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## Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols (review)

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*Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* BY  
DAVID M. ROBINSON. Cambridge: Harvard University  
Asia Center, 2009. Pp. xiv + 439. \$49.50.

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In recent decades, Western scholars have produced few monographs on the Mongols in East Asia; even rarer have been studies that explore untapped sources and present them in an erudite and original fashion, thus paving the way for new lines of inquiry. Against this backdrop, Robinson's *Empire's Twilight* is a most welcome addition to the scholarly literature on the Mongol empire. Offering "a view from the edge" in terms of both time and space, it focuses on the empire's northeast corner in the decades preceding the fall of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). In particular, Robinson scrutinizes the Red Turbans' campaigns of the 1350s and 1360s in the context of Northeast Asia, a region that he defines as comprising the Korean peninsula, southern Manchuria, the Shandong peninsula, and the area north of the Yuan capital of Dadu on the site of present-day Beijing. Through this prism Robinson highlights four major themes: the importance of adopting a regional perspective rather than a dynastic- or state-oriented one; the processes by which newly captured territories were integrated into the Mongol empire and the consequences thereof; the tendency of individual and family interests to trump dynasty, state, or linguistic affiliations; and the need to recognize Koryŏ as part of the wider Mongol empire (p. 6).

*Empire's Twilight* is a profoundly erudite study; especially worthy are its numerous references to Korean scholarship (in addition to Chinese, Japanese, and Western studies). The book also draws on a wide range of primary sources, supplementing the official histories of Yuan China and Koryŏ with a panoply of private sources—poems, funerary inscriptions, diaries, and memorials—as well as later reconstructions of the period that were written in China, Korea, and Mongolia. Furthermore, Robinson intersperses the text with lengthy quotations from primary sources in both English and Chinese (for accommodating Chinese texts Harvard University's Asia Center is to be commended). Whereas some of the longer excerpts hinder the argument's flow, other passages serve well to convey a sense of the period. All told, by virtue of his extensive use of primary and second-

ary sources, Robinson creates a nuanced picture of a region and epoch that scholars of the Mongol empire have often overlooked.

The first chapter reviews the integration of Northeast Asia under Mongol rule. Here, Robinson establishes the regional perspective as his primary analytic unit and unveils the amalgamation of political and administrative authorities in Mongol Liaodong and in the Korean Peninsula, which included Mongolian nobles (descendants of Chinggis Khan's brothers); the Koryŏ monarch; and a host of Mongol, Korean, Chinese, and Uighur officials and generals who counterbalanced the ruling class. The author also reviews the political, commercial, ethnic, religious, and cultural networks that bound this region together. Whereas earlier scholarship put an emphasis on the indigenous culture's influence on the Mongol conquerors, Robinson, following in the footsteps of Thomas T. Allsen's seminal work,<sup>1</sup> emphasizes the impact that Mongol cultural norms and administrative practices had on their subjects in a broad spectrum of areas, from military organization and multi-ethnic administration to gift giving, fashion, and food. This chapter is complemented by Chapter 3, which examines Koryŏ's standing in the Yuan *ulus* (empire, state, literally the people subject to a Mongol prince), with an emphasis on the marriage relations between the two dynasties. Chapter 3 also introduces the Korean King Kongmin (r. 1351–1374), whose legitimacy was largely dependent on his relationship with the Mongols, both as a son-in-law (*küregen*) of the Yuan emperor and as someone who grew up in the royal guard in Dadu together with other members of the Yuan elite. Kongmin was indeed highly assimilated: he possessed a Mongol name (Bayan Temür); practiced archery, polo, and wrestling; and dressed in the Mongolian style. This does not mean that he did not strive to manipulate the Yuan weakness for his own ends. However, his attitude toward the Mongols was more complicated than the standard anti-Mongol image painted of him in most general histories of Korea. This chapter also describes Empress Ki, the cherished Korean wife of the last Yuan emperor, Toghon Temür (r. 1333–1370). Empress Ki orchestrated two failed attempts to depose her husband in favor of her son and also endeavored to replace Kongmin with his uncle—she

<sup>1</sup> For example, Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

might have taken advantage of the Mongol tradition of female political power.

