

EMPIRES

Perspectives from Archaeology and History

Edited by

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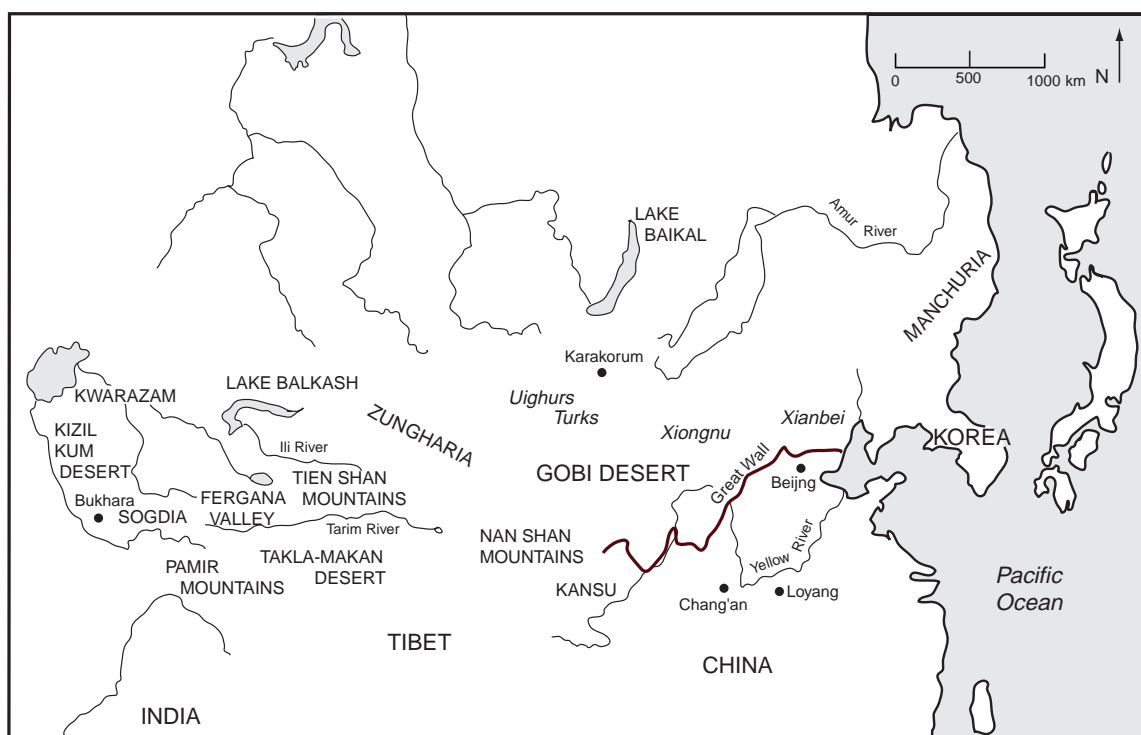
The shadow empires: imperial state formation along the Chinese–Nomad frontier

Thomas J. Barfield

The large empires periodically established by the pastoral nomads of the Eurasian steppe present significant problems to students of imperial organization. With economies based on a mobile form of animal husbandry, small and scattered populations, and a tribal social organization, these horse-riding peoples stood in stark contrast to neighboring sedentary civilizations. Their relatively unsophisticated technology and lack of urban centers made them poor candidates for achieving state level organization, let alone imperial hegemony. Yet beginning in the third century BCE along China's northern frontier, the nomads nevertheless managed to create a series of empires that controlled immense territories under the rule of powerful long-lived dynasties. Over a period of more than 2000 years they terrorized, and periodically conquered, rival states in northern China, Central Asia, Iran, and eastern Europe (Fig. 1.1).

Empires established by nomads in Mongolia were distinctive “shadow empires” that arose as secondary phenomena in response to imperial expansion by the Chinese. Their stability depended on extorting vast amounts of wealth from China through pillage, tribute payments, border trade, and international reexport of luxury goods – not by taxing steppe nomads. When China was centralized and powerful, so were nomadic empires; when China collapsed into political anarchy and economic depression, so did the unified steppe polities that had prospered by its extortion.

Evidence for this pattern comes from both sides of the frontier and is well documented because ancient and medieval Chinese historians left detailed records of their dealings with the nomads north of the Great Wall. Though these records are often very Sinocentric, they include contentious court debates about China's nomad policies, accounts of military expeditions (often tales of disasters), reports of frontier officials, diplomatic correspondence, treaties with the nomads, and details about trade and other economic relations. They have survived largely because each new dynasty in China commissioned an official history of its predecessor as evidence of its own merit, producing an almost continuous record of China's dealings with its nomadic neighbors. Each of these works followed a basic pattern of composition established by the *Shi ji*, China's first great history of the Qin and Former Han dynasties authored by Sima Qian in the first century



BCE (Ssu-ma 1993). He drew his material from court records and devoted individual chapters to each of the major foreign peoples along China's frontiers. Source material drawn from archives was usually inserted verbatim in a "cut and paste" fashion rather than being summarized, so that the level of detail is often quite extraordinary. Sima Qian was writing his work during the reign of Han Wudi (r. 140–87 BCE) when the "nomad problem" was one of the most contentious issues at court. His model was followed by Ban Gu, author of the *Han shu*, which completed the history of Former Han dynasty. This rich material has been the source for a number of important studies on Han frontier relations (Lattimore 1940; Loewe 1967; Yü 1967; Hulsewé 1979), as well as later periods, particularly for the Tang (Shafer 1963; Mackerras 1972) and Ming dynasties (Serruys 1959, 1967; Waldron 1990).

