

THE SILK ROAD IN THE MONGOL ERA



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### Abstract

This research aims to explain the causes for the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Empire by examining to what extent religious freedom and political stability played a role. The success of silver as an intercontinental currency demonstrates that, in the time of the *Pax Mongolica*, intercontinental trade alongside the Silk Road flourished. This thesis examines to what extent the Mongol Empire promoted religious freedom and provided a stable political climate and to what extent that open climate facilitated the intercontinental trade along the Silk Road. The findings regarding religious freedom and political stability urge Central Asia to take note of this research as they are joining China's new Silk Road Initiative.

*Keywords:* Religious Freedom, Political Stability, Economy, Silk Road, Central Asia, Pax Mongolica, Yassa (law)

## Contents

Abstract .....	2
1. Introduction.....	4
Contextualization of the Research .....	4
A. What is the Silk Road?.....	4
B. The Mongol Era .....	6
Research question .....	8
Structure of the Research .....	9
Methodology.....	9
Relevance of the Research .....	9
A. Academic relevance .....	9
B. Societal relevance .....	10
2. The success and decline of the Silk Road in the Mongol Era.....	11
The Eurasian silver century .....	11
3. Pax Mongolica in the Mongol Era.....	16
Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?.....	16
Before European hegemony: The world system A.D. 1250–1350 .....	17
Religious freedom in the Mongol Empire .....	18
Political stability in the Mongol Empire.....	20
4. Discussion and Conclusions .....	24
Discussion.....	24
Conclusions.....	26
Bibliography .....	27

## 1. Introduction

President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan (2015) recently stated that:

*“Every religion has its own dignity. It should always unite Kazakhs. It should encourage peace and harmony, community development and the strengthening of the economy and the state”.*

This translation of the speech in which president Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan posits the link between economy, on the one hand, and religious freedom as well as peace, on the other hand. That triggered me to further explore the particular relation of religious freedom and economic development in the Mongol Era in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Contextualization of the Research

#### A. What is the Silk Road?

The Silk Road is back into our collective mind since China officially unveiled its plans to launch a new Silk Road (Silk Road Initiative or One Belt, One Road) in 2013 (Heath, 2012; Swaine, 2014; Xi, 2013; Xi, 2014). Although the term is not new, the question remains: what is it exactly?



Figure 1. The Silk and Spice Routes (Source: UNESCO, n.d.).

The Silk Road is a web of maritime and land trade routes connecting South-East Asia and Japan with Europe and eastern Africa (UNESCO, n.d.). Figure 1 depicts the routes, which are part of the Silk Road.

It is difficult to name an exact inception date of the Silk Road, because it is unclear what the tipping point is from being qualified as independent routes functioning, for example, as highways to facilitate rapid communication into a major trade network connecting numerous peoples. The Persian Royal Road, for example, was rebuilt in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC to increase swift communication. Later the Romans connected parts of the Persian Royal Road with other contemporary roads and turned it into a unified whole and used it also for trade. Is this part of the Silk Road? If so, from the onset or later on? Those questions are hard to objectively answer and make it hard to determine the nascence of the Silk Road (Graf, 1994). However, extensive trade in silk by the Chinese is reported under the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) and already during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC silk arrived in the Roman Empire (De la Vaissière, 2014; UNESCO, n.d.).

The Silk Road continued to develop and expand during the course of its existence and turned into an extensive trade network, by incorporating older trade routes and connecting them to newly build ones. During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries the trade between the West and East was primarily realized over three main routes: 1) A southern maritime route, which crossed Egypt; 2) Another maritime route that had an overland stage between the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf; 3) And a third overland route that went across Eurasia to China and India (Martinez, 2009).

One of the side effects of this connectivity created by the Silk Road is that diseases spread more easily as well. The Black Death in Europe originated from Central Asia. This disease is transmitted by fleas, which were probably transported by the caravans. First reports of the disease are from inscriptions in Nestorian graves, found in eastern Kazakhstan, which refer to the plague and date back to 1338. Between 1347 and 1353 Europe gets halved by this disease (Kohn, 2008).

Just as the genesis of the Silk Road is unclear, so its dissolution. The overland route falls into disuse, the maritime routes also take a major hit, but don't completely vanish. The maritime routes lasted longer, with the Italian seafaring city states functioning as a hub between eastern supply and western demand until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. (Lesaffer, 2009).

Interestingly, the term Silk Road is a rather recent invention. This network of routes historically did not have a particular name. It was the German geologist, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, who coined the term *Die Seidenstrasse* (the Silk Road) in 1877 (UNESCO, n.d.; Waugh, 2007).

## B. The Mongol Era



Figure 2. The Four Mongol Khanates in 1290 (Source: Biran, 2007).

The Mongol Era roughly covers the period between 1200 and 1400 AD. The Mongols existed before that, but only became united in one empire in 1206 under the rule of Genghis Khan. According to Taagerpera (1997), the Mongol era continued to exist until 1600, but he admits that the Mongol empire does not exist anymore around 1400 as the unified empire it once was and that it becomes divided in several entities with Mongol heritage. Komaroff (2012) and Liu (2010) support that by stating the Mongol Empire ceased to exist at respectively 1388 (the defeat of the last remnants of the Yuan dynasty, which had previously been recognized as the official successors of the Genghis Khan bloodline) and 1405 (death of Tamarlane, Khan of the Chagatai Khanate, which lead to high tensions in the khanate). However, both also acknowledge that in the lead-up to the disintegration there have been tensions, revolts and full blown wars. That explains why they come to different dissolution dates. Therefore the meaning of the Mongol Era in this thesis refers to the times in which the Mongol Empire was unified and when the individual khanates were intensively cooperating. Figure 2 gives an overview of the different khanates.



Figure 3. The red line depicts the greatest extent of the Mongol Empire (Source: Shepherd, 1911).

As shown in figure 3, the geographical area encompassed by the Mongol empire in its prime contains modern day Central Asia, Mongolia, China, a big part of Russia, and pieces of the Middle East. The Mongols had managed to conquer this area between 1206 and 1279 (Komaroff, 2012). In order for the centralized power to control the outskirts of the vast empire, the Mongols gave a new impetus to the already existing network of communications that linked East and West. A messenger typically travelled about 25 miles (40 km) from one station to another where he could receive either a new fresh horse or would relay the message to a new rider. This way express messengers could travel up to 200 miles per day. When a Great Khan died in Karakorum, in the middle of contemporary Mongolia, the news could reach forces in Central Europe within 4-6 weeks (Lane 2009; Shagdar, 2000).

