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THE GEOGRAPHICAL FACTOR IN MONGOL HISTORY

OWEN LATTIMORE

*Evening Meeting of the Society, 14 December 1936*

FROM ancient times the most accepted writers have considered the life of the steppe nomads of the old world to be as changeless as it is barbarous. This may be described as the classical view. It has been elaborated, without being really changed, by those geographical determinists who believe that primitive human society is controlled rigidly by its environment. Proceeding from this assumption, they describe both the occasional overrunning of settled lands by nomads and the occasional advance of settlers into nomad territory as "waves," which are caused by variation, notably climatic variation, in the geographical environment.

More recently, this classical view and its geographical explanation have been modified by writers who believe that human society is capable of modifying its geographical environment. Both the cultivation of marginal areas and the overgrazing of stock in true steppe areas can ruin the soil, create deserts and "change the climate." This may be called a semi-classical view.

My own opinion is that the relation of history to geography is much more complicated; that steppe society has been modified by both evolution and devolution, and also by shifts between extremely extensive forms of economy and relatively intensive forms. I believe that while the environment strongly conditions a primitive society, it does not always make social evolution impossible. Moreover society, as it evolves, attempts to exercise choice and initiative in the use of the environment. Consequently, marginal environments and marginal societies, permitting initiative of this kind, are of special importance in studying the way in which historical movements are generated. In attempting to establish this opinion, I shall first review the classical concepts and their modern variants, and in so doing set out the grounds which, I think, justify my own concept.

In his encyclopaedic 'Study of history' Mr. Arnold Toynbee made a notable attempt to survey all the geographical factors in the history of nomadic peoples in the whole steppe zone of the old world, from North Africa across

Arabia to the Persian Gulf, and from the Caspian to China.<sup>1</sup> Except for his greater emphasis on climate, and especially climatic variation, his findings reaffirm and elaborate, with great learning, an understanding of nomadic life and history that is well established. For this reason his work makes an excellent starting point for an attempt to reveal certain shortcomings that are inherent in the orthodox or classical view, and to press on toward an understanding of wider scope and greater depth. I shall here deal only with Mongol history and the geography of Mongolia; but the conclusions that can be reached from a study of the Mongol people in the setting of Mongolian geography can be applied with only minor modifications to all the steppe nomads of the old world.

The geographical environment of the steppe is compared by Toynbee to the sea; human use of it demands continual movement. This means that the people of the steppe must, to use Toynbee's term, accept a "challenge" and make themselves masters of a highly specialized way of life. He goes on to the conclusion that the steppe nomads were so successful in doing this that they incurred the "penalty" of becoming "the perpetual prisoners of an annual climatic and vegetational cycle." Their society became so rigidly specialized that it ceased to have "any inner evolution." The history of nomadic peoples came in consequence to be guided mechanically. At times they were "pushed off" the steppe by climatic change (increased aridity); at other times they were "pulled out" of the steppe by the "breakdown and disintegration" of sedentary civilizations, which tempted them to raid and conquer.

Both kinds of mechanical agency might cause migrations, but neither could result in evolution or change in the character of nomadic life itself, which remained so rigidly specialized that nomads who conquered settled peoples could not adapt themselves to a changed or mixed way of life. They were therefore absorbed by the peoples they conquered. When, like the Osmanli Turks, they survived for a time, it was only by the pseudo-adaptation of "turning themselves from shepherds of sheep into shepherds of men."

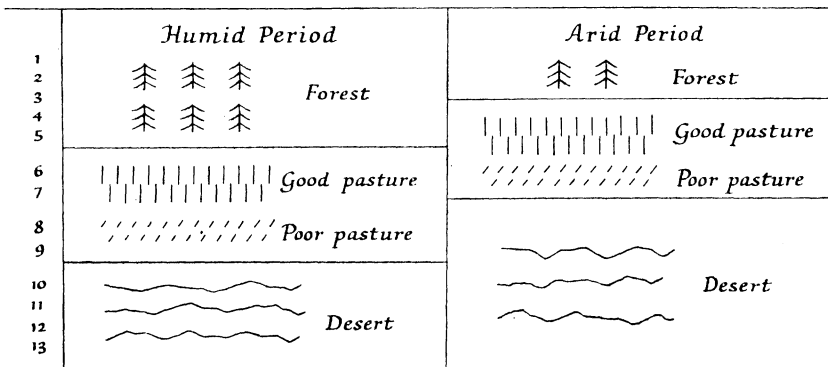
Toynbee develops the theory of climatic variation in great detail. He provides a chronology of the alternating encroachment of nomads on settled lands (to be explained by periods of aridity) and of settled peoples on the nomad steppes (to be explained by periods of increased rainfall). Among what he considers the direct correspondences between desiccation and nomadic "eruption" is a "paroxysm" of aridity in Central Asia in the thirteenth century, coinciding with the Mongol unrest out of which Chingghis Khan arose. This was followed at the beginning of the fourteenth century by a "physiographical recoil towards humidity," which "likewise corresponds in date with the rapid ebb of the Mongols." He makes allowance also for the fact that the nomadic people which attacked a settled country may not always have been set in migration by aridity in its own pastures. It may have been attacked by some other tribe, whose pastures had dried up, and thus have

<sup>1</sup> 'A study of history,' by Arnold J. Toynbee. London, 1934 (first three volumes). See especially vol. III, "The Nomads," pp. 7-22; "The Osmanlis" (an acute study of the transition of nomads to empire over settled peoples), pp. 22-50; and Annex II, on the causes of "Nomad eruptions," pp. 395-454.

been startled or pushed into a migration which it would not otherwise have attempted.

