Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors

Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800

Jonathan Karam Skaff

Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors

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JONATHAN KARAM SKAFF

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To three brave warriors:
Karam, Donna, and Kassiani

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CONVENTIONS OF TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

Chinese is transliterated using standard pinyin romanization. Chinese names and words that are homonyms include tone marks to distinguish them from each other. In transcriptions and translations of fragmentary documents, gaps in the text are indicated by [. . .]. Unless otherwise noted, Chinese official titles and administrative units are translated according to Hucker (1985). Arabic is rendered according to the standard convention. I follow Beckwith's systems (1987, xiii–xiv) of transliterating Tibetan and Turkic with the exception that Turkic ś is replaced with sh. In some cases I probably have unwittingly deviated from Beckwith's system due to the confusion caused by the variety of Turkic transliteration methods and the failure of many authors to specify which one they use. I have followed the scholarly convention of using the spelling "Türk" to distinguish the tribe and empire of medieval Mongolia from the "Turk" nationality of modern Turkey (Beckwith 2009, 116, n. 12). Medieval Turko-Mongol names reconstructed from Chinese that have gained general scholarly acceptance have been adopted. Even if these reconstructions are not perfect, they will be closer to the original pronunciation than pinyin renderings in modern Chinese.

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Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors

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Introduction

The China-Inner Asia Frontier as World History

It is high time to set about breaking down the outmoded topographical compartments within which we seek to confine social realities, for they are not large enough to hold the material we try to cram into them.

—Marc Bloch *(Address to the International Congress of Historical Sciences, August 1928)*

Over eighty years after Bloch admonished historians to give greater attention to transnational history, we only have reached the early stages of understanding the entangled histories of China and Inner Asia. The topographical compartments of China and Inner Asia are still popularly considered to be irrevocably separate and hostile. China had a huge farming populace, which by premodern standards yielded enormous amounts of wealth and manpower. In contrast, the deserts and steppe of Inner Asia supported sparse populations of pastoral nomads and oasis farmers. Chinese agriculturists, whose staple product was grain, are normally regarded as distinct from pastoral nomads who raised large livestock—such as sheep, horses, cattle, and goats—that can subsist on the grasslands. Chinese farmers were sedentary, while nomads lived in tents as they migrated with their flocks. Militarily, this confrontation typically is depicted as a battle between large Chinese infantry armies of conscripted peasants versus smaller and swifter Inner Asian forces composed of cavalry. Ideologically, Chinese and steppe rulers also fought battles of words by negatively stereotyping each other. The polemics of state-level foreign relations have deeply influenced conventional, exclusivist perceptions of China and Inner Asia as irreconcilable.

This book takes a different "integrationist" perspective by reexamining relations between the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) Empires and neighboring Turko-Mongol pastoral nomadic peoples in the period from about 580 to 800. Particular attention is given to the successive Turkic khanates based in Mongolia, especially the First Türk (552–630) and Second Türk (682–742) Empires. Heeding Bloch's

call (1969) for a comparative methodology, this book argues that these China-based and Mongolia-based states had "entangled histories" resulting from centuries of diplomacy, competition, and incorporation of pastoral nomads in North China.[1] As a consequence, medieval Eastern Eurasian powers deployed strikingly similar elements of ideology, diplomacy, and political networking to seek hegemony over each other and the smaller Turko-Mongol tribes inhabiting the intervening borderlands. This book also reveals the existence of shared diplomatic norms in the wider sphere of Eurasia from Korea in the east to Byzantium and Iran in the west. Agents perpetuating medieval political, economic, and cultural entanglements included not only the more familiar Silk Road monks, merchants, and diplomats, but also Turko-Mongol pastoral nomads of the Eurasian steppe.

I. Method and Theory

The tendency to see China's culture as distinctive derives in part from conventional methodologies of historical scholarship. Historians of premodern China—with the notable exception of many frontier specialists—normally carry out research exclusively by using Chinese sources, and make comparisons between earlier and later dynasties to achieve a diachronic understanding of Chinese history. This approach began with premodern scholars who had a deep reverence for classical texts and historical precedent (Bol 1992, 1–5, 191–201; Skaff 2009b, 170–6), was incorporated into modern Sinology in the early twentieth century, and aligned with the normal practice of professional historians to take the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. The conventional China-centered methods are alluring because premodern Chinese records are relatively copious, and chronological comparisons are useful for understanding historical change.[2] However, overreliance on this approach has resulted in "frog in the well syndrome." The proverbial Chinese frog at the bottom of the well (*jingdi zhi wa*) was complacent because of his ignorance of the world outside. Studies of premodern China often suffer from this syndrome. Historians who exclusively utilize Chinese language sources and chronological comparisons perpetuate a fallacy, common to national histories, that Chinese identity and history are unique products of internal evolution (Fischer 1970, 142–4, 226–30). Methodologically, this book forestalls "frog in the well syndrome" with an interdisciplinary, multi-perspective, and synchronically comparative approach that provides a more balanced perspective on relations between the Sui-Tang Empires and various Turko-Mongol peoples.

