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

Nicola Di Cosmo

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In the time of Duke Huan of Ch'i [the position of] the son of Heaven had become humble and weak, while the feudal lords used their energies in attacking [one another]. The Southern Yi and Northern Ti engaged the Central States in battle, and the continued existence of the Central States seemed [to hang by] a thin thread [. . .] Duke Huan was troubled about the distress of the Central States and the rebelliousness of the Yi and Ti. He wished to keep alive what was dying and to preserve what was ceasing to exist, to bring esteem to [the position of] the son of Heaven and broaden civil and military occupations. Therefore the Book of Kuan-tzu grew out of this situation. (*Huai-nan-tzu*, 21:7a)<sup>1</sup>

It seems a shared human experience that the malleable substance at the origin of “civilizations” – a sense of cultural cohesion, shared destiny, and common origin – coagulates into a harder and stronger matter when the peoples who belong to it are confronted, at times in a threatening way, by other peoples who are seen as being different and “beyond the pale.” The pale, the wall, the furrow in the soil are potentially dividing lines, demarcating the territory a community recognizes as its own, whose crossing, by an alien entity, can generate conflicts and threaten the stability of the community and, in extreme cases, cause its demise.

No wonder, then, that the antagonism between those who are “in” and those who are “out,”<sup>2</sup> and the criteria the community adopts to demarcate

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Alan Rickett, trans., *Guanzi*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> On the separation between “in” and “out” in the Chinese conception of world order, see Lein-sheng Yang, “Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order,” in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 21.

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not only its territory but also the characteristics that are assumed to be the very basis of its *raison d'être* (a faith, a race, a code of behavior, a shared set of values) are at the foundation of how a “civilization” defines itself. Although a sense of “belonging” to the community might exist prior to an external challenge, the fact of being challenged makes its members acutely aware of their common boundaries, forcing them to define cultural differences and leading them to build psychological and physical defenses. If there is one characteristic that civilizations have in common, it is their ideological need to defend themselves not just against their own enemies, but against the enemies of civilization, the “barbarians.” This opposition between civilization and its enemies can be recognized as one of the great ongoing themes that we encounter in world history. Frontiers, however, are neither fixed nor exclusively defensive. With the expansion of civilization, the opening of new spaces to investigation, the acquisition of broader geographic and cultural horizons, frontiers acquire ever-different meanings. Because of their marginal yet critical status, frontiers are often gray areas, liminal zones where habitual conventions and principles can lose value, and new ones begin to appear. In this sense, the study of frontiers often promotes a critical stance toward definitions of “community,” “culture,” or “civilization.”

The subject of the present work is the early history of China's northern frontier, the area that is understood as both crucial to a fuller understanding of ancient China and the locus of one of the great themes of Chinese history until modern times, namely, the confrontation between China and the steppe nomads. The blueprint of this “theme” was fixed in the historical literature during the Han dynasty, as the Grand Historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien composed, probably around 100 B.C., a monograph on the steppe nomadic people called Hsiung-nu, which he included in his *Shih chi* (Records of the Grand Historian). Ssu-ma Ch'ien based his history of the north on the assumption (or the pretense of it) that a chasm had always existed between China – the Hua-Hsia people – and the various alien groups inhabiting the north. That assumption is still with us, reflected in modern notions that the northern frontier has always been characterized by a set of dual oppositions – between pastoral and settled people (steppe and sown), between nomadic tribes and Chinese states, between an urban civilization and a warlike uncivilized society.

The main questions that this book explores are all about the historical realities hidden behind these dualisms: how and when did pastoral nomadism appear on the northern fringes of the Sinitic world? What was the genesis of these two opposite principles – what the medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) called the civilization (*'umran*) of the settled and the civilization of the nomad – in Chinese history? How did the Inner Asian geographic, political, and ethnographic space become an integral part, consciously researched, of China's first comprehensive history?

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Given the primary need to contextualize the cultural and political dimensions of this relationship, the historical circumstances of the northern peoples' interaction with China will form the arena of our first investigation. Two phenomena are particularly important here: the expansion of Sinitic political power into alien areas throughout much of the pre-imperial period, and the formation of the nomadic empire of the Hsiung-nu that emerges soon after the imperial unification. We need also to examine the cultural paradigm constructed by Ssu-ma Ch'ien to establish the meaning of the north within the mold of a unified vision of China's history, a paradigm that could also be used by his contemporaries and by future generations for gathering information about the north.