Two important pillars of the Mongol political organization were the Great Khan and the Kurultai. The Kurultai is a political and military council of Mongolian nobles. One of its most important tasks was to appoint the Great Khan. Genghis Khan is the first one to be appointed and receive this title in 1206. However, this had no effective implications since the Kurultai was already under Genghis Khan's control and therefore it was rather an acknowledgment of what already was. This changed after his son, Ögedei Khan, died. Then, senior members of the Kurultai interfered more with who should become the new Great Khan. The Kurultai also

assigned other key positions, made militaristic decisions were and established law and policy (Hawting, 2005; Shagdar, 2000).

The Great Khan (or Khagan) is the emperor of the Mongolian Empire. When making decisions he had to take into account other senior members of the Kurultai, such as military commanders. After the split of the empire into four khanates, viz., the Yuan Khanate, the Ilkhanate, the Golden Horde, and the Chagatai Khanate, in 1264 there are officially no Great Khans anymore, although the khans of the Yuan Khanate still used that title. Rulers over one of the four khanates were called khans and were lower in rank than the Great Khan, but after 1264 that did not matter (Grosset, 1970). The Great Khan ruled by means of the Yassa. This document was reproduced by several authors, since there are no known surviving copies of it. The Yassa was an unpublished, written code of law composed by Genghis Khan with three aims: to demand total obedience to Genghis Khan, to amalgamate the different nomad clans, and to punish wrongdoings. However, the elite could get preferential treatment for example by getting several chances before being punished. After Genghis Khan, his son Ögedei Khan amended the Yassa and later rulers continued to do the same (Great Yasa of Chinggis Khan, 2010; Hawting, 2005).

At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Mongol empire became fully disintegrated as the four independent khanates did no longer cooperate. This did not develop by mere chance. After the death of Great Khan Möngke, the grandson of Genghis Khan, there was no clear successor creating rivalry among possible successors. The Mongol Empire was plunged into a civil war, which lasted from 1260 until 1264 and resulted in a four-way split of the Mongol Empire. This did not immediately cause the disintegration of the Mongol Empire, because the khanates remained allied and peacefully coexisted in the so-called *Pax Mongolica* for approximately another 100 years. This peace did not last forever, though. From the 1360s onwards the Mongol Empire is in a constant state of disarray with whole khanates breaking away. All in all, historians do no longer refer to the Mongol Empire at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Shagdar, 2000).

### **Research question**

During the Mongol era there has been a period of religious freedom and political stability as well as a period of religious intolerance and civil war. Interestingly, during those periods the Silk Road respectively was economically wealthy and declined. The period of religious freedom and political stability is often referred to as the *Pax Mongolica* (Mongolian Peace) (Neal & Williamson, 2014).

This dissertation will therefore try to answer the following question:

*What are the causes of the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Era?*

This research focuses on the following two sub questions:

*“To what extent did religious freedom influence the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Empire?”* and;



*“To what extent did political stability influence the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Empire?”*

## **Structure of the Research**

In order to give an answer to the research question in a structured way the thesis will be divided in several chapters. The first chapter introduces the research questions and presents the paper's relevance. The next chapter infers from the trade in silver the trade in general on the Silk Road and how that evolved over time. The third chapter describes the state of religious freedom and political stability in the Mongol Empire and tries to link that to the trade on the Silk Road. The final chapter will portray the conclusion of the thesis: giving an answer to the research questions and discussing the obtained results.

## **Methodology**

This historical research both uses primary and secondary sources. The primary sources have been carefully reviewed and selected on the basis of their reliability and relevance to the dissertation. Primary sources enjoy preference, however it is not always possible to use or find them, due to incompatibility or the lack of access to sources.

The Yassa is the most notable primary source used. Texts from contemporary travelers such as William of Rubruck will only be sporadically consulted. Special attention will be given to the articles of respectively Kuroda (2009), Grim, Clark & Snyder (2014) and Abu-Lughod (1991). The article by Kuroda (2009) will be used to show the evolving trends of trade on the Silk Road. Grim, Clark & Snyder (2014), viz., have been able to proof the existence of a link between religious freedom and economic growth. Abu-Lughod (1991) connected the *Pax Mongolica*, and in particular political stability, to the success of the Silk Road.

In this research I will hold the following assumption: trade is necessary for economic growth. Grim et al. (2014) specifically focus on economic growth. However, since most countries (exceptions such as North Korea aside) experience economic decline if trade disappears, this research will use economic growth and trade interchangeably.

## **Relevance of the Research**

### **A. Academic relevance**

There is plenty of research on the policy of religious freedom by Genghis Khan as well as his military (Komaroff, 2012; Halbertsma, 2008; Shagdar, 2000), but there is considerably less research on the emergence of religious intolerance and the consequences of political instability. This analysis will add to the existing literature in this field.

## **B. Societal relevance**

Furthermore, this research might be useful for the Chinese as well in two regards. Interestingly, China made a shift in its economic policy. Whereas China used to be a total communist government, nowadays it implements state-directed capitalism (The Economist, 2012; Lawrance, 1998). Both capitalism and religious freedom are closely connected (Woodberry, 2012) and fall under the liberal worldview held by the West (Donohue, 2006). So, if historical evidence confirms that religious freedom facilitated economic growth along the Silk Road intolerance then China might need to rethink its religious policies and become also politically more liberal, rather than just economically.

And it is also interesting to see if the Chinese can use this inquiry for their implementation of the Silk Road Initiative. A possible conclusion might be that religious freedom would be an extra factor to help the Silk Road Initiative succeed. That might result in China promoting religious freedom in all the countries that participate in this new set of trade routes.

Furthermore, China is growing more assertive in a military sense, such as in the South China Sea as well as against India (Weissmann, 2010; Barry, Fisher and Lee Myers, 2018). It has, however, also internally political problems with certain regions such as the Uyghurs and Tibet (Dillon, 2004; Sperling, 2004). This research can help shed light on the economic consequences of such policies.

It will also help to give Central Asians a better understanding of their history. After gaining independence from Russia in 1991, Kazakhstan started a policy of ‘Kazakhification’ and started to reinvestigate its history (Kesici, 2011). Since a lot of Kazakh literature was banned during Soviet times, it is now being investigated to gain a better comprehension of the Kazakh past (Berikbolova, Abiyir & Aydogdu, 2014).

Finally, this paper can be useful for the development of mutual understanding and co-operation between peoples and countries in our time. It might add to the evidence that the liberal values of religious freedom and peace for all is not only morally right, but also has economic benefits.

## 2. The success and decline of the Silk Road in the Mongol Era

The difficulty in researching the economic success and decline of the Silk Road is that, although there are individual accounts of travelers along the Silk Road, (economic) data are almost non-existent. In order to get some idea of how the trade developed I will look into the trade of silver during 1276-1359, the so-called Eurasian silver century. During this period, which roughly coincides with the *Pax Mongolica*, the silver output of the London mint peaked at three times, between 1276-1288; between 1299-1309; and between 1344-1359.

