

## Inner Asia and Cycles of Power in China's Imperial Dynastic History

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Throughout its imperial dynastic history, the tribal peoples of the northern frontier constituted the greatest threat to China's political integrity. For almost 900 years foreigners ruled over large parts of north China, and on two occasions they conquered the whole country. Even when native dynasties controlled China, they faced attacks by large steppe empires that appeared able to cut through border defenses at will. However, with few exceptions, most analytical studies of the northern frontier have confined themselves either to very short periods of time with limited comparability,<sup>1</sup> or have treated the problem in gross terms as a struggle between China and generic "barbarians".<sup>2</sup> Even work demonstrating that during some periods China was forced to deal with its neighbors as equals has paid little attention to the differences among the foreign peoples involved.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the question of why Manchuria should be the cradle of so many foreign dynasties, or why powerful steppe empires showed such little interest in ruling China, has either not been addressed or else treated in isolation without explaining the modes of interaction among different regions and societies.

An examination of a standard list of major dynasties in China and their tribal counterparts on the northern frontier reveals a number of recurring characteristics (*Chart #1*). First, most successful empires on the Mongolian steppe appeared in tandem with native Chinese dynasties that ruled all of China. This pattern is the reverse of the generally accepted premise that the steppe nomads grew stronger as China grew weaker. Instead, nomadic empires and unified Chinese dynasties rose and fell together, a pattern particularly apparent with the Han and Hsiung-nu, and the T'ang and Turks. Second, those foreign dynasties which did successfully establish themselves in China were almost exclusively from Manchuria, not Mongolia. Of the five major foreign dynasties that ruled in China, four had their original homelands in the Liao River Basin. Third, the alternation of powerful steppe empires and native Chinese dynasties with periods of "Manchurian" foreign rule in China

created a regular cycle of dynastic succession that repeated itself three times over the course of 2000 years, with only the Mongol Yuan appearing out of phase. Far from being an issue of peripheral history, understanding the relationship established between China and its tribal neighbors is crucial in explaining the long term political development of East Asia.

I have approached the problem not as a sinologist, but as an anthropologist interested in the long term historical development of tribal societies beyond China's frontier and disclaim any special expertise in Chinese history. Nevertheless, the standard Chinese dynastic histories provide a unique resource for investigating the development of tribal societies in north Asia because each contains specific chapters on a dynasty's relations with its foreign neighbors. Nowhere else in the world is there such a continuous record of foreign relations. In addition, because Chinese writings about nomad "barbarians" have held a unique fascination for western scholars, they are almost all available in translation. Ironically, questions about China's interaction with tribal peoples is more accessible to the non-sinologist than many bigger issues concerning China itself.

### A Model for Dynastic Succession and Frontier Relations

To address these problems I propose the following model of dynastic succession in China based on four premises:

1) The arrival of foreign conquerors was not the random product of weakness in China, but part of a larger cycle of frontier relations with its own internal coherence.

The succession of dynasties in China has recurring elements that took two basic forms: a bi-polar political world divided between a united China and a unified steppe empire; a fractured political world where central order was absent both on the steppe and in China, permitting the rise of foreign dynasties from Manchuria. The breakdown of either system brought about the conditions for the emergence of the other. That is, conditions of anarchy in China following the collapse of an established native dynasty set the stage for the development of foreign dynasties; but the eventual reestablishment of order and prosperity by these foreign dynasties created the conditions for the reunification of China under native rule and a return to the more stable bi-polar frontier.

2) The nomads of the northern steppe established centralized empires on the steppe which were economically dependent on exploiting a prosperous and united China, and therefore structurally linked to them.

Chart #1

Cycles of Rule: Major Dynasties in China and Steppe Empires in Mongolia<sup>4</sup>

	Native Chinese Dynasties	Foreign Dynasties	Steppe Empires
CYCLE 1	1. Ch'in and Han (221 B.C. - A.D. 220)  2. Chinese dynasties during the Period of Disruption (220-581)	3. T'o-pa Wei (386-556) and the other foreign dynasties directly before and after	<u>HSIUNG-NU</u> (209 B.C.-A.D. 155)  (Jou-jan)
CYCLE 2	4. Sui and T'ang (581-907)  5. Sung (960-1279)	6. Liao (Khitan) (907-1125)  7. Chin (Jurchen) (1115-1234)  8. Yüan (Mongol) (1206-1368)	<u>1st TURKISH</u> (552-630) <u>2nd TURKISH</u> (683-734) <u>UIGHUR</u> (745-840)  <u>MONGOL</u>
CYCLE 3	9. Ming (1368-1644)	10. Ch'ing (1616-1912)	(Oirats) (Eastern Mongols) (Zunghars)

(STRONG STEPPE EMPIRES)

(weak steppe empires)

Nomadic empires on the northern steppe developed stable, though periodically hostile, relationships with native dynasties in China that were vital to their existence. Supported by raiding, Chinese subsidies, or trade, such nomadic states were not interested in conquest of sedentary territory and avoided any attempts to conquer China itself. Although they initially constituted the major military threat to China's northern frontier during the Han, T'ang, and Ming dynasties, their aim was generally the extortion of a lucrative peace treaty. Once such a relationship was established, the nomads proved extremely loyal (albeit for self-interested reasons) and even provided military aid to protect these dynasties when they were threatened by internal revolt. Dependent on the receipt of revenue extracted from China by native dynasties, nomadic empires on the northern steppe disappeared when China fell into anarchy and its economy collapsed. They reappeared only when China again had surplus wealth to exploit. Except under Chinggis Khan and his Yüan dynastic descendants, nomads from Mongolia never established a stable dynasty in China.

3) The vast majority foreign dynasties which established themselves in China came from the marginal border areas of Manchuria where tribal and Chinese culture mixed together, although during times of native Chinese dynastic rule these areas were militarily weak and politically disorganized.

When China and the steppe were united the marginal border territories within Manchuria were split between them, and attempts by the peoples there to gain autonomy were ruthlessly suppressed. Therefore, Manchurian kingdoms could develop only in times of anarchy on the northern frontier when central authority both in China and on the steppe had collapsed. During such periods they established small states drawing on support from both agricultural and pastoral populations. Manchurian administrations were characterized by a dual organization quite different from either the imperial confederacy structure employed by the Mongolian nomads or native Chinese court practices. This dual organization was characterized by separate lines of administration for tribal peoples and Han Chinese within a single governmental framework. This allowed sedentary Chinese territory to be ruled by Chinese officials using their Chinese administrative practices, while tribal peoples were organized around modified versions of their own tribal traditions. Once in power in China, such foreign dynasties proved adept at keeping their nomadic tribal rivals in Mongolia disorganized and on the defensive. However,

when faced with native rebellions within China, they eventually neglected their frontier defenses to concentrate on maintaining power there. This allowed the nomads to reunite, and, by the time Chinese rebels had reestablished native rule, the tribes of Mongolia had also reorganized. The frontier again reverted to its bi-polar form.

4) The Mongol Empire was not the culmination of political development on the Mongolian steppe, but an aberration which pitted a uniquely centralized nomadic state bent on extortion against a Manchurian state which resisted militarily until it was destroyed.

An examination of Mongol history shows that it arose under unusual circumstances with a political structure quite unlike previous steppe empires. However, Chinggis Khan's initial military strategy was not unlike those of previous nomadic states: his aim was the exploitation of neighboring sedentary states, not their conquest. The destruction of the Jurchen Chin was the consequence of their consistent refusal to strike a deal with the Mongols, who, for the first time, had the capacity to overwhelm the fixed defenses of a sedentary state. It was only under Chinggis Khan's successors that the Mongols stopped simply occupying Chinese territory and began to govern it. While the Mongol conquest fundamentally altered the Chinese view of nomads from exploiters to potential conquerors, after the fall of the Yuan the steppe reverted to its older pattern and never again threatened any dynasty in China with destruction.

### The Chronological Phases and Cycles of Dynastic Rule

In order to determine if these generalizations are valid it is first necessary to examine Chinese frontier history more closely. Any model of macro-development is, of course, subject to considerable variation within each dynastic period. The twists and turns of China's frontier relations cannot be examined in detail within the confines of a single paper. Here we are presenting only the summary conclusions of a book length monograph which documents the developments within each dynasty in much greater detail.<sup>5</sup> Even in its outline form though, the cycle described above integrates China's history of periodic centralization and decline into the larger context of north Asia. The following summary of Chinese frontier history (admittedly highly schematic) provides the basic sequence of relationships:

### Cycle 1

The Han and Hsiung-nu were closely linked as partners along a bi-polar frontier. They both came into existence as imperial powers with the fall of the Ch'in dynasty in 207 B.C. and for centuries thereafter remained the dominant powers of northern Asia. The Hsiung-nu empire derived its stability from the exploitation of China, initially through direct raiding. However, in time most of their revenue was derived more indirectly through increasingly generous peace treaties disguised under the cloak of the "tributary system" in which the nomads promised peace in return for trade and subsidies. By the first century A.D. the Hsiung-nu became the official border guards of the empire, increasing the influence they held at the Han court.

