppe, people were largely illiterate, and thus, society was governed by these very norms and unwritten rules, the *törü* being the highest of these. As Chapter Two has shown, hierarchies in ritual and performance were of the utmost importance in Mongol culture.⁴ Thus, even those such as Batu and Töregene, who reshaped how the Mongols considered their positions, did not emphasise the new aspects of their actions, but rather how they were simply reconnecting to ideals of the past.⁵ Batu played up his loyalty to the *jasaq*, to the process of the *quriltai*, and thereby to the Chinggisid legacy. For the Mongols, whose religious rituals involved the representation of their ancestors in images made of felt, Batu shows himself as merely honouring the wishes of his illustrious ancestor.⁶ Töregene also connected herself to the tradition of both consultation and the figure of the *aqqa* in reaching out to Chaghadaï and the other Chinggisid princes to approve of her regency. However, when these figures showed a lack of respect for tradition, they were told as much. When Batu requested in 1248 to hold the *quriltai* closer to him due to his gout, he was told by the

⁴ In this aspect I disagree with Lane, *Daily Life*, p. 22 who states 'Steppe leaders had no need for pomp and ceremony.'

⁵ Favereau, *The Horde*, pp. 25, 96-7, states that this respect for tradition while innovating is in fact central to nomadic culture, and what provides its dynamism.

⁶ These felt images (called *ongghot*) were noticed by European travellers such as John of Plano Carpini, *Mongol Mission*, p. 9; Marco Polo, *Travels*, p. 98, and Armenian chroniclers such as Grigor of Akanc', *Nation of Archers/Bedrosian*, p. 2; Vardan, *Compilation of History*, p. 97. See DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion*, pp. 37-41 and Lane, *Daily Life*, p. 184.

Ögödeids that his request was absurd, as Chinggis' capital was where such things took place.⁷

Töregene likewise was informed by her son Köten that she could not do as she wished with the officials Chinqai and Maḥmūd Yalavach, as they must be tried for the crimes she suspected of them at the *quriltai*.⁸

Loyalty decisions, particularly for non-Chinggisids, could be life or death affairs, and thus they could rarely afford to be so idealistic. Aq Buqa's die-hard commitment to the Ilkhan Gaykhatu may have been commended by later commentators, but it cost him his life while amirs around him capitalised on the wind blowing a different way. However, even joining a successful leader could be perilous, if it was done in the wrong way. The examples of Jamuqa's followers' execution at the hands of Chinggis, or Taghachar's by Ghazan, show that ideal loyalties were not taken lightly and that the pure opportunists rarely had long term success either. This culture of uncertainty seems to have been deliberate, and it affected the way later rulers treated the Chinggisids. They often sought power not in their own name, but in the name of a Chinggisid puppet, as a fall back should their khan grow too powerful. Only once was their power assured did they dispense with formalities.⁹

Many of the loyalty categories the Mongols adhered to were taken on by other dynasties also. Adherence to the *jasaq/törü* continued in some form or another under the Timurids, and its influence was such that even the Mamluks, great enemies of the Mongols, were believed by their own historians to have taken on its concepts.¹⁰ The respect for Mongol regents and women more generally as arbiters of power also permeated the Middle East, where women such as Shāhrukh's wife Gawharshād for the Timurids and the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmāsp's daughter Parī Khān Khānum played major political roles, either as regents or as sponsors of pretenders.¹¹ In Míng China there was

⁷ RAD/Thackston, Vol. II, p. 387. Rashīd al-Dīn specifically mentions Töregene Khatun as complaining about this breach in protocol, though this seems impossible as the historian himself states that Töregene was dead by this point.

⁸ Juvaini/Boyle, Vol. I, p. 242.

⁹ One can think of the Chupanids, Jalayirids, Timurids, Oirats etc.

