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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is the third in a series of guides developed to help college and high school teachers incorporate information about Inner Asia into their courses. A discussion of the diplomatic tradition of Inner Asia is presented. The author documents a strong political tradition that made possession of the Orkhon valley in the steppe region necessary for imperial leadership. Inner Asian imperial clans acquired the valley through a confederation process, convinced the neighboring Chinese that the clans were a threat, and tried to live in urban luxury by offering China peace in exchange for civilized goods. Common soldiers and lesser clans frequently forced changes in the imperial leadership that brought benefits of the diplomatic policy to new groups. The author believes this policy of diplomacy toward China provides a unifying theme for the study of Inner Asia and helps dispel the stereotype of the savage, nomadic barbarians of Inner Asia. A bibliographic note cites several books which describe eighth century A.D. Chinese political policy toward the steppe clans, and 13th century living conditions in the Mongol capital. (Author/AV)

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Asian Studies Research Institute

TEACHING AIDS FOR THE STUDY OF INNER ASIA



NO. 3

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Hope College

# THE INNER ASIAN DIPLOMATIC TRADITION



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## TEACHING AIDS FOR THE STUDY OF INNER ASIA

No. 1 Denis Sinor, What is Inner Asia? (1975)

No. 2 Turrell V. Wylie, Tibet's Role in Inner Asia (1975)

No. 3 G. Larry Penrose, The Inner Asian Diplomatic Tradition (1975)

The Teaching Aids published in this series do not necessarily contain the results of original research. They are prepared and published for the purpose of helping non-specialized college and high school teachers to incorporate Inner Asian topics into their courses.

Offers of collaboration, suggestions for topics, are welcome and should be addressed to Professor Denis Sinor, Director, Asian Studies Research Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind. 47401.

Orders should be addressed to the same address. For postage and handling a charge of $1.00 (one) will be made for every two copies sent. Checks should be made payable to Inner Asian Teaching Aids.

It is sometimes difficult to find a place to begin in the study of Inner Asia. Even in the several pamphlets that constitute this series, a teaching method is not always explicit. Numerous approaches are possible, but one may be particularly effective. It is to begin with a centralizing, a unifying, concept against which a wide range of events can be tested. Even when the concept is not confirmed in all particulars, its pedagogic function can remain unimpaired. This pamphlet departs from the rather more straightforward approach taken in others. It deals with an idea, an interpretation, that can provide a central theme, a starting point for the study of Inner Asia.

Some prior knowledge is certainly helpful in using the essay that follows. At the least, the reader should have close at hand either Denis Sinor's Inner Asia: a syllabus (Indiana University Publications, Uralic and Altaic Series vol. 96, second, revised edition, 1971), or René Grousset's The Empire of the Steppes: a history of Central Asia (Rutgers University Press, 1970).

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The Imperial nomads have seldom been understood on their own terms. Instead they have been approached in terms of the threat that they have represented to the sedentary cultures that surround the steppe heartland. By far the greatest volume of material that treats of the Turks and Mongols in any period of history is composed of sedentary observations. That there should be a bias in such sources is only to be expected. Shock, horror, and disgust are the predictable reactions of residents of Lo Yang, Kiev, Samarkand, or Baghdad who saw their cities, their cultures, burned, raped, and pillaged. One could easily believe that all the Inner Asians ever did was to raid or move about in search of grass and water in order to fit out their horses for future raiding.

To the extent that they exist, steppe sources might also be used to confirm the impression that life in the grasslands of Mongolia and western Siberia was nothing but endless rounds of mounted warfare punctuated by the occasional raid on townsmen. The savagery of such as the 7th century Old Turkic monuments is no less vivid, nor at first glance any less mindless, than that reported by the citydwellers. No small part of the sedentary horror

must have been the evidently capricious nature of the nomad appearances. That there was purpose in them, unity, the advancement of general historical themes that could be understood in terms of the steppe itself, did not enter the mind of the landed chronicler. The best that was ever done to explain the nomad attacks was to have recourse to a God, or to gods, angry with the sedentary folk. That it was the nomad who was the instrument of this divine vengeance was explained by the genetic insatiability of the nomad when it came to civilized goods and women. The theory of drought-stricken pastures was advanced in a more recent, and more secular, age with little more effect than that of earlier cosmic explanations.

