

The Manchu Conquest in World-Historical Perspective: A Note on Trade and Silver

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I. CENTRAL EURASIAN PERSPECTIVES

A question that in my view lies at the very root of Inner Asian history is the following: can we see historical progress in the history of the peoples of Inner Asia? We may put this question in a different way: can the history of the “steppe empires” only be interpreted as a series of cycles of expansion and contraction, of unity and fragmentation? In an essay published long ago I argued that, from the point of view of state formation, we can actually see considerable change over time, and that an important element of difference between different nomad empires could be identified in the ways in which Inner Asian political entities managed the *extraction of resources from outside* their original environment and productive base.¹

It has been noted that the periodization I proposed on the basis of this particular phenomenon of the formation of Central Eurasian (or “Inner Asian”) empires coincides with periodization schemes that world historians have proposed for world history, based on quite separate and altogether different criteria.² This may be coincidental, but the coincidence itself indicates that, if we aimed to integrate Central Eurasian history within a broader scheme of world history, a starting point would be to take the periodization

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schemes concerning both Central Eurasia and other world regions and see how they might fit together. For instance, world historians have long been engaged in studying cross-cultural and transregional phenomena such as long-distance trade, migrations and invasions. In all these respects, Central Eurasian history figures prominently. In eighteenth-century Europe it was argued that the movement of “barbarian” peoples into Europe must be traced back to events taking place in the Far East, as nomads from Mongolia and north China moved west, creating waves of migrations that eventually pushed peoples such as the Huns against the borders of the Roman empire.³ The Türk empire established in the sixth century opened up communications between Byzantium and China during the Sui and Tang dynasties, and the Mongol empire is thought to have created favorable conditions for the development of international trade between the Mediterranean and China.⁴ Moreover, the connection between Central Eurasian traders and political leaders (aristocrats and military lords) was one of the essential ‘engines’ of historical change and that which constituted a core feature of the success of “nomads” as empire-builders.⁵

For the purpose of constructing a world-historical framework for Central Eurasian history, it is essential to re-evaluate older paradigms. For instance, Central Eurasian history has often been constructed as a chain of “eruptions” in the nomadic regions of Central Eurasia, resulting in migrations and conquests. Historians have for too long focused almost exclusively on the trope of nomads pouring out of the steppe and impacting the surrounding civilizations with destructive force. This is one side of the story, but it cannot be allowed to become the whole story, especially since it results in a static stereotype based on sources that, stemming from victims of such nomads, are by necessity quite partial. Much less has been said on how and why the nomads managed to achieve such a prominent place in world history for so long. Even less attention has been paid to the effects that world events and global long-term historical trends may have had on the rise of states and military powers in Central Asia, that is, on the interaction between “internal” and “external” causes. Or, to be more precise, between endogenous and exogenous ones, whereby “endogenous” refers specifically to the participation of Central Eurasian societies and polities in global or transnational trends.

A more recent historiographical trend, however, has begun several years ago to take shape, one that elects as its primary focus the integration between the civilizations of Central Eurasia and other peoples and civilizations according not just to “conquest” but to more positive modes of interaction. Thus the study of trade, demographic movements, and social mechanisms

of cultural and technology transfers have played a central role in defining the position of Central Eurasia in world history. This trend is opening the door to exciting prospects for future research, as it becomes ever clearer that without giving due weight to territorial mobility, technological inventiveness, economic behavior, cultural orientation and political institutions created by Central Eurasian peoples, the history of globalization simply cannot be properly understood. The recent works by David Anthony on the early spread of wheeled vehicles and language, by Thomas Allsen on cultural and technology transfer under the Mongols, by Christopher Beckwith on what he terms the “Central Eurasian Cultural Complex,” are examples of the potentialities inherent in this trend of research.⁶

Key to the development of this field is the integration of textual analysis of sources with DNA studies to trace the movements of ancient peoples, linguistic analysis to assist in reconstructing the complex ethnolinguistic map of Central Eurasia, and especially archaeology, which has produced an extraordinarily large record of the material culture of Central Eurasia.⁷ Yet control of all these areas over the more than three millennia in which the “Silk Road” was active is a herculean job, well beyond the forces of any historian.⁸ The macroscopic nature of an integrated disciplinary approach to Central Eurasian history makes it extremely difficult that we may, in the near future, achieve a better idea than we now have about how Central Eurasian societies functioned from antiquity to the more recent pre-modern past, unless coordinated efforts take place. Such development, however, is not to be hoped for in the short or medium term as it involves the creation of structures that could serve as venues for integrated multidisciplinary research. Being unable to implement such a research methodology, we risk to be forced into one of two positions.