The early nomads left no written records of their own, but there is extensive archaeological material, mostly tomb sites, that flesh out the nomads' material culture (Jettmar 1964; Rudenko 1970; Cosmo 1994; So and Bunker 1995). Beginning with the Turks in the eighth century, we also have nomad inscriptions that supplement this picture with their own words (Tekin 1968), as well as travel accounts from non-Chinese sources (Bretschneider 1888; Minorski 1948). The period of the Mongol empire provides the most details on the nomadic lifeways and political organization of the world's largest empire. These include the Mongols' own oral history of their rise to power (Cleaves 1982), as well as more

1.1 Steppe empires of Central Asia. Regions and landforms are in capital letters; italic type indicates peoples.



1.2 Nomadic pastoralists leave relatively few remains, so that much of what we know about groups like the Xiongnu is derived from archaeological excavations of tombs. These contemporary Kazak timber graves near the Mongolian border sit in an older graveyard marked by an ancient stone stele with an incised human face. (Altai Mountains, Xinjiang, Peoples Republic of China, July 1987.)

general contemporary histories and first-hand accounts of nomadic life in Persian, Latin, and Chinese (cf. Juvaini 1958; Rashid al-Din Tabib 1971; Spuler 1972).

THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF NOMADIC STATES

Historically, the Mongolian frontier presents the clearest example of secondary imperial development because nomads there faced a single state, China, of overwhelming size and power. The problem the nomads faced was this: when China was united under native dynasties it wanted nothing to do with the nomads and attempted via walls, frontier garrisons, and occasional military campaigns to cut them off both politically and economically. When divided into many fragmented tribal groups scattered across vast distances (Fig. 1.2), these nomads were no match for the world's largest agrarian state, but when united into a single empire they became China's most effective foreign enemy. They stood as a political equal against a Chinese state that was fifty to one hundred times larger than their own in population, ruled over by a powerful centralized government with access to an immense revenue stream, and possessed of a standing army and Great Wall. The key to the nomads' success was a singular military advantage, horse cavalry,



1.3 The Xiongnu owed their strength to their cavalry. Each warrior was expected to bring his own horse and supplies for military games. Horse riding skills were sharpened by games such as these in which two riders gripping a single leather thong each attempt to pull the other off. (Kazak nomads, Altai Mountains, Xinjiang, Peoples Republic of China, July 1987.)

and an imperial state organization that distributed revenue to subject nomad groups instead of collecting it.

The steppe nomads were masters of mounted archery with an unlimited supply of horses (Fig. 1.3) and a warlike tradition who, as a Han Chinese official complained, made “a business of pillage and plunder” (Ssu-ma 1993, 2: 196). They created a political organization, an imperial confederacy that centralized their military power and kept the tribes united. It employed the principles of tribal organization and indigenous tribal leaders to rule at the local level, while maintaining an imperial state structure with an exclusive monopoly controlling foreign and military affairs.

This structure had three basic levels of organization. The imperial leadership of the empire was drawn from the ruling lineage of the tribe that founded the state. At the second level were governors appointed to supervise the indigenous tribal leadership and command regional armies. Drawn from collateral relations of the ruler, these imperial appointees served as the key links between the central administration and indigenous tribal leaders. The local tribal leaders constituted the third level of organization. They were members of the indigenous elites of each tribe and, although structurally inferior to imperial appointees, they retained considerable autonomy because of their close political ties to their own people who would follow them in revolt if the imperial commanders overstepped their authority (Barfield 1981).

Imperial confederacies maintained levels of organization far in excess of that needed to handle tribal relations or livestock problems. They emerged in Mongolia as a structural response by the nomads to the problems of organizing themselves to manipulate China. No single tribe along the frontier could

effectively deal with a united China, but a single empire with an imperial administration could wield a power that even China could not ignore. Initially the unification of the steppe tribes was the product of a steppe-wide military conquest by a charismatic tribal leader. But uniting the nomad tribes of Mongolia by conquest was only the first step in building an effective empire because the nomadic state could not depend solely on the threat of military force to maintain cohesion; it also had to offer real economic benefits. The political bargain was this: in exchange for accepting a subordinate political position, the leaders of the confederacy's component tribes received access to Chinese luxury goods and trade opportunities they could not have gained for themselves alone. Therefore the imperial confederacy and its leadership owed their continued financial success and political stability to their relentless exploitation of resources from *outside* the steppe. Exclusive control of foreign affairs was central to their power. To understand why we must first understand just how little there was for a nomad leader to exploit internally in an undiversified livestock economy with a low population density.

ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION OF NOMADIC LIFE

Nomadism in central Eurasia has always depended on the exploitation of extensive but seasonal steppe grasslands and mountain pastures. Since humans cannot digest grass, raising livestock is an efficient way of exploiting the energy of such a grassland ecosystem. The herds consist, as the Mongols say, of the "five animals": sheep, goats, horses, cattle, and camels. Of these, sheep and horses are the most important, but the ideal was to have all the animals necessary for both subsistence and transportation so that a family or tribe could approach self-sufficiency in pastoral production. There was never any specialization in the production of a single species (such as developed among the camel-raising Bedouin of the Near East and North Africa). The proportion of each species within a herd always reflected the constraints imposed by local ecological conditions: a higher percentage of cattle in wetter regions, proportionately more goats than sheep in areas of marginal pasture, and larger numbers of camels along desert margins. More than in any other pastoral area, the nomads of central Eurasia took full advantage of the multiple uses of their animals. Steppe nomads not only rode horses but milked mares, ate horsemeat (and sometimes blood), and used their skins for leather. Similarly, while the camel was used primarily as a baggage animal, it was also milked, utilized as a source of hair, and occasionally eaten. Oxen were also employed to pull carts or carry loads. In any event, there was little economic diversity, unless perhaps one wanted to trade cows for camels. Everybody raised the same animals and produced the same products. This was excellent for subsistence but provided a weak internal economic base for a state.

