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Owen Lattimore: World Historian

Abstract and Keywords

The American scholar, traveler, political adviser, and public intellectual Owen Lattimore strongly shaped American public opinion toward China and Central Eurasia in the twentieth century, but he also wrote major works on the geography and environment of the frontiers of Asia that still influence global historians today. His writings asserted the vital importance of China's relationship with the nomads of the steppe, including the Mongols, for defining the boundaries, cultures, and geopolitical strategy of empires and nation states. He argued for sophisticated explanations of relationships between environmental forces like climate and human culture, and he analyzed China and Central Eurasia so as to provide new perspectives on world history. This article evaluates Lattimore's contributions to world history in the light of his dynamic political and academic life.

Keywords: [Lattimore](#), [China](#), [Central Eurasia](#), [climate](#), [frontiers](#), [geography](#), [Mongols](#), [nomads](#), [steppe](#), [environment](#)

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Introduction

Owen Lattimore (1900–1989), the American traveler, diplomat, geographer, journalist, and businessman, founded the historical study of Chinese frontiers and Central Eurasia as we know it today. His voluminous writings on Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Russia, and other nations on China's frontier explored the cultural history of the borderlands where Chinese met the peoples of the oases, forests, and steppe lands. Although he never gained an academic degree, and he lost his academic base in the United States because of persecution by Senator Joseph McCarthy, Lattimore, more than any other Asian historian of his time, has inspired us to investigate the underlying forces shaping the contours of China and Central Eurasia by looking beyond national boundaries. World historians owe him an enormous debt, and we can still build on his insights.

Biography

Lattimore was born in 1900 in Washington, DC. His father was a high school teacher who became a businessman in China.¹ His family sent Owen to Europe at the age of twelve to get an education, and he studied classical languages in Switzerland and England, but Oxford University rejected his application for a scholarship, so he never got a college degree. In 1919, he returned to China to work in his father's import-export business in Tianjin. The 1920s in China were a time of chaos, when warlords struggled to dominate the country. Finding the business itself and the expatriate foreign community tiresome, he devoted himself to the intensive study of Chinese and to traveling. In 1925, he found his way to Guihua (modern Hohhot) at the end of the railhead in Inner Mongolia, where he saw camels and caravans bringing bales of wool from Central Eurasia. Once he saw the edge of steppe from Hohhot, he had to go farther.

He met his future wife, Eleanor, in the same year, and married her in 1926. They then planned a very unusual honeymoon. Owen would follow the camel caravan route across Mongolia, while Eleanor took the Russian trans-Siberian railway through Manchuria to Xinjiang. They would meet up at the end of the railway in Semipalatinsk and travel south from there through Xinjiang and over the Karakorum pass into India. By the early twentieth century, Xinjiang, the westernmost region of China under the Qing dynasty, inhabited mainly by Turkic Muslims, had fallen under the rule of independent Chinese warlords. Its people suffered through the influences of the Bolshevik revolution, Islamic revivalism, remnants of the collapsed Qing empire, bandits, warlords, and roving nomads who all competed for power. Owen and Eleanor did reunite in this chaotic land, and each of them wrote riveting accounts of their travels through remote, dangerous landscapes. Lattimore wrote his first travel book, *Desert Road to Turkestan* (1929), based on this experience, and Eleanor wrote hers as well, entitled *Turkestan Reunion* (1934), based, as she said, on her "letters written on my wedding journey in Chinese Turkestan."²

This journey inspired Lattimore's lifelong love of the Mongols and the steppe:

"I was childishly thrilled to be traveling with a caravan into that great plateau of depth and color, with mountains in sight, mountains on whose far side lay strange country, where I might travel but the one time in my life, living for a few score days the life of men in other ages."

Lattimore learned to love the Mongols and the Chinese Muslim drivers of the caravans, but he also expressed contemptuous views of the Chinese peasantry. What bothered him most was the relentless pressure of a growing Chinese population penetrating the grasslands and driving out the Mongols:

"the Chinese peasant simply cannot comprehend the idea of a fertile leisure, cautious marriage, and the fostering of his sons by enlarging the measure of their opportunities." [Instead they practice] "reckless marrying and begetting," expanding the area of their breeding

grounds and marriage grounds. "The Chinese are evicting the Mongols at the rate of ten miles a year, all along the edge of the caravan route."³

Lattimore viewed the Chinese farmer not as a peaceful agriculturalist content to cultivate his fields in harmony with nature, but as an aggressive, menacing force, driven by overpopulation and aided by government polices to penetrate the sparsely populated borderlands, at the expense of the native population:

so the Mongols were to withdraw from the menace of fields and houses and a life they did not understand; the game would be scared from the pretty hills, and instead of pines and sheep and white yurts there would be only a few squalid villages. To my way of thinking it was tragic.

From these on-the-ground experiences traveling in Mongolia and Xinjiang, Lattimore derived his lifelong fascination with the lives of pastoralists, and an aversion to the damaging environmental impact of Han Chinese settlement.

