Section 3: The Yuan Dynasty

The Mongol Invasions

The Yuan dynasty was founded by Kublai Khan, leader of a major Mongolian clan who invaded China but adopted many Chinese customs and practices.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Connect the Mongol invasions to the establishment of the Yuan dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- Established by Kublai Khan, the Yuan dynasty was the ruling dynasty of China and Mongolia and a khanate of the Mongol Empire.
- Genghis Khan and his successors expanded the Mongol Empire across Asia, eventually conquering northern China.
- Möngke Khan commenced a military campaign against the Chinese Song dynasty in southern China, during which time Kublai Khan rose to power and took on the title of Great Khan.
- Instability, including civil war with the Mongol clans and continued fighting with the Song, troubled the early years of Kublai Khan’s reign.
- In 1272, Kublai Khan founded the Yuan dynasty in the style of a traditional Chinese dynasty.
- Eventually, Kublai won over the Song, both militarily and through adopting Chinese customs and practices.
- The Yuan dynasty is traditionally given credit for reuniting China after several hundred years of fragmentation following the fall of the Tang dynasty.
Key Terms

- **Great Khan**: A Mongolian title equal to the status of an emperor and used to refer to someone who rules a khanate, or empire.
- **Mandate of Heaven**: An ancient Chinese belief/theory and philosophical idea that tiān (heaven) granted emperors the right to rule based on their ability to govern well, appropriately, and fairly.
- **I Ching**: An ancient divination text and the oldest of the Chinese classics, which uses hexagrams to provide guidance for moral decision making and upright living.

Overview

The Yuan dynasty was the ruling dynasty of China established by Kublai Khan, leader of the Mongolian Borjigin clan. Although the Mongols had ruled territories including today’s North China for decades, it was not until 1271 that Kublai Khan officially proclaimed the dynasty in the traditional Chinese style. His realm was, by this point, isolated from the other khanates, and he controlled most of present-day China and its surrounding areas, including modern Mongolia and Korea. It was the first foreign dynasty to rule all of China and lasted until 1368, after which its Genghisid rulers returned to their Mongolian homeland and continued to rule the Northern Yuan dynasty. Some of the Mongolian emperors of the Yuan mastered the Chinese language, while others used only their native language, Mongolian.

The Yuan dynasty is considered both a successor to the Mongol Empire and an imperial Chinese dynasty. It was the khanate ruled by the successors of Möngke Khan after the division of the Mongol Empire. In official Chinese histories, the Yuan dynasty bore the Mandate of Heaven, following the Song dynasty and preceding the Ming dynasty. The dynasty was established by Kublai Khan, yet he placed his grandfather Genghis Khan on the imperial records as the official founder of the dynasty as “Taizu.” In the Proclamation of the Dynastic Name, Kublai announced the name of the new dynasty as Great Yuan and claimed the succession of former Chinese dynasties from the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors to the Tang dynasty.

In addition to Emperor of China, Kublai Khan also claimed the title of Great Khan, supreme over the other successor khanates: the Chagatai, the Golden Horde, and the Ilkhanate. As such, the Yuan was also sometimes referred to as the Empire of the Great Khan. However, while the wester khans at times recognized the claim of supremacy by the Yuan emperors, their subservience was nominal and each continued his own separate development.

The Rise of Kublai Khan and the Mongol Invasions of China

Genghis Khan united the Mongol and Turkic tribes of the steppes and became Great Khan in 1206. He and his successors expanded the Mongol Empire across Asia. Under the reign of Genghis’s third son, Ögedei Khan, the Mongols destroyed the weakened Jin dynasty in 1234, conquering most of northern China. Ögedei offered his nephew Kublai a position in Xingzhou, Hebei. Kublai was unable to read Chinese but had had several Han Chinese teachers attached to him since his early years by his mother Sorghaghtani. He sought the counsel of Chinese Buddhist and Confucian advisers. Möngke Khan succeeded Ögedei’s son Güyük as Great Khan in 1251, and he granted his brother Kublai control over Mongol-held territories in China. Kublai built schools for Confucian scholars, issued paper money, revived Chinese rituals, and endorsed policies that stimulated agricultural and commercial growth. He adopted as his capital city Kaiping in Inner Mongolia, later renamed Shangdu.
Möngke Khan commenced a military campaign against the Chinese Song dynasty in southern China. The Mongol force that invaded southern China was far greater than the force they sent to invade the Middle East in 1256. Möngke died in 1259 without a successor. Kublai returned from fighting the Song in 1260 and learned that his brother, Ariq Böke, was challenging his claim to the throne. Kublai convened a kurultai in Kaiping that elected him Great Khan, but a rival kurultai in Mongolia proclaimed Ariq Böke Great Khan, beginning a civil war. Kublai depended on the cooperation of his Chinese subjects to ensure that his army received ample resources. He bolstered his popularity among his subjects by modeling his government on the bureaucracy of traditional Chinese dynasties and adopting the Chinese era name of Zhongtong. Ariq Böke was hampered by inadequate supplies and surrendered in 1264. All of the three western khanates (Golden Horde, Chagatai Khanate, and Ilkhanate) became functionally autonomous; only the Ilkhans truly recognized Kublai as Great Khan. Civil strife had permanently divided the Mongol Empire.