When the Hsiung-nu empire lost its hegemony on the steppe around A.D. 150, it was replaced by the Hsien-pi who maintained a loosely structured empire by constantly raiding China until the death of their leader in A.D. 180. That same year a major rebellion broke out in China during which regional military commanders began to take power from the central government. By A.D. 200, the Later Han dynasty existed in name only, shattered by war and famine, its population suffering a precipitous decline. It was not the nomads, but Chinese rebels, who had destroyed the Han and, unable to extort revenue from warlords in China, the steppe tribes could not maintain a centralized empire. Border tribes began to govern neighboring parts of north China directly, while Chinese military leaders fought to establish their own states.

By the middle of the third century, while wars raged within China, the Manchurian descendants of the Hsien-pi had begun to create small frontier states. Of these the Mu-jung Hsien-pi state of Yen proved the most viable. Employing a dual organization to separately administer tribal and Chinese peoples, it established control over northeast China during the middle of fourth century. Yen was conquered by the T'o-pa Wei, another Hsien-pi tribe, which adopted its administrative framework wholesale and went on to unify all of north China in the early fifth century. Political stability was restored and the Wei went on to rule successfully for more than a century.

It was only with the reunification of north China that the nomads in Mongolia were again able to establish a centralized state under the leadership of the Jou-jan tribe. However, the T'o-pa Wei policies toward its northern neighbors were distinctly different than those employed by native Chinese dynasties. It maintained huge garrisons of mobile troops along the frontier and invaded Mongolia with the aim of capturing as many people and livestock as possible. They succeeded so well that the Jou-jan were never really able to

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control the other steppe tribes. Not until the end of the Wei dynasty's history, when the T'o-pa court had become sinicized and began employing appeasement policies similar to those of the Han, did the Jou-jan become a threat to China.

### Cycle 2

Internal rebellion brought down the Wei at the close of the sixth century beginning a period of reunification in China under the native Sui dynasty. During the same period, the Jou-jan were overthrown by their vassals the Turks, who went on to carve out steppe empire ranging from the borders of Manchuria to the Caspian Sea. The Turks were so feared by the newly emerging dynasties in China that they all paid large subsidies in silk to remain at peace. Preferring extortion to conquest, the Turks stayed relatively neutral in the wars that followed the fall of the Sui in 618. Making no attempt to conquer China, they provided small amounts of aid to various Chinese contenders for the throne, including the founders of the successful T'ang dynasty who succeeded in conquering all of China.

The T'ang continued the policy of subsidy payments to the Turks until the reign of T'ang T'ai-tsung (627-649). Taking advantage of a civil war among the Turks, he incorporated the nomads into a multi-national empire. But this was a short lived phenomenon, for it required the T'ang emperor to act in accord with Turkish as well as Chinese values. After T'ai-tsung's death, the Turks revolted to found a new empire. The frontier reverted to its bi-polar form with a nomad imperial confederacy once again extorting subsidies and trade from China. Ironically, as the T'ang dynasty declined, it became dependent on the nomads to keep it in power. The Uighurs, successors to the Turks, proved particularly decisive in putting down the An Lu-shan Rebellion in the middle of the eighth century, prolonging the life of the T'ang by a century. After the Uighurs fell victim to an assault by the nomadic Kirghiz in 840, the northern steppe entered a period of anarchy. The T'ang was destroyed by the next major rebellion in China.

The fall of the T'ang opened the way to the development of new mixed states in Manchuria. The most important of these, the Liao, was established by the nomadic Khitans in 907. They succeeded in occupying northeast China after the demise of a series of short-lived dynasties during the middle of the tenth century. Kansu became a Tangut kingdom, while the rest of China fell under the control of the native northern Sung dynasty. Like the Mu-jung state of Yen centuries earlier, the Liao employed a dual administration that accommodated both Chinese and tribal organization. Like Yen, Liao also fell

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victim to another Manchurian group, the Jurchen forest tribes. They overthrew the Liao dynasty in 1125 to establish the Chin state. The Chin then conquered most of north China, confining the Sung to the south.

To this point, the first two cycles were remarkably similar in structure, but the rise of the Mongols created a major disruption. Overcoming both the lack of a secure tribal base of support and Jurchen opposition, Chinggis Khan united Mongolia in 1206. Like previous steppe nomad unifiers, Chinggis's initial military goal was the extortion of China, not its conquest. Although highly sinicized culturally, the Jurchen court rejected appeasement as a policy option and refused to cut a deal. Over the next three decades the ensuing wars between the Chin and the Mongols destroyed most of north China. The fall of the Chin capital in 1234 left the Mongols in charge. Their lack of interest and preparation for such a responsibility was reflected in their failure both to declare a dynastic name or establish a regular administration until 1260 in the reign of Chinggis's grandson, Khubilai Khan. Under the Yüan dynasty the northern steppe was held under tight political control and the Mongol court never completely severed its links with the steppe. Indeed, when confronted by powerful Ming rebels in the south, the Yüan emperor chose to return to Mongolia in 1368 rather than fight to hold north China. All other foreign dynasties fought to the bitter end to hold China.

### Cycle 3

While the Mongols were the only nomads from the northern steppe to ever conquer China, that experience profoundly altered Chinese attitudes toward subsequent nomad empires. Initially, the Ming Yung-lo emperor (r. 1403-24) followed a Manchurian style foreign policy of tribal alliances coordinated with large scale invasions to prevent the unification of Mongolia. However, this policy ended with his death, and the Ming reverted to fixed defenses. The traditional bi-polar frontier reemerged as new imperial confederacies arose on the northern steppe, led first by the Oirats and later by the Eastern Mongols. These nomad empires attempted to fund their states by demanding trade and tributary benefits from China similar to those received centuries earlier by the Hsiung-nu and Turks.

With the Mongol conquest still a fresh historical memory, the Ming court ignored the many Han and T'ang precedents for such a relationship and instead adopted a policy of non-intercourse. Unable to negotiate a system of regular trade and subsidies from China, the northern tribes responded by continually raiding the frontier, subjecting the Ming to more attacks than any other

trade and subsidies from China, the northern tribes responded by continually raiding the frontier, subjecting the Ming to more attacks than any other

Chinese dynasty. Although the lack of subsidies and trade undermined the economic foundation of these nomad empires, the military cost to China was enormous. After the Ming finally changed its policy to accommodate the nomads in 1575, the attacks largely ceased and the Mongolian frontier remained at peace.

The Ming was toppled by Chinese rebels in the mid-seventeenth century, but it was the Manchus, and not the Mongols, who took advantage of the situation to conquer China. Like earlier Manchurian rulers, the Ch'ing dynasty (1616-1911) employed a dual administrative structure in China and effectively prevented the political unification of the steppe by co-opting the Mongol leaders and dividing their tribes into small units under Manchu control. The cycle of traditional relationships between China and Inner Asia ended when modern weapons, transportation systems, and new forms of international political relations destroyed the sino-centric East Asian world order.

The relationship between the steppe, China and Manchuria is, of course, much more complex than reflected in this outline. In essence we contend that the northern steppe tribes played a key role in frontier politics without becoming conquerors of China, and that Manchuria, for political and ecological reasons, was the breeding ground for foreign dynasties when native dynasties collapsed in the face of internal rebellions. Thus, the relationship between China and its tribal neighbors was part of a sphere of interaction with a long time depth that had an impact on political developments far beyond the usual scope of frontier relations.

### The Interactive Spheres

The history of Inner Asia and China was played out along a vast frontier that could be divided into four key ecological and cultural areas: the northern steppe, north China, Manchuria, and Turkestan.<sup>6</sup> The northern steppe encompassed greater Mongolia, stretching north from the Great Wall to the Siberian forests, and from the Altai Mountains on the west to the Khinghan Mountains on the east. It was the home of the nomads who raised vast herds of animals on the steppes and mountain slopes of Inner Asia. With their seasonal migrations, an extensive economy, low population density, and tribal political organization the nomads were in almost every respect the opposite of the Chinese whose society was organized around intensive irrigated agriculture with high population densities ruled over by a centralized bureaucratic government. The cleavage between the two societies was also sharp geo-

graphically, for the frontier between them was linear. Through it ran the Great Wall—an enormously ambitious construction originally built by the Chinese to physically demarcate and separate for all time their own empire from the world of the nomads.<sup>7</sup>

While Mongolia and China could be easily categorized, the geographical areas to the east and west were more complex. Both Manchuria and Turkestan incorporated a number of different ecological zones inhabited by a variety of peoples, both nomadic and sedentary. When China and Mongolia were powerful, control of these regions was split between these two great powers, but when China and the steppe periodically fell into anarchy, border regions formed their own states which incorporated elements of both Chinese and tribal culture.

