

## Ancient China and Its Enemies

**Review Number:**

312

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 February, 2003

**Author:**

Nicola Di Cosmo

**ISBN:**

521770645X

**Date of Publication:**

2002

**Price:**

£47.50

**Pages:**

378pp.

**Publisher:**

Cambridge University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge

**Reviewer:**

Yuri Pines

In 221 BCE the state of Qin eliminated the last of its rivals, putting an end to centuries' long endemic warfare of the Warring States (*Zhanguo*, 453-221 BCE) age. The First Emperor (Qin Shi Huangdi, r. 246-221-207 BCE), proud of his unprecedented achievement, ordered bronze weapons throughout the empire to be collected and melted down, 'to show that they will no longer be used.'<sup>(1)</sup> Yet only a few years later a huge Qin army of reportedly 300,000 soldiers was mobilized and dispatched against the 'Hu' people at the north, i.e. against the Xiongnu. Few could imagine then that this campaign marked not only the end of the *pax Qinica* but more broadly, the beginning of a centuries-long struggle between the rulers of Chinese Central Plain and their northern neighbours. From the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) dynasty on, contentious relations with the Northern frontier (or, more aptly, Northern Zone) influenced decisively the political, economic and military life of China proper.

This pivotal role of the Northern frontier in Chinese history explains the continuous scholarly interest in Sino-nomadic relations from the Han dynasty onward. In particular, many studies have been dedicated to the Han struggle against the Xiongnu, which was colourfully depicted by two major contemporary historians, Sima Qian (c. 145-90 BCE) and Ban Gu (32-92 CE).<sup>(2)</sup> Despite this variety of studies many important questions have remained unanswered. One of the largely unresolved mysteries concerns the Xiongnu ascendancy: why and how did these people, who were but marginal players during the Warring States period, become the most formidable enemy of the Han and the ultimate Other in the eyes of contemporary Chinese statesmen and thinkers? What were the processes that brought about their rapid entrance on the central stage of Han history?

Scholars wishing to answer these questions face a series of tough obstacles. First, the Xiongnu, like other

early inhabitants of the steppes, were illiterate, and no autochthonous accounts of their history exist. Second, Chinese historiography is of little help for those who are interested in pre-Han history of the Xiongnu and their predecessors. The pre-imperial history of Chinese Central Plain was dominated by the strife between 'Chinese' states that shared common ritual and written culture, while the aliens, and particularly the nomads and the semi-nomads of the Northern Zone, remained marginal players, whose very existence was all but ignored by contemporary historians, statesmen and thinkers. The sketchy and largely idealized accounts of the Xiongnu ascendancy in Sima Qian's *Shiji* and Ban Gu's *Han shu* cannot compensate for the dearth of earlier materials, as a result of which those scholars who have tried to reconstruct the early history of China's northern neighbours have sometimes had either to overstretch their sources, or to rely heavily on anthropological theories, which could not always be supported by the extant evidence.

In recent years a major breakthrough in studies of the early history of the Northern Zone has become possible. Hundreds of archaeological discoveries from various sites within present-day China and beyond its boundaries have provided scholars with new data about the material life of the Northern Zone dwellers, their social structure, and their economic interaction with the inhabitants of the Central Plain. Parallel to this development, scholars have developed far greater sensitivity to the ancient Chinese historical texts, their sources, agendas and composition. This abundance of the new data and the improved access to the written sources has made possible a new reconstruction of the history of Xiongnu and their predecessors. This reconstruction has been brilliantly performed by Nicola Di Cosmo in his *Ancient China and its Enemies* – a study that for years to come will certainly set the tone for the research of the early stages of Sino-nomadic relations.

