

What Were the Mongol People Like In the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries? Depends on Whom You Ask!

According to Chinggis Khan's shaman, reported in a Mongol-written history in 1228:

Before you were born [1167] . . . everyone was feuding. Rather than sleep they robbed each other of their possessions. . . The whole nation was in rebellion. Rather than rest they fought each other. In such a world one did not live as one wished, but rather in constant conflict. There was no respite [letup], only battle. There was no affection, only mutual slaughter (Secret History of the Mongols, sec. 254, qtd. in Ratchnevsky 12).

According to the Italian friar John of Plano Carpini, who spent several months in the Great Khan's court in the late 1240's:

In the whole world there are to be found no more obedient subjects than the Tatar . . . they pay their lords more respect than any other people, and would hardly dare to lie to them . . . Their women are chaste . . . Wars, quarrels, the infliction [causing] of bodily harm, and manslaughter do not occur among them, and there are no large-scale thieves or robbers among them . . . They treat one another with due respect; they regard each other almost as members of one family, and, although they do not have a lot of food, they like to share it with one another. Moreover, they are accustomed to deprivation [doing without]; if, therefore, they have fasted for a day or two, and have not eaten anything at all, they do not easily lose their tempers . . . While riding they can endure extreme cold and at times also fierce heat.

They are extremely arrogant toward other people, [and] tend to anger . . . easily . . . They are the greatest liars in the world in dealing with other people . . . They are crafty and sly . . . [and] have an admirable ability to keep their intentions secret . . . They are messy in their eating and drinking and in their whole way of life, [and] cling fiercely to what they have. They have no conscience about killing other people . . . If anyone is found in the act of plundering or stealing in the territory under their power, he is put to death without any mercy.

The chiefs or princes of the army . . . take up their stand some distance away from the enemy, and they have beside them their children on horseback and their womenfolk and horses . . . to give the impression that a great crowd of fighting- men is assembled there. (Qtd. in Spuler 78-79.)

According to the French friar William of Rubruck who spent several months in the Great Khan's court in the early 1250's:

It is the duty of the women to drive the carts, get the dwelling on and off them, milk the cows, make butter and to dress and sew skins . . . They also sew the boots, the socks, and

the clothing, make the felt and cover the houses.

The men make the bows and arrows, manufacture stirrups and bits, do the carpentering on their dwellings and carts; they take care of the horses, milk the mares, churn the mares' milk, make the skins in which it is put; they also look after the camels and load them. Both sexes look after the sheep and goats.

At the entrance [of the palace] Master William of Paris has made for him [the Great Khan] a large silver tree, at the foot of which are four silver lions each having a pipe and all belching forth white mares' milk . . . The whole dwelling was completely covered inside with cloth of gold, and in the middle in a little hearth was a fire of twigs and roots of wormwood . . . and also the dung of oxen (Qtd. in Spuler 96-97).

According to a letter by a Hungarian bishop who had custody of two Tartar captives taken in Russia, written to the bishop of Paris in 1257:

I asked them about their belief; and in few words, they believe nothing. They began to tell me, that they were come from their own country to conquer the world. They make use of the Jewish [actually, Uighur; the Uighurs were a semi-sedentary, literate steppe people, and early allies of the Mongols] letters, because formerly they had none of their own . . . They eat frogs, dogs, serpents and all things . . . Their horses are good but stupid (Qtd. in Paris 449).

According to a description by Matthew Paris, English chronicler, in the 1270's :

They are inhuman and beastly, rather monsters than men, thirsting for and drinking blood, tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and men, dressed in ox-hides, armed with plates of iron . . . thickset, strong, invincible, indefatigable . . . They are without human laws, know no comforts, are more ferocious than lions or bears . . . They know no other language than their own, which no one else knows; for until now there has been no access to them....so that there could be no knowledge of their customs or persons . . . They wander about with their flocks and their wives, who are taught to fight like men (Qtd. in Rockhill).

What was the Mongol Leader, Chinggis (Genghis) Great Khan, Really Like? Depends on Whom You Ask!

According to a southern Chinese author who was an eyewitness of the bloody Mongol campaign in north China:

- This man is brave and decisive, he is self-controlled, and lenient [merciful] towards the population; he reveres [respects] Heaven and Earth, prizes loyalty and justice (Qtd. in Ratchnevsky 167).

