**8. THE YUAN (Mongol) DYNASTY (1279-1368)**

The Mongols were the first of the northern barbarians to rule all of China. After creating an empire that stretched across the Eurasian continent and occupying northern China and Korea in the first half of the 13th century, the Mongols continued their assault on the Southern Song. By 1276 the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou had fallen, and in 1279 the last of the Song loyalists perished.

Before this, Kublai Khan, the fifth "great khan" and grandson of Genghis Khan, had moved the Mongol capital from Karakorum to Peking. In 1271 he declared himself emperor of China and named the dynasty Yuan, meaning "beginning," to signify that this was the beginning of a long era of Mongol rule.

In Asia, Kublai Khan continued his grandfather's dream of world conquest. Two unsuccessful naval expeditions were launched against Japan in 1274 and 1281. Four land expeditions were sent against Annam and five against Burma. However, the Mongol conquests overseas and in Southeast Asia were neither spectacular nor were they long enduring.

Mongol rule in China lasted less than a century. The Mongols became the most hated of the barbarian rulers because they did not allow the Chinese ruling class to govern. Instead, they gave the task of governing to foreigners. Distrusting the Chinese, the Mongol rulers placed the southern Chinese at the lowest level of the four classes they created. The extent of this distrust was reflected in their provincial administration. As conquerers, they followed the Ch'in example and made the provincial governments into direct extensions of the central chancellery. This practice was continued by succeeding dynasties, resulting in a further concentration of power in the central imperial government.

The Chinese despised the Mongols for refusing to adapt to Chinese culture. The Mongols kept their own language and customs. The Mongol rulers were tolerant about religions, however. Kublai Khan reportedly dabbled in many religions.

**The Mongols and the West**. The Mongols were regarded with mixed feelings in the West. Although Westerners dreaded the Mongols, the Crusaders hoped to use them in their fight against the Muslims and attempted to negotiate an alliance with them for this purpose. Friar John of Carpini and William of Rubruck were two of the better known Christian missionaries sent to establish these negotiations with the Mongol ruler.

The best account of the Mongols was left by a Venetian merchant, Marco Polo, in his `Marco Polo's Travels'. It is an account of Polo's travels over the long and perilous land route to China, his experience as a trusted official of Kublai Khan, and his description of China under the Mongols. Dictated in the early 14th century, the book was translated into many languages. Although much of medieval Europe did not believe Polo's tales, some, like Christopher Columbus, were influenced by Polo's description of the riches of the Orient. (See Kublai Khan; Mongol Empire; Polo, Marco)

After the death of Kublai Khan in 1294, successive weak and incompetent khans made the already hated Mongol rule intolerable. Secret societies became increasingly active, and a movement known as the Red Turbans spread throughout the north during the 1350s. In 1356 a rebel leader named Chu Yuan-chang and his peasant army captured the old capital of Nanjing. Within a decade he had won control of the economically important middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, driving the Mongols to the north. In 1368 he declared himself the emperor Hung-wu and established his capital at Nanjing on the lower Yangtze. Later the same year he captured the Yuan capital of Peking. (See Kublai Khan; Mongol Empire)

**Kublai Khan (1215-94)**. The founder of China's Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty was a brilliant general and statesman named Kublai Khan. He was the grandson of the great Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan, and he was overlord of the vast Mongol Empire. The achievements of Kublai Khan were first brought to the attention of Western society in the writings of Marco Polo, the Venetian traveler who lived at the Chinese court for nearly 20 years (See Polo, Marco).

Kublai Khan was born in 1215, the fourth son of Genghis Khan's fourth son. He began to play a major role in the consolidation of Mongol power in 1251, when his brother, the emperor Mongke, resolved to complete the conquest of China. He therefore vested Kublai with responsibility for keeping order in conquered territory. After Mongke's death in 1259, Kublai had himself proclaimed khan. During the next 20 years he completed the unification of China. He made his capital in what is now Beijing.

Kublai's major achievement was to reconcile China to rule by a foreign people, the Mongols, who had shown little ability at governing. His failures were a series of costly wars, including two disastrous attempts to invade Japan; they brought little benefit to China. Although he was a magnanimous ruler, Kublai's extravagant administration slowly impoverished China; and in the 14th century the ineptitude of his successors provoked rebellions that eventually destroyed the Mongol dynasty. (See Genghis Khan; Mongol Empire)

**Polo, Marco (1254-1323?)**. In 1298 a Venetian adventurer named Marco Polo wrote a fascinating book about his travels in the Far East. Men read his accounts of Oriental riches and became eager to find sea routes to China, Japan, and the East Indies. Even Columbus, nearly 200 years later, often consulted his copy of `The Book of Ser Marco Polo'.

In Marco's day the book was translated and copied by hand in several languages. After printing was introduced in the 1440s, the book was circulated even more widely. Many people thought that the book was a fable or a gross exaggeration. A few learned men believed that Marco wrote truly, however, and they spread Marco's stories of faraway places and unknown peoples. Today geographers agree that Marco's book is amazingly accurate.

