

HAO YIDONG

THE WAY OF PRAIRIES

GRASSLANDS AND
HUMAN CIVILIZATION



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Human Civilization



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Contents

Chapter 1

Steppe Routeways and East-West Exchanges

Eurasian Steppes: The Ancient East-West Thoroughfare	4
Traces of Exchanges in Time Immemorial	16
Waves of Exchange in the Alteration of Nomadic Empires	21
Summary of the Roles of Eurasian Thoroughfare	57
Reading Materials: Concept and Connotation of “Prairie Silk Road”	75
Reading Materials: Tibetan Buddhist Temple by the Baltic Sea	77

Chapter 2

Changing Face of Nomadism

General Knowledge of Nomadism	84
19 Head: Upper Limit for Per-capita Livestock Holdings Unchanged for Three Millennia	104
Evolution and Transformation of Nomadic Lifestyle	131
Reading Materials: Postscript to <i>Intensive Grassland Animal Husbandry</i>	163

Chapter 3

Meat from Grassland—Timeless Treasure

American Beef Dominating World Market	168
Heritage and Development of Inner Mongolian Meat	186
Prairie Meat: Competing for Customers	226
Prairie Meat Products from Other Parts of the World	231
Secrets of Prairie Meat Flavor	240

Chapter 4

Modernization of Animal Husbandry in Grassland Areas

Different Outcomes of Nomadic History	260
“Cells” of Modernization	270
Division of Labor and Cooperation	298
Path to Modernization	309
Reading Materials: Ordos’ Exemplary Project of Establishing Standards for a Modern Animal Husbandry Industry (Abridged)	330

Bibliography	334
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Postscript	337
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Postscript for the English Edition	341
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| Chapter 1 |

Steppe Routeways and East-West Exchanges





- The open flat Eurasian Steppes, stretching from the Hinggan Mountains in Northeast Asia, to the west of the Carpathian Mountains in Europe, were a natural thoroughfare for ancient human migrations and exchanges between the East and the West. Ever since the arrival of the nomadic age, trains of horses, caravans and camels, carrying people, goods and culture, have promoted the synchronous evolution of European and Asian civilizations.
- The axial zone of the Eurasian Steppes comprised of the Mongolian, Central Asian and Eastern European grasslands, has since ancient times shared such common characteristics as a relatively favorable climate, ecological consistency, parallelism in economic activity and lifestyle, and easier access. The steppe thoroughfare and the five ancient civilizations adjacent to it in the south have together formed the power house for the evolution of world civilization.
- Evidence of ancient East-West exchanges is first of all archaeological finds. Ancient humans all over the Eurasian Steppes experienced the Paleolithic, Neolithic, Microlithic, Bronze and Iron ages at more or less the same periods. Meanwhile, linguistic research has also uncovered evidence of

human migrations and exchanges along the Steppe thoroughfare.

- Nomadism is a historic by-product of specific natural environmental conditions when human civilization reached a certain level. The Eurasian Steppes have provided unique natural conditions for nomadism. The domestication of the “five animals” of the prairie, the human taming of the horse, the invention and use of the wheel, and the formation of an integrated military and production-oriented society, are the necessary pre-conditions for the emergence and development of nomadism.
- With the solidification of modern nation-states on the Eurasian Steppes, the functions of the steppe trails declined and eventually disappeared. The transmission to the East of waves of Western industrial civilization and modernization that emerged later was also disrupted.
- Chang’an and Great Capital of the Yuan (Beijing) are two widely recognized ancient international cities that played a leading role in East-West exchanges. Within these two major ancient capitals there were residential areas specially designated for foreigners, and outside them there were avenues and courier roads leading in all directions. These were the “ancient highways” that connected the East and the West in unprecedented proximity.



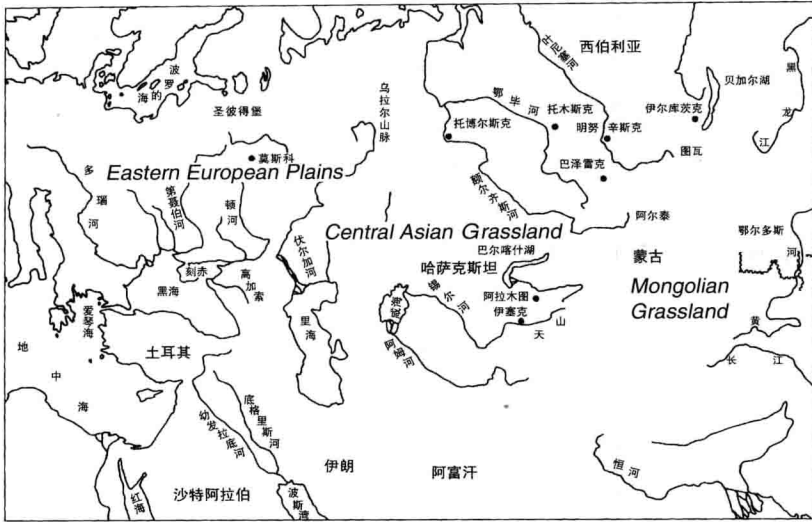
Eurasian Steppes: The Ancient East-West Thoroughfare

