

The Imperial Era: III

Mongolian Interlude

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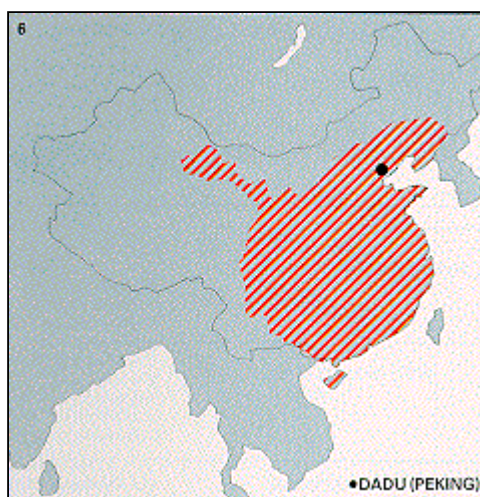
By the mid-thirteenth century, the [Mongols](#) had subjugated north China, Korea, and the Muslim kingdoms of Central Asia and had twice penetrated Europe. With the resources of his vast empire, Kublai Khan (忽必烈 1215-94), a grandson of [Genghis Khan](#) (成吉思汗 1167?-1227) and the supreme leader of all Mongol tribes, began his drive against the Southern Song. Even before the extinction of the Song dynasty, Kublai Khan had established the first alien dynasty to rule all China--the Yuan (1279-1368).

Although the Mongols sought to govern China through traditional institutions, using Chinese (Han) bureaucrats, they were not up to the task. The Han were discriminated against socially and politically. All important central and regional posts were monopolized by Mongols, who also preferred employing non-Chinese from other parts of the Mongol domain--Central Asia, the Middle East, and even Europe--in those positions for which no Mongol could be found. Chinese were more often employed in non-Chinese regions of the empire.

As in other periods of alien dynastic rule of China, a rich cultural diversity developed during the Yuan dynasty. The major cultural achievements were the development of drama and the novel and the increased use of the written vernacular. The Mongols' extensive West Asian and European contacts produced a fair amount of cultural exchange. Western musical instruments were introduced to enrich the Chinese performing arts. From this period dates the conversion to Islam, by Muslims of Central Asia, of growing numbers of Chinese in the northwest and southwest. Nestorianism and Roman Catholicism also enjoyed a period of toleration. Lamaism (Tibetan Buddhism) flourished, although native Taoism endured Mongol persecutions. Confucian governmental practices and examinations based on the Classics, which had fallen into disuse in north China during the period of disunity, were reinstated by the Mongols in the hope of maintaining order over Han society. Advances were realized in the fields of travel literature, cartography and geography, and scientific education. Certain key Chinese innovations, such as printing techniques, porcelain production, playing cards, and medical literature, were introduced in Europe, while the production of thin glass and cloisonne became popular in China. The first records of travel by Westerners date from this time. The most famous traveler of the period was the Venetian Marco Polo, whose account of his trip to "Cambaluc," the Great Khan's capital (now Beijing), and of life there astounded the people of Europe. The Mongols undertook extensive public works. Road and water communications were reorganized and improved. To provide against possible famines, granaries were ordered built throughout the empire. The city of Beijing was rebuilt with new palace grounds that included artificial lakes, hills and mountains, and parks. During the Yuan period, Beijing became the terminus of the Grand Canal, which was completely renovated. These commercially oriented improvements encouraged overland as well as maritime commerce throughout Asia and facilitated the first direct Chinese contacts with Europe. Chinese and Mongol travelers to the West were able to provide assistance in such areas as hydraulic engineering, while bringing back to the Middle Kingdom new scientific discoveries and architectural innovations. Contacts with the West also brought the introduction to China of a major new food crop--sorghum--along with other foreign food products and methods of preparation.