The first is to continue research “locked” in a specific region or time period. Specific attention to just one period or place, however, tends to completely obscure the *longue-durée* processes that are especially important for Central Eurasian societies. Without such a long diachronic view it is more difficult to overcome the “historical cycle” paradigm. According to this well-known theory, Central Eurasian and especially nomadic societies go through periods of political consolidation and concentration that allow for the creation of strong, conquest-prone empires, which are then followed by periods of disintegration and decline. In this particular “paradigm,” Central Eurasia is politically and socially “static” and the conditions for such alternation of “rises and falls” are usually pinned on a leader’s successful bid for imperial unity, that is, to the military exploits of a particularly gifted

individual.⁹

The other position is to concentrate on a given historical phenomenon as self-standing phenomena. The spread of metallurgy, horse domestication, the migration of a given people, the spread of a given language, are readily available examples. But this approach typically eschews connections to political and social developments. These discussions are dominated by concerns over stimulus/diffusion processes and the conditions under which they may be accelerated or slowed down. A good example of this is the so-called *Pax Mongolica* and the effects it had on Eurasian trade.

Both positions constitute a marked improvement over discredited notions of nomads as naturally violent, greedy and rapacious, but still do not help us explain how empires appear or disappear, and for the full range of interactions generated by Central Eurasian societies and their underlying mechanisms. In order to do so it is important to keep in mind that we cannot isolate or separate these processes from the specific “ingredients” of the political culture that accompanies empire-building and state-formation events. The management of the material resources upon which such a power eventually has to be based is one of the most important among such “ingredients.” Neither peoples’ mobility, nor economic production and social differentiation, and most certainly not the rise of courts and armies, can occur as historical phenomena without a political culture connected to them. It is through the study of Central Eurasian political culture (or “cultures”), moreover, that we can hope to understand Central Eurasian history not as a series of “cycles” but as a cultural unit with its own autonomous development, whether we choose to inscribe it into the notion of “civilization” or not.

Coming to the specific object of this essay, the rise of the Manchus in what has been defined as the “proto-history” of the Qing dynasty offers us an intriguing set of questions related to the connections between internal processes and external ones, and at the same time between material resources and the political and strategic choices involved in the “state-building” process. The rise to power of Nurhaci and of the Jianzhou Jurchen in lower Manchuria can illustrate not just the impact of wider world trends onto local economic processes, but especially how such wider trends intersected internal dynamics and were acted upon by means of a political culture that can be sourced to the deeper history of Central Eurasia. In this essay I shall first introduce some problems connected to the interpretation of the Manchu conquest and then examine how one of the “classic” themes of Central Eurasian history, trade, can be used to open new research perspectives and potentially subvert deep-set approaches. Focusing on trade also leads us to explore, albeit tentatively,

what happens when we expose what has been regarded as a “typical” Central Eurasian (or Inner Asian) process of state formation to an analysis that takes world-historical elements into account.

II. THE MANCHU CONQUEST OF CHINA AS CENTRAL EURASIAN HISTORY

The rise of Manchu power in northeast Asia and the Manchu conquest of China can be placed chronologically between the beginning of Nurhaci's career in 1583 and the proclamation of the Qing dynasty in 1636. Within this time frame we can recognize at least three periods: (1) the period leading up to the establishment of an independent regime by Nurhaci, the Aisin or Latter Jin dynasty in 1616; (2) the duration of Nurhaci's reign as “Khan” (*han* in Manchu) of this dynasty until his death in 1626; (3) the reign of his son Hong Taiji up to the proclamation of the Qing dynasty in 1636. During this period of time the Manchu state took shape, according to some in the form of a Chinese dynasty, and according to others as something more akin to a traditional Inner Asian dynasty, and more specifically taking as its model the Mongol empire. What I wish to focus on, however, is not any “analogy” but rather one essential aspect of the way in which Nurhaci came to consolidate his power: trade. To this end I will only take into consideration the very early part of Nurhaci's “career.” First, however, it may be appropriate to review briefly how the Manchu conquest has been interpreted in current historical literature.

Frederick Wakeman's *The Great Enterprise*, published over twenty years ago, is by far the best book available in English on the Manchu conquest of China. This work provides a full narrative account of the entire period of the end of the Ming and founding of the Qing. Its central focus, as the subtitle says, is not the conquest of China by the Manchus *per se*, or the subjugation of China by foreign conquerors, but rather the *restoration* of a new dynastic order.¹⁰ A reviewer remarked that *The Great Enterprise* is a masterpiece not because it achieves some infallible perfection but because it represents the very best that a first rate western historian of China could reasonably be expected to produce in the 1980s.¹¹ Nonetheless, as Kent Guy wrote, it provided many interesting perspectives but failed to knit them together into one all-encompassing view of the founding of the Qing dynasty.¹² Especially a *new* view.