¹⁰ Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition*, pp. 16-18; D. Ayalon, 'The Great *Yāsa* of Chingiz Khān: A Reexamination (Part C2). Al-Maqrīzī's Passage on the *Yāsa* under the Mamluks', *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 38, (1973), pp. 107-156 has shown that the actual evidence for any use of the *jasaq* in the Mamluk Sultanate is negligible, but that Mamluk historians such as Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī attributed its influence to the moral decay of the realm in the 14th century. See also Van den Bent, 'Mongols in Mamluk Eyes', pp. 123-151. However, this reaction may have been due to the influence of groups of *wāfidiyya* Mongols, such as the Oirats, who for a long time did not convert to Islam, and were heavily involved in succession issues in the late 13th and early 14th century. For more on this see Van den Bent, 'Mongols in Mamluk Eyes', pp. 220-6.

¹¹ B. de Nicola, 'Pādshāh Khatun: An Example of Architectural, Religious, and Literary Patronage in Ilkhanid Iran', in (eds.) M. Biran, J. Brack and F. Fiaschetti, *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants and Intellectuals*, (Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2020), pp. 270-289, de Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, Chapter 3 and Lane, *Early Mongol Rule*, Chapter 5 have shown how women's political roles in vassal states of the Ilkhanate were increased at this time. B.F. Manz, 'Gowhar-šād Āgā', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/gowhar-sad-aga>, Accessed 31st March 2022; R. Savory, *Iran Under the*

a complex response to Mongol rule, whereby there was great condemnation of Mongol government and culture in official histories, particularly with regards to the influence of women, but in practice, Yuán influence was great in the Míng period.¹² Take the much-emphasised neo-Confucian approach to women in power, as expressed in an edict by the Hóngwǔ Emperor, Zhū Yuánzhāng (r. 1368-98), the founder of the Míng dynasty: 'Although the empress and consorts are exemplars of motherhood to the empire, they must not be allowed to participate in the affairs of government'.¹³ However, the Dowager Empress Zhāng was a decisive figure in the reign of her son Xuāndé (r. 1425-35), then becoming unofficial regent for her grandson Yīngzōng (r. 1435-1449). She was apparently involved in all major councils on military and state affairs. However, she refused the Míng officials' request that she establish a regency on the basis that this violated ancestral laws, setting a precedent in the Míng period that women did not take the official title of regent.¹⁴ This paradoxical approach to women's role in the government looks to be a reaction to the brazen expressions of female power in the Mongol period, where in name these women subscribed to neo-Confucian ideals about their roles in society, but in essence they continued to wield a great deal of power at the heart of Míng politics.

The importance of the figure of the *aqa* was such that the term came to be used as a respectful title by many later states, as well as in modern Persian and Tajik. Mongol loyalty networks and their processes were often adopted and adapted by later dynasties; the important institution of the *keshig* (imperial bodyguard) and the Mongol written oath, the *möchelge*, are only two of the most notable.¹⁵ It was not just in the Middle East and Central Asia where these ideas were influential of course, as Donald Ostrowski and Charles Halperin have been keen to elucidate the impact of the Mongols on the political structure of the principality of Muscovy in the 14th and 15th centuries.¹⁶ There are certainly further examples of the Mongol legacy in political systems, but it is key to understand that for all the misunderstandings of the exact functioning of Mongol power dynamics,

Safavids (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 70-74. Parī Khān Khānum was in conflict with the wife of the Shah Muḥammad Khudābanda, usually titled Mahd-i 'Ulyā, who took over as essential regent from Parī Khān, who was assassinated, until she herself was strangled.

¹² Robinson, 'The Ming Court', *passim*.

¹³ E. Soulliere, 'The Writing and Rewriting of History: Imperial Women and the Succession in Ming China, 1368-1457', *Ming Studies*, Vol. 73, (2016), p. 14, from the *Míng Shǐ*, Vol. 12, Chapter 113.

¹⁴ Idem, pp. 16-19.