### The Eurasian silver century

This chapter will try to show, as argued by Kuroda (2009), that the sudden increased production of silver from the London mint fulfilled the demand of a universally acknowledged means of exchange. This indicates that the intercontinental trade flourished during the Eurasian silver century and suggests that, when the production of silver declined at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, this was because the intercontinental trade was slowing down.

The chapter uses Kuroda (2009) as its main source. The reason the choice has fallen on silver as an indicator for intercontinental trade is twofold. Out of pragmatism: there are enough data to see some developments in this sector. Moreover, as a medium of exchange (=currency), silver plays a pivotal role in the economy.

### The peaks and (non-)European silver

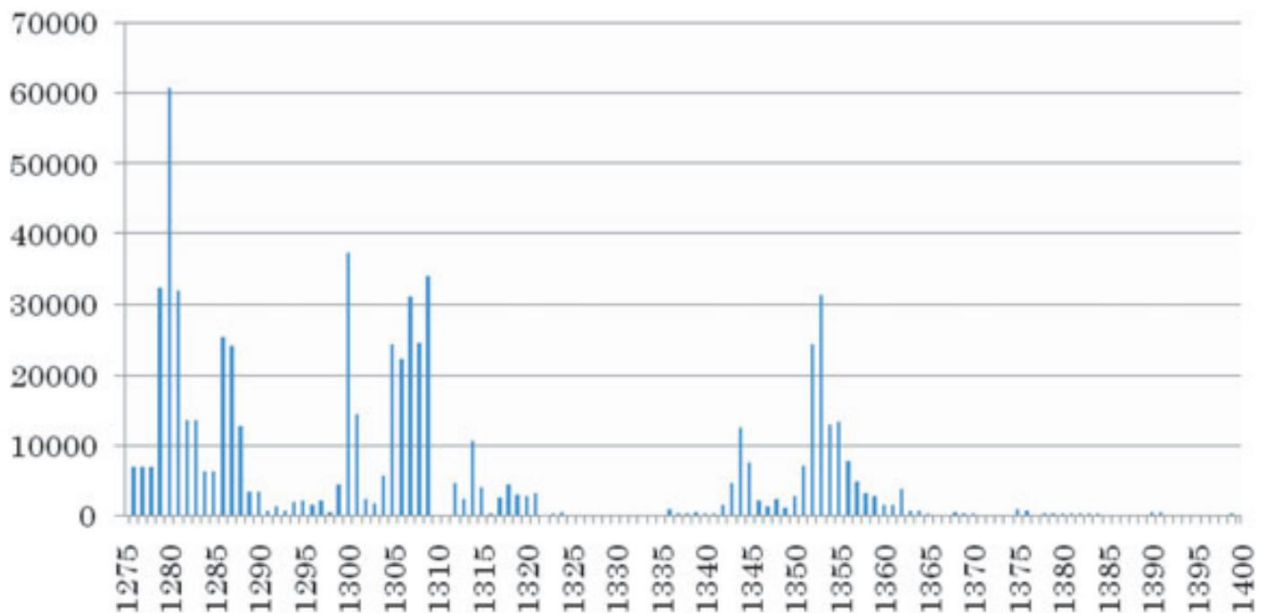


Figure 4. Annual silver output of the London mint 1273-1400 (kg) (Source: Kuroda, 2009).

As shown in figure 4, during the silver century there have been three peaks in the silver output of the London mint. Those peaks may have been facilitated by the Mongol invasions into

Burma (from 1277 onwards), which is famous for its silver mines, and partly by the existence of the unified Silk Road which facilitated the transmission of this silver to London.

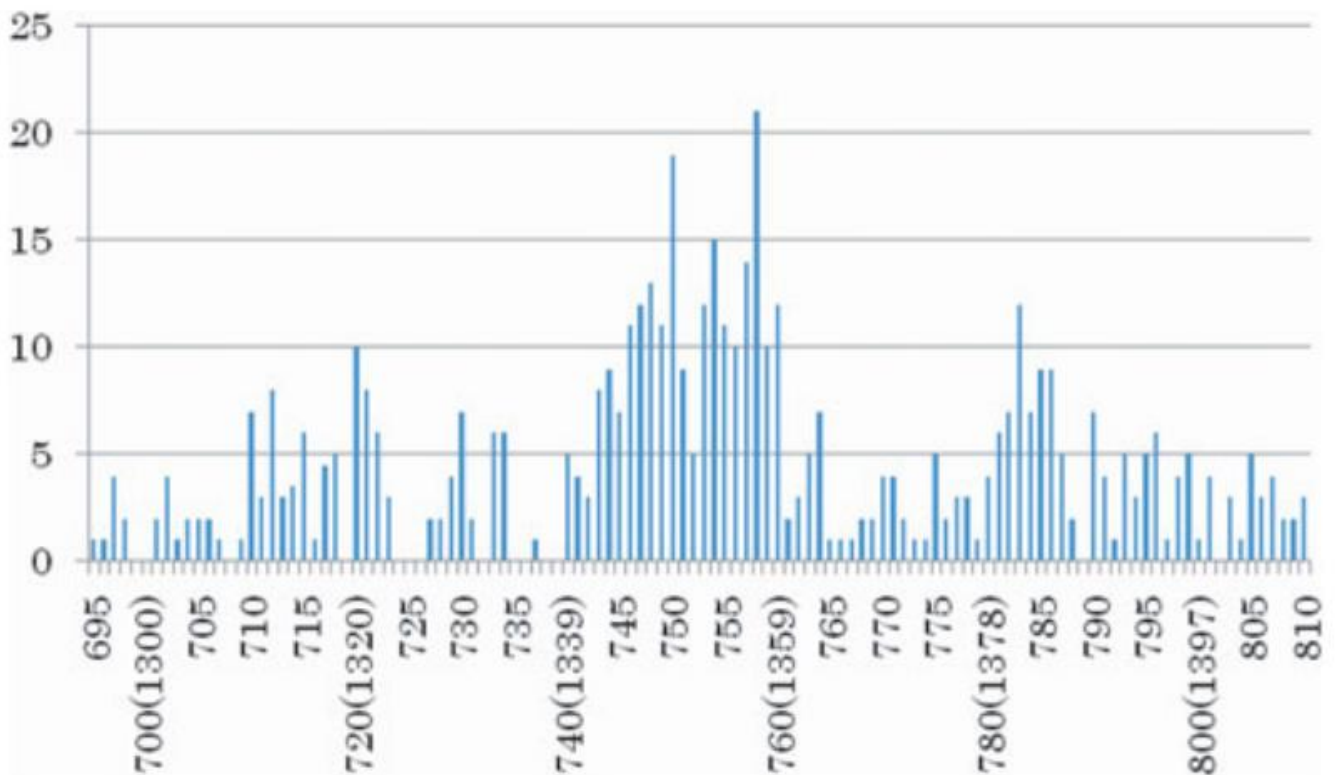


Figure 5. Silver coinage issued by Bengal sultans in Burma (by frequency) (Source: Kuroda, 2009).

