

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

# Cooperation and Confederacy:

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A Comparison of Indigenous Confederacies in  
Relation to Imperial Polities

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## Introduction

The study of world history is often based on relations between a “core” urban center with highly developed bureaucratic institutions and their interactions with less politically evolved “peripheral” groups located beyond direct control of the “core.” Often it is populations with decentralized forms of government which are labeled peripheral, and traditional historical accounts have given these groups little agency in their relations with expansionist powers. Too often history is written in terms of historical winners and losers, “us” versus “them,” or civilization pitted against uncivilized peoples. At times history can glorify the “victors,” the seemingly inevitable conquerors in their uncompromising quest for supremacy be it territorial expansion, economic domination, religious zealotry, or some other form of perceived hegemony. In his book *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, Francis Jennings cautions, “With our eyes fixed upon conflict between two sides, and our sympathies fixed upon one of them, we glory in triumphs and fail to see the benefits to be derived from cooperation, or at least accommodation, between those sides.”<sup>1</sup> Cooperation and accommodation even when engaged in begrudgingly, as is often the case, is the true story of history itself. In this vein, Daniel Richter points to the interconnectedness of European colonization and local history in North America writing, “Neither a focus on monolithic European empires and Indian tribes nor on isolated localities can fully convey the texture of colonial history, nor can the empires and the localities be understood apart from one another.”<sup>2</sup> Although Jennings and Richter are referring specifically to North America in this instance, it would not alter their sentiments to substitute the Ming dynasty (1368-

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: The Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with English Colonies from its beginnings to the Lancaster treaty of 1744* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), 375.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel K. Richter, “Cultural Brokers and Intercultural Politics: New York-Iroquois Relations, 1664-1701.” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Jun., 1988): 66.

1644) and its relations with Mongol confederacies on the steppes of Central Asia. Regardless of location, history devoid of multiple perspectives is necessarily devoid of accuracy.

With this in mind, I intend to analyze the flexible nature of relations between so-called “peripheral” groups and their respective imperial adversaries. As a means to provide a unique perspective, and attempt to further our understanding of developments in world history, I intend to compare Altan Khan’s Mongol confederacy to the Iroquois Confederacy. Similarities between the Iroquois and the Mongols may not initially be evident to most scholars, but upon closer review, I believe strong parallels can be drawn between the two seemingly different polities. Granted, the Mongols lived a nomadic lifestyle, of various degrees, on the steppe grasslands of Inner Asia, while the Iroquois<sup>3</sup> resided in a semi-sedentary manner in the Eastern woodlands of North America. Although geographic, economic, cultural, and political differences abound, there are some striking resemblances within these categories as well. The Iroquois, like the Mongols, were forced to confront an increasingly expansionist empire. First the British, and later the Americans, pressured the Iroquois to cede their ancestral homelands through a combination of economic and militaristic means, just as the Mongols confronted the Ming dynasty’s attempts to increase its influence on China’s northern frontier. Also, the Iroquois and Mongols were both decentralized kin-based societies wherein social, political, and military alliances were based on local personal interactions often contingent on ritualized gift giving and ceremonial diplomacy. The fluid ideological, social, and political flexibility of these

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<sup>3</sup> While Native American polities do not conform neatly to modern notions and definitions in regards to nation-states I will nonetheless use the term “Iroquois” when making reference to the shared history, culture, economic practices, politics, and social organization of the five principal tribes which would eventually comprise the Iroquois League. These tribes: the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas, while functioning independently from one another, share common key characteristics making general reference to them as “Iroquois” as a whole possible. When divisions necessitate differentiation, I will refer to the tribes individually, but when appropriate, for simplicity, I will use the term “Iroquois” or Five Nations.

societies allowed them to adapt to changing circumstances in order to maintain a semblance of group cohesion while allowing for autonomous action locally.

Recent historiography has begun to uncover the mechanisms and strategies used by “peripheral” peoples to actively and reactively resist, adapt, and borrow in affairs with centralized polities. Analyzing case studies in conjunction with current scholarship will help make meaningful comparisons that can serve to shed light on the question, “How did ‘peripheral’ peoples use confederacies in relations with ‘core’ polities?” Although diverse variables exist, it is my contention comparing the Mongols in Inner Asia, under the leadership of Altan Khan in the mid-sixteenth century, and the Iroquois in North America, during the mid-seventeenth century, will demonstrate how networked confederacies maintained their autonomy, at least for a time. So long as a relative balance of power existed between the Ming and the Mongols or the British and the Iroquois, as the case may be, the Mongols and the Iroquois were able to utilize their confederacies to enhance their agency. However, technological advances in weaponry and communications combined with changing geopolitical circumstances greatly reduced the confederacies’ ability to negotiate from a position of strength. The rise of the Jurchens, in modern day Manchuria, and their founding of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) significantly altered alliances, which the Qing used to eliminate any significant Mongol resistance. Likewise, the Iroquois and British defeat of the French and Algonquians during the French and Indian War (1754-1763) followed by the British defeat in the American Revolution (1775-1783) drastically altered the balance on power in North America. With the French and then the British losing their empires in North America, the United States remained as the sole authority in which to negotiate. Losing the ability to play one imperial rival against another substantially weakened the Iroquois’ bargaining power.

Although these events did not end Mongol and Iroquois attempts to resist and adapt to these “new core” polities, they did alter the balance of power in such a way that the impetus for relatively equitable relations was lost. It is prior to this point, where my study of the Mongol and Iroquois confederacies resides. The following case studies demonstrate how Altan Khan’s Mongol confederacy negotiated with the Ming dynasty, and the ways in which the Iroquois Confederacy politicked with the British, particularly the colony of New York. Analyzing and comparing these relations will demonstrate the agency of these “peripheral” peoples, and shed light on the ways in which they adapted their own sociopolitical institutions, adopted new methods, and borrowed from “core” polities serving to enhance this agency. Examining both similarities and differences in these cases, followed by a review of the existing scholarship in the fields of Iroquois and Mongol history will provide a platform from which to better answer, “How did ‘peripheral’ peoples use confederacies in relations with ‘core’ polities?”

### **Confederacy in Action**

The complexity posed by the decentralized nature of Mongol governance is clearly demonstrated in relations between Altan Khan and the Ming court following Altan’s attack on Beijing in 1550. Altan’s assault shocked the Ming court and essentially forced them to capitulate to his repeated demands for trade. While Ming officials were internally divided as to the expediency of engaging in trade-tribute relations<sup>4</sup> with the Mongols, military concerns

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<sup>4</sup> Chinese dynasties preferred the trade-tribute system for conducting foreign diplomacy and trade. This system consisted of foreign states or kingdoms coming to the dynastic capital to offer goods and/or products in tribute and recognition of China’s superior status. The Chinese would then bestow “presents” on the visiting dignitaries, give them titles, and allow them to trade during their visit. This relationship was beneficial to the foreign kingdoms as it served to enhance their position with Chinese recognized titles and they profited economically from the exchange, as the Chinese were sure to present gifts of far greater value than had been presented to them. Meanwhile, the Chinese delighted in the acknowledgement of their elevated standing, and gained valuable information and products from foreign lands although officially these latter benefits were eschewed. The trade-tribute system will be examined in greater detail throughout the paper.

momentarily overshadowed political apprehensions. The risk of dynastic collapse and a reestablishment of the former Mongol dynasty, known as the Yuan (1271-1368), necessitated the establishment of socioeconomic relations, despite causing the Ming to appear politically weak in the minds of some Ming officials. However, if and when the Mongols were to be “allowed” to present tribute certain stringent regulations were to be implemented. A key tenet in these directives was the Ming’s insistence on Altan’s assurances that all further Mongol raids on the frontier, or into the interior of the dynasty for that matter, cease and violators be meticulously punished. Nevertheless, markets opened at Xuanfu and Datong in 1551 and 1552 were closed within a year due to the seemingly unceasing raids of Altan and his followers.

Although Altan assured Ming officials he would discontinue and ban all frontier raids upon their insistence, he was politically unable to do so. Verbally agreeing to such a demand, in order to obtain trade rights, was far easier than enforcing such a measure. The decentralized nature of Mongol chieftains made it difficult, near impossible, for Altan to control his own “subordinates” let alone tribes unaffiliated with him entirely. Altan attempts to explain the situation in a memorial:

At Ta-t’ung, since the return of Minister Shih Tao to the capital, those barbarians who sought to exchange cattle and sheep for grain and beans, after a lengthy wait, received no answer, so they dispersed into [small groups] and engaged in daily robbery. During the eleventh month [of the twenty-ninth year of Chia-ching, 1550], they crossed the border in great force and looted and captured a great many people and animals. The governing official dispatched an interpreter both to rebuke and conduct an inquiry. Altan answered evasively, saying “these poor barbarians have no where from which to obtain food. It is impossible to stop [them] by prohibition only. Although the law of the Middle Kingdom is strict, is there no theft among the people? It is possible for me to restrain myself [but] it is impossible for me to forbid [my] subjects.”<sup>5</sup>

Altan argues the Ming cannot control their entire populace either, so how can he be held personally responsible for all of his subjects? However, this clever argument somewhat conceals the deeper nature of the problem wherein Mongol sociopolitical organization does not provide

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<sup>5</sup> The *Ming Shilu* in Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall: Nomadic-Chinese Interaction Through Two Millennia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 94-95.

Altan with the authority to mandate complete termination of raids across the vast and politically divided and disunited steppe. In fact, according to Jagchid and Symons, “Altan was powerless to restrain even his sons from encroaching upon China’s frontier.”<sup>6</sup> As a perceptive politician and able negotiator, Altan does not explicitly articulate this point so as not to forfeit the prospect of engaging in trade in the future. Therefore, he can retain his elevated status in foreign relations with the Ming and position himself, and his followers, to profit from potential economic relations, if and when the situation presents itself.

Likewise, the Iroquois were, in some regards, hindered by their use of shared authority rather than a more hierarchical system in dealing with the British in North America. The founding of the Iroquois League<sup>7</sup> and the incorporation of the British into the Covenant Chain<sup>8</sup> provided some political apparatus, but lacked institutional controls to manage the people relying principally on social pressures and personal dissuasion. New York’s governor Edmund Andros (1674-1683) worked vigorously to enhance the Covenant Chain alliance inherited from the Dutch, and succeeded in forcing other colonies to treat with the Iroquois at Albany thus assuring New York’s predominance in Indian relations. Barbara Graymont writes, “As a result of Andros’s endeavors, the Iroquois enlarged the Covenant Chain to include Maryland and Virginia, and a few years later, Maryland’s Indian allies also. The beneficiaries of this

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<sup>6</sup> Jagchid and Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 105-106.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars generally refer to the initial political association of the Iroquois tribes as the Iroquois League. Only at some point after this, the exact timing of the transition is heavily debated but commonly acknowledged as occurring prior to the inclusion of the Tuscarora in 1722, did the Iroquois League morph into what historians term the Iroquois Confederacy. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines a league as, “an association of nations or other political entities for a common purpose”, and identifies a confederacy as, “a league or compact for mutual support or common action: alliance.” Therefore, with the historical transition from league to confederacy being ambiguous and the definitions being similar, I will use the term Iroquois League in reference to the initial establishment of a recognizable alliance amongst the tribes and thereafter refer to the Five Nations as a confederacy. See *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “League” and “Confederacy.”

<sup>8</sup> The Covenant Chain was a political, economic, and military alliance between the British and the Iroquois used to secure alliances, foster trade, and theoretically for mutual protection. The origin of the Covenant Chain, as well as its meaning to both the British and the Iroquois will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper.

arrangement were both New York and the Five Nations. The council fire that had been established at Albany enhanced New York's role in Indian affairs, and the enlarged Covenant Chain assured Iroquois predominance for another century."<sup>9</sup> With the proliferation of the Covenant Chain the Iroquois were ascribed supremacy over other tribes incorporated into the Chain boosting their position, but also elevating their responsibilities. British officials endorsed an Iroquois empire, which simply did not exist, in order to enhance their territorial claims in North America and the Iroquois political system was not equipped to "govern" or control such an engrossing territory. Nevertheless, the Iroquois at times accepted the fallacy in order to profit from the economic and political benefits it carried. However, they simply did not have the institutional muscle to uphold the facade of the fabricated "domain."

The British expected the Iroquois sachems, or leaders, to command obedience from their followers, but the makeup of Iroquois sociopolitical networks could not produce unequivocal compliance. After one particular encounter in 1677 between Mohawk braves and a supposedly "friendly nation," Mohawk sachems try to explain their situation to the Governor's messengers. The translator quotes them saying, "Do give a string of wampum 10 high for this reason: they acknowledge the bad side of their people who go against their commands. Hope and pray that the agreement made before this which was renewed in intent should not be broken, that they will not be made the laughing stock of the other nations, and that this evil could be forgotten.... Giving for this the reason that while we are indeed sachems, we cannot simply turn our back on our soldiers, for they are our protectors and have to fight for us since we are old people."<sup>10</sup> Here the sachems seem to be referring to the dual nature of their tribal governance differentiating

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<sup>9</sup> Barbara Graymont, ed., *New York and New Jersey Treaties, 1609-1682*, Vol. VII of *Early American Indian Documents: Treaties and Laws, 1607-1789* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, Inc., 1985), 352.

<sup>10</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VII, 385.

themselves as civil leaders from the young warriors serving as military leaders. The Mohawk sachems express their inability to force these soldiers to obey their wishes, as they cannot persuade them with rhetoric, but also because they are reliant on them for protection. Like Altan Khan's response to the Ming, the Mohawks point out there are those who choose not to heed their pleas but argue that, in itself, should not void previous agreements.

Although the British and the Chinese often demanded Iroquois and Mongol leaders to control their populace, they simply did not often possess the means to accomplish this feat, despite promises to try. William Fenton notes, "Factionalism was at home in Iroquois society. The theory of unanimity, or one mind, to the contrary, factionalism operated at every level of the society and between nations of the league. It fed on success and abated only to face a common threat or disaster."<sup>11</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo argues likewise in regards to the Mongols, claiming nomadic confederacies in Inner Asia united in response to a crisis that necessitated joint action, and this thesis will be explored in detail later. Factionalism was a part of Iroquois and Mongol society which each was able to use to its advantage, at times, although the confederacies contained inherent weaknesses because of this as well.

The British, and particularly the Chinese, recognized the fissions present in the confederacies of their counterparts and worked to exploit these divisions. With centuries of experience in dealing with nomadic confederacies, the Chinese had long established philosophies and stratagems aiming to neutralize their threat. Alastair Johnston's intriguing book, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, offers an ideal starting point from which to consider Chinese foreign policy philosophies and practices. Johnston argues the

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<sup>11</sup> William N. Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 251.

Chinese utilized two different and often opposing strategic cultures.<sup>12</sup> The first is derived from what Johnston calls the “Confucian-Mencian paradigm,” which is a nonviolent approach to issues of foreign policy. Confucius and Mencius stressed moral righteousness in personal and state behavior as a means to pacify nomadic enemies and submit them to sinification. According to this “traditional” Chinese philosophy, the state should rely on accommodationist directives in foreign affairs, followed by defensive maneuvers, and only upon failure of the first two, should the state resort to limited use of violence in an offensive manner.<sup>13</sup> This idealized and often symbolic stratagem for foreign relations, served as a rhetorical cloak for more realistic Chinese initiatives than as an actual guide to foreign affairs. Johnston claims after closely examining the *Seven Military Classics*<sup>14</sup> it becomes evident the Chinese prefer to employ a strategic culture that he refers to as a “parabellum.” Johnston argues these military writings reflect, “A *parabellum* or hard realpolitik strategic culture that, in essence, argues that the best way of dealing with security threats is to eliminate them through the use of force. This preference is tempered by an explicit sensitivity to one’s relative capacity to do this.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Chinese dynasties chose the use of direct force and violence when they were in a position of strength to do so, but they expressed this desire in Confucian-Mencian language giving the impression of nonviolent desires. This cost-benefit analysis performed by Chinese dynasties in determining their policies in regards to nomadic confederacies is consistent with arguments put forth by Thomas Barfield,

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<sup>12</sup> Johnston defines strategic culture as consisting of, “two basic elements: (a) a central paradigm that supplies answers to three basic, related questions about the nature of conflict in human affairs, the nature of the enemy, and the efficacy of violence; and (b) a ranked set of strategic preferences logically derived from these central assumptions.” See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), ix-x.

<sup>13</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> The *Seven Military Classics* were written over several centuries and were highly influential in forming Chinese foreign policy. The texts combine philosophical elements from Sunzi, Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism often stressing the importance of righteous war and virtuous actions. The previously separate works were organized and compiled as the *Seven Military Classics* during the Song dynasty and became standard reading for court and military officials.

<sup>15</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, x.

Joseph Fletcher, and the work of Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, which will be examined in detail later on.

The parabellum rationalization of foreign policy objectives and strategies described by Johnston hinges on inverse power relations. Citing examples from foreign policy debates at court during the Ming dynasty in particular, Johnston argues Chinese dynasties took a more conciliatory approach to relations with steppe nomads when they were in a position of relative military weakness. In these instances, the Chinese were more likely to make alliances as well as trade concessions. Johnston's analysis of Sino-nomadic dynamics parallels the arguments of Barfield as well as Jagchid and Symons as to the fluctuating nature of relations based on a relative balance of power. While Ming court memorials and dynastic histories do not explicitly denote when the Chinese identify themselves to be at a disadvantage, Johnston claims parabellum rationale leads to shifts in Chinese strategy, which is particularly evident during the reign of the Ming dynasty. At times of perceived weakness, the Chinese transition away from aggressive offensive tactics to more defensive measures. This policy stays in effect until the Chinese have gained strength and once again believe themselves to hold the advantage, at which point they resume initiatives that are more aggressive.

