



Kublai Khan: The Mongol King Who Remade China

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*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree*

Kublai Khan lives on in the popular imagination thanks to these two lines of poetry by Coleridge. But the true story behind this legend is even more fantastic than the poem would have us believe. He inherited the second largest land empire in history from his grandfather, Genghis Khan. He promptly set about extending this into the biggest empire the world has ever seen, extending his rule from China to Iraq, from Siberia to Afghanistan. His personal domain covered sixty-percent of all Asia, and one-fifth of the world's land area.

The West first learnt of this great Khan through the reports of Marco Polo. Kublai had not been born to rule, but had clawed his way to leadership, achieving power only in his 40s. He had inherited Genghis Khan's great dream of world domination. But unlike his grandfather he saw China and not Mongolia as the key to controlling power and turned Genghis' unwieldy empire into a federation. Using China's great wealth, coupled with his shrewd and subtle government, he created an empire that was the greatest since the fall of Rome, and shaped the modern world as we know it today. He gave China its modern-day borders and his legacy is that country's resurgence, and the superpower China of tomorrow.

Kublai Khan: The Mongol King Who Remade China Details

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Vijai says

Someone very smart once said, winning a prize is one thing but keeping it is another. The latter part of winning - be it a kingdom, a title or just monopoly - is the area my heart truly yearns to learn about. That and about unsung heroes, the men and women who run the show from behind curtains. This would be a machiavellian's favorite bed time story book.

These two ingredients, Mr. John Man serves you in large portions with his book on Kublai Khan.

How the empire moved from Genghis to Ogedei to Monkhe to Kublai and how they went about consolidating their wins and expanding from there is wonderful to learn about. I loved how he brings the unsung heroes to light like who the hero was (or so) behind the trebuchet with the why, what and how behind that trivia, about that Jing guy from Song kingdom and his frailties, Sorghaghtani, the Japanese defense build up etc. Very interesting!!

Especially, with Mr. John Man's almost stereotypical British upper lip narrative - for example, he has this habit of throwing the most known myth about something and then immediately and abruptly debunking it (reminiscent of P.G Wodehouse if I may dare say). OK, I know the purists will foam at mouth about that considering Mr. John Man is not widely accepted but give that guy a break OK? with a subject as dry as history is, he is doing his best.

I am not an expert in Mongolian history but from the sound of it I would say Mr. John Man seems to know what he is talking about.

You know, read this book as a respite from whatever genre you are usually into. Trust me, by the time you get through all that mass killing/ genocide/ and crown grabbing written about in this book, you will wish you did not take that vacation from your genre in the first place.

Robert Hepple says

Written in 2006, Kublai Khan tells the story of that famous leader of the Mongol Empire, the better known successor to Genghis Khan. The story is well told, with a professionally cynical view of contentious historical claims, and exaggerations that many old references are rife with. He makes regular use of the tales of Marco Polo, and often pulls them apart due to inconsistencies. The story is laced with numerous exotic methods of execution, at which the Mongols seemed to excel. The main thrust of the biography is the key role played by Kublai Khan in the making of China, and time is spent in looking at how this has affected subsequent history. In addition, some use is made of modern archaeological evidence of some of the events described, not to mention the destruction of key remains during the cultural revolution. A very informative read.

Mary Soderstrom says

For one of my writing projects, I've recently done a lot of reading about roads. I realize now that what we think of as roads really had little sense in the past. Roads were tracks that people and animals followed, the major exceptions being the paths that armies took when they went war.

The 200 years of Mongol influence shows this clearly. Mongol warriors travelled with at least five horses, and frequently their families. This meant that broads swaths of grasslands stretching across Eurasia were trampled. If you want to learn about Genghis Khan, who started it, read Jack Weatherford's excellent *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*.

John Man's book tells the story of his grandson who tried to take off where the old man stopped. Indeed he conquered Song China, and Man revels in the details of all the battles fought. This is the reason that the book is not nearly as captivating as Weatherford's. There is little of the big picture, and too much about how to make trebuchets, the sort of catapult that Man says was the key to Kublai Khan's success.