The Indian historian Juzjani wrote in 1256 in the Sultanate of Delhi and had been an eyewitness of Chinggis Khan's raid on India in 1221. According to him:

- A man of tall stature, of vigorous build, robust in body, the hair on his face scanty and turned white, with cat's eyes, possessed of great energy, discernment [judgment], genius and understanding, awe-inspiring, a butcher, just, resolute, an over thrower of enemies, intrepid [fearless], sanguinary [bloodthirsty] and cruel (Qtd. in Saunders 63).

Chinggis himself had a letter written to a Chinese Daoist sage whom he had invited to discuss religious topics. The Daoist's companion included the letter in the account of the trip. He said:

- I wear the same clothing and eat the same food as the cow-herds and horse-herders. We make the same sacrifices and we share our riches. I look upon the nation as my new-born child, and I care for my soldiers as if they were my brothers (Qtd. in Ratchnevsky 149).

The Muslim historian Rashid al-Din, the official court historian of the Mongol khan of Persia. According to him, some of Chinggis's sayings included.

- From the goodness of severity the stability of government.
- When the master is away hunting, or at war, the wife must keep the household in good order. Good husbands are known by their good wives. If a wife be stupid or dull, wanting in reason and orderliness, she makes obvious the badness of her husband.
- Only a man who feels hunger and thirst and by this estimates the feelings of others is fit to be a commander of troops. The campaign and its hardships must be in proportion with the strength of the weakest of the warriors.
- My bowmen and warriors loom like thick forests: their wives, sweethearts and maidens shine like red flames. My task and intention is to sweeten their mouths with gifts of sweet sugar, to decorate their breasts, backs and shoulders with garments [clothes] of brocade, to seat them on good geldings [horses], give them to drink from pure and sweet rivers, provide their beasts with good and abundant [plentiful] pastures, and to order that the great roads and highways that serve as ways for the people be cleared of garbage, tree- stumps and all bad things; and not to allow dirt and thorns in the tents.

- It is delightful and felicitous [good] for a man to subdue rebels and conquer and extirpate [destroy] his enemies, to take all they possess, to cause their servants to cry out, to make tears run down their faces and noses, to ride their pleasant-paced geldings [horses], to make the bellies and navels of their wives his bed and bedding, to admire their rosy cheeks, to kiss them and suck their red lips (Rashid al-Din, *Collected Chronicles*, qtd. in Riasanovsky 91)

According to inference from the laws or decisions made by Chinggis:

- If it is necessary to write to rebels or send messages to them they shall not be intimidated by an excessive display of confidence on our part or by the size of our army, but they shall merely be told: if you submit you will find peace and benevolence. But if you continue to resist—what then do we know [about your future]? Only God knows what then shall become of you (Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Syriacum*, qtd. in Spuler 40-41).
- Whoever gives food or clothing to a captive without the permission of his captor is to be put to death.
- [Leaders are to] personally examine the troops and their armament before going to battle, even to needle and thread; to supply the troops with everything they need; and to punish those lacking any necessary equipment.
- Women accompanying the troops [are] to do the work and perform the duties of men, while the latter are absent fighting.
- All religions [are] to be respected and . . . no preference [is] to be shown to any of them (Qtd. in Riasanovsky 83-85).
- When fighting against hereditary enemies of his tribe, Chinggis's own son begged him to spare the life of the enemy leader's son. Chinggis replied: "How often have we fought them? They have caused us much vexation and sorrow. How can we spare his life? He will only instigate another rebellion. I have conquered these lands, armies, and tribes for you, my sons. Of what use is he? There is no better place for an enemy of our nation than the grave (Rashid al-Din, *Collected Chronicles*, qtd. in Riasanovsky 86)!"
- At a Grand Council meeting headed by Chinggis in 1202, it was decided that "in days gone by the Tartars killed our ancestors and forefathers. [Therefore] we will sacrifice them in revenge and retribution...by massacring all except the youngest...down to the very last male and the remainder will be shared as slaves among us all (Secret History of the Mongols, secs. 148, 154, qtd. in Ratchnevsky 151).

How Did Chinggis Khan Turn a Pastoral Nomadic Society Into an Efficient War Machine?

Before Chinggis, the Mongols were organized into tribes that fought and raided each other for plunder, for women (no marriages were allowed between members of the same tribe), and to avenge insults. Largely self-sufficient, they often raided, traded with, and extracted tribute from neighboring settled agricultural communities.

