Decline of the Mongols

**Invasions and Campaigns**

In the initial days of their rule in China, Khubilai Khan and the Mongols had remarkable military successes, their greatest victory being the conquest of Southern Song China by 1279 C.E. This particular campaign, for which the Mongols had to organize a navy in order to cross the Yangtze River and move into southern China, entailed tremendous logistical efforts. Ultimately, though, the failure of their military campaigns became a key factor leading to the weakening and eventual demise of the Mongol empire in China.

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. And after one of the ambassadors was harmed (a branding of his face), the Mongols felt that this act had to be avenged. 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. Though this time the Mongols actually managed to land in Java, the heat, tropical environment, and parasitic and infectious diseases there led to their withdrawal from Java within a year.

Similar problems afflicted the Mongols in all their attacks and invasions into mainland Southeast Asia — in Burma, Cambodia, and in particular, Vietnam. Though they initially succeeded in some of these campaigns, the Mongols were always forced to withdraw eventually because of adverse weather and diseases. It would seem that the Mongols simply were not proficient in naval warfare and did not have much luck in this part of the world. And with each failed campaign, vast sums were expended, and the empire was further weakened.

**Economy**

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.

*Asia for Educators*

1) What was the greatest military failure of the Mongols? Why is it so damaging to the Mongol image?

2) How did the Mongols' own policies lead to their decline in China?

3) Rank the causes of Mongol decline in China (1-3). Explain why with each cause.