

The Mongols in World History

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The Mongols' Mark on Global History

a new look at Mongol contributions

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key elements in the Mongols' pastoral-nomadic way of life

THE MONGOLS' MARK ON GLOBAL HISTORY

The Barbarian Stereotype

Most Westerners accept the stereotype of the 13th-century Mongols as barbaric plunderers intent merely to maim, slaughter, and destroy. This perception, based on Persian, Chinese, Russian, and other accounts of the speed and ruthlessness with which the Mongols carved out the largest contiguous land empire in world history, has shaped both Asian and Western images of the Mongols and of their earliest leader, Chinggis Khan.

Such a view has diverted attention from the considerable contributions the Mongols made to 13th- and 14th-century civilization. Though the brutality of the Mongols' military campaigns ought not to be downplayed or ignored, neither should their influence on Eurasian culture be overlooked.

A New Look at Mongol Contributions

The Mongol era in China is remembered chiefly for the rule of Khubilai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan. Khubilai patronized painting and the theater, which experienced a golden age during the Yuan dynasty, over which the Mongols ruled [also see [The Mongols in China: Cultural Life](#)]

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under Mongol Rule, below]. Khubilai and his successors also recruited and employed Confucian scholars and Tibetan Buddhist monks as advisers, a policy that led to many innovative ideas and the construction of new temples and monasteries.

The Mongol Khans also funded advances in medicine and astronomy throughout their domains. And their construction projects – extension of the Grand Canal in the direction of Beijing, the building of a capital city in Daidu (present-day Beijing) and of summer palaces in Shangdu (“Xanadu”) and Takht-i-Sulaiman, and the construction of a sizable network of roads and postal stations throughout their lands – promoted developments in science and engineering [also see The Mongols in China: Civilian Life under Mongol Rule, below].

Perhaps most importantly, the Mongol empire inextricably linked Europe and Asia and ushered in an era of frequent and extended contacts between East and West. And once the Mongols had achieved relative stability and order in their newly acquired domains, they neither discouraged nor impeded relations with foreigners. Though they never abandoned their claims of universal rule, they were hospitable to foreign travelers, even those whose monarchs had not submitted to them.

The Mongols also expedited and encouraged travel in the sizable section of Asia that was under their rule, permitting European merchants, craftsmen, and envoys to journey as far as China for the first time. Asian goods reached Europe along the caravan trails (earlier known as the “Silk Roads”), and the ensuing European demand for these products eventually inspired the search for a sea route to Asia. Thus, it could be said that the Mongol invasions indirectly led to Europe’s “Age of Exploration” in the 15th century.

Support for Foreign Contact and Exchange

The Mongols’ receptiveness to foreigners was a critical factor in promoting cultural exchange and a truly “global” history. Their attitude of relative openness toward foreigners and foreign influence led to an extraordinary interchange of products, peoples, technology, and science throughout the Mongol domains.

So it is no accident that Marco Polo reached China during this era [also see Key Figures in Mongol History: Marco Polo, below]. And also no accident that **Ibn Battuta**, the great Islamic traveler from Morocco, also reached China during this time, and that **Rabban Sauma**, a Nestorian Christian from the area around Beijing, reached Europe and had audiences with the kings of England and France and the Pope.

From the Mongol period on, then, we can speak about a Eurasian – if not a global – history, in which developments in one part of Europe would have an impact not only in Europe but also in Asia, with the same being true for Asia. And if we remember that Christopher Columbus was actually looking for a new route to Asia when he landed in America – and that one of the few books he had with him was Marco Polo’s account of his travels in Asia – we could even say that global history begins with the Mongols and the bridge they built between the East and the West.

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Missionaries from Rome: Bridging East and West

The Mongol Era brought about the first instances of direct contact between Europe and Mongol-ruled China.

The Mongol attacks on Hungary and Poland in 1241 had alerted the Europeans to the power of the Mongols and so frightened them that, in 1245, the Pope in Rome called an Ecumenical Council to deliberate on a response to the Mongols. Two Franciscan missionaries were eventually dispatched to the East.

The first, who left Europe in 1245, was **John of Plano Carpini**, and the second was **William of Rubruck**, who traveled through the Mongol domains during 1253-1255. Both sought to achieve a kind of rapprochement with the Mongols, attempting to deter them from further attacks and invasions on Europe, as well as seeking to convert them to Christianity.

The Europeans had received information that the Mongols had a leader, named “**Prester John**,” who had converted to Christianity. They also assumed that many of the Mongols already were Christians. In fact, some Mongol women, including Chinggis Khan’s own mother, had converted to a heretical form of Christianity known as Nestorian Christianity. The Nestorian sect had been banned from Europe from around the 5th Century C.E., but had first spread to West Asia and then reached all the way to East Asia. But the idea that the Mongols could be converted to Christianity was an illusion at best.

Nonetheless, John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck were greeted cordially at the Mongol courts. Though they succeeded in neither their religious nor diplomatic missions, they were able to bring back the first accurate accounts of the Mongols.

Mongols Support Trade, Facilitating East-West Contacts

Along with Western missionaries, traders from the West (particularly from Genoa) began to arrive in the Mongol domains, mostly in Persia and eventually farther east.

The Mongols were quite receptive to this. This attitude, which facilitated contacts with West Asia and Europe, contributed to the beginning of what we could call a “global history,” or at least a Eurasian history.

The Mongols always favored trade. Their nomadic way of life caused them to recognize the importance of trade from the very earliest times and, unlike the Chinese, they had a positive attitude toward merchants and commerce.

The Confucian Chinese professed to be disdainful of trade and merchants, whom they perceived to be a parasitical group that did not produce anything and were involved only in the

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exchange of goods. Mongols altered that attitude and in fact sought to facilitate international trade [also see [The Mongols in China: Life for Merchants under Mongol Rule](#), below].

In China, for example, the Mongols increased the amount of paper money in circulation and guaranteed the value of that paper money in precious metals. They also built many roads – though this was only partly to promote trade – these roads were mainly used to facilitate the Mongols’ rule over China.

The Status of Merchants Improved under Mongol Rule

Under Mongol rule, merchants had a higher status than they had in traditional China. During their travels they could rest and secure supplies through a postal-station system that the Mongols had established.

The postal-station system was, of course, originally devised to facilitate the transmission of official mail from one part of the empire to another. Set up approximately every 20 miles along the major trade routes and stocked with supplies of food, horses, and lodging, the stations were an incredible boon to all travelers, whether they were traveling for business or otherwise.

Under the Mongols, merchants also had the benefit of not being faced with confiscatory taxation, as was the case during the rule of the traditional Chinese dynasties.

Support for trade characterized not only Mongol policy in China but their policy throughout their domains. In Persia the Mongols granted higher tax breaks and benefits to traders in an effort to promote commerce. The Mongols even tried to introduce paper money into Persia – though this would become merely a failed experiment. Nonetheless, the attempt indicates the desire of the Mongols to provide additional assistance to traders.

Merchants Associations Alleviate the Perils of Caravan Trade

To further support trade and commerce, the Mongols established merchant associations, known as *Ortogh*, specifically to promote caravan trade over long distances.

The Mongols recognized that the caravan trade across Eurasia was extraordinarily expensive for any single merchant. Often there would be as many as 70 to 100 men on each mission, and all had to be fed and paid and provided with supplies (including camels, horses, and so on) over a lengthy period of time.

Quite a number of the caravans simply did not make it, either because of natural disasters of one sort or another or plundering by bandit groups. Travelers, for example, mentioned coming across numerous skeletons, animal and human, on these routes. Because of the expense involved in such a disaster, just one such failed caravan could devastate an individual merchant’s holdings.