The main difficulty in discussing these issues is that early Chinese history is an exciting but extremely fluid field of study: new texts and artifacts regularly emerge from archaeological excavations, pushing new analyses and interpretations to the surface. Because the material excavated is varied, and the questions posed by archaeologists fan out in different directions, the interpretive "surface" is continually bubbling with novel possibilities. The historian is placed in suspension under these circumstances, as narratives are constantly being destabilized. Striving to match archaeological "narratives" and historical text-based narratives is a thankless task and often of limited use given the intrinsic incompatibility of the two sets of evidence. The textual sources often refer to an inherited tradition and, in any case, incorporate the thought process of their authors; the material evidence (as a body) is relatively accidental, and its interpretation and usefulness depend on the questions asked by modern scholars. Yet all the information available can be placed side by side to form a series of "contexts" that in their interaction may provide useful leads. Thus data collected from disparate sources "rebound" on each other within what is essentially a comparative analysis that tends to establish possible similarities, analogies, and points of contact and, by a logical process, suggests scenarios for possible solutions.

These problems have, if anything, even greater cogency in the study of China's northern frontier, where the analysis of cultural contacts must span huge geographical expanses and long periods of time. That alternative paths of inquiry exist does not mean that the historian is forever prevented from reaching any solution. To the contrary, it is the growing body of evidence itself that offers the most exciting possibilities, while demonstrating that an analysis is needed that moves away from the claustrophobic narrowness of the Chinese classical tradition (largely endorsed by the modern Western exegesis). This tradition has firmly enclosed the analysis of cultural contacts across the northern frontier between the Scylla of "sinicization" and the Charybdis of "natural" (and therefore cultureless) behavior. The "other" in the Chinese tradition seldom rose above a person regarded either as someone who was suitable material for cultural assimilation or someone

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whose nature was hopelessly different and impermeable to civilization and thus destined to remain beyond the pale, often in unappealing or dangerous ways for the Chinese. Under these conditions, a history that critically examines cultural contacts and ethnic differences as part of the formation of various cultures is written only with great difficulty. In fact, the history of the northern frontier has frequently been reduced to a recital of mutual conquests by peoples representing two opposite principles.

This book is an attempt to expand that narrow space and to place the history of the northern frontier on the level of a cultural history, by establishing various contexts in which such a history can be articulated. Let me say from the start that these “contexts” are not meant to be exhaustive. Nor do I try to espouse a single narrative. My principal aim is to provide more than one key, in the hope of opening up different possibilities of interpretation. Hence four separate, but interconnecting, contexts are introduced here, each of which is examined as a separate *problématique* of the frontier. Partly as a consequence of the type of sources available, partly as a function of the historical discourse itself, these four contexts have been arranged in more or less chronological order. Even though these contexts (and the narratives that they produce) are still tentative and, as already noted, intrinsically unstable, this is not to say that this type of investigation necessarily leads to a blind alley. By moving from one set of evidence to the next, asking questions that emerge especially from the comparative analysis of the materials, and proposing answers that have not been previously envisaged, I hope to see a rich context emerge that will place the history of the relations between China and the north in a new light.

The book is divided into four parts, each having two chapters. Each part represents a separate narrative of the frontier. Although other scholars have treated these topics with great knowledge and competence, their results are different from mine because they base them on radically different premises. For instance, let us take two books, published in the same year, that are classics in their genre and closely relevant to the subject matter of this book, namely, Jaroslav Průšek's *Chinese Statelets and the Northern Barbarians in the Period 1400–300 B.C.* (Dordrecht, 1971) and William Watson's *Cultural Frontiers in Ancient East Asia* (Edinburgh, 1971). Průšek's control of the classical sources exceeds that of anyone else who has ever written on this topic, but he bases his narrative on certain premises (the rise of pastoral nomadism in north China, for instance) that are outside the reach of the textual tradition and that can be confirmed only by archaeological investigation. Průšek's deep erudition provides a reading that, in the end, goes far beyond the texts he so expertly analyzes, and the resulting picture remains too close to a single set of evidence to be per-

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suasive.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Watson's archaeological work is extremely rich and truly insightful, but if we look for answers to historical problems, this evidence immediately shows its limits. The same can be said of other scholarly works that have provided much enlightenment on discrete issues and problems but have remained limited to a particular period, set of sources, or scholarly tradition and disciplinary training.<sup>4</sup> All of them, of course, provide a generous platform onto which one can climb to look farther ahead.

