

Integration of Mongols into Chinese Political System

-- The Role of Imperial Examination System in the Yuan Dynasty

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the imperial examination in the reign of Emperor Yanyou (1314-1320 A.D.) promoted the integration of Mongols into the Chinese political system. By using primary sources in Chinese, Japanese, and Farsi, such as Yuan Shi and Jami'al-Tawarikh, and secondary academic sources, I argue that Yanyou imperial examinations increased the number of Mongol officials and promoted the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials in the Yuan Bureaucracy. The Yanyou imperial examination gave Mongol commoners a chance to become officials, encouraged more Mongol nobles to become officials in Han regions, and promoted the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials.

Keywords

Mongol Empire; Yuan Dynasty; Emperor Yanyou; Imperial Examination; Ethnic Integration.

1. Introduction

Kublai Khan (Kublai Khan, or Borjigin Kublai, was the founder of the Yuan Empire) established the Yuan Dynasty (1271 A.D.-1368 A.D.) based on the ruling territory of the previous Han Chinese (According to *Nancun Chuogenglu(Notes Made While Resting from the Plow)* written by Zongyi Tao, Han Chinese refers to the combination of Hanren(northern Chinese) and Southerners (southern Chinese)) region and adopted a Chinese traditional political system to effectively manage Han Chinese people and efficiently collect taxes.[1] However, the ruling Mongols hardly integrated into this political system because of distinct traditions and political cultures.[2] Since Kublai Khan's time, therefore, positions in the political system were monopolized by Han Chinese and Semu People. (According to *Nancun Chuogenglu(Notes Made While Resting from the Plow)* written by Zongyi Tao, Semu refers to people who come from Central and West Asia. It is told that there are 31 categories among them.).

The imperial examination, as a traditional method to select promising officials, has been utilized by Chinese emperors since the 6th century and has gradually become indispensable for the Chinese political system. Realizing that, Khans in the Yuan Dynasty, even before the Yuan Dynasty, were active in recovering the imperial examination which had been discontinued due to the warfare and the frequent change of regimes in the 12th century.[3] Ogodei (Ogodei Khan, or Borjigin Ogodei, was the son of Genghis Khan and the second Khan of the Mongol Empire.) Khan and Kublai Khan tried to restart the imperial examination that had been discontinued for decades due to the warfare and regime changes in China. However, their ambition to restart the imperial examination remained at most limited and had little impact on governance and ethnic integration. [4] In 1314, Ayurparibhadra, commonly known as Emperor Yanyou, ascended the throne and restarted the imperial examination.[5] He did so with the goal of coopting more Han Chinese into his Mongol court. [6] Different from his ancestors, Yanyou successfully restarted the imperial examination and facilitated the integration of Mongols into Chinese political system.

I find that Yanyou imperial examinations increased the number of Mongol officials and promoted the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials in the Yuan Bureaucracy. More specifically, the Yanyou imperial examination's impact was threefold: it gave Mongol commoners a chance to become officials, it encouraged more Mongol nobles to become officials in Han regions, and ultimately promoted the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials.

Scholars of the imperial examination and Mongolian studies ignored the relationship between the imperial examination in the Yuan Dynasty and ethnic integration. First, existing studies on the Imperial Examination focused on a wide range of topics and covered different historical periods. Some scholars focused on the development of the imperial examination in Chinese history, analyzing the imperial examination and its influence on societies. Wang Rui [7], He Gan [8], and Feng Yuan [9] all divided the imperial examination's development into different parts and only spent one paragraph on the situation in the Yuan Dynasty. Some scholars do focus on the imperial examination in the Yuan dynasty, but mainly discussed the education institutions and the education system. Lao Yan-Shuan and Xu Man focus on the educational institutions, such as the Bailudong Academy and their developments in the Yuan dynasty. [10] Sun Xianjun [11], Zhang Taichang and Huang Benjia [12], and Shao Jianchun and Wu Hongyun [13] wrote on the education system in different regions and analyze its influence on local education and academic development. However, the analysis of the imperial examination itself is in lack. Second, scholars focusing on Mongolian history showed little interest in imperial examination. Xiao Qiqing, an outstanding Mongolian history scholar, has written several articles about the integration and Sinicization of Mongols into Han Chinese culture during the Yuan dynasty. Xiao illustrates how Mongols, especially Mongol nobles, mastered sinology and became Sinicized. [14] However, imperial examination was stunningly absent in his analysis. Xiao only provides two reasons why Mongol nobles easily passed the imperial examination and became officials in the government: first, nobles could more easily learn from outstanding Han scholars; second, nobles needed to maintain their social statues through the imperial examination. [15] However, these findings fail to explain most cases. More importantly, the analysis should expand beyond Mongol nobles so as to examine the overall effect of the imperial examination system.

