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# Intellectual jousting and the Chinggisid Wisdom

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## Bazaars<sup>1</sup>

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GEORGE LANE

*In recent years the image of the Mongols has undergone a steady change. This shift reflects a growing interest in the development of the Chinggisid Empire and its assimilation of the peoples and cultures that it absorbed and conversely the absorption, not always voluntarily, of things Mongol by the sedentary cultures which acted as the Mongols' hosts. It was not only military technology, cuisine, medicine, art, and the practicalities and instruments for enhancing the quality of life and commerce which were exchanged but the intellectual ideas and ideals which underpinned the life styles of those who were encountered. Chinggis Khan famously aspired to provide his wives and children with the fineries of life and the best the world had to offer. But it was not just the material world that he aspired to but also the intellectual luxuries of scholarship and learning. Throughout the Chinggisid Chronicles there are references to wise men and learned advisors who were consulted on the great decisions but also not infrequently there are references to debates often described in language more reminiscent of jousting tournaments or duels than intellectual exchange. These learned debates, usually between clerics of rival faiths, were staged by various princes in courts throughout the empire for sport and entertainment. Their popularity highlights aspects of the regimes' character.*

*This paper will consider the nature of these debates and the traditions from where they might have emerged and at the same time it will consider the role of 'wise men' in Chinggisid society.*

The question of whether the famous theological debates and the seemingly ubiquitous presence of scholarly consultants at the Chinggisid courts were a common, very real feature of princely court life, or merely a set of complex *topoi* attached to the histories of the Great khans, has vexed scholars on all sides of the ideological debate over the nature of the Chinggisid Empire. Were the khans constructing a self-image based on *topoi* from Central Asian tradition stretching centuries back, or were these elaborate court debates, and noisy consultations with collections of disparate scholars, wise men, and theologians, earnest attempts at considered decision-making mixed with intellectually stimulating entertainment? The debate as a bazaar of ideas and talent became a fixture of the Chinggisid courts and the frequent references to circles of wise men and experts on hand to advise the king are too numerous to be considered merely a *topos* or even a trophy to decorate the emperor's image and memory as Reuven Amitai in a recent paper has convincingly demonstrated.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank the British Academy for their generous inclusion of me in their Mid-Career Fellowship Scheme, which allowed me the time to complete this research.

<sup>2</sup>Amitai, "Hülegü and his Wise Men: Topos or reality?" in Judith Pfeiffer (ed.), *Politics, Patronage and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th-15th Century Tabriz* (Leiden and Boston, 2014), pp. 15–34.

Many who cling to the image of the Chinggisids in particular as debauched and intemperate barbarian butchers would see the evidence of intellectual indulgence as cosmetic and political and proof of their egotistical vanity with an eye to the history books. However, it is increasingly becoming evident that the Eurasian steppe has long harboured an intellectual tradition and the Chinggisids were able to nurture this tradition and feed their spiritual and scholarly curiosity from the rich cultures of their neighbours that it was their great fortune to encounter and absorb.

This study will consider the various manifestations of intellectual exposition referenced in the sources, from the classical theological debate so beloved of the steppe khans, to the intellectual bazaars created by Öljeitü in his urban creation and dream city, Sultāniyya. In addition it will consider the possible influences that both Chinese and Central Asian court traditions might have had on the practices found in the Chinggisid courts. The conclusions drawn suggest that the Chinggisid khans viewed the acquisition of intellectual strength and exposure to knowledge and learning as highly desirable and an aim in themselves. They approached the procurement of knowledge in much the same way as they dealt with the acquisition of goods and cultural accoutrements, allowing themselves maximum exposure and then selecting that which best suited their tastes and current needs.

There is no clear line differentiating consultations from discussions and formal debates. These manifestations of intellectual exposition served a variety of aims and purposes, sometimes appearing as a form of entertainment but also acting as a source of information and education, even as an intellectual fishing trip or cultural window shopping, as well as being a useful instrument for intelligence-gathering, and defensive strategy.

The debates can be seen to have served four main purposes. First, there was the entertainment factor and certainly the humiliation of the pompous and the over-confident would seem to have been a source of welcome amusement. Secondly, there was the acquisition of knowledge and education so crucial for any would-be conqueror and his advisors. Thirdly, they taught verbal skills and tactics and just as in battle the ruses and deceptions employed by the Chinggisids were legendary so their ambassadors and representatives would be expected to be conversant with every rhetorical ruse, flourish, and artifice that a clever debater might employ. Fourthly, the debates could serve as an ideological showcase and present the court as theatre providing potential ideologies that might then be officially adopted. The debate was a useful forum in which to test-drive any given doctrine that the court's many advisors might present. The khans oversaw a global empire and sought to dazzle and enthrall all those who visited their palaces and equally to impress those to whom they sent their ambassadors. These verbal jousts could provide knowledge, and they could also test that knowledge through comparison and contrast. They provided entertainment and sustenance to relax the soul, and – possibly most crucially – they provided instruction in eloquence, rhetoric, and articulation.

