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Mongol Responses to Christianity in China:

A Yuan Dynasty Phenomenon

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Mongol Responses to Christianity in China: A Yuan Dynasty Phenomenon

Li TANG

1. The World of China in the 13th Century

Medieval China (10th – 13th centuries) underwent a series of divisions and experienced the situation of being one among many with its “barbarian” neighbors.¹ Chinese history during this period witnessed the rise of the “alien” Khitan Liao (970-1125) and the Jurchen Jin (1115-1234) dynasties in the north, the Tangut Western Xia (1032-1227) in the West and the Chinese Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) in the South. This status of what the Mongol historian Morris Rossabi called, “China among equals” was somehow accepted by the Chinese at the time. However, this divided scene was soon ended as the Mongol cavaliers made a clean sweep from east to west across the Steppe.

The thirteenth-century Mongol conquest led to, no doubt, a horrible destruction of the sedentary worlds of Inner Asia. However, the Mongol legacy, under the shadow of these savage invasions, may not necessarily have been all negative. One of the consequential effects of the Mongol conquest was the unification of Eurasia and the emergence of *Pax Mongolica*, thus creating favorable conditions for cultural and economic exchanges and interaction between the East and the West.²

The Mongol conquest of China had already started at the time of Chinggis Khan and continued during the reign of Ögedai and Möngke (reign 1251-1259). However, it was Khubilai Khan 忽必烈 (reign 1260-1294), the grandson of Chinggis Khan who finally accomplished the conquest of the Southern Song Dynasty. Kublai had already engaged in campaigns against China with his brother Möngke 蒙哥. After he became Khan in 1260, he resumed his conquest

¹ For a deeper discussion of this period, see F.W. Mote, *Imperial China 900-1800*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999): pp. 377-399.

² For more on the Mongol legacy, see a relatively new publication edited by Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *The Mongol Empire and Its Legacy*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

efforts. In 1276, the siege of the Song capital Lin'an 臨安 (today's Hangzhou 杭州) marked the formal surrender of the Southern Song Dynasty. Yet, some of the Song militants retreated further south to Guangzhou 廣州 near the South China Sea and resisted until 1279 when the Song commander reportedly committed suicide by jumping into the South China Sea with the young Song emperor in his arms. The drowning of the last Song Emperor marked the end of the Southern Song Dynasty.³

Khubilai moved the Mongol capital from Karakorum to Dadu (today's Beijing/Peking) in 1267. In 1271, he adopted the Chinese dynastic system and named his Dynasty 'Da Yuan 大元', the Great Yuan.⁴ 'Yuan' was derived from 'Qian Yuan 乾元', a term borrowed from the Chinese Classics *Yi Jing* [Book of Changes]⁵, meaning 'the very beginning of all things'. Such being the case, Kublai became Emperor of China. This marked the end of the divided scene in East Asia which had existed since the turn of the 10th century.

2. Religious Background of the Mongol Khans

The nomadic Mongols were originally adherents of Shamanism, a tradition popular among the Altaic peoples, and rooted deeply in antiquity. The concept of Shamanism is animistic. The central figure of the belief system is the shaman who can communicate with spiritual forces, who can guide and heal and who knows the archaic techniques of ecstasy. Mongol shamanism is, historically, closely connected to Turkic cult. Medieval historians like Juvaini (1226-1283) and Bar Hebraeus (1226-1286) both attributed the origin of the Mongol shaman to that of the Uighur, a Turkic people. It was the Turks who passed this kind of cult to the Mongols. Viewed linguistically, the medieval word for a Turco-Mongol shaman is *qam* or *kam*⁶, a Turkic word meaning "diviner".⁷ Juvaini, the Persian historian at the Mongol court recorded that "when the

³ *Song Shi* [History of the Song Dynasty] Vol. 47.

⁴ *Yuan Shi* [History of the Yuan Dynasty] Vol. 7: Shizu 4.

⁵ The *Yi Jing* is a divination classic composed on the basis of prehistoric techniques which date back perhaps as early as 5000 B.C.

⁶ Mahmud al-Kasryari. *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Diwan Lugat at-Turk)*. Edited and translated by Robert Dankoff. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985): 125.

⁷ Jean-Paul Roux. *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols*. (Paris : Payot, 1984) :64.

