

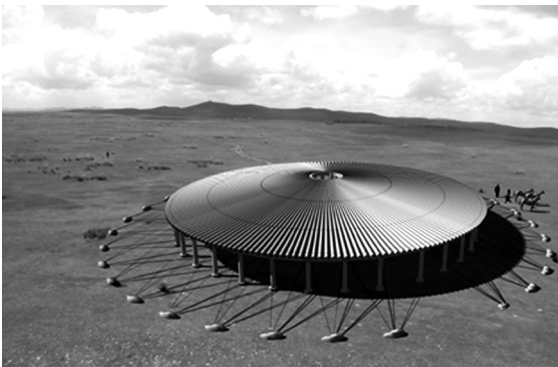
Chinggis Khan's Vision of World Rule, and How it Remade China

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Sometimes it is useful to be an outsider. It allows me to look at the world and history from a long way off, which happened in a dream I had a few nights ago. I dreamed I was kidnapped by aliens. In their orbiting spaceship, they put a little device in my ear. It was a universal translator, which solved the language problem. The captain, a charming creature with ten tentacles and a smart uniform, explained why I had been captured.

He said 'We have been observing your planet for years, and we want you to explain something. We want you to explain China. In their TV broadcasts, the Chinese speak a lot about national unity. They say they are one big family. But when we look at the country' – I could see what he meant on a huge TV screen – 'it is not at all unified. There is the heart of China – two big rivers, fertile land, huge cities. But then all around very different landscapes: the deserts of the northwest, the great icy mountains of Tibet, the semi-tropical southwest of Yunnan. They don't belong together. Please tell us – why is this all one country?'

So I told them. To understand why China is so big and so varied, you have to look outside China, north - imagine please the view on the screen swinging north, over the Gobi and the grasslands, to mountains and the beginning of the Siberian forests. And then, I said, you have to stop looking, and use your imagination, because you have to get inside the mind of a young man. On one of these mountains, about 830 years ago, this young man – Temuchin, of course - had just escaped from his enemies. In gratitude for his escape, he gave thanks to his god, Blue Heaven. He felt he was



protected. But he was a nobody. Why should Heaven protect him? There had to be a reason.

Over the next few years, he found an answer. He proved to be one of the most brilliant leaders in history. He defeated his enemies and united warring clans. Every success told him more and more strongly why he had been saved by Heaven – to go on with his task, uniting not only clans but nations, not only nations but the whole world, until the world was at peace under Mongol rule. Yes, peace – Chinggis is remembered for the deaths he caused, millions of them, but the very long term strategy was to destroy in order to win, and to win in order to rule in peace. This was the vision that Chinggis and his followers took from his successes – that the whole world had been given to the Mongols by Heaven, for ever, and it was Chinggis's task and his heirs' task to make everyone else realize this astonishing fact.

Now at this stage in my dream I asked my hosts to refocus their lens, to pull back until the whole earth comes into view. You see, (I said), how very unrealistic that vision was. The whole world! In the late 12th century no one on earth knew what it was. Of course, no Mongol leader could reach Africa, the Americas, and Australia, let alone conquer them, let alone rule them. The idea is ridiculous.

But Chinggis didn't know that. So, like a creative teenager who believes nothing is impossible, he started. And having started he found there was no end. First, he turned on the Tanguts of today's northwest China, then on north China, then half the world of Islam, and Afghanistan, and always more and more.

So when he died in 1227, he had done much. How fantastic to start from nothing and nowhere, and create the world's largest land empire! But so much more remained to be done. It's not easy to wage war in order to rule in peace. The task would be taken on by his heirs. So the empire grew further, until it included Hungary and Iraq and southern Russia. But still his first target, China remained only half conquered.

The vision of world rule was inherited by Chinggis's descendants. The empire was divided between children, grandchildren and cousins, and soon each part had its own interests. Thirty years after his death, Monkhe was khan, sharing Chinggis's vision with his brother Kublai. Their main task was to follow their grandfather's dream by conquering all of southern China, the mighty empire known as Song. Kublai was in command. As a start, he led an army right past Song's western borders and took Yunnan, which had been independent. Then, when he became khan, he conquered all of Song. It took 20 years. By 1279, he was head of a family that ruled one fifth of the world's populated land area, part of which was his personal domain - all China.