Chinese dynasties, like the Song (960-1279), tried to exacerbate nomadic hostilities in this way, believing they were buying the allegiance of a nomadic ally, helping to secure their northern border from attack. Morris Rossabi notes the Song and Tang (618-907) dynasties were unable to command traditional trade-tribute relations throughout their reigns, forcing them to adapt their policies in this way. His book, *China Among Equals*, challenges the conventional

view that China unyieldingly demanded superior status in foreign relations.<sup>16</sup> A short-term alliance to use one nomadic faction against another was seen as a preferable compromise to possibly being subjected to the humiliation of the *heqin*<sup>17</sup> policy.

Despite the philosophical flexibility of Song foreign relations policy, their cooperation with various nomadic groups was shameful to Neo-Confucians. Like the Han, the Song entered into economic and political associations upsetting traditional conceptions of social hierarchy. In his chapter of Rossabi's book, Shiba Yoshinobu writes, "China's trade with the Liao, the Hsi Hsia, and the Chin was accompanied by political and diplomatic relations which the Chinese found humiliating. But China's balance of trade with its northern neighbors was favorable to the Sung. Despite its military weakness, the Sung benefited from its commercial relations with the northerners."<sup>18</sup> While the Song may not have conformed to "traditional" foreign policy, they conceptualized and implemented a strategy, which reaped great economic benefits for the dynasty. Yoshinobu applauds the Song approach as it "resulted in the rapid economic development of China and a booming trade with its neighbors, and hence in the gradual 'eclipse of the tribute system by trade.'"<sup>19</sup> Commercial considerations, rather than philosophical, in foreign relations led the Song into financial prosperity. In this way, their military disadvantage led to their economic benefit.

When a Chinese dynasty believed they were in a position of strength, however, they often ended the network of alliances and trade exchanges with the nomads. During the reigns of the

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<sup>16</sup> Morris Rossabi, ed., *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>17</sup> After the defeat of Emperor Gao (202-195 B.C.E.), the Han dynasty (206B.C.E.-220 C.E.) was forced to accept, the Xiongnu steppe nomadic leader, Maodun's peace settlement. The agreement forced the Han to acknowledge the Xiongnu as equals, pay yearly tribute in silk and grain, and send a Chinese princess to marry the Khan.

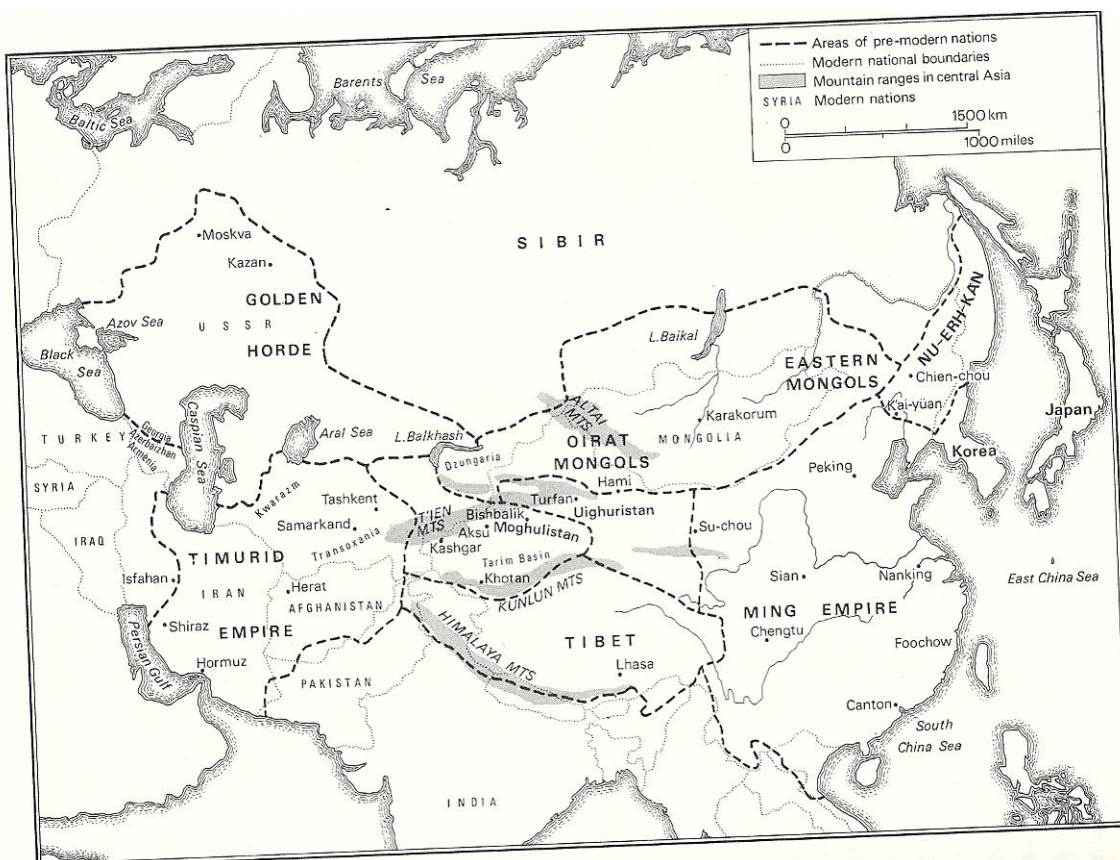
<sup>18</sup> Shiba Yoshinobu, "Sung Foreign Trade: Its Scope and Organization," in *China Among Equals*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Hongwu emperor (r. 1368-1398) and the Yongle emperor (r. 1402-1424) the Ming dynasty, in particular, attempted to maintain a hard-line approach in relations with the Mongols, relying on offensive military campaigns until circumstances forced them to adjust. Barfield argues the Ming embarked on an aggressive foreign policy, refusing trade concessions, with the Mongols due to their fear of another Mongol conquest of China. Former Chinese dynasties, he claims, were not threatened with total nomadic occupation of China, since nomads historically retreated quickly back to the steppe after incursions, and it was widely believed nomads were incapable of capturing a unified China. Morris Rossabi agrees with Barfield on this point writing, “Ming China, having just endured a century of Mongol rule, sought to avert further occupations by a people or state from Inner Asia. Court policy was, therefore, generally based on restricting relations with foreigners, particularly those from across the northern and northwestern borders. Fear of future invasions conditioned the Ming’s attitudes and policies toward Central and Inner Asia. The court was determined to reinstate the Chinese world order so as to maintain control over the conduct of foreign relations.”<sup>20</sup> Barfield, Rossabi, and Johnston all note the aggressive nature of Ming policies and actions towards the Mongols at the beginning of the dynasty, and particularly so during the reigns of the Hongwu emperor and the Yongle emperor.

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<sup>20</sup> Morris Rossabi, “The Ming and Inner Asia,” in *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 8 The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644*, Part 2, eds., Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 221.



### China and Inner Asia at the beginning of the Ming

(See Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett eds., *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 7 The Ming Dynasty 1368-1644*, Part 1. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank general eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 224.)

These historians would disagree as to the reasons why the Ming were inclined to take offensive action against the Mongols however. While Rossabi and Barfield would credit the Ming's historical memory in this regard, Johnston argues practical calculations by the Ming led them to determine their strength was greater than the Mongols, generating an advantageous opportunity to strike. It seems likely Ming fears of a possible return of the Yuan dynasty was a major factor as Ming officials crafted the dynasty's early foreign policy objectives. Not only were the Ming fearful of a return of the Yuan, but Chinese officials also wanted to avoid and atone for the embarrassing conduct of the last "native" Chinese dynasty, the Song, in their

foreign relations strategy. While Song policies did not stoop to the level of the Han, in the minds of Neo-Confucians, they were still considered contrary to the “proper” Chinese trade-tribute world order. These concerns combined with the martial strength and experience gained by the Ming army during the founding of the dynasty, appear to have combined in the early Ming rationale for aggressively pursuing Mongol forces.

Johnston’s work highlights the Ming dynasty, focusing on policy debates and events, which bring forth realpolitik considerations and subsequent modifications to Ming stratagem. He reaffirms his belief the Ming took aggressive military action against the Mongols when they were in a position of strength to do so. According to Johnston, “After the Mongols had been pushed out of the north China plain in the 1360s, the primary concern was to cripple a still-potent Mongol military capability, divide and conquer the numerous Mongol tribes that occupied the areas along the northern border, and push the Ming’s boundary of control as far north as possible...”<sup>21</sup> These militaristic goals are counter to Confucian-Mencian philosophy, but support Johnston’s argument the Chinese prefer to eliminate potential threats by force whenever possible. However, under the leadership of Esen, in July of 1449 the Oyirad Mongols decisively defeated a Ming army, capturing the emperor in the process.<sup>22</sup> This defeat altered the balance of power and caused a shift in Ming policy, according to Johnston.

The Mongol victory at Tumu forced the Ming to reassess their military capabilities and led to alterations in Ming interactions with the Mongols. Johnston argues, “From this point on, despite fluctuations in both the degree of unity among the Mongols and the degree of coherence and activism in Ming security policy, the Ming military forces were essentially in a holding

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<sup>21</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 184.

<sup>22</sup> Rossabi, “The Ming and Inner Asia,” 232-234.

pattern along the border. Mongol raiding was countered with more defensive measures.”<sup>23</sup> The Chinese ideology of *quan bian*, or absolute flexibility, allowed the Ming court to re-evaluate their past policies and assume a less aggressive stance as their military strength waned. To this end, Johnston acknowledges Arthur Waldron’s work in *The Great Wall of China*, for delineating various nonexclusive approaches the Ming adopted in response to Mongol threats.

The explanation for Ming defeat at Tumu and its repercussions, in Waldron’s mind, parallel a number of debates that will be raised throughout this paper. Waldron, like Barfield and Fletcher, sees the rise of Mongol confederacies in direct correlation to the founding of a strong Chinese state. He notes, “We have argued...steppe confederations develop in response to the creation of settled states. If that is so, then it was only a question of time before the Ming would face a unified and hostile steppe. When this new steppe power inflicted a crushing defeat on a large-scale Chinese punitive expedition, the security system of the early emperors was shattered.”<sup>24</sup> According to Waldron’s analysis, the Mongol victory at Tumu occurred at the point in which the Mongol confederacy was reaching its zenith and the Ming’s martial skills were entering their decline. Having arisen and gained strength in response to the Ming dynasty, the balance of power tipped in the Mongols favor forcing the Ming to implement a less aggressive strategy.

Examining, once again, the rule of Altan Khan and his relations with the Ming can help underscore the divergence between Chinese foreign policy rhetoric and actions, as well as demonstrate how the Mongol confederacy under Altan’s leadership utilized its decentralized nature to gain economic benefits and retain their independence. Using sporadic raids following

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<sup>23</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 87.

the closing of trade fairs after 1553, Altan continued to harass the Ming intermittently in pursuit of goods, but also with hopes of creating, or forcing the Ming into, sustained trade relations. Engaging in trade-tribute relations would not only elevate the standard of living of his followers, but also enhance his prestige amongst the various Mongol tribes whose leaders were all vying for supremacy and legitimacy. According to Thomas Allsen, acquisition of silk, particularly for robes, and other goods for redistribution were essential to internal Mongol politics. “Investiture not only created hierarchy at court, it was also a means of fashioning chains of clientage that was at the very heart of Mongolian princely politics.”<sup>25</sup> Following a domestic dispute, Altan’s grandson surrendered to Ming border officials in 1571 presenting an opportune moment, in the eyes of Altan, to enhance his authority by deriving greater access to Ming goods. However, the Ming were determined to exploit the situation to their advantage as well.

Having obtained Altan’s grandson, Dayicing, the frontier official Wang Chonggin seized the opportunity in an attempt to reconfigure Ming-Mongol relations situating the Ming in a more advantageous position. Wang utilized Dayicing’s surrender in an attempt to leverage Altan into submission, rather than face the prospect of his grandson’s death or Mongol defections to Daiching’s camp on the outskirts of the Ming border. In this way, Wang claimed Altan was willing to submit to Ming authority, becoming a tributary, in exchange for the safe return of his grandson. Jagchid and Symons summarize Wang’s petition to the Ming court writing, “Wang suggested that Altan’s change in attitude towards the Middle Kingdom was evident in his willingness to accept the Ming rank of *Shunyi Wang* (Prince of righteous obedience), thereby recognizing his subservience to the court. It was also apparent because of the submissive tone in his petitions to the throne, because of his willingness to turn over Chinese dissidents in his camp,

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas T. Allsen, “Robing in the Mongolian Empire,” in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 307.

and in his role of persuading other nomadic princes to offer tribute.”<sup>26</sup> Henry Serruys notes Wang argues, unconvincingly in his mind, that the situation in 1571 was far different than in 1551. Whereas the Mongols had been in a position of military advantage in 1551 causing them to revert to raiding even after the establishment of frontier markets, the current state of affairs benefitted the Ming. Wang claims, “the Mongols have caused much harm, but have also suffered many casualties; they have also suffered from Chinese armies going out to attack their camps and drive off their horses. If now they ask to open tribute and trade relations, it means that now they see an advantage in respecting the border.”<sup>27</sup> While it may be true the Mongols suffered from Chinese offensives against them, it seems doubtful the Ming attacks would have been the catalyst pushing them to a peaceful resolution. However, Serruys writes Wang had several supporters at the Ming court who argued the situation of 1570 and 1550 were not comparable, nor would entering into trade-tribute relations at this time parallel the embarrassing accords between the Mongols and the Liao (907-1125), Jin (1115-1234), or Song. Whereas the Song were forced to enter trade relations due to military weakness, according to Wang’s supporters, the Ming would do so from moderate military strength and build up their forces. Yet Serruys claims, “In spite of many external discrepancies, the situation of 1571 was not so much different from that of Sung times.”<sup>28</sup> Serruys disputes the claims made by Wang, but notes Wang’s claims were meant to restructure Ming policies while also maintaining proper deference to tradition and the prohibition of discussion of horse fairs at court by the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522-1566) in 1552.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jagchid and Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 99.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Serruys, *Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs (1400-1600)*. *Melanges chinois et bouddhiques*, V. 17 (Bruxelles: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1975), 164.

<sup>28</sup> Serruys, *Trade Relations*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> Serruys, *Trade Relations*, 164.

It appears Wang's arguments for reestablishing trade-tribute relations, based on realpolitik calculations, is nevertheless couched on Confucian-Mencian language as described by Johnston. Serruys' study has shown border raids persisted from 1540 to 1570, and it is difficult to believe Wang's claim Altan Khan has been drawn into negotiations due to weakness. Altan consistently sought trade and tribute diplomacy with the Ming knowing his verbal submission would equate to huge economic and sociopolitical benefits without his suffering in real loss of autonomy. The *Jewel Translucent Sutra* offers an alternative, Mongol, perspective on the events leading up to the reestablishment of trade-tribute relations that maintains the balance of power was far different than assessed by Wang.

The Mongol account of the reengagement of nonviolent Ming-Mongol foreign relations ascribes an inverse power relationship to the one articulated by Wang. Rather than approaching the Ming in a meek manner, begging for his grandson's safe return, the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* records Altan as the party of strength who forced the Ming to not only return his grandson but also acquiesce to his demand for trade-tribute relations. The text records negotiations between Ming messengers and Altan beginning with Ming pleas saying,

“When we release and return your son, tarry the siege of the city and the Great State will be united!” When Altan was informed of this offer he responded saying, “If you stabilize the unstabilized state, there will be happiness at home and abroad.

If the decree of the Emperor releases and returns the child, there will be peace.

Or the Forty Tumen of the Mongols will all set out separately and approach

Your great walled cities and towns, and smash them to pieces, thus

Taking your customs of state and making it like before.

Therefore release Daiching Ejei and we will unite the Taiping Great State.”

The Chinese Silang and Dutang at the head of the greater and lesser Lords agreed,

“Having released Daiching Ejei, and when the immaculate Great state is united,

We will issue limitless titles and treasures.” Saying, “Explain this to the great Longqing Emperor [r. 1567-1572]!”

They sent off messengers [from Datong to Beijing].<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Johan Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sutra: Altan Khan and the Mongols in the Sixteenth Century* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2003), 122 (lines 448, 452-461).

This passage clearly indicates Altan believed himself to be militarily superior to the Ming. His confidence in this belief plays on prominent Ming fears of a re-establishment of the Yuan dynasty as Altan threatens to “take customs of the state and make them like before.” Likewise, the Chinese messengers seem to imply a similar understanding of his power as they guarantee “limitless titles and treasures” should Altan cease his siege of the city and preparations for a larger attack. Whereas Wang argues the Mongols were weak and therefore willing to take reduced titles and limited trade-tribute entitlements, the passage above wholly disputes his interpretation of events.

With keen political acumen Altan simultaneously threatened the Ming with a massive invasion should his grandson fail to be returned unharmed, but also floated the possibility of instituting formal relations between his tribal confederacy and the Ming. Unwilling to endure the brunt of Altan’s military might once again and hoping to utilize his armed forces in defense of their own borders the Ming reached an official trade-tribute agreement with Altan based on traditional Chinese protocols. Official Ming documents record the agreement as thus,

Recently, your grandson came to surrender, and [We] issued special orders to border officials to provide him with protection, for and clothing, rich entertainment, and a safe return. You were moved by Our mercy and were willing to subjugate [yourself] as a vassal, to pay tribute year after year, to be a vassal from afar forever, and return all rebellious traitors as an expression of [your] faithfulness. Border officials have written many memorials and petitioned repeatedly. We believe tribute from the northern foreigners was paid in many dynasties, and it is a customary ceremony in our country. You admire China and surrender as a vassal and petition with obedience and sincerity. This is recognized as coming from one who understands deeply the way of Heaven. We are extremely pleased, accept your petition, and make you Prince Shun-I, with *tu-tu* or other official titles to be bestowed upon your younger brothers, sons, and the tribal chieftains so you might live in your homeland from generation to generation to graze and hunt....<sup>31</sup>

In return for defected Chinese advisors, or “rebellious traitors,” and recognition of their superiority the Ming were willing to bestow titles and establish frontier markets accessible to the Mongols. In this way the Ming followed historical precedents set by previous dynasties while also, hopefully, securing their borders from Altan’s damaging raids. While the rhetoric used by

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<sup>31</sup> The *Ming shih-lu* in Jagchid and Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 102.

court officials stresses Mongol subjugation in admiration of the Ming and their mercy, realpolitik considerations concerning the relative balance of power drove both parties to accept the accord.