Chapters 2, 4, and 5 focus on the Red Turban wars, namely the rebels' attacks on Dadu and Shangdu (the Yuan summer capital in Inner Mongolia) in the 1350s (Chapter 2) and their two incursions into Koryŏ in 1359 and 1361 (Chapters 4, 5). With respect to the Yuan central capital and its outlying regions, Robinson concludes that the Mongols basically succeeded in keeping the Red Turbans at bay throughout most of the 1350s. In fact, as late as 1358, it was far from evident to most contemporaneous observers that the dynasty would fall. After being repulsed from Beijing, the rebels moved eastward, wreaking havoc in Liaodong and Korea. Robinson expatiates on the military, political, and diplomatic activity against the Red Turbans in Northeast Asia (1357–1362), which culminated in the Korean victory over the rebels—and the immediate assassination of the generals who presided over the triumph. The rebels appear to have been quite sophisticated from a military standpoint, especially in the arts of cavalry and archery, and even mobilized a significant naval force. Nevertheless, in spite of these observations, the focus of these chapters is not military history. Instead, Robinson hones in on the social and political aspects of the Yuan dynasty's collapse, identifying the shifting loyalties and interests of all the parties involved.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 cover the ramifications of the Red Turban wars on Northeast Asia. The author opens with the struggle's immediate impact on Korea and Liaodong before turning his attention to broader issues, such as Japan's role in the "drama," the impact of the Red Turbans on the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the fall of the Koryŏ and rise of the Chosŏn dynasties (1392–1910), and the construction of the memory of the Red Turbans in Korea, China, and Mongolia. He concludes that the integration of Liaodong into Chinese society during the Yuan period led to its future inclusion in Ming territory. Moreover, stressing the role of the Mongols in Koryŏ's legitimation, Robinson urges that the Koryŏ dynasty was eliminated only after Zhu Yuanzhang had routed the northern Yuan in Mongolia in 1388.

By adopting the aforementioned regional perspective, Robinson transcends the framework of the national histories of Korea and China, and portrays the region in its full complexity. This vantage point helps him to articulate the multiple loyalties of the main actors, which were

often determined by local, personal, or family ties rather than ethnic or political considerations. Put differently, the backdrop for the interactions between the various players was far from a black-and-white struggle between “collaborators” and “nationalists” or pro- and anti-Mongol factions. During the period in question, conflicting interests among the key players, together with the militarization of society (one of the main consequences of Yuan rule), weakened the loyalty of the army leaders to the Mongol (or Korean) crown. In other words, although Chinggis Khan could, with unwavering confidence in their loyalty, send one general to conquer North China and another to fight beyond the Caspian Sea, neither Toghon Temür nor Kongmin could take for granted the loyalty of their generals, who were fighting much closer to their capitals. In the Mongol world this meant collapse.

*Empire's Twilight* underscores the necessity of viewing Korea and all other Mongol-ruled territories within the contexts of both their own local histories and as parts of the greater empire. This complex perspective, then, warrants a comparative inquiry on several levels. Above all, due to the crises in each of the regions, the mid-fourteenth century bore witness to the rise of militarization and increasing power on the part of military commanders in all four Mongol khanates. This development triggered the fall of the Ilkhanate in 1335; forced the Yuan out of China in 1368; and caused the Chaghadaid khanate to lose Transoxania to Tamerlane in 1370. The Golden Horde fared slightly better, as its forces managed to return the Chinggisid khans to power following the rule of Emir Mamai, who was soundly defeated by the Russians at the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380. Although the Golden Horde survived for another century, its fragility was apparent throughout the fifteenth century. What were the main factors behind the vicissitudes of the mid-fourteenth century? Was Mongol collapse connected to the environmental changes and natural disasters that Robinson frequently mentions? This issue demands further inquiry. Apparently the main difference between the crisis of the Yuan and that of the other khanates is that popular uprisings, driven by messianic expectations (that is, the Red Turbans) played a larger role in the former. Yet certain common features of the crisis are discernable: in all the khanates military commanders who had married into the Chinggisid dynasty (namely *Küregens* like King Kongmin) played a decisive role in the khanate's crisis or in its demise and the succession struggles that ensued. At

least in Iran, the central role of non-Mongol figures (again like King Kongmin) in the political and military domains of the Ilkhanate is also apparent.<sup>2</sup> In Iran and Central Asia, the rise of the military commanders was accompanied by the retribalization of society. Robinson, however, does not directly refer to this phenomenon (although he does mention that Naghachu, one of the major Mongol generals who fought the Red Turbans, was a descendant of Muqali and thus in all likelihood a Jalayirid). The role that tribal affinities may have played in the Yuan dynasty's collapse deserves more attention.

