

Khānbaliq, The City of Assimilation

Hard and Soft Space

in the Yüan Cooptation of China

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At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Chinggis¹ Khān transformed the Mongols from a minor nomadic people into a world-conquering empire; but in the second half of the century, another transformation was due. In 1260, the Mongol Empire was rocked by a civil war between the Chinese Yüan khān, Qubilai, and the steppe traditionalist, Ariq Böke,² as well as an unprecedented military defeat at ‘Ayn Jalut.³ The era of unified Mongol expansion was ending, with the Yüan defeats in Japan in 1274 and 1281 marking the last nails in the coffin.⁴ It was time for the Mongols to settle down and consolidate power. For Qubilai Khān and his Yüan dynasty, that meant establishing a new form of legitimacy suited both to the pastoralist norms of Mongols and their assimilated steppe allies, as well as to the agrarian and urban sensibilities of their new Chinese subjects. While Mongol rule in China required substantial borrowing from Chinese tradition, the Mongols both preserved their own customs and used Chinese borrowings as a method to assimilate the Chinese to Mongol culture. Nowhere is this more clear than in the field of spatial culture, where pastoralist and sedentary cultures came into direct conflict.

Mongol Adaptation and the Chinese City

Long before the Mongols invaded China, the Chinese had been building and, more importantly, planning cities. The Chinese had been codifying the ideal proportions, organization,

¹ I will be transliterating all Mongol names as accurately as possible. Genghis will be written as Chinggis, Kubla as Qubilai.

² George Lane, *A Short History of the Mongols*, (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2018) 160.

³ David Morgan, *The Mongols: Second Edition*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 138.

⁴ George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006) 10.

and functions of cities well before first century BCE,⁵ steadily distilling several strands of Chinese philosophy into a coherent ideal.⁶ The ideal was first successfully embodied in the Tang capital of Chang'an. As Liu Xujie writes in *Chinese Architecture*:

Chang'an was surrounded by a rectangular wall... 9.7 kilometers east to west and 8.6 kilometers north to south... Inside in the north center of Chang'an were two more walled enclosures north and south of each other... In all, nine major streets cut across the city north to south and twelve transversed it east to west. These twenty-one streets defined the walled boundaries of the 110 wards.⁷

The ideal of the Chinese city was a roughly square plan, surrounded by a large earthen wall, divided into a regular grid by straight, orthogonal streets, and focused on the northern central area as the locus of power. This design, with its long history and deep ties to Chinese culture, was a cornerstone of Chinese legitimacy. It was absolutely crucial for the Mongols to co opt the Chang'an model if the Yüan dynasty was to be accepted as a legitimate Chinese dynasty.

The Mongols, being pragmatic adopters of foreign customs even in the time of Chinggis Khān, were quick to do just that. Returning to the site of the former Jin northern capital of Zhongdu, conquered in 1215 by Chinggis Khān, Qubilai Khān established his own northern capital of Khānbaliq, also known by the Chinese name Daidu.⁸ For the most part, Khānbaliq was a typical Chinese capital. Its walls were rectilinear, with three gates in each wall except the North wall, which had two. The streets were straight and connected the gates to each other across the city, dividing it into wards. Inside the main wall, a further walled complex housed the Yüan court and the palace.⁹ All of these characteristics were quintessentially Chinese, and would have resonated with the Chinese audience as a symbol of authority and legitimate Chinese rule.

⁵ Paul Wheatley, "The ancient Chinese city as a cosmological symbol," *Ekistics* 29 (1975): 147.

⁶ Arthur F. Wright, "The cosmology of the Chinese city," in *The city in late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner, (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 1977) 32-73.

⁷ Nancy S. Steinhardt, ed. *Chinese Architecture*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002) 92.

⁸ Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 62.

⁹ Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture*, 204-5.

In some ways, Qubilai Khān even outdid his Chinese predecessors. George Lane remarks in *A Short History of the Mongols* that the “imperial city was criss-crossed by canals, bridges, lakes, and gardens, all features found in traditional grand Chinese residences”.¹⁰ However, Lane understates the significance of Khānbaliq’s waterworks. Marco Polo, recounting his famous travels to Yüan China, describes one of the “gardens” of Khānbaliq thus:

This mound is covered with a dense growth of trees, all evergreens that never shed their leaves. And I assure you that whenever the Great Khan hears tell of a particularly fine tree he has it pulled up... and transported to this mound by elephants. No matter how big the tree may be, he is not deterred from transplanting it. In this way he has assembled here the finest trees in the world. In addition, he has had the mound covered with lapis lazuli, which is intensely green, so that trees and rock alike are as green as green can be and there is no other colour to be seen.¹¹