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The Mongol solution to these concerns was the establishment of *Ortogh* – through which merchants could pool their resources to support a single caravan. If a caravan did not make it, no single merchant would be put out of business. The losses would be shared, as would any risks, and of course, profits when the caravans succeeded. The Mongols also provided loans to merchants at relatively low rates of interest, as long as they belonged to an *Ortogh*.

Pax Mongolica: The Mongolian Peace

The Mongols promoted inter-state relations through the so-called “Pax Mongolica” – the Mongolian Peace.

Having conquered an enormous territory in Asia, the Mongols were able to guarantee the security and safety of travelers. There were some conflicts among the various Mongol Khanates, but recognition that trade and travel were important for all the Mongol domains meant that traders were generally not in danger during the 100 years or so of Mongol domination and rule over Eurasia.

Mongol Support of Artisans

The Mongols did not have their own artisan class in traditional times because they migrated from place to place and could not carry with them the supplies needed by artisans. They were thus dependent upon the sedentary world for crafts, and they prized artisans highly.

For example, during Chinggis Khan’s attack on Samarkand, he instructed his soldiers not to harm any artisans or craftsmen. Craftsmen throughout the Mongol domains were offered tax benefits and were freed from *corvée* labor (unpaid labor), and their products were highly prized by the Mongol elite.

The Mongol’s extraordinary construction projects required the services of artisans, architects, and technocrats. When Ögödei, Chinggis Khan’s third son and heir, directed the building of the capital city at Khara Khorum, the first Mongol capital, or when Khubilai Khan directed the building of Shangdu (also known as “Xanadu”), his summer capital, as well as the building of the city Daidu (the modern city of Beijing), all required tremendous recruitment of foreign craftsmen and artisans [also see [The Mongols in China: Civilian Life under Mongol Rule](#), below].

Artistic and Cultural Exchange under Mongol Rule

The Mongols’ favorable attitude toward artisans benefited the Mongols themselves, and also ultimately facilitated international contact and cultural exchange.

The Mongols recruited artisans from all over the known world to travel to their domains in China and Persia. Three separate weaving communities, for example, were moved from Central Asia

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and Persia to China because they produced a specific kind of textile – a cloth of gold – which the Mongols cherished.

Apparently some Chinese painters – or perhaps their pattern books – were sent to Persia, where they had a tremendous impact on the development of Persian miniature paintings. The dragon and phoenix motifs from China first appear in Persian art during the Mongol era. The representation of clouds, trees, and landscapes in Persian painting also owes a great deal to Chinese art – all due to the cultural transmission supported by the Mongols. [Also see [The Mongols in China: Cultural Life under Mongol Rule](#), below].

The Status of Artisans under Mongol Rule

The Mongols provided artisans with a higher status than was the case in many societies. Traditional Chinese officials, for example, had prized the goods made by craftsmen but accorded the craftsmen themselves a relatively low social status. The Mongols altered this perception of craftsmen and offered them special concessions and privileges [also see [The Mongols in China: Life for Artisans under Mongol Rule](#), below].

In addition, the Mongols in China established a tremendous array of government offices to supervise the production of craft articles. About one half of the 80 agencies in the Ministry of Works during the Mongol era dealt with the production and collection of textiles. There were also offices for bronzes, and offices of gold and silver utensils.

A Tactic of Religious Tolerance

The Mongols had a benevolent attitude toward foreign religions, or at least a policy of benign neglect. Their belief in Shamanism notwithstanding, the Mongols determined early on that aggressive imposition of their native religion on their subjects would be counter-productive. Instead, they sought to ingratiate themselves with the leading foreign clerics in order to facilitate governance of the newly subjugated territories. They even offered tax benefits to the clerics of Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, and Nestorian Christianity in order to win the support of those religions.

A quintessential Mongol view of religion may be found in Marco Polo's writings. According to Marco Polo, Khubilai Khan said: "There are prophets who are worshipped and to whom everybody does reverence. The Christians say their god was Jesus Christ; the Saracens, Mohammed; the Jews, Moses; and the idolaters Sakamuni Borhan [that is, Sakiamuni Buddha, who was the first god to the idolaters]; and I do honor and reverence to all four, that is to him who is the greatest in heaven and more true, and him I pray to help me."

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For more on the Mongol rulers' policies of religious tolerance, see the following sections in this document:

- [The Mongols in China: Religion under Mongol Rule](#)
- [Key Figures in Mongol History: Chinggis Khan's Four Legacies](#)

The Mongols and Islam

The Mongol dynasty's relation to Islam, in particular, had tremendous impact on China's relations with the outside world.

The Mongols recruited a number of Muslims to help in the rule of China, especially in the field of financial administration – Muslims often served as tax collectors and administrators. They were accorded extraordinary opportunities during the Mongol period because Khubilai Khan and the other Mongol rulers of China could not rely exclusively upon the subjugated Chinese to help in ruling China. They needed outsiders, and the Muslims were among those who assisted Khubilai.

The Mongols in China also recognized that Islamic scholars had made great leaps in the studies of astronomy and medicine, and they invited many specialists in those fields to come to China. Among those to make the trip was the Persian astronomer Jamal Al-din, who helped the Chinese set up an observatory. Bringing with him many diagrams and advanced astronomical instruments from Persia, Jamal Al-din assisted the Chinese in developing a new, more accurate calendar.

The Mongols were also impressed by the Persians' advances in medicine. They recruited a number of Persian doctors to China to establish an Office for Muslim Medicine, and the result was even greater contact between West Asia and East Asia.

THE MONGOL CONQUESTS

What Led to the Conquests?

The first question about the Mongol conquests is: Why did the Mongols erupt from Mongolia in the early 13th century to begin their conquests of the rest of the world, creating the largest contiguous land empire in world history? There has been considerable speculation about the reasons for the Mongol eruption from Mongolia, and though there is no scholarly consensus on specific reasons, many have pointed to the causes of **ecology**, **trade disruptions**, and the figure of **Chinggis (Genghis) Khan**.

Ecology. In the period from 1180-1220, Mongolia experienced a drop in the mean annual temperature, which meant that the growing season for grass was cut short. Less grass meant a real

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danger to the Mongols' animals, and, since the animals were truly the basis of the Mongols' pastoral-nomadic life, this ecological threat may have prompted them to move out of Mongolia. [Also see [The Mongols' Pastoral-Nomadic Life](#), below].

Trade Disruptions. A second reason often mentioned is the attempt by Mongolia's neighbors in north and northwest China to reduce the amount of trade with the Mongols. Since the Mongols depended on trade for goods that they desperately needed – such as grain, craft, and manufactured articles – cessation of trade, or at least the diminution of trade, could have been catastrophic for them. The attempts by the Jin dynasty, which controlled North China, and the Xia dynasty, which controlled Northwest China, to reduce the level of trade that the Mongols could expect, created a crisis for the Mongols. Unable to obtain goods that they so desperately needed, the Mongols' response was to initiate raids, attacks, and finally invasions against these two dynasties.

Chinggis Khan's Personal Mission. A third explanation has to do with Chinggis Khan himself, in particular his shamanic beliefs. It is said that Tenggeri, the sky god of the Mongols, gave Chinggis the mission of bringing the rest of the world under one sword – that is, bringing the rest of the world under the shamanic umbrella – a mission that may have motivated Chinggis to begin his conquests. Whatever the explanations, they all gravitate around the figure of Chinggis himself. Thus it is important to see what Genghis' policies led to and to analyze his life and career.

