



Kublai Khan フビライ・ハン (born 1215 – died 1294)
Grandson of Genghis Khan

Kublai was Great Khan (of all Mongols) from 1260 to 1294.
Kublai established the Yuan Dynasty in China, in 1271, and was Emperor of China from 1271 until his death in 1294.

Kublai Kahn is one of the most complex and powerful people in world history. He was Great Khan and Emperor of China during the height of the Mongol Empire (1206-1368), and his power and determination alone were the greatest forces that kept the Empire alive. In just 75 years after Kublai's death, the Mongols would lose their entire Eurasian empire and be forced back to their nomadic homelands in Mongolia, to never again become a powerful nation or people.

Kublai Khan: Psychological profile

Kublai Kahn's psychology combined deep intellectual curiosity and high administrative drive with chronic anxiety, intense rages, and deep cultural isolation. Struggling to balance his dual identity as (1) a traditional Mongol military leader and (2) a legitimate Chinese emperor, his psyche (inner mental and emotional states) was defined by a constant personal tension between (i) his vision of a unified and reformed East Asia and (ii) his endless mistrust of people and political paranoia.

Core Personality & Traits

- **(+) Intellectual Curiosity:** Kublai Khan showed great interest in philosophy, world religions (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity), science, art, and poetry. He famously welcomed foreigners like Marco Polo, who became a close advisor and intellectual companion for Kublai during Polo's 17 years in China (1275-1292).
- **(+) High Conscientiousness:** Unlike his grandfather Genghis Khan, Kublai was a focused bureaucrat who loved system-building, legal codes, and large-scale infrastructure-construction projects such as China's Grand Canal (1,776 km of waterways that still connect inland regions of northern and southern China today).

- **(-) Chronic Neuroticism:** Historical records and modern psychological profiles point to Kublai's severe stress, mood swings, impatience, and violent fits of temper. These psychological characteristics became worse with age due to his intense physical pain, which was caused by his obesity and gout (inflammatory arthritis) (痛風, 關節炎).
- **(-) Split Identity:** Caught between (1) conservative Mongol elites, who viewed him as too "Chinese," and (2) Chinese people, who saw him as a foreign conqueror, Kublai lived with "chronic imposter syndrome" (a constant struggle for self-identity).

Key Pressures Shaping His Mindset

- **Civil War with a Brother:** Fighting his brother Ariq Böke for the title of Great Khan (1260) broke the unity of the Mongol Empire and left Kublai with a permanent mistrust of his own Mongol clan.
- **Legitimacy Deficit:** To rule China and the Chinese people, Kublai had to adopt the Chinese "Mandate of Heaven" so that he could become the emperor. However, this alienated traditional Mongol tribes, who thought the Chinese and their civilized and sedentary life made them weak, something that was the opposite of a strong Mongol spirit based on physical and martial (fighting) skill.
- **Failing Expeditions:** Disastrous, costly losses in places like Japan (1274 and 1281) and in Vietnam (1284 and 1287) damaged Kublai's pride and added immense fiscal (monetary) and psychological strain to his reign over the Yuan Dynasty.



Kublai Khan's most-trusted Advisors

Of the ten people that historians generally consider to be Kublai Khan's closest advisors during the Yuan Dynasty, only three were Mongols. Kublai surrounded himself mostly with a diverse international group of people that included Central Asians; Persians; Muslims; Tibetans; Buddhists; Daoists; Chinese scholars, artists, and engineers; and the Venetian-European explorer Marco Polo. But the most influential was likely Kublai's main wife, the Empress Chabi (who was one of the three Mongols).

Kublai Khan had four primary wives, each associated with one of the four great houses (factions) of the Mongol Empire. But he also kept numerous (perhaps 20-50) subordinate wives and concubines (consorts) of various ages, though the exact number of women can never be known due to inadequate records. Chabi was just one year younger than Kublai and was the head of the most important faction, which was the Yuan in China. As Empress of Yuan China, Chabi was a major force in Yuan politics and culture. She was popular among the Chinese nobility due to her skill and compassion in peacefully negotiating with various Chinese noble families and related groups. She also became the most important person in shaping the arts and cultural policies of the Dynasty. She was also very involved in reducing taxes on farmers, to help protect peasants and agriculture, which was extremely important for maintaining peace in China and creating sustainable, long-term tax revenue for the Yuan government and its infrastructure projects like roads and canals.

