To What Extent Did the Mongol Empire Transform the Silk Road into the First Global Trade Network?

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Table of Contents

Abstract 2

1. Introduction 3

2. Historiography 4

3. Methodology 6

4. The Silk Road Before Mongol Rule 7

5. Mongol Transformation of Eurasian Exchange 9

5.1 Political Integration and Imperial Scale 9

5.2 Merchant Protection, Patronage and Regulation 11

5.3 The Yam, Paiza and Monetary Coordination 12

5.4 Goods, People, Information, Technology and Belief 14

6. Was This the First Global Trade Network? 16

7. Conclusion 17

References 19

Abstract

This paper evaluates the extent to which Mongol rule transformed the Silk Road during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and whether the resulting system can be called the first global trade network. It argues that the Mongols did not create Eurasian exchange. Commercial and cultural routes had linked China, Central Asia, the Islamic world and the Mediterranean for centuries, while maritime circuits connected China to South and West Asia before the Mongol conquests. The Mongol achievement was instead institutional and scalar. Imperial rule joined an unusually large part of Eurasia within related political frameworks; rulers protected merchants, issued credentials, maintained relay stations, mobilised credit and encouraged traffic between khanates. These arrangements made some long-distance journeys more regular and enabled goods, people, information, technologies and religions to move across previously separate regions. Yet the transformation was neither peaceful nor complete. Conquest destroyed cities and populations, coerced artisans into migration, imposed heavy burdens on relay communities, and gave way after 1260 to recurrent warfare among successor khanates. Moreover, most exchange remained local or regional, agriculture dominated the economy, and major maritime systems retained their own logics. The Mongol-era network is therefore best understood as the first exceptionally integrated transcontinental Afro-Eurasian trade system, rather than the first fully global network in a strictly planetary sense.

1. Introduction

The image of the Silk Road as a single highway stretching from China to Europe is compelling but misleading. In practice, the term describes a changing web of caravan tracks, oasis markets, river corridors, ports and maritime routes. Travellers rarely crossed the whole distance and goods usually passed through many hands before reaching their final destination.

Between the early thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth, Mongol armies created the largest contiguous land empire in history, uniting territories from northern China to the Black Sea under the singular control of the Khan

\. Even after the unified empire divided into the Yuan dynasty, Ilkhanate, Chaghatai khanate and Golden Horde, shared Chinggisid political practices, diplomatic conventions and elite networks continued to connect the successor states. Prajakti Kalra describes this process as the linking of smaller economies into a broader macro-economy, while also stressing that Mongol rulers inherited and enlarged earlier nomadic traditions of facilitating trade (Kalra, 2020). The issue is thus one of degree, not a choice between total discontinuity and no change.

This paper argues that the Mongol Empire transformed the Silk Road to a large extent, but that the phrase “first global trade network” requires qualification. The Mongols did not originate Eurasian commerce. They did, however, create an unprecedented political and logistical framework across much of the landmass. Merchant protection, paiza credentials, the yam relay network, state patronage of commercial partnerships, urban reconstruction and diplomatic mobility reduced some transaction costs and connected distant markets more regularly. At the same time, violence and coercion were integral to this process, inter-khanate wars repeatedly interrupted movement, and the volume of long-distance luxury trade remained small beside agriculture and regional exchange. The result was an integrated transcontinental Afro-Eurasian network with globalising effects, not a fully global economy comparable to the post-1500 world.

The argument proceeds in five stages. First, it places the question within debates over conquest, the so-called Pax Mongolica, the scale of medieval trade and the meaning of globalisation. Second, it explains a method that combines institutional evidence, travellers’ accounts and material remains while treating each source critically. Third, it establishes a pre-Mongol baseline. Fourth, it assesses political integration, merchant protection, communications

infrastructure and the movement of people and knowledge. Finally, it tests the Mongol system against explicit criteria for a global trade network. This structure permits a balanced judgment: Mongol power radically changed the conditions of Eurasian connectivity without erasing older routes, local exchange or the costs of conquest.

