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Abstract

The Mongol Yuan Dynasty experienced rapid continental expansion. However, when the Mongols reached Southeast Asia in 1279, they failed, falling short with the Khmer Empire in modern-day Cambodia, the Dai Viet kingdom in Vietnam, and Champa in between. With constant attempts at conquest, the Mongols arrived and retreated from the Southeast over the following two decades, never effectively securing a foothold in Southeast Asia.

My research paper examines the physical, tactical, and strategic missteps of the Mongols that prevented them from overcoming Southeast Asia. I have established three reasons for this preclusion. First, and the most widely disseminated reason, the tropical, unfamiliar landscape and rampant disease prevented the steppe-familiar Mongols from advancing into this region. Second, the incoming Mongol invasion compelled the three kingdom forces to band together in temporary allyship, while refusing to exact recognized submission under the Yuan Dynasty *tusi* system. Lastly, the successes of the Mongols in other regions of Eurasia inspired their condescension toward the people of Southeast Asia – creating false security in their ability to seize the region. While the first point is the most widely disseminated reason for Mongol failure in Southeast Asia, my latter two assertions create a more nuanced analysis of Mongol failings further to wider historical narrative.

I will present these three ideas using research from historians including Susan Bauer and Geoff Wade, leading scholars in the polities of Southeast Asia, while connecting the Mongol's view of Southeast Asian society to *A Record of Cambodia* by Zhou Daguan, a Yuan Dynasty ambassador to Angkor. Through my examination of these scholarly sources and connections to Zhou's journey to Cambodia, I will exhibit the multifaceted reason why the Mongols were unable to usurp power from stakeholders just beyond their domain.

Keywords: Angkor, envoy, guerilla warfarse, Medival Southeast Asia, Mongol, polity, succession, tanistry, *tusi* system, Yuan Dynasty

Introduction

The Mongol Empire was unprecedented – a seeming impossibility, and an ascription to the antithesis of pastoral nomadism. The 13th century nomadic groups of the northern Gobi Desert and Kazakh steppe were similar in many respects: a similar spoken language family, a reliance on the cultivation of land and proliferation of "animal wealth," and tanistral succession. They lived in their own groupings, scattered throughout the steppe with the Tatar, Mongghols, Naiman, and the Kereyid. Then, at *kuriltai,* the Mongols established a supratribal and implemented the khanate and the once separate political entities became unified under the politicized identifier of the Mongol name, creating an unexpected unity among the "un-unifiable."

The empire was expanding outwards of Karakorum with an unprecedented ease even for the most advanced sedentary people. With the dissolution of unification following Möngke Khan's death in 1259, the Khanate split into four entities, the Yuan Dynasty, the Il-Khante, the Golden Horde, and the Chagatai Khanate. The Yuan Dynasty and East Asia under Khubilai was poised for continental dominion. However, when the Mongols reached southeast Asia in 1279, they met no success, falling short with the Khmer empire in modern-day Cambodia, the Dai Viet kingdom in Vietnam, and Champa in the interim. With constant siege and attempts at conquest, the Mongols arrived and left the Southeast over the two decades that followed, trying to surmount Khmer and Viet forces, quashing the city of Thang Long, but never effectively securing a foothold in Southeast Asia (Bauer 385). The question is: why? How did some of the Mongol constituencies reach as far as Iran and Northern Manchuria, yet not overcome a place seemingly right outside their dominion?

This essay examines the physical, tactical, and strategic missteps of the Mongols that prevented them from overcoming the land beyond the Song dynasty of southern China. Because of their geopolitical differences, lack of familiarity with guerrilla warfare, Southeast Asia's refusal to conform to the *tusi* system, and false sense of security from extreme imperial success, the Mongols were unable to usurp power from stakeholders in Southeast Asia.

Contextualization

The inefficacy of the Mongols in invading Southeast Asia was due to rapid expansionary efforts of the Yuan dynasty under Khubilai that did not account for unfamiliar terrain and military practices of the ruling people. The Mongols were unable to usurp power from the elite parties in either the Khmer or Dai Viet polities due to a semi-permanent alliance between the two. The context to this collision is quite nuanced and there were several stakes, both internal and external, that contributed to the success and failure on either side.

