The Mongol Steppe Wolf
Replacing the Forest Tiger

THE RUZHEN JIN REPLACED BY THE MONGOL YUAN

Wontack Hong
Professor, Seoul University

A MONGOLIAN EMPIRE CONFRONTING A MANCHURIAN STATE IN NORTH CHINA

The co-existence of the Han dynasty and the Xiongnu empire was followed by the conquest of North China by the Manchurian Touba Wei dynasty. The co-existence of Sui-Tang China and the (Uigur-Turks) Turkic empire ended with the occupation of North China by the Manchurian Qidans and Ruzhens. The appearance of Chinggis Khan (1206-1227) in Mongolia, however, produced an entirely new situation in which a united Mongol empire confronted a Manchurian conquest dynasty in North China.

Before Chinggis Khan united the Mongol tribes in 1206, the Mongols were one of the weaker tribes in the steppes and most of Mongolia had been occupied by the Turks. In the early seventh century, some Turkish tribes had fled west under attack by Tai-zong of Tang (626-49). Now under the combined pressure of both the Mongols and Manchurian dynasties (Liao and Jin), most Turks were forced to move towards Central and West Asia, unintentionally opening the route for the Mongol conquest of Eurasia and paving the steppe turnpikes for the trans-continental Mongol empire.

A nomadic conqueror always attempted to draw under his banners all kinds of nomads he could collect on his way to conquest. Batu (r.1227-55) could successfully wage the
European campaigns of 1236-41, occupy the whole of ancient Scythia, including steppes north of the Black Sea and Caucasus, and also enforce suzerainty over the Russian principalities, leading less than 4,000 pure-blooded Mongol troops (that were allocated specifically to him by Chinggis Khan’s dying wish), only by mobilizing the Turks that had settled in those regions a long time ago.1

Numbering less than 1.5 million, the Mongols tried to incorporate all ethnic groups that submitted without fighting (including the Qidans, Chinese, Uighurs, Tibetans, Turks and Persians) into their armies and government. A surrendered Song commander, for instance, helped the Mongols in the construction of a river fleet, expediting the conquest of southern China full of rivers, canals, and streams. Many former Song troops (termed newly-adhered armies) were either organized into new units with Mongols or Northern Chinese (including Qidan, Ruzhen and Koreans) as their officers, or were incorporated into the existing Yuan ranks.2

Chinggis Khan had completely reorganized the tribal or clan armies, united only in a fluid association, into a more rigid hierarchical force. A tribe or clan exceeding a thousand fighters was divided into several units (Ming-an) of 1,000, while the Ming-an with a smaller number of fighters was filled by assembling kinsmen who had been scattered in other clans or tribes, or even by co-opting war captives. All male adults between fifteen and seventy years of age were liable for military service when needed. Each unit was assigned grazing land, and the families were also put under the same administration. The hereditary chieftains, however, constituted an officer corps rather than a feudal aristocracy. The chieftains had been accustomed to exacting levies from the self-sufficient military families under their jurisdiction and depending on the spoils acquired in campaigns, but after the founding of the Yuan dynasty, officers became a hereditary salaried aristocracy.3

The Tai-zu of the Northern Song dynasty had designated all the elite troops, including the offspring of politically privileged families, as the Imperial Guard (divided into a couple of mutually independent contingents to provide a counter-balance) and also kept about half of them in the capital region, effectively ensuring the loyalty of influential

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1 The Batu’s khanate of Kipchak, with its capital at the lower Volga near the Caspian in the midst of subjugated Kipchak Turks, was to be known to history as the Golden Horde (Altan-ord). These Mongolian rulers in Europe survived as unassimilated foreigners encamped on European soil until 1502, long after the Chinggis Khanites had been driven out of China, Persia and Turkestan. Tamerlane (1336-1405) declared himself the heir and continuator of Chinggis Khan and Chagatai, but he belonged to a Turkic aristocratic clan in Transoxiana. He was brought into the great Chinggis Khanite family only by marriage in 1397. The Timurid epic conquests were executed by the Turkic forces that were born of Chinggis Khanite military discipline.

2 In addition to the core Mongol army, there also appeared the Newly-adhered (former Song) army, the Ruzhen army, the Qidan army, the Korean army (of Shenyang), and others. See Hsiao (1978: 15-6, 74, 174).