In most tribes, there were no specialists other than shamans and blacksmiths. Women and men both contributed to the economy, and the division of labor by sex was not rigid. Those men who could afford it married more than one wife, each of whom had her separate household, owned property outright, and had considerable freedom of action. Women rode, shot with bow and arrow, and hunted. They gave political advice and could rise to the rank of chief, though rarely. The senior wife had special status and respect, and her children were often favored as heirs. On campaign, wives, children, and flocks often went with the army. Women and even children could be drafted to ride on the fringes of battle to simulate larger numbers. It is unclear whether they ever took an active part in combat. The tribes were divided into nobles and commoners, and only members of noble lineages could become chiefs, though class differences were not strongly marked.

All Mongols were fighters, but Chinggis made a reorganized army the core of the society and the carrier of many of his reforms. Under him and his successors, the Mongol army had the following characteristics, many designed by Chinggis himself:

- All males 15-70 served in the army, all as cavalry.
- The army's 95 units of 10,000 soldiers were subdivided into units of 1,000, 100, and 10. Members of different tribes were mixed together in units of every size to ensure loyalty to the army above loyalty to the tribe. Allies and levies from conquered territories were also integrated into the fighting force, the latter usually being placed in the front ranks.
- Absolute obedience to orders from superiors was enforced.
- Officers had tight control over their troops' actions (plunder only with permission, no one allowed to transfer out of their unit).
- Officers and men were bound to each other by mutual loyalty and two-way responsibilities.
- No one in the army was paid, though all shared to varying degrees in the booty. All contributed to a fund to take care of those too old, sick, or hurt to fight.
- During three months every year, large-scale hunting expeditions served as intensive military training simulations.
- Cavalry troops had to supply their own bows and other military equipment, which had to meet officers' standards.

- Gathering intelligence had high priority. Scouts were sent out, local knowledge sought, and traveling merchants rewarded for information.
- Foreign experts and advisors were extensively used, notably Chinese and Persian engineers skilled at making and using siege weapons such as catapults and battering rams.

The highest level of government was Chinggis and his family, especially his sons by his senior wife and their descendants, known as the “Golden Family.” From among their members the Great Khans and after Chinggis Khan’s death the khans ruling the four successor empires were selected by agreement of the Kuriltai, the council made up of Chinggis’s family members and those others they invited.

Lack of clear-cut rules of succession opened the way for power struggles after the death of each ruler. Some earlier pastoral nomadic empires did not long survive the death of the leader who founded them. The Mongol state was unusual in surviving for as long as it did, even though it divided into four separate kingdoms, or khanates after about 1260.

Chinggis Khan’s administrators were picked for demonstrated high performance regardless of their wealth or social class. Among Chinggis’s closest advisors were people from both allied and conquered non-Mongol backgrounds, notably literate scholars and scribes from China, Persia, and the Inner Eurasian oasis towns

What Was it Like to Live in the Mongol Homeland?

John of Plano Carpini, an Italian friar who traveled to Mongolia in the 1240's described the Mongol homeland as follows:

- In some parts the country is extremely mountainous, in others it is flat . . . in some districts there are small woods, but otherwise it is completely bare of trees . . . Not one hundredth part of the land is fertile, nor can it bear . . . unless it be irrigated by running water, and brooks and streams are few there and rivers very rare . . . Although the land is otherwise barren, it is fit for grazing cattle; even if not very good, at least sufficiently so.
- The weather there is astonishingly irregular, for in the middle of the summer . . . there is fierce thunder and lightning which cause the death of many men, and at the same time there are very heavy falls of snow. There are also hurricanes of bitterly cold winds, so violent that at times men can ride on horseback only with great effort. [Sometimes one can] scarcely see owing to the great clouds of dust. Very heavy hail also often falls there. Then also in summer there is suddenly great heat, and suddenly extreme cold (Qtd. in Dawson 5-6).

