CHINA AS A SUCCESSOR STATE TO THE MONGOL EMPIRE

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1. The Khan-Emperor

The greatest legacy of the Mongol Empire bequeathed to the Chinese is the Chinese nation itself.

The history of what we conventionally call China began in 221 B.C.E. when its first emperor, Shih-huang-ti of the Ch'in, conquered city-states of diverse ethnic origins and politically unified what was then known as the 't'ien-hsia' or "the land under heaven." This first China lasted only for twelve years until the emperor died and old kingdoms resurrected in force. Eventually King Liu Pang of the Han assumed the title of emperor but other kingdoms prevailed and the land under heaven was far from reunified. It took another sixty years before a centralized imperial structure was more or less fully restored under the reign of Wu-ti, Liu Pang's great-grandson. Thus did the first China come back to life.

Wu-ti's reign was immortalized by his court historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien in the very first comprehensive history of China, Shih-chi. History is not just a record of what has happened. It is rather a systematic interpretation of the man-inhabited world along the axes of both space and time in dimensions surpassing the reach of any single individual. Thus a well-written history has the power of ideologically defining the reader's perception of the world, and Shih-chi, the first world history in Asia, was truly decisive in determining what China was for many, many centuries to come.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien begins his history with the reign of Huang-ti, whose reported imperial accomplishments closely resemble those of Wu-ti. Huang-ti and his four direct successors are classed together as the Five Tis (wu ti). Originally the character ti meant no more than a "spouse," and each of the Five Tis was a heavenly husband of the guardian goddess of a city-state. Despite their assigned role in Shih-chi as prototypes of the Ch'in-Han emperors, they clearly belong to mythology.

Somewhat less mythical history starts with the Hsia, whose first king is credited with the creation of mountains and rivers, or the physical world. The Hsia is described as if it ruled all the land under heaven and accordingly treated as a dynasty, as are the Yin and the Chou, that followed it. Yet in reality there does not seem to have been any semblance of a political unity under those so-called Three Dynasties (san tai), which were not much more than the relatively powerful among many city-states. Thus there really was no China in the pre-Ch'in period.

Neither was there a Chinese nation yet. Legends told about the Hsia have a strong Southeast Asian flavor, and its kings are said to be the ancestors of the Yi people who inhabited the East and South China Sea coast. Those southern connections make the Hsia an I people, a term which originally meant "low," hence "lowlanders" who inhabited the flood plains east and southeast of Honan Province. In contrast to the Hsia southerners, both the Yin and the Chou who came in later and established themselves in what was to become North China were clearly of North Asian origins. The Yin were Ti hunters from the north and the Chou. Jung nomadic herdsmen from the west. Those three ethnic groups of different modes of living, together with Man slash-and-burn peasants in the mountains south of Honan who built the kingdom of Ch'u, are conventionally regarded as the Four Barbarians (tsu i) as if the Chinese had an early existence as a nationality separate from them. The fact is that the early population in the walled cities were of an ethnically mixed ancestry. In other words, the Chinese of the Ch'in-Han period had descended genealogically from the Four Barbarians, who had adopted an urban civilization and turned themselves into a new ethnic group within the walls of their cities.

The Chinese national identity was defined not genetically but by the three components of its civilization: the Chinese characters, the city, and the emperor. A Chinese was a person who read Chinese characters, correct usage of which was imperially decreed, lived in a city

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1 The present writer has written extensively on the nature of the Chinese civilization, mostly in Japanese. For the most comprehensive, see the following: H. Okada, "Higashi Ajia taiiku ni okeru minzoku," in Kam minzoku to Chigoku shokan, ed. M. Hashimoto (Tokyo, 1985), pp. 47-110.