3 Hsiao (1978: 14, 25)
families and discouraging the regional uprising and usurpation of the throne. Chinggis Khan created the Imperial Guard from among the sons and younger brothers of commanders of proven loyalty, the offspring of aristocratic families all over Mongolia, and the royal hostages offered by surrendered kings to serve as his own bodyguard and also as personal domestic staff of imperial household. It was a hostage camp, an academy for young aristocrats promised a future of prominent official positions, a form of privileged apprenticeship for the future ruling class, a key link in maintaining Khan’s personal relationship with aristocracy and, at the same time, a rudimentary executive organ to transform the loose confederation of nomadic chieftains into a centralized autocratic despotism.4

The Xiong-nu and Uighur Turks had traditionally pursued the strategy of extortion against the Han Chinese dynasties. The conquest of mainland China did not, at first, appear to have been a primary goal of Chinggis Khan either. Unlike the Han Chinese courts, however, the Manchurian Jin court flatly refused appeasement with the Mongols. Instead of yielding to extortions (in the traditional Chinese fashion), they fought the Mongols until the dynasty was itself completely destroyed.

The Mongols conquered the Western Xia in 1227, the Jin in 1234, Korea in 1259 and the Southern Song in 1279. According to Janhunen (1996: 134), “none of the Mongol conquests in East Asia was easy, for their military actions lasted 20 years against the Western Xia (1207-27), 24 against the Jin (1210-34), 40 against Korea (1219-59), and 44 against the Song (1235-79).”

The Han Chinese had been able to maintain their cultural and political integrity in the south when they confronted Xianbei Wei, Qidan Liao, and Ruzhen Jin. The Mongols, however, completely wiped out the Chinese dynasty. The complete conquest of all the territory of the Han Chinese state was emulated later by the Manchu Qing.

The Mongols had adopted the terror tactic of massacre to obtain prompt submission and prevent rebellion. They burned down cities and destroyed farm fields to convert them into steppe. In Eastern Iran, four-fifths of the population

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4 Hsiao (1978: 33-39)

5 According to Jagehid and Symons (1989: 19-20), “Chinggis (r.1206-1227) sought and failed to sustain trade and tribute arrangements with the Jin which would have enabled him to obtain essential goods from China. Once exchange institutions were closed to him, Chinggis’s only alternative was war. … The interest of Chinggis in securing goods rather than territory or political power is apparent by his activities in 1213 when he entered the North China plain and besieged Zhong-du (Beijing). After receiving bounteous gifts from the court and plundering the countryside, he returned home. To this point in
was slaughtered. The Mongol barbarity was born of ignorance of sedentary civilization. After the conquest of the Jin in 1234, however, the Mongols had time to collect many civilized advisors and to learn the art of ruling an empire in the North China plain that was already well experienced in alien domination. Khubilai (r.1260-1294), the grandson of Chinggis, was able to declare himself the emperor of Yuan in 1271, eight years prior to the final extinction of the Southern Song.

The Uighur Turks in East Turkestan had submitted peacefully to Chenggis Khan who referred to the Uighur ruler as his fifth son. The Mongols adopted the Uighur script for their written language. Ledyard (1983: 348) notes: “It may have been simply a historical accident that Uighur literary influence, Central Asian administrative and governing techniques, and Christian and Islamic religious currents penetrated Mongol life before Chinese practices did, but the effect was to provide the Mongols with many services and techniques that insulated them from the need to seek similar things from China. And when the Mongols did become closely associated with Chinese life, it was not the only form of higher civilization they had encountered, and they were therefore less susceptible to its lure.”

All the Turko-Mongol nations were unified into a single empire. From Manchuria to the Caspian, an iron discipline was imposed in order to ensure the unmolested travel of caravans. More than two hundred thousand horses were distributed among the relay stations in service of the imperial mails. Khubilai was not only the emperor of China, but in theory the Khan of the entire Mongol Empire of Chinggis-Khanite appanages, realizing the Pax Mongoliana.

FALL OF THE MONGOL EMPIRE

Khubilai Khan transferred his capital from Karakorum in Mongolia to Beijing (known then as Dadu) in 1264 and became the emperor of Yuan (1206-1368). It was the first foreign dynasty to conquer and rule all of China. The Mongols were garrisoned at key points. They used Uighur, Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and sinicized Ruzhens in government offices. The necessity to maintain more than 150,000 troops garrisoned in arid Inner Asia exhausted the Yuan dynasty.


