

L E S S O N 3

China and the Larger World

On this [New Year's] day all the rulers, and all the provinces and regions and realms where men hold land or lordship under [the Great Khan's] sway, bring him costly gifts of gold and silver and pearls and precious stones and abundance of fine white cloth, so that throughout the year their lord may have no lack of treasure and may live in joy and gladness. . . . I can also assure you for a fact that on this day the Great Khan receives gifts of more than 100,000 white horses, of great beauty and price. And on this day also there is a procession of his elephants, fully 5,000 in number, all draped in fine cloths embroidered with beasts and birds. . . . Let me conclude with one more fact, a very remarkable one well worthy of mention in our book. You must know that a great lion is led into the Great Khan's presence; and as soon as it sees him it flings itself down prostrate before him with every appearance of deep humility and seems to acknowledge him as lord. There it stays without a chain, and is indeed a thing to marvel at.

Marco Polo, from *Travels*

This detailed account of a day at the Great Khan's court at Beijing was written by Marco Polo, a traveler from Venice, Italy. Polo lived in China from 1275 until 1292. The Great Khan in this report was Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan.

Although only 17 years old when he arrived in China, Polo served Kublai as an ambassador and in other ways. At the time of his visit, all of China, as well as much of the rest of the world, was under Mongol rule.

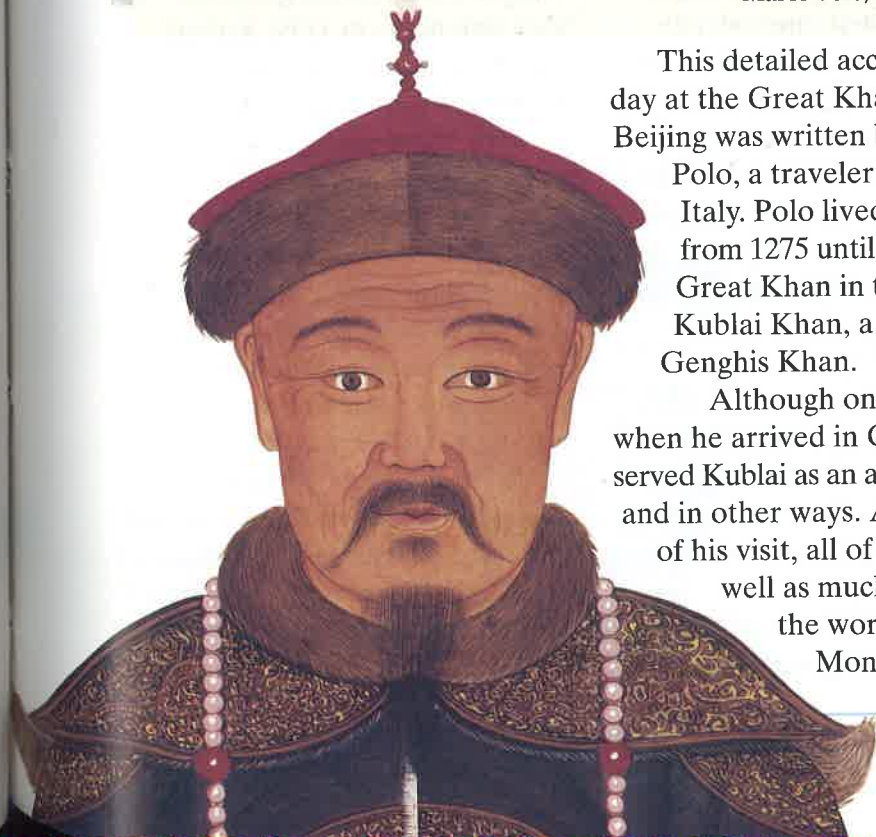
THINKING FOCUS

What factors caused China to open trade at some times and remain isolated at others?

Key Term

- despot

◀ In this portrait of Kublai Khan, he is dressed in the traditional clothing of a Chinese emperor.



The Mongols in China

While southern China prospered under the Song Dynasty, Genghis Khan made life very difficult for people in northern China. His well-organized and skillful



▲ Mongol warriors, like the one in the upper picture, shot arrows from large bows with force enough to pierce armor. They rode small, sturdy horses like the one shown in the ceramic model above. This ceramic horse was found in a tomb from the Tang Dynasty.