This weakness was compounded by structural difficulties nomad leaders faced if they wished to extract revenue or labor from their widely scattered subjects.

Unlike peasants who were tied to specific pieces of land, nomadic peoples could move themselves and their animals if they felt put upon. Even if nomad leaders could tax their followers regularly, there was little point to it. Unlike grain that could be cheaply warehoused at a single point, live animals needed constant attention and had to be moved regularly among widely scattered pastures. Therefore nomadic leaders tended toward irregular exactions in times of need, in particular demanding that their subjects be prepared to go to war at short notice and provide their own weapons, supplies, horses, and other equipment for military campaigns. Thus the economic foundation of imperial political organization on the steppe was rooted not in the relatively undiversified pastoral economy of Mongolia but on exploiting the wealth of China. The foreign policies of all imperial confederacies of Mongolia had a single aim: to extract direct benefits from China directly by raiding or indirectly through subsidies, and the establishment of institutionalized border trade agreements that met subsistence needs. Without such revenue the nomadic state would collapse. To get this revenue the nomad rulers of Mongolia turned to China and made them an offer they could not refuse.

The outer frontier strategy

The number of nomads confronting China was small, perhaps about a million people overall, and they were trying to extort Chinese dynasties that in Han times (202 BCE–220 CE) ruled over fifty million people, and one hundred million in the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). To succeed they had to influence decision-making at the very highest levels of government because Chinese foreign policy was made at court and not by frontier governors or border officials. To this end the nomads implemented a terroristic “outer frontier” strategy to magnify their power. Taking full advantage of their ability to suddenly strike deep into China and then retreat before the Chinese had time to retaliate, they could threaten the frontier at any time (Fig. 1.4). Such violence and the disruption it caused encouraged the Chinese to negotiate agreements favorable to the nomads.

The outer frontier strategy had three major elements: violent raiding to terrify the Chinese court, the alternation of war and peace to increase the amount of subsidies and trade privileges granted by the Chinese, and the deliberate refusal to occupy Chinese land that they would then have to defend. The threat of violence always lurked beneath the surface of even the most peaceful interactions. Zhonghang Yue, a Chinese defector working for the nomads, once warned some Han dynasty envoys of the danger they faced in very simple terms.

Just make sure that the silks and grain stuffs you bring the Xiongnu are the right measure and quality, that’s all. What’s the need for talking? If the goods you deliver are up to measure and good quality, all right. But if there is any deficiency or the quality is no good, then when the autumn harvest comes we will take our horses and trample all over your crops! (Ssu-ma 1993, 2: 144–5)

1.4 Steppe nomads often cultivated a fierce image when dealing with the outside world. Among the Kazaks, keeping hunting eagles, who some claim were once used in battle, fits this ideal of a fierce warrior people. (Altai Mountains, Xinjiang, Peoples Republic of China, July 1987.)



The Chinese had no good choices when confronted with frontier violence. They had three policy options: (1) respond defensively, fortify the frontier, and ignore the nomads' demands; (2) respond aggressively, raise an expeditionary cavalry force, and attack the nomads on the steppe; or (3) appease the nomads with expensive peace treaties that provided them with subsidies and border markets. Each approach produced its own set of problems. If the nomads' demands were ignored, they could continually raid the frontier, looting to get what they wanted and wreaking havoc with China's border population. But the alternatives of aggressive military action or appeasement were only slightly less problematic. Seeming to pay "tribute" to milk-drinking barbarians violated the very essence of a Sinocentric world order in which the Chinese emperor was deemed paramount. Such payments were particularly galling since Chinese court officials recognized that in terms of population, military strength, and economic production, they were far more powerful than the nomads. Yet any sustained war

conducted by China against the nomads faced serious obstacles. While the nomads could be driven away from the frontier, they could not be conquered because they were mobile and simply moved out of sight until the Chinese armies withdrew. Their land could not be permanently occupied because it was unfit for agriculture. Although nomad attacks on the border could be stemmed by means of large armies and campaigns on the steppe, frontier warfare was economically more disruptive for the Chinese than for the nomads. It drained the treasury and strained the peasantry with ever increasing demands for taxes and soldiers. For the nomads war was cheap. Steppe households were always prepared to provide horses, weapons, and supplies on short notice, and the loot collected in China repaid this investment many times over. Finally, continuous military operations threatened the balance of power at court by increasing the political influence of the military and the emperor at the expense of the civilian bureaucrats. Threatened with the loss of their hegemony, these officials moved to end aggressive military campaigns, arguing that they were far more expensive than simply paying the nomads to stay away. Consequently, no native Chinese dynasty was able to maintain an aggressive foreign policy against the nomads for longer than the reign of a single emperor.¹ China disguised the true nature of this appeasement policy by devising an elaborate “tributary system” in which large payments to the nomads were described as gifts given to loyal subordinates come to pay homage to the emperor.