2. Historiography

Modern interpretations of Mongol rule often oscillate between two powerful narratives. The first presents the Mongols chiefly as destroyers whose campaigns depopulated cities, ruined irrigation systems and shattered established societies. The second emphasises the Pax Mongolica: a period of security in which merchants and envoys could travel across Eurasia under imperial protection. Morris Rossabi warns that both images are grounded in real evidence but become misleading when treated as complete explanations. The conquests caused terrible destruction, yet Mongol regimes also promoted travel, commerce and cultural transmission on a remarkable scale (Rossabi, 2011, pp. 1–18). The historiographical task is not to choose one moral portrait. It is to explain how conquest and integration could operate together.

The destructive interpretation rests on contemporary testimony. ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini, a Persian administrator writing under Mongol rule, described the capture of Bukhara and Samarkand in language of burning, killing, plunder, conscription and deportation. His famous summary—“they came, they sapped, they burnt, they slew, they plundered and they departed”—captures the trauma recorded by Persian urban elites (Juvaini, cited in Rossabi, 2011, p. 79). Juvaini’s casualty totals are difficult to accept literally, and his rhetoric follows conventions of catastrophe, but the displacement of populations and artisans is corroborated across sources. A commercial history that begins only after order was restored risks treating devastated communities as invisible costs.

The integrative interpretation focuses on institutions and mobility. Janet Abu-Lughod’s reconstruction of a thirteenth-century world system places Mongol Central Asia within eight interlocking commercial circuits running from north-western Europe to China (Abu-Lughod, 1989, pp. 153–184). Ronald Findlay and Mats Lundahl go further, calling the creation of the empire the strongest episode of globalisation yet attempted (Findlay and Lundahl, 2006, pp. 13–54). Kalra similarly foregrounds infrastructure, storage, markets, monetary policies and the political roles of merchants (Kalra, 2020). These accounts use “globalisation” to mean unprecedented integration across the Old World, rather than a literally worldwide system.

A second debate concerns the volume and character of Silk Road commerce. Valerie Hansen challenges the familiar picture of large caravans regularly crossing the whole continent. Documents from Central Asian sites suggest that most merchants travelled short stages and dealt in local or regional goods; silk was important but not the dominant commodity. Long-distance exchange could therefore be economically modest yet culturally transformative (Hansen, 2012, p. 235; Hansen, 2021). This revision changes the standard of proof. Marco Polo's descriptions of wealthy cities cannot by themselves establish mass intercontinental commerce. The more defensible claim is that Mongol institutions increased the possibility and regularity of connections among regional circuits, especially for high-value goods, official missions and mobile specialists.

The name "Silk Road" can itself distort the debate. Silk was a prestigious diplomatic gift, store of value and luxury commodity, and European envoys associated Asian wealth with access to silk. Yet surviving documents show many other products in motion, including grain, animals, textiles, metals, medicines, ceramics, furs and spices. Some of the most economically important exchanges occurred between neighbouring regions and never approached the full continental distance. In this paper the term is therefore a geographical shorthand, not a claim that silk dominated traffic or that one road joined two fixed endpoints. This usage follows Hansen's insistence on a plural, segmented and culturally consequential network (Hansen, 2012, p. 235; Hansen, 2021).

A third debate surrounds the term Pax Mongolica itself. It is useful because merchants, missionaries and diplomats did benefit from shared rules and protected corridors. Yet Peter Jackson argues that the phrase becomes too positive when applied to the era after 1260. The khanates fought one another, the unified relay system fractured, and political frontiers could close even while traders found ways to cross hostile zones (Jackson, 2017, pp. 210–241). Peace was therefore uneven, negotiated and periodically absent. Pegolotti's fourteenth-century assertion that the route from Tana to China was "perfectly safe" belongs to a commercial guide based on merchant reports, not to an eyewitness account of every segment (Pegolotti, cited in Rossabi, 2011, pp. 148–151). It reveals confidence in a usable route, but not permanent peace.

Finally, scholars disagree over when "global" history begins. A strict definition requires durable economic interdependence across all inhabited continents, a condition that medieval Eurasia did not meet. A looser definition identifies networks whose consequences transcended civilisations and joined distant regions into a shared field of exchange. The Mongol case fits

the second definition more securely. Abu-Lughod demonstrates that a multi-centred Old World system existed before European maritime hegemony, while the essays collected by Michal Biran, Jonathan Brack and Francesca Fiaschetti show how generals, merchants and intellectuals moved through overlapping imperial and commercial spaces (Biran, Brack and Fiaschetti, 2020, pp. 1–24). The strongest synthesis therefore distinguishes globalisation as a process from a fully global system as an achieved condition.

