

Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.1

Could an Empire be Ruled From Horseback?

Some fifty years after Chinggis's death, the following situation existed. The unified Mongol empire divided about 1260 into four successor empires, or khanates: 1) China and part of Mongolia, where the Mongol regime was called the Yuan dynasty, 2) Inner Eurasia, a state called Chagatay after the name of one of Chinggis's sons, 3) the Khanate of the Golden Horde (or the Khanate of Kipchak), which included the steppes north of the Caspian and Black Seas, as well as domination over Russia, and 4) the Ilkhanate of Persia and Iraq. The Ilkhans had that title because they were in theory "deputies" of the Great Khan in China, though in reality they were independent.

Khubilai Khan was the Great Khan and ruled China. But his relatives who ruled Chagatay, the Golden Horde, and the Ilkhanate in Persia and Iraq were in reality independent, though acknowledging the Great Khan as supreme. The term Ilkhanate means "deputy" of the Great Khan.

The military under Khubilai Khan consisted of an infantry and a navy, as well as cavalry. Soldiers were paid from the government treasury.

In China, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists from central and western Eurasia were given most key positions because the Mongol rulers distrusted Chinese high officials owing to their local interests and loyalties. Governing methods were a mixture of Chinese, Muslim, Turkish, and Mongol ideas. Finances for the empire came almost entirely from relatively low-level taxation, based on as accurate a census of the population as possible.

Khubilai Khan performed public Confucian rituals prescribed for Chinese emperors, while personally leaning towards Tibetan Buddhism and keeping up to shamanist rituals.

Ideology of conquest showed in Khubilai's thinking of himself as a universal emperor. He made repeated, though mostly unsuccessful, attempts to conquer Japan, Vietnam, Burma, and even Java in Southeast Asia.

Khubilai's ideology of rule was not only to enrich Mongols, but also to serve China as a Son of Heaven. Concerned to establish the legitimacy of his rule, he tried, with some success, to enlist the goodwill and support of the peoples he ruled.

Among Buddhists, his legitimacy was bolstered when monks declared him to be the reincarnation of a Bodhisattva, or Buddhist saint. He worked to keep Mongol backing by acting traditionally in at least some ways, and protecting Mongols' privileged position in the empire. He drew his advisors from many ethnic, language, and religious backgrounds.

In line with Khubilai's ideology of rule, his government had a welfare program. It paid for assistance to the old, infirm, and poor out of taxes. Villages that suffered natural disasters were sent grain, clothes, cash, and had their taxes cancelled.

Khubilai founded the Office for Stimulation of Agriculture; forbade nomad animals from roaming on farmland; arranged for the teaching of advanced agricultural techniques to the population around the old Mongol capital of Karakorum; and forgave taxes for those who chose to become settled farmers.

He moved the Mongol capital to a newly-built city near modern Beijing in China, its site chosen according to the Chinese ideas of feng shui.

The name of the dynasty was changed to Yuan—Chinese word meaning “origin.”

Mongols were forbidden intermarriage with Chinese.

Women’s position under Mongol rule was generally higher than it had been in the agricultural societies the Mongols had conquered. A woman was named provincial governor under Khubilai. Mongol women refused to adopt the Chinese custom of foot binding. Khubilai took his second wife Chabi’s advice on some public issues.