In his classic work on China's relationship with their northern neighbors, Owen Lattimore noted that the linear northern frontier marked a permanent boundary between two markedly different cultural and economic worlds. Neither the nomads nor the Chinese could permanently incorporate their opponent's land and maintain their own way of life. Nomads that conquered agricultural areas found themselves rapidly alienated from their cousins who remained on the steppe because their way of life changed so drastically. Forced to adopt new types of political organizations and cultural traditions to govern their conquests, the descendants of nomads became a political elite dependent on their sedentary subjects. Conversely, China's attempts to incorporate the steppe foundered because the nomads had no cities to conquer or rich land to settle. Unlike China's expansionistic southern frontier, where foreign peoples and their land were absorbed into the Chinese state over time, the northern frontier always remained permanent barrier to expansion. While either side might encroach on the margins, over the course of dynastic history the line of division between China and her northern neighbors remained remarkably constant.<sup>8</sup>

The cyclical pattern of this relationship between China and Inner Asia is best explained by positing a process of political ecology in which the sequence of dynastic succession was analogous to ecological succession. Ecological succession is the process by which biological communities replace one another in an orderly sequence. As the ecologist Eugene Odum has put it:

By and large, succession seems to be characteristic of the community itself; it results from the fact that the action of the community on the habitat tends to make the area less favorable for itself and more favorable for other sets of organisms—that is, until the equilibrium or climax state is reached.<sup>9</sup>

A climax state is the self-perpetuating stable relationship among species in which the community is in equilibrium; it remains constant over time until it is disrupted by some outside force. When a stable climax relationship among species is destroyed, it is replaced by a series of transitory communities, seral stages, which succeed one another in a predictable sequence until the old climax state is restored. The length of each seral stage varies, depending on the climate, environment, and communities of species involved, but in general it moves faster in situations where the climax state is reestablishing itself (secondary succession) than when it begins in a previously unoccupied area (primary succession). The rate of change slows as seres approach the climax state. Since the species composition of each seres is usually quite different from its successor, and the whole cycle may be centuries long, the sequence of relationships is not obvious to the casual observer at any one point in time.

A well known example of this process can be seen in the evolution of a climax oak-hickory forest in the southeastern United State. The mature trees' shade and natural herbicides prevent other species from establishing themselves on the forest floor and they cannot be naturally displaced. If, however, these mature trees are destroyed, by logging or fire for example, secondary succession begins with the arrival of a more varied but unstable series of species which quickly invade the area. First, fast growing but short lived weeds, grasses and bushes with high rates of reproduction dominate the landscape. The new ground cover facilitates the establishment of longer lived species of coniferous trees which eventually displace the weeds and bushes. These pine trees shelter slower growing oak and hickory hardwood trees that form a forest understory, producing a more stable mixed forest which continues for a long period of time. In the end, however, the hardwoods grow above their coniferous neighbors, displace them, and reestablish the climax state [see Chart #2].

The developmental sequence of the various native and foreign dynasties in Chinese history displays a strikingly similar pattern, and for similar reasons. A stable dynastic climax state was marked by a bi-polar world in which a unified China and unified steppe empire split the frontier between them. No alternative political structures could emerge while they existed. Like a climax forest, all unified Chinese states met their end as a result of internal cataclysms, not foreign invasion. Such a collapse of order within China, often accompanied by severe economic depression and population crash, created a highly unstable political environment.

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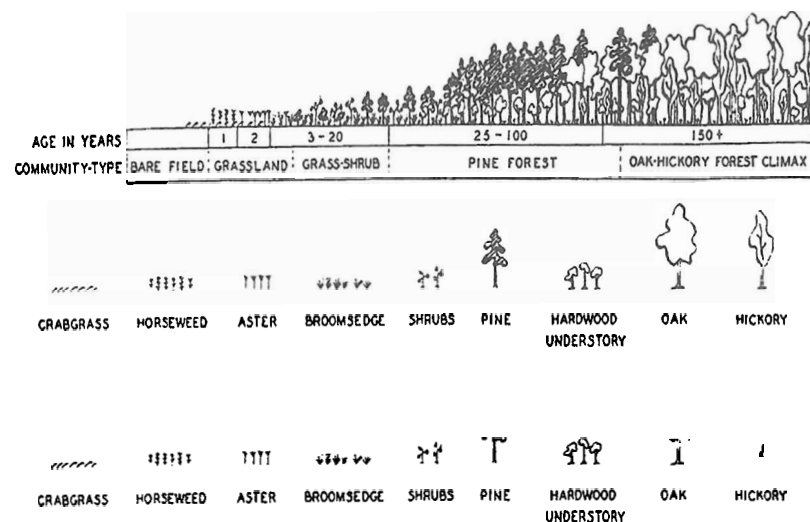
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—political weeds that were the target of attack by any rising warlord or tribal chieftain who could raise an army. They were replaced by better organized dynasties which restored order and successfully administered large areas. Native dynasties in the south and foreign dynasties from the northeast and northwest divided China's territory among themselves. These foreign dynasties ruled all or part of China, often for long periods, and rebuilt its economic base. But the structural weaknesses inherent in a mixed state where a small number of privileged foreigners attempted to maintain dominance over a much greater number of Chinese left them vulnerable to subversion and native rebellions. Eventually they were all replaced by more stable native Chinese dynasties that drew their ultimate strength from control a united political administration financed through the exclusive control of a country wide economic base. Thus, foreign dynasties were similar to seres in ecological succession. Each became established under particular historical conditions that its own success gradually eliminated. Over time they inevitably created the conditions for their own replacements until a "climax state" was reestablished.

A similar process was at work on the steppe. When China collapsed and fell into the hands of aggressive warlords or small tribal groups, it was not possible to extract the revenue that was the key to the creation of a steppe empire. Each tribe was on its own. The conquest of north China by Manchurian dynasties altered this situation because, in theory, there was enough wealth in the hands of a single government there to fund a nomadic state. However, unlike the native Chinese dynasties, foreign dynasties had a policy of periodic disruption to prevent the emergence of a unified nomad

Chart #2

*Secondary Succession in the Southeastern United States Piedmont Region*





state. Through military campaigns, marriage alliances, and divide and rule strategies, they attempted to prevent the unification of the tribes. Under such conditions it was difficult for any nomad leader to succeed, but when the foreign dynasties abandoned the frontier to protect themselves against rebellion in China, the nomads' chance of success greatly improved. The establishment of native dynasties in China and steppe empires in Mongolia were contemporaneous because they were both linked to the destruction of foreign rule in China.

The end of each set of conditions led to the emergence of its counterpart, and the succession of the different types of dynasty proceeded in a remarkably predictable fashion. The lag time between the fall of a major native dynasty and the reestablishment of order under foreign rule decreased with each cycle: centuries of instability following the collapse of the Han state, decades after the fall of T'ang, and immediately upon the overthrow of the Ming. The duration of foreign dynasties showed a similar pattern—shortest in the first cycle, longest in the third.

### The Climax States: A Unified China/A Unified Steppe

The most stable political situation for frontier affairs occurred when China was unified under a single native dynasty and faced a single steppe empire on the northern steppe. The emergence of a united China under native rule was a product of internal development in which the steppe tribes played almost no part. It produced an empire which was centralized, hierarchical, and immensely wealthy. Any nomad empire in Mongolia with the organization and military strength to tap that wealth could become the dominant power of the Eurasian steppe. When it was not possible to extract wealth from China, even the greatest nomad conquests rarely resulted in powerful states. Classic nomad empires therefore appeared contemporaneously with the Han, T'ang, and Ming dynasties in China.

The initial relationship between the steppe nomad states and native Chinese dynasties could be best described as predatory or parasitic. It was necessary and beneficial only for the nomads and had a negative impact on China, which could have continued quite nicely even if Mongolia had dropped off the edge of the world. Over time, however, the relationship matured into a form symbiosis in which the nomads protected revenue paying dynasties from internal rebellion and attacks by other frontier tribes.

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Uighurs. The Hsiung-nu established their state contemporaneously with the unification of China under the Ch'in/Han dynasties and remained the major foreign power dealing with China for the next 400 years. Similarly, the Turks created a united empire contemporaneously with the rise of Sui/T'ang dynasties and dominated the steppe for 300 years. In both periods not only did the steppe empires arise at the same time as unified dynasties in China, they had similar political structures and foreign policies. Both steppe empires were dependent on huge revenue payments from China and attempted to prop up their Chinese counterparts when they were in danger of falling to internal rebellion. The decline of central authority in China had immediate consequences for the steppe because the collapse of a native Chinese dynasty destroyed the economic foundation of a nomadic state. The nomadic states of Mongolia disappeared when the Han and T'ang could no longer provide the revenue needed to finance a supra-tribal kingdom on the steppe.