Today, it is harder to define that absence of an all-encompassing view

as a “failure,” considering that in the twenty-plus years since its publication no one has even attempted to confront the challenge adumbrated in Kent Guy’s criticism. This consideration is all the more urgent because of the extraordinary evolution of the field of early Qing studies in the same time span. Today a student of early Qing history can use the works by Pamela Crossley, Mark Elliott, James Millward, Evelyn Rawski, Peter Perdue, Lynn Struve, and even the first early Qing volume of *The Cambridge History of China* has recently been published. It is remarkable that, within the research trend that some have dubbed “New Qing History,” no new encompassing interpretation of the Manchu conquest has even been attempted.¹³

Chinese scholars have also refrained from providing general “theories” of the Manchu conquest. The substantial studies on the economic, social and military changes occurring in pre-Qing (more properly, pre -1644, or *ru guan qian* 入關前) Jurchen/Manchu society have not resulted in any “paradigm shift.” In Europe as well the question of a “new” theory of the Manchu conquest seems to lay outside the scholarly research agenda, notwithstanding the efforts of some German scholars to understand aspects of the rise of the Manchus, such as Michael-Bernd Linke’s work on the bureaucratization of Nurhaci’s state or the more recent work by Britta-Maria Gruber on Manchu state building.¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that a closer focus on non-Sinitic frontier areas of China has been part of a broad trend in Japanese scholarship to advance different interpretations of the Manchu conquest. Scholars such as Kishimoto Mio, Iwai Shigeki, and Sugiyama Kiyohiko have begun to move away from traditional, China-centered theories of the Manchu conquest, and to examine more closely local processes, but with a new sensitivity towards issues relevant to world history.¹⁵

Yet in terms of actually trying to explain why and how the Manchus conquered China, I am afraid we are still unable to go beyond analyses that ultimately go back to seventeenth-century ideas generated within the milieu of Ming and Qing literati writings and Qing official historiography. In the last instance, we are still anchored to a perspective that perceives the Qing conquest as an opportunistic act: the result of the Ming failure to control the devastating crises of the 1630s and 1640s, with the Manchus portrayed as stereotypical northern warriors who made deals with Chinese generals and literati while waiting for the right time to pounce.

One has to wonder how the history of Manchuria in the forty-odd years between the early 1600s and 1644 truly relates to the Manchu conquest of China, and whether it is not a parallel story that accidentally intersects that of the fall of the Ming. Its relevance seems to be limited to those “factors” that

can be useful to explain the post-1644 *reconstruction* of imperial power: the Qing “pacification” and recruitment of the provincial elites during the war against the Southern Ming, the struggle to defeat rebel armies, the territorial unity of China not just preserved but expanded by the Manchus, and the prosperity gradually brought back to the Chinese economy. But none of these aspects can actually explain how the Manchus reached the point of conquering China. Even in the most sophisticated studies, the temptation to look at the origins of Manchu power from the perspective of those elements that continue to have currency after 1644 is quite strong: the Banner System, social and economic institutions, elements of imperial ideology and ethnicity that appear to be defining traits of the Qing dynasty. We do not need to invoke a specific Inner Asian (as opposed to a “Qing,” or China-centered) perspective to see that such a retrospective interpretation of the “conquest” period would provide a skewed or at least self-limiting reading of the pre-conquest period.

At the same time, we need to be critically aware of the limitations of theories that assume that the Manchus, being closer than other Inner Asian people to the Chinese “mode of production” (agriculture), could Sinicize more easily, and therefore absorb more readily Chinese institutions that made it possible for them to eventually govern China. If the Manchus developed agriculture in the late sixteenth century (as they certainly did) I would like to ask how they did so, rather than to assume that this was just a necessary stage on the road of becoming Chinese. This is clearly too flawed an approach to be taken seriously, but it has been an integral part of the “discourse” about the Manchu conquest.

While the Manchu conquest ought to be seen as a phenomenon that has its roots, in terms of political and strategic culture, in Central Eurasian history, it is essential that historical analogies between the Manchus and the “imperial nomads” of previous eras not be unduly stressed, as it may lead to an overemphasis on those shared elements — e.g., traditional values and military institutions — that may define the Manchus as a successful “conquest dynasty.” There have been a few influential essays in this direction, which have highlighted commonalities between Manchus and Mongols, but this perspective also tends to assimilate the Manchus to a “stereotype” of so-called steppe conquerors, and implicitly downplay what is truly innovative, unique, dynamic, and contingent to the Manchu conquest. Undoubtedly the Central Eurasian roots of the Manchus also represent an aspect of the “discourse,” and one that has been recently enriched by more sophisticated approaches to ethnicity and concepts of rulership.¹⁶ Yet, when we discuss the “proto-history”

of the Manchus we are in danger of pitching one flawed notion of cyclical history (the Chinese dynastic cycle) against another, the Inner Asian imperial cycle, that is just as flawed, as if cyclical and the conceptual baggage that comes with it can provide the only codes that we can use to organize our knowledge of this period.

III. NURHACI AND TRADE

Focusing on “trade” we note two related aspects: (1) the progressive commercialization of the late sixteenth-century Manchurian economy, and (2) the monopolization and use of commercial capital by “puissant” lords for political purposes. In the early phase of Nurhaci’s rise to power the number of Manchu merchants recorded at various border market towns (usually referred to as “Passes” or “Barriers”) increased sensibly through the sixteenth century, up to several hundred people visiting the border towns on the northeastern frontier of China where the so-called “horse markets” were allowed.

