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One of the most intriguing aspects of the Mongol empire is the extensive use of captured or submitted personnel in military operations alongside the Mongols, as tutors and craftsmen who worked for the Mongol elite, and as administrators of other conquered populations. This was a necessary strategy if the relatively small number of Mongols wished to continue to extract the maximum amount of resources from the societies they had conquered (successfully argued by early advisors like the famous Jurchen Yelü Chucai). In fact, it may be argued that one of the main reasons the Mongols were so successful in establishing and maintaining their world empire was this use of foreign personnel as administrators over the various sedentary societies they conquered.<sup>1</sup> Such was certainly the case in China, where the *Semuren* personnel formed an indispensable core of the Mongol administration.

Since the *Semuren* played such an important role in Mongol China, it is imperative that we know who they were and what they did in order to really understand that period of Chinese history. This task, which is at the heart of this book, is not as easy as it seems, since it involves a somewhat new approach to the history of Mongol China. Rather than viewing China during the period of Mongol rule as a society roughly divided between two opposing groups of conquerors and conquered, let us see it as a complex terrain that consisted of a variety of partially overlapping networks of social power in which individuals could choose among a *repertoire* of options depending on

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<sup>1</sup> It may also be argued that reliance on a large group of non-Mongol personnel, which made possible the existence of the Mongol world empire, was also ultimately the cause of its undoing, since the Mongols had thereby forsaken one of their chief sources of strength, their nomadic life and ways. This is a topic well beyond the scope of this book.

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the situation.<sup>2</sup> At the broadest level, this approach seeks to uncover how Mongols, *Semuren* and Chinese all interacted in the web of networks of political and social power in China at that time. Because they occupied a kind of liminal political and social space as, simultaneously, subjects and masters, the stories of the prominent Uyghurs presented in this study provide an unusual opportunity to see how these networks of power operated at close range.

The *Semuren* were obviously part of the conquering political elite, and with the Mongols held all of the important positions of real power in China. But they were also subjects of those same Mongols, a fact constantly reinforced by the Mongol social classification scheme and legal code imposed in China, as well as the systematic retention by Mongols of all of the top civil and military positions.

Because they governed on the Mongols' behalf, many *Semuren* also came into regular contact with the native Chinese population, especially aristocrats. While generally excluded from the ranks of power, Chinese literati – especially those in the south – retained substantial social and cultural power in their own communities. And in the later Yuan, such men began to assume roles as scholar-officials, with appointment to some of the more important advisory and ideological imperial bureaus such as the Hanlin Academy. The question of the social power of the *Semuren* in this arena is much more complex than their political power; they certainly held real power over the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Hymes's description of culture as a *repertoire*, "not a smoothly coherent system but a lumpy and varied historical accumulation of models, systems, rules, and other symbolic resources, differing and unevenly distributed, upon which people draw and through which they negotiate life with one another in ways intelligibly related to their own experiences, places in society, and purposes" is especially pertinent to my description of life for the *Semuren* in Mongol China. See his *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 5.

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Chinese population, but as they became aficionados of Chinese culture and ways, they came increasingly under the sway of the most prominent Chinese scholars, writers and literati of the time.<sup>3</sup> At a fundamental level, their success in both realms depended on the kinds of resources available to them and how they used them.

This approach pays particular attention to the types of resources, or capital, that elites possess and the strategies they employ to maximize that capital to their advantage. It draws heavily on the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. As I have already described above, Bourdieu developed a “science of practices” that tries to uncover a person’s actions meant to maximize his material or symbolic profit.<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu sees all action as “interested” or aimed at achieving a specific social goal, and central to this concept of interested action – or action as strategy – is the notion of the political economy of culture, where actions all have relevance to one’s position in the social hierarchy, and depend on one’s resources, cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, and symbolic capital (see my discussion of this above).<sup>5</sup>

Bourdieu’s science of practices, especially his thesis that all actions are embedded in strategies that will maximize a person’s place in existing hierarchies of power by tapping different forms of “capital”, is a useful way to

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<sup>3</sup> A third network of social power that this book cannot address is the competition for power and resources among the various constituent *Semuren* groups. Much further research of other groups of *Semuren*, as well as a fuller study of the Uyghurs themselves, will be required before we can adequately address this issue.

