The Mongols, Astrology and Eurasian History

Johan Elverskog*

On the afternoon of 15 February 1894, a powerful explosion ripped asunder the seeming tranquillity of the Greenwich Observatory. This chronological terrorism, carried out by Martial Bourdin, a 26-year-old French anarchist, was seen as an act of complete madness. The novelist Joseph Conrad went so far as to proclaim that it was a 'bloodstained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought', and proceeded to write the novel *The Secret Agent* on this very premise. Indeed, why would an anarchist attack the new clock of the world?

Only 12 years earlier, at the International Meridian Conference in Washington, DC, 25 delegates from different countries had agreed upon Greenwich as the location of the prime meridian. This choice was, of course, far from self-evident. A Louisville newspaper asked why the United States 'should "concede to John Bull's dull Greenwich the position of time dictator? Now what is Greenwich to us? A dingy London suburb" '.[1] Similarly, the French contingent argued the necessity for a scientific and specifically 'non-national' location for the line, certainly not one in the centre of the British Empire. The 25 delegates in Washington, DC did not need to know of the now large corpus of scholarship on time as a social reality, from writers such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim to Bloch and LeGoff, to understand that the control of time was a technique of power.

[1] Burnett, 'Writing the History of Time': 44.

* Department of Religious Studies, 6424 Hyer Lane 300B, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275-0202, USA. E-mail: johan@smu.edu

The Medieval History Journal, 19,1 (2016): 130–135
SAGE Publications ♦ Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC/Melbourne
DOI: 10.1177/0971945815626314

Indeed, it is only now in the modern world that the reality of universal rule as manifested in the hegemonic construction of time and space has largely been achieved. But, in the process, what the modern world largely forgot was that this achievement had always been the dream of pre-modern empires, as reflected in their use of astrology.

Astrology was, in pre-modern Eurasia, fundamentally about orienting oneself—and one's realm—in time and space and, as such, by bringing order to chaos, it functioned as a handmaiden of empire. Yet, the reality faced by all imperial systems was one of the competing universal claims of power that were based on radically different systems of astrology, astronomy and divination. In their effort to come to grips with this diversity, Eurasian empires usually adopted one of two contrasting attitudes, either a fundamentalist orthodoxy or an open syncretism. In China, for example, some dynasties, such as the Qing (1644–1911), mandated conformity and outlawed heterodox astrological, calendrical or divination systems, many of which were invariably tied to rebellions. On the other hand, other dynasties, such as the Tang (618–907), used a 'doctrine of mixing together' (混合說 *hunheshou*), which enabled diverse systems to thrive within the imperial order. And it was such a model that was followed by the Mongols' predecessors, the Khitans of the Liao (907–1125) and Western Liao dynasties (1124–1211), both of which used a syncretistic model in order to maintain the indigenous, Buddhist, Chinese, Christian, Islamic and other traditions within their state.[2] In turn, it was this same open and eclectic system that was adopted by the Mongols. This much is well known. What is less commonly acknowledged is that the Mongols gave this system of cosmos and power a new coherence.

The Mongols were the primary agents of commercial, technological and intellectual exchange across Eurasia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[3] Moreover, as much recent scholarship has shown, including the work of Azfar Moin and the papers in this forum by Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Audrey Truschke, the post-Mongol—or dare we say the early modern world—was defined largely in relation to the

[2] Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*.

[3] See especially Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire*; *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*; *Technician Transfer in the Mongolian Empire*; *The Central Eurasian Studies Lectures*; 'Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia'.

Mongol legacy.[4] The Mongol quest for knowledge—especially of state-of-the-art astrology and the power it entailed—knew no bounds. Moreover, both the fruits of such endeavours (such as Liu Binzhong's *Shoushili*,[5] Pakpa Lama's *Kalacakra*-reorientation[6] and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsi's recension of Ptolemy's *Almagest* and Persian translation of al-Sufi's *Description of Fixed Stars*), and the drive to maintain such an 'occultist arms race', as Melvin-Koushki calls it, continued to shape the statecraft among their successor states. Thus, in many ways, the Mongols established a model that was readily emulated by their successors.