The interdisciplinary and multi-perspective aspects of the methodology derive from the choice of sources. The foundations of research are standard Sinological texts, including Sui-Tang dynastic and annalistic histories and central governmental documents preserved in literary and administrative compendia.[3] Although yielding relatively copious information by medieval norms, these records have hindered

understanding of the Sui-Tang frontier relations because they reflect the perspectives of the authors, the literati-Confucian elite stationed in the capitals, which will be discussed in chapter 2. Their court-centered viewpoint encourages "frog in the well syndrome" because it downplays the importance of foreign peoples, and of provincial and frontier affairs. To overcome these drawbacks, this book supplements court-centered sources with excavated Tang documents and funerary epitaphs, non-Chinese sources, and modern archaeological and anthropological scholarship. Modern archaeological discoveries have been particularly helpful in providing evidence—including documents, tomb epitaphs, and material culture—that reveals signs of cultural interactions between China and Inner Asia.[4] Additional information on the activities of Turko-Mongols and other Eurasian peoples was obtained through research in Arabic annals in the original language, and English translations of Turkic inscriptions and Byzantine chronicles.[5] Modern historical and ethnographic studies on pastoral nomads also were helpful in explaining and contextualizing laconic descriptions of Turko-Mongol behavior contained in medieval texts. Though the chronological scope of research runs from approximately 580 to 800—from around the founding of the Sui Dynasty through the reign of Tang Dezong—particular attention is given to the best-documented early to mid-Tang period of 630 to 755.[6] Taken together, these sources provide a more holistic depiction of Sui-Tang frontier society, Turko-Mongol peoples, and patterns of interstate relations.

Sources furnishing multiple perspectives facilitate another aspect of the book's methodology, synchronic comparisons of culture. Succeeding chapters will compare and contrast political and diplomatic practices of Sui-Tang, Turko-Mongol, and other Eurasian cultures. The building blocks of comparisons are close readings of millennium-old texts and artifacts—rather than secondary studies—with an eye to finding evidence, particularly anecdotes, that reveals the actual thought and behavior of people living in China and Inner Asia. The research methodology draws inspiration from Clifford Geertz's ethnographic "thick description" (1973, 5, 9–10, 17), which views culture as "webs of significance" that are articulated "through the flow of behavior."[7] Interpretation involves "sorting out the structures of signification . . . and determining their social ground and import." Geertz even likens the challenges of the ethnographer to the historian reading manuscripts "full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries." Both must discern the "socially established code" scattered among the individual quirks and unique events. The historian's more specialized interpretive task is to determine which cultural forms reflect actual thought and behavior of historical actors, and which are products of the idealized worldview of medieval authors.

Evidence gleaned from texts was subject to comparative historical analysis to identify what the sociologist Jack Goldstone calls "robust processes" (1991, 50–62) and the historian C. A. Bayly (2004, 1–14, 41–4) terms "uniformities." The former, which should be distinguished from determinism, refers to events at different times and/or different locations where similar causal factors can trigger

similar outcomes.[8] A simple example is the recurring invention of sacral kingship in ancient states that were geographically isolated from one another. In contrast to robust processes, uniformities describe interconnected social phenomena. Different from homogeneity, uniformities were widely shared elements of culture that developed as "forms of human action adjusted to each other and came to resemble each other" even as these interactions paradoxically reinforced distinctive identities. For example, in the modern world, national flags are uniformities, universally expected of every country, but each has a unique design that ideally epitomizes a specific national experience and identity. Though mainly focused on early modern globalization, Bayly (2002, 2004, 40–1) recognizes that uniformities existed in the era of "archaic globalization." The distinguishing feature of archaic uniformities was their gradual spread on subcontinental and transcontinental scales, relatively modest in comparison to the frenetic globalization of today.[9] Since the major trends in Eurasian uniformities emerged prior to the time period covered in this book, the search for their origins will not be a major concern. However, the role of ongoing Eurasian entanglements in sparking the replication and modification of uniformities will become apparent.

II. China-Inner Asia Relations

This book's focus on comparative perspectives contributes to the integrationist trend in Chinese historical scholarship, which is challenging the former dominant paradigm of China-Inner Asia relations, the so-called "Chinese worldview." Promoted by the prominent historian John King Fairbank in the 1960s and still holding sway over the popular imagination, the Chinese worldview appropriates the assumption of national history that China was not only the product of internal, evolutionary development, but also a dominant "culture island" assimilating other peoples living on the periphery through the power of "sinicization" (Fairbank 1968). Since the 1980s, historians of the integrationist school, aligned with the broader world history movement, have contested the implicit chauvinism of the Chinese worldview. However, their rejection of notions of China's perpetual political dominance and cultural influence are based almost exclusively on studies of dynasties founded by external conquerors, particularly the Qing (1644–1911).[10] This book breaks new ground by focusing on the Sui and Tang dynasties, involving entanglements with Eurasia that were not necessarily connected to conquests from outside of China.

The book's fresh perspective on China-Inner Asia relations allows a challenge to a corollary assumption of the Chinese worldview that has received less critical scrutiny. This is the idea that cultural sharing in East Asia mainly occurred in a "Sinic zone" that included China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (Fairbank 1968, 12). Within this region Chinese writing was adopted, allowing the sharing of China's

high culture of literary, historical, philosophical, religious, and ritual traditions. Tang China often is viewed as the height of Chinese cultural exportation (Twitchett, ed. 1979b, 32–8). Most germane to this study, Sinic diplomacy was conceived of as a "tributary system" in which vassals bestowed tribute to Chinese emperors in exchange for valuable gifts and titles indicating their subservience. Fairbank contrasts the Sinic peoples with those of Inner Asia who "had their own non-Chinese views of the relationship to China and accepted the Chinese view of it only in part, superficially or tacitly, as a matter of expedience." Like Fairbank, most scholars conclude that China-based rulers ignored Confucian ideology to act "pragmatically" in external affairs, parallel to the "expediency" of foreigners, but have not questioned the Sinic origins of the ideology and diplomatic praxis (Franke and Twitchett, eds. 1994, 14–6; Hevia 1995, 11–5, 29–56; Millward 1998, 49, 194–202; Pan 1997, 62–5; Rossabi 1983, 1–12; Wright 2005, 35–8). In contrast, this book offers the hypothesis that the Sinic zone of Chinese textual culture was nested inside a broader "Eastern Eurasian" region of political and diplomatic uniformities, which in turn was contained within a wider "Eurasian" sphere via links with South Asia, West Asia, and Byzantium. Inner Asia played a key role connecting all major regions via its trade routes and steppe zone stretching from Manchuria to Eastern Europe.