Just as the treaty in 1551 mandated an eradication of all border raids for the markets to continue unabated, the Ming insisted Altan stop incursions into Chinese territories in 1571 and beyond. Altan's response to the Ming during negotiations demonstrates Altan's willingness to "submit" formally, while in all practicality his lack of executive power still hindered any unilateral peace agreement. While Altan may have been sincere in his promise to end raiding in China, perhaps due to his old age, and even though he genuinely tried to restrict lower-ranking Mongol leaders from raiding, the shared authority of the Mongol sociopolitical structure made it difficult to do so. The division within the confederacy is evidenced in Altan's response replying to the court's memorial above.

The newly installed Prince Shun-I, vassal of the northern barbarians, Altan and others, bowed a hundred times to render grateful homage and have memorialized His Majesty, the Merciful Saintly Emperor of the Great Ming. The most honorable of all realms under Heaven is the Celestial Court of the Imperial Ming. He is truly the Son of Heaven above and legitimate lord of the Chinese and the Barbarians. All of the nine *i* [barbarians] and the eight *man* [barbarians] have received ranks and pay tribute individually. [We, your] vassals, have been raised in the northern foreign lands and know nothing about the rituals of vassalage.<sup>32</sup>

Altan's memorial is clearly written, or was at least rewritten, by Ming officials to assure the Mongols showed proper deference to the Ming emperor. Although Altan and other leaders bow a hundred times in homage of the emperor, the decentralized confederation of Mongol polities is still evident as the different "barbarian" groups each received distinctive ranks and titles and paid tribute individually. This demonstrates the political dexterity of the Mongols in that they were able to negotiate with the Ming, with Altan as the chief diplomat, while still maintaining their local autonomy. Individual sovereignty is what makes Altan's promise for peace difficult to

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<sup>32</sup> "A Memorial for Tribute from Altan, Shun-I Wang of the Northern Barbarians," in *Husan-lan-t'ang ts'ung-shu* in Jagchid and Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 206.

maintain, but also infuses the confederacy with strength and agility in negotiating further trade-tribute profits.

Altan continues in his memorial seemingly referring to this sovereign status, of the Jinong in this case, as both a warning of potential assaults and as a bargaining chip to induce the Chinese to offer more titles, rewards, and markets to appease the as yet unsatisfied and unmanageable Jinong.

[I] petition the Emperor, Your Majesty, to have pity on [me, your] vassal, who in his old age regrets [his] transgressions and is sincerely appreciative of the mercy extended to forgive the crime of border aggression that [your] vassal committed at the instigation of the traitors. [We, your] vassals, present tributary horses [to Your Majesty], so please accept them in your mercy and bestow rewards upon us.

The *Jinong* and [his relatives] are descendants of the [former] *Jinong*, who was an elderly relative of [your] vassal. [I, your] vassal, have already mutually agreed with them to surrender single-handedly. [We, your] vassals, have individually received official titles, but the *Jinong* and [his relatives] have not received titles or rank. [We, your] vassals, are fearful that [our] ancestors may condemn us, and [we] therefore petition for Sacred Mercy, that official titles might be bestowed on the *Jinong* and [his relatives] and that they be allowed to participate in the tributary markets.<sup>33</sup>

The subtle, yet complex, diplomatic intricacies revealed in this statement necessitate a close examination. Within the passage, Altan expresses regret for having repeatedly infringed upon Chinese lands, though it is doubtful Altan would have considered this a “crime” as is memorialized. Altan blames “the traitors,” his Chinese advisors whom he handed over to the Ming, for encouraging and initiating these raids, thus absconding himself from blame in this regard. He continues noting as vassals, they present horses with an expectation rewards will be bestowed upon them in return. Altan then claims his ancestral kinsman, perhaps a blood relative or a fictive-kinship relation, and leader of the Jinong have agreed to surrender to the Ming with him “single-handedly.” Despite the single-handedness of this submission, Altan seemingly infers he has little control over the decisions and actions of the Jinong themselves. Since the Jinong have yet to receive individual titles Altan lobbies the Ming, “[We, your] vassals, are

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<sup>33</sup> “A Memorial for Tribute from Altan, Shun-I *Wang* of the Northern Barbarians,” in Jagchid and Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 207.

fearful that [our] ancestors may condemn us, and [we] therefore petition for Sacred Mercy, that official titles might be bestowed on the Jinong and [his relatives] and that they be allowed to participate in the tributary markets.”<sup>34</sup> It is impossible to ascertain the implication of what Altan implies by saying he is fearful of Jinong condemnation. Does this connote the possibility of a Jinong attack on Altan and his followers? Alternatively, is it a veiled threat of a Jinong raid against the Ming, which Altan is preemptively excusing himself from? Perhaps both scenarios are possible. Whatever the case, Altan is seemingly manipulating the supple alliance system of Mongol polities in order to bargain for ever greater amounts of goods and resources, and only upon their presentation can he assure the Chinese of his “single-handed” surrender.

Further convoluting Altan’s “submission” to Ming authority is the contradictory statements recorded in the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* detailing the affair. Elverskog translates line 479 of the sutra as, “The Chinese Great Ming Emperor presented to Altan Khan of the Mongols, the esteemed rank of *Shunyi Wang*.”<sup>35</sup> While Chinese sources, as seen in the Ming memorial above, confirm the awarding of this title, meaning Obedient and Patriotic King<sup>36</sup> to Altan Khan, the verb usage in the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* alters the supremacy of the parties. According to Elverskog the Mongolian verb used in the context of the translation above signifies, “that an inferior is presenting something to a superior. Therefore in this case the Chinese emperor is classified as an inferior presenting the title to Altan Khan.”<sup>37</sup> This alternative perspective has several possible explanations that require examination.

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<sup>34</sup> “A Memorial for Tribute from Altan, Shun-I Wang of the Northern Barbarians,” in *Husan-lan-t’ang ts’ung-shu* in Jagchid and Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 207.

<sup>35</sup> Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sutra*, 124-125 (line 479).

<sup>36</sup> Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sutra*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sutra*, 124.

First, the sutra is a seventeenth century Buddhist text describing not only the life and religious significance of Altan Khan, but also as a historical record for successive generations of Mongols. Therefore, it seems feasible the author would depict Altan as having attained preeminence over the Ming, which did not exist in all actuality. Second, as Alastair Johnston has so ably demonstrated, Ming rhetoric in regards to the Mongols was constrained and filtered through conventional Confucian-Mencian language. Had the Ming emperor truly assumed an inferior position in bestowing the title, traditional speechcraft, worldview, and foreign policy would have barred any admission of this in dynastic records. While both of the first two options seem plausible, I believe a third possibility similar to the first two, best explains the discrepancy. Realpolitik considerations of the Ming seem to have dictated entering into a trade-tribute relation with Altan Khan at this time to be the most viable resolution to the current state of affairs. Threatened by Altan's raids and preparations for a larger invasion, the Ming preemptively offered the chance for the Mongols to "submit" and receive "rewards" before any larger incursions could undermine the political and military position of the Ming. As Franke and Twitchett point out in the *Cambridge History of China Vol. 6 Alien Regimes and Border States 907-1368*, frontier peoples had a long history of interaction with the Chinese state and had learned to traverse the political system according to proper protocol without being fully incorporated into Chinese civilization. With this acquired knowledge of Chinese political institutions, particularly from his experiences with Ming diplomacy during the treaty of 1551, Altan deemed "submission" to the Ming the most effective means for garnering the titles, wealth, and status he and his followers desired. Therefore, while Altan technically accepted Ming supremacy, allowing the Ming to maintain face, he did so knowing the arrangement benefited him. Similarly, the political dexterity and local autonomy of each tribe within his alliance

insured his surrender would mean little in practical terms outside of ensuring greater trading rights and tribute from the Ming.

As we will later see, similar to Iroquois relations with the British, Altan's rhetorical "submission" to the Ming was merely one political tool available to peripheral confederacies in their diplomatic engagements with core societies. British and Ming sources, alike, bemoan their inability to gauge Iroquois and Mongol sincerity and thus limit their means for acquiring goods.

In a famous argument objecting to the opening markets and trade-tribute relations with the Mongols in 1551 Yang Jisheng memorializes

These dogs and sheep are untrustworthy and constantly changing. Now, when we send an important minister to carry gold and silk to the border, they may not abide by the agreement and may refuse to come. Or, they may come to the market to trade today but to invade tomorrow. Or, they may send their masses to invade and say that it was done by other tribes. Or, they may bring weak horses but ask for a high price. Or, because they sell horses, they may ask for excessive rewards. Or, they may demand something beyond what we can bear. As it is, we are unable to hobble them, but they are able to fool us. We will thus be trapped in a shrewd plot by the northern barbarians.<sup>38</sup>

Similar concerns continued to permeate the Ming court in 1571 causing Ming officials to demand Altan accept similar stipulations and regulations concerning the amount of goods and products exchanged, the location of markets, the number of representatives and traders present, and other various concerns as had been implemented in 1551. The nature of Yang's concerns and his admission that, "we are unable to hobble them, but they are able to fool us" contradicts the superior position the Ming claimed in dealing with the Mongols, both in 1551 and 1571. Furthermore, the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* records Altan Khan and his followers were able to alter and increase their demands for Ming tribute almost on a whim. For example, the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* records, "When the Khan and the lords of the Three Tumen mentioned what they had thought of, Wonderful titles and tribute of many kinds that could not be surpassed, And whatever thing that entered [their] minds as satisfiable, They were given, without interruption,

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<sup>38</sup> The *Ming shih-lu* in Jagchid and Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall*, 202.

every year and month. Thus it was that tremendous titles, tribute and trade were issued...<sup>39</sup>

While this Mongol source may be embellishing here for effect, not unlike Ming sources, the concerns Yang Jisheng had in 1551 seem to be playing out in Mongol historical records from 1571. In light of this, it seems Altan and his followers were anything but submissive, and actually dictated at least some of the characteristics encompassed in the trade-tribute relationship.

A prominent theme in the discussion above deals with competing definitions and interpretations about what constituted “submission,” who was submitting to whom, and what was expected of the vassal party. While the Mongols may have technically assented to accept lower status in Ming records, they certainly did not see themselves as second tier. Altan Khan simply deduced the economic and political advantages gained through rhetorical “submission” far outweighed any loss of fundamental liberties relating to his confederacy’s self-rule. The limited hierarchy in the Mongol confederacy stymied Altan’s ability to dictate directives, let alone the Ming’s capacity to command obedience from their new “subordinates.” In North America, as well, the British found themselves befuddled by Iroquois assurances of their status as British subjects, yet refusing to accept the political limitations enmeshed in this position. Like the Mongols, the Iroquois utilized the shared authority inherent to their political system in order to maximize the benefits derived from being servile to British interests when opportune, but retaining the right to negotiate politically as an independent confederacy when advantageous. Although my research will not explore the nature or presence of a “British strategic culture,” due in part to space and time limitations, it would nevertheless be worthwhile to investigate in future studies. Johnston notes all states want to react violently to real or perceived threats even if, at

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<sup>39</sup> Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sutra*, 126 (lines 486-490).

times, their capacity to do so restricts their actions.<sup>40</sup> With this in mind, I believe it is safe to assume the British preferred an offensive strategy when applicable considering the number of military engagements they involved themselves in competing for territory in North America, as well as the fact they were an expansionist imperialist power in the seventeenth century, where my work here is focused. Examination of treaty documents and personal correspondence will demonstrate the British were unable to militarily control their Iroquois “subjects” in much the same way the Ming were incapable of commanding Mongol obedience under Altan’s leadership. Again, competing definitions and responsibilities of “subordinate” polities come into play. Verbal acknowledgment of themselves as British subjects served the Iroquois nation well, and the decentralized nature of their confederacy allowed them to retain their autonomy, at least for a time.

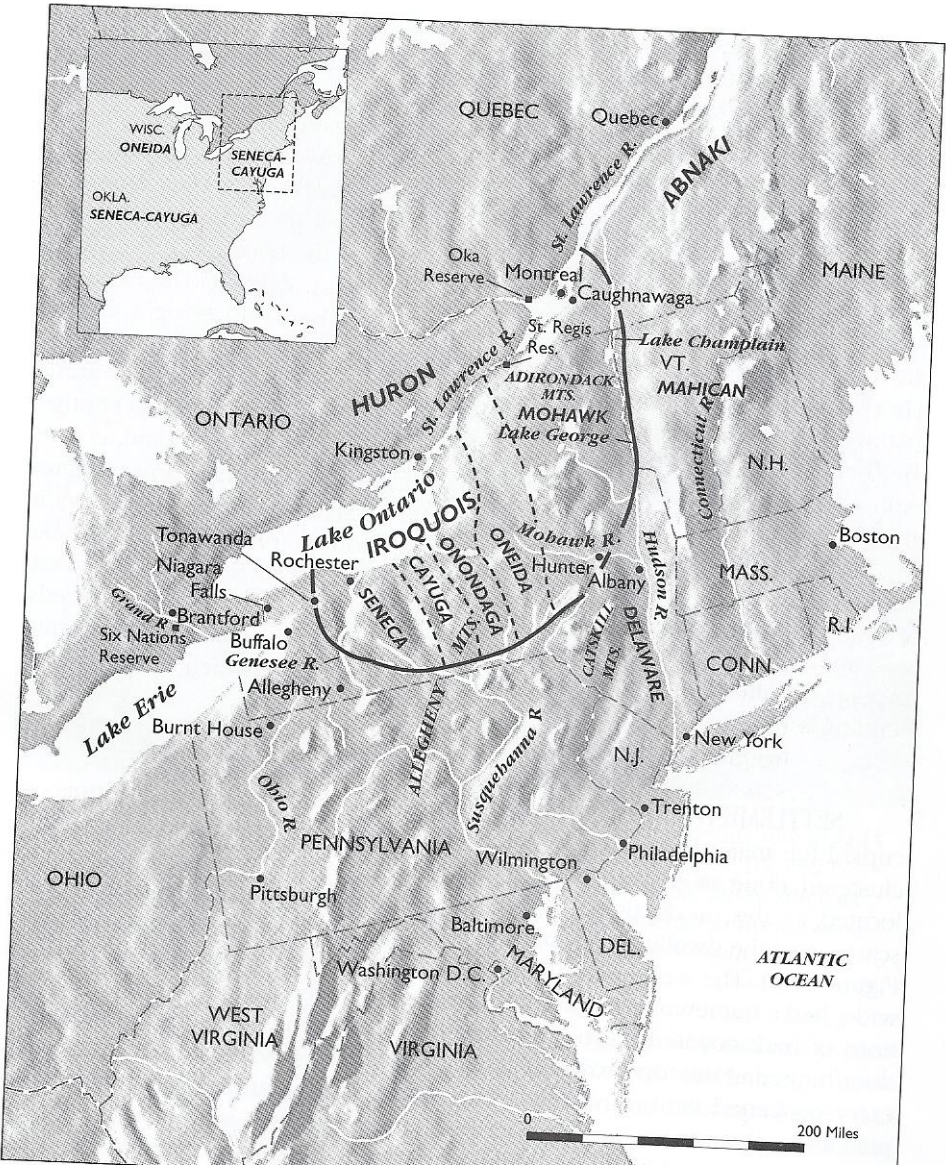
By the 1680s, the Iroquois benefited economically, politically, and militarily from the expansion of the Covenant Chain and their key location as a buffer between the British and the French in North America. This central locale placed the Iroquois at the epicenter of the competition over the fur trade and empire. Their martial skills and geopolitical positioning made them both powerful and coveted allies. The British, particularly the governor of New York Thomas Dongan (1684-1688), diligently worked to maintain productive economic and military relations with the Iroquois. Barbara Graymont writes, “The Iroquois flattered the English and readily acknowledged their Covenant Chain alliance with them, gladly accepting the king’s promise...to protect them and their land. Despite this friendship, they continued to maneuver diplomatically between the French and the English whenever it suited their purpose.”<sup>41</sup> Reliant

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<sup>40</sup> Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, x.

<sup>41</sup> Barbara Graymont, ed., *New York and New Jersey Treaties, 1683-1713*, Vol. VIII of *Early American Indian Documents: Treaties and Laws, 1607-1789* (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, Inc., 1995), 82.

on their economic and military cooperation, and unable to force their compliance, the British essentially accepted the diplomatic independence of their Iroquois “subjects,” but not without protest.



**Area of early historic Iroquois occupation**

(See Oswalt, *This Land Was Theirs: A Study of Native Americans* (Boston: McGraw Hill Companies, 2002), 361.)

