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# Empire of the Great Khan

## TERMS & NAMES

- Kublai Khan
- Marco Polo

### MAIN IDEA

Kublai Khan ruled China and encouraged foreign trade, but the Yuan Dynasty was beset by problems.

### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The influence of Chinese ideas on Western civilization began with the Mongols' encouragement of trade.

**SETTING THE STAGE** Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, assumed the title Great Khan in 1260. In theory, the Great Khan ruled the entire Mongol Empire. In reality, the empire had split into four khanates. Other descendants of Genghis ruled Central Asia, Persia, and Russia as semi-independent states. The Great Khan focused instead on extending the power and range of his own khanate, which already included Mongolia, Korea, Tibet, and northern China. To begin, Kublai had to fulfill the goal of his grandfather to conquer all of China.

## Kublai Khan Conquers China

It took three generations of Mongol leaders to complete the conquest of China begun by Genghis Khan. In 1234, Genghis's son Ogadai conquered northern China. This opened southern China to direct attack. Chinese soldiers in the south held off the Mongols for 40 years, but the armies of Kublai Khan finally overwhelmed them in 1279.

Throughout China's long history, the Chinese feared and fought off invasions of northern nomads. China sometimes lost territory to nomadic groups, but no foreigner had ever ruled the whole country. The first to do so was Kublai Khan.

**Beginning a New Dynasty** As China's new emperor, **Kublai Khan** founded a new dynasty called the Yuan (yoo-AHN) Dynasty. It lasted less than a century, until 1368, when it was overthrown.

However, the Yuan era was an important period in Chinese history for several reasons. First, Kublai Khan united China for the first time in 300 years. For this he is considered one of China's great emperors. Second, the control imposed by the Mongols across all of Asia opened China to greater foreign contacts and trade. Finally, Kublai and his successors tolerated Chinese culture and made few changes to the system of government.

Unlike his Mongol ancestors, Kublai spent almost his entire life in China. Far from the Mongolian steppe, he did not share his ancestors' hatred of civilization. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed living in the luxurious manner of a Chinese emperor. He maintained a beautiful summer palace at Shangdu, on the border between Mongolia and China. He also built a new square-walled capital at the site of modern Beijing. The size of Kublai's palace in Beijing greatly impressed the European traveler Marco Polo, who called it "the largest that was ever seen."



This helmet was worn by a Mongol officer.

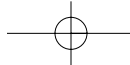
### Background

*Shangdu* is the origin of the English word *Xanadu*, which means an idyllic, beautiful place.

### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The hall is so vast and so wide that a meal might well be served there for more than 6,000 men. . . . The whole building is at once so immense and so well constructed that no man in the world . . . could imagine any improvement in design or execution.

MARCO POLO, *The Travels of Marco Polo*



This detail from a 13th-century Japanese scroll depicts Japanese warriors fighting off a Mongol warship.



Kublai built this palace to enhance his prestige, but his new capital meant something more. Previously, the Great Khans had ruled their empire from Mongolia. Moving the capital from Mongolia to China was a sign that Kublai intended to make his mark as emperor of China.

**Failure to Conquer Japan** After conquering China, Kublai Khan tried to extend his rule to Japan. In 1274 and again in 1281, the Great Khan sent huge fleets against Japan. The Mongols forced Koreans to build, sail, and provide provisions for the boats, a costly task that almost ruined Korea. Both times the Japanese turned back the Mongol fleets.

The second fleet carried 150,000 Mongol, Chinese, and Korean warriors—the largest seaborne invasion force in history until World War II. After 53 days, Japanese warriors had fought the invaders to a standstill. Then, on the following day, the sky darkened and a typhoon swept furiously across the Sea of Japan. Mongol ships were upended, swamped, and dashed to bits against the rocky shore, despite their sailors' attempts to escape onto the open sea. Many Mongols drowned and the Japanese quickly slew many others. For centuries afterward, the Japanese spoke reverently of the *kamikaze*, or “divine wind,” that had saved Japan.

#### Background

Japanese suicide pilots in World War II adopted the name *kamikaze* after the legendary typhoon that saved Japan from the Mongols.

## HISTORY MAKERS



**Kublai Khan**  
1215–1294

As ruler of both China and the Mongol Empire, Kublai Khan straddled two worlds. He built luxurious palaces, dressed as a Chinese emperor, and supported the work of Chinese artists. However, he remained a Mongol warrior at heart.

The Great Khan is said to have planted a plot of grass from the steppe in the gardens at Beijing to remind himself of his home. He also loved to hunt and enclosed a large hunting ground at his palace at Shangdu.

Kublai also preserved the customs of his nomadic ancestors. Every August 28, he performed the Mongol ritual of the scattering of mare's milk to honor his ancestors and ensure a year of good luck. The rite involved calling out the name of Genghis Khan and scattering over the ground the milk that came from a special herd of white horses.