2 On the peculiar nature of the Chinese characters which do not correspond to any particular language and the resultant absence of a common spoken language
administered by officials appointed by the emperor, and had his name listed in the emperor's census register. Biological extraction had nothing to do with his identity. Such evolution of the Chinese nation was completed only shortly before Suo-ma Ch'ien wrote his history around the turn of the first century B.C.E. Our historian, however, felt it necessary to legitimize the emperorship by assigning its origin to the most distant past and establishing its uninterrupted transmission through the blessed reigns of the Five Tis and the Three Dynasties, rather than admitting its creation by the denigrated Ch'in emperor. This scheme effectively placed the origin of China as a nation at the very beginning of world history because the emperorship was synonymous with the Chinese civilization.

The structure of Suo-ma Ch'ien's work amply expresses the centrality of the emperorship by surrounding its imperial annals (pen chi) with individual biographies (tien chan) of those whose life was related to the emperors in some way. Even the great nomadic empire of the Hsiung-nu, whose shan-yüü was the Han emperor's equal, is not accorded recognition as an independent political entity and is relegated to an individual biography in Shih-chi. Our historian adopted this attitude because to him the world was the emperor and the emperor was the world, and his world history was a history of the emperorship.

This format of Shih-chi was fully adequate when Suo-ma Ch'ien described his world around 100 B.C.E., and the concept of China thus defined by his work was to determine the Chinese perception of the world and its history for more than two thousand years to come. But in reality the first Chinese world lasted only for four centuries. Its population, which numbered more than fifty million in the mid-second century, collapsed in the aftermath of the Yellow Turbans (huang chin) Uprising that broke out in 184 C.E., leaving only less than five million survivors half a century later. This virtual extinction of the first Chinese nation was what prompted the migration of the North Asian nations into China in the third century, and the newcomers were to become masters of North China, where the Chinese Chin Dynasty disintegrated by itself in a civil war in 300. Although traditionalist historians of China long insisted that a succession of the legitimate emperorship continued in the South after the North

was lost, those Southern Dynasties (nan ch'ao) were not much more than regimes in exile in barbarian lands outside China. Now a completely new Chinese nation evolved in the North, who spoke a common language whose phonology revealed a strong Altai-ization of Old Chinese of the Han times. When the Sui, a Northern dynasty of Hsien-pei origin, finally conquered the South and thus created a second China in 589, the new historical reality called for a new historiographical format but none was readily available to the court historians, who had no choice but to fall back on the traditional one inherited from Shih-chi.

Inadequacy of the definition of China as the sole theater of history and the centrality of the emperorship in the world established by Suo-ma Ch'ien became even more obvious when Emperor T'ai-tsong of the T'ang, another dynasty of Hsien-pei origin, briefly assumed the gaghanship of the nomadic Türk Empire overthrown by him in 646. Then the Sha-t'o Turks dominated North China in the tenth century, followed by the Qītāy and the Jurchens who built their Northern empires in succession. Those empires, with their own dynamic tradition, clearly belonged to a separate and independent world apart from China. It is not justified to view them as dynasties of conquest, for they never really settled in China. Peking was only a winter camp for the Qītāy and Jurchen khans, with the additional function of an administrative center for the local Chinese population.

The Mongols proved far more realistic than the Chinese when it came to writing histories. After Qubilai Qa'an conquered the Southern Sung in 1276 and thus completely absorbed China and the second Chinese nation into the Central Eurasian world, the historians at the Mongol court produced Liao-shih and Chin-shih in recognition of the legitimacy of those Northern dynasties, rather than relegating them to a biographical section in Sung-shih as Chinese traditionalists would have done. This historiographical arrangement in itself represented a highly significant change in world view, in that it amounted to allowing the existence of two equally legitimate emperorships side by side. Thus the Chinese emperorship lost its most important attribute, its centrality, and was replaced by the North Asian khanship. The Chinese kept calling their khans emperors, but those emperors were no longer the center of the traditional Chinese world only, but in fact a Chinese aspect of the khans ruling the vast Mongol Empire and its successor states.

