Seeking Systematic Symmetry in the History of Various Chinggisid Khanates

No matter the extent that researchers grounded in nationalist perspectives have over the past several centuries successfully characterized the period of the Mongol Empire and subsequent Chinggisid regimes as "abnormal" phases in their respective national histories—labeled as a "yoke," a "dark age," or a period of decline—the study of the Mongol Empire today must contend with a new wave of self-reflection prompted by paradigm shifts. The new approaches place greater emphasis on constructing historical narratives from within the ruling circle of the empire itself, rather than from the perspective of their sedentary subjects, despite the fact that most of the documented records we rely on come from the latter. Additionally, since the late 1990s, the "Imperial Turn," which views the empire as a global network for exchanging materials and resources, has further encouraged scholars to reassess the history of the Mongol Empire from new perspectives and evaluative frameworks.

Under these circumstances, Marie Favereau's book, published during the pandemic, stands out as a phenomenal contribution to the field. The author goes beyond the entanglements of Russian nationalist historiography to offer a vivid panorama of the history of the Golden Horde. Organized in five chapters, the content of *The Horde* spans from the first Mongol westward campaigns to the post-Toqtamish era. Due to the scarcity of indigenous records, the history of the Golden Horde, particularly during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, has often been portrayed as a vague chronicle of major events, occasionally interspersed with legendary episodes. However, Favereau seeks to uncover the underlying dynamic driving the historical processes and highlights the transformations within the governing apparatus itself.

"A horde is more precisely a nomadic regime or power," (p. 12) the statement in the introduction not only explains the author's preference of "Horde" to the traditional "Golden Horde" in the title of the work but, more importantly, underscores her focus throughout the book: the functioning and adaptation of state power within the political traditions of nomadic societies. The book unfolds along two main thematic lines. The first explores the transformation of the nomadic political system, reflected in the fragmentation and reorganization of the power core, often accompanied by shifts in the mechanisms of power distribution. The second focuses on the Golden Horde's influence on global trade networks, which were closely tied to the authority of the Khan. These networks not only supplied luxury goods that symbolized the royal power and the human resources necessary to sustain their military forces but also became a key consideration in Mongol diplomacy after they abandoned their ambition of world conquest.

As such, Favereau's book offers valuable insight for scholars of Chinggisid regimes across Eurasia, each deeply involved in the vortex of localization in

their respective territories. Additionally, the author demonstrates a "holistic view" to understanding Mongol history (p. 7), emphasizing a methodological approach that goes beyond national and geopolitical boundaries, and I would like to summarize this as "systemic symmetry." This symmetry refers to the fact that similar historical processes and institutional developments seen in one Chinggisid state can be observed in another, despite limited communication and significant differences in culture and environment between them. Moreover, this symmetry is not confined to isolated historical events but also manifests in how the early institutions established during the time of Chinggis Khan were adapted to local contexts. The histories and institutions of the Golden Horde and the Ilkhanate, for instance, often serve as mirror images of one another. Even in the case of the Golden Horde and the Yuan dynasty—two regimes situated in vastly different geopolitical and cultural environments, with minimal reference to each other in official records—notable parallels are seen in their events, institutions, and concepts of legitimacy.

For instance, the author summarizes the process of the institutional transformation in the Golden Horde as a shift from the "Khan—*keshig*" co-rule system to the "Khan—*Beglerbeg*—Qarachu *beg*s." Initially, the dual structure of the Khan's family and the *keshig* organization maintained control over the empire, with the stability of the regime depending on their close cooperation. This structure began to change after Nogay's failed attempt at seizing the throne. Following a watershed civil war, the successive Khans were forced to devolve power to the military aristocracy from non-Chinggisid families, referred to as the Qarachu *beg*s in this work. The rise of the Qarachu *beg*s compensated for the disintegration and decline of the *keshig* (p. 266). This trend was irreversible, such that even khans with strong authority, such as Toqto'a and Özbek, could only achieve restored centralization through compromises and power-sharing with the Qarachu *bey*s.

Yet, when examining this process within the context of the Yuan dynasty, further parallels emerge. A parallel case in the Yuan dynasty would be the "Battles of *Tianli*" (title of Tuq-Temür's reign, r. 1329–1332), which, like the civil war between Nogay and Toqto'a, swept across the entire territories of the empire and led to significant changes in the ruling structure. Afterwards, the Yuan emperors were compelled to share power with the newly rising military aristocracies, such as El-Temür of Kipchak and Bayan of Merkit, while marginalizing the Chinggisid princes who performed poorly during the civil war from the core of power. Neither El-Temür nor Bayan belonged to the old noble families of the Chinggisid era, making them, in effect, part of the "Qarachu" nobility.

However, at least in the Yuan dynasty, this transformation was a result of a long-term development. Since the khanate was essentially a conglomeration of various princely *ulus*, most Chinggisid princes resided in their own distant fiefs, far away from the central court of the Great Khan. Consequently, they

were naturally less capable of responding promptly to unexpected events in the imperial core, and their dispersed interests made them prone to fragmentation into competing factions. In the later period of Qubilai's reign (r. 1260–1294), a sharp critic perceptively pointed out, "Now, within the state, the imperial clans are scattered about like stars, and the consort relatives are dispersed everywhere, each merely receiving fiefs yet holding no power."[1] Thus, the royal family's involvement in core imperial affairs diminished, and their political influence inevitably declined. For the Great Khan, who was at the center of power, it became only natural to seek out new collaborators.

Compared to the well-documented appanage system in the Yuan dynasty, there is significantly less information referring to the Jochid princes outside of the Batuid and Ordaid clans. How did these obscure Jochid princes participate in the power distribution within the Golden Horde? If we accept the view that the political institution of each Chinggisid khanate derived from the same prototype and thus exhibited certain similarities during the process of localization, it would be worthwhile to encourage further comparative studies.

On the whole, this is a well-argued study of the history and institutional evolution of the Golden Horde, with implications for various other Chinggisid regimes and related topics. I will henceforth use this work frequently and effectively in the future, especially when drawing on the history of the Golden Horde to counterbalance the centralized, autocratic perspective naturally reflected in the official history of the Yuan dynasty.

Yihao Qiu

1 "今國家內族星布, 外戚雲分, 皆獲食邑而不預大權。" Zhao Tianlin 趙天麟, "Taiping jinjing ce 太平金鏡策 [Mirror of Peace: A Collection of Policy Essays]," in Li Xiusheng 李修生, ed., *Quanyuan wen* 全元文 [Complete Collection of Yuan Prose] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1998), p. 199.