It is important to add a note at this point on an issue that, when injected into the discussion, tends to act as a logical decoy. It is perfectly true that the Manchus were not “nomads.” They inhabited villages and based themselves on a mixed economy in which hunting and gathering played an extensive role, together with agriculture and animal husbandry, which included raising large numbers of horses. However, their armies and modes of warfare, when limited to autochthonous formations, were virtually undistinguishable from the classic model of a nomad army. There were no appreciable differences between Mongol and Manchu armies at the turn of the sixteenth century, with the possible exception that the Manchus may have had a better appreciation for the defensive military uses of static fortifications to protect cities and villages. Even so, in the famous battle of Sarhū Nurhaci fought in the open field, with light cavalry based on high speed and mobility, exactly like a Mongol army would have done. The Manchu/Jurchen armies were formed by mounted soldiers armed with bow and arrow (in addition to other weapons) not unlike any “nomadic” warrior. Only with the gradual incorporation of Chinese Bannermen (*hanjun*) and, during the Qing dynasty, of Green Standard troops (*lüying*), did they acquire military capabilities such as infantry and artillery in addition to cavalry. Hence, the different bases of the Manchurian and Mongolian economies should not be assumed to have generated wildly different “products” either in the military or, as I would argue as well, in the political sense. For instance, the Mongol and the Manchu

aristocracies were two social classes fully compatible in terms of their social perquisites, paths to social mobility, and notions of political organization (the political titles and terminology are very close and in some cases virtually interchangeable), even though cultural differences could be quite marked and the steppe lifestyle was different from that of most Manchus. Differences in the economic and productive bases of Mongols and Manchus, therefore, cannot be logically assumed to have automatically determined different paths to state building, just like the assumed cultural closeness between them (an assumption that I would be skeptical of outside the realm of political rhetoric and symbolism or ritual ceremonies) cannot be taken as evidence of similar patterns of state formation. Rather, the rich Central Eurasian political tradition provided a series of solutions and expediciencies that could be adopted and modified to suit given strategic goals, *regardless* of the predominant economic basis as long as one could provide the necessary resources (for instance, war horses). It is also clear from their military history that Mongols and Manchus, as individual warriors, had fundamentally the same martial skills. Therefore, unless a credible argument can be built to the effect that their economic basis produced a military or political culture radically different from that of “real nomads,” whether the Manchus were hunter-gatherers, semi-nomads, or plain agriculturalists is largely immaterial to a discussion of state formation *except* (and this is of course a crucial “except”) for what concerns the growth of their economy and the political strategies implemented in the economic realm.

The rise of Nurhaci is intimately connected to the increase in trade between the Jianzhou Jurchen (that is, the southernmost of the Manchurian ethno-political groups) with China, Korea, Mongolia, and upper Manchuria.¹⁷ There were essentially two types of trade: the commerce carried out at the frontier market towns and the exchanges that took place under the umbrella term of “tribute visits.” The first consisted mainly of products of the traditional hunting and gathering economy, such as ginseng, furs, and river pearls, which fetched very respectable prices. The second consisted of presenting to the Ming court horses in exchange for money, silk, and other “rewards” granted to Nurhaci and the other tributary lords by the Chinese emperor. The “tribute-bearing” missions routinely included over a hundred and as many as 357 people.¹⁸

The young Nurhaci was personally involved in the tremendously lucrative ginseng trade, and a great amount of Manchu folk literature preserves the romanticized image and myth of his prowess as a ginseng picker.¹⁹ Other highly priced items were furs and pearls, which the trapping

and fishing forest economy supplied in abundance. In fact, neither animal husbandry nor agricultural production — both of which were the bases of the Jurchen economy — provided the largest cash revenues, but rather the pricy products of hunting and gathering. The accumulation of commercial capital in Nurhaci's hands was favored by the Ming policy to grant tribute and trading licenses to Jurchen leaders, numbering altogether one thousand five hundred, five hundred of which went to Jianzhou leaders, and one thousand to Haixi leaders. Nurhaci's early wars were waged against license-holding chieftains, who once defeated had to surrender their trading privileges to Nurhaci. Eventually Nurhaci was able to hold a near-complete monopoly on the Manchurian-Ming trade, before it was interrupted (at the official level) with the breakout of open hostilities.

It has been argued persuasively that from the very beginning Nurhaci's strategy aimed to control the flux of commercial products moving towards the market towns.²⁰ This he accomplished by cutting off trade routes, occupying critical passes, and conquering other Manchurian tribes whose chieftains held commercial patents that he thereafter appropriated. The Ming system of distributing commercial patents to Manchurian leaders therefore clearly advantaged the aggressive strategy adopted by Nurhaci, who could gradually increase his control over trade. Secondly, Nurhaci increased his regional power by receiving from the Ming recognition as a local strongman, and by rewarding him with titles and annual grants of silver.²¹ His "tribute" visits to the Ming court constituted important occasions to consolidate his power and retain trading privileges.