Robinson calls attention to Mongol forms of indirect rule, specifically the practice of allowing local monarchs to remain on their thrones while paying taxes and providing military assistance when required. Compared to previous steppe empires (such as the Great Turks, Seljuqs, and Qara Khitai), the Mongol empire relied much more heavily on direct rule and taxation. In this respect, Robinson overstates his claim that the destruction of the Jin, Song, and Khwārazm constituted exceptions to the rule that typically governed the Mongols' treatment of defeated rulers. In terms of territory, most of the empire was administered directly, and the Mongols were reluctant to leave authority in the hands of any ruler who posed any sort of military or ideological threat. Therefore, those dynasties that were tolerated by the victors, such as the Koryō, tended to be in relatively small, peripheral territories outside the steppe belt. Yet with the dimensions of the Mongol empire, these indirectly administered polities accumulated considerable territory. Among the regions that had this sort of system in place were Fārs, Kirmān, Herāt, Anatolia, Georgia, Armenia, the Gaochang Uighurs, Tibet, and, of course, the Rus principalities. Not all these vassal polities held on to their semi-independence throughout the period of Mongol rule (the Kirmānid and Anatolian dynasties, for example, were dissolved by the Ilkhanate in 1306 and 1307, respectively). Alternatively, while a peaceful surrender improved the local leadership's chances of survival, the Koryō dynasty managed to secure and preserve indirect rule despite its strong opposition to Mongol domina-

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ghiyāth al-Dīn, son of Rashīd al-Dīn or Maḥmūd Shāh Injū. For an examination of the last decade of the Ilkhanate, which is curiously missing from Robinson's bibliography, see Charles Melville, *The Fall of Amir Chūpān and the Decline of the Ilkhanate, 1327–37: A Decade of Discord in Mongol Iran*, Papers on Inner Asia, no. 30 (Bloomington: Indiana University, Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1999).

tion. Robinson's detailed treatment of Koryō invites a comparison of indirect forms of Mongol rule in different parts of Eurasia that also takes into account the localities' regional integration in their respective khanates. A fruitful direction seems to be to compare the situation in Northeast Asia with regions on the other side of the steppe, either the Caucasus, where the Georgian kings retained their kingdom, or Anatolia, where the Seljuqs of Rūm paid a tribute to the empire from 1243 to 1307. Charles Melville's study of Anatolia under the Ilkhans, for example, illustrates the multiple administrative and political authorities that the Mongols established therein in an effort to counter the power of the local dynasty, in a way reminiscent of the situation in Yuan Koryō.<sup>3</sup>

Comparisons of vassal states throughout Eurasia will contribute to our understanding of Mongol rule, both in its heartland and on the periphery. Over the past few decades, the "New Qing Historians," such as Pamela Crossley, Evelyn Rawski, Mark Elliot, and Nicola Di Cosmo, have demonstrated that substantial progress can be made in the study of Manchu rule if we do not limit ourselves to Chinese sources. Unfortunately, in the case of the Yuan, there is no Mongolian equivalent to the Manchu documentation to complement the Chinese sources, so it is incumbent upon scholars to pursue other avenues of research. One possibility, in this reviewer's estimation, is assiduously to track a handful of noteworthy Mongol institutions and concepts across Mongol-ruled Eurasia. Worthy topics for this sort of analysis include the guard (*Kesig*) and its role as the incubator of the future Mongol elite; the diplomatic corps of professional envoys (*Ilchis*); the court (*Yargu*) and the—rather slippery—Mongol law code (*Jasaq*); the postal system (*Jam*); the trading partners (*Ortaqs*); the mechanism of gift giving; the multiple and multi-ethnic administrations; the political role of women; and the role of marriage ties to the Chinggisids. A comparative study along these lines promises to expand our knowledge of Mongol rule and political culture, which is often blurred by the mediation of the mostly sedentary, non-Mongol authors who penned the relevant historical texts. Such synthesis still has to be written—and, one hopes, from a full Eurasian perspective—but much research needs to

