Writing political history in the twenty-first century is challenging. A monograph consisting of unfamiliar names, tied to convoluted political events spanning over a century would be a hard sell to a publisher, let alone appeal to a broad audience. Thus, it is no wonder that political history has become an unpopular subfield in history, and it has been—according to the publisher’s home page for the book under review—almost fifty years since the last publication of a “complete history of the Īlkhānate in English.”[1] Michael Hope’s *Power, Politics, and Tradition in the Mongol Empire and the Īlkhānate of Iran* fills in this gap with a unique perspective that inspires a new approach to writing political history.

Hope’s monograph provides a consistent, overarching, and though-provoking theme to explain the critical political events during this era. As the title reads, it covers the political authority of Chinggis Khan; examines the reigns of Ögödei Qa’an, Güyük Khan, and Möngke Qa’an (the “early Mongol Empire, 1227-1259”); and then narrows the focus to the khans of the Īlkhānate (1258-1335). The final chapter examines how the legacies of Chinggis Khan and the Īlkhānate continued to the era of Temür Gürken (1336-1405, better known as Tamerlane in English-language scholarship).

To guide the reader through this long and complicated period, Hope offers an interpretation centered on two competing systems of political authority that he has respectively labeled as “the collegial” and “the patrimonial.” Building on the Weberian concept of “the routinization of charisma,” Hope adopts a sociological approach to examine how a temporary political entity based on a single individual transitioned toward a more permanent state. According to Hope, the collegial school, mostly consisting of the extended family of Chinggis Khan and senior commanders, emphasized how the Mongol Empire and the following Īlkhānate should be ruled more collectively with authority shared among the high-ranking officials, especially the military commanders. In contrast, the followers of the patrimonial school considered that the authority of the empire belonged to the direct descendants of the founder and emphasized a more centralized imperial rule around a single qa’an/khan.

This contrast, which may be rather particular, oddly specific, and seemingly unfamiliar to historians of the Mongol Empire, works surprisingly well in explaining the political history of the early Mongol Empire and their rule over Iran. For example, the famous Persian vizier Rashid al-Din praised Chinggis Khan’s immediate successor, Ögödei Qa’an, for actively demonstrating his generosity to his Mongol companions. Rashid’s praise, among many other examples, highlights the collegial rule...
that defined the era of Ögödei Qa’an. Conversely, Möngke Qa’an’s succession occurred through a “coup” where the collective will of the Mongol princes and military officials failed to play an essential rule through the quriltai or the council of notables. The centralization policies of Möngke, what Thomas Allsen famously compared to the “modern concept of total war,” exemplifies the weakened role of the collegial rule, as well as the rise of a new claim of patrimonial authority by Möngke Qa’an (chapter 2). In spite of being the younger brother of Möngke Qa’an, Hülegü failed to follow his brother’s model as the circumstances around the newly formed Ilkhānate prevented the formation of a more centralized rule. Instead, the various princes and military leaders who constituted the joint Iran expedition forces reinstated a collegial rule, emphasizing their shared governance where the military commanders effectively decided the policies of the Ilkhānate. In the case of Ahmad Tegüder Khan, they even murdered the khan himself (chapter 3). During the ages of Arghun Khan, and eventually, Ghazan Khan, the patrimonial interpretation of Chinggis Khan’s authority, combined with Shiite Islamic ideology of messianic sovereignty brought the revival of the patrimonial and more centralized rule (chapter 4). After Ghazan, the tides shifted back toward the collegial rule and continued to the end of the Ilkhānate and beyond (chapter 5).

The strength of Hope’s analysis is threefold. First, his analysis enables a comprehensive perspective on understanding the complex history of this period while successfully incorporating the works of previous scholarship. As seen in recent individual research articles—all which have been examined and noted by Hope—scholars have identified various elements that explain the continuously changing political landscape of the Mongol Empire. Hope notes that these elements—reexamining the role of Islam in internal and external conflicts, the clash between centralization and regional autonomy, the conflicting interpretations of Chinggis Khan’s jasaq (laws) that seemingly justified any political acts, etc.—were different interpretations regarding the two main political thoughts of the collegialists and the patrimonialists. And more importantly, Hope demonstrates that these two competing thoughts were still fundamentally based on the legacy of a single authority: the founder Chinggis Khan. In this sense, Hope’s work identifies the balance between the consistency (adhering to the legacy of the founder) and the adaptability of the Mongols (developing competing political theories of authority in combination with other elements).

Second, identifying the broader trends of the patrimonial or collegial rule during the Ilkhānate enables us to have a more holistic understanding of this period. For example, different sources have presented competing explanations on the collision between Hülegü and the Jočids in the 1250s. When Qubilai Khan granted Hülegü exclusive rights to the land of Iran, many Persian and Armenian accounts tell that a personal clash between Hülegü and Berke resulted in the ongoing conflict between the Mongols in Iran and Russia. In contrast, Grigor of Akanc’s records provide a more detailed account on the noyat (senior commanders) who not only offered their support to Hülegü but also actively participated in apprehending and executing the Jočids within the court of Hülegü. Even though Grigor mistakenly recorded (duly noted by Hope) that Möngke, not Qubilai, was the qa’an of that time, Hope argues that the overall collegial rule during the early Ilkhānate period makes Grigor’s account more plausible, as it would have granted the opportunity for the noyat to play a more active role. As another example, once we understand the dominant role of these noyats and the continuously collegial rule of early Ilkhānate, the seemingly random and puzzling deposition of Aḥmad Tegüder Khan makes much more sense, as it was the result of the increasing authority of the noyat over the Chinggisid descendants.

Finally, Hope’s application of sociological theory to the history of the Mongols—in this case
specifically, the Weberian approach on the institutionalization of an individual charisma—enables us to see the history of the Mongol Empire in a more theoretical and comparative perspective, and in turn, invites us to follow his lead. Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire is indeed one of the greatest land-based empires, but overemphasizing the unique success of the Mongols leads to viewing the Mongols as an anomaly or exception that does not leave much room for inspiration beyond the small field of specialists. But as this work shows, reinterpreting and routinizing the legacy of a charismatic individual is not necessarily a new sociological or historical phenomenon limited to the Ilkhanate. Hope has already suggested the possibility of applying a similar approach to the Mongol rule of China, and his model could be employed for other potential subjects including but not limited to political authority, ethnicity, empire studies, and religion, among others.

One might not necessarily agree with Hope’s approach, as the binary of “collegial” and “patrimonial” factionalism can sometimes seem a bit too forced and overly simplistic. On a more philosophical perspective, scholars might ask whether any additional details could have been found if Hope had referred to more reliable editions of the Jāmi‘ al-tavārikh (such as the newer edition by Rawshan in lieu of the older Karimī edition) or the complete version of Tārīkh-i Vaṣṣāf (as an alternative to Hope’s use of the Tahrīr-i Tārīkh-i Vaṣṣāf). Still, Hope provides one synthesis based on the previous half-century research that can stimulate different interpretations and comparisons. Essentially, Power, Politics, and Tradition in the Mongol Empire and the Ilkhanate of Iran is an up-to-date book on understanding and reviewing the political history of this period and region and a starting point to build on it.

Note

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