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Frontispiece: In the golden days of the Silk Road, members of the elite in China were buried with ceramic camels for carrying goods across the desert, hoping to enjoy luxuries from afar even in the other world. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

For Weiye and Yafeng, scientists who also understand history

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Editors' Preface

This book is part of the New Oxford World History, an innovative series that offers readers an informed, lively, and up-to-date history of the world and its people that represents a significant change from the "old" world history. Only a few years ago, world history generally amounted to a history of the West—Europe and the United States—with small amounts of information from the rest of the world. Some versions of the "old" world history drew attention to every part of the world *except* Europe and the United States. Readers of that kind of world history could get the impression that somehow the rest of the world was made up of exotic people who had strange customs and spoke difficult languages. Still another kind of "old" world history presented the story of areas or peoples of the world by focusing primarily on the achievements of great civilizations. One learned of great buildings, influential world religions, and mighty rulers but little of ordinary people or more general economic and social patterns. Interactions among the world's peoples were often told from only one perspective.

This series tells world history differently. First, it is comprehensive, covering all countries and regions of the world and investigating the total human experience—even those of so-called peoples without histories living far from the great civilizations. "New" world historians thus share in common an interest in all of human history, even going back millions of years before there were written human records. A few "new" world histories even extend their focus to the entire universe, a "big history" perspective that dramatically shifts the beginning of the story back to the big bang. Some see the "new" global framework of world history today as viewing the world from the vantage point of the Moon, as one scholar put it. We agree. But we also want to take a close-up view, analyzing and reconstructing the significant experiences of all of humanity.

This is not to say that everything that has happened everywhere and in all time periods can be recovered or is worth knowing, but that there is much to be gained by considering both the separate and interrelated stories of different societies and cultures. Making these connections is still another crucial ingredient of the "new" world history. It emphasizes

connectedness and interactions of all kinds—cultural, economic, political, religious, and social—involving peoples, places, and processes. It makes comparisons and finds similarities. Emphasizing both the comparisons and interactions is critical to developing a global framework that can deepen and broaden historical understanding, whether the focus is on a specific country or region or on the whole world.

The rise of the new world history as a discipline comes at an opportune time. The interest in world history in schools and among the general public is vast. We travel to one another's nations, converse and work with people around the world, and are changed by global events. War and peace affect populations worldwide as do economic conditions and the state of our environment, communications, and health and medicine. The New Oxford World History presents local histories in a global context and gives an overview of world events seen through the eyes of ordinary people. This combination of the local and the global further defines the new world history. Understanding the workings of global and local conditions in the past gives us tools for examining our own world and for envisioning the interconnected future that is in the making.