Unlike many women in China and other parts of Asia at the time, Mongol head-wives tended to exercise at least some if not a lot of power and commonly advised their husbands on many different types of matters. Chabi, like other highly valued Mongol women, also produced ten children with Kublai (Mongol society at the time valued women who had both mental and physical strength).

According to the writings of Marco Polo, Kublai Khan had 47 sons and likely just as many daughters, for a possible total of 100 children, and these were just among his elite (legitimate) wives and concubines. Historical analysis suggests that Kublai Khan might have also fathered an additional 50 or more illegitimate children with lower-ranking women, children he probably never knew. This high number of children was not strange for the sons and grandsons of Genghis Khan, as Genghis himself had 40 sons and probably just as many daughters. Mongol society placed great importance and status on men who could produce as many children as possible.

The Influence of Growing Up in a Culture of Structural Violence

On the negative side of having so many children and factional obligations, Kublai Khan had poor relationships with most of his sons, especially the sons who would rule in the major factions of the empire. For the most part, he considered his sons mentally weak and incapable of original thoughts. Like his grandfather and uncles, Kublai Khan was raised in an environment that modern psychologists call “structural violence” or systemic trauma. At the time of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, Mongol society and traditions prized aggression, excessive physicality, and fearless domination over others. Common practices, especially toward non-Mongol peoples (conquered peoples), included torture, beheadings, mass murder, dissociation (lack of empathy) for victims, rape of women, and taking women and children as slaves. In short, ruthlessness and barbarity were signs of strength and considered positive qualities in Mongol manhood.

In such an environment, men like Kublai Khan developed extremist characteristics, such as the ability to write lovely poetry one moment and then use the very same hand to execute someone. The difference is that Kublai Khan himself, unlike most Mongols, recognized the barbarity of Mongol civilization, a civilization that was ultimately unsustainable. This is why he distanced himself from Mongolia itself and made himself Emperor of the “more civilized,” organized, and educated China. In China, however, he also recognized problems with Chinese civilization, mostly its closed-mindedness, its

love of ancient institutions and thought systems, and its lack of meritocracy (i.e., people were forced into a social system based on their jobs and could never really rise to a higher level).

Partly to compensate for his self-imposed isolation from the Mongol people, and partly to turn China into a land that wasn't only for the Chinese nobility and aristocracy, Kublai Khan surrounded himself with many kinds of people from throughout the empire, including Mongols, Chinese, Persians, Tibetans, Kazakhs, Arabs, and even Europeans like Marco Polo. The goal was to learn as much as possible about the world, to build an empire that did more than merely dominate East Asia and give power to a small, elite population. His new empire was to break from past traditions, in both Mongolia and China, to be a kind of Rome of the East, to connect people, trade, science, religions, and inventions.

Conclusion for China

Ultimately, Kublai Khan failed. His character and personal motivations were simply not enough to realize such an empire. He needed male heirs and other family members who were dedicated to continuing his vision after his death. But ultimately, most people around him preferred the old ways of power and wealth: the rich and powerful shall always remain rich and powerful, and the poor and weak shall always remain poor and weak. When the Yuan Dynasty and all of the Mongol Empire collapsed after year 1368, the new Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) restored a social system of traditional hierarchy and control, but one that was even more rigid, anti-foreigner, and closed to global ideas than ever before. The Chinese nobility and the Royal Family itself would also give themselves more power than ever before, which ultimately led to the oppression, corruption, and violence that made Ming China the last Han-Chinese dynasty in history. After 1644, China would be ruled again by another northern people, the Manchu (Jurchens), who were far more oppressive and totalitarian than Kublai Khan or the Yuan Dynasty had ever been. This new Manchu empire (1644-1912) would completely cut China off from the entire world, an empire in which over 30 million Chinese would die from famine, disease, massacres, and genocide.