His explanation of why modern China can claim Tibet is interesting, however.

Jasmine Ho says

well-paced story telling that is captivating and very relate-able despite the subject matter occurring almost a millennium ago. very well researched book with clear explanations of how the empire building efforts of 2 men define modern geographical boundaries. however, due to the span of time and geography, the number of characters mentioned does become daunting and sometimes a little difficult to keep track of.

Chris says

Brilliant, lively read, well structured - including the several necessary jumps through space and time that get you caught up with events across the Mongol Empire so that you can move on, fully informed, with the next bit of Kublai's life.

In Chapter 12 John Man portrays Kublai Khan as the CEO of the Yuan Dynasty. The chapter opens:

"Kublai had inherited astonishing managerial skills. He was no intellectual genius, but he had talents that made him one of the greatest CEOs of all time: he was a superb judge of character, entirely without personal prejudice, and had the knack of hiring people who were smarter than himself." (p271)

This builds on earlier chapters discussing Kublai's "apprenticeship" as a prince building up his share of the Chinese portions of the Mongolian Empire, then later expanding the Empire's Chinese lands, not to mention the sound advice from his mother to learn about and from his Chinese subjects. Later the chapter discusses Kublai's tolerance and leniency:

"How come the world's most powerful man, the head of a regime noted for its iron control, ruled a regime of such relative leniency? Because his people did as they were told, and Kublai knew that justice was justice, and that harshness was counter-productive." (p287)

However, this wisdom and judgment of character doesn't quite seem to mesh with Chapter 14, which describes how an Uzbek official named Ahmad was allowed to build his own thoroughly corrupt and abusive little empire within Kublai's empire. People are strange and complicated.

The book is split into four parts: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. I found the last couple of chapters started to fall apart, but that seems appropriate, as Kublai himself seemed to slowly fall apart in his winter years. Marco Polo takes an ever more prominent role as the book moves through Autumn into Winter, and Man seems to argue for the more-or-less based on a true story veracity of Marco Polo's account of his travels. I found this tended to take some of the attention away from Kublai, however. Still, that's a minor quibble with an otherwise good book.

Read this.

Babak Fakhamzadeh says

The man is a gifted story teller, mixing up prose and history as if they're meant for each other. Clearly, Man has a bit of an advantage, re-using material he's researched for his two previous books on Chinggis and Attila but his imagery, style and pace are so infectious, it doesn't matter, reading practically the whole book with a smile on your face because every paragraph has boatloads of interesting information and many a few jokes. And then there are the many lovely footnotes of history Man throws around all over the place. It's a bit like reading the gossip pages on history, except that you're -really- being told what happened. For example, the catastrophic loss of life during Kublai's second failed invasion of Japan, due to a typhoon, was the largest loss of life in a single day, ever, until, ironically, the bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. That is not to say his conquests were not impressive, spanning 20% of the -world's- land mass.

One of the things Man already hinted at in his book on Chinggis Khan, he explains here in more detail: The irritation of the Chinese that their history, their birthright if you will, was initiated by an outsider, a non-Chinese, a Mongol. As this would be easy to swallow if the Mongols were in fact Chinese, it is this exact reason that China has always (well, during the last 7 centuries or so) tried to take and keep control of Mongolia, moving truckloads of Chinese into Inner Mongolia, the part of Mongolia that actually is within the boundaries of present-day China.

It was Kublai who started the Yuan dynasty (not coincidentally also the name of China's currency) and laid the foundations of the Beijing as it is known today. Without Kublai, who had to bridge his Mongol ancestry and Chinese constituency, the Chinese capital would still have been in the south of the country, as it always had been, closer to the water and on much more fertile soil.