Geographically, Eastern Eurasia will be defined as the vast territory encompassing the Sinic zone plus Manchuria, Mongolia, Tibet, and interspersed regions of Inner Asian steppe and desert oases as far west as the Pamir Mountains. Most of the book's evidence derives from Sui-Tang interactions with Turko-Mongols from about 580 to 800. Other Eurasian polities that had contacts with the Turko-Mongols studied in this book make cameo appearances including the Yarlung Dynasty of Tibet (570–842), the Byzantine Empire (476–1453), and the successive West

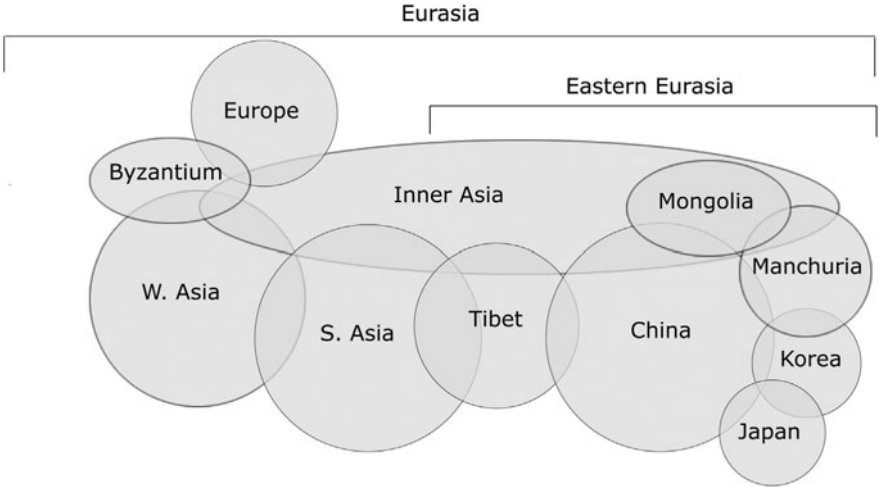

Figure 0.1. Schematic Diagram of Eurasian Cultural Zones

Asian powers of the Sasanian Dynasty (ca. 224–651) and Islamic Umayyad Caliphate (661–750).[11] Within Eastern Eurasia there is evidence of common notions of rulership, diplomacy, political networking, and ritual beliefs. In the wider sphere of Eurasia, uniformities in norms of rulership, diplomacy, and political networking also existed, but were more attenuated.

Succeeding chapters will argue for the prominence of mobile pastoral nomads, not necessarily traveling on Silk Roads caravan routes, in the exchange of these political ideas. David Christian (2000) notes that the Silk Roads typically are defined as east-west land and sea routes—linking the agricultural regions of East, South, and West Asia and serving as conduits transmitting luxury goods, technology, religion, and artistic motifs. This book adopts Christian's definition and emphasizes that Silk Roads also were pathways transmitting political culture via diplomatic exchanges. More crucially, Christian argues for the equal importance of north-south, trans-ecological "Steppe Roads" linking the Eurasian grassland and agricultural regions.[12] Christian conceives of Steppe Roads as commercial routes, driven by a "natural" economic exchange of agricultural and pastoral products, but succeeding chapters will demonstrate that interactions also resulted from recurrent diplomatic intercourse and episodic political and environmental calamities, which could spark long-distance migrations of Turko-Mongols. These regular and irregular movements of pastoral nomads have been overlooked as contributors to exchanges of political culture in Eurasia.

A. Eurasian Diplomacy

A comparative perspective provides a valuable lens for rethinking medieval Eurasian diplomacy. Previous research on diplomatic relations between the Sui-Tang Empires and Inner Asia has tended to take three general approaches. The first is narrative history of interstate relations with attention to strategic concerns (Beckwith 1987; Pan 1997; Twitchett 2000). The second focuses on particular features of bilateral agreements, such as horse-silk trade or diplomatic marriages (Beckwith 1991; Holmgren 1990–1; Jagchid 1989; Mackerras 1969; Pan 1992b, 1997a). The third type, termed the material school in chapter 8, places the Sui-Tang period within the *longue durée* of China-Inner relations and argues that the primary diplomatic objective of Turko-Mongols was to profit from relations with China-based regimes through trade, direct subsidies, or raiding (Barfield 1989; Di Cosmo 1999b; Jagchid and Symons 1989; Perdue 2005, 532–5). All of these approaches share the tendency to focus on particular aspects of diplomatic relations—such as geopolitical strategy, trade, marriage, or material subventions—without examining the full spectrum of considerations involved in negotiating relationships in a multilateral sphere of diplomacy. They also assume a fairly rigid cultural divide between China and Inner Asia.