Eloquence and success in the debating chamber became a route to advancement, influence and success as a story recounted by Khwānd-Amīr illustrates:

One of the vizier's (Ghiyāth al-Dīn) customs was to invite the learned every Friday eve and sit with them in a hall with four benches. This assembly was open to all the learned, regardless of their rank. [225] After discussion began, he would have anyone from whom he heard a good

argument brought nearer to him. . . . When the vizier's elite confidants saw how great his attention to me was, they favoured me as I have said.<sup>3</sup>

The story details the slow process through which the aspiring official's regular attendance at the scholarly debates enabled him to move closer to the minister as his performances in debates attracted notice until such time as he found himself sitting on the same bench as Ghiyāth al-Dīn himself. This process is in fact found in the classical debating formats of Tang China, where seating was based on the reputation of the speaker, with the more well-known debaters sitting progressively closer to the host's seat.<sup>4</sup>

The king as the eager recipient of wisdom and knowledge is a motif of the Eurasian steppe which certainly predates the Mongols. The Khazar Qaghan, who considered his people "a bookless crowd",<sup>5</sup> sought the advice of his wise men when he needed to choose a religion more in keeping with his new sophisticated friends and trading partners, the Persians, Arabs and Byzantines. He gave them leave to debate, and in the end Judaism was adopted.<sup>6</sup> The historical accuracy of this story is of less importance than its depiction of the king surrounded by a council of wise and scholarly advisors and as the eager recipient of knowledge and learning, a Eurasian motif predating the Mongols.

Juwaynī (d. 1283) cites another example of a pre-Mongol debate with the case of the Uighurs, whose ruler, like the Khazar Qaghan, needed to decide which faith to adopt for the good of his people. He summoned shamanists (*qāmān*) and Buddhist priests (*toyins*) and he had them dispute before him in order that "the religion of whichever party defeated the other" might be adopted, until finally he decided on Buddhism, the religion of the Khitans, whose books (*nom*) were found to be absorbing, revealing, practical, morally principled and inspiring.<sup>7</sup> Once again the significance of the tale, regardless of its questionable historical accuracy — the Uyghur king Būqū Khan and his elite became Manichaeans in 762 — is in its depiction of the king consulting wise men and listening to them debate before making an important decision which in this case was conversion to another religion.

A strikingly similar story concerning conversion appears in Bar Hebraeus and explains how Chinggis Khan came to favour Buddhists over the shamanists. Bar Hebraeus records how when the Chinggisids first conquered the lands of the Uighur Turks they were seduced by the words and visions of the Uighur "enchanters" (*kāmāye*) and "turned aside after them in their simplicity". Chinggis Khan received their priests and ambassadors and ordered them to debate with the shamanist "enchanters". After the Buddhists read extracts from their *Nāwm* and explained their theories of reincarnation and the transmigration of souls "the Enchanters

<sup>3</sup>Khwānd-Amīr, *Ḥabīb al-siyār*, translated by Wheeler Thackston (ed.), *Classical Writings of the Medieval Islamic World: Persian Histories of the Mongol Dynasties: Mirza Haydar Dughlat, Khwandamir, Rashīd al-Dīn Hamadānī*, 3 vols (London, 2012), II, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup>Mary M. Garrett, "The 'Three Doctrines Discussions' of Tang China: Religious debate as a rhetorical strategy", *Argumentation & Advocacy* 30/3 (1994), p. 151.

<sup>5</sup>Francis Butler, "Representation of oral culture in the Vita Constantini", *Slavic and East European Journal* 39:3 (1995), p. 367, cited in K. A. Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD, 2006), p. 101.

<sup>6</sup>Amitai, "Hulegu and His Wise Men", pp. 16–17. On the Khazars' conversion, see D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton, NJ, 1954), pp. 89–170; P. B. Golden, "Khazaria and Judaism", *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 3 (1983), pp. 127–156.

<sup>7</sup>Alā' al-Dīn Aṭā Malik Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i-Jahān-gushā*, (ed.) M. Qazwīnī (London and Leiden, 1912–37), I, p. 44; Juwaynī, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, translated by John A. Boyle, 2 vols (reprinted Manchester, 1997), I, pp. 59–60; see also Amitai, "Hülegü", pp. 17–18.

failed and were vanquished, and they were unable to reply because they were destitute of knowledge".<sup>8</sup> Although considered the losers, however, the shamanists and their shamans were not punished, and remained among the Mongols. Chinggis Khan treated them with honour and respect and even continued to consult and seek their advice. In Mongol tradition the role of advisor and wise man had often been adopted by a very powerful shaman, and his duty went beyond providing spiritual sustenance to supplying what has been referred to as practical magic<sup>9</sup> which would furnish the tribe with the means of attaining good health, prosperity, security, and success.

Though the Chinggisids adopted the practice of debating with relish, there is evidence that they were continuing a popular tradition. The Naiman renegade, Güchülüg (d. 1212) hurriedly arranged a theological debate on the plains outside the besieged city of Khotan, to where he had proceeded after he had finally secured the surrender and obedience of the people of nearby Kāshghar. In Khotan, Güchülüg forced the citizens to house and feed his soldiery and administrators under the same roofs as their families, and they were told that they must either commit apostasy or adopt Khitan dress.

