

Ruler who united China

Kublai Khan (1215-1294 AD) was a scholar, poet and reformer who has his place in both Chinese and Western history. He transformed China with ideas, innovation and efficient administration, writes **Sarah Brennan**

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In 1271, a young Venetian trader travelled along the Silk Road to China, arriving in Xanadu (now Shangdu), home to the Emperor Kublai Khan. The legendary Travels of Marco Polo, recording his 17-year sojourn in China, made Kublai Khan the most famous Chinese Emperor known in the West, even today.

And yet Kublai Khan was not Chinese! He was born in Mongolia in 1215, favourite grandson of the mighty Genghis Khan, who in just two decades had created a vast empire stretching from the Sea of Japan to the Caspian Sea. Kublai had a typically Mongolian childhood, sleeping in a ger, riding horses, hunting with bows and arrows, and even going into battle. But from an early age, he was fascinated by Chinese culture, and at 21, he was given an estate in Hebei (河北) province. He immersed himself in Chinese studies under leading Chinese Buddhist scholars.

After Genghis died in 1227, his third son Ogedei ruled. He was succeeded by his eldest son Guyuk. Guyuk's cousin, who was Kublai's brother Mongke, became Great Khan. He promoted Kublai to rule northern China. He was immediately successful and popular as a ruler, introducing reforms that led to better agricultural production and social welfare. But his campaign was dramatically interrupted when, after Mongke's sudden death in 1259, Kublai's younger brother, Ariq Boke, proclaimed himself Great Khan, leading to civil war. Kublai won, becoming leader of the Mongol Empire. Then he defeated the Song army and united the country. He took on a Chinese title, declaring himself the first Yuan Emperor in 1271.

True to his respect for Chinese culture, Kublai included many aspects of Chinese administration in his government. He moved the capital of the Mongol Empire to Dadu -

now Beijing - then built what Marco Polo described as "the greatest palace that ever was" at Xanadu with walls supposedly covered in gold and silver. He began a huge programme of public works, building roads, canals and sea transport systems. Trade along the Silk Road reached its peak, with travellers protected by Mongol soldiers in what is now called the Pax Mongolica.

New ideas flooded into China and conversely, Chinese inventions reached as far away as modern-day Russia, Iran and Iraq. Kublai was tolerant of foreign religions and he even introduced paper money throughout China, making tax collection much easier.

To control of his new empire, he used a system of divide and rule, with Mongols at the

top, then Central Asians, then the northern Chinese, and, at the bottom, the southern Chinese. Nonetheless, overall he was a popular ruler due to his efficient management and use of Chinese advisers and systems.

But his military conquests were less successful. While he was able to take control of Korea, Burma and Vietnam, his expeditions to Japan and Java failed, leading to the destruction of much of his army. Also, the "sinification" - bringing under Chinese influence - of his administration alienated many Mongol chieftains, leading to instability in the Mongol Empire, and its rapid collapse after his death at the age of 78 in 1294.

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- Kublai defeated the Song armies with catapults designed by Persian engineers.
- He was an accomplished poet.
- His empire officially covered one fifth of the world's inhabited land area at the time.
- His summer garden at Xanadu inspired Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous 1797 poem *Kubla Khan*.
- He was known as a humane conqueror, sparing the residents of defeated regions and setting up "pacification commissions" instead of slaughtering conquered civilians like his famous relatives



legendary (adj) 傳奇的	sojourn (n) 逗留	reforms (n) 改革
agricultural (adj) 農業的	civil war (n) 內戰	canals (n) 運河

say it

Illustration: Pearl Law