These assumptions, reasonable enough in themselves, make it possible to account for almost any migration in history, since the lack of any immediate and obvious climatic explanation can always be attributed to the time lag between aridity in one place and the appearance of nomad invaders at some quite distant point, a good many years later. Such assumptions are tempting and dangerous. Our knowledge of the details of many nomadic movements in the past is not sufficiently exact. By piling one assumption on another it is possible to tabulate the history of successive migrations in a manner that looks astonishingly accurate and convincing. It is well to remember therefore that the results which look so solid are based largely not only on a chain of speculative causes and assumed effects, but often on original details which are much too fragmentary to carry so solid a superstructure.

Toynbee prints a note by G. F. Hudson, pointing out some of the weaknesses of the climatic theory, when it is taken unmodified and accepted as all-explanatory. Hudson provides an excellent diagram which makes it clear that periods of aridity, resulting in a south-to-north shift of climatic belts in the zone between the Gobi on the south and Siberia on the north, need not result in a serious decrease in the amount of pasture available for a steppe nomad society.



*The shift of climatic belts resulting from a period of aridity on the Eurasian steppe*

Hudson concludes that there is no doubt that there have been oscillations of climate and that they have been factors in the eruptions of nomads, but that the "push" of climate and the "pull" of settled lands ready to be raided do not explain everything. He thinks that there is a measure of real development in nomadic societies, and mentions as factors contributing to development the mixture of nomadic and sedentary societies and the growth of commerce.<sup>1</sup>

This is a step away from the excessively mechanical understanding of the geographical factor in history, and a step towards the more reasoned study of society as it functions in a geographical environment. The approach can be

<sup>1</sup> G. F. Hudson, in Toynbee, *op. cit.*, vol. III, pp. 453-4. Diagram reproduced by courtesy of Mr. Toynbee, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and the Oxford University Press.

advanced another step by reference to the recently fashionable theory of the effect of human society on geographical environment. The spectacular development of a huge dust-bowl in Western America and Canada has made the phenomenon of "man-made deserts" so popular that it is even being used in attempts to override theories of desiccation in regions that are old favourites of those who believe in "climatic pulsation."<sup>1</sup>

This kind of human influence, like natural climate and natural climatic variation, is in fact important, though its proper significance is also in danger of being exaggerated. Along the southern edge of Inner Mongolia, colonized by Chinese in successive stages within the last two or three generations, great areas have been laid waste by the practice of agriculture on too thin a soil.<sup>2</sup> The destruction is likely to be greatest where the rainfall is most variable, because too much rain washes away the soil exposed by ploughing, and lack of rain leaves a thin, dry soil to be blown away. At the same time, in a large part of the Mongol lands adjoining the zone of colonization, the restriction of grazing grounds resulting from loss of part of the old tribal pastures has led to over-grazing. This also destroys the grass-cover and exposes the topsoil, bringing on desert conditions.

Over-grazing carries another penalty. The pasture becomes stale, sour, and less nourishing, and the cattle grow poorer and more subject to disease. In parts of Chahar and Suiyüan provinces I have myself seen a most curious phenomenon: the deterioration of the pastoral economy of the Chahar Mongols and some of the Olanchab League Mongols, as a result of their being cramped within too narrow grazing grounds, and at the same time, in the old Mongol lands now colonized by Chinese, agriculture beginning to decline as the relatively thin soil is exhausted. Yet, on the stubble and on the fallow of the colonized belt, cattle are being grazed in increasing numbers, and they are better in quality than the Mongol cattle, and not so subject to disease. This is partly because the land, through being rested from the use of cattle for a while, has become cleaner and better for grazing at the same time that it has deteriorated for agricultural use. It is also partly because the lands colonized by the Chinese are just those lands which were formerly the best winter pastures of the Mongols. It is the condition in which livestock come through the winter and face the critical season in which they bear their young that largely determines the prosperity of a nomadic pastoral economy.

Were it not for the operation of economic and political factors (of which railways and modern firearms are probably the most obvious), differing from anything in the previous history of the region, it would be possible to predict that many of the Chinese colonists would eventually convert themselves, as a result of the failure of their agriculture, into a pastoral people, and would finally, in order to give their pastures the necessary seasonal rotation in use, adopt a migration-cycle, thus becoming nomads and assimilating their society to that of the older nomads. Things like this have happened in the past all along the Mongol-Chinese border. Not only have Chinese "turned Mongol," but Mongols have "turned Chinese," and this process is still going on, notably

<sup>1</sup> W. J. Lowdermilk, "Man-made deserts," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. VIII, No. 4, December 1935.

<sup>2</sup> James Thorp, "Colonization possibilities of North-west China and Inner Mongolia," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. VIII, No. 4, December 1935.

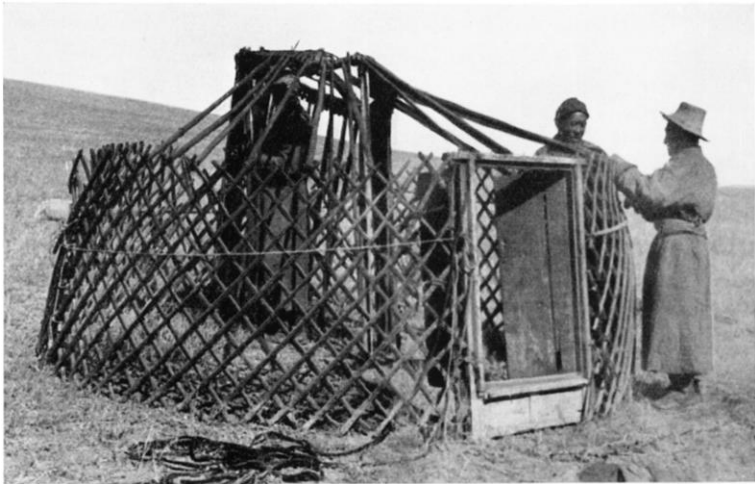


*(Courtesy of the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad)*  
*Reindeer mask for horse, from Pazyryk tomb, Eastern Altai*





