China and Korea Under Mongol Rule (1215–1368)

The Mongols conquered China and Korea in successive campaigns stretching over seven decades. Even the non-Chinese rulers of north China, the Tanguts and Jurchens, themselves horsemen proud of their reputations as fierce fighters, had to submit to the superior striking force of the Mongols. Although the Mongols brought massive destruction in their early campaigns, by the time of Khubilai (r. 1260–1294), they had become more sophisticated administrators. Since Mongols and people from elsewhere in Asia occupied a large share of administrative posts, the traditional elite of Confucian-educated men generally had to turn to other occupations.

Scholars of this period have devoted much of their energy to working out the political and military history of this period. How did Jin, Koryŏ, and Song officials organize resistance, and why did it fail? What policies did the Mongols put in place? Why did the Yuan Dynasty in China fail to last even two centuries? Another set of questions revolves around how Chinese and Koreans coped with the Mongol presence. Did the experience of bitter defeat have any long-term effects on Chinese or Korean culture? What was going on in society at local levels, beyond the purview of Mongol rulers?

The Mongol Conquest of the Jin and Xia Dynasties

North China fell to the Mongols early in Chinggis's campaigns. Chinggis had raided Jin territory in 1205 and 1209 and in 1211 launched a major campaign. He led an army of about fifty thousand bowmen, and his three sons led another of similar size. The Jin, with one hundred
fifty thousand cavalry, mostly Jurchen, and more than three hundred thousand Chinese infantrymen, thought they had the strongest army known to history. Yet Mongol tactics frustrated them. The Mongols would take a city, plunder it, and then withdraw, letting Jin take it back and deal with the food shortages and destruction. Both the Jin Western Capital (modern Datong) and their Central Capital (Beijing) were taken in this way more than once.

Jin did not have stable leadership during this crisis. In 1213 a Jurchen general murdered the Jin emperor and put another on the throne, only to be murdered himself two months later. In 1214 Jin negotiated a humiliating peace with Chinggis, who then withdrew his armies from the Central Capital. The new Jin emperor decided the Central Capital was too vulnerable, so he moved the court to the Southern Capital, Kaifeng, bringing thirty thousand cartloads of documents and treasures (reversing the journey north of 1126). Since Chinggis thought Jin had agreed to vassal status, he interpreted the transfer of the capital as revolt. When the Central Capital fell in 1215, it was sacked and burned. From then on, Jin controlled little more than a province-sized territory around Kaifeng.

The rump Jin state, hoping to expand to the south, attacked Song from 1216 to 1223. The next Jin emperor concentrated on defending against the Mongols, but in 1229 when the new khan, Ögedei, sent the main Mongol army to destroy Jin, Jin could barely slow their advance and succumbed by 1234.

As the Mongols captured Jin territory, Chinggis recruited more and more Chinese and Khitans into his armies, arguing that they had little reason to be loyal to the Jurchen. Chinese soldiers and generals were incorporated into Mongol armies, and literate Chinese were given clerical jobs. Chinese also were put to work as catapult operators during sieges. In 1218 the Mongol commander leading the north China campaigns recommended to Chinggis a well-educated and highly sinicized Khitan named Yelü Qucai. Chinggis is said to have addressed him, “Liao and Jin have been enemies for generations; I have taken revenge for you.” Yelü had the courage to disagree: “My father and grandfather have both served Jin respectfully. How can I, as a subject and son, be so insincere in my heart as to consider my sovereign and my father as enemies?” Chinggis, admiring his forthrightness, took him into his entourage. Yelü served the Mongols for the next twenty-five years, patiently trying to get them to see the benefits of ruling their Chinese subjects in Chinese ways.