Kublai Khan: A portrait of the founder of Yuan dynasty, the Mongolian Kublai Khan.

The Rule of Kublai Khan

Instability troubled the early years of Kublai Khan’s reign. Ogedei’s grandson Kaidu refused to submit to Kublai and threatened the western frontier of Kublai’s domain, and the hostile but weakened Song dynasty remained an obstacle in the south. Kublai secured the northeast border in 1259 by installing the hostage prince Wonjong as the ruler of Korea, making it a Mongol tributary state. Kublai was also threatened by domestic unrest. Li Tan, the son-in-law of a powerful official, instigated a revolt against Mongol rule in 1262. After successfully suppressing the revolt, Kublai curbed the influence of the Han Chinese advisers in his court. He feared that his dependence on Chinese officials left him
vulnerable to future revolts and defections to the Song.

Kublai’s government after 1262 was a compromise between preserving Mongol interests in China and satisfying the demands of his Chinese subjects. He instituted the reforms proposed by his Chinese advisers by centralizing the bureaucracy, expanding the circulation of paper money, and maintaining the traditional monopolies on salt and iron. He restored the Imperial Secretariat and left the local administrative structure of past Chinese dynasties unchanged. However, Kublai rejected plans to revive the Confucian imperial examinations and divided Yuan society into three, later four, classes, with the Han Chinese occupying the lowest rank. Kublai’s Chinese advisers still wielded significant power in the government, but their official rank was nebulous.

Founding of the Yuan Dynasty

Kublai readied the move of the Mongol capital from Karakorum in Mongolia to Khanbaliq in 1264, constructing a new city near the former Jurchen capital Zhongdu, now modern Beijing, in 1266. In 1271, Kublai formally claimed the Mandate of Heaven and declared that 1272 was the first year of the Great Yuan in the style of a traditional Chinese dynasty. The name of the dynasty originated from the I Ching and describes the “origin of the universe” or a “primal force.” Kublai proclaimed Khanbaliq the “Great Capital” or Daidu of the dynasty. The era name was changed to Zhiyuan to herald a new era of Chinese history. The adoption of a dynastic name legitimized Mongol rule by integrating the government into the narrative of traditional Chinese political succession. Khublai evoked his public image as a sage emperor by following the rituals of Confucian propriety and ancestor veneration, while simultaneously retaining his roots as a leader from the steppes. The Yuan dynasty is traditionally given credit for reuniting China after several hundred years of fragmentation following the fall of the Tang dynasty.

Trade and Currency under the Yuan

During the Yuan dynasty, trade flourished and peace reigned along the newly revived Silk Road, contributing to a period known as the Pax Mongolica.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the trade and monetary policies of the Yuan dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• Kublai Khan, who established the Yuan dynasty in China as an extension of the already dominant Mongolian Empire, promoted progressive policies that allowed trade and prosperity to flourish.

• The Mongolians revived the Silk Road and established peace throughout their extensive trade routes, leading to the so-called Pax Mongolia.

• Many Europeans, most famously Marco Polo, travelled to Yuan China and observed Chinese cultural and technological innovations.

• One of the more notable applications of printing technology in China was the chao, the paper money of the Yuan, which became one of the first instances of a unified paper money economy in the world.
Key Terms

- **Pax Mongolica**: A historiographical term, modeled after the original phrase Pax Romana, that describes the stabilizing effects of the conquests of the Mongol Empire on the social, cultural, and economic life of the inhabitants of the vast Eurasian territory that the Mongols conquered in the 13th and 14th centuries.

- **Silk Road**: An ancient network of trade routes that for centuries were central to cultural interaction through regions of the Asian continent connecting the East and West from China to the Mediterranean Sea.

- **Chao**: The official banknote of the Yuan dynasty in China.

- **Marco Polo**: A Venetian merchant traveller whose travels, especially to Mongolian-ruled China, are recorded in The Travels of Marco Polo, a book that introduced Europeans to Central Asia and China.

Overview

Kublai Khan promoted commercial, scientific, and cultural growth. He supported the merchants of the Silk Road trade network by protecting the Mongol postal system, constructing infrastructure, providing loans that financed trade caravans, and encouraging the circulation of paper banknotes. *Pax Mongolica*, Mongol peace, enabled the spread of technologies, commodities, and culture between China and the West. Kublai expanded the Grand Canal from southern China to Daidu in the north. Mongol rule was cosmopolitan under Kublai Khan. He welcomed foreign visitors to his court, such as the Venetian merchant Marco Polo, who wrote the most influential European account of Yuan China. Marco Polo’s travels would later inspire many others, like Christopher Columbus, to chart a passage to the Far East in search of its legendary wealth.