I loved the (too brief) chapter on the power politics of central Asia, skirmishes between Kublai and his nephews on control over the Stans. And then there's one of the great what ifs... of history. The Ilkhan of Persia (Kublai's nephew) came up with the idea of a joint Christian-Mongol crusade against Muslims with the side objective of 'liberating' Jerusalem. His envoys, Nestorian Christians of Turkish origin from close to the Mongol heartland, practically convinced the kings of France and England and came close to getting the then-pope on board. Islam could have been pretty much wiped off the map.

Also, Man makes it clear that although Marco Polo wasn't shy of using hyperbole in his (ghost-written?) stories, he did have a real-life basis for what was put on paper in his name. What was new to me was that

Marco Polo, who was travelling with his father and uncle, was accompanying seasoned travellers, both of them already having visited Kublai Khan some years before.

It doesn't stop. When I was working in Afghanistan, one of my co-workers' name was Dayan. After the Ming took over from the Mongols, claiming a bit of Mongol themselves, the actual Mongol rulers were banned back to their ancestral homeland, Mongolia. Quite a few years later, around 1500, under a uniting new Khan, the new dynasty was called Da Yuan, 'Great Yuan' (Yuan being the name given by Kublai to his new Chinese dynasty), shortened to Dayan. Ain't history great.

And then there's the beautiful description (on page 347 if you want to check it out on Amazon) of how to get to what is most likely Kublai's (and Chinggis') final resting place in Khan Khenti or Bulkhan Khaldun not too far from Mongolia's capital. I need to go back!

Tom says

A pretty good book, as others say, the informal tone is different. At first I didn't like it but it grew on me, though at the slower parts of the book (maybe the 100 or so pages on the ruling of China in the book's 2nd half) it got annoying again, though as the story got better (when things picked up with Vietnam and Japan), my tolerance for the little interruptions increased. Sort of funny that he calls out Marco Polo for doing the same thing. There are all these little blurbs about what his visit was like to a particular site, complete with anecdotes about the people he met. And, randomly, even though Kublai Khan had nothing at all to do with the invention of movable type, we get 5 pages on movable type. Oddly, by the time I had gotten that far in the book, I was sort of ok with that.

As for his portrayal of Kublai Khan, what I really liked about his informal style is that it gave him license to really 'teach the debate'. He doesn't march in and pretend to have absolute figures on troop numbers in particular battles but is more likely to say something dismissive about being able to know for sure and just cavalierly recommend dividing by 10 any number given by Marco Polo. He might not be the most critical judge of Kublai's accomplishments, but he does seem pretty fair.

I'm curious what his book on Attila the Hun is like, as that sounds promising.

minky_monster says

Lama juga nunda2 baca biografi ini, yg sebenarnya cukup menarik untuk diikuti. Dan harusnya saya bisa selesai baca dalam 3-4 hari aja, kalo niat. Penulis buku ini, John Man, memang fokus dengan sejarah Mongol. Selain buku tentang Kubilai, dia juga menulis biografi tentang Jenghis Khan. Jenghis dan Kubilai adalah dua nama penguasa dari Mongol. Kubilai adalah cucu dari Jenghis, penerusnya yg memperluas wilayah kekuasaan Mongol hingga mencapai puncaknya. Well, keberhasilan utama Kubilai adalah merebut Cina, tepatnya Cina Selatan (Song), dan secara ga langsung membentuk Cina seperti sekarang. Kubilai menjadi orang paling berkuasa yang pernah hidup di muka bumi, sebelum munculnya negara2 adidaya modern. "Dia menguasai seperlima wilayah bumi yang berpenghuni, barangkali setengah dari umat manusia saat itu."

Membaca kisah tentang Kubilai dan Mongol ini, gw jadi teringat dengan suku Dothraki di Game of Thrones.

Obviously, GRRM menciptakan Dothraki berdasarkan Mongol, terlihat dari beberapa kemiripannya. Suku barbar, yg berkuda, dan hidup di padang rumput. Dan jd Khal, kepala suku Dothraki, adalah Khan, pemimpin di Mongol.

Buku ini terbagi jadi 4 bagian, diibaratkan musim, sejak awal hingga kejayaan Kubilai, hingga akhir hidupnya.