Undoubtedly, Marco Polo’s account exaggerates the extent, maintenance, and splendor of Khānbaliq’s gardens. After all, his account is a highly sensationalized work meant for entertainment, self-aggrandizement, and popular appeal. However, Andrew of Perugia, a Catholic Missionary, seems to concur. He writes that any description of Khānbaliq would “seem unbelievable to my hearers”.¹² Clearly, the gardens and waterworks were a sight to be seen. In fact, even the Chinese would have perceived them as novel, due to the advanced infrastructural technology required, such as sluice gates.¹³ More importantly, they show an extreme degree of settlement. The Mongols would have immediately understood the value of investing in defensive infrastructure like walls and gates, which had vexed them during their conquests, but large-scale infrastructural investment in spaces that were wholly aesthetic demonstrates a much deeper appreciation for sedentary ways of thinking about and inhabiting space.

¹⁰ Lane, *A Short History of the Mongols*, 151.

¹¹ Ronald Latham, trans. *The Travels of Marco Polo*, (New York, Ny: Penguin Books, 1958) 127.

¹² Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) 235.

¹³ Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture*, 205.

In the second half of the 13th century, the Yüan had begun acting as rulers, rather than conquerors, and as such they needed to be accepted by their Chinese subjects as a legitimate Chinese dynasty. Given China's long tradition of spatial power and urban planning, it was vital for the Mongols to co opt that tradition in order to legitimate their rule. The Yüan succeeded, becoming much more sedentary, constructing walls and roads according to Chinese custom and the ideals embodied by the Tang capital of Chang'an, and even developing a sedentary sense of spatial aesthetics that required them to invest in advanced infrastructure.

The Ordu Ger City and Mongol Heritage

The Yüan had become thoroughly sedentary and Sinified to appease their Chinese subjects, but it was a dangerous game to play. In 1260, Qubilai's reign had almost been ended before it began when Mongol traditionalists claimed that the Yüan had lost sight of their heritage and were no longer fit to lead the Mongol Empire.¹⁴ Even when Sinification did not incite civil war, the Mongols were still accustomed to a certain way of life, and complete Sinification was likely neither possible nor desired. As a result, Khānbaliq bore a distinctly Mongolian character in spite of its obvious Chinese influences.

In some instances, the Khānbaliq's permanent structures directly rejected Chinese norms in favor of Mongolian practices. The most obvious case of this is the placement of the palace complex. Recall that, "[i]nside in the north center of Chang'an were two more walled enclosures north and south of each other."¹⁵ In contrast, however, Khānbaliq was designed with the palace near the centre of the city, which may have been influenced by "the placement of tents in a typical Mongol military camp, with the leader at the center."¹⁶ This analysis is further supported

¹⁴ Lane, *A Short History of the Mongols*, 160.

¹⁵ Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture*, 92.

¹⁶ Lillian M Li, Alison J. Dray-Novey, and Halil Kong, *Beijing: From Imperial Capital to Olympic City*, (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005) 16.

by the accounts of explorers Marco Polo and Guillaume de Rubrouck. In Marco Polo's account of his travels, he recounts that when sitting at a banquet Qubilai Khān, "sits at a much higher table than the rest at the northern end of the hall, so that he faces south. His principal wife sits next to him on the left."¹⁷ This is strikingly similar to de Rubrouck's observation of Mongol camps. He writes that, "[w]hen they have pitched their houses with the door facing south, they arrange the master's couch at the northern end. The women's place is always on the east side, that is, on the left of the master of the house when he is sitting on his couch."¹⁸ The entire structure of the city was organized in a way that would have been intuitive to the Mongols. The centre of the camp was the centre of the city. The palace complex was the Khān's ger, oriented southward with the women to the left or East.¹⁹ In fact, the analogy may have been overtly flaunted by the Yüan Khāns. Marco Polo remarks that the palace walls were whitewashed,²⁰ which may have been a visual pun on the white felt with which Mongols covered their gers.²¹ The whole city was a coded representation of the Mongol *ordu*, and the palace was similarly representative of the Khān's ger.

However, beyond the organization of the city plan, the Mongol element would have been visible in more tangible ways. Marco Polo describes that, "[t]he grass grows here in abundance... no rain-water collects in puddles, but the moisture trickles over the lawns, enriching the soil and promoting a lush growth of herbage. In these parks there is a great variety of game."²² Essentially, Qubilai Khān imported and built a steppe in the middle of a Chinese city,

¹⁷ Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 135.