This paper adopts that synthesis. It rejects both a triumphalist Pax Mongolica and a destruction-only account. It also separates four claims too often collapsed into one: that exchange existed; that its volume increased; that its institutions became more coordinated; and that its geography became global. Evidence strongly supports the third claim and gives qualified support to the second. It supports the fourth only if "global" is explicitly limited to an integrated Afro-Eurasian scale. Such distinctions make it possible to recognise Mongol innovation without attributing to the empire the creation of routes, markets and maritime connections that long predated it.

3. Methodology

The paper uses a comparative, source-critical method. It first establishes a baseline for exchange before 1206, then evaluates change through five indicators: geographic reach, frequency and regularity of movement, security, institutional coordination and the range of things transmitted. "Trade network" refers not only to goods and merchants but also to the routes, cities, intermediaries, credit arrangements, credentials and political protections that made repeated exchange possible. "Transformation" means a substantial alteration in several of these indicators, not simply a rise in the quantity of trade. "Global" is tested in two senses: a strict planetary sense and a historically contextual Afro-Eurasian sense.

The evidence is uneven. Persian chroniclers such as Juvaini and Rashid al-Din wrote close to Mongol courts and preserve valuable administrative detail, but political patronage and literary convention shaped their narratives. Marco Polo offers unusually rich descriptions of Yuan institutions and cities, yet his work magnifies imperial abundance and has a complicated textual history. Pegolotti wrote for merchants but apparently did not travel the entire route he described. Each is therefore used for what it can establish: Juvaini for conquest and administration; Rashid for relay obligations and court patronage; Marco Polo for how Yuan

institutions appeared to an informed outsider; and Pegolotti for commercial knowledge and perceived conditions rather than direct observation (Rossabi, 2011, pp. 70–83, 123–151).

Secondary scholarship supplies comparison and context, while archaeological evidence checks literary claims. The ninth-century Belitung cargo demonstrates large-scale maritime exchange long before Mongol rule, and the 1323 Sinan wreck illustrates the continuing density of East Asian sea trade during the Yuan period (Krahl et al., 2010; National Museum of Korea, n.d.). Neither shipwreck proves the effect of Mongol land policy by itself. Together they prevent an overland-centred argument from treating maritime Asia as a Mongol invention. This triangulation also guards against converting colourful anecdotes into aggregate economic statistics. Where evidence permits only a claim about connectivity, the paper does not infer mass trade.

Chronology provides a further control. The analysis concentrates on the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, separating the period of a formally united empire from the later era of cooperating and competing khanates. Evidence from the 1340s cannot simply be projected backward to Chinggis Khan, and practices attributed to the founder may reflect later codification. Conversely, the fragmentation after 1260 does not erase the institutions built earlier. Claims are therefore tied to the regime and date that the evidence actually describes. This prevents “the Mongol Empire” from becoming a timeless actor and makes institutional continuity, rather than continuous political unity, the relevant measure.

4. The Silk Road Before Mongol Rule

The Mongols entered an already connected Eurasia. Long before the thirteenth century, Chinese silk and ceramics, Central Asian horses, Indian spices, Iranian metalwork and many other goods travelled through overlapping land and sea routes. Buddhist texts and artistic forms moved from South and Central Asia into China; Islamic merchants operated across the Indian Ocean; and steppe peoples repeatedly mediated between agrarian empires. The very plurality of these paths is why “Silk Roads” is often more accurate than “the Silk Road.” No central authority designed the system. It emerged from the interaction of courts, pastoralists, oasis communities, religious institutions and merchant diasporas.

Material evidence makes the pre-Mongol scale particularly clear at sea. The Belitung ship, wrecked in the Java Sea in the ninth century, carried an estimated 60,000 Chinese ceramics

together with metals, spices and precious objects. Its sewn-plank construction and cargo provide direct archaeological evidence for maritime movement between China and the western Indian Ocean centuries before Chinggis Khan (Krahl et al., 2010; Flecker, 2010, pp. 101–119). The find does not prove a single continuous market from China to Europe. It does prove that bulk, specialised and consumer-oriented exchange across long distances was not a Mongol creation.

