

# The Mongol Empire and the Prosperity of the Silk Road

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**Abstract.** With much reference to the frequent wars and annexations of the Mongol Empire, its emphasis on trade throughout its institution and practice was of much a contrast against its belligerent nature. It was not only the spoils of war that the Mongol Empire thrived upon, but also the pro-trade environment which they created fostered their development. The author hereby offer an analysis using historical records regarding certain measures, rules, and regulations the Mongol Empire adopted during its sovereignty, providing certain insights on several conditions the Mongol Empire created and maintained, which later casted significant impact on structuring a stable trade environment, while further establish the connections between these institutional factors and the development of the Mongol Empire. The author also makes a brief comparison between the trade of the Mongol Empire and the Silk Road Economic Belt, which China and its surrounding nations are building today, thereby offering certain insights from a theoretical standpoint.

**Keywords:** Mongol Empire; Silk Road; Institutional Analysis.

## 1. Introduction

The Mongol Empire, being the largest contiguous land empire in the history, has been of great interest and value for institutional studies. With the goal of determining the predominant factor that promotes trade under such a regime, the author by first shall discuss the historical background of the Mongol Empire, then the author will further extend to its relations with the rules and regulations fostering such a pro-trade environment. The author shall end with an inspection on the Silk Road Economic Belt that China proposed in 2013, with comparisons and insights based on previous discussions.

### 1.1 Exterior and Interior Environment

Whereas the overland Silk Road was segregated by Jin (sometimes written as Kin, Jurchen Jin, Jinn, or Chin), Liao (also known as the Khitan Empire, or the Great Liao) and Jurchen (collectively describe several East Asian Tungusic-speaking peoples, descended from the Donghu people), the Mongolians were also encompassed by those potential antagonists. As typical as any nomadic tribe of that era, the Mongolians must commit to barter trade, which particularly involves trade with regimes like Jin and Xi Xia (Western Xia, or Great Xia, also known as the Tangut Empire, and known as Mi-nyak to the Tanguts and Tibetans) [1]. They were poised at a position of absolute disadvantage, for they were subordinate to Jin due to historical reasons and were extorted tribute violently, which indicates that they must breach a way out to survive.

In terms of the interior environment of the Mongolian regime, the Mongolian tribes could be separated into two categories based on their economy and culture: hunting and grazing [2]. There were boundaries between the two originally, but they started to merge later. The travelling merchant of different ethnic groups between the grasslands and cities became messengers connecting nomadic culture and farming culture before the establishment of the Mongol Empire. Merchants seek protection from the nomads, and the nomads who had been in a closed state for a long time also hoped to obtain necessary goods and information from the merchants. This complementary relationship naturally led to the close relationship between nomadic culture and farming culture. But both patterns of living still left the Mongolians underdeveloped, and together with the exterior factors, induced great disadvantages in their barter trade.

## 1.2 Outcomes

The Mongols were aware of the limitations casted by both their exterior and interior environment. While actively preparing for territorial expansion, they carefully maintain the relationship with the surrounding regimes (countries, regions, nationalities, and ethnic groups) through trade. Due to stronghold of Jin and Xixia, together with a natural barrier of the sea, the Mongolians were forced to commit to the west; this might well propel them for future annexations as well as the development of the Silk Road based on oasis and the vast grasslands.

Genghis Khan conquered Naiman (a medieval tribe originating in the territory of modern Western Mongolia) and annexed all their land, fought three times against Xi Xia and finally forced them into a peace treaty including their subordination [3]. Whilst on the other side of the map, people from Uyghur (a Turkic ethnic group originating from and culturally affiliated with the general region of Central and East Asia) and the Semu people (31 Semu categories referred to people who came from Central and West Asia,) tributed to the great Khan, together with their willingness to serve as the humble vassals of the forceful Mongol Empire; Genghis Khan accepted them with complacency and prepared himself for the revitalization of the Silk Road with a rather unified environment.

## 1.3 The “Trigger”

After the initial territorial expansion of the Mongols, the territory of Mongolia and the territory of Khwarazm became contiguous. The capital of Khwarazm, Urgench (Köneürgenç) was a hub connecting Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the Turkic steppe tribes in the Kazakh region and East Asia, the crossroads and trade centre for merchants [4]. Genghis Khan proposed equal trade to Khwarazm with absolute sincerity, sending 450 traders together with nearly all the fortunes of the early Mongol Empire to trade in Kunya-Urgench [5]. But his trust and goodwill encountered atrocious violence and solidified his will to conquer the west. During the first expedition to the west, the Mongols annexed Khwarazm, and conquered all the nations or regions along its way. The expedition was in fact a fulfilment of their economic purposes, amassing fortune, cloth, silk, as well as food and livestock [6].

## 2. Institutional Analysis

After the first expedition, the Mongol Empire that stretched across Eurasia emerged, settling the squabbles of different regimes and religions, bringing temporary peace along its way. The formation of a sole sovereignty served as a key factor for an establishment of "peaceful" trade.

### 2.1 Courier Stations

During the period of Genghis Khan, the method of Mingghan (a social-military unit of 1,000 households) was created and adopted as the management for these courier stations [7]. With each two Mingghan supporting one courier station, sufficient supplies and military protection and provided for the merchants [8-10]. Genghis Khan also laid solid foundation in the west, he ordered to establish trade routes, build courier stations and provide manpower as well as livestock accompanying it. This created the oasis Silk Road and improved the trade conditions; it reduced the pressure of the northern grassland Silk Road as well.

Courier stations also served for military, political and cultural purposes. The government and the military use these courier stations to convey orders and transport supplies, thus they were precious instalments for a stable sovereignty. Civilians along the oasis silk road also got the chance to communicate with the outside more frequently, cultural exchanges between the oasis dwellers and outside changed their way of living and propelled their future developments.

### 2.2 Garrison

As per any regime with a vast territory, the Mongol Empire is due to face internal issues. The internal squabbles between different factions and religions inside the empire as well as potential rebellion made garrison was a desideratum for the empire. The appointment of officials and the use

of military was indispensable to the integrity of the empire, both to establish proper administration and quenching the potential mutinies, or even coup d'état.

After Genghis Khan conquered Central Asia, he stationed and appointed a group of officials in various cities such as Khwarazm and Khorasan. For example, he appointed Yelü Eshai the administrator of Samarkand, Kunya-Urgench, Bukhara and other places [5]. During the empire's expedition to the west, many soldiers from central Asia were captivated, thence left in Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai, to prevent these remnant enemies from making a comeback, Genghis Khan established the patrols along the western border.

After Möngke Khan throned, he strengthened the control in the west and central Asia to prevent the potential chaos caused by the conflicts between his faction and the faction of the former Khans. It was due to a transition of power from the faction led by Chagatai Khan and Ögedei Khan to the faction led by Möngke Khan through a series of events. Möngke Khan also added the administration of Bechbaliq (or Beshbalik) to handle the military affairs in the west.

### 2.3 Religious Tolerance

During the reign of Genghis Khan, he held a tolerant attitude towards various religions and treated all religious denominations equally. The Mongol Empire covered a large body of the religions in the world, such as Shamanism for the Mongolians, Buddhism for Tibetans, Tangutians and the Han People, Taoism and Manichaeism for people from Jin and Southern Song, Islam for people from Uighur as well as other western nations, Christianity for people from some tribes on the Mongolian plateau as well as countries like Kipchaks and Russia.

Religious tolerance led to the thrive of Islamic traders. Because of the attitude of Genghis Khan and the worship of the "Yellow God of Wealth (Vaiśravaṇa)" by the Mongolians, almost all Mongolian nobles have been obsessed with doing business and making profits since Genghis Khan [11]. The capabilities of the Islamic traders soon captivated the Mongolian nobles (who still lacked the tact of trade); A trusteeship was then formed; they were granted with permissions to run the exchequer as well as businesses of the nobles. During the periods of Ögedei Khan and Güyük Khan, with regards to the policy of religious tolerance, a free flow of merchants, missionaries and travelers were realized; Buddhism, Islam, Shamanism and Christianity co-existed in the empire. Provided with the fertile soil of trade, the Islamic traders prospered and stimulated the development along the Silk Road.

### 2.4 Selection of Officials with Talent of Trade

The Mongolian dictators were particularly fond of officials with talent of trade; the dictators also appointed rich merchants to collect taxes on their behalf. After Genghis Khan conquered Khwarazm, in addition to enfeoffing the vassal kings, he appointed Khwarazmian Mahmud Yalavach and his son Masqud (Mas'ūd Bek) who were good at financial management, he also appointed Darughachi (officials in the Mongol Empire that were in charge of taxes and administration in a certain province) to supervise and manage the cities and towns in Central Asia.

