May on Wang, 'In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200-1600'

Review published on Sunday, July 14, 2019


Reviewed by Timothy May (University of North Georgia) Published on H-Asia (July, 2019) Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)


It is sometimes said that conquest is easy, but ruling is difficult. While the Mongol conquests as well as their imperial institutions have received significant attention, less has been written about the transformation of society within the Mongol Empire, particularly at the local level. One reason for this is the lack of sources that address local events, particularly outside of large urban areas. The gazetteers of the former Song Empire in south China are an exception to this, but for northern China, it is less common. Furthermore, Jinping Wang’s work demonstrates that the experience of Song China and the Mongols cannot be applied to the former Jin domains. For this reason, Jinping Wang’s work should be of great interest, as she not only achieves a detailed study of localities during the Mongol Empire, but also sheds light on the social transformation that occurred. As the title implies, the book begins its story at the time of the Mongol invasions of the Jin Empire in the early thirteenth century and investigates the transformation of locales in northern China. The book concludes during the Ming period to provide a glimpse at the long-term ramifications of the Mongol conquests.

In the Wake of the Mongols consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, and two appendices. The book is accompanied by eighteen illustrations, eight of which are in color; four maps; and three tables. All the chapters are quite lengthy, but the author’s approach is intriguing and draws the reader into the narrative and analysis with seamless transitions. The focus of the work is on the world created by Daoist monks and nuns of the Quanzhen Daoists as well as the Buddhist clergy in the post-Mongol conquest world. This is juxtaposed against the fate of the Confucian literati in a new society where the rulers did not value the Confucian education system. Wang emphasizes that the Mongol period dramatically transformed Chinese society. Whereas the Jin and Qing dynasties were both foreign regimes, they retained the Chinese social order with a civilian bureaucracy managed by the Confucian literati. The Mongol period, however, altered this situation by largely leaving the Confucian literati on the sidelines. Throughout In the Wake of the Mongols, the author keeps two questions as the focus of her investigation: 1) How did people rebuild society after the Mongol devastation, and 2) how did their efforts alter social and economic forces in the succeeding areas (pp. 3-4)? In doing so, the author recognizes that the Mongols introduced a new system of governance by abandoning the Confucian system, but she also keeps in mind both short-term and long-term consequences and does not attempt extend her conclusions further than the evidence permits.

Buddhist monks and nuns as well as their equivalent from the Quanzhen Daoist religious order took
the lead in managing and deploying resources in localities, not government officials. The devastation caused by the Mongols left the government of the late Jin Empire incapable of providing officials who normally filled these roles. Additionally, the early Mongol government was not sufficiently organized, or interested, in assuming these responsibilities. Thus, into the leadership vacuum entered religious orders, who progressed from offering comfort and some semblance of normalcy to becoming the new social and political elite in many localities in northern China. As Jinping Wang notes, this would be the only time after the eleventh century that organized religion served as the institutional anchor of social order down to the village level.

The four chapters center on individual groups: the Confucian Literati, the Quanzhen Daoists, the Buddhists, and the Irrigation Societies, which intersected with the clergy as well as a rising military aristocracy with ties to the Mongols. The final chapter examines the continuity and change for localities during the Ming Dynasty. The structure of each chapter is the same. After a brief introduction, the author uses case studies focused on particular localities and individuals to illustrate her point. She does not unduly extrapolate from a single individual but traces their lives as members of the literati or clergy and discusses those individuals with whom they came into contact. Jinping Wang brilliantly paints a picture of local life in a number of localities in north China from just before the Mongol invasion into the fourteenth century. In doing so she not only demonstrates how each group (Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist) fared, but also how they adapted to the situation in this era of rapid change.

