

Qubilai Qa'an's Three Confucian Crises

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The relationship of Qubilai Qa'an to his Confucian advisers is one of the most important topics in Yuan history. While popular histories often paint Qubilai Qa'an as avid proponent of Confucianism and a betrayer of the Mongol legacy, more scholarly accounts properly point out the degree to which Qubilai Qa'an refused to follow the full Confucian point of view. Within the traditional history of the Yuan dynasty, Qubilai's sometimes frosty relationships with his Confucian advisers are often attributed to the Li Tan rebellion early in his reign, which implicated Li Tan's father-in-law Wang Wentong, an advocate of governance who was executed in 1262. This explanation was popular with Confucians since it explained the alienation without blaming either Confucian officials or Qubilai himself – both were the victims of misunderstanding.

In this paper, however, I will argue that three other crises, poorly documented precisely because they were so controversial, were much more important in shaping Qubilai Qa'an's attitudes to Confucian governance. The first struck in 1257, when Möngke Qa'an ordered his brother Qubilai's experiments in Confucian governance in North China halted. In this crisis, it appears that the possibility of Qubilai refusing to comply was actually mooted by some Confucian officials, while others argued on the side of compliance. This crisis, barely averted, left a legacy of hostility between Qubilai's officials and those of Möngke Qa'an that fed directly into the civil war between Ariq Böke. The second crisis occurred in 1273-74 when Qubilai Qa'an followed the advice of generals like Aju and ordered a massive mobilization to conquer the Song. Although their tracks were later covered up when the campaign surprised everyone by being a rapid and smashing success, enough remains of the debates of the time to show that the Confucian officials unanimously opposed the campaign. This opposition appears to have confirmed Qubilai Qa'an in his sense that Confucian officials would never be fully in sympathy with his administration. Finally in 1285, when a South Chinese official openly proposed that Qubilai Qa'an abdicate and leave the throne to his more Confucian son Jingim, this too caused a crisis that was only averted with Jingim's sudden death at age 42.

These three crises all occurred precisely when genuine and widely-shared Confucian principles collided with the demands of ruling the Mongol empire. As a result these crises, much more so than the Wang Wentong issue, highlight the real issues leading Qubilai to avoid ever giving full power to his Confucian advisers.