Owen and Eleanor returned to the United States briefly, but then went back to China in 1929. This time, they traveled in Manchuria, where they saw a similar process of eviction of Mongols by Chinese colonists. In Manchuria, Mongolia, and Xinjiang, Chinese warlords and officials actively promoted the settlement of Han peasants in order to ensure tighter control and greater revenue. Later, the Nationalist government would promote an even more aggressive settlement program, just as the Qing had done before. Since Russian and Soviet penetration of the steppe, by contrast, had not advanced as far, Lattimore came to believe that Russian and Soviet policies toward Central Eurasians were more enlightened than those of the Chinese. Although he endorsed some of the policies of the Soviet Union and its warlord allies, he was never a Communist, or even a Marxist. He was always suspicious of grand theories that were not based on the reality of people's lives.

Having earned acclaim with his travel account, Lattimore was hired upon his return to the United States by the Institute of Pacific Relations to be the editor of its flagship journal, *Pacific Affairs*. Under Lattimore's editorship from 1934 to 1941, this journal published academic and popular articles by writers from many nations about critical developments in Asia. Lattimore himself wrote articles giving historical and cultural perspectives on Japanese imperialism, Mongolian society, and Chinese nationalism, among other topics. Back in Beijing in 1934, he had had a fateful encounter with Karl August Wittfogel (1896–1988), a German Marxist Sinologist who had fled Hitler's Germany. Wittfogel also interested himself in Chinese frontiers, but he never traveled very extensively. His primary focus was academic. In Germany, he had written Marxist class analyses of Chinese agrarian society and class structure, and in collaboration with a Chinese scholar, Feng Jiasheng, he was working on a large scholarly study of the Liao dynasty, the dynasty that ruled northern China and Manchuria in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴

Wittfogel presented himself as a disciple of the more experienced Lattimore. He even persuaded Lattimore to cite his own work in *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*. At first, Lattimore sympathized with Wittfogel, who seemed to share his

scholarly perspectives, but Eleanor warned him: "Be careful. This man is flattering you in order to get started in the U.S. He is the kind who is always either licking your boots or jumping on you with his own boots."⁵ But Lattimore refused to listen to her.

As editor of *Pacific Affairs*, Lattimore encouraged articles combining scholarship and political commentary. He focused mainly on the implications of Japan's invasion of Manchuria for stability in Asia. He was especially concerned with Japan's impact on Mongolia, as he recognized that Japan could not stop in Manchuria; the logic of imperial expansion would lead it to penetrate Mongolia and ultimately to challenge Russia and China. His expert analysis of Mongolian social relations demonstrated that Japan would fail to control Mongolia, and this would only stimulate anti-Japanese resistance. He concluded that "The fate of China, whose maritime gates have for a century been sagging under the pressure of the West and are now being battered down by Japan, will largely be determined by what happens at the inland gates that open toward, or from, Central Eurasia and Siberia."⁶

Lattimore not only intervened in the heated scholarly and political debates about East Asia in the 1930s; he kept on traveling. He went to Moscow, where he met the leading Russian scholars studying Mongolia, and he began to study Russian. After returning to China, he visited the Chinese Communist Party leaders, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, who had retreated in 1936 to caves in Yan'an, in the northwestern province of Shaanxi. The Communists and Nationalists, at least in name, had formed a United Front to struggle against Japan, and Lattimore, like many other observers, regarded the Communists as being more dedicated to national unity than to class struggle. He was, however, well aware that the Communists intended to create a socialist society after the end of the war, and that the United Front policy was a temporary tactic.

Lattimore returned to the United States in 1938 to take a position as director of the Page School of International Relations at the Johns Hopkins University. Then he went back to China in 1941 to become an advisor to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of Nationalist China. Chiang asked Lattimore to transmit appeals for military and financial support to President Franklin Roosevelt. To the annoyance of provincial American diplomats, Lattimore had special access to Chiang Kai-shek, because he knew Chinese and sympathized with the Nationalist struggle against Japan. He was also able to meet with Zhou Enlai, the Communist Party leader, under the terms of the United Front between the Nationalists and Communists.

After the war with Japan ended, the Nationalists and Communists began to fight each other for uncontested rule over China. Lattimore, like the most perceptive of the State Department diplomats, knew from the inside that the Nationalist government, whose leader was hailed as a fighter for freedom by Henry Luce and *Time* magazine, was riddled with corruption and incompetence. The Communists, by contrast, seemed to have much tighter discipline, a severely ascetic society, and a genuine commitment to fighting against Japan. His analysis differed little from that of intelligent State Department analysts like John Service, or the independent journalist Edgar Snow, but Lattimore had the advantage of long residence in China and

familiarity with many intellectual and social circles beyond the Nationalist ruling elite.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 once again put Lattimore in the spotlight, when a furious debate broke out in the United States around the question "Who lost China?" In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy, leading a campaign to indict State Department officials like Alger Hiss and members of the American military as Soviet spies, who, he claimed, deliberately sabotaged the Nationalist regime, denounced Lattimore as "the top Soviet spy, the boss of the whole ring of which Alger Hiss was a part."⁷

As the "Who lost China?" debate intensified, the search for scapegoats expanded. The simple wisdom of the right wing of the Republican party held that Lattimore himself had caused the loss of China to the Communists; Moscow had brought Mao to power through conspiracy and spying; and, in the words of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the People's Republic of China was a "Soviet Manchukuo," a puppet state completely under the thumb of Stalin that shared the Bolshevik plan for world conquest.