The Tangut Xia Dynasty suffered much the same fate as Jin. Early on, in 1209, Xia submitted to Chinggis and agreed to help the Mongols attack Jin, but during the dozen years also tried to secure alliances with Jin and Song. Chinggis eventually decided that Xia had failed to live up to the terms of its submission to the Mongols and personally led a large force into Xia territory in 1226. It only enraged Chinggis when Xia soldiers fought well; in response, he had his generals systematically destroy Xia city by city. Chinggis himself led the final siege of the capital, which valiantly held out for five months. Chinggis died during the siege, but his death was kept secret. When the Xia ruler offered to surrender, he was persuaded to walk out of the capital with a small entourage. Perhaps because he was held in some way responsible for Chinggis’s death, he was promptly hacked to death, and the Mongol troops, on entering the city, did their best to slaughter every living being in it.

North China in this period suffered enormous destruction. Mongol armies did not try to control territory; they only plundered it. Sometimes they slaughtered the entire population of a town, and even when people were not slaughtered, they were frequently seized like their cattle and enslaved. The Mongols began by giving out large chunks of land as fiefs to generals, both Mongols and allies. This did not lead to orderly government, however, as the fief holders were generals on campaigns elsewhere. With no one maintaining order, farmers suffered the depredations not only of Mongol soldiers but also of bandits, rebels, and local defense forces.

Ögedei’s much of the new Qucai offered Mongols shelter because from them the He calculated enues of 500 silk, and taxation of s to put his ta much of a a few Rivals convinced Asian Muslims for licenses these Centra oppressive to. Some Chinese refused to ser defeated dynasties passed the edge Kaifeng during the fall, he wrote fifty-four measures. He him on his release cials for a a viewed contr Chinese city “Crossing th what he saw

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Ögedei’s Mongol advisers proposed turning much of north China into pasturage. Yelü Qucai offered the counterargument that the Mongols should leave the Chinese farmers in place because great wealth could be extracted from them through equitably collected taxation. He calculated that the Mongols could raise revenues of 500,000 ounces of silver, 80,000 bolts of silk, and over 20,000 tons of grain by direct taxation of subjects. He was given authorization to put his tax plan into effect, but before it had much of a chance to show its benefits, Yelü’s rivals convinced Ögedei that an even more lucrative way to raise revenue was to let Central Asian Muslim merchants bid against each other for licenses to collect taxes. To the Chinese, these Central Asian tax farmers were even more oppressive than the Mongol lords.

Some Chinese who had served the Jurchen refused to serve the Mongols out of loyalty to the defeated dynasty. Yuan Haowen (1190–1257) passed the examinations in 1221 and served in Kaifeng during Jin’s final struggle. When Kaifeng fell, he wrote a letter to Yelü Qucai asking that fifty-four men of letters be spared by the Mongols. He himself was interned for two years and on his release devoted himself to collecting materials for a history of the Jin Dynasty. A poet, he also wrote poems on the fall of the Jin. He viewed continuing to write as a way to preserve Chinese civilization. The following poem, “Crossing the Yellow River, June 12,” describes what he saw around the time Kaifeng fell:

White bones scattered like tangled hemp, how soon before mulberry and catalpa turn to dragon-sands? I only know north of the river there is no life: crumbled houses, scattered chimney smoke from a few homes.2

Other Chinese subjects of the Jin took a different attitude. From experience with the Jin, they knew that the Chinese would fare better if Chinese were the administrators and could shield Chinese society from the most brutal effects of Mongol rule. Therefore, many Jin officials willingly served the Mongols. Some dedicated Confucian scholars such as Xu Heng devoted themselves to the task of teaching Mongol rulers the principles of Confucian government.

THE MONGOL CONQUEST OF KOREA

Disruption broke out in the Khitan ranks, and the leader of the Khitan fled to the Mongols, but the remaining Khitan army moved south across the Yalu River to the Korean peninsula in 1216 to evade Mongol forces. Many of the local population in northern Koryo cooperated with the Khitan; they were young men called yangsuchŏk, who earned their living by hunting, weaving willow baskets, and sending their daughters out to become kisaeng (female entertainers and courtesans). The Koryo government never bothered to tax them or register them for labor and military service, but when Ch’oe Ch’ung-hon imposed taxes on them for the first time, they decided to act as guides for the Khitan. Ch’oe, meanwhile, overestimated the strength of his army and hated to be bothered by all the frequent reports of small-scale attacks and uprisings on the northern frontier. He ordered the border commanders not to inform him of attacks until at least two or three walled towns had been captured.