The Chinese Regain Power

明



Rivalry among the Mongol imperial heirs, natural disasters, and numerous peasant uprisings led to the collapse of the Yuan dynasty. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was founded by a Han Chinese peasant and former Buddhist monk turned rebel army

leader (朱元璋). Having its capital first at Nanjing (南京 which means Southern Capital) and later at Beijing (北京 or Northern Capital), the Ming reached the zenith of power during the first quarter of the fifteenth century. The Chinese armies reconquered Annam (安南), as northern Vietnam was then known, in Southeast Asia and kept back the Mongols, while the Chinese fleet sailed the China seas and the Indian Ocean, cruising as far as the east coast of Africa. The maritime Asian nations sent envoys with tribute for the Chinese emperor. Internally, the Grand Canal was expanded to its farthest limits and proved to be a stimulus to domestic trade.

The Ming maritime expeditions stopped rather suddenly after 1433, the date of the last voyage. Historians have given as one of the reasons the great expense of large-scale expeditions at a time of preoccupation with northern defenses against the Mongols. Opposition at court also may have been a contributing factor, as conservative officials found the concept of expansion and commercial ventures alien to Chinese ideas of government. Pressure from the powerful Neo-Confucian bureaucracy led to a revival of strict agrarian-centered society. The stability of the Ming dynasty, which was without major disruptions of the population (then around 100 million), economy, arts, society, or politics, promoted a belief among the Chinese that they had achieved the most satisfactory civilization on earth and that nothing foreign was needed or welcome.

Long wars with the Mongols, incursions by the Japanese into Korea, and harassment of Chinese coastal cities by the Japanese in the sixteenth century weakened Ming rule, which became, as earlier Chinese dynasties had, ripe for an alien takeover. In 1644 the Manchus (满洲人) took Beijing from the north and became masters of north China, establishing the last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911).

The Rise of the Manchus

清



Although the Manchus were not Han Chinese and were strongly resisted, especially in the south, they had assimilated a great deal of Chinese culture before conquering China Proper. Realizing that to dominate the empire they would have to do things the Chinese way, the Manchus retained many institutions of Ming and earlier Chinese derivation. They continued the Confucian court practices and temple rituals, over which the emperors had traditionally presided.

The Manchus continued the Confucian civil service system. Although Chinese were barred from the highest offices, Chinese officials predominated over Manchu officeholders outside the capital, except in military positions. The Neo-Confucian philosophy, emphasizing the obedience of subject to ruler, was enforced as the state creed. The Manchu emperors also supported Chinese literary and historical projects of enormous scope; the survival of much of China's ancient literature is attributed to these projects.

Ever suspicious of Han Chinese, the Qing rulers put into effect measures aimed at preventing the absorption of the Manchus into the dominant Han Chinese population. Han Chinese were prohibited from migrating into the Manchu homeland, and Manchus were forbidden to engage in trade or manual labor. Inter-marriage between the two groups was forbidden. In many government positions a system of dual appointments was used--the Chinese appointee was required to do the substantive work and the Manchu to ensure Han loyalty to Qing rule.

The Qing regime was determined to protect itself not only from internal rebellion but also from foreign invasion. After China Proper had been subdued, the Manchus conquered Outer Mongolia (now the Mongolian People's Republic) in the late seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century they gained control of Central Asia as far as the Pamir Mountains and established a protectorate over the area the Chinese call Xizang (西藏) but commonly known in the West as Tibet. The Qing thus became the first dynasty to eliminate successfully all danger to China Proper from across its land borders. Under Manchu rule the empire grew to include a larger area than before or since; Taiwan, the last outpost of anti-Manchu resistance, was also incorporated into China for the first time. In addition, Qing emperors received tribute from the various border states.

The chief threat to China's integrity did not come overland, as it had so often in the past, but by sea, reaching the southern coastal area first. Western traders, missionaries, and soldiers of fortune began to arrive in large numbers even before the Qing, in the sixteenth century. The empire's inability to evaluate correctly the nature of the new challenge or to respond flexibly to it resulted in the demise of the Qing and the collapse of the entire millennia-old framework of dynastic rule.

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