The first part, devoted to archaeology, is concerned with a frontier defined through separate material cultures, the "northern" and the Chinese, that can cross borders and interact but that by and large represent two completely different traditions. The second part refers to a frontier defined not through material objects, artifacts, and burial rituals, but through written words and the ideas they convey. This is a frontier that separates peoples holding deeply divergent understandings of life, of society, of morality, and of the values that inform and define them. It is also a frontier found between those who write and those who do not (hence the one-sidedness of the evidence). The third part describes a frontier that is more properly political, one that is the result of political events, recorded in history, that led to profound transformations in the concept of frontier. From a place frequented by mythological and beastlike beings, the frontier became more concrete, a place where soldiers were deployed, merchants went to trade, and politicians sought to exploit. The fourth and last part deals with the historiography of the frontier as it was "created" in the first historical narrative in Chinese history, the *Shih-chi* of Ssu-ma Ch'ien. The influence of this early narrative cannot be overstated, as it colored deeply later understandings of the formative process of the frontier, a process whose main lines have remained largely unquestioned.

PART I. The two chapters in Part I attempt to define the archaeological context of the emergence of nomads in northern China. The first chapter

<sup>3</sup> This is not a criticism of Průšek's work, especially since Průšek did not have at his disposal the type of information we enjoy today, but rather a caveat on placing excessive faith on the written sources when trying to articulate a historical hypothesis.

<sup>4</sup> As a paragon of philological accuracy we could mention, for instance, A. F. P. Hulswé and Michael Loewe, *China in Central Asia: The Early Stage*, 125 B.C.–A.D. 23. *An annotated translation of chapters 61 and 96 of the History of the Former Han dynasty* (Leiden: Brill, 1979); on a different level, Jenny So and Emma Bunker's archaeological expertise is brought to bear in the bold re-evaluation of the trade between China and the North in their *Traders and Raiders on China's Northern Frontier* (Seattle and London: Arthur Sackler Gallery and University of Washington Press, 1995).

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delineates the process through which pastoralism expanded in the Eurasian steppe zone and the emergence of cultures that had developed advanced bronze metallurgy and handicraft technologies. The introduction of horse-back riding and wheeled transportation gave these cultures further impetus and probably played a role in their ability to spread across Central Eurasia. During the early first millennium B.C. mounted nomads, recognizable as “early” or “Scythian-type” nomads, are evident in clustered cultural centers throughout Eurasia. Northern China – as we see in Chapter 2 – was by no means extraneous to this continentwide cultural process. Mixed economies practicing both agriculture and stock rearing, culturally related to the Inner Asian metallurgical complex, emerged between the world of the Shang and the bronze cultures of Central Asia, Siberia, and the Altai. At this early stage, the northern frontier societies constantly interacted with the Shang and early Chou, and, even though a frontier did exist, no sharp demarcation can be detected. In fact, China’s early frontier was permeable to the introduction of forms of art and technology both from and through these neighboring northern societies.

Gradually, northern China also experienced a transition to greater reliance on animal husbandry. Here “Scythian-type” societies began to appear, characterized by expert horsemanship, martial valor, and taste for animal-style art whose formal conventions were shared across Central Eurasia. These societies, which most likely developed a degree of internal specialization, included farmers and herders and a nomadic aristocracy that seems to have achieved a dominant position. Horse riding and iron technology gradually became widespread in northern China, possibly as a result of a general evolution, among pastoral nomads, toward more sophisticated forms of social organization. The final phase of the development of this “archaeological” frontier in pre-imperial China unearths an abundance of precious objects, mostly of gold and silver, which point to a commercial role for the aristocracy and increased trade with China, dating, probably, from the fifth or fourth century B.C.