After Möngke became the great khan of the Mongols, he pressed King Kojong to leave Kanghwa Island, return to the old capital at Kaegyŏng, and proceed to the Mongol capital to offer obeisance. After stalling for two years, Möngke sent an army in 1233 to enforce the demand, and Mongol forces captured several mountain forts and slaughtered the inhabitants. Kojong was inclined to surrender, but the new Ch’oe family head, Ch’oe Hang, prevented him from doing so. Finally King Kojong crossed over to the mainland from Kanghwa Island in 1254 and sent his second son to pay court to Möngke, before he returned to the island. Nevertheless, the Mongols charged Kojong with duplicity because Ch’oe Hang and other officials had still not left Kanghwa and Kojong had punished officials who had surrendered to the Mongols.

Because of Ch’oe Hang’s refusal to quit the island, the Mongol commander, Jalayir, showed up with another army and over the next six years caused even more destruction. In 1254 alone, about 207,000 Korean prisoners were captured, and the number of deaths reached new heights as starvation and famine spread throughout the country.

Ch’oe Hang was assassinated by a cabal of military and civil officials and some Ch’oe family slaves in 1237. When his successor, Ch’oe Úi, was also murdered by two officials in 1258, Ch’oe family rule collapsed, and King Kojong sent the crown prince to the Mongol court as a hostage, tore down the fortifications on Kanghwa Island, and submitted to the Mongols, but he refused to leave the island until his death and died there in 1259. His crown prince returned from the Mongol capital to assume the throne as King Wŏnjong, but he too stayed on Kanghwa Island and sent his crown prince back as a hostage. Peace was restored, and military rule ended.

THE MONGOL CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHERN SONG

The Song Dynasty had plenty of time to get ready to fight the Mongols. They knew of the Mongols’ conquests of both Xia and Jin. In the 1230s, the Mongols had also attacked Sichuan, under Song control, and refugees from Sichuan brought stories of the horror of the Mongol advance. Song knew it had to raise revenues and prepare its armies for a fearsome enemy. In a desperate attempt to raise revenues, an activist chancellor confiscated parts of the lands of the rich, leading to the disaffection of important segments of the population. But the attack did not come when expected in the 1240s or 1250s, a period when the Mongols were busy extending their conquests into Central Asia, Persia, and Russia. Song therefore had more time to prepare and the Mongols more time to learn how to deal with south China.

Khūbilai

The man behind the final conquest of the Song was Khūbilai (b. 1215), a grandson of Chinggis, son of his youngest son, Tolui. In Khūbilai’s youth, his uncle Ögedei was great khan (r. 1229–1241), and succession went to Ögedei’s descendants until 1251, when Khūbilai’s elder brother Möngke became great khan.

In the 1240s Khūbilai spent much of his time in Mongolia. One of the Chinese who came to call on him there was Liu Bingzhong (1216–1274), a believer in Three Teachings syncretism (which drew from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism). Khūbilai appointed Liu as a major adviser, and Liu in turn introduced Khūbilai to many other Chinese, both generals and scholars. From them, Khūbilai came to understand that the repeated plundering of north China had greatly reduced its worth and that letting Mongol lords make the residents of their lands slaves had impoverished the society and made it practically ungovernable.

In 1251, Khūbilai was assigned control of all north China and put in place a much more Chinese style of government. Khūbilai never learned to read Chinese and did not identify with Chinese culture, but he did come to appreciate that China could be exploited most effectively through Chinese methods. In 1254, Möngke
sent Khubilai to lead a campaign south from Sichuan into Yunnan, where he defeated the independent country of Dali, incorporating this region into China for the first time. (See Documents: The Luoluo.) When Khubilai was enraged at the resistance of the king of Dali, a Chinese adviser convinced him not to slaughter the population for the faults of their ruler by reminding him of a passage in which Mencius asserted that only someone “who takes no pleasure in killing people” would be able to unify the realm (Mencius 1A6).

