

## **CHINA UNDER MONGOL RULE: THE YUAN DYNASTY**

The Yuan Dynasty, or Great Yuan Empire (Mongolian: Dai On Ulus; Mandarin: Dà Yuán Dìguó) was a ruling dynasty founded by the Mongol leader Kublai Khan, who ruled most of present-day China, all of modern Mongolia and its surrounding areas, lasting officially from 1271 to 1368. It is considered both as a division of the Mongol Empire and as an imperial dynasty of China. Although the dynasty was established by Kublai Khan, he had his grandfather Genghis Khan placed on the official record as the founder of the dynasty, known as the Taizu. Besides Emperor of China, Kublai Khan also claimed the title of Great Khan and therefore supremacy over the other Mongol khanates spread over Eurasia - the Chagatai Khanate of Turkestan, the Golden Horde of present day Russia and the Ilkhanate in Persia. Thus the Yuan Dynasty is sometimes referred to as the Empire of the Great Khan, as the Mongol Emperors of the Yuan held the title of Great Khan of all Mongol Khanates.

### **MONGOLIAN ORIGINS**

In 1259, the Great Khan Mongke died while Kublai Khan, his brother, was campaigning against the Song Dynasty in South China. Meanwhile his other brother Ariq Boke commanded the Mongol homelands. After Mongke's demise, Ariq Boke decided to attempt to make himself Great Khan. Hearing of this, Kublai aborted his Chinese expedition and had himself elected as Great Khan in an assembly with a small number of attendees in April of 1260. Still, Ariq Boke had his supporters and was elected as a rival Great Khan to Kublai at Karakorum, then the capital of Mongol Empire. The brothers then engaged in a series of battles, ending with Ariq Boke's capture in 1264. This event essentially marked the end of a unified Mongol empire. The four major successor khanates never came again under true one rule, though the Great Khans of the Yuan were nominally acknowledged as the suzerains of all Mongol dominions.

### **FOUNDING OF THE DYNASTY**

After winning the war against Ariq Boke, Kublai Khan began his reign over his realm with greater aspirations and self-confidence. In 1266, he ordered the construction of his new capital at the site that is now the modern city of Beijing. The city had been called Zhongdu during the Jin Dynasty, and in 1272 it came to be known as Dadu (meaning "Great Capital") to the Chinese, Daidu to the Mongols, and Khanbalikh ("City of the Khans") to the Turks. In 1271, Kublai formally established the Yuan Dynasty, which would proceed to be the first non-Han dynasty to rule all of China. Its official title, Da Yuan originates from the I-Ching phrase dà zāi qián yuán, literally translating to 'Great is the Heavenly and Primal'. In 1272, Dadu officially became the capital of the Yuan Dynasty. In the early 1270s, Kublai began his massive drive against the Southern Song Dynasty. By 1273, he had blockaded the Yangzi River with his navy and besieged Xiangyang, the last obstacle in his way to capture the rich Yangzi River basin. In 1275, a Song force of 130,000 troops under Chancellor Jia Sidao was dealt a crushing defeat by the Yuan and by 1276, most of the Southern Song territory had been captured by Yuan forces. In 1279, the Yuan army led by the Chinese general Zhang Hongfan crushed the last Song resistance in the Battle of Yamen. This traditionally marks the end of the Southern Song, whereby, for the first time since the late Tang Dynasty, all of China was again reunited under one sovereign ruling house. After the founding of the dynasty, Kublai Khan was put under pressure by many of his advisers to further expand the sphere of influence of the Yuan through the traditional Sinocentric tributary system. However, the attempts to establish such tributary relationships were rebuffed and expeditions to Japan, Vietnam and Java would later meet with less success.

## KUBLAI KHAN AND THE WEST

Kublai Khan sought to govern China through traditional institutions, and also recognized that in order to rule China he needed to employ Han Chinese advisers and officials, though he never relied totally on Chinese advisers. Yet, the Hans were discriminated against politically as almost all important central posts were monopolized by Mongols, who also preferred employing non-Hans from other parts of the Mongol domain in those positions for which no Mongol could be found. Society was divided into four castes, in order of privilege: Mongols, Semu (various non-Han Chinese peoples of Central Asia), Northerners (including Northern Han Chinese, Koreans and Jurchens), then Southerners (the former subjects of the Song Dynasty). During his lifetime, besides constructing the imperial capital of Dadu, which is present-day Beijing, Kublai Khan also made Shangdu (known to Marco Polo as Xanadu) his summer capital. The reason for the construction of a new capital far to the northwest was political, in order to keep a watchful eye on the Northern border where foreign invasions traditionally originated. Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant who served under Kublai Khan as an official, described his rule as benevolent: relieving the populace of taxes in times of hardship; building hospitals and orphanages; distributing food among the abjectly poor. Kublai also strongly supported the Silk Road trade network, allowing for contact between Chinese and Western technologies. Through Marco Polo, Kublai Khan developed a keen interest in the Latin world, especially Christianity, and sought to invite hundreds of Western missionaries to China through a letter written in Latin to the Pope. Marco Polo's travels would later inspire many others like Christopher Columbus to chart the passage to the "Middle Kingdom" of the East in search of wealth and splendor.

Indeed, a rich cultural diversity developed during the Yuan Dynasty, as the political unity of China and much of central Asia promoted trade between East and West. The Mongols' extensive West Asian and European contacts produced a fair amount of cultural exchange. That is to say, the other cultures and peoples in the Mongol World Empire permanently influenced China and vice-versa. Buddhism had a great influence in the government, and Tibetan-rite Tantric Buddhism also took permanent root in Chinese Buddhism. The Muslims of the Yuan Dynasty introduced Middle Eastern cartography, astronomy, medicine, clothing, and diet in East Asia. Middle Eastern crops such as carrots, turnips, new varieties of lemons, eggplants, and melons, high-quality granulated sugar, and cotton were all either introduced or successfully popularized by the Yuan Mongols. On the other hand, certain Chinese innovations and products - such as the printing press, gunpowder, porcelain, playing cards and medical literature were exported to Europe and Western Asia.

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