In a conference with the Five Nations in August of 1686 Gov. Dongan insists the Iroquois do not engage in foreign relations without his approval and refrain from coming into violent confrontation with the French. Gov. Dongan protests, “I charge you neither to make warr nor Peace wt. any Christians without my approbation....And that the Brethren shall not Trade or Traffique, or Enter Into any Covenant chain wt. any Christians french or English as to matters of Trade or Traffique without my Consent and approbation.”<sup>42</sup> These demands are hollow, however, as the governor lacks the economic and military will to enforce his demands, for doing so would risk the safety and profitability of the British colonies along the Atlantic coastline. Fear of a French-Iroquois alliance or a large Native American uprising, similar to King Philip’s War (1675-1676), restrained the governor from alienating the Iroquois. Without the support and goodwill of the Iroquois through the Covenant Chain, the British would conceivably concede their profitable fur trade revenues, as well as open themselves to devastating French and/or Native American attacks. Additionally, Gov. Dongan’s request demonstrates the tenuous nature of the Iroquois status as subjects in itself. By placing oneself under the jurisdiction of the crown, one necessarily forfeits the right to pursue individual foreign policy objectives and agrees to follow the laws and orders as directed by the king. These facts were not lost on the Iroquois, however, as their reply indicates a keen awareness of these particulars.

In response Rode, a Mohawk sachem, speaking on behalf of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Seneca delivers an insightful and politically dexterous reply. Rode is recorded as saying,

We consider that we are Corlaer’s subjects,<sup>43</sup> in whose land we live. We are one head, one body, and one heart. We like to hear this which was not said just for the sake of talk, but because it is true. Give two beavers.

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<sup>42</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 89.

<sup>43</sup> The title “Corlaer” originates from the Dutchman Arent van Corlaer who negotiated the initial alliance between the Iroquois and New Netherland. Jennings writes, “It is certain that Corlaer acquired the Mohawk’s admiration, which they reverently preserved in tradition as though he had been one of their own great chiefs: they made the

As to his Honor's orders that we should not be the first ones to take up the hatchet against the French, we will obey and not molest the French unless they attack us. But if they attack us, then his Honor will have to help us, for if we suffer then his Honor will suffer, for if the body suffers then the head is not free from danger, for if one member suffers the whole body is in pain. On the other hand, Corlaer is obliged to help us for the Governor of Canada speaks very despisingly about his Honor and says that his help would not stay with us. But we trust that when it comes to that point, we will see something different. Give 5 beavers.<sup>44</sup>

Iroquois political acumen is on full display here as the orator accepts a submissive position claiming the Iroquois are Corlaer's "subjects," but conversely claims the British and Iroquois are of the same body; sharing one head and one heart. This analogy is antithetical to a relationship between a lord and subject as it implies equality amongst portions of the body. In this way, Rode concedes British supremacy in one breath and with the next, reasserts parity in their relations. Similarly, Rode acknowledges the Iroquois will abide by the governor's wishes to avoid attacking the French. Gov. Dongan's statement asserts his domineering position in Iroquois foreign policy charging the Iroquois make neither war nor peace without his consent. Without the ability to make independent decisions concerning war and peace a polity essentially ceases to exist in autonomy, which British officials believe to be proper behavior of all vassal states. The Iroquois orator concedes the Iroquois will follow British directives so long as the French do not attack them, at which time the Iroquois reserve the right to counterattack. Rode maintains "when," and not if, the French attack, the Iroquois not only have the authority to engage in retaliatory military actions, but also as the British are united with them in a singular body the British have an obligation to aid them in their endeavors.

The nuances of Rode's oratory are discrete, simultaneously acknowledging British superiority and insisting on their equality by refusing to follow British foreign policy directives should they not coincide with Iroquois interests. Furthermore, to help prompt British support

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name Corlaer into a title by which they later addressed respected governors of the English colony of New York." See Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 56 and 167.

<sup>44</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 90.

Rode gently chides Gov. Dongan saying the Iroquois appreciate overtures reaffirming their alliance, “which was not said just for the sake of talk, but because it is true.” Promises for protection and military support ring hollow should the British fail in the hour of need. Having appealed to the honor of imperial rhetoric, Rode’s declaration continues transcending the nature of the national rivalry between the French and the British attempting to spur actual military support, when it becomes necessary, by involving personal animosities. Rode, seemingly inadvertently, challenges Gov. Dongan’s honor and resolve by mentioning the low regard in which the Governor of Canada holds him. Surreptitiously Rode says, “the Governor of Canada speaks very despisingly about his Honor and says that his help would not stay with us. But we trust that when it comes to that point, we will see something different.” In this way Rode indirectly challenges the governor to uphold their alliance on a personal, as well as national, level through the disparaging words allegedly attributed to the governor of New France, either the newly appointed Jacques-Rene Brisay de Denonville (1685-1689) or his predecessor Joseph-Antoine Le Febvre de La Barre (1682-1685).

Rode’s speech in response to British claims of authority, are not unlike the dialogue between Altan Khan and the Ming court. Both orators pledge their allegiance to the “core” nation, linguistically recognizing their place as subordinates, while alternatively reestablishing themselves as equal to, or superior than, their imperialist ally. Both Rode and Altan Khan recognize the benefits of placating the British, or Chinese as the case may be, with conciliatory and flattering language in order to reap the economic, political, and perhaps military benefits derived from the partnership. While controlling, or at least counterpoising, the martial balance of power the Iroquois and Mongols have little to lose by appeasing the economically more advanced empires with their word play. They have far more to gain by linguistically

“submitting” than to lose, and as we have seen neither the Iroquois nor the Mongols truly accepted imperialist directives if they did not coalesce with their own objectives. Both confederacies understood their value to the British and Chinese, respectively, and thus were not forced to succumb to political dependence.

Official British correspondence reflects this reality far more than Chinese communications, perhaps because of the restraints of Confucian-Mencian language on Chinese officials as they dealt with the paradigm of ancient philosophy versus their reality. Whatever the cause, Gov. Dongan was acutely aware of the value of the Iroquois to the colony of New York and the British efforts to establish permanent economically sustainable and defensible settlements. The British recognized the need to counterbalance the alliance formed between the French and Algonquians, by maintaining healthy relations with the Iroquois so as to better secure their North American interests. In a report written to the Committee of Trade and Plantations on the status of New York in February of 1687 Gov. Dongan writes, “The five Indian Nations are the most warlike people in America, and are a bulwark between us and the French and all other Indians[;] they goe as far as the South Sea the North-West Passage and Florida to Warr. New England in their last Warr with the Indians had been ruined, had not Sir Edmund Andros sent some of those Nations to their assistance. And indeed they are soe considerable that all the Indians in these parts of America are Tributareys to them. I suffer noe Christians to converse with them any where but at Albany and that not without my license.”<sup>45</sup> It is evident Gov. Dongan, and by proxy the British, are not only dependent on Iroquois military aid in wars against other Native American tribes, but also somewhat fearful of their martial prowess in general. The report continues indicating how reliant the province of New York is on the Iroquois in the beaver

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<sup>45</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 103.

trade in order to enhance their profitability. Personal correspondences as well as diplomatic meetings continuously reveal the importance of this trade, not only to the Iroquois, but to the British as well. Lacking the ability to force Iroquois political compliance, and leaning on them in the beaver trade, the governor had little more than diplomatic overtures as a means of attempting to control the Iroquois nations.

The lack of recourse did not hinder Gov. Dongan from attempting to persuade Iroquois sachems from following his directives however. In a somewhat empty argument made in a conference with the Iroquois in 1687 the governor states, “Brethren I took it very ill, that after you putt your selfs in the number of the great King of England’s subjects, that you should ever offer to make peace or war, without my consent; you know, that we can live without you, but you cannot live without us; for you never found, that I told you a lye, and did offer you assistance as you wanted, provided you would be advused by me for I know the French better than any of you doe.”<sup>46</sup> Dongan insists that as subjects the Iroquois are unable to make any decisions of a sovereign nation, like war and peace, without the consent of their protector. He also argues the British do not need the Iroquois as they need the British, but his writing examined above demonstrates this is faulty reasoning, as both the British and the Iroquois were well aware of their mutually beneficial relationship. Gov. Dongan later advises them to consolidate their government into a more hierarchical structure in wartime, claiming it will add expediency and secrecy to their military planning, but also this council is to report to him. If the Iroquois were to heed Gov. Dongan’s advise and form a smaller more powerful governing body, at least in wartime, then he would potentially wield more influence as the number of delegates he would have to sway to follow his advise would be far fewer.

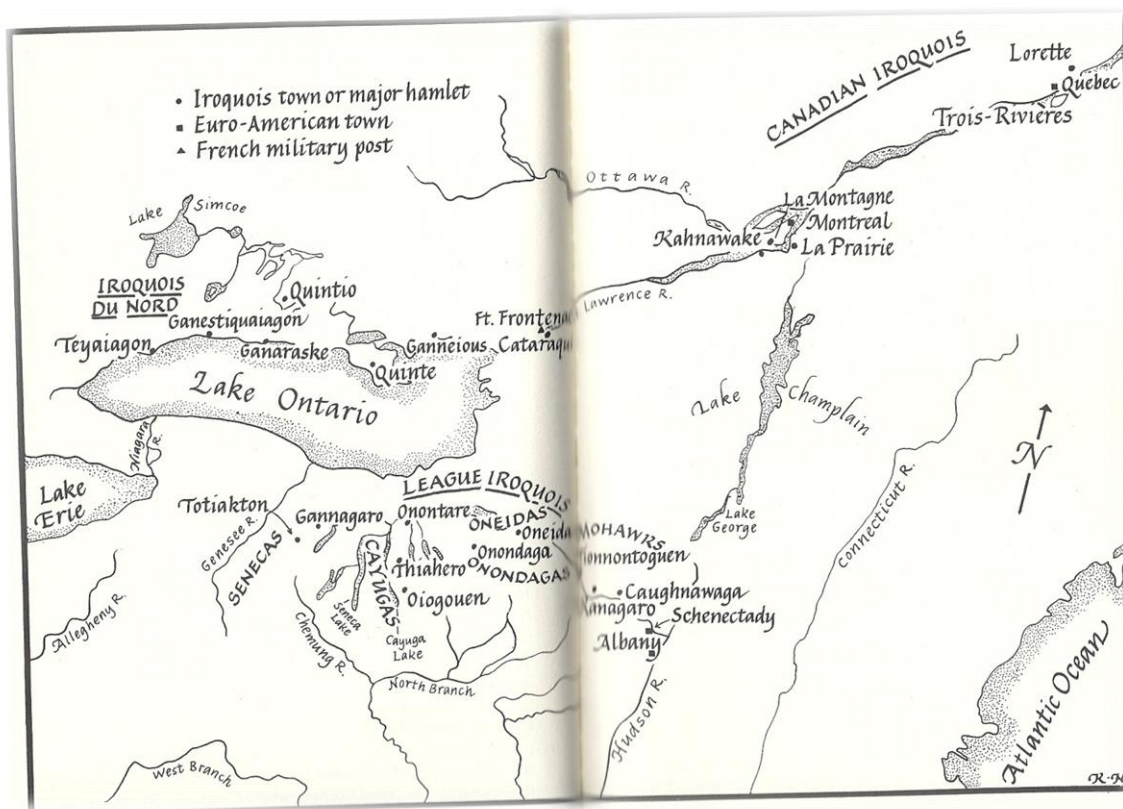
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<sup>46</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 133.

Following a French military campaign into Seneca lands, on the far western reaches of the Iroquois nation in 1687, the Iroquois launched a brutal retaliation against their French and Indian nemeses. Despite promises of assistance, Gov. Dongan failed to protect his allies in the Covenant Chain yet, somewhat amazingly, continued to insist the Iroquois rely solely on him to negotiate a peace with the French following the conclusion of hostilities. In response to his overtures not to attend a peace conference in Canada, the tribes utilize the political malleability of the Iroquois Confederacy fully. The Mohawks, geographically closer to Albany, and more politically allied with the British than the other tribes agree to refrain from engaging in political relations with the French, but say nothing about the other tribes. Somewhat differently the Oneidas respond saying, “Concerning our Journey to Cadarachqui, wee were intended to goe there to Speak to the Indians off ottowawa of Peace, But we will hearken to Corlaer’s Councill and wholly hearken to the maquasse our Brethren, and doe what they shall think fitt.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the Oneidas give the impression they will follow British directives and the Mohawk’s council while not excluding the possibility for their attending the peace conference in French Canada. As the “younger brothers” to the “elder” Mohawks in fictive Confederacy kinship relations, and geopolitically situated closer to the Mohawks than the remaining Iroquois tribes, this response is consistent with the Oneidas’ self-interests.

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<sup>47</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 100.



### Iroquois Villages in the Mid-1670s

(See Richter, p. 122-123)

Further removed from Albany and more intimately involved in the conflict with the French, the Onondagas and Cayugas give a much different response than their Mohawk and Oneida counterparts.<sup>48</sup> The Onondagas refer to a planned assembly of all the Iroquois Nations in order to discuss the proper course of action at which time a decision will be made. They inform the governor, “As for our intended voyage to Cadarachqui, to Speak to the governor of Canida and the Sachims of ottowawa, wee can give no Positive answer before our general meeting of all Nations be over which will be about the beginning of June next EnSueing within four Dutch miles of our Castles, when we shall Discourse about itt.”<sup>49</sup> Being noncommittal allows the

<sup>48</sup> The Seneca were not present in order to respond to Gov. Dongan’s requests due to high water impeding their ability to travel to Albany where the conference was being conducted.

<sup>49</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 101.

Onondagas the maximum amount of political leeway without directly contradicting their Covenant Chain allies. Likewise the Cayugas respond saying, “Wee must acknowledge wee were Resolved to goe to Cadarachqui, to Speak with the Sachims of ottowawa about Treaty of Peace, the Rather because we hear that they of ottowawa are intended to Deliver up some oneyde Prisoners; Butt wee Stand not to that Resolution, but Submitt ourselves wholly to the Issue of a Certain general meeting of all the 5 nations which shall be held 4 D. mile from onnondage there wee know not only this that the onnondages and wee have Solely given over our Votes to the Sinnekes to doe therein as they Shall see meet, and the oneydes have given over their Votes to the Maquase.”<sup>50</sup> As the final respondents to the governor’s requests, the Cayugas reveal, in some respects, the designs of the confederacy. Attributing their political envoy to Canada as an attempt to recover prisoners, rather than to pursue an individual peace with the French and Ottawa, does not technically impede Gov. Dongan’s directives. Furthermore, although the issue of their attendance has yet to be decided, the Onondaga and themselves have pledged their votes in support of whatever course the Seneca pursue. In a politically correct way, the Cayuga excuse themselves from fault and yet vaguely concede they will probably attend the French peace conference.

The four different answers given by the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, and Cayugas demonstrates the self-governing nature of the Iroquois Confederacy that gives them elasticity in their dealings with the British. This allows for divergent answers, with each nation following the consensus of its members, while retaining the vestige of strength provided by the confederacy as a whole. This gives the confederacy as well as its individual members the ability to maintain two fronts; one as loyal British subjects and the other as independent nations able to act on their own accord. In June of 1688 the Oneidas, Onondagas, and Cayugas all traveled to Canada were they

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<sup>50</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 101.

affirmed a peace with the French, denying they were unlawfully able to pursue this course of action as British “subjects.” The Onondagas responded to this inquiry on behalf of all three tribes saying, “they had always resisted his [Gov. Dongan] pretensions and wished only to be friends of the French and English, equally, without either the one or the other being their masters, because they held their country directly of God, and had never been conquered in war...”<sup>51</sup> As sovereign nations within the Iroquois Confederacy the Oneidas, Onondagas, and Cayugas were asserting their independence in pursuit of their tribal self-interests. In this setting, the strength of the united confederacy in association with diplomatic deftness and the political malleability of the confederacy itself were fully utilized to the benefit of the tribes involved.

Up to this point, the primary documents examined relating to the Iroquois have concerned issues of a more political rather than economic nature, whereas the opposite is true of the records relating to the Mongols. This, however, is not meant to indicate Iroquois-British relations were more politically based while Mongol-Ming relations were solely economical. Rather, both associations contained economic and political aspects that in many ways were often intimately linked. Iroquois sachems, like Mongol khans, sustained their leadership positions not only by making sound decisions on behalf of the whole, but also through constant maintenance of sociopolitical networks, in part, built on the redistribution of wealth and resources. As the Iroquois became more directly involved in global economic networks through participation in the fur trade, they became more reliant on mass-produced products. As a result, access to these commodities grew in importance, and Iroquois leadership positions often became contingent on one’s ability to acquire wares. This development did not reduce the Iroquois to economic and political dependence in the early eighteenth-century, however, as they continued to use their geopolitical position and sociopolitical organization to their advantage.

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<sup>51</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 176.

In yet another conflict between France and Britain, known in the American colonies as Queen Anne's War (1702-1713), the Iroquois initially pledged to remain neutral. Nevertheless, in a conference with New York governor Robert Hunter (1710-1720) in June of 1711, the Five Nations invoked their neutrality as a means of obtaining more favorable trade considerations. At the conference, the Iroquois are recorded as saying, "they [the Iroquois] have constantly requested of every Govr. that Goods might be sold cheaper which hath never been complied with, they now renew their Request which if not granted will render them as poor as Dogs. That the Public Presents given them are but Trifling when divided amongst them. If he will let Goods be sold cheaper, their old and young Men will wholly devote themselves to her Majesty."<sup>52</sup> Just as Altan Khan prompted Ming officials to increase the gifts and titles for the Jinong in order to ensure "single-handed" submission, the Iroquois are pressuring the British to render greater amounts of "presents" so they will "wholly devote themselves to her Majesty." In this instance, whether the meaning of "devotion" is in reference to aiding the British in their current war, or perhaps becoming "true" British subjects is unknowable. Either way, the Iroquois are offering "devotion" in return for a greater number of gifts and lower prices. In this way, the Iroquois, like the Mongols, offer an ill-defined intangible in return for tangible goods.

