

Kublai's clan

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue



KHAN AND COMPANY: Benedict Wong (left) plays Kublai Khan, Uli Latukefu (center), his bastard son, and Lorenzo Richelmy, Marco Polo in a Netflix series. PHOTO BY PHIL BRAY. © 2014 NETFLIX. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

In December Netflix released an entire season of its original series *Marco Polo*, perhaps hoping to entice winter's binge viewers. The show's big budget reflects big aspirations: Netflix is reaching out to audiences outside the United States in an effort to expand its empire.

The show, loosely based in history, begins in the 13th century as young Marco Polo (Lorenzo Richelmy) arrives with his father (Pierfrancesco Favino) at the court of Kublai Khan (Benedict Wong). Kublai's court is generally tolerant of people of other religions; in fact Kublai's mother, Sorghaghtani Beki, was a Christian. While Kublai doesn't share her faith, he respects it. His tolerance, however, is pushed to its limits when his son reads the engraving on a cross that Marco wears around his neck. "All kings shall bow before him" (Ps. 72:11).

Marco has grown up without his father. Now, soon after they've met for the first time, his father abandons him, buying himself safe passage on the Silk Road by offering his son to Kublai Khan as a gift. This is the beginning of the theme that the show treats best: daddy issues.

Kublai Khan has his own daddy issues. He's motivated by his father's failure to be a Mongol leader like his grandfather Genghis, and he has a complicated relationship with his son and heir, Prince Jingim (Remy Hii). Of course, Jingim has daddy issues

too. He's hounded by doubts that he can be the khan that his father is, and his doubts are made worse by his failures in battle, by the fact that he doesn't have a son, and by the presence of Marco ("the Latin"), who has the khan's favor.

The show's best energy pulses in the twisted love triangle between Kublai, Jingim, and Marco. To what degree can Marco, a foreigner, find a father in Kublai? To what degree can Kublai Khan trust Marco? Can Jingim find acceptance from his father, and is Marco a threat to this acceptance?

In the midst of this entanglement among the male characters, what about the female characters? In his review "O.K., the Women Can Kill, but They Have to Be Nude," Neil Genzlinger calls the exploitation of female characters "the show's most egregious flaw" (*New York Times*).

This exploitation is at its worst with Mei Lin (Olivia Cheng), whose status as a concubine is used to turn her into a naked assassin. Cheng does manage, however, to add depth to a subplot that involves her daughter. Other actresses give interesting performances. Joan Chen, as Empress Chabi, is beautiful and cold in her support of her husband and advocacy for her son. Zhu Zhu plays Marco's love interest, Kokachin. While there is little about Marco that explains Kokachin's interest in him, Zhu Zhu is fascinating in her own subplot as a captured princess with a hidden identity.

Marco Polo is emotionally flat and fails to deliver on the grandness of its imperial theme. But Wong's portrayal of Kublai Khan is a high point of the show. He's everything an emperor should be: a commanding presence on his throne and on the battlefield. This khan is majestic and charismatic, but his character also has subtlety. He can be stupid about women and about his pride. His relationships with his wife, his son, his advisers, and Marco are all beautifully drawn. This khan feels the weight of his responsibilities deeply and has a palpable tenderness toward those he stewards. Wong's talent is especially striking because almost every other relational pairing falls flat. One wishes the show were named *Kublai Khan*.

It's too bad that when it was reaching for a global audience Netflix cast the epic drama through one European's eyes. If Kublai were the center of the show, Wong would have even more room to flourish. Still, it's a treat to see so many nonwhite actors play substantive roles. If *Marco Polo* makes it to a second season, producers should capitalize on Wong's talent.