in China, see: H. Okada, "Shinjitsu to kotoba," in Ajia to Nipponjin, ed. H. Okada
put an end to the dynasty, for China was only one of its colonies. The Yuan Dynasty persisted in Mongolia for the next two decades until the last direct descendant of Qubilai Qa'an lost his life in a rebellion and his throne was taken over by a descendant of Arigh Böke in 1388. Still the new khan and his successors kept up their dynastic tradition calling their nation Dayan/Dayun (for Ta yüan). The Chinggisid house and the Mongol tribes supporting it were for a time overwhelmed by the Oyrad (Oirat), a powerful anti-Chinggisid tribal confederation, but rose again in the second half of the fifteenth century. Thus the Mongols never accepted the Ming emperors reigning in China as their sovereigns as long as the Chinese dynasty continued.

2. The Chinese Ming Dynasty

With the new khan-emperorship came a new nation. The Chinese Ming Dynasty was not a resurrected form of the old Sung Dynasty but one of the many successor states to the Mongol Empire, distributed all way across the Eurasian Continent.

As regards territories, the Ming did not extend beyond the old borders of China except in two regions: Yunnan and the Liao River Basin in Southern Manchuria, both of which it had inherited from the Mongols. Yunnan, an old Thai kingdom, had been conquered by Qubilai himself before his accession and become part of the Mongol Empire, but not of China. The Liao River Basin had lost its ethnic Po-hai population in civil wars in the thirteenth century and been repopulated by the Korean captives transplanted there by the Mongol army invading their peninsular homeland. There was no historical ground on which to base Chinese territorial claims in either region. Given such non-Chinese origins of those new territories, the only possible justification of the Ming sovereignty over them was a claim that the Ming emperors were legitimate successors to the Mongol khans who used to rule them.

The first Ming emperor, Hung-wu, was the one who publicly admitted how much he and his new nation owed to the Mongols. When Toghon Temür Khan died in Mongolia and his son Maitreyapāla was brought back prisoner by the Chinese army, the Ming emperor bestowed on the deceased khan the posthumous title of Shun Huang-ti in formal recognition of his legitimate imperial status. Hung-wu also disapproved the aggrandizing language of the congratulatory memorials presented to him by his vassals, saying: "The Yuan was master of the central empire for a hundred years, during which our and your parents all depended on it for livelihood. How can you speak such ostentatious words?"

The conscious effort on the part of the Ming emperors to identify themselves with the political tradition of their Mongol predecessors is evident also in the bureaucratic structure of their government, which they borrowed directly from the Mongols.

The three top offices in the Yuan imperial government, the Secretariat (chung shu sheng), the Bureau of Military Affairs (shu mi yüan) and the Censorate (yü shih t'ai), all had original connections with the person of Chabui Qutan, the Qunggirad empress of Qubilai Qa'an. The Secretariat was a council of Chinese warlords serving the khan, whose meetings were presided over by Prince Chinkim, Qubilai's son by Chabui, with the assistance of Antun of the Jalayir whose mother was a sister of Chabui. After the Rebellion of Li T'an in 1262, the office was turned over to the Chinese intellectuals surrounding the prince and its military administration was transferred to the Bureau of Military Affairs, of which the prince was also appointed Supervisor. The Censorate was first headed by Toghachar, a grandson of Chinggis Khan's brother Temüge Odchigin, but it was in that office that a movement eventually started advocating the khan's abdication in favor of the prince. There was also another top office, the Department of State Affairs (shang shu sheng), which later merged with the Secretariat. Despite the historical association of its name with the council of ministers, the Yuan version was in fact a financial organization managed by Ahmad of Banakat, a confidant of Chabui Qutan, with the sole purpose of raising revenues for Qubilai Qa'an.

Such organization of the Yuan imperial government owed little to the supposedly traditional Chinese bureaucratic structure going all the
way back to Shih-huang-ti of the Ch’in, but was what Emperor Hung-wu actually inherited from the Mongol Yuan. The structure had to be slightly modified after the emperor organized a successful coup d'état in 1360, massacred his old secret society brethren and assumed personal control of all the three offices. The Secretariat was abolished in name and each one of its Six Ministries (liu pu) was placed under the direct control of the emperor. The Chief Military Command (tu tu tu fu), corresponding to the Yuan Bureau of Military Affairs, was also divided into Five Chief Military Commissions (wu tu tu fu), each taking orders directly from the emperor. The Censorate was for a time abolished but soon revived under a new name, tu ch’a yüan, with not one but two Censors-in-Chief to head it.

