

Willem van Hasselt

Research Master Asian Studies

Leiden University

Horse Breeding in Semi-nomadic Society

Various anchor points have served historiography to shape our perspectives of the world. Western or Sinocentric perspectives have been viewpoints that have governed our understanding of history. China for instance has developed into a power center with peripheral satellite societies considered impressionable barbarians. Our lack of insight has engulfed us in a process of ‘othering’ them, whereas in fact, the makers of history can equally be considered peripheral societies of these barbarians.

Taking the Central Eurasian steppe nomads as a point of reference, this essay explores three societies at the periphery of pastoral nomadism. The Yuan Chinese, the Hungarian Magyars and the Egyptian Mamluks all developed a semi-nomadic culture with sedentary characteristics. They have also settled about a physical boundary (The Great Wall, the Carpathian mountains and the Syro-Arabian desert respectively) that drew a line between sedentary and nomadic civilization. One of the intriguing preserved aspects of nomadic society in these cultures is the art of horsemanship. Good horses have always been a commodity sought after by sedentary societies, while they never were quite successful in raising horses in the way the nomads did. The physical boundary is the scene of a tension between pastoral nomadism and agricultural sedentaries, and yields clues as to the differences in horsemanship between them.

Exploring literature on husbandry and horse training, this paper aims to create a survey of three very different cultures that share very similar characteristics in their semi-nomadic horse culture. These similarities will help to explain why horse breeding could never be implemented on the same scale in sedentary societies. The physical range of steppe pastures – the mobile home and breeding ground of nomads – thus defines a highly mobile Central Eurasian economy, for which the aforementioned power centers offer a gateway to the wider global medieval economy.

Sander Molenaar

Research Master Asian Studies

Leiden University

How the Mongols Learned to Sail

Current historiography of Mongol military is occupied with the unification of central Asian nomadic tribes and the organization of their cavalry army. One under appreciated aspect is the way the Mongols faced the geographical challenge of south China. The water rich and mountainous land ill suited Mongol cavalry. Accustomed to crossing rivers on inflated leather bags and makeshift rafts, the Mongols faced the Yangzi River, the longest river in Asia. Furthermore, the Southern Song dynasty, the Mongols' main opponent in south China, possessed a navy to defend the river and to sail reinforcements and provisions to cities bordering the waterways. In 1279, at the battle of Yaishan, a Mongol fleet defeated the Song navy. How did the Mongols develop a fleet capable of defeating the Song navy? To what extent did they adapt their military structure to the geographical challenge of south China?

The current state of field proposes the simplistic view that the Mongols took over, wholesale, the Song navy and added leadership, despite acknowledging the Mongol ship-building program. This paper aims to nuance this view by examining several naval battles in campaigns of Mongke Khan and Kubilai Khan between 1257 and 1279. In specific I will pay attention to the role of north Chinese, and of south Chinese defectors, in the Mongol invasion of Southern Song China. The Song dynasty developed its navy in response to the nomadic threat that cut them off from central Asia, and I will argue that (former) subjects of the Song dynasty in turn played a vital role in disseminating nautical knowledge among the Mongols. The rise of (semi-)nomadic dynasties in northern China and central Asia forced the Southern Song to reinvent itself. In response to this global development, the Chinese court switched its attention to the rivers and seas, both for commercial opportunities and for the defense of the state. It turned out to be to no avail, but the nautical knowledge acquired in a local setting was transferred to the Mongols and enabled the continued expansion of their world.

Barend Noordam, MA

PhD candidate

Leiden University

Stereotyping Military Inferiority: European Military Culture and Perceptions of the Ming Military

Many of the global early modern developments pertaining to the military are still framed within the technologically deterministic framework of the “Military Revolution”, which posits an early European military superiority vis-à-vis the rest of the world, including Asia. This paper proposes to look at the question of military superiority from the viewpoint of the early modern Europeans themselves, instead. Early interactions with the Chinese Ming Empire furnished us with a number of accounts, reflecting European perceptions of the Ming military. By analyzing perception and self-perception, I will endeavor to lay bare the assumptions which underlay European positive and negative assessments of military capability. A crucial concept I will introduce in this context is military culture, which I understand as the normative valuing of behavior, modes of combat, organization, and weaponry in the context of the military field. Perceptions will be viewed in the context of the military culture of the perceivers, mitigating the danger of technological determinism brought about by a narrow teleological reading of the source material. This will allow us to further elucidate and re-evaluate the role of the military variable in the European expansion and also shed light on the process of cross-cultural perception and identity formation.

Lujie Wang

Research Master Asian Studies

Leiden University

Mongol Way in China

Localization and de-localization of Mongols in China during 13th and 14th centuries are the key issues to be discussed in this article. What has changed and what not?

In order to avoid a broad and vague discussion, I select two certain periods to reflect those two issues respectively. The first is around 1272, when Qubilai Khan(忽必烈, 1215-1294) moved his capital to Peking, a period when Mongols got involved in Chinese culture totally for the first time. Instead of a normal analysis of the frequent contact and inevitable Sinicization, I focus my attention to the part of their lifestyle they most protected. The Mongols' real attitude towards Chinese culture could be revealed inadvertently through a careful survey of details of their life. Due to the limitation of historical records, only the royal lifestyle can be practically studied. Royal family's touring, hunting, and the Mongol form of organizing feasts would be the best examples to illustrate what has not changed.

The second period is after 1368, when Mongols were defeated and retreated to the steppe. Although the royal family could no longer live in China or get sufficient Chinese resource, they still kept some habits or hobbies which were obviously China-influenced. Imperial court then, the Northern Yuan(北元, 1368-1402), before its complete collapse, viewed China as their legal territory and tried to their best to recover the great Yuan dynasty(元朝, 1271-1368).

I mainly rely on the method of text-analysis to approach the topic and most text are written in Chinese. As well as admitting their importance, we still need to keep a critical attitude towards those Chinese authors' possible bias or forced compliment, especially those Ming(明, 1368-1644) scholars' anger and Qing(清, 1644-1912) scholars' pressure from politics.

Possible comparisons between Yuan dynasty and other Han or non-Han dynasties, would be listed. Only by that we could understand what sense hunting, to give an example, carries in different traditions, what its specific cause and influence is during Yuan dynasty.