

# China's transformation during the mongolian occupation

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The extent to which China was transformed by the Mongolian occupation of 1206 to 1369 remains ambiguous. Some reforms were far reaching and lasting, others were minor and transitory. Indeed, many of the changes introduced by the Mongols did not last beyond the Yuan Dynasty, suggesting that they did not take hold and failed to change Chinese society in any substantial way. From the moment Temujin rose to power as Genghis Khan in 1206, Mongolia's powerful influence was already felt within China.

The Mongols frequently engaged in large-scale cross border raids into Chinese Xi Xia and Jin territory for over four decades, forcing the Chinese into submission and tribute. Although the Mongolian army under Genghis Khan would continue to invade China over these decades, their decision only to conquer the northern part of China meant that the cultural and social transformations brought by them were not felt in the greater part of China. According to historian John Man, " Xi Xia is hardly known beyond a few specialists, because Genghis did his best to wipe state, culture and people from the face of the earth.

Jin troops also suffered the loss of thousands in Genghis' capture of Jin's capital Yanjing. Stories of the Mongol's military strength spread across China like wildfire. As told by Ata-Malik Juvaini, by order of Genghis Khan, " Whoever presumed to oppose and resist him, that man, in enforcement of the yosas and ordinances which he imposed, he utterly destroyed together with all his followers, children, partisans, armies, lands and territories. " However, apart from this supernatural fear of Mongol excess, Mongolian

influence was not significantly felt in China until Kublai Khan, Genghis' grandson.

After Genghis' death in 1227, his son and successor, Gedei continued expanding the Mongol borders, and it was evident that empire expansion was far more important to this Khan than social reform of conquered territories. Social transformations only began during Kublai's reign. Indeed, the name Great Yuan ("Da Yuan") is itself an indication of the revolutionary changes during the period. This was the first Dynasty to use the word "Great" in its title. Subsequent dynasties coveted the title too so that the Ming Dynasty labeled itself the "Da Ming".

The institutions that Kublai set up in China were borrowed or adapted from many traditional government institutions of China. According to J. A. G. Roberts, the Mongols under Kublai "retained many superficial features of the Song Secretariat, 6 Ministries and the division between Civil, Military, and Censorial Branches of Government". Morris Rossabi of Columbia University states, "The Chinese, therefore, found much of the Yuan Dynasty's political structures to be familiar". The reforms that Kublai began had a huge impact on the political, economic and social structure of China.

Kublai consolidated his rule by centralizing the Chinese government, making himself an absolute monarch, something that no previous Chinese ruler had even attempted. Perhaps one of the greatest transformations Kublai Khan brought about was the elimination of the most basic of Chinese institutions - the civil service examinations. This change was enormous, as the exams had

been in practice since the sixth century. Although this change weakened the role of Mandarin scholars on the everyday running of Chinese society and replaced it with the Mongol's version of meritocracy, the change did not endure.

By 1315 the civil service exams were reintroduced and political and military ability gave way again to academic achievement. Of course, it has been argued that one reason Kublai stopped the exams was due to his distrust of the Han Chinese. The suggestion is that Kublai favoured Mongols, other Central Asians, Middle Easterners and other "light-eyed" nationalities of his empire over the Han Chinese. The Yuan Dynasty justified this quoting Confucius' proverb that one must "Raise to office those whom you know."

This transformation, along with many others, would not survive long, as it proved a factor for Chinese resentment and rebellion. As soon as they could, the Chinese threw off this Mongol imposition and returned to their cherished entrance exams to the bureaucracy. Kublai Khan realised that rather than pillaging the peasantry, he should lend it support in order to win its acceptance. Throughout his reign, Kublai continued to seek support from the peasantry and others of Chinese society's lower classes, including artisans and merchants, with varying degrees of success.

Previously, the peasantry had been forced to work, and their support for the emperor was considered irrelevant and unnecessary by the nation's rulers.

Only in the sixth century had China come close to addressing the discrimination against peasants when they were drafted into the army under

the guise that they would be defending their own land by fighting for the rulers of the day. That, however, was insignificant compared to the help the Mongols offered the peasants to organise themselves according to cooperative rural organisations.

As Rossabi notes, these " self-help organisations comprised about 50 households under the direction of a village leader. " Although the Mongols' aim was economic self interest rather than a concern with the political and social aspirations of the peasantry - they were hoping to stimulate agricultural production and promote land reclamation for their own benefit - it cannot be denied that the Mongols had definitely transformed peasant life and promoted the interests of China in the short term. Although traditionally, the products made by artisans were prized by the Chinese, the artisans themselves were not accorded a high social status.