Mongol horsemen traveled for weeks at a time, making surprise attacks along the Chinese frontier. They learned to use catapults and gunpowder bombs to break through city walls. With few horses and inferior riding skills, Chinese armies were rarely able to defeat the Mongols. In 1234,

a few years after Genghis Khan's death, the Mongols completed the conquest of northern China.

A Mongol Dynasty

Kublai Khan was chosen *khan*, or ruler, in 1260. In 1267, Kublai moved his capital from Mongolia to Beijing (*bay JIHNG*) in northern China in order to be closer to his subjects.

Kublai adopted certain Chinese traditions of government to

make it easier for him to rule and be accepted by the Chinese. For example, he rebuilt the capital in the traditional Chinese style and declared himself emperor and Son of Heaven. He even founded his own dynasty, called the Yuan (*yu AHN*), which lasted until 1368.

However, unlike many northern barbarians before them, Kublai Kahn and the Mongols did not try to change Mongol culture so that it became more like Chinese culture. They used some Chinese systems of government, but only to strengthen Mongol rule. The most important government positions were held by Mongols or by other non-Chinese, including Marco Polo. The Chinese themselves were given the least important jobs. Government documents were usually written in Mongolian and then translated into Chinese.

Kublai Khan staged many attacks on the Song Dynasty in southern China. His forces finally overpowered the last group of Song defenders in 1279. Kublai thus became the first ruler to control all of China in over 300 years.

An Interruption in Progress

Although the Mongols maintained the basic Chinese government structure, their occupation of China disrupted economic and social development. It also slowed the remarkable progress of Chinese civilization under the Tang and Song dynasties. Millions of Chinese died during the decades of the Mongol invasions, including about half the population of the North. Some were killed by the Mongol attacks while many more

died from outbreaks of disease that often followed the attacks. Once highly populated areas, such as the eastern province of Anhui, were almost empty of people by the time the attacks ended.

Much of the wealth of the Tang and Song dynasties was lost as the Mongols burned cities and used vast areas of fertile farmland as pastures for their horses. They neglected canals and irrigation systems, and fertile fields soon became parched and barren. Many farmers lost their land to the Mongols, and many civil servants lost their jobs.

In the south, the Mongols hoped to win support from the wealthy landowners by letting them keep their lands. However, the Mongols seized land from the peasants, forcing them to seek work as hired hands on large estates. Thus the rich remained rich, while the poor became even poorer.

A Direct Link to the West

The Mongols disrupted Chinese life and culture. However, they strengthened China's links to

the rest of the world. Camel caravans traveled throughout the vast Mongol Empire, from Beijing to central Asia to the Black Sea, carrying silks and ceramics for the Western market. The Mongols expanded the Chinese system of postal relays, establishing stations with supplies and horses for travelers who crossed the Asian steppe.

Travelers who crossed the Indian Ocean to China found thriving port cities, such as Guangzhou (*GWAHNG joh*), sometimes known as Canton, and Fujien (*FOO jihn*). Merchants, missionaries, and diplomats from the Arab world gathered in southern China's seaports. Through Arab merchants, many goods from the West and from southeastern Asia were traded in Chinese ports.

Increased contacts with the world not only expanded trade in China but also aided the spread of ideas in the West. For example, knowledge of printing and gunpowder probably spread from China to western Asia and then to Europe during the Mongol period. ■

■ *In what ways did the Mongol conquest of China affect the livelihood of most Chinese people?*

The Ming Dynasty

Merchants prospered under Mongol rule. But most Chinese were eager to expel the foreigners who did not appreciate China's traditions. The Chinese rebelled against the Mongol rulers and founded a new dynasty in 1368. The rebel leader and founder of the Ming Dynasty was Emperor Taizu (*ty TSOO*). The Ming Dynasty continued to rule China until as late as 1644.



Familiar Traditions

Emperor Taizu turned to familiar traditions for help in restoring the empire. He reestablished the civil service examination system and encouraged promising scholars. He undertook public works projects: repairing irrigation systems, building reservoirs, and extensively rebuilding the Great Wall. He helped homeless people by

◀ *Blue and white ceramics such as this Ming vase became the most popular kind of ceramics for trade. Cobalt, used to make the blue color on this vase, was first imported during the Mongol period.*