Module 4: Mongol Conquest and Political Administration of China

The Mongols gradually conquered China, and ultimately ruled the land of the leadership of Khubilai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan. The first reading is a brief overview of the gradual conquest of China by the Mongols. Once they conquered, the Mongols conformed with Chinese tradition by establishing a dynasty of their own, the Yuan. Sources 2 and 3 discuss the conquests and how the political regime established by the Mongols was similar to and different from earlier Chinese dynasties.

Source 1: Excerpt from Robert Strayer, “China and the Mongols”

Long the primary target for nomadic steppe-dwellers in search of agrarian wealth, China proved the most difficult and extended of the Mongols’ many conquests, lasting some seventy years, from 1209 to 1279. The invasion began in northern China, which had been ruled for several centuries by various dynasties of nomadic origin, and was characterized by destruction and plunder on a massive scale. Southern China, under the control of the native Song dynasty, was a different story, for there the Mongols were far less violent and more concerned to accommodate the local population. Landowners, for example, were guaranteed their estates in exchange for their support or at least their neutrality. By whatever methods, the outcome was the unification of a divided China, a treasured ideal among educated Chinese. This achievement persuaded many of them that the Mongols had indeed been granted the Mandate of Heaven and, despite their foreign origins, were legitimate rulers.

Source 2: Excerpt from “The Mongols in World History”

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/china/china.htm

“What was the Mongols’ Influence on China?”

Until about 20 years ago, most scholars of Mongol-era China emphasized the destructive influence of Mongol rule.

One major scholar of Chinese history even wrote: “The Mongols brought violence and destruction to all aspects of China's civilization. [They were] insensitive to Chinese cultural values, distrustful of Chinese influences, and inept heads of Chinese government.” This assessment fits in with the traditional evaluation of the Mongols as barbarians interested primarily in maiming, plundering, destroying, and killing…

It is true that the Mongols, in their conquest of both North and South China, did considerable damage to these territories, and that great loss of life certainly ensued. The population of North China did decline somewhat, though earlier estimates that there was a catastrophic decline in population have subsequently been revised.
It is also true that the Mongols eliminated one of the most basic of Chinese institutions — the civil service examinations. The examinations remained banned until 1315, and even after the ban was lifted, they were no longer the only means to officialdom for the Yuan Dynasty, the dynasty that the Mongols founded in 1271 C.E., as they had been in the past.

The Mongols recruited a number of Muslims to help in the rule of China, especially in the field of financial administration — Muslims often served as tax collectors and administrators. They were accorded extraordinary opportunities during the Mongol period because Khubilai Khan and the other Mongol rulers of China could not rely exclusively upon the subjugated Chinese to help in ruling China. They needed outsiders, and the Muslims were among those who assisted Khubilai.

The Mongols perceived China as just one section of their vast empire. And they classified the population of their domain in China into a hierarchy of four groups — with the native Chinese at the bottom. The Mongols, of course, were at the top; then came the non-Han, mostly Islamic population that was brought to China by the Mongols to help them rule; third were the northern Chinese; and at the very bottom of the rung were the southern Chinese.

Source 3: Excerpt from “The Mongols in World History”

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/china/china.htm

“Khubilai Khan in China”

Notwithstanding the aspects of their rule that were certainly negative for China, the Mongols did initiate many policies — especially under the rule of Khubilai Khan — that supported and helped the Chinese economy, as well as social and political life in China...

Khubilai also set up institutions to rule China that were very familiar to the Chinese, adapting or borrowing wholesale many of the traditional governmental institutions of China. For example, the Six Ministries that had been responsible for carrying out policy were retained by Khubilai's government, as was the Secretariat, a decision-making body. And the provincial administrative structure that organized China into provinces, further divided into districts and counties and so on, was not changed. The Chinese, therefore, found much of the Yuan Dynasty's political structures to be familiar.

And finally, Khubilai's economic policies in China, at least initially, promoted the interests of China and were quite successful.

Guiding Questions:

1. According to Source 1, what are some differences between the Mongol conquest of China and other Mongol conquests?
2. According to Source 3, what did the Mongols “destroy” as they conquered and Ruled China?
3. Who were often the bureaucrats in Yuan China?
4. What kind of social hierarchy was created by the Mongols in China?
5. According to Source 4, how was the Yuan government similar to that of earlier Chinese dynasties?

When you go to your collaborative group, explain:

1) Describe the Mongol Conquest of China.
2) Tell your peers about the Yuan Dynasty and how it ruled over China. How was it similar and different from other Chinese governments?
Excerpts from “The Mongols in World History”

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/china/china.htm

Source 1: Artisans

Traditionally, the Chinese prized the products produced by artisans — jades, bronzes, ceramics, porcelains — but did not accord the artisans themselves a high social status. The Mongols, on the other hand, valued crafts and artisanship immensely and implemented many policies that favored artisans.