The simplest explanation for the increases in London's mint would be the prosperity of silver mines such as those in Bohemia and Sardinia in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, supplying the mint. However, especially the first and third peak of London's silver issuance does not appear to coincide with the production in these mines. As for the first peak, the increase is simply too great (e.g. from 7.000 kg in 1278 to 60.000 kg in 1280) to be merely a recoinage (a replacement of the currently used currency). Never before had a coinage led to these enormous outputs. European silver mines would not be able to supply the mint with that much silver. Furthermore, the London mint does not stand alone. In Tunis and Genoa the mints generated the same extraordinary outputs. At the time of the third peak in 1344-1356, the European mines were almost exhausted. At the same time, there was an increase of silver output in Burma, as shown in Figure 5. That country had already been conquered and connected to the Silk Road after a Mongol military campaign in 1287, but still contained massive amounts of silver. This was distributed to numerous mints, including the London one and some of it stayed in Burma. Thus, it is safe to say that there must have been other causes which lead to this enormous increase in London's mint than merely prosperous mines in Europe (Kuroda, 2009).

The Functioning of silver

Before and after the Eurasian silver century Europe suffered from a recurring scarcity of silver. Countries used their own distinct monetary systems and did not have a universal medium of exchange for trade. Those monetary systems were usually a mix of copper cash and payment in kind (e.g. grain) (Prakahs, 2004). This was a problem, because there was a need for a currency that could anonymously circulate among people and be used in great quantities. Silver could fulfill that purpose, when there was a sufficient amount of it, because it could be handled flexibly, initially, as a medium of exchange between countries and peoples. Some would argue to use gold instead, but there was just not enough to use it as a currency amongst the different peoples. Otherwise it would result in the use of subsidiary money, complicating the use as a medium of exchange. This happened to silver, as this chapter will explain later, when its demand increased too much by the collapse of paper money in China which ultimately resulted in the uselessness of silver as a currency (Kuroda, 2009).

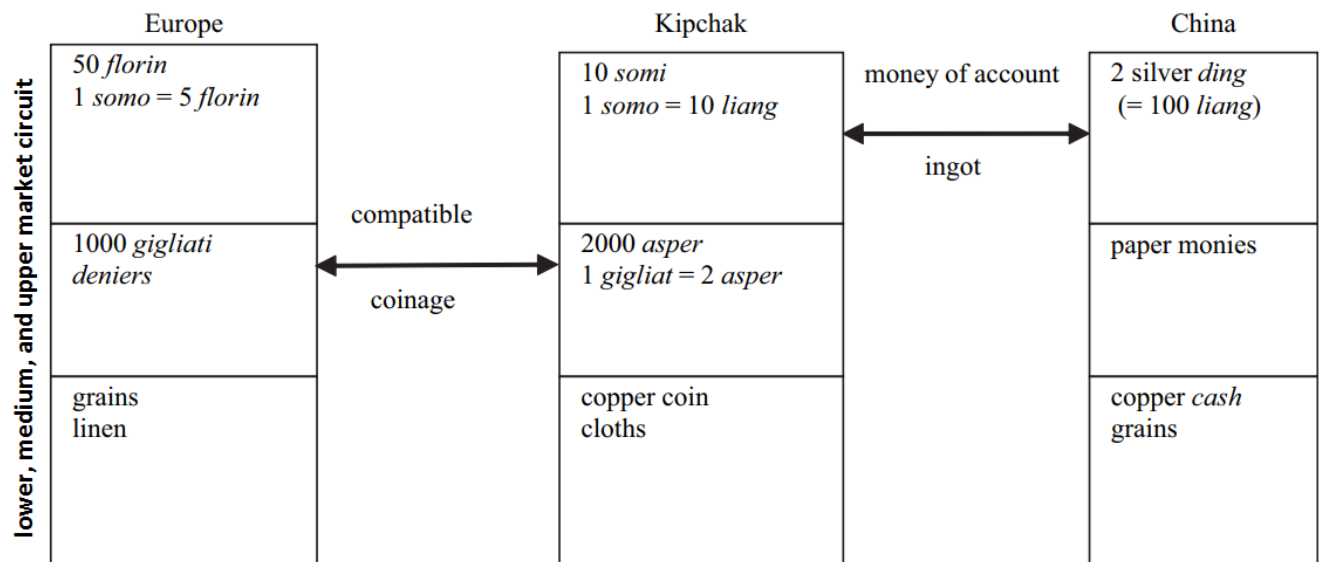


Figure 6. Multiple strata of monies (Source: Kuroda, 2009).

During the silver century, money moved in multiple strata (=levels). Across Eurasia, silver tended to flow only in the upper stratum. Meaning that silver was used in particular for intercontinental trade which, for instance, could be in silk. The lower stratum represents the everyday trade on the market. This could be the trade in grain which people needed for their bread. So, for the continental trade (upper stratum) silver was often used as a currency, but on the everyday markets (lower stratum) people used copper or cowries for the simple reason that silver was not fractional enough. So silver appeared alongside other coins and currencies as shown in figure 6. If all transactions would have depended on the real silver than shortages of it would have repeatedly caused a collapse of the long-distance trade. The collaboration of silver, the paper monies, and other petty currencies in the different strata ensured that people were able to

buy at lower circuits of the market and at the same time long-distance trade continued to take place (Kuroda, 2009).

Throughout the Silk Road, silver was used as a medium of exchange for long-distance trade except in China. At the Chinese border the silver had to be exchanged for paper money and other small coinage, which was denominated in and backed by silver, but this means the Chinese markets were still driven by silver (Lopez & Raymond, 1967). So, silver functioned as a commensurability across currencies that maintained a flow of trade across the Eurasian continent.

### The End of the Eurasian Silver century

Remarkably, in the 1360s the use of silver coins became rare across Eurasia as abruptly as it had become abundant at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century suggesting the decline in trade on the Silk Road (De la Vaisière, 2014). The London's mint decreased production from 10.324 kg in the 1350s to 971 kg in the 1360s. Also in the north Indian markets little silver was to be found from the last quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

The paper money crisis in China played a significant part indicating the decline of the Silk Road. Around the 1360s, the paper money in the Yuan Khanate collapsed due to high inflation. As a result, the demand for silver in the lower tier markets in China increased extremely which could not be satisfied. This created shortages of silver along the whole Silk Road, because now silver was also used in the other strata. This complicated the trade across the continent and traders reverted back to other (petty) currencies. As a result, silver lost relevance as a currency, ending the silver century. Once again, Eurasia suffered from a familiar scarcity of silver (Kuroda, 2009).