When Senator McCarthy charged that hundreds of Communist Party members had infiltrated the State Department, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee held hearings, in which McCarthy made Lattimore the central target of his campaign. The key witness against Lattimore was none other than his former disciple, Karl August Wittfogel. Wittfogel, who had converted from a fervent Communist activist in Germany to become an equally fervent anti-Communist in the United States, eagerly joined McCarthy's witch hunt. The FBI compiled a dossier of 39,000 pages on Lattimore, and a grand jury indicted him for perjury in 1952, but a year later, a federal judge threw out the indictment.⁸

Yet the president of Johns Hopkins, under pressure from his trustees to fire Lattimore, abolished the school of which Lattimore was the director, placing him on paid leave. Although he later returned to teaching, he had no opportunity to train graduate students or build programs in his field. Lattimore resented the cravenness of the university, so, in 1962, he accepted an appointment to build a new department of Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds in England. This position gave him the chance to build his own program in Mongolian studies, and he trained many students at Leeds until his retirement in 1970. He then moved to Cambridge University, England, where he had many friends. Never comfortable about staying in the United States, he spent most of the rest of his life in Mongolia or Europe. (He visited the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies only once, in 1974, and it was there for the first time that I heard him speak to a scholarly audience.)

In 1969, he was installed as the first foreign member of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, and for the rest of his life the Mongols of independent Mongolia demonstrated their gratitude for his contributions to Mongolian studies. At his memorial service, held in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1989, his old friend, the Mongolian scholar Urgunge Onon, read a poem in his honor:

- Thinking and gazing from afar

- You have given your love to the Mongols
- who have all become your brothers.
- The blue sky is now your quilt
- The green grass your blanket;
- As long as Gurban Saikhan Khangqai stands
- The Mongols will remember you.

Lattimore's Scholarly Writings on the Frontier

Lattimore led an adventurous life, and his voluminous writings included travel accounts, political commentary, official memoranda, and scholarly research. He also left a large archive of photographs, now held at the Harvard Peabody Museum. No one has yet done a comprehensive survey of even his academic writings, and this essay is no exception. I will merely concentrate here on several themes in his writings: (1) the geography of Central Eurasia, and the interactions of non-Chinese peoples with China; (2) geopolitical analysis; and (3) the question of environmental determinism. Modern historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have revised many of Lattimore's arguments, but they still rely on his insights. All of the themes addressed by Lattimore continue to inspire world historians today.

Life on the Steppe and Inner Asian Frontiers of China

Lattimore derived his knowledge of steppe life from personal experience, traveling with the camel drivers across desert wastes, lodging in the dingy caravanserai of northwest China, and suffering the cold, drought, and danger of the trade routes of his day. He brought to his scholarship a deep sympathy for the lives of peoples whose way of life was about to disappear. No longer the mighty warriors of the steppe and the profitable caravan traders of the period of the Tang, Yuan, and Qing, the peoples of Mongolia and Central Eurasia in the twentieth century suffered destitution, warfare, and neglect. Furthermore, the inexorable outward push of Han Chinese settlers, abetted by the Nationalist state, turned the oasis dwellers and pastoral nomads into dependent populations, injured by disease and ousted from their traditional livelihoods while being forced into global markets that paid a pittance for their animal products. Lattimore's genius was to see through the signs of decadence in the Central Eurasia of his day to a more robust past, and to make that past a foundational element in the formation of Chinese states from earliest times.

Inner Asian Frontiers of China, first published in 1940, and *Studies in Frontier History*, a collection of his writings through 1958, form the core of Lattimore's scholarly work.⁹ They still provide fresh insights about the role of pastoralism in world history. Lattimore argued that, from ancient times, Chinese settlers of

the north China plain had created an agrarian civilization and formed early states, based on ploughing the soft soils of the loess region, moderate climate, limited rainfall, and the availability of tough grain crops like wheat, sorghum, and millet. On the edges of the north China plain, however, where arid conditions prevailed, there evolved a radically different form of life: pastoral nomadism. This form of life has almost disappeared today, although a few pastoralists still survive in Mongolia and Africa. Pastoral nomads, instead of relying on stable locations in settled fields, rely on animals that eat the various grasses of the steppe. They spend their lives in constant motion, searching for appropriate pastures in response to the current weather conditions and the availability of fodder. Unlike many historians and commentators, Lattimore realized that pastoralism, far from being a primitive reversion to a hunting and gathering mode of life, was a sophisticated, highly elaborate method of wresting a living out of extremely challenging environments.

Pastoralism thrives in many environments, from the taiga and tundra of Siberian reindeer herders, through the Central Eurasian grasslands extending from Manchuria to Hungary, to the high plateau of Tibet populated by yak herders. It is also found in Africa, North and South America, India, and the Middle East.¹⁰ The combinations of animals, the movements of its peoples, and their interactions with states vary widely from place to place. Lattimore concentrated almost entirely on the Turco-Mongolian nomads of Central Eurasia, but he was well aware of nomadic features in other regions.