I provide a more well-rounded analysis on the imperial examination's impacts on ethnic integration in three perspectives: its impact on Mongol commoners, on Mongol nobles, and on the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials. I focus on imperial examinations in Yanyou's time because those exams marked the reinstatement of imperial examination after several decades of discontinuation and therefore brought the greatest impact on Mongols' integration into Chinese political system.

2. Data and Source

This paper contains different types of primary sources, including official and unofficial records, collections of works, and annals. The official record that provides the most references is *Yuan Shi (History of Yuan)* written by Song Lian, the most authoritative scholar in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the dynasty right after Yuan. Based on the tradition of Chinese regimes, the new regime was required to write a detailed and impartial official record for the previous regime, so as to showcase its recognition to the previous regime and its legitimacy to inherit the power from the previous regime. *Yuan Shi*, as the official record made for the Yuan Dynasty, is widely recognized as the most reliable source to study the history of the Yuan Dynasty. This book contains descriptions of important officials, including Xu Youren, Zhao Shiyan, Li Meng, and Wang Yi. [16] The first two are used to demonstrate the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials, and the last two are mentioned to be an example of Mongol and Han Chinese officials working together in the same position. Besides providing anecdotes, *Yuan Shi*

also records decisions made by Khans. The decision made by Yanyou to reinstitute the imperial examination and his intention to do so were recorded in *Yuan Shi*, and I utilize them to demonstrate my point that Yanyou reinstituted the imperial examination to summon promising Confucians from his subjects.

More anecdotes are provided by *Yuanchao Mingchen Shilue* (*Brief Account of Famous Officials in the Yuan Dynasty*) written by Su Tianjue and *Jinhua Huangxiansheng Wenji* (*Collected Works of Master Huang in Jinhua*) written by Huang Jin. *Yuanchao Mingchen Shilue* is the most detailed primary source that records famous officials in the Yuan Dynasty. It is also the only source that contains histories of noble families in the Yuan Dynasty, providing depictions of later-generation officials which are hardly found in other sources. *Jinhua Huangxiansheng Wenji* was written by Huang Jin, a Yuan official enrolled in the Yanyou imperial examination. His book contains the depiction of officials in Yanyou's time, the same time with him. These two books both mention Baiju, one of the leading Mongol officials who supported Confucianism. [17][18] This paper therefore utilizes the details about Baiju provided in these two books.

Khudukdal, the first *Zhuangyuan* (*Zhuangyuan* refers to the tester who ranks number one in the imperial examination.) of Yanyou's imperial examination, is another key character in this paper. *Dongchangfu Zhi* (*Annals of Dongchang Province*) and *Cao Wenzhen Shiji* (*Collection of Cao Wenzhen's poems*) contribute to the demonstration of Khudukdal. *Dongchangfu Zhi* is the annals of Dongchangfu where Khudukdal was born. After Khudukdal became *Zhuangyuan*, *Dongchangfu Zhi* recorded how local people commemorated him, which provides indication of Khudukdal's social class. [19] Cao Wenzhen, the writer of *Cao Wenzhen Shiji*, had direct communication with Khudukdal right after he became *Zhuangyuan* and put his experience with Khudukdal into *Cao Wenzhen Shiji*, his collection of works. [20] When writing this paper, I regarded these two sources as the most reliable description of Khudukdal and quoted information from them.

Secondary sources also play an important role in this paper. *Iminzoku no Shina Touji Shi* (*History of the Chinese rule of a foreign nation*) (*Chinese Ruling History of Alien Ethnic Groups*) written by Ryotaro Komatsu, one of the most authoritative Mongolian history scholars in Japan, provides the numbers of enrolled testers from different backgrounds and states that 63% of enrolled testers were from the noble family. This data helps this paper to show that descendants of nobles were more likely to gain a position in the government through the imperial examination. *Conquerors and Confucians: aspects of political change in late Yuan China* written by John W. Dardess focuses on the development of Confucianism in the Yuan Dynasty, providing unique views of Confucians and Mongol Confucianism supporters. I refer to its evaluation on Dorji and Toghto, two Confucian supporters mentioned in my paper.

