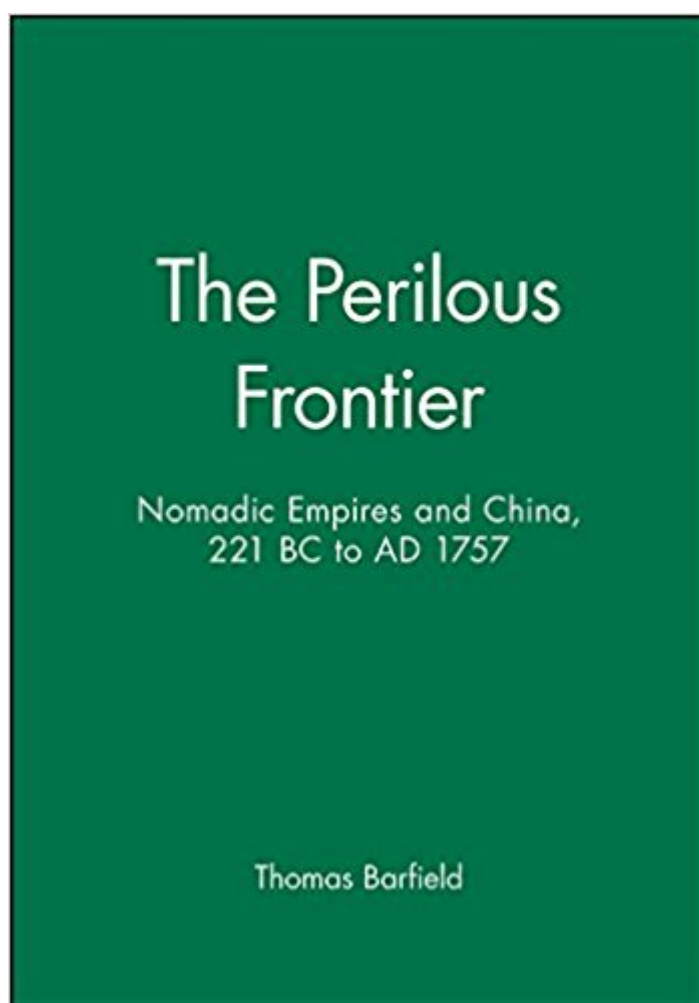


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# The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires And China 221 B.C. To AD 1757 (Studies In Social Discontinuity)



## Synopsis

Around 800 BC, the Eurasian steppe underwent a profound cultural transformation that was to shape world history for the next 2,500 years: the nomadic herdsman of Inner Asia invented cavalry which, with the use of the compound bow, gave them the means to terrorize first their neighbors and ultimately, under Chingis Khan and his descendants, the whole of Asia and Europe. Why and how they did so and to what effect are the themes of this history of the nomadic tribes of Inner Asia - the Mongols, Turks, Uighurs and others, collectively dubbed the Barbarians by the Chinese and the Europeans. This two-thousand year history of the nomadic tribes is drawn from a wide range of sources and told with unprecedented clarity and pace. The author shows that to describe the tribes as barbaric is seriously to underestimate their complexity and underlying social stability. He argues that their relationship with the Chinese was as much symbiotic as parasitic and that they understood their dependence on a strong and settled Chinese state. He makes sense of the apparently random rise and fall of these mysterious, obscure and fascinating nomad confederacies.

## Book Information

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"An excellent piece of work ... Barfield writes clearly, with a gratifyingly total absence of social scientific jargon ... his case is put with impressive cogency." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*

"Barfield's significant and demanding book brings to a general audience a challenging new interpretation of relations between China and her northern neighbours ... provocative and persuasive ... Highly recommended." *Choice* "Barfield's study is rich and provocative." Graham E. Johnson, University of British Columbia "A welcome addition to the literature on the relations

between Central Asian empires and China in premodern times. Thomas J. Barfield provides us with stimulating interpretations." American Historical Review "Excellent study of Chinese-nomadic relations. Weaves a fascinating and detailed tapestry. This excellent work awakens the reader to another level affected by the emerging world system in the nineteenth century." The International History Review "The appearance in paperback of this book is welcome. Breaking moulds." Asian Affairs "Fine study. A most welcome addition to the literature." Bulletin School of Oriental and African Studies

