Dr Wang Jinping, assistant professor of the Department of History, National University of Singapore, argued at an EAI weekly seminar that the Mongols had shifted financial and political support to Quanzhen Daoist and Buddhist religious orders, making their clergy one of the most powerful social groups from the early years of their conquest, instead of relying on Confucian-educated literati to rebuild local society like the Jurchens had done.

Dr Wang specifically mentioned the role of the Quanzhen Daoist group in the postwar social reconstruction of the northern society in the wake of the Mongol invasion, which is part of her research and book titled, *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200-1600*. Dr Wang first detailed the Mongol conquest of north china from 1211 to 1234, arguing that it resulted in a catastrophic destruction. The Mongols also brought in new systems of governance that drew heavily from steppe traditions not found in China proper.

Employing steles and inscriptions in Shanxi province as the major sources in her research, Dr Wang’s attempts to address two questions: How did the northern Chinese react to Mongolian conquest and rebuild their society after extreme devastation? How did their efforts change the socioeconomic landscape in north china in the succeeding centuries?

Dr Wang’s presentation centred on the role of the Quanzhen Daoist group and its role in the postwar social reconstruction of north china. She detailed the reasons for the Quanzhen Daoist group success during the Jin-Yuan dynasty transition. The Quanzhen Daoist group had doctrinal and social appeal, displayed religious simplicity, adhered to economic self-reliance, active in charitable activities, and was a provider of necessary social services as well as a force for moral, cultural and social authority.

The group also enjoyed Mongol imperial patronage as the Quanzhen Daoist privileges were granted by early Mongol khans. Their members were exempted from military/labour service and taxation. They were granted autonomous rights to issue ordination certificates and monastic plaques. The Quanzhen Daoist strategy of development was to build abbeys to save the people, and as a result, the institutional expansion of the Quanzhen Daoist group overlapped with the social undertaking of postwar community building. The statistics showed that there were more than 4,000 Quanzhen abbeys and convents in cities towns and villages, and more than 300,000 Quanzhen monks and nuns.

The Quanzhen Daoist sect also accommodated many Confucian literati, providing them with new jobs such as editing and printing. The Daoist canon was produced in 1244, and Quanzhen history was also documented during this period. In the then new Daoist education system, these were new routes to fame and power. The Quanzhen Daoist group also promoted the survival and success of women. One third of the Quanzhen population in the 13th century were women. They assumed leadership roles in public life and represented an alternative to family life for
women in better-off families. There was a sharp contrast between northern and southern strategies for women in difficult times of political crisis and social disorder.

In her conclusion, Dr Wang argued that the Quanzhen Daoist order created new sinews that supplanted the Confucian order to bind the fragmented postwar Chinese society together. It took on partial government functions to build postwar infrastructures and reorganised local communities, achieved something approaching a congregational religion at the local level; it also provided dynamic strategies for northern men and women to survive and navigate the Mongolian rule. Dr Wang noted that there was a distinctive northern path of social transformation (clergy activism) in the middle period of China that differs fundamentally from the south-centric narrative (literati activism). On an ending note, Dr Wang argued that the Mongol-Yuan state, which practised decentralised rule brought in from the steppes, was replaced by the Chinese imperial tradition of centralised rule during the Ming Dynasty.