PART II. If archaeology can help us to define cultural types in terms of their way of life, technical abilities, local customs, and even spiritual realm, only through written sources can we learn about the cultural and political perspectives of the Chinese regarding the north. This issue is inextricably linked to a “culturalist” perspective that has long dominated the study of foreign relations in early China. This perspective emphasizes the sharp dichotomy between a world that is culturally superior and literate, with a common sense of aesthetic refinement, intellectual cultivation, moral norms, and ideals of social order embedded in rituals and ceremonies, and a world that lacks such achievements. The boundary between these two worlds, supported by abundant statements in the early Chinese sources, was easily interpreted as a boundary between a community that shared civilized values

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and a community that did not recognize those values. This interpretation has been so dominant as to preclude any other approach, even in the face of notable contradictions, such as, for instance, that a single term analogous to the European “barbarian” did not exist in ancient China. This is not to deny that the world “outside” the Central Plain was at times portrayed, in the ancient literature, as a hostile and different environment or that foreign peoples often were lumped together under an abstract concept of “otherness” and regarded as inferior, uncultured, and threatening. But we need to ask what this meant for the actual conduct of foreign relations. How can we connect these statements about cultural difference to the historical reality that produced them?

In my view, we cannot limit the discussion about the relations between Chinese (i.e., Central Plain, or Chou) states and these other political communities to a series of “cultural” statements retrieved from terse historical sources open to diverse interpretations. Such an approach would tend to establish that a system of cultural values existed, defined both as “Chinese” and in opposition to the system of “anti-values” supposedly embraced by non-Chinese peoples, regardless of the historical context in which these statements appear. But how can we accept that these statements marked a true cultural boundary without analyzing the circumstances under which they were made? To answer this question, Chapter 3 investigates the actual contexts of political relations between foreign states and Chinese states. This chapter argues that the separation between a “Hua-Hsia” Chinese cultural unity and an external barbarism, although perceived of and expressed in those terms, was actually embedded in a pattern dominated by the political and military strategies essential to the survival of the Chinese states. Moreover, those states adopted a variety of attitudes and strategies vis-à-vis the northern peoples, along a spectrum ranging from virulent opposition to alliance, political equality, and peace.

It is against a background of endemic warfare and ruthless conquest, and within a logic finely tuned to exploit every advantage that might promote the survival of the state, that we must place the statements that we find in Chinese sources stressing cultural differences. Recourse to arguments pointing to the inferiority of alien peoples served, at times, the political need to escape norms regulating interstate relations and legitimize the conquest and annexation of these peoples. At other times, the Chinese used foreign peoples as resources for strengthening the state and as allies in interstate relations.

Chapter 4 focuses on the early history of the relationship between nomads and the northern Chinese states. During the late fourth century B.C. a new type of protagonist appears in Chinese history: the mounted steppe warrior. Contemporary sources hesitatingly acknowledged the existence of horse-riding warriors, documented primarily through a famous debate in



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which the king of the state of Chao expounds on the necessity to adopt the methods of mounted warfare predominant in the north.

Analysis of events at this time reveals a new transformation taking place on the frontier. The incorporation of various Jung and Ti peoples by the stronger Chinese states did not exhaust the states' need to expand or to increase the resources at their disposal. In fact, the demands of the new military situation, which resulted in the need to sustain prolonged, expensive wars and in a great increase in the number of armies, may have been at the root of the northern states' expansion in the north. Offering a new interpretation for the motives behind the construction of the early "long walls" in northern China, this chapter will argue that the construction of static defense structures served to establish firm bases from which Chinese "occupation" armies could control the surrounding, non-Chinese territory. Using textual and archaeological evidence, this chapter will revisit the traditional interpretation according to which the fortified lines of defense, the precursors of the Great Wall, were built to defend the Chinese civilization (or the incipient Chinese empire) from the incursions of the nomads. Rather, walls were meant as a form of military penetration and occupation of an alien territory that the Chinese states could use in a variety of ways, including horse breeding and trade, and as a reservoir for troops and laborers. Once the Chinese began a more sustained pattern of relations with nomadic peoples, the fundamental attitude they adopted toward the nomads shows continuity with the policies and strategies that had dominated Chinese relations with the Jung and Ti, not the rupture that a purely defensive strategy (implied by the erection of "defensive walls") would entail.

PART III. The issues considered in Part II are essential to understanding the next transformation of the frontier, which coincides with the emergence of a unified nomadic power, the first such "empire" in world history and precursor to the Türk and Mongol empires. The policy of occupation and creeping expansionism practiced by the northern Chinese states in the third century B.C. was endorsed with a vengeance by the unifier of China, Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, who in 215 B.C. sent an enormous army to conquer and colonize the pasture grounds located in the Ordos region. Chapter 5 argues that the relentless pressure of the Chinese states on the northern frontier possibly acted as a catalyst for deep social transformations among the nomads. In a partial reappraisal of the genesis of the Hsiung-nu empire, I discuss in this chapter a pattern of state formation among Inner Asian nomads that aims to be consistent with the events as they are narrated in the historical sources. The rise of the Hsiung-nu empire forced radical modification of traditional approaches to "frontier management," as the Chinese were now in a position of military inferiority. A new world order thus emerged wherein the main powers split the world that they knew into two large areas of influence; although unified, China was no longer



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hegemonic. The policy that dominated the relations between Hsiung-nu and Han in the early Former Han period was one of appeasement and accommodation in which China became a virtual tributary of the Hsiung-nu.