Mongke died in 1259 during a campaign against Song. His death brought the campaign to a close, as the Mongols headed north to select a new khan. Before a full assembly met, however, Khubilai declared himself the successor. Elsewhere his younger brother Arigh Böke did the same thing. It took a four-year civil war to end this dispute in Khubilai’s favor.

In 1264 Khubilai constructed a new capital at the site of the Liao and Jin capitals. This capital, Dadu (modern Beijing), became the main capital of the khanate of the Great Khan (which stretched from Mongolia through north China and Korea). In the 1270s Khubilai began more concerted efforts to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese. In 1271 he adopted the Chinese name Yuan (“primal”) for the Mongols’ state in China, casting it as a dynasty to the Chinese. He explained the choice of the word Yuan by reference to a passage from the ancient Book of Changes. Although the Yuan retained the traditional Chinese country and prefectural governments, it added a new higher level, the province, which had the authority to handle much of government business on its own, without seeking approval from the central government.

Crossing the Yangzi River

Many non-Chinese groups had gained control of north China in the past, from the Xianbei of the Northern Wei to the recent Khitans and Jurchens. None of them, however, had been able to secure control of any territory south of the Yangzi River, in no small part because cavalry were of little advantage in a land crisscrossed with streams and canals. Moreover, controlling the Yangzi required a navy. When Jin had conquered Shu in the third century and Sui had conquered the last of the Southern Dynasties in the sixth century, the first step to conquest of the south had been the construction of a fleet of ships large enough to contest control of the Yangzi River. By the 1260s, the Mongols had plenty of Chinese advisers to explain this to them. They soon put Chinese shipbuilders to work building a fleet.

In 1268 the Mongols set siege to Xiangyang, a major city on a northern tributary leading into the Yangzi River. Both sides saw this city as the key to control of the river, and as a consequence the siege lasted five years. Each side had thousands of boats and tens of thousands of troops. The Mongols’ force was multiethnic, with Chinese, Uighur, Persian, Jurchen, and Korean experts in siege warfare and naval tactics. Muslim engineers demonstrated their superior catapults, which could throw rocks weighing up to a hundred pounds each. To keep the residents of the city from starving, the Chinese fleet regularly ran the blockade to ferry food supplies into the city.

Once Xiangyang fell to the Mongols in 1273, the Mongol general Bayan (1237–1295) was put in charge of the invasion of the south. He led an army of two hundred thousand, mainly Chinese. Victory was often achieved without fighting: generals who had already gone over to the Mongols were sent ahead to persuade Song commanders of the wisdom of surrender. At one point the Song chancellor, Jia Sidao, personally led an army of one hundred thirty thousand and a navy of twenty-five hundred ships to keep the Mongols from entering the lower Yangzi region. The Mongols, landing their cavalry on both sides of the river and using catapults to destroy Song ships, still prevailed. Jia was dismissed from office and soon killed by angry local officials.

Although by the 1260s many Chinese in the north were working for the Mongols, some officials and the educated class more generally tended to see in the Mongols the greatest threat Chinese civilization had ever faced. As Song officials readied themselves for the inevitable onslaught all-out eff non-Chinese Mongols protect ke. 

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onslaught, many committed themselves to an all-out effort. That China had survived rule by non-Chinese before did not allay their fears. The Mongols seemed more savage and less likely to protect key features of Chinese culture and tradition than any previous foe.

Although Song had generals willing to resist to the bitter end, it lacked adequate leadership. The emperor at the time was a child, and the advisers to the empress dowager spent much of their energy opposing each other’s plans. By the time the Mongol armies crossed the Yangzi in 1275, the empress dowager was reduced to calling on the people to rise up and fight the invading barbarians. Although some two hundred thousand recruits responded to the call, they were no match for the battle-hardened Mongols. The Mongols also had the advantage of scare tactics. To frighten Hangzhou into submitting without a fight, on the way there the Mongols ordered the total slaughter of the city of Changzhou. The ploy worked. The empress dowager, wanting to spare the people of the capital, surrendered. She, the child emperor, and other members of the Song imperial family were taken north to Beijing as hostages. Song loyalists, however, held out for three more years, placing young children from the Song imperial family on the throne. The final battle occurred off the coast of Guangdong province. Many Chinese fled into Vietnam, which the Mongols soon unsuccessfully attacked with an army of recently defeated Chinese soldiers.