Another instance of Mongol legacy inherited by the Ming Dynasty was its administrative structure. This Chinese dynasty was peculiar in having imperial princes enfeoffed in outlying provinces and commanding their personal armies, a practice unknown under the Ta’ang or the Sung Dynasty. It is, however, easily explained as a Mongol heritage. In Mongol society all organizations were built on the personal, rather than bureaucratic, principle, and the Yuan local administration was no exception. The impression one has in reading the geographical chapters of the Yuan-shih that the empire was neatly divided into twelve provinces governed uniformly is an illusion, produced by the Ming historiographers whose frame of reference was again none other than the old Shih-ch’u format. Under the Yuan Dynasty, as a matter of fact, the inhabitants of each city or locality had personal connections to the house of a tribal chief who had conquered them in the days of the Mongol conquest. In some cases even an entire province constituted a princely fief. This arrangement, Mongol style, copied by the Ming, was what gave the Chinese dynasty a tribal-feudal outlook.

Then there was the Ming military structure. As was the case with any other Chinese dynasty, the true base of the Ming imperial power was the army, not the civilian-Confucian bureaucracy. The dynasty had its own military aristocracy, comprising the descendants of the generals who had personally followed its founder, Emperor Hung-wu. They enjoyed exceptional privileges in their home province, Anhwei. In fact they were the equivalent of a home tribe to the emperor, comparable to the nomadic tribal chiefs who surrounded the Mongol khan in the Yuan court.

The political importance of the Ming military only increased after the death of Hung-wu and the usurpation of the imperial throne by his son Yung-lo in a civil war. The new emperor built a new capital at Peking, right at the gateway to Mongolia. The choice of location for his capital was an indicator of his wish to be not just an emperor of China but a khan of the Mongol Empire, as Peking was not quite in China. With this shift of the seat of imperial power, the Nine Frontier Defense Commands (chio pien ch’en) stationed along the Great Wall gained a great political influence, so much so that every new emperor had first to bribe their troops to win support for his accession. Emperor Cheng-te yearned for the extravagance of the border city of Hsian-fu, where he kept returning dressed as a general, to escape the boredom of his Peking court. These circumstances go to prove that the Ming emperorship was military rather than civilian-bureaucratic, contrary to what Confucian traditionalists would have us believe.

The decimal organization of the Ming populace introduced by Hung-wu was another prominent example of Mongol legacy and an old North Asian tradition going all the way back to the Hsung-nu Empire. The emperor first organized the families of his troops as professional Military Families (ch’ien hu), in Centuries (po hu so), Chiliarchies (ch’ien hu so) and Guards (soo) or military counties. Then he expanded the system to include also Civilian Families (min hu), whose basic organizations were an equivalent of Centuries called li (Communities), each of which belonged to a County (hsien). The hereditary military officers commanding local Guardsmen were of Mongol origin, as is learned from their census registers, called hsian pu, surviving today.

Even Neo-Confucianism, philosophical orthodoxy for bureaucratic purposes under the Ming Dynasty, owed its status to the Mongol Yuan. After suffering repeated persecutions as a heresy under the Chinese Southern Sung, it won for the first time official recognition as the standard interpretation of classical texts when the Yuan Dynasty reintroduced the Imperial Examinations (ko ch’ı) in 1313.