Chapter 6 demonstrates why this policy eventually had to be abandoned and why the Han dynasty needed to turn to more aggressive strategies. Two factors emerge: first, the ripening of conditions that on the political, military, and economic levels enabled China to invest more of its people and resources in an all-out war effort; and second and most important, the ideological shift that accompanied the realization that the *ho-ch'in* policy of appeasement did not guarantee peace. Several explanations have been offered to account for the Han endorsement of a military stance, and this chapter will explore why the *ho-ch'in* policy did not work, by looking more closely at the Hsiung-nu side. From an Inner Asian perspective, it appears that the “appeasement” policy failed owing to a structural incompatibility between Hsiung-nu and Han understandings of their mutual international obligations.

Chapter 6 ends with a survey of Han westward expansion and of the Han motives in establishing a military presence in the “Western Regions.” Again, the debates are not new, and most of the opinions I express here coincide with those of other scholars. Yet my perspective emphasizes not so much the economic factors as it does the military and political ones, which seem to have prevailed in a context in which destruction of the Hsiung-nu empire as a single political entity was the overriding concern.

PART IV. A further, decisive, “transformation” of the frontier occurred in the first century B.C., when the north finally became an object of conscious historical and ethnographic inquiry. The relationship between the Hsiung-nu and China, as constructed by Ssu-ma Ch'ien in the *Shih chi*, became a polarity between two antithetical principles whose genesis coincided with the dawn of Chinese history. Together with the “crystallization” of Inner Asian history into a pattern that had not been recognized before in any way even remotely comparable to the grand scheme erected by him, the historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien opened the door to an empirical investigation of the north, made not of mythological accounts and moral precepts, but of information that was as historically rigorous as one might expect from the “Grand Historian.” He selected his sources carefully, acquired much information from persons who had been closely engaged in Hsiung-nu affairs, copied memorials and diplomatic correspondence, and narrated events with precision and an abundance of detail. Part IV is based on the identification of two chief strands in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's narrative, one the collection of information vital to understanding the Chinese confrontation with the Hsiung-nu empire; the other, no less vital, the construction of a pattern that rationalized the relevance of the north in Chinese history. Chapter 7 focuses on the information that Ssu-ma Ch'ien incorporated in his monographic

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account of the Hsiung-nu (chapter 110), effectively starting an ethnography and a literate history of the north that also served as a model for later dynastic histories. Chapter 8 looks at how Ssu-ma Ch'ien rationalized the history of relations between the north and China into a broad pattern resting on two elements. One was the creation of a "genealogy" of northern peoples that could match the historical "genealogy" of Chinese dynasties and hegemonic states from the mythical beginning of history to the historian's time. The other was the insertion of the north and its inhabitants within the system of correspondences between the celestial and the human spheres that was believed, in Han times, to constitute cosmic order. Events such as wars or the downfalls of rulers were regarded as manifestations at the human level of the workings of that cosmic system, and, therefore, history was the "output" of a machinery of correlations that could not exclude the Hsiung-nu or more generally, foreign peoples. Thus foreign peoples and their lands become equal partners in the construction of Chinese history, whereas in the past they had been (as far as I can tell) excluded from the system of correlations and predictions upon which historical causality was ultimately based.

Our knowledge of the genesis and earliest evolution of relations between China and the north, down to the Han dynasty, is still gotten through the lens of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's "master narrative." This narrative effectively made the north into a historical protagonist. At the same time, it trapped the history of the northern frontier into a dichotomous patterns from which we have yet to free ourselves. By identifying the history of the frontier as an artifact, as a "narrative" that must be placed in a given time and intellectual milieu, and as the culmination (obviously not the end) of a long and intricate process, we can also re-establish the northern "sphere" of Chinese history as an area with its own autonomous, internally dialectical, historical, and cultural development.