Introduction

Six centuries after the collapse of the Mongol empire, it continues to confound historians. The Mongols integrated a wide variety of regions and peoples, each with its own local traditions, beliefs, and forms of organization. Few scholars possess the daunting linguistic and historical training necessary for comprehensive study of the Mongol empire. At a minimum, scholars need a firm command of classical Persian and Chinese, the major documentary languages of the empire, and preferably some Arabic, Turkish, and Mongolian. One might easily expand the list to a dozen classical and modern languages. In addition is the small matter of reading and contextualizing all those documents. Finally, and perhaps most challenging, is the task of synthesis, looking beyond the fragmented parts to perceive the greater whole.

Understandably, scholars often focus on one slice of the empire, most commonly units that correspond fairly well to contemporary nation-states. These studies often trace the unfolding of native political, cultural, economic, social, or intellectual traditions, with various degrees of attention to the impact of Mongol rule. A second major concern has been the interaction between the metropole—various Mongol courts throughout Eurasia—and local elites. Especially valuable has been the investigation of how local elites, both the well established and arrivistes, sought to advance their own interests within the matrix of the Mongolian empire. This dynamic of accommodation constitutes an essential element of empire. As Charles Maier has observed, “Empire is a form
Introduction

of political organization in which the social elements of those who rule in the dominant state . . . create a network of allied states in regions abroad who accept subordination in international affairs in return for security of their position in their administrative unit.” Several studies have drawn attention to ways that local elites from Armenia, Kart, and Rus to Tibet, North China, and Koryŏ forged ties with the Mongols to consolidate their position at home.

Single-slice studies are invaluable and provide the nuanced analysis possible only through mastery of the intricacies of difficult documentary traditions and careful consideration of prior cultural and political developments in a given area. Unfortunately, this kind of training and perspective can easily result in a balkanization of research and a fractured sense of the Mongolian empire.

Less examined but equally vital are the frameworks of empire within which both elites and commoners from disparate allied (or subjugated) lands interacted. The Mongols relocated sizable populations throughout Eurasia, often taking technical specialists from one part of the empire and resettling them in areas where the Mongols found their presence most convenient. Elite intermarriage between ruling houses, the practice of sending young princes as hostages to the Mongol court, service in the personal guard of the Mongol khans, great state banquets, and regular gift-exchanges were among the ways the Mongol empire fostered political allegiance and integration among a variety of regions and peoples. Single-slice studies only poorly capture this critical synchronic dimension of the Mongol age.

Another imbalance plagues the study of the Mongol empire—diachronic perspective. The dramatic early decades of world conquest and the glories of the mature empire during the mid- to late thirteenth century have been studied in great detail. The Mongols’ decline and fall have in contrast languished in relative neglect. All the world knows Chinggis Khan; few recognize Toghan-Temür (1320–70) or Abu Sa’id (d. 1335), the last khans of khans to control East and West Asia, respectively. The fading decades of Mongol empire lack the larger-than-life figures and the clear plotline of war, conquest, and glory. With expansion came greater complexity; with decline, chaos. The parade of short-lived rulers, endless court intrigues, and countless regional uprisings across the page seems more an avalanche of unfamiliar names, dates,
and places than a coherent narrative. Nonetheless, the age of Mongol domination did not end in the thirteenth century, and generalizations about the empire are impossible until we better understand the fourteenth century.

This work is an effort to address some of these problems. Inevitably it is a compromise. Although informed by considerations of the Mongol empire as a whole, it focuses on a discrete geographical area—Northeast Asia. I use “Northeast Asia” to refer to the kingdom of Koryŏ (918–1392) on the Korean peninsula, southern Liaodong (southern Manchuria), Shandong, and the territory northeast of the primary Mongol capital in eastern Eurasia, Daidu (present-day Beijing). Thus, I am looking at more than a single kingdom but far, far less than the entire empire. Similarly, although it considers the emergence of Mongol structures of empire in Northeast Asia throughout the thirteenth century, this study analyzes warfare during the tumultuous mid-fourteenth century and its impact on Mongol rule. Finally, I argue that a more nuanced appreciation of dynamics in Northeast Asia during a time of crisis can shed light on similar developments elsewhere in Eurasia and, more generally, on the nature of the Mongol empire.