However, the Mongols transformed this by freeing artisans from unpaid labour, providing them with tax remissions, and granting them higher social status. Merchants, like artisans, were also given a low social status in China, but under the Mongols, a more favourable attitude toward merchants and commerce was celebrated. The Mongols initiated merchant associations, helping long-distance trade, and increased the availability of paper money while reducing tariffs imposed on merchants. John Man points this out: " as CEO, Kublai was committed to Mongolia Inc. , which rode high on the wheels of commerce.

Craftsmen were favoured with rations of food, clothing and salt, and were exempted from forced labour. Merchants had previously been seen as parasites; now they were encouraged. " While, as in the case of agricultural reform, the reason driving the changes was economic and political self interest, the result was largely of benefit to these sectors of society, allowing merchants, physicians, scientists, and artisans to travel freely throughout the Mongol domains in Eurasia. Both commerce and cultural exchanges flourished while these groups became more socially mobile than had hitherto been possible.

However, like all of Kublai's economic transformations, they only lasted till the end of the Yuan Dynasty - making them relatively short-lived. As China turned inward and the Mandarins returned to political dominance, the artisans and merchants saw their social status decline. Further tax reform was a key pillar of Kublai's economic policies for China. While partially intended to win the support of the peasantry by offering tax relief and establishing grain storage facilities in parts of the country devastated by decades of war between Mongolia and China, the reforms were also intended to stimulate higher production.

The Mongols, unlike previous rulers over China, believed that additional tax revenues would be brought in if the peasant economy was allowed to succeed, even flourish, rather than by adding ever more burdensome taxes on their paltry incomes. The Yuan Dynasty was the first in China to use paper currency as the predominant circulating medium. Marco Polo observes, " the coinage of this paper money is authenticated with as much form and

ceremony as if it were actually of pure gold or silver". This made collecting taxes and administering the huge empire much simpler, while also reducing the cost of transporting gold and silver.

However, like perhaps many of Kublai's attempts to help China, it failed, and eventually the combination of poor financial discipline and high inflation resulted in economic disaster later on in the Dynasty. Noted by John Man, paper money was " a neat trick, which later dynasties (and many modern governments) could not match. Soon after the Yuan fell in 1368, paper money fell out of use for 400 years. " The most significant transformation under the Mongols, however, occurred through Pax Mongolica.

Although this too was a change that only lasted the duration of the Dynasty under the Mongols, it was China's biggest and most influential transformation, at least until modern times. The exchange of Chinese and Middle Eastern ideas, culture and technology via the re-established Silk Road and land routes under the control of the Mongols had a huge impact, not only on China, but the rest of the world. Politics and religion were amongst the most important ideas transmitted between two continents, with the exchange of ambassadors and attempts of a Franco-Mongol alliance, and the introduction to China of Islam, Christianity and even Judaism.

Kublai Khan's tolerance of religious and cultural diversity was essential to the introduction of new ideas, art and culture to China. This new-founded tolerance of religion is arguably the only transformation that was long-lasting. As was seen in the succeeding Ming Dynasty, a wide range of

religions were practised across China; indeed, the royal family and prominent figures who were appointed by the emperor were largely Muslim, a religion that had grown significantly as a result of Pax Mongolica.

Prior to Kublai's rule, religion and culture was imposed upon the Chinese people by its rulers. But the Mongols, on the other hand, believed that religion was a very personal matter, and should not be subject to law or intrusion. Pax Mongolica and Mongol openness to the outside world enabled a number of mosques to be built in China, while Tibetan monks were recruited to help rule China and promote Buddhism; Nestorian Christianity was also promoted by the Mongols, possibly because Kublai's own mother was an advocate of that faith.

Religious tolerance had been practised by the Mongols even in Genghis' day. In *The Travels of Friar Odoric*, Odoric of Pordenone wrote of Genghis, " So the Khan called them to him, and the bishop thereupon taking the cross from the staff presented it to the Khan to kiss. Now at the time he was lying down, but as soon as he saw the cross he sat up, and doffing the cap that he wore, kissed the cross in the most reverent and humble manner. " Only one religion, Daoism, was not supported, largely because of the violent riots that frequently arose between the Buddhists and the Daoists.

This preference for Buddhism over Daoism was most likely simply Kublai's personal preference, as Genghis Khan had expressed his own preference in the dispute. The personal opinions and efforts of rulers to sympathise with the Chinese were therefore vital to gain support from the populace. Kublai



personally put in great effort to assimilate and integrate with the Chinese, insisting on giving his son a Chinese-style education, tutored by Confucian scholars in the subjects of both Confucianism and Buddhism.