This book takes a more holistic approach to diplomacy. Comparing Sui-Tang and Turko-Mongol diplomatic practices reveals the existence of shared conceptions of

the form and function of interstate relations that frequently have been misidentified as products of the Chinese worldview. Diplomatic rituals, discussed in chapter 5, involved elaborate displays of pageantry, status ranking, obeisance, gift exchanges, and feasting. Chapters 6 through 8, concerning bilateral negotiations, reveal that Eurasian diplomatic talks occurred within uniform parameters. The foundation of most agreements was an investiture relationship in which a greater power bestowed a feudal title or official appointment on a lesser one to signal a truce. Depending on the needs of the two parties, bargaining also might include discussions of marriage or trade relations, subsidies, and/or military operations against mutual enemies. Monarchs—whether situated in China or Inner Asia—generally sought the most advantageous mix of political, strategic, symbolic, and material concessions from negotiating partners. When the balance of power between the two parties shifted or unexpected contingencies arose, relationships typically were renegotiated or severed in an outburst of warfare. Each bilateral negotiation was unique, but the parameters—seldom deviating from issues of investiture, kinship, finances, and/or military affairs—were uniform. In essence chapters 5 through 8 are a preliminary effort to create a handbook of customary medieval Eurasian diplomacy.

B. Sui-Tang Cosmopolitanism

This study also contributes to understanding the social and ecological pluralism of the Sui-Tang empires. The Tang is popularly considered to be China's glorious cosmopolitan age. However, Sui-Tang scholarship contains two competing visions of history. An integrationist or cosmopolitan school depicts an inclusive society whose elites were eager to accept exotic foreign cultural elements, especially related to religion, art, music, dance, food, and material culture. On the other hand, institutional and intellectual historians have had a tendency to downplay the external impact in favor of emphasizing continuities with earlier imperial government and thought. Neither school has seemed to show much awareness of the other or the sharp dichotomy of their perspectives. The result is a schizophrenic image of Sui-Tang elites who checked their exotic tastes at the doors of their homes and turned into orthodox Confucians upon arrival at government offices.

The doyens of the integrationist school were the late Xiang Da and Edward Shafer. Xiang (2001) pioneered a cosmopolitan perspective in the 1930s and influenced Schafer (1963), whose book, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, is the most visible example of this genre in the west. Their sources often are personal ones of the literary vein, including poetry, literature, and miscellaneous writings, which reveal that the Sui-Tang elite had a taste for exotic goods and arts from other parts of Eurasia. Both scholars influentially promoted the Silk Roads as the primary avenues of cultural exchanges. Schafer wrote about foreign people and goods with relish, which has served to glamorize the dynasty. His ability to entertain readers has kept his book in print long after his death and burnished the image of the Tang as a glorious and cosmopolitan age.

A contrasting vision comes from intellectual and institutional historians who tend to downplay foreign influences and assume that "Chinese" governance was the bedrock of Sui-Tang empires. Their point-of-view reflects their sources, which normally are public ones—official histories, government documents, and philosophical or legal-bureaucratic prescriptive texts. Their diachronic comparative methodology focuses on tracing the evolving Chinese administrative organization and accompanying textual tradition that originated in tandem during the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BCE) and Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) and continued to develop throughout the Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang. Social history, when considered, is limited to examining the lives of the upper classes who manned the bureaucracy. The late Denis Twitchett (1979b, 8–22; Wright and Twitchett, eds. 1973) was the most prominent purveyor of Sui-Tang institutional scholarship in the West. Although institutional and intellectual historians, like Twitchett, acknowledge that the Tang imperial family had exotic tastes, their scholarship downplays its impact on the public realm of government.

The conflicting visions of integrationist and institutionalist schools have emerged because of a shared tendency to essentialize Sui-Tang culture. If we stop assuming that Sui-Tang society was homogenous, the contradictions can be resolved. The Sui-Tang empires were pluralistic realms containing tens of millions of people who had different ethnicities, regional traditions, status rankings, and religions. The modern institutional historians have been influenced by the Sui-Tang literati Confucians who dominated the civil bureaucracy and even more importantly the historiographical office. Their discursive power over public records has created a false impression of their dominance over governmental policy and popular culture. The integrationist school also has its limitations. It has been unable to clarify the identities of the consumers of the exotic imports or demonstrate how foreigners and indigenous ethnic minorities were politically and socially integrated into a cosmopolitan empire. In addition, integrationists have underestimated Turko-Mongols as agents of cultural exchange in favor of the caravan merchants, diplomatic envoys, artists, and religious clerics who plied the Silk Roads. Finally, there has been an overemphasis on the uniqueness of the Sui-Tang cosmopolitanism. Eurasia has a long history of people who favored cosmopolitanism in taste and interpersonal relationships. North China dynasts, ruling over multiethnic populations in the pre-Sui and post-Tang periods, shared cosmopolitan inclinations. This tendency is visible elsewhere in Eurasia and much later in history (Fewkes 2009, 163–6).

Chen Yinke (2001, 183–235) has made the most influential attempt to reconcile the perspectives of the institutional and integrationist schools. Chen recognized that from 317 onward Inner Asian conquerors and their descendants who ruled over North China oversaw the rise of eminent lineages of mixed ancestry in northwestern China, including the founders of the Sui and Tang dynasties. Chen advanced a hypothesis that the non-Chinese background of the Tang House was the "key" to understanding its style of rule. However, Chen saw a waning of outside influence

as the ruling class assimilated to Confucian norms in the eighth century. Long after Chen's death, most historians continue to view the Sui and Tang as transitional between the culturally mixed Northern Dynasties and the more orthodox Song Dynasty (960–1279). Though Chen made a valuable contribution by calling attention to the impact of dynasts of Inner Asian origin on North China, his focus on the backgrounds of high-ranking civil officials in the capitals overlooks the continued existence of a pluralistic society in North China interacting with Inner Asia.