¹⁵ Melville, 'The *Keshig* in Iran', *passim*; Subtelny, 'Binding pledge', *passim*. A.K.S. Lambton, "Dārūgha", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Online, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1728, Accessed 22nd March 2021, has shown that this position, in different forms, lasted up to the Constitutional Period in Iran. C.P. Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric*, (London: Tauris, 2009), p. 50, shows that many Turco-Mongol official posts like *qurchi*, *yasavul* and *yurtchi*, were present in the Safavid realm.

¹⁶ Halperin, 'Muscovite Political Institutions' *passim*; D.G. Ostrowski, 'Muscovite Adaptation of Steppe Political Institutions: A Reply to Halperin's Objections', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (2000), pp. 267-304. The two authors disagree as to the degree of Mongol influence.

states across Eurasia, both during the Mongols' own period and beyond, regularly tapped into Mongol ideas to try and enhance their own prestige and bolster their subjects' loyalties. Despite the united Mongol Empire's relatively brief time span, the ideas which were at the heart of the impressive early Mongol enterprise and the long reign of many of their successors continued to have a powerful influence over various regions of Eurasia.

Even this relatively short study highlights the complexities of Mongol society, cultural norms and political administration. There are a great many geographical areas, ideas and loyalties which have been passed over for the sake of coherence, but further investigation of such issues would deepen our understanding of these networks. A study on the interaction of Mongol officials and their loyalties or specific analyses of regions like Yuán China or the Caucasus are *desiderata* in the broader field of Mongol studies. It would also be of great interest to see the relationship between loyalty to the Mongols and religious ideals, as these regularly ran afoul of each other.¹⁷

This dissertation has shown that by applying the framework of loyalty provided to us by authors such as Thomas Welsford and Naomi Standen, we can see how political actors in the Mongol world understood their decisions. Analysing these categories of loyalty: charismatic, clientelist, inertial, communal and idealistic loyalties, we see how the dynamics of these decisions played out at key moments. The Chinggisid enterprise created a network of loyalty objects, which was extremely powerful when there was a balance struck between loyalties of self-interest and those which prioritised the Chinggisid legacy. The venue for the performance of these loyalties, the *quriltai*, was arguably the key cog in this wheel. When political actors were forced to confront each other, the social aspect of this gathering saw to it that consensus was required. Even a qa'an could not go against the public assertion of this grand assembly if he wanted to remain in power.¹⁸ As these empire-wide *quriltais* were marginalised through regionalisation, their localised iterations continued to occur and maintain relevance at times, but they were no longer able to heal the bonds which had been severed in the 1250s and 1260s.

The power of the Chinggisid legacy was such that dynasties from Russia to China played with Mongol political concepts, adapting or rejecting those they thought could strengthen them or those which held too much memory of a barbarian oppressor. It is only through returning to the Mongol

¹⁷ One can consider perhaps the incident when Ghazan, despite his conversion to Islam, wanted a formal marriage to his father's wife Bulughan Khatun, illegal under Islamic law. A *fatwa* was issued by an unnamed *ulema* saying that because Bulughan had been married to a non-Muslim, Arghun, this marriage was not valid, and thus Ghazan had every right to marry her, see Amitai, 'Ghazan, Islam and Mongol Tradition', p. 3; Melville, *'Pādshāh-i Islām*, p. 77.

¹⁸ Favereau, *The Horde*, p. 99.

rise to power that we can understand the dynamism which was so attractive to these later societies. This dynamism married respect for tradition with a great respect for charismatic displays of power.¹⁹ It was in this tension that both the Mongol Empire thrived and eventually fell apart, though its successor states sought to recapture and reframe this loyalty network, to varying degrees of success. Interestingly, it was in states where the Mongols sought to incorporate more local ideas of rule that power slipped away quicker. In Iran and China, Chinggisid Mongol rule had disappeared by the 1370s. However, in the realms where the Mongols were able to maintain the more classic Mongol system, such as the Jochid *ulus* and Moghulistan, their rule lasted for at least another two hundred years.

¹⁹ Idem, p. 25. This was also noticed by Marie Favereau, whose work echoed my own thoughts on the matter.