Within this border trade and overall commercial relationship between the Jianzhou Jurchen and China the ginseng trade was especially lucrative. Ginseng production in China, limited essentially to the area of the Taihang mountains in Shansi, had been basically exhausted towards the end of the Ming period, creating pressure for ginseng imports. The Liaodong peninsula and Korea produced ginseng but diminishing supplies from these two areas necessitated greater imports from the northeastern regions, and the Jianzhou Jurchens possessed highly productive ginseng grounds. Under Nurhaci, control over ginseng production in southern Manchuria was such that Chinese and Korean ginseng poachers were prosecuted and punished severely. In 1608 the Ming, who were trying to restrain Nurhaci's political ambition, punished him by imposing an embargo on ginseng trade which proved a tremendous loss for Nurhaci. According to a record, over a period of two years "the ginseng that rotted was over 100,000 [*jin*]."²² How reliable this and other figures are is hard to gauge, and both the scarcity of data and their

credibility make it especially difficult to quantify this trade.

A sample of Ming records preserved in the Northeastern Archives (Dongbei Dang'anguan) informs us of trade relative to three months (seventh to ninth) of 1583 and three months (first to third) of 1585.²³ During this time 11,870 Jurchen merchants entered the border markets at Zhenbei and Guangshun to conduct trade transactions. Mostly, the Jurchen imported domestic animals, textiles, and especially iron plows, in fairly large quantities (altogether 4,848 items). Manchurian exports included valuable ginseng, furs, pearls, and horses.

Just limiting ourselves to a rough calculation based on rather meager evidence, we can see that the total value of the Ming exports amounted to 852 silver ounces (or taels). On the Manchu side, the sales of ginseng alone amounted of 3,919 *jin*, and sold for over 30,000 taels of silver, which means a median price of about 9 taels per *jin*. Moreover, also in 1582-83 (Wanli 11 and 12), in nineteen recorded instances of trade the Haixi Jurchen altogether sold 3834 *jin* of ginseng and 4600 furs.²⁴ If we add to the ginseng and the furs other items such as pearls and horses, we can surmise the existence of a very substantial trade gap, which would be consistent with the military and political competition for access to trade, the rapid development of the Manchurian economy, and the growing accumulation of riches in the hands of political leaders.

Our scenario is hindered by a near total absence of direct evidence regarding the flow of silver into Manchuria and its uses, and we are therefore forced to derive some numbers from data that are *per se* of questionable value, but which nonetheless open several important questions about the development of Manchuria during Nurhaci's time. If we take the aforementioned figure of 100,000 *jin* of ginseng, this seems exceedingly high, as ginseng was found in the wild and the root is quite rare. If compared with the other figures quoted, which go back to the early 1580s, and therefore about twenty-five years before 1608, and for a shorter but nonetheless substantially long period quote figure lower than 4,000 *jin*, they seem especially high. We should however consider that by 1608 Nurhaci had achieved already a near-monopoly in the ginseng trade with the Ming. Ginseng production was undoubtedly increased by mobilizing greater resources. What is even more important, however, is the suggestion that Nurhaci received the ginseng from upper Manchuria (Heilongjiang) and re-sold it at the border markets at a higher price. If the degree of monopolization of ginseng production included both southern and northern Manchuria, and if the people mobilized to seek ginseng were in excess of ten thousand expert pickers, it is not inconceivable

that Nurhaci could have hoarded in a year's time 50,000 *jin* of ginseng (or 100,000 over a two-year period).

Proceeding in the conjectural plane, however, and assuming that such a problematic figure can be trusted or at least show "ball park" evidence of the relevance of ginseng in the border trade, we may try to quantify at least one source of a hypothetical flow of silver into Manchuria. At a price of 9 ounces per *jin* the commercial value of 100,000 *jin* of ginseng would be 900,000 silver ounces (*liang*), which corresponded, at a weight of 37 gr. per ounce, to a hypothetical 33,300 kg of silver in total, or 16.65 metric tons per annum. According to Richard von Glahn's estimates the total import of silver in China in the five years from 1606 to 1610 was 340.3 metric tons, which averages 68 tons per annum.²⁵ Therefore the potential sale of Manchurian ginseng alone for two years corresponded in value to approximately 25% (a quarter) of the total foreign silver imported in China in a single year.

These data, as scant as they are, do not have to bear a relationship to the long-lasting controversy over imports of silver into China and its effects on the fall of the Ming.²⁶ However, it is important to register, for reasons on which I will expand below, that of all the scholars who have participated in the debates on the late Ming silver flows and their impact on the Chinese economy, to my knowledge no one has doubted that China really was the "black hole" or the "sink basin" of the world's silver. Ming China, however, did not include Manchuria or Mongolia, and silver flowing beyond the Great Wall cannot be regarded as a matter of internal circulation.