No society remains static, but rarely do they change as suddenly and dramatically as during a period of crisis such as the collapse of the Jin Empire. Jinping Wang successfully demonstrates that pre-Mongol Chinese society was destroyed on many levels, but a new, vibrant local society also emerged. Whereas the literati no longer were ascendant, other groups not only filled the vacuum but also took on new roles within society. Her use of individuals places the transformation on a personal level while still connecting it to the big picture. Furthermore, Jinping Wang does not simply write off the literati but explores how they adapted to their new circumstances. While some entered the military or became farmers, others found work connected to the rise the Quanzhen Daoists as well as Buddhist institutions, not only as members of the clergy but by using their literary skills and copying texts or writing sermons, et cetera. For both the Quanzhen Daoists and Buddhists of Mt. Wutai, Jinping Wang provides context for the emergence of these religious groups and analyzes not only why they became successful in securing imperial support, but also how they interacted with local groups. Her chapter on the irrigation societies brings all of these groups together. The control of water resources has always been of importance to an agricultural society, and it is clear that it was no different in Mongol China. Yet, Jinping Wang deftly illustrates the complexity of these associations that included numerous villages, but also other groups such as the Quanzhen Daoists and Buddhist monasteries who had to accommodate water-related religious beliefs (various river gods and other beings related to water) who did not normally fit into the traditional Buddhist or Daoist canon.

In the final chapter, the author shows how the Ming reversed many of the social changes that occurred in the Mongol period. With their strong ties to the Mongol imperial state as well as robust economic ties, both religious groups remained powerful institutions even with the collapse of the Yuan Empire. Over time, the Ming attempted to diminish the authority and influence of the Daoists and Buddhists, but ultimately failed as they could never completely remove other Yuan influences. Only when the central bureaucratic authority strengthened could the state truly encroach on the
religious institutions and marginalize the influence of both Daoist and Buddhist leaders.

There is much to commend about this book. The first is the author’s use of the source material. In addition to documents, Jinping Wang made extensive use of stelae for local history. These are connected to appendix 1, which is a list of unpublished inscriptions she used. Appendix 2 consists of translations of two stelae from the fourteenth century. Her work vividly demonstrates the value of the stelae in understanding the period. She provides color to her analysis by using period poetry that commented on the social changes. While the author is quick to note that the poems should be taken with a grain of salt, their messages nonetheless give us a glimpse into the minds of their authors and serve as useful social commentary. Additionally, the author does a remarkable job of providing context. While many scholars have commented on the Confucian exam system, very few have actually explained how it worked beyond generalities. By examining the life of the failed literati Yuan Haowen, we receive a nuanced description of the system at all levels and the journey of an aspiring student. Furthermore, as she discusses the lives of those who not only acquired the jinshi degree, but also those who failed in their endeavors, the reader gains an appreciation of the full gamut of the literati world. In the same fashion, the reader gains a thorough appreciation of the rise of Quanzhen Daoism, not only in terms of a brief theological overview, but also why it was successful.

One criticism of Wang’s work is that she bemoans the destruction of the Confucian meritocracy, while missing the existence of the Mongols’ own meritocracy. While it is true that those with huja’ur or personal connections to the Mongol elite benefited the most, this is not significantly different from nepotism and personal connections within other systems. Furthermore, her own case studies and description of the Confucian exam system clearly demonstrate that the exam system was not quite the ideal meritocracy that she pines for. While she is quite correct that the Confucian exam system offered many opportunities for those who succeeded, the wealthy and those with relatives already in the bureaucracy had greater success in the exams as well as finding a government position, again similar to the Mongol huja’ur connection. Also, scholars of the Mongol Empire need to be wary of the author’s usage of the term “appanage.” She views it as analogous to the Chinese term touxia, which means a “share of population, land, or booty” (my translation). It is not to be confused with ulus (a people). As the author does define this early on, any confusion should be avoided, but it is important to keep in mind as the term “appanage” can be used haphazardly in the study of the Mongol Empire. For those familiar with the touxia, it will not be an issue.

These criticisms are minor, however. *In the Wake of the Mongols* is a study that greatly expands our understanding of Mongol rule in China as well as life under that rule. The innovative approach and use of sources are to be commended as they demonstrate what can be teased out of a limited body of information without sacrificing rigor or overstating the evidence. Scholars of medieval history, particularly of Chinese history, will find the book useful for the content. Historians of all eras and locations should find the methodological approach interesting and worthy of their attention.


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/).