From that moment on several sources tell us that the trade declines or is even regarded to be "simple irrelevant" (De la Vaisière, 2014). The complexity of trading, due to the (in)security on the roads, halted all trade on the overland route conducing to the decline of the Silk Road. The disappearance of political stability will be further elaborated on in the next chapter. The overland trade does not return the same way as before. The maritime routes continue, with the Italian seafaring city states functioning as a hub between eastern supply and western demand until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, but are rendered less significant (De la Vaisière, 2014; Inalcik & Quataert, 1994; Lesaffer, 2009).

All this points to an interconnected process which Abu-Lughod (1991) tries to explain. Without the Silk Road silver could not have travelled the distances it did and at the same time silver stimulated trade by entering the upper stratum in the intercontinental trade circuit. Next chapter we will examine some of the causes for the intercontinental trade.

This chapter showed that the Eurasian silver century is a strong indicator of the success of intercontinental trade during the *Pax Mongolica*. The peaks, namely between 1276 and 1288, between 1299 and 1309, and between 1344 and 1359, are probably caused by the delivery of silver from mines, such as the silver mines in Burma, which prior to the peaks were not connected to the Silk Road. Because silver was a universally acknowledge means of exchange in the intercontinental trade it can be used to indicate the flourishing of the trade on the Silk Road.

The paper money crisis in China indicates the decline of the Silk Road. Silver could not fulfill its 'obligation' as medium of exchange for intercontinental trade. That caused, ultimately, a major drop of demand of silver rendering it useless and thereby ending the Eurasian silver century, indicating that the intercontinental trade started to slow down.

### 3. Pax Mongolica in the Mongol Era

This chapter will explore the developments in the Mongol Era regarding religious freedom and political stability and try to link them to the intercontinental trade along the Silk Road.

As to religious freedom, it stands out that, until the 1360s, particularly Genghis Khan, but also other Mongolian rulers to a greater or lesser extent promoted religious freedom and that, afterwards, religious freedom is neglected. The end of religious freedom seems to coincide with the end of the Eurasian silver century. That is well in line with Grim et al. (2014), since they convincingly argue that religious freedom facilitates economic growth. So, having little to no religious freedom should, according to Grim et al. (2014) have economic consequences as well.

Regarding political stability, the dominating view is that until the 1360s the Mongolian Empire is rather stable. There is one notable exception, namely the split of the Mongol Empire into four closely collaborating khanates, which changed the internal structure of the empire, but had no lasting effect on the security and the unity of the Empire, which was so necessary for the merchants to safely cross the long distances to reach either side of the empire. That is in accordance with Abu-Lughod (1991) who argues that political stability was necessary for the success of the Silk Road.

After the 1350s the Empire plunged into civil war and never rises again. The end of the so-called *Pax Mongolica* coincides with the end of the Eurasian silver century and seems to confirm that the lack of political stability negatively influenced the intercontinental trade alongside the Silk Road.

Before exploring the Mongolian attitude towards the different religions and reviewing the political stability during the Mongol Era, the paper by Grim et al. (2014) will be discussed to understand how they linked with economic growth and Abu-Lughod's (1991) view on political stability will be examined.

#### Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?

Grim et al. (2014) discovered a positive relationship between religious freedom and economic growth. They found it in two ways. First, they found a positive relationship between religious freedom and global economic competitiveness, "the set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country" (World Economic Forum, 2013). The World Economic Forum developed an index to measure global economic competitiveness called the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI). The GCI uses 12 pillars<sup>1</sup> representing fundamental drivers of an economy's growth rate such as 'higher education and specialized training' or 'financial market development'. The Pew Research Center (2014) provided data on religious freedom. This is reflected by low government restrictions and low social hostilities in

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<sup>1</sup> Religious freedom is not part of these pillars.



relation to religion. The government restrictions measure, on a 10-point scale, 20 different criteria on government laws, policies and actions that restrict religious beliefs or practices. This includes for instance, banning of particular faiths, prohibition of conversions etcetera. Social hostilities measure, on the other hand, on a 10-point scale, 13 different criteria on acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations and social groups. This includes for instance, mob or sectarian violence, harassment over attire for religious reasons etcetera.

Secondly, they found an empirical significant negative relationship, through data analysis, between economic growth and the combination of government restrictions and social hostilities. Meaning that a higher level of government restrictions and/or social hostilities is detrimental to the economic growth. Herewith, Grim et al. (2014) confirmed the first finding.

They do, however, acknowledge that religious freedom is not an antidote to economic malaise. A plausible clarification for this relationship is, according to Grim et al. (2014), that religious freedom is highly correlated with the presence of other freedoms, so that it can be considered part of a bundled commodity of social goods that have significant correlations with a variety of positive social and economic outcomes ranging from better health care to higher incomes for women (Grim 2008). Another notable remark in their research is that it has shown that religious freedom is a key ingredient to peace and stability (Grim et al., 2014) which leads us to Abu-Lughod.

### **Before European hegemony: The world system A.D. 1250–1350**

Abu-Lughod (1991) poses that the attractiveness of the intercontinental trade alongside the Silk Road lied in the fact that the Mongols have been able to create “an environment that facilitated land transit with less risk”. Earnings from trade and profit margins could be high, but depended largely on the security and unity of the trade routes. This security was to be provided by the governments by stationing garrisons or erecting watchtowers. Whenever the governments were unable to do so, for instance due to war with another country making them focus on that rather than security, traders tended to seek for alternate routes because they would run the risk of losing their cargo. This security was important, because the big caravans travelled months, sometimes years to get to their destination. On the route, bandits awaited their chances to rob the caravans and if the caravan trade was to survive, caravans needed to be able to arrive.

Genghis Khan was able to achieve the necessary security and unity. He brought peace to his realms and encouraged travel and trade. The unification of the vast region under Mongol control reduced the number of competing tribute gatherers along the way and assured greater safety in travel. When this unity was undermined by the disintegration of the empire at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, this negatively impacted intercontinental trade on the Silk Road. The fact that the Eurasian silver century ended in the 14<sup>th</sup> century seems to confirm that intercontinental trade had indeed slowed down.

## Religious freedom in the Mongol Empire

### Religious freedom in the Yassa

As mentioned before, Genghis Khan took the throne of the unified Mongol Empire in 1206. Although applied by Genghis Khan, the Yassa was only promulgated among the Mongol elite when Ögedei became the Great Khan. The unpublished Yassa functioned as a binding framework for the ruling elite upon which they based their own laws and, as already stated in the introduction, it had three aims: to demand total obedience to Genghis Khan, to amalgamate the different nomad clans, and to punish wrongdoings. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that during the existence of the Yassa it was closely followed by the rulers, even after Genghis' death. Ögedei Khan, however, began to use it as a source of inspiration and he added some of his own laws. This practice was continued by other successors (Great Yassa of Chinggis Khan, 2010; Hawting, 2005).