Mongols had no knowledge or science, they had from ancient time yielded obedience to the words of these *qam*.”⁸ At the time of Juvaini’s writing, i.e. the 13th century, Mongol “princes still believe in their words and prayers, and if they engage upon some business they will conclude nothing until these astrologers have given their consent. And in a similar manner they heal their sick”.⁹

The Mongols, like other Altaic peoples, worshipped many natural objects, e.g. the earth, the Sun, the Moon, stars, thunder, lightening, wind, fire, water, mountains, plants and animals. They also made sacrifices to these worshipped objects. Through ritual dances, communication with the spirits was achieved. The shamanistic rituals were performed by the Khans at court at festive seasons, as was witnessed by Franciscan missionaries (e.g. William of Rubruck) at the Mongol court. However, above all the deities, the Mongols believe in the supreme Heaven “*tengri*”. Heaven was conceived as the omnipotent God who entrusted Chinggis Khan and his successors with the Divine Mission to rule over all countries and peoples.¹⁰

3. Christianity during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368)

3.1. Primary Sources

Christianity during the Yuan Dynasty had two forms: the Nestorian and the Roman Catholic. However, both groups were labeled as “*Yelikewen*” in Chinese historical records, official documents, chronicles, and local annals, e.g. *Yuanshi* 元史 [History of the Yuan], *Yuandianzhang* 元典章 [The Institutions of the Yuan Dynasty], *Zhishun zhenjiang zhi* 至顺镇江志 [The Annals of Zhenjiang of the Zhishun Period], to name just a few. The origin of the term *Yelikewen* (*Ärkägün*) is still debated although many have conjectured that it is derived from the Greek word “*archon*” (ἀρχων), meaning arch-deacon.¹¹ The name is mentioned many times in *Yuanshi* together with religious groups, such as Muslims, Taoists, and Confucians in

⁸ Juvaini, Ala-ad-Din ‘Ata-Malik, *The History of the World Conqueror*. Translated from the text of Mirza Muhammad Qazvini by John A. Boyle. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958): 59.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Anatoly M. Khazanov. “Muhammad and Jenghiz Khan Compared: The Religious Factor in World Empire Building” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 35, No. 3 (1993): 466.

¹¹ A.C. Moule. *Christians in China before the Year 1550*. Reprint. (Taipei: Ch’eng Wen Publishing, 1972): 218.

association with religious policies. Nestorian Christians were sometimes called “diexie” (迭屑), the origin of which is almost certainly the Persian word “Tarsā”,¹² meaning “God-fearers”, a reference to Christians.

Chinese official records contain limited, sometimes even inaccurate information on Christianity in the Yuan period. The Nestorian Christian presence is, however, very well-attested by archaeological finds. A large number of Nestorian Ordos crosses, head-stones and tomb-stones with short inscriptions in Chinese, Syriac, Turkish with Syriac script, Uighur and Phags-pa¹³ languages have been unearthed in various parts of China, e.g., Inner Mongolia, Quanzhou, Beijing, Yangzhou, etc., where large Nestorian populations once resided.

Western sources from the 13th to the 14th centuries on Nestorians in the Mongol Empire include correspondence between Western church leaders and the Mongol rulers; the famous *Description of the World*¹⁴ by Marco Polo¹⁵ and most importantly, travel accounts written by Franciscan (e.g., Giovanni dal Piano del Carpini 1182-1252; William of Rubruck 1215-1295) and Dominican missionaries who visited the lands of the Mongol Khans. These sources, in addition to Chinese sources, provide more detailed description of Nestorians in China at various occasions, for instance, healing, religious festivals, and so on. According to the Book of Marco Polo, Nestorians were quite numerous in China during the Mongol period. His account notes the widespread Nestorian churches from Kashgar to Peking, and extending from the southern to the eastern provinces.¹⁶

¹² Tarsā is an old Persia word, (masculine, singular) referring to a Christian, a fire-worshipper, a guebri, a pagan or an infidel. See H. Junker, *Persisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Tehran: Isharat Amier Kabier, 1971), s.v. “tarsā”. See also, John Shakespear, *A Dictionary, Hindustani and English*, 4th ed. (London: Pelham Richardson, 1849), s.v. “tarsā”.

¹³ The Mongol alphabet created on the basis of the Tibetan alphabet.

¹⁴ See A.C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, (eds). *Marco Polo: The Description of the World*. London: G. Routledge, 1938.

¹⁵ There is a controversy over Marco Polo’s travels to China. Some deny that he had ever been in China because his name was not mentioned in Chinese records. See Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo go to China?* London: Secker & Warburg, 1995. There are also many who are convinced of his presence in China and the value of his travel accounts. See Igor de Rachewiltz, “Marco Polo Went to China,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 27 (1997): 34-92; and Jørgen Jensen, “The World’s Most Diligent Observer,” *Asiatische Studien* 51 (1997): 719-28.

¹⁶ M.G. Pauthier. *Le Livre de Marco Polo Citoyen de Venise Conseiller Privé et Commissaire Impérial de Khoubilai Khan*. (Paris: Librairie de Fimin Didot Frères, 1864), 135-153 ; 159-161 ; 166.