IV. SILVER AND FRONTIER RELATIONS

The ginseng-for-silver trade is only one aspect of the many-sided question of trade that includes not only other products but also the very important "front" of Manchu-Korean relations, or the Manchu-Mongol relations. The general "commercialization" of the northern frontier of the Ming from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards is a well-attested phenomenon not limited, therefore, to the Manchurian region, but which includes Mongolia and Korea. The Mongols too had privileged access to a number of market towns, and competition to monopolize trade at these access points was fierce. Ligdan Khan launched a full scale war to preserve access to the border town of Guanning²⁷ and in 1628 a Čaqar caravan numbering 3,000 merchants, presumably en route to Chinese markets, was wiped out by a hostile Mongol military force.²⁸

Moreover, in addition to commercial transactions, we need to consider the “political transactions” that were also responsible for the transfer of silver to the north. For example the Čaqar and other Mongol tribes secured a hefty payment from the Ming as “protection money.” This included approximately 400,000 *liang* of silver per annum to the Čaqar and Qalqa (200,000 each, later appropriated completely by the Čaqar.) Ligdan and other Mongol leaders also received direct payments of 240,000 taels from Datong, 100,000 taels from Shanxi, 180,000 taels from Xuanfu, and more “rewards” request on an ad hoc basis. For instance extra disbursements to Čaqar and Qalqa leaders amounted to 300,000 taels of silver in 1621, and to 360,000 taels in 1622-23.²⁹

Moreover, we know that under Nurhaci the Manchurian economy became increasingly monetized: a head of cattle cost between 15 and 18 *liang* of silver, and a slave between twenty-five and thirty, and members of the aristocracy as well as commoners traded among themselves.³⁰ This process accelerated in later years. When Hong Taiji punished the nobleman Wakda in 1635, the goods and property requisitioned included four thousand ounces of silver in addition to twenty three small villages, one hundred ninety-nine Chinese slaves and three hundred and four servants and artisans working on his properties.³¹ The rough-and-ready Manchu warriors, it turns out, were rich already before conquering China.

This study is still in its early stage, and I am not going to try to guess how these figures may have affected the total circulation of silver along the frontier. Whether these figures can be believed or not, however, they are indicative of a situation in which strong circumstantial evidence supports the following hypotheses. First, in the frontier regions there was a gradual but sustained transition to a monetary economy. Second, increasing trade revenues fueled the monopolistic aspirations of political leaders and their desire to control access to trade. Third, the flows of silver into Manchuria and Mongolia, if confirmed, would show that China exported substantial sums of silver in foreign relations either to buy security or to obtain commodities that, unlike most European products, were much sought after. The silver imported into Manchuria allowed then the political leadership to transform rapidly the local economy. The fast development of farming and urban centers, as well as manufacturing and mining, can best be explained by the availability of large sums of cash (in silver, but possibly also silk and copper coins) as profit extracted from the trade of highly priced traditional products of the Manchurian forests and rivers, once trade was monopolized by the puissant lords. We can surmise that the silver inflow also provided the resources that allowed the Jianzhou Jurchen aristocracy, led by Nurhaci, his companions-

in-arms (*gucu*) and his clan members, to consolidate their power and to undertake the deep social, military and administrative transformation of their society consisting of the creation of the Eight Banner system, of a civil bureaucracy, and of a large standing army. As an example of this process we may refer to a passage from the *Jiu Manzhou Dang* in which Nurhaci, speaking to his son Cuyeng in 1612 (Wanli 41), said: “To you two brothers born of the same mother. Who reached manhood before your other brothers, I gave five thousand households of people (*gurun*) each, eight hundred head of livestock (*adun*) each, *ten thousand taels of silver* [my emphasis] each and eight rescripts (*ejehe*) [i.e., trading licenses granted by the Ming dynasty, my note] each.”³² Large amounts of silver were held by Nurhaci’s patrimonial government, and surely in his own hands, the source of which is, in view of our previous discussion, most likely foreign trade.

V. HOW IS SILVER “PART OF THE STORY”?

Given the scenario roughly sketched above, probably the central question about the end of the Ming should not be that which Flynn and Giraldez as well as other economic historians have asked, namely: “did the decline in the flow of silver to China in the 1630s and 40s bring about the end of the Ming dynasty?” Rather, it may be necessary to ask: “Without the flow of silver into Manchuria, would the Manchus have conquered China?” The main obstacle so far to a precise calculation of the impact of the flow of silver into the frontier zone and into Manchuria in particular has been the absence of documentary evidence emanating from within the Manchurian side itself that could shed light on the use of silver by Nurhaci himself and the Jianzhou Jurchen or Jin elite. At most one could put together a “circumstantial case,” but is that sufficient? In my view what we have showed so far is certainly sufficient, at the very least, if not to quantify how much silver flowed into Manchuria and how it circulated within the Manchu (or pre-Manchu) state, to generate a research hypothesis based on the following premises.

In the first place the data presented above points to the existence of a substantial “trade imbalance” between China and Manchuria, in the sense that the exports from Manchuria fetched a higher value than their imports. Was, then, barter trade the only form of commercial exchange available to the Manchus, in addition to the “tribute trade”? The sheer volume of the exchanges, the number of people involved, the denomination of prices in monetary terms (silver), and the presence of a highly monetized Chinese

economy, which brought to the frontier substantial sums of money, makes the notion of a non-monetized frontier trade based uniquely on barter extremely implausible.