Di Cosmo has benefited enormously from the rapid increase in archaeologically-obtained materials from the Northern Zone; and in incorporating these materials he has succeeded in accomplishing several formidable tasks. First, he has integrated diverse excavation reports and archaeological surveys, which were performed by scholars from different countries at different periods of time, were written in different languages, employed different techniques and often proposed different, even mutually contradictory interpretations of their data. Second, Di Cosmo has successfully synthesized archaeological materials with textual sources, taking into account new breakthroughs in textual criticism during the recent decades. Third, Di Cosmo not only managed to reconstruct the basic dynamics of early Sino-nomadic contacts, but has also proposed novel explanations of Sino-nomadic relations in the age of the Han dynasty and before. These three major achievements turn Di Cosmo's book into a laudable scholarly model, the impact of which will be felt well beyond the narrow field of Northern Zone studies.

*Ancient China and its Enemies* combines the clarity and comprehensiveness of a textbook with the novelty and originality of the specialist-oriented study. Some may dislike the mixture of two genres, but in my eyes this is an undeniable advantage of Di Cosmo's study. The book is neatly organized into four sections, which comprise two chapters each; each chapter and each section serve as a solid foundation for the subsequent discussion. The narrative is clear and readable, and the author's arguments are based on dependable and transparent research. Di Cosmo does not hesitate to defy generations-old theories, as he does for instance in his brilliant and provocative explanation for the construction of the Great Wall (see below), but he is careful not to overstretch his sources and to leave certain questions open for further research. He masterfully synthesizes broad range of archaeological, textual and, to a lesser extent, epigraphic sources, employing whenever needed an impressive amount of secondary materials, which include, aside from works written in Chinese and Western European languages, also studies in Japanese, Russian and – at least in one case – in Mongolian.

The first two chapters of *Ancient China and its Enemies* deal with the first appearances of nomads in the Inner Asian steppe in general (Chapter 1) and in China's Northern Zone in particular (Chapter 2). These are the less innovative parts of Di Cosmo's research, and the discussion here is largely based on a synthesis of recent archaeological discoveries along China's boundaries and beyond. Di Cosmo briefly surveys major theories that have tried to explain the rise of the nomadic way of life, concluding that there is no single key to this crucial question. The emergence of nomadism may be rather explained as a combination of environmental, technological and social factors. Thus, advances with respect to horse-riding and, probably,

chariots were crucial in allowing a shift from part-time pastoral economy to full-scale nomadic life. This development was apparently paralleled by the appearance of warring aristocrats who learned to utilize the advantages of their superior mobility and martial abilities. This class in turn played a crucial role in the centralization of nomadic peoples and their further military expansion. Yet Di Cosmo is careful not to impose this model automatically on the early nomadic and semi-nomadic cultures of China's Northern Zone and he emphasizes that 'one cannot see, in the Northern Zone as whole, a linear evolutionary continuum' (pp. 87-8). Instead, it is possible that several parallel pastoral societies were emerging in northwestern, north-central and northeastern sub-zones, inter-acting among themselves and with their semi-pastoral and sedentary neighbours. Di Cosmo's cautious discussion shows that at the current stage of our knowledge an attempt to locate the Xiongnu back in history may be not only premature but generally untenable. What is possible is to outline, as Di Cosmo does, basic trends of developments in the steppe region to the north of China proper; but much more archaeological research is required before we can restore with sufficient clarity the sociopolitical dynamics in this area prior to the entrance of the steppe region into the orbit of Chinese history.

In analyzing the rise of the nomadic way of life, Di Cosmo laudably avoids simplistic linear schemes, and his caution invites the reader to consider further possible explanations for the advent of nomadism. Among them one could expect more emphasis to be given to climatic factors, which are mentioned only in passing (p. 23). This is regrettable, because the field of paleo-climatic studies has developed dramatically in recent years and much relevant data is now available.[\(3\)](#)

In the second section of his book Di Cosmo shifts from archaeological to textual evidence. The third chapter focuses on the intriguing issue of early Chinese attitudes toward the aliens. Heretofore this topic has never been systematically explored in Western research, resulting in sketchy and often highly misleading accounts of the origins of the 'Sino-Barbarian' dichotomy. Scholars often cite selected passages from pre-imperial texts out of their context, to prove that the Chinese viewed the aliens as inferior, marginal and insufficiently human. This simplistic approach, which was partly influenced by the Han period discourse, failed to do justice to the complexity of ancient Chinese relations with their neighbours, allowing for a highly skewed picture of alleged Chinese 'racism', as presented recently by Frank Dikötter.[\(4\)](#) Di Cosmo breaks away from the tradition of simplistic selected citations, and presents a novel and refreshing picture of Chinese views of the Other.