Besides the western sources, medieval Persian historians (e.g. Rashid al-Din 1247-1318¹⁷; Juvayni¹⁸ 1226-1283) and Syriac historians (Bar Hebraeus¹⁹ 1226-1286) also made reference to Nestorian Christians among the Mongol elite. Juvayni claimed to have made use of oral Mongol narratives for his historical work, while Rashid al-Din used many written Mongol sources.²⁰

3.2. Status of Christianity during the Yuan Period

Historical records and archaeological evidence reveal a widespread Christian presence in China under the Mongol Empire. Although these Christians comprised different groups, e.g., Nestorians, Byzantine Orthodox, Armenians, Jacobites and Roman Catholics, the two main representative ones were the Nestorians and the Roman Catholics.

3.2.1. Nestorian Christianity

The term “Nestorian Church” is erroneously used to refer to the East Syrian Church originally established in Mesopotamia. The name “Nestorian” can be traced back to a person named “Nestorius” who was bishop of Constantinople during the period 428-431 CE. The word “Nestorianism” is closely linked to the fifth-century Christological debates and controversies in the Church. Nestorianism is the doctrine supposedly held by Nestorius (though he himself declared that he was misinterpreted) that the incarnate Christ had two separate natures, the divine and the human; and the Virgin Mary was the “Christ-bearer” (*christotokos*) as opposed to the orthodox doctrine of the incarnate Christ being a single Person, at once God and Man; and Mary being the “God-bearer” (*theotokos*). At the Council of Ephesus in 431, Nestorianism was denounced as heresy and Nestorius himself was deposed.²¹

¹⁷ For an English version of Rashid al-Din’s original work *Jami’ al-tawarikh* [Compendium of World History], see John A. Boyle. *The Successors of Genghis Khan: Translated from the Persia of Rashid al-Din*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971; W.M. Thackston. *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’ u’ t-tawarikh Compendium of Chronicles: A History of the Mongols*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

¹⁸ See John A. Boyle (trans.), *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror by Ala al-Din Ata Malik Juvayni Translated from the Text of Mizra Muhammad Qazivini*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.

¹⁹ Bar Hebraeus. *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum*. Edited by J.A. Abeloos and Lamy. Lovanii: Peeters, 1872-1887.

²⁰ W. Barthold. *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. Second edition, (London: Messrs, Luzac and Co. Ltd., 1958): 41.

²¹ For the fifth century Christological debates, see, Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche. Band 1: Von der apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451)*. Freiburg: Herder, 1990; and Walter Bauer,

The Nestorian controversy cast a shadow over the East Syrian Church which supposedly upheld the doctrine of Nestorianism and was therefore labeled as “Nestorian,”²² even though the name Nestorius was unheard-of to most of its believers. The doctrinal quarrels victimized a large number of Christians from the Persian/Sassanian Empire, who had sought theological education at the School of Edessa in the Roman territories, which was closed due to its connection to Nestorianism. Being expelled from the Roman territories, Nestorian Christians fled to Persia and were protected by the Persian government which happened to be the enemy of Rome. Despite occasional severe persecutions by the Sassanian kings, the Nestorian church in Persia gained its organizational strength from the 5th till the middle of the 7th century when the Arabs conquered Persia. Persecutions and the Arab conquest generated more Nestorian missionary zeal to push towards the East and South, i.e., to Central Asia, Arabia, South India and the Far East. In the middle of the seventh century, Nestorians arrived in China and gained permission from the Tang emperor Taizong (reign 627-650) to propagate their religion in the middle kingdom.

Nestorian Christianity flourished for over two centuries in China until the end of the Tang Dynasty when a religious persecution carried out by Emperor Wuzong in 845 befell it. Although Buddhism was the main cause and target of the religious persecution in 845, all other foreign religions also fell prey. Nestorian Christianity therefore suffered and declined in the Middle Kingdom. Those who survived withdrew to the north-western part of the country. By the 11th century, some of the Steppe peoples in Central Asia and north-western China were found to be adherents of Nestorian Christianity. They were Mongol and Turkic tribes, namely, the Kerait²³ near the Orkhan River, south-east of Lake Baikal; the Ongut²⁴ along the north of the loop in the Yellow River; the Naimen to the west of the Orkhon River, the Merite to the south of Baikal, the Uighur and the Oryiat.

Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity, translated by a team from the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, ed. R.A. Kraft and G. Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.

²² The correct rendering should be “the East Syrian Church” or “the Church of the East”. However, the term “Nestorian” has been used to refer to this church for many centuries, and therefore this paper maintains this convention.

²³ For the conversion of the Kerait, see D. Dunlop, “The Kerait of Eastern Asia”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11 (1943-1946): 276-289; Mingana, “The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* Vol. 9 (1925): 308-311; Erica C.D. Hunter, “The Conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in A.D. 1007” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 22 (1989-1991): 142-163.