In *Inner Asian Frontiers*, Lattimore traces the interaction of pastoral and settled ways of life over several millennia, focusing on the efforts of Chinese states to defend and expand their territory in the face of resistance and raids by their rivals, the pastoral nomads. For a long time, the two kinds of life coexisted in a tense symbiosis, in which neither form could eliminate the other, but ultimately, in the twentieth century, China defeated the Mongolian pastoralists. Lattimore, however, did not confine himself to the interaction of Mongolian pastoralists and settled farmers in northwest China. The first section of *Inner Asian Frontiers* is a vast overview of the geography, environment, peoples, and politics of all of Central Eurasia, encompassing Manchurian forests, Mongolian grasslands, Tibetan highlands, and the oases of Xinjiang. Still, the fundamental organizing principle of Lattimore's study is the division between the sown lands and the steppe lands, between regions of dense, nearly immobile populations and dispersed, mobile ones. Sown lands include oases in the middle of deserts as well as the broad fields of China and southern Manchuria. Mobile peoples include steppe nomads, forest peoples, yak herders, and caravan merchants. In the modern age, the settled populations of China and Russia, aided by railroads, capitalists, and state power, penetrated the remote, sparsely populated lands, leading to geopolitical competition, environmental devastation, and the near extinction of ways of life that had lasted for thousands of years.

Lattimore outlined this interaction as a stark opposition. While recognizing the role of trade and cultural interchange, he insisted that China's Great Wall marked an "absolute frontier" separating the steppe and the sown. For him, following his informants, "the pure nomad was the poor nomad," uncontaminated by urban life and settled agriculture, content to move with his animals constantly, without durable shelters or monuments. But only a small

proportion of pastoralists remained in this pure state. Pastoralists who kept their small-scale tribal organization could retain their mobility and autonomy. Often, however, ambitious leaders aimed to create supra-tribal confederations, linking together many tribes over large expanses. In order to build these confederations, most nomadic leaders found it to their advantage to trade with settled states, join in military alliances, and even create their own settled communities. It was much more profitable for a nomadic leader to derive his resources from the neighboring settled state than to build them out of the dispersed resources of the arid steppe.¹¹

Although pastoralism probably had multiple origins, modern archaeological investigations in the Ukraine and Russia have uncovered a great deal more evidence about it. Many scholars now believe that it originated in the western end of the Eurasian steppe, in the region of the Black Sea, much of modern Ukraine. There, around 4000 BCE, farmers moved away from the fertile black soil region and into poorer lands, acquired carts and carriages, and finally mounted on horseback. The archaeologist David Anthony, like Lattimore, emphasizes the importance of domesticating the horse.¹² Once these people learned to ride horses, they acquired immense power and mobility. They spread rapidly in all directions: eastward across Central Eurasia to Mongolia, Manchuria and China; southward through Iran and Afghanistan into India; and westward into the Middle East and Africa. At around the same time, the first Chinese settled states, forming in the middle of the second millennium BCE, spread to the north, northwest, and northeast from their earliest base in the bend of the Yellow River near modern Xi'an

The encounter of settled states with nomadic confederations generated military conflict, cultural exchange, and technical advance. The nomads brought the tools of mobility and warfare—horsemanship, carriages, and logistical networks—which enabled them to defeat settled states with cavalry forces. The settled regimes realized that, in response, they, too, had to get up on horses, acquire carriages, and learn how to combine both mobile and infantry warfare. At this point in time, the term “barbarian [yi]” applied by Chinese settled regimes to the mobile peoples was a generic description, not an ethnic term, or even a particularly disparaging one. By the middle of the first millennium BCE, however, the two ways life had sharply distinguished themselves from each other.¹³

The settled states of China, in turn, in order to strengthen their resource bases, allied with pastoral cavalry forces to wage war against rival states, adopted skills of horsemanship for specialized military units, and improved their weaponry with the new metallurgy brought from the steppe. (Although many Chinese and Western scholars assert that bronze metallurgy originated in China in its own distinctive form, there is considerable evidence that the later stages leading to iron casting originated in Central Eurasia.)¹⁴

Although he regarded pastoralists and settlers as opposed in political and cultural orientations, Lattimore recognized that the two cultures interacted with each other. Later historians and anthropologists have stressed more than Lattimore the nonmilitary interactions between nomadic federations and settled empires. Lattimore himself had remarked on the “shadow principle,” in

which nomadic state builders relied on the resources of their neighboring Chinese empire to acquire new resources. Through raiding and trading, the nomadic leaders gained supplies of agricultural goods, clothing, and money to reward their followers. In this way, nomadic confederations built themselves in the shadow of established Chinese empires.

Anatoly Khazanov and Thomas Barfield have developed Lattimore's original insight into a general theory of nomadic state formation. The theory helps to explain how the Xiongnu confederation rose and fell in parallel with the Han dynasties of the third century BCE to the third century CE; how the Türk empires paralleled the rise and fall of the Tang dynasty from the seventh to the ninth centuries CE; while the Liao, Jin, and Tangut empires contested for Chinese territory with the Song dynasties in the ninth to thirteenth centuries CE. Only the Mongol Yuan dynasty briefly conquered all of the core Han Chinese territory, from 1279 to 1368, but it, too, kept a separate sphere outside the settled region reserved for its court and nomadic dependents.