Yuandai Jinshi Jikao (*Collection of Scholars in the Yuan Dynasty*) written by Xiao Qiqing offers both data of the number of people from different ethnic groups that were enrolled in each examination and individual description of each enrolled scholar in Yanyou imperial examinations, [21] providing important preference about the components of testers enrolled by Yanyou imperial examinations.

3. The Yanyou Imperial Examination Allowed Mongol Commoners to become Officials in Chinese Political System

The Yanyou imperial examination attracted Mongol commoners because it provided them with an important chance to improve their social statuses. Contrary to the common view, most Mongols were not privileged in the Yuan Dynasty because the social hierarchy of Yuan dynasty is blood based, not ethnicity based. [22] Only Mongol nobles were superior while common Mongols were in the same social class as people of other ethnic groups. They had to strive to improve their social status.

However, not all noble descendants could maintain their superior status. First, only the eldest sons of nobles had the right to inherit. [23] Second, only high-ranking generals and civil officials were granted to pass their position to their descendants. [24] Keshig army, originally the convoy of the Khan and gradually became the school of noble descendants, could be another way to keep the social status because noble sons enrolled by Keshig army usually gained a high position in the government. But the opportunities to become a member of Keshig army were occupied by several most worshiped families. Therefore, except for descendants who could inherit the official position or could be enrolled by the Keshig army, most noble sons also became commoners, and they also needed a way to retrieve their social status.

Imperial examinations reinstated during Yanyou's time became the hope of commoners. Educated by Han Confucian scholars, [25] Yanyou had the conviction that the empire should be managed under Confucianism rule which had been proved effective by Han Chinese regimes. He was aspired to summon promising Confucians from his subjects, including nobles and commoners, through the imperial examination. [26] He encouraged commoners to take the imperial examination, emphasizing "the examination should not limit the social status of testers." [27] Encouraged by the Khan, commoners actively participated the imperial examinations after the reinstatement in 1315. Some testers became famous in the future.

The imperial examinations in the Yuan dynasty divided testers into two groups: the left part, which refers to Han Chinese, and the right part, including Mongols and Semu people. The *Zhuangyuan* of the right part in the first Yanyou examination (1315) was a Mongol called Khudukdal. Although no record about his family background has been found, it can be inferred from a poem written in the same year stating, "the *Zhuangyuan* of the examination is a name I've never heard of." [28] The poet Boqi Cao was an official in the government during Yanyou's time, so he would have heard the name of the *Zhuangyuan* if his ancestor had been a noble or official. Therefore, it was highly likely that Khudukdal was a commoner. Becoming the *Zhuangyuan*, his fellow-townsmen built a street called *Zhuangyuan* Street to commemorate him. [29] Mongol commoner testers became *Jinshi* (*Jinshi* refers to testers who were admitted to become official.) and were enrolled in the government after passing the examination. Nearly 50% Mongol officials were commoner *Jinshi*, [30] most of which occupied positions of power. [31] Therefore, a number of Mongol commoner officials integrated into the Chinese political system and played important roles in it thanks to the reinstatement of the imperial examination.

4. For Sinicized Mongol Nobles, the Yanyou Imperial Examination Encouraged Them to become Officials in Chinese Political System

Kublai Khan was the first Khan to advocate of Sinicization among Mongol nobles. He encouraged them to learn Chinese culture to improve their governance in China. [32] Although Mongol nobles became acquainted to Chinese culture and were gradually Sinicized, they were more interested in arts and literature, not politics on which Kublai Khan hoped them to put emphasis. Mongol nobles actively participated in art salons held by Han Chinese. Gu Ying, a worshiped Han Chinese Confucian, frequently held art salons in his house. Taibuqa, a famous Sinicized Mongol noble, was the regular attender of Gu's salon. He even wrote couplets for Gu's house. [33] In the salons, Confucians and Mongol nobles only discussed art, not politics, so although more Mongol nobles accepted Chinese culture, only 22 of them before Yanyou's time showed their interests in the political ideologies of Confucianism. [34] Their political participation remained low in general.