²⁴ See, P. Pelliot, “Chrétien d’Asie centrale et Extrême-Orient” *Toung-pao* 15 (1914): 623-644.

With the completion of the Mongol conquest, all peoples across the Steppe were brought under Mongol rule. The solution for the Mongols, a once nomadic people, to the challenge of how to rule this sedentary world was to inherit the cultural and administrative traditions of the empires of the Steppes. In other words, the Mongols conquered the inhabitants of the Steppe through barbaric killing, but embraced and united the cultures, traditions, administrative systems and religions of the conquered. As China also fell under Mongol rule, the Confucian system was in the end retained by Kublai Khan.

The Yuan Dynasty rulers divided their empire's population into four classes according to ethnic affiliation: Mongols, Central Asians, Northern Chinese and Southern Chinese at the bottom. Of course, the Mongol rulers trusted Central Asians more than Han Chinese. As more and more Central Asians came to serve the Mongol Khans in China, their religious identities also became obvious. Many Nestorian and Muslim Central Asians served in the Mongol court.

Nestorians made a big come-back as the Mongols began to rule China. Many of them had been employed by the former Liao (947-1125) and Jin (1115-1234) Dynasties in the northern part of China and their culture was very much influenced by the Uighur. It was the Uighur Nestorian Christians that spread their religion to some Mongol tribes. When the Liao and Jin Dynasties were conquered by the Mongols, their administrative systems were subsequently taken over by the Mongols. As a result, the Nestorians who once served at the Liao and Jin courts then found themselves under a new ruler, the Mongol Khan.

It is unknown how many Nestorian Christians lived in China during the Yuan period. However, the extant information does demonstrate wide-spread Nestorian communities within the Empire. The Yelikewen population was in fact so large that the Yuan government needed to establish a special department for that religion. As a result, the Chongfusi 崇福司, a department of the second rank, was set up in 1289 to be in charge of the religious affairs of the Yelikewen clergy.²⁵ During its functioning period from 1289 to 1315, seventy-two local offices for Christian affairs were under its supervision.²⁶

²⁵ *Yuan shi* [History of the Yuan] Vol. 89.

²⁶ *ibid.*

The accounts of medieval Western travelers to China provide more detailed and vivid descriptions of Nestorians in China. Apart from Marco Polo's description mentioned before, William of Rubruck also noted that "the Nestorians are to be found in fifteen cities of Catair (Cathay)."²⁷ Rubruck had a negative and biased description of those Nestorians who, in his eyes, were ignorant people, drunkards, having several wives as the Tartars did, washing their lower parts in the Saracen's manner when entering the church, and chanting in Syriac, a language which they pretended to know.²⁸

Other medieval western travelers to the Mongol Empire also gave accounts of the Nestorian presence in China. John de Cora, archbishop of Soltania, a Dominican, in his *Book of the Estate of the Great Caan* composed ca. 1330, described more than 30,000 Nestorians dwelling in the empire of Cathay, who were rich and had handsome and devoutly ordered churches with crosses and images in honor of God and the saints. They also had sundry offices under the Emperor who gave them many privileges.²⁹ According to the list of the Nestorian metropolitans in the Far East compiled by Amr, the Metropolitans of China -- Khan Balik and Kashgar -- were included, which in turn suggests that the Nestorian communities in these northern and western areas were so numerous that they needed a metropolitan see.³⁰

For Yelikewen in eastern area, a local gazetteer, *The Annals of Zhenjiang of the Zhishun Period* (1330-1332) compiled by Yu Xilu at the end of the Zhishun Period provides a detailed record of Yelikewen in Zhenjiang, a city situated in the southwest of today's Jiangsu province on the southern banks of the lower Yangzi River. According to the census conducted in the year 1331 in Zhenjiang, 215 Yelikewen resided in the city³¹ representing 8.8% of the foreign population and 0.033% of the total population. The vice governor (*darugha*) of Zhenjiang was Mar Sargis,³² a Nestorian whose noble roots extended back to Samarkand. At least seven

²⁷ Peter Jackson (translator), *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253-1255*. (London: the Hakluyt Society, 1990): 163.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ However, it is not certain whether John de Cora heard about this or he himself had traveled to Cathay. See Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*. 240.

³⁰ Gismondis (ed.), *De Patriarchis Nestorianorum Commentaria* in Mingana's "Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document" *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* Vol. 9 (1925): 321.

³¹ Yu, Xilu. *Zhishun Zhenjiang zhi* [Annals of Zhenjiang during the Zhishun Period] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999): 90-93.

³² *ibid.* 365-366.

