

Tripolar Interaction: Mongolian Steppe, Manchuria and Mainland China

The Tripolar Framework of Analysis



2.2. Northeast Asia
Blunden and Elvin (1998: 10-11)

¹ According to Jagchid and Symons (1989: 14, 23 and 165), the decision of the nomads to accept the nominal tributary system or attack the Han Chinese depended on such factors as the relative strength of each party, the impact of weather or disease upon their flocks or herds, the internal dynamics within the Chinese and their own courts, political and psychological motives, the nature of the chaotic frontier zones, and whether the Chinese bureaucracy was functioning effectively.

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As Barfield (1989: 12) contends, the Mongolian steppe, Manchuria, and mainland China must be analyzed as parts of a single historical system. The complexity of developments in East Asia is the product of changing relationships among the Turko-Mongols, Xianbei-Tungus, and Han Chinese of these East Asian sub-regions through time.

This tripolar framework is clearly different from the simple bipolar approach of nomads versus the sedentary Chinese. The latter approach typically contends that, when the nomadic peoples were not able to obtain essential commodities such as grain and clothes from the Han Chinese through gifts, subsidized trade at the frontier markets, and court-to-court intermarriage arrangements, they raided China to acquire the goods they needed, but if the Chinese were willing to provide these goods peacefully to the nomadic peoples, peace was possible.¹

Few people recognize the simple fact that, with the exception of the Mongol Yuan (1206-1368), all of the foreign conquest dynasties in China were of Manchurian origin: Tuoba

Wei (386-534) and Qidan Liao (916-1125) originating from the Liao-xi steppe of western Manchuria, and Ruzhen Jin (1115-1234) and Manchu Qing (1616-1912) originating from the wild forest regions of eastern Manchuria. The Xianbei rulers of the Wei and Liao dynasties were very much Mongolic, while the Ruzhen rulers of Jin and Qing dynasties were definitely Tungusic. China was never conquered from the south.

The central theme of Barfield (1989) is as follows. The extreme physical and cultural dissimilarity between Mongolian steppe and mainland China enabled the coexistence of Turko-Mongol nomadic empires and sedentary Han Chinese dynasties most of the time, with the partner empires tending to flourish or perish together. There was, however, no such an extreme dissimilarity between Manchuria and the Great Plain of China. Western Manchuria was very much nomadic and eastern Manchuria was heavily forested, and yet the North-East Manchurian Plain (the *Dong-bei* plain consisting of Song-hua and Liao River basins) has been producing wheat and millet. Consequently, the “Barbarians” of Manchuria tried to conquer the Han Chinese whenever the Chinese dynasties and the nomadic partner empires in the Mongolia □ n steppe were both weakened.

The Chinese chroniclers classified the “barbarians” in the east of Greater Xing’an Range into two groups: the Eastern Hu (Dong-hu) in the Liao-xi steppe of western Manchuria and the Eastern “Barbarians” (Dong-yi) in the central and eastern Manchuria.² The Eastern Hu included the Wu-huan and Xianbei people who had founded Yan and Tuoba Wei, and were the ethnic ancestors of the Qidan. Their language belongs to the Mongolic branch of the Altaic language.³ The Eastern “Barbarians” consisted of the Ye-maek (*Waimo*) Tungus who had founded Old Chosun, Puyo, Koguryeo and Three Han, and the Mohe-Ruzhen Tungus who were the descendants of Sushen-Yilou and the ethnic ancestors of the core Manchu. The language of all Eastern “Barbarians” may be classified as a Macro-Tungusic branch of the Altaic language.

Among the Manchurian people, only the Ye-maek Tungus of central Manchuria, the ethnic ancestors of modern Korean people, failed to establish a conquest dynasty in China.

² Emperor Qian-long also took the matter of the phrase “Eastern Barbarians” in his edict (commissioning the *Man-zhou Yuan-liu Gao*) as just another example of the “mistreatment” he deplored. Emperor Qian-long reminded us the fact that, “because of their geographical locations, Mencius had referred even to Shun as an Eastern Barbarian.” (See Crossley, 1999, p. 302.)

欽定 滿洲源流考 卷首諭旨乾隆四十二年八月十九日 上諭頃閱 ... 不可以不辨若夫東夷之說 因地得名 如孟子稱舜東夷之人 ...

According to the *Hou Han-shu*, however, “yi” does not imply “barbarian” but implies the “root, origin or primary source of all things in the universe.”

後漢書 卷八十五 東夷列傳第七十五 王制云 東方曰夷 夷者 柢也 言仁而好生 萬物柢地而出

Every new dynasty in China compiled an official history of its predecessor as a tool for instructing current rulers that included an extensive description on the neighboring “barbarians” because they always presented security problems and had to be put under the close attention of every Chinese dynasty.

³ They were called the Eastern Hu because they had originally been located east of the Xiong-nu (Hu).

During the first half of the last two millennia, they were pressured by the steppe wolves of the west and forest tigers of the east to move their seat from the Song-hua plain down to the mountainous Hun-Yalu River valleys, and then further south to join their Ye-maek cousins who had settled in the Korean peninsula long ago. Perhaps a failure turned into a blessing. At least the people in the Korean peninsula continue to maintain an independent polity as of the twenty-first century, while all those once successful Manchurian conquerors, including those Ye-maek Tungus who had stayed behind in Manchuria and assimilated into the Manchus, came to be absorbed into what is now the People's Republic of China.

Janhunen (1996: vii, 15-16), a linguist, states that: "Much later I realized that both Korea and Japan are, indeed, intimately connected with Manchuria not only by their recent historical fates, but also as far as their most remote past and ethnic 'origins' are concerned." In his study of the ethnic groups of North and East Asia and their languages, Janhunen treats Korea and Japan as essential parts of Manchuria. He makes a cynical comment that, although Korea had never seriously considered a conquest of China, Japan played its Manchurian role so well that it established the short-lived Manzhou-guo puppet state (1932-45), headed by the last Qing emperor, and even launched a full-scale conquest of China proper. He might also have mentioned the bombast of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-98), invading Korea to conquer the Ming China.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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