<sup>3</sup> Charles Melville, "Anatolia under the Mongols," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 1, *Byzantium to Turkey 1071–1453*, ed. Kate Fleet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 51–101. Sara Nur Yildiz, *Mongol Rule in Seljuq Anatolia* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming) is likely to elucidate this subject further.

be done before it can be completed. Yet studies like *Empire's Twilight* are among the main building blocks that will make such an enterprise possible.

This book sheds light not only on the period of the Mongol empire's collapse, but also on its future impact on the Eurasian map; and here, as in his previous work, Robinson stresses the Ming's adoption of assorted Mongol methods and frameworks. A famous cliché about Mongol history is that the empire vanished just as quickly as it emerged, leaving no legacy. This refrain is often contrasted with the Arab conquests of the seventh century that left a palpable imprint—most notably, the Arabic language and the Muslim religion—on large parts of their subject territories. The Mongols indeed refrained from forcing their language, religion, or ethnic customs on the people they conquered. Instead, they disseminated their imperial culture, which was originally composed of different cultural elements. As a result, it was easier for the succeeding regimes that adopted their predecessor's system of governance to ignore their debt to the Mongols. Yet current research on the Mongol empire duly stresses its long-term impact on subsequent Eurasian polities.<sup>4</sup> This is applicable to two kind of states: first, those that were established by nomads or semi-nomads who relinquished their peripatetic lifestyle as part of their empire-building project, but preserved many aspects of nomadic political culture (for example, Timurid Central Asia, Mughal India, Uzbek Central Asia, and Qing China), and second, states that had once been ruled by the Mongols and left components of the empire's political culture or administrative framework intact, even though the new rulers often considered themselves bitter enemies of the Mongols (for instance, Ming China and Muscovite Russia). The subject of the Mongol legacy in the early modern world calls for comprehensive inquiry that takes into account the Eurasian dimensions of the phenomenon. If the *Empire's Twilight* is any indication, Robinson's planned study on the Ming in their capacity

<sup>4</sup> See Beatrice F. Manz, "Mongol History Rewritten and Relived," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la méditerranée* 89–90 (2000): 129–49; Robert D. McChesney, *Central Asia: Foundations of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Pamela K. Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); David M. Robinson, ed., *Culture, Courtiers and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).



as the Yuan dynasty's successors is likely to constitute a key contribution to this enterprise.

After such high praise for *Empire's Twilight*, it is somewhat anticlimactic to turn to technical matters, but they also deserve mention. To begin with, a book that highlights its regional perspective should have included at least one good map of Northeast Asia, ideally one featuring many of the toponyms used in the text, so that readers could follow the main events with greater ease. The three maps that are reproduced in the book leave much to be desired: Northeast Asia only appears in the overly general map of the Yuan dynasty's territories; the map of the Red Turban rebellions does not include the Korean Peninsula; and the map of Korea, which in any case is too small and dark to be of much value, leaves out Manchuria. Readers would have also benefited from a short chronology of the main events. With respect to the bibliography, it is a pity that the titles of the studies written in Asian languages were not translated into English, especially since a wide segment of the book's potential audience (the reviewer included) is not fluent in Korean. Lastly, and as a general comment, the use of footnotes instead of endnotes would have made the book much more user-friendly.

These minor critiques notwithstanding, Robinson's book is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the Mongol empire or in the medieval and early modern history of Korea, China, or East Asia in general.

*The Four Great Temples: Buddhist Archaeology, Architecture, and Icons of Seventh-Century Japan* BY DONALD F.

MCCALLUM. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

Pp. xvii + 328. \$40.00.

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Donald F. McCallum, an art historian, has produced a detailed study of major Buddhist temples during Japan's Asuka period, roughly the seventh century, based on careful analysis of physical remains, mostly the result of modern archaeology, and textual references. Perhaps I should have declined the request to review this book, since I am an expert in neither the period nor the academic disciplines covered by