Nestorian monasteries were built by Mar Sargis, six in Zhenjiang, one in Hangzhou. The existence of Nestorian churches in Zhenjiangfu was confirmed in the Book of Marco Polo which mentions two Nestorian Churches in Zhenjiang established in 1278 by Mar Sargis, governor of the city for three years.³³

Written sources on the existence of Nestorian Christians in China during the Yuan period are less plentiful than archaeological evidence. There have been over fifty Nestorian tombstones from the 13th to the 14th centuries unearthed in China. In Quanzhou alone, twenty-three tombstones have been discovered, nine of them with Syriac inscriptions, two with Chinese and bilingual ones, four in Phags-pa and one in Uighur. The most recent tombstone – one with a Syrio-Uighur inscription -- was discovered in Quanzhou in 2002.³⁴ These tombstone inscriptions, though many of them have not been fully deciphered, translated and studied, could reveal a picture of once dynamic Nestorian communities in these areas. The Quanzhou Nestorian inscriptions are the remaining evidence of a prevailing Nestorian phenomenon during the Yuan dynasty. Meanwhile, the Turco-Syriac inscriptions in Inner Mongolia and Quanzhou offer a possible clue to the Turkic-speaking Nestorian Onguts in China, who received the Christian faith from Uighur Nestorians. During the Yuan Dynasty, Ongut Nestorian clergymen were sent to different dioceses within the Empire. This in turn suggests the origin of the Quanzhou Turco-Syriac tomb inscriptions, which may have been for Nestorian Ongut clergymen.³⁵

3.2.2. Bar Sawma and the Yahballaha III

A special event for Nestorians in China was a Uighur monk becoming the Catholicos³⁶ of the East. Bar Hebraeus, in his *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*, mentioned two Uighur monks who were

³³ *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and the Marvels of the East*. Translated by Henry Yule. (London: John Murray, 1929): 177.

³⁴ See Niu Ruji, “Quanzhou faxian de xuliyawen huihuyu jingjiao beiming” [The Syrio-Uighur Nestorian Tomb-inscription Discovered in Quanzhou] in *Xiyu Yanjiu* [Western Regions Studies] Vol. 3 (2004): 91-93. 牛汝极, <泉州新发现的叙利亚文回鹘语景教卑铭> 《西域研究》3期, 2004. 91-93页.

³⁵ Zhang Bosong, “Neimengu Chifeng shi songshan chutu de Yelikewen jiao cizhi mubei” [The Yelikewen Porcelain Tomb-stone Unearthed in Songsan District of Chifeng City in Inner Mongolia] in *Haijiao shi yanjiu* [Studies in Maritime History] Vol.1 (1994): 117-118.

³⁶ The ecclesiastical title of the Nestorian and Armenian patriarchs —editor’s note.

sent from China by the command of the great Mongol king Kublai Khan and ordered to go and worship in Jerusalem.³⁷ In 1887, Soloman, a Lazarist Chaldean from Kurdistan saw a Syriac manuscript held by a Turkish Nestorian in Tekhama, which he then copied. The content of the manuscript turned out to be a narrative of the travel of the two Uighur monks whom Bar Hebraeus mentioned.³⁸

The manuscript tells of these two Uighur monks, Sawma and Markos, who set off from Peking heading towards Jerusalem in the middle of the thirteenth century. However, they were prevented from going to Jerusalem due to difficulties and dangers on the way. They then encountered the Catholicos of the East, Mar Denha in Bagdad who for reason of his own ordained one of the monks, Markos, as metropolitan of China with the name of Yahbhallaha III. Since the two monks were unable to go to Jerusalem, they prepared to go back to China in 1281. At that time, Mar Denha died, and Yahbhallaha III was elected Catholicos of the East with his seat in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. He served there until his death in 1317.³⁹

The history of Yahbhallah III testifies, from another angle, that the Nestorians in China were officially represented within the Nestorian Church through the newly-elected Catholicos who came from among them as an unlearned man but rose up to the throne in Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the merits of his good disposition and solid faith.

3.2.3. The Roman Catholics

Although Christian presence under the Mongol Empire was predominantly Nestorian, Roman Catholic groups in medieval China did exist, including Franciscan missionaries, European traders, as well “as prisoners of war” brought back by the Mongol cavaliers. The *Book of Marco Polo* described some Franciscan Friars in China. In addition, the Friars themselves wrote travel diaries which gave vivid descriptions of the Mongol world which they perceived. Giovanni dal Piano del Carpini (1180-1252), a Franciscan from Italy was sent by Pope Innocent IV as courier to the Mongol court with a purpose of persuading the Khan to accept Catholicism and to be

³⁷ Abbeloos and Lamy, eds. *Chron. Eccles.* Tome iii, col. 451.

³⁸ E.A. Wallis Budge. *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China.* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1928): 4.