*Top of tent used by Torgot Mongols being set up as a temporary shelter*



*Trellis work which forms the bottom part of the Mongol tent; conical roof of framework being added*



*Adding the felt coverings to the framework of the tent*

in parts of the Ordos region, among the Tumets of Suiyüan and the Tumets and Kharchins of Jehol.<sup>1</sup> Changes between different forms of the nomadic life are also known; there are Mongols that have become Tibetanized, while in the Altai, in the north-west of Outer Mongolia, there are tribes of Turkic stock who have changed from forest nomadism to pastoral nomadism and in the process have been Mongolized.<sup>2</sup>

It is plain that neither natural climatic change nor changes wrought in the geographical environment by human activity can be ignored. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that geography is merely the framework within which history takes place, even though history may alter the framework here and there. The study of geography should not be distorted in the attempt to make it explain the whole of any historical process. The only sound approach is through study of the way a society functions in its geographical setting. It is necessary in the first place to realize that although the history of the Mongolian and Central Asian steppe zone, from Siberia in the north to China on the south, and from Manchuria in the east to Turkistan and South Russia in the west, is dominated by the pastoral nomad peoples, it is not monopolized by them. The history of the steppe peoples is not independent of the history of forest hunters and the history of agricultural communities. The plough has never been wholly exiled from Turkistan, the land of oases and deserts, and there are good lands in the north of Outer Mongolia where agriculture has flourished at different periods, though not continuously.

Moreover, archaeological evidence carries far back into the past the record of alternation between the three ways of life that are important in the history of the steppe region and its fringes—hunting, cattle-breeding, and agriculture. In considering this alternation, the bias toward a crude reliance on geographical environment is not the only thing that hinders a clear understanding. It is necessary also to dispose of the idea, still tenaciously held by many Chinese and Western writers, that the evolution of society proceeds always and inevitably from a hunting economy to a pastoral economy, then to agriculture and then to “modern civilization.”

Toynbee provides evidence for disproving this assumption. He proves that the sequence of change is not invariable, although at the same time he retains his belief in climatic variation as the cause of change. Citing the discoveries of the Pumpelly expedition, he asserts emphatically that nomad pastoralism is not necessarily a more “primitive” way of life than agriculture. The stratification of certain archaeological sites in Central Asia establishes the fact that sometimes agriculture has preceded pastoralism.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, the Pumpelly finds do not provide the only evidence of the kind, but

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Mongols of Manchuria,’ by Owen Lattimore. New York, 1934; London, 1935. See especially under “Kharchins” and “Manchu-Mongols.”

<sup>2</sup> ‘Social structure of the Mongols: Mongol nomadic feudalism,’ by B. Ya. Vladimirtsov. Leningrad, 1934, p. 149. Also Ney Elias, “Narrative of a journey through Western Mongolia, July 1872 to January 1873,” *Geogr. J.* 43 (1873) 108–55.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Explorations in Turkestan: Expedition of 1904: Prehistoric civilizations of Anau,’ by R. W. Pumpelly. Washington, 1908. (Carnegie Institution, Publication No. 73.) See especially the contribution by J. U. Duerst, on animal bones, animal domestication, etc., vol. II, p. 438.



they are of particular importance because of their early date; the change from agriculture to pastoralism being attributed, by Pumpelly and his associate, J. U. Duerst, to the eighth millennium B.C.

If it is to be accepted that peoples change from agriculture to nomadic cattle breeding, and from pastoralism to hunting, as well as from hunting to cattle breeding and from cattle breeding to agriculture; and if it is true also that changes in the environment are not necessarily the sole cause or even the most important cause of social change, then what are the true standards by which differences in the economic organization of society can be rated, and what are the causes and processes of change?

I suggest that the standard of differentiation between economic forms is not evolutionary but economic. There is not necessarily a historical sequence from hunting to pastoralism and from pastoralism to agriculture; but these three forms do range through a significant economic scale. The economy of hunting is extensive. Hunting peoples need to spread out over a wide territory. They live therefore in small groups, and though families living and hunting at a distance from each other may belong to the same tribe, it is not possible for them to assemble together for long at a time. It is difficult to base a strong tribal organization, much less concerted political action, on a population so thinly scattered.

The economy of pastoralism is also extensive, but not so extensive as that of hunting. The degree of extensiveness varies according to the kind of livestock and the richness of the pasture, but in any case the tribal cohesion can be greater than that of hunting peoples, and a stronger political grouping is possible. Agriculture, even at its crudest, is much more intensive than any herdsman's economy, and permits closer and larger groupings of people; and irrigated agriculture, especially in oases, is a highly intensive economic form. Movement along the scale from the extreme of extensiveness to the extreme of intensiveness should not however be confused with progress from the primitive to the civilized. Historically, there may be devolution from the intensive to the extensive as well as evolution from the extensive to the intensive; and in degree of culture a mature and flourishing pastoral society may stand higher than a society that is bound down to a primitive or debased agriculture.

As for the process of transition from one form to another, I suggest that it may be either stimulated or impeded by the environment. From this it follows that changes in the environment may affect the bias toward or against social transition; but the most important momentum of change, I suggest, is to be looked for in the society itself. This momentum depends largely on the balance between the society and its environment, which may be described in terms of action and reaction. The original form of a society is likely to be strongly conditioned by the environment; but as the society develops, it is likely to react by attempting to choose the way in which it uses the environment. This is where the question of balance comes in, which I believe to be of acute importance in judging the interaction of geography and history. In a terrain where there is not enough to hunt and not enough running water or rainfall to permit agriculture, steppe nomads may live in perfect or almost perfect balance with the environment, their society generating relatively



*The tent dismantled for transport*



*The maikhan: possibly the original steppe-tent*



*Primitive hut tent, common only in sandy regions where willow scrub is plentiful*



*Camel carts used in the east of Outer and Inner Mongolia. The hooded cart can be used as a sleeping place*



*The Mongolian steppe: Sanctuary of Chingghis, Ordos*



*Tent mounted on a cart, in the ancient style, at the Sanctuary of Chingghis*

little impulse toward change. If however the terrain permits both hunting and cattle breeding, or both cattle breeding and agriculture, the balance is not perfect. The people living in the territory may have mixed interests. Their history is likely to develop a bias toward one or another alternative form of development, as the result of attempts to exercise a choice in the use of the environment. The bias may also vary at different historical periods, as the result of extremely complicated adjustments and readjustments between the range of possibilities afforded by the environment and the range of choice favoured by different groups within the society.