Additionally, the Iroquois sachems caution Gov. Hunter that if their demands are not met they will be unable to remain in a position of authority over their young men. The conference records note, "They repeat this Request again and again and say unless Goods particularly Powder be sold Cheaper they must disperse themselves and that the Sachems can no longer keep up their Authority over the young Men."<sup>53</sup> As young men traditionally represent the more militaristic faction within Iroquois society, I interpret this as a warning against impending raids

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<sup>52</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 635.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

should their demands go unanswered. Again, just as Altan Khan preemptively washed his hands of responsibility should violence ensue following the Ming's failure to heed his advice, the Iroquois sachems are proactively citing their innocence should their economic demands not be met. Upon receiving the governor's sympathetic response and promises to improve the situation, sachems representing the Mohawks, Oneidas, Cayugas, and Senecas spoke to the governor in private assuring the governor of their desire to, "keep the Covenant Chain inviolable with this Government [the British] with whom they never had any war but with the French several."<sup>54</sup> Apparently, the governor had received their intended message and rendered an acceptable response.

These case studies have demonstrated the ability of Altan Khan's Mongol confederacy as well as the Iroquois Confederacy to manipulate either the Ming or the British, as the case may be. Utilizing the decentralized nature inherent to confederate style sociopolitical networks allowed the Mongols and the Iroquois to "submit" verbally to a "core" polity, thus gaining access to economic, political, or military benefits derived from the relationship, without limiting their autonomy. While officially claiming to be superior to, and in direct control of either the Mongols or the Iroquois, neither the Chinese nor the British could completely control affairs. Unless the confederacies deemed their advice agreeable, Ming and British officials were left frustrated. The Five Nations' negotiations with the British and French, like Altan's foreign relations with the Ming hinge on the agency of the confederacies as they utilized their flexibility to enhance their diplomatic, economic, and military advantages over the more hierarchical and thus less nimble bureaucracy of more "developed" governments. A closer evaluation of the research produced by scholars in the fields of Iroquois and Mongol history will further illuminate

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<sup>54</sup> Graymont, *Early American Indian Documents* Vol. VIII, 636.

some of the themes that have already arose throughout this paper, as well as bring forth other key debates.

### **Iroquois Historiography**

In order to begin examining the political acumen of the Iroquois Confederacy it is essential to ground ourselves in historical accuracy in regards to Iroquois history, environment, society, culture, and political organization. A thorough review of the historiography pertaining to the Iroquois Confederacy will allow established facts concerning these issues to come to the fore, as well as illuminate some scholarly debates that divide historians studying the Iroquois.

Lewis H. Morgan is often credited as one of the first scholars to examine the structure and functions of the Iroquois Confederacy. Morgan's personal interest in the Iroquois inspired him to diagram the actual organization of the Confederacy and attempt to define and categorize its various positions. Accompanied by a couple friends, Morgan traveled to the Tonawanda Reservation to witness the inauguration of new chiefs in 1845 in hopes of uncovering the inner workings of the alliance system, as existing literature on the topic was virtually nonexistent. It is here Morgan witnessed and recorded an Iroquois Condolence ceremony as well as conducting interviews with several Seneca participants with the help of a young Ely S. Parker.<sup>55</sup> The notes and research obtained during this event were organized into a series of articles and lectures given by Morgan and eventually published as a book, *League of the Iroquois*, in 1851. While Morgan refrains from recording personal events, Elisabeth Tooker notes Morgan was working under the assumption he was witnessing and documenting a deteriorating institution. Tooker writes, "as Morgan later commented, 'The League of the Iroquois, dismembered and in fragments, still

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<sup>55</sup> Historians of the American Civil War will be acquainted with Ely Parker as he earned moderate fame serving on the staff of General Ulysses S. Grant as a brigadier-general during the war, and was designated by Grant as United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs after the war.

clings together in the twilight of its existence.’ But, as this remark also indicates, Morgan did believe that although not yet dead, the League was dying...”<sup>56</sup> Although Morgan misunderstand some critical information he gathered, like the function of certain chiefs and the number of clans within each tribe, his belief in the inevitable decline of the Iroquois League drove his research on their sociopolitical system. While missing some important details, Morgan’s work continues to influence Iroquois history, as Tooker claims his skill as an ethnographer have proven to be a lasting contribution in the field of anthropology.<sup>57</sup>

Francis Parkman, a nineteenth-century American historian, also devoted much of his life to the study of Native Americans and greatly influenced the field through his many celebrated works. While Parkman has received severe critiques from many twentieth-century historians,<sup>58</sup> his influence, for better or worse, has greatly shaped the study of Native Americans as well as the geopolitical conflict between the French and the British in North America. In his article, “Francis Parkman and Frederick Jackson Turner Remembered”, Wilbur Jacobs admits Parkman is a controversial figure, but claims his narrative novelistic style in volumes such as *Pontiac*, *Pioneers*, *Jesuits*, *LaSalle*, *Count Frontenac*, *A Half Century of Conflict*, *Montcalm and Wolfe*, and *The Old Regime* is how Parkman should be remembered.<sup>59</sup> Some scholars, including Jacobs, claim Parkman’s brief experience traversing the Oregon Trail, “gave him a capacity to understand Indian lifestyles and even personality traits, especially traits of early Iroquois people. He was better able to judge historical sources on Indians because he had studied ethnology and

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<sup>56</sup> Lewis H. Morgan and Elizabeth Tooker, “The Structure of the Iroquois League: Lewis H. Morgan’s Research and Observations.” *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Summer, 1983): 142.

<sup>57</sup> Morgan and Tooker, “The Structure of the Iroquois League,” 151.

<sup>58</sup> Many ethnohistorians claim Parkman deliberately manipulated historical sources in order to portray Native Americans in diabolic ways. They argue his vivid descriptions of Indian lifestyles are infused with indecorous language bombarding the reader with vernacular cues as to the inept and “natural” savagery of Native Americans, thus justifying their extermination.

<sup>59</sup> Wilbur R. Jacobs, “Francis Parkman and Frederick Jackson Turner Remembered.” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. 105 (1993): 42.

had made the effort to know Indians firsthand.”<sup>60</sup> Parkman injected this experience into his study of the Iroquois whom he considered the pinnacle of Native American sociopolitical development. Parkman’s scholarship helped develop and perpetuate the myth of a large highly structured Iroquois empire, yet he claimed, “[T]heir organization and their intelligence were merely the instruments of a blind frenzy, which impelled them to destroy those whom they might have made their allies in a common cause.”<sup>61</sup> While further investigation of this claim will prove Parkman’s ethnocentric assessment wrong, his massive, seemingly well-documented volumes earned him widespread respect and adulation from his peers.

As previously noted, not all historians regard the work of Parkman, or Morgan for that matter, as a credit to the field. Francis Jennings, in his book *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, takes aim at the scholarship of both Morgan and Parkman accusing them of erroneously contributing to the myth of an “Iroquois empire.” In order to debunk the falsehood of this commonly held assumption, Jennings engages in a detailed investigation searching for the origins of the bogus assertion. Jennings convincingly argues the myth of an Iroquois empire was originally concocted by British statesmen as a means to claim title to lands in the trans-Appalachian region through their association and alliance with the Iroquois. “Britain would have the Iroquois rights of conquest because Iroquois dependency meant that what belonged to the Iroquois belonged to Britain. Lacking a reasonable alternative until the French could be forced off the continent, the British donated an empire to the Iroquois in order to claim it for themselves.”<sup>62</sup> Crown officials serving in New York, like Cadwallader Colden and Robert Livingston, advocated the concept of an Iroquois empire in writings and speeches in an attempt

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<sup>60</sup> Jacobs, “Francis Parkman and Frederick Jackson Turner Remembered,” 48.

<sup>61</sup> Francis Parkman, *Jesuits*, p. 36 in Francis Jennings, “Francis Parkman: A Brahmin Among Untouchables.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 42, No. 3 (July, 1985): 319.

<sup>62</sup> Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 11.

to force these tenuous British claims to transform from fictitious hyperbole to concrete claims of jurisdiction. Daniel Richter too, points to the British diplomats as the source of the conjured empire. Richter writes, “the English-Iroquois alliance blazed brightly only in the fertile minds of such imperialist politicians as Cadwallader Colden, who spun the elaborate fiction that the Covenant Chain was an Iroquois ‘empire’ of native peoples and their lands all ‘dependent on the Province of New-York’ and thus all subject to British, rather than French, suzerainty.”<sup>63</sup> It is from the disingenuous geopolitical scheming of Colden and other British officials, which gave birth to the “Iroquois empire” that became accepted as fact and eventually passed on in American history by the works of Morgan and Parkman.

Although Jennings is critical of the “logic” of British imperialists searching for a “legal precedent” from which to outflank their French adversary in North America, he reserves his harshest criticism for Morgan and Parkman themselves. *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire* was published in 1984 at a time when historians were reinvestigating commonly held assumptions about American history. In this context, Jennings harshly condemns the scholarship of Morgan and Parkman claiming Morgan’s Marxist ethnology and Parkman’s belief in Social Darwinism, combined with both men’s white supremacy, caused them to contribute to the perpetuation of the myth of Iroquois empire. Jennings declares, “The combination of Morgan and Marxism with Parkman and Social Darwinism was irresistible; it swept all criticism and dissidence aside. Without need for a pedestal of evidence—in outright defiance of the evidence—the idea of Iroquois empire was enthroned.”<sup>64</sup> The works of Jennings, Richter, and William Fenton, to name only a few, have successfully deconstructed this myth of empire opening new avenues for investigation and turning a page in the study of American Indian history in general.

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<sup>63</sup> Richter, “Cultural Brokers and Intercultural Politics,” 66.

<sup>64</sup> Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 19.

Although historians of Parkman and Morgan's generation were unable or unwilling to see through the diplomatic scheme fostered through official documents written by imperial-minded British officials, contemporary historians have recognized the mechanism used by the British to indirectly claim suzerainty over the "Iroquois empire." These claims rest on what is known as the "Covenant Chain," a military and political arrangement between the British and the Iroquois used to secure alliances, foster trade, and theoretically for mutual protection. The ambiguity of the Covenant Chain arises in light of how each side viewed and utilized the system to maximize their personal benefit derived from the relationship. The English saw the Covenant Chain as the best way to pacify the Iroquois tribes while maintaining a buffer zone between themselves and their French rivals. The Covenant Chain also helped secure and expand economic relations with the Iroquois, particularly in regards to the fur trade. While the English believed, or at least maintained, the Covenant Chain signaled Iroquois submission to British authority, the Iroquois had a far different view of the meaning of the arrangement. From the Iroquois perspective the Covenant Chain was a mechanism through which to negotiate better trading conditions, increase their prestige amongst other Native American tribes, and secure an ally against the French and hostile Indian neighbors. Although they paid lip service to the idea of British superiority, these words were merely used to placate English officials as the Iroquois continued to act in their best interest regardless of English directives.

Historians have recognized the divergent views of the Covenant Chain held by the British and Iroquois and begun to unpack the theoretical framework of both sides. Daniel Richter notes the Covenant Chain was not only a means to claim British authority over Native American tribes in the Northeast, but also as a way for New York to establish itself as the primary negotiating partner with Indian polities in the region. He writes, "For Andros [New York governor Edmund

Andros], the Chain was an elaborate, if ad hoc, means to pacify the natives, simplify English-Indian relations, and—because governments of Massachusetts, Maryland, and Virginia all participated in treaty negotiations as subordinate partners to New York—to establish the preeminence of the duke’s province in Anglo-America.”<sup>65</sup> The British maintained the Covenant Chain, originally developed and utilized by the Iroquois and Dutch to foster peaceable relations, as they took over the area that became New York. Continuation of the Chain provided continuity and helped ease the transition of relations with the Iroquois from one European power to another. Likewise, New York was able to inherit and expand its role as the primary colony for which to negotiate with the Iroquois and by extension all Indian tribes “subordinate” or allied to the Iroquois. This not only brought prestige and power to the colony of New York but also held large economic benefits as the fur trade was directed through Albany, just as the Dutch had previously used Fort Orange as a prime point of exchange.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of the Covenant Chain and maintain workable relations with the Iroquois, the British were forced to accept the theoretical construct of the Chain, which was based on the Iroquois condolence ritual. This ritual was originally developed as a means to alleviate intertribal warfare amongst the Iroquois themselves, by replacing the need for “mourning wars”<sup>66</sup> with the condolence ritual. The ceremony assuaged the grief of a loved one while reaffirming intertribal alliance and cooperation through observance of rites and ceremonial gifts like wampum. The Iroquois consciously extended this practice transforming the function and meaning of particular aspects in order to extend their system of alliances that

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<sup>65</sup> Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 136.

<sup>66</sup> Wendell Oswalt explains, “According to Iroquois legends, the intensity of warfare within the Five Nations, and with other tribes, produced ‘mourning wars,’ a widespread Native American response to killing of relatives. Warriors among the Iroquois, at the instigation of female relatives, raided enemies for captives who were either ritually executed, as a part of the mourning process, or adopted by a family in mourning to replace the deceased. All too often mourning wars led to ongoing feuds.” See Wendell H. Oswalt, *This Land was Theirs*, 370.

included European powers. Thus, to be accepted as a link in the symbolic “chain” the British had to acknowledge a primarily Iroquoian system conducted according to native schematics.

While the British were able to influence the function of the Chain, allowing the system to accommodate greater economic interests and more formal political negotiations, the alliance system retained its initial constructs based on the Iroquois condolence ritual. “As a symbol of an alliance capable of infinite expansion to admit both native and European parties, the chain had metamorphosed from the Iroquois concept of linking arms in friendship—of persons tied by a single umbilical cord so that if one moved or was struck, everyone felt it.... After 1664, the English renewed the previous alliance and, having joined the chain, extended it to include other colonies.”<sup>67</sup> In this way, royal officials in New York not only accepted Iroquois sociopolitical symbology but also manipulated and extended the system to include other colonies serving to enhance their own position within the Chain itself. As the principal “link” to the Iroquois all other colonies were forced to defer to New York in matters involving the Iroquois and their “empire.”

Flexible dynamics within the constructs of the Covenant Chain allowed the British to adapt and mold the system to best fit their individual needs and goals while the Iroquois did likewise, but neither side could alter the status quo further than their collaborator was willing to permit. As William Jennings correctly claims, “the Chain was an example of accommodation and cooperation between peoples of different ethnicity, different cultures, and different social and political structures.”<sup>68</sup> In a similar manner, the Mongols and Ming engaged in trade-tribute relations each adapting the practice to be consistent with their cultural values, but still acceptable

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<sup>67</sup>Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, 349.

<sup>68</sup>Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 374-375.

to the other. Jennings' assessment corroborates the work of Richard White, whose book *The Middle Ground*, although only indirectly related to Iroquois studies, was a transformative work heavily influencing the nature of Native American histories including the study of Iroquois-British relations. White underscores cultural confrontation in his work espousing the idea that neither the European traders nor the native tribes completely controlled all aspects of the developing trade relations and the new formation of frontier communities. Each side compromised and adopted the best of each prevailing culture to form a completely new shared culture in which each group could feel comfortable. In this way, Native Americans and Europeans reached a "middle ground" of societal norms and interactions amongst themselves. "Perhaps the central and defining aspect of the middle ground was the willingness of those who created it to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner's cultural premises. Those operating in the middle ground acted for interests derived from their own culture, but they had to convince people of another culture that some mutual action was fair and legitimate. In attempting such persuasion people quite naturally sought out congruencies, either perceived or actual, between the two cultures."<sup>69</sup> This model of Native American cooperation in their incorporation into a new world-system demonstrates the flexible nature of the process.

Following a similar line of reasoning as White, Matthew Dennis applies the concept of collaboration in his study of the Covenant Chain. Dennis argues while the Chain was based originally on the condolence ritual, both the English and the Iroquois had a hand in redefining and altering the alliance system. He writes, "the Iroquois accommodated new circumstances while maintaining the symbolic meaning of the sacred pledges between 'brethren.' The Covenant Chain was a hybrid form, a multicultural creation which each side believed reflected

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<sup>69</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 52.

the design of the other, and which each sought to shape to its own advantage.”<sup>70</sup> Rather than viewing the Covenant Chain as a hierarchical institution with the British holding the supreme position at the top, as Francis Parkman would claim, Dennis and a majority of contemporary historians, argue sociopolitical organization developed over time. A collaborative process based on cultural, political, and economic bargaining between the various parties occurred until gradually a system emerged in which each side could feel comfortable negotiating with the other.

Unlike the work of Richard White, Alan Taylor’s book *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* argues European colonizers tried to limit collaborative efforts in an attempt to reduce Iroquois power enabling Euroamericans to extend their landholdings at the expense of the Indians. While White’s “middle ground” is primarily confined to relations prior to the American Revolution, conceding the cross-cultural relationship faded as Native Americans lost potential allies, Taylor’s work begins in the mid-eighteenth century during the waning years of the cooperative process. Taylor details how British relations with the Iroquois changed after the American Revolution as Great Britain and the new United States attempted to create “hard” borders demarcating their respective territories and ability to influence the Iroquois at the expense of Iroquois autonomy and landholdings.<sup>71</sup> With the use of violence, intimidation, and backroom deals American settlers slowly divided Iroquois lands developing diverse, often overlapping, claims to tribal lands. Attempts by the Iroquois to adjust to American land grabs, such as leasing the land to small farmers, were rejected by US officials and land speculators as these efforts undermined *their* ability to exploit the land for profit.

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<sup>70</sup> Matthew Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace: Iroquois-European encounters in Seventeenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 269.

<sup>71</sup> Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 406-407.