Carpini was right. Winters in the Mongol homeland were long and cold and still are today. The average mean temperature in January is minus 34 degrees centigrade, but extremes have been recorded of minus 55 degrees. The air temperature fluctuates heavily from day to day. Even in the mountainous region of the northwest, the heat can hit 40 degrees centigrade. There is little rainfall, and 85 percent of it falls during the three summer months. There is evidence that the climate of the steppes had turned cooler and drier for a while before and during the time of the Mongol conquests. Climatological data shows that the climate of the steppes was turning cooler and drier about the time of the Mongol conquests, reducing the season when ample grazing land was available for horses, sheep, and other stock. We can only speculate, however, about a possible connection between the Mongol conquests and an ecological crisis (Christian 387).

Horses were essential to the Mongol way of life. They were pastured entirely on the open steppe, with no supplementary grain or hay even in winter. Although extremely hardy, Mongol horses could not be ridden day after day or carry heavy loads. Therefore, every mounted soldier ideally possessed not one horse but a string of remounts as well (Lattimore 2).

Long-distance travel was tough. **William of Rubruck**, a Flemish monk who visited Karakorum, the Mongol capital, in the 1250s, took eleven months to return from there to the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean. The Merchant's Handbook, a book based mostly on information from Genoese traders of the early 1300's, suggests a nine-month journey from the Black Sea to Beijing, the capital of the Chinese Mongol state. People traveled across the steppe by ox-drawn wagon, river boat, camel caravan, donkey, and horse. The Daoist sage Ch'ang Chun took fourteen months to get from the Chinese border to Samarkand in what is today Uzbekistan, a country north of Afghanistan (Larner Appendix II).

His companion **Li Chih-Ch'ang's** account of the journey suggests some reasons for the length of time taken. He reported that:

- The country was now so mountainous, the ascents so formidable and the valley-gorges so deep that the use of wagons became very difficult. The road here was first made for military purposes by the great Khan's third son. Our cavalry escort helped us to deal with the wagons, dragging them up hill by attaching ropes to the shafts and getting them down by tying ropes to the wheels and locking them fast . . . Our oxen were incapable of further effort and abandoning them by the roadside we harnessed six horses to our wagons. Henceforward we did not again use oxen.
- We descended a deep ravine . . . Stream after stream rushes into this defile, forming a torrent that bends and twists down the pass . . . It was the Great Khan's second son who when accompanying his father on the western campaign first constructed a road through the defile, piercing the rocks and building no less than forty-eight timber bridges of such width that two carts can drive over them side by side (Li Chih-Ch'ang 76-77, 84-85).

Mongol Technology: Highly Effective Low Tech

The Mongols' own tribal technology was similar to that of other steppe nomads. The weapons their blacksmiths made on portable anvils and forges were relatively crude. The Mongols also acquired by plunder, tribute, and trade high-quality weapons made by urban artisans.

The bow was the Mongols' most important weapon. Made from layers of horn, sinew, wood, and waterproof lacquer, it shot an arrow faster and with more power than a wooden bow could. It had a pull of up to 160 pounds and a range of up to 350 yards.

A stone thumb-ring used in the release further increased the speed and penetrating power of arrows, which were made for different purposes. There were short and long range arrows, "singing" arrows used for signaling, fire-starting arrows, and arrows tipped with tiny gunpowder grenades. The Mongols did not, however, win every battle they fought because mounted enemies usually had similar equipment.

Mongol troops also carried iron or leather helmets, a leather-covered wicker shield, a lasso, a forearm-strapped dagger, a small sword, and if they were heavily armed, a scimitar, battle-axe, and 12-foot lance. Soldiers learned from the Chinese to wear closely-woven silk undershirts. If an arrow hit a soldier's torso, it would drive the silk into the wound without breaking it. Therefore, the arrowhead might do less damage and could more easily be removed.

Mongol saddlebags, made from the waterproof stomachs of animals, could be inflated to help in river crossings. These bags held minimal field rations of millet, dried meat, fermented mares' milk in a leather bottle, and tools such as files and needles for repairing equipment. When a Mongol messenger needed to ride a long distance and had little food and no time to hunt, he sometimes opened a vein in one of his horses and drank the blood.

In military communications, it well-coordinated and efficient use of transport and signaling that gave the Mongols an edge. They signaled by shooting whistling arrows tuned to make different sounds, waving flags (a forerunner of the semaphore), burning torches, and dispatching fast-riding couriers. The army set up and maintained networks of staging posts where riders could rest and exchange horses.

Could an Empire be Ruled From Horseback?