Prolog: Untuk Jenghis, Seorang Cucu

Ada 2 peristiwa penting di tahun 1215, yg kemudian memicu dinamika dunia, menghubungkan wilayah dan kebudayaan yg tadinya terpisah. Pertama, penaklukan China Utara (Beijing) oleh Jenghis Khan. Kedua, lahirnya cucu Jenghis, Kubilai.

Bagian I: Musim Semi

1. Singa Betina dan Anaknya.

membahas Sorkaktani, ibu dari Kubilai. Meskipun bukan berada di garis keturunan utama sebagai pewaris tahta, ketekunan dan kecerdikannya membawa anak2nya menjadi penerus tahta Mongol.

2. Perang Pertama Melawan Teror.

membahas upaya penaklukkan Mongol ke dunia Islam, oleh Hulagu, adik Monkhe (putra tertua Sorkaktani yg menjadi Khan). Ada penumpasan kaum Assassins yg berniat membunuh Monkhe. Ekspansi ini berhasil merebut Kekhalifahan Abbasiyah, tapi terhenti ketika hendak menaklukkan Mesir.

3. Penaklukan Yunnan.

Kubilai bertanggungjawab untuk menaklukkan kekaisaran Song (China Selatan), tapi akan sulit untuk menyerang langsung. Karena itu, mereka merebut Yunnan sebagai pintu menuju Song.

4. Di Xanadu

Kubilai membuat pusat kekuasaan di wilayahnya, dan menamakannya Xanadu (Shang-du), sebuah kota, tidak seperti penguasa2 Mongol sebelumnya, dan mulai memerintah.

5. Sang Penuntut

Di tengah2 usaha penaklukkan Song, Monkhe, khan saat itu, meninggal. Kubilai menjadi kandidat terkuat untuk menjadi penggantinya dan kemudian terpilih. Tapi ada tantangan dari adiknya, Ariq, yg secara sepihak menyatakan diri sebagai khan berikutnya, dan mengadakan perlawanan. Setelah berhasil meredam perlawanan Ariq, disusul kematian Hulagu, Kubilai menjadi satu2nya yg tersisa, menjadi Khan, tapi dihadapkan dengan masalah perpecahan.

Bagian II: Musim Panas

6. Ibukota Baru

Kubilai membangun ibukota baru Mongol di Beijing, beserta kota dan istana. Dia mendirikan dinasti baru, yaitu Dinasti Yuan, dan melakukan ritual untuk memperkenalkan dinasti baru ini, di antaranya upacara dan perburuan besar.

7. Merangkul Buddha dan Tibet

Untuk dapat merangkul dukungan rakyat, Kubilai memeluk Buddhisme yg sedang berkembang saat itu. Tibet ditaklukkan Kubilai sebelum mereka menaklukkan Song, tapi masalahnya ketika China sudah melepaskan diri dari Mongol, mereka tetap menganggap Tibet bagian dari China. Itu sebabnya permasalahan Tibet saat ini.

8. Kunci Penaklukan

Untuk menaklukkan Song, penyerangan dilakukan bertahap. Mereka harus menaklukkan Xiang Yang dulu, wilayah strategis di pertemuan sungai. Xiangyang dikelilingi tembok2 tinggi yang membentenginya, yang sulit ditembus. Solusi: membangun alat perang trebuchet, yang bisa melontarkan beban dari jarak jauh.

9. Juggernaut

Akhirnya, penaklukkan Song, dipimpin oleh jendral Kubilai yg tangguh, bernama Bayan. Ibukota Song

akhirnya ditaklukkan tanpa perlawanan, tapi sebelumnya mereka menghadapi perlawanan sengit dari beberapa faksi Song yg loyalis, yg memilih mati daripada tunduk pada Mongol.

Bagian III: Musim Gugur

10. Terbakar Matahari Terbit

Kubilai berusaha memperluas penaklukannya ke Jepang, tapi serangan awal karena badai. Setelahnya, Jepang membangun tembok2 untuk memperkuat pertahanan.