Fiscal Systems and Frontier Innovation

Later analysts have elaborated further upon the oppositions of Lattimore's model. Fiscal institutions, a topic that Lattimore did not discuss in detail, seem to play a key role in the evolution of both nomadic and settled empires.¹⁵ The degrees of separation between steppe and sown varied from dynasty to dynasty. Each of the pastoral states had to adapt institutions from China to secure stable rule over the settled regions under their control. To rule settled peoples, they needed a bureaucracy, and they needed revenue. Mobile pastoralists cannot impose large tax levies on their followers, since disgruntled subjects of a ruler can simply move away from him. States rely on promises of gain from raiding to attract more ambitious warriors. When ruling settled areas, however, pastoral rulers have the advantage of being able to prey on immobile populations. To do this, however, they need literate clerks, census takers, and a revenue-collecting bureaucracy.

Each of the major pastoral regimes devised different, but progressively more sophisticated, fiscal institutions as they extended their rule over China. The Liao dynasty, the subject of Wittfogel and Feng's study, maintained separate administrations for the pastoral and settled portions of the state in Manchuria. The Jin, which penetrated much farther south into China, increased its bureaucratic presence by employing larger numbers of Chinese civil servants. The Mongol Yuan, which came to occupy all of Han China by the thirteenth century, developed the most elaborate fiscal institutions, combining techniques from the preceding Song dynasty with its own military apparatus. Chinese historical accounts give credit for this innovation to the Khitan Turk Yelu Chucai, who persuaded the Khan that it would be more profitable to tax the settled population rather than exterminating them to make way for horse pastures. Whether or not the legend is true, its persistence indicates that pastoral states and settled states viewed land and population differently.

For their part, the settled regimes that resisted pastoral conquest also responded with institutional adaptations. The Tang dynasty, whose rulers had a partially Turkish heritage, created new fiscal institutions defined by military

needs alongside a strengthened Chinese bureaucracy. Most taxes were collected in kind—as grain, cloth, or corvée labor—and most independent farmers owed compulsory military service. In addition, the Tang used military colonies: soldiers who both defended frontiers and cultivated the land—expanding a practice first used on the frontiers by the Han dynasty.

The Song dynasty, driven to the south by invasions by the Liao and Jin, was forced to rely heavily on commercial levies to support its own armies and to pay the high indemnity imposed by the peace treaty with the Jin. Relying so heavily on commercial taxes was a great innovation in Chinese fiscal practice, marking a sharp break with the Han and the Tang. The Han and Tang had established state monopolies on essential goods like salt and iron, but not regular taxation of trade. The Song expanded these monopolies, but derived a very large percent of its budget from commercial taxes. We can argue that if the Song had not lost control of northern China, its fundamental agrarian base, it would not have been compelled to change its fiscal system so radically. In this way, the Song experience also bears out Lattimore's argument that frontier experiences drove institutional innovation.

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644), however, reacted against pastoral influence, creating the longest period during which most of Han China was insulated against the frontier. The Ming founder, who came from southern China, raised peasant armies to drive out the Mongol rulers and built his capital in the south, in Nanjing. His son, the third Ming emperor, built a second capital in Beijing (which means “northern capital”) in order to defend northern China against Mongol attacks. Although Beijing had previously been one of the capitals of the northern dynasties, including the Yuan, the Beijing we know today dates from this period in the early fifteenth century. The location and structure of Beijing also shows how frontier considerations shaped the structure of the Ming and Qing empires. Its location and design combine geostrategic thinking and geomantic considerations. Beijing itself, from the point of view of Han China, lies on an extreme northern periphery, and it lies just outside the edge of the Mongolian steppe and the Manchurian forests. The third Ming emperor placed his northern capital near the grasslands in order to support his military campaigns against the Mongols. He oriented the capital so that mountains protected it from the north, while the Forbidden City faced south, toward the heat of the sun.

The Ming founder also attempted to return the Ming fiscal system and economy to its rural roots, abolishing commercial taxes and destroying the circulation of currency with an abortive effort to impose paper money on the country once again. Yet the lure of the frontier persisted. One hapless Ming emperor tried to invade Mongolia in 1449, only to find himself captured by the Mongolian Khan. The bureaucracy in Beijing carried on under his half brother, and life went on as usual until he was returned. From the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, Ming officials established the widest possible distance from steppe culture, eventually building what we now know as the Great Wall to ward off nomadic raids over a region extending for thousands of miles. Yet even during this period, the Ming conducted active trade relations with the Mongols, acquiring horses from them in exchange for tea and silk, as so many of its predecessors had done.

The Qing rulers, who as Manchus had strong Central Eurasian links, like the Mongols, once again succeeded in linking the steppe and settled regions under a single rulership, but the Qing, unlike previous conquest dynasties, lasted for nearly three hundred years. Qing armies confronted a major nomadic rival, the Zunghar Mongolian empire, which flourished in western Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet from the mid-seventeenth century until its destruction in the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁶ In the course of this struggle, Qing rulers, once again reflecting the creative influence of frontier challenges, transformed the empire's fiscal, communication, and administrative structures. The Lifanyuan, a separate branch of the government designed to deal with Central Eurasian envoys; the Grand Council, a communication system created for rapid transmission of military and economic information; new reforms in the collection of taxes and registration of populations, and an innovative method of dealing with foreign commerce, first designed for Kashgar and later applied to the British in Canton, all came out of Qing expansion into the distant frontiers. When Qing expansion ceased in the mid-eighteenth century, the empire lost much of its dynamism, leaving it unprepared for the onslaught of Western powers in the nineteenth century.