Similarly, Euroamerican legal codes were implemented and enforced during this struggle for property and power. The British accepted the Iroquois practice of “covering the grave” of a murdered individual, wherein the offending party paid a debt for the victim rather than apprehending the murderer for execution as was colonial procedure.<sup>72</sup> With the erosion of the “middle ground”, this system was no longer observed as Americans insisted the Iroquois be held accountable to their legal system alone. The process whereby the Iroquois lost their lands through militaristic actions, crooked treaties, settler incursions, and Euroamerican rejection of Iroquois attempts at cohabitation in the mid-eighteenth through the nineteenth century, while beyond the limited scope of my work here, is nevertheless essential to our understanding of Iroquois foreign relations. The geopolitical balance of power necessitated the creation of the “middle ground,” but with the loss of French and then British power in North America the Iroquois were left to face the expanding United States alone. Successful use of the Covenant Chain, by the Iroquois, was dependent on an indispensable balance of power, as noted in earlier.

### **Mongol Historiography**

Some fundamental debates in the field of Inner Asian/Chinese history need to be acknowledged and addressed in order to facilitate any cross-cultural comparisons between the Mongol and Iroquois confederacies. Comprehensive histories of steppe nomads are difficult to ascertain and have led to conflicting analysis as to why supratribal nomadic confederacies developed. An essential component within this dialogue is the issue of nomadic dependence on China to provide essential goods. Historians all agree that raiding and trading was an essential component in the creation of tribal confederacies and occasionally vast empires, but they are divided as to the reasons why. A review of the scholarship in regards to these issues will not

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<sup>72</sup> Taylor, *The Divided Ground*, 31.

only help to define the historical debates, but also reveal insights supplementing the search for answers and historical context.

If traditional Chinese accounts of Sino-nomadic relations are to be believed, nomads perpetrated violent raids against the sedentary Chinese due to their innate barbarism and insatiable desire for goods. While ancient Chinese historians, like Sima Qian, presented Chinese society as mere defenders of their territory in dynastic histories, the nomadic polities were presented as subhuman marauders hell bent on absolute destruction. While contemporary historians have begun to look beyond the veil of prejudice contained in these primary sources, initial scholarship conducted by Western historians on Sino-nomadic relations largely adhered to the misguided perception of nomads as predators of sedentary society. For example, Rene Grousset explains in the preface of his book *The Empire of the Steppes* that while nomads were “practical people” they were nevertheless driven by the “law of nature” to raid civilized sedentary communities in search for goods and women, with hopes of conquest.<sup>73</sup> While acknowledging the intelligence of various nomadic polities, Grousset does not break with ancient Chinese accounts of nomadic “timid borrowings and bloodthirsty raids.”<sup>74</sup> Grousset’s view of steppe history is similar to the cyclical mode of Chinese history, wherein nomadic polities rise and fall only to be replaced by another fiercer and more determined steppe polity. To Grousset, like Chinese historians of old, nomadic confederacies and economies depended on Chinese wealth.

Henry Serruys, too, argues nomadic confederacies thrived only when they had access to the vast wealth of a civilized society. As an early voice in the field, Serruys’ detailed scholarship continues to play an intricate role in the historical debates about nomadic economies and tribal

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<sup>73</sup> Rene Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), ix-x.

<sup>74</sup> Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, vii.

formation. In his well-researched study of Sino-nomadic trade relations Serruys makes a compelling case demonstrating the direct relationship between Mongol access to Chinese trade and their decision to conduct raids. Highlighting primary source materials, Serruys notes the Mongols repeatedly requested the Ming dynasty allow them to present “tribute” from 1400-1600. In this way, the Mongols hoped to acquire grains and manufactured goods through trade-tribute relations, which had been a long established practice throughout Chinese history.

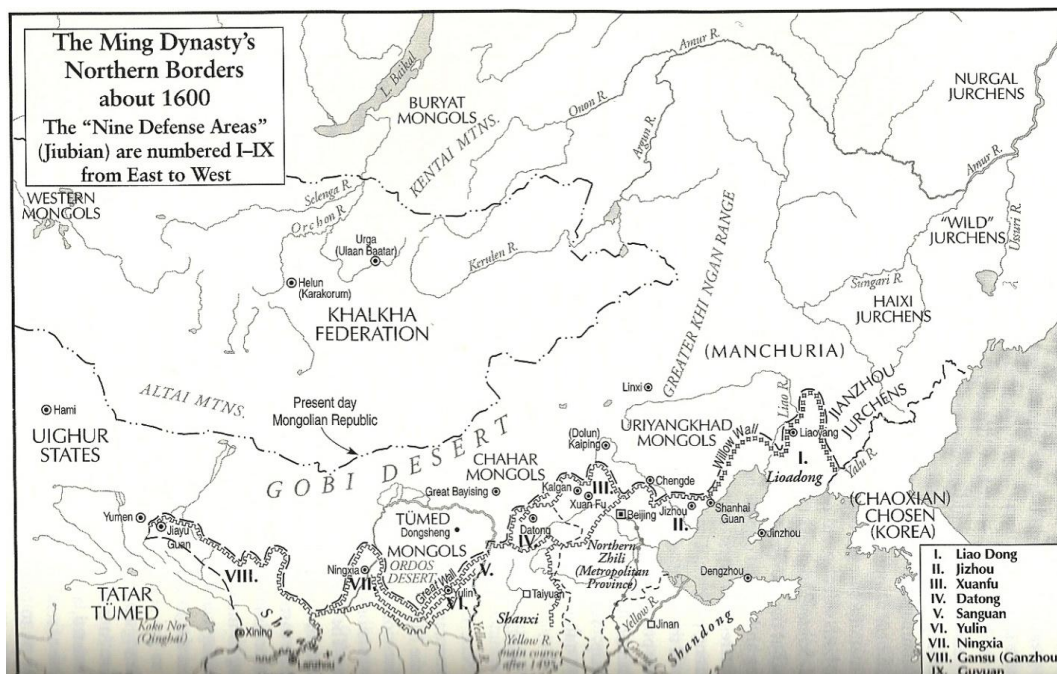
The trade-tribute system, the preferred method of foreign diplomacy and trade of Chinese dynasties, consisted of foreign states or kingdoms coming to the dynastic capital, sometimes by force, to offer goods and/or products in tribute and recognition of China’s superior status over them. The Chinese would then bestow “presents” on the visiting dignitaries, give them titles, and allow them to trade during their visit. This relationship was beneficial to the foreign kingdoms as it served to enhance their position with Chinese recognized titles, and conceivably military support, but perhaps more significantly they profited economically from the exchange, as the Chinese were sure to present gifts of far greater value than had been presented to them. Meanwhile, the Chinese delighted in the acknowledgement of their elevated standing, and gained valuable information and products from foreign lands although officially these latter benefits were eschewed. This arrangement suited established Mongol constructs as they viewed trade-tribute relations as an extension their sociopolitical networks predicated on gift exchanges and kinship/fictive-kinship relations. In fact, Stewart Gordon argues investiture of luxurious robes, as was typical during ceremonial exchanges between the Ming and Mongols, initially developed among steppe nomads, “first perhaps as a semi-diplomatic relation with the sedentary culture but soon as a prerogative of the nomadic leader.”<sup>75</sup> Chinese dynasties often refused to

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<sup>75</sup> Gordon, *Robes and Honor*, 5.

allow steppe nomads the “privilege” of partaking in the trade-tribute system however, as court officials believed this to fuel the nomads’ insatiable desire for Chinese goods and wealth.

Serruys claims that when denied the privilege of participating in this system, the Mongols conducted raids taking the products they desired to the utter frustration of Ming officials. He illustrates how Altan Khan, having sacked the suburbs of the Ming capital of Beijing in 1550, forced the Ming to concede to formal trade relations in the form of horse fairs. Access to goods through established means greatly reduced the frequency of Mongol raids until the Ming once again abolished the trade fairs in 1552.<sup>76</sup> Unlike Grousset, Serruys does not pinpoint innate greed as the pretext for nomadic raids, but rather uses primary evidence to construct an economic justification. According to Serruys, dependence on Chinese grain and manufactured goods, particularly during times of drought, served as the catalyst for Mongol raids and overtures for trade.



### Ming borders about 1600

(See Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China 900-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 694.)

<sup>76</sup> Serruys, *Trade Relations*, 150-160.

The work of Grousset and Serruys has been elaborated upon and refined by successive generations of historians. While the philosophy of “raid or trade” is still prominent in the field, some scholars have attempted to use nomadic dependence inherent to this school of thought to help explain the creation of large tribal confederacies. Historians such as Owen Lattimore, Thomas Barfield, and Joseph Fletcher argue steppe tribal confederations were formed as a response to growing agrarian states in order to benefit from the stored wealth of these sedentary peoples. Fletcher claims, “the main purpose of the tribe was to exploit the pastoral habitat and that the main purpose of the supratribal polity was to extort the wealth from agrarian societies.”<sup>77</sup> According to Lattimore, Barfield, and Fletcher, Inner Asian nomadic confederacies were dependent on Chinese wealth for their existence, and individual tribes fought over access to this wealth, which invariably led to the victors’ preeminence on the steppe. Lattimore writes, “Wars between the different tribes led repeatedly to the same result; the prize of victory in tribal warfare was the privilege of claiming either the chief benefits derived from an invasion of China, or the major share of the subsidies exacted from China.”<sup>78</sup> Grains and silks, confiscated during raids or acquired through trade, were redistributed by the tribal leadership to other allied tribes in order to retain their allegiance. In this way, Barfield argues, “Nomadic imperial confederacies came into existence only in periods when it was possible to link themselves to the Chinese economy.”<sup>79</sup> Without access to Chinese resources, large tribal polities on the steppe would not have been possible according to Lattimore, Barfield, and Fletcher.

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph Fletcher, “The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jun., 1986): 11-50, 16.

<sup>78</sup> Owen Lattimore, “Prince, Priest and Herdsman in Mongolia,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Mar., 1935): 35-47, 37.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1989), 9.

Barfield claims Inner Asian nomads not only developed in response to Chinese dynasties but also, restructured their organizational system in order to better manipulate the Chinese state. He uses the Xiongnu as a case in point, claiming their imperial government was borrowed from the Han (206 BCE- CE 220). "Rather than being the result of indigenous evolution, the Hsiung-nu state was a structural response by the nomads to the problems of organizing themselves so that they could effectively manipulate the Chinese."<sup>80</sup> Centralizing authority allowed nomadic leaders to negotiate with Chinese bureaucrats from an increased position of power. Supratribal elites could successfully command greater respect and increased resources from the Chinese due to their amplified potential for attack(s). Due to their dependence on a strong Chinese state, Barfield contends the rise of a native Chinese dynasty<sup>81</sup> simultaneously stimulated a united nomadic polity on the steppe. To this end, Barfield argues that when "foreign" dynasties<sup>82</sup> ruled China they inevitably became embattled in internal upheavals, forcing them to ignore the peoples on the steppe. This reprieve afforded nomadic groups time to unify and exploit dynastic divisions within the empire. Thus, when a new native Chinese dynasty arose, both the Chinese and the steppe nomads were organized under centralized leadership and in a position of strength. Barfield claims this series of rise, fall, and conquest repeated three times with only the "anomalous" Mongol rise to power interrupting this cycle.

The interactions between the steppe nomads and Chinese were based on a relative balance of power. This, in Barfield's view, dictated which of two foreign policies the nomads would adopt in relation to the Chinese: an "inner frontier strategy" or an "outer frontier strategy." The inner frontier strategy, "consisted of one party (usually the weaker) in a tribal civil war

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<sup>80</sup> Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 37.

<sup>81</sup> A native dynasty, according to Barfield, is one that originated within China itself and was ruled by an ethnic Chinese family.

<sup>82</sup> The foreign dynasties to which Barfield refers most commonly originate from what is known as modern day Manchuria, although these dynasties would not have identified themselves as Manchus before 1636.

obtaining China's aid to destroy his steppe enemy... The 'inner frontier' strategy called on a leader to maintain his autonomy and keep free of direct Chinese control."<sup>83</sup> The Chinese backed nomads tried to exploit this alliance to help rebuild and unite their divided tribal confederacy. The outer frontier strategy, meanwhile, emphasized nomadic speed in violent raids into China and then a quick retreat to avoid Chinese counterattacks. Nomads used brutal violence to terrify the Chinese court into accepting peace agreements conceding essential products, like silk and grains, the nomads could not produce themselves. By refusing to occupy Chinese territory, nomads avoided administrative responsibilities and the inherent dangers that accompany every occupation force. Alternating between war and peace forced Chinese courts to increase the amount of subsidies and trade privileges given to the nomads.<sup>84</sup> The brutal unpredictability of these nomadic raids kept the Chinese court in a perpetual struggle to placate them with ever-greater goods and trading opportunities.

Thomas Allsen fully supports Barfield's analysis of nomadic strategies for dealing with sedentary Chinese dynasties, particularly their use of the "inner frontier strategy." It is the implementation and successful use of this approach, which eventually can lead to the creation of a supratribal confederacy according to Allsen. "Nomads formed larger political unions—confederacies—and created formal state structures primarily for conducting relations with and fending off threats from settled states. This is the reason that major nomadic empires normally evolved near the frontiers of sedentary polities and not in the innermost recesses of the Eurasian steppe."<sup>85</sup> The establishment of a powerful Chinese dynasty forced nomadic polities to restructure themselves in a more cohesive manner to engage efficiently in political intercourse

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<sup>83</sup> Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 63.

<sup>84</sup> Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 49.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Allsen, "The Rise of the Mongolian Empire and Mongolian Rule in North China," in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6 Alien Regimes and Border States 907-1368* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 329.

with China as well as providing a more unified front against the growing sedentary threat. Allsen notes during the Jin dynasty the Mongols acquired a relatively equal balance of power with their sedentary neighbor and engaged in raids, by passing defenses, to target women and booty, rather than attempting to occupy new lands.<sup>86</sup> Allsen's example clearly demonstrates the implementation of what Barfield refers to as the "outer frontier strategy."

As noted earlier, David Fletcher concurs with Barfield's analysis, but he makes some variations in his interpretation. Fletcher argues nomads were not dependent upon access to sedentary grain production for survival as Barfield claims. He maintains steppe nomads practiced limited agriculture enabling them to live in small dispersed clans. Fletcher's argument insists that rather than being dependent on Chinese grains for their physical survival, nomadic confederacies were dependent upon Chinese wealth as a means to sustain their cohesiveness. Once a charismatic individual ascended to the preeminent leadership role within a tribal confederation, his ability to retain the position was contingent upon acquisition of wealth for redistribution in order to keep the allegiance of his military and political allies, which were one and the same. Fletcher maintains, "if the tribes were to remain under the discipline of a steppe autocrat, he must raid and invade. The price of autocracy was that the autocrat could not stop. He must continue to enrich and engage his subjects by continuing war."<sup>87</sup> Under these circumstances, Fletcher argues nomadic confederacies were limited in their foreign policy options. Similar to Barfield's inner and outer frontier policies, Fletcher claims nomadic polities were faced with the decision of "invasion, threat of invasion, and outright dependency" in their relations with the Chinese state.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Allsen, "The Rise of the Mongolian Empire and Mongolian Rule in North China," 351.

<sup>87</sup> Fletcher, "The Mongols," 32.

<sup>88</sup> Fletcher, "The Mongols," 15.

In *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall*, Jagchid and Symons contend Sino-nomadic relations were centered almost solely on nomadic access to trade. The authors agree with Barfield that nomadic peoples were dependent on sedentary Chinese for grains and silk cloth. Like Barfield, the authors concur nomadic access to these essential products, which they could not produce themselves, determined their relations with the Chinese. On this key point Thomas Allsen also supports Jagchid, Symons, and Barfield. Allsen claims, “nomads were necessarily compelled to turn to their sedentary neighbors for agricultural products.”<sup>89</sup> This, in turn, would necessitate the raid or trade philosophy advocated by Jagchid and Symons in their work. When the Chinese opened markets for trade with the nomads, enabling them to procure the products they needed, relatively peaceful relations ensued. As noted earlier, the Chinese were often loath to engage in trade-tribute relations with nomadic steppe “barbarians” however, as it brought little prestige and nothing of economic value, excluding horses, according to Chinese officials. When, as often happened, the Chinese refused to trade with the nomads, there was an outbreak of nomadic raids in order for them to secure the necessary products. The authors also agree with Barfield in that Sino-nomadic relations were contingent upon a relative balance of power, which in turn, determined the policies and techniques both the Chinese and nomadic confederacies utilized in dealing with the other.

Not all historians are in agreement with this assessment of nomadic supratribal formation however. Some historians such as Nicola Di Cosmo, Anatoly Khazanov, and J. Daniel Rodgers contend the amalgamation of large tribes formed in response to a crisis or crises, which necessitated the need for unified action. It is in response to an emergency, like a foreign invasion, natural disaster, or epidemic, which causes a breakdown in hierarchical distinctions and

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<sup>89</sup> Allsen, “The Rise of the Mongolian Empire and Mongolian Rule in North China,” 328.

allows for the emergence of a strong leader.<sup>90</sup> Tribes agreed to follow the new leader, until the catastrophe abated, creating more political organization on the steppe according to Di Cosmo. Khazanov concurs with Di Cosmo's position when he asserts, "the Mongolian conquest movements were aimed at overcoming initial societal crises at a time when an external political situation favored expansion."<sup>91</sup> After unifying, expansion was the only way for the ruling elite to maintain the new political organization as well as their elevated positions in society. J. Daniel Rodgers elaborates on this point further when he writes, "Foreign [Chinese] luxury foods may have been especially significant for the steppe polities that formed confederations or hierarchical alliances of relatively independent groups. In this type of organization, maintenance of the confederation often depended on the ability of central elites to provide subordinates with access to luxury goods as part of the maintenance of alliances."<sup>92</sup> Chinese wealth was essential to Inner Asian nomadic polities, not because they were dependent on Chinese products for their physical survival, but rather as a means of securing tenuous alliances, according to this theory.