While steppe empires emerged in tandem with native dynasties in China, the nomadic state was a secondary phenomena. The development of a centralized state in a tribal society based exclusively on pastoral nomadism was inherently unstable, unless it could draw on some other source of revenue. The nomadic population of the steppe was scattered over vast distances and highly mobile, making direct political control problematic. This difficulty was compounded by a naturally fragmented tribal political system in which local tribal leaders could, by virtue of their kinship ties, command the loyalty of their own people in opposition to a central government. The pastoral economy was also relatively undiversified and the surpluses it produced consisted mostly of living animals which were subject to severe losses from disease, theft, or severe weather. Nor could surplus live animals simply be concentrated in one place like grain. For these political and economic reasons, it was not possible for a state structure to arise as the result of internal developments within the nomadic societies on the steppe. The need for a state administration, and the revenue to support it, was a consequence of external relations with neighboring sedentary societies.<sup>11</sup>

Such organizational problems were successfully overcome by creating an "imperial confederacy," that is, a confederation using 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. The imperial leadership of the empire was drawn from the ruling lineage of the tribe that founded the state. Collateral relations of the ruler were usually appointed as governors to supervise the indigenous tribal leadership in each region. Although in handling foreign

drawn from the ruling lineage of the tribe that founded the state. Collateral relations of the ruler were usually appointed as governors to supervise the indigenous tribal leadership in each region. Although in handling foreign

affairs the imperial confederacy appeared to be a centralized state ruled by an autocrat, internally local tribal leaders retained considerable autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

Imperial confederacies had levels of organization far beyond any needed to handle tribal relations or livestock problems. Indeed, such large scale political organizations rarely appeared among pastoral societies in other parts of the world. 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 hope to deal effectively with a united China, but a single empire with an imperial administration could wield a power that even China could not ignore. Conquering the nomad tribes of Mongolia was only the first step in building an effective empire. The nomadic state did not depend solely on the threat of military force to maintain unity, it offered real economic benefits. In exchange for a subordinate political position, the leaders of the confederacy's component tribes received access to luxury goods and trade opportunities they could not have gained themselves. Because imperial confederacies owed their continued financial success and political stability to the relentless exploitation of resources from *outside* the steppe, exclusive control of foreign affairs was central to their power.

The foreign policies of all imperial confederacies had a single aim: to extract both direct subsidies from China and profitable border trade agreements. The number of nomads confronting China was small, perhaps about a million people, yet they were trying to extort dynasties that ruled over 50 million people in the Han and T'ang.<sup>13</sup> To succeed they had to influence decision making at the very highest levels of government, because foreign policy was made at court, and not by frontier governors or border officials. To this end they implemented a terroristic "outer frontier" strategy that magnified their power. It took full advantage of the nomads' ability to suddenly strike deep into China and then retreat before the Chinese had time to retaliate. The threat of frontier violence and the consequent disruption it caused were key to the nomads' success in obtaining a favorable outcome from a Chinese court.

The outer frontier strategy had three major elements: violent raiding to terrify the Chinese imperial 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 even after great victories. The threat of violence always lurked beneath the surface of even the most peaceful interactions. 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 grainstuffs you bring the Hsiung-nu 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!<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese had three choices when confronted with frontier violence: respond defensively and ignore the nomad demands, fight them aggressively by attacking the steppe, or buy peace with expensive treaties. Each approach produced its own set of problems for native Chinese dynasties. If their requests were ignored, the nomads could continually raid the frontier, looting to get what they wanted and wreaking havoc with China's border population. The Ming dynasty, which persisted longest with such a non-intercourse policy, suffered more nomad invasions than any other Chinese dynasty. The political and military pressure created by nomad attacks eventually forced all Chinese dynasties to attempt the other solutions.

The alternatives of aggressive military action or appeasement were, however, only slightly less problematic. Seeming to pay "tribute" to horse-riding barbarians violated the very essence of a sino-centric world order in which the Chinese emperor was (in theory) paramount. Such payments were particularly galling since from the beginning the Chinese recognized that in terms of population, military strength, and economic production, they were far more powerful than the nomads. Therefore, the Han, T'ang and Ming dynasties all at least once attempted to deal with the northern steppe problem by conducting punitive campaigns against the nomad tribes, but success always proved illusive.

Any sustained war conducted by China against the nomads faced a number of major 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. Although nomad attacks on the border could be stopped by means of large armies and campaigns on the steppe, sustained frontier warfare was economically far more disruptive for the Chinese than for the nomads. It drained the treasury and oppressed the peasantry with new 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, they argued that



military campaigns were always far more expensive than simply paying the nomads to stay away and constituted an important internal lobby for gaining peace through appeasing the nomads. 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. Although their military strategies differed, each dynasty was finally forced to conclude that war was not the answer to its nomad problem.

Soon after the former Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 8) was established its founder, Kao-tsu, attempted to overawe the nomads by mounting a large expedition against the Hsiung-nu in 201-200 B.C. Deceived by the classic nomad tactic of the feigned retreat, he found himself surrounded by the Hsiung-nu and barely escaped capture. He quickly signed a peace treaty with the Hsiung-nu, married a Han princess to their leader, and provided them with an annual subsidy.<sup>15</sup>

The Han did not again resume military campaigns for another 70 years when Emperor Han Wu-ti, convinced that it was inappropriate to treat the nomads as equals, sent troops to attack the Hsiung-nu in Mongolia itself. Faced with the overwhelming might of China, the nomads ran away. The Han troops were forced to chase them deeper and deeper into steppe where the Hsiung-nu often turned the tables on their pursuers and destroyed them. Although the Han did win a number of major victories in the field, they were extremely costly in men, money, and animals. Nomad land could not be usefully occupied and there was nothing to conquer. Civilian officials at court condemned Wu-ti's policies for bankrupting the Han treasury and disrupting the internal stability of the state in a quest for military glory. By the end of his reign, after forty years of inconclusive fighting, Wu-ti's aggressive policies were abandoned.<sup>16</sup> The Han then relied on a policy of appeasement which again provided the Hsiung-nu with trade and subsidies. For the remainder its history, the dynasty never seriously campaigned on the steppe.

The later Han (A.D. 25-220) was even more defensive than its predecessor. The frontier defenses were left in the hands of the Hsiung-nu, whose empire had fragmented, and was dependent on these nomad auxiliaries for protection. The only steppe campaigns the later Han undertook were in support of allied nomad tribes engaged in civil war. Throughout this period Chinese subsidies to frontier tribesmen grew apace.<sup>17</sup>

The T'ang approach to Mongolia was initially more sophisticated. After a period of paying tribute to the Turks, the second T'ang emperor, T'ai-tsung (r. 627-649), took advantage of political divisions within the First Turkish Empire to incorporate many of the tribes into the T'ang military. Personally

familiar with tribal culture and with great personal charisma, he in effect became a "Chinese khaghan," the leader of a polity that ruled over both the steppe and China. Under the T'ang banner the Turks extended Chinese control deep into central Asia. However, after T'ai-tsung's death it proved impossible to institutionalize this structure because his successors reverted to a more classical Chinese style of rule that was culturally incompatible with the personal style of leadership required by Turkish political tradition. Chinese officials at court purged the Turks from the government and treated the tribes as subject people. When the generation of leaders personally loyal to T'ai-tsung died, the Turks grew dissatisfied with their treatment and revolted, founding a second empire which resumed its attacks on China.<sup>18</sup>

For the remainder of its history the T'ang reverted to the defensive strategies characteristic of the Han dynasty, adopting a policy of appeasement which bought peace on the border in exchange for large payments of silk. By the time the Uighurs replaced the Turks as leaders of the steppe, the mere threat of invasion was enough to extract a lucrative treaty from the T'ang whose troops remained within China's frontiers.<sup>19</sup>

The Ming dynasty, under the Yung-lo emperor, moved its capital from Nanking to Peking in order to have a strategic base from which to campaign against the nomads in Mongolia, but at his death the dynasty immediately reverted to passive defenses. However, unlike the Han and T'ang, for most of its history the Ming refused to provide subsidies to the nomads. Ironically, while this policy proved highly effective at subverting steppe empires because they could not raise enough revenue to support themselves, the lack of subsidies and trade induced the nomads to raid the frontier constantly.<sup>20</sup> Ming attempts to ward off these attacks were spectacularly unsuccessful—the most embarrassing incidents being the capture of a ruling emperor by the Oirat leader Esen in 1449 and the appearance of Altan Khan's Eastern Mongols at the very gates of Peking in 1550. The Ming finally agreed to pay them in the late sixteenth century and the wars with the Mongols ended.<sup>21</sup>

The failure of the military approach eventually induced all native Chinese dynasties to adopt appeasement policies for dealing with the nomads of Mongolia. To mask the ideological problem of paying tribute to the steppe, each disguised the subsidies under the cloak of the "tributary system." The nomads were expected to pay formal homage to China's superiority and in return receive gifts. Beginning with the Hsiung-nu, the nomads perceived that such a system was a hollow shell and quickly exchanged empty talk for full camel loads of silk, satins, and wine. During the later Han, for example, it has been estimated that the annual subsidy to the nomads amounted to one-third

of the government payroll or 7 percent of all the empire's revenue, in modern terms this would have amounted to about \$130 million dollars a year.<sup>22</sup> During the T'ang the subsidies were obtained through horse exchanges in which the nomads forced upon the Chinese large numbers of horses to be paid for in silk at many times their true value. The Turks received 4-5 rolls of silk for each horse, a price that was inflated 10 rolls per horse by the Uighurs. According to Arab sources, and support by Chinese records, the Uighurs received about a half million rolls of silk each year during the ninth century.<sup>23</sup> In spite of these large payments to the steppe the cover of the tributary system made them ideologically acceptable and disguised the true nature of the transaction.

