Lesson 3 The Mongol Empire

BEFORE YOU READ
In Lesson 1, you read about people from the north who invaded China after the fall of the Han Dynasty. Nearly a thousand years later, as you will read in this lesson, people from the north once again invaded China.

AS YOU READ
Use a diagram like the one below to record the major events of Mongol rule in China.

TERMS & NAMES
- Genghis Khan strong Mongol leader who unified the Mongols around 1206 and started an empire that would eventually stretch from northern China to Europe
- Kublai Khan grandson of Genghis Khan who took power in 1260 and captured southern China, becoming the first ruler in 300 years to control all of China
- Mongol Ascendancy period during which the Mongols controlled China and Central Asia
- Marco Polo trader from Venice, Italy, who traveled the Silk Roads to China and worked for Kublai Khan

The Mongol Invasion
(pages 233–234)
Who were the Mongols?
The Mongols were a people that lived to the northwest of China. They were nomads. Nomads are people who move from place to place. The Mongols had no central government. Instead, they lived in independent family groups called clans. Around 1206, though, a man named Temujin united the clans for the first time. He became the khan, or ruler, of all Mongol tribes. He took the name Genghis Khan, which means “universal ruler.”

As nomads, the Mongols had a military advantage over settled people. Settled people had to defend their towns and villages. Nomads could attack quickly and then move on. Using this advantage, Genghis attacked northern China and Central Asia.

Genghis died in 1227. After he died, his son Ogadai took power. Ogadai conquered all of northern China. He also extended the Mongol Empire as far as Russia and Persia. The Mongols divided the empire into four parts. Each part was called a khanate. A different relative of Genghis Khan ruled each khanate.

Kublai Khan took power over the empire in 1260. Kublai was Genghis’ grandson. In 1260, the Chinese Song Dynasty still controlled southern China. Kublai defeated the Song in 1279. The Mongols now controlled all of China. They ruled until 1368.

1. By what year did the Mongols conquer all of China?

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Mongol Government

What was the Mongol government like?
Kublai Khan was the first ruler in 300 years to control all of China. The Mongols were also the first foreign power to rule China. Kublai ruled for 15 years. He died in 1294.

The Mongols did not have much experience with government. But the Chinese had a lot of experience. Kublai kept some of the Chinese governing traditions. For example, he built his capital at Beijing, using Chinese styles. He also declared himself emperor, beginning the Yuan Dynasty. The Chinese were familiar with such steps. Taking these steps made it easier for Kublai to control China.

However, Kublai did not let Chinese people gain political power. He kept political power for the Mongols. He ended the testing system for choosing government officials. Only Mongols and trusted foreigners could get important positions. The Mongols limited Chinese people to minor jobs with little power.

Kublai Khan was a capable leader. He worked to rebuild China, which had suffered from years of warfare. He also promoted trade and helped to build contacts with other regions.

2. What role did Chinese people play in the Mongol government?

In the past, China had closed overland trade routes because of war and banditry, or stealing. Now, the Mongols controlled Central Asia. Mongol control made the overland routes safe. The period of control is called the Mongol Ascendancy. Groups of traders traveled over the Silk Roads. These were ancient trade routes between China and the Black Sea. Traders carried silks, ceramics, tea, and other goods to Western markets. Traders returned with new foods, plants, and minerals.

The Mongols also encouraged trade by sea. Ships sailed across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Merchants traded goods in busy Chinese ports, such as Guangzhou and Fuzhou.

Increased trade led to more Chinese contact with people from other countries. People from Arabia, Persia, and India visited China. Europeans also visited China. These visitors helped to tell other parts of the world about Chinese civilization.

The most famous European visitor was Marco Polo. He was a trader from Venice, Italy. He traveled the Silk Roads with his father and uncle. He arrived in China around 1275 and stayed for 17 years. After he arrived, Polo entered the service of Kublai Khan. He traveled around China doing work for the government. Later, he published a book about his travels. The book was a great success in Europe. Even so, many Europeans found some of Polo’s stories about China hard to believe.

3. How did China become more open to foreigners?

Opening China to the World

What was the Mongol Ascendancy?
Kublai Khan helped make China more open to the outside world. The Mongols encouraged foreign trade. They also welcomed visitors from other countries.