A conventional concept, such as that of an Inner Asian diplomatic tradition, might be employed, but only if it can be shown that there is a deeper and more self-conscious continuity than has hitherto been seen in the activities of the steppe people. This can be shown, and a more conventional explanation can reasonably be offered. That is, there is evidence to suggest that the Inner Asians knew perfectly well what it was that they

were about over a long period of time. It is possible to postulate a keen historical consciousness on the part of the nomad that underlies a pattern of behaviour of sufficient consistency and duration to justify reference to it as tradition, or even "policy," and it has nothing to do with mindless and capricious savagery.

This policy can be simply stated as follows: strong nomadic confederations built cities in the steppe that were maintained by peaceful tribute from sedentary peoples. This Inner Asian diplomatic tradition is a blend of cultural, political, and military considerations and it has to do with the nomadic notion of what a proper empire should be.

The tradition has a geographical locus that is contained by a very small area on the upper Orkhon river in the present-day Mongolian Peoples Republic (MPR). It is most unequivocally represented by two steppe cities, Karabalgasun of the 9th-century Uighurs and Karakorum of the 13th-century Mongols. The ruins of these cities are found some two hundred miles west and slightly north of Ulan Bator, the capital of the MPR. The site has a radius of but fifty miles and within it are found

the home bases of empires that extend in time from the second century B.C. through to the thirteenth century A.D. The Old Turkic monuments, our best steppe "documents," are located in the valley. Numerous imperial confederations occupied the area including the Hsiung-nu (2nd century B.C.-2nd century A.D.), the Hsien-pi (3rd century A.D.), the Juan-juan (5th century A.D.), the Türk (6-8th centuries A.D.), the Uighurs (9th century A.D.), and the Mongols (13-14th centuries A.D.). Indeed, occupation of this site was a virtual prerequisite for imperial status. There existed a political tradition that tied legitimacy to control of the Orkhon valley, called Ötükän in the Old Turkic language, and there was a religious tradition that included seasonal ceremonies in the valley and, in most cases, veneration of the mountains around it. The valley came to be a symbol of successful confederation and a psychological advantage over other contenders accrued to those who held it. The Old Turkic monuments tell us that,

> If the Türk kaghan rules from the Ötükän there will be no trouble in the realm.
>
> The place from which the tribes can best be controlled is the Ötükän.

> If you stay in the ötükän and send caravans from there you will have no trouble. If you stay in the ötükän you will live forever dominating the tribes.*

Perhaps the most revealing statement about the valley comes from a certain Tonyuquq who was prime minister to the second Türk empire and who was also instrumental in the founding of it in 680-682 A.D. His monument relates, with a characteristic lack of modesty,

> It was I myself, Bilgä Tonyuquq, who led the Türk kaghan and the Türk people to the ötükän. Having heard that the Türk were in control of the ötükän there came people from the south, west, north, and east and submitted to us.

For the purposes of this essay what is most interesting about the Orkhon valley, aside from its evident political and religious importance, is that every major confederation that controlled it either built, or considered building, a city in it. These cities are uniquely Inner Asian and they represent a solution, never very successful in the long run, to a

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* Passages from the Old Turkic inscriptions are paraphrased from Talat Tekin, A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic (Indiana University Publications, Uralic and Altaic Series vol. 69, 1968).

knotty problem. The problem was that nomad leaders, being in most respects no different from their sedentary counterparts, wished to live in maximum luxury. Yet, luxury meant Chinese goods and Chinese goods undermined the nomadic lifestyle upon which the leadership depended for military clout. The mounted archer was the ultimate weapon of the day only so long as he did not worry about rending silk garments in battle or lose his culture to urban fleshpots. In either case the leadership, however it might choose to live, had lost the very weapon that made them leaders.