Once the agreements were in place with native Chinese dynasties, the frontiers experienced long periods of peace because a nomad leader’s ultimate aim was to extort China, not conquer it. A symbiotic relation developed in which some nomad leaders even allied with China to fend off rivals when they were driven off the steppe and China turned more and more to the steppe nomads as a source of auxiliary troops to put down peasant rebellions or revolting provincial governors. Indeed, in their final years Chinese dynasties often found that *only* the nomads remained loyal. The nomads were dependent on the subsidies supplied by such dynasties and the collapse of the latter was a fatal blow to any nomadic state in Mongolia.

Circulation of goods and political power in steppe empires

Because nomadic states depended primarily on revenue extracted from China in various ways, we should examine why these goods were important. Sedentary states were ultimately based on the labor of a subject peasantry in a landlord-dominated agrarian economy that supported a complex class hierarchy and paid the costs of state administration. Nomad states were more like redistributive chiefdoms. They lacked a strong class structure and the leaders’ main responsibilities internally were organizational rather than extractive. They were expected to provide real benefits and prestige goods to component tribes and their leaders. They also took precedence in commanding armies, handling foreign affairs, and resolving disputes that threatened internal order. While force

could be used to keep component tribes from rebelling or breaking away, the system depended less on threats of force than on regular flows of outside revenue. Initially these resources from China were acquired directly through raids. At some point, however, every sophisticated nomadic ruler realized he needed a more regular source of revenue and luxury goods to support the political elite, as well as an outlet for regular trade for ordinary nomads. It was at this point that nomads changed their policies from simple raiding to the extraction of lucrative treaty agreements that provided them with both direct subsidies and border markets.

Border trade in subsistence goods

What goods did the nomads seek and why? Because the steppe economy was so undiversified the nomads naturally looked to their sedentary neighbors for a wide range of products and as an outlet for their own surpluses. The nomads produced regular surpluses in items (horses, milk products, meat, hides, and wool) that were in short supply and highly valued in agricultural communities. These agricultural communities produced grain in abundance, as well as metal goods, cloth, and luxury items such as silk and wine that were sought after by the nomads. Trade was therefore a natural process along the frontier and Chinese government attempts to restrict or prohibit it were the greatest source of tension in frontier relations.

Grain was one of the products most in demand by nomads, but because this trade was so ordinary it is scantily documented and scholars continue to argue over whether the steppe nomads included grain as a regular part of their diet. While in theory it may have been possible to survive entirely on a diet of milk products and meat, historically most nomads have had a substantial grain component to their diet. Grain was an important food source because it could be stored for long periods and complemented the milk products and meat supplied by the animals. Grain could be grown in parts of the steppe but the early frosts in Mongolia made its production there doubtful. Growing grain was also not compatible with nomadic movements, although part of the population (or Chinese captives at some periods) could have been devoted to this task. The nomads were willing to travel long distances to trade (or raid) for grain supplies because they had the baggage animals like camels that could transport bulk goods over long distances at low cost. The Chinese, by contrast, could not move grain very far overland economically in the absence of canal or river systems because they relied on grain-fed oxen to pull transport carts. It was easy to calculate the range at which the cost of feeding the oxen exceeded the amount of grain being transported. Thus, grain surpluses on China's frontier that could not profitably be extracted by the center were economically attractive to the steppe nomads despite being moved much longer distances. Camels that carried grain needed only natural pasture, hence their profitable transport range was almost unlimited.

In addition to grain, ordinary nomads were also interested in other goods for use, particularly cloth and metals. Linen cloth (from hemp, ramie, or kudzu) and cotton (of Central Asian origin) were a useful supplement to the felts and woolens produced by the nomads. Perhaps not absolutely necessary, they nevertheless made life easier and were much in demand (anyone who has ever experienced the discomfort of trying to dry steaming wet wool after a rainstorm can appreciate the value of a change of faster-drying clothes!).

Metals were the most strategic of the common goods needed by the nomads. Iron was in particularly high demand on the steppe for tools and weapons, but China was also a good source of bronze and copper. The nomads had their own tradition of metallurgy, of course, but the Chinese produced bronze and iron in such quantity that it was much simpler to acquire metal from them and rework it on the steppe than to have to mine and refine the ore themselves. Chinese coins were a particularly good source of metal because when they went out of circulation they could be purchased in bulk even though this trade was often prohibited. In Han times trade in iron to the nomads was absolutely banned and violators were punished by death, a penalty inflicted on 500 merchants in the capital in 121 BCE when they (in ignorance of the law) sold iron pots to a delegation of visiting nomads (Yü 1967: 119).

Border markets where the nomad trade flourished were characteristic of China's frontier areas. The relationship was a natural one and profitable to both sides, but the Chinese insisted that these markets be closely regulated and during many periods they prohibited all trade with the steppe peoples. This was because native dynasties feared they would lose control of their frontier areas if they were too closely integrated into the steppe economy. Banning trade, however, only caused the nomads to get what they wanted by force and turned the frontier into a zone of endemic raiding. Jagchid and Symons (1989) go so far as to argue that peace or war between China and the steppe depended entirely on whether China permitted such markets to be opened. While this argument is too simplistic, it does capture the fact that the status of border trade in ordinary goods was a key point of dispute between the nomads of Mongolia and China over the centuries.