Di Cosmo's careful reading of the received texts and especially his contextualization of their accounts allows him not only to undermine the monochromatic picture of putative Chinese 'racism' as presented by Dikötter and others, but also to restore the complex dynamics of Chinese relations with the Rong, Di and other tribes. Different, and at times contradictory, doctrines co-existed among ancient Chinese statesmen with regard to the proper treatment of the aliens: proponents of aggressive conquest and incorporation of the 'barbarians' were opposed by supporters of a peaceful policy, while harsh statements about the aliens' 'bestiality' did not prevent Xia ('Chinese') states from trading, allying and intermarrying with their neighbours. This diversity of approaches reflects not only a complex political situation, but also a deeper cultural reality. Di Cosmo's observation that the 'boundaries between presumed cultural communities in the Eastern Zhou (770-256 BCE) period appear to have been drawn ad hoc, according to ever-changing political circumstances' (p. 104) is an important reminder to the readers that the retroactive imposition of imperial cultural definitions on the pre-imperial world is methodologically untenable. Indeed, *pace* Han dynasty thinkers, Chinese statesmen of Chunqiu ('Springs and Autumns', 772-453 BCE) and Zhanguo periods were much more preoccupied with the struggle against their 'brethren' who shared a similar written and ritual culture, than with repulsion of the 'uncultivated' aliens.

Di Cosmo's contextualization of Chinese views of the aliens in contemporary political dynamics could have been even more insightful, had the author not confined himself exclusively to the relations of the Xia with their northern neighbours. This limited perspective derives primarily from the author's desire to reach and discuss topics which became relevant in the Han period, when thinkers and statesmen were debating the proper policy toward the Xiongnu. This teleological selection, however, comes at the expense of an in-depth discussion of the other flank of Chinese world, which was by far more important, politically and militarily,

throughout most of the Chunqiu period, namely the Southern and Southeastern frontier. The brief hegemony of two 'semi-barbarian' southeastern superpowers, Wu and Yue, at the end of the Chunqiu period was a shocking experience for ritual purists, but in the long term it supplied the Chinese with a model of cultural interaction with militarily superior but culturally inferior powers – a model that was to remain highly relevant for future Chinese history. Diplomatic and military needs encouraged the rulers of Wu and Yue to adopt aspects of Zhou ritual culture, and even forge a favourable pedigree that would further legitimize their hegemony. Large-scale use of advisors of Xia origin further facilitated the erstwhile barbarians' adaptation to Zhou ways; and eventually southeasterners were adopted, even if reluctantly, into the Zhou world despite their preservation of significant traits of non-Zhou indigenous customs. This example of acculturation from a position of power and not of weakness may be largely irrelevant to the Xiongnu of Han times, but it became highly important in later centuries.

The fourth chapter, which deals with the first contacts between the Chinese and the 'real' nomads, the ancestors of the Xiongnu, is one of the most novel and daring parts of the whole book. Di Cosmo tries to resolve the riddle of the sudden appearance of the nomadic menace after centuries of limited and largely peaceful relations across the (then still indistinct) Northern frontier. Conventional wisdom, based on Han period stereotypes, holds that the nomads' inherent belligerence encouraged them to invade and plunder their southern neighbours, who in response built protective 'long walls'. Di Cosmo completely refutes this thesis. His careful reading of historic records, and combining them with archaeological evidence brings him to a radically different conclusion: namely, the walls were not built to 'protect the sedentary civilization', but, rather, to protect the recently conquered nomadic territories. The nomads were not the belligerents; it was the 'cultivated' Chinese who invaded nomadic pastures as a part of the process of territorial expansion characteristic of the Warring States era. Zhanguo walls, just like their heir, the Qin Great Wall, did not mark an ecological boundary between the steppe and the sedentary realm, but rather were built deep inside the original nomadic territory. Far from being beast-like war-mongers, the nomads were victims of Chinese expansionism, which came as a direct consequence of the previous occupation and incorporation of the lands inhabited by the Rong and the Di tribes.