These considerations are of the very greatest importance in dealing with the geographical factor in the history of a region like Mongolia. They suggest that the sources of movement and change in the history of steppe nomads are not to be looked for among the typical nomads of the typical steppe so much as among the marginal societies of marginal regions.<sup>1</sup> They make unnecessary the romantic explanation of hordes of erratic nomads, ready to start for lost horizons at the joggle of a barometer, in search of suddenly vanishing pastures. "Marvellous indeed," in the words of Ralph Fox, "must have been the appetites of those few thousand head of horses and sheep that had to roam from Baikal to the plains of Hungary before they found satisfaction." For, as Fox goes on to say, "in historic times there has been no great desiccation of middle and High Asia, and to explain the great invasions we must look for the cause in the life of these peoples itself, in that history which is supposed not to exist."<sup>2</sup>

Suppose we look afresh at the Mongolian and Central Asian steppe zone as a whole. While the steppe is the dominant feature, the geographical range includes or borders on forested mountains and deserts of sand and gravel, rich pasture lands and even richer areas of irrigated agriculture. The peoples who take part in the history of the steppe, far from conforming to a single, unvarying nomadic-pastoral type, are divided from each other by different economic activities and gathered together in a number of different kinds of political grouping. There is no need to restrict historical analysis to a supposedly limited evolutionary scale of hunting, pastoralism and oasis agriculture. We see that on the flanks of the main body of steppe society there formed, in the course of centuries, an almost infinite series of combinations of steppe-nomadic, hunting, agricultural, and town life—some of which penetrated far into terrain that we normally think of as unmodified steppe. We see individuals, family groups, tribes, and whole peoples changing their way of life, or bringing under political control other groups with either a similar or a different way of life, or building complicated political structures in which were combined the trade, tribute, and military power of hunting peoples, true steppe nomads, oasis peoples, and the agricultural communities which flourished at times, though never permanently, even in regions like Northern Mongolia.

Against this background it becomes plain that the interaction of nomad society and such old and solid civilizations as those of China and Persia was

<sup>1</sup> Owen Lattimore, "Social geography of the Great Wall of China," *Geographical Review*, vol. XXVII, No. 3, October 1937.

<sup>2</sup> 'Genghis Khan,' by Ralph Fox. New York, 1936, p. 37.



not abnormal, even when it took the form of conquest. The changes that were effected by conquest were inherent in the unending struggle for balance and adjustment between different economic interests, different social groups and different political combinations; but in time of conquest the rate of change was precipitate instead of fluctuating.

The processes of change are illustrated by the grave finds of Pazyryk (lat. 50° 50' N., long. 86° 10' E.), in the eastern Altai, excavated in 1929. The finds are now in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad.<sup>1</sup> They are attributed to about 100 B.C. The region is intermediate between the Siberian forests and the Mongolian and Central Asian steppe. It comes within the geographical range of the series of tribes anciently and in modern times centring on the Sayan, Altai, and Tangno mountains, and on the enclosed basin of the upper Yenisei, in the Tannu-Tuva Republic, formerly known as Urianghai or Tangno-Urianghai. In this grave were found several horses, which had been sacrificed to accompany the dead. Water, penetrating into the grave and freezing into ice which never thawed, had preserved them perfectly. Among the horse-trappings was a kind of combination mask and headdress in the form of reindeer horns; and not only this, but the saddles in the tomb were of the special type used with reindeer, differing from any of the horse saddles used by steppe nomads.

The careful and ceremonial imitation of reindeer suggests that the chief who owned the horses belonged to a reindeer-using people who had recently moved from the forests to the edge of the steppe; or who, without actual migration, had begun to change from the use of reindeer to the use of horses, but so recently that the important ceremonial for the death of a chief still demanded the sacrifice of reindeer. The decorated saddles, of a type better for use with reindeer than with horses, confirm the suggestion of recent migration or change. A ceremonial observance of this kind, testifying that old cultural associations persist after the culture itself has changed, is all the more interesting because it recalls the fact that certain of the Yakut people, living too far north in Siberia to use horses, have preserved, at least until recently, ceremonial horse skulls.<sup>2</sup> The Yakut are known to have been established at one time in the region of Lake Baikal,<sup>3</sup> and horses are still used by the southern Yakut. It is to be assumed therefore that as they moved northward, those who came into reindeer country gave up the use of horses, but still kept skulls of horses for certain ceremonial purposes.

In the territory between Lake Baikal and the Altai the geographical conditions permit an overlapping and interpenetration of the hunting economy (often combined with reindeer nomadism), the strict steppe economy and

<sup>1</sup> For references in English, see *Illustrated London News*, 6 August 1932; *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. XXXVII, No. 1, 1933, pp. 30-45 and plates I-III; *Revue des Arts Asiatiques*, vol. X, No. IV, 1936, plates LXIX-LXXI. The Hermitage Museum is preparing a monograph to be published in the beginning of 1939. I owe this information, and the accompanying illustration, to the courtesy of Mr. Orbelli, of the Hermitage Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Statement in a lecture at Harvard by the late Professor Roland Dixon. I have been unable to verify the source.