¹⁸ Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 95.

¹⁹ It exceeds the scope of this paper, but the same pattern holds true for the Il-Khānid capital at Takht-e Solaymān.

²⁰ Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 124.

²¹ Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 94.

²² Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 126.

transforming the land itself into a familiar form. And that is not all that would have struck a Mongol as viscerally familiar. Lane explains that the Mongols would even pitch their gers within the city walls and Qubilai Khān's, "sons lived close by their father in their own gers adjacent to the palace, and when one of his wives became pregnant he ensured that the last stages of childbirth were experienced in the traditional felt-covered dwelling."²³ Between the steppe-like fields of grass and the traditional gers, Khānbaliq would have been surprisingly legible to Mongol visitors and inhabitants, and might even have been refreshingly familiar after travelling through China to get there.

The Yüan had to strike a delicate balance between adapting to Chinese rulership and abandoning their own culture. If they acted too Mongolian, the Chinese would never accept their legitimacy. If they became too Chinese, they would invite civil war and insurrection. The result was a mixture of spatial cultures, where Chinese hard architecture and Mongolian soft architecture stood side-by-side, and the rigid norms of Chinese urban planning could become a coded version of the Mongol *ordu*. Moreover, from this seeming compromise, it becomes clear that the Mongols were not merely assimilating to Chinese space, but were instead transforming it, while borrowing whatsoever they found convenient in the Chinese tradition.

Impermanence and the Nomadic City

The layered meanings that went into Khānbaliq's planning showed that Mongolian and Chinese spatial practices could coexist; however, the relationship between the two cultures is best seen in terms of how the city was used. The Mongols may have built Khānbaliq, but they were not content to remain there. As David Morgan notes in *The Mongols*, Khānbaliq shared its status as capital with the city of Shang-tu, better known in the West as Xanadu.²⁴ The Mongols

²³ Lane, *A Short History of the Mongols*, 151.

²⁴ Morgan, *The Mongols: Second Edition*, 108.

had traditionally travelled north in the summer and south in the winter, providing fresh pasture land for their flocks and avoiding the worst of the northern weather. When they settled down, that tradition remained. The Yüan court was not stationary, but instead moved back and forth seasonally between the summer capital in Shang-tu and the winter capital in Khānbaliq. Interestingly, this custom would not have seemed foreign to the Chinese. Khānbaliq was not the only capital ever to be built on that site. Before the Mongols invaded, the Jin had their capital of Zhongdu in the same location, and just like Khānbaliq, Zhongdu was not the exclusive capital. In fact, the Jin had five capital cities, several of them built on the sites of capitals in simultaneous use during the Liao dynasty.²⁵ Here Mongolian and Chinese tradition needed no intermediary. The movement of the emperor and the movement of the khān were parallel traditions, and the principle difference lay in how each culture assigned historical meaning to the movement.

On the other hand, the Yüan emperors did not limit themselves to seminomadic urbanism. Marco Polo describes in an account of Qubilai Khān's travels, "[w]hen he has travelled so far that he arrives at a place called Cachar Modun, then he finds his pavilions ready pitched there...the tent in which he holds his court is big enough to accommodate fully a thousand knights."²⁶ Qubilai Khān had established locations where he could travel to a pre-assembled court of lavish soft architecture. It was a long way off from the simple felt gers of his ancestors, with Polo saying of them, "[s]o precious indeed and so costly are these three tents that no petty king could afford them,"²⁷ yet the nomadic core of the tradition remained. The Mongols maintained a culture of soft architecture and spatial impermanence by refusing to rely on cities as their only centres of power. In time, the Yüan dynasty itself proved impermanent, and when the

²⁵ Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture*, 145.

²⁶ Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Ming dynasty took over Khānbaliq in 1398, they quickly disassembled the old Yüan buildings to make way for their new capital of Beiping.²⁸ In the end, the great walled city that had stood as the height of Mongol hard architecture was disassembled as if it had been nothing more than a lavish pavillion in the Chinese countryside. Khānbaliq's hard architecture did not eliminate soft space, and its destruction calls into question whether a hard versus soft distinction is appropriate at all.

Assimilation to the Culture of Cooptation

Crucially, Khānbaliq cannot be understood merely as a compromise between Chinese and Mongol customs. The Mongols built an empire that spanned most of Eurasia, and even indirectly impacted Africa through trade, war, and diplomacy with the Mamlūk Sultanate. They adopted heavily from every culture they encountered, but they also introduced separate cultures to each other. Looking with a more nuanced eye, we can see that cultural borrowing is not Mongol culture succumbing to foreign influence, but rather a form of cooptation, which was a core value of Mongol culture that resoundingly demonstrates its power.