³⁹ *ibid.* 3; 151-157.

united with the West against the Muslims. He arrived in the Mongol capital in 1246. Giovanni was eventually able to write a history of the Mongols, *Ystoria Mongalorum*, from his travel observations. Another Franciscan Friar from Belgium, William of Rubruck, went to China as a religious missionary.

An official Roman Catholic mission station was established in Khanbalic by the Franciscan missionary John of Montecorvino (1246-1328) in 1294. Sent by Pope Nicolas IV in Rome, John of Montecorvino was successful in winning about 6,000 converts during his mission, while setting up two churches in Khanbalic and a school for liturgical training of boys. He worked among the Ongut in the north for many years and lived with Armenian and other Christian communities in China. He translated the Biblical psalms and the New Testament into the Mongolian language. In 1307, being highly pleased with John's work in China, Pope Clement V sent seven Franciscans to consecrate John of Montecorvino as Archbishop of Peking, and this took place in 1313. Based in Peking, the Franciscan mission was also extended to the eastern areas in the major cities like Yangzhou, Hangzhou and Quanzhou. After his consecration, John of Montecorvino set up a Suffragan See⁴⁰ in Quanzhou.

Medieval Christianity in China declined after the fall of the Mongol Empire. The Catholic mission during the Yuan period is attested by some missionary letters and most importantly, a Latin tomb-stone of 1342 in Yangzhou in memory of a Christian woman called Catarina, providing graphic evidence of Franciscans in China.⁴¹

4. The Mongol Response to Christianity in the Empire

A religious yardstick of the Mongol Empire can be seen in the "Great Yasa of Chinggis Khan",⁴² a general law which Chinggis Khan himself laid out in order to bind the actions of all his descendants. Although the original copy of the Yasa did not survive, fragments from various

⁴⁰ The seat of a subordinate bishop.

⁴¹ See Francis A. Rouleau "The Yangchow Latin Tombstone in a Landmark of Medieval Christianity in China" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol. 17, No. 3 (1934): 346-365.

⁴² For more discussion on the Yasa and its source, see David Ayalon, "The Great Yasa of Chingiz Khan" in *Studia Islamica* 33 (1971): 97-140; 34 (1971): 151-180; 36 (1972): 113-158; and 38 (1973): 107-142.

sources exist and the pattern of the regulation can be recovered.⁴³ Information on the Yasa is, for the most part, found in medieval Muslim sources or sources compiled in Muslim countries.⁴⁴ The most detailed account of the regulations of the Yasa can be found in the work of the 15th-century Egyptian writer al-Maqrizi⁴⁵ (†845/1441-2). Of course, at the time of Chinggis Khan, the Mongols had no written records. Upon adopting the Uighur alphabet, the Mongols could produce written works, e.g., “the Great Yasa (regulation) of Chinggis Khan” in which political, social and religious regulations were clearly stated. What is worth mentioning of this work is the granting of religious tolerance to all creeds including Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The Khans, though believing in shamanism, demonstrated religious tolerance towards the world religions.

Chinggis Khan’s tolerance towards other religions was based on his ambition to bring all peoples under his dominion, whereas for other great Khans, religious preference could arise out of their personal interests and background. Guyuk, the third Khan (reigned 1248-1257) was brought up in the Christian faith, as Juvaini recorded, and therefore went to great lengths in honoring the Christians and their priests. For the most part, it was Christian physicians that were attached to his service. Consequently, the cause of Christians flourished during his reign, and no Moslem dared to raise his voice to them.⁴⁶ Guyuk had a church-tent set up near his royal pavilion. Möngke Khan was perceived by all religious groups as one of them. Kubilai Khan respected his advisor, the Tibetan monk Phags-pa and therefore was himself attached to Tibetan Buddhism, but Kubilai also loved Christians partly for his mother’s sake. He even asked the Pope through the Polo brothers to send more priests to his empire.

4.1. Favorable Policies towards the Clergy

⁴³ For a full discussion of the Yasa, see David O. Morgan, “The ‘Great Yasa of Chingiz Khan’ and Mongol Law in the Ilkhanate” in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* Vol.49 (1986): 163-176.

⁴⁴ The Egyptian historian (766/1364-845/1442) al-Maqrizi mentioned this source in his topographical work *Al-Mawa’iz wal-I’tibar fi Dhikr al-Khitat wal-Athar* Vol. II [Historical Description and Topography of Egypt] (Bulaq: Dar al-Tiba’ ah al-Misriyah, 1270/1853): 219.

⁴⁵ For a French translation of the work, see Silverstre De Sacy. *Chrestomathie Arabe*. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1806.

⁴⁶ J.A. Boyle (translator), *The History of the World Conquerer by ‘Ala-ad ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini Translated from the Text of Mirzah Muhammad Qazvini* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958): 259.