Thus the Ming Dynasty was in all its aspects a shrunked form of the Mongol Empire if anything.6

3. The Manchu Ch'ing Empire

The Manchu Ch'ing was not a dynasty of conquest ruling in China either. Nine years before the Manchus conquered China, the first Ch'ing emperor, Hong Taiji, was elected to his throne at Mukden in 1636 by the representatives of his Manchu banners, sixteen Inner Mongolian tribes and the Chinese armies that had gone over to his side, when a jade seal of old Yuan emperors was brought back by the victorious Manchu army, obtained from a widow of Lingdan Khan of the Chacars, the last legitimate Chinggisid khan of the Mongols. Interpreting the arrival of this seal as a clear indication of heavenly mandate for the Manchus to rule the world, Hong Taiji proclaimed a new dynasty, Daicing, and styled himself in three languages, Gosin Onco Huwaliyasaun Enduringge Han in Manchu, Aghuda Orushiyegchi Nayirmadagnu Bogha Qaghan in Mongolian and K'uan Wen Jen Sheng Huang-ti in Chinese, all meaning “the Vastly Gracious, Harmonious and Holy Khan-Emperor.” This trilingual title signified a full revival and inheritance of the Mongol imperial tradition originating in Chinggis Khan, which legitimized in the eyes of Asian nations Manchu rule of the eastern half of the old Mongol Empire.7

It is too obviously wrong to call the Ch'ing a Chinese empire, because, again, China was only one of the Ch'ing colonies and the Chinese population, though numerically large, was a political and cultural minority under the Manchu dynasty. Even the Great Ch'ing Code (Ta ch'ing li lü), applied only to the Chinese subjects, leaving other parts of the empire outside its jurisdiction.8

The Ch'ing khan-emperor was several things in one. To the Chinese he was their Chinese emperor in the tradition of Shih-huang-ti of the Ch'in and Wu-ti of the Han. To the Mongols and other nomads he was their khan, a supreme leader of their tribal confederation, in the tradition of Chinggis Khan. To the Tibetans he was the greatest patron of Tibetan Buddhism, in the tradition of Qubilai Qa'an. The Muslim population of East Turkestan had only an indirect relation to the Manchu khan-emperor through his General stationed on the Ili (U-li chiang chin), who had replaced their former overlords, the Junghar khong tuyii, after the 1758/39 conquest of the region.

4. The Republic of China

The Republic of China claimed to have inherited the rights to rule the empire built by the Manchus from the last Ch'ing emperor when he abdicated in 1912, but neither the Mongols nor the Tibetans acknowledged them. The Mongols of Outer Mongolia declared independence from the Ch'ing Empire on the eve of the foundation of the republic, and elected the last Rje-bsun-dam-po Qutughtu of Urga their khan. In Tibet the Ch'ing troops withdrew and the Thirteenth Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa from his exile in India. In December 1912 the Mongols and the Tibetans concluded a treaty of friendship and exchanged diplomatic recognition between themselves as independent nations.9 With Manchuria under Japanese domination and Sinkiang too remote to exercise effective control over, the Republic of China remained little more than a Chinese nation-state as long as it existed on the continent.

Not only politically but culturally too, the Republican China retained very little of the imperial, supposedly Chinese, tradition. In the last days of the Ch'ing Empire, old institutions had been replaced by new ones imported wholesale from Japan following China's humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894/95. The Japanization process most significantly presented itself in language and military affairs. Chinese nationalism, born for the first time in the Republican period, also was a by-product of Japanization, which gave the Chinese a new definition of China as an ethnically homogeneous nation with a long, uninterrupted history of its own civilization little affected by occasional barbarian intrusions. This new national consciousness of the present-day Chinese amounts to a revival of Su-MA Ch'ien's

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7 The Manchu claim of the Mongol imperial rights to rule the world was discussed by the present writer in “The Yuan Imperial Seal in the Manchu Hands: The Source of the Ch'ing Legitimacy,” a paper read at the 33rd Meeting of the Permanent International Altaic Conference, Budapest, June 24–29, 1990. See Asian Religious Beliefs and Practices (Budapest, 1992), pp. 267–270.