The reintroduction of the imperial examination in Yanyou's reign shifted Mongol nobles' interests and motivated them to learn the political works of Confucians. The news of reintroducing the imperial examination was soon spread, and learning Confucianism became prevalent throughout the empire. Not only Mongols, people from other ethnic groups were all

enthusiastic to the examinations. For Han Chinese scholars, they had longed for the reinstatement of the imperial examination for several decades, and Confucian schools were established in their areas soon after the reinstatement of the imperial examination. [35] For Semu people, many scholars encouraged their descendants to learn Confucianism and participate in the examination.

Mongol nobles followed this trend of learning Confucianism.[36] They recruited top Confucian scholars to tutor their descendants. As mentioned above, Sinicized Mongol nobles formed solid relationship with Han Chinese Confucians by attending their salons or other art gatherings. These Confucians were willing to teach the sons of Mongol nobles. Their willingness was sometimes out of friendship, but for most of the time they could gain benefits. Monetary rewards were the most basic. For tutors being recognized by the nobles, they could work under the nobles and get decent salary, or they could seek a higher position in the government through the recommendation of the nobles.[37] The tutoring of Confucian scholars was not the only advantage of Mongol noble descendants. They often studied in *Guozixue* (*Guozixue* refers to the Imperial Academy.), where only descendants of nobles and high-ranking officials were accepted. Therefore, Mongol noble descendants were highly competitive in the imperial examination. [38] While taking up only 1% of the population, Mongol noble families contributed 63% *Jinshi*. [39] In their careers, Mongol noble descendants could easily integrate into the political system not only due to their qualified level of Confucianism, but also because they played important roles in advocating and resisting against those who tried to weaken the power of it. Baiju was born in the family of Muqali, the noble family which had the highest status in the Mongol Empire.[40] He learned Confucianism and when he was young. In the first imperial examination held by Yanyou(1315), Baiju was enrolled and then appointed as the *Taichang Liyiyuanshi* (*Taichang Liyiyuanshi* refers to Etiquette Envoy.). In 1322, he was even promoted as the prime minister. In his term of office, he practiced Confucianism and fought against the conservative empress dowager who wanted to eliminate Confucianism in the government.[41] Noble descendants like Baiju not only integrated themselves into the Chinese political system, but also became the defenders of Confucianism, the foundation of the political system. They therefore were highly respected.

5. Yanyou Imperial Examination Promoted the Cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese Officials

Yanyou Imperial Examination promoted the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials by eliminating the language barrier. Before the reinstatement of the imperial examination in the time of Yanyou, hardly could officials from different ethnic groups communicate without the help of interpreters. That was mainly because the Mongols and Semu people did not have the motivation to learn Chinese, the language of the dominant group.[42] Therefore, the government had to use various languages in different regions. The empire had three major languages--Mongolian that did not have characters yet, Arabic, and Chinese. In the Mongol region, officials used grooves to represent numbers; in central Asia and western Asia, officials mainly used Arabic; and in Chinese region, officials used Chinese. The usage of each language was managed by one high-ranking official. [43] The division of official languages in the empire limited the circulation and cooperation of officials in different places. When officials gathered, they could not communicate to each by themselves. Once the local commissioners and officials in Dadu met, they spoke their own languages and could not understand others' languages. [44] To make it more convenient for officials to communicate, the Yuan government hired and cultivated interpreters and translators. The social statuses of interpreters and translators therefore reached the peak, higher than the ones of other dynasties in Chinese history. [45] Though these two positions were heavily staffed, officials still outnumbered them.

Therefore, the language barrier was not erased when there was a lack of interpreters and translators.