Tribal Groups vs. Mongol Identity under Chinggis Khan

The major lessons that Chinggis Khan learned from the hardships of his early years (his father's untimely death forced his mother to eke out a survival for the family in the harsh desert lands of Mongolia) convinced him that no one could survive in the daunting landscape of Mongolia without maintaining good relations and seeking help on occasion from one's allies. Chinggis's earliest experiences thus convince him of the importance of forging alliances. [For more on Chinggis's early life, see [Key Figures in Mongol History: Chinggis Khan](#), below.]

One's *anda* (blood brother) pricked his finger and mixed blood with one to forge a blood brotherhood. Chinggis found many *andas*, and his blood brothers, realizing his superior abilities and his charisma, would often join under his banner.

Early in his rise to power, Chinggis attempted immediately to break down the tribal groups that joined him, because he felt that loyalty in the tribal group would belong to the tribal leader rather than to himself. He wanted to eliminate any feeling of tribal identity and convert it to a Mongol identity – a unit that would be much larger, greater than that of the tribe, wherein the loyalty would remain with him, rather than with a tribal leader. Thus, when a tribe did join him, he quickly dispersed its members through the various units that he controlled. [Also see [Key Figures in Mongol History: Mongol Unity under Chinggis Khan](#), below]

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Chinggis's Mastery of Organization and Military Tactics

Chinggis Khan's organized units were based on the principle of ten. He organized his people into units of ten, a hundred, a thousand, and ten thousand, and the head of a unit of ten thousand would have a strong personal relationship with Chinggis himself. That kind of loyalty was to be extremely important in Chinggis's rise to power and in his ability to maintain authority over all the various segments of his domain.

Chinggis's military tactics showcased his superiority in warfare. One particularly effective tactic Chinggis liked to use was the feigned withdrawal: Deep in the throes of a battle his troops would withdraw, pretending to have been defeated. As the enemy forces pursued the troops that seemed to be fleeing, they would quickly realize that they'd fallen into a trap, as whole detachments of men in armor or cavalries would suddenly appear and overwhelm them.

Another key tactic was the use of the horse in warfare. Read more about the Mongols' tactical use of horses in warfare in this online reading: *All the Khan's Horses* [.pdf], by Morris Rossabi (in *Natural History*, October 1994. Reprinted with permission from the author.)

Further Reading

The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe, by James Chambers (London: Cassell, 1988).

Three Invasions Led by Chinggis

Chinggis Khan personally led three invasions. In each case, an economic issue was involved.

Tanguts. In 1209, Chinggis set forth on a campaign against the Tanguts, who had established a Chinese-style dynasty known as the Xia, in Northwest China, along the old silk roads. The Tanguts had become involved in a trade dispute with the Mongols. Chinggis quickly overwhelmed the Tanguts, received what he wanted in terms of a reduction of the tariffs the Tanguts imposed on trade, and returned to Mongolia. He did not capitalize upon his victory, this time, to expand the Mongols' territory.

Jin. The second campaign was against the Jin dynasty of North China, which controlled China down to the Yangtze River. The Jin were a people from Manchuria and were actually the ancestors of the Manchus. They too had become involved in a trade dispute with the Mongols, and the result was an attack by the Mongols, who desperately needed the products the Jin produced. By 1215, Chinggis's troops had seized the area now known as Beijing and defeated the Jin, forcing them to move their capital south. Chinggis had what he wanted in terms of additional trade – again, he returned to Mongolia.

Central Asia. The third campaign was initiated because of the murder of envoys Chinggis had sent to Central Asia. The shah of Central Asia, not knowing anything about Chinggis or the Mongols, killed the envoys for being insolent enough to request changes in the conditions of trade

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between the Mongols and the Central Asians. From the Mongol standpoint, the murder of the ambassadors was the most heinous of crimes, and this campaign against Central Asia was first and foremost an act of revenge.

After devoting considerable time to logistical planning, Chinggis organized a major force and finally set forth against Central Asia in 1219. This would be the most devastating of his campaigns. Both sides engaged in mass slaughter, and it took several years for Chinggis to successfully penetrate and conquer the great centers of Central Asia. And when he left Central Asia in 1225, Chinggis didn't pull out all his forces as he had in his previous campaigns. This time, Chinggis left behind Mongol troops to occupy the lands he had conquered.

In 1227, still making his way back to Mongolia, Chinggis Khan died.

Map Link

[The Mongol Empire at the Death of Chinggis Khan in 1227 \[NationalGeographic.com\]](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/genhis/khanmap.html)

[<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/genhis/khanmap.html>]

This map shows the location of Chinggis Khan's death, as well Khara Khorum, the Mongol capital at the time, and the Jin and Xia [Xi Xia] empires, both conquered by Chinggis before his death.

Related Topic in this document

[Key Figures in Mongol History: The Death of Chinggis Khan](#)

Chinggis's Successor and Further Expansion of the Empire

When Chinggis Khan died, he did not leave behind an orderly system of succession to the Khanate, nor any principle, other than a personal loyalty to a specific figure, as a basis for the confederation. The confederacy he had designed was based upon personal loyalty from tribal or other kinds of chieftains – it did not transcend to a Mongol nation or Mongol ethnic identity. Thus, each succeeding khan would have to rebuild these personal relationships.

Chinggis had four sons, and before his death he had tapped the third, Ögödei, to be his successor. Ögödei oversaw the greatest expansion of the Mongol Empire. During his 12-year reign (1229-1241), the Mongols dramatically increased the territories under their control. They moved from Central Asia into Russia in the 1230s and absorbed much Russian territory; they also occupied Georgia and Armenia; and by 1234, they had completely destroyed the Jin dynasty of North China, occupied all of China north of the Yangtze river, and moved into parts of Western Asia, particularly the eastern sections of Persia. [Also see [Key Figures in Mongol History: Ögödei](#), below.]

How a Small Group of Mongols Conquered Such a Vast Domain

One answer to this question is that the Mongols were adept at incorporating the groups they conquered into their empire. As they defeated other peoples, they incorporated some of the more

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loyal subjugated people into their military forces. This was especially true of the Turks. The Uyghur Turks, along with others, joined the Mongol armies and were instrumental in the Mongols' successes.

A second explanation is that the rest of Asia was declining at this point. China at this time was not a unified country – in fact, it was divided into at least three different sections, all of which were at war with one another. Central Asia was fragmented, and there was no single leader there. As for Russia, it was only a series of fragmented city-states. And after four centuries of success, the Abbasid dynasty in Western Asia had by this time lost much of its land.

By 1241, Mongol troops had reached all the way to Hungary but had to withdraw that very year because of the death of Ögödei, the Great Khan. The Mongol elite returned to Mongolia to select a new Great Khan, but they were unsuccessful in their efforts to form a consensus on the matter. For the next 19 years, there would be a variety of disputes over who was the most meritorious of Chinggis Khan's descendants and who ought to be the next Great Khan.

The Collapse of the Empire

By 1260 these and other internal struggles over succession and leadership had led to a gradual breakdown of the Mongol Empire.

Because the basic organizing social unit for the Mongols was the tribe, it was very difficult to perceive a loyalty that went beyond the tribe. The result was fragmentation and division. And added to this was yet another problem: As the Mongols expanded into the sedentary world, some were influenced by sedentary cultural values and realized that, if the Mongols were to rule the territories that they had subjugated, they would need to adopt some of the institutions and practices of the sedentary groups. But other Mongols, traditionalists, opposed such concessions to the sedentary world and wanted to maintain traditional Mongolian pastoral-nomadic values. [Also see [The Pastoral-Nomadic Life](#), below.]