For the Mongols, the years that preceded their late thirteenth century conquest of Southeast Asia was dynamic, as evidenced through the introduction to *The Mongols and Global History*, by renowned Professor of Mongol History, Morris Rossabi. Following the tanistry succession of Chinggis Khan's choice, when Ogödei died, a khuriltai was held to decide the successor. After irreconcilable conflict between Sorghatani Beki and Töregene, the widows of Tolui and Ogödei and the death of Ogödei's son, Güyüg, Möngke was enthroned as the Great Khan (Rossabi 6). However, his succession was seen as illegitimate in the eyes of Ogödei's

descendants, leading to bloody opposition and recoil causing the fragmentation of the subjugated Mongol territories into four distinct entities, one being the Yuan Dynasty in East Asia led by his brother Khubilai.

Khubilai Khan now had power on the historical stage. He received territories in northern China and in turn, devised a regular administrative system and with the help of expatriate advisors, he promoted agriculture, issued paper money, and collected taxes (Rossabi 7). In 1258, indulging in the successes of Northern Chinese conquest, Möngke wanted to expand their domain beyond the Yangzi River and surmount the forces of Southern China and beyond the Southern Seas. So, he commissioned Khubilai to lead an army to conquer the Southern Song: Khubilai's most important step in achieving legitimacy (Rossabi 8).

At the center of the two strongholds that protected the Middle Yangzi basin and the coasts, Xiangyang and Fancheng, the conflict arose. In 1268, the Mongols laid siege to Xiangyang and after five years of combat, they surrendered. By 1276, the Mongols attacked the Song capital of Hangzhou, the world's most populous city and the Empress Dowager, on behalf of her five-year-old grandson, surrendered the city. After three years, the Mongols reached China's southern extremity and caught up with fleeing loyalist troops, and the leading loyalist took the emperor child and jumped to their death into the sea. The Song dynasty collapsed, and China was finally in the grasp of Khubilai (Rossabi 8).

Khubilai made it a point to integrate sedentary tradition into the daily life of the Yuan dynasty — attracting Chinese support, while also protecting the Mongols. He transferred the imperial capital of the Southern Song, Hangzhou, and the Mongol capital of Karakorum to Daidu, which signaled a concerted effort to weave Mongolian culture in with the Chinese (Rossabi 7). In addition, he quickly recognized that "Buddhism offered legitimacy because of its approval of political involvement" (Rossabi 6). In 1261, he placed Phags-pa, a Buddhist monk who had joined the court in charge of all Buddhist clergy, "and 'Phags-pa then identified him with Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, and portrayed him as a Chakravartin or "Universal King,'' offering Khubilai greater legitimacy with Buddhists" (Rossabi 6).

The Mongols were poised for successful invasion of the maritime provinces of Asia. Not only did Khubilai align himself with Buddhism, the main religious practice in Southeast Asia, he developed a government that was a confluence of sedentary prestige and Mongol tradition. Between the integration of sedentary practices, bolstering up the naval capabilities of the Mongols, and appeasing the religious majority: how did the Mongols fail at advancing to Southeast Asia?

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The answer to this lies in the only remaining primary source document that highlights society during the 13th century Khmer Empire and the Kingdom of Angkor, , and more importantly the imperial conquest that preceded it: *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People* written by an ambassador of the Yuan Dynasty Zhou Daguan.

While the Mongols were uniting and expanding under Chinggisid rule, the people south of the Yangzi River, known as the Dai Viet, Champa, and Khmer were involved in their own polital operations, that quarreled with one another. In the mid-12th century, the Annam

province on China's southern coast rebelled against the Song and became the independent Li Dynasty: the beginning of the Dai Viet kingdom (Zhou 27). South of Dai Viet, in the kingdoms of Khmer and Champa, there was consistent warfare. The Khmer in 1113 under Suryavarman II had begun to spiral down into anarchy and fragmentation; in a series of deadly internal battles, Suryavarman whipped his rebellious nobility into line. Then he turned his gaze outward. "He saw the kings of the other countries that he desired to subjugate," a contemporary chronicle notes, "... [and] he himself went into the countries of his enemies." It was his duty to subjugate the earth (Zhou 28).

The Khmer king conducted a series of raids into Champa and created panic among the Cham who sought asylum with the Dai Viet. Then the Khmer moved an offensive into Dai Viet, which proved successful. During this time, the beautiful city of Angkor was the flourishing and sprawling epicenter of Khmer success (Zhou 29). However, due to constant war and extravagant expenses, the glory days of Angkor ended almost as quickly as they commenced. The haphazard Champa confederation, unstable Khmer Empire, and broken Dai Viet dynasty had to put their historical disdain to the wayside. The Mongols were approaching.