<sup>3</sup> 'On the question of Turco-Mongol feudalism,' by N. N. Koz'min. Moscow-Irkutsk, 1934, p. 79.



even agriculture.<sup>1</sup> So far as I know, this is as true of the past as it is of the present. There is no reason whatever to suppose that in the past the different forms of economy alternated with each other, in response to climatic changes. On the contrary, there is every indication that they have always overlapped and interacted, and that an important reason for this was the fact that the geographical environment did not decisively favour one form of economy against the others over the region as a whole.

Neither the archaeological evidence of the Pazyryk finds nor observation of the Yakut in recent times necessarily indicates forced migration in response to climatic change. What both indicate is that on the periphery of a region favouring several ways of living, groups migrating away from the terrain suitable for reindeer have had to abandon their reindeer, and groups migrating away from terrain suitable for horses have had to abandon their horses; while in marginal terrain, permitting the use of either reindeer or horses, it can only be supposed that relative efficiency has influenced the historical trend. From ancient times to the present day however there has been no climatic change drastic enough to force the tribes that remained within the old environment to abandon permanently any of the occupations known to them. In what is now the Tannu-Tuva Republic the mixed hunting and reindeer economy, steppe pastoralism and agriculture are still practised within a short distance of each other.

Evidently, in considering geographical environment, transitional zones are of great importance, as well as homogeneous forest zones and steppe zones. They prevent abrupt cleavage between different societies and make possible a certain amount of cultural borrowing. The round Mongol felt tent, for instance, is usually considered peculiarly Mongol and peculiarly suited to the steppe environment. Yet its construction requires a great deal of wood, which has sometimes to be brought from a distance of 100 miles, or even more. Why do the Mongols not use a low, spreading tent, either of the Arab type or the type used by the nomads of the Tibetan plateau, requiring much less wood? The answer is that the Mongols do have such a tent, the *maikhan*, which is entirely different from the round felt tent or *ger*.<sup>2</sup> The *maikhan* is nowadays made of cotton material bought from Chinese traders, but in ancient times it may well have been made of woollen fabric. It is much more portable than the *ger*, and is accordingly used with caravans, while the *ger* is used by households camping at their regular pastures.

The *ger* in fact while admirably suited to the uses to which it is put in the steppe environment, shows evidence of being derived in part from peoples of the forest. The perpendicular wall of the *ger* is made of wooden trellis work, covered with felts. The domed or conical roof (the form varies a little regionally), is made of light poles, also covered with felts. Wall and roof are entirely separate units. The roof-poles are arranged much like those of an Indian *tipi*, or the spokes of an umbrella. The *ger* as a whole can therefore

<sup>1</sup> 'Studies in the history and economy of Tuva,' by R. Kabo. Moscow-Leningrad, 1934. See review by Owen Lattimore, in *Pacific Affairs*, vol. X, No. 4, December 1937.

<sup>2</sup> I use the common Mongol word *ger* rather than *yurt*, which is generally used by Western writers. The word *yurt* is confusing, because in historical literature it is also used as the equivalent of the Mongol *notok*—"home" in the territorial sense; also "feudal domain."

be described as a *tipi* which has been raised up on a circular wall. The roof or *tipi* part is the essential element. The wall is merely a later refinement, giving more head room. When Mongols are moving from one pasture to another, they frequently set up only the roof or *tipi* for the night's halt. When they camp for a few weeks or months, the whole *ger* is put up.

Now the Tuva forest tribes and the Reindeer Tungus use a true *tipi* or wigwam, covered either with skins or birch bark.<sup>1</sup> All things considered, I believe this to be the origin of the Mongol *ger*. At some time in the past, peoples living at the edge of the forest and the steppe moved out into the steppe for good.<sup>2</sup> They took their *tipi*-tents with them, and learned to cover them with felts. The flexible wall which now forms the lower unit of the *ger* may even have been originally a device for mounting the *tipi* on a cart, since it would be difficult to set either a *tipi* or any other kind of tent directly on a cart; though the improvement may also have been adopted simply because it gave more room. The *ger* thus replaced the *maikhan*, which I believe to be the true steppe-tent, in general Mongol use. At one time the common practice of the Mongols was to move their tents on carts<sup>3</sup>; they then camped in large agglomerations of households, and the present habit of camping in small groups came later. The only survivals of the cart-tent that I have ever seen are those at the "sanctuary" of Chingghis Khan in the Ordos.<sup>4</sup> I believe that the change from large encampments to small, scattered camps, is to be explained by the fact that anciently the Mongol society was much more tribal than it is now. The tribal following of a chief was more important to him than the ownership of a strictly defined territory. The present division of the Mongols into "Banners," each with strict frontiers, and with public ownership of the Banner territory as a whole but regular assignment of pastures to clans or families, is of relatively modern origin.

From what has here been said it is plain that there have been intricate processes both of evolution and devolution in the history of such peoples as the Mongols. The established opinion, so learnedly and ably represented by Toynbee, that there is no "inner evolution" in the history of the steppe, needs to be modified. The processes are there, though the details are largely hidden from us—because, it must be remembered, the history of steppe-nomadic peoples has for the most part been written by settled peoples, whose accounts are biased by ignorance as well as by enmity.

It is also necessary to take into account the fact that evolution did not follow a straight line—for example, from a patriarchal clan society to a kind

<sup>1</sup> For descriptions and illustrations, see 'Unknown Mongolia,' by Douglas Carruthers. London, 2 vols., 1913. Also E. J. Lindgren, "North-Western Manchuria and the Reindeer Tungus," *Geogr. J.* 75 (1930) 518-36. See also Vladimirtsov's theory of the evolution of the *ger*, *op. cit.*, p. 41. There is another primitive form of Mongol dwelling, found in sand-dune regions where scrub willow grows freely, made of wicker covered with felt.

