**Central Asia: A Historical Overview**



**Introduction**

Very little information has appeared about the region of Central Asia in books and articles. There are two reasons for this problem. First of all, there is really no country that one can identify in the area until early 1990s. Most specialists in Asian studies tend to focus on a specific country. But for Central Asia, this is not the case. In addition, this area was closed off to the foreigners until recently because the western part of Central Asia was under Soviet rule and the eastern part was part of China.

There are five Central Asian countries that used to part of the Soviet Union. Four of them are Turkic (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan), and one is Persian speaking (Tajikistan). On the eastern side of Central Asia is the autonomous region of Xinjiang. Some people will also include Afghanistan as part of Central Asia. Very often, this area is also referred to as Inner Asia. This term, however, incorporates a broader sweep that includes Mongolia, Manchuria, and parts of Iran. It is an area that has witnessed tremendous amount of historical incidences. It is about the most multi-cultural region that you can imagine. Every major religion has passed through this area, such as Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, etc. Every artistic media, like sculptures, ceramics, cave paintings, has also flourished in this region.

Although there are tremendous interests in this area, Central Asia has not attracted much attention. This is partially due to the fact that the people in this area are transmitters rather than creators. Their roles have been to transmit ideas and innovations across Asia. The second drawback is that there was not a written language early on in history. The first written language was Sogdian that dated to 6th-7th centuries C.E., almost 2,000 years later than the Chinese language. The first Turkic script was derived from the 8th-9th centuries C.E. For the most part, our knowledge of the area prior to this period was derived from the material remains rather the literary sources. In addition, the population of this area did not develop a historical consciousness, like China or Persia. Very often, we have to depend on the Chinese or Persian accounts to tell us about this region that distort the whole history. In many instances, a negative image of Central Asia was conveyed.

The first important innovation of this region was the development of wheel in today Kazakhstan. The first chariot was also developed in this region around 2000-1500 B.C.E.

**The Scythians**
We do not know much about the people who lived in this region until the appearance of the Scythians in 8th-7th centuries B.C.E. The Scythians started out in Central Asia and swept all the way across to the Black Sea region. They were an important force from 8th-4th centuries B.C.E. They exhibited a lot of nomadic characteristics of Central Asia.

The Scythians were divided into two groups, the royal and the ordinary. From burials, we have learnt that the royal group tends to be taller physically. Height tends to play a role in history. It appears that the Scythians did have kings, but most of them met a grisly end. They did not seem to have a system of succession. Eventually a system of tanistry was installed in which nobles and princes will get together and choose the successor. This system, however, did not work very well. So there was always an extraordinary amount of instability within these Central Asian kingdoms or khanates.

Most of the Central Asian people are nomadic. The optimal size of a nomadic unit is usually small because the land cannot sustain a group of animals that is too large in number. Too many animals would require the group to move constantly to look for new pasture for the animals. The best unit is a tribal unit, which is a small group. In this case, the unit does not have to travel as much since the animals are not consuming the grass as rapidly. It is difficult to go beyond this tribal system of organization. The Scythians followed these patterns.

The Scythians also depended on their horses. The horses gave them mobility in warfare and made them an effective military force. The sedentary people whom they came in to contact with did not have this mobility.

Women played a very important role in the nomadic group. The economic structure of the nomadic organization cannot be sustained without them. Women carry out all the chores and labor. These so-called “barbarians” by the Chinese are far advanced in terms of women’s rights. We know in later periods of nomadic history that women have to right to own property and animals, which is unique in traditional times. They have a right to divorce. While the men can focus on warfare and fighting against enemies, the women would take care of economic basis of the entire economy of a nomadic group.

The nomads love arts and crafts. In the case of the Scythians, it was the gold as seen in the spectacular animal-style objects.

All these people supported trade. They need objects and products that they cannot produce themselves. Access to sedentary civilizations is important to their survival. Unlike the Chinese, the nomads are very supportive of commerce and value trade enormously.

Another characteristic that afflicts these people throughout the ages is the horrendous problems with alcohol. Initially, it was fermented mare milk. But as these people interact with sedentary folks, they have an even greater access to liquor. One of my friends has pointed out that one of the reasons of the Mongols’ decline had to do with liquor and food. Increased access to alcohol and much richer food led to shorter lifespan. In some ways, Islam has helped the situation in this region because of the prohibition of liquor.

The Scythians began to decline around 5th century B.C.E. and eventually were overwhelmed by another nomadic group. This is very typical. Nomadic empires last for relative short periods. One possible explanation is that splits among the nomads appear once they become successful. Some of them began to live in cities in order to rule, and they began to lose their heritage and values that are associated with nomads. As they are gradually assimilated into a sedentary way of life, they find themselves at odds with the people who continue to be nomads. For example, the Mongol empire collapsed because of internal rifts and civil wars rather than external factors.