Yet, there are important discontinuities between what the Mongols achieved and what their successors could. For one, none of the post-Mongol regimes controlled anywhere near the territory that the Mongols had. Clearly, they knew this, and thus any claims about 'universal' rule that they were bound to proclaim on account of imperial protocol were not the same as that of the Mongols, who not only had a religio-political theology that made all people and modes of thought subservient to Mongol power,[7] but also actualised that reality. And, as such, they controlled time and space to a previously unprecedented degree. In thirteenth century Iran, for example, the New Year was not celebrated at the vernal equinox according to the Islamic calendar, but was celebrated six weeks before the spring equinox in keeping with the Chinese calendar.[8] In fact, it was precisely such control that their quest for astrological, astronomical and divinatory knowledge was meant to ensure. And to a certain extent, it is precisely this universal ethos and its actualisation that actually made the Mongol empire quite different from anything before or since.

Rather than simply allowing different traditions to coexist and cross-pollinate as had historically so often been the case, the Mongols as part of their imperial policy actually wove them all together into a new coherent whole. This synthetic wholeness is a marked feature of Mongol astrological works, which are neither simply composite texts, nor simply cutting and pasting of Tibetan, Chinese and Indian texts in order to create a new pastiche. Rather, these texts are a reworking of these

[4] See, for example, Abate, 'The Reorientation of Roger Bacon'; App, *The Birth of Orientalism*; Ristuccia, 'Eastern Religions and the West'.

[5] Sivin, *Granting the Seasons*.

[6] Schuh, *Untersuchungen zur Geschicte der Tibetischen Kalenderrechnung*.

[7] Atwood, 'Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty'.

[8] Melville, 'The Chinese Uighur Animal Calendar'.

disparate elements into a coherent whole. Moreover, we find throughout the text continuous references to its own conceptual framework, which it calls 'Mongol', in contradistinction to the other four traditions with which it engages, namely, the Indian, Tibetan and the Chinese 'peasant' and 'scholarly' traditions.[9] Thus, as Baumann has shown in his recent work on the *Manual of Astrology and Divination*, although the text is clearly aware of the late seventeenth-century *White Beryl* (*Baiḍūrya dkar po*)—the main astrological text of the Gelukpa school—the Mongol almanac is strikingly different, not least since the Tibetan work focuses on elemental divination and the Mongolian text focuses on omens, but also because the Mongolian text has neither the natal horoscopes or pebble divination that are central to the *White Beryl*, nor does it follow the Tibetan eight-day week or even the *nakshatra* system of the Tibetan tradition. Rather its 28 Lunar Mansions system is influenced by Chinese traditions, and the Chinese influence is also seen in the Mongol use of the hundred-unit reckoning system, the 12 double-hour system, the 23 joints and breaths, as well as the Chinese method for fixing the intercalary month. Yet, at the same time, the Mongolian almanacs are not wholly Chinese; instead, they are a fusion of these diverse elements.[10] And this fusion, or reformulation, of these previously disparate traditions into a holistically coherent new one is found not only in Mongolian astrological texts, but also in medical texts as evidenced in the *Handbook of Medicines* (*Bükün-e tusalaqu eldeb jüil em-yin nayirul?a kemekü orosiba*),[11] and even translations of Chinese astrological works such as the *Xuanze guangyu xia ji* [*Record of the Multi-Faceted Jade Box* (選擇廣玉匣記)]. Thus, even though this Tang dynasty text includes a vast array of Chinese divinatory practices including coin divination, physiognomy, weather divination and various Chinese star spirits and omens that became vastly popular among the Mongols, the Mongol version is not simply a translation. Rather, as Walther Heissig has pointed out, the extant Mongol versions are reworkings that create a new composite text much like the *Manual of Astrology and Divination*.[12]

[9] On this multiplicity and its implications, see Elverskog, 'Mongol Time Enters a Qing World'.

[10] Baumann, 'Divine Knowledge'.

