CHINA SERIES · BOOK THIRTEEN

Kublai Khan

The Great Mongol Emperor — Conquest, Governance, and the Unification of East and West

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Chapter One

China Series · Book Thirteen · Available April 9, 2027

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

PART ONE

The Steppe Prince (1215–1251)

Chapter One

The World Genghis Made

On the vast grasslands of what is now Mongolia, the twelfth century was a time of chaos. The plateau was home to dozens of tribes and clans, Mongols, Tatars, Kereits, Naimans, Merkits, Öngüts, and others, who spoke related languages, shared a pastoral way of life, and fought one another constantly. They lived by herding horses, sheep, goats, cattle, and camels, moving seasonally between summer and winter pastures. They lived in round felt tents, the ger, that could be dismantled and loaded onto carts in an hour. Their children learned to ride before they could walk properly, and every adult man was a mounted archer capable of shooting accurately at full gallop.

This way of life produced extraordinary soldiers but rarely produced lasting states. Steppe confederations rose and fell, held together by the charisma of a strong leader and the promise of plunder, and dissolved when the leader died or the plunder ran out. To the south lay the agricultural world of China, rich, populous, and divided. In the early thirteenth century it was split among three states. The Jurchen people of Manchuria had conquered the north a century before and ruled it as the Jin dynasty. The Tanguts held the northwest as the kingdom of Xi Xia. In the south, the Chinese Song dynasty, driven from the north in 1127, ruled from its elegant capital at Hangzhou. The relationship between the steppe and the sown had for a thousand years followed a familiar pattern: nomads raided, settled states bribed or fought them, and occasionally a nomadic people conquered

part of China and settled down to rule it, eventually becoming more Chinese than nomad.

Into this world, around 1162, was born a boy named Temüjin. His father was poisoned by Tatars when he was about nine. His clan abandoned the widow and her children, who survived by foraging for roots and fish, an almost unthinkable humiliation for a steppe aristocrat. Temüjin killed his own half-brother in a quarrel over food. He was captured by enemies and escaped. His young wife, Börte, was kidnapped by Merkits and rescued with the help of his father's sworn brother, Toghril, the khan of the Kereits. Over the next thirty years, through a combination of military genius, political skill, ruthlessness, and an unusual willingness to promote men on merit rather than birth, Temüjin defeated every rival on the plateau. In 1206, at a great assembly on the banks of the Onon River, he was proclaimed Chinggis Khan, the title we know as Genghis Khan, ruler of "all the people who live in felt tents."

What Genghis created was not simply another confederation. He broke the old tribal structures and reorganized the entire population into military units of tens, hundreds, thousands, and ten thousands, commanded by men personally loyal to him. He created an elite bodyguard, the keshig, which also served as a training school for future commanders and administrators. He adopted the Uighur script to write the Mongol language, so that his commands and laws could be recorded. He proclaimed a body of law and custom known as the jasagh. Above all, he gave his people an ideology: Eternal Heaven, Tenggeri, had granted him and his descendants the right to rule the world. Those who submitted would be spared. Those who resisted would be destroyed.

Then he turned that machine outward.

• • •

The campaigns of Genghis Khan are among the most astonishing in military history. In 1209 he forced Xi Xia into submission. In 1211 he

invaded the Jin empire, a state with perhaps forty or fifty million subjects and armies many times the size of his own. The Mongols did not at first know how to take walled cities, so they devastated the countryside, recruited Chinese and Khitan engineers who did know, and kept coming back. In 1214 the Jin emperor bought peace with tribute, including a princess, and then, fearing a renewed attack, moved his court south across the Yellow River to Kaifeng. Genghis regarded this as a breach of faith. In 1215 his generals besieged the old Jin capital at Zhongdu. When it fell, the city was sacked and burned. Travelers who passed through months later reported that the ground was slippery with human fat and that bones were piled into mountains outside the walls. Whether or not those details were exaggerated, Zhongdu was ruined.

It was in that year that Kublai was born.

The Mongol conquest continued for decades after. In 1218 to 1223, Genghis led his armies west against the Khwarazmian Empire in Central Asia and Iran, after its governor at the frontier town of Otrar had massacred a Mongol-sponsored trade caravan and its ruler had insulted Genghis's envoys. The cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv, Nishapur, and Urgench were captured, and several were destroyed with appalling loss of life. Mongol generals Jebe and Sübe'etei rode around the Caspian Sea, crossed the Caucasus, and defeated a Russian army on the Kalka River in 1223. By the time of Genghis's death in 1227, during a final campaign against Xi Xia, the Mongols ruled from the Pacific coast of north China to the Caspian Sea.