Di Cosmo's convincing reconstruction of the early stage of the Sino-nomadic encounter raises the question of the reasons for the sudden Chinese expansion into the fringes of the steppe in the late Zhanguo period. One possible answer may be the advent of iron technology, which allowed lands that were previously unsuitable for agriculture to be turned into arable fields. All major Zhanguo states were preoccupied with reclaiming the wasteland, both within and beyond their boundaries. The northward expansion of the states of Qin, Zhao and Yan was part of this process; and the conquest of new territories was usually accompanied with settlement activities. It might have taken some time before the Chinese learned that most (although not all) of the Northern Zone is largely unsuitable for agriculture and gave up the idea of incorporating it fully into farmland; in the Zhanguo period. However, the hopes of establishing a viable agricultural base in the southern part of the steppe belt might still have been high, which explains the aggressive policy of the Chinese states. This policy culminated with Qin incursions against the Xiongnu in the Ordos area in 215-214 BCE, which resulted in the erection of a large section of the Great Wall, which became the hallmark of Qin military achievements.

Qin massive aggression against the Xiongnu had unexpected consequences for Sino-nomadic relations. The Xiongnu reorganized and used the opportunity of the collapse of Qin in 207 BCE to renew military pressure on China's boundaries; subsequently, Han military setbacks changed once and for all the nature of China's relations with the peoples of the Northern Zone. These events are discussed in the fifth chapter. Scholars have long been fascinated by the almost simultaneous rise of two unified empires – Qin-Han and the Xiongnu – on both sides of the Great Wall, and have proposed numerous explanations for the connection between Chinese empire-building and the consolidation of the nomads' power. Di Cosmo observes that many of the past theories cannot be adequately supported by historical evidence, and suggests an alternative model; the nomadic organization was a response to the crisis engendered by Qin incursions deep into Xiongnu territory. The resultant militarization of nomadic society brought about the emergence of a military aristocracy, which sought to maximize its power through limited political centralization on the supra-tribal

level, and continuous extortion of Chinese goods. This model, which turns both Chinese and nomads into active players and takes into account dynamic changes in Sino-nomadic relations, fits not only the Xiongnu case, but also many of the later establishments of nomadic empires, by Qidans and Mongols among others.

The sixth chapter of *Ancient China and its Enemies* deals with the well-known narrative of the collapse of the Chinese policy of peaceful coexistence with the nomads (the so-called 'kin harmony' policy, *he qin*). Why did the accommodation policy collapse? Di Cosmo suggests that it was impossible in the long run to maintain peace with nomads due to the incompatibility of the political structures of the Han empire and of the Xiongnu confederation. While the Han generals strictly observed the peace terms, the unmanageable Xiongnu chieftains frequently defied the agreement terms and invaded Chinese territory, emptying *he qin* policy of value. This novel observation adds an interesting dimension to our understanding of the reasons of the breach of the agreements by the Xiongnu: actually, their leader, the *chanyu* (or *shanyu*) could not impose his will with the same efficiency as a Chinese emperor could. The explanation is ultimately valid, even if it slightly exaggerates the degree of Chinese imperial authority in the border areas. It was the Chinese understanding of the impracticality of peaceful coexistence with the Xiongnu that led to the implementation of an assertive military policy in the age of Han Wudi (r. 141-87 BCE).