Yelikewen, together with the Buddhists, Taoists and Muslims were exempted from military service⁴⁷ and corvée (forced labor) because their job was to pray for the Khans so that they might obtain blessings.⁴⁸ When Genghiz Khan was still in power, every one had to pay taxes. However, during the reigns from Guyuk to Möngke (1246-1260), land and commercial taxes were waived for all clergy. Kublai Khan gave edict in the 19th year of Zhiyuan (1283) to grant Yelikewen clergy provisions.⁴⁹ Later, only clergy with family had to pay land tax. After 1308, all clergy had to pay taxes.

The Mongol attitude towards Catholics had political motives as well as religious. The Khans wanted to be associated with the West through Christianity. This is why Kubilai asked the Pope to send priests to China.

4.2. A Special Place for Nestorian Christianity

Through marriage with Nestorian Christian women from other tribes, mainly the Kerait, the Khans became acquainted with Nestorian ritual practices in which they occasionally participated. The daughter-in-law of Chinggis Khan, Sorkaktani Peki of Kerait origin, was a Nestorian Christian. Being also the mother of three Mongol Khans, i.e., Möngke Khan (reign 1251-1260), Hülagu, the Il-Khan (in Persia) and the great Kublai Khan (reign 1260-1295), Sorkaktani played a crucial role in influencing the Mongol rulers to be favorable to Christians. This special role was reflected in her special identity: first, as being the daughter-in-law of Genghis Khan, secondly as the mother of three Mongol Khans, and last but not least, as an influential Nestorian Christian

⁴⁷ *Yuan Shi* Vol. 5.

⁴⁸ *Yuan dianzhang* [Institutions of the Yuan Dynasty] Vol. 33.

⁴⁹ *Yuan Shi* Vol. 12.

woman among the Mongol elite. Sorkaktani was mentioned in Syriac,⁵⁰ Persian,⁵¹ Mongol⁵² and Chinese⁵³ sources as one of the great figures in the 13th century.

Coming from the Kerait tribe, Sorkaktani (†1252) was the niece of the chieftain of the Tooril tribe, the Wang Khan. Wang Khan was first allied with Genghis Khan, but was finally conquered by him in 1204. Genghis Khan then took the first of Wang Khan's two nieces as his wife, and the younger niece, Sorkaktani he gave to his son Tulei as wife.⁵⁴ Sorkaktani therefore became a member of the Khan's family. The Kerait were at least nominally Nestorian Christians. Their conversion to Christianity at the beginning of the 11th century was recorded by Bar Hebraeus who wrote that "a nation from the nations of the Turks inhabiting the interior of the country towards the East called Kerit, believed in Christ, and were instructed in the faith and baptized through a miracle that happened to their king."⁵⁵ Although several medieval sources like those of Bar Hebraeus' mentioned the Christian element of the Kerait people, information on their conversion is still quite vague.⁵⁶

As a Nestorian Christian mother, Sorkaktani's influence on her sons cannot be underestimated. Mongol young men gave special respect to their mothers as they "came out of her belly."⁵⁷ The Khans later favored Christians because their mother was a Christian. Their participation in Christian services was witnessed by William of Rubruck in the middle of 1250s. Rubruck visited the court of Möngke Khan and later made anecdotes on one of the occasions of the Khan and his family including children to celebrate the Day of Epiphany on January 11,

⁵⁰See Grigor, Abu al-Faraj. *The Chronography of Gregory Abu 'l Faraj... Commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus Being the First Part of His Political History of the World*, translated from the Syriac by E.A. Wallis Budge, etc. (Vol.1.English Translation; Vol.2 Facsimiles of the Syriac Texts in the Bodleian MS. Hunt No. 52). London: Oxford University Press, 1932.

⁵¹See works by Rashid, Al-Din, like *Histoire des Mongols de la Perse*. Translated into French by Quatremere. Paris: Imp. Royale, 1836. Work by Juwayni, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror. Translated from the Text of Mirza Mhammad Qazvini* by J.A. Boyle. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958.

⁵²Xie Zaishan, (translator), *Menggu Mishi* [The Secret History of the Mongols]. (Beijing: Kaiming shudian, 1957): p. 106. 谢再善译《蒙古秘史》北京，开明书店，1957。

⁵³See Song Lian (Ming Dynasty). *Yuan Shi* [History of the Yuan]. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976. (明)宋濂，《元史》，北京：中华书局，1976。

⁵⁴Xie Zaishan (translator), *Menggu Mishi* [The Secret History of the Mongols]. (Beijing: Kaiming shudian, 1957), p. 106. 谢再善译《蒙古秘史》北京，开明书店，1957, 106页。

⁵⁵Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography Syr.*, 204. For the debate on Bar Hebraeus' record, see, Erica Hunter, "The Conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in A.D. 1007," *Zentralasiatische Studien*, Sonderausdruck (1989/91): 142-163.