He compelled the inhabitants to abjure the religion of Muḥammad, giving them the choice between two alternatives, either to adopt the Christian or idolatrous creed or to don the garb of the Khitayans.<sup>10</sup>

The muezzins were silenced, the schools were closed, and finally the imams were herded outside the city walls and assembled in the plain before Güchülüg, himself recently converted from Christianity, who hoped to convince all others of the errors of their ways. Therefore a proclamation was sounded throughout the town that all who "wore the garb of science and piety" should assemble outside the city walls to witness "three thousand illustrious imams"<sup>11</sup> gathered before him to debate and argue their case against his new-found beliefs. From among the multitude 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad, the Imam of Khotan, stepped forward to accept the challenge; but it appeared that the worthy shaykh became extremely upset at Güchülüg's irreverent language and lack of respect towards Islam. "Foul ravings . . . poured from his lips",<sup>12</sup> since no doubt he was unaware of the arts of ridicule, jokes, and mockery which played an acceptable part in classical Chinese debates.<sup>13</sup>

However when the revered cleric himself used profane and abusive language towards Güchülüg, the Naiman usurper took great exception and ordered that the shaykh be seized, "forced to abjure Islam and embrace unbelief and infidelity",<sup>14</sup> and kept naked and chained in prison until such time as he realised the fallacies of his belief. Despite continued torture and "promises, threats, inveiglements, intimidation and chastisement", the shaykh refused to recant his faith and in exasperation Güchülüg finally ordered his crucifixion on the gates of

<sup>8</sup>Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abu'l Faraj the Son of Aaron Hebrew Physician Commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus, Being the First Part of His Political History* (reprinted Piscataway, 2003), p. 355.

<sup>9</sup>W. Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, translated by G. Samuel (London, 1980), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Juwaynī, (ed.) Qazwīnī, I, p. 49; translated by Boyle, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 53; translated Boyle, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 54; translated Boyle, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup>Friederike Assandri, "Inter-religious debate", in Friederike Assandri and Dora Martins (eds), *From Early Tang Court Debate to China's Peaceful Rise* (Amsterdam, 2009), pp. 18–19.

<sup>14</sup>Juwaynī, (ed.) Qazwīnī, I, p. 54; translated by Boyle, p. 72.

his madressa in Khotan. Güchülüg not only lost the debate; shortly afterwards, in 1218, he lost his life and the oppressed Muslim peoples of eastern Turkestan rose up and welcomed as liberators the armies of Chinggis Khan under the command of Jebe Noyan and they “knew the existence of this people [Mongols] to be one of the small mercies of the Lord and one of the bounties of divine grace”.<sup>15</sup>

Güyük (d. 1248) was not such a friend to Muslims, but when his Buddhist advisors complained about the dangers that Islam presented, the khan insisted that the matter be resolved through debate. In reporting the debate Jūzjānī claims that the intellectual battle was unfair against the Imam Nūr al-Dīn Khwārazmī, and that God was forced to demonstrate the real victors of the debate by “inflict[ing] a disease upon Güyük which, with the knife of death, severed the artery of his existence, so that verily that same night he went to Hell”; in the morning his shocked sons sought the Imam’s pardon.<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that it was the Buddhists’ learning and academic discipline which most impressed the Chinggisids. Debates were staged partly to help the khans develop their spirituality but they also fulfilled educational and entertainment functions. This tradition of the khans surrounding themselves with the learned can be traced back to pre-Chinggisid steppe culture and certainly back to the earliest times of Chinggis Khan. In one instance a Muslim cleric, ‘Alī bin Rukn al-Dīn, after falling prisoner to Mongol soldiers, had no problem finding a highly regarded cleric within Chinggis Khan’s inner court with ready access to the Great Khan, to plead his case and affect his immediate release.<sup>17</sup> The Daoist holyman, Ch’ang-Ch’un-tzū, was summoned personally by the emperor from eastern China to attend him in his court near the city of Balkh, so valued was his advice. The Chinggisids were aware of the limitations of their life on the steppe, and rather than make decisions from a position of ignorance they allowed themselves total exposure to all options before making any decision. They had the experts present their views and argue their positions. They stood back and permitted the opposing teams to pinpoint the weakness of their opponents and the strengths of their own offerings. The debate was the perfect forum for the spiritual and intellectual vendors to present their wares.

The increasing flow of goods, people, and also ideas and ideologies, was not random but carefully directed and channelled. This rising river of commodities and cultural exchange has been shown by Thomas Allsen to have been in the firm control of the Chinggisid princes and overlords, who filtered and adapted the cross-cultural tide to meet their many requirements. One agent for filtering this flow was the debate and the open discussions and consultation with experts and men of learning and wisdom. Bar Hebraeus, whose father established close contacts with the Mongols when they first appeared in Anatolia, clearly states that respect for wisdom and learning was a fundamental part of their ethos and claims that this respect is enshrined in their laws.<sup>18</sup> “Let [the Mongols] magnify and

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 50 and p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Minhāj-i Sirāj Jūzjānī, *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*, (ed.) ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī, 2 vols (Tehran, 1363/1984), II, p. 175; Jūzjānī, *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī: A General History of the Muhammadan Dynasties of Asia*, translated by H. G. Raverty, 2 vols (reprint Calcutta, 1995), pp. 1163–1164.