This brief account of dynastic expansion and transformation takes its inspiration from Lattimore's striking insights into the role of frontier confrontation in driving innovation in imperial China. It shows that modern scholars have extended his focus on the impact of Inner Asian frontiers on Chinese state development, finding further consequences for institutional reforms, cultural orientations, and military strategy in all the major dynasties.

Lattimore as Geopolitical Analyst

Besides writing about Central Eurasian history, Lattimore, as journalist, diplomat, and scholar, also engaged actively in the politics of his time. He wrote policy documents for the U.S. government, he wrote for newspapers and magazines, and he edited the influential journal *Pacific Affairs*. He observed at first hand the growth of the Japanese empire, the penetration of Russia into Asia, the rise of Chinese nationalism and communism, and the postwar era of Maoism and the Cold War. How well have his analyses stood the test of time, and what can we take from them today?

While he was editor of *Pacific Affairs*, from 1934 to 1941, Lattimore wrote a series of articles on contemporary developments in Manchuria and Mongolia after the Japanese invasion of 1931.¹⁷ In these articles, he drew on his knowledge of long-term relations between Chinese empires, the peoples of Manchuria, and the Mongols to evaluate the new position of Mongols in the twentieth century. Mongolia had long been divided between Inner Mongolia, on the Chinese border, and Outer Mongolia, north of the Gobi Desert on the border with Siberia. A substantial part of the Mongol population came under Japanese rule in Manchuria, while others lived in Turkestan and Russia. Divided among these five regions, the Mongols struggled to create a unified nationalist movement, but they also suffered from class divisions within the pastoral society. Many of the princes profited from commercial dealings with

Han Chinese merchants, while ordinary herders suffered impoverishment and loss of livelihood to Chinese migrants. Lattimore asserted Mongolia's vital geopolitical significance because of its location in the heart of the Eurasian continent.

Lattimore was partly right. Japan did aim to expand into Mongolia in the 1930s in order to secure its control of Manchuria and northern China. The key battle between Japanese and Soviet troops for control of Central Eurasia took place at Nomonhan (Khalkhin Gol) on the border of Mongolia and Manchuria in 1939. Japan's defeat in this battle determined the fate of the conquest of northern Central Eurasia, and it freed up Soviet troops to launch the invasion of Poland in the same year. On the other hand, after this time, the key sites of battle shifted to the south of China, and Mongolians failed to unite in a single nationalist movement. Central Eurasia itself played little role in the rest of World War II, until the Communists and Nationalists competed for control of Manchuria during the Civil War of 1945-1949.

Lattimore's political analysis did not draw on environmentally determinist explanations: instead, he explained Mongolian developments past and present in terms of relationships between princes, their subjects, Manchu officials and generals, and Han migrants. For these analyses, social and political conflicts took precedence over long-term processes. In the broader time frame of *Inner Asian Frontiers*, however, Lattimore put greater stress on climate, geography, and structure than he did in his *Pacific Affairs* articles. Following his writing, we can see him working out problems that all global historians face: how to balance long-term change with contingencies, how much stress to put on sociopolitical relations compared to environment, and how much to indulge in prediction as opposed to detached historical analysis. No matter whether he was right or wrong, Lattimore's approach to these questions shows the touch of a masterful social historian at work.

He also analyzed incisively the features of "secondary imperialism" in the Nationalist government's treatment of the Mongols. While the Nanjing government suffered from the invasion by Japan and penetration by foreign capital, it perpetrated analogous policies on the Mongols. By building railroads into Inner Mongolia and supporting reactionary princes, it exploited the resources of Mongolia for the benefit of Han merchant elites and failed to benefit the majority of Mongolian people. Lattimore thought that, by comparison, the treatment of Outer Mongolia by the Soviet Union was less colonial and more beneficial to the local population.

But frontier policies extended well beyond the Mongolian frontier. Both the Nationalists and Communists, forced deep into the interior of China by Japanese forces, found themselves immersed in difficult terrain, alien peoples, and radically different challenges of government and cultural legitimacy from what they had faced in Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai. The Communists devised their nationality policy in response to contact with the non-Han people they encountered along the Long March and in China's northwest.¹⁸ This nationality policy, quite distinct from the Soviet version, became a keystone of the new state after 1949. The Nationalists, too, needed to devise technologies of public health, resource mobilization, energy, and governance in Chongqing and Kunming, which were mountainous, subtropical regions distant from

modern medicine or power networks.¹⁹ They did achieve successes in engineering and medicine, and the pioneers of these difficult times contributed a great deal to the economic development of both the mainland and Taiwan.

Although Lattimore's primary sympathies lay with the Mongols, caught between China and Russia in the twentieth century, he also recognized the power of Chinese nationalism. When Chinese began to mobilize against Western and Japanese imperialism, Lattimore held a more positive evaluation of the power of Chinese nationalism than did many of his contemporaries, and a more negative image of Japan. We need to remind ourselves that the United States from 1895 to 1931 preferred Japan, as the rising, modernizing power of Asia, over China, viewed as a sick empire that had degenerated into warring factions, famine, and turmoil. Few people in the State Department expected much from Chiang Kai-shek after he nominally unified China in 1927, and even after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, many diplomats urged China to compromise with Japan rather than undertake a futile resistance. Yet after Pearl Harbor, Lattimore found himself more in tune with American opinion, leading to his appointment as special envoy to Chiang in 1941.