Bonnie G. Smith
Anand Yang

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CHAPTER 1

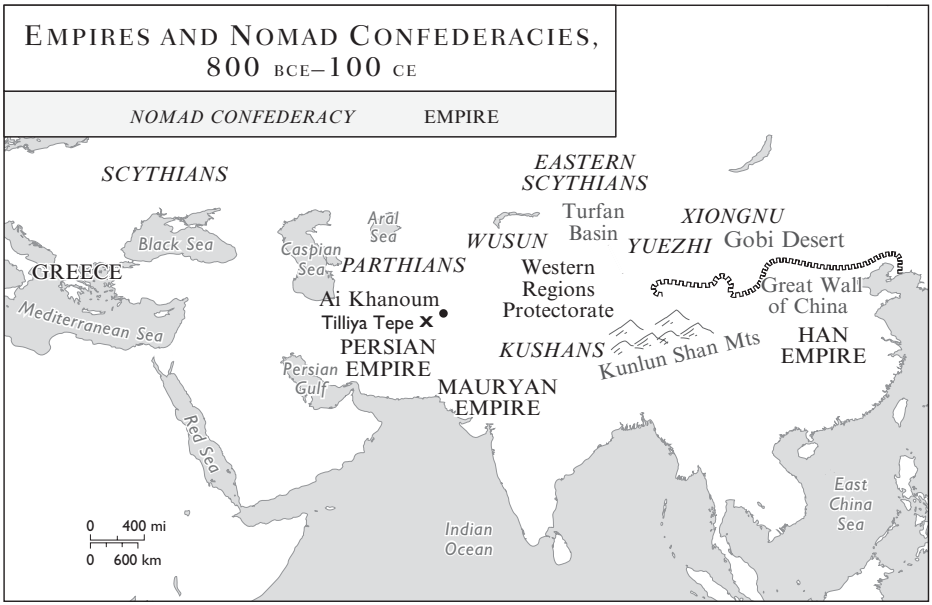
China Looks West

From the time Eurasians started using polished stone tools to plant and harvest crops and to keep domesticated animals, they began to split into two distinct societies divided by the Tianshan, Altai, and Caucasus mountain ranges. To the fertile south, people became farmers. But on the Eurasian steppe, people continued to herd livestock such as cattle, sheep, and horses. Their herds fed in the cool mountains in summer, where the grass was lush, and were shepherded in winter to warmer valleys and plains. Each group of nomads grazed its animals according to a fixed annual pattern. However, climate changes and political conflicts with other nomads or with agricultural societies to the south often forced nomads out of their normal rounds. The movements of nomadic populations and their livestock continually threatened the settled lives of farmers, whose crops could be quickly destroyed by herds. Sometimes these displaced people and their herds moved westward in search of more fertile grasslands in western Asia and eastern Europe.

Some time around 600 BCE, horseback riding had begun to spread on the Eurasian steppe, and by the 400s BCE, nomads on the north border of the agricultural zone had learned to combine horsemanship with archery to become masters of the horse as a military machine. It is about this time, when these cavalries emerged, that our story of organized trade and communication along the steppe thoroughfares begins, for it was nomads on the Central Asian steppe who brought West and East together.

In the fifth century BCE, seven agricultural states in what is now eastern China were fighting each other for supremacy. In addition to fighting with each other, three northern states, the Qin, Zhao, and Yan, also had to cope with frequent incursions of nomadic cavalry.

Nomads from the steppe raided villages and towns, looting millet and wheat, the major grains of north China, and silks, which were common in China but considered rare and precious among nomads on the western steppe. Sericulture, the process of raising silk worms and extracting silk yarn, had appeared in China in the third millennium BCE; Zhou Dynasty folk songs of the early first millennium BCE frequently refer to silk weaving and textiles.



The mounted archers of the steppe had the advantage of speed and surprise. In an effort to defend themselves, the three northern states built walls along the mountain ranges to divide the agricultural and pastoral zones. Realizing the advantage of the nomads' tactics and horsemanship, the state of Zhao, under King Wuling, reformed its army in the fourth century BCE. His troops began to master the bow and arrow and began to dress in trousers and tight-sleeved robes as the nomads did. The members of his court heaped criticism on these reforms, since they considered the nomads "barbarians" and unworthy of any emulation. Prince Cheng, the king's uncle and an important courtier, advised:

> wise and intelligent people reside and all material wealth gathers here; sages and saints teach here, good morals dominate here, poetry, prose, rituals, and music are practiced here, and efficient technological inventions are tested here. People of faraway countries admire and learn from here, barbarians emulate the ways things are done here. Now your majesty is giving up our high standards to follow the clothing style of outsiders, thereby changing the teachings of our ancestors and the ancient ways. This will upset your people and make scholars angry, as it deviates from the values of the Middle

> Kingdom [China]. Your majesty's subject wishes you to reconsider your decision.[1]

Nevertheless, the Zhao state's adoption of its enemies' military practices continued and improved its defenses.[2] Once the superiority of nomadic tactics and weaponry to the traditional horse and chariots and infantry was demonstrated, other northern Chinese states followed Zhao's example.