Marco Polo on the Silk Road: A closeup of the Mallorquín Atlas depicting Marco Polo traveling to the East on the Silk Road during the Pax Mongolica.

Trade under the Yuan Dynasty: *Pax Mongolica*

*Pax Mongolica* is a historiographical term, modeled after the original phrase *Pax Romana*, that describes the stabilizing effects of the conquests of the Mongol Empire on the social, cultural, and economic life of the inhabitants of the vast Eurasian territory that the Mongols conquered in the 13th and 14th centuries, including the Yuan dynasty in China. The
term is used to describe the eased communication and commerce the unified administration helped to create, and the period of relative peace that followed the Mongols' vast conquests.

Before the Mongols' rise, the Old World system consisted of isolated imperial systems. The new Mongol Empire amalgamated the once-isolated civilizations into a new continental system and re-established the Silk Road as a dominant method of transportation. The unification of Eurasia under the Mongols greatly diminished the amount of competing tribute gatherers throughout the trade network and assured greater safety and security in travel. During the Pax Mongolica, European merchants like Marco Polo made their way from Europe to China on the well-maintained and well-traveled roads that linked Anatolia to China.

On the Silk Road, caravans with Chinese silk and spices such as pepper, ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg from the Spice Islands came to the West via the transcontinental trade routes. Eastern diets were thus introduced to Europeans. Indian muslins, cotton, pearls, and precious stones were sold in Europe, as were weapons, carpets, and leather goods from Iran. Gunpowder was also introduced to Europe from China. In the opposite direction, Europeans sent silver, fine cloth, horses, linen, and other goods to the near and far East. Increasing trade and commerce meant that the respective nations and societies increased their exposure to new goods and markets, thus increasing the GDP of each nation or society that was involved in the trade system. Many of the cities participating in the 13th century world trade system grew rapidly in size.

Along with land trade routes, a Maritime Silk Road contributed to the flow of goods and establishment of a Pax Mongolica. This Maritime Silk Road started with short coastal routes in Southern China. As technology and navigation progressed, these routes developed into a high-seas route into the Indian Ocean. Eventually these routes further developed to encompass the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the sea off East Africa.

Along with tangible goods, people, techniques, information, and ideas moved lucidly across the Eurasian landmass for the first time. For example, John of Montecorvino, archbishop of Peking, founded Roman Catholic missions in India and China and also translated the New Testament into the Mongolian language. Long-distance trade brought new methods of doing business from the Far East to Europe; bills of exchange, deposit banking, and insurance were introduced to Europe during the Pax Mongolica. Bills of exchange made it significantly easier to travel long distances because a traveler would not be burdened by the weight of metal coins.

### Monetary Policies and Paper Money

One of the more notable applications of printing technology in China was the chao, the paper money of the Yuan, made from the bark of mulberry trees. The Yuan government first used woodblocks to print paper money, but switched to bronze plates in 1275. The Mongols experimented with establishing the Chinese-style paper monetary system in Mongol-controlled territories outside of China. The Yuan minister Bolad was sent to Iran, where he explained Yuan paper money to the Il-khanate court of Gaykhatu. The Il-khanate government issued paper money in 1294, but public distrust of the exotic new currency doomed the experiment.

Foreign observers took note of Yuan printing technology. Marco Polo documented the Yuan printing of paper money and almanac pamphlets called “tacuini.” The vizier Rashid-al-Din recognized that printing was a valuable technological breakthrough, and expressed regret that the Mongol experiment with printing paper money had failed in the Muslim world. Rashid-al-Din’s view was not shared by other chroniclers in the Middle East, who were critical of the experiment’s
disruptive impact on the Il-khanate.

In 1253, Möngke established a Department of Monetary affairs to control the issuance of paper money in order to eliminate the overissue of the currency by Mongol and non-Mongol nobles since the reign of Great Khan Ögedei. His authority established united measure based on sukhe or silver ingot; however, the Mongols allowed their foreign subjects to mint coins in the denominations and weight they traditionally used. During the reigns of Ögedei, Gūyūk, and Möngke, Mongol coinage increased with gold and silver coinage in Central Asia and copper and silver coins in Caucasus, Iran, and southern Russia.

The Yuan dynasty under Kublai Khan issued paper money backed by silver, and again banknotes supplemented by cash and copper cash. The standardization of paper currency allowed the Yuan court to monetize taxes and reduce carrying costs of taxes in goods, as did the policy of Möngke Khan. But the forest nations of Siberia and Manchuria still paid their taxes in goods or commodities to the Mongols; chao was used only within the Yuan dynasty. Ghazan’s fiscal reforms enabled the inauguration of a unified bimetallic currency in the Ilkhanate. Chagatai Khan Kebek renewed the coinage backed by silver reserves and created a unified monetary system throughout the realm.