<sup>2</sup> It is not necessary of course to assume actual migration as the sole method of spreading the use of a particular kind of tent. Once the advantages and suitability of the tent had been proved, it could be adopted by people who had never themselves lived at the edge of the forest and the steppe.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimirtsov, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 41, 86, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Owen Lattimore, "The shrine of a conqueror," *The Times*. London, 13 April 1936.



*Good steppe converted into poor farmland, in the northern part of the former Tumet territory in the province of Suiyüan*



*Mixed grazing and farming land: southern pastures of Chahar Mongols now colonized by Chinese*



*The escarpment of the Inner Mongolian plateau: the pass from Kalgan to the Chahar pastures*



*Monastery introduced with Tibetan Buddhism: the addition of fixed property to nomad pastoralism*



*The palace of a prince. The tents in the courtyard represent the traditional nomad order*

of feudalism, and from feudalism to imperial centralization. It followed what I can only describe as a spiral course: that is to say, it evolved upward toward a certain point, but at the same time it moved in repetitive cycles. This largely accounts for the fact that the history of steppe nomads appears to alternate between cycles of concentration and cycles of dispersion, without evolution. The recent Russian writers, who have made by far the most important contribution to the study of the economic factor, have to my mind somewhat stultified the potential value of their studies by underestimating the importance of the recurrent cycle and attempting to force their evidence into the pattern of a straight line of evolution.<sup>1</sup> Even when they recognize that peoples have at times fallen back from a relatively high to a relatively primitive level of culture, they fail to relate such devolution to the phenomenon of the recurrent cycle.<sup>2</sup> To assume for instance that the imperial centralization achieved by Chingghis Khan was something entirely new is to distort the earlier history of the succession of steppe peoples to which the Mongols belonged. The truth is that the dispersion and disorder of the Mongols and related peoples just before the time of Chingghis was a repetition of previous periods of the same kind; while the success of Chingghis in uniting the nomads created an empire greater than previous nomad empires, but not different from them in kind.

The repetitive cycle moreover was as important in settled countries like China and Persia as it was in the steppe. Strong dynastic centralization in the settled countries was followed by degeneration, the seizure and abuse of local power, and finally the fall of the dynasty, peasant rebellions, and a wild scramble for new power between rivals more or less indistinguishable from each other. In the steppe, centralization under a "khan of khans" alternated with the dispersal of tribes and the small beginnings of new concentrations. It was only by what I have called spiral repetition that a gradual advance was made toward the evolution of new forms. It is justifiable both to say that the T'ang dynasty in China (A.D. 618-906) repeated the history of the Han dynasty (B.C. 206-220 A.D.) and to say that it represented a higher point in the evolution of the dynastic form. In the same way the empire of Chingghis repeated the phenomena of the empire of the Hsiungnu, but also achieved certain advances in the form of the dynastic nomad empire and certain evolutionary changes in the society on which it was based. Without going into further detail, it may be added that the repetitive cycles in the steppe and in the settled countries cannot be studied apart from each other. It can be shown that the nomads were often, though by no means always, in the phase of centralization when the settled peoples were in the phase of decentralization. I am very much inclined to believe that the resultant invasions of settled countries by nomads, alternating with the intervention in tribal affairs of strong dynasties in settled countries, had a great deal to do with keeping up the repetitions of the cycle and preventing the more rapid and direct evolution of new forms in either the settled or the nomadic world.

<sup>1</sup> For instance Vladimirtsov (who however cannot be taken as a representative Communist author), *op. cit.*; also Kabo, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> For instance Koz'min, *op. cit.* Also Ralph Fox, *op. cit.* (exceptionally well grounded in the modern Russian literature).



Yet throughout all this, it is true, evolution was in one sense decidedly limited; neither the steppe life as such nor Asiatic agriculture ever evolved into anything else. Neither of them created an industrial technique of the kind which has transformed the modern world. The geography of the steppe included or merged into forested regions and arable regions, but the dominant landscape was that of the true pastoral steppe in which, lacking the industrial technique, no society was possible except that of the nomadic herdsman. People were drawn away from the steppe life into marginal territories, into the civilized countries that were conquered at one time or another and into the patches of irrigated agriculture here and there in the steppe; but others were as constantly being recruited to pastoral nomadism from the forests and the marginal lands, and the steppe life therefore never ceased.

The main characteristics of steppe life show why this was so. It is based on an economy which is capable of being entirely self-sufficient. Its own resources provide the essentials of food, housing, clothing and transport, and even fuel (from cattle dung). Nor does it prevent the mining and working of metals on a small scale, as is known from archaeological evidence. The steppe nomad can withdraw into the steppe, if he needs to, and remain completely out of contact with other societies. He can; but so rarely does he do so that this pure condition of nomadic life can fairly be called hypothetical. For every historical level of which we have any knowledge there is evidence that exchange of some kind, through trade or tribute, has been important in steppe-nomadic life.

Since however contact with other societies was in the last resort optional, it seems that the most important agents in exercising the option were the nomad chiefs. It has been pointed out that the archaeological material so important for the earlier periods gives a wrong emphasis because the tombs of chieftains have been especially sought for, in the hope of finding gold ornaments and other spectacular objects, while the tombs of common people have on the whole been neglected, so that we do not have an equal knowledge of the subject population on which the power of the rulers was based.<sup>1</sup> There is in consequence a tendency, partly unconscious, to assume that the chiefs were representative of the culture of the people. It is nevertheless true that the graves of chiefs are absolutely indispensable for gauging the extent to which those chiefs enlarged the original power based on control of their own people and modified its character, acquiring new kinds of power and wealth by controlling the relations between their own tribes and other peoples.