Cuisine is, perhaps, the clearest example of this. We can see evidence of a merging of tastes that questions the idea that the Mongols were assimilated. For instance, a Yüan cookbook called the Yin-Shan Cheng-Yao includes recipes with distinctly Middle-eastern ingredients. Historian Thomas Allsen lists elements including wheat products, chickpeas, and eggplant, among others.²⁹ The introduction of these foreign ingredients shows that the Mongols were not merely bowing to Chinese culture, they were taking elements from a variety of cultures and applying them to each other. That is to say, the Mongols did not assimilate to Chinese or Persian

²⁸ Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture*, 207.

²⁹ Thomas T. Allsen, "Cuisine," in *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 131.

culture, but rather coopted Chinese and Persian practices in order to assimilate subject peoples to Mongol culture.

Even more telling, the Mongols had their own culinary traditions that survived in spite of newfound food and foodways. One earlier account by Guillaume de Rubrouck recalls that the Mongols, “eat all dead animals indiscriminately”³⁰ and that they made such efficient use of an animal that “they feed fifty or a hundred men with the flesh of a single sheep.”³¹ These are practical measures for people living in the harsh environment of the Eurasian steppe. To the early Mongols, wasting edible meat would have potentially meant death. However, even when the Mongols left the steppe and found themselves with abundant food, their tendency to eat all of the parts of animals persisted. For example, the Chinese encyclopedia *Chü-Chia Pi-Yung Shih Lei* (*CCPYSL*) includes a recipe for *qavurma*, a stew made with, among other things, a sheep’s head.³² When food is plentiful, it seems as though people would prefer to avoid eating sheep’s head, but eating “all dead animals indiscriminately” had transcended mere necessity and become a cultural tradition strong enough to survive exposure to other cultures. In fact, historian Paul Buell points out that the *CCPYSL* was “for popular Chinese rather than elite consumption.”³³ Not only did steppe food survive, it actually found its way into Chinese cuisine. Chinese culture fundamentally transformed, becoming assimilated to Mongol culture.

By looking at cultural borrowings not as assimilation to Chinese culture, but as an expression of the Mongolian tradition of borrowing, it becomes clear that the Mongols actually maintained their own tradition and converted much of their world to Mongol culture. We can

³⁰ Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 97.

³¹ Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 97.

³² Paul D. Buell, “Mongol Empire and Turkicization: The Evidence of Food and Foodways,” in *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy*, (Leiden: Brill. 1998), 214.

³³ *Ibid.*

then apply that paradigm to space. Where we, or even Ariq Böke, might look at hard architectural spaces as un-Mongolian, or see them as proof of assimilation, the fact that Chinese space functions as part of Yüan culture, rather than in opposition to it demonstrates the successful conversion of the Chinese to Yüan culture, which is to say Mongol culture.

Conclusion

Like the Yüan Khāns who produced it, Khānbaliq was caught between the conflicting forces of two distinctive and violently opposed cultures. Straying too far in either direction would have spelled turmoil, if not outright collapse. In order to project Chinese spatial and historical legitimacy, the Yüan carefully adhered to Chinese urban planning norms, building multiple layers of walls, straight, uniform roads, and even gardens and waterworks. On the other hand, Chinese values and aesthetics were mediated by Mongolian pastoralist codes and practices. First, the city was oriented around the true centre, like a Mongol *ordu*, rather than the centre-north like a Chinese city. Second, the palace was painted white and oriented southward with women being seated to the Khān's left in the main hall, all in homage to a traditional ger. Finally, the Yüan even imported real gers and steppe-like grasses to recreate their traditional homes in a foreign land. On the other hand, the habitation of the city was distinctly transient, a tradition familiar to both the Mongols and the Chinese. In the midst of conflict, there were surprising opportunities for harmony. Finally, the establishment of permanent campsites and the ultimate impermanence of Khānbaliq interrogates the significance of the distinction between soft architectural Mongolian space and hard architectural Chinese space. However, such borrowing and compromise were actually core Mongolian values. They were indicative of the fact that the Mongols were never assimilated, but rather coopted Chinese elements and then assimilated the Chinese to Mongol culture. In order to understand Khānbaliq, we must view it through the lens

of culture and space, the power struggles that gave them meaning in Yüan China, and the politics of cooptation that was needed to balance conflicting interests and legitimize the Yüan dynasty.

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