**Xiongnu**
The next great Central Asian empire was the Xiongnu, who may have been the ancestors of the Huns. They arrived around the 3rd century B.C.E. and began to challenge the Chinese. There were disputes about trade and land. The Han dynasty, which ruled China from 3rd century B.C.E. to 3rd century C.E. (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.), tried to deal with the nomads in a variety of ways. None of them was particular successful. One way to deflect raids and attacks is to work out marital alliances. Often, a Chinese princess would be sent to the head of Xiongnu confederation in marriage. This, however, did not solve the economic problem since the Xiongnu wanted to trade with China. Eventually, the Chinese devised a tribute system that worked rather well. This system is really a trade system but it portrayed the Xiongnu as inferiors. If the Xiongnu accept three requirements -- accepting the Chinese calendar as their calendar, paying respect to a newly enthroned emperor, and sending periodic tribute to the Chinese court, they are allowed to set up tribute embassies which were really trade missions. This resolved the conflicts between the Central Asian nomads and the Chinese for quite some time.

**Uyghurs**
The Xiongnu was overwhelmed by the Ugyhurs around the 8th century. The Uyghurs are the first important Turkic group. They played a dramatic role in linking the West and the East. The Uyghur people were also the first to have a developed written language that was based upon Aramaic. The Uyghur also adopted the Manichaeism and they introduced this religion to China as well. The Uyghurs traded across Eurasia; they brought different objects into China, such as Persian silvers and textiles. They introduced Islam into China. Vise versa, they also helped bringing Chinese culture to the west. In short, they acted as cultural transmitters. Around 840, the Uyghur Empire collapsed due to divisions between the nomadic and sedentary groups.

**Period of Decline**
Meanwhile in Central Asia, Islam was developing at a rapid rate partly through the efforts of Arab and Persian traders who crossed along the Silk Road. They converted the local people. Mosques were built in cities like Samarkand and Bukhara.

In late 9th and early 10th century, China collapsed. Simultaneously, the opposite empire in Persia also went into a period of decline. Thus, from 10th to 13th century, Central Asia could no longer function as transmitter, the role that it traditionally played.

**The Mongols**
The Mongols revived this situation when they came into power in the 13th century. They created a condition that allowed extraordinary contact to be made between the East and the West. The Mongols had taken all the characteristics of Central Asian nomads and elevated them to the highest degree. They were very interested in trade. Europeans arrived in China for the first time through the Mongols. They imported Persian medicine into China and had a great impact on Chinese medicine. Persian astronomical instruments were also brought to Beijing. A new and more accurate calendar was created as a result. They also built observatories in China, which was a Mongol innovation. Mongols also had an impact on Chinese textile in the 13th century The Mongol empire later collapsed due to internal rifts.

**The Roles of China and Russia in the post-Mongol Period**
Once the Mongols were out of the picture, the role of Central Asia changed. This has a lot to do with the after-effects of the Mongol rule. In the east, the Chinese became increasingly xenophobic. As a result, China was more and more isolated. In Persia, there was also an aversion towards foreign influences. Central Asia could no longer play the role of a transmitter of culture and technology. The Silk Road also began to decline during this period. When trade diminished, the Central Asian people also became impoverished.

In the early 16th century, Iran was converted to the Shiite form of Islam. This put them at odds with the Muslims in the west as well as the east. This development also had a negative impact on trade. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, this area became the backwater. This region has lost its significance. The discovery of sea routes is an additional strike against Central Asia. The population by this time decreased in this area. This region became culturally stagnant.

Starting around the 17th century, both Russia and China made incursions into Central Asia. The Russians initially wanted to build up a buffer zone from the east by expanding into this region. China did the same kind of thing from the east. The Russians eventually were also interested in trading with China. They are interested in tea, silk, porcelain, etc. These commodities could fetch tremendous prices in Europe. They, in the end, signed a treaty with the Chinese in 1689. This treaty allowed the Russians to enter China to trade for these products. In return, the Chinese got additional territory in Central and Inner Asia. Simultaneously, the Russians demanded the Chinese to accept a number of Russian students to study the Chinese and Manchu languages. As a result, Orthodox mission was also set up in China in the 18th century The Russians were the only foreign country to have a presence in China during this time. However, this kind of exchange was not very popular on either side.

Russians also began to take over gradually Central Asia during this period. By the 19th century, Central Asia was completely taken over by Russia. In 1868, the Russians moved into Tashkent and made the city their capital in Central Asia. China moved into the region of Xinjiang even earlier in 1760s. The results in both cases were disastrous. The Tsarist and Chinese governments tried to prevent problems by instructing their: 1) not to interfere with the practice of Islam, 2) not to impose discriminatory taxation on the local population, and 3) not to let Chinese and Russian nationals to take advantage of the local people.

Unfortunately, the group of officials who were sent out to Central Asia did not observe these instructions. The results were riots and revolts. Considerable local oppositions against foreign powers existed in Russian Central Asia in 19th century, such as the revolts by the Kazakhs in 1840s and the revolts among the oases of Central Asia in 1860s. These rebellions continued into the 20th century. It was not until 1928 that these rebellions were completely quelled. Similar situation also applied to the region of Xinjiang (Chinese Central Asia or Tarim Basin).

**The Great Game and its Effect on Local Islamic Population in Central Asia**
Meanwhile, the British were trying to build a buffer zone to protect India, particularly from Russia, by expanding into areas such as Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. In addition, they also tried to expand into Tibet and Afghanistan. These activities were later referred to as the Great Game.

As a result, the Islamic population in Central Asia was being surrounded by Great Britain, Russia, and China in the 19th century. These foreign powers attacked Islam as a religion, the infrastructure that existed in these oases, and the nomadic way of life.

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