Yuan dynasty money: Yuan dynasty banknote, the chao, with its printing plate (1287)

Decline of the Yuan Dynasty

After years of internal struggle, famine, and diminishing territorial control, the Yuan dynasty was defeated by the rising Ming dynasty in 1368.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the events that led to the fall of the Yuan dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points
The final years of the Yuan dynasty were marked by struggle, famine, and bitterness among the populace, with Kublai Khan's successors losing all influence on other Mongol lands across Asia.

From the late 1340s onward, people in the countryside suffered from frequent natural disasters such as droughts, floods, and the resulting famines, and the government's lack of effective policy led to a loss of popular support, eventually leading to the Red Turban Rebellion, which weakened the Yuan's power.

Emperor Toghun Temür defeated the Red Turban Rebellion, but was weakened and needed to rely more heavily on local warlords, and therefore central government control dissipated.

Toghun fled north to Shangdu from Khanbaliq (present-day Beijing) in 1368 after the approach of the forces of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), founded by Zhu Yuanzhang in the south, thereby ending the Yuan.

The Yuan remnants retreated to Mongolia after the fall of Yingchang in 1370, and there formally carried on the name Great Yuan in what is known as the Northern Yuan dynasty.

Key Terms

- **Northern Yuan**: The Mongol regime based in the Mongolian homeland after the fall of the Yuan dynasty in China in 1368.
- **Red Turban Rebellion**: An uprising influenced by White Lotus Society members that, between 1351 and 1368, targeted the ruling Yuan dynasty of China, eventually leading to its overthrow.

**Decline of the Yuan Dynasty**

The final years of the Yuan dynasty were marked by struggle, famine, and bitterness among the populace. In time, Kublai Khan's successors lost all influence on other Mongol lands across Asia, as the Mongols beyond the Middle Kingdom saw them as too Chinese. Gradually, they lost influence in China as well. The reigns of the later Yuan emperors were short and marked by intrigues and rivalries. Uninterested in administration, they were separated from both the army and the populace, and China was torn by dissension and unrest. Outlaws ravaged the country without interference from the weakening Yuan armies.

From the late 1340s onwards, people in the countryside suffered from frequent natural disasters such as droughts, floods, and the resulting famines, and the government's lack of effective policy led to a loss of popular support. In 1351, the Red Turban Rebellion started and grew into a nationwide uprising. In 1354, when Toghtogha led a large army to crush the Red Turban rebels, Toghun Temür suddenly dismissed him for fear of betrayal. This resulted in Toghun Temür's restoration of power on the one hand and a rapid weakening of the central government on the other. He had no choice but to rely on local warlords' military power, and gradually lost his interest in politics and ceased to intervene in political struggles, all of which led to the official end of the Yuan dynasty in China. After trying to regain Khanbaliq, an effort that failed, he died in Yingchang (located in present-day Inner Mongolia) in 1370. Yingchang was seized by the Ming shortly after his death. Some Yuan royal family members still live in Henan today.

Prince Basalawarmi of Liang established a separate pocket of resistance to the Ming in Yunnan and Guizhou, but his forces were decisively defeated by the Ming in 1381. By 1387 the remaining Yuan forces in Manchuria under Naghachu had also surrendered to the Ming dynasty.
Northern Yuan

The Yuan remnants retreated to Mongolia after Yingchang fell to the Ming in 1370, and there formally carried on the name Great Yuan in what is known as the Northern Yuan dynasty. According to Chinese political orthodoxy, there could be only one legitimate dynasty whose rulers were blessed by Heaven to rule as emperors of China, and so the Ming and the Northern Yuan denied each other's legitimacy as emperors of China, although the Ming did consider the previous Yuan it had succeeded to have been a legitimate dynasty. Historians generally regard Ming dynasty rulers as the legitimate emperors of China after the Yuan dynasty.

The Ming army pursued the ex-Yuan Mongol forces into Mongolia in 1372, but were defeated by the Mongol forces under Böljü Khan Ayushiridara and his general Köke Temür. They tried again in 1380, ultimately winning a decisive victory over the Northern Yuan in 1388. About 70,000 Mongols were taken prisoner, and Karakorum (the Northern Yuan capital) was sacked. Eight years later, the Northern Yuan throne was taken over by Böljü Khan Ayushiridara, a descendant of Ariq Böke, instead of the descendants of Kublai Khan. The following centuries saw a succession of Genghisid rulers, many of whom were mere figureheads put on the throne by those warlords who happened to be the most powerful. Periods of conflict with the Ming dynasty intermingled with periods of peaceful relations with border trade.