11. Tantangan dari Kampung Halaman.

Selain usaha menaklukkan wilayah lain, Kubilai juga menghadapi masalah dari dalam, yaitu Kaidu, sepupunya, yg menguasai Asia Tengah. Kubilai tidak berhasil menumpasnya dalam masa hidupnya.

12. China Baru Sang Khan

membahas bagaimana Kubilai memerintah China. Dia pemimpin yg cukup terbuka, menggunakan berbagai nilai2 dari budaya lain, membuat berbagai lembaga pemerintahan dan mempekerjakan orang2 taklukannya. Dia membawa perubahan2 yg lebih baik. Semua untuk menciptakan pemerintahan yg stabil, dan kebahagiaan rakyatnya.

Bagian IV: Musim Dingin

13. Kamikaze

Kubilai menjutkan usaha penaklukkan Jepang, dengan serangan melewati laut dengan armada kapalnya. Usaha kali ini gagal total, di antaranya karena faktor alam, lalu juga karena ketidakpahaman Kubilai dan orang Mongol tentang laut, juga karena keberanian orang2 Jepang.

14. Uang, Kegilaan, dan Pembunuhan

membahas kebusukan yg terjadi di pemerintahan Kubilai, yaitu Ahmad, orang kepercayaannya yg ternyata manipulatif, oportunistis dan korup. Ketidakmampuan Kubilai menyadarinya membuat penilaianya diragukan.

15. Batas Pertumbuhan

membahas kegagalan Kubilai menaklukkan daerah2 di Selatan, yaitu Burma, Annam dan Champa (Vietnam), dan Singasari (Jawa, Indonesia).

16. Bagaimana Timur Sampai ke Barat

membahas bagaimana Eropa menyadari keberadaan Mongol dan China. Awalnya karena invasi jaman Jenghis. Informasi tentang Mongol dan Kubilai, sebagian besar berasal dari cerita perjalanan Marco Polo, walaupun menurut penulis, kisah Marco Polo banyak yg dilebih2kan dan ga akurat. Cerita Marco Polo memicu orang2 Eropa untuk melakukan penjelajahan, termasuk Columbus yg kemudian menemukan benua baru.

17. Gunung Keramat, Makam Rahasia

Kemunduran Kubilai disebabkan antara lain: kehilangan dalam kehidupan pribadi (istri dan anaknya), pemberontakan (Kaidu), dan kekalahan di luar negeri. Menyebabkan depresi dan beralih ke makan dan minum2. Kubilai pun meninggal, dan dia dimakamkan di sisi kakeknya, Jenghis.

Epilog: Warisan Sang Khan Agung

Kemunduran Mongol setelah kematian Kubilai, hingga China berhasil mengusir khan terakhir. Meski begitu, dinasti2 China selanjutnya tetap meneruskan sistem yg dibangun Kubilai (Dinasti Yuan). Orang2 Mongol sendiri merasa terasing dan tak punya tempat di rumahnya sendiri.

T says

This January I resolved I will read one fiction and one non-fiction simultaneously through the year. Then

towards July middle, I started Kublai Khan by John Man and Mrs. Dalloway. Half way through both the books, suddenly started to long for children's books, fantasies and other lighter ones. And in between my favorite genre science fiction which is not light but still my favorite genre. So got into a light reading streak till October when I finally picked up and finished Mrs. Dalloway. Now done with Kublai Khan as well. It chronicles the life of Kublai Khan from the time before his ascent to the throne till his demise at an advanced age. It is a fascinating story of a man romanticized by Tennyson's famous poem 'Xanadu', And brings lot of context to other historic and contemporary events. The story is a tale of a Mongol Steppe warrior trying to fit himself into the mold of Chinese emperor. This is an interesting theme - a barbaric empire conquering a region and tried to claim the rich culture of the conquered people. It also gives a context of Chinese history for Kublai was apparently the one who actually united most of current China. It is interesting how back in those days, Mongolia conquered China while today Mongolia lives a little country under China's looming shadow. There are also lot of individual stories such as the adventures of Marco Polo, Khan's campaign against the Jing and Song dynasties who ruled parts of China, his strained relations with his brothers and cousins, the internecine struggle of the heirs of Genghis Khan. The book also throws light upon the political expediencies for the brutalities of leaders such as Genghis. Overall an instructive read.