⁵⁶See Hunter. "The Conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in A.D. 1007, pp. 142-163.

⁵⁷Xie Zaishan (translator), *Menggu mishi* [Secret History of the Mongols], p. 169.

1254.⁵⁸ He also noticed that Möngke Khan and his royal family would go to Christian, Islamic and Buddhist Festivals. However, what they knew about Christianity remained only the outward practices, like burning incense and worshipping the cross.⁵⁹ William of Rubruck mentioned that Möngke's son was brought up by a Nestorian priest and knew something of the Scriptures.⁶⁰ Later, Kublai and Hülagu (the Il-Khan in Persia) also welcomed Christian missionaries in their Khanates.

Upon the death of Sokaktani in 1252, a Christian funeral was conducted in memory of her. As recorded in the *Yuan Shi*, at the Temple of the Cross in Ganzhou, a memorial service was conducted for the mother of Kublai Khan.⁶¹ This Temple of the Cross was the place where Kublai Khan offered prayers and sacrifice for his mother. It was rebuilt and became a big temple.⁶² The reason of choosing Ganzhou as a memorial place for Sorkaktani may be associated with a former military engagement conducted in Ganzhou led by Kublai Khan. At that time, Sorkaktani was on Kublai's side and stayed with him in the military camp.⁶³ She was buried alongside the tombs of her husband and of Genghis Khan.⁶⁴

5. Conclusion Remarks

1. Mongol openness towards religions gave many Nestorians as well as Muslims from Central Asia the opportunity to hold high positions in the Mongol court. In spite of their participation in Nestorians rituals, the Khans themselves were not propagators of Christianity and were still, on the whole, very much attached to their own shamanistic concepts and practices. As William of Rubruck observed, the soothsayers were

⁵⁸ Nau, F. "L'Expansion Nestorienne en Asie," *Annales du Musee Guimet*, Tome XL (1913): 290.

⁵⁹ Feng Chengjun, (translator), *Duosang mengushi*. [*Histoire du Mongol depuis Tchinguiz-Khan jusq'a Timour Bey ou Tamerlin*. By C. D'Ohsson, Amsterdam: Muller 1852]. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), p. 264.

⁶⁰ Manuel Komroff (ed.), *Contemporaries of Marco Polo: Consisting of the Travel Records to the Eastern Parts of the World of William of Rubruck [1253-1255]; The Journey of John of Pian de Carpi [1245-1247]; The Journal of Friar Odoric (1318-1330) and the Oriental Travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela [1160-1173]* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1928), 161.

⁶¹ *Yuan Shi*, Vol.38, p. 826.

⁶² Zhong Gengqi (ed.), *Ganzhou fuzhi* [Prefectural Gazetteer of Ganzhou], (1779), Vol. 4. (清) 钟庚起 纂修, 《甘州府志》卷四。乾隆 44 年(1779).

⁶³ Ibid. Vol. 2. 《甘州府志》卷二。

⁶⁴ Song Lian, *Yuan Shi*, p. 2897.

constantly outside the court of the Mongols and of other wealthy people.⁶⁵ The religious inclusiveness of the Mongol rulers was rooted more in their animistic background than their willingness to tolerate. Mongol rulers welcomed the prayers of all religious groups as long as they prayed for the benefit of Mongol rule. Any religion could be practiced provided that it did not pose any threat to Mongol dominance.

2. The Mongol court from the time of Chinggis Khan was very open towards Christians, Muslims and Buddhists. The positive attitude towards Christians may have developed through close contacts with Nestorian Christians who either became part of their family or served as high-ranking officials in the Mongol court. Mongol favor to Nestorian Christianity was closely connected to their family ties with the Nestorian tribes, mainly the Kereit and the role of Sorkaktani Peki who was the mother of three Mongol Khans. Therefore, the Nestorian Christian element was transformed from a religious phenomenon into a matter of kinship to which the Khans were accommodating. Although women in the Mongol royal family practiced the Christian religion, generally their faith manifested itself outwardly only in the crudest forms, such as going to church services, wearing amulets inscribed with a cross, or tattooing a cross on the body.
3. The reluctance to accept Chinese religious systems -- either Taoism or Confucianism -- drove the Khans' interests towards Central Asian religions. As a result, Nestorian Christianity fell into favor.
4. Mongol attention to Catholicism had a political element which involved establishing diplomatic ties with Christian Europe.
5. On the whole, Mongol rulers believed that it was the eternal Heaven, the "tengri" that entrusted them to rule the world. All religions could be tolerated as long as they did not pose any threat to their political realm.

⁶⁵ Peter Jackson (translator), *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of Great Möngke Khan 1253-1255*. (London: the Hakluyt Society, 1990): p. 156.

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