

Sonic Boom: The Audial Landscape of Religious Practice in Sino-Mongol Quanzhou

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In 1276/9 the Mongols conquered China, founded the Yuan dynasty (1276/9-1368), and began to rule over a population ethnically and culturally different from themselves. This was exceptionally so in the port city of Quanzhou, described by Marco Polo as “one of the two ports in the world with the biggest flow of merchandise.” Beyond serving as a clearing house for things, Quanzhou served as an entrepôt for people, their cultures and religions. The Mongols promoted expatriate practitioners of religions not indigenous to China; these expatriates hailed from locales throughout Quanzhou’s extensive maritime trade networks that reached as far as the east coast of Africa.

This paper shows how, under Mongolian colonial rule, these expatriate residents of Quanzhou shaped the intra- and extramural quarters of the city. Specifically, this paper reconstructs the role of the sonic dimensions of religions not indigenous to China in changing habitation patterns in Quanzhou. At least six mosques, three Catholic churches, one Brahmanic temple, and one Manichean temple produced this sonic landscape in Quanzhou. Ultimately, this paper shows how the polyphony of Quanzhou, at once supported and undercut by its multilingual denizens, remapped its urban geography despite the existence of city walls and established landmarks.