This provides a valuable light in which to examine questions of historical geography. The theoretically pure steppe-nomadic life assumes a very close adaptation to geography. Otherwise the necessary symbiosis of the society and the herds providing it with food, clothing, housing, fuel, and transport would be impossible. The social structure of such a pure nomadic society must also have been very exactly balanced. Consequently either war and conquest or trade and accumulation would bring both changes in the supply and distribution of articles of daily use and objects of luxury, and changes

<sup>1</sup> 'Excavations in Northern Mongolia (1924-1925),' by Camilla Trever. Leningrad, 1932 (Memoirs of the Academy of History of Material Culture, No. III), pp. 22-23, and p. 22, note 1.

in the political gearing between chiefs and tribesmen. The chief would become actually a chief with new functions, though still basing his moral claim to authority on old sanctions. The society also, while remaining nominally the same (for the names of institutions change more slowly than their functions), would require new kinds of duties and services to be rendered by the tribesmen to their chiefs.

In such changes, the limiting effects of geographical environment must have had a great but variable importance. The environment which can support a theoretically pure nomadic society includes terrain which forbids anything but a pastoral economy, terrain which permits a combination of hunting and pastoralism or agriculture and pastoralism, and terrain which actually encourages development away from pastoralism toward hunting, agriculture, or even town-building and trade. Within steppe society as a whole therefore it can be assumed that some groups clung stubbornly to their steppe-nomad characteristics, in spite of wealth acquired by trade or power acquired by war, while others, in varying degrees, were prone to adapt themselves to external contacts or to accept new practices within their own territories. This is of course an extremely simplified statement. The number of possible variations is unlimited. The mode of life might remain almost unchanged in a given area, while the old population of the area—in some cases the whole population and in some cases just the chiefs and nobility—migrated to a new habitat in order to follow a different order of existence, leaving the old order to be carried on by newcomers.

I am sure however that there was one factor which time after time set a limit to the possibilities of social change: the extent of the area which favoured the life of the steppe herdsman was so much greater than any of the areas favouring a modification of economy, within or at the edge of the general steppe zone, that the steppe-nomadic society never permanently lost its ascendancy over other forms. The marginal areas permitted or favoured change and development away from the steppe-nomadic norm and thus kept up the ferment necessary to prevent history from stagnating. Their importance was immense. It is quite probable that the impulses governing the cycles of nomad dispersion and concentration, the fall and rise of dynasties and kingdoms, originated more often in these marginal areas than in the typical steppe because of the perpetual effort to change and adapt political power to economic changes and the resulting changes in the structure of society. This was indisputably true of the "time of troubles" preceding the rise of Chingghis Khan, who like his father and like Wang Khan of the Keraites, to whom for many years he acknowledged allegiance, held a border title.

These titles were granted by the Chin or Juchen dynasty, which had based an empire in North China on its mastery over the marginal terrain between the steppe and the sown in what is now Inner Mongolia and Manchuria. The Liao or Khitan who ruled before the Juchen-Chin were also a marginal people, lords of a marginal terrain. So were the Manchus, at the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> The instability of these mixed societies had more to

<sup>1</sup> For the position of the Manchus in the tribal scale running from "extreme barbarian" to "semi-civilized" or partly Chinese, compare "The Gold Tribe, "Fishskin Tatars" of the Lower Sungari," by Owen Lattimore. *Menasha*, 1933. (Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, No. 40.)

do with what we not too accurately call the "migrations of nomadic hordes" than is generally realized. Yet at the same time the special kind of power that could be asserted by control over the typical steppe nomads, in the typical steppe terrain, reasserted itself each time in a fresh convergence of tribes and peoples (of the most diverse origin) on the line that led toward a new ascendancy of the pure steppe-nomadic society, even though the hypothetically pure condition of steppe nomadism was probably never attained. Nor should it be assumed that the pure nomad is so primitive as to be a prisoner of his environment. Quite the contrary: steppe nomadism, though in one sense highly specialized, demands much more versatility, independence and initiative in the individual than, for instance, primitive agriculture. It is therefore an admirable preparation for rapid change and the learning of new activities, as was proved by the Mongols of the time of Chingghis Khan.

It is of special interest to consider the mechanism of cyclical alternations of this kind. Obviously climatic variation might add impetus and emphasis to either dispersal or concentration; but I do not think it can be set apart as a necessary factor, much less the sole agent, in any period of which we have any historical knowledge. A good test case is the question of the agriculture which is known to have been practised or patronized in the northern part of Outer Mongolia by the Turks of the sixth to the ninth century A.D. (contemporaries of the T'ang dynasty in China). This was not a primitive agriculture. Irrigation engineering was well developed. Why should agriculture have been introduced at all; why should it have been developed to a high level of technique; and why should it then have been wiped out entirely?

Almost ten years ago I suggested that the areas in Mongolia in which agriculture was possible and profitable were so dominated by the typical steppe areas that when a settled culture like that of the Orkhon Turks became prosperous enough to tempt plunderers, it was too vulnerable to defend.<sup>1</sup> This argument can be improved by taking other factors into consideration. The Turks of the Orkhon were nomads by origin, but they developed a good deal of trade both with China and with the oases of Turkistan. The sable and squirrel skins which they acquired from the forest peoples of the Baikal region and Urianghai (Tannu-Tuva) were important in this trade, because they were portable and represented high value for small bulk.<sup>2</sup> I do not know whether it is possible to state which came first, trade or agriculture; but it is fair to presume that each stimulated the other and that the chieftains of the Orkhon Turks were converted gradually into potentates of a certain luxury, whose revenues were far from being restricted to the levy of a tribute in cattle and services from exclusively pastoral subjects. Their own interests favoured the introduction of agriculture; and once it was established, they themselves became perforce rulers of a new kind.

The agriculture in question was intensive and irrigated. This may not have been due to uncertain rainfall so much as to the necessity for hastening the growth and ripening of crops in the comparatively short summer season. Whatever the cause, the result was something very like an oasis, but without

<sup>1</sup> Owen Lattimore, "Caravan routes of Inner Asia," *Geogr. J.* 72 (1928) 497-531.