Four Sectors. The result of these difficulties was that by 1260, the Mongol domains had been split into four discrete sectors. One, ruled by Khubilai Khan, was composed of China, Mongolia, Korea, and Tibet [also see [The Mongols in China](#), below]. The second segment was Central Asia. And from 1269 on, there would be conflict between these two parts of the Mongol domains.

The third segment in West Asia was known as the Ilkhanids. The Ilkhanids had been created as a result of the military exploits of Khubilai Khan's brother Hulegu, who had finally destroyed the Abbasid Dynasty in West Asia by occupying the city of Baghdad, the capital city of the Abbasids, in 1258.

And the fourth segment was the "Golden Horde" in Russia, which would oppose the Ilkhanids of Persia/West Asia in a conflict concerning trade routes and grazing rights in the area of contemporary Azerbaijan.

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Still, despite all these fissures within the Mongol empire and the various sections of its domains, the reign of the Mongols would still help to usher in the beginnings of what could be called a “global” history.

For a comprehensive look at the rise and fall of the Mongols:

“The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives,” by Joseph Fletcher, in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 46/1 (June 1986): 11-50.

THE MONGOLS IN CHINA

What was the Mongols’ Influence on China?

Until about 20 years ago, most scholars of Mongol-era China emphasized the destructive influence of Mongol rule.

One major scholar of Chinese history even wrote: “The Mongols brought violence and destruction to all aspects of China’s civilization. [They were] insensitive to Chinese cultural values, distrustful of Chinese influences, and inept heads of Chinese government.” This assessment fits in with the traditional evaluation of the Mongols as barbarians interested primarily in maiming, plundering, destroying, and killing.

As a 13th-century Persian historian wrote of the Mongol campaigns: “With one stroke a world which billowed with fertility was laid desolate, and the regions thereof became a desert, and the greater part of the living, dead, and their skin and bones crumbling dust, and the mighty were humbled and immersed in the calamities of perdition.”

It is true that the Mongols, in their conquest of both North and South China, did considerable damage to these territories, and that great loss of life certainly ensued. The population of North China did decline somewhat, though earlier estimates that there was a catastrophic decline in population have subsequently been revised.

It is also true that the Mongols eliminated one of the most basic of Chinese institutions – the civil service examinations. The examinations remained banned until 1315, and even after the ban was lifted, they were no longer the only means to officialdom for the Yuan Dynasty, the dynasty that the Mongols founded in 1271 C.E., as they had been in the past.

The Mongols perceived China as just one section of their vast empire. And they classified the population of their domain in China into a hierarchy of four groups – with the native Chinese at the bottom. The Mongols, of course, were at the top; then came the non-Han, mostly Islamic population that was brought to China by the Mongols to help them rule; third were the northern Chinese; and at the very bottom of the rung were the southern Chinese.

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The Mongol rulers were somewhat distrustful of the Confucian scholar-officials of China because they represented a different path for China than that which they themselves had conceived. These scholars, and other native Chinese, thus were not eligible for some of the top positions in the ruling government.

Khubilai Khan in China

Notwithstanding the aspects of their rule that were certainly negative for China, the Mongols did initiate many policies – especially under the rule of Khubilai Khan – that supported and helped the Chinese economy, as well as social and political life in China.

In order to ingratiate himself with Confucian China, for example, Khubilai restored the rituals at court – the music and dance rituals that were such an integral part of the Confucian ideology. He also founded ancestral temples for his predecessors – his father and Chinggis (Genghis) Khan (his grandfather) – in order to carry out the practices of ancestor worship that were so critical for the Chinese.

And in an even greater effort to ingratiate himself personally to the Chinese, Khubilai insisted on giving his second son, Jin Chin, a Chinese-style education. Confucian scholars tutored the young boy, and he was introduced to the tenets of both Confucianism and Buddhism.

Khubilai also set up institutions to rule China that were very familiar to the Chinese, adapting or borrowing wholesale many of the traditional governmental institutions of China. For example, the Six Ministries that had been responsible for carrying out policy were retained by Khubilai's government, as was the Secretariat, a decision-making body. And the provincial administrative structure that organized China into provinces, further divided into districts and counties and so on, was not changed. The Chinese, therefore, found much of the Yuan Dynasty's political structures to be familiar.

And finally, Khubilai's economic policies in China, at least initially, promoted the interests of China and were quite successful.

Life in China under Mongol Rule: For Peasants

The Mongols gave strong support to the peasants and peasant economy of China, believing that the success of the peasant economy would bring in additional tax revenues and ultimately benefit the Mongols themselves.

Relief measures – including tax remissions, as well as granaries for the storage of surplus grain – were thus provided for peasant farmers in North China, in the areas that had been devastated during the war between the Mongols and the Chinese. And early in their reign, in 1262,

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the Mongols prohibited the nomads' animals from roaming in the farmlands and thereby undermining the peasant economy.

The Mongols also sought to help the peasants organize themselves and initiated a cooperative rural organization – a self-help organization comprising about 50 households under the direction of a village leader.

These rural cooperatives had as their principle purpose the stimulation of agricultural production and the promotion of land reclamation. The village/cooperative leader had the task of guiding and helping his organization through everything from farming, planting trees, and opening up barren areas, to improving measures for flood control and increasing silk production. In addition, the cooperatives conducted a periodic census and assisted in surveillance over recalcitrant Chinese and other possible saboteurs of Mongol rule. They also served as a kind of charity granary to assist the unfortunate during poor harvests or droughts, providing food and other supplies to orphans, widows, and the elderly.

The Mongols also devised a fixed system of taxation for the peasants. Rather than having to anticipate unpredictable and extraordinary levies, as in the past system they had much resented, peasants under the Mongol system could know exactly how much would be required of them.

Perhaps the one area in which the Mongols did not much take into account the interests of the peasantry was labor obligations. During their rule the Mongols embarked on a series of extraordinary public works projects throughout China, including the extension of the Grand Canal to Daidu (present-day Beijing), a vast postal-station system, and the building of a capital city in Daidu. All these projects required vast investments of labor, and most of this labor was recruited from the peasantry. This policy became one that generated much animosity from the peasant ranks. [Also see [The Beginnings of Mongol Collapse: Public Works Failures](#), below.]

Life in China under Mongol Rule: For Artisans

Traditionally, the Chinese prized the products produced by artisans – jades, bronzes, ceramics, porcelains – but did not accord the artisans themselves a high social status. The Mongols, on the other hand, valued crafts and artisanship immensely and implemented many policies that favored artisans.

The benefits artisans gained from Mongol rule include freedom from *corvée* (unpaid) labor, tax remissions, and higher social status. Thus, artisanship reached new heights in the Mongol era. Spectacular textiles and porcelains were produced, and blue and white porcelains, a style generally associated with the Ming dynasty, were actually first developed during the Mongol era.

For more on the Mongols' support of artisans throughout their empires, see the following section in this document:

- [The Mongols' Mark on Global History: Support of Artisans](#)

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Life in China under Mongol Rule: For Merchants

Traditionally, merchants were accorded a relatively low social status in China. The Mongols, however, had a more favorable attitude toward merchants and commerce – their nomadic way of life, which is much reliant on trade with sedentary peoples, had caused them to recognize the importance of trade from the very earliest times. Thus, the Mongols worked to improve the social status of merchants and traders throughout their domains.