Even today historians tend to accept at face value the idea that China's superiority over the barbarians was inherent in tributary relations.<sup>24</sup> In fact, for the northern nomad tribes, it was little more than a threadbare illusion. The nomads continually demanded the opportunity to present tribute at court and it was the Chinese who tried to stop them from coming because it was so expensive. For example, it was the cancellation of tribute visits that began the war with the Oirats which led to the capture of the Ming emperor in 1449.<sup>25</sup> Centuries earlier, in 3 B.C., the Han court had attempted to refuse a Hsiung-nu request to pay homage at court because of the cost and the belief that they were ill-omened, for on two previous occasions the Han emperor had died immediately after such tributary visits. The decision was reversed when a minister pointed out how dangerous it would be not to receive "tribute" from the nomads:

Repudiating their former expressions of good will, they will look upon our declarations of the past, and imbibing a bitter hatred of China, will sever every connecting bond, and never more will they respect the imperial presence. It will be impossible to overawe them, it will be useless to address them...<sup>26</sup>

The Hsiung-nu arrived in 1 B.C., received their gifts and went home. The emperor died later that year.

Peace treaties with the nomadic empires of Mongolia were effective because the nomads were willing to be appeased. Imperial confederacies depended on outside revenue to support themselves, and while this could be extracted by raiding it was much simpler and more profitable to accept payments not to cause trouble, at least for awhile. Since the redistribution of goods from China to the component tribes of the empire reinforced the importance of a nomadic leader, such treaties were often superior to wars

payments not to cause trouble, at least for awhile. Since the redistribution of goods from China to the component tribes of the empire reinforced the importance of a nomadic leader, such treaties were often superior to wars

because without raids the common nomads were dependent on their leaders to provide them with Chinese goods and border markets. Extorting wealth from a native dynasty in China was thus an end in itself, not the prelude to an attempt at conquest.

Although the idea of appeasement lies in ill repute today, Chinese dynasties rightly assumed that the nomads were not their rivals for power in China itself and that goods paid to them would not finance an attempt at conquest. Nomadic states had no desire to rule China. They lacked the administrative capacity, even the basic understanding of how of an agrarian society operated, to make such a conquest viable. For the nomads, Chinese dynasties were necessary intermediaries that organized the production of goods they desired. Once a treaty was signed, peace came to the frontier for long periods. Even the wars, or threats of wars, that periodically disrupted relations between the steppe and China were aimed at increasing either the amounts of subsidies provided by China or the expanding the levels of frontier trade. They were never designed to destroy the dynasty that provided them.

The first peace treaties negotiated by China with the nomads were the products of coercion, failed military policies, or fear of disruption, so it was only natural that traditional dynastic histories treated them in mostly negative terms. However, although Chinese officials were loathe to admit it, the historical record also demonstrates that peace treaties with imperial confederacies, even expensive ones, eventually proved advantageous to native dynasties. Dealing with a single empire simplified frontier relations. A peace agreement with an imperial confederacy brought security to the entire northern border, something that was very difficult to achieve when dealing with numerous autonomous tribes, a situation that confronted the later Han in the third century and the Ming in the late sixteenth century.

The greatest benefit derived from treaty relationships with the nomads was the military and political support they provided to native dynasties in decline. While such a benefit was almost never openly acknowledged or formally recognized, it is clear that, once having established a relationship with a dynasty in China, the nomads had an interest in its preservation. Sometimes this support was indirect as when the Hsiung-nu refused to support the rebellions of the seven feudal kings who revolted against the former Han in 154 B.C., or when they kept their troops out of the civil war which established the later Han in A.D. 25.<sup>27</sup> On both occasions Hsiung-nu aid could have proved decisive, but they preferred to maintain the status quo.

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preserving the T'ang dynasty from destruction by the rebellions in the eighth century, most notably in putting down the An Lu-shan Rebellion. Of course the Uighurs extracted a price: they looted Lo-yang savagely on both occasions and then had to be paid handsomely to go home.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the T'ang remained in power for an additional century as a consequence of Uighur military aid. Indeed, it was somewhat ironic that when the Han and T'ang did succumb to internal revolt their last line of defense consisted of nomad auxiliaries. The Hsiung-nu stayed loyal to the Han until the end, and the Shat'o Turks preserved the figment of T'ang rule against rival warlords for 50 years, until 910, following rebellions that fragmented China. Even the Ming attempted to buy Mongol help when confronted by the growing power of the Manchus. If the nomads in Mongolia had truly been interested in deposing Chinese dynasties, they would not have continually passed up so many opportunities.

If the existence of an imperial confederacy were tied to its relationship with China, then the destruction of centralized rule in China also meant an end to its counterpart on the steppe. This was clearly the case at the end of the later Han dynasty where the last united nomad empire collapsed in 180 A.D. This coincided with the beginning of numerous rebellions in Han China which by 200 A.D. had produced a massive economic depression and population collapse. No new empire on the steppe would emerge for the next two centuries. Similarly, the long period of anarchy following the collapse of the T'ang dynasty in the late ninth century left the nomads little opportunity to extract resources from China and the steppe remained fragmented for 350 years. The lesson was this: when China's economy collapsed and central rule disappeared there was nothing for the nomads to steal by raiding, no effective dynasty to extort, and few opportunities for trade. At these times new strategies emerged and political organizations capable of thriving in a world of anarchy rose to power.

### **The Manchurian Candidates**

#### **The Developmental Cycle of Frontier Dynasties**

Periods of foreign rule in China occurred only after the collapse of the Han, T'ang, and Ming dynasties. The study of these historical periods has generally been neglected, consisting as they do of a series of fragmented regional states, some short lived, some long lasting, that separated the twilight of one great Chinese dynasty from the dawn of the next. However, the succession of foreign dynasties was not the result of random conflict. With the

exception of the Mongol Yüan, each of these stable foreign dynasties was Manchurian in origin and employed a dual organization structure that maintained separate Chinese and tribal administrations. There was direction in this process from less stable dynasties to more stable dynasties within each cycle, and with each cycle the power of foreign dynasties to dominate China grew greater and their periods of rule longer.

Although the Han, T'ang, and Ming were all replaced by foreign dynasties in north China, it is important to note that they were all destroyed by internal rebellions, not by foreign invasion. The collapse of domestic order within China created a vacuum that was first filled by Chinese warlords and nomads from the central steppe. These Chinese warlord states were militaristic, for their survival depended both on preserving themselves from attack by rivals while expanding their own states. The frontier tribes were also drawn into these conflicts because warlord states did not pay subsidies to buy peace. The nomads from the central steppe, such as the Hsiung-nu after the fall of the Han or the Turks after fall of the T'ang, were the first to establish foreign kingdoms in China because the northern steppe tribes already had their military organization in place. Combining into confederations under established tribal leaders, they could quickly recruit allies and put a formidable force in the field. In times of anarchy these tribes were among the strongest contenders for power. The heritage of their nomadic past gave them a ready made strategy of attacking weak spots, supporting themselves by pillage, and fighting to destroy their opponents rather than to induce retreat.

In north China, where the terrain favored cavalry tactics, the northern steppe tribes often conquered large areas, pushing rival Chinese kingdoms south. However, the governing of conquered territories was an afterthought, and, although militarily powerful, tribal leaders proved administratively inept once having established a state. Imperial confederacies traditionally avoided holding Chinese territory in favor of extorting existing dynasties, thus their leaders had almost no administrative experience in ruling sedentary peoples. Nor could a tribal model of government easily incorporate the large number of Chinese officials necessary to administer their conquests. Nomad rulers in China soon found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. If they adopted a Chinese style of administration and raised native Chinese to high positions in order to govern more effectively, they alienated their tribal followers who constituted the core of their military strength. On the other hand, nomad rulers who attempted to maintain the old tribal system basically by extracting revenue through pillaging their own territories alienated their Chinese subjects and weakened their own economic base.

The unrest created by either of these situations was usually fatal because of the constant warfare in north China. Neighboring states and internal opponents immediately took advantage of any weakness to destroy their rivals. Few leaders had the luxury of being able to correct a mistake. The Hsiung-nu dynasties that arose in the fourth century and the Turkish kingdoms of the tenth century were all examples of short lived states brought down because they could not effectively resolve the problem of how to combine a tribal political structure with a Chinese administrative system.

The unstable military states struggling for power in north China were eventually replaced by more sophisticated frontier states from the northeast or northwest. They created systems of government that could successfully combine tribal armies with a Chinese-style bureaucracy. Such a solution took time to perfect. It developed in marginal regions which were geographically isolated and spared the constant warfare between rival warlord states that was destroying north China. These regions were also ecologically and culturally more diverse than either Mongolia or north China. In the northeast they consisted of neighboring zones inhabited by steppe nomads, forest hunters or farmers, and sedentary agricultural villages and cities. In the northwest they combined Chinese settlers, native oasis inhabitants, nomads from Mongolia or the Tibetan borderland. When China and northern steppe were each united, these marginal regions fell into a separate spheres of influence, the tribal people under the control of Mongolia, the agricultural population under Chinese administration. When imperial control lapsed, local leaders began the process of creating a single mixed state that combined adjacent ecological / cultural zones.