The Red Turban Wars

The largest rebellion of the fourteenth-century world occurred in its most affluent and powerful empire, the Great Mongol Nation (Yeke Mongghol ulus), or the Great Yuan ulus (Dai Yuwan ulus), as it was known in East Asia. The Great Yuan ulus controlled territory corresponding to today’s People’s Republic of China, Mongolia, and southern Siberia and exercised profound influence over Tibet and Korea. At the core of the rebellion, or more accurately many related rebellions, were the Red Turbans. Loosely organized and inspired by a heady brew of apocalyptic millenarianism rooted in Buddhism, the Red Turbans produced dozens of important military and religious leaders. During the mid-fourteenth century, these leaders clashed with Yuan imperial regulars, locally organized Chinese militias, and largely autonomous Chinese and Mongolian warlords. They also established regional regimes that shaped the lives of millions of people during the 1350s and 1360s.

The destructive Red Turban wars are most commonly approached from the perspective of Chinese history. The battles were fought largely
on Chinese soil, nearly all the leaders and followers were Chinese, and they contributed to the fall of an alien regime (the Mongol Yuan) and the rise of the last Chinese dynasty, the Ming (1368–1644). Thus, in recent decades and in past centuries, most scholars have tended to approach the reconfigurations of the late Yuan as a prelude to the Ming dynasty’s rise. Distant from the epicenter of early Ming rule in Jiangnan (the arc of affluent cities and their hinterlands radiating out from present-day Shanghai), developments in Northeast Asia, in contrast, are frequently shunted to the margins. Few have considered the significance of these rebellions in the wider context of the Mongol Empire or East Asia.

The fighting in the Northeast Asian theater of the late Yuan wars was a major international event. It is difficult to imagine that an episode of similar magnitude in European history—hundreds of thousands of imperial regulars, royal troops, local militias, and rebel soldiers fighting for more than five years across approximately 250,000 square miles (about the size of France or the state of Texas) in a strategic region with consequences that would be felt for decades—might be passed over in near silence. Yet, not a single English-language study has examined this important facet of the Mongolian empire’s collapse. Consideration of the Red Turban wars in Northeast Asia deepens our understanding of several major developments of the mid-fourteenth century: the renewed importance of military men, intensified diplomatic activities among an unusually wide variety of actors, and precarious state control of local society and resources.

The Red Turban campaigns were both a cause and a symptom of the growing prominence of military men. The rise of military warlords in the Yuan during the mid-fourteenth century has been well studied in the context of Chinese history. Scholars of Korean history, too, have noted the emergence of powerful generals, one of whom ended the Koryŏ kingdom and established the Chosŏn (1392–1910). Closely linked, these developments should be seen as a regional trend that also included the rise of such Mongolian figures as Naghachu and Gaojianu in Liaodong. The Red Turban wars illumine both points of commonality and significant variation in the role and impact of military men across the region.

Similarly, the intensification of diplomatic activity within Northeast Asia occasioned by the Red Turban wars sheds light on patterns that normally do not emerge with such clarity in dynastic chronicles. Simul-
Introduction

taneously, these shifting military and political exigencies altered relations both between the ruling houses of the Great Yuan ulus and Koryŏ and between the thrones and their nominal, but increasingly autonomous, servants. Powerful Mongol leaders in Liaodong struggled to adjust to a world in which Daidu’s writ seemed increasingly distant and allies closer to home grew more vital. These Mongol military commanders alternately cajoled, threatened, and courted the Koryŏ throne (and more local figures along the northwestern and northeastern borders of Koryŏ). The Koryŏ court’s triumph in the Red Turban wars threw into relief its strategic importance to competing interests within the Mongol court and showed how closely intertwined political elites in Northeast Asia had grown. During the 1350s, 1360s, and 1370s, Great Yuan ulus ministers, the Koryŏ court, local Mongol commanders in Liaodong, and Chinese warlords far to the south all invoked the Red Turban campaigns to advance their interests. The particular ways that they employed the Red Turban wars illumine the increasingly precarious balance of alliance and autonomy, of past ties and future opportunities.