Long-distance trade and tribute in luxury goods

If trade in ordinary goods made up the bulk of exchanges, it was the acquisition of luxury goods (silk, gold, wine, etc.) that is the focus of most of the written histories. Why the nomad preoccupation with these luxury goods, especially silk? First, silk was a valuable luxury good. Although not well suited for steppe life, it was a highly valued sign of elite status (Fig. 1.5). Perhaps more important, it was a store of wealth, light in weight and high in value, that could be traded for more utilitarian objects or luxury goods from elsewhere. Silk was not the only product the nomads demanded. Gold, satin, precious metals, bronze mirrors, and even musical instruments appear on lists of gifts. And alcohol (mostly as rice wine), or yeast to make it, was a common trade item and given in large quantities as gifts

1.5 The Xiongnu incorporated many foreign goods into the steppe, where they became part of everyday life. The combination of Chinese silk into a sheepskin hat worn by traditionally dressed Kazak men in northwestern China today is an example of the long-term historic relation between China and the steppe nomads. (Altai Mountains, Xinjiang, Peoples Republic of China, July 1987.)



to nomad leaders. Throughout steppe history, the nomads' appetite for alcohol was legendary and was associated with excess (Jagchid and Hyer 1979: 42–3), which led the Greeks to refer to drinking wine unmixed with water as “Scythian style” (Herodotus, *The History*, 6.84.3).

The Chinese had strong reservations about the export of luxury goods generated by tributary gifts because the Han court lost revenue in these transactions. Even private trade with distant foreign nations, it was argued, only served to drain China's real wealth for the acquisition of expensive luxury items whose only value was their rarity. This bias against international trade was closely tied to a Confucian ideology that condemned merchants as a class for being leeches on the hard work of peasants and artisans. Why, they argued, should a merchant deserve any more than the cost of transport for moving goods from one place to another? That they could make phenomenal profits by moving merchandise from areas of surplus to areas of shortage was not an entrepreneurial virtue but a defect in the government administration that had allowed such shortages to arise in the first place. This is not to say that trade was unimportant in China. Many individuals, including government officials, profited from trade and throughout the Han period there were wealthy merchant families that controlled large enterprises. However, at the elite level such enterprises were deemed illegitimate, and merchants were therefore forbidden from competing in the imperial examinations which led to high office and their wealth was subject to arbitrary confiscation. (A modern analogy that captures the flavor of this official distaste might be the public attitude toward fabulously wealthy drug smugglers whose businesses and morals are condemned even as their money is welcomed.) Ideally China should be autarkic: self-sufficient and self-contained. The existence of a merchant class was evidence that it had failed to reach this ideal. Such attitudes stood in sharp contrast to those of the nomad elites in Mongolia. They actively encouraged trade and attempted to attract merchants into their territories because the pastoral economy was not self-sufficient except in terms of sheep or horses. Far from viewing export trade as a drain on national wealth, nomads saw it as a source of prosperity and stability.

The demand for trade and the extortion of luxury items increased exponentially with the unification of the steppe. As a redistributive chieftain, the Xiongnu *Shanyu*'s power was secured in large part by his ability to generate revenue from China and secure trading privileges there. But the nomads' increasing demands for such luxury goods, particularly silk, were not simply for their own use. Once they had acquired a surplus of these valuable commodities the nomads in Mongolia became the center of an international reexport trade which attracted traders, especially from the oases of Central Asia, who became wealthy middlemen linking the economies of China and the West. Indeed, when China under Emperor Wudi did expand into Central Asia it was to “cut off the right arm of the Xiongnu” by stopping the revenue the Xiongnu derived from the city-states of Turkestan (Hulsewé 1979: 217). The wealth of items found in nomadic

tombs in Mongolia and their wide source of manufacture provide evidence of this flow.

Thus, although Mongolia was never a center of production, as a center of extraction the nomad imperial confederacies acted as a trade pump, drawing surplus goods from China and redirecting them into international markets. While it has often been noted that the political unity of the steppe facilitated long-distance overland trade by securing the routes for peaceful passage, it may be equally true that the nomads themselves (and not the Chinese) were the source of much of what was traded along the silk route. This is particularly true if, in addition to the goods the nomads themselves resold, we take into account the number of foreign merchants who were incorporated into official tributary visits or who traveled under the protection of nomadic states in order to participate in border markets. The latter may have been particularly important since rich foreign merchants were less vulnerable to exploitation by Chinese officials when under the diplomatic protection of a powerful nomad empire like the Xiongnu. While this is supposition for the Han period, it is amply documented in the Tang dynasty in the eighth to ninth centuries when the Turks and Uighurs provided protection to Sogdian merchants from Central Asia in the Tang capital of Chang'an (cf. Mackerras 1969).

Dual unity

Because centralized empires on the steppe were economically dependent on exploiting a prosperous and united China, they were structurally linked to them. Nomadic empires came into existence simultaneously with the unification of China and disappeared when China's political and economic organization collapsed. As Table 1.1 shows, there was a close correlation between the unification of China under native Chinese dynasties and the rise of imperial confederacies in Mongolia. This was particularly true of the relationship of the Han dynasty and the Xiongnu and the Tang dynasty and the Turks/Uighurs. For this reason nomadic empires in Mongolia were intent on exploiting, not conquering, China. Native Chinese dynasties never feared their replacement by nomads, but the nomads' potential for disruption. With the exception of the Mongol empire, foreign dynasties that established kingdoms in China were all from Manchuria, and products of a very different tribal tradition (Barfield 1989: 85–130, 164–86).