The most fruitful area for such development was the Manchurian borderland of the Liao River Basin. Here, in a reasonably small area, nomadic pastoralists of the Liao-hsi steppe, Chinese villages and cities occupying the Liao-tung peninsula, and forest peoples living at the Liao River head waters, could all be contained in a single state. This area was the cradle of almost all of China's stable foreign dynasties: the Hsien-pi dynasties of Yen and northern Wei (fourth through sixth centuries), the Khitan Liao (907-1124) and Jurchen Chin (1115-1234), and the Manchu Ch'ing (1616-1912). Their historical prominence was due in part to Manchuria's strategic military position bordering the populous north Chinese plain. Manchurian dynasties were well positioned to take advantage of a power vacuum in China because their troops were close by. The traditional choice the Peking region as their capitals, for example, was an attempt to maintain power in China without losing their hegemony in Manchuria.

The northwestern border area around the Kansu corridor offered a secondary area for developing mixed states that combined oasis farmers, steppe tribes, and Chinese colonists. However, because states in the northwest were geographically isolated from the rest of China, they rarely attempted military conquests outside of their region. Instead they formed such independent kingdoms as the various Liang dynastic states in the fourth century and the Tangut kingdom of Hsi-hsia (990-1227). It was indicative of the isolation of the northwest that the long lived Tangut state was not included in the traditional list of Chinese dynasties, in spite of the fact that it occupied land that had been part of China from the time of the Han.

Manchurian dynasties employed a dual system of organization which maintained separate administrative structures for Chinese and tribal areas. The Chinese administration retained its traditional bureaucratic structure, supervised agricultural areas, and dominated the civilian side of government. The tribal administration was in charge of non-Chinese areas, foreign settlements within China, and dominated the military. The two lines of administration were both under the control of the imperial court. As portrayed in Chinese history, this system was usually viewed as a means of maintaining the loyalty and separate identity of a conquest elite in opposition to the much larger number of Chinese. However, the dual structure first evolved not as a means to gain control over sedentary areas, but as a way to break tribal power and develop a centralized state. The Chinese administration became a weapon with which to strip tribal leaders of their autonomy by denying them independent access to wealth and military power. It was a slow process that usually took two or three generations to complete. Only after it was complete did foreign rulers discover the utility of applying the structure in a different way to China. There the tribal groups were treated as a privileged class employed as a counterweight to the Chinese administration, but only after they had been destroyed as independent actors.

The founders of Hsien-pi Yen dynasty, Khitan Liao, and Manchu Ch'ing were all faced with the problem of having a very unstable political base. Unlike the hierarchically organized tribes of Mongolia, where political leadership was generally confined to royal lineages, those in Manchuria (whether from the steppe or forest zones) were egalitarian in structure, with no firm tradition centralized authority. In Manchurian tribal political systems formal leaders held relatively little power compared to their northern steppe counterparts. Among the nomadic Hsien-pi, for example, tribal leaders were elected from the ranks of ordinary tribesmen, and they could not automatically pass the office on to their descendants.<sup>29</sup> Among the Khitans, leadership was

hereditary but rotated among a large number of eligible candidates who served renewable three year terms.<sup>30</sup> The early Manchus had no leadership above the clan level, and viewed a collective tribal council as the most appropriate forum for decision making.<sup>31</sup> In any event, there was little scope for centralized leadership during those periods when Manchuria was under the domination of Mongolia and China, but when that outside interference ceased, ambitious tribal leaders attempted to create new political structures.

The transformation of Manchurian tribal organizations into mixed states began with the conquest of Chinese territory in Liao-tung and Liao-hsi. In return for maintaining order and delivering revenue, Chinese officials kept their old positions in a new Manchurian government. Since their administrative responsibilities had no tribal counterpart, they became a separate arm of government devoted to Chinese affairs. The revenue provided by the Chinese territories gave the Manchurian ruler a resource beyond the control of his tribal followers. More importantly it provided him with sophisticated Chinese advisors whose model of government had at its head an all powerful emperor. Their future was tied to the creation of a centralized state and they advised their new patron both on how to deal with China and how to undercut the power of the tribes.

The process is illustrated by the rise of A-pao-chi, the founder of the Khitan Liao dynasty, in 907.

The Chinese told A-pao-chi that there was no case of a Chinese ruler being replaced on the throne. Thereupon A-pao-chi made increasing use of his power to control the tribes and refused to be replaced. After nine years the tribes reproached him for not being replaced after such a long time. A-pao-chi had no choice but to pass on his banner and drum [symbols of authority]. But he said to the tribes, "The Chinese whom I have obtained during the nine years of my rule are numerous. I should like to organize an independent tribe to govern the Chinese City. Is this permissible?"

The tribe consented to it.

The Chinese city which was situated southeast of Mount T'an and on the Luan River, enjoyed the advantages of salt and iron.... Its land was suitable for the cultivation of the five grains. A-pao-chi led the Chinese in cultivating the land and constructed a city, houses, and markets after the system of Yu prefecture. The Chinese were satisfied with this and had no thought of returning.

A-pao-chi, realizing that people could be used, followed the plan of

his wife Sho-lü and sent emissaries to inform the tribal chieftains: "I own the salt-lake from which you eat [salt]. But though the tribes know the advantages of eating salt, you do not realize it has an owner. Is that fair? You should compensate me."

The tribes considering this to be right, all assembled at the salt-lake with oxen and wine. A-pao-chi placed soldiers in ambush nearby. When the wine had begun to take effect, the hidden soldiers came forth and killed the tribal chieftains. Then he set himself up and was not replaced.<sup>32</sup>

The process among the Manchus took a similar though less violent route. In the early seventeenth century Nurhachi, the founder of the Ch'ing dynasty, broke tribal autonomy by reorganizing the Jurchen clans into "banners" with mixed tribal background, but within a generation the banners themselves and their leaders had become a locus of tribal power. Chinese advisors then developed a plan by which Hung Taiji, Nurhachi's successor, reduced the power of banner leaders, forcing them to deliver all captured loot and prisoners to the central administration and make requests to the court if they needed anything. Without an independent revenue source, rival banner leaders were less able to assert themselves against the emperor.<sup>33</sup>

The growth of these Manchurian states was slow enough so that the changes could take place gradually. Succeeding rulers had Chinese style educations that taught them to think bi-culturally. In their dealings with China they displayed the proper etiquette and took on symbols of Chinese political legitimacy, such as assuming dynastic names and seeking recognition of their titles from established dynasties in China. On the other hand, they also kept an active interest in tribal affairs and customs such as hunting, maintained seasonal capitals, and provided abundant rewards and privileges to members of the tribal administration and army. Chinese and tribal administrations were integrated at the top level of the central government. Civil bureaucratic officials undercut the autonomy of the tribes, while the tribal military elite maintained control over Chinese territory.

In foreign affairs emerging Manchurian dynasties were conservative. These border kingdoms were not predators like the militaristic states in China or the steppe, but scavengers. They had enough power to defend themselves against invasions, but demonstrated little success in conquest against the warlords to the south. It was only after the warlord dynasties collapsed because of poor organization that they moved in to pick up the pieces. Although the Manchurian dynasties were neither as militarily strong as nomad



imperial confederacies nor as administratively sophisticated as Chinese dynasties, in times of anarchy they could provide more stability than their competitors in north China.

The first Manchurian dynasties had a high rate of survival in periods of anarchy because they were well organized and conservative. They restored considerable order and prosperity to the territories they occupied. Upon moving out of Manchuria, however, this conservatism became a liability. Because their predisposition was towards defense, they proved unable to conquer the remaining states in north China. Their military forces and civil bureaucracy proved too large to be supported within these limited boundaries, and, without expansion, they eventually fell victim to a fiscal crisis that left them vulnerable to attack. For example, the Yen and Chin dynasties which had only a foothold in northeast China were both destroyed in this manner. The Manchu Ch'ing avoided this fate only because it was able, with the aid of Chinese troops, to gain control of all of China.

This weakness provided an opportunity for the creation of a second type of Manchurian dynasty, founded by frontier clients of the first. Of either steppe or forest origin, they had to be within striking distance of Manchuria to seize the center of power from their rivals without having a developed political organization of their own. Ironically, their very backwardness encouraged them to adopt their rivals' political/military structure intact, which was preadapted to their needs. Militaristic, and the more uncultured than even the northern steppe tribal kingdoms, these new Manchurian invaders destroyed the top level of reigning dynasty, but were careful to maintain its dual military/bureaucratic organization. Indeed, they were often welcomed by officials from the old dynasty because an aggressive policy of expansion promised wealth and new positions. Combining the former dynasty's organization with new and more aggressive leadership they extended foreign rule to all of north China. The T'o-pa Wei and Jurchen Chin established their power in this manner. However, the second wave of Manchurians were necessarily heirs to the organization developed by their predecessors.

