

Old Turkic Nomadic Peoples and the Agro-pastoral Transition Zone in Northern China between the Sixth and the Eighth Century

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In the Eastern part of Eurasia, there are two zones: the Mongolian pastoral area in the North and the Chinese agricultural area in the South. In the Mongolian steppe, pastoral nomadic states appeared at various times in history. These nomadic states frequently plundered China by using a strong cavalry; consequently, the relationship between these two areas was always strained. This is also why previous studies tended to regard the two zones as clearly divided by the Great Wall. For example, Kurakichi Shiratori, the founder of the study of Inner Asian history in Japan, dubbed the history of Mongolia and Central Asian as *Saigai-shi*: “the history of the area outside of the Great Wall.”

However, more recently, Japanese scholars have argued that an agro-pastoral transition zone existed in Northern China between the pure nomadic area in the North and the pure agricultural area in the South. In this zone both nomadic and agricultural peoples lived together. These scholars also argue that the nomads living in this zone often played an important role in Chinese history. Nomads who had migrated from Mongolia to this transition zone for reasons of economic or/and political troubles were later recruited into the cavalry forces of Chinese dynasties. Nevertheless, if Chinese dynasties failed to control them, they rebelled against the Chinese controllers, and the rebellions occasionally overthrew the dynasties. In other words, the transition zone provided strong military support as well as holding serious risks of rebellions for the Chinese dynasties. A number of scholarly articles have been published discussing the historical role played by the nomads settled in this zone. In Japan in particular, the Tang Dynasty’s employment of nomadic peoples resident in this zone has received scholarly attention.

In some respects, however, these studies are problematic. They focus only on the inflow of nomadic peoples into the transition zone from Mongolia and ignore migrations in the opposite direction. If only the nomads from Mongolia would have migrated into the transition zone, Mongolia would have become depopulated. Since nomadic populations in Mongolia continued to exist, we must discuss flows of nomadic peoples from south to north, as well as from north to south.

Against this background, I will analyze how Old Turkic nomads moved between Mongolia and the transition zone between the sixth and the eighth century. In the course of my discussion, I will reassess the role of the agro-pastoral transition zone as an important joint linking the Mongolian pastoral area with the Chinese agricultural area.