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Zhou Daguan was sent to Yasodharapura (Angkor) on behalf of Chinese Emperor Temür, grandson of Khubilai as part of a delegation whose mission was to explore the dominions residing just beyond the Yangzi River that had yet to fall to the mercy of the Yuan dynasty in China. The notes taken during this escapade remain the only surviving account of daily life in Angkor and throw light on how the savages were viewed in the eyes of Mongol officials.(Harris vii). Zhou's input is striking as he navigates the threshold of Mongol and traditional Chinese culture. Despite being raised in China, he is a representative of a nomadic government.

Zhou is originally from Hangzhou, China: A' "bustling port city… without a doubt the finest and most splendid city in the world" (Harris 7), and, as aforementioned, was the imperial capital of China prior to Khubilai's movement to Daidu. Therefore, Zhou grew up inhabiting the threshold of Mongol practices and sedentary prestige under Khubilai.

Zhou's trip is not dated, but it is speculated to have taken place during the 1290s, shortly after Khubilai's death. In fact, the purpose of his mission, as Zhou informs us, is to "deliver an imperial edict" (Harris 8). Presumably, it was charged with proclaiming the accession of Temür as emperor and securing recognition of Mongol suzerainty, and therefore was probably a mission of peace. As to why Zhou was selected for the mission, we can infer that he was from a well-connected trading or official family, perhaps one of the families that the Mongols classified as a scholar family (*ru bu).* He may have also had a penchant for linguistics, as his book is peppered with Khmer and Sanskrit expressions (Harris 12).

Zhou is an interesting nonconformist in the diplomatic and elite practices of the Yuan Dynasty and sedentary China as not immediately separate himself from the people whom he observed. "Disaffection was a common sentiment among Chinese scholars during the period of Mongol rule in China, when a strong sense of difference often divided cultivated Chinese from the Mongols, whom the Chinese regarded as uncouth and ill-mannered, not to mention foul-smelling" (Harris 13). This sense of difference was reinforced by the Mongols' policy of

classifying their subjects into people of different types, and by their suspension until 1315 of the imperial examination system, the customary Chinese ladder to high office (Harris 13). Certain Chinese scholars were extremely disaffected — refusing to use Mongol reign titles and other indications of Mongol status. Zhou was not one of these people and respected nomadic people such as the Mongols, as evident in various respectful exchanges dotted throughout his account. Lastly, even though Zhou was alive after the attempted Mongol invasion of Southeast Asia, his remarks help contextualize and explain the tone of the era — how did the Khmer people react in the face of power usurpation, especially at the hands of the Mongols?

Geography and Guerrilla Warfare

One of the primary reasons scholars attribute to the success of the Khmer people and other Southeast Asian empires in maintaining their territory, even in the wake of the Mongols, was their nuanced knowledge of their land. At the time of the Song Dynasty cession and Khubilai's concerted efforts at infiltrating the South, the Mongols were prominent in the arid deserts of the Northern steppe, the mountainous terrain of Manchuria, the forested landscapes of Sichuan, and southern regions of China, all while maintaining connectivity and continuity throughout the realms (Rossabi 2). However, one land that was fiercely unfamiliar to the Mongols was the damp, and pallid forests south of the Chinese coasts. It was so unfamiliar, that the modestly clad Mongol descendants were appalled to find that "from the king down, the men and women all wear their hair wound up in a knot and go naked to the waist" (Zhou 49). While certainly different from what the Mongols were wont to do, it was tactically advantageous in the oppressive heat and in manoeuvring through the land without drawing attention. "The soldiers, too, go naked and barefoot. In their right hand they carry a lance, and in their left hand a shield. They have nothing that could be called bows and arrows, trebuchets, body armor, helmets, or the like" (Zhou 82). In doing this, the Khmer soldiers were able to traverse quickly and efficiently through the thick jungles without the burden of excess baggage and supplies.