From these examples we can see the following pattern of succession: The conquest of China by foreign dynasties was the work of Manchurian peoples, either nomads or forest tribes from the Liao River region. The contemporaneous political collapse of centralized rule in both China and Mongolia freed these border peoples from domination by either great power. Unlike the tribes of the central steppe, they had an egalitarian political structure and close contact with sedentary regions within Manchuria. In times of disunion they established small kingdoms along the frontier that combined both Chinese and

tribal traditions within a single administration. Islands of stability, they waited in the wings as short-lived dynasties founded by Chinese warlords or steppe tribal leaders destroyed one another in north China. When these dynasties collapsed, the Manchurians moved to conquer first a small part of north China, and then, usually under a second Manchurian dynasty, to conquer all of it.

While the unification of north China under foreign rule created favorable economic conditions for the rise of a nomadic state in Mongolia, they rarely emerged because foreign dynasties employed a strikingly different frontier policy than did native Chinese administrations. The Manchurians practiced a policy of political and military disruption, actively campaigning against the nomads to prevent their unification. With the exception of the Mongols under Chinggis Khan, the nomads from the northern steppe were never able to establish powerful empires when their cousins from Manchuria ruled in China. Only when the foreign dynasties abandoned the frontier to deal with rebels within China were the nomads able to unify. By the time Chinese rebels had ousted the foreigners and founded a new native dynasty, the steppe was also unified and prepared to begin its campaign of extortion.

### Beating the Odds: Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire

Any model of cyclical interaction employing an ecological analogy to characterize political developments over time opens itself to the criticism of neglecting the role of the individual and being overly deterministic. The rise of Chinggis Khan and his creation of a world empire demonstrates that the model we have presented is probabilistic, not deterministic, and provides an example in which the structural barriers that inhibited alternative relationships were circumvented. However, in overcoming those barriers Chinggis Khan created a political and military system unlike any other in steppe history. This resulting relationship with neighboring sedentary states was characterized by unparalleled death and destruction, still vivid even today in the historical memory of the nations the Mongols invaded. The exceptional nature of the Mongol Empire has been largely misunderstood because, as the most powerful nomadic state that ever existed, it was presumed to be the culmination of political evolution on the steppe rather than the exception it was.<sup>34</sup>

There were always tribal leaders who attempted to oppose foreign dynasties in China, but their chances of unifying the steppe against determined opposition from established Manchurian states, which drew on the wealth of China, were low. From the fall of the Uighurs 300 years earlier, the northern steppe tribes were kept divided by their own internal rivalries and a skillful



policy of disruption carried out by the Liao and Chin dynasties. Whenever a leader in Mongolia appeared on the verge of uniting the steppe, these Manchurian dynasties threw their military and political support behind a coalition of less powerful tribes. With cold calculation, the Manchurians regularly switched alliances, attacking former friends and embracing former enemies. This policy failed only once, when the Jurchen underestimated the talent and luck of Chinggis Khan in defeating a series of confederations arrayed against him.<sup>35</sup>

Unlike the founders of the Hsiung-nu and Turkish empires, Chinggis Khan rose to the leadership of a great nomadic empire from an extremely marginal position. He lacked a secure base of tribal support and could count upon the consistent support of neither the Mongol clans nor his own lineage. Even his uncles and brothers allied themselves with rivals at various times. This experience had a strong impact on Chinggis and he was never willing to delegate power to his own relatives or to other Mongol leaders without in some way limiting their autonomy. He saw autocracy as the only way to preserve his power. Military commands were distributed to personal friends and retainers, not to relatives. While all previous steppe rulers had a personal following, only Chinggis Khan elevated his multi-tribal elite above his own family. Chinggis's political organization was not, therefore, the culmination of a long evolving steppe tradition because it rejected the imperial confederacy model. Instead, the Mongol state was based on the principles of centralized administration, the destruction of tribal patterns of leadership, and a rigid discipline to a degree previously unknown among the nomads. It was a unique creation. After the fall of the Mongol empire the nomads reverted to the older and more traditional imperial confederacy model of organization.

As described earlier, the normal relationship between the imperial confederacies of Mongolia and the native dynasties in China was parasitic or predatory, that is the nomads could stabilize their own political structure only by exploiting China. Although such a relationship was generally resulted in a net economic loss for China, it produced a stable long term interaction. The negative effects distorted, but did not destroy, China's ability to maintain its own political and economic stability, and had almost no impact on population growth. The logic of such a political/economic relationship was such that while violence by the nomads, or the threat of violence, was an intrinsic part of the relationship, it was generally limited to specific ends which never included the direct conquest of China. A comparison with the predatory interactions of a two-species population is illustrative of this pattern:

A cardinal principle is that the negative effects tend to be quantitatively small where the interacting populations have had a common evolutionary history in a relatively stable ecosystem. In other words, natural selection tends to lead to reduction in the detrimental effects or to the elimination of the interaction altogether, since continued severe depression of a prey or host population by the predator or parasite population can only lead to the extinction of one or both populations. Consequently, severe interaction is most frequently observed where the interaction is of recent origin (when two populations first become associated) or when there have been large scale or sudden changes (perhaps temporary) in the ecosystem...<sup>36</sup>

The Mongol Empire was the product of such a "severe interaction" involving a sudden change in the pattern of relationships between the nomads and China in two ways. First, after unifying the steppe, Chinggis Khan created a new type of state that was politically more centralized and militarily more powerful than any previous nomadic empire in Mongolia. Second, he confronted a Manchurian dynasty in north China that rejected the policy of appeasement traditionally employed by native Chinese dynasties. This situation was both historically unique and highly destructive.

Like any nomad leader who had successfully united the steppe tribes, Chinggis Khan faced the problem of keeping his empire intact. He attempted to obtain a treaty which would guarantee him large payments, similar to those which the Khitan and Jurchen themselves had extracted from the Sung dynasty. The Mongol military strategy in north China can best be understood as a flawed attempt to implement the outer frontier strategy to obtain these needed resources. However, the strategy of extortion failed because of Chinggis Khan's enormous military success. Instead of coming to an accommodation with the Mongols, the Jurchen rejected peace proposals and poured their resources into military resistance. In response, the Mongols increased their own military pressure until the dynasty was destroyed and all of north China lay in ruin. A policy designed to disrupt China and extort it for revenue ended in devastation.

Throughout Chinggis Khan's lifetime, the Mongols appear to have been unwilling to recognize the extent of their policy's political failure. Even after they had conquered vast regions, they continued to act as if China were simply a place to loot rather than to govern. Nowhere was the impact of this ideology more pronounced than in the Mongol destruction of cities and farms. Violent raiding was an old steppe tactic, but the Mongols carried it to excess. They

were the first steppe nomads to acquire (mostly through captive engineers) the technical ability to reduce sizable walled fortifications with siege engines or divert rivers. Extremely conscious of their small numbers, they employed terror as a tool to discourage resistance and destroyed whole districts, regardless of the economic consequences. Such behavior was inexplicable to sedentary historians, for whom the conquest of productive populations was the goal of warfare, and was rooted in the lack of direct established ties between the nomads of Mongolia and neighboring sedentary civilizations.

The steppe tribes of the north had only indirect links with Chinese agricultural producers. They traded at border markets and got gifts directly from the Chinese court. To the nomads China was a fabulous storehouse of wealth, but how this wealth came to be produced, or how the Chinese organized its administration and the taxation of millions of peasants and artisans, was of no interest to the Mongols. Chinese peasant production, the basis of the Chinese economy, was belittled by the nomads who considered peasants to be no more a part of a political universe than were the domestic animals of the steppe. Peasants fell into the category of useless people who, as individuals, could provide no special service to the Mongols. They were used as shields in human wave attacks on cities, displaced from their homes, and prevented from returning to productive farming. A Chin census of 1195 showed a population of about 50 million people in north China. The first Mongol census of 1235-36 counted only 8.5 million.<sup>37</sup> Even accepting a large undercount because of the disorder in the north, clearly the population and productivity of north China had collapsed. The Mongols had killed the victims they had only intended to extort.

Widespread destruction was just one result of the Mongol attitude that China was to be looted or its government extorted. For a long period of time they also refused to accept their responsibility for administration. When pressed they tended to delegate the task to an expatriate staff which carried out its work under Mongol supervision. This was particularly true in taxation policy. The Mongols initially depended on tax farming, allowing Central Asian Muslims who were members of trading corporations (*ortakh*) to extract revenue from China. The land and people were often given out appanages to Mongol leaders and members of the royal family. The Mongol census of 1235-6 showed that of the 1,730,000 registered households in north China, 900,000 (over 50%) fell into this category. The Mongols extracted grain, silk, and silver, as well as weapons of war produced by captured artisans. Unlike previous foreign dynasties the Mongols were not dependent on the Chinese civil bureaucracy that had played such an important role in maintaining

traditional governmental values. Not until the reign of Chinggis Khan's son Ögödei's was his Manchurian prime minister, Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, able to set up proper administration in China.

