

MONGOL'S CHINA. THE YUAN DYNASTY

A COSMOPOLITAN EMPIRE

Kublai distrusted the Classical Chinese script, because it was the landmark of the scholar-official class. Instead, he promoted colloquial language in writing, and it found its way in Yuan literature, especially in theater, that flourished in Yuan China.

All kinds of theatrical representations, from puppet show to great stage operas, were staged in the city's streets and in important banquets, generally accompanied by music. With the Yuan drama, the Chinese theater becomes for the first time a literary genre.

Buddhism was not the only religion favored in Yuan China. Many other religious communities, like Muslims and Nestorians, expanded greatly. The city of Quanzhou today holds the more impressive remains of enormous mosques that bear witness to the presence of a large Muslim community while lavish stone coffins and elaborate tombstones attest the status of these elite Muslims.

Quanzhou also had a thriving community of Nestorians and its maritime museum has an impressive collection of Nestorian tombstones, where angels seating in the Buddhist meditation position and with huge Buddha's ears hold in their hands a Christian cross emerging from a lotus flower.

Even the Manicheans had their community in Quanzhou: the only remaining Manichean temple in the world is to be found on the outskirts of Quanzhou.

In this Chinese rendering of Mani, he looks almost identical to Buddha, both for his dress and his meditation position. But Buddha has closed eyes that focus on his internal spiritual life, while Mani, following the ways of Western gods, looks straightforward into the eyes of his worshipers.

These three Quanzhou communities, Muslims, Nestorians and Manicheans, testify to maritime connections between China and Persia in Yuan times. On the other hand the Yangzhou tombstone of an Italian girl, Caterina Viglione, who died in 1342, reminds us of the significant presence of Italian merchants in Yuan China: Marco Polo was only one of them.

Mongol China housed an astounding variety of beliefs, customs, creeds, foods, languages, scripts and philosophies. They were a highly cosmopolitan dynasty, as all medieval European travelers attested. But all this diversity was a result of alien rule and the Chinese elites were not interested in it.

The Chinese elite shielded itself against any Mongol influence and in fact survived the Mongol experience with their own culture intact. Kubilai reigned for 38 years and on the whole was a good emperor in that he left a prosperous state for his successors.

But his last years saw a swift decline. To retain his power and to occupy his powerful military establishment, Kubilai, like all Mongol Khans, needed to wage war.

The repeated expeditions against Japan in 1274 and 1281 were decimated by adverse climatic conditions, that the Japanese interpreted as sacred winds or Kamikaze, sent to protect their islands. Successive expeditions against tropical south-east Asia, where their horses proved useless, and against Java in 1292, also ended in complete failure.

For the Mongols these successive defeats entailed not only an economic setback but also a reversal of propaganda: their aura of invincibility vanished with their defeats.

All the others Yuan emperors were short lived and Kubilai's death in 1294 revealed the inconsistencies of Mongol rule. The Mongols themselves were divided between those in favor of Kubilai's accommodating policies and those cherishing a more Mongolian way of life.

By mid-14th century corruption was rife amongst the Mongol masters and their Muslim tax-collectors, and the budgets that should have been used to maintain river dykes and irrigation works disappeared into their pockets.

When droughts and floods arrived and the Grand Canal broke its dykes famine, plague and rebellion came together and the Mongol days in China came to an end.