Some fifty years after Chinggis's death, the following situation existed. The unified Mongol empire divided about 1260 into four successor empires, or khanates: 1) China and part of Mongolia, where the Mongol regime was called the Yuan dynasty, 2) Inner Eurasia, a state called Chagatay after the name of one of Chinggis's sons, 3) the Khanate of the Golden Horde (or the Khanate of Kipchak), which included the steppes north of the Caspian and Black Seas, as well as domination over Russia, and 4) the Ilkhanate of Persia and Iraq. The Ilkhans had that title because they were in theory "deputies" of the Great Khan in China, though in reality they were independent.

- Khubilai Khan was the Great Khan and ruled China. But his relatives who ruled Chagatay, the Golden Horde, and the Ilkhanate in Persia and Iraq were in reality independent, though acknowledging the Great Khan as supreme. The term Ilkhanate means "deputy" of the Great Khan.
- The military under Khubilai Khan consisted of an infantry and a navy, as well as cavalry. Soldiers were paid from the government treasury.
- In China, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists from central and western Eurasia were given most key positions because the Mongol rulers distrusted Chinese high officials owing to their local interests and loyalties. Governing methods were a mixture of Chinese, Muslim, Turkish, and Mongol ideas. Finances for the empire came almost entirely from relatively low-level taxation, based on as accurate a census of the population as possible.
- Khubilai Khan performed public Confucian rituals prescribed for Chinese emperors, while personally leaning towards Tibetan Buddhism and keeping up to shamanist rituals.
- Ideology of conquest showed in Khubilai's thinking of himself as a universal emperor. He made repeated, though mostly unsuccessful, attempts to conquer Japan, Vietnam, Burma, and even Java in Southeast Asia.
- Khubilai's ideology of rule was not only to enrich Mongols, but also to serve China as a Son of Heaven. Concerned to establish the legitimacy of his rule, he tried, with some success, to enlist the goodwill and support of the peoples he ruled.
- Among Buddhists, his legitimacy was bolstered when monks declared him to be the reincarnation of a Bodhisattva, or Buddhist saint. He worked to keep Mongol backing by acting traditionally in at least some ways, and protecting Mongols' privileged position in the empire. He drew his advisors from many ethnic, language, and religious backgrounds.
- In line with Khubilai's ideology of rule, his government had a welfare program. It paid for assistance to the old, infirm, and poor out of taxes. Villages that suffered natural disasters were sent grain, clothes, cash, and had their taxes cancelled.

- Khubilai founded the Office for Stimulation of Agriculture; forbade nomad animals from roaming on farmland; arranged for the teaching of advanced agricultural techniques to the population around the old Mongol capital of Karakorum; and forgave taxes for those who chose to become settled farmers.
- He moved the Mongol capital to a newly-built city near modern Beijing in China, its site chosen according to the Chinese ideas of feng shui.
- The name of the dynasty was changed to Yuan—Chinese word meaning “origin.” Mongols were forbidden intermarriage with Chinese.
- Women’s position under Mongol rule was generally higher than it had been in the agricultural societies the Mongols had conquered. A woman was named provincial governor under Khubilai. Mongol women refused to adopt the Chinese custom of foot binding. Khubilai took his second wife Chabi’s advice on some public issues.

What was the Impact of the Mongols on Conquered Peoples?

The impact of the Mongol conquest on the conquered peoples included:

- Death
- Destruction Extortion of wealth Disease Displacement

It also included:

- the intensification of activity on the trade routes connecting East Asia with the Mediterranean lands and Europe.
- the further spread of Islam in Asia
- the advancement of Tibetan Buddhism in China.

Death: The Mongols inflicted it on a large scale. In battle, their powerful bows caused heavy enemy casualties. Moreover, mass slaughter of defeated enemy soldiers and civilians was used as deliberate policy of terror in order to:

- decrease the enemy's will to fight.
- induce cities to surrender without fighting, thus avoiding long sieges, which the Mongol army could not afford because it needed to keep moving to find grazing land for its horses.
- avoid the risk of leaving enemies behind that might be capable of renewing resistance.
- reduce the size of the occupying detachments needing to be left behind.

The total death toll directly inflicted by the Mongols during the period of their conquests, spanning nearly two centuries, may have been several millions. This includes the deaths by hunger and disease that were by-products of Mongol military operations and rule.

