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0521770645 - Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History -

Nicola Di Cosmo

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Ancient China and Its Enemies

It has been an article of faith among historians of ancient China that Chinese culture represented the highest level of civilization in the greater Asia region from the first millennium B.C. throughout the pre-imperial period. This Sinocentric image – which contrasts the high culture of Shang and Chou China with the lower, “barbarian” peoples living off the grasslands along the northern frontier – is embedded in early Chinese historical records and has been perpetuated over the years by Chinese and Western historians. In this comprehensive history of the northern frontier of China from 900 to 100 B.C., Nicola Di Cosmo investigates the origins of this simplistic image, and in the process shatters it.

This book presents a far more complex picture of early China and its relations with the “barbarians” to the North, documenting how early Chinese perceived and interacted with increasingly organized, advanced, and politically unified (and threatening) groupings of people just outside their domain. Di Cosmo explores the growing tensions between these two worlds as they became progressively more polarized, with the eventual creation of the nomadic, Hsiung-nu empire in the north and Chinese empire in the south.

This book is part of a new wave of revisionist scholarship made possible by recent, important archaeological findings in China, Mongolia, and Central Asia that can now be compared against the historical record. It is the first study investigating the antagonism between early China and its neighbors that combines both Chinese historical texts and archaeological data. Di Cosmo reconciles new, archaeological evidence – of early non-Chinese to the north and west of China who lived in stable communities, had developed bronze technology, and used written language – with the common notion of undifferentiated tribes living beyond the pale of Chinese civilization. He analyzes the patterns of interaction along China’s northern frontiers (from trading, often on an equal basis, to Eastern Hun–Chinese warfare during the Ch’in dynasty) and then explores how these relations were recorded (and why) in early Chinese historiography. Di Cosmo scrutinizes the way in which the great Chinese historian, Ssu-ma Chi’en portrayed the Hsiung-nu empire in his “Records of the Grand Historian” (99 B.C.), the first written narrative of the northern nomads in Chinese history. Chinese cultural definitions are explained here as the expression of political goals (for example, the need to cast enemies in a negative light) and the result of historical processes.

Herein are new interpretations of well-known historical events, including the construction of the early walls, later unified into the “Great Wall”; the formation of the first nomadic empire in world history, the Hsiung-nu empire; and the chain of events that led Chinese armies to conquer the northwestern regions, thus opening a commercial avenue with Central Asia (to become the Silk Road). Readers will come away with an entirely new, more nuanced picture of the world of ancient China and of its enemies.

Nicola Di Cosmo is Senior Lecturer in Chinese History at the University of Canterbury (Christchurch, New Zealand). He has been a Research Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and has taught at Indiana University and Harvard University. He is a contributing author of *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* (Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy, eds., 1999) and *State and Ritual in China* (Joseph McDermott, ed., 1999). He is a member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Asia Major*, and the *Journal of East Asian Archaeology*.

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To My Parents

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Acknowledgments

So many times have I thought that this page would never be written, that it is with great relief that I can now begin to thank all the friends and people who have in one way or another given me assistance or inspiration. Because in a previous incarnation part of this book was my doctoral dissertation, my first debt of gratitude goes to the members of my doctoral committee in the then Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies at Indiana University: Christopher I. Beckwith – with whom I first discussed my idea – and Yuri Bregel, György Kara, and Elliot Sperling, who allowed me to pursue an interest that was at best tangential to the mainstream of the discipline. Lynn Struve was an exceptionally scrupulous and insightful external member. I must also thank Denis Sinor for encouraging me, while I was still a graduate student, to present papers at several conferences. I did much of the research that eventually went into this book at Cambridge University, where I was a Research Fellow in the Mongolia Studies Unit (1989–92); my sincere thanks to Caroline Humphrey and to the staff of the Mongolia Studies Unit and the Faculty of Oriental Studies for having given me valuable and much-appreciated support.

The dissertation being written, I had no intention of continuing my research in ancient Chinese history. If I have persevered, the merit belongs to Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy. In different ways, they are among the best scholars I have ever worked with. Loewe's valuable works were the first that I read in this field and also the last, given the inexhaustible pace of his scholarship. Although not an Inner Asian specialist, Loewe (in collaboration with Hulsewé) has done more to enlighten our understanding of the ancient relations between China and Central Asia than any other scholar, including Pelliot and Chavannes.

Loewe and Shaughnessy's influence on this book has also been essential in a very direct way. I was thrilled when they asked me to contribute a

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chapter to the *Cambridge History of Ancient China*, but I accepted the task without a clear notion of how I was going to fulfill it. Having had to train myself in the basics of archaeological scholarship to write the chapter, my work for the *History* helped me to keep my interest in ancient China despite pressure “to return” to my original field, Manchu and Qing history. My participation in the making of the volume and the chance to meet the greatest scholars in the field were an invaluable psychological boost. My gratitude, then, goes to all the participants in the “Starved Rock” preparatory workshop. By the time the chapter was written, I had had some ideas that perhaps could be developed further. In talking with Ed Shaughnessy I decided to try to consolidate those ideas into a book; Ed also volunteered – a selfless act for which I am very grateful – to read a first draft. Needless to say, neither Shaughnessy nor Loewe is in any way responsible for any shortcomings of this book, but their support and encouragement have been essential to keeping me in this field long enough to finish it.

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Whatever debts I have incurred in writing this book, responsibility for it rests solely with me. This book is by no means an arrival point; rather, it is a temporary stop on a journey that cannot be charted for sure. No doubt our understanding of the "northern frontier" of China will become increasingly rich, but this process of accumulating knowledge must be guided by a sense of history that has sometimes been obfuscated, or simply overwhelmed, by the combined weights of millenarian literary tradition and quantities of archaeological data. Trying to find its way between the Scylla of archaeology and the Charybdis of tradition, this book is an attempt to recover that sense of history. In all, I must say that (while not without its perils) it has been a marvelous voyage.