Song China further developed these maritime networks. Ports such as Quanzhou and Ningbo linked Chinese producers with Southeast Asia, India and the Islamic world, while customs duties became an important source of state income. The Song used the compass, supported naval forces and participated in a commercial environment that the Yuan later inherited. The account of Kublai Khan's invasions of Japan in Fitzhugh, Rossabi and Honeychurch's collection explicitly notes the extensive Asian maritime trade of the Song and the Mongol effort to control it (Delgado, Sasaki and Hayashida, 2009, pp. 245–254). The Mongol conquests thus shifted the political ownership of a sophisticated coastal economy rather than bringing such an economy into existence.

Overland commerce before 1206 was both extensive and structurally limited. Political frontiers, local tolls, warfare, ecological hazards and changing alliances raised costs. Yet fragmentation did not equal isolation. Merchants adapted by operating in stages and relying on linguistic, familial and religious networks. Hansen's evidence from Central Asia suggests that small transactions and short-distance peddling formed the ordinary base of the system, while governments and wealthy patrons occasionally moved larger consignments (Hansen, 2021). This pattern helps explain how goods could travel very far even when individual merchants did not.

Segmented exchange also explains why political unification could matter without causing every merchant to cross Eurasia. A trader moving cloth between two oasis towns depended on conditions in a limited area, but the resale of that cloth could link successive markets over thousands of kilometres. Fewer toll barriers, more predictable protection and faster news at several junctions could therefore improve a transcontinental chain even when behaviour at any single link remained local. The Mongol contribution should be sought in the relationship among links, not only in the number of heroic end-to-end journeys recorded by travellers.

The appropriate baseline is therefore a mature but decentralised set of networks. It carried modest quantities across the full continental distance, supported substantial regional trade and generated powerful cultural effects. Its weaknesses were not a total lack of routes or knowledge. They were inconsistent political protection, limited coordination across jurisdictions and the difficulty of moving safely between separate regional systems. Mongol rule could transform those conditions without replacing the commercial expertise of the people who already used them. Indeed, the conquerors depended on Uyghur, Muslim, Chinese and other intermediaries precisely because those groups possessed the administrative and mercantile knowledge the new rulers lacked (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 184–186).

5. Mongol Transformation of Eurasian Exchange

5.1 Political Integration and Imperial Scale

The first Mongol transformation was geographical. Chinggis Khan and his successors conquered steppe corridors, oasis cities and agrarian states on a scale no earlier polity had sustained. The united empire lasted most clearly from 1206 to 1260, but conquest created a Chinggisid political world that endured in the successor khanates. Shared dynastic legitimacy, diplomatic forms and administrative personnel gave distant regions a partially common framework even when their rulers competed. Kalra's formulation of micro-economies linked into a macro-economy captures the result: not a single centrally managed market, but a network in which decisions at one end could affect routes and intermediaries far away (Kalra, 2020).

Conquest also removed or absorbed many political barriers. The Xi Xia state, for example, occupied important routes between China and Central Asia. Its defeat gave the Mongols access to trade, tribute, raw materials, soldiers and strategic cities (Dunnell, 2009, pp. 153–161). Farther west, the conquest of Khwarazm brought major urban centres into the imperial sphere. The origin of that war itself reveals the fusion of commerce and diplomacy: after merchants associated with Chinggis Khan were killed at Otrar, the khan treated the incident as both an economic injury and an intolerable political insult (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 120–126). Merchants were not peripheral civilians. They were informants, envoys, financiers and instruments of imperial strategy.

Integration, however, began in catastrophe. At Bukhara and Samarkand, Mongol armies seized provisions, killed or dispersed inhabitants, conscripted young men and redistributed craftsmen.

Juvaini's numbers cannot be used as precise demographic data, but his narrative establishes the intended logic of conquest: resistance was punished, resources were extracted and mobile skills were reassigned to imperial purposes (Juvaini, cited in Rossabi, 2011, pp. 73–83). The same forced movement that later transmitted techniques across Eurasia could start with enslavement. Transformation therefore describes a political-economic process, not an uncomplicated improvement in human welfare.