This work makes a new attempt to reconcile the competing integrationist and institutionalist outlooks on the Sui and Tang. While not denying the historical significance of the Northern Dynasties and caravan routes as avenues of foreign influence—this book explores how Sui-Tang imperial institutions incorporated Turko-Mongol peoples in the ecologically and ethnographically diverse northern tier of the empires. Sui-Tang rulers valued Inner Asians as subjects because of their ability to supply livestock and render military service. Turko-Mongols in turn were willing to live under Sui-Tang suzerainty in the China-Inner Asia borderlands because the terms of incorporation were politically, culturally, and economically acceptable. Turko-Mongol elites who became long-term inhabitants of the Sui-Tang empires selectively adopted aspects of the high culture of capitals, but had a strong incentive to cultivate bicultural identities and martial skills that were the sources of their power as military leaders. In turn, Sui-Tang emperors and government officials also made efforts to accommodate their Turko-Mongol subjects. The ecological and cultural diversity of the empires was an important contributor to Sui-Tang cosmopolitanism.

C. Identity and Power: Patrimonialism

A major impediment to understanding the roles of Turko-Mongols in the Sui-Tang empires has been conventional approaches to sociopolitical history. Early efforts to study Sui-Tang society, such as Chen's, concentrated on eminent lineages, sometimes referred to as great clans or an aristocracy, with a particular focus on their putative dominance of government. More recently, anthropological concepts of ethnicity have been applied to the study of Sui-Tang society. Neither type of analysis has been helpful in understanding the prominent political role of Turko-Mongols in the Sui-Tang realms. This book proposes that Weberian and post-Weberian sociological concepts of patrimonialism provide a more effective analytic lens to perceive common patterns of integration and revolt of Turko-Mongols serving Sui-Tang *and* Inner Asian empires.

Earlier studies of Sui-Tang social history, which took domestic eminent lineages as the main focus of study, effectively ignored the role of Turko-Mongols and other peoples in the empires. This approach—originating in the early twentieth century with the Japanese scholar, Naitō Torajirō, and prominently championed by Chen Yinke—borrowed categories of analysis from medieval Chinese textual sources. As

a result, the modern scholars saw the medieval period as politically dominated by a small number of elite lineages (Chen 2001; Miyakawa 1955). Several prominent works of western scholarship have promoted the general outline of Naitō and Chen's views, only disagreeing on the timing of the downfall of the eminent families (Ebrey 1978; Hartwell 1982; Johnson 1976; Twitchett 1973). Although historians of the Sui and early Tang have been slow to challenge the idea of a "medieval Chinese aristocracy," revisionist scholars of the Northern and Southern Dynasties and late Tang have made highly effective critiques over the past two decades. They argue that claiming eminent status was a social convention, not a guarantee of immediate access to power or intergenerational sociopolitical dominance. False assertions of descent from illustrious ancestors were common.[13] Most germane to this study, Tanigawa Michio (1985, 120–2) has noted that during the Northern Dynasties the Särbi (Xianbei) elite monopolized dynastic and military power at the expense of so-called Han "aristocrats" in the bureaucracy. Thus, assertions of elite status should be viewed as a strategy of "symbolic violence" in competition for power.[14] This book is not the place to scrutinize the putative rise and fall of the Sui-Tang eminent lineages, but it exposes the flaws of this approach for understanding contemporary social status and political power. As chapter 3 demonstrates, non-members of great families, including Turko-Mongols and Han Chinese commoners, could gain privileged status through military service and other types of governmental duties.

A more recent effort to understand the role of foreigners and indigenous minorities in Sui-Tang China involves the anthropological concept of ethnicity, which commonly is accepted to be a relational social identity that arises when different cultural groups come into contact (Barth 1969; Crossley et al. 2006, 1–17; Keyes 1981). Abramson (2008) has made the most prominent attempt to analyze Tang attitudes toward ethnicity. Though providing an excellent overview of the elite's positive and negative discourses on foreign "barbarians," he fails to clarify non-Chinese ethnic self-identity or explain their rise to social prominence despite frequently being targets of negative stereotyping (Skaff 2008/2009). Other historians of middle and Late Imperial China have debated the applicability of the concept of ethnicity to the premodern period. This book takes the position that elites in the Tang Empire recognized ethnic differences, but that ethnic identity played a subordinate role in political bonding.[15]

A more promising approach to understanding Sui-Tang and medieval Eurasian social, political, and diplomatic history is Max Weber's (1864–1920) concept of patrimonialism. According to Weber (1968, 956–65, 1006–38), patrimonial governance originates as the extension of the authority of the patriarchal household to a larger realm, and has four aspects especially relevant to medieval Eastern Eurasian sociopolitical relations: 1) Subjects render *personal* allegiance to the ruler. 2) Symbolically, the patrimonial domain is treated as the possession of the ruler, and subordinates accordingly are regarded as members of the ruler's *household* with the right to be *fed* at the lord's table. 3) In return for some form of regular income,

subjects render military or administrative service to the master. 4) Rulers typically give ad hoc rewards to adherents who have provided outstanding service. They in turn render "honorary gifts" to the master. Weber (1968, 1006–8) contrasts patrimonialism with modern bureaucratic authority that is characterized in part by an established hierarchy of offices, administrative regulations, record-keeping, and monetized salaries for officials. Weber (1968, 226–66, 1047–51) recognized that pure patrimonialism has never existed. He places premodern imperial Chinese government in the category of patrimonial-bureaucracy, meaning bureaucracy with strong patrimonial characteristics.