Finally, the Red Turban wars provide insight into more local political and socioeconomic developments throughout Northeast Asia. The Red Turban campaigns held a different strategic importance for Koryŏ’s King Kongmin (1330–74) than they did for the Great Yuan ulus’s khan of khans, Toghan-Temür; their impact on domestic political dynamics mirrored that divergence. The Red Turban wars throw into relief the precarious position of the Koryŏ king vis-à-vis the aristocracy in his own capital, Kaegyŏng, his uncertain control of material and labor resources in the countryside, and questions about the loyalty of the military to the throne. Red Turban forces twice invaded Koryŏ in large numbers, occupying both Sŏgyŏng 西京 (hereafter referred to as the Western Capital, present-day P’yŏngyang) and Kaegyŏng 開京 (the dynasty’s main capital and site of the central government, modern Kaesŏng), driving the court south to Pokju 福州 (present-day Andong) severing government control over much of northern Koryŏ, throwing royal finances into chaos, providing fertile ground for deadly intrigue at the Koryŏ court, and greatly increasing the prominence of military leaders in regional and dynastic politics.

Although Red Turban forces sacked Toghan-Temür’s secondary capital of Shangdu, his primary capital, Daidu, held firm. Developments
to the south in the economically critical regions of present-day Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian commanded more of his attention and resources than did the Red Turban campaigns in the northeast. Nonetheless, the Red Turban wars in Shandong and Liaodong reveal the limitations of local Yuan governance, the steady militarization of society, and how overland and maritime transportation networks that once united the empire could be turned to its subversion. They facilitated the flow of war refugees beyond government control and the movement of rebel forces to vulnerable areas in the Great Yuan ulus.

Themes of This Study

Four related themes run through my attempt to place the Red Turban wars in the wider context of Northeast Asia and the Mongol empire: the need for a regional perspective versus that of dynasty or country; the process and consequences of integration under the Mongols; the tendency for individual and family interests to trump those of dynasty, country, or linguistic affiliation; and finally, the need to see Koryŏ as part of the wider Mongol empire.

Several scholars, perhaps most notably Thomas Allsen and Sugiyama Masaaki 杉山正明, have undertaken global studies of the Mongol empire.\textsuperscript{5} Lacking their linguistic and historical gifts, I have taken up a more modest project—exploration of the northeastern corner of the empire during the chaotic mid-fourteenth century. This study eschews an exclusive focus on any one country. The Great Yuan ulus encompassed much more than just China proper. In fact, the term “Yuan dynasty,” with its misleading connotations of a Chinese-style dynasty, is perhaps best avoided.\textsuperscript{6} It directly administered the vast expanses of Mongolia, Liaodong, and the transitional zone between the steppe and the sown only intermittently controlled by Chinese dynasties. The Yuan also expanded southward into areas never before subjugated by the Chinese. Finally, the Yuan exercised greater influence in Koryŏ and Tibet than almost any Chinese regime. Given the enormous scale of the Great Yuan ulus, developments in one of its regions frequently had significant repercussions elsewhere in the empire. Exclusive focus on a single component of the story—whether China, Korea, or the steppe—misses the big picture. Such a perspective also risks miscasting even the disaggregated elements.
Northeast Asia formed an important part of the Mongol empire. Developments there are fundamental to understanding the nature of both the Mongol empire and the new post-empire world emerging in the 1350s and 1360s. In Northeast Asia, Jurchen, Mongol, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese interests intersected (and would continue to intersect until the last days of imperial East Asia). The collapse of the Great Yuan ulus reshaped Northeast Asia perhaps more dramatically than any other region of East Asia. To understand this transition, or series of transitions, one cannot examine single dynasties in isolation. Neighboring polities nearly always influence one another, and the Mongol period witnessed much intensified interaction.

My decision to focus on the region of Northeast Asia rather than China, Korea, or Liaodong is linked to a second theme of the book—the unprecedented integration under the Mongols. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Mongol rule extended from the Pacific coast to eastern Europe, from the forests of Siberia to subtropical southern China. The largest contiguous land empire in history, it ushered in a new scale of global integration. Under the Mongols, everything from people, textiles, and foodstuffs to religion, art, and precious jewels, from scientific technologies, military hardware, and administrative ideals to microbes, spices, and sartorial fashions flowed more broadly and more rapidly than ever before. Entire peoples were uprooted, and ethnic identities remade.