But ruling China was a difficult step politically. His background was in a land of open spaces and no cities, but here he was ruling a land of cities, and farmers,

and a complex culture with a language that was foreign to him. He needed good government, records, taxes, and well-trained officials. So to rule China, he had to rule in China. That was why his court was at first on the border of old Mongolia and China, in the place the Chinese call Shang Du, Upper Capital. The English know it as Xanadu. The Mongols called it DzuNaiman Sum. Some Mongolians saw him as a traitor for not ruling in Kharkhorin. A few still do. But there was no way to rule China from Mongolia. That was why he rebuilt Beijing, destroyed by Chinggis in 1215. Nor could he abandon his Mongol roots. He needed both. That was why he used Xanadu as his summer place and went back and forth to Beijing every spring and every autumn.

Marco Polo came from Europe in the late 13th century and worked for Kublai. Marco Polo was not a reliable reporter all the time, but sometimes he was very good. One thing he described was what he called a Cane Palace which Kublai built in Xanadu. From his description this is, I believe, what it looked like. But what is it? I suggest it is a bamboo lodge, where Kublai and his family and friends could gather while playing at hunting, remembering great days in the huge open spaces of Mongolia. But it had a wider purpose. Shang Du was a Chinese city. But Kublai's roots were in Mongolia. He needed a symbol that united the two. I believe this building was it. It was built before he conquered southern China, but after he conquered Yunnan. Yunnan has bamboo. So only Chinese architects could build it. But bamboo makes a wonderful dome, which gives it the shape of a ger. Chinese materials, a Mongolian shape and also collapsible, so that it could be taken to pieces and stored every year - a perfect way to express Kublai's need to join two very different worlds.

Ruling his own part of the empire needed one more element - an ideology. Chinggis's vision of world rule would not appeal to all China's varied peoples and religions. They knew nothing of Blue Heaven. But Buddhism, the religion of Tibet, had a tradition of the Universal Emperor, the Chakravartin Rajah, the ruler of the world. It was for this reason that he invited a young lama from Tibet to be his advisor. The lama is known as Phags-pa, which means Noble Guru. To control Phags-pa's religious sect, Kublai needed to control Tibet. That was why Tibet had to become part of Kublai's China.

So now he ruled a unified China, plus Tibet and Yunnan. Xinjiang, the Western Regions, had been part of ancient China, but they had been cut off by the Tanguts. They had also been very ruthlessly destroyed by Chinggis, and their lands inherited by Kublai. That opened the way to Xinjiang, which Kublai claimed from two rebellious relatives.

All this was a foundation for more conquests. But Kublai had reached the limits of what was possible. He tried to invade Japan, twice, and failed disastrously. The second invasion in 1281 with 4,000 ships was destroyed by a typhoon. But I

think it would have failed anyway. Its ships were poorly built, the leadership was disastrous and the Japanese were extremely determined. Kublai also tried to invade Vietnam and Java, and failed. Kublai knew about horses, but not about ships.

So there we are: central China as it always was, and all the western parts – Yunnan, Tibet and Xinjiang – brought under Mongol control by Kublai. As a result of Kublai, China more than doubled in size.

And of course when the Ming took over from the Mongols in 1368, they simply took over the borders established by Kublai. So did the Manchus in 1644. So did the Communist Party in 1949, though by then Mongolia had broken away – but that's another story which you all know better than I.

Let's keep the focus on China. If you wonder why China's borders are where they are, you must look back to Kublai and his ambition to lay the foundations of world rule. And where did this extraordinary idea originate? In the mind of a young man, unknown to the outside world, who escaped enemies on an obscure mountain in the Khentii. If luck had been against him, he would have died, and there would have been no vision of world rule, and no Mongol empire, and China would have evolved very differently over the last 800 years.

Ladies and gentlemen, we all know that Chinggis's vision and genius created Mongolia. But not many people know that the same vision of world rule, inherited by his grandson, also created the borders of modern China.