

# The overland system

The Chinese government, we said, organized foreign relations in two distinct ways depending on the degree of threat posed by the foreigners they confronted. Political entities to the south and the east of China were never serious challengers since the land borders here were well protected and the long coastline meant that any attackers would have to arrive in China by sea. Political entities to the north and the west were an entirely different matter since the land here was only sparsely populated and the borders diffuse and impossible to conclusively secure. The result was an international system which took two quite distinct forms. Perhaps we could talk about the “overland” and the “tribute” system respectively. Although there was a considerable overlap between the two – in particular, many of the overland states were also tribute bearers – the systems were nevertheless governed by quite different logics.

It is easy to explain the attraction which China held to the peoples on the steppes. These peoples were predominantly nomads, meaning that they followed their herds – of goats, sheep and horses above all – to where they could find pasture. Nomads are always potentially on the move, and since they never stay long enough in one place, they have problems accumulating resources. Indeed, they characteristically build no buildings and they take their homes with them as they travel. Instead the wealth of nomads is accumulated in their animals, meaning for example that while the wealth easily multiplies, it is difficult to store. The Chinese, by contrast, were overwhelmingly farmers and some were city-dwellers, meaning that they lived sedentary lives and stayed put in one place. Every Chinese family had a home, be it ever so humble, where they gathered possessions which they were prepared to defend with their lives. While the nomads had nothing to defend that they could not take with them, the

Chinese and their treasures were located in fixed and well-known places. And of course some Chinese families were very wealthy indeed. To the nomads this constituted an obvious temptation. Their general aim was not to occupy and colonize China, and to rule the country as theirs, but simply to raid the villages and cities and to take with them whatever they could lay their hands on. The nomads were interested in all kinds of resources as long as they were portable – gold and silver, animals, women.

It was always difficult for the Chinese to fight the nomads. The land between these northerners and themselves consisted of steppes and large deserts such as the Gobi and the Taklamakan. The steppes were easily crossed by the nomads on their swift horses, but they were far more difficult for the Chinese armies to cross on foot. The deserts constituted obstacles for both parties to be sure, but since they were more familiar to the nomads, they were far more likely to keep the Chinese in than the nomads out. The borders which separated China and the peoples of the steppes were thus difficult to not only to defend but even to define. While the Chinese thought of this border in territorial terms – as a question, that is, of where a line should be drawn between what is yours and what is mine – such distinctions made little sense to the nomads for whom all borders were obstacles to the movements required by their animals. Refusing to define borders, the nomads had no reason to defend them. Besides the peoples of the steppes were difficult to fight for the simple reason that they were very ferocious warriors. Although they initially at least had little by means of military technology, and made few inventions of their own, they had access to horses, the technology which mattered the most in pre-modern warfare. The nomads learned the art of horsemanship already as toddlers and as children they learned to hunt and to kill prey on horseback. These skills were easily adapted for the purposes of warfare. On horseback they could cover large distances very quickly and they could attack an enemy at full speed, wielding

their spikes and firing off arrows with high precision.

The perennial question for the Chinese was how best to deal with such enemies. The most obvious option was to pursue a defensive strategy, and this is what the Chinese did for much of their history. That is, they built walls. The walls protected them from the intruders, it protected their treasure, and from the parapets they could defend themselves against the assailants. Every Chinese city of any size had a city wall, and the city-wall of Beijing was a particularly impressive structure. It consisted of two parallel walls, a foreign visitor reported at the end of the Qing dynasty, which were 14.4 meters high, with the 20.5 meter space in-between them filled up by mud, stones and concrete. All in all the Beijing city-wall was 42 kilometers long, with loopholes and niches for cannons and massive towers at every 200 meters. And then of course there was the "Great Wall of China" itself. Built as a series of smaller structures, it was joined up by the First Emperor and improved during the Han dynasty, when hundreds of thousands of manual laborers were forcibly conscripted to work on it. Yet it was only during the Ming dynasty that the wall took on the form and shape which tour-groups see when they visit it today. The Great Wall covers a distance of some 6,000 kilometers, but since it undulates across mountains and through valleys, the structure is itself far longer, perhaps 50,000 kilometers. And, as a visitor noted at the end of the eighteenth-century, the Great Wall was broad enough to allow five horses, or two carriages, to travel side by side along it. *[Read more: The Great Wall of China does not exist!]*