The world-renowned French historian René Grousset makes it clear in the first sentence of his *Prairie Empire*: “The earliest road that we know running through the Eurasian continent is on the Steppes in the North.” And in college, I first heard from my teacher of grassland science that the Inner Mongolian grassland is part of the Eurasian Steppes. Later, I learned that the western boundary of the Eurasian Steppes lies in the Danube Basin. In October 1999, I arrived on the banks of the Danube River on the outskirts of the Austrian capital Vienna, after a flight of nine hours, yet geographically speaking, I was still on the Eurasian Steppes, which gave me a vivid feeling of its vastness. The terrain of upper reaches of the Danube is mostly mountainous, but as the river runs through the Vienna Basin, typical prairie landscapes are seen on both banks. Standing by the river looking around, I saw no forests or villages, and the landscape was open. The smoothly undulating flat terrain was covered with yellowish grass, and I felt I

might be in the Hulun Buir or Xilin Gol grasslands in late autumn. It could be imagined that if we continued downstream along the Danube into the hinterland of the Eastern European Grassland, the scenery would be more like that of the Mongolian grasslands of the Asian heartland.

Vast Natural Thoroughfare

The western boundary of the Eurasian Steppes comprises the Carpathian Mountains and the Black Sea coast in mid-Eastern Europe, and if further extended westward, it would reach the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Its eastern frontier reaches the Stanovoy Mountains and Greater Hinggan Mountains, and if extended a little further eastward, it would reach the Pacific Ocean. So the Eurasian Steppes are actually a terrestrial channel connecting the two great oceans. The western part of the Eurasian Steppes comprised of the prosperous Eastern European plains, which connect in the east with the Central Asian Grassland, and further east with the Mongolian Grassland, now including Mongolia and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. These three grasslands constitute the axial zone of the Eurasian Steppes thoroughfare. On its northern and southern extremities are the Pamirs and Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the Siberian Plateau, which are also important parts of the Eurasian Steppes. The main body of the Eurasian Steppes covers a longitude of over 110 degrees from east to west, with a length of more than 10,000 kilometers, and it covers at its widest part a latitude of about 30 degrees from north to south, with an average width of nearly 2,000 kilometers, and this makes it the world's largest single stretch of prairie.



Map of Main Body of Eurasian Steppes

The Eurasian Steppes' role as a pathway for ancient human migrations and exchanges lies mainly in its following characteristics:

- Suitable climate: The axial zone of the Eurasian Steppes is mostly in the temperate zone at latitudes 40°-60°, with four distinctive seasons and relatively less extremes of cold or heat. In the hunting-gathering, nomadic and hunting eras, even when the level of productivity was extremely low, ancient peoples inhabiting it could still manage to survive and multiply.
- Similar ecological environment: The Alps and Carpathian Mountains at the west section of the axial zone of the Eurasian Steppes block the moist air from the direction of the Atlantic Ocean, the Stanovoy and Greater and Lesser Hinggan Mountains in the east stop the moist air from the Pacific Ocean, and the Himalayas and the Pamirs to the south block the moist air from the Indian Ocean, while the Ural Mountains, the Sayan

Mountains and the Kent Hills to the north halt the moist air from the direction of the Arctic Ocean. Thus, the climate within the area stretching 10,000 kilometers from the east to the west is consistently arid or semi-arid, and the terrain, landforms, plant communities and biological food chains are all similar, with substantially similar internal characteristics, yet significantly different from those of the surrounding areas. Precipitation is the basic determinant of vegetation types. Annual precipitation of 400-500 millimeters is usually the dividing line between forest and grassland. Generally speaking, an average annual precipitation of 300-450 millimeters can produce meadow grasslands with lush herbs and scattered trees, as is seen at the foothills surrounding the Eurasian Steppes. An average annual precipitation of 200-350 millimeters may afford typical grasslands with vegetation truly characteristic of grassland, and this type of vegetation is the main vegetation of the Eurasian Steppes. An average annual precipitation of less than 200 millimeters can, generally speaking, only afford desert steppes. And an average annual precipitation of less than a couple of dozen millimeters will result in only desert, as can be often seen in the heartland of the Mongolia Plateau, in Central Asia and in areas north of the Caspian Sea. Describing this phenomenon, some Russian scholars contended that the Eastern European Plain was “a wedge of Asia inserted into the European continent,” by which they mean just such similar grasslands.