In particular, the Mongols initiated the *Ortogh*, or merchant associations, that helped merchants who were in the business of long-distance trade. They also increased the availability of paper money and reduced some of the tariffs imposed on merchants. The result was an extraordinary increase of trade across and throughout Eurasia. [Also see [‘The Mongols’ Mark on Global History: Merchant Associations](#), above.]

Along with the merchants, physicians, scientists, and artisans traveled freely throughout the Mongol domains in Eurasia, and these interchanges of knowledge and culture became important not only for the rest of world, but for China as well. [Also see [‘The Mongols’ Mark on Global History: Relations with Islam](#), above.]

For more on the Mongols’ support of merchants throughout their empires, see the following section in this document:

- [‘The Mongols’ Mark on Global History: Improved Status of Merchants](#)

Life in China under Mongol Rule: Legal Codes

In 1291, the Mongols instituted a new legal code in China that was much more innovative and flexible than some of the earlier Chinese legal codes and also less onerous for the population. [Also see [Key Figures in Mongol History: Chinggis Khan’s Four Great Legacies](#), below.]

Life in China under Mongol Rule: Civilian Life

The Mongols had a great impact on civilian life in China. One major contribution in this area is the building of Daidu (present-day Beijing), the second Mongol capital. (Marco Polo calls this city “Cambaluc,” for *Khan Bhalik*, meaning “The City of the Emperor”). Khubilai Khan recognized that the Mongol capital at Khara Khorum was not suitable for a great empire, mainly because it required tremendous logistical efforts to supply the city. About 500 carts a day had to be transported into Khara Khorum to provide essential supplies of food and clothing for the population.

Khubilai thus decided to move the capital farther south into China, to the area that is now Beijing. The new capital, called Daidu, became a typical Chinese-style city, though there also were plenty of Mongol touches associated with the city.

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Related Web Links

Map of the Yuan Dynasty

[<http://www.paulnoll.com/China/Dynasty/dynasty-Mongol.html>]

Shows Khara Khorum and Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

Online Readings

Marco Polo's account of life at Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

Text excerpted from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, translated and edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule

- *Chapter X: Concerning the Palace of the Great Kaan* [.pdf]

Description of Khubilai Khan's palace at Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

- *Chapter XI: Concerning the City of Cambaluc* [.pdf]

Detailed description of the layout of the city of Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

- *Chapter XXII: Concerning the City of Cambaluc, and Its Great Traffic and Population* [.pdf]

Detailed description of the population and life in the city of Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

Life in China under Mongol Rule: Religion

An important legacy of the Mongols' reign in China was their support of many religions. Islam, for example, was well supported, and the Mongols built quite a number of mosques in China. The Mongols also recruited and employed Islamic financial administrators – a move that led to good relations with the Islamic world beyond China, in particular with Persia and West Asia. [Also see [The Mongols' Mark on Global History: Relations with Islam](#), above.]

The Mongols were also captivated by Buddhism – particularly the Tibetan form of Buddhism – and they recruited a number of Tibetan monks to help them rule China and promote the interests of Buddhism. The most important of these monks was the Tibetan 'Phags-pa Lama. This policy resulted in an astonishing increase in the number of Buddhist monasteries in China, as well as in the translation of Buddhist texts.

Even Nestorian Christianity was promoted by the Mongols, partly because Khubilai Khan's own mother was an adherent of that faith.

There was one religion, however, that did not have Mongol support: Daoism. Daoism was at that time embroiled in a struggle with Buddhism that often flared into actual pitched battles between the monks of the two religions. The Mongols, siding with the Buddhists, did not look favorably upon the Daoists. In fact, at a meeting in 1281 where Buddhist and Daoist monks debated the merits of their individual religions, Khubilai Khan supported the Buddhists and imposed severe limits on Daoism. As a result of this meeting, a considerable number of Daoist monasteries were converted into Buddhist monasteries, some Daoist monks were defrocked, and some of the wealth and property of the Daoists was taken over either by the Mongol state or by Buddhist monasteries. [Chinggis Khan, on the other hand, favored Daoism. Read more in [Key Figures in Mongol History: Chinggis Khan's Legacy of Religious Tolerance](#), below.]

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For more on the Mongols' tactic of religious tolerance, see the following section in this document:

- [The Mongols' Mark on Global History: Religious Tolerance](#)

Life in China under Mongol Rule: Culture

Written Language. The Mongols were great cultural patrons. They conceived, for example, the idea of a new written language that could be used to transcribe a number of the languages within the Mongol domains. Khubilai Khan commissioned the Tibetan 'Phags-pa Lama to develop the new script, which came to be known as "the Square Script" or the 'Phags-pa script. Completed around 1269, the Square Script was a remarkable effort to devise a new written language. The Mongol rulers, however, did not foresee how difficult it would be to impose a written language on the population from the top down. Though they passed numerous edicts, regulations, and laws to persuade the public to use the new script, it never gained much popularity and was limited mainly to official uses – on paper money, official seals, a few porcelains, and the passports that were given by the Mongol rulers.

Theater. The Mongol rulers were ardent patrons of the theater, and the Yuan Dynasty witnessed a golden age of Chinese theater. The theater at this time was full of spectacles, including acrobats, mimes, and colorful costumes – all of which appealed greatly to the Mongols. The Mongol court set up a special theater within the palace compound in Daidu (Beijing) and supported a number of playwrights.

Painting. The art of painting also flourished under Mongol rule. One of the greatest painters of the Yuan Dynasty, Zhao Mengfu, received a court position from Khubilai Khan, and along with Zhao's wife Guan Daosheng, who was also a painter, Zhao received much support and encouragement from the Mongols. Khubilai was also a patron to many other Chinese painters (Liu Guandao was another), as well as artisans working in ceramics and fine textiles. In fact, the status of artisans in China was generally improved during the Mongols' reign. [Also see [The Mongols' Mark on Global History: Artistic and Cultural Exchange](#), above.]

Mongol Rituals. Though Chinese culture was valued and supported in many ways, as discussed above, this support was not at the expense of the Mongols' own native culture. That is, the Mongols did not abandon their own heritage, even as they adopted many of the values and political structures of the people they conquered and governed.

In fact, the Mongol rulers took many steps to preserve the rituals, ceremonies, and the "flavor" of traditional Mongol life. For example, the ritual scattering of mare's milk was still performed every year; and before battle, libations of *koumiss* (alcoholic drink made of mare's milk) were still poured and the assistance of Tenggeri (the Sky God) still invoked. In fact, traditional Mongol shamanism was well supported, and shamans had positions at Khubilai Khan's court in China.

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In addition, many Mongols continued to wear their native costumes of fur and leather, extravagant feasts in the Mongol tradition were held on Khubilai Khan's birthday and the birthdays of other great Mongol leaders, and the sport of hunting, a quintessential Mongol activity originally designed as training for warfare, flourished. And when a Mongol princess entered her eighth or ninth month of pregnancy, she continued the custom of moving to a special *ger* (the traditional Mongol home) to give birth.

- See photographs from [a traditional Mongol cultural festival](#) as it is still celebrated today
- For more on traditional Mongol life and customs, see [The Mongols' Pastoral-Nomadic Life](#), below

Beginnings of Mongol Collapse: Military Successes and Failures

In the initial days of their rule in China, Khubilai Khan and the Mongols had remarkable military successes, their greatest victory being the conquest of Southern Song China by 1279 C.E. This particular campaign, for which the Mongols had to organize a navy in order to cross the Yangtze River and move into southern China, entailed tremendous logistical efforts. Ultimately, though, the failure of their military campaigns became a key factor leading to the weakening and eventual demise of the Mongol empire in China.