[11] Heissig, *Catalogue of Mongol Books*: 192. For details on this work, see Heissig, *Die Pekinger*: 171–72.

[12] Heissig, *Catalogue*.

In sum, what the Mongols did was not simply to follow a 'doctrine of mixing together' that allowed different systems to function in parallel, rather they forged a wholly new syncretic system of astrology and its related sciences (especially calendrical). And it is this system that they imposed across the empire. Of course, as is the case today with the western governance of time and space,[13] there was invariably resistance, as well as interesting new interpretations; nevertheless, what they forged on account of the empire was something that was not possible to be maintained in the fractured landscape of the post-Mongol world. Even so, an interesting question is whether this universal and totalising vision of the Mongols, which as we know did make it to Europe and influence thinkers such as Tycho Brahe, played any role in the subsequent development of scientific thought. Or to put it another way, while the rest of Eurasia fell back into the ancient patterns of competing local astrological systems of time and space, was it only the Europeans who followed in the universalising footsteps of the Mongols?[14]

References

Abate, Mark T. 2013. 'The Reorientation of Roger Bacon: Muslims, Mongols, and the Man Who Knew Everything', in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture: East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Transcultural Experiences in the Premodern World*. Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter: 523–73.

Allsen, Thomas. 1997. *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles*. Cambridge.

———. 2001. *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. Cambridge.

———. 2002. *Technician Transfer in the Mongolian Empire*. The Central Eurasian Studies Lectures No. 2. Bloomington: Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University.

———. 2014. 'Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia', in Reuvan Amitai and Michal Biran (eds), *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*. Honolulu: 119–51.

App, Urs. 2010. *The Birth of Orientalism*. Philadelphia.

[13] Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time*.

[14] In contradistinction to much recent scholarship that has tried to downplay the revolutionary developments in early modern Europe—provincialising it if you will—, Jack A. Gladstone has recently reminded us that we do in fact need to recognise that something transformative happened (Gladstone, 'Divergence in Cultural Trajectories').

Atwood, Christopher P. 2004. 'Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in the Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century', *The International History Review*, vol. 23 (2): 237–56.

Baumann, Brian G. 2008. *Divine Knowledge: Buddhist Mathematics According to Antoine Mostaert's Manual of Mongolian Astrology and Divination*. Leiden.

Biran, Michal. 2005. *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World*. New York.

Burnett, D. Graham. 2000 (1 September). 'Writing the History of Time: Greenwich Village', *The New Republic*, vol. 223(11): 37–45.

Elverskog, Johan. 2005. 'Mongol Time Enters a Qing World', in Lynn Struve (ed.), *Time, Temporality, and Imperial Transition*. Honolulu: 169–71.

Gladstone, Jack A. 2012. 'Divergence in Cultural Trajectories: The Power of the Traditional within the Early Modern', in David Porter (ed.), *Comparative Early Modernities, 1100–1800*. New York: 165–93.

Heissig, Walther. 1954. *Die Pekinger lamaistischen Blockdrucke in mongolischer Sprache*,[*The Beijing Lamaist Blockprints in Mongolian*]. Wiesbaden.

———. 1971. *Catalogue of Mongol Books, Manuscripts and Xylographs*. Copenhagen.

Ogle, Vanessa. 2015. *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870–1950*. Cambridge.

Melville, Charles. 1994. 'The Chinese Uighur Animal Calendar in Persian Historiography of the Mongol Period', *Iran*, vol. 32: 83–98.

Ristuccia, Nathan J. 2013. 'Eastern Religions and the West: The Making of an Image', *History of Religions*, vol. 53(2): 170–204.

Schuh, Dieter. 1973. *Untersuchungen zur Geschicte der Tibetischen Kalenderrechnung [Investigations on the History of Tibetan Calendar Reckoning]*. Wiesbaden.

Sivin, Nathan. 2009. *Granting the Seasons: The Chinese Astronomical Reform of 1280, with a Study of its Many Dimensions and an Annotated Translation of its Records*. New York.