7 See Hsiao (1978: 57-60). The necessity to maintain more than 150,000 troops garrisoned in arid Inner Asia exhausted the Yuan dynasty.

8 After the annihilation of the Southern Song, the Yuan was at peace for a long time and the people did not know war. The descendants of the generals inherited the offices from generation to generation. See Hsiao (1978: 26-7). The Mongol soldiers were ill adapted to farming life, and their families suffered from the chronic absence of male adults and
exploitation by corrupt military superiors. The solidarity between the impoverished military households and their superiors disappeared.

The Ruzhen soldiers of the preceding Jin dynasty had been allocated land in North China and been able to lead, with difficulty to be sure, a decent agricultural life to support their military duties, as did the bannermen of the Qing much later. Why were the Mongolian soldiers utterly unable to make a decent living on Chinese land? Hsiao (1978: 20) answers this question in this way: “we must bear in mind that the Ruzhen and Manchus had some agricultural experience before they entered China — which was certainly not the case with most if not all the Mongols.”

9 See Janhunen (1996: 166). Ledyard (1983: 326) notes: “while most Qidan and Ruzhen residents of Chinese areas simply blended into the landscape when their regimes came to an end, the Mongols were still very much Mongols when the Yuan dynasty’s days ran out.”

The Mongol rulers resisted sinification by conducting their business in the Mongol language, living in tents erected on the palace grounds, spending their summers in Mongolia, and maintaining the tradition of choosing the emperors through bloody competition. Khubilai Khan discouraged Mongols from marrying Chinese, and he himself took only Mongol women into the palace. The Han Chinese, on the other hand, were not forced to adopt the conqueror’s customs. After the collapse of the Yuan dynasty, the Mongol rulers simply fled with their troops, avoiding Chinese linguistic and cultural domination.9 The Mongols fled back to their old homelands in 1368, founding the Northern Yuan which survived into the early 17th century to be conquered by the Manchu Qing. One may now get surprised to hear that the first emperor of the Northern Yuan was a half Korean.

KORYEO PRESERVING ITS DYNASTIC EXISTENCE

In Koryeo, a group of discontented military generals revolted in 1170, enthroned a new king, and purged a large number of arrogant civilian aristocrats, commencing a century of military rule. They chastised the king for allowing the abuses practiced by the aristocratic families and the Buddhist establishment. The military rulers later fell as an aftermath to the Mongol invasions.

By the early thirteenth century, the Ruzhen Jin came under sustained Mongol attack. The Qidan had taken the opportunity to assert their independence, but following the fall of the Jin capital in 1215, Mongol pressure drove the Qidan into Koryeo territory.10 The Mongol-Koryeo coalition forces destroyed the Qidan in 1219, but after this incident the Mongols demanded from the Koryeo court heavy annual
tribute. The Koryeo king, however, refused to pay tribute on several occasions, inviting thereby a series of Mongol invasions beginning in 1231. Ordering peasantry to keep fighting in the mountain fortresses, the Koryeo rulers, entrenched in the Kang-wha Island, stubbornly waged resistance against the Mongols for almost 30 years until its surrender in 1259 under the new civilian leadership that replaced the military rulers.

Ledyard (1983: 325) notes: “The territory of the Yuan dynasty … combined that of Jin and Song, so that Manchuria was wholly joined with China and placed under the same administration. … Koryeo was able to preserve its dynastic existence … although … Koryeo’s northern territory … was removed and placed under the direct Mongol administration.”

Needing to sustain the abortive Mongol campaigns against the Kamakura shogunate on the Japanese islands in 1274 and 1281, the Koryeo constructed hundreds of warships and provided the necessary provisions. It furnished about 900 ships, 15,000 sailors, and 5,000 to 10,000 troops for two invasions that ended in complete disaster because of heavy storms.\(^\text{11}\)

The Yuan court adopted a policy of reconciliation, and Kublai Khan gave his daughter to the crown prince of Koryeo in 1274, plotting in this way a slow but sure genetic conquest of stubborn Koryeo rulers. Thereafter a succession of Koryeo kings had princesses of the Yuan imperial house as their primary consorts.\(^\text{12}\) As a son-in-law nation to Yuan, the Koryeo court could maintain its position as sovereign ruler of an independent state.\(^\text{13}\) Genetically, however, the Koryeo kings rapidly converged to the pure blooded Mongol princes. Seemingly a retaliation of sorts, Koryeo exported a woman to become in 1340 the second empress, called Empress Ki, of the last Yuan Emperor (Shun-di, r.1333-68, d.1370). According to Dardess (1994: 580), in view of “the effect of her new status on the complex issue of Yuan relations with Korea,” many Mongols had opposed to making her second empress. She gave birth to the Prince Imperial who was installed as heir apparent in 1353 and ascended the throne of Northern Yuan in 1370.