Although raids and crude extortion may have characterized the early interactions between nomad empires and native dynasties in China, they eventually evolved into a more symbiotic relationship. To maintain their lucrative trade relations and imperial subsidies, leaders of imperial confederacies would give military assistance to declining Chinese dynasties to protect them against domestic rebellions. The most prominent example was the importance of Uighur aid in putting down the An Lushan Rebellion against the Tang dynasty when it was on

Table 1.1. *Cycles of rule: major dynasties in China and steppe empires in Mongolia*

Native Chinese dynasties	Dynasties of foreign origins ^a	Steppe empires ^b
Qin and Han (221 BCE–220 CE)		XIONGNU (209 BCE–155 CE) Xianbei (130–180 CE)
Three Kingdoms and Period of Disunion (221–581 CE)	Toba Wei (386–556 CE) and other foreign dynasties directly before and after	Rouran
Sui and Tang (581–907 CE)		FIRST TURKISH (552–630 CE) SECOND TURKISH (683–734 CE) UIGHUR (745–840 CE)
Sung (960–1279 CE)	Liao (Khitan) (907–1125 CE) Jin (Juchen) (1115–1234 CE) Yuan (Mongol) (1206–1368 CE)	MONGOL (Yuan)
Ming (1368–1644 CE)		Oirats Eastern Mongols
	Qing (Manchu) (1644–1912 CE)	

Notes:^a All but Yuan are of Manchurian origin.^b Unified steppe empires that ruled all of Mongolia are given in capitals.

the verge of extinction in the mid-eighth century (Pulleyblank 1955). As leaders of a steppe empire, the Uighurs sent the cavalry troops who broke the back of the rebel army in battle and helped restore the dynasty to power. By 840 CE, the Uighurs were collecting 500,000 rolls of silk a year in subsidies from China (Mackerras 1972). Because they presented a few horses annually at court, the Chinese officially deemed them “tributaries,” an unrivaled example of the literate sedentary world’s ability to disguise embarrassing facts about its relationship with the steppe. But perhaps the best way to understand an imperial confederacy is to turn to the Xiongnu, the first and most stable nomadic empire the world has ever seen.

THE XIONGNU EMPIRE

The first political unification of Mongolia occurred with amazing rapidity at the end of the Warring States period. China was first temporarily united under the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE, see Yates, this volume) and, after a period of civil war, reunified more permanently by the Former Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE). At almost the same time the steppe was unified by the Xiongnu under the leadership of their *Shanyu* (the nomad emperor) Maodun. This Xiongnu empire was extremely long-lived, dominating the entire eastern Eurasian steppe from the end of the third century BCE through the middle of the first century CE, and surviving as a minor power into the fourth century.

The Xiongnu provide a classic example of an imperial confederacy, a form of large-scale political organization that could not exist without a united and prosperous China to extort. The Xiongnu empire was founded by their leader Maodun in 210 BCE, contemporaneous with the civil wars that reestablished a unified China under the Han dynasty. Although the nomads on the steppe took no part in the civil war that followed the collapse of the Qin dynasty in 206 BCE, they did threaten to devastate border regions by raiding, wreaking havoc, and stealing anything that could be carried off. They also plotted with frontier commanders against the central government. Such raids and border intrigues induced the newly established Han dynasty to attack the Xiongnu in 201–200 BCE, but the war ended disastrously when the nomads encircled the Han army. The emperor had to sue for peace to escape capture. It was the most humiliating defeat that the Chinese were ever to suffer at the hands of the Xiongnu and the emperor sent envoys to the *Shanyu* to negotiate peace and establish the *hoqin* (“marriage alliance”) policy as a framework for relations between the two states. The *hoqin* policy had four major provisions (Yü 1967: 41–2):

- (1) The Chinese made fixed annual payments in goods to the Xiongnu (which at their maximum amounted to somewhat less than 100,000 liters of grain, 200,000 liters of wine, and 92,000 meters of silk);
- (2) the Han gave a princess in marriage to the *Shanyu*;
- (3) the Xiongnu and Han were ranked as co-equal states;
- (4) the Great Wall was the official boundary between the two states.

In exchange for these benefits the Xiongnu agreed to keep the peace.

Here we see the implementation of the outer frontier strategy in full flower, for as generous as the treaty provisions seemed to the Chinese, the Xiongnu were still not satisfied. After expanding their own power in Mongolia, they renewed their raids on China and then sent envoys seeking peace. Pointing out that the Xiongnu were now the paramount power on the northern frontier, Maodun demanded a new peace treaty in a letter to the Han court:

All the people who live by drawing the bow are now united into one family and the entire region of the north is at peace. Thus I wish to lay down my weapons, rest my soldiers, and turn my horses to pasture; to forget the recent affair [of

raiding China] and restore our old pact, that the peoples of the border may have the peace such as they enjoyed in former times, that the young may grow to manhood, the old live out their lives in security, and generation after generation enjoy peace and comfort. (Ssu-ma 1993, 2: 140–1)

The Han court decided the Xiongnu were far too powerful to attack and so agreed to renew the treaty and open border markets. Maodun died peacefully in 174 BCE, leaving his large steppe empire to his son.

After Maodun's death, the Xiongnu made greater access to these regular markets their key demand, for the *hoqin* subsidy payments, although very profitable for the political elite, could not adequately compensate the much larger number of ordinary nomads who were forced to forgo raiding. Without the guarantee of regular access to border markets where ordinary nomads could trade live animals or other pastoral products for grain, cloth, or metal, the *Shanyu* could not expect his people to observe the peace. Since the Chinese feared that such widespread economic links between their own frontier people and the nomads would lead to political subversion, the Han court was opposed to any increase in the size or number of border markets. The Xiongnu were therefore forced to extort increased trade privileges the same way they extorted increased subsidies: by raiding or threatening to raid China. Loot from such raids kept the Xiongnu tribesmen supplied until China finally agreed to liberalize its trade policy.