This refusal to take on the responsibilities of government was a logical consequence of the steppe nomads' traditional dependency on a compliant dynasty within China to deliver subsidies and trade goods to the frontier. The collapse of the Jurchen state forced the Mongols to run an enormous state without any previous experience in government and without a grasp of the basic principles that made agricultural civilizations work. For thirty years after the great conqueror's death, his descendants clung to the belief that the empire could be centered around their steppe city/encampment at Karakorum, which for that short time was the political power center of Eurasia.

Not until the reign of Khubilai (1260-1294) was the half-century of Mongol misrule in China brought to an end. In a civil war with his younger brother Khubilai's troops in China cut off Karakorum's food supply and exposed the weakness of the capital. Mongol power in east Asia shifted to China and Khubilai transferred the Mongol capital from the steppe to Peking. In 1271, he proclaimed the Yüan dynasty marking the official integration of the Mongol Empire into the Chinese political tradition. Neither Chinggis Khan nor his immediate successors had seen any need for accommodating themselves to Chinese tradition. This was in sharp contrast to all previous foreign dynasties which had tried to make themselves at least minimally acceptable to the Chinese by proclaiming dynastic names and assuming Chinese titles long before they conquered Chinese territory. Only with Khubilai, a leader who was comfortable with being both a Chinese emperor and a steppe khaghan, did the goals of the Mongol state begin to come into line with those of previous foreign dynasties.<sup>39</sup>

During Khubilai's reign the Yüan dynasty followed more traditional Chinese patterns of administration with an eye to preserving and enlarging the productivity of the state. Those nobles with appanages continued to get revenue, but it was channeled through the central government. Nowhere was this new attitude more clear than in the conquest of Sung China. Khubilai's attacks there were aimed at bringing down the government, not in providing loot for the troops (who were now in the main Chinese infantry and more suitable for fighting in the south). Comparatively little damage was done to the economy and the landowning classes were allowed to remain in place. The Sung conquest was conducted while preserving the south's economic base, and it was not marked by the reckless pillage that had ruined the north.

In spite of its development under Khubilai, the Yüan dynasty retained many steppe characteristics. By Chinese standards, succession to the throne was often deemed irregular because it permitted lateral inheritance from elder to younger brother. Its governmental structure did not use the dual system of administration employed by other foreign dynasties, instead it relied on local representatives to oversee administration in Chinese areas and set ethnic quotas that favored Mongols and Western Asians over Chinese for official positions. The Yüan was also the only foreign dynasty in history to ever abandon China when confronted with serious military opposition instead of fighting until the bitter end. Though long removed from steppe life, the Yüan leaders abandoned China in the same casual way their ancestors acquired it without thinking too much about the consequences.

### Conclusions

We have presented a model that examines the cyclical development of native and foreign dynasties in the context of an interactive model. Across the course of 2000 years there were striking similarities in the types of states developing along China's northern frontier, alternating between imperial confederacies in Mongolia arising in opposition to unified native dynasties in China, and foreign dynasties of Manchurian origin arising in times of political anarchy. Each had its own distinct political organization, foreign policy, and administrative structure.

This dynamic is displayed in all three cycles of foreign rule in China, but with each cycle the foreign dynasties established themselves sooner and were more stable. The first Manchurian dynasties in the Era of North-South Division (316-589) were relatively weak compared to their Khitan and Jurchen successors (907-1234), while the Manchu Ch'ing (1616-1912) proved to be China's most stable foreign dynasty. There was also less lag time between cycles as time went on, with powerful native Chinese dynasties establishing themselves more quickly each time. This is apparent just in the raw numbers of dynasties and their average length of rule listed in *Chart #3*.

The foreign dynasties appearing in the era following the collapse of the Han dynasty were the most numerous, but also the most short lived, and came from all sectors of the frontier. The Manchurian dynasties founded at that time, while they were the ultimate victors in the struggle to control north China, took well over a century to displace their rivals. At the end of the first cycle, a half century elapsed after the collapse of foreign rule in China before

*Chart #3*  
*Sequence of Foreign Dynasties Ruling in China*

*Cycle 1: From the Fall of Han in 220 [Han dynasties lasted 426 years]*

Origin	Number	Average length of dynasty
Steppe	5	34 years
Kansu/Tibetan	6	32 years
Manchurian I	4	22 years
Manchurian II	1*	148 years

[Period of time from fall of Manchurian II until native Chinese reunification = 47 years]

*Cycle 2: From the Fall of T'ang in 907 [T'ang dynasty lasted 289 years]*

Origin	Number	Average length of dynasty
Steppe	1	13 years
Kansu/Tibetan	1	237 years
Manchurian I	1	218 years
Manchurian II	1*	119 years
[Mongol Irruption]	1**	108 years]

[Period of time from fall of Mongol Yuan until native Chinese reunification = 0 years]

*Cycle 3: From Fall of Ming in 1644 [Ming dynasty lasted 276 years]*

Origin	Number	Average length of dynasty
Steppe	0	0
Kansu/Tibetan	0	0
Manchurian I	1**	268 years
Manchurian II	0	0

Note: \* = ruled all of north China for more than one generation  
 \*\* = ruled all of China for more than one generation

medieval and modern times and earlier nomads who occupied the same territory. Similarly, for the first half of its history, Turkestan was Iranian in culture and language, while the term Manchuria is a creation of western geographers.

7. Lattimore 1962:97-118.
8. Lattimore 1940.
9. Odum 1959:259.
10. Odum 1959:263.
11. Irons 1979:362.
12. Barfield 1981.
13. Loewe 1974:80-81. The Chinese estimated the Hsiung-nu population at less than a province, or even a large district, of the Han state. cf. HS 48:13b, SC 110:16a. cf. Bielenstein 1987.
14. SC 110:17b; Watson 1961,2:172 *Records of the Grand Historian of China*
15. Yü 1967:9-11; The following history of the Hsiung-nu during the former Han period is found in the *Shih-chi* (SC), chapter 110, of Ssu-ma Ch'ien and the *Han-shu* (HS), chapters 94A&B, by Pan Ku. Other material relating directly to the nomads of this period may be found in the chapters on the Western Region (SC123 and HS96A&B).
16. 8. see Loewe 1974:211-243. Hulsewé 1979.
17. The history of the Hsiung-nu in the later Han period is found in the *Hou Han-shu*, chapter 89 (or 119 in those editions that place it after the biographies). Bielenstein (1967:92ff) covers the dynasty's foreign policy during its formative period.
18. The history of the first two Turkish empires is recorded in the succeeding Chinese dynastic histories for this period, each of which contains a chapter on the nomads. The Turks relationship with the successors to the Wei dynasty and the end of the Jou-jan is found in the *Chou-shu*, *Peh-shi* (99) and the *Sui-shu* (84). The relationship of the Turks with the T'ang dynasty is described in the *Chiu T'ang-shu* [CTS] (144) and the *Hsin T'ang-shu* [HTS] (215). Although these two sources cover the same period, each has slightly different material. Liu Mau-tsai (1958, 2v) brings all of this material together in a German translation.; cf. Ecsedy 1968, 1972.
19. Mackerras (1972) provides side by side translation of the Old and New *T'ang-shu* chapters on the Uighurs as well as an analysis of their relationship to China.
20. cf. W. Franke 1946 and Serruys 1967. The *Ming Shih-lu* (MS) chapters on the Mongols and Oirats are the basic source for this period.
21. Mote 1974:243-272. and Serruys 1967:64-93.

to China.

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21. Mote 1974:243-272. and Serruys 1967:64-93.

22. Yü 1967:61-64.
23. Minorski 1948 and Mackerras 1972:47-50.
24. Yü 1967:38-41.
25. Farquar 1957: 60-68.
26. HS 94B:17a-18a; Wylie 1875:62-63
27. SC 106 for War of the Seven Kings who had planned to call on the Hsiung-nu to augment their forces in the north. (Bielenstein 1967:92ff).
28. Mackerras 1972:14-32.
29. HHS 90:1b-3a; Parker 1892-93:73,75. See also Schreiber 1949/55, 1956.
30. Wittfogel and Feng 1949:398-402; LS 112:12a.
31. Li 1975: 115.
32. Wittfogel and Feng 1949:142, *Wu-tai Shih-chi*
33. Li 1975:133-134.
34. cf. Saunders 1971:17-28 who sees the Turkish Empires as a "rehearsal" to the Mongol conquests.
35. The basic source for political and social conditions in Mongolia during Chinggis Khan's lifetime is the *Secret History of the Mongols* (Cleaves 1982). Its focus on the tribal battles that brought about the unification of Mongolia provides a vivid account of the difficulties faced by rising tribal leaders.
36. Odum 1959:239.
37. Tao 1976:5 *Chin-shih* 46:9b; also Ping-ti Ho 1970.
38. Schurmann 1956:66-67.
39. Dardess 1972-3: 117-165

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