

Communicating the Yasa: Legal Powerplay and (Mis)understandings In and Around the Mongol Empire

For the Mongol conquerors, the law was an important part of their mission, for through the law and its application they showed their authority over their subjects. In diplomatic correspondence as well as more informal communications they voiced the legal procedures and principles dear to them, and also they did not hesitate to put these into practice when the occasion demanded. The Mongol khans were the ultimate judicial authority in each of the khanates they ruled.

This paper will explore how the Mongol legal principles were communicated to their officials and their subjects, bringing into focus the contrast between the views of the Mongols and those of their subjects, and between the different khanates. The 'yasa' in particular, as the supposed repository of Mongol legal wisdom, changed its meaning repeatedly as the concept travelled from the steppes to the sown, to Persia, Egypt and China. It was a malleable concept which came to embrace ever new meanings.

The way in which legal decisions and edicts were communicated to the subjects was a matter which also showed wide variation between different places and different khanates. China stands out, as communication with the local officials about the law was the most frequent and intense of all the khanates. In fact, Yuan China gave rise to a significant number of edicts, often translated directly from the Mongolian, which are significant in the development of Chinese law. This paper will elucidate why such a great number of edicts was issued (and preserved) only in China.