Among the failed campaigns were two naval campaigns against Japan – one in 1274 and one in 1281 – both of which turned into complete fiascos. The campaigns had been launched because of the Japanese shogunate's refusal to submit to the Mongols after the arrival of Mongol ambassadors in Japan in 1268 and 1271. And after one of the ambassadors was harmed (a branding of his face), the Mongols felt that this act had to be avenged. In 1274, they organized their first expedition, which failed largely in part because of the weather. Still determined, the Mongols launched a second expedition in the summer of 1281 – this time much larger than the first – but were once again thwarted by weather: a terrible typhoon, in fact, that erupted and damaged the Mongol fleet enough to force them to abort the mission.

The Japanese for their part believed that this typhoon was no accident – it was divinely sent – and they called it the “divine wind,” or *kamikaze*. They were convinced that the Japanese islands were thus divinely protected and could never be invaded by aggressive outside forces.

Expeditions such as these were extremely costly and weighed heavily upon the Mongol rulers in China. And a 1292 expedition against Java, also a disaster, only served to further weaken the Mongols' resources and resolve. Though this time the Mongols actually managed to land in Java, the heat, tropical environment, and parasitic and infectious diseases there led to their withdrawal from Java within a year.

Similar problems afflicted the Mongols in all their attacks and invasions into mainland Southeast Asia – in Burma, Cambodia, and in particular, Vietnam. Though they initially succeeded in some of these campaigns, the Mongols were always forced to withdraw eventually because of adverse weather and diseases. It would seem that the Mongols simply were not proficient in naval

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warfare and did not have much luck in this part of the world. And with each failed campaign, vast sums were expended, and the empire was further weakened.

Related Reading

“Relics of the Kamikaze,” by James P. Delgado, in *Archaeology* 56/1 (January/February 2003).

[*Read online at* <http://www.archaeology.org/0301/etc/kamikaze.html>]

Related Web Link

Mongol Invasion Scrolls [Bowdoin College]

[http://academic.bowdoin.edu/mongol_scrolls/intro.html]

This interactive site allows you to view individual scenes from a scroll depicting the Mongol invasions of Japan. Takezaki Suenaga, a warrior who fought against the Mongols in both 1274 and 1281, commissioned these scrolls recounting his actions.

Beginnings of Mongol Collapse: Public Works Failures

The public-works projects that the Mongols initiated in China – the building of the capital city in Daidu (Beijing), the construction of a summer capital in Shangdu (Xanadu), the building of roads and a network of postal stations, the extension of the Grand Canal – were all extraordinarily costly. [[Map Link](#)]

All these projects required vast investments of labor and capital secured through inordinately high taxation upon the peasantry and the merchants. Toward the end of Khubilai Khan’s reign, the Mongols resorted to a deliberate inflation of the currency to cover costs. Those who administered these policies – the financial administrators who initiated the additional taxation or inflation of the currency – were mostly foreigners, such as Muslims and Tibetans, that the Mongols had brought in from their other domains.

These fiscal problems undermined the economy, and before long the Mongols could no longer maintain even the public-works projects traditionally supported by the native Chinese dynasties, such as the Grand Canal or the irrigation-control projects along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. The results were predictable.

In the 1340s terrible floods erupted, changing the course of the Yellow River and leaving a large group of people homeless and wandering around the countryside amid much confusion and destruction. Ultimately, some of these bands of unemployed and homeless peasants united into a rebel force, and in the 1350s began the process of ousting the Mongols from China. By the mid-1360s, many of the Mongols had already returned to Mongolia, and the Ming dynasty, a native Chinese dynasty, finally took back control of China in 1368.

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KEY FIGURES IN MONGOL HISTORY

Chinggis Khan (1162[?]-1227)

Chinggis (Genghis) Khan was born probably in 1167, though Mongol tradition has it that he was born in 1162. Because much of his early life is not described, except in myth, reliable knowledge of Chinggis's early life is very limited.

What we do know is that his father was assassinated when Chinggis was nine years old, and that this event left his family extremely vulnerable. Chinggis's mother appears in the traditional Mongol sources as a savior and great heroine.

Chinggis's mother kept her family together, even after many of her retainers left when her husband, the family patriarch, was killed. She kept the family going in the harsh desert lands of Mongolia, surviving on nuts and berries or whatever else they could find. She taught Chinggis the basic skills of survival, particularly those needed for survival in the steppelands and in the desert.

Mongol Unity under Chinggis Khan

Many believe that his unification of the Mongols – rather than the conquests that he initiated once he had unified the Mongols – was Chinggis Khan's biggest accomplishment.

Unifying the Mongols was no small achievement – it meant bringing together a whole series of disparate tribes. Economically the tribal unit was optimal for a pastoral-nomadic group, but Chinggis brought all the tribes together into one confederation, with all its loyalty placed in himself. This was indeed a grand achievement in a country as vast as Mongolia, an area approximately four times the size of France.

Once Chinggis had succeeded in bringing the Mongols together, in 1206, a meeting of the so-called *Khuriltai* (an assemblage of the Mongol nobility) gave their new leader the title of “Chinggis Khan”: Khan of All Between the Oceans. Chinggis's personal/birth name was **Temujin**; giving him the title “Chinggis Khan” was an acknowledgment by the Mongol nobles of Chinggis's leadership and their loyalty. From that point on Temujin would be the Khan of all within Mongolia and of the Mongols.

For more on Chinggis Khan's unification of the Mongols, see the following section in this document:

- [The Mongol Conquests: Tribal Group vs. Mongol Unity under Chinggis Khan](#)

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Chinggis Khan's Four Great Legacies

Tolerance. One of Chinggis Khan's greatest legacies was the principle of religious tolerance. In general, Chinggis provided tax relief to Buddhist monasteries and to a variety of other religious institutions. And though Chinggis himself never converted to any of the religions of the sedentary peoples he conquered (he remained loyal to Mongolian shamanism), he was quite interested in Daoism, particularly because of the Daoists' pledge that they could prolong life. In fact, on his expedition to Central Asia Chinggis was accompanied by **Changchun**, a Daoist sage from China, who kept an account of his travels with his Mongol patron. Changchun's first-hand account has become one of the major primary sources on Chinggis Khan and the Mongols. [Also see [The Mongols in China: Religious Life under Mongol Rule](#), above, to compare Chinggis's legacy to Khubilai Khan's policy of religious tolerance.]

Written Language. The creation of the first Mongol written language was another legacy of Chinggis Khan. In 1204, even before he gained the title of "Chinggis Khan," Chinggis assigned one of his Uyghur retainers to develop a written language for the Mongols based upon the Uyghur script. [Also see [The Mongols in China: Cultural Life under Mongol Rule](#), above, to compare Chinggis's legacy to Khubilai Khan's commissioning of a Mongol script.]

Trade and Crafts. A third legacy was Chinggis's support for both trade and crafts, which meant support for the merchants and artisans in the business of trade and craft. Chinggis recognized early on the importance of trade and crafts for the economic survival of the Mongols and actively supported both. [Also see [The Mongols in China: Life for Artisans under Mongol Rule](#) and [Life for Merchants under Mongol Rule](#), both above, to compare Chinggis's legacy to Khubilai Khan's support artisans and merchants.]

Legal Code. Chinggis also left behind a legal code, the so-called *Jasagh*, which consisted of a series of general moral injunctions and laws. The *Jasagh* also prescribed punishments for transgressions of laws relating particularly to pastoral-nomadic society.