Several solutions to the resulting dilemma existed. Conquest was always a possibility. But conquest meant both hard work and, ultimately, the feared loss of culture. The Old Turkic inscriptions staunchly defend nomad, Turkic, culture against that of the Chinese (see below the words of Tonyuquq on this matter). We may stop short, as most have, of calling this attitude "nationalism," though a clear sense of Turkic identity is unmistakable. Another possibility was long-range raiding. But, this might be counterproductive. We have a passage that explains how all the sheep and cattle taken in a raid to the China

border either died on the return to the Orkhon or were consumed. The net gain was nil or less. Some compromise was needed. The solution most often opted for by powerful confederations was an anomaly--it called for a city in the Orkhon valley supplied with civilized luxury goods extorted by threat of invasion. The nomads themselves occupied the city only on occasion.* As will be shown here this solution conflicted with the need to maintain a claim to leadership. Nevertheless, for imperial confederations the choice of building the city was clearly preferred to long-range raiding and to conquest with its attendant loss of culture. As long as the city was located in the sacred Orkhon valley and as long as the imperial clansmen did not completely forget the sources of their military prowess, this unusual compromise of nomad habit with urban pleasures worked rather well.

The beginning of the city building, and, for that

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* The Franciscan friar, William of Rubruck, visited Karakorum in 1254. He found the Mongols nomadizing around the city. The leaders entered from time to time for ceremonies that Rubruck characterized as 'drinking bouts.'

matter, its end, can be dated with some accuracy. The Hsiung-nu sites on the middle and lower Selenga, to which the Orkhon is a near right tributary, fall only a few miles outside of the core zone already described. They are impressive ruins, date from the second century B.C., and are very urban in character. They reflect the new era of Chinese architectural influences that had just replaced the Scythian, or western, styles. The end of the period of city building comes with the decline of Karakorum, the Mongol capital, to the status of a provincial garrison in the late fourteenth century A.D.

To make the case that what is under consideration here can by called 'policy' it might first be necessary to set aside some romantic notions about nomadism, about the Inner Asian 'barbarians.' Even Inner Asianists have trouble sometimes to avoid these notions. We have, after all, but a handful of indigenous documents. And, as already noted, they might be used to reinforce the view of steppe life that offers little more than catch-as-catch-can raiding and opportunistic conquest. Some of these very important materials, however, may also be suspect in terms of their ability to convey an overall

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impression of steppe political dynamics. The Orkhon (Old Turkic) inscriptions give great detail ous, fighting life in the saddle. They co... ken as a general statement of all that life was for the Türk, or for other confederations. It is also possible to see them, however, as detailed accounts only of how it was that a confederation was put together. The inscriptions take for granted, as did the people who erected them, that everyone knew why confederation was a reasonable goal. They mention briefly, but very significantly, that the seal of victory is settlement in the Orkhon valley. That is, the proof of successful confederation, which does involve a good deal of riding and raiding to and fro, is control of the Orkhon valley. What then happens when the confederation process is completed?

In 716 A.D. the kaghan Bilgä assumed control of the Türk confederation. He asked the wise Tonyuquq, whom we have already met, what the course of the confederation should be. Tonyuquq's answer was consistent with his responsibilities as prime minister; he reminded the new kaghan of the possible consequences were the Türk to build a city:

> The Türk are but one for every hundred Chinese. They seek water and pasture. They hunt, they have no fixed abode and they practice warfare. If they feel themselves strong they advance and if they are weak they retreat and hide. In this way they compensate for the advantage that the Chinese possess in their superior numbers, an advantage of which they cannot make use. If you establish the Türk in a walled town and are beaten, though it be only once, by the Chinese, you will become their prisoner.

Yet, Bilgä wanted to build the city. Tonyuquq counseled peace offers to China first. But the offers were rejected because the Chinese were not yet convinced that the Türk represented a realistic threat. By 721 the Chinese attempt to break the confederation by aiding the Basmils and the Uighurs against the Türk ended in failure when the Türk defeated the two other contenders. And, on the heels of a convincing Türk raid on China, in 722 peace was established. Tonyuquq did not duck the responsibility for this policy success. His monument reports that the Chinese tried to lure the Türk to them with sweet words and soft material, but, "I (Tonyuquq) having stayed in this place (the Orkhon valley) came to an amicable agreement with the Chinese. They gave us gold, silver, and silk in abundance."