Unlike most Americans, however, whose sympathies with China reflected missionaries' dreams of conversion, or businessmen lured by the prospects of a huge market, Lattimore's support came from geopolitical considerations. He knew that the great imperial past of China lent it a latent power that, if mobilized, could transform Asia and the world in positive ways. China, a victim of imperialism, once it learned how to stand up, could show the other colonized peoples of the world how to resist domination. But he also knew the darker side of China, in the form of the "secondary imperialism" inflicted by the rulers of China, and the Han population, on the non-Han peoples of the periphery. China simultaneously suffered foreign invasion, penetration of markets, and cultural disorientation in its encounter with the West, while also inflicting the same deleterious consequences on the peoples of its periphery. This dual status of China, as victim of imperialism, and as an imperialist in its own right, still describes accurately China's position in the world in the view of most Western scholars today. The Chinese government, on the other hand, promotes only the victim narrative, ignoring the plight of those, like Tibetans and Uighurs, who suffer discrimination under Chinese rule. Lattimore would have found the current stance of the People's Republic of China toward its Central Eurasian minority peoples quite similar to that of the Nationalist government in the 1930s.

Where Lattimore went astray was in his excessive valuation of the importance of Central Eurasia to the geopolitical conflicts of the twentieth century, and a tendency to praise the Soviet Union. In the years before World War I, Halford Mackinder, the Scottish geographer, had outlined a theory of the dominance of the center of the Eurasian continent over the destiny of the world. His paper entitled "The Geographical Pivot of History," presented at the Royal Geographical Society in 1904, formulated the Heartland Theory of civilizational dominance. According to this theory, the power that dominated Central Eurasia would dominate the "World Island" of Eurasia and, thereby, rule the world.²⁰ He urged Britain to prevent Germany from taking control of this vital region, which included Central Europe, Russia, and Central Eurasia.

Lattimore, although he seldom, if ever, cited Mackinder, shared his continental perspective. This approach stood in contrast to the traditional maritime orientation of the British Empire and the theory of maritime dominance espoused by the American naval officer Alfred T. Mahan.

As it turned out, in the twentieth century, Mongolia and Xinjiang did not become the “Pivot of Asia.” The decisive battles for power in Asia in the second half of the century were fought by American marines in the Pacific, by Chinese resistance forces in North China, by the Communists in Yan’an, and by the Nationalists in Chongqing, not by relatively small armies in Xinjiang, Mongolia, Russian Central Asia, or Tibet.

Yet frontier influences still left their marks on all sides. Manchuria became the central source of industrial materials for Japan, and the conflict over Manchuria between Nationalists and Communists determined the subsequent course of the civil war. Lattimore’s book on Manchuria, published only a few months after the Japanese invasion in 1931, outlined the long-standing Chinese and Central Asian cultural encounters over this borderland.²¹ Lattimore called Manchuria a “reservoir” from which nomadic tribal confederations repeatedly launched invasions of the Han Chinese lands to the south. Manchuria also contained a border zone where Han colonists penetrated in order to shore up defenses against these invasions. In this book, he argued that Chinese migration to the steppes was defensive, not aggressive, and that even the Great Wall was mainly a defensive bulwark. He contrasted the Chinese drive for security with the aggressive, adventurous exploratory consciousness of Americans and Russians.

Lattimore tended to indulge in large-scale ethnic generalizations about the psychological characteristics of large groups of people over extended periods of time. Later scholars have in fact confirmed much of what he said about the differences between the pioneer settlers of Manchuria, especially those from Shandong, and those from the West.²² But some of Lattimore’s larger cultural generalizations about the entirety of the Han Chinese have too much of a whiff of racial categorization to be persuasive. He really only addressed the character of Chinese in the north, not the very different society of south and maritime China. In these parts of China, migrants to the borders did look much like American and Russian pioneers, as they aggressively exploited the land, sought profits, and extended links to their home villages. The same applies to the overseas Chinese.²³

Although Lattimore exaggerated the military and resource significance of Central Eurasia at the time, in a broader sense his attention to China’s peripheries, the regions distant from the developed coast, still has much to offer in stimulating research on China in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Now the PRC, going beyond Qing territorial claims, embraces economic and military expansion deep into the Central Eurasian continent and into the maritime zone of the South China Sea. The One Belt One Road policy of Xi Jinping, promises to create peaceful development across Eurasia based on heavy infrastructural investment by China. Promoters of this grandiose policy like to cite the ancient Silk Roads as its predecessors, but they do not draw from Lattimore’s insights about the troubled relationship between Han

expansion and Central Eurasian peoples. Yet frontiers and geopolitics still dominate discussion of China's future in the world.