The cost in human life was enormous. Modern historians argue about the numbers, which medieval chroniclers often inflated for rhetorical effect, but no serious scholar doubts that the Mongol conquests killed millions of people and devastated entire regions, some of which took centuries to recover. The Mongols used terror deliberately. A city that surrendered promptly could expect to be spared, taxed, and incorporated into the empire. A city that resisted, especially one that killed Mongol envoys or rebelled after submitting, might be

annihilated as an example to others. This was the world into which Kublai was born and the inheritance he would carry: an empire built on extraordinary violence and an ideology of universal rule, which his generation would have to learn how to govern.

• • •

Kublai's father was Tolui, the youngest of the four sons Genghis had with his principal wife, Börte. By Mongol custom, the youngest son was the otchigin, the "prince of the hearth," who inherited his father's home territory and core household. Tolui was renowned as the finest general among Genghis's sons, a bold and energetic commander who had led some of the bloodiest operations of the Khwarazmian campaign, including the capture of Merv and Nishapur. He was also, by most accounts, a heavy drinker, as were many Mongol aristocrats. Alcohol, in the form of fermented mare's milk, kumis, and later grape wine and distilled spirits, was woven into Mongol social and ritual life, and it would kill more than one member of the imperial family, including, in the end, contribute to the decline of Kublai himself.

Kublai's mother was Sorghaghtani Beki, and she is one of the most remarkable women in the history of the Middle Ages. She was a Kereit princess, a niece of Toghril, the Kereit khan who had been Genghis's patron and later his enemy. When Genghis destroyed the Kereit confederation in 1203, he distributed the women of its ruling family among his own sons as wives. Sorghaghtani went to Tolui. Like many Kereits, she was a Nestorian Christian, a member of the Church of the East, which had spread from Mesopotamia across Central Asia centuries before. She remained a Christian all her life. She was also a shrewd judge of people and politics, an able manager of her household's vast resources, and a believer in the value of learning and religious tolerance. Her contemporaries, across every culture, praised her in terms they rarely used for anyone. The Persian historian Rashid al-Din called her extremely intelligent and able, and the Syriac Christian scholar Bar Hebraeus quoted a saying that if he

saw among women another like her, he would say that women were far superior to men.

Sorghaghtani and Tolui had four sons: Möngke, born in 1209; Kublai, born in 1215; Hülegü, born in 1217; and Ariq Böke, born around 1219. All four would play decisive roles in history. Möngke would become Great Khan of the whole Mongol Empire. Hülegü would conquer Baghdad and found the Ilkhanate in Iran. Ariq Böke would claim the title of Great Khan and fight a civil war against his brother. And Kublai would become Emperor of China. Few mothers in history have raised four sons who between them ruled more of the world's surface.

• • •

According to the Chinese records, Kublai was born on the twenty-eighth day of the eighth month of the year yihai, a date that corresponds to 23 September 1215 in the Western calendar. Marco Polo, who knew the Khan in his old age, placed his birthday celebration in the same season, at the end of September, and described the magnificent feast held each year to mark it, at which the Khan's barons and officials appeared in robes of gold-embroidered silk that he had given them.

We know little about his childhood with certainty. Rashid al-Din preserves a story that Genghis, seeing the infant, remarked that all the other children of the family were ruddy-cheeked, while this one was dark, and that he must take after his mother's maternal kin. Rashid also tells us that Kublai was nursed by a woman of the Naiman people, who had a son of her own at the same time, and that Sorghaghtani gave her own son's place at the breast to the nurse's child for a time, so that Kublai should have the nurse's milk. Such fosterage arrangements created bonds of loyalty that the Mongols took seriously, and Kublai honored the nurse throughout her life.

One childhood scene survives in some detail, and it is worth pausing over because it shows the boy in the world of his grandfather. In 1224,

as Genghis was returning from the great western campaign, Kublai, then about nine years old, and his younger brother Hülegü rode out to meet him near the Ili River region. On the way, according to Rashid al-Din, Kublai shot a hare and Hülegü shot a deer. It was a Mongol custom that when boys made their first kill, their elders would rub fat from the game on their middle fingers, a ritual that marked the beginning of their life as hunters. Genghis himself performed the ceremony for his grandsons. Kublai, the story says, took his grandfather's hand gently, while Hülegü grasped it roughly, and the old conqueror remarked on the difference.