Once established, these border markets quickly became important trade centers to which the Xiongnu flocked, exchanging pastoral products for Chinese goods. Now instead of prohibiting trade, the Han court attempted to control it by regulating what items could be sold, as well as the location and timing of trade fairs. The whole relationship between China and the nomads became more stable and old hostilities were forgotten: "From the *Shanyu* on down, all the Xiongnu grew friendly with the Han, coming and going along the Great Wall" (Ssu-ma 1993, 2: 148). This situation lasted until 133 BCE when, under the aggressive leadership of Emperor Wudi, the "Martial Emperor," the Han court abruptly abandoned the *hoqin* policy and mounted a surprise attack on the nomads, beginning more than a half-century of frontier warfare.

Although the *hoqin* policy had successfully preserved the peace for three generations, it was always unpopular at the Han court because treating the Xiongnu as an equal state violated the very essence of a Sinocentric world order, a view well expressed earlier by Jia Yi, an official at the court of Emperor Wen (r. 179–157 BCE):

The situation of the empire may be described just like a person hanging upside down. The Son of Heaven is at the head of the empire. Why? Because he should be placed at the top. The barbarians are at the feet of the empire. Why? Because they should be placed at the bottom . . . To command the barbarian is a power vested in the Emperor at the top, and to present tribute to the Son of Heaven is a ritual to be performed by vassals at the bottom. Now the feet are put on the top and the head at the bottom. Hanging upside down is something beyond comprehension. (Yü 1967: 11)

Emperor Wudi was susceptible to such criticism. Although his predecessors considered it expedient to appease the Xiongnu to avoid trouble, he now considered such a policy demeaning. China was an empire unrivaled in wealth and military power that would invade the steppe, defeat the Xiongnu and destroy their power forever.

Wudi's wars failed. Although China sent a series of massive expeditionary forces against the Xiongnu, they found nothing to conquer but empty land. Lack of supplies forced Chinese armies to retreat within a few months of each campaign. Although they occasionally defeated the nomads in battle and engineered the defection of some of the Xiongnu empire's component tribes, the cost of these wars in men, horses, and money was so high that the dynasty practically bankrupted itself. Nor did the attacks destroy the stability of the Xiongnu empire; ironically the invasions only reinforced the *Shanyu's* position as protector of the nomads against Chinese aggression. After decades of war, the Han court reluctantly concluded China had no more chance of ruling the nomads of the steppe than they had of governing the fish in the sea. By 90 BCE they had abandoned their attacks on the steppe and adopted a completely defensive position of cutting off trade while repulsing raids (Loewe 1974a).

The Xiongnu had long understood that the disruption of peaceful relations over the long term worked to their disadvantage so throughout the war they had sent envoys to China requesting a resumption of the *hoqin* treaties as a way to restore the *status quo ante*. But China had rejected such peace offers, insisting that any new peace agreement take place within the new framework of a "tributary system" in which, they told the nomads, the Xiongnu would be required to pay homage to the Han emperor, send a hostage to court, and pay tribute to China. It was a relationship the Xiongnu considered unacceptable and explicitly rejected in 107 BCE:

"That is not the way things were done under the old alliance!" the *Shanyu* objected, "Under the old alliance the Han always sent us an imperial princess, as well as allotments of silks, foodstuffs, and other goods, in order to secure peace, while we for our part refrained from making trouble at the border. Now you want to go against the old ways and make me send my son as hostage. I have no use for such proposals!" (Ssu-ma 1993, 2: 157)

Yet with no subsidies, no trade, and borders too strong to raid, successive Xiongnu *Shanyus* found their political positions undermined. In 60 BCE a succession dispute split the Xiongnu elite into rival factions who warred upon one another. The losing *Shanyu*, Huhanyeh, decided that his only chance of political survival was to come to terms with China and so he broke with Xiongnu tradition in 53 BCE by agreeing to accept the Chinese demands for peace under the terms of the tributary system. Surprisingly, the tributary system proved a sham. In return for formal compliance, the Xiongnu received even larger gifts and better border markets. During his first visit to the Han court in 51 BCE, Huhanyeh received twenty *jin* of gold, 200,000 cash, seventy-seven suits of

clothes, 8000 pieces of silk, and 6000 *jin* of silk floss; his followers were supplied with 34,000 *hu* of rice² (Wylie 1875: 44–7).

The discovery of the true nature of the Han tributary system allowed Huhanyeh to implement a new “inner frontier” strategy in steppe politics. In essence he used Han wealth and military protection to reestablish unity within the Xiongnu empire. This strategy differed from outright surrender to China, in which a tribal leader accepted Chinese titles and entered the Han administrative framework, disappearing from the steppe political scene. Instead Huhanyeh maintained his autonomy and avoided direct Chinese control while demanding foreign aid and even military assistance to defeat rival Xiongnu leaders. The Chinese were eager to support contenders in a civil war (“using barbarians to fight barbarians”), a policy always popular at the Han court with the expectation that by aiding the winning side they would be able to dominate their ally in the future. While in the short term such goals could be realized, in the long term Chinese aid simply enabled the nomads to rebuild their empire and return to their aggressive outer frontier strategy once again. In 43 BCE, after a decade of receiving Chinese aid, Huhanyeh did just this and returned north to his homeland as supreme ruler of the Xiongnu, “and his people all gradually came together from various quarters, so that the old country again became settled and tranquil” (Wylie 1875: 47–8).

Even though they regained their unity and power, the Xiongnu never again objected to the structure of the tributary system. Instead, they actively set about exploiting it for their own ends. They continually demanded the right to present “tribute” and send hostages to court because they profited so handsomely. Indeed, they threatened invasion if their tributary missions were not received and appropriately rewarded. For the remainder of the Former Han dynasty Xiongnu regularly visited the Chinese court, with each *Shanyu* generally making at least one visit during his reign. And with each visit the amount of gifts increased (Table 1.2; also Yü 1967: 47).