It is evident that border war with the Chinese

was part and parcel of the confederation process so well described by the inscriptions. It is the same process that produces new leadership in the steppe. But peace with China on nomad terms, was ' policy of completed imperial confederation. The dia ue between Bilgä kaghan and Tonyuquq shows how clearly the options were understood. With considerable consistency the choice was to build the city in the steppe, declining the other choices of conquest or raiding. Had he not suffered domestic difficulties there is little doubt but that Bilgä would have built his city. His successor, the leader of the Uighur confederation, did build his.

The Uighurs came to power in 745 replacing the Türk in what amounted to a palace revolution. They were also speakers of a Turkic language and they followed the policy of peace from strength in every detail. There was some conflict within the Uighur camp over the choices due to an element that urged conquest despite that fact that after giving the Chinese a whiff of arrow the Uighurs had built their city, Karabalgasun, and had settled down to enjoy the flow of Chinese tribute. There was a strong Sogdian party in the Uighur court

that urged conquest. The Sogdians were Iranian traders, not nomads, and they had suffered some indignities at the hands of the Chinese who were obliged to deal courteously only with the Uighurs. The Sogdians wanted the kaghan to invade China. They hoped, no doubt, that their martial friends would win for them the control of the entire Inner Asian route from its origin in China to its termini in Persia and Byzantium. The major figures in the dispute were the kaghan Itichen and his best general, Tun Moho. The kaghan was ready to be persuaded by the Sogdians when Tun Moho reacted to what he understood to be an unacceptable policy by engineering a coup in 779. The Sogdian party and the kaghan were murdered.

Tun Moho then took the title Kutlugh Kaghan and sent off an embassy to the Chinese to tell them that the regular tribute could resume. It did, and Kutlugh humored the Chinese by accepting the traditional investiture with a Chinese title. By 787 the tribute from China included a very pretty royal princess and relations were on firm enough ground to allow Uighur-Chinese cooperation against their common enemy, the Tibetans.

The coup of 779 can be viewed as an excellent example

of the fact that the Inner Asians were perfectly aware of what choices they had before them. The choice of peace from strength, of tribute sent to a steppe city from China after a realistic demonstration of nomad force, is the historically consistent one. Tun Moho's policy produced the desired goods without any particular effort on the part of the Uighurs and it also provided them with an outlet for useless old horses that the Chinese received with much gnashing of teeth and listed as "tribute."

As Tonyuquq had warned, this solution could have some tactical drawbacks, though there is no record of a successful Chinese attack on one of the steppe cities. Perhaps more serious, the benefits of the policy were certainly never shared by more than a few aristocrats of the imperial clan. The rough nomad horseman did not caress Chinese princesses. Conflict between the leadership and lesser clans was sure to erupt sooner or later in the Orkhon valley. The resulting changes in leadership were often violent and have earned for the nomad dynasties the undeserved reputation of being "ephemeral." Leadership changes should not obscure

constancy of policy originating in a sense of history and a world view shared by most who came to power. This is not to dehorn the dilemma which, to repeat, consisted of retaining the loyalty of mounted archers while the leadership lived in non-nomadic luxury.

Even the Mongols never really solved the problem. And, the Mongols are something of a problem for the interpretation suggested here because they are known to the world as quintessential conquerors. The very name "Mongol" evokes images of cruel and universal dominion, of imperious dictation to Popes and French kings, images that could not be farther removed from a concept of the steppe ideal that calls for a city on the Orkhon supported by the peaceful policies outlined above. Yet, the interpretation can hold the Mongols; they can be shown to have been constant to the diplomatic tradition of the steppe. They did build a city on the Orkhon and they did supply it from China.

It is possible to distinguish at least two stages of imperial Mongol development; first, the confederation process that makes empire possible, and second, the empire itself. The end of the confederation process and the building of Karakorum are coincident. Chingis

Khan designated the site for the city in 1220. Serious construction did not begin until 1234, under Ögedei, the first successor to Chingis. The decision to build was not made until "the Khan's mind was at ease about the Chinese campaign."* Since we know that the major Mongol campaign against the native, the real, the Sung Chinese did not begin until 1235 it is hard to imagine how the khan's mind could have been at ease about this in 1234. The answer is that the reference to "the Chinese campaign" concerns not the campaign that led to the conquest of all of China, but to the last of the confederation battles which was fought in 1234 against the "barbarian" Kin in north China. If this is the case, then the khan ordered the city built when the confederation process was completed precisely as the Türk and Uighur khans had done before him. Ögedei then sat down near his nice town to enjoy the expected fruits of having come to leadership in a confederation strong enough to draw tribute from China.