The reinstatement of the imperial examination largely solved this problem. Since the imperial examination required mastering of Chinese and Confucian ideology, Mongol testers were highly motivated to learn Chinese and get in touch with traditional works in China.[46] After assuming posts in the Yuan government, these Mongols had the ability to communicate with Han Chinese officials. Compared with the previous situation, Mongol officials no longer needed translators or interpreters to help communicating, and they also mastered the thinking mode of Han Chinese, which paved the road for future cooperation that improved government efficiency. Some scholars state that the reinstatement of Yanyou did not make great contribution to the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials since these two groups of officials gathered in different positions. Zhou argues that Mongol officials were concentrated in the position of ministers, *Pingzhang zhengshi* (*Pingzhang Zhengshi* refers to Manager of Government Affairs, one of the masters in the Yuan government.), and local commissioners, while Han Chinese officials were not concentrated here.[47] This argument is biased, since the mixture and cooperation of Mongol and Han Chinese officials was common in Yanyou's reign. *Pingzhang Zhengshi*, for example, was filed with Han Chinese officials such as Li Meng and Wang Yi with other Mongol officials. This was the first time when both Mongol and Han Chinese officials were appointed as *Pingzhang Zhengshi* since the time of Kublai Khan.[48] After all, due to the understanding of Chinese and Confucianism, Mongol officials were more likely to cooperate with Han Chinese officials and therefore integrate into the political system.

The imperial examination of Yanyou also provided a platform for Mongol and Han Chinese officials to develop deeper inter-ethnic relationships, which included teacher-student relationship, colleague relationship, and marriage relationship. Marriage was the major one. Mongol nobles, or high-ranking officials, looked for promising Han Chinese testers from the imperial examination and betroth their daughters to them. Xu Youren, a Han Chinese official who finally became the prime minister of the empire, was recognized by a Mongol *Daxueshi* (*Daxueshi* refers to Grand Secretary.) called Zhao Shiyan and married Zhao's daughter. After the marriage, Xu and Zhao deepened their cooperation in politics.[49] They worked together to control the flood of Hun River and put down the revolt in the Central Plain. [50] Apart from marriage relationship, the imperial examination also motivated the formation of mentorship relations. Mentioned before, Toghto learned Confucianism since his childhood. He was the student of Wu Fangzhi, a famous Confucian and official in southern China. After becoming the prime minister, Toghto, with the help of Wu, implemented Confucianism and utilized it into his management. [51] In 1350, he adopted the taxation policy used by Confucian politicians in Song Dynasty(960-1279) to increase the fiscal income of the empire.[52] In different ways, the imperial examination helped Mongol officials form solid relationships with Han Chinese officials. This connection made it easier for Mongol officials to cooperate with dominant Han Chinese officials and therefore integrate into the Chinese political system.

6. Discussion

This article fills the vacancy of imperial examination studies and Mongolian history studies, provides arguments of how the imperial examination promoted the integration of Mongols into the Chinese political system. It also contains analysis in a variety of perspectives, focusing not only on Mongol nobles, but also on commoners and on how the imperial examination promoted the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials. In the noble part, this passage provides a new theory that "the imperial examination attracted sinicized Mongol nobles who wanted to promote Confucianism," which was not mentioned by pioneers such as Xiao Qiqing. This article is also outstanding because of its concentration on Emperor Yanyou's reign, a time

when the impacts of the imperial examination were the most outstanding. Moreover, this article utilizes considerable statistical results and special types of primary sources, including collected works, poems, and annals, to support the arguments.

There are still areas for improvement in this article. Firstly, this passage only uses primary sources and data from Yanyou's reign, so the situation and trend in other eras may be completely in accordance with the analysis in this article. Secondly, the primary sources used are mainly official records, so different perspectives from unofficial records may not be sufficient. Thirdly, this article only focuses on Mongols, which could not represent the integration of other ethnic groups such as Semu people. Therefore, this passage hopes future scholars focus on different eras such as the reign of Toghon-Temur(1320-1370) or on other ethnic groups such as Semu people. He also expects to see articles with various primary sources. More importantly, he looks forward to see articles that provide new arguments on the same topic as his.

7. Conclusion

This paper argues that Yanyou imperial examinations advanced the number of Mongol officials as well as the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials in the Chinese political system. It proposes ideas of the relationship between the imperial examination and ethnic integration, filling the vacancy of current studies. It also provides focused, detailed analysis on the imperial examinations in Yanyou's reign; broadens the extent of discussion from Mongol nobles to Mongol nobles, commoners, and the cooperation between Mongol and Han Chinese officials after the imperial examination; contributes new theories of why the imperial examination promoted the integration of Mongol nobles into Chinese political system; and gives novel analysis based on special primary sources. These novelties help future scholars generate a more comprehensive understanding of the related topics and inspire them in the methodologies of doing relevant research.

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