

Middle Ages: Asia

“That’s Asia”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, many people in Asia stopped living nomadic lifestyles and began settling together in towns. In Japan, villages sprung up everywhere. The country modeled its government after China’s, where power was centralized around one leader, the emperor. However, Japanese emperors had little real power. Lords, known as the daimyo, established a feudal system much like the one that grew in Europe, and they were the people in charge at the local level. The daimyo rented their land to peasants for farming; in the case of war, the daimyo would protect them. The daimyo were also responsible for choosing the shogun, the supreme military leader. Many shogun had more power than the emperor himself. Feudalism lasted longer in Japan than anywhere else in the world, and its strength meant that Japan essentially had two separate systems of rule.

Notes

2. The daimyo needed warriors to maintain their power, so they created private armies of samurai. In return for land, the samurai served their lords during times of war and offered protection. Samurai were knights much like the knights of Europe. They wore armor, rode horses and were masters of the sword. They had their own code of honor called Bushido, which meant “the way of the warrior.” This code placed great importance on bravery, loyalty and honor. As part of the Bushido, the samurai were expected to endure intense physical hardship and never complain. If a samurai did something that displeased their lords, they might practice seppuku, a form of ceremonial suicide that involved slicing open their stomachs. Seppuku—also called hara-kiri or “belly splitting”—was a way to avoid shame and dishonor.

Notes

3. During this period, two different religions gained popularity, Zen Buddhism and Shinto. Zen Buddhism emphasized self-control and meditation instead of prayer. Many warriors practiced Zen Buddhism because it helped them go into battle without fear. In the Shinto faith, people worshipped divine spirits called kami. Kami weren't gods like gods in other polytheistic faiths; they were spirits that could be a part of anything, such as wind, rain, animals and people. They responded to prayer, and people believed they could influence the course of natural and human events.

Notes

4. In China, emperors struggled to govern their enormous lands. During the short-lived Sui Dynasty (581-618 BCE), one emperor attempted to unify the north and south by building a canal between the Yangtze and the Yellow Rivers. The waterway, known as the Grand Canal, stretched more than 1,400 miles. It made communication and the transportation of troops easier and faster than ever and ushered in a period of enormous progress. The Song Dynasty (960-1279) was a time of innovation and intellectual achievement. It was a period of busy cities, advances in communication and great artistic development. Landscape painting flourished, the printing of literature grew and people used printed money in trade. Additionally, the Chinese began using gunpowder-fueled bombs in battles, which revolutionized warfare in China and around the world. However, this growth came to a sharp stop when the Chinese were overrun by Genghis Khan (1162-1227) and his Mongol armies.

Notes

5. Genghis Khan was born around 1162 in a nomadic Mongol tribe. As he grew up, he began to build power for his people, and went on to establish the Mongol Empire (1206-1405), the largest empire the world had ever seen. He was a smart and ruthless military leader. Most of Khan's army were horsemen who were fast, organized and had excellent skills and tools. They made small, powerful bows that were far more advanced than those the Europeans were using. They had specially designed saddles and stirrups that allowed them to turn backwards and fire arrows even as they retreated. Khan organized his soldiers in units of 10 (Arbat), 100 (Zuut), 1,000 (Myangat), and 10,000 (Tumen), each with a leader reporting to the next higher level. Kahn's armies were brutal, and brutally efficient; most estimates put the number of casualties left in their wake in the millions.

Notes

6. Khan built his empire strategically, first using his troops to unite Mongolia's tribes. He then moved to take the lands around him, starting in 1207 with attacks on Xi-Xia, which is now China and part of Tibet. In 1274, 30,000 Mongol soldiers boarded hundreds of ships and sailed from what is now Korea toward Japan, hoping to conquer it. However, a tropical hurricane called a typhoon, which seemed to arise from nowhere, destroyed the entire Mongol fleet. Seven years later, the same thing happened again: A typhoon destroyed all of the Mongol's ships. The Japanese called these typhoons "kamikaze," or divine wind. This was the same name later given to Japanese fighter pilots in World War II who went on suicide missions.

Notes

7. Genghis Khan kept on after that, pushing both east and west until the Mongol Empire spread from the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic Sea. At the height of his powers, he ruled more territory than anyone ever had before. Even after his death, the empire continued to expand until 1279, when it covered 22% of Earth, meaning that over one-fifth of the world was ruled by one man. Among Genghis's successors was Kublai Khan, his grandson. Kublai Khan ruled from China. He lived in Beijing, where he set up the Yuan Dynasty, the first non-Chinese dynasty to rule China. He was in command in China when the Italian explorer Marco Polo paid his famous visit to the East. By most accounts Kublai was not as war-hungry as his grandfather and tried to use diplomacy when possible. When it wasn't, however, he would attack.

Notes