<sup>17</sup> Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā, *Nizam ad-Din: Morals for the Heart*, translated by Bruce B. Lawrence (New York, 1992), pp. 99–100.

<sup>18</sup> George Lane, “An Account of Gregory Abu Hebraeus Abu al-Faraj”, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 2:2 (1999), pp. 213–214.

pay honour to the modest, and the pure, and the righteous, and to the scribes, and to the wise men”.<sup>19</sup>

It is the missionary, William of Rubruck (journey 1253–55), armed with a letter of introduction from Louis IX, who has provided the most detailed description of a Mongol courtly debate. The debate was held at Möngke’s court, probably for the entertainment of the Qa’an’s guests, though the participants would have taken it far more seriously. Qa’an Möngke as the royal referee would have been able to observe objectively the various representatives of the different faiths and the behaviour of people from different lands and from different traditions. Though the heightened passions and the trading of insults would have provided amusement, much useful knowledge could be gleaned of the manners and nature of the foreigners with whose leaders the Chinggisids might one day be trading and negotiating. Proceedings were started with a proclamation from Möngke warning against anyone making provocative or insulting remarks against an opponent, or disrupting the debate in anyway. Each party had its own or appointed translators, and Rubruck provides a reasonably detailed account of the debate though, since he was a participant, his words cannot be taken as unbiased, especially his claim that the Muslims present, after hearing the arguments given by Rubruck and then the Nestorians, apparently conceded defeat: “we concede that your religion is true . . . and therefore we have no wish to debate any issue with you”. Peter Jackson, in a footnote in his translation, suggests that the Saracens might have been referring to their shared belief in Jesus and the “community of belief between Christians and Muslims”, in which case they might have felt that there was little constructive that they could add to the debate between the Buddhists and Christians.<sup>20</sup>

The Chinggisids had long fully understood the importance of intelligence as a prerequisite for battle, invasion, negotiation, settlement and in trade and diplomacy; and as they coldly observed the unbridled passion of the participants in these debates, the Chinggisid princes and their *noyans* must have delighted as they were assailed by the revelation of so much uncensored intelligence regarding the beliefs and traditions of the target nations. Both Carpini and Rubruck had recoiled from accepting the role of chaperon to any Tatar embassy to Europe for fear of revealing any national weaknesses to their potential enemies, but they do not seem to have appreciated the opportunities for intelligence-gathering that these debates seemed to offer. The Chinggisids frequently hinted at their growing sympathy with a particular faith or sometimes openly claimed to be willing to convert or even to have converted, and they were able to provide vital clues to support their assertions. Carpini, who was of course a spy himself, was alive to their deviousness, and by 1260 the Pope expressed publicly his knowledge of the Mongols’ feigning of friendship and sympathy with Christians, which of course would at least partially explain the frustration of the Ilkhans’ efforts to secure cooperation with the European powers against their common enemy, the Mamlüks.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Bar Hebraeus, p. 354.

<sup>20</sup>William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, translated by Peter Jackson, introduction and notes by Peter Jackson and David Morgan (London, 1990), pp. 226–235. See Benjamin Z. Kedar, “The multilateral disputation at the court of the Grand Qan Möngke, 1254”, in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, Mark R. Cohen, Sasson Somekh and Sidney H. Griffith (eds), *The Majlis. Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam* (Wiesbaden, 1999), pp. 162–183.

<sup>21</sup>See Peter Jackson, “The Mongols and the faith of the conquered”, in Jackson, *Studies on the Mongol Empire and Early Muslim India* (Farnham, Surrey, 2009), art. V, pp. 4–8.

Among the various anecdotes relating examples of these staged debates, one of the more intriguing is that recording the debate between the Sufi-poet ‘Alā’ al-Dawla Simnānī and a Buddhist monk, staged before the Ilkhan, Arghun Khan. Though the debate reached lofty intellectual heights, it also borrowed something akin to the Chinese tradition of *xiexue* or ridicule, with Simnānī making disparaging remarks about the size of the monk’s stomach.<sup>22</sup> According to Simnānī’s account, he also awoke great sympathy in his long-time friend, Arghun, for his beliefs and the two retired to a private garden where his words “found a place in Arghun’s heart” and the two continued the theological debate.<sup>23</sup> He did not succeed in converting Arghun, but the episode underlines the importance that these disputations held for the Chinggisid courts.