- Similar forms of economic activity and lifestyle: Archaeological research reveals that the civilizations of ancient people in the Eurasian Steppes underwent basically the same evolutionary process. In the 3,000 years providing any written evidence, most of the dozens of nations, tribes and kingdoms active on the Eurasian Steppes virtually adopted a nomadic way of life, even though there was a small amount of land between the desert oases and river valleys suitable for farming, and hunting and fishing were also practiced in the right seasons.

- Convenient traffic: In the axial zone comprising the Mongolian, Central Asian and Eastern European grasslands, there are almost no mountain barriers, and the terrain is open and flat. Although there are many deserts and mountain ranges in its periphery, they are not connected and account for only a small proportion of the land area, and thus do not form a barrier to East-West traffic.
- Proximity to birthplaces of ancient civilizations: Among the five major ancient civilizations of the world, three were close to the southern frontier of the Eurasian Steppes, and they are the civilizations of ancient China, ancient India and ancient Babylon. The other two ancient civilizations, i.e., ancient Egypt and ancient Greece, were at the western end of the Steppes, with the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea in between. Ancient peoples living on the Eurasian Steppes, and the ancestors of these ancient civilizations were involved in a constant process of movement, exchange and integration, and the benefits of civilization thus created and acquired were passed along the Steppe trails to more distant peoples. Therefore, before the industrial revolution, civilizations connected by the Steppes served as the powerhouses of world civilization.

The Silk Road

The Silk Road was the result of efforts to stabilize and provide easier access to the steppe thoroughfare. According to archaeological hypotheses, though the ancient people had used the Eurasian Steppes in East-West exchanges for thousands of years, the usage had always been spontaneous and scattered. It was only during the 2nd century BC when the Chinese Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) reached its heyday that regular routes began to gradually emerge. In 140 BC, Zhang Qian was sent on missions to the Western Regions as an envoy of the

Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 25) and it was then that the specific routes of the Silk Road were formally identified.

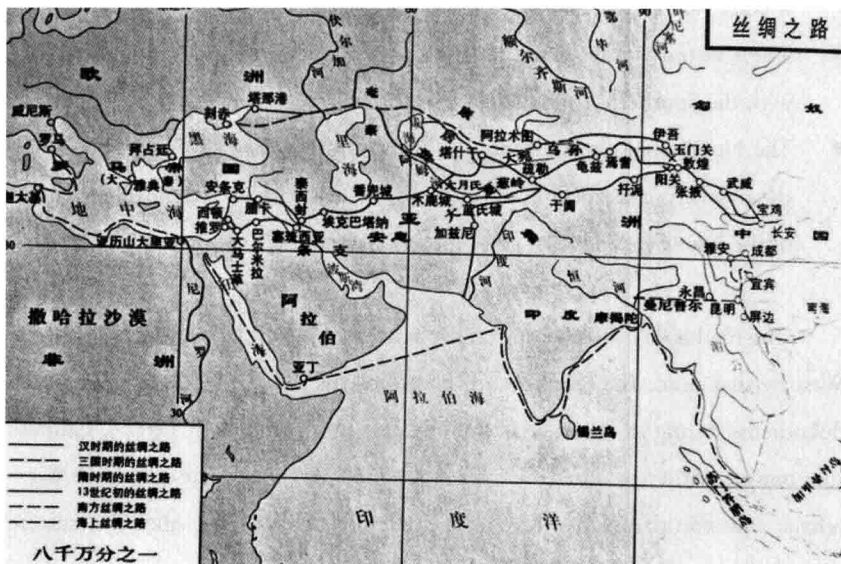
The starting point of the Silk Road was Chang'an, the capital of the Western Han Empire, and it extended westward as far as the city of Rome via Central Asia, West Asia, and Eastern Europe, in addition to being connected with North Africa across the Mediterranean Sea. It was the earliest international transit with clear and regular routes across the Asian, African and European continents. After the Silk Road ran from Dunhuang to the Pamirs or Talas (now Jaunpur of Kazakhstan) and left the Western Han territory, it went further west along three routes:

- The Southern Route: Going westbound from the Pamirs, over the Hindu Kush Mountains to Kabul, now capital of Afghanistan, and then going further west via Baghdad and Damascus, arriving on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and reaching Rome by sea;
- The Central Route: Crossing the Pamirs and heading northwest, to join with the Southern Route beyond Tehran;
- The Northern Route: Heading northwest along the Syr Darya, bypassing the northern coast of the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea, to the eastern coast of the Azov Sea, and then getting to Constantinople (now Istanbul) by sea.