Having explained the reason for the Han's abandonment of conciliatory policy, Di Cosmo tries to explain the reasons for the unprecedented scope of Wudi's megalomaniac military campaigns, which brought Chinese armies deep into central Asia, into the Gobi desert, and into the remote areas to the south and southwest. The explanation is entirely functional; namely, the campaigns were undertaken due to the improvement in Han military technology, particularly the increasing use of cavalry. This in turn demanded occupying arid areas in the North that could be turned into pastures; simultaneously, invading Central Asian oases was aimed at severing Xiongnu's political and economic ties with the inhabitants of the Tarim basin and with the Qiang people further to the south. While these explanations are certainly plausible, it may be observed that Di Cosmo does not pay sufficient attention to the ideological factors behind Han Wudi's new course. In particular one could expect more discussion about the impact of the ideas presented in the *Gongyang zhuan*, a text which was elevated in Wudi's time almost to the status of an official state ideology. The *Gongyang* emphasis on the universal supremacy of the Son of Heaven, and on 'leaving nothing external' to the true king, provided Wudi with ideological legitimacy for his campaigns, the ultimate aim of which was to promote imperial grandeur to the levels previously attained only by the Qin First Emperor. In light of the general trend for activism during Wudi's reign, an ideological explanatory framework cannot be neglected.

The final two chapters deal with the cultural re-conceptualization of the Xiongnu as the fearsome 'Other'. Here Di Cosmo shifts decisively from archaeological to textual sources, analyzing in great detail the way Sima Qian depicted the Xiongnu. In this discussion the author displays laudable sensitivity to his major source, the *Shiji*. On the one hand he demonstrates how the accumulation of geographic and anthropological knowledge in the early Han period served Sima Qian, and how the historian synthesized his diverse sources to present a detailed account of Xiongnu history and life, and of the impact of the wars with Xiongnu on Chinese economy. Yet aside from presenting an account of the adversary's habits and political life, Sima Qian sought to provide an ideological explanation for the Xiongnu menace by incorporating them into a comprehensive cosmological-philosophical system. By inventing the Xiongnu's genealogy, by allocating them space in the larger cosmological scheme, and by projecting the Sino-nomadic confrontation back into the past, the Han historian rationalized the conflict, thereby providing a useful model for later historians who continued to employ similar clichés when dealing with Sino-nomadic relations. So powerful was this model, that its impact is observable not only in traditional accounts of the nomads, but even in the modern historiography of ancient China. It is Di Cosmo's achievement that he has succeeded in going beyond accepted narratives to present us with novel and refreshing observations about the early stages of Sino-nomadic relations.

Di Cosmo's comprehensiveness, intellectual boldness and remarkable ability to synthesize diverse sources will doubtless make his book a most welcome addition to the Sinological library, and its impact will be felt beyond the narrowly defined limits of the discipline. It would be most desirable therefore, if the Cambridge

University Press were to consider the economic constraints of students in the field and provide them with a cheaper paperback edition. Hopefully, the new edition will contain at least several illustrations, which are badly needed especially when the author discusses the stylistic characteristics of various artifacts. A single illustration on the front cover does not suffice to explain what 'animal style' is or to demonstrate the shape of bronze vessels discussed extensively in the first two chapters.

Unfortunately, the current edition is not only fairly expensive and lacking in illustrations, but it is also full of annoying typos, which are particularly unwelcome due to their predictably negative impact on the student audience. To begin with, Di Cosmo's decision to use the Wade-Giles transliteration throughout the book is not helpful. This awkward and fairly obsolete system of transliteration is now being abandoned even in Taiwan, and it is highly recommendable that academic presses shift to the much more convenient *pinyin* system. In Di Cosmo's case, the author's awareness of the inadequacy of the Wade-Giles system has resulted in numerous idiosyncratic and sometimes fairly awkward transliterations. Thus, the province of Shaanxi is sometimes referred to (according to the Chinese Postal Atlas system) as Shensi (pp. 13, 48), and sometimes, idiosyncratically, as Shaansi (pp. 45, 85). Di Cosmo furthermore routinely misspells the Wade-Giles syllable 'i' as *pinyin* 'yi'; hence the same city is referred to on p. 302 as Lo-yi and on the next page – as Lo-i; another example of inconsistent transliteration is referring to the same person as either 'Han' or 'Hann' An-kuo (p. 210). In some cases the author suddenly adopts *pinyin* Romanization almost *in toto* as in the case of Nie Weng-yi (p. 211; in Wade-Giles it should be Nieh Weng-i).