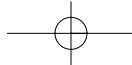
## Mongol Rule in China

Early in Kublai Khan's reign, one of his Chinese advisers told him, “I have heard that one can conquer the empire on horseback, but one cannot govern it on horseback.” This advice illustrates the problems faced by Kublai Khan in ruling China. Mongol ways would not work in a sophisticated civilization like China's. Besides, the number of Mongols in China was few compared to the huge native population. Kublai would need to make use of Chinese institutions and non-Mongol officials to help him rule successfully.

**The Mongols and the Chinese** The Mongol rulers had little in common with their Chinese subjects. Because of their differences, the Mongols kept their separate identity. Mongols lived apart from the Chinese and obeyed different laws. They even kept the Chinese out of high government offices, although they retained as many Chinese officials as possible to serve on the local level. The Mongol rulers gave most of the highest government posts to Mongols and to foreigners. Foreigners included Muslims from western Asia and Christians such as Marco Polo of Venice. The Mongols believed that foreigners were more trustworthy than the Chinese since the foreigners had no local loyalties.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

**A. Making Inferences** How might the Chinese have felt about their lack of power in Kublai's government?



Despite his differences with the Chinese, Kublai Khan was an able leader. He restored the Grand Canal, which had been built during the Sui Dynasty, and extended it 135 miles north to Beijing. Along its banks a paved highway ran for 1,100 miles, from Hangzhou to Beijing. These routes ensured the north of a steady supply of grain and other goods from the southern heartland.

#### Background

Since the decline of the Tang Dynasty after 900, robbers and warring peoples had nearly shut down the caravan routes across Central Asia.

**Encouragement of Foreign Trade** Kublai Khan also encouraged foreign trade. The Mongol Peace made the caravan routes across Central Asia safe for trade and travel. Kublai Khan established post roads, or mail routes, that linked China to India and Persia and greatly improved trade. He invited foreign merchants to visit China. Most of them were Muslims from India, Central Asia, and Persia. Many European travelers, including Christian missionaries, also reached China.

Over the Silk Roads and other routes, traders transported Chinese silk and porcelain, which continued to be desired in Europe and western Asia. Other Chinese products and inventions that went west included printing, gunpowder, the compass, paper currency, and playing cards.

**Marco Polo at the Mongol Court** The most famous European to visit China in these years was a young Venetian trader, **Marco Polo**. With his father and uncle, he traveled by caravan on the Silk Roads, arriving at Kublai Khan's court around 1275. Marco had learned several Asian languages in his travels, and Kublai Khan sent him to various Chinese cities on government missions. Polo served the Great Khan well for 17 years. In 1292, two years before Kublai died, the Polos left China and made the long journey back to Venice. They traveled by sea around Southeast Asia and India.

Later, during a war against Venice's rival city, Genoa, Marco Polo was captured and imprisoned. In prison he had time to tell the full story of his travels and adventures. To his awed listeners, he spoke of China's fabulous cities, its fantastic wealth, and the strange things he had seen there. He mentioned the burning of "black stones" (coal) in Chinese homes. (Coal as a fuel was little known in Europe.) He also recorded the practical workings of the khan's government and aspects of Chinese life. Here is his description of trade in Beijing.

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

More precious and costly wares are imported into Khanbalik [Beijing] than into any other city in the world. . . . All the treasures that come from India—precious stones, pearls, and other rarities—are brought here. So too are the choicest and costliest products of Cathay [China] itself and every other province. . . . Every day more than 1,000 cart loads of silk enter the city; for much cloth of gold and silk is woven here.

MARCO POLO, *The Travels of Marco Polo*

A fellow prisoner gathered Polo's stories into a book. It was an instant success in Europe, but most readers did not believe a word of it. They thought Polo's account was a marvelous collection of tall tales. It was clear to Marco Polo, however, that the civilization he had visited was the greatest in the world.

## The End of Mongol Rule

During the last years of Kublai Khan's reign, cracks began to form under the surface of Mongol rule. In an attempt to further expand his empire, he sent several expeditions into Southeast Asia. His armies and navies suffered many humiliating defeats at a huge expense of lives and equipment. Heavy spending on fruitless wars, on public

### HISTORY MAKERS



**Marco Polo**  
1254?–1324

The man who described Kublai Khan to Europeans left behind very little information about himself. He was 17 when he set out from Venice with his father and uncle, who were on their second visit to Kublai's court. According to Marco, Kublai recognized his "merit and worth" and sent him on special missions around the empire. His impressions of China became the basis of his book, but he described few actual events about his life.