But:

- More urban populations were spared than were massacred. Often spared were artisans, clerics of all religions, scribes, scholars, merchants, young women, and often officers, nobles, and administrators.
- Mass slaughter was not a Mongol monopoly either in their own time or later. In taking a little Song Chinese town in 1218, the Jin general had 15,000 of the inhabitants put to the sword. In 1291, King Edward of England slew nearly 10,000 people of Berwick. In 1303, 30,000 Hindus died in a battle at Chitor.
- By the time of Mongke's rule, the Great Khan insisted that destruction be limited to a minimum and civilians be left alone. To show he was serious, he had a senior Mongol commander of 10,000 publicly executed for killing a Persian civilian.
- Khubilai's revision of the Chinese law code reduced the number of offenses that carried the death penalty to half what it had been under the previous dynasties.

Destruction: The Mongols often destroyed the towns they attacked, usually as a by-product of the battle, sometimes deliberately after their conquest. Mongols traditionally had no use for towns. Destroying them was a practical measure to prevent their use for resistance.

- Irrigation channels, without which agriculture in regions with fragile ecosystems was impossible, were in many areas seriously damaged or neglected. Gradually they silted up and became unusable, with serious long-term ecological consequences that resulted in a set-back for agriculture over wide areas for centuries. This problem was especially acute in Persia and Iraq.

- Destruction was a by-product of the Mongols' conquests, rather than policy. They were unaware of or uninterested in the damage; while the local population, reduced by flight, massacre, famine, disease, could not spare the labor to restore and maintain the irrigation channels.

But:

- There was a great deal of construction initiated and supported by the Mongols. Many of the towns the Mongols destroyed rose again a few years later with Mongol help.
- Courier services were expanded and many additional way stations were built along trade routes, where both troops and civilian travelers could get food, drink, lodging, and a change of horses. In China under Khubilai Khan, the postal relay system came to include 1400 way stations 14-40 miles apart.
- Roads and bridges built to service the Mongol military became trade and travel routes.
- The extension of the Grand Canal to Beijing by the Mongols allowed cheap transport of rice from southern to northern China.

Extortion of wealth: After first plundering the conquered, the conquerors were for a while satisfied with tribute in the form of demand of silk, grain, precious metals, and sophisticated war machinery. Unpredictable and capricious demands were gradually replaced with regular though intermittently extortionate taxes, sometimes made worse by demands that greedy Mongol princes and officials made for extra payments.

But:

- Some of the wealth that flowed to the Mongols was redistributed. Only part made its way to Mongolia. Much went back to those conquered areas where Mongols settled as occupying troops, administrators, and governors.
- From about 1250, the Mongols undertook reforms. The Great Khan Mongke commanded: "Make the agricultural population safe from unjustified harassment, and bring despoiled provinces back to a habitable condition." He introduced the very modern graduated income tax; repaid debts of previous rulers said to be owing to merchants; and made it more difficult for princes and high officials to practice extortion.
- The lot of some segments of the conquered population actually improved, owing to profits from the trade promoted and supported by the Mongols, to their enforcement of law and order within their territories, and to their opening of careers to merit, not only birth or wealth. The poorest classes received something like government welfare assistance: food, clothes, and money.

Disease: The association of disease and warfare is commonplace. Troops live under more unsanitary conditions than is normal. Unburied corpses often contaminated water supplies. Among the overcrowded and underfed in besieged cities and in close quartered armies, an infectious illness could spread quickly. The existing food supply must be stretched to feed the invading army, leaving little for the local population and thereby reducing its immune system.

- The frequent long-distance travel of military personnel, merchants, and others promoted the wider spread of diseases. Of these the Black Death (bubonic plague) was the best known and most severe. This disease may have been carried by soldiers from Inner Eurasia to the Black Sea, and from there to West Asia, North Africa, and Europe. This infection killed about one third of the total population of Europe.

Displacement: During the Mongol campaigns of conquest and later, there was large-scale enslavement and forced movement of populations.

- Many fled in terror when news reached them of an approaching Mongol army.
- Within the army, peoples of different backgrounds were deliberately mixed in all groupings from 10 men to 10,000. They and their families, who often accompanied Mongol armies, moved long distances on campaigns and spent long periods in far-away places as occupying armies.
- In conquered territories, the Mongols usually rounded up the craftspeople, and assigned them to Mongol princes and commanders. These captives, who could number tens of thousands in a single city, were carried off to Mongolia or other parts of the growing empire. This gave rise to considerable population exchanges between Russia, Central Asia, Persia/Afghanistan, Mongolia, and China.