Some typos are fairly disturbing, when they skew understanding of historic events (in what follows I adopt the Wade-Giles system): thus on p. 98 one should read 'Ch'i' and not 'Chin'; on p.111 n. 48 'Ch'in' should be emended to 'Ch'u' and on p. 113 'Wei' should be 'Wey' (twice). Furthermore, Wey's house was not 'royal' but 'ducal' (p. 98) – the rulers of this polity never assumed royal title; 'Hsiang-tzu of Chao' (p. 128) should be 'Chao Hsiang-tzu' (Chao was his lineage name and not his state affiliation); while 'Chien and Hsiang' (p.135) are not personal names but abridged forms of the posthumous titles of 'Chao Chien-tzu' and 'Chao Hsiang-tzu'. It may be noticed also that the Buriat Republic in Russia is no longer called 'Buriat-Mongol A.S.S.R' (p. 251, nn. 155-6) – this is a Soviet designation.

Certain problems occur within bibliographic section, which lacks reference to the *Shiji* and *Han shu*, and also to Hayashi Minao's study cited on p. 256, n. 2; and the index is inadequate and does not reflect fully the book's richness. However, the major problem is undoubtedly the Glossary, which contains an unbearable amount of typos in Chinese characters and/or in transliterations: I have counted no fewer than fifteen typos. It is highly recommended that these typos be emended in the next edition of the book.

These technical problems, annoying as they are for such an expensive book, are nevertheless marginal to its overall quality. Nicola Di Cosmo is to be congratulated on an excellent piece of scholarship, which has significantly raised the bar for subsequent explorations in the field of Sino-nomadic relations.

## Notes

1. Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Grand Historian. Vol. 3: Qin Dynasty*, (Chinese U. of Hong Kong Press; Hong Kong, 1993), p. 184.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For example, Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Blackwell; Oxford, 1989); Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War and Trade along the Great Wall* (Indiana University Press; Bloomington, 1989); Yü Ying-shih, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (University of California Press; Berkeley, 1967).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See for example, Hong, Y. T. *et al*, 'A 6000-year record of changes in drought and precipitation in northeastern China based on a 13C time series from peat cellulose,' *Earth and Planetary Science Letters*, 185 (2001), 111-19; Kong Zhaochen *et al*, 'Neimenggu zizhiqu Chifengshi jujin 8000 – 2400 nian jian huanjing kaoguxue de chubu yanjiu' ['Preliminary environmental archaeology research on the period between 8000 - 2400 BP in Chifeng, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region'], *Huanjing kaogu yanjiu*

- , 1 (Beijing, 1991), 112-19; Qiu Shanwen *et al*, 'Dongbei xibu shadi gu turang yu quanxinshi huanjing' ['Ancient desert soils and the environment of the western area of northeast China during the Pleistocene'], in *Zhongguo quanxinshi danuanqi qihou yu huanjing* (Beijing, 1992), pp. 153-60; M. G. Winkler and P. K. Wang, 'The late-quadernary vegetation and climate of China,' in H. E. Wright, *et al*, eds, *Global Climates since the Last Glacial Maximum* (Minneapolis and London, 1993), pp. 221-64; Yang Zhirong and Suo Xiufen, 'Zhongguo beifang nongmu jiaocudai dongnan bu hunajin kaogu yanjiu' ['Research of environmental archaeology of the southeastern part of the agriculture-pastoralism interaction zone of north China'], *Huanjing kaogu yanjiu*, 2 (Beijing, 2000), 81-8. I am grateful to Gideon Shelach for introducing me to these studies.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. F. Dikköter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford University Press; Stanford, 1992), pp. 1-30 ff.[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

#### Other reviews:

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/312#comment-0>

#### Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1549>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>