Rashīd al-Dīn, a renaissance man, a prolific writer and scholar, and an avid lover of learning and the acquisition of knowledge, found a kindred spirit when Qubilai Khan sent Bolad Chingsang, a career diplomat and rising star in the Yuan administration, to the Iranian Ilkhanid court as his ambassador.<sup>24</sup> The Turk and Tajik, the Mongol luminary and the Persian man of letters, found deep rapport and established a thriving intellectual bridge between the Han-lin institute in Khanbaliq and the Rab’-i Rashīdī in Tabrīz. Both the Persian and the Chinese courts were fired with a culture of artistic endeavour and intellectual development. The Ilkhan, Ghazan, a Muslim, charged Rashīd al-Dīn, his vizier, with composing a history of the Mongols which was eventually to become the world’s first universal history. While contemptuously belittling Hülegü’s interest in and financial support for alchemists, the vizier also recognised the khan’s deep love of wisdom and his encouragement of debate and scholarship and admired his royal court “adorned with the presence of scholars and wise men”. This view was endorsed by Bar Hebraeus, another intellectual giant who had personal knowledge of the king, and who believed Hulegu “was possessed of an understanding which endeared him to wise men and ulama” – a characteristic he shared with his brother Qubilai, who “loved wise men, the ulama and the godly of all sects and nations”.<sup>25</sup> Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, almost as soon as he was released from the Ismā‘īlī stronghold of Alamūt, found himself as Hülegü’s special advisor with enormous influence and power, a position he owed solely to his reputation for erudition and wisdom and his known deep knowledge of science.<sup>26</sup>

Qāshānī echoes Rashīd al-Dīn when he writes that Hülegü “loved science, was infatuated with astronomy and geometry; consequently scientists from East and West congregated at his court and his contemporaries were fascinated by different branches of learning, geometry and mathematics”. However, he continues, that “in the time of Just Abaqa, . . . his intention was the promotion of farming, building and agriculture in such a way that his contemporaries followed and were guided by him”,<sup>27</sup> and to complete the picture he claims that industry and chemistry were the disciplines that Arghun encouraged. The early Ilkhans are portrayed

<sup>22</sup>Shaykh ‘Alā’ al-Dawla Simnānī, *Chihil Majlis*, (ed.) ‘Abd al-Rafī‘a Ḥaḳīqat Rafī‘a (Tehran, 1379/2000), p. 133.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 131–136; Devin DeWeese provides a far fuller account and translation of this debate and encounter in “‘Alā’ al-Dawla Simnānī’s religious encounters”, in Pfeiffer (ed.), *Politics, Patronage*, pp. 49–54.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 63–71.

<sup>25</sup>Bar Hebraeus (Ibn al-‘Ibrī), *Kitāb mukhtaṣar al-duwal*, (ed.) A. Ṣāliḥānī, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Beirut, 1985), p. 281.

<sup>26</sup>See George Lane, *Early Mongol Rule in Thirteenth Century Iran* (London, 2003), pp. 213–225.

<sup>27</sup>Abū’l-Qāsim ‘Abd Allāh bin Muḥammad al-Qāshānī, *Tārīkh-i Uljayū* (Tehran, 1348/1969), p. 107.

as surrounding themselves with the wise and the scholarly, there to be consulted and their opinions weighed and compared with those of their fellow experts.

The tradition continued even after Ghazan and much of his court converted to Islam. Rashīd al-Dīn confirms Ghazan's love of debate and his habit of surrounding himself with the learned. "When he debated with the leaders of each religion they would be unable to respond" even though he knew the answers, his faithful vizier assures us.<sup>28</sup>

The sixteenth-century historian, Khwānd-Amīr, distant enough to be objective but close enough to have personal insight, lists the literati, intellectuals, clerics, and scientists that blossomed under each Ilkhan's individual reign and it is the number of names as well as the names themselves which is impressive. This diverse elite formed the Ilkhanid establishment and it is not inconceivable that the debating chamber was its medium of communication. Despite their spatial isolation and the practical problems of communication, Tabrīz and Khanbaliq, the Rab'-i Rashīdī and the Han-lin academy, formed a magnificent intellectual and cultural bridge between east and west, mutually providing access to oceans of learning. Khwānd-Amīr, citing the same vizier, claims that Ghazan kept the company of scholars to challenge and invigorate his mind and sought out for example Mawlānā Hibatallāh, a respected cleric from Turkistan, because "by keeping company with him our nature grows ever sharper and purer".<sup>29</sup> The Rab'-i Rashīdī was an outstanding achievement which in 1315 hosted 150 beneficiaries and staff<sup>30</sup> with one of its principal aims being the intellectual maintenance of the country.

When Öljeitü constructed his fabulous capital, Sultāniyya,<sup>31</sup> which his father, Arghun, had first conceived, he had constructed a number of audience chambers centred around a raised dais where, according to Mustawfī's *Zafarnāma*, he would be able to observe and direct the discussions which he had organised. Nearby he had constructed the *House of Good Works* (*dār al-Mabarrat*) designed under the guidance of Rashīd al-Dīn, which would be open to rich and poor alike and which would attract the masters of all professions, who would freely give their services and advice to all who might seek it. Doctors of medicine and of philosophy and artists and artisans, agriculturists and botanists, veterinarians and physicians would all be on hand to exchange expertise and dispense knowledge and learning. Just as the city's bazaars exceeded anywhere else in the country in variety of goods on offer,<sup>32</sup> so for intellectual and physical nourishment and well-being Öljeitü hoped his creation would be matchless. He imagined that the learned community of Sultāniyya would stage debates, discussions and verbal jousting for entertainment and education of the wider populace in the nearby audience chambers. In fact, so enamoured was the Sultan with such learned discourse, he had a special cloth madrasa constructed that could accompany him on his trips away from the capital and in which he could conduct legal consultations and debates with the ulama.