The Death of Chinggis Khan

In 1227, heading back to Mongolia after a victorious campaign against the Central Asians, Chinggis Khan died. One legend has it that a funeral cortege conveyed Chinggis's body to northeastern Mongolia and buried 40 virgins and 40 horses with him. According to this legend, the grave was stamped down by the horses' hooves as a means of hiding the location of his tomb.

There is a second possibility, however, that Chinggis's body was simply allowed to lie where it fell. At this time in their history, the Mongols had not yet developed a tomb culture; in fact, they would only develop a tomb culture after they'd had greater contact with the Chinese and the Persians. Thus, Chinggis's body may have been left to be consumed by the animals.

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Map Link

[The Mongol Empire at the Death of Genghis Khan in 1227 \[NationalGeographic.com\]](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/genhis/khanmap.html)

[<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/genhis/khanmap.html>]

This map shows the location of Chinggis Khan's death, as well Khara Khorum, the Mongol capital at the time, and the Jin and Xia [Xi Xia] empires, both conquered by Chinggis before his death.

The Myth of Chinggis Khan

More has been written about Chinggis Khan than perhaps any figure in Asian history, but much of this has been misleading, inaccurate, or prejudicial. Many Westerners accept the stereotype of Chinggis as a barbaric plunderer intent on maiming, slaughtering, and destroying other peoples and civilizations. To the Mongols, however, Chinggis Khan is a great national hero who united all the Mongol tribes and carved out the largest contiguous land empire in world history. And according to this latter view, Chinggis and his descendants promoted frequent and extended contacts among the civilizations of Europe and Asia, ushering in an era of extraordinary interaction of goods, ideas, religions, and technology.

Often based on secondary accounts and myths that cannot be attested, these divergent views usually bear scant relation to what we find in the limited primary sources on Chinggis Khan that have survived to this day. Many Westerners are unaware, for instance, that "Chinggis Khan" is a title and that his birth name was Temujin. In addition, no contemporaneous portrait of Chinggis Khan has survived in any painting or in any other visual media.

The Primary Sources

Surprisingly few reliable accounts about Chinggis Khan have been discovered. *The Secret History of the Mongols* is one that presents a contemporaneous Mongol perspective. The author (or authors) are anonymous, and the date of the work's completion is unknown, but it is certainly a 13th-century work and offers, together with self-serving myths, the most complete account of Chinggis's life and career.

The Persian historian and official **Ala-ad-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226?-1283)**, who served at the Mongol court in West Asia, wrote the best description of Chinggis's campaigns. His work is generally judicious – it is (in his own words) “on the one hand, [a] candid recital of Mongol atrocities, [a] lament for the extinction of learning, [a] thinly veiled criticism of the conquerors and ... [an] open admiration of their vanquished opponents; and on the other hand, [in] praise of Mongol institutions and Mongol rulers and [a] justification of the invasion as an act of divine grace.”

Chinggis also invited a Daoist sage named **Changchun** to accompany him on his campaigns to Central Asia, and he wrote a fine, first-hand description of his Mongol patron that yields fascinating insights into his personality.

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Further Reading

The best modern work on Chinggis Khan is *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, by Paul Ratchnevsky, trans. by Thomas Haining (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

Khubilai Khan (1215-1294)

Khubilai Khan was an important transitional figure in Mongol history, in particular because he sought to rule – and not merely conquer – the vast domains that the Mongols had subjugated.

Among other things, Khubilai Khan:

- established an administration to govern China
- supported agriculture, trade, and crafts
- patronized painting, the decorative arts, and theater
- provided funds and support for Buddhist monasteries, Confucian scholarship, Islamic mosques, and Nestorian Christian churches

This is not to say that Khubilai did not persist in efforts at military expansionism – indeed, he successfully brought South China under his control in 1279. But his three naval campaigns – two against Japan, in 1274 and 1281, and one against Java in 1292-3 – failed disastrously and led to the eventual collapse of Mongol power in China in 1368.

- *For more on Khubilai Khan's rule in China, see [The Mongols in China: Khubilai Khan in China](#), above.*
- *For more on Khubilai's failed military campaigns, see [The Mongols in China: Military Successes & Failures](#), above.*

Two key figures closely related to Khubilai Khan include **Chabi**, his second principal wife, and the Tibetan monk **Phags-pa lama**, who was his close friend and adviser.

Read Marco Polo's Descriptions of Khubilai Khan and His Court:

[Text excerpted from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, translated and edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule]

- *Chapter VIII: Concerning the Person of the Great Kaan* [.pdf]

A physical description of Khubilai Khan, and general descriptions of his family, his court, and his concubines

- *Chapter IX: Concerning the Great Kaan's Sons* [.pdf]

Descriptions of Khubilai Khan's twenty-two sons

Ögödei (1185-1241)

Ögödei, Chinggis Khan's son and successor, presided over the greatest expansion of the Mongol empire. During Ögödei's twelve year reign (1229-1241), the Mongols dramatically increased the territories under their control, moving from Central Asia into Russia in the 1230s and absorbing

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much of Russian territory. They also occupied Georgia and Armenia, and by 1234 they had destroyed the Jin dynasty of North China and occupied all of China north of the Yangtze river. They'd also moved into parts of Western Asia, particularly the eastern sections of Persia.

Among other accomplishments, Ögödei is credited with:

- building the first Mongol capital city at Khara Khorum
- devising the first regular and orderly system of taxation in the newly subjugated territories
- recruiting Muslims to assist in the financial administration of the empire

Persian historian **Rashid al-Din** portrays Ögödei as an easy-going, fun-loving, and bibulous ruler whose policies were supportive of trade, merchants, and crafts.

For Rashid al-Din's portrayal of Ögödei:

The Successors of Genghis Khan, translated from the Persian by John Andrew Boyle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

Marco Polo (1254-1324)

The Venetian merchant and adventurer was in China from 1275 to 1291 and returned to Europe with extraordinary accounts of his travels in Persia, China, Central Asia, Armenia, and Southeast Asia among other places. [[See a map of Marco Polo's journey](#)]

Read the following excerpts of Marco Polo's account of life at Khubilai Khan's court. The text is from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, translated and edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule.

- *Chapter VIII: Concerning the Person of the Great Kaan* [.pdf]

A physical description of Khubilai Khan, and general descriptions of his family, his court, and his concubines

- *Chapter IX: Concerning the Great Kaan's Sons* [.pdf]

Descriptions of Khubilai Khan's twenty-two sons

- *Chapter X: Concerning the Palace of the Great Kaan* [.pdf]

Description of Khubilai's palace at Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

- *Chapter XI: Concerning the City of Cambaluc* [.pdf]

Detailed description of the layout of the city of Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

- *Chapter XXII: Concerning the City of Cambaluc, and Its Great Traffic and Population* [.pdf]

Detailed description of the population and life in the city of Cambaluc (Daidu/Beijing)

- *Chapter XXIII: Concerning the Oppressions of Achmath the Bailo, and the Plot That Was Formed Against Him* [.pdf]

Account of a plot against Achmath, upon whom Khubilai Khan entrusted much, until he learned of his corrupt ways

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- *Chapter XXIV: How the Great Kaan Caused the Bark of Trees, Made Into Something Like Paper, To Pass for Money Over All His Country* [.pdf]

Description of paper money, as it was made and circulated in Mongol China

- *Chapter XXVI: How the Kaan's Posts and Runners are Sped Through Many Lands and Provinces* [.pdf]

Detailed description of the postal system in Mongol China

- *Chapter XLVI: Of the City of Caracoron* [.pdf]

About the foundation of the city of Caracoron (Khara Khorum), the first Mongol capital, and Marco Polo's own theory about the rise of the Tartars (the Mongols)

- **For an assessment of Marco Polo's writings:**

Marco Polo's Asia, by Leonardo Olschki (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

- **On the question of whether Marco Polo really ever reached China:**

Read Online: "Did Marco Polo Really Go To China?" by Morris Rossabi

THE PASTORAL NOMADIC LIFE

Introduction

The Mongolian pastoral nomads relied on their animals for survival and moved their habitat several times a year in search of water and grass for their herds. Their lifestyle was precarious, as their constant migrations prevented them from transporting reserves of food or other necessities. Rarely having the luxury of surpluses to tide them through difficult times, they were extremely vulnerable to the elements. Heavy snows, ice, and droughts (judging from contemporary times, droughts afflicted Mongolia about twice a decade) jeopardized their flocks and herds and heightened their sense of fragility. The spread of disease among the livestock could also spell disaster. Herders hunted and farmed to a limited extent but were dependent on trade with China in times of crisis.