After conquest, Mongol rulers had practical reasons to restore production and traffic. Armies, courts and new capitals required immense supplies. Rashid al-Din reported that Khara Khorum depended on hundreds of provision carts arriving daily, while excavated and written evidence presents the capital as a meeting point for people and goods from many regions (Rashid al-Din, cited in Rossabi, 2011, p. 123; Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 199–203). Urban life revived in parts of the western empire as well. Daniel Waugh notes the development of Sarai and the recovery of Black Sea and Russian commerce; Genoese privileges at Kaffa and the multi-ethnic character of Golden Horde cities connected steppe routes to Mediterranean shipping (Waugh, 2009, pp. 173–180). Imperial demand and urban reconstruction thus created nodes that linked regional economies.

Administrative integration depended heavily on conquered peoples. The Mongols had neither the personnel nor the specialised knowledge to govern every sedentary society directly. They employed multilingual Uyghur scribes, Muslim financiers, Chinese officials and local tax administrators, adapting established practices to imperial demands. Secretariats translated orders, authenticated documents with seals and kept accounts across languages (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 184–186). This reliance complicates any claim of purely Mongol invention. The empire's distinctive capacity lay in assembling proven regional techniques inside a transcontinental ruling structure. Standardisation was incomplete, but officials and merchants increasingly encountered related forms of written authority, taxation and safe conduct as they crossed political zones.

The political framework was never uniform. After the succession crisis of 1260, wars between the Golden Horde and Ilkhanate, between Central Asian rulers and the Yuan, and within dynastic branches complicated travel. Yet fragmentation did not immediately destroy the larger system. Traders, diplomats and religious figures could cross khanate boundaries because the rulers shared conventions and needed revenue. The important change was not uninterrupted peace but the existence of a recognisable trans-imperial arena within which security could be

negotiated. That is a more precise meaning of Pax Mongolica than the claim that all routes were always safe.

5.2 Merchant Protection, Patronage and Regulation

Mongol rulers treated commerce as a source of revenue, information and political service. Major Uyghur and Muslim merchants entered imperial employment as tax officials, advisers and diplomatic agents. Their relationship with the ruling elite is often described through the ortoq, or commercial partnership, in which court capital and merchant expertise were combined. Such arrangements could finance distant ventures and give traders access to power, but they also blurred the boundary between public administration and private enrichment. The commercial order was therefore highly institutionalised without being impersonal or open to all participants equally (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 184–185; Kalra, 2020).

Rashid al-Din's account of Ögödei offers a vivid example of patronage. When a would-be trader was burdened by debt, the khan reportedly supplied capital so that part could repay creditors and part could fund a new venture. On other occasions Ögödei ordered merchants' wares purchased at full price, even when sellers inflated their demands (Rashid al-Din, cited in Rossabi, 2011, pp. 126–127). The story praises royal generosity and cannot be read as a neutral market report. Nevertheless, it illustrates a governing ideal in which a successful ruler attracted merchants by providing liquidity and reliable demand.

Security was equally important. Laws protecting lost property and severe penalties for theft were remembered as measures that benefited travellers and traders. Ratchnevsky concludes that personal protection and safer routes reduced the risk of transporting costly goods, while generous court purchases promised exceptional profits (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 189, 205–206). Pegolotti's merchant handbook, written in the 1340s, mapped costs, currencies, pack animals and danger points from Tana through Central Asia toward China. His assurance that a company of sixty could cross a particularly difficult segment safely shows that Italian commercial communities possessed actionable knowledge about the route (Pegolotti, cited in Rossabi, 2011, pp. 148–151).

Yet protection was selective and costly. Merchant privileges could shift burdens to cultivators, artisans and households obliged to host travellers. Ratchnevsky argues that elite long-distance commerce enriched rulers and major merchants while imposing accommodation and transport duties on ordinary people. It could also encourage elite indebtedness and the export of wealth

in return for luxury goods (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 203–206). Taxes were not abolished: the tamgha was levied on commercial transactions and workshops in several Mongol realms, though rates and practice varied. What the empire offered was not free trade in the modern sense. It offered politically backed trade whose benefits and costs were unequally distributed.