Post-Weberian social scientists have elaborated on other aspects of patrimonialism relevant to the Sui-Tang society and Eurasian diplomacy. Norbert Elias has noted that sociopolitical hierarchies in which elites compete for status and power characterize patrimonial or partly patrimonial societies. Rivalry for social prestige and political authority normally entailed attention to ceremony and etiquette, as well as lavish displays of wealth, including gifts and feasts (Elias 1983, 41–116).[16] The ruler should be the only object of loyalty in the ideal patrimonial realm, but another typical aspect of patrimonial and patrimonial-bureaucratic rule is the prevalence of personalistic vertical patron-client relationships and horizontal alliances that permeate all levels of the governmental hierarchy (Eisenstadt 1973, 35; Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980, 64–6). The role of patronage in bolstering political power has received copious attention from historians of the Roman Empire (Badian 1984; Wallace-Hadrill 1989) and European colonialism (Newbury 2003), and political scientists of modern developing countries (Kaufman 1972; Theobald 1982), including China (Dittmer 1995; Nathan and Tsai 1995; Pye 1995). There is broad agreement that patron-client relationships have a significant impact on political patterns.

Applying Weberian and post-Weberian sociological models to the empires of China and Mongolia is somewhat controversial. Some historians have argued convincingly that the Mongol Empire was organized along patrimonial lines (Hsiao 1978, 38; Allsen 1986, 516), and others have used patrimonialism to further understanding of imperial Chinese court politics (Eisenberg 1998, 2008; Michael G. Chang 2007). Gan (2003, 291–311) and Chittick (2010) have noted the significance of patron-client ties during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period as the means of maintaining political authority and the *cause* of upheaval when the patron died and clients dispersed. Nonetheless, there have been critiques of specific elements of Weberian and post-Weberian analysis of Chinese society,[17] and some resistance to categorizing Turko-Mongol states as patrimonial.[18] Some criticism is reasonable—Weber had imperfect knowledge of Eurasian society and history because he wrote while Western scholarship on the East was at a nascent stage—but at best calls attention to the need to refine the patrimonial model rather than invalidate it. The broad outline of Weber's concept remains useful to the study of medieval Eurasia because, unlike most contemporary social science, he took a broadly

comparative and historical approach that drew attention to shared aspects of the human experience, and distinctive characteristics of modern *and* premodern social organization. This book follows scholars who have argued that patrimonialism, and the cognate phenomena of symbolic status competition and patron-client ties, are valuable conceptual tools for understanding Chinese and Turko-Mongol politics. Moving beyond previous scholarship, future chapters will demonstrate that the post-Weberian patrimonial model can be applied profitably to analyze interstate relations in medieval Eurasia.

The patron-client concept is particularly valuable for providing insights into medieval political loyalties and identities. The empires of China and the Mongolian Plateau were multiethnic agglomerations of people. Pastoral nomads living in areas outside of direct legal-administrative control—most people in Turko-Mongol polities and those on the periphery of the Sui-Tang empires—primarily were brought into political formations via reciprocal allegiances between people at higher and lower levels in the hierarchy. The ruler stood at the apex of the political system, representing the ultimate object of loyalty. As chapters 3 and 6 argue, the terminology of political identifications varied, but generically can be conceived of as a patron-client relationship with reciprocal obligations. Allegiances were *personal* and thus *political* identities were too. While it is well known that Turko-Mongol clients identified themselves as followers of their monarch, called a *qaghan* in medieval times (Sneath 2007, 167–9), future chapters will demonstrate that a Sui-Tang "Heavenly Qaghan" also could be the object of allegiance and identification. The situation was analogous to medieval Europe where "everything from the 'mentality' of the medieval individual, through the activities of the so-called 'state' seems to have been shaped by personal bonds" (Althoff 2004, 2, 105).

Kinship identity was an adjunct to some patrimonial patron-client relationships. Although Weber's reference to the household as the prototype for the patrimonial realm alludes to the importance of kinship in political relations, he does not elaborate on this phenomenon. Kinship ideology frequently is cited as playing a significant role in Turko-Mongol political organization (Lindner 1982, 698–701; Khazanov 1994, 138–44; Barfield 1993, 149). The functional purpose seems to be akin to medieval Europe where many social and political bonds "imitated the kinship model. The aim was to reproduce the conditions and obligations existing with the family group . . . the ideas and terminology of kinship . . . even had an effect on the bonds between a lord and his men" (Althoff 2004, 62–3, 160). Among scholars of imperial China only a few have stressed the importance of fictive kinship in politics. Gan Huaizhen (2003, 207–58, 291–300) notes that the modern Chinese word for nation or country (*guojia*) literally means state-family. In early imperial times the *guojia* was conceived as a household composed of the emperor, his lineage members, and his officials, especially those closest to the emperor. Moreover, from the late Han Dynasty onward, rulers and officials with close bonds began to form fictive father-son relationships. Howard Wechsler (1985, ix–x) has argued

that Tang legitimacy was based partly on the idea that emperors ruled over a "political family" that included "non-familial elements, especially their own high officials." Gan and Wechsler provide evidence that medieval Chinese elites imagined their state as a patrimonial household bound together by artificial kinship. However, their focus on civil officials as family members is too narrow. Chapters 3 and 7 demonstrate that the Sui-Tang "political family" encompassed all high-ranking elites, including Turko-Mongol tribal leaders and military officers, and that rulers elsewhere in Eurasia sometimes brought the language of kinship into their political relationships. Like solidarities based on personal relationships, manufactured kinship could be harnessed to create common ground among people who differed in ethnicity, status, and religion.