Such reforms increased the need for horses. The agricultural societies did not have the knowledge or the pasture to produce good horses, especially military mounts. Only the vast grassland could breed large numbers of fast, hardy horses with great endurance. Obtaining such horses was not easy. During the third century BCE, the Yuezhi, who lived in a region relatively near China, northwest of its western borders, between the northern foothills of the eastern end of the Tianshan Mountains and the Turfan Depression, had emerged as a powerful confederacy on the steppe. They maintained a friendly trading relationship with agricultural China. The minister and economist Guanzi (?–645 BCE) in his treatise on the economics of the Qi state argued that jade supplied by the Yuezhi should be the most highly valued currency of the state. "Our ancestor kings attributed the highest value to jade, as it came from a long distance. Gold is the second, and copper currency is the third."[3]

From antiquity, Chinese societies of the Yellow River Valley and the Yangzi River Valley had treasured jade more than gold. Most of the jade items found in their rulers' tombs were made of materials from Khotan, an oasis on the southern edge of the Takla Makan Desert in modern Xinjiang. The Yuezhi had been middlemen between China and Central Asia in ancient times. During the Warring States period, when the northern Chinese desperately needed good horses to supply their cavalries, they naturally turned to the Yuezhi.

East of the Yuezhi territory, on the Mongolian grassland, lived the Xiongnu, another powerful nomadic confederacy. Unlike the Yuezhi, they were in constant conflict with nearby Chinese states. When the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty, indeed the first emperor of China, Shihuangdi—which means simply "first emperor"—united the seven warring states and established the Qin Empire in 221 BCE, the Xiongnu were the foremost threat to his imperial power. The Qin, and later Han, rulers sent large quantities of silk textiles and floss (a silk padding used to make quilted cloth for the cold winter on the steppe) to appease the nomads or to trade for horses. Some of the silks were government-made

products for presentation to the Xiongnu nobles, but many more were plain silk textiles produced by farm women. Silk textiles were used to line fur coats, and silk floss was used to pad quilted cloths. The quilted cloth was not only warm but also extremely light, and it was used not only for bedding but was also made into jackets and trousers. Such exquisite silk garments made the chieftains on the steppe look much more elegant than their followers. In this early international commerce, it was largely the ruling elites, whether nomadic or sedentary, and their demand for exotic goods from foreign lands, not the urge to market their own products, that motivated the trade. Only rare and luxurious goods from far away could mark the difference between the ruling elite and their subjects. The principal reason the chief of the Xiongnu nomads distributed Han silk robes was to demonstrate the political hierarchy of his confederacy and maintain the loyalty of his most important followers. Silk became the symbol of power and prestige on the steppe.

In addition to silk diplomacy, the Qin emperor fended off the constant Xiongnu raids by linking the walls previously built by different states to form the Great Wall, which ran all along the border between agricultural China and the steppe. To build the wall, he used peasants and convicts. Where there were gates in the wall, markets formed where farmers and herdsmen exchanged their products. Among the nomads who came to trade, one chief of the Yuezhi, whose surname was Luo, made a fortune selling good horses to the Chinese. The horses of the Tianshan foothills were taller and stronger than those of the Xiongnu, and Luo sold many of them to Shihuangdi for silks, which he then sold to other chiefs on the steppe. The chiefs paid him, according to the historian Sima Qian of the second century BCE, "ten times his original investment with their livestock." This wealth probably made the nomad Luo not only rich but also powerful among his followers. "The first emperor of the Qin showed his appreciation by granting Luo a position of the same rank as the highest ministers in the court," according to Sima Qian.[4] The Yuezhi became the great ally of the Qin Empire by supplying them with crucial military mounts.

The Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE) ruled with strict and cruel laws and exhausted its people with many large projects, including the Great Wall, which caused unrest in the country. It was soon replaced by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), whose rulers also faced a persistent threat from the Xiongnu on its northern borders. The early Han Empire had just emerged from a devastating civil war, which had ended the Qin Dynasty, and was in a completely defensive position. The Xiongnu once surrounded the Han's founding emperor, Gaozu, on the northern