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*'Ata-Malik Juvaini, The History of the World Conqueror, translated from the Persian by J.A. Boyle, two volumes, consecutive pagination, p. 236.

I believe that this is all the Mongols ever intended to accomplish.

The Hollywood image of young Chingis dreaming of controlling the known world dies hard, but there is no evidence for it and the pattern of Inner Asian history argues against it. In the beginning the Mongol vision did not include Sung China or the world of Islam. It is true that the first Mongol attacks on the Middle East and Russia came as early as 1220, but these were punitive raids, not campaigns of conquest, and they come only as a consequence of extreme and rash provocation, not as a consequence of some imperial concept. Muhammad Khwarezm-shah and his son Jalal ad-Din, ignorant of the fact that a few melons and pretty girls would have kept the Mongols in Mongolia, precipitated the raids by extreme rudeness.

The great campaigns, as distinct from raids designed to publicize the existence of a realistic threat, came only in the 1230's and were still the result of some provocation. In 1234 the Sung Chinese were foolish enough to try to reoccupy their former capital of Kaifeng after it was abandoned by the Kin who, as already noted, had been drawn into the Mongol confederation. There is no doubt but that the brilliant successes of these

later campaigns broadened the Mongol horizons and introduced a new imperial logic that could not be denied even though it was no longer consistent with traditional goals.

Still, the steppe ideal was not forgotten. Rebellious, and one might say, conservative, princes fought with the Great Khan in China, Kubilai, over Karakorum in the Orkhon valley, not over the wealth of China itself. As late as 1301 Kubilai had to defend the city against the rebel prince Kaidu who may have sought the restoration of traditional steppe policies as opposed to the growing Chinese orientation of the Great Khan himself whose official capital had already been in China for 40 years. In China the Mongols took the dynasty name Yüan, though they still remembered their origins. Two passages from inscriptions erected at Karakorum by order of the Yüan in 1346 reveal the extent to which tradition had endured:

> As for the place our dynasty arose, it stoops to regard the myriad states.
>
> From the Han time down there have been none comparable to us. In establishing the capital at Karakorum the foundation for creating the state was set up.*

*F.W. Cleaves, "The Sino-Mongolian Inscription of 1346," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, XV, 1952, p. 31.

To summarize the foregoing, it could be said that there existed a strong political tradition that made possession of the Orkhon valley necessary for imperial leadership. Having acquired the valley in a confederation process that the sources describe well, and having convinced the Chinese that they constituted a genuine threat, imperial clans consistently tried to support themselves in urban luxury. They built cities and offered China peace in return for civilized goods. The resulting compromise between the dictates of steppe leadership and the desire for luxury was an uneasy one that in no case endured for long because common soldiers and lesser clans forced changes in the leadership that would bring the benefits of the policy to a new group. Still, it was a policy, a diplomatic tradition, and the understanding of it serves as a viable focus, a unifying theme for the study of Inner Asia. It also liberates the student from many sedentary and culture-bound cliches about the mindless, savage nomad.

## A Bibliographic Note

Basic works by Sinor and Grousset have already been noted in the text along with the special literature by Tekin on the Old Turkic monuments, by Cleaves on the Sino-Mongolian imscriptions, and by Juvaini on the rule of Chingis Khan.

Two other books in English are helpful in understanding the questions considered here. First there is Colin Mackerras' The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories, a study in Sino-Uighur relations 744-840 (University of South Carolina Press, Asian Publications Series number 2, 1973). This is an extremely useful account of the agonies through which the T'ang Chinese went in an attempt to fashion a policy to counter the steppe tradition. Second, there is Christopher Dawson's Mission to Asia, narratives and letters of the Franciscan missionaries in Mongolia and China in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Harper Torchbooks, 1966). This book gives a very interesting and entertaining account of life in the Mongol capital, Karakorum.