<sup>2</sup> Koz'min, *op. cit.*, p. 18. The same author (*ibid.*, p. 17) cites the Orkhon inscriptions to emphasize the importance of agriculture.



*Itinerant Chinese shearing the sheep and goats of the nomad Mongols for the Chinese traders*



*Chinese caravan traders, who have taken over the caravans passing through Mongolia*



*Western Chahar woman, married to a Western Tümet, preserving the traditional costume but living in a Chinese-style house*



*Mongol women roasting, in sand, millet purchased from Chinese traders*



the geographical isolation of the Turkistan oases. A true oasis is an island in the desert; the cultivated areas of the Orkhon Turks created islands of intensified economy, supporting a society different from that of the steppe people, whose economy remained extensive, though modified by close contact with the settled areas. There was no geographical separation to keep these different interests distinct. Since both communities belonged to the same state, the rulers of the state had to straddle between their traditional nomad origins, which presupposed one kind of functions, and their acquired interest in the settled community, which created other functions. As the cultivable area was not large enough to allow for the transformation of the whole society, my own opinion is that there developed a tendency for the sub-chiefs of the steppe-nomad part of the nation to break away. Defence of their traditional privileges and importance could not stop short of war, eventually, against the encroaching interests of those supporters of the tribal sovereign whose power was based on the settled area. In any struggle of this kind the settled area, being relatively small, open, and populated in the main by unarmed peasants, would be hopelessly vulnerable.

Many writers have drawn attention to the obvious military advantages of the nomad, in Asia, over the farmer and townsman. The ordinary mobility of the nomad, arising out of his everyday life, could be converted into military mobility with no special expense. The townsman and the farmer could not withdraw to evade attack; the nomad could. The kind of plunder which nomads took from farm and town was, for them, immediate wealth which could be put to immediate use. The plunder value of a successful expedition against nomads was on the other hand no compensation at all for the expense, to a settled people, of equipping and maintaining the necessary troops.

These considerations are perfectly valid; but there is another which is far more important. The damage done to a settled people in prolonged war with nomads could easily result in the destruction of agriculture itself and the depopulation of wide stretches of country. A peasant population so impoverished as to be untaxable was of no use to its rulers. This was not true of the nomads. Plunder added to the power of the chiefs and made possible a greater concentration of tribal power. In every period of prolonged warfare between China and the steppe peoples, it can be shown that the ascendancy of the nomads gradually became more marked. Such periods began with scattered raids by various nomads, whose tribes are often difficult to identify, and culminated in serious invasion by a united steppe people that had acquired the status of a nation. When the Chinese held the ascendancy, on the other hand, they always won it rapidly, because they held it only at times when they could topple over a nomad dynasty or border state which had already become unstable, through conversion of the rulers and nobles from steppe chieftains with unmistakable functions into an aristocracy of conquerors with mixed and in part contradictory functions.

This lays bare a truth which is at the core of all steppe-nomadic history: it is the poor nomad who is the pure nomad. When they have modified their economy, their society and above all the status of their chiefs, nomads become vulnerable. The chiefs and nobles become less effective in their original functions, because they become attached to new vested interests in trade,

the levy of new kinds of tribute and the taxation of new, non-nomad, agricultural and urban subjects. In times of defeat, on the contrary, as the chiefs are stripped of these hampering privileges and as the nomad society as a whole is forced back closer and closer to the level of the bare necessities and prime characteristics of a nomadic life, it gets nearer to the sources of its true strength. Poverty sharpens the hunger for war of the whole people, and new chiefs begin to rise who, with no extraneous vested interests as yet and no non-nomad sources of privileged income to safeguard, are willing to head new ventures.

Consequently it is possible to understand why agriculture and even considerable towns have intermittently appeared, flourished, and been blotted out, not only in Northern Mongolia but even more frequently in the border country of Inner Mongolia (including the western part of what is now Manchuria). They marked recurrent modifications of parts of the nomad society toward a way of life resembling that of oasis peoples in everything but geographical isolation. They arose as products of the glory and increasingly sophisticated luxury of rulers who were of nomad derivation. In time this encrustation prevented such rulers from exercising efficiently those functions in the nomad society which were still essential to the maintenance of their power. When they fell, most of what had been added to the nomad society disappeared with them; but the poorest parts of the steppe remained a permanent reservoir in which the essentials of the nomadic way of life were preserved.

This whole era of history has now closed. Industrial civilization, with its mines and factories and new means of transport, can span the desert and coordinate the farm, the town, and the steppe as no ancient civilization could. We shall not see again the old cycle of tribal war, the conquest of settled countries, the decay of dynasties unable to stand for long with one foot in the steppe and one in the settled country, and tribal war again.

Yet certain lessons of the old history remain of value. In Outer Mongolia, when an attempt was made to press the economic and social revolution too hastily, people slaughtered their cattle and, seemingly, destroyed the main wealth of the community.<sup>1</sup> The poorest people could withdraw into the poorest country and there survive by the herding of an almost unbelievably small number of livestock. These people, able to live in the ancient Mongol way, closely approximating to the pure nomadism which I have called hypothetical, were obviously the root of the Mongol nation. Ways have now been found to attract them to the support of the Mongol Revolution,<sup>2</sup> instead of driving them back into reliance on the ancient resources of steppe nomadism, but the truth remains: the poor nomad is the pure nomad, best able to survive under the strictest conditions of the old life, and at the same time best able to evolve into new ways of life.

<sup>1</sup> From the Report of Gendun, Prime Minister of the Mongol People's Republic, to the Seventh General Assembly, in *Pacific Ocean*, 1 (3), January-March, Moscow, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> "Historical lessons of fifteen years of revolution," in *Pacific Ocean*, 3 (9), July-September 1936. (Report by Doksom, President of the Little Assembly, to the Jubilee 21st session of the Little Assembly, together with a brief résumé of the report of Amor.)