Kublai's efforts, however, stretched even beyond his personal family unit, and restoration of Confucian traditions at court such as music and dance rituals, for example, were ensured; and ancestral temples, which were critical for the Chinese in their practices of ancestor worship, were founded for his predecessors. Although seeking transformation and success, Kublai's policies looked also towards continuity and gaining legitimacy.

Cultural diversity and the bringing back of old traditions was a theme of Mongol policy, hence some transformations were not socially progressive. Chinese women continued to be treated as second class citizens and the Mongols even perpetuated the barbaric Chinese custom of female foot-binding, which was carried into the Ming and Qing Dynasties. However, Dorothy Ko argues that "men's desire for bound feet was connected to larger concerns such as cultural nostalgia", once again emphasising the Mongols' efforts to restore traditional Chinese customs.

While the Mongols could have done much for social reform and to elevate women in Chinese society, especially as Mongol women were exempt from such practices, they chose instead to maintain the status quo. In regards to bringing back yet other "cultural nostalgias", theatre and painting, it can be said that under Kublai's rule, both arts flourished, and Rossabi called the Yuan Dynasty "a golden age of Chinese theatre", probably because these

arts appealed greatly to the Mongols, and Kublai was himself a patron to many Chinese painters and other artisans.

Kublai Khan's efforts at reform in these respects were therefore once again more conservative than transformative, although their impact cannot be downplayed. On top of bringing back old Chinese traditions, the Mongols passed numerous edicts, regulations and laws to persuade the public to use a new written language they called " the Square Script" that could be used to transcribe a number of the languages within the Mongol domains. However, it never gained much popularity and was limited mainly to official uses.

The Mongols' construction of roads, postal stations, extensions of the Grand Canal, and the building of present-day Beijing and Xanadu, made famous by Coleridge's poem which starts with the line " In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a pleasure dome decree", were all failures as these projects required vast investments of labour and capital that could only be achieved by raising taxes on the peasantry and merchants, thus squandering earlier political and social gains.

These, along with the costly military expeditions to Japan, although ambitious and intended for the benefit of China, were all pecuniary disasters which ultimately undermined the economy and the Yuan regime. While the Mongols were very supportive of the Chinese civilization and culture, and at times even promoted it, age-old Mongol traditions were still practised.

According to John Man, it was Kublai himself " who gave Genghis his Chinese

credentials, and thus founded the belief widespread among Chinese today that Genghis was 'really' Chinese".

Kublai's own domestic policies included many aspects of the old Mongol traditions and customs. Mongol rituals, ceremonies and the "flavour" of traditional Mongol life were maintained, including ritual scattering of mare's milk annually and the pouring of an alcohol-based mare's milk, koumiss, before battle. As Kublai continued his reign, these Mongol traditions would clash more and more frequently with traditional Chinese culture, increasing the sense that the Mongols were indeed foreigners to the xenophobic Chinese. The perception of the Mongols as "foreign" rulers ultimately led to the Mongol's downfall.

Operating a caste system where Mongols were masters and Chinese were servants did not help. The two peoples were governed by separate laws and intermarriage was forbidden. The Yuan Dynasty's downfall was the result of a combination of factors, not only limited to the cultural clashes and racial discrimination. Despite the great success of the Silk Road, China came to a standstill in terms of technological and economic advances halfway through the fourteenth century. Despotism was also reinforced and entrenched, further increasing the perception of the Mongol's as barbarians that began to spread across the nation due to xenophobia.

A drop in the population of 40 million in the 200 years up to 1400, however, was probably the point when the Yuan Dynasty's demise became inevitable. This fall, brought on by forced migration, ethnic cleansing, and deaths

caused by natural disasters such as the 1344 Yellow River flood, and man-made disasters such as famines induced by land seizure and destruction, led to countless rebellions in the 1340s against what had become by then oppressive Mongol rule. Attempts to extend the Grand Canal to help those affected by the floods only proved counterproductive, as the Chief Minister employed forced labour to do so.

The rebellion of 1351 sealed the end of the Yuan Dynasty. This downfall consequently and obviously limited the extent of Mongolian transformation upon China. Although the Mongols, particularly Kublai Khan, had introduced many and major political and economic reforms that transformed Chinese society of his day, these were not permanent and they soon disintegrated following the fall of the Yuan Dynasty. Perhaps a major factor in this was that Kublai Khan was only motivated by economic self-interests, and not a desire to transform Chinese society in any real sense.

Therefore, the social changes that came about under his rule could not last long. They were likely to fail whenever he or his descendents readjusted economic policies. As Kublai Khan's chief Chinese advisor Liu Bingzhong said, "the Empire has been conquered on Horseback; it cannot be governed on Horseback..." Had the Mongols ruled China less barbarically, China may have not closed itself off to the rest of the world, and the political, economic and social transformations that Pax Mongolica had enabled may have lasted.