Prominent among the Song loyalists was Wen Tianxiang, a poet and official who took up arms. Long after there was any real chance of driving the Mongols out, Wen kept fighting, withdrawing farther and farther south. Even after he was captured, he resisted all inducements to serve in the Yuan government, preferring execution to serving the Mongols.

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**LIFE IN CHINA UNDER THE MONGOLS**

Life in China under the Mongols was much like life in China under earlier alien rulers. Once order was restored, people did their best to get on with their lives. Some suffered real hardship. Many farmers had their lands expropriated; others were forced into slavery or serfdom, perhaps transported to a distant city, never to see their family again. Yet people still spoke Chinese, followed Chinese customary practices in arranging their children’s marriages or dividing their family property, made offerings at local temples, celebrated New Year and other customary festivals, and turned to local landowners when in need. Teachers still taught students the classics, scholars continued to write books, and books continued to be printed. (See Color Plate 16.)

The Mongols, like the Khitans and Jurchens before them, did not see anything particularly desirable in the openness of Chinese society, with opportunities for people to rise in status through hard work or education. They aimed instead at stability and placed people in hereditary occupational categories: farmer, Confucian scholar, physician, astrologer, soldier, artisan, salt producer, miner, Buddhist monk, and others. Many occupational groups had to provide unpaid services according to a rotational schedule and earn their living the rest of the year. Often the only alternative for those whose obligations threatened to bankrupt them was to abscond.

Besides these occupational categories, the Mongols classified the population into four grades, apparently as a way to keep the Chinese from using their numbers to gain a dominant position. Not surprisingly, the Mongols put themselves in the top grade. Next came various non-Chinese, such as the Uighurs and Central Asians. Below them were the former subjects of Jin, called the Han. And at the bottom were the former subjects of the Song, called southerners. These classifications affected methods of taxation, judicial process, and appointment to office. The Han, for instance, were taxed by household according to Jin practice, whereas the southerners were taxed by acreage, following Song precedent. In legal cases, each group was tried and sentenced according to its own legal tradition, which meant, for instance, that Chinese were the only ones tattooed if convicted of theft.
The region of modern Yunnan province in southwest China became part of China for the first time during the Yuan period, after the Mongols conquered it in the mid-thirteenth century. During Tang and Song times, this region was ruled by the independent kingdoms of Nanzhao and Dali. In 1301 the Chinese official Li Jing was given the post of deputy pacification commissioner for the northwest corner of Yunnan and neighboring Guizhou. After two years there, he wrote a treatise on the many different ethnic groups of the area, with particular attention to where they stood on a continuum from “raw” to “cooked,” that is, how civilized they were. In the passage below, he describes the Luolu. Also called the Yi, the Luolu remain a major ethnic group in the area.

The Luolu [Yi] are also known as the Wu Man, or Black Barbarians.

The men put their hair up in a coil and pluck their facial hair, or shave their heads. They carry two knives, one at each side, and enjoy fighting and killing. When a disagreement arises among fathers and sons and among brothers, they are known to attack each other with military weapons. Killing is taken lightly, and they consider it a sign of valor. They prize horses with cropped tails, their saddles have no trappings, and their stirrups are carved from wood in the shape of a fish’s mouth to accommodate the toes.

The women wear their hair down and wear cotton clothing, and the wealthy wear jewelry and embroidered clothes; the humble are garbed in sheepskin. They ride horses side-saddle. Unmarried girls wear large earrings and cut their hair level with their eyebrows, and their skirts do not even cover their knees. Men and women, rich and poor, all wear felt wraps and go barefoot, and they can go as long as one year without washing face or hands.