After Ögedei Khan throned, Mahmud Yalavach was appointed to administrate Transoxiana, the place where the Mongolians defeated Khwarazm (the country of origin of Mahmud Yalavach). Even after the transition of power between the two factions, Möngke Khan still appointed Masqud as an administrator to run the government.

The Mongolian emperors believed in using the appropriate talent to run the government, it fostered a stable economic environment, promoting further trade as well as the emergence of towns that lived on trade, handicraft, and logistics [6]. The selection of officials stabilized the country, whilst bringing prosperity to both the empire and the Silk Road.

### 2.5 Law Enforcement

Yassa (de facto law of the Mongol Empire) was enacted to protect private property and handicraft, as well as provide measures to subsidize merchants. Whoever commits the crime of theft can use a

livestock to pay for the crime or use his son instead of a livestock, the Yassa also stipulated that if the thief does not have property and sons, he will be killed like a livestock [12]. Yassa created a political environment favoring the merchants and craftsmen, thus incentivized trade, as well as the later developments of the silk road. During all three conquests to the west, on the contrary to all its decimation and massacres, craftsmen were surprisingly all well protected.

The administration of the government was chaotic when Möngke Khan enthroned, for the vassal kings could enact Yassa by themselves, and noyans were allowed to collect their own taxes. Möngke Khan took back all the sealed documents and plaques issued during the reign of the previous three Khans; vassal kings were not allowed to affect administrative affairs without consulting the ministers of the Khan ever since [13].

## **2.6 Social Welfare**

### **2.6.1 Anti-poverty measures**

The empire had a set of rules to render support for those who suffered from penury (especially slaves who could not afford aliments due to a lack of private property). For example, Ögedei Khan give one sheep out of every hundred sheep from taxes to the poor [14]. Apart from this particular rule, there are also various records of anti-poverty actions from different sources, specifying rules and regulations the empire adopted to help the poor (including a specific tax to collect funds), this shed light on their goal of a better social environment that everyone has a shelter to live and a way to make a living.

### **2.6.2 Compensation and tax exemption for the bereaved (those with military exploits)**

Fatalities are inevitable during wars. Mongol Empire, with its belligerent nature, conducted three expeditions to the west and thrived upon it; the empire built a system to prevent death from disincentivizing its soldiers, as well as maintaining a stable social environment. Records shown that Genghis Khan used methods such as absolution for the surrendered enemies, raising the child of the bereaved (such as Weidaer in 1206) as part of his social care measures. But the author could not find the specific standards for such measures, only scattered occurrences of it from various sources.

With reference to William of Rubruck (Willem van Ruysbroeck), he recorded the rule of tax exemption for the bereaved at his year of death, which could be roughly translated as “When a person dies, people will cry loudly to express their grief, and his tax of the year will be exempted (for his family)”. The tax is more specifically called Qubchur, submitting one out of every hundred livestock to the noyans.

## **3. Conclusion**

Albeit the Mongol Empire mode of trade was rather unfair, it did breach the enclosure and thence fostered an environment for stable trade for the future. It suggested that positive international interactions are necessary, so as to maintain amicable relationships between trading partners and dissolve possible conflicts instead of harbouring resentment.

With reference to all previous analysis, it ascertains the idea that stable trade could not happen without proper infrastructure. China has been actively investing in the construction of railroads and highways, with the goal of building an intercontinental transportation network. The management of the "Road and Belt" shall be conducted with tact as well. It could not be sufficiently exercised without proper international co-operation and co-ordination on a broad range of issues. The Mongolians did an exceptional job on building a multi-cultural and multi-religious environment, which served as a key factor for the prosperity of the Silk Road.

The conditions today do share the same characteristics of having a wide range of ethnic groups, religions and ideologies along the road. A system that does not avail such characteristics is deemed to fail, and it should be one of the major concerns for our foundation of the modern "Road and Belt". During the periods of the Mongol Empire, its regime promoted trade through a series of actions,

including but not limited to legislations and support from the upper class. This indicates that the support of the government is indispensable for building a large-scale trading environment. The Chinese government has to play as a key factor in this scenario.

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