The tension between security and extraction helps explain both the strength and fragility of the system. When officials enforced rules, maintained routes and kept demands predictable, merchants could treat distant journeys as calculable ventures. When couriers commandeered horses, tax farmers extorted communities or rulers fought one another, the same institutions became sources of insecurity. Mongol commerce depended less on an abstract preference for markets than on the quality of imperial administration. It worked best where rulers recognised that protecting traffic would enlarge tribute, customs revenue and access to strategic goods.

Commercial policy also worked through reputation. Ögödei's conspicuous purchases, paizas carrying threats of punishment and severe laws against theft all advertised the ruler's capacity to reward cooperation and punish interference. Whether every promise was fulfilled is less important than the fact that merchants could incorporate imperial backing into decisions about credit, partners and routes. Reputation reduced uncertainty only when local officials honoured it, so commercial confidence remained vulnerable to administrative abuse. The empire's achievement was to project a recognisable promise of protection across unusual distances, not to eliminate risk.

5.3 The Yam, Paiza and Monetary Coordination

The yam relay system was the clearest material infrastructure of Mongol integration. Stations supplied horses, food and lodging so that official messages and authorised travellers could move rapidly across long distances. The institution drew on Turkic, Chinese and other precedents, but the empire extended and coordinated it on an exceptional scale. Rashid al-Din described relay stages protected and provisioned through organised obligations, while Ratchnevsky shows that Ögödei formalised the station system and compulsory support duties as imperial expansion increased the volume of official traffic (Rashid al-Din, cited in Rossabi, 2011, p. 123; Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 180–186).

Under Kublai Khan, the Yuan maintained more than 1,400 postal stations, repaired roads and bridges and used the network to move orders, envoys and information. The government also reduced some merchant taxes, extended low-interest loans to merchant associations and

promoted paper currency (Rossabi, 2009, pp. 209–213). These measures did not create one currency for all Eurasia, but they lowered transaction costs within Yuan territory and improved the interface between political communication and commerce. A market is more integrated when information about prices, demand and danger moves faster, even if most goods themselves continue to travel slowly.

Paizas, or tablets of authority, identified people entitled to official support and safe passage. Their use predated the Mongols, yet Chinggisid governments adopted them across a much larger realm. Surviving examples threaten punishment against anyone who harms or disobeys the bearer (Fitzhugh, Rossabi and Honeychurch, 2009, back cover; Waugh, 2009, pp. 174–176). The paiza therefore made authority portable. It allowed a written or inscribed credential to activate services far from the ruler's physical presence. For envoys and approved merchants, this was a significant form of institutional coordination.

Marco Polo's description of Yuan paper money offers another example. He portrayed notes issued under imperial seals as accepted throughout Kublai's domains and exchangeable against valuable commodities (Marco Polo, cited in Rossabi, 2011, pp. 132–134). His rhetoric of universal obedience magnifies the reach and reliability of the system, and Yuan currency experienced inflation and local resistance. Even so, the account demonstrates a state ambition to standardise payment across a vast territory. Together, coin, silver, paper money and local currencies did not form a single Eurasian monetary union, but official exchange rules made conversion among commercial zones more manageable.

Infrastructure imposed heavy social costs. Rashid al-Din complained that unauthorised or abusive messengers seized horses, supplies and lodging, sometimes travelling with enormous escorts. Yuan documents likewise record officials mistreating station households. Ratchnevsky notes that some families assigned to relay duties fled or sold dependants when demands became unbearable (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 180–183, 203). The yam was thus both connective technology and extractive institution. Its historical importance lies therefore in the capacity of the state to efficiently mobilise resources over distance for privileged users and oppressively for many providers.

This double character also clarifies why the system weakened with political fragmentation. Relay stations required dependable taxation, disciplined officials and cooperation between jurisdictions. Jackson notes that early fourteenth-century rulers still had to repair broken links

in the post system, evidence that the supposed Pax was neither automatic nor permanent (Jackson, 2017, pp. 210–241). Nevertheless, the very effort to reconnect stations shows how essential communications infrastructure had become to government and trade. Mongol rule made long-distance coordination a normal problem of imperial policy.

5.4 Goods, People, Information, Technology and Belief

The economic effects of Mongol rule cannot be measured only by cargo volume. The network carried people whose knowledge altered institutions and cultures. Conquest transferred craftsmen from defeated cities; courts recruited doctors, astronomers, translators, clerics, financiers and engineers; missionaries and diplomats travelled between societies that had previously known one another mainly through intermediaries. Rossabi describes Chinese medical knowledge and plants moving toward Iran, Muslim astronomical expertise moving into Yuan China, and artistic motifs passing between Chinese and Iranian workshops (Rossabi, 2011, pp. 7–13). These movements were selective, but their range was extraordinary.