8 The Great Ch'ing Code owed almost all its contents to the Great Ming Code (Ta ming lü), authored and promulgated by Emperor Hung-wu of the Ming, and had therefore no provisions for legal cases involving non-Chinese persons. In the Ch'ing Empire each nationality was governed by a separate code: Pa-ch'i Tse-lü for the Manchus, Great Ch'ing Code for the Chinese, Li-fan-yuan Tse-lü for the Mongols and the Tibetans, and Hsi-chuang Tse-lü for the Muslims of East Turkestan. See M. Shimada, Shincho Moko Rii no kengo (Tokyo, 1982), pp. 89–90.

world view and is historically untenable, but has affected both the
Chinese themselves and modern foreign historians to a great degree.

5. The People’s Republic of China

In contrast to the Republic of China, which was a Chinese nation-
state as was the Ming, the People’s Republic of China is not China
but an empire in the mold of the Mongol Empire, as is obvious
from the fact that its claim of suzerainty over Tibet is based on the
historical relationship between the Mongol-Manchu khan-emperors
and the Tibetan Buddhist church that existed in the days of the
Yüan and Ch’ing Dynasties. This means that the PRC too is a suc-
cessor state to the Mongol Empire, owing its political legitimacy and
the rights to rule its present territories ultimately to Chinggis Khan.

6. Conclusion

The Mongol Empire did to Asia and Eastern Europe what Rome
did to Western Europe. The principle of unity established by Chinggis
Khan with his heavenly mandate was what made it possible for the
Russian khan-tsars to expand their rule over the western half of the
old Mongol Empire and has ultimately shaped the now-defunct Union
of Soviet Socialist Republics. Thus China in the east and Russia
in the west are the greatest legacies of the Mongol Empire that sur-
vive in the world today.

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10 The famous episode of Ivan IV, who enthroned Simeon Bekbulatovich, alias
Sain Bulat of the Kazimov, as tsar of All Russia in Moscow and then succeeded
the latter on the throne, amply illustrates the importance of being a Chinggits to
be a khan-tsar. Ivan’s great seal carries the word “tsar” only with regard to Kazan
and Astrakhan, which goes to prove that the Russian title is none other than
Mongolian “khan” in translation. In other words, the legitimacy of Russian “tsar”
ultimately derived from the khanship of Chinggis Khan. See O. Pritsk, “Moscow,
the Golden Horde, and the Kazan Khanate from a Polycultural Point of View,”
SOME COMMENTS ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DECLINE OF THE MONGOL EMPIRE ON THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE MONGOLS

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If you ask a historian about the legacy of the Mongol Empire he will surely tell you about the consequences of the Mongol invasions in the conquered lands. He will work out two components, a positive one that includes the achievements of the Mongolian Yuan dynasty in China (1271–1368) and of the Ilkhanate in Persia (1220–1356/57), as well as a negative one in the same lands. The latter means, e.g., the development in conquered Muslim lands which was characterized by a decline of the cities, agriculture, the massive destruction of cultural objects, the rejection of ethnic identities and strong demographic recessions, the consequences of which were felt by the people over centuries. It is legitimate to say, in general terms, that Mongol rule provoked a long lasting disruption of many structures in the Middle East.

But only rarely do people raise questions about the consequences of the Mongol Empire and especially of its decline for the Mongolian heartland and the nomadic Mongolian society. As it is very complicated to find reliable sources, these questions are rather difficult to answer. We have hardly any chronicles which throw light on this period. But we do know that the decline of the Mongol Empire led to a qualitative change in the development of Mongolian society, the expression of which was a stagnant phase in its social evolution. This happened after a period of almost eruptive development in Mongolian society. Within two centuries, the Mongols left behind the stage of the primitive society. Tribes united to become tribal confederations. With the establishment of private property in livestock, the usurpation of tribal territory by several members of the tribal aristocracy took place. This process did not run in a straight line but was rather contradictory in itself and strongly influenced by the geographical conditions of the country. Here, we have to take into account that nomadic mobility and the elements of accident resulting from it often prevented this process from being continuous.
The Mongol Empire & its Legacy

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