In the context of East Asian history, many have noted that the Mongols unified “Greater China” for the first time in centuries, bringing the north and south together under one rule and greatly facilitating economic integration and cultural developments in areas as varied as theater, painting, thought, and geography. The incorporation of southern Chinese territories into the Mongols’ global empire “exploded the cramped, localist perspective of the Southern Song, a perspective imposed as much by geopolitical confines as by politics and ideology.” At the same time, as numerous studies have elucidated, such groups as Tibetans, Turks, Muslims, Jurchens, and Khitans played a large role in the Great Yuan ulus. In Northeast Asia, the Mongols forcibly relocated tens of thousands of Koryŏ subjects to southern Liaodong. Later, other inhabitants of Koryŏ followed voluntarily in search of economic and political opportunities. New administrative structures of the empire cut
Introduction

across old dynastic borders: the Mongols established bureaucratic offices in the Koryŏ capital of Kaegyŏng; they created military zones in northern Koryŏ that reported to Daidu rather than Kaegyŏng; and they set up overlapping jurisdictions in Liaodong under Mongol nobles, former Koryŏ military men, and a variety of Chinese, Jurchen, and Koryŏ bureaucrats. Overland and maritime transportation networks bound the region more tightly than in previous centuries, facilitating the flow of personnel, material, and culture from Kaegyŏng to Liaodong, Daidu, and beyond.11

If we think in terms of region rather than nation or dynasty and if we bear in mind the new levels of economic, political, military, and social integration, it is easy to understand why personal and family interests often trumped those of dynasty, country, or linguistic affiliation. This, my third theme, was particularly true in time of rapid change. If the rise of the Mongols transformed world history and culture, the empire’s collapse in the mid-fourteenth century had similarly profound consequences. The sprawling, loosely knit polity’s fall not only brought decades of suffering, death, and unrest but also created new political dynamics, opportunities, and vacuums. The patterns of integration forged by the Mongols profoundly shaped behavior during the empire’s twilight. Half a century ago, Henry Serruys, a clear-eyed scholar of daunting industry and exacting standards, observed apropos Sino-Mongol relations, “A national feeling in the modern sense that one belonged to a definite nation, or was a member of a specific race sharply distinct from any other one, hardly existed in China in the fourteenth century. Loyalty was loyalty to a reigning house, a dynasty, a leader, a general, an army commander.”12 In fact, I would argue that political, military, and economic ties transcended those to individual dynasties or countries. The integrative structures of the Mongol empire provided those who lived through the chaotic decades of the fourteenth century a wider perspective that facilitated cooperation and alliance across dynastic or linguistic affiliations.13 The empire’s collapse reflected its quiddity.

Finally, this book argues for the need to see the Koryŏ kingdom as part of the Great Yuan ulus. The ruling Wang dynasty was part of the Eurasian elite created under the Mongol empire. The Wangs were küre-gen, Chinggisid in-laws, and full participants in a set of institutions that incorporated elite Tibetans, Uyghurs, Persians, Georgians, Armenians,
Introduction

and others into the Great Mongol Nation. Much Korean scholarship casts Koryŏ’s position vis-à-vis the Mongols as unique or anomalous. Scholars have debated how Koryŏ under the Mongols should be characterized: defeated in battle but still administratively distinct; conquered and subjugated; or autonomous but subject to Mongol interference. Others argue that since Koryŏ culture and identity survived, the country must have been independent. The focus on independence or identity in the face of empire is understandable given the context of aggressive, invasive Japanese colonization of Korea during the first half of the twentieth century and the succeeding cold war. However, framing the question in such terms obscures more than it illuminates. The Mongols generally showed little interest in converting their subject lands to Mongolian culture or custom.¹⁴

Koryŏ was far from unique. Its position was analogous in many ways to several small and midsize polities throughout Eurasia, such as the Sa skya regime of Tibet, the Uyghurs of Turfan, the regional “lords” (naxarars) of Armenia, the princes of Rus, the Qutlugh Khanid dynasty of Kirman, or the Karts of Herat, whose regimes the Mongols either incorporated or created.¹⁵ The destruction of the Song, the Jurchen Jin (1115–1234), and the Khwārazmshāh were the exceptions, vitally important, but still not the rule. The Mongols incorporated polities and ethnic groups, both steppe and sedentary, whenever feasible. As the following chapters demonstrate, Koryŏ during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries must be considered in the global context of the Mongol empire.¹⁶ Although the depth and accuracy of their understanding varied widely, observers from Western Europe and West Asia understood that Koryŏ had fallen under Mongol dominion and that Koryŏ envoys regularly traveled to Mongol capitals.¹⁷ Their knowledge of Koryŏ derived, of course, from the Mongolian matrix that facilitated the flow of information throughout most of Eurasia.