Karakorum symbolised the mobility of skilled labour. Chinese and Iranian artisans, a Russian goldsmith and the Parisian Guillaume Boucher worked in or for the Mongol court. Ratchnevsky presents the capital as a cosmopolitan centre, yet also reminds readers that many specialists arrived through deportation (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 199–200). Calling this cultural exchange without specifying coercion would conceal the mechanism. Mongol integration expanded the audience for techniques and objects partly because imperial power could uproot their makers.

Travel accounts reveal the widening horizon of direct contact. Marco Polo's narrative, whatever disputes surround its composition, gave European readers a sustained depiction of Yuan China. Rabban Sauma, a Christian monk born in northern China, travelled west and met rulers and church leaders in Europe. Their roughly opposite journeys show that the Mongol world enabled individuals to cross multiple cultural zones within related diplomatic frameworks (Rossabi, 2009, pp. 217–219). The significance was not that either traveller represented ordinary migration. It was that their routes became conceivable, recordable and politically useful.

Mongol-era exchange also reached beyond the steppe routes. Yuan embassies sought tributary and commercial relationships in Southeast Asia. Zhou Daguan's mission to Angkor in the 1290s produced the best-known Chinese account of the city and reflected a wider effort to gather information and stimulate contact (Rossabi, 2011, pp. 155–156). Maritime merchants

simultaneously connected ports across the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. The 1323 Sinan ship, sailing from China to Japan with tens of thousands of objects, demonstrates the density of East Asian traffic during the Yuan period (National Museum of Korea, n.d.). These networks interacted with Mongol power but were not simply branches of the yam.

Religious movement illustrates the same combination of tolerance, mobility and political calculation. Mongol rulers generally granted privileges to Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Daoist institutions in return for prayer, expertise and loyalty. Clerics benefited from tax exemptions and could serve as diplomatic intermediaries. This did not produce modern religious equality; court favour varied, local conflicts persisted and rulers sometimes restricted practices they considered politically disruptive. Yet a relatively plural imperial environment allowed beliefs and texts to circulate with travellers and merchants (Ratchnevsky, 1991, pp. 184–186; Rossabi, 2011, pp. 4–7).

The range of goods also widened, although long-distance luxury items remained more visible than bulk necessities. Chinese porcelain and textiles, Central Asian horses, Persian metalwork, medicines, spices, furs and precious materials moved through linked markets. Marco Polo described Hangzhou's dense markets, warehouses and paved transport routes, while Golden Horde cities connected steppe products and slaves with Italian Black Sea commerce (Marco Polo, cited in Rossabi, 2011, pp. 135–139; Waugh, 2009, pp. 173–180). The scale in Polo's numerical claims is probably exaggerated, but the concentration of specialised urban services is credible.

The cultural consequences may have exceeded the aggregate economic ones. Rossabi estimates that agriculture still engaged roughly 85 to 90 per cent of Yuan China's population and generated most wealth. Long-distance trade remained concentrated in high-value goods and represented only a small part of the economy (Rossabi, 2009, pp. 210–213). Yet the movement of a physician, astronomical table, artistic design or diplomatic report could influence institutions far beyond its weight or price. Hansen's distinction between limited trade volume and major cultural transmission is therefore essential: the Silk Roads mattered not simply because they moved commodities, but because repeated contact changed what elites and specialists could know and do (Hansen, 2012, p. 235).

The same channels could transmit disease. Historians have long connected the fourteenth-century Black Death with intensified Eurasian mobility, but the exact route and timing remain

debated. Rossabi cautions that the link requires more evidence than a simple claim that Mongol peace spread plague from China to Europe (Rossabi, 2011, p. 17). The safest conclusion is structural: denser routes and connected ports created opportunities for pathogens as well as merchants and ideas. This negative externality reinforces the argument for integration, while warning against attributing a single linear itinerary without sufficient proof.

