

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part II: The Yüan Dynasty



The softer side of Hulegu Khan (brother of Khubilai Khan)

This painting is part of the collection installed at the British Museum in London. It appears that Hulegu Khan might be taking a break from the rigors of battle with a cup of tea. However, tea was not a traditional beverage among the Mongols of the Yüan dynasty.

The Great Khans, from Genghis to Khubilai, might be considered the thirteenth-century equivalent of today's corporate raiders. Genghis started by uniting the disparate tribes of Mongolia which, in total, numbered about one million people. From this, he selected a hundred thousand fierce warriors and "merged" the neighboring countries into an empire that eventually stretched across a land mass in Eurasia that covered nearly 12 million contiguous square miles.

Under the Mongol Khans, the concept of a unified continent was formed for the first time. Had the Mongols managed their acquisitions more astutely, and not lost control of their vast empire, the world would be quite different today.

Please turn to page 44.

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part II

Part I of our series ended with the fall of the (Southern) Song dynasty (1127 - 1279). In spite of a vigorous *Tea for Horses* trading campaign with Tibet, Song's Chinese army was unable to fend off the aggressive attacks of the Mongolian warriors, lead by Khubilai Khan.

The title *Great Khan (Khaghan)*, is the Mongolian equivalent of *Emperor*. The first Great Khan, Genghis (Ghinggis) Khan, united the nomadic tribes of Mongolia to create the original Mongolian Empire. Under Genghis Khan and the Great Khan successors, the Empire annexed substantial portions of the world between Eastern Europe and the Pacific Ocean. By the time of Genghis' death, the Mongolian Empire included all lands of northern Asia from the Caspian sea to what is now Beijing, and as far south as Indonesia. Significantly, they controlled seventy-five percent of the war horses on the Eurasian continent.

Khubilai Khan, grandson of Genghis, was the fifth and final Great Khan. He claimed the title in 1260, which would have set him up pretty well if his brother had not claimed the title at the same time. After a brotherly squabble that lasted several years, Khubilai prevailed and refocused on the favorite fantasy of his childhood, conquering all of China.

Late in 1271, Khubilai Khan declared himself ruler of southern China, commencing with the start of the new year. His would be called the *Yüan dynasty*. This brief period in China's long history would see many changes, including the onset of Western influence. As an outsider himself, Khubilai was open to influences that prior Chinese rulers rejected as barbaric. He did not always embrace foreign ideas, but he would not reject them outright.

The claim by Khubilai that he was now ruler of southern China did not signal the immediate end of the Song dynasty, since domination by the Great Khan was totally repudiated by southern Chinese officials. Rather, the end of the Southern Song came when the Mongolian armies finally overtook Szechuan, ending a siege that lasted from 1265 until 1279. You will recall from Part I of our series that Szechuan was a strategic center of trade, and played a major role in the *Tea for Horses* campaign of the Song. With the capture of Szechuan, the Song dynasty was officially fin-

ished, although resistance and uprisings continued throughout the Yüan.

Meanwhile, European traders were rapidly expanding eastward, establishing trading centers in cities closer to their sources in the east. The precious furs, spices, silks, and other goods of trade changed hands several times before they reached Europe, and each exchange meant a higher price for the final sale. Overland routes were less efficient, and more hazardous than sea routes, so commerce centered in the well-situated coastal cities of the Mediterranean. Venice was the gateway for most goods traveling from the East to Europe, and what did not pass through Venice was shared by the rest of the Latin city-states, with Genoa being the principal rival of Venice.

Merchants who could eliminate some of the intermediaries could trade at higher margins and still compete on price. The most efficient way to improve margins was to avoid all middle agents and simply pirate the goods of other merchants. A common practice of the time, piracy was not punished (perhaps it was even encouraged) if the merchant ship of an enemy state was targeted. Thus, wars between Venice and Genoa were common in the thirteenth century.

While at sea, Venetian merchants banded together in caravans for protection. On land, commercial centers were established at strategic coastal cities farther east. Constantinople, positioned at the straits between the Mediterranean and Black Sea, was one of the most active and prosperous cities on the trade routes.

Constantinople was wrested from the Greeks in 1204, at the end of the fourth crusade, and for over half a century it remained under the control of the Latin Empire. Venice's role in the crusades, which included moneylending and sea transportation for the crusades, earned Venetian traders special concessions in Constantinople, including exemption from taxes and duties.

The Venetian community in Constantinople thrived until 1261, when Greece formed an alliance with Venice's arch-rival, Genoa, and recaptured the city. The Genoese expelled the Venetians from Constantinople, after blinding them and cutting off their noses. In exchange for their support, and to solidify the alliance, Greece offered the Genoan traders the same concessions that were formerly enjoyed by the Venetians.

Two Venetian merchants who escaped with their eyes and noses attached were the brothers

Nicolo and Maffeo Polo, who left Constantinople for Sudak in 1260, just prior to the overthrow. The Polo family had an outpost in Sudak, a trading port in the Crimea, well removed from the waters occupied by the Greek navy. This was their first stop after leaving Constantinople. From there they continued east to Saria, on the Volga River, and proceeded to Bokhara. This easterly route would be in the opposite direction of Venice, which supports the theory that their departure from Constantinople was not a flight of panic, but rather a business trip, intent on expanding the family business farther east. Had they actually been trying to return to Venice after fleeing Constantinople, as some suggest, they would have headed in a northwesterly direction from Sudak.

While details of the Polo brothers' adventures after their departure from Constantinople are not precisely known, the story of Nicolo and Maffeo, and that of Nicolo's son, Marco, have fascinated readers for centuries. The story of the Polos was documented three decades later by Marco, while he was imprisoned in Genoa. *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian* is a classic English-language translation of Marco Polo's account, published in 1854 by Henry G. Bohn of London. In this work, Bohn states the following:

During their stay there [Bokhara], it happened that a Tartar nobleman, sent by Hulagu to Kublai his brother, came thither, and in an interview with the two brothers, was so gratified with hearing them converse in his native language, and with the information he derived from them, that he invited them to accompany him to the emperor's court, where he assured them of a favorable reception, and an ample compensation for the labor of their journey ... and after travelling twelve months, [they] reached the imperial residence.

It has been assumed by many that the *imperial residence* mentioned here was Beijing. However, it was not until 1266 that Khubilai ordered the construction of Ta-tu, which would later become the modern city of Beijing. He held his first court in Ta-tu in January, 1274, so it seems impossible that the Polos would have been in Beijing for their introduction to Khubilai Khan.

A more plausible account of the first meeting between the Polo brothers and Khubilai Khan has the event taking place in Karakorum in central Mongolia, then the capital of the Mongolian Empire.

Regardless of the place of their meeting, Marco Polo claimed that his father and uncle befriended Khubilai, and that he extended them great courtesies, among which was a special passport for traveling safely, and in style, throughout his kingdom. He also asked the brothers to return to Italy and persuade the Pope to send a team of Christian scholars to China.

There are differing interpretations about Khubilai's motivation for asking the Pope to send Christian scholars to China. Some accounts claim that Khubilai Khan was interested in spreading Christianity throughout China, or even in converting to Christianity himself. This is not likely. He was a confirmed Buddhist, and made Buddhism the official religion of China. He was, however, a strong supporter of religious freedom.

Upon returning to Venice in 1269, Nicolo discovered his wife, who was pregnant when he left Venice for Constantinople fifteen years prior, had recently died. Pope Clement IV had also died in November, 1268, and due to internal squabbling among the college of cardinals, the Papacy remained vacant for another two years. All this time the Polo brothers were anxious to return to the East, but until a new Pope was elected, no one had authority to grant the Great Khan his request for Christian scholars.

Shortly after Pope Gregory X was elected in September, 1271, the Polo brothers attempted to interest the new Pope in complying with the Khan's request, but to no avail. Instead of a hundred scholars, the Polos were sent off with two Dominican friars, who got cold feet by the time they reached Armenia.

After traveling for three years, the Polos theoretically arrived at Ta-tu. The year was 1275, just as Khubilai was solidifying a hold on his vast empire, and enjoying his new digs. Although the Polo brothers arrived without the scholars, the Emperor received them with great courtesy. According to Marco, Khubilai was impressed with him from the start, and installed him as a special aid to the throne, with assignments to visit remote areas of China and report back on observations made.