This code of law contained a few articles concerning religion (Great Yasa of Chinggis Khan, 2010):

8. "When an animal is to be eaten, its feet must be tied, its belly ripped open and its heart squeezed in the hand until the animal dies; then its meat may be eaten; but if anyone slaughter an animal after the Mohammedan fashion, he is to be himself slaughtered."
10. "He (Genghis Khan) decided that no taxes or duties should be imposed upon the descendants of Ali-Bek, Abu-Ta-leb, without exception, as well as upon fakirs, readers of the Al-Koran, lawyers, physicians, scholars, people who devote themselves to prayer and asceticism, muezzins and those who wash the bodies of the dead."
11. "He ordered that all religions were to be respected and that no preference was to be shown to any of them. All this he commanded in order that it might be agreeable to God."

Article 8 is an anomaly in the Yassa when it comes to religious freedom. It makes life a bit more difficult for religious people, in particular for the Muslims and Jews. That particular manner is incompatible with the way of slaughtering the Jews and Muslims practiced (Hawting, 2005). It does, however, only address a small issue in practicing their faiths.

Article 10 is a practical implementation of article 11. Basically everyone who dedicated their lives to religious practice is exempted from taxation and public service (Weatherford, 2004).

Article 11 shows the fundamental stance of the Mongols that all religions should be respected and that this view is 'agreeable to God'. This coincides with the worldview the Mongols held.

The Mongols, namely, believed that every faith worships the same God. William of Rubruck cites Möngke Khan when he expresses this worldview: "We believe that there is only one God, by whom we live and by whom we die, and for whom we have an upright heart. But as God gives us the different fingers of the hand, so he gives to men diverse ways to approach him."

(Religious debate in the court of Möngke Khan, documented by William of Rubruck on May 31, 1254).

### Tolerance for religion

This framework for religious freedom in the Yassa allowed religions to spread even more easily along the Silk Road. While the Silk Road was developing and expanding it facilitated not only a mere exchange of goods, but also of traditions and cultures. Exemplary is how religions, such as Nestorian Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, travelled across the Silk Road changing the beliefs of many groups along the route. Buddhism originated in India and reached China and even Korea and Japan alongside the Silk Road (UNESCO, n.d.; Asia Society, 2017; Halbertsma, 2008; Weatherford, 2004).

The Mongols, for instance, were initially shamanists, but Nestorian Christianity gained major influence in the Mongol Empire. The powerful Mongol tribe 'Kerait' converted to Christianity in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Although Genghis Khan, who ruled the Mongol Empire from 1206 until 1227, remained shamanist, his sons married Christian wives from this tribe. Next to that, several advisors to Genghis Khan and other Khans professed their faith in different religions. Well-known examples are Mahmud Yalavach who was a Muslim governor ruling over Central Asia and later became mayor of present-day Beijing or the Muslim Ahmad Fanakati who was Kublai Khan's finance minister under the Yuan dynasty (Halbertsma, 2008; Weatherford, 2004).

The 7<sup>th</sup> ruler of the Ilkhanate, Mahmud Ghazan (1295 to 1304) is another example of a ruler favoring religious freedom. At first sight he is not the best example, because he persecuted Buddhists and destroyed their temples. What makes him a good example is that he comes back on this policy and aims for reconciliation. Just before his conversion to Islam, he built a Buddhist temple in Khorasan. After his conversion, Islam gained more support among the people, but he, nonetheless, respected the provision in the Yassa concerning religious freedom. He granted permission to Buddhist monks to go to Tibet to profess their faith more freely and nominated a Jewish convert to Islam to be Prime Minister (Atiya, 1970).

### Neglect of religious freedom

Notwithstanding a few exceptions, Mongol rulers abided by the provision of religious freedom, as provided for in the Yassa. It was only at the end of the 1350s that a new period was ushered in. The Ispah Rebellion, which will be further examined in the paragraphs on political stability, had profound consequences. The rebellion had religious causes and left deep marks in the empire. After this rebellion more religious based conflicts erupted and hostility towards minority religions grew. The Ming dynasty, the successor of the Yuan Khanate, expelled all Christians in 1369, including the Nestorian Christians, from the country. The Ming dynasty wanted to preserve the Chinese identity and get rid of all the foreign influences, such as non-Buddhist religions and foreigners in general. This, however, not only happened in China. The other khanates embraced the Islam and although with various rulers at various times other religions were alternately condoned and reconciled with, intolerance vis-à-vis one or more

confessional groups was prevalent. At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Christianity drastically declined in Asia and Buddhism was only widespread in China (Luttwak, 2011).

Thus, we see that religious freedom is widely accepted until approximately the 1360s. With this framework for religious freedom laid down in the Yassa religions could spread even more easily along the Silk Road. The end of the 1350s, however, paint a different picture. The rulers are deviating from the initial binding framework as published by the Yassa and become intolerant vis-à-vis one or more confessional groups. At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Christianity drastically declined in Asia and Buddhism was only widespread in China.

### **Political stability in the Mongol Empire**

In 1206 Genghis Khan united the Mongolian tribes after an intense political struggle for power. However, as soon as he established himself as Great Khan political stability returned to the Mongolian lands under his authoritative rule. Genghis' objective was to conquer neighboring countries. This conquest was continued by his successors. The Mongols were famous for their military might. Their swift invasion in Central Europe, which brought them all the way to the gates of Vienna, let even the European powers shiver. Their military organization was simple, but effective using a decimal system. The army consisted, as also described in the Yassa, of squads of tens, hundreds, thousands, and ten thousands. They were famous for their horse archers, but other groups were equally skilled. The Mongol focus was always on swiftness; they had light armor and usually travelled with several horses to quickly switch to a fresh horse (Sverdrup, 2010). Obviously, this expansion drift was particularly destabilizing for the attacked countries. However, the Mongol Empire was not free from political instability either. More specifically, troubling times occurred at 1241 – 1251 and 1259 – 1264.

