

The Mongol Conquests in World History

By Timothy MAY

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Research on the Mongol Empire began during the Ming dynasty in China and in the eighteenth century in the West. The study of the empire over such an extensive period has led to two research traditions that largely differ between the East and West, depending on whether the main object of research is the Yuan dynasty or the Ilkhanate. This ‘bifurcation’ of research may have resulted from different geopolitical interests as well as the vastness of an empire with a variety of cultures and languages. Both traditions, however, failed to study the Mongol Empire from the viewpoint of world history. Both China and the West have conducted research based on views confined to their own cultural sphere: researchers in China essentially studied Chinese sources while those in the West primarily used sources written in Persian. Furthermore, the branding of the Mongols as brutal barbarians and aggressors has been an obstacle to historical research on the Mongol Empire. Consequently, the Mongol Empire has tended to be treated merely as a fleeting episode in history.

As time passed, scholars have begun to question the existing perspectives regarding the Mongol Empire, which led to studies based on more diverse approaches. Scholars have stopped labeling the Mongols as aggressors and, instead, begun to consider them as rulers who shaped an epoch. Such progress prompted scholars to recognize the need to broaden their perspectives. Because the Mongol Empire wielded its influence throughout

most parts of Eurasia, it has grown increasingly obvious that fragmented research based solely on Chinese or Persian sources makes it difficult to draw closer to a historical portrait of the entire Mongol Empire. Currently, scholars studying the Mongol Empire face the challenge of equipping themselves with perspectives that transcend regional limitations to be able to describe world history.

Undertaking such a challenge, however, is not at all easy. First of all, it is difficult for an individual scholar to master all the various languages, including Chinese and Persian, used in sources related to the Mongol Empire. Moreover, it would take a considerable amount of time for an individual to examine all the research progress made in both the East and the West. Despite these difficulties, there have been continuous efforts to study the Mongol Empire from the perspective of world history. Those efforts led to the understanding that the influence the empire wielded was responsible for changing the course of world history. It thus became necessary to develop a framework for narrating the impact the Mongol Empire had on developments in world history. Thomas T. Allsen is the first scholar to perform this task in book form.

In his work entitled *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, Allsen reveals the global traits that the Mongols possessed. For this purpose, he describes the relations between the Yuan dynasty and the Persian Ilkhanate, the people who mediated their relations, and the diverse cultural exchange between the two empires in areas such as historical description, geography, agriculture, cookery, medicine, astrology, and printing. However, by largely focusing on Chinese and Persian Mongols and the political and cultural exchange between them, his research overlooks the task of unveiling various exchanges among other Mongol groups in Central Asia, Russia, and the Black Sea lowland, as well as the task of analyzing the effects of such exchanges.

Following in the steps of Allsen, Timothy May attempted to analyze the Mongol empire from a wider perspective, which resulted in *The Mongol Conquests in World History*. The book consists of an introduction and two parts. The introduction explains why analyzing the Mongol Empire's history is necessary for understanding world history, namely, because

the empire was responsible for forming an “integrated” Eurasia, and, by extension, an integrated world. The Mongol Empire’s rapid conquests and expansion steered the vast Eurasian continent toward a path of integration and exchange. Additionally, historical sources mentioning the Mongol Empire have been written in many languages other than Chinese and Persian, which establishes that people throughout Eurasia were influenced by the Mongol Empire, and which therefore makes the empire a topic that cannot be overlooked in the history of Eurasia and the world. Hence, the author emphasizes the need to consider the Mongol Empire as a “global empire” in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This is made apparent through the statement that “many of the advances that occurred could not or would not have happened without the Mongol conquests.” (p. 21) As Part One’s title, “The Mongol Conquests as Catalyst” suggests, the first section of the book examines the process through which the Mongol Empire served as a catalyst for globalization. Part One comprises three chapters that describe the historical process the Mongol Empire underwent to integrate Eurasia and the empire’s legacy, illustrating the author’s view that “the Mongol Empire is world history and vice versa.” Part One also notes an issue that arises from the concurrent discussion of the Mongol Empire and world history: it is difficult for one scholar to cover in detail sources authored in such a variety of languages. Anyone studying the Mongol Empire is keenly aware of this, and although some scholars do collaborate to analyze sources in diverse languages, such efforts fall short of completely addressing the issue. A reliance on translations of historical sources and relevant research findings therefore becomes inevitable, which implies that appropriately interpreting and making use of such translations and findings is yet another challenge facing those who wish to advance research on the Mongol Empire.

The first and second chapters of Part One address the Mongol Empire’s formation and dissolution, respectively, which are the most frequently discussed topics in historical studies on the Mongol Empire. The process through which the empire was established by Chinggis Khan and then rapidly expanded until Khubilai and Ariq Böke began a civil war that led to the unified empire’s dissolution must still be covered in order to ex-

plain the empire's state structure. Therefore, while the first and second chapters offer an outline of the Mongol Empire's history, the third chapter of Part One describes how the empire started to fuse with world history.