Dr.J.G. says

One begins to read this book about the famous historical persona from Mongolia, a land of mystery for most of the world and a land that much horrors emanated from for those that experienced the invasions and onslaughts, and the author assures us that the famous Kublai Khan and his much more famous grandfather Chengis Khan (Chingis Khan and Genghis Khan being alternative spellings) were not the murderous figures as they are normally understood but men of ability, thought, and more.

And then he proceeds to give the history of the person and the clan, with all that they and their armies, mostly cavalries, did to the world they touched. Horror it is, unmitigated horror, at every stage almost, considering how many hundreds of thousands were massacred in how many different cities in very diverse parts of the world, only because this clan began with the man who believed he had a divine mandate to rule the world - and his progeny inherited this belief and stuck to it, often when they lacked territory to rule, and had infights amongst the various cousins all progeny of the one Chingis Khan only so one could find supremacy to rule the piece of earth he had chosen to rule. As for descendants of this man, somewhere one has read that they number in millions, with whole villages of central Asia often claiming descent from him.

Not that descriptions of thought and details of administrations lack as far as the life and times of Kublai Khan - and his mother - go, but the constant running theme is war, massacre of cities that do not capitulate immediately, and subsequent taxation of the conquered territory for financing of the future campaigns of the Mongols. Having conquered the territory from Mongolia to Hungary via all of central Asia and much of west Asia, the clan has not enough yet, and gets their nose tweaked only by Egypt due to the change in land; then they - specifically Kublai Khan - turn to China, conquer Tibet and all of China and declare him emperor of China (hence the Chinese claim to Tibet and genocide of hundreds of thousands of Tibetans with deliberate settling of Tibet by Han race from faraway east coast, all because if Kublai Khan was Chinese emperor he must be Chinese and not Mongolian, according to Chinese logic; by this logic Hanover could very well claim US and all the rest of English colonies!); and yet this is not enough, he must then turn to Japan and think about what next.

There are explicit details of how many thousands, sometimes even hundreds of thousands, massacred in what city, from Baghdad, and Nishapur (which translates as City of Night, in Sanskr; so it probably was so

prosperous a metropolis it need not sleep at night to save on oil for lamps) in Persia to various cities in China and Japan. But the horror of the whole Mongol mentality is reflected in the mere detail of administrative time when they are of the firm opinion that farmers and peasants should be simply driven out - no matter if they starve by millions - from their land, and the land turned to pasture for the horses of Mongolians, since Mongolian horses are more precious than humans of other races and nationalities.

Not that Chinese lack horrors to match - the explicit descriptions of their weapon sophistication leaves merely scientific progress as gap from then until now, with their not only explosives knowledge and usage for war but also chemical and biological weapons.

No wonder it takes so long to read this - it takes long to overcome the horror of various accomplishments of Mongols to be able to pick it up again and go on with the next part!

And Chinese solution to the shame of conquest of China by Mongolia is simple - declare the Mongolian emperor of China as a Chinese, claim his conquests as Chinese territory, and simply never mention any of the persons of any of the other races that contributed to the glory of China, such as the architect of the palace Kublai Khan had constructed in Beijing - today's imperial palace in the place is constructed along the same lines, following the same plans and dimensions, according to this author, post the razing of his palace by the successor.

One little detail - the famous wall of China was constructed to keep out other Mongols post Kublai Khan. Thank heavens, or else who knows what other parts of earth China would claim were a part of China!

Tuesday, June 26, 2012

Zeke Chase says

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree...