<sup>28</sup>Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh*, (ed.) M. Rawshan and M. Mūsawī (Tehran, 1373/1994), II, p. 1337; and translated by Thackston in *Classical Writings*, III, p. 465.

<sup>29</sup>Khwānd-Amīr, translated by Thackston, *Classical Writings*, II, p. 107.

<sup>30</sup>Birgitt Hoffmann, "In Pursuit of Memoria and Salvation", in Pfeiffer (ed.), *Politics, Patronage*, p. 175.

<sup>31</sup>For the following see Mustawfī, *Zafarnāma*, facsimile edition (Tehran, 1999), p. 713b; translated L. J. Ward, "Zafarnamā of Mustawfī", PhD dissertation, Manchester University, 1983, II, pp. 566–567.

<sup>32</sup>Mustawfī, facsimile edition, p.713a; translated by Ward, "Zafarnama", p. 565.



Since Sultan Muḥammad greatly enjoyed discussing legal matters with the ulema, he ordered a madrasa made of canvass with four porticos and chambers that could be taken along on trips. Mawlana Badruddin Shuturi and Mawlana Azududdin Iji were among the leaned men who taught in that cloth madrasa. There were always around a hundred students in residence, and their rooms, board, and mounts, as well as all other necessities, were paid for by the supreme divan.<sup>33</sup>

The Ilkhans' fondness for debates would have found a ready welcome in Iran, where there was a strong literary attachment to the debate. In Tabrīz Abū'l-Majd Tabrīzī, a local man of letters probably with government connections, compiled a complete library of literature, presumably for his own use since he was not a professional copyist. His *Safīna-yi Tabrīz* provides a unique picture of the intellectual *milieu* of Ilkhanid Iran. In the collection of texts can be found everything from geographical treatises to texts on geomancy and mathematics. There are dictionaries and philosophical theories, as well as a generous collection of Persian literature. Included in this collection are examples of the *munāzara* or *paykā*, the literary debate between such disputants as wine and hashish, the eye and the ear, or even the sun and the moon, arguing their relative merits, a genre of writing which became popular in mediaeval Iran. In this *Safīna* there are eleven different literary debates, some in poetic form but most in prose. Abū'l-Majd compiled the greatest collection of literary debates since the first such debate between a rose and wine appeared in 1189 in an era and *milieu* where such intellectual sports were encouraged and reflected the appetites of the ruling elite.

Debates had already been a regular feature of the Yuan administration, and skilled debaters could use their success in the conferences and discussions to attain high office. Qubilai recruited scholars and advisors from every court that he conquered or rather absorbed into his own, and he accorded those with wisdom great power. Phags-pa was Tibetan, Aḥmad was a Muslim Uighur, Yao Shu was Chinese, Bayan was Mongol, Marco Polo was Italian. The infamous "quick-witted and eloquent . . ." <sup>34</sup> Aḥmad Fanākatī (d. 1282), <sup>35</sup> whose inclusion in the *Yuan-shi's* section devoted to treacherous officials is possibly undeserved, is said to have owed his remarkable rise to the pinnacle of power partly to his skill in raising revenue but also to his oratory prowess and his skills in the debating chamber. His successor, Sangha, the ambitious Uighur or possibly Tibetan <sup>36</sup> minister, sought not only to broaden his spheres of influence and power but moved to instigate his financial policies, an area in which he had no remit, and discovered that his linguistic and oratory skills proved advantageous. In order to establish himself as proficient to rule on financial matters, he ensured that his voice was heard and noted in the debates which were convened to discuss such matters. So impressive were his contributions to the debates mooted in March 1287 to discuss the introduction of a new currency, *Chih-yüan pao-ch'ao* (Precious Paper Money of the Chih-yuan Period), that

<sup>33</sup> Khwānd-Amīr, translated by Thackston, p. 110.

<sup>34</sup> Song Lian 宋濂 *et al.* (eds.). *Yuan shi* 元史, 15 vols (Beijing, 1976), Vol. 15, *juan* 卷 205, pp. 4558–4559.

<sup>35</sup> See Rashīd al-Dīn, (ed.) Rawshan and Mūsawī, II, pp. 915 f; Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 178–184.

<sup>36</sup> According to either Rashīd or Tibetan sources: see H. Franke, "Sangha (? – 1291)", in Igor de Rachewiltz, Hok-lam Chan, Ch'i-ch'ing Hsiao and Peter W. Geier (eds), *In the Service of the Khan: Eminent Personalities of the Early Mongol-Yuan Period, 1200–1300* (Wiesbaden, 1993), p. 558.

his recommendations to Qubilai for a thorough re-shuffling of the Secretarial Council and the elimination of officials whom he considered unfit for office were accepted.<sup>37</sup>

The scholar-official Tung Wen-yung used his position in the Han-lin academy and his reputation as a respected academic to attend court conferences and debates. He made use of the relative freedom of speech observed in the court debates to attack a powerful Chinese official, Lu Shih-yung (d.1285), who owed his original position to the disgraced chief minister Ahmad and who was now reinstating many of that fallen minister's allies. Lu Shih-yung boasted that he could triple revenue without resorting to tax increases, and none dared refute this claim until Wen-yung took his turn to address the debaters and successfully silenced his political foe. Following this particular debate Wen-yung's fortunes rose while Lu's fell and within a year Lu had been executed.<sup>38</sup>