The benefits artisans gained from Mongol rule include freedom from corvée (unpaid) labor, tax remissions, and higher social status. Thus, artisanship reached new heights in the Mongol era. Spectacular textiles and porcelains were produced, and blue and white porcelains, a style generally associated with the Ming dynasty, were actually first developed during the Mongol era.

Source 2: Merchants

In particular, the Mongols initiated the Ortogh, or merchant associations, that helped merchants who were in the business of long-distance trade. They also increased the availability of paper money and reduced some of the tariffs imposed on merchants. The result was an extraordinary increase of trade across and throughout Eurasia.

Traditionally, merchants were accorded a relatively low social status in China. The Mongols, however, had a more favorable attitude toward merchants and commerce — their nomadic way of life, which is much reliant on trade with sedentary peoples, had caused them to recognize the importance of trade from the very earliest times. Thus, the Mongols worked to improve the social status of merchants and traders throughout their domains.

Source 3: Religious Tolerance

An important legacy of the Mongols' reign in China was their support of many religions.
Islam, for example, was well supported, and the Mongols built quite a number of mosques in China. The
Mongols also recruited and employed Islamic financial administrators — a move that led to good
relations with the Islamic world beyond China, in particular with Persia and West Asia.

The Mongols were also captivated by Buddhism — particularly the Tibetan form of Buddhism — and
they recruited a number of Tibetan monks to help them rule China and promote the interests of
Buddhism... This policy resulted in an astonishing increase in the number of Buddhist monasteries in
China, as well as in the translation of Buddhist texts.

There was one religion, however, that did not have Mongol support: Daoism. Daoism was at that time
embroiled in a struggle with Buddhism that often flared into actual pitched battles between the monks
of the two religions. The Mongols, siding with the Buddhists, did not look favorably upon the Daoists...

As a result of this meeting, a considerable number of Daoist monasteries were converted into Buddhist
monasteries, some Daoist monks were defrocked, and some of the wealth and property of the Daoists
was taken over either by the Mongol state or by Buddhist monasteries. (Note from Mr. Leff: This is true
of the Mongols under Khubilai Khan, but it’s worth noting the Chinggis Khan showed admiration for
Daoist thinkers)

Source 4: Military Successes and Failures

Among the failed campaigns were two naval campaigns against Japan — one in 1274 and one in
1281 — both of which turned into complete fiascos. The campaigns had been launched because
of the Japanese shogunate's refusal to submit to the Mongols after the arrival of Mongol
ambassadors in Japan in 1268 and 1271…In 1274, they organized their first expedition, which
failed largely in part because of the weather. Still determined, the Mongols launched a second
expedition in the summer of 1281 — this time much larger than the first — but were once again
thwarted by weather: a terrible typhoon, in fact, that erupted and damaged the Mongol fleet
enough to force them to abort the mission.

…

Expeditions such as these were extremely costly and weighed heavily upon the Mongol rulers in
China. And a 1292 expedition against Java, also a disaster, only served to further weaken the
Mongols' resources and resolve…

Similar problems afflicted the Mongols in all their attacks and invasions into mainland Southeast
Asia…with each failed campaign, vast sums were expended, and the empire was further
weakened.

Source 5: Public Works Excesses
The public-works projects that the Mongols initiated in China — the building of the capital city in Daidu (Beijing), the construction of a summer capital in Shangdu (Xanadu), the building of roads and a network of postal stations, the extension of the Grand Canal — were all extraordinarily costly.

All these projects required vast investments of labor and capital secured through inordinately high taxation upon the peasantry and the merchants. Toward the end of Khubilai Khan's reign, the Mongols resorted to a deliberate inflation of the currency to cover costs. Those who administered these policies — the financial administrators who initiated the additional taxation or inflation of the currency — were mostly foreigners, such as Muslims and Tibetans, that the Mongols had brought in from their other domains.

These fiscal problems undermined the economy, and before long the Mongols could no longer maintain even the public-works projects traditionally supported by the native Chinese dynasties, such as the Grand Canal or the irrigation-control projects along the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. The results were predictable.

In the 1340s terrible floods erupted, changing the course of the Yellow River and leaving a large group of people homeless and wandering around the countryside amid much confusion and destruction. Ultimately, some of these bands of unemployed and homeless peasants united into a rebel force, and in the 1350s began the process of ousting the Mongols from China. By the mid-1360s, many of the Mongols had already returned to Mongolia, and the Ming dynasty, a native Chinese dynasty, finally took back control of China in 1368.

Questions:

1. What advantages were artisans given by the Mongol rulers
2. How is the treatment of merchants under Mongol rule similar to the treatment of Artisans (especially in its relation to these groups' traditional social status in Chinese history)
3. Why do historians say that the Mongol rulers of China were tolerant of different religions? Why was Daoism different?
4. What were some of the Mongol military failures to damaged Mongol rule?
5. What were some of the economic causes of Mongol decline?

When you go to your collaboration group, tell your peers about:

1) How Merchants and Artisans were treated by the Mongols
2) Religious Tolerance in Mongol-occupied China
3) Some reasons for the fall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty