MONGOL CONQEROR (The)

Director(s): Patrick CABOUAT, Masakazu TANIGUCHI

Writer(s): Alain MOREAU

Protected by its great wall and by three thousand years of history, the Middle Kingdom felt forever safe from invaders. That was counting without the hordes of nomadic horsemen who came from the Mongolian steppes, commanded by Kublai.

The great Kublai Khan, grandson of Gengis Khan, was born in 1214. He was the very incarnation of twelve centuries of invasions of sedentary civilisations by nomadic people.

His great ambition was to complete the conquest of the northern part of China - which his grandfather had started - by defeating the southern part of the country. To him, China was more than just an empire: Kublai's goal was to conquer a civilisation and make it his own. Since the beginning of its three thousand-year-old history, China had kept to itself.

When conquering Siang Yang, Kublai Khan became the only ruler of the Middle Kingdom. From then on, China, Turkestan, Persia and Russia had been united in one Empire, under the authority of the Mongol princes. For the following century, the newly established Yuans dynasty would continue in the traditional lineage of the old Chinese dynasties. Kublai the Nomad carried the ostentatious mantle of the Chinese emperors and adopted their ceremonial protocol.

For the first time in its history, the Middle Kingdom opened to the outside world and established direct relations with Persia and the West. The Mongols, who had secured safe passage for the caravans, opened both transcontinental routes, which had been closed since the end of antiquity. Travellers from Europe could from then on take either the Southern route which led through Persia to the Jade Gate, or opt for the Northern route from the Crimea, crossing the south of Siberia reaching China via the north.

In 1275, a Venetian merchant travelling through Tai-tou, asked to be received by Kublai Khan. His name was Marco Polo who wrote in his memoirs about his reception at the Kublai's palace, describing the magnificence and splendour of his court. Kublai died in Peking in 1294 at the age of 80. It had taken seventy years for the Nomadic horsemen from the steppes in order to make the dream of Alexander the Great come true: unite the East and the West.

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Categorie(s): Discovery & Nature, History & Current Affairs
Tag(s): History, Discovery/Adventure, History revisited

Producer(s): Producer(s): NHK, POINT DU JOUR NHK, POINT DU JOUR

Coproducer(s): Coproducer(s): FRANCE 5 - France T

Length: Length: 1x491x49 / Format: One-off

Original version: Japanese

Versions available: Versions available: French / International French / International

Nationality: France, 2004

Rights: TV & DVD : Latin America, Europe excl. UK & excl. German-speaking

Support(s): SD â€“ Digital 16/9

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