Examining Nicola Di Cosmo's arguments more meticulously reveals gaps in the scholarship presented by Barfield, Fletcher, and Jagchid and Symons. In *Ancient China and its Enemies*, Di Cosmo points to the variation of steppe grave goods as proof of extended trade networks linking steppe nomads to distant civilizations. Graves in Inner Asia have revealed arrowheads, pieces of bridles, engraved stones with animal designs, and chariots. These goods display markings indicating the transmission of information and technologies with peoples throughout Central Asia. Di Cosmo argues this evidence demonstrates that, contrary to the

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<sup>90</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo, "State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History," *Journal of World History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1999): 1-40, 15-16.

<sup>91</sup> Anatoly M. Khazanov, "Muhammad and Jenghiz Khan Compared: The Religious Factor in World Empire Building," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Jul., 1993): 461-479, 463.

<sup>92</sup> J. Daniel Rodgers, "The Contingencies of State Formation in Eastern Inner Asia," *Asian Perspectives*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Fall 2007): 249-274, 254.

beliefs of Barfield, Jagchid, and Symons, Inner Asian nomads were not solely dependent on the Chinese for access to trade goods. Steppe nomads had trade networks that spread throughout Central Asia allowing for the distribution of technology and foodstuffs that did not necessarily originate in China. He contends, “evidence of the vitality of a ‘steppe civilization’ where diverse metallurgical, artistic, and possibly spiritual components were rapidly transmitted, exchanged, and absorbed from community to community. The very rapidity of these elements spread encourages us to surmise that many groups had reached a fairly similar degree of economic, technological, and social development and that contacts among them had intensified steadily over time.”<sup>93</sup> Although northern parts of China did take part in this developing nomadic culture Di Cosmo clearly points out China was only one, and not the most important, among the cultural areas that participated in the rise of this social phenomenon.<sup>94</sup> If Inner Asian nomads were not solely dependent on the Chinese for necessary goods, their economic options would have been far greater than Barfield, Fletcher, Jagchid, and Symons all proposed.

There are striking similarities in the theses put forth by Di Cosmo and Fletcher despite their divergent views of nomadic state formation. As previously noted, Fletcher argues nomads were not dependent on Chinese trade to acquire necessary grains, as they participated in limited agriculture and exchanges with other sedentary groups. Di Cosmo, likewise, repeatedly emphasizes this fact in his writings. In his article “Ancient Inner Asian Nomads” Di Cosmo explains, “Farming was carried out as a supplementary activity in various areas within the economic zones dominated by mounted nomad—in different manners according to relative

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<sup>93</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39.

<sup>94</sup> Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, 88.

economic composition and technological advances.”<sup>95</sup> On this point Fletcher would agree, but maintains that while nomadic peoples can survive in this way, they cannot coalesce into larger confederations without depending on a strong centralized state. As discussed earlier, once a nomadic confederation united around a strong individual, the leader had to maintain alliances through redistribution of wealth requiring trade or tribute, which, according to Fletcher, could only be obtained from a centralized state.

Di Cosmo, too, sees nomadic expansionism driven by the need for greater goods to retain followers. It is to ensure their elite positions in nomadic society, Di Cosmo claims, that nomads traded or raided for Chinese goods to dispense, in order to retain their socioeconomic status.<sup>96</sup> In this way, the arguments of Fletcher and Di Cosmo look quite comparable, so what is the difference? Fletcher asserts nomadic confederacies were dependent on a strong Chinese state in order for them to form and thrive. Fletcher explains, “The main purpose of the tribe was to exploit the pastoral habitat and that the main purpose of the supratribal polity was to extort wealth from agrarian societies.”<sup>97</sup> In this way, large steppe polities are like a parasite growing along with the thriving body-politic of the Chinese state. Conversely, as previously discussed, Di Cosmo believes confederacies formed as a response to a crisis. Nomadic groups merely remained united because it facilitated their ability to “extort” goods and products from the Chinese. In Di Cosmo’s analysis, unlike Fletcher’s, nomadic confederacies choose to raid or trade with China, not because they had to, but because they could. Forcing Chinese dynasties into trade relations was merely the easiest, but not the only, way for nomadic tribal elite to retain their positions.

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<sup>95</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo, “Ancient Inner Asian Nomads: Their Economic Basis and Its Significance in Chinese History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Nov. 1994): 1092-1126, 1094.

<sup>96</sup> Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, 23-24.

<sup>97</sup> Fletcher, “The Mongols,” 16.

To this end, I find the arguments presented by Barfield and Fletcher to be unsatisfactory. While Barfield explains the rise of the Mongol confederacy and their expansive conquests as an “anomaly,” this does not adequately account for their ability to maintain their large social configuration and semblance of political cooperation as long as they did. If supratribal nomadic polities were truly dependent on the strength of a united Chinese state to maintain their sociopolitical networks, it stands to reason, the Mongol confederacy would also be tied to a Chinese dynasty and would have crumbled shortly after they conquered China. However, the Mongols were able to maintain a consortium following the fall of the Song dynasty, and the scholarship of Di Cosmo can help delineate the reasons why.

Di Cosmo has shown the Mongols were not dependent on the Chinese to supply necessary grains, silks, and manufactured goods. While nomadic polities did engage in trade with the Chinese, it was a mutually beneficial arrangement, despite false Chinese overtures claiming otherwise. Di Cosmo also argues nomadic confederacies arose from a crisis on the steppe, causing a breakdown in social structure, allowing a strong and capable leader to emerge and unite diverse tribes under his control. According to Di Cosmo this process occurred numerous times on the steppe, but the budding supratribal polities were not carbon copies of one another through space and time. Steppe confederacies improved their social, political, economic, and diplomatic institutions, learning from experience, to more efficiently derive income in order to maintain themselves. “The gradual—yet uneven, expansion of ways to achieve a better control and management of revenues appears, then, to be a crucial feature and a major driving force in the history of inner Asian states.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, when the Mongols initially appear on the steppe they have long been exposed and grown accustomed to diverse and evolving

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<sup>98</sup> Di Cosmo, “Inner Asian State Formation and Periodization,” 39.

sociopolitical structures. The Mongols continued this evolutionary process and were so proficient in their extraction of Chinese wealth they caused the collapse of the Song dynasty. However, the fall of the Song did not lead to the disintegration of the Mongol confederacy. The Mongol khanates merely adjusted their means of revenue extraction yet again exchanging tax incomes, tribute, luxury as well as bulk goods, and even artisans and other trained professionals. Even in times of conflict between the Mongol factions this lucrative trade was continued.

In this way, the Mongols adapted their economic mechanisms to meet current circumstances. Di Cosmo divides the development of external revenue collection into four nonexclusive periods: “tribute, trade, dual administration, and agrarian taxation.”<sup>99</sup> Utilizing all of these systems, contingent on place and circumstance, the Mongols expanded their existing trade networks and administrative capabilities as they enlarged their empire. The Mongols developed and expanded in a similar manner as other steppe supratribal confederacies, so explaining Mongol conquests as an “anomaly” is insufficient rationalization to describe such a historic world event. Di Cosmo’s thesis that nomadic confederacies formed because of a crisis and were independent of a Chinese state seems much more plausible as it synthesizes the maturation of nomadic polities including the Mongols. This proposal can even address the configuration of nomadic confederacies following the fall of the Yuan dynasty. The crisis in the case of Altan Khan’s confederacy was the need for self-preservation. In the face of fierce competition from other nomadic factions on the steppe, as well as the imposing presence of the Ming dynasty, Altan united a network of tribes under his stewardship and set about obtaining the means to retain his elite position just as countless past khans had done.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

## Social Structures and Foundation Myths

A few words concerning the basic nature of Iroquois communities and society in general will help illustrate further similarities, as well as some differences, with the Mongols. The five tribes were each self-sufficient as their subsistence practices combined horticulture and hunting, making life in semi-sedentary villages possible. Responsibilities for food production were divided between the sexes as women planted and tended the fields around the village, and men fished and hunted. Women's cultivation of corn, beans, squash and pumpkins in addition to the game provided by men created a relatively well-balanced and stable sustenance pattern. The responsibility for crop production enhanced the position of women within the kin-based society. Iroquois villages were matrilineal with husbands moving in with their wife's family upon marriage. Children looked to their mother's brother(s) for guidance and support serving to reinforce matrilineal ties within the family structure. Iroquois families resided in longhouses with approximately six to ten families sharing a single extended structure. Longhouses were divided by hearths, each hearth servicing two families living on opposite sides of the longhouse, which were spaced evenly down the length of the longhouse. This form of communal living necessitated the formation of strict cultural and social norms allowing for self-regulation of proper behavior. Politeness and befitting protocol, in all circumstances, served as the catalyst for harmonious family and village co-existence.

The principal tenet facilitating and encompassing every healthy social relationship within Iroquois culture hinged on the concept of reciprocity. Redistribution of goods and supplies were essential to creating and maintaining positive social interactions within the family, village, tribe, and beyond to allies. Daniel Richter notes in his fine work, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, "For the Five Nations, themes of reciprocity and exchange, war and peace, and alliance and spiritual

power entwined to define most relationships among persons, kin groups, and villages. They also were at the heart of the most significant of all connections between one village and another, the entity called the Great League of Peace and Power.”<sup>100</sup> Concepts of reciprocity and exchange were fundamental to the redistributive economy of the Iroquois, just as it was to the Mongols. In both societies the significance of gift giving extended far beyond simple economic considerations. Gifts were not merely utilitarian in nature; they held greater cultural and spiritual meaning(s). Thus relationships were defined not by the quantity of gifts presented, but rather by the character and associations tied to the object(s) or goods being exchanged. For example, sharing foodstuffs with family, friends, and allies was expected, while gifts such as hides, pipes, weapons, precious stones or metals, and later manufactured goods held greater significance.

Relationships were expressed through the act of exchange and the nature of the gift changing hands. Among the Iroquois, no gift held greater importance than the presentation of wampum<sup>101</sup> from one tribe to another. While offering little in the way of utilitarian use, strings of wampum held great cultural and social significance, as they were closely associated with the story of the original alliance formed between the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas, which melded them into a league. While the exchange of wampum was a widespread practice amongst tribes in the Northeastern woodlands, and would grow in importance with the coming of European traders, the Iroquois held the exchange of wampum in particularly high regard as it harkened back to the founding of the Iroquois League itself, although the practice predated this event.

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<sup>100</sup> Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 29.

<sup>101</sup> A belt or string of wampum consisted of white and/or black cowrie shells woven together in a geometric pattern designed as a visual representation to accompany a speakers’ meaning and demonstrate the sincerity of the words and ideas being expressed. Wampum served as a visible reminder of peace agreements, trade arrangements, or as a declaration of war once the meeting parties departed.

Scholars believe intertribal warfare raged between the five tribes in the Owasco period depleting the strength of each tribe as mourning wars consumed both men and resources in cyclical raids and reprisals, seemingly, without conclusion. Iroquois oral traditions maintain Hiawatha, distressed over the loss of his daughters to one such “war”, fled to the woods seeking solace where he meet Deganawida. Deganawida, a prophet-like figure with supernatural powers, taught Hiawatha how to overcome his grief and shared with him how the Iroquois could end the self-destruction caused by mourning wars. While Iroquois legends differ on the details, they all credit Hiawatha and Deganawida for teaching them nonviolent means for addressing their grievances amongst themselves, and ultimately unifying them into a single confederacy founded on the ideology of internal peace.

The principal means for eliminating internal unrest taught by Hiawatha and Deganawida was the Condolence Ceremony. This highly formalized ritual combined the exchange of speeches and wampum as well as a feast in order to “requicken” the deceased and ceremonially “replace” him, or more accurately bestow the deceased leader’s title on a successor. “Through these means, the Condolence rituals, ceremonial gifts, and Requickening rites symbolically addressed the same demographic, social, and psychological needs served by the mourning-war, restoring the deficit of spiritual power caused by death.”<sup>102</sup> These rites allowed the Five Nations to simultaneously reaffirm their shared history, renew alliances and friendships, maintain peaceful relations, and perpetuate the league. In this way the Creation Epic of Hiawatha and Deganawida gave meaning and purpose to the rituals associated with the Condolence Ceremony in which all of the Five Nations could participate and share in common.

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<sup>102</sup> Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, 40-41.

In comparison, *The Secret History of the Mongols* also uses legends to stress important cultural values aimed at reducing internal strife. Paul Kahn notes an overarching theme throughout the entire story emphasizes family cooperation and mutual respect.<sup>103</sup> A cohesive family unit is imperative to achieving harmony within the family itself increasing ones' chance of survival, creating a stable society, and succeeding in the turbulent world of steppe politics. Evidence of this becomes apparent in the opening stanzas of the *Secret History* as the ancestral mother of the Mongol tribe, Alan the Fair, makes an impassioned speech to her sons advising them to remain united for strength. "Then Alan the Fair spoke to her five sons and gave them advice: 'You five were all born from one womb. If, like the five single arrows that you held you separate yourselves, each going alone, then each of you can be broken by anyone. If you are drawn together by a singular purpose bound like the five shafts in a bundle how can anyone break you?'"<sup>104</sup> Although the speech of Alan the Fair cannot be historically verified by other sources, the analogy emphasizes the importance of strength in numbers, reveals cultural values and advice the author of the *Secret History* deemed important enough to record. In this way the mythical, perhaps ahistorical, nature of the *Secret History* and the Iroquois legend of Hiawatha and Deganawida are important, not for their historical accuracy, but rather for the cultural and social insights and values the stories reveal. Emphasizing a shared unity and bond, either through kinship or fictive-kinship, help these societies coalesce in order to work in mutual cooperation in facing internal as well as external threats.

Like the *Secret History*, the legend of Hiawatha and Deganawida is intertwined with metaphors and myths, giving voice to the ideological constructs and values on which the

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<sup>103</sup> Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chinghis Khan*. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), xx.

<sup>104</sup> Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 6.

Iroquois League was founded. William Fenton notes, “Rather than a single event, the formation of the Iroquois League was a process that occupied the lifetimes of its founders.... The League as such was a confederacy of independent but related tribes or nations; and confederacies, as political institutions, owe their rise usually to the need to compose internal hostilities in order to meet the threat of common enemies.”<sup>105</sup> Fenton’s sentiment as to the reasons why confederacies form parallels many arguments presented by scholars studying Inner Asia, particularly Di Cosmo. Likewise, Iroquois and Mongol legends about the importance of cooperation are similar, as are the processes by which the confederacies formed. Unfortunately, the murky details surrounding the foundation of the Iroquois League limit our ability to date, accurately, the League’s establishment.

The oral traditions of the Iroquois make pinpointing a date for the League’s creation difficult since references to events and times vary according to different versions of the story. Although Timothy Shannon notes he is unable to apply a specific date to the creation of the Iroquois League, he estimates its formation at some point between 1450 and 1600.<sup>106</sup> Likewise, Francis Jennings approximates the league’s configuration slightly prior to Shannon’s dates setting his from 1400 to 1600.<sup>107</sup> Most historians tend to favor the dates used by Shannon without venturing to speculate more definitively. Neta Crawford, however, is willing to assign a more specific date for the league’s birth writing, “The negotiations for the formation of the Iroquois League probably were concluded around 1450, about eighty-five years before the Mohawks, in the League members’ first direct contact with Europeans, met Cartier on the Saint

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<sup>105</sup> Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, 72.

<sup>106</sup> Timothy J. Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire: The Albany Congress of 1754* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>107</sup> Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 8.

Lawrence.”<sup>108</sup> Crawford’s assessment gets to the exact point about the formation of the Iroquois League. The Five Nations united prior to European contact for internal reasons in order to extinguish intertribal fighting. In this way, Di Cosmo’s theory of nomadic state formation on the steppe, being in response to a crisis, can seemingly be applied here to the Iroquois, the crisis in this case being the devastation of intertribal violence.

The league does not seem to be an outgrowth from the need to better negotiate with Europeans upon their arrival, adopting a more centralized government as a way to politically relate to the Dutch, French, or English. Even if Crawford’s date of 1450 is incorrect, and we instead rely on the latest date of 1600 offered by Shannon and Jennings, European influence would have been minimal at most. Iroquois encounters with Europeans did not begin until Jacques Cartier’s voyages in 1534, 1535-1536, and 1541-1542 and these encounters were relatively brief. At this time, a long interactive relationship with Europeans had not yet developed limiting the influence of Eurocentric worldviews and political systems in the development of the Iroquois League. The League simply (re)created and extended existing Iroquois kinship ties, social values, and community networks to a larger Iroquois “nation” that were once again adapted and transformed into the Covenant Chain. The League and later the Confederacy was itself acceptable to local villages and tribes, where the power of the League’s Grand Council<sup>109</sup> derived, because it was not a completely new or foreign political structure but rather something that was intimately relatable to their existing social and political networks.

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<sup>108</sup> Neta C. Crawford, “A Security Regime among Democracies: Cooperation among Iroquois Nations.” *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Summer, 1994): 345-385, 354.

<sup>109</sup> The Grand Council was the highest ranking council within the Iroquois Confederacy and consisted of 50 sachems. Richter notes the Grand Council was more of a religious body whose, “role was to preserve the Great Peace through ceremonial Words of Condolence and exchanges of ritual gifts.” See Richter, *The Order of the Longhouse*, 40.