Secondly, silver and other valuables were handed over by the Ming to the various Manchurian lords in the context of the tribute system of exchange. Unless this was simply hoarded, for which there is no evidence either, it seems likely that it was circulated. The patents (*ejehe*) through which the Ming dynasty conceded trading rights for access to the border markets along the Ming-Manchurian frontier are known to have been at the root of Nurhaci's expansionist policy. If we assume that there were no monetary revenues from such trade, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to explain the wars fought for control of these patents and of the market towns.

On the other hand, and this is the third point to be considered, the expansion not only in general of the Manchurian agricultural, mining and manufacturing sectors, but also of its military capabilities, and of the urban centers directly under Nurhaci's control, bespeaks of substantial investments that are consistent with increased revenues controlled by a political center.³³ If the economy had been limited to barter, it would be extremely difficult to achieve a rapid development, attract more and more immigrants from neighboring areas, and especially store wealth in the coffers of the political leaders. It is certainly possible that there were different levels of economic exchange, and that barter continued to play an important role, but for the purpose of financing a political and military growth that depended on foreign trade with states in which monetary circulation was highly developed at the time — such as China and Korea—it seems that the presence of high levels of importation and circulation of silver must be taken into serious consideration, whether we are able to quantify them or not. Of course, other forms of currency, such as bronze coins, and money-substitutes, such as silk, were very likely in circulation as well. It is also important to note that, given the relatively low population density in most of Manchuria and the limited size of their economy, a large influx of silver could go a long way and a comparable sum of money would have a much greater impact there than in more developed and populous Chinese provinces.

In conclusion, I have tried to present some unusual sides of early Manchu history. My primary aim is to show some of the threads that we can follow to get out of the straitjacket represented by the twin paradigms of the dynastic cycle and “barbarian invasion” cycle, and bring contextual history, based on contemporary Manchu and Mongol documents, in addition to Chinese sources, into the picture. Frontier relations in the late Ming became part of

a more general economic transformation that connects not just China, but also Manchuria and Mongolia, to larger regional and global trends. From this arises the need to see the Manchus' achievement not as something accidental but as the outcome of a series of concomitant historical causes and conscious actions. So far much less attention has been paid to the study of the economic and political processes underway in the Mongolia and Manchurian regions and along the Ming and the Korean frontiers than to late Ming economy and society.

The conclusion reached by Flynn and Giraldez in an influential essay is emblematic of this "oversight," as they said that: "[u]nhappily for the Ming dynasty, fixing taxes in terms of silver may have created a fiscal crisis that led to the emergence [my emphasis] of the Qing dynasty."³⁴ And yet the same authors also state, in the very same essay, that "[t]he fact that Spain's empire owed its financial foundation to distant Ming China is a forceful reminder that much of what passes for local history in the early modern period can only be understood in terms of world history."³⁵ Following the same logic, should not the rise of the Manchus and the Manchus' phenomenal enterprise also be understood as the interplay of local and world history? The story of silver, while still shrouded in uncertainty and mystery, can lead us to answer this question, which is clearly crucial to the correct understanding of the Manchu Conquest, an epochal transformative "revolution" that was already considered by the Jesuit missionaries who witnessed the conquest as the most important event of the seventeenth century, not just in Chinese and "Tartarian" history, but in world history as well.³⁶

NOTES

¹ Nicola Di Cosmo, "State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History," *Journal of World History* 10.1 (1999): 1-40.

² Jack A. Goldstone, "Neither Late Imperial nor Early Modern: Efflorescences and the Qing Formation in World History," in ed. Lynn A. Struve, *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 251.

³ The theory has been widely attributed to the master historian Edward Gibbon, but it was based on the work of the French Orientalist De Guignes and his *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres Tartares* (1757).

⁴ See for instance Nicola Di Cosmo, "Mongols and Merchants on the Black Sea Frontier (13th-14th c.): Convergences and Conflicts" in *Turco-Mongol Nomads and Sedentary Societies*, eds. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 391-424.

⁵ As an example of this see Thoman T. Allsen, "Mongolian princes and their Merchant OPartners, 1200-1260," *Asia Major* 3rd Ser. 2.2 (1989): 83-126.

⁶ David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the*

Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Thomas T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁷ As an example of the methodology involved see L. Luca Cavalli-Sforza, "The spread of agriculture and nomadic pastoralism: insights from genetics, linguistics and archaeology," in *The Origins and Spread of Agriculture and Pastoralism in Eurasia*, ed. David R. Harris (London: UCL Press, 1996), 51-69.

⁸ I use the term "Silk Road" as shorthand for the many routes and areas linking Europe, China, the Middle East, and India, and not as a specific "route" or road. The period that I consider here goes approximately from 1500 BCE to 1800 CE. It seems to me, but I cannot expand on this here, that the year 1500 BCE should be adopted as a time in which technological progress, linked especially to the spread of metallurgy, wheeled vehicles, and a specialized nomadic lifestyle, gave way to a steep increase in the rapidity of movements and contacts.