In addition to identity, patrimonial patron-client bonding is a valuable analytic concept explaining "robust processes" related to the integrative and disintegrative elements of Eastern Eurasian domestic and interstate politics. As Goldstone (1991, 36, 46–7) argues, a frequently overlooked aspect of historical causation is that societies are "fractal" exhibiting "similarity of organization on a variety of scales." In medieval times hierarchical interpersonal relationships existed at all social levels and extended from the domestic to diplomatic spheres in the Sui-Tang empires and Turko-Mongol khanates. Chapter 3 demonstrates the value of the patron-client model for understanding elite and plebeian political bonding in Eastern Eurasia. Chapters 6 through 8 show that patron-rulers in China and Turkic Mongolia used similar strategies to compete for control over the smaller Turko-Mongol tribes living in the margins between them. The great powers sought the exclusive right to invest outer clients with titles of office or nobility in order to indicate interstate alliances.[19] Marriage, fictive kinship, or trade—signaling a closer relationship—could supplement investiture. Turko-Mongol clients willingly acceded to these arrangements to gain material rewards and elevate their status. In essence, Türk and Sui-Tang rulers shared the ability to rule from the saddle in building their empires.[20] The volatility of patrimonial politics and diplomacy is detailed in chapter 9. Patron-client political bonds were vulnerable to personality clashes or death. The inherent fragility of patrimonial relationships partly explains why the Sui-Tang and Türk empires experienced periodic internal political instability and tribal revolts. Medieval interstate relations often appear to be a whirlwind of alliances and warfare in part because interpersonal allegiances and identities were relatively brittle mortar binding Turko-Mongols to their rulers in Mongolia *or* China.

D. China-Inner Asia Borderlands

The China-Inner Asia borderlands—of modern Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang—were another factor shaping the patters of interactions and exchanges between Sui-Tang empires and neighboring Turko-Mongols. Over the past two decades, the borderland has emerged as an influential concept among

historians and social scientists. Older ideas about frontiers viewed them as "natural" geographical, political, and cultural dividing lines. When empires expanded, cultural change was believed to diffuse unidirectionally, only occurring when "civilized" peoples engulfed, tamed, and assimilated so-called "barbarians" (Skaff 2004, 117–8). Joseph Fletcher (1986, 40–1) has advanced the most sophisticated version of the thesis that China was relatively isolated from the rest of Eurasia. Fletcher argued that ecological factors explained differences in nomadic-sedentary interactions in East and West Asia. In the western parts of the continent, such as Iran, pastures were in close proximity to settled oases. Consequently, nomads tended to regularly interact with settled farmers. However, he claimed that in East Asia the "lines between nomad and sedentary were most sharply drawn, Mongolia and China confronted one another through much of history as worlds apart." Many scholars still ascribe to variations of the Fletcher thesis.[21]

A countervailing and increasingly dominant trend in the historiography dates back to the work of the mid-twentieth century explorer and scholar, Owen Lattimore ([1951] 1962, 238–51), who introduced the concept of the "marginal zone" to Chinese history and the wider realm of scholarship. More recently, scholars have revived and expanded on Lattimore's ideas of frontiers as zones of cultural interaction, including historians of China's North and Southwest (Andrade 2007; Di Cosmo 1999a; Gaubatz 1996; Giersch 2006; Millward 1998; Shin 2006). Borderland studies have introduced the concept that frontier peoples living on the peripheries of states were active participants in history "who considered their homelands to be the center, not the edge" (Limerick 1987, 26). State institutional and ideological power is weaker on frontiers, giving local elites and common people higher degrees of political freedom, but exposing them to more violent conflict. Borderlands also tend to be regions with higher degrees of ethnic and cultural interaction. As a result, identities and cultures have greater fluidity than in core areas because there are more options for sharing, borrowing, adapting, and innovating (Baud and Van Schendel 1997; Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Scott 2009; Skaff 2004; Cheng 2010). Borderlands and core regions of states can mutually influence each other. This aspect of core-borderland relations most frequently has been applied to the contexts of early modern and modern European colonialism and American expansionism (Gould 2007a, 1416). However, it would be a mistake to assume that the European colonial experience parallels earlier historical patterns because of its shorter duration and greater asymmetries of power between Europeans and indigenous peoples. This book follows Gaubatz (1996, 19–21) in arguing that China and Inner Asia had a "persistent" borderland, which was the site of millennia of interactions between core regions of China and Mongolia. The resulting exchanges were more symmetrical and had a profounder long-term mutual impact than those of the age of European imperialism.

Studies of medieval Chinese frontier history have taken two approaches to frontier issues. Some scholars of Sui-Tang foreign relations ignore geographic considerations,

implicitly assuming that political divisions between the agricultural empires and nomadic states reflected a clear ecological and cultural divide between Chinese and Turko-Mongols (Beckwith 1987; Pan 1997). More recent work on mid-imperial China's northern borderlands demonstrates the existence of interethnic political relationships and shared cultural practices (Skaff 2004; Standen 1999, 2007, 15–25), but fails to define the geographical, ecological and ethnic parameters of China's northern borderlands. Chapter 1 and Appendix C make a preliminary attempt to rectify this shortcoming by using information in Tang geographical texts to map the contemporary China-Inner Asia borderlands. More generally, the importance of the China-Inner Asia borderlands to Eastern Eurasian history is a recurring theme of this book. Control of this frontier region, which harbored farming and pastoral peoples, contributed to changing patterns of political conflict and cultural synergy between China and the rest of Eurasia.

