MONGOL'S CHINA. THE YUAN DYNASTY

MERCHANTS, ARTISANS AND DOCTORS

Both the elite and the peasants fared badly under the Mongols. But other groups were favoured by the Mongols, especially merchants and artisans. Trade, both internal and external, was encouraged and merchants lived much better than in previous Chinese dynasties.

To foster trade, paper currency was issued in huge quantities, which is why Marco Polo saw so much of it. But Mongol and Muslim merchants did much better than their Chinese counterparts. They were grouped in powerful merchant associations, the ortogh, and could acquire loans at low rates of interest.

They could also travel through all Asia with inscribed metal plates (paizas) to be used as passports; Marco Polo carried one of these on his return journey to Venice. The merchants had also the right to stay for free in any one of the fourteen hundred postal stations erected by Kubilai at an enormous cost.

The artisans were the other group most highly favored by the Mongols, even if they were classified as hereditary households. The artisans engaged in engineering works, in the production of military supplies and of luxury items attained better positions than in any traditional Chinese dynasty.

The Mongols loved beautiful objects and understood their commercial value. Any Asian Art Museum has Mongol objects, because they became such great producers of them. Their textiles were gorgeous and so were their ceramics. Easy access to Persian cobalt will foster a massive use of blue color in pottery, and blue-and-white porcelain will become a permanent feature of Mongol pottery, that the Ming will inherit.

Doctors and astronomers were also highly favored by the Mongols. Nestorian and Muslim physicians from Central Asia and Persia were attracted to Kubilai's court, while some of the sons of the Chinese elite, who now the path to officialdom had blocked, turned to the medical profession.

With the Mongols, doctors gained a higher status in China. Astronomy thrived with the increased relations with Persia, and through the Islamic Astronomical Bureau established in Beijing in 1271.

Many Iranian astronomers and astronomical instruments found their way to China and the Muslims astronomers brought with them a significant amount of Greek science.

This is the Muslim astronomical establishment with which the Jesuits will have to compete a couple of centuries later. Yuan China was, in all aspects, a multi-cultural and a multi-religious empire.

Kubilai maintained the tolerance that had been a landmark of the Mongols' religious policies, even if he was very influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, whose magic aspects linked with Mongol shamanism.

One Tibetan monk, 'Phags-pa, gained a great influence in Kubilai's court, and was even appointed head of all the Buddhist clergy. In exchange, 'Phags-pa proclaimed Kubilai to be a reincarnation of Manjusri, the Bodhissatva of Wisdom. In 1269 Kubilai commissioned 'Phags-pa to create a new national script to replace the Uyghur-based script that Chinggis had first adopted.

The idea was to have a script suitable for the transcription of all the languages of the empire, especially Mongolian and Chinese. Both the Chinese and the Mongols eyed the new script with reluctance and 'Phags-pa script was only used systematically in official documents and in official workshops like those making the paiza, the trading passports made of metal, or weaving gold-thread textiles.

The Chinese shunned the script reform, but it became quite fashionable in far-off Europe where Italian early Renaissance painters, like Giotto, reproduced it, albeit erroneously, in the trimmings of religious figures or on the headbands of their characters.