But:

- Although captive artisans and young women (destined to be slaves, concubines, prostitutes, and entertainers) often remained in their masters' hands for the rest of their lives, some gained their freedom and married locally, some eventually returned to their homelands. Moreover, artisans often gained privileges. The movement of peoples resulted in exchanges of goods, ideas and styles and in frequent and widespread contact between peoples of widely different cultural, ethnic, religious, and language backgrounds.
- Thousands of people traveled from western and central parts of Eurasia to serve the Mongol regime in China. Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant who traveled to China with his father and uncle in 1271 and remained there for seventeen years, was just one of these foreigners seeking opportunity in Mongol administration.
- Genoese merchants, who traded extensively in the Muslim lands and Inner Eurasia in the Mongol era sold Chinese silk and "Tatar cloth" at the fairs of Northern France.
- Chinese artisans designed ceramics especially to appeal to Muslim tastes.
- The Chinese exported copper & iron goods, porcelain, silks, linens, books, sugar, & rice to Japan & Southeast Asia in return for spices and exotic items like rhino horns.
- At the time of his death in Italy, Marco Polo had among his possessions a Mongol slave, Tartar bedding, brocades from China, and a Buddhist rosary.
- Khubilai Khan had Persian copies of the works of Euclid & Ptolemy translated into Chinese.
- Egyptian experts were called in to improve Chinese sugar-refining techniques.
- Muslim medical and astronomical sciences became known in China. Chinese medical works were translated into Persian.
- Buddhist monks built Chinese style pagodas in Persia.
- Persian miniatures show Chinese-style mountains and dragons.
- A Mongol version of the traditional stories about Alexander the Great was produced.
- Diplomatic contact with Western Europe intensified.
- Columbus owned a copy of Marco Polo's book, and on his first voyage he took with him a letter from the Spanish king to the Great Khan.

Islam's spread among the peoples of the Mongol empire was also helped by the movement of peoples.

- Many of the Turkic groups that allied with the Mongols had earlier converted to Islam. A significant number of them were literate, and employed by the Mongols as clerks, administrators, and translators as well as soldiers. They carried the Qur'an and their beliefs to new potential converts.
- Persia and Iraq were overwhelmingly Muslim when the Mongols swept in. Persian became one of the official languages of the Mongol empire, used even in China. And Persian culture, along with Islam, spread into Central and Eastern Asia.
- The Mongol Great Khans' preferred Muslims for senior positions in China. They thought that foreign Muslims could be more impartial than local Chinese. The foreign recruits could be blamed in case of Chinese dissatisfaction. Scholars from Persia were especially admired for their scientific and cultural achievements.
- Starting in the thirteenth century, the Mongol khans of the Golden Horde and of Persia converted to Islam and threw their governments' power behind the Muslim faith.

Buddhism advanced in China owing partly to direct support from the Great Khans, starting with Khubilai. Tibetan lamas (monks), who had frequently held secular as well as religious power at home, began to move to China. Khubilai, whose wife Chabi was an ardent Buddhist, found the political experience of the lamas useful to him. He put a number of them in positions of power and influence. He also made large donations to Buddhist temples, gave tax-exemption to Buddhist monks, and supported them in their arguments with Chinese Daoists.

- Christianity lost out in the long run in Asia, though not through any action of the Mongols. Some members of the Mongol princely houses and senior advisors were Nestorian Christians. Christians also served in the army. Some of the steppe tribes within the Mongol empire were Nestorian Christians. Several Popes, that is, the head of the Latin, or Roman Catholic Christian church, sent several envoys and missionaries from western Europe to Mongolia and China. European leaders had hopes of allying with Mongol leaders against the Muslim powers that challenged European political and commercial interests in the eastern Mediterranean. Neither the political overtures nor missionary labors resulted in much success for the Latin Church in Asia.
- Christianity suffered partly because it did not speak with a single voice: believers in Latin Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Nestorian, and other Christian doctrines engaged in heated disputes with one another and competed for converts. Latin Christianity never caught on in any of the Mongol lands, and, with the advance of Islam, Nestorian communities in China and Inner Eurasia gradually shrank.