Two Men and a Woman

This study is also the story of two men and a woman. The men were the rulers of the Great Yuan ulus and the Koryŏ dynasty—Toghan-Temür and King Kongmin, respectively. The woman was Toghan-Temür’s Korean-born wife, Empress Ki. Less renowned than his illustrious forefathers Chinggis Khan (1167–1227) and Qubilai Khan (1215–
Introduction

94), Toghan-Temür nonetheless held the throne longer than any other Yuan ruler and more than four times as long as any other Mongol emperor of the fourteenth century—from 1333 to 1370. King Kongmin, too, enjoyed an unusually long reign for fourteenth-century Korean rulers (1352–74).

Both men have mixed reputations. Many have noted Toghan-Temür’s efforts to revitalize the Great Yuan ulus in the early years of his reign. Perhaps more ink has been spilt about his shortcomings: contemporary observers criticized Toghan-Temür for his lack of interest in matters of state; some decried his debilitating enthusiasm for Tantric Buddhism, sex, and elaborate ceremonies; still others struggled to square his obvious intellectual abilities with his failure to conform to Confucian ideals of a moral sage. Later historians further excoriated him as a cynical manipulator who cast aside powerful ministers once they were no longer of use or had grown dangerously powerful. In some ways, he was an odd figure. In contrast to most Mongolian nobles, he disliked alcohol. Instead he found solace in painting, calligraphy, and boating. Ultimately, however, he is known as the last Mongolian emperor to rule China, the man who lost the jewel of Qubilai’s empire.

Most accounts hold that King Kongmin also began auspiciously. Editors of the mid-fifteenth century Official History of the Koryŏ Dynasty praised the king for his intelligence, compassion, and early successes in wresting greater autonomy from the Mongols. Writing in the wake of five decades of Japanese colonial rule and in the midst of the cold war period, Korean historians of the twentieth century also warmed to these elements of Kongmin’s legacy. Like Toghan-Temür, he was a gifted painter, a man of refined sensibilities who disliked the hunt but appreciated the ferocity of his prey. Scholars often see the death of his beloved Mongolian queen in 1365 as a turning point. Overwhelmed by grief, the king is said to have lost interest in government, yielded the reins of power to an unprincipled Buddhist monk, and turned to handsome young men to fill the gaping hole created by his wife’s death. Prominent scholars such as the late Kim Sang-gi 金庠基 hold that these actions hastened the Koryŏ dynasty’s fall. Thus, for some he is a romantic, even tragic, figure, who began well but was destroyed by loss and grief.
The two men struggled to maintain power in a time of accelerating change: bloody purges at court, growing militarization of local society, and a series of devastating floods, epidemics, and famines throughout the empire. The campaigns against the Red Turbans shaped the worlds of Toghan-Temür and King Kongmin. They affected economic resources, social policy, personnel decisions, and military strategy. The course of the campaigns figured in the fortunes of leading ministers and generals at the courts of both men and in the relations of the two rulers to their respective servitors. Finally, the rebellions had a palpable impact on relations between emperor and king, between the Great Yuan ulus and the Koryŏ dynasty.

And what of the woman? Beautiful, ambitious, and a brilliant politician, Empress Ki was the most influential woman in mid-fourteenth-century Eurasia. Having won Toghan-Temür’s affection and secured her status as empress, she built a powerful patronage network that stretched from the Yuan court to the provinces, from the Mongolian capitals of Daidu and Shangdu to the corridors of power in Kaegyŏng. Empress Ki’s ambitions for her son, the heir apparent, would imperil both her husband and King Kongmin. Although Chinese and Korean accounts portray her as conniving, unprincipled, and dangerous, Ki reflected the more general status of women in the Mongol empire, which allowed significant political power to women, even non-Mongolians. At the same time, her particular passions and ambitions shaped domestic and international relations throughout Northeast Asia in specific ways.