Yao Shu (1203–80), a top government advisor who had first entered Ögödei's service in 1233 as the director of the *National College for the Promotion of Confucian Studies*, was another man of great leaning who had been plucked from the Han-lin academy and who owed much of his reputation to his performance in the advisory debates which were a feature of the Mongol administration. Qubilai is said to have spoken highly of his oratory abilities. "Gong Mao [i.e. Yao Shu] is good at words and debate. He can describe a round object as if it had a handle".<sup>39</sup> In 1271 he, Tao Mou, Xu Heng and others had been summoned back to the capital to attend the a royal conference and to debate with some Han-lin academicians the nature of Confucian ideology following a move by the latter to reinstate the imperial examinations which Qubilai had recently abolished.<sup>40</sup> Though Yao Shu was an ardent advocate of these examinations, it was not until 1315 that the Great Khan Ayurbarwada Buyantu Khan (Emperor Renzong) imposed a modified system of exams on applicants for government service, a return to a fundamental mainstay of Chinese governance.

If the debate and the presence of scholarly advisors at the Chinggisid courts reflected a Central Asian tradition and the adaptive development of Eurasian culture, both institutions also suggest a strong element of continuity with the region's ties to China's culture and tradition. The *Jigujin Fo Dao lunheng* records the theological debates between Buddhism and Daoism during the Tang era presented to the emperor in 664 by the Buddhist apologist, Daoxuan. The debates sought firstly to entertain and educate their audiences, and decided through competition which participant was rhetorically more skilful and more profound and which religion or ideology or idea would prove more useful to the state. Daoxuan detailed the subjects and occurrences of these court debates including *verbatim* accounts of the exchanges which were often conducted in less than formal or polite language. In fact it was the sometimes abusive and crude polemics which led to Daoxuan's text being dismissed as academically and intellectually questionable despite an explanation and justification for the inclusion of such invective outbursts in the section on the art of 'Ridiculing' *Xiexue* 諧謔.

<sup>37</sup> Franke, "Sangha", p. 562.

<sup>38</sup> Franke, "The Tung brothers: Tung Wen-ping (1217–1278), Tung Wen-yung (1224–1297), Tung Wen-chung (1230–1281)", in De Rachewiltz *et al.* (eds), *In the Service of the Khan*, p. 638.

<sup>39</sup> Hok-lam Chan, "Yao Shu (1203–1280)", in De Rachewiltz *et al.* (eds), *In the Service of the Khan*, p. 404; "公茂善談論，物之圓者隻說出柄來", *Zhongtang shiji* 中堂事記 (records from the Court) in: 《秋澗先生大全文集》 (by Wang Yun), Chapter 81, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Chan, "Yao Shu", p. 399; *Yuan Shi*, Chapter 148, p. 3502, biography of Dong Jun 董俊.

Daoist Li Rong, the hair hanging down from your head makes it look like the head of a sheep. On your mouth, there is a moustache; it looks just like a deer's tail! Your mouth is barely good enough for small snacks, but not to discuss literature! . . . When you raise your hands to greet, it looks like donkey's hoofs being raised, when you move your legs, it looks as if you are swaying on the knees of a crane!<sup>41</sup>

At that time among fashionable intellectuals of high society, polemical ridicule and insults were *de rigueur*, and in *New Writings from the Great Tang* Lui Su, the contemporary commentator, devotes a section to the practice which he observes was popular with the Emperor Taizong (r. 627–50), who ordered his ministers to ridicule each other. In the *Taiping guangji* (*Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*) compiled by Li Fang in 978 CE, more examples of polemical ridicule listed in sections headed 'mockery' and 'jokes' are cited including examples taken from debates. Friederike Assandri detects the influence of Indian debating practice in the Chinese debates along with the indigenous Chinese tradition of 'pure talk' (*qingtan*), a tightly disciplined and ritualised system of dialectic through reason. The Chinese Buddhist scholar (600–64) brought back the art of debate to China from India and he certainly popularised the institution, which had become widespread and popular by the time the Chinggisids swept across China, introducing their own steppe versions of the court debate and rhetorical clashes.<sup>42</sup>

Qubilai's famous staged debate between his feuding Buddhist and Daoists took place in K'ai-p'ing in 1258 and was designed to end the intensifying conflict raging between the two groups which was in real danger of escalating into armed clashes if not civil war. The 1258 debate was the grandest of a series of debates, of which at least two others were held in 1255 and 1256 and had centred on the authenticity of the Daoist apocrypha.<sup>43</sup> Möngke had assigned his younger brother to preside, with Confucian scholars acting as impartial moderators between Buddhist and Daoist clerics. The Confucian team was headed by Qubilai's favourite, Yao Shu, and his fellow Han-lin scholar, Ta Mou. In all 300 Buddhists, 200 Daoists, and another 200 court officials and Confucian mediators converged on the grand hall in a contest which must have evoked the spirit of China's heyday during the Tang dynasty, when court debates were at their height and just such debates between Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians reached their apogee.<sup>44</sup> A further unfortunate link with the 'Three Doctrine Discussions' of the Tang in this particular debate was that the result had already been decided and the outcome served a greater political purpose. Though by 870 CE Tang debates had become ritualised, this was not the case with the Yuan contests.<sup>45</sup>

Qubilai himself took an active role in the debate, posing leading questions, commenting on the speakers' responses and very clearly demonstrating that his sympathies lay with the Buddhists, so that no one was surprised when they were proclaimed the debate's winners. As a face-saving gesture the Daoists were invited to perform the feats of magic that they had often claimed able to do but not surprisingly they declined. The debate had never been

<sup>41</sup> Daoxuan T 2104, 4: 392a27, cited in Assandri, p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Assandri, pp.18–22.

