1.4D: The Yuan Dynasty: The Age of Foreign Rule

What do you see here? Who seems to have the most political power? What aspects of the emperor’s court indicate that he is quite powerful? In what ways are the men in the lower left corner different from the rest of the people in the image? These are the Polos from Venice, Italy. What would bring these Europeans to China?

In this transparency we see an illustration of the court of Kublai Khan, where Marco Polo and his father were treated with great hospitality and were entertained by fire-eaters and jugglers.

- The lands of the Yuan empire made up the Chinese sector of the Mongol empire, and was called the Khanate (kingdom) of the Great Khan (Khan means leader in Mongolian). This region was one fourth of the enormous Mongol empire, which stretched from the arctic circle in the north to the Gulf of Tonkin in the south. Yuan emperors ruled from the shores of the East China Sea to the Himalayas in the West. Kublai Khan (reigned A.D. 1279–1294), the first Yuan emperor, had both a winter and a summer palace, the latter located north of the Great Wall. In the winter he ruled from his palace in Dadu, present-day site of Beijing. During the summer he held his court at Shangdu.

- The Yuan dynasty was founded by the grandson of Genghis Khan, one of the most feared leaders the world has ever seen. Genghis Khan—originally named Temujin—was born in A.D. 1167, high on the Mongolian plains. When he was 12 years old, his father was murdered and Temujin swore he would become a great leader to avenge his father’s death. Temujin’s reputation as a fearless fighter and leader grew as he led his ever-increasing army to one victory after another. In A.D. 1206, an assembly of Mongol chiefs chose Temujin to be their khan. They gave him the title Genghis Khan, which means “ruler of all within the seas.” Under Genghis, the Mongol armies swept across Asia striking terror into the hearts of people from Poland to Korea. Genghis’ magnificent cavalry men carried six weapons at a time, including a bow that shot arrows that could pierce armor from a distance of 200 yards. Genghis reportedly said, “Man’s highest joy is in victory; to conquer one’s enemies, to pursue them, to deprive them of their possessions, to make their beloved weep, to ride on their horses, and to embrace their wives and daughters.”

- Genghis’ grandson, Kublai Khan, inherited the Khanate of the Great Khan in A.D. 1260, eventually establishing the only foreign-ruled dynasty in China’s history to that date. Kublai Khan fought against the Song for 40 years before finally establishing the Yuan dynasty in A.D. 1279. Like his grandfather, Kublai Khan was a great warrior, but he faced the problem of finding a way to rule in traditional Chinese style while keeping power in the hands of the Mongols. Kublai was successful because he retained the civil-service
bureaucracy, but staffed it with foreigners, especially Turkish and Persian Muslims and Christians. In this way, Kublai was able to maintain control without giving power to the former Southern Song civil servants. Under Yuan rule, a strict hierarchy of social classes developed: nontaxed Mongols at the top; non-Chinese collaborators, who made up the civil service, second; Northern Chinese third; and Southern Chinese fourth. Under the Khan, no Chinese were allowed to walk the streets after sunset or to carry a weapon, and they could not learn the Mongol language or marry a Mongol. These rules applied to all Chinese, including Northerners, even though they had lived with the Mongols for 150 years prior to Yuan ascendancy.

- Chinese belief systems were largely unaffected by Yuan rule, despite the fact that the Mongols did not strongly support any Chinese belief system. Kublai Khan retained the belief system of his ancestors, called shamanism, which holds that good and evil spirits pervade the world and can be summoned and heard only through priests called shamans. At his court in Dadu, Kublai Khan retained hundreds of shamans, who read the stars and communicated with the spirits of nature and fate on behalf of the Great Khan. Chinese commoners continued to practice their traditional religions largely without interference, and under Kublai Khan's patronage the number of Buddhist establishments in China rose to 42,000, with 213,000 monks and nuns.

- Yuan rule was not popular among the Chinese because of the suffering and economic disunity caused by Mongol governmental practices. The wars of conquest fought by the Mongols resulted in the death of millions of Chinese, including a significant portion of the empire's northern population. Additionally, the Mongols seized land from many Chinese and turned it into pasture for their horses and flocks of livestock. This meant that many Chinese became impoverished because land was the source of their wealth. The seizing of land also decreased the amount of food available to the Chinese, causing many to die of disease and starvation. Additionally, though under Kublai Khan China maintained an advanced, efficient transportation and communication system—which included a postal system of relays with post horses that traveled between stations—later Mongol rulers lost favor by not maintaining roads and canals; roads in poor condition slowed Chinese commerce by isolating farmers from markets and ports.

- Although Yuan China represented a step back from the glory of Chinese culture under the Tang and Song, Europeans who arrived in China were amazed at the empire. The most famous traveler in China during Yuan rule was Marco Polo, a young Italian from Venice who accompanied his merchant father across the Silk Road to China. Marco was 17 when he arrived at Shangdu in A.D. 1275. He spent 17 years in the service of Kublai Khan as an ambassador and civil servant, travelling from Burma to Korea and throughout China. Upon returning to Europe, Polo turned his adventures into a book about his travels called A Description of the World. The world he described, of rocks that burned (coal); of mountains of jewels; of palaces whose walls were plated in gold and silver and decorated with dragons, beasts, and birds; of parades of 5,000 elephants; of currency
made from the bark of mulberry trees (paper money); and much more, was so amazing that few believed him. On his deathbed, when asked to recant his stories, Polo responded, “I have only described half of what I saw.” Soon other Europeans traveled to Cathay, as they called China then, and verified Polo’s tales. Aware of the wealth in China, Europeans would soon begin to make the long journey halfway around the world and back, and the course of Chinese history would forever be altered.

Ask six students to come forward and stand in front of the transparency, assuming the positions of the Khan, the Polos and entertainers. As the “on-scene reporter,” prompt students with these questions:

To Kublai Khan: Who are you? How did the Mongols come to control China? How is the government of your dynasty different from those in the past? Why are the Chinese treated as “fourth-class citizens” in their own country?

To the entertainers: Who are you? What are you doing? How do you feel about the Mongols ruling China? What kinds of problems has Mongol rule created in China?

To the European visitors: Who are you? What are you doing in China? What was your journey to China like? How does life in China compare with life in Europe?

Yuan Dynasty
A.D. 1260-1368

How did this dynasty rise to power?
• dynasty founded by Kublai Khan, grandson of powerful Mongol leader Genghis Khan
• Kublai Khan fought Song for 40 years before founding China’s only foreign-ruled dynasty

How did this dynasty govern China?
• civil-service system maintained by staffed Turks and Persians
• strict hierarchy of social service classes developed:
  1st: tax-free Mongols
  2nd: non-Chinese civil servants
  3rd: Northern Chinese
  4th: Southern Chinese

What belief systems did this dynasty encourage? Discourage?
• Kublai Khan retained shamanism
• Chinese belief systems largely unaffected by Yuan rule
• under Kublai Khan’s encouragement the number of Buddhist monasteries increased

How did this dynasty affect daily life in China?
• Yuan dynasty’s bloody wars of conquest led to the destruction of farmland
• Kublai Khan maintained China’s roads and canals, but later Yuan emperors let them deteriorate

List two ways this dynasty helped unite China.
• retained civil service, but staffed it with foreigners
• allowed Chinese belief systems to coexist with Mongol shamanism