To tell this story, I have brought together several bodies of scholarship that usually stand separate, principally studies of the late Koryŏ period, the late Yuan period, and the Mongol empire in general. I have drawn on court chronicles, private histories, policy proposals, letters, essays, temple inscriptions, and poems written in classical Chinese from the Great Yuan ulus, the Koryŏ dynasty, and to a lesser extent the later Ming and Chosŏn dynasties. In order to make sense of Northeast Asia under the Mongols, I have made liberal use of the excellent work of scholars working in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean who have examined everything from art patronage, religious practices, and political reform to military institutions, maritime trade, and cultural transmission. My debt to them is great and gratefully acknowledged.
Better capturing the interlocking connections of this period, a regional perspective gives due consideration to discrete political borders but also makes clear the larger developments of the day. The organization of this book reflects this approach. It begins with a bird’s-eye view of the Mongol consortium during the mid-fourteenth century to better contextualize events in East Asia. From there, it reviews the challenges that the Yuan faced during its last decades. Having established the problems, approaches, and resources available to the Yuan court, I then focus on developments in the Northeast, that is, present-day Shandong province, Hebei province northeast of Beijing, southern Liaodong, and Koryŏ. Another way to think about the region under examination would be to say the lands bordering Bohai Bay and the northern Yellow Sea and their hinterlands.

Chapter 1 examines the integration of Northeast Asia under the Mongols. It begins with a consideration of governance, most especially that of Liaodong and Koryŏ, under the Mongols. These structures incorporated several key groups, including powerful Mongolian nobles, ethnic groups placed under the control of Korean allies, and finally administrative and military units in northern Korea and Kaegyŏng that reported directly to the Great Yuan ulus. The chapter concludes with a survey of other forms of integration such as culture, religion, economics, and the military.

Chapter 2 argues that the collapse of Mongol rule in North China, most especially the Capital Region during the fourteenth century, was not a foregone conclusion in 1350. It then traces the spread of banditry, famine, and disease, the rise of the Red Turban commander Mao Gui, his seizure of Shandong, his attack on Daidu, and the Yuan government’s successful military campaign against the Red Turbans in the Capital Region and Shandong. It closes with a brief review of Master Guan and other Red Turban leaders whose troops sacked Shangdu and threatened Liaodong and beyond.

Chapter 3 considers the place of Koryŏ in the Mongol empire. After reviewing the marriage ties that linked the ruling houses of the Great Yuan ulus and the Koryŏ dynasty, it looks at the fate of several of King Kongmin’s predecessors during the fourteenth century. It ends with
Kongmin’s response to the spreading rebellions in China and his efforts to bolster the power of the throne at home.

Chapters 4 and 5 narrate the Red Turban wars in Northeast Asia. Chapter 4 chronicles the first years of Red Turban wars in Liaodong and Koryŏ from 1357 to 1360; Chapter 5 treats the Red Turban wars in Koryŏ to their conclusion early in 1362. It considers Koryŏ’s military response and war’s impact on domestic politics. In particular it shows that widespread fighting increased the power and standing of military commanders and argues that King Kongmin tacitly approved the elimination of the generals who had just won back his capital.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 consider the impact of the Red Turban wars on Northeast Asia. Chapter 6 looks briefly at Liaodong and Koryŏ in the wake of the Red Turban wars. Chapter 7 analyzes the ways in which the Red Turban wars became imbricated into diplomatic relations between the Koryŏ and Yuan courts through a study of Tash-Temür, a Koryŏ royal clansman the Mongols attempted to put on the Koryŏ throne. Chapter 8 widens to examine the shifting international landscape of East Asia during the 1360s, with special attention to the place of Koryŏ. It argues that the Red Turban wars figured in international perceptions of the Koryŏ dynasty and that King Kongmin attempted to exploit his military success in those wars during his negotiations with such varied players as the Mongol generals Naghachu and Köke-Temür, and the Chinese warlord Zhang Shicheng. The study concludes with a brief consideration of shifting memories of the Red Turban wars and a look forward to the emerging order of the late fourteenth century.