

Marco Polo was born in 1254 to Niccolo Polo, a leading merchant of Venice. In 1260, Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, Marco's father and uncle, traveled to Peking (Khanbaligh), which Kublai Khan had made the capital of his extensive empire. After nine years, the men returned to Venice having made a promise to the Khan that they return to China and bring with them some friars in order to aid in the introduction of Christianity. Seventeen-year-old Marco joined his father and uncle for this second journey, which began in 1271. The party was well-received by the Khan in 1275, although they did not bring the friars he had requested.

Because Marco Polo was more "a studious young man with a gift for languages" than a merchant like his father, the Khan appointed him to civil service in 1277 (Collis 382). Marco rose quickly through the ranks and was sent by the Emperor on several confidential missions. Marco eventually became prefect of Yangchow, a large city on the Grand Canal. "His career was the most brilliant any European has ever had in the Chinese service," and during his fifteen years of duty he gained much information about India and Japan and also learned of China through the Mongol point of view. When Marco applied for leave around 1290, the Khan refused because he could not stand to lose the excellent service of the man. Marco was finally granted leave in 1292, but only because he was thought to be the best man to escort the Lady Kokachin to Persia, where she would marry Kublai Khan's grand-nephew. Marco was allowed to leave on the condition that he would return to the Khan's service; however, the Khan's subsequent death released him from this obligation.

Marco continued his journey and arrived in Venice in 1295. At this time, Venice was at war with the republic of Genoa, and a ship on which Marco was traveling was captured by the Genoese. Marco was held prisoner in Genoa from 1296 to 1299, and it was during these years that the Travels was produced. Polo dictated to a fellow prisoner by the name of Rusticello of Pisa. After his release in 1299, Marco Polo lived in Venice where he became the joke of the townspeople who did not believe his travel stories. He died in 1324 and was buried in the Church of San Lorenzo.

Questions:

1. What is a merchant? Friar?
2. Why did Kublai Khan appoint Marco Polo to civil service in China?
3. What knowledge did Marco Polo gain during his appointment?
4. What allowed Marco Polo to escape from the Khan's service?
5. What did the Europeans think about Marco Polo on his return?

Name: _____ Period: _____

The Mongols

In the 13th century, nomadic Mongol horsemen in Central Asia united under a great leader named Genghis Khan. He directed his fierce warriors on a way of conquest that lasted for 20 years. Russia and portions of the Muslim Empire fell to the Mongols. The conquests continued after Genghis Khan died in 1227. Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis, became Mongol emperor in 1260 and conquered the Sung in 1279. He ruled the Mongol Empire, one of the largest ever to exist, until his death in 1294. Kublai Khan constructed roads and canals and rebuilt the city of Peking. He gave aid to orphans and old people and provided hospitals for the sick. He also purchased food supplies in times of plenty to store away for use when famine struck.

During this period, Marco Polo of Venice in Italy came to China with his father and uncle, two merchants. Polo just 17 years old, became a favorite of Kublai Khan and remained in China for 17 years. He traveled throughout the empire. After Polo returned to Italy in 1295, he wrote a book about what he had seen. Many refused to believe his descriptions of the size, wealth, and wonders of China. In time, other Europeans followed Polo's route to China. Marco Polo's book is regarded as a major step in promoting the exchange of goods and ideas between China and the West.

The Chinese never accepted the Mongol culture. They regarded the Mongols as foreigners and barbarians. As Mongol rule weakened, Chinese opposition strengthened. In 1368, Chu Yuan-chang, a Buddhist monk who had become a rebel leader, drove the Mongols out of Peking. A new Chinese dynasty, the Ming, replaced Mongol rule.

1. List 4 changes that Kublai Khan made during his reign as emperor to help people in China?
2. Explain: Marco Polo was a "bridge" between East and West