For roughly seventeen years Marco Polo traveled throughout China, supposedly observing the many wonders of the Orient. The Polos returned to Venice in 1295, and some time between 1296 and 1298, Marco was taken prisoner during a battle between Venice and Genoa.

While in prison, Marco befriended a prison mate by the name of Rustichello da Pisa, a writer of romance novels such as *Roman de Roi Artus* (*Romance of King Arthur*). Marco dictated the story of his travels to Rustichello, and the resulting treatise was later translated into several languages. The Rustichello document has been lost, so current accounts of the adventures of Marco Polo are at least one generation removed from the original document.

How much of the Marco Polo story is fabrication, based on secondhand information, and possibly a bit of romantic creativity by Rustichello? Did the Polos really reach Ta-tu? One of the oddities of Marco Polo's writings of particular interest to our readers might be the lack of reference to tea. Some have erroneously credited Marco Polo with introducing tea to Europe. In fact, there is no evidence that he ever experienced the beverage! This would seem impossible in the context of the experiences that he claims to have had, traveling throughout China.

A number of Europeans preceded the Polos, including Christian emissaries, such as John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck. Their writings are accepted as more credible than the story of Marco Polo, but the fact that they wrote in Latin, rather than the more popular French-Italian style of Rustichello, limited their audience. The credibility of Marco Polo's account is perhaps less important than the impact that it had on readers over the next few centuries.

Tea was not an important crop to the Mongolian rulers of China. In *A History of the World in 6 Glasses*, Tom Standage states:

To emphasize the extent and diversity of the Mongol Empire, Kublai's brother Mangu Khan installed a silver drinking fountain at the Mongol capital of Karakorum. Its four spouts dispensed rice beer from China, grape wine from Persia, mead from northern Eurasia, and koumiss [a fermented, alcoholic beverage made from mare's milk] from Mongolia. Tea was nowhere to be seen. But the sprawling empire symbolized by this fountain proved unsustainable and collapsed during the fourteenth century. A renewed enthusiasm for drinking tea was then one way in which Chinese culture reasserted itself following the expulsion of the Mongols and the establishment of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

It is probable that tea did not reach Western Europe for several centuries after Marco Polo

returned to Venice. If it did, there is no evidence to support that fact. It is first mentioned in European literature in the mid-sixteenth century, but even then, only as a secondhand account.

There are several reasons why it took so long for tea to reach Europe. First, and perhaps foremost, overland routes to the Far East were difficult and fraught with danger. The risks were high, but huge profits could be had from the established trade in goods like spices, furs, precious gems, and silk. Demand for such products greatly exceeded supply, so every ounce of cargo capacity was allocated to these goods. There was nothing to gain from transporting a new product, like tea, for which no demand existed. Tea commerce between China and Europe would have to wait for the discovery of a sea-only route to the Far East.

Khubilai Khan's dynasty began to collapse after his death in 1294. As a warrior, Khubilai was a masterful leader, but his success on the battlefield did not carry over to governing his vast empire. Yeliu Chu-Tsai, chief advisor to the Khanate, supposedly said to Ogodai Khan (Khubilai's uncle, and fourth Great Khan), "The Empire was created on horseback, but it cannot be governed on horseback." Ruling the vast Yüan Empire required delegation and local management, in areas far removed from the imperial palace. There was little oversight of local officials, who often had their own agenda. A fated caste system was established by Khubilai that placed southern Chinese, representing over seventy-five percent of his empire, at the lowest level. This ensured that his interpretation of a unified China would not last.

The end of the Yüan dynasty was accelerated by devastating meteorological events of the fourteenth century, often called the most disastrous century in recorded history. Over a third of the winters of the 1300's were said to have had much colder temperatures than normal. In 1303 the Baltic Sea froze over twice. Crops throughout China and Europe failed for several years, resulting in massive starvation. This was followed by the black plague, which originated in China and spread to Europe by way of Genoan traders.

The Mongols were eventually expelled, and China was once again dependent on external suppliers for war horses. The *Tea for Horses* campaign was resumed.

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.