Marco Polo was born in the city-republic of Venice in 1254. His father and uncles were merchants who traveled to distant lands to trade. In 1269 Marco's father, Nicolo, and his uncle Maffeo returned to Venice after being away many years. On a trading expedition they had traveled overland as far as Cathay (China). Kublai Khan, the great Mongol emperor of China, asked them to return with teachers and missionaries for his people. So they set out again in 1271, and this time they took Marco.

From Venice the Polos sailed to Acre, in Palestine. There two monks, missionaries to China, joined them. Fearing the hard journey ahead, however, the monks soon turned back. The Polos crossed the deserts of Persia (Iran) and Afghanistan. They mounted the heights of the Pamirs, the "roof of the world," descending to the trading cities of Kashgar (Shufu) and Yarkand (Soche). They crossed the dry stretches of The Gobi. Early in 1275 they arrived at Kublai Khan's court at Cambaluc (Peking). At that time Marco was 21 years old.

**Polo at the Court of the Great Khan**

Marco quickly became a favorite of Kublai Khan. For three years he governed busy Yangchow, a city of more than 250,000 people. He was sent on missions to far places in the empire: to Indochina, Tibet, Yunnan, and Burma. From these lands Marco brought back stories of the people and their lives.

The Polos became wealthy in Cathay. But they began to fear that jealous men in the court would destroy them when the khan died. They asked to return to Venice. Kublai Khan refused. Then came an envoy from the khan of Persia. He asked Kublai Khan for a young Mongol princess for a bride. The Polos said that the princess' journey should be guarded by men of experience and rank. They added that the mission would enable them to make the long-desired visit to Venice. The khan reluctantly agreed.

Since there was danger from robbers and enemies of the khan along the overland trade routes, a great fleet of ships was built for a journey by sea. In 1292 the fleet sailed, bearing the Polos, the princess, and 600 noblemen of Cathay. They traveled southward along Indochina and the Malay Peninsula to

Sumatra. Here the voyage was delayed many months.

The ships then turned westward and visited Ceylon and India. They touched the East African coast. The voyage was hazardous, and of the 600 noblemen only 18 lived to reach Persia. The Polos and the princess were safe. When the Polos landed in Venice, they had been gone 24 years. The precious stones they brought from Cathay amazed all Venice.

Later Marco served as gentleman-captain of a ship. It was captured by forces of the rival trading city of Genoa, and he was thrown into a Genoese prison. There he wrote his book with help from another prisoner. Marco was released by the Genoese in 1299. He returned to Venice and engaged in trade. His name appears in the court records of his time in many lawsuits over property and money. He married and had three daughters. He died about 1323.

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| **Mongol Interlude (1271-1368)**An overview of the Mongol era in East Asia is included in the Timeline in Module 1. After the destruction of the Jin and Xixia states (of which 90% of the population was decimated), the Southern Song finally submitted to the Mongols in 1271. The Mongols had superior military organization and a better grasp of the advances in military technology (such as siege engines, primitive rockets, and simple cannons) than previous northern invaders—and for the first time China fell completely under foreign rule. As Wolfram Eberhard has noted, for the next 631 years, China would be under the control of foreign invaders for 355 years and under Chinese rule for only 276. Khubilai Khan**Khubilai Khan**Khubilai Khan, who had spear-headed the defeat of the Southern Song, founded a dynasty in China known as Yuan, and declared himself emperor. In order to keep the realm under control, he instituted a system of ethnic stratification that put Mongols of various origins at the top, other northern peoples such as the Uygurs and the surviving Tangut were in second place, while northern Chinese (who had a long history of interaction with the steppe people) were in the third position of trust, and the southern Chinese in the last. Many government and clerical positions were staffed with people from the northwest and Central Asia—especially Uygurs from the now Islamic areas of Xinjiang— who learned both Chinese and Mongolian. Most Chinese, especially in the rich Yangzi river valley were shut out of governmental appointments. Some scholars, like Guang Hanqing, released their creative energies by writing dramas, an art form that appealed to both the Chinese and their Mongol overlords.Summer Palace in Chengde**Summer Palace in Chengde**As the Yuan dynasty progressed the economy weakened as large amounts of wealth left China in the hands of foreign merchants who were allowed many advantages over their Chinese counterparts. Pressure was also put on peasants by Chinese gentry who had been allowed to keep their lands and by Mongols who were given tracts of land as part of the spoils of war. The government also needed tax revenues and corvee labor for massive public works projects, such as the overhaul of the old canal system, which was now needed to transport rice from the fertile south to the more barren north. A huge new capital was built –today known as Beijing. Even Beijing was too hot for the Mongol rulers, and a special summer palace (in Tibetan style) was built farther north in Chengde, near the old Mongol homelands. As the economic system weakened and some Mongols became disenchanted with a sedentary lifestyle, popular discontent grew. After about eighty years, ruling China became increasingly difficult. The Mongols were finally driven out by a peasant rebel named Zhu Yuanzhang, who had found common cause with the patriotic Chinese gentry. Zhu would become emperor of the Ming dynasty—the last Han Chinese dynasty in imperial history.  |