4.13: The Yuan Dynasty

The last major dynasty prior to China’s early modern period is the Yuan [you-an] Dynasty. Like earlier neighbors lying to the north of the Song, the Yuan was also a northern conquest dynasty. The key players here were steppe nomads living on the grasslands of Mongolia, known as Mongols, and their leader Genghis Khan. The story of their rise and how they created the largest territorial empire in the history of the world properly belongs to Chapter Eleven, which covers Central Asia, so we here only provide a brief introduction. The most important point to bear in mind is that the Mongols conquered many countries, including China, and incorporated them into a large Eurasian empire.

In the twelfth century CE, the Mongols were one of many tribes of nomadic pastoralists living on the steppes of Central Asia. Although these tribes were made up of peoples of differing ethnicity, they held in common a way of life. Since the steppe was unsuited to farming, they relied principally on their herds, but also on what they could obtain by trading with neighboring sedentary peoples. The nomads lived in temporary campsites, periodically breaking down their yurts and relocating as the seasons required. Since the tribes often fought with each other or turned to raiding, nomads were also excellent at mounted warfare. Their chieftain leaders—referred to as khans—were usually selected based on skill in battle and charisma.

Undoubtedly, the most famous khan in Central Asian history is Genghis Khan. In the late twelfth century, he accrued an army of loyal followers and began to subdue tribes across the Mongolian steppe. In 1206 CE, at a gathering of tribal leaders, he was proclaimed Universal Khan of a tribal confederation. Using a powerful military with a tight command structure, Genghis proceeded to unleash a wave of campaigning in northern China and Central Asia, thereby adding much territory to a growing Mongol Empire (see Map \(\PageIndex{1}\)). After he died in 1227 CE, this empire was divided into four khanates, each of which went to one of his four sons as their territorial inheritance.
Tolui, Genghis Khan’s youngest son, was granted the Mongol homeland as well as subjugated territory in northern China held by the Jin Dynasty. But this rugged warrior died in 1232 at the young age of forty, so the task of managing Chinese territory fell to Tolui’s capable wife Sorghagtani Beki and her second son, **Kublai Khan** (1215 – 1294 CE). Unlike his predecessors, who largely treated Chinese as chattel and ruthlessly exploited their towns and villages, Kublai saw the advantages of taking a more enlightened approach. With the advice of Chinese advisors, he adopted Chinese-style methods for governing China. In fact, after Kublai was elected as the fifth Universal Khan in 1260, he chose to move his capital from Mongolia to Beijing, making it the center of his khanate. He then took on the trappings of a Chinese-style sovereign and, in 1273, declared the founding of the Great Yuan Dynasty. Accordingly, he asserted that the Mandate of Heaven had been transferred to him from the Song Dynasty.
Kublai then engaged in a decade of conquest that concluded with the fall of the Song. This victory over the Song Dynasty, China required careful preparation. The Song was located in the southern two-thirds of China, where the terrain was matted with lakes, rivers, and canals. The Mongols had little experience with naval warfare, so they turned to Chinese advisors to build a navy. Mongol cavalry boarded the ships and floated down rivers leading to the Song capital, laying siege to cities along the way. When they reached it in 1276, Kublai’s generals took the capital without bloodshed. The regent to the young Song emperor worked out conditions for surrender to them. Hence, the Mongol Yuan Dynasty had won control over China. After Kublai died, nine of his descendants ruled as emperors until the dynasty fell to native rebellions in 1368.
Historians differently assess the impact of Mongol Yuan rule on China. Earlier generations of historians judged that violent Mongol conquests devastated the land and led to a population drop. The Mongol style of rule was despotic. Rather than sustain the openness of Chinese society and use the merit-based examination system to bring talent into their government, Mongol rulers placed Chinese in rigid occupational categories and suspended the exams. Many capable men simply avoided official service and turned to other professions.

Recent studies, however, offer a more positive assessment. Because Yuan rulers followed the counsel of Confucian advisors and adopted traditional Chinese methods for governing, for most Chinese life went on as before. Early on, much attention was also paid to the farming population. To promote agriculture, Yuan rulers provided relief measures and promoted the formation of rural cooperatives. Also, Mongols highly valued crafts and implemented policies that greatly benefited artisans and promoted their work. Hence, arts such as textiles and ceramics flourished (see Figure 1). Finally, the assessment of Yuan rule in China should be linked to a broader assessment of the impact of Mongol rule on world history (see Chapter Eleven). While duly acknowledging the devastation caused by Mongol conquests, historians also find much merit in Mongol patronage of arts and support for constructions projects and advancements in the areas of medicine and astronomy. Most importantly, the massive Eurasian empire they forged initiated a new era of trade and contacts between Europe and China, as well as the regions lying between.