It is the custom of husbands and wives not to see each other during the day, but only to sleep together at night. Children as old as ten suf most likely have never seen their father. Wives and concubines are not jealous of each other. Even the well-to-do do not use paddies on their beds, but just spread pine needles on the ground with only a layer of felt and mat. Marriages are arranged with the maternal uncle’s family, but if a suitable partner cannot be found public, Kubilai even prohibited Chinese from dealing in bamboo because it could be used to make bows and arrows. Chinese were subject to severe penalties if they fought back when attacked by a Mongol. Mongols, however, merely had to pay a fine if found guilty of murdering a Chinese.

Since the Mongols wanted to extract wealth from China, they had every incentive to develop the economy. They encouraged trade both within China and beyond its borders. The Mongols allowed paper money into circulation, and a Grand Canal was dug to initial conquerors followed by the farmers thriving on farms excavated or terraces that were we...
they can look elsewhere for a match. When someone falls ill they do not use medicine, but instead call in a male shaman who is known as the daixi. He uses chicken bones to divine good and evil fortunes. The tribal leader always has the shaman at his side, and he must consult the shaman to make a final decision in all matters great and small.

A woman who is about to get married must first have relations with the shaman, and then “dance” with all the groom’s brothers. This custom is known as “making harmony.” Only after that can she be married to her husband. If any one of the brothers refuses to go along with this custom, he will be regarded as unrighteous and everyone will be disgusted with him.

The first wife is known as the naide, and it is only her children who can inherit their father’s position. If the naide has a son who dies before marrying, she will go ahead and arrange a wife for him anyway. Anyone can then have relations with the deceased son’s wife, and any child born is considered the child of the deceased. If the tribal leader does not leave a male heir, his wife’s [the naide’s] daughter then becomes the leader. However, she then has no male attendants—only ten or more young male attendants, with whom she can have relations.

When the tribal leader dies, they wrap his body in a leopard skin, cremate him, and then bury his bones on a mountain at a location known only to his closest relatives. After the burial they take images of the Seven Precious Things and place them on a high platform. They then go steal the head of a neighboring nobleman and offer it as a sacrifice. If they are not able to obtain one, they cannot make the sacrifice. At the time of the sacrificial ceremony all the relatives arrive, and they sacrifice more than a thousand cattle and sheep, or at least several hundred. Every year when they celebrate the spring festival during the twelfth month, they take a long vertical pole and a horizontal piece of wood, [and arranging a seesaw] with one person on each side, they go up and down together playing.

They support many soldiers, who are called jukje, and they generously provide for them. When they go off to battle they view death as “returning home.” They expertly craft armor and swords that are worth dozens of horses. On their javelins and crossbow arrow tips they put a poison that kills instantly.

They are found in Shunyuan [near Guiyang, Guizhou], Qujing, Wumeng [Zhaotong], Wusa [near Weining, Guizhou], and Yuxi [north of Xichang, Sichuan].


Chinese from...
Chapter 12  China and Korea Under Mongol Rule (1215–1368)

MATERIAL CULTURE

Blue-and-White Porcelain

Porcelain is distinguished from other types of ceramics by its smoothness, whiteness, and translucence. Only certain types of clays can be used to make porcelain, and the wares must be fired at very high temperatures (1280–1400°C, 2336–2522°F). During Song times, Jingdezhen in Jiangxi became a major center for making porcelain.

The development of the highly popular blue-and-white style of porcelain owes much to the circumstances created by the Mongol Empire. The Yuan rulers established an official agency to supervise ceramic production at Jingdezhen. Artists at these kilns invented a new style of decoration, with underglaze-painted decoration using cobalt blue. West Asia was the best source for cobalt, so Chinese production depended on stable trade relations across Asia. Moreover, the designs of this type of porcelain seem to have been stimulated by Arab clients who wanted ceramics that would be more durable and refined than the ones they were used to, but with designs of the sort common in their region. Some Yuan-period blue-and-white wares exported to the Middle East are kept today in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul. They have dense, busy designs reminiscent of the textiles and carpets of the region.