Historians cannot be sure the anecdote is accurate in every detail; it may have been polished in the retelling at the courts of Kublai and Hülegü's descendants. But the scene is suggestive. Here is a world in which hunting is the training ground for war, in which a grandfather's approval matters intensely, and in which the boys' first kills are a public event. Kublai would remain a passionate hunter for the rest of his life, and the hunts of his old age, with their elephants, cheetahs, and thousands of beaters, were in a sense continuations of that first hare.

• • •

What kind of education did a Mongol prince receive? In the first place, he learned to ride, to shoot, to handle horses, and to endure hardship: the bitter winters of the plateau, the summer heat, long rides with little food. He learned the genealogies of his family and the oral traditions of his people, many of which were later written down in the work we call The Secret History of the Mongols. He learned the customs of the camp, the protocol of the great assemblies, the obligations of kinship and sworn brotherhood. He learned to command men.

Sorghaghtani added something more. She made sure her sons were literate in Mongol in the Uighur script, and she exposed them to the cultures and religions of the conquered peoples. She herself

supported Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Daoist institutions, giving alms and grants to all. She seems to have grasped earlier than most of her contemporaries that the Mongols could not hold their conquests by force alone. They would have to govern, and governing required knowledge of the people they governed.

Kublai absorbed this lesson more deeply than any of his brothers. From an early age, he showed curiosity about the settled world, especially about China. As we shall see, he began gathering Chinese advisers around him while still in his twenties, long before he had any formal authority over Chinese territory. Yet he never fully learned to read or write Chinese. He conversed through interpreters, relied on scholars to explain the classics to him, and remained, in his language, his habits, his diet, and his loyalties, a Mongol to the end of his life. This duality, curiosity about China combined with an unshakable Mongol identity, is the key to his whole career.

• • •

Genghis Khan died in August 1227, during the final siege of the Tangut capital. Before his death, he had arranged for his empire to be divided among his sons in a characteristically Mongol way. The territories were not a single state with a single owner but a family enterprise. Each son received a share of people and pasture. Jochi, the eldest, who had died shortly before his father, had been assigned the westernmost lands, the steppes north of the Caspian and the Aral Sea, which would become the domain of his sons, notably Batu, and later be known as the Golden Horde. Chaghadai, the second son, received Central Asia. Ögedei, the third son, received lands in western Mongolia and Dzungaria. Tolui, as the youngest, inherited the Mongol homeland and, crucially, the bulk of his father's army: perhaps 101,000 of the 129,000 men in the Mongol military establishment, according to a later Persian account.

But who would be Great Khan? Genghis had chosen Ögedei, the third son, a genial, generous, hard-drinking man known for his ability to

reconcile quarrels. Jochi's legitimacy had been questioned because he was born shortly after Börte's return from captivity among the Merkits. Chaghadai was proud and quarrelsome. Tolui was a great soldier but perhaps not seen as a statesman. Ögedei was a compromise candidate, a man everyone could live with.

In 1229, after an interregnum during which Tolui served as regent, a great assembly, a quriltai, confirmed Ögedei as Great Khan. Tolui loyally supported his brother. In the years that followed, he led the decisive campaign against the Jin dynasty, winning a crushing victory at the battle of Sanfengshan in early 1232. The Jin court, now at Kaifeng, was doomed; the city fell in 1233, and the last Jin emperor killed himself in 1234.

Tolui did not live to see the end. In 1232, during the Jin campaign, Ögedei fell gravely ill. According to the Mongol sources, the shamans determined that the spirits of the Chinese lands, angered by the destruction, were taking revenge, and that the illness could be transferred to a member of the khan's family. Tolui volunteered. He drank a cup of water in which the shamans had washed away his brother's sickness, and soon afterward he died. The Secret History of the Mongols records this story as an act of supreme fraternal self-sacrifice. Rashid al-Din tells a similar story. More skeptical modern historians note that Tolui was a notorious drinker and suggest that alcohol may have played a role. Whatever the truth, Tolui was dead at about forty, and his widow, Sorghaghtani, was left in charge of the largest share of Genghis Khan's inheritance, with four sons between the ages of about thirteen and twenty-three.

Kublai was sixteen or seventeen years old. His childhood was over. His real education, in the politics of a family empire where brothers, cousins, and widows competed for power, was about to begin, and his teacher would be his mother.

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

The China Series

Twenty-one volumes.
A world of enduring ideas.

Preorder the complete 21-volume China Series at 15% off through the final volume's launch, approximately June 4, 2027.

Book Thirteen available April 9, 2027

ipcnews.org · ipc.asia

orders@ipcnews.org

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

© 2026 Robert Miller. All rights reserved.