The policy of lavish tributary payments continued into the Later Han dynasty (25–220 CE) and expanded to include other newly powerful frontier tribal groups like the Xianbei, Wuhuan, and Qiang. By 50 CE when the system was regularized, it is estimated that the annual cost of direct subsidies to the nomads amounted to one-third of the Han government payroll or 7 percent of all the empire’s revenue, goods to the value of \$130 million dollars in modern terms (Yü 1967: 61–4).

This fragmentation of the tributary system in the Later Han was a consequence of a second civil war that permanently divided the Xiongnu into northern and southern branches beginning in 47 CE. As in the previous civil war, the southern *Shanyu* allied himself with China and employed the inner frontier strategy, using China’s wealth to defeat his rival. However, because this civil war lasted more than forty years, the victorious lineage of the southern *Shanyu* was unable to reassert its control over northern Mongolia which fell into the hands of the rival Xianbei nomads. Instead, the southern *Shanyu* maintained his close

Table 1.2. *Xiongnu visits to the Han Chinese court*

Year of visit BCE	Silk floss(<i>jin</i>)	Silk fabric (pieces)
51	6,000	8,000
49	8,000	9,000
33	16,000	16,000
25	20,000	20,000
1	30,000	30,000

connection with China and was content to leave the steppe fragmented, maintaining control only around the immediate frontier in order to dominate the flow of goods to the steppe and keep the less well-organized nomads from gaining access to the system.

By the end of the second century CE, the relationship between the Han dynasty and the southern Xiongnu had become so close that they acted as “frontier guarding barbarians,” protecting China from attacks by other tribes on the steppe and, not coincidentally, milking the dynasty for more subsidies. Although during the second century the southern Xiongnu became so closely tied to the Han court that they fell under the indirect control of Han frontier officials who could determine succession to leadership by supporting favored candidates, they never lost their identity as an independent state.

So important was this relationship that it was the nomads who provided the last bulwark against domestic rebels when China fell into civil war in 180 CE. But because nomad empires were dependent on a prosperous and stable Chinese dynasty, they could not survive its collapse. When the Han dynasty finally dissolved in 220 CE, China’s economy and population were devastated. The nomads no longer had any rich provinces to loot, had no dependable border markets in which to trade, and saw their subsidy payments disappear. Under such conditions centralization proved impossible and the tribes in Mongolia reverted to anarchy. Thus an empire as powerful and centralized as that of the Xiongnu would not reemerge for another three hundred years until the Turks were able to exploit a reunifying China under the Sui and Tang dynasties in the sixth century to establish a relationship structurally analogous to that of the Han and Xiongnu. Like that relationship, unity on the steppe also disappeared with the collapse of the Tang dynasty at the end of the ninth century (Barfield 1989).

EMPIRES AND SHADOW EMPIRES

When comparing the Xiongnu empire with Han China, an immediate question arises. Can states that are so different both be empires? They were certainly politically comparable and both ruled over vast territories. But in most other ways (sophistication of administration, political centralization, urbanization, size of population, economic specialization, etc.), they bore almost no similarities. This

was because steppe empires were secondary phenomena, arising in response to imperial state formation in China and largely dependent on exploiting a unified China for their existence. However, the Xiongnu empire is not a unique case. Looking at the other examples of empires discussed in this volume, we find a similar sharp divide between those that most scholars would easily accept as empires and those that are in some way problematic. The “primary empires” would include Assyria, Achaemenid Persia, Rome, China, Inka, Aztec (though this was still in its formative stage when destroyed by the Spaniards), Spanish, and Ottoman. The problematic cases are the Xiongnu, Nubia, Carolingian Europe, and the Portuguese Indies. But (to paraphrase Tolstoy) while all primary empires are alike, each problematic empire is problematic in its own way. In some respects, they are outwardly empires, but each is missing something vital that sets it apart and makes it a shadow empire.

Primary empires

What is an empire and how does it differ from other types of polities? An empire is a state established by conquest that has sovereignty over subcontinental or continental sized territories and incorporates millions or tens of millions of people within a unified and centralized administrative system. The state supports itself through a system of tribute or direct taxation of its component parts and maintains a large permanent military force to protect its marked frontiers and preserve internal order. Empires also share a set of five common internal characteristics:

First, empires are organized both to administer and exploit diversity, whether economic, political, religious, or ethnic. While empires may begin with the hegemony of a single region or ethnic group, they all grow more cosmopolitan over time with the incorporation of new territories and people very different from themselves. Indeed it is characteristic that, once established, the elite of an empire may change or be replaced without the necessary collapse of the state structure. Egypt’s many dynasties are a notable example of this, as was the tendency of Roman emperors to be drawn from non-Italian regions after the end of Augustus’ line. Even in China one finds that dynasties that drew their elite from one region during the formation of a new empire moved to broaden their base to countrywide recruitment within a couple of generations. It is their ability to incorporate large numbers of different ethnic, regional, and religious groups that makes empires so different from tribes and locality-based polities such as city-states that organize themselves on the basis of some common similarity.

Empires are comfortable with, and even thrive on, diversity. The famous frieze at Persepolis with all the Persian empire’s many component satrapies lined up before the Great King in their native dress to present tribute of distinctive local products is a physical representation of this diversity. Of course this was not because empires thought well of peoples different from themselves, but rather that their policies were designed to make all groups integral parts of the empire