The road is so called because silk was at the heart of Chinese exports to the West by that time. The Greeks' enthusiasm for silk is recorded in ancient Greek documents dating as far back as the 5th century. Through this trade, Chinese silk, pongee, satin and other silk fabrics became familiar to more and more Westerners, and won their favor. Knowledge of mulberry planting, silkworm culture and silk weaving also spread along the route. Thus, scholars of later generations dubbed this long-known regular route the "Silk Road." Western goods imported

into China were mainly fur, jade, jewelry and spices. More important were the all-round exchanges in plant and animal species as well as people, culture, religion, science and technology, politics, economy, and military art. In the 2,000 years following the opening of the “Silk Road,” other routes across the Steppes kept playing an important role. In particular, the emergence of several “prairie empires” enabled each route across the Steppes to play its due unique role in the all-round exchanges between Eastern and Western civilizations. It was precisely because of the Silk Road and the Steppe thoroughfare that Chang’an, the capital of the Western Han and later Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, grew into a leading international metropolis of the time. Meanwhile, they were also an important factor for the rise of Beijing during the Yuan (1279-1368) and the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties to become one of world’s luxurious capitals.

Although the Silk Road was only one of the routes running through the



The Silk Road

Steppes, it became, in a very short time span, the major transit one, known and recognized throughout the civilized world for its easy access and the extent of its impact. Later, scholars named collectively all the lines scattered across the Steppes the “Prairie Silk Road,” “Fur Road,” “Tea Road,” etc. Some others also called the maritime exchange route that appeared in more modern times the “Maritime Silk Road.” In fact, on the Steppes there were many routes similar to the Silk Road. The total historical role of the Steppe thoroughfare can in no way be condensed into any single one of these routes. The modern railway network across Eurasia, starting at the east from Pacific coastal cities in China to the Atlantic coastal cities in the European continent at the west, now plays an extremely important role in land transportation of world trade. And this serves as a foil to the great significance of the ancient Steppe thoroughfare to East-West communication. This is true even in today’s world when maritime and air traffic have come to play the dominant role.

Courier Roads of the Yuan Dynasty

Communication between China and the West started in time immemorial. As early as the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) “guests from the West” came to China. The Silk Road which runs at the southern part of the Steppes was in place in the Han Dynasty, but large-scale institutional promotion of East-West exchanges did not flourish until the Yeke Mongghol Ulus (Great Mongol Empire) and Yuan Dynasty reunited China and held sway in the overwhelming part of Central and Western Asia by establishing four subordinating great khanates, such as the Chaghatai Khanate, the Uls of Jochi (Kypchak Khanate) and Ilkhanate, and the territory under the name of “the Great Yuan of Great Mongol” extended to 33 million square kilometers (and some put it at 44 million square kilometers). A huge courier road network was established in this vast

territory to facilitate its rule and trade. According to historical records, in the Yuan Dynasty a total of 913 courier stations were set up under eight “branch secretariats,” with over 300,000 courier horses, in addition to quite a number of waterway courier stations, cattle stands, dog stations and deer stations for courier purposes. The development of maritime transport further expanded the range and scale of East-West trade. The door of trade between Europe and Asia was then wide open, and businesspeople of all nations formed an endless stream on the road, and East-West exchanges reached an unprecedented high.

The Middle Land Route: It was also the major route for East-West exchanges. In the west, Sarai, the capital of the then Uls of Jochi (Kypchak Khanate), was made a distribution center, from where the route headed east from the southern Russia grasslands, via the Caspian Sea, the Kyrgyz Grassland, the Ili River Valley, to Ali Mari, and from there went north to arrive at Karakorum, or went east to arrive at the Upper Capital and the Great Capital of the Yuan Empire. On its way, the Mongolian Grassland, the Central Asian Grassland, Persia, Kypchak Grassland, Russia and the Asia Minor were all connected with post roads. Along the east-west trunk line special personnel were stationed for road maintenance, and “clean white-felt tents” were provided, and in the Upper Capital porters were available. “So for messengers from all directions, there are premises when they need to stay, there are woven tents when they are tired and food and drink when they are hungry, and transport by both land and the sea are convenient, and guests from all over the world gather together.” The convenience of communication and trade was obvious.

The Northern Land Route: The central section of the northern line ran from the southern foot of the Altai Mountains to Lake Baikal. Going south by Lake Baikal along the west foot of the Greater Hinggan Mountains, one might arrive at the Upper Capital and the Great Capital of the Yuan. Going west from the Altai Mountains via Sarai (capital of Kypchak Khanate), and then turning