E. Environment

The historical climate and environment were factors that affected the borderlands and relations between the China and Inner Asia, reconfirming that there is "a close link between environmental and frontier history" (Perdue 2005, 17). Climatic theories have garnered attention—and criticism—mainly as potential explanations for pastoral nomadic attacks on China. In the early twentieth century, a number of scholars posited that long-term aridity triggered human migrations in Eurasia, including invasions of China. Their environmental determinism fell out of favor with historians due to lack of corroborating evidence (Perdue 2005, 16; Teggart 1939, 233–5). Recently, Chinese climatic scientists who study long-term trends in temperature and rainfall have hypothesized that pastoral nomadic conquests of China occurred during cold and arid periods, but these studies suffer from a weak grasp of the historical background.[22] In contrast, this book will argue that long-term climatic and population trends encouraged incorporation of Turko-Mongols into the northern tier of the Sui-Tang empires. Chapter 1 presents scientific and historical evidence that grasslands of the medieval China-Inner Asia borderlands were more plentiful than at present, providing an environment favorable to incorporating pastoral nomads as a significant constituency of the empires. Significantly, some historians who see a clear division between China and Inner Asia, such as Fletcher, draw their evidence from the late imperial period, when Inner Mongolian pastoralism appears to have been on the decline.

Short-term weather aberrations also shaped events by increasing the volatility of bonds between Turko-Mongol clients and their rulers. Scholars of Inner Asia have long recognized that weather disasters threatened pastoral nomadic subsistence economy and political organization. Episodic droughts and severe winters are known to increase livestock mortality, which in turn can have a severe impact on herding populations (Begzsuren et al. 2004; Khazanov 1994, 72–3). When lack of

rain or heavy snow deprived animals of forage, tribes had a strong incentive to migrate in search of new pasture. If the disaster led to significant herd die-offs, they sought new rulers who could provide material aid or war leadership to restore livelihoods. The most extreme crises could cause massive warfare and wholesale political reorganization on the steppe (Di Cosmo 2002a, 179–81). Past research, though valuable, mainly has focused on the impact of weather disasters on internal pastoral nomadic politics. This book will demonstrate that harsh weather also could disrupt relations between the Sui-Tang empires and Turko-Mongols living in the China-Inner Asia borderlands.

In sum, environmental factors gave rise to two different types of "robust processes" affecting relations between the Sui-Tang empires and neighboring Turko-Mongols. Long-term climatic trends favored incorporation of pastoral nomads into the Sui-Tang empires and thus promoted cosmopolitanism. Short-term bursts of severe weather periodically threatened the pastoral nomadic economy and political attachments to Sui, Tang and Turko-Mongol monarchs. Thus, the relatively favorable medieval climate was an integrative factor, while extreme weather intruded periodically as a disruptive element.

F. Warfare

Borderlands also played a role in influencing the changing Eastern Eurasian balance of power, which in turn affected patterns of diplomatic negotiations detailed in later chapters. Medieval diplomatic agreements—over terms such as investiture, marriage, and trade—were consciously calibrated and recalibrated to reflect the prevailing strength of various parties in a multilateral geopolitical arena. Military aggression served not only as a means of obtaining territory or plunder, but also as a negotiating tactic to gain a more favorable agreement in diplomatic agreements. Unfortunately, current scholarship only provides a piecemeal understanding of the contemporary power relations during the period from 580 to 800. Some episodes are well understood, such as Tang imperial expansion in the seventh century or the dynasty's dependence on the Uighur after the An Lushan rebellion of 755. However, we lack a synthetic account that takes a long-term and multilateral perspective to analyze the capabilities of various Eastern Eurasian states to project force.[23] Chapter 1 and Appendix A take a step toward improving knowledge of power relations by investigating the patterns of attacks on North China from 599 to 755, and give particular attention to relations between the Sui-Tang empires and the Turkic khanates of Mongolia. Cognizance of the swings in the balance of power will enhance understanding of the negotiations described in chapters 6 to 8.

Aside from describing shifts in the China-Mongolia power balance, this book proposes a hypothesis that control of the intervening borderlands was a factor in determining the ability of both sides to project force. Earlier scholarship offered an Inner Asian-centered thesis to military power that emphasized the superiority of

Turko-Mongol cavalry over infantry of agricultural societies. Turko-Mongol conquests reached limits when internal political organization lacked strong leadership or externally expanding armies arrived at regions without adequate pasture for cavalry mounts (Fletcher 1979–80, 237–9; Lindner 1982, 1981; Sinor 1972, 1981; Smith 1978). More recently, Di Cosmo (2002b) points out that the outcome of nomadic-sedentary military conflict involved greater numbers of variables. For example, in the case of Tang conquest of the Türks in 630, the Türk army became vulnerable due to a combination of internal dissent and severe winter weather (Graff 2002b). This book builds on these recent insights to argue that control over the China-Inner Asia borderlands was another significant factor determining the outcome of warfare between the Sui-Tang dynasties and Turkic khanates. When Türk rulers controlled Inner Mongolia, it was a launching pad for their heavy raiding of Tang China. On the other hand, when Inner Mongolia and other borderlands were incorporated into the Sui-Tang empires, Turko-Mongol khanates became defensive. Not only were strategic passes to invade China blocked, but borderland pasture provided Sui-Tang dynasts with the ecological environment needed to create effective cavalry armies for expansion. Retaining the China-Inner Asia borderlands and loyalties of the Turko-Mongol inhabitants therein became keys to determining the Eastern Eurasian balance of power.

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PART ONE

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

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