The title "The World of 1350: A Global World" suggests that the third chapter is likely to describe how the world became "globalized" in the 1350s. However, a closer look at this chapter shows that it mainly illustrates developments in world history after the Mongol Empire. By 1350, the empire was already at an ebb: its impact had already changed the political situation and caused world history to take an entirely new turn. It is thus odd for the author to use this year in the chapter's title. Perhaps the author was trying to avoid using the term "Mongol Legacy," which in fact continues to this day. The most obvious evidence of this enduring influence is that, unlike other peoples, such as the Xiongnu, Uighurs, Khitans, and Manchus, a country named after the Mongols still exists.

While Part One portrays an overview of the Mongol Empire, Part Two delves into the details of how the empire influenced different realms of world history. The title of Part Two, "Chinggis Exchange," has significant implications. After Columbus discovered the New World, the Old World engaged in active exchange with the new Continent in terms of not only politics, economy, and culture, but also diseases, wild life, and resources. The term "Columbian Exchange" was coined to highlight how such exchanges changed the course of world history; this phrase must have inspired the book's author to coin the term "Chinggis Exchange." Although the author is wary of giving all the credit to a single hero, he must have chosen the term "Chinggis Exchange" over "Mongol Exchange" as an acknowledgement that the various changes described in Part Two would not have been initiated if not for Chinggis Khan. The use of the term "Chinggis Exchange" also underscores that this exchange prompted a transition in world history as massive as the worldwide change the Columbian Exchange caused during the Age of Discovery. After all, if not for the Chinggis Exchange, the Columbian Exchange may never have occurred.

Details of the Chinggis Exchange are described throughout Chapters Four to Ten. Chapter Four looks at trade, which tends to be closely tied with direct exchange. Descriptions of the system of horse relay stations

and the *ortagh* (the class of a trader) merchants lead to explanations about trade along both land and sea routes. The chapter goes as far as to cover the trade beyond the Silk Road that occurred around the Black Sea. Chapter Five explains how the Mongol Empire influenced modern warfare by disseminating military tactics and weapons around the world. Having thoroughly explored the Mongols' war tactics in his previous publications, the author focuses in Chapter Five on how new tactics were used and eventually caused world history to change. In covering the Mongol Empire's political and administrative system, Chapter Six reveals that the Chinggis Exchange involved the Mongols accepting the native cultures of those they had conquered and mixing them with their own culture. Chapter Seven addresses religion, particularly in terms of how the Mongol Empire utilized various religions to run state operations and govern its conquered subjects. This method caused changes in Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, and prompts the need to analyze how the Mongol Empire transformed the world's religious landscape. The epidemic covered in Chapter Eight is the plague that swept across Eurasia. The fact that the plague contributed to the Mongol Empire's decline serves as a reminder that the fate of the empire was connected to the fates of other societies across the world, as they, too, experienced rapid change due to the epidemic. In dealing with migrations and demographic trends, Chapter Nine focuses on the fact that the migration of diverse peoples across Eurasia formed new ethnic landscapes, which is how the Mongol Empire came to contribute significantly to the Turkicization of Eurasia. Finally, Chapter Ten takes a closer look at cultural exchange to analyze how the exchange of ideas, art, culinary traditions, and other cultural artifacts contributed to the flow of world history.

Unlike other research publications, this book does not include a conclusion that summarizes the book's main content. Considering how the book's title ties the Mongol Empire to world history, a conclusion would have stated the obvious: that the empire substantially influenced the history of surrounding regions and therefore warrants examination within the context of world history. The fact that the Ming and Qing dynasties, the West Asian Safavid Empire, the Anatolian Ottoman Empire, and the Indian Mughal Empire were all born as successors of the Mongol Empire further

demonstrates how closely the empire links to world history. It is now up to other scholars to use the analytical framework provided in this book to develop diverse research topics and fill in the spaces left by the conclusion. At the end of the book, the author suggests that “in the future scholars will also give emphasis to a north-south exchange and indicate how the Mongol Empire impacted the culture of Siberia and south and Southeast Asia in greater detail.” (p. 256)

The significance of *The Mongol Conquests in World History* is already being academically recognized worldwide because the work suggests various research topics and a descriptive framework for analyzing the Mongol Empire in the context of world history. And as the author writes, “while the Mongols set the conditions and served as facilitators, most of the Chinggis Exchange was the result of the efforts of the subjects of the Mongols and outsiders.” (p. 23) In the process of globalization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, not only the Mongols but everyone else in Eurasia each played a unique role. The book’s accessibility has recently been enhanced with the publication of its Chinese translation in China, which is proof that the book is becoming increasingly considered necessary for understanding the history of the Mongol Empire.