Around 800 BC, the Eurasian steppe underwent a profound cultural transformation that was to shape world history for the next 2,500 years: the nomadic herdsman of Inner Asia invented cavalry which, with the use of the compound bow, gave them the means to terrorize first their neighbors and ultimately, under Chingis Khan and his descendants, the whole of Asia and Europe. Why and how they did so and to what effect are the themes of this history of the nomadic tribes of Inner Asia - the Mongols, Turks, Uighurs and others, collectively dubbed the Barbarians by the Chinese and the Europeans. This two-thousand year history of the nomadic tribes is drawn from a wide range of sources and told with unprecedented clarity and pace. The author shows that to describe the tribes as barbaric is seriously to underestimate their complexity and underlying social stability. He argues that their relationship with the Chinese was as much symbiotic as parasitic and that they understood their dependence on a strong and settled Chinese state. He makes sense of the apparently random rise and fall of these mysterious, obscure and fascinating nomad confederacies.

Classic of the field - informative and essential reading for those studying Central Asia and historic relations between nomadic groups and successions of Chinese dynasties.

It's really helpful to understand why Manchuria could conquer China 300 years ago, and I hope people who are interested in China's history can enjoy this book.

This concise and thoughtful book provides a really interesting perspective on the history of China and surrounding societies. Written by an anthropologist with field experience among central Asian nomads and largely a reinterpretation of prior secondary literature and the primary narrative sources, *The Perilous Frontier* provides a fine narrative and analysis of the centuries of interactions between Chinese states and Inner Asian nomads. This book has 2 particular strengths. First, it focuses primarily on the actions and institutions of the nomadic peoples of the steppe rather than

putting Chinese civilization at the center of the story. Second, Barfield provides a very useful analytic scheme to make sense of the centuries of conflict between China and the steppe peoples. Looking across a very broad sweep of time, 200 BC to the mid-18th century, Barfield defines 3 major types of actors in an essentially cyclical series of events. These are relatively centralized, relatively urbanized agrarian Chinese empires dominated by Confucian ideology and civilian bureaucracies, fluctuating steppe nomad empires north and west of China, and a group of states combining elements of both the prior polities emerging from the Manchurian region. Barfield sees the existence of strong Chinese states and real steppe empires as linked. Leaders of steppe empires could only maintain their states by extorting-raiding resources from a centralized Chinese state. Steppe empires rose and fell in tandem with the rise and fall of Chinese states, the latter usually done in by internal pressures. Manchurian based states act as "vultures" in this process. The fall of a Chinese state precipitates the collapse of its corresponding steppe empire. In the chaos accompanying the process of dual collapse, Manchurian states, with a dual experience in managing both nomadic and sedentary peoples, are able to build successful states in North China. These states eventually experience their own difficulties, collapse, and are replaced by Chinese dynasties ruling all of China with the re-emergence of a corresponding steppe empire. The cycle then recurs. Apparently based on the experience of the first major Chinese-steppe empire dyad, the Chin-Han/Hsiang-Nu, Barfield's model works well up to the irruption of Chinggis Khan and his empire. This is shown to be distinctive in that the Mongols directly conquer China, they are succeeded directly by a native Chinese dynasty, and the Ming successors did not pursue the tributary diplomacy typical of earlier dynasties. Barfield's pattern is partly restored by the Qing conquest of China, which has many of the features of prior Manchurian "vulture" conquests. In the mid-18th century, expanding Qing and Russian power, and some luck lead to the extinction of the last great nomadic state, the Zunghar confederation, ending 2 millenia of Inner Asian influence over Eurasia.

My history professor claims that this is one book which former students complain about years after having read it. It is dense. There are lots of odd names which run together. It is absolutely not for the casual reader. But I would consider it necessary reading for all scholars of China, Asia, or just history in general. I found it fascinating that the steppe tribes and the various Chinese governments had a not-always unspoken agreement, in which the tribes were essentially allowed to conquer a limited region of China, in exchange for securing trade routes and defending against tribes outside of the system.

Barfield's primary thesis is that the dynamics of Chinese civilization are not intelligible considered in isolation. Rather, comprehension requires the distinction between Manchurian and Native dynasties and the role that empires of the steppe played in the changes between them. Of special interest is that by far the best known steppe empire, that of the Mongols under Temujin and his successors, was an anomalous exception to the 2,000 year pattern. Typical steppe empires were interested in extortion (or tribute, or gifts, depending on who tells the story), not direct rule. If you're a student of Chinese history or of the dynamics of civilizations, read this book. You'll think differently.

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