#### Struggle for power

Following Ögedei Khan's, the successor of the Genghis Khan, death in 1241, his widow was regent of the Mongol Empire until the Kurultai would appoint a new Great Khan. She persecuted some of Ögedei's officials and awarded high positions to her allies. She also built palaces, cathedrals, temples et cetera. This was meant to win over the Mongolian elite to support her son Güyük to become the next ruler of the Mongolian Empire. Batu, the khan of the Golden Horde refused to attend the Kurultai because he was allegedly ill and the climate was bad for his health. This created a stalemate, since the election of a new khan required the attendance of all senior members who amongst other things commanded the military. This stalemate left the Empire without a rightful ruler until 1246. Others were threatening to take the throne and if necessary by force. That is when Batu conceded and acknowledged Güyük as the new Great Khan. However, in 1248, Güyük mobilized troops and marched westwards with an unclear motive in the direction of Batu. Some argued it was for a legitimate attack in the Middle East, others say it was meant as a surprise attack on Batu. On Güyük's way westwards he died unexpectedly. It is possible he was poisoned. This created again succession questions. Güyük's widow tried to follow the example of Ögedei Khan's widow, but was less successful. The

Kurultai offered the position to Batu. Claiming not to be interested, he nominated Genghis Khan's grandson Möngke, who became the new emperor of the Mongol Empire in 1251 ending the struggle for the Mongolian throne (Atwood, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Weatherford, 2004). The second time troubling times in the Mongolian appeared was when Möngke marched south with his army aiming to conquer China. An outbreak of either cholera or dysentery in the army caused the death of Möngke Khan in 1259. A new khan had to be appointed and like before there was no consensus over whom that should be. Several people made claims to the throne. Hearing about Möngke's death, his brother Hulagu breaks off his successful military conquest of Syria leaving a small contingent behind. His enemies defeat this contingent and Hulagu ceases his journey to Karakorum to avenge this loss. In China, Kublai Khan, another brother, heard about Möngke's death too. Rather than returning to Karakorum to attend the Kurultai, he continues his conquest of China. This leads to Ariqboke, a younger brother, to take advantage of the absence of Hulagu and Kublai and lay claim on the throne. He convenes a Kurultai and wins the title of Great Khan for himself. When Kublai discovers this, he convenes his own Kurultai in China who proclaims Kublai to be the Great Khan. This quickly led to a civil war within the Empire. Kublai marched on Karakorum and conquered it, but quickly afterwards Ariqboke retook the capital. Hulagu sided with Kublai, but clashed with the khan of the Golden Horde until Hulagu's death in 1264. However, Ariqboke's allies lost battles against Kublai Khan's commanders and could not reinforce Ariqboke anymore. Simultaneously, Kublai Khan cut the provision lines to the capital. Ariqboke saw that he could not hold the capital and retreated. Finally, Ariqboke surrendered to Kublai in 1264 ending the civil war.

Kublai Khan won the civil war and convened a Kurultai to confirm his status as Great Khan. The other 3 khans, however, did not attend this Kurultai and thereby did not recognize him as Great Khan. The end result was that Kublai Khan was, nominally, the new Great Khan, but did not have the full powers. He was unable to unite all the khanates. Each khanate became more independent, but remained part of the Mongol Empire. Over time relations improved ushering in the start the 100-year *Pax Mongolica*. During that period, traders could again safely use the Silk Road without being hindered by exorbitant tariffs or robbers (Morgan, 2007; Shagdar, 2000; Weatherford, 2004).

### Civil war

The *Pax Mongolica* is characterized by a further normalization of relations between the khanates after the Civil war. Exemplary is the establishment of friendly relations between the Golden Horde, Ilkhanate, Chagatai Khanate, and the Yuan dynasty. Although political disagreement regarding the succession of the Great Khan between different contending families remained, economically and commercially they cooperated successfully (Weatherford, 2004).

After 1350 tensions started to rise again resulting, ultimately, in the end of the *Pax Mongolica*. The Khanates increasingly focused on their own territory rather than cooperating with each other. This led to Khanates adopting other religions for political reasons rather than conviction creating friction between the Yuan dynasty, who favored Buddhism, and the three other khanates, favoring Islam. Furthermore, rival families who were spread over different

khanates vehemently competed for thrones in the different khanates with rival families which was also a cause for tensions. Once a family obtained a throne it would not stop, but it would try to secure another throne as well.

Between 1357 and 1366 there was a series of civil uprisings in the Yuan Khanate, referred to as the Ispah Rebellion. Causing this conflict is that Shia Muslims were excluded from fully participating in daily life and were treated inferiorly by particularly the Sunni Muslims. The Sunnis were financially helped by the Mongols for their help in conquering China for the Mongol Empire. They became stronger and more influential politically and in an economic sense. The Shiites increasingly resented the Sunnis. A weaker Yuan government provided the Shia Muslims the opportunity to take up arms in 1357. They conquered a few cities and even the provincial capital Fuzhou, located opposite of present-day Taiwan. In 1362 their army was collapsing into internal conflict making it increasingly difficult to defend against the Yuan government. In 1366 the Shia army was crushed by the Yuan Khanate and the Shia Muslims were massacred by Yuan commander Chen Youding (Gladney, 1996).

That was not all for the Yuan Khanate. The native Chinese were frustrated with being treated as second-class citizens by the Mongols. Kublai Khan, who was fifth in the line from Genghis Khan, believed that the Mongol elite was losing power because they became too Chinese. This led him and Kublai Khan's descendants to stress their Mongol identity. The Chinese inhabitants started to grow more xenophobic against the Mongols as a counter-reaction. The massive inflation in the 1360s only amplified the poor conditions the Chinese found themselves in. A civil war erupted and the crumbling Yuan dynasty this time was unable to thwart the rebellion. In 1368, the rebels decisively won the battle for present-day Beijing and launched a new dynasty, the Ming-dynasty. The new Chinese leaders expelled all the foreign influences such as religion and foreigners in general. China was meant to be for the Chinese and by the Chinese. They cut all ties with the other khanates and trade with others did not interest them and they basically withdrew themselves from the world trade system (Gascoign, 2003; Shagdar, 2000).

Another instance of increased political instability takes place in the Golden Horde. In 1359, Khan Berdibek of the Golden Horde was murdered. It was the start of a prolonged civil war. Sometimes up to four potential khans were vying for control of the khanate. In the 1360s some provinces tried to free themselves from Golden Horde rule. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania opportunistically launched a large-scale expedition into the Golden Horde conquering Kiev. The Golden Horde managed to survive the rebellion. In the 1390s it went even on the offensive and started conquering other lost territories and continued to attack the Timurid Empire, which was founded by Timurlane in 1370 and situated in Central Asia. The Golden Horde lost the battle and in 1395-1396 the Timurid Empire defeated the Golden Horde and looted the capital. From that point on it was mainly downhill for the Golden horde losing more and more territory and provinces breaking away. From 1410 onwards only a fraction of the Golden Horde survives and is intermittently independent or ruled by other powers (Atwood, 2009).

The examples of the Yuan Khanate and Golden Horde are emblematic of the tensions after 1350 in these and the other khanates of the Mongol Empire. On top of that, the bubonic plague, infamously known as the Black Death, worked as a catalyst for all these events. The Mongols had conquered remote and isolate areas, but the plague made it difficult for the demographically weakened Mongols to exert their control over these territories. This appeared to be especially fatal since revolts started to break out in the dissolving Ilkhanate and the tumultuous Chagatai Khanate and Yuan Dynasty, due to the plague and aforementioned tensions. These revolts in turn led to a cut of production of goods and flow of trade. Halfway to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century political stability becomes rare and the Mongol Empire falls apart piece by piece (Shagdar, 2000; Abu-Lughod, 1991).

