

A Subtle Cataclysm: Rise of a New Epigraphic Genre in North China in the Mongol Eurasian Context

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The abrupt emergence of a new epigraphic genre —generally entitled “steles of ancestral graveyard (*xianying bei*)” — specializing in displaying extensive genealogical information in North China under Mongol rule (1210s to 1368) has been contextualized in the “spontaneous evolution (Chin. *zifa fazhan*)” of Chinese epigraphy. This paper challenges this conventional wisdom by correlating the epigraphic practice with the dominant principle of the Mongol imperial governance, which evolved around the notion of hereditary bond of loyalty between master and servant. When it came to define one’s political status in Mongol Empire, the number of generations her/his bloodline had served for Mongol ruling elite carried crucial significance. Called “*genjiao* (lit. root and feet, or foundation)” in Old Mandarin, this ruling principle permeated the distinct social layers and led to the rise of genealogical studies among the imperial subjects across the empire. Whereas comfortably fit into the conventional Chinese epigraphic *bei* style with inscription almost always written in Classical Chinese, the “steles of ancestral graveyards,” erected by both Han and non-Han families, precisely embodied the mutual acculturation between the Mongol political tradition and Chinese funerary and epigraphic customs. After the demise of Mongol rule in China, the steles of ancestral graveyards remained standing and facilitated the further evolution of descent groups in North China, with their inscriptions and genealogical charts reinterpreted/reutilized by the descendants of the original erectors, who strove to expand their kinship ties with alleged agnate collaterals to dominate more resources in local society over subsequent centuries. Mongol rule and the spread of genealogical studies under it marked a pivotal turning point in the history of the society in North China, not only for it drastically transformed the way the local elite defined themselves, but because it has exerted profound impact over the way the families in North China imagine their ancestry and kinship up until today.