<sup>43</sup> Chan, "Yao Shu", p. 394.

<sup>44</sup> Garrett, "The 'Three Doctrines Discussions'", p. 150.

<sup>45</sup> See Garrett, "The 'Three Doctrines Discussions'"

about ideology but more about the new reality of power with the growing presence of politically active Tibetans in China and at the Yuan court.

With the Buddhists formally declared the winners, Qubilai as the debate's convenor now stipulated the penalties that the Daoists must accept and endure. Seventeen Daoist leaders had their heads shaved and were forcefully converted to Buddhism. All copies of the 'forged' texts and any engraved or painted versions were ordered to be destroyed. Finally all 237 Buddhist temples and other properties occupied by the Daoists were to be immediately restored to their rightful owners, the Buddhists. However, Daoism was not proscribed and no cleric was executed or imprisoned; and by forbidding any violent purges or encouraging any acts of violence against the losers, Qubilai was avoiding any backlash in the future by disgruntled Daoists, since the religion remained popular amongst all classes in China and he had no wish to alienate such a large community of his subjects. The debate succeeded in bringing relative stability for a while and Qubilai received plaudits from all sides, the Mongol elite admiring his political skills, the Chinese impressed by his presiding and mediating over the debate, and the administration conscious of his intelligence and credibility as an executive and rising political insider.

The 1258 confrontation was an example of the royal debate which owed much to its Chinese legacy. It was conducted on a grand scale and presided over by a prince. It was both theatre and also served a serious political function. Möngke had been worried by the growing militancy of the religious parties and the growing potential for conflict and civil strife. The debate allowed for a peaceful solution to this threat of instability. Unlike the classical debates of the Tang period, which were often staged to subvert or at least weaken the growing influence of Buddhism, perceived as threatening the more indigenous religions of Daoism and Confucianism,<sup>46</sup> Qubilai aimed to undermine the Daoists, whom he perceived as too powerful. The debate also allowed the rhetorical skills of the speakers to be appreciated and rewarded, and the audience would have enjoyed and appreciated the subtleties and skills of the speakers as well as the grand setting in which the conference was set.

In Yuan China another form of debate was held which underlies the importance accorded knowledge throughout the Chinggisid world. Rashīd al-Dīn recounts the story that the succession dispute between the two grandsons of Qubilai Qa'an, Kammala and Temūr, was decided by a knowledge quiz. Their mother and interim ruler, Kokojin/Kököchin, proposed that whoever could display the deeper knowledge of Chinggis Khan's *biligs* should occupy the throne. Temūr was known for his eloquence and he was able to pronounce the *biligs* well with masterful *ayalghu* (intonation), which duly impressed the judges and contrasted sharply with Kammala's slight stutter and less confident delivery. As a result, all unanimously shouted: "Temūr Qa'an knows the *biligs* better and pronounces them better. He is worthy of the crown and throne". And so in K'ai-p'ing fu in 1295 he was enthroned as the Yuan emperor, but in recognition of his respect for his elder brother, Kammala, he awarded him a large share of their father's wealth and sent him to Qaraqorum "where Chinggis Khan's *yurts* and *ordos* remain still, and put the troops in that area under his command".<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>47</sup> Rashīd al-Dīn, (ed.) Rawshan and Mūsawī, II, pp. 948–949.

Such competitions to decide on the competence of government officials have a long history and might well reflect the pre-literate past when recitations of the clan's traditions kept alive the tribe's sense of identity and history. Rashīd al-Dīn records the story of Möngke and Chaghatai's personal *bilig* writers<sup>48</sup> and the test to determine the superior competence of Chaghatai's Chinese former herdsman, Vazir. Such skills were highly prized, and it is likely that in a martial society where military prowess was valued the rhetorical warrior would similarly be valued.

That debating and learned discussion had been a recorded tradition from pre-Chinggisid times must influence any assessment of the culture of the Eurasian steppe; but the enthusiasm with which so many Chinggisid courts embraced the intellectual vigour of the debating chamber, and the fiery exchanges inevitable when a circle of learned scholars of very diverse opinion is formed, suggests reasons why their revolution persisted for so long and was embraced by so many. The early period of particularly harsh and violent conquest was comparatively short-lived, and many of the later conquests were conducted with the acquiescence of the conquered, as in Iran and much of China. <[gl1@soas.ac.uk](mailto:gl1@soas.ac.uk)>

GEORGE LANE

*School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 774–775.