Thus, from 1206 until the 1360s, the Mongol Empire is politically stable. During the politically stable periods, encompassed by the *Pax Mongolica*, merchants could safely use the Silk Road without being hindered by exorbitant tariffs or robbers and the different khanates cooperated successfully in economical and commercial matters. At the end of the *Pax Mongolica*, during the 1350s, tensions rise again. Khanates did not cooperate as intensively anymore and the population is murmuring. Halfway to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, security and unity became a rather scarce 'commodity' due to different wars between the khanates. On top of that the Black Death demographically weakens the Mongols making it very difficult for them to exert control over remote regions. Therefore the Mongol Empire was no longer able to effectively govern and protect the overland Silk Road.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

### Discussion

My research started off by focusing only the religious freedom aspect, but soon after starting my third chapter it became clear that this focus was too narrow. I discovered that political stability was a very important factor to economic growth as well and seeing the remark of Grim et al. (2014) that they deem religious freedom as a key ingredient to peace and stability made me include political stability, although I did not look at the link between religious freedom and political stability itself.

The reason for focusing on only religious freedom and political stability is that both show a fascinating chronological parallel with the trade on the Silk Road. This is demonstrated during the *Pax Mongolica* and the period afterwards. This research established that during the *Pax Mongolica* there was both religious freedom and political stability. This research also established that from the 1360s onwards religious intolerance and civil war are rampant. What I hoped to discover was whether religious freedom and political stability was causal to the decline of the Silk Road.

The second chapter of this research displayed that the Eurasian silver century is a strong indicator of the success of intercontinental trade during the *Pax Mongolica*. The connection of Burma to the Silk Road is important, because otherwise the Burman silver would not have been able arrive in London and the European mines were not able to supply that much silver. This shows that once connected to the Silk Road, goods travelled along the whole Silk Road, indicating again the flourishing trade on the Silk Road.

Since silver was used as a universally acknowledge means of exchange in the intercontinental trade it can be used to indicate the flourishing of the trade on the Silk Road. The peaks in silver production reflect the need of this means of exchange. The paper money crisis in China (caused by the government to fund their military expenditures against the civil uprisings?), on the other hand, indicates the decline of the Silk Road. Silver could not fulfill its 'obligation' as a medium of exchange for intercontinental trade. That caused, ultimately, a major drop of demand of silver rendering it useless and thereby ending the Eurasian silver century. It probably even contributed to the decline of the trade, because without the necessary means of exchange the intercontinental trade became very complicated. Other sources also confirm the decline of the trade along the Silk Road (De la Vaisière, 2014; Inalcik & Quataert, 1994; Lesaffer, 2009).

Religious freedom is widely accepted until approximately the 1360s. Afterwards religious intolerance is rampant leading to the drastic downfall of Buddhism, except for China, and Christianity in Asia. That is an important time frame, because the Eurasian silver century ends, remarkably, at more or less the same time. This in itself does not prove a direct relationship between religious freedom and the trade on the Silk Road.

However, there seems to be a correlation. The conclusion of Grim et al. (2014), stating that religious freedom is good for economic growth, seems to support the suggestion that religious freedom helped facilitate the economic success of the Silk Road between 1270s and



1360s. Grim et al. (2014) do state that religious freedom is not an antidote directly affecting economic growth, but is more of an indicator for freedom in general which is necessary for economic growth. According to Grim et al. (2014) the idea of participating in economic life is only possible with enough freedom, of which religious freedom is an indicator.

Although, outside of the scope of this dissertation. There seems to be a relation between religious freedom and political stability. For instance, religious tensions caused the Ispah rebellion and during my research, I found more instances of religiously inspired conflicts. Future inquiry could focus on the relation between religious freedom and political stability in the Mongol Era. If a positive relationship is found, it would indirectly show that religious freedom is one of the causes for the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road since, as I will present later, political stability does have a positive relationship with success and decline of trade along the Silk Road.

Until the 1360 the Mongol Empire is politically stable. During this period, merchants could safely use the Silk Road without being hindered by exorbitant tariffs or robbers. At the same time, the different khanates cooperated successfully in economical and commercial matters. That is important, because, as Abu-Lughod (1991) argued, “an environment that facilitated land transit with less risk” made the intercontinental trade possible. In order to have such an environment you need security and unity along the Silk Road, which was only possible through political stability.

There are two exceptions to that stability and one even changes the internal structure of the empire, but it has no effect on the security and the unity, which is so necessary for the merchants to cross the long distances safely to reach either side of the empire.

Once again, the time frame is important. When civil war erupts within the Mongol Empire, the Eurasian silver century ends. The Khanates stop cooperating and security and unity along the Silk Road is hard to find. The Black Death, in addition, makes it extra difficult to exert control over remote regions. The Mongol Empire was no longer able to effectively govern and protect the overland Silk Road, which ultimately resulted in its gradual decay.

Important to know is that there were a couple of limitations to this research. First of all, this has been a qualitative research. I did not perform any statistical analyses. However, some papers that were consulted in the process of the research did do so, such as Kuroda (2009) and Grim et al. (2014). Therefore, it was hard to draw a conclusion regarding the question on religious freedom. It was not possible to assemble data on for example how many government restrictions or social hostilities occurred over the years, so that it was not possible to directly apply the theory of Grim et al. (2014) to the Mongol Era. In general, information on religious freedom was difficult to find, although not impossible. It would have helped me to draw a conclusion on religious freedom if there were more policy documents available on religious freedom after the Yassa had been compiled. Finally, in order to test my hypothesis I had to assume that trade is necessary for economic growth. There is a total lack of data on economic growth, but not on trade. This assumption was necessary to make findings of Grim et al. (2014) relevant for this thesis.

## Conclusions

This dissertation attempted to find an answer to the following research question:

*What are the causes of the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Era?*

This research focused on the following two sub questions:

*“To what extent did religious freedom influence the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Empire?”* and;

*“To what extent did political stability influence the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Empire?”*

What emerges from this study is that there seems to be a correlation between religious freedom and the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Empire. It is, however, hard to define to what extent exactly. There is no direct link between the implementation of religious freedom and trade activity, but the periods of religious freedom and religious intolerance fit the ones of respectively success and decline of trade along the Silk Road. Also, it fits the conclusion made by Grim et al. (2014) that religious freedom is good for economic growth, assuming it is therefore also good for trade.

The picture regarding political stability is clearer. Again, the periods of political stability and civil war fit the ones of respectively success and decline of trade along the Silk Road. This time, however, we know why. We can safely conclude it is because of the security along the Silk Road and the unity among the different khanates, which is necessary to make the intercontinental trade possible. This security and unity was only possible through political stability. Therefore, I conclude that political stability was necessary for the success and decline of trade along the Silk Road in the Mongol Empire.

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