<sup>4</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1970; rpt. with new introduction, 1977), for an excellent restatement of Bourdieu’s theory of the reproduction of elites in society.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1983; rpt. 1986), 241–58.

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analyze Mongol China. Factors such as social connections and level of education are just as important as material wealth. Recognizing these hidden forms of capital allows us to conduct a much more nuanced analysis of the ways that elites were produced and reproduced than old models based on simple economic or class distinctions.

Moreover, this approach is applicable to the pre-modern world, as Michael Chamberlain has already demonstrated in his pathbreaking work on aristocrats in medieval Damascus.<sup>6</sup> In fact, he is perhaps the first scholar to apply Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social capital to premodern social history, and I have drawn from his study in my own work because of interesting similarities between the medieval Middle East and Mongol China. One of the most striking of these parallels is the patrimonial nature of medieval Middle East society, and the fact that there was a noticeable lack of formal institutions through which elites established and maintained their identity and power. Chamberlain studies how elites in Damascus acquired and passed on status, and some parallels can easily be drawn between the Middle East and Mongol China (or, for that matter, other parts of the Mongol empire).

Chamberlain studies biographical materials of literati to inquire how those persons gained and maintained their status and power in Damascene society. He concludes that they had one especially important resource at their command, knowledge, and used knowledge, especially literacy, as types of social and cultural capital, to survive and thrive as members of the elite, and to pass their status to their descendants. He finds that the medieval Middle East was patrimonial in nature, and that status did not depend solely on one's place in formal institutions, such as a civil bureaucracy. One of the most interesting aspects of

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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his study (and model for this book) is the use of biography by the Damascene elite as the single most important method by which they manipulated and displayed their cultural capital, their knowledge. He concludes that biographies served as unique vehicles for the elite to imagine and construct their social universe.

Chamberlain's approach is applicable to studies of the *Semuren* in Mongol China, since they were clearly specialists in the same kinds of technologies of knowledge as their Damascene counterparts, and they engaged in similar literate pursuits, especially using biographically oriented writings to manipulate their identities. But perhaps most important, his approach suggests that "examining the practices of social reproduction enables us to establish interrelations between domains that historians have considered distinct."<sup>7</sup> Connecting what have been assumed to be separate networks of social power in Mongol China should help us see how the fusion of nomadic and sedentary social systems affected each of the several groups brought together by the Mongol conquest.

One of the major yet largely unexamined consequences of the submission of the Gaochang Uyghurs to the Mongols was the development by that diaspora elite of techniques and unique forms of capital by which they produced and reproduced their status. What happened when these largely sedentary, highly cultured personnel were assimilated into the Mongol nomadic social structure, with its very different orientation of hierarchies of power and ways of obtaining and transmitting status? Certainly, those members of the Uyghur elite who were physically relocated to serve throughout the Mongol empire now had to conform to a nomadic-oriented social system that originally had few entry points for outsiders. The Gaochang Uyghurs already had a well-established system of bureaucratic and

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<sup>7</sup> Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice*, 22.

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honorific titles of Turkic, Persian, Tokharian and Chinese origin that defined elite status and power. Once the Uyghurs submitted and were integrated into the Mongol hierarchy, they were subjected to a very different form of social organization within unfamiliar constellations of power relationships. In order to maintain even some semblance of their former status in this new social arena, the *Semuren* had to adapt to this new situation, and they did so by means of the only resources available to them as diaspora people, their social and cultural capital.

When the Uyghurs were sent into sedentary areas conquered by the Mongols as officials, the situation became even more complex for them. Now, the *Semuren* political elite had power over the natives, but if they wanted to integrate into local social circles in China, and compete in that arena of social power, they had to compete with the Chinese on terms other than the exercise of raw power. They could only become recognized according to terms laid down and accepted by the Chinese *shidafu*. One of the larger questions that frames this book is to compare the strategies used by *Semuren* to maintain and/or construct identities as political and social elites in the Mongol, and in the Chinese arenas.