Eighty years after Lattimore first traveled there, academic research on Xinjiang has flourished. New studies based on the study of archival and published materials in Russian, Chinese, Manchu, Uighur, Mongol, and Japanese have shown that Xinjiang was a site of active intercultural exchange and political innovation in the early twentieth century.²⁴ Elements of the PRC's minority policy were anticipated by Han Chinese governors of Xinjiang, who needed to secure the allegiance of the multiple ethnicities of the province at a time when the Soviet Union used its own "affirmative action" policies to seduce them away from nationalist rule.²⁵ The governors both carried on the imperial legacy of the Qing and transported it into the new nationalist environment of the twentieth century. They behaved very much like colonizers, and many of their policies succeeded. Of all the Qing's frontier regions, only Xinjiang remained entirely under nominal Nationalist and later Communist rule throughout the twentieth century. Mongolia split into two separate states, Tibet was virtually independent until the PRC invaded it in 1951, and Manchuria fell under Japanese occupation, until the PRC reconquered it. Except for Mongolia and Taiwan, the PRC recovered nearly all the former territories of the Qing empire at its back, using familiar techniques to do so.

Even if the major battles of the war of resistance against Japan and the Chinese civil war took place in the core of Han China, Lattimore had pointed to the endurance of imperial ideals in the Qing borderlands into the twentieth century, and these regions ultimately did return to Beijing's control under the PRC. They have left an enduring legacy of tension and a site of resource extraction and infrastructure building up to the era of Xi Jinping's One Belt One Road policy.

Lattimore on Environmental Determinism and Historical Methodology

Lattimore always paid close attention to the landscape, the economic conditions, and the climate of the places through which he traveled, and he knew well that the culture of the local peoples depended heavily on their environment. The dramatic deserts, oases, and grasslands of Central Eurasia struck many travelers as some of the harshest conditions for survival of humans anywhere on the planet. Other travelers and geographers, most notably Ellsworth Huntington, professor of geography at Yale from 1907 to 1915, derived major theories of environmental determinism from their experience. Huntington argued that great nomadic invasions occurred after times of desiccation in the steppe, driving desperate nomads in all directions in search of pasture and food. Karl Wittfogel likewise traced the roots of

Communist autocracy in Russia and China to imperial control of water supplies in arid regions.

These writers certainly influenced Lattimore's thinking substantially, because, like him, they announced large generalizations about comparative history, tying broad historical trends to geography and climate. They also used openly racist descriptions of non-Western peoples, and they endorsed biological metaphors of "rise" and "decline" of civilizations. Lattimore did not escape these "pernicious" influences, as William Rowe notes, but he used them for different purposes.²⁶ Until the 1930s, he often wrote of long-term trends and structural explanations that transcended political changes. But as we have noted, during his editorship of *Pacific Affairs*, he engaged more actively in political debate, and he began to link his racial and cultural perspectives to current events. He invoked the vigor of Manchurian settlers as a positive factor leading them to resist Japanese expansion, and he explored the options for the Mongols to unite against the secondary imperialism of the Nationalist government and Japanese and Soviet influence.

In most of his academic writings, he turned away from simplistic environmental determinism. In 1954, he commented that Wittfogel preferred theory to empirical research:

Wittfogel's tendency is to create a theoretical framework and a terminology to go with it, and to adapt the facts to the framework.²⁷

Rather than turning humans into victims of environmental forces, in the service of a grand theory, Lattimore stuck to the maxim that "men make the frontiers" as much as frontiers make men.

When Lattimore invoked the common vocabulary of "primitive" and "advanced" civilizations, it was in service of nonracial objectives. As noted above, he argued strenuously that pastoralism was not a "primitive" form of production by comparison to agriculture; on the contrary, pastoralism evolved out of agriculture, driven by adventurous pioneers seeking to escape oppressive state power by adapting to the rigorous conditions of the steppe. In this sense, Lattimore's vision of the steppe resembles that of James Scott's *Zomia*: a zone of refuge for people escaping settled state power.²⁸

Lattimore and Huntington wrote their analyses before accurate information on historical climate change was available. Recently, climate scientists have collected new data on long-term changes in the steppes, and some have espoused deterministic theses on the effects of environmental forces on nomadic invasions. Many of these analyses are too simplistic to be credible. One more nuanced account, done with collaboration among climatologists, historians, and archaeologists, does find a climatic link to the rise of the Mongols under Chinggis Khan, but it is a completely different one from the desiccation thesis espoused by Huntington and others.²⁹ During a brief period in the early thirteenth century, rainfall above average levels stimulated rapid growth of grasses in the steppe, providing the fodder for increasing the size of herds. These increased animal populations could have supported military mobilization by a determined leader. But these climatic conditions could only

provide the raw materials: it still took a charismatic personality like Chinggis to arouse and mobilize them.

The work of Wittfogel and Huntington, as well as environmental determinist explanations, still attract attention, because they pose important questions about the relationship between natural processes and human history. But Lattimore's insights into relationships between climate change, geography, and history still give us a more nuanced account.³⁰

Conclusion

As global traveler, geographer, historian, government official, and academic, during the most tumultuous years of China's modern history, Owen Lattimore straddled more roles than any of us can ever imagine doing. Because of his engaged, passionate interactions with the peoples of China and Mongolia, combined with his historical imagination and vivid writing style, he profoundly shaped American understanding of the eastern half of Eurasia, and he has left many productive insights for world historians to pursue.

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