Impressive as these physical structures no doubt were, a defensive strategy never worked all that well. The Mongols in particular soon learned how to besiege a city using catapults and various ingenious siege engines. In fact, many of the most successful techniques they seem to have learned directly from Chinese engineers. For that reason it was better for the

Chinese to go on the offense, and this is indeed what the emperors did on numerous occasions. Already the first Han emperor undertook large military campaigns, involving hundreds of thousands of troops and just as many horses, and these campaigns continued during his successors. The Chinese established farming communities on the steppes and built fortified towns. The court forcibly moved peasant farmers to new frontier settlements, along with government-owned slaves and convicts who performed hard labor. The court also encouraged commoners to voluntarily migrate to the frontier. Yet this, as the nomads saw it, provided only another Chinese settlement which they could attack. As the emperors discovered to their chagrin, the nomads were infuriatingly difficult to conclusively defeat. Since they had no given territory and no fixed possessions of their own, they could simply retreat across the steppe and outrun, or ambush, any Chinese soldiers that came in pursuit of them. If the Chinese managed to hold on to the territory which they conquered, the nomads would certainly be pushed further and further away, yet this only meant that they lived to fight another day.

If defense was impossible and offense difficult, the question was what the Chinese could do. The option which the imperial court eventually arrived at was to engage the peoples of the steppes in various *ad hoc* arrangements designed to give them a stake in the system. By creating shared institutions there was a chance that the nomads gradually would come to see things China's way, or perhaps that "barbarians could be used to control the barbarians," or that they could be tricked in some fashion or perhaps bribed off. The most obvious option here was to negotiate a treaty. This was a strategy which the Chinese tried in relation both to the Xiongnu Confederacy and the Russians. In both cases, and most unusually for the envoys of the Chinese empire, they sat down to negotiate with the foreigners much as though they had been equal parties. And in case of the Xiongnu, the treaty they concluded required the Chinese to send them a large number of tributary gifts,

including clothes, food and wine. In the case of the Russians, the negotiations led to the conclusions of two treaties – at Nerchinsk, 1689, and at Kyakhta, 1727 – which regulated the border between the two countries. The Russians were given a number of favors unknown to other Europeans: the right to build their own church in Beijing, with its own graveyard and a resident priest. *[Read more: Treaties of Nerchinsk, 1689, and Kyakhta, 1727]*

Another strategy, used in relation to Tibetans and Mongols, was to incorporate elements of the foreign culture into the practices of the Chinese state. Thus Tibetan-style Buddhism was a common point of reference during the Qing dynasty and Mongolian references were everywhere. For example: the Qing emperors constructed a to-scale replica of the Potala palace in Lhasa at their summer retreat in Chengde, and they established Tibetan temples in Beijing to which various lamas continuously were invited. The aim was to make the foreigners feel that they had a stake in the Chinese state – that the empire had universal pretensions and that it included them too. Whenever such cultural measures were unlikely to work, the Chinese government tried more hands-on tactics. They would, for example, give away imperial princesses as wives or consorts to the rulers on the steppes in order to bring their respective families closer together; or they would engage in elaborate gift exchanges in order to establish relationships of mutual dependence; or, in cases where the emperors were particularly desperate, they would even place themselves in the subordinate position of tribute-bearers. *[Read more: independence for Xinjiang]*

The lively commerce which took place along the caravan routes of Central Asia provided opportunities too. *[Read more: Sogdian letters]* The trade brought a large range of goods to the people of the steppes which they never could have produced for themselves, and by selling their own products to the merchants they could raise much needed cash. The Mongols, in particular,

were great supporters of the trading network and they worked hard to improve security along the routes and to build relay stations where travelers could rest, get food and change horses. Since the trade was important to them, they could not afford to disrupt it through warfare. The problem for the Chinese authorities was only that the nomads in this way could gain access to all sorts of goods which the Chinese much preferred them not to have – military technology in particular.