The first Uyghurs inducted into service came from a largely urban society and controlled several different kinds of resources of value to the nomadic Mongols, including their writing system, their experience in administering an ethnically and socially diverse population that ranged from nomadic to sedentary groups, the troops that they could command on behalf of the Mongols, and their credentials as men of high culture. Their social capital included their explicit association with the Uyghur *idiqu* who had submitted voluntarily to Chinggis Qan, and their own network of relationships amongst themselves. Acquiring these men as advisors provided Chinggis Qan a certain degree of spiritual and ideological legitimacy as a grand

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qan, but he also put them to good use in military campaigns, as administrators, and as imperial tutors.

This pattern of engagement is clear from the case studies examined here. All of the men associated with the Uyghur *idiqu* in 1209 were immediately inducted into the Mongol administration, which consisted mainly of members of the Mongol imperial clan. These men served in a wide variety of civil and military roles, but most of them were distinguished by their fluency in their native written language.

But this early pattern of *Semuren* duties changed over time, especially after the center of power shifted from Qarakhorum to China proper under the last grand qan Qubilai, who began his reign in 1260. When he completed the conquest of Song China in the 1270s, he reunited all of traditional China for the first time since the Tang period, and opened the south, long the economic and intellectual heartland, to foreign domination. Now the Mongols controlled all aspects of society in the south as well as the north, and the Chinese elites were cut off from their traditional avenues of social power as members of the imperial civil bureaucracy even there. Mongols and *Semuren* dominated the highest offices, and the Chinese personnel had to be satisfied with lower level positions. In fact, it was probably the imposition of the Mongol social and administrative system that had the most profound impact on the Chinese population at the time.

But while the Mongols and *Semuren* personnel now held political and military power throughout China and determined the fate of the Chinese population, the Chinese remained the arbiters of their own culture, at least within their communities in southern China. If the Mongols and *Semuren* in China wished to gain the acceptance and cooperation of the Chinese population in this new era, then they would need to rely on something besides the exercise of raw power. The Mongol qans adopted a *realpolitik*

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stance in southern China, and the *Semuren* who were sent to south China shared in this shift.

In the cases examined in this book, virtually all of the Uyghurs who served in southern China saw their careers and lives change in some important ways, not least of which was a gradual distinction between the civil and military spheres of power. Members of the Uyghur families we have examined ended up serving exclusively in the civil bureaucracy by the time they had been in south China for one generation. This should not be read as evidence that all Uyghur *Semuren* became primarily civilian officials (since there are other examples of Uyghurs in Mongol China who continued to serve in military capacities). But it is interesting to note that by the early fourteenth century, the Mongol administration began to look more and more like the traditional Chinese system, with strict division between civilian and military spheres and a formal hierarchy of power where title of office correlated with one's power and duties.

Many of these same *Semuren* also began to interact in meaningful ways with Chinese aristocrats in the south, for example, by having their sons educated in the Chinese tradition, buying property, and establishing new permanent residences there. Among the cases examined in this book, this all happened after these Uyghurs had been transferred south. And why did they do this? Probably for several interrelated reasons. They were undoubtedly genuinely attracted to Chinese cultural modes and ways, as we can see in examples such as Xie Wenzhi, who is said to have got the bug as a very young boy. They were probably also canny, sensing a diminution of Mongol power in the south and over time. Perhaps they even sensed that Mongol rule of China would not last so very long, and were thus positioning themselves to be able to survive a future loss of Mongol political authority in China?



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The stories of these Uyghur *Semuren* provide us with a unique view onto the process of elite production in Mongol China. First, these *Semuren* all seem to have built and sustained their status on a national level. Since *Semuren* were moved around regularly in their positions, it is not surprising that that group constituted a national political elite. But they also reconstituted a national social elite of the type that Chinese scholar-officials had not enjoyed since the days of the Northern Song. These Uyghurs circulated throughout the country in their postings, and maintained social alliances with other *Semuren* and Chinese literati in similar scope.

Most of the Uyghurs examined here had at least two marriages, one with a *Semuren* partner and one with a Chinese partner. In most cases, it does not seem these people married within their locality.<sup>8</sup> Rather than focusing on marriage within one's home district, marriage within a status group seems to have been the driving force behind those unions. This can be seen, for example, in the marriages entered into by members of the Lian and Xie families.