6. Was This the First Global Trade Network?

The case for calling the Mongol system the first global trade network rests on reach, coordination and regularity. For the first time, related regimes controlled or strongly influenced most of the overland corridor from China to eastern Europe. Italian merchants could obtain practical information about routes toward China; Muslim traders served courts across Asia; envoys travelled between Yuan China, Iran and Europe; and Black Sea ports connected steppe commerce to the Mediterranean. Abu-Lughod's eight-circuit model shows that these were not isolated voyages but points of contact among regional systems (Abu-Lughod, 1989, pp. 3–23, 153–184). If "global" means an integrated Old World arena, the description is persuasive.

The institutional case is equally strong. Conquest alone cannot create a network. The transformative mechanisms were portable credentials, relay stations, road and bridge maintenance, court credit, merchant partnerships, urban markets and diplomatic norms. They enabled repeated rather than purely exceptional movement. Even after political division, commercial actors could navigate between khanates using shared practices and local intermediaries. The Mongols did not administer every transaction, but their states altered the infrastructure within which transactions occurred. On the criteria defined at the outset, this amounts to a major transformation in coordination and geographic scale.

Three counterarguments prevent the strongest version of the claim. First, the Americas and much of sub-Saharan Africa were outside the system, so it was not global in a planetary sense. Second, long-distance connections were built on older and often autonomous regional networks. The Belitung ship proves substantial China–Indian Ocean commerce centuries earlier, while Song ports demonstrate that the Yuan inherited a developed maritime economy. Third, most people and goods did not cross continents. Agriculture dominated, many merchants moved only between neighbouring markets, and luxury trade could be spectacular without representing the bulk of economic life (Hansen, 2021; Rossabi, 2009, pp. 210–213).

The political chronology also resists the language of a stable world market. The unified empire's period was brief, successor states fought repeatedly, and routes rose or declined with local conditions. Pegolotti's optimistic guide and Jackson's account of interrupted post roads can both be true: traders could find workable corridors within a landscape of recurrent conflict (Pegolotti, cited in Rossabi, 2011, pp. 148–151; Jackson, 2017, pp. 210–241). "Pax" should therefore describe a set of protections and expectations available in particular times and places, not a century of universal peace.

Nor did later European maritime expansion simply replace a Mongol invention. Rossabi argues that intensified contact helped increase European knowledge of and desire for Asian products, contributing to the background of fifteenth-century exploration (Rossabi, 2011, pp. 17–19). This is a legacy claim, not proof of a direct causal line from the yam to Atlantic voyages. The Mongol-era system mattered because it demonstrated the commercial and informational value of sustained Eurasian access. When overland conditions later changed, European states and merchants pursued other routes toward markets whose attraction had become more concrete.

The best judgment is consequently two-part. The Mongols transformed the Silk Roads to a large extent because they integrated institutions and political space on an unprecedented transcontinental scale. They did not create the routes, monopolise their commerce or make Eurasia uniformly safe. The resulting network may be called the first global trade network only when "global" is defined historically as Afro-Eurasian integration. Under a strict planetary definition, it was a proto-global or globalising system: a decisive stage in the history of intercontinental connectivity, but not the endpoint of that history.

7. Conclusion

The Mongol Empire transformed the Silk Road primarily by changing the political and institutional conditions of exchange. Pre-Mongol Eurasia already contained sophisticated land and maritime networks, and most commerce continued to operate through regional stages. Mongol conquest nevertheless placed an exceptional span of the continent inside related regimes. Merchant patronage, paizas, relay stations, road maintenance, credit arrangements and cosmopolitan cities made some journeys more predictable and connected information, goods and specialists across greater distances.

That transformation was inseparable from violence. Cities were destroyed before they were restored; artisans moved through deportation as well as opportunity; relay services burdened households; and elite merchants enjoyed privileges not shared by ordinary producers. After 1260, wars among khanates repeatedly disrupted the ideal of a Pax Mongolica. The network's economic weight must also be kept in proportion: agriculture and local exchange remained dominant, while long-distance commerce concentrated on high-value goods. Its cultural, technological and diplomatic consequences were often greater than its share of total output.

In conclusion, Mongol rule transformed the Silk Roads to a large extent through coordination of existing trade rather than directly creating exchange. It produced the first exceptionally integrated transcontinental Afro-Eurasian network, though not a fully global system in a planetary sense.

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