In 1797, British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge did a little reading on Kublai Khan, smoked some opium, passed out and had a vivid dream the Great Khan's majestic palaces. He awoke with a 300 line poem already in his head, but was interrupted by his opium dealer, who'd arrived in the middle of the night and took an hour to complete their transaction. Thus, Coleridge forgot most of his poem, and was able to scrounge together a mere 54 lines with which to write one of the most infamous poems in the English language.

John Man not only knows his history, but he also has a way of writing. It's his prose. He knows exactly where to go with his narrative to convey the most amount of information and keep you interested. In "Genghis Khan: Life, Death and Resurrection", he spent a good deal of time describing modern day Mongolia, the tribulations Mongols faced under Stalin and the emerging risk of Chinese cultural and economic domination, all by relating it to his travels through Mongolia and the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia. A sort of steppe travelogue that's very heavy on the history. It's not the sort of writing style that's for everyone, but it really worked for me. Here, in Kublai Khan: The Mongol King Who Remade China" he does the same, recounting his travels through China, modern day Beijing and the ruins of Xanadu, but it's less so. The bulk of Genghis' life is, after all, a small collection of details painted over a wide canvas which he have only one limited source for, whereas Kublai's life we have much more.

The book is divided into four parts – Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter – which is divided into 17

chapters. Collectively, they cover Kublai's beginnings; Hulegu's atrocities in the Middle East; the conquest of Yunnan; the civil war with Ariq-Boke; Kublai's bureaucratic and religious administration; the key to the Song conquest; both attempts at Japan; Kaidu's challenge, the attempts at Burma, Vietnam and Java; and the end of his life and his secret burial (amongst other subjects). Oh, and the genesis of Coleridge's poem.

While I applaud Man for his thoroughness, there is perhaps one area where the book could have used a more detailed history: Nayan's Rebellion. He does cover it, briefly in the end, but it's a by-the-way sort of mention. Also, he references the current China-Mongolia relationship in his epilogue, building upon what he's written in "Genghis Khan", but largely glossing over that as well. In that regard, it helps to have read the other book (which I would highly recommend).

An excellent book. I've always sort of found Kublai to be one of the boring ones in Mongol history – perhaps because, to me, he comes off more Chinese than Mongolian. Here, Man makes it interesting by exploring quandary in Kublai's own cultural identity.

Uday Saripalli says

Very vivid and detailed history of the life and times of Kublai Khan, one of the world's greatest nation builders and founder of China's Yuan dynasty. Incidentally it is the legacy of Kublai Khan and the Yuan dynasty that forms the basis for China's territorial claims in Central Asia and Tibet. The book also deals with Marco Polo's travels to Yuan China and the time he spent in the company of Kublai Khan. John Man lucidly alludes to the controversies surrounding Marco Polo's travels and presents facts and arguments both pro and con while at the same time maintaining neutrality. Kudos to John Man

Martin Birch says

The story of Kublai Khan and his time is complex and challenging. Running from Mongolia; through the empires/kingdoms of China and Tibet; to Japan and the outskirts of India; it is history on an epic scale.

John addresses this well and the book is very readable although I did struggle more than with his book on Attila the Hun. This may be partly down to my intimate knowledge of Europe and its landscape; whereas my knowledge of the far East is more sketchy.

Ultimately this is a good book covering the history in a thorough and yet entertaining way. Because of the subject matter however it is not really something you can read a few pages at a time but more likely need to dedicate a couple of hours to sit down and read properly.

Ethan Stan says

I'm a history nerd and have a lot of patience for its drier parts. But let me tell you, this book surprised me with just how readable, exciting, and entertaining it was. John Man has taken a distant story and made it into an engrossing tale, not unlike Marco Polo, whom he mentions frequently. Punctuated with his personal anecdotes and explanations of how ancient history influences the modern world, it really is a "boring history book" worth reading.

Tin Wee says

Nicely paced biography of Kublai Khan, his exploits and challenges. Kublai expanded the Mongol empire, ended the Song dynasty, and put in place a bureaucracy to rule his lands which span different cultures, religions and languages- no mean feat for one from a nomadic background.