Further Reading

"Mongolian Herders Struggling to Survive," by John Leicester, in *Mongol Tolbo* 21 (March 2001): 6-7.

Sheep: A Source of Bounty

The most numerous and valuable of the Mongols' principal animals, sheep provided food, clothing, and shelter for Mongol families. Boiled mutton was an integral part of the Mongol diet, and wool and animal skins were the materials from which the Mongols fashioned their garments, as well as their homes. Wool was pressed into felt and then either made into clothing, rugs, and blankets or used for the outer covering of the *gers* [or tents].

Dried sheep dung was collected and used for fuel. Though the Mongols used wood and currently also use coal as fuel sources, animal dung was often the most readily available source. Women, and secondarily children, were responsible for gathering the dung.

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Survival of young sheep (and other animals) was vital to maintaining the pastoral-nomadic way of life, and a significant responsibility for Mongol women was to coax the ewes to nurse their young.

Further Reading

“Khubilai Khan and the Women in His Family,” by Morris Rossabi, in *Studia Sino-Mongolica: Festschrift für Herbert Franke*, W. Bauer, ed., (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, GMBH, 1979) 153-180.

Goats

Goats were not as pervasive as sheep in the Mongol flocks, but the Mongols consumed goat meat, milk, and cheese. The poor wore goat skins; and in more modern times, goats have become valuable as the source for cashmere.

Because goats were not as tough and needed more care than sheep, the Mongols kept fewer goats. In addition, because goats consume the grass to the root when they graze, they devastate the grasslands, resulting in desertification.

Mongols in traditional times therefore limited the number of goats in their flocks. Modern demand for cashmere caused many herders in the 1990s to increase their numbers of goats, potentially undermining the traditional ecological balance.

Survival of the Flocks

The reproduction of sheep and goats is essential for the survival of Mongol pastoralism. The animals are culled annually for food, hide, and skin, and many do not survive the harsh winters. Replenishment of the herds and flocks, therefore, is vital. But encouraging successful procreation and survival of the young requires tremendous skill and knowledge.

Another threat to the survival of the sheep and goats are wolves. They generally attacked the young but were also known to threaten adult animals. Herders kept and trained fierce dogs to protect the herds from such predators. In addition, the Mongols periodically went on hunts to cull the wolf population.

Further Reading

Bounty from the Sheep: Autobiography of a Herdsman, by Tserendash Mankhainyambuu, translated from the Mongolian by Mary Rossabi, with introduction by Morris Rossabi (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2000).

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Yaks and Oxen

Yaks and oxen require excellent grazing grounds and cannot endure well in the deserts and other marginal areas. They are found primarily in the steppelands, and thus there are fewer of them than sheep or goats.

Yaks offer meat and milk, and the Mongols often use yak and ox carts to transport their belongings as they migrate from one region to another.

Camels

The Bactrian or two-humped camel permits the Mongols to transport heavy loads through the desert and other inhospitable terrain. The camel is invaluable not only for transporting the folded *gers* and other household furnishings when the Mongols move to new pastureland, but also to carry goods designed for trade.

A camel could endure the heat of the Gobi desert, could drink enormous quantities of water and then continue for days without liquid, required less pasture than other pack animals, and could extract food from the scruffiest shrubs or blades of grass – all ideal qualities for the daunting desert terrain of southern Mongolia.

In addition to the camel's importance for transport, the Mongols valued the animal's wool, drank its milk (which can also be made into cheese), and ate its meat. No wonder then that "in the Mongol epoch the camel enjoyed the highest esteem he was attain in the Chinese lands" [in "The Camel in China Down to the Mongol Invasion" by Edward Schafer, *Sinologica*, 2 (1950), p. 190].

Further Reading

- *The Camel and the Wheel*, by Richard Bulliet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
- "The Camel in China down to the Mongol Dynasty," by Edward H. Schafer, in *Sinologica* 2 (Basel: Verlag für Recht und Gesellschaft, 1950).

Horses

Horses offered mobility to the Mongols, permitting them to roam the steppes in search of pasture for their flocks, as well as to round up other horses that have been allowed to graze freely faraway from an encampment.

Riders gathering the horses together were equipped with a pole at the end of which was a special lasso. Children, who became skilled riders at an early age, assumed this responsibility on occasion.

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In traditional times horses gave the Mongols the decided tactical advantage of mobility in conflicts against sedentary civilizations. They could, for example, initiate a hit-and-run raid on a Chinese village, fleeing to the steppelands and thus evading the less mobile Chinese forces.

Further Reading

- *Read Online:* “All the Khan’s Horses,” by Morris Rossabi, in *Natural History* (October 1994). Reprinted with permission from the author.
- “Chagi’s Charge,” by Robert McCracken Peck, in *Natural History* (June 1999).

Mare’s Milk

In summer, women milked the mares, sometimes as often as eight or nine times daily. Much of the milk was allowed to ferment, producing an alcoholic drink known as *airag* (or *koumiss*).

Some of the Mongol Khans and members of the elite consumed vast quantities of liquor, including *airag*, prompting one scholar to attribute the fall of the Mongol Empire in part to the increasing problem of alcoholism among its leaders.

Contemporary Mongolia continues to face a high incidence of alcoholism.

Further Reading

“Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire,” by John Masson Smith [.pdf], in *Journal of Asian History*, 34/1 (2000). Reprinted with permission from publisher, Harrassowitz Publishing House.

Traditional Clothing and Jewelry

The national dress, worn both by men and women, is a form-fitting robe known as a *del*. The *del* was often woven out of silk frequently imported from China.

During festivals or celebrations, women wore a variety of headdresses, including the traditional elaborate *boghtagh*.

Elite women often had exquisite jewelry, which constituted a considerable quantity of the family’s wealth. Small but valuable items such as jewelry were ideal means of preserving wealth, as they could readily be carried during the Mongols’ frequent migrations.

- See *photographs from a traditional Mongol cultural festival as it is still celebrated today*.

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The Portable home: The Ger

The Mongolian nomads have developed a circular felt-covered dwelling, the *ger* (or *yurt* in Turkish language), adapted to the difficult conditions of their daily life (cold, wind, sun) and easy to be moved, as they can be raised and dismantled in 30-60 minutes. The *gers* have beautiful carved and decorated doors, south oriented. When entering into a *ger*, airag and cheese are blown and snuff bottles are exchanged.

[Text for this section only courtesy of VisitMongolia.com]

- *Contemporary photograph of a Mongol family in front of their ger.*