The Uyghur *Semuren* we have examined also associated with the most prominent Chinese literati of the time, regardless of where they lived. It is true that some relations forged between Uyghurs and Chinese were based on local community ties. For example, several Chinese writers from Jiangxi appear to have developed friendships with various Xie family members, not surprising since Xie Wenzhi and his family lived there for some thirty years. And on the other hand, while Uyghur *Semuren* may have tended to marry outside their own locality, it does not necessarily follow that Chinese elites also did this in any significant numbers. After all, *Semuren* probably would

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<sup>8</sup> Much more work needs to be done to confirm whether this was the case, since there was relatively little data on the marriage partners of these Uyghur *Semuren*.

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have been moved about much more frequently and more widely than their Chinese counterparts. Whether or not some members of the Chinese elite in Mongol China also adopted a more national strategy to retain and build up their own status and social power, the fact that this particular group of *Semuren* did so at least problematizes the assumption that all elites in Mongol China relied on purely localist strategies and relationships to assert their social power.

What do these case studies of Uyghur *Semuren* reveal, in the final analysis, about the process of elite production and reproduction in Mongol China? In China, at any time, elites were formed in two ways. First, the imperial government had the power to name any individual it wished to positions of power and authority, and often did so. Elites generated by imperial fiat were acceptable to society because of the legitimacy of the imperial government in the eyes of the educated population. Those people entered the stream of upward mobility solely on the basis of imperial choice, though that imperial choice may well have been based on merit or ability, as well as on other factors such as ethnicity and clan or political alliances.

This method contrasted with the second way in which elites were formed in China, by a hierarchy of status that was generated by Chinese society itself on the basis of commonly accepted values and the ideal of merit and ability, which was in theory open to almost all men in China. In this system men achieved the highest level of status by meeting the *shidafu* qualifications. These were assessed by the state, especially from the Tang period on, primarily through the three-level examination system. The same *shidafu* qualities also determined men of slightly lower status who, while not passing the state examinations, imitated the *shidafu* in their lifestyles because of their wealth (derived mainly from land ownership).

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The Mongols initially relied almost exclusively on the first pattern to generate elite groups, although even before they had conquered the south there was a half-hearted attempt to reinvigorate some of the traditional Chinese methods. In fact, they adhered quite closely to their own nomadic customs in generating elites, especially in such institutions as the qan's bodyguard and inheritance of office. Over time, and especially once the Mongols had brought all of China under their control, they began to use and reinvigorate some of the Chinese systems and hierarchies of status. Chinese, but also some *Semuren* and Mongols, also took advantage of these systems of upward social mobility. We have seen several examples of Uyghurs who were admitted into the bureaucracy and advanced in office on the basis of their having competed in the civil service examinations. But the Mongols continued to rely on their own power as the imperial government to select elites, even as they instituted some of the Chinese institutions. This dual system of producing elites and social mobility was one of the ways in which China under Mongol rule differed so dramatically from native Chinese dynasties.

The question remains, why did any *Semuren* feel the need to compete in the Chinese system of elite production, and have their elite status determined by mechanisms and standards based on Chinese cultural norms and standards? After all, they already had preferential access to power simply because they were *Semuren*. Moreover, all of the individuals seen in this book could, and often did, claim office by inheritance.

If the stories of these Uyghur *Semuren* indicate larger patterns in Mongol China, then it appears that their liminal existence, which originated with their diaspora experience, prodded them to seek arenas in which they could garner the most social power. Since they already had the power invested in them by their Mongol masters as members of the political elite, they sought to develop

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complementary loci of power as social elites among the Chinese population that could be exercised for different purposes among a different group. These Uyghurs were drawn to Chinese culture out of an apparently genuine interest, and their history and ongoing experience as men of culture and learning undoubtedly equipped them to satisfy the cultural, social and intellectual standards set down by the Chinese literati. By investing materially, socially and intellectually in that national community of Chinese literati, they became part of a group that survived and, to varying degrees, prospered in China long after their first benefactors, the Mongols, had departed the scene.