CHAPTER 12

Section 3

HISTORYMAKERS Kublai Khan

Balancing Mongol and Chinese Ideas

"I have heard that one can conquer the empire on horseback, but one cannot govern it on horseback."—Chinese adviser to Kublai Khan

A fearless warrior and wise leader, Kublai Khan ruled over the Mongol Empire for many years. Kublai was born and trained in the Mongol tradition, but he came to accept many practices and ideas of his adopted home in China. Throughout his life, he tried to balance these two cultures.

Kublai was born in 1215 to Tolui, a son of Genghis Khan, and Sorghaghtani Beki, a noblewoman. Because Tolui was often away fighting wars, Kublai spent most of his childhood with his mother. According to a Persian historian, she was "extremely intelligent and able and towered above all women in the world." She was a Christian, and he learned religious tolerance from her. She was also proud and tough-minded. When Genghis Khan died, and her husband was passed over as his successor, she was determined that her four sons would never suffer that fate. Indeed, all four came to rule different parts of the Mongol Empire.

Kublai grew up to be an able Mongol warrior. He was known for both his skill as a horseman and his great courage. In 1251, his older brother became the ruler, or the Great Khan, of Mongol China. As a result, Kublai led his armies there and experienced his first major success. Following the teachings of his mother, he tolerated all religions in the area, helping to win acceptance of Mongol rule by the Chinese. Also, recognizing that his Mongol followers were better suited to conquer than to rule, he relied on Chinese advisers to help him govern.

Success in North China led to greater power. During this time, Kublai also built his famous and luxurious summer palace in Shangdu. By designing the palace in the Chinese style, he showed his subjects that he was adopting Chinese culture.

In 1259, Kublai led one of three Mongol armies into southern China. During the fighting, the Great Khan was killed, and Kublai made a claim to the throne. So did another brother, though, and many Mongols supported that brother. They felt that Kublai was abandoning the old Mongol ways and becoming too Chinese. In the resulting civil war, Kublai emerged victorious but was plagued by challenges from conservative Mongol leaders throughout his reign.

To win their allegiance, Kublai continued the Mongol policy of conquest. His armies won control of southern China, ending the Song Dynasty, in part because he used artillery operated by two Muslim engineers. He also won control of Burma and present-day Vietnam. These successes gained him the support he needed. He did not lose that backing despite suffering disappointment in his attempt to conquer Korea and Japan.

In running his empire, Kublai tried to balance Mongol and Chinese cultures. He adopted the Chinese system of government, had his children given a Chinese education, and even moved the capital from Mongolia to China. However, he imposed a four-level structure on society that put the Mongols at the top and the Chinese at the bottom. He also made sure that top-level government posts were reserved for Mongols or other peoples and not the Chinese.

On the other hand, he took steps to promote the Chinese economy. He created an agency of the government to help farmers learn how to increase their crop production. In addition, he extended the Grand Canal, which made it easier to transport food. Finally, he promoted trade, an activity that traditional Chinese emperors had looked down upon.

Kublai's last years were sad, however. The failures in Japan proved costly, and his monetary policy hurt the Chinese economy. The deaths of his wife and son also took their toll. He died in 1294, having lost his energy and his role in ruling his empire.

Questions

1. **Recognizing Effects** How did Kublai Khan's mother influence him?
2. **Making Inferences** How did Kublai Khan's actions reflect the advice of his Chinese adviser?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** How successful was Kublai Khan in trying to balance Mongol and Chinese ideas? Explain.