

SONG CITIES AND MONGOL CONQUEST  
CHINGGIS KHAN AND THE UNIFICATION OF MONGOLIA

As we saw in previous lectures, the Song were the peak of China's civilization. And yet, in the thirteenth century they were swept away by the Mongols, together with most of Asia. How could this happen? Why did the Mongols become such an invincible force, how did they gather the biggest continuous empire that the world has ever seen, and why did they wane away in less than two centuries?

It is worth remembering that at the beginning of the thirteenth century, on the eve of the Mongol invasions, the area that is today China was not one single country, but six. To the north was the Jin Empire, founded by the Jürchen that occupied Manchuria and the valley of the Yellow river. On the Gansu corridor were the Xixia, founded by the Tanguts. **On today's Xinjiang** were the Kara Khitai, founded by a branch of the Khitai. To the south was the Southern Song empire. And still further south was the Dali kingdom, occupying what is today Yunnan. And there was also Tibet, which at that moment did not have a unified government. The region was utterly fragmented, and this fragmentation helps to explain how all six Chinese kingdoms will end up conquered by the Mongols.

In the twelfth century, the barren Mongolian steppe was sparsely inhabited by loosely related tribes that fought constantly among themselves. The Mongols were only one of these tribes and not at all the most powerful. For Temujin, the future Chinggis Khan, the urge to conquer did not come first. He was a poor child in a poor tribe, lost in the middle of the harsh steppes of what we now call Mongolia. When he was nine years old, his father was killed by a rival tribe. Later Temujin himself was kidnapped by another, and still later on so was his young wife. This turbulent way of life was congenital in the steppe where its few tribes made a living by hunting and looting, and fought each other all the time. Intertribal marriage was common, but so was kidnapping of women and this led to unending blood feuds. To keep his family alive, a young Temujin fished, hunted, gathered and looked for allies.

He led a hard life that fostered some of his most remarkable capacities: he was loyal for life to those on whom he could rely, ruthless to those who opposed him,

and he had an extraordinary capacity to discern talent wherever he found it. Some of his best generals were picked out from among the poorest youngsters of the steppe, and some of his best and longest-lasting collaborators came from the lands and administrations that he had conquered. His initial and most remarkable feat was the unification of the Mongolian tribes into one large fighting force. He attracted them by his charisma as an extremely skilled fighter, and by his fairness in equally sharing the spoils of plunder. Temujin had his troops organized in the traditional way of the steppe.

But his decimal groups of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000 men were intertribal units, so that their loyalty would be to their comrades and not to their tribe. It was not an easy feat, as he had to crush the clan loyalties of the great steppe clans that favored fragmentation. Temujin spent twenty years in tribal fighting, during which he won a prestigious reputation for being a warrior of genius and a first-rate political organizer.

Then in 1206 he convened a Kuriltai, a general assembly of the tribes, that proclaimed him Chinggis Khan, a title that can mean either universal khan or fierce khan.

To enhance Chinggis Khan's newly acquired position, both he and his sons are richly attired with embroidered silks, and a big Chinese blue-and-white porcelain stands out at the center of the painting.

This new-born Mongol nation was in fact a military state, with its basic institutions inspired by the great Mongol hunts. The great periodic hunts provided the kind of training that could be transferred to the battlefield, and gave the Mongols a sense of tactics, discipline, utmost mobility, strict coordination and swift communication that made their raids unique. It was the need for swift connections that brought about the yam, or postal system. This secured communication for the ever growing empire and was backed up every 30 or 40 km with provisions of horses, food, and lodgings for the riders.

A kind of legal framework was also devised. The Yasa, as it was called, was not exactly a legal code, but rather a series of loose regulations that were specifically meant for the smooth expansion of the nomads. One of the regulations demanded that all religions be treated equally: tolerance became one of the landmarks in Mongol rule and they certainly used it to their own advantage in their multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire.

By 1206, when the Kuriltai was held, Chinggis was already in control of Mongolia and its fringes, a territory of about 2,000 square km. and with a population of hardly a million. It has been suggested that 30 years of persistent drought and low temperatures had severely diminished the grazing surface of Mongolia: the search for pastures could have been one of the motors of the Mongol uprising.