⁹ For a recent version of this notion see Christopher I. Beckwith, *op. cit.*, 136-38.

¹⁰ See the review by Philip Kuhn in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 19.2 (1988): 388-89.

¹¹ Review by T H Barrett in *Modern Asian Studies* 23.3 (1989): 597.

¹² Review in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 51.2 (1988): 376.

¹³ On the New Qing History see the essay by Joanna Waley-Cohen, "New Qing History," *Radical History Review* 88 (2004): 193-206.

¹⁴ Michael-Bernd Linke, *Zur Entwicklung des mandjurischen Khanats zum Beamtenstaat: Sinisierung und Bürokratisierung der Mandjuren während der Eroberungszeit* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1982); and more recently Britta-Maria Gruber, *Zur Entwicklung der Herrschaft im Aisin-Staat 1616-1636* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

¹⁵ See issue number 88 of *Acta Asiatica* (Tokyo, 2005).

¹⁶ See Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Pamela K. Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁷ It is important to note here that in southern Manchuria there were two main large groupings of Jurchen: the Jianzhou and the Haixi. They were confederacies of various territorial and consanguineous units more or less fluidly moving across a political spectrum dominated by aristocratic "corporate" groups. Internally, these units recognized themselves according to a number of terms such as *hala* and *mukūn*, and gioro that indicated family and clan names (as in the title of the work *Jakūn gūsai Manjusai mukūn hala be uheri ejehe bithe*, "Complete Genealogies of the families and clans of the Eight Banner Manchus") and nation (*gurun*), but are difficult to render exactly in English, not least because their meaning shifts often.

¹⁸ Zhou Yuanlian, "Nuerhachi yu Ming chao zhengfu de guanxi," *Qingshi luncong* 4 (1982): 237 [224-240].

¹⁹ Giovanni Stary, "Der Mandschukhan Nurhaci als Held mandschurischer Sagen und Marchen. Teil. I: Orale Volksliteratur in Prosa," in *Fragen der mongolischen Heldendichtung Teil III*, ed. W Heissig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1985), 410-45; Peng Bo, "Koutou zuopin zhong de Hanwang xingxiang yu manzu minjian wenxue [The figure of Hanwang (Nurhaci) in oral traditions and Manchu folk literature]" *Shehui kexue jikan* 1 (1983): 142-46.

²⁰ See in particular Teng Yao, "Lun manzu ru guan qian de wai yi jingji," *Manzu yanjiu* 2 (2002): 37-38 [37-44].

²¹ According to Iwai Shigeki, the frontiers of the late Ming, both continental and maritime, were

characterized by the proliferation of local warlords, one of whom was Nurhaci. See his “China’s Frontier Society in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” in *Acta Asiatica* 88 (2005): 1-20.

²² Lin Yanqing, “Lun Mingdai Liaodong mashi cong guanshi dao minshi de zhuanbian,” *Minzu yanjiu* 4 (1983): 53 [50-57].

²³ The following figures are based on Zhou Yuanlian, “Guanyu 16 shiji 40-80 niandai chu Jianzhou Nuzhen he zaoqi Manzu de shehui xingzhi wenti,” *Qingshi luncong* 1 (1979): 160 ff.

²⁴ Lin Yanqing, *op. cit.*, 53.

²⁵ *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000-1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 232.

²⁶ That is, since the publication of William Atwell’s milestone essay “Notes on silver, foreign trade, and the late Ming economy,” *Ch’ing-shih wen-ti* 8 (3): 1-33.

²⁷ Michael Weiers, “Die Kuang-ning Affäre, Beginn des Zerwürfnisses zwischen den mongolischen Tsakhar und den Mandschuren,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 13 (1979): 137-190.

²⁸ Nicola Di Cosmo and Dalizhabu Bao, *A Documentary History of Manchu-Mongol Relations (1616-1626)* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 45.

²⁹ Darijab [Dalizhabu], *Mingdai mo nan Menggu lishi yanjiu* (Hailaer, 1997), 303.

³⁰ Jin Chengji, “Qing ruguanqian baqi tudi zhidu shitan” *Qingshi luncong* 1 (Beijing, 1979), 151.

³¹ *Chiu Man Chou Tang/Old Manchu Archives*, translated and annotated by Nobuo Kanda, Jun Matsumura and Hidehiro Okada, vol. 2 (Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 1975), 303.

³² Quoted in Sugiyama Kiyohiko, “The Ch’ing Empire as a Manchu Khanate,” *Acta Asiatica* 88 (2005): 26.

³³ For an idea of the investments in building Nurhaci’s capital in Mukden (Shenyang), see Qinghua Guo, “Shenyang: the Manchurian ideal capital city and imperial palace, 1625-1643,” *Urban History* 27.3 (2000): 344-59.

³⁴ Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, “Born with a ‘Silver Spoon’: The Origin of World Trade in 1571,” *The Journal of World History* 6 (1995): 214.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁶ Edwin J. Van Kley “News from China; Seventeenth-Century European Notices of the Manchu Conquest,” *The Journal of Modern History* 45.4 (1973): 564 [561-582].