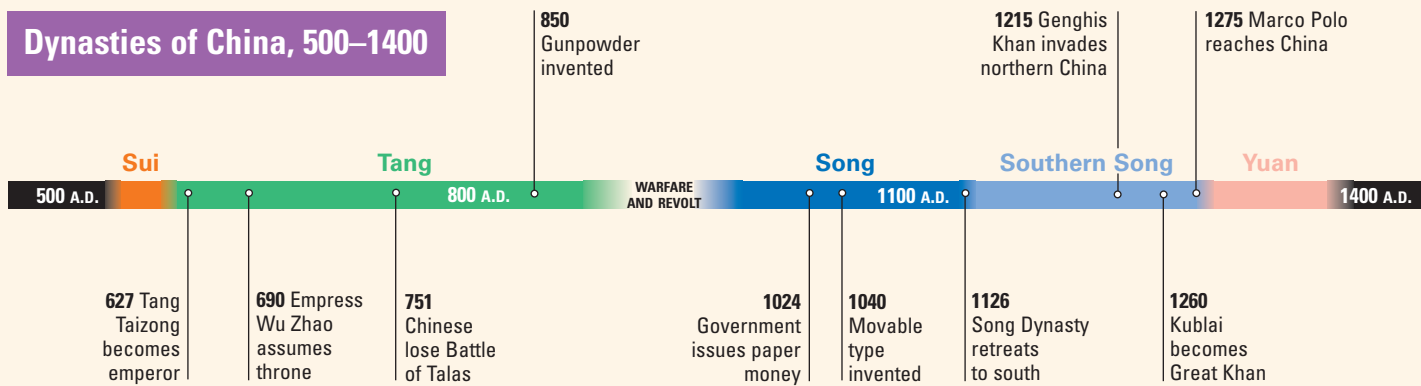
Since his book first appeared, people have debated whether or not Marco Polo actually saw all that he claimed to have seen. He is not mentioned in Chinese accounts of this time. His tales also fail to mention such common features of China as tea, acupuncture, or foot binding.

On his deathbed, Polo was asked if his travel stories were true. He replied that he had told barely half of what he had seen.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

##### B. Analyzing

**Motives** Why do you think Kublai Khan employed Marco Polo?



works, and on the luxuries of the Yuan court burdened the treasury and created resentment among the overtaxed Chinese. This presented problems that Kublai's less able successors could not resolve.

**Yuan Dynasty Overthrown** Kublai Khan died in 1294. He was nearly 80. Mongol rule weakened after his death. Although the Yuan Dynasty remained in power for another 74 years, family members struggled among themselves over who would rule. In one 8-year period, four different khans took the throne.

Rebellions broke out in many parts of China in the 1300s. The Chinese had long resented their Mongol rulers, and the Mongol humiliation of the Chinese only increased under Kublai Khan's successors. The rebellions were also fueled by years of famine, flood, and disease, along with growing economic problems and official corruption. In 1368, Chinese rebels finally overthrew the Mongols and seized power. The rebel leader founded a new dynasty—the Ming—which you will read about in Chapter 19.

Some Mongols remained in China during the Ming Dynasty and were valued for their skill as cavalymen. Many others, however, returned to their homelands on the Mongolian steppe.

**Decline of the Mongol Empire** By the end of the Yuan Dynasty in China, the entire Mongol Empire had disintegrated. The government of the Ilkhanate in Persia fell apart in the 1330s. The Chagatai khans ruled Central Asia until the 1370s. Only the Golden Horde in Russia stayed in power. The Golden Horde ruled Russia for 250 years. As discussed in Chapter 11, Ivan III finally asserted Russia's independence from the Mongols in 1480.

The rise and fall of Mongol rule affected civilizations from eastern Europe to China. Despite the efforts of Kublai Khan, Mongol domination never extended to Japan. However, several centuries earlier, the Japanese had embraced the influence of an outside culture—that of China—as its civilization developed. This development is described in Section 4.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**C. Analyzing Causes** What factors contributed to the decline and fall of the Yuan Dynasty?

## Section 3 Assessment

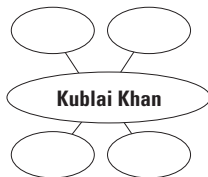
### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- Kublai Khan
- Marco Polo

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Create a web diagram showing the impact of Kublai Khan on East Asia.



Choose an event from your diagram and explain how it affected China. Did the event make China stronger or weaker?

### 3. EVALUATING DECISIONS

Judging from the events of the Yuan Dynasty, do you think the Mongol policies toward the Chinese were effective?

**THINK ABOUT**

- the accomplishments of Kublai Khan as emperor of China
- the Mongols' policies towards the Chinese
- the military campaigns of Kublai Khan
- the fate of the Yuan Dynasty

### 4. ANALYZING THEMES

**Cultural Interaction** What evidence is there that the Chinese way of life influenced the Mongol conquerors?

**THINK ABOUT**

- the seat of Kublai Khan's empire
- Kublai's actions as emperor of China