

MONGOL'S CHINA. THE YUAN DYNASTY

YUAN CHINA: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

By 1250 Kubilai had started to rule in north China. Almost immediately he **occupied the kingdom of Dali, in today's Yunnan**. This region secured the overland routes to South-East Asia, Burma and India.

Yunnan was incorporated into China for the first time in history, and its administration was staffed with Muslims from Central Asia. Even now, many Muslims live in this province. After being elected as great Khan, Kubilai went on with the conquest of Song China, which put up a long and fierce resistance until 1279.

Even so, and notwithstanding some occasional massacres, the Mongol conquest of south China was a much less bloody affair than the conquest of north China had been. According to the 1290 population census, China had lost half its population but looking at this map it is clear that this catastrophic reduction mainly affected the north.

From now on, south China is going to fare much better than the north. China was a very big prize, but stabilizing the conquest meant that Kubilai had to foster a political and administrative structure that would appeal to his Chinese subjects.

In the very first years Kubilai decided to construct a new capital, the three square concentric sections of the new city that Europeans will know as Xanadu, showed already a thoroughly Chinese design.

In 1279 Kubilai founded a new Chinese dynasty, the Yuan, and to attest his willingness to become a truly sedentary Chinese emperor he launched many grandiose construction projects.

A new capital, that was called Dadu by the Chinese and Cambalich by the Mongols, **was built on the site of today's Beijing**, while Shangdu remained as summer capital and hunting reserve. He also ordered an extension of the Grand Canal to supply the capital's inhabitants.

To cope with these expenses, he established government monopolies on salt, iron, tea, liquor, gold, and silver. Following the advice of outstanding Chinese advisors, he restored traditional bodies like the Six Ministries and the Grand Secretariat, and maintained the administrative division of China in provinces

and prefectures, albeit giving increased power to the body of Censors that controlled the whole administration.

Kublai's distrust towards the Chinese, due mainly to the fact that they outnumbered the Mongols by 100 to one, inspired the division of the population into four groups.

On top were the Mongols; second came the Semuren (meaning people of many categories), which grouped together Muslims and Central Asians; third came the north Chinese; and last came the south Chinese, the former subjects of the Song Dynasty.

In order to govern the biggest and most civilized population in the world, Kubilai needed assistance, and he didn't want to rely on the native Chinese bureaucracy. Central Asian and Persian Muslims had the skills as tax collectors and financial administrators that he needed and he attracted them with beneficial policies.

Distrust towards the Chinese also led to another radical measure, the suppression of the official government exams. Even when a later Yuan emperor reinstated them in 1315, they no longer provided access to the highest levels of officialdom.

The scholar officials were the major group to feel excluded from the Yuan dynasty, because Mongols and Central Asians displaced them as the leaders of the country. Among the Chinese official class there was bitter resentment about the discrimination they suffered.

They got their own back, however, by writing a thoroughly negative version of Mongol rule that will be set down for posterity. On the other hand, there were many talented Chinese who kept their reluctance to themselves and actually sided with the Mongols.

This was the case of the most prominent Yuan painter, Zhao Mengfu, who occupied a highly distinguished position in the Yuan court. Once there he tried to foster the presence of Chinese officials in government posts. He painted horses, that were certainly a favorite subject for his Mongol masters, but he added a groom to highlight the relevance of the man who took care of the horse.

The meaning was that a groom is needed to tame a horse just as Chinese scholars were needed to help the Mongols govern. Others decided to remain outside and launch explicit criticism.

This was the case of Zheng Sixiao, whose exquisite orchids, much in the line of Song painting, were left without soil, the meaning being that the soil had been stolen by the Mongol barbarians.

Another strong critic of the Mongol rule was Gong Kai, who was reduced to extreme poverty by the Mongol invasion. His striking emaciated horse with its attentive and strained look decries the miserable life of scholars under Yuan rule.

The other group that fared badly with the Mongols were the peasants, who amounted to 95% of the population. Kubilai took some measures to protect the peasants, adopting systems derived from earlier Chinese practice.

He fostered the construction of irrigation works, and restored the Ever-normal granaries that were the traditional Chinese system for preventing famine, by storing grain when it was cheap in order to control prices when grain became expensive.

Rural households were organized into communes known as *she*, which were made up of fifty households, whose tasks were to promote agriculture and collect taxes. But peasants went through hard times because, having been handed over as booty to the conquering army leaders, they were treated like serfs by their landlords.

Furthermore, all the public-works projects that Kubilai initiated in China were extraordinarily costly, and all of them implied unpaid supplementary labour for the peasants.

The final rebellion against Mongol rule will be the peasants' doing.