Blue-and-White Dish. This fourteenth-century dish eventually entered the Ottoman collection and is today in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul. Note how it combines Chinese imagery, such as the auspicious, imaginary qilin in the center, with dense floral patterns highly appreciated in the Islamic world.

(Hadjiye Cangakce/Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul)

hit by the Mongols and began a downward spiral that took centuries to reverse. First came the devastation of the initial conquest. Restoring production was impeded by widespread scattering of the population, much of it forced by the conquerors. Taxation, once it was in the hands of tax farmers, was often ruinous. The Mongols had difficulty regulating the paper currency, and by the fourteenth century inflation was rampant.

After the death of Kubilai in 1294, Mongol administration began to decline. Cliques of

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Mongol nobles fought over the place of China within the khanate of the great khan. Should traditional steppe strategies of expansion remain central to the Mongol state? Or was there too much to be gained from exploiting China that they should give up steppe-based expansion? Unlike the Jurchen, who had largely moved into north China, most of the Mongols remained in Mongolia. Renzong, who came to the throne in 1311, was the first Mongol emperor able to both read and speak Chinese, and he shifted the emphasis toward China. In 1313 he reestablished a limited civil service exam system. His son Yingzong succeeded him in 1320, but when he continued the China-centered policies, he was assassinated by opposing factions. Civil wars and factional violence marred the next several reigns. The last Mongol emperor, who came to the throne in 1333 at age thirteen, was bright and well educated in Chinese but not a strong ruler. By his reign, the central government was failing to keep order in China or even maintain a stable currency. A colder than average climate and the spread of deadly diseases added to the hardship. Power devolved to the local level, to anyone who could organize an area well enough to suppress banditry.

The Chinese Educated Elite During the Mongol Era

Government service, which had long been central to the identity and income of the educated elite in China, was not as widely available during the Yuan Dynasty. Since the Mongols employed Mongols, Tibetans, Uighurs, Persians, Jurchens, and others in their government in China, there were fewer positions for the Chinese educated elite than there had been under either Jin or Song. Moreover, the large majority of Chinese who gained government positions came from clerk, not from scholar-official, families. The Mongols had no interest in doing their own paperwork and employed clerks to keep the records that made government possible. Clerks without classical educations had always been looked down on by Chinese scholars. To the Mongols, however, they seemed perfectly suited to doing their bidding.

The Mongols reinstituted the civil service examinations in 1315, but opportunities for scholars were still very limited. There were quotas to ensure that no more than a quarter of those who passed would be southerners, no more than a quarter would be Han, and half would be Mongols and other non-Chinese. In addition, there were regional quotas, which had the effect of limiting opportunities for those from the southeast, where educational traditions were strongest. On top of that, only about 2 percent of the positions in the bureaucracy were filled through the examination system anyway.

In the south, the generation that had devoted themselves to resisting the Mongols rarely also served them, but their sons, growing up under Mongol rule, frequently did. The Mongols were tolerant of all religions but tended to favor Buddhists over Confucians. Kubilai gave the Tibetan cleric Yang Lianjian wide powers in postwar Hangzhou. He not only converted the Song palaces to Buddhist temples but excavated the Song imperial tombs to extract valuables from them to cover the cost of building more Buddhist temples. Defeated Song loyalists gave meaning to their survival by secretly searching for the bones of the Song emperors and respectfully reburying them.

Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) is a good example of a southern literatus who decided to serve the Mongols. Descended from the first Song emperor, Zhao had grown up as a member of the privileged imperial clan. He had enrolled in the imperial academy in Hangzhou before the fall of the Southern Song, but he had not yet held office. For the first five years after the Song surrender, he kept to his circle of friends interested in poetry, painting, and calligraphy. Several of them had lost their property during the wars and were dependent on patrons to survive. This group looked on painting in archaic styles as a way to express longing for the past and dissatisfaction with the present.

When Kubilai in 1286 dispatched a southerner to recruit prominent southern literati to