Another geographical reason that the Khmer and other Southeast Asian groups were able to effectively ward off the Mongols was their experience in the oppressive heat and climate. "The place is unbearably hot, and no one can go on without bathing several times a day. Even at night you have to bathe once or twice" (Zhou 80). The heat was one of the main factors that contributed to the Mongols' ineptitude in Southeast Asia, and further geographical reasons for this ineptitude are examined in *The History of the Renaissance World* by historian Susan Wise Bauer. "The damp, unfamiliar heat, so far south from their native lands, did not help; the humidity bred bacteria and sickness thinned their ranks" (Bauer 384). The heat was a breeding ground for new viruses and infection for the Mongols and was one of the most prolific killers in the Mongols' military advancements. Furthermore, their hallmark military unit, the decimal calvary, was rendered useless by the forested land (Rossabi 9-10). In this vein, the Mongols were not able to conquer the Southeast due to their inexperience with the land and their inability to adapt to the heat. These shortcomings enabled the Khmer, Dai Viet, and Champa to engage in tactical guerrilla warfare: the bane of the Mongols' military existence.

The Mongols were not known for their stealth and are frequently examined as using psychological warfare against their enemies. Cities and villages remained in fear of the

incoming Mongol siege, understanding all too well that the Mongols rarely showed mercy. Even in the military envoys in unfamiliar terrain, it was common practice for the Mongols to send an ambassador ahead of reinforcements with the goal of receiving submission (Bauer 383). For the people of Southeast Asia, their lack of expansionistic ideals rendered this practice, and the offense-centric mindset of the Mongols, extremely alien. During the time of the Mongol invasion, the three kingdoms of Southeast Asia (Dai Viet, Champa, and Khmer) vied for the maintenance of their respective territories and employed guerilla warfare tactics against the Mongols. Upon receipt of the Mongol intent to invade, the king of Champa, Indravarman V, tried to chart a middle road (Bauer 385). He sent an ambassador to Khubilai's court to negotiate a treaty, hoping to avoid both war and subjection. However, Khubilai chose to regard the sent ambassador as a surrender. The army of the Champa retreated into the mountains where they carried on a forest guerrilla war that "the Mongols could not easily resist" (Bauer 384). The Dai Viet unleashed the same strategy on Khubilai's army. The mountainous terrain in combination with continuous back-to-back ambush attacks from the armies of the southern kingdoms compelled the Mongols to retreat (Bauer 385). Therefore, the consistent, calculated, and unexpected attacks proved to be an effective deterrent against a military that scarcely meets defeat, proving that ambush from Southeast Asia precluded their ability to sustain a foothold in the region.

In 1284, with the continuation of the Champa expedition, Khubilai sent his largest army with one of his sons, Prince Toghan, leading the troops. He won an initial victory and established an offensive front close to the Dai Viet capital city Thang Long but was once again quashed by a guerilla army. This time, the Dai Viet army had prepared by staking the bottom of the river with bronze spikes. When the tide began to run out, the Mongol river barges were caught. So many Mongols were slaughtered on the river that the water ran red and Khubilai removed all soldiers from the vicinity. The time had finally come that the Mongols gave up on the lands below the Southern Song (Bauer 384).

Simply, the Khmer, Dai Viet, and Champa's penchant for defensive strategy, understanding of their native land, and use of guerilla warfare effectively stopped the ill-prepared and equipped Mongols from having a stake in the land of the Southeast.

Incompatible Expansion and an Unforeseen Allyship

Aside from the obvious physical obstacles and limitations that prevented the Mongols from obtaining a stake in Southeast Asia, I posit that their desire for expansion caused them to make poor decisions in preparation for conquest. This polity expansion and its repercussions are examined in *Asian Expansions: The historical experiences of polity expansion in Asia* by historical fellow Geoff Wade. First, due to the vast nature of the Yuan dynasty at the end of the thirteenth century, the Mongols were not able to enact their typical policy of direct rule. Normally, Mongols would be appointed to directly rule a newly captured region (Wade 80). The overland ventures of Khubilai Khan rendered this direct rule unfeasible. As a result, the Mongols adopted the *tusi* system from China, where local chieftains and ethnic minorities would perform governing functions in newly-captured territories — ruling in a recognized submission (Wade 80). These practices were successful in China, but in Southeast Asia where the common goal is to defend the land, the kingdoms of the Dai Viet, Khmer, and Champ did

not oblige, causing the Mongols to divert crucial soldiers and supplies far away from the capital Daidu. Therefore, the Mongols were unable to seize the power of the Southeast Asian kingdoms, as they did not conform to their expansionist strategies and *tusi* polity attempts. This, in turn, caused the Mongols to head south and subject themselves to the physical barriers that the region posed — rendering their conquest a failure.

