Experts, Institutions, and Networks: An Uighur Astronomer in the Yuan Court

Qiao Yang (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science)

Calendars as well as astronomical and astrological predictions had important political and ideological implications on the Yuan dynasty. The Mongols in China combined this Chinese perception with their own political tradition of astronomy. On the one hand, the Yuan dynasty adopted a Chinese astronomical system, which the Chinese astronomers significantly improved in the 1270s and 1280s. On the other hand, the Mongols brought non-Chinese astronomers to Yuan China in order to help them rule a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural population in China as well as balance the political influence of Chinese scholar-official astronomers. These foreign astronomers, like other foreign experts serving the Yuan court, are usually underrepresented or misrepresented in Chinese sources. This forms the biggest challenge for studying the role the non-Chinese played in the Yuan and for understanding the pluralistic nature of the Yuan administration, politics and culture.

This paper attempts to overcome the limitation and bias of sources with the database "Mobility, Empire and Cross Cultural Contacts in Mongol Eurasia". I will reconstruct the biography of the Uighur astronomer Aruhun Sali (阿魯渾薩理 A-lu-hun sa-li), whose significance in Yuan astronomical institutions, politics and culture has been underestimated because of the scattered information on him and his misrepresentation as Sinicized in his biography in the Official History of Yuan (元史 Yuanshi). I will also analyze the social networks of Aruhun Sali and highlight his relationship with the Mongol rulers and his Chinese and non-Chinese counterparts. Aruhun Sali will serve as a case study to demonstrate how the database serves as an efficient tool for combining pieces of information to reconstruct the biographies of nonChinese experts, and more importantly, for in-depth reading and analysis of the biographic information.