Empress Ki’s brothers, who came to exercise mighty power in the Koryeo court, were eliminated by King Kong-min (1351-74) in 1356, the year Zhu Yuan-zhang seized Nan-jing.

\(^{11}\) The second Mongol invasion force amounted to 3,500 ships and 100,000 soldiers who sailed from South China, and 900 ships and 40,000 soldiers who left from a Korean port.

\(^{12}\) The marriage of the Koryeo crown prince, later King Chung-yul (1274-1308), to a Mongol princess took place in 1274. In the century that followed seven Mongol princesses were married into the Koryeo royal family, and the offspring of these unions held the throne. See Henthorn (1972: 123).

\(^{13}\) A cadet branch of the Koryeo royal family was given appointments as governors of the Liao-yang area to govern the large Korean communities there. Later Koryeo monarchs were given honorary control of the Liao-yang area and invested with the title of “King of Shenyang 瀋王.” See Henthorn (1972: 123).

\(^{14}\) 元史 卷一百一十四 后妃一 完者忽都皇后奇氏 高麗人 生皇 太子愛猷識理達臘…初…進為宮 女…立為第二皇后 初奇氏之族 在高麗者 怙勢驕橫 高麗王怒 殺之 唐正 二十三年 后謂 皇太子曰 汝何不為復讐耶? 遂 立 高麗王族人留京師者為王…用兵一萬…過鴨綠水 伏兵 四起 乃大敗 餘十七騎而還 后大慚… 二十五年…皇后崩…后宜正位中 宮 帝不答… 二十八年 [1968] 從帝北奔
新元史 卷二百四十九 列傳 第一百四十六 外國一 高麗 至正

冊立皇太子…

【1953】

十八年 有密告 奇轍 潛通 天城叛民 謀逆 祺殺之 夷其族…

二十三年 皇太子欲為奇皇后復仇 乃立德興君…

【1964】

二十四年

……以大兵一萬圍義州為崔詡等所敗 一軍皆沒

新元史 卷二十六 本紀 惠宗四元

至正二十四年 春正月 [1364]

朱元璋自稱吳王 是月 崔帖木兒與高麗人戰於定州敗績…

三十年 [1370] 惠宗崩於應昌 皇太子卽皇帝位… 改元宜光… 宜光元年

明太祖洪武四年也 [1371] 遼陽行省…

二十五年 [1372] … 大破明…

Empress Ki could at last persuade the Prince Imperial in 1364 to send an army and replace the Koryeo king, but the Mongol force was annihilated, marking the end of Mongol power in the Korean peninsula. 

In 1356, Koryeo had sent an army to attack the Yuan commandery headquarters at Ssang-seong, Ham-gyeong province. The cooperation of Yi Ja-chun, who was a local magnate and father of Yi Seong-gye, had played a decisive role for Koryeo to recover its lost territory.

When the family of the Empress Ki assembled Yuan refugees in Manchuria in 1368 with the intention of avenging the downfall of their clique, “King Kong-min dusted off the tradition that Koryeo was the successor to the old state of Koguryeo and thus the rightful sovereign of Manchuria and sent two of his best generals, Chi Yong-su and Yi Seong-gye, into Manchuria. Yi Seong-gye (1335-1408) was the fifth-generation scion of a military family which had for three generations held the post of Chief of One Thousand in the Korean northeast. … While Yi Seong-gye swept north through the Ham-heung plains, General Chi drove west toward Liaodong and took the city of Liao-yang [in 1371]. The Koreans were unprepared to hold their gains and recalled their armies, although they repeatedly brought up their claim to all lands east of the Liao River. Ming forces soon moved into the area, permanently settling the question (Henthorn, 1972: 129).”