Another fatal flaw of the Mongols' attempts at overcoming Southeast Asia was their expectation that the three kingdoms in the region would be in contention with each other. The fact of the matter is that each region was impacted by internal and external strife, and in the face of Mongol attack, they banded together. In the Contextualization section of this paper, it was explained that the Khmer Empire was exhausted from warfare with the Dai Viet and Champa, as well as with the extravagance of its furnishings, that it was not in an offensive position. To the east, the "downtrodden Champa had shaken off the Khmer eminent Khmer attack" (Bauer 300). The loose confederation of tribes was unified under Jaya Paramesvaravarman I. He began intra-kingdom trading and rebuilt temples and palaces, and in turn, became one of the most prosperous nations in the southeast. "He reinstalled all the lingas of the south... and the lingas north," read the inscriptions from his reign (Bauer 300). The Dai Viet, adhering to the Southeast Asian typicality of defending land that historically belonged to the kingdom, wanted old land back from the Champa. A Dai Viet army "stormed into the north of Champa; in the battle that followed, Jaya Paramesvaravarman fell and his daughter, the crown princess Bo Dala, was taken captive" (Bauer 301). A three-way truce was created between the three kingdoms, in view of the greater threat of the Mongols. In this way, there was mutually assured assistance against the Mongols and the three kingdoms were able to uphold their claim over the land of the Southeast, as a united front – much to the chagrin and oblivion of their nomadic adversaries.

Chinese, Cambodian, Condescension

As a final remark, the Mongol ambassadors to Southeast Asia had the tendency to be condescending towards the local people. At the beginning of his account, Zhou Daguan declares that "the one thing people know about southern barbarians is that they are coarse, ugly, and very black. I know nothing at all about those living on islands in the sea or in remote villages, but this is certainly true of those in the ordinary localities" (Zhou 54). His initial engagement with these people is one that implies superiority for the Yuan dynasty, simply based on external appearance. The reason that this sentiment is ironic is that, in history, the nomads, and those who represented them, were people who faced abhorrent discrimination from sedentary peoples. For example, to the Song Chinese, the Jurchens of Manchuria were still merely barbarians. "Our vast land now smells of goat and sheep," complained the poet Chen Liang (Bauer 26). Even though the Yuan dynasty is not quintessentially nomadic, it contains systems that are mimetic of nomadic influence, some of which like the Mongol system of rank and officiality (that Khubilai replaced the Chinese examination system with), Zhou respects and agrees with.

The engagement of Zhou Daguan, an ambassador representing a nomadically influenced society, to the Khmer people undermines the previous struggles of nomadic groups and calls into question the self-awareness of an empire that expanded in the speed and manner that it

did. Zhou mentions that “[We] can see from this that although this is a country of barbarians, they all know at first hand that they have a supreme ruler” (Zhou 84), which conveys the same rhetoric that galvanized the Mongols to their subjugational success. Simply, the Mongols did not adequately prepare for the climate, temperature, geopolitical situation, or method of warfare, falsely expecting their prescriptive methods of war to work. In this way, Zhou’s condescension towards the Khmer people is emblematic of the Mongol’s false sense of security that drove their army to slaughter.

Conclusion

After Khubilai’s death in 1294, the Khanate was over, and the four separate factions of a once-unified front developed on their own time. The failed conquests of Southeast Asia caused a significant setback in Mongol advancement and cost a lot of resources. With the death of Khubilai, all Mongols pulled out, never to attempt to conquer again. Khubilai’s grandson Temür was more passive, and potentially sent Zhou there to appraise the surroundings and do record-keeping for the Yuan dynasty. There was no attempt at conquering and no sense of disquietude between the parties, other than the a few disparaging remarks from Zhou. Zhou’s account allows us to contextualize the Mongol “failure” entrenched in their sea of successes. As historians, we often look to the Mongols as the perfect military storm. Pop culture, historical epics, and the imagination of the masses portray the Mongols as unstoppable. In viewing history critically, examining where the Mongols failed is a vital part of emphasizing their innumerable successes, and enables us to shed light on underserved pockets of historical memory, such as these three kingdoms, preventing them from being lost in antiquity.

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