

Migration and Cultural and Religious Exchange between West and East Asia: the Mongol Empire

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The scale of migration and cultural exchange under the Mongol Empire is only starting to be systematically investigated. The Mongol conquest was the catalyst for vast people movements, including not only soldiers and merchants but monks and artisans and agricultural colonists who often settled, or were re-settled, thousands of kilometers from their places of origin. This resulted in unprecedented cultural exchange of which religious ideas were an important part. Due to the Mongol conquest of diverse cultural areas, cultural and religious principles were able to have influence far beyond their previous domains.

Despite continuing communication between various areas of the Mongol empire, cultural and religious exchange was never straightforward however, and was influenced both by the Mongol rulers, other mediators and the subject peoples. Mongol rulers brought shamanism as well as other religions such as Buddhism with them. They chose books to translate and religious practices to promote. Members of the khans' entourages also exerted significant influence because of their close access to the khans. But people far from the corridors of power also played decisive roles. Mongols living in new areas had to choose between keeping their practices and adopting new ones. In addition, the subjects of the Mongols consciously rejected or accommodated certain influences, while societal practices also contributed to shaping the extent and directions of cultural exchange.

This panel presented some of the latest research conducted using Persian, Arabic and Chinese sources together in order permit an in-depth examination of cultural and religious exchange between East and West. The presenters are part of the "Mobility, Empire and Cross-Cultural Contacts in Mongol Eurasia" project based at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which aims to promote analysis of migration and its effects through the use of sources in multiple languages and the building of a database. We examined three case studies: the movement of Oirats into Eastern and Western Asia (including the Ilkhanate and the Mamluk sultanate) and factors affecting their integration (or lack thereof) into their new environments; how the Mongols brought Buddhism into the Ilkhanate; and the influence of religiously-inspired legal principles in new areas under the Mongols.