The flexibility of the Iroquois Confederacy allowed it to mature as an institution, learning from experience, on how to best negotiate with and manipulate political discourse and social relations with various European powers based on circumstance. The local nature of the Confederacy's authority gave the Iroquois political dexterity, which they learned to use advantageously in relations with European countries. With freedom to maneuver independently, within the whole of the confederacy, the Five Nations could each act and/or react according to regional geopolitical concerns expediently. With its roots planted in tradition and locally accepted practices, the Confederacy could mature within the context of Iroquois sociopolitical constructs. Therefore, while it is difficult to decipher a date or specific events from the League's foundation myths, in this case, the generalizations revealed by the stories are perhaps more fundamental to our understanding of social themes and values held in common by the Iroquois.

Although earlier historians believed the Iroquois League was designed as an organization for facilitating expansion, contemporary scholars have all agreed on the fallacy of this notion. Here current Iroquois and Mongol scholarship differ widely as many historians researching the Mongols argue expansion was a driving force behind confederation. Matthew Dennis writes, "Conquest had not created the Iroquois League; internecine fighting, which caused chaos in the Owasco and early Iroquois world, did not annihilate communities or create empires but instead provided the incentive to invent peaceful solutions."<sup>110</sup> The Iroquois League was created as a means to live peaceably, rather than expand territorially. According to Neta Crawford, "The main purposes of the Iroquois League were to achieve general peace and to keep unity and order among the five nations, which frequently had fought one another before the Iroquois League's

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<sup>110</sup> Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace*, 68.

formation.”<sup>111</sup> The persuasive arguments presented by Dennis and Crawford, alike, are shared by other prominent historians such as William Fenton, Francis Jennings, and Dean Snow to name only a few. With this overwhelming consensus, it is safe to conclude the Iroquois League was formed to alleviate intertribal warfare, and provide a structure by which to live peaceably.

In this way, scholarship relating to the reasons for confederation amongst the Iroquois and the Mongol polities differ substantially. While historians studying the formation of the Iroquois League seemingly agree on the reasons why the league formed, rejecting conquest as a motive, scholars writing about nomadic steppe confederacies differ widely in their assessments as we have seen. Although local and regional variables need to be considered, it seems plausible that if the Iroquois Confederacy can exist without the need for expansion, so too could confederacies in Inner Asia. Along these lines, further investigation of a comparative nature could, perhaps, help develop our understanding of confederacy formation in general.

### **“Relative” Relations**

In his study of Northeast Asia, predominantly pertaining to relations between the Yuan dynasty and the kingdom of Koryo (918-1392) in the mid-fourteenth century, David Robinson examines the patterns of social integration fostered by the Mongols during the Yuan dynasty’s waning years. He argues, “Elite intermarriage between ruling houses, the practice of sending young princes as hostages to the Mongol court, service in the personal guard of the Mongol khans, great state banquets, and regular gift-exchange were among the ways the Mongol empire fostered political allegiance and integration among a variety of regions and peoples.”<sup>112</sup> While Robinson’s quote is in reference to the Yuan’s interactions with Northeast Asia in particular,

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<sup>111</sup> Crawford, “A Security Regime among Democracies,” 355.

<sup>112</sup> David M. Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

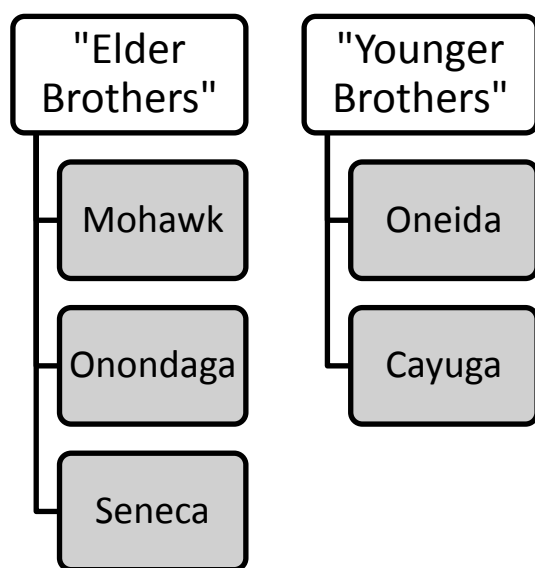
Mongol social and political interactions, like the ones described above, persisted after the fall of the Yuan dynasty. While the state apparatus of the Mongols may have dissolved with the downfall of the Yuan, Mongol sociopolitical practices remained intact as the Mongols merely retreated to their ancestral homelands on the steppe as they traditionally did during a time of crisis. Altan Khan utilized these same methods to integrate and (re)build a new Mongol confederacy based on long established practices of steppe nomads. Therefore, it is possible to apply Robinson's assessment of Mongol integration of social and political networks to ensuing Mongol polities.

The enmeshing of kinship, fictive kinship, and other social ties into the Mongol political system is not unlike the methods used by the Iroquois League and later the Iroquois Confederacy as a means to integrate diverse peoples and polities into a cohesive sociopolitical unit. While intermarriage, gift-exchange, shared ceremonies, and military alliances initially helped integrate the Mongol tribes under the leadership of Chinggis Khan (r. 1206-1227) through the combination of shared goals, the amalgamation was never so comprehensive as to fully illuminate all local characteristics. Likewise, the Five Nations utilized these same means to ally themselves in the Iroquois League at some point between 1400-1600, but as with the Mongols, this process did not eliminate all distinctions and divisions amongst the tribes so as to make them indistinguishable. For this reason, ceremonies and gift-exchanges needed to be continually held as a means to renew and maintain allegiances. New marriages needed to be arranged following the death of a spouse, and hostages had to be repeatedly exchanged as they returned home after an extended stay, came into conflict with their hosts, or invariably passed away. Without the constant renewal and reaffirmation of shared social, political, economic, and military objectives disintegration of alliances could occur in a single generation or less.

These factors allowed individual polities to retain their individual characteristics and customs even while participating in a larger political or state organizational system. If the overarching institution began to fail one of the participating members, all they had to do was let the sociopolitical ties lapse in order to dissolve themselves of membership. However, this was not always possible if the larger governing body was in a position of strength to force cooperation from its smaller members. Too much autonomy allowed local polities' shared interests to fade along with their sociopolitical networks, while perceived excessive control from the governing body of the confederacy risked alienating the local polities, which the coalition relied upon for its power.

The structure and organizational system comprising the Iroquois Confederacy and Altan Khan's Mongol Confederacy is of importance to my study, since it is this sociopolitical composition, which I believe, allowed the Iroquois and Mongols to maintain their independence in the face of European and Chinese encroachments, respectively. The Iroquois extrapolated fundamental social characteristics of their society, like concepts of kinship and reciprocity discussed above, and extended these values as they designed the structure of their league. Thus, fictive kinship relations were adopted within the league, just as they were within Mongol polities. The Five Nations were divided into two moieties with the Mohawk, Onondaga, and Seneca comprising one side acquiring the title of elder brothers, and the Oneida and Cayuga making up the other side and known as younger brothers in the league. Fenton writes, "Although not a true state, the Iroquois League was based on kinship, real and fictive. Its formation and successful operation depended on shared kinship usages that reached down to the local level. It accommodated local differences and achieved unity through the principles of unanimity and

reciprocity. Each nation had one vote or a veto on the rest.”<sup>113</sup> The division of the league into two moieties sharing a fictive kinship relation served to integrate the tribes into an established and thus readily understandable relationship structure. The league operated on the principle of unanimity, like local politics, giving each “brother” a voice in “national” matters.



The Mongols also utilized fictive and formulated kinship ties to limit internecine violence. In 1567, according to the *Jewel Translucent Sutra*, Altan Khan sent messengers to part of the Oiyarat tribe, the Khirgud, in an attempt to establish a marriage alliance between the previously antagonistic rivals in hopes of bringing about peace through traditional Mongol means of reconciliation and nation building. The author of the sutra writes:

They said, “Heeding us and our Lord, the scintillating Holy Altan Khan,  
 Let us establish a marriage alliance according to ancient custom.”  
 Heeding what the messengers initiated, on that occasion the Khirgud’s Toson Orlog and Tuglar Akhalakhu  
 Offered their own daughter as a gift and they became related through marriage.  
 [Altan Khan] gave her to his own son, Kulugchi Taishi.  
 By speaking together of the state, the long separated nations were in harmony.  
 By bestowing gifts, the messengers returned home rejoicing.  
 They returned to their homes and rejoiced with great peace.  
 Taking his immeasurably Great Nation, Altan Khan set out for China.  
 Crossing over the Great Wall he surrounded the city of Shizhou and took it.

<sup>113</sup> Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, 101.

He seized an immeasurable amount of gold, silver objects, possessions, women and children. He took too much booty to be weighed and dismantled safe and sound.<sup>114</sup>

Having sealed the alliance between the tribes through wedlock, as well as gift giving, the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* reports Altan immediately conducts a large raid against the Ming city of Shizhou, which is today, Lishi. Fostering peaceful relations with one time adversaries through marriage alliance was, “a well-established strategy for forging strategic alliances on the steppe,” according to David Robinson.<sup>115</sup> Sealing this alliance with mutual gift exchanges as well, Altan was able to expand the size and strength of his nation, and eliminate the violent friction between the polities. With the alliance with the Khirgud, Altan quickly utilized this enhanced power to loot China, perhaps as a means of acquiring booty for redistribution to his new allies cementing their support to him as supreme leader of the “Great Nation.” As previously noted, many scholars argue the acquisition of booty was the preeminent means of retaining a leadership position, so while Altan’s raid may have enhanced his elite status, it could not ensure his place indefinitely nor secure unending Khirgud support. Continuous maintenance of the alliance was necessary to retain their allegiance, should fictive and/or actual kinship ties fade or mutual gift exchanges and rituals fail to be upheld the autonomous tribes were free to pursue their own interests.

Like the Mongols, Iroquois political alliances were sustained by constant renewal and exchanges. One means of accomplishing this was the regular meeting of the Five Nations at Onondaga, in a Grand Council, to reaffirm alliances, a shared history, and discuss any pressing issues. Thus, the Grand Council was placed at the top of the Iroquois sociopolitical structure, but its power was derived from the autonomous local villages comprising the five distinct nations.

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<sup>114</sup> Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sutra*, 112-113: lines 382-393.

<sup>115</sup> Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight*, 100.

William Fenton describes the Iroquois political system as a vertical analysis, “ascending from the fireside family, the kindred, lineage or maternal household, clan, moiety, tribe or nation, and the League itself.”<sup>116</sup> He goes on to note the political structure could be viewed from the top down as well. Using the fireside family as the building block of society allowed the Iroquois to use familiar terms and relationships integrating them throughout the political system working to bind the League into a larger family-style network. Likewise, ideas could travel both up and down the chain serving to spread information, allowing for debate, and ultimately coming to a consensus or dropping the issue due to lack of consent.

At each “level” in the decision making process unanimity was necessary before the proposal was to be presented to the successive intermediary for review. José Antônio Brandão translates a text he credits to René Cuillerier describing how political debates were handled in local Iroquois villages in the 1600s. Cuillerier writes,

He then, or she, who has some propositions to make begins by assembling the elders of his or her family, and if it is something that concerns the warriors, one or two captains of this same family are summoned to be witnesses to the thing being proposed. Each one there gives his opinion in a very serious manner, after they agree upon the procedure. That being finished, an elder appointed by them goes to invite the other families, I mean the elders and war chiefs, supposing that the thing requires it. In this way, all these formalities are done in a very seemly manner; it has surprised me many times to see their conduct in that. At last, being assembled, this proposition appears on the mat to those invited by strings of wampum—when the matter is significant.<sup>117</sup>

Cuillerier reveals some interesting characteristics of the fireside family and local decision making process in this passage that need to be dissected. First, Cuillerier makes a point of emphasis to note women, as well as men, are able to bring concerns up for discussion. Women and men in Iroquois society, were believed to represent the dual balance in nature. Thus the division of labor discussed earlier in which the men hunt and fish while the women control the

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<sup>116</sup> William M. Fenton, “Leadership in the Northeastern Woodlands of North America.” *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1, The History of American Indian Leadership (Winter, 1986): 23.

<sup>117</sup> José Antônio Brandão and René Cuillerier. *Nation Iroquoise: a seventeenth-century ethnography of the Iroquois. The Iroquoians and their world* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 61-63.

fields and all things concerning village life. This symbiotic relationship allowed women to vocally participate in local as well as tribal and League politics without over stepping their bounds socially. Second, the text emphasizes the family discussion of an issue prior to its presentation to the kindred and clan. Without family support the issue at hand would be foregone. Third, elders are shown to hold elevated positions within the family and clans as they are singled out by Cuillerier as a representative group almost separate from the family, maternal household, and clan in which they are a part. Iroquois deference to elders, like kinship ties, pervades every level of the political structure becoming fictive at the upper echelons of the system but no less respected. Finally, if the issue is significant enough to warrant, wampum is presented to signify its meaningfulness and reconfirm family, clan, moiety, and League associations. Here the cultural significance of wampum is displayed serving to reinforce shared history, values, and alliances as previously discussed.

With so many social, political, and cultural factors involved, proper ceremony and protocol are essential in order to maintain decorum. Without following prescribed measures the issue being presented will not be taken seriously jeopardizing a decision causing the topic to stall and ultimately fail. Cuillerier continues,

It happens sometimes that they do not reach a decision at that very moment, and ordinary they do not make a prompt decision except in an urgent matter. If in the decision they judge it appropriate to give notice of it to the other villages, that is done with ceremony, as for example among the Oney8t [*sic*], which is composed of three families, namely the family of the Wolf, the family of the Turtle, and that of the Bear. In this case, they appoint one or two of the principal men of each family to go and explain their plans to their allies.<sup>118</sup>

The decision making process was methodical, slow, and dictated by protocol in order to achieve a resolution as Cuillerier's words once again demonstrate. Only when deemed appropriate was the matter brought to other families, villages, and allies according to established ceremony.

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<sup>118</sup> Brandão, *Nation Iroquoise*, 65.

Having gained support locally the issue was stewarded further along the political chain by “principal men” of each family, usually elders who commanded authority and respect having proven themselves.

The nature of the political system allowed villages to remain independent of one another governing their local matters separately from other concerns. If issues were considered worthwhile they were ceremoniously presented to successive groups of families, villages, allies, and nations. As Crawford points out, “The Iroquois League was not conceived as a union that would eliminate all differences among the original five nations, and the Great Law<sup>119</sup> clearly states that the five nations were to remain autonomous. Moreover, the rights of each nation, that is, their cultural as well as political autonomy, were not to be changed by their membership in the League...”<sup>120</sup> With or without the formal recognition of cultural and political autonomy by the Confederacy, local tribes retained their independence simply by the nature of the political system. If local issues were not considered significant enough, they were simply not passed along to outside villages or allies. This essentially allowed villages to govern themselves. Similarly, unanimity throughout the Iroquois political structure allowed neighborhoods and families to accept or reject any proposals presented to them from the Grand Council or any other governing body. With ultimate power resting in the hands of the people, they could ensure their interests including cultural and political considerations were maintained.

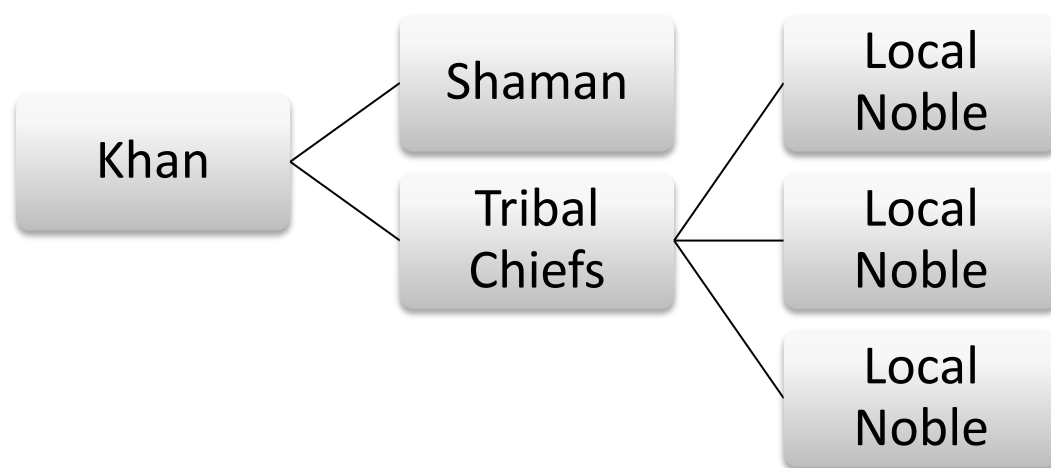
In Mongol society and politics as well, local tribes comprising the general populace validated or invalidated the decisions of the khan based on their actions or inactions. While the khan was technically the leader of the tribe, his authority was confirmed and counterbalanced by

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<sup>119</sup> The “Great Law” of the Iroquois was a formalization of rights and laws which Francis Jennings claims was, “a reconstitution of Iroquois traditions as remembered in the nineteenth century...” See Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 23.

<sup>120</sup> Crawford, “A Security Regime among Democracies,” 355-356.

religious leaders, known as shamans, and other nobles acting as a “tribal council.”<sup>121</sup> Historian George Lane explains, “The tribe operated on a minimum of two administrative levels. At the highest level was the tribal chief, who exercised direct control over the tribal nobles. At a lower level, individual nobles controlled their own retinue of commoners, who were solely answerable to them. Sometimes it was considered in the tribes’ interest to form alliances or join confederations or even seek the protection of a stronger tribe. However, this invariably involved some loss of independence, something that any tribe was loath to suffer.”<sup>122</sup> Circumstance and the balance of power determined the creation of alliances and confederations, which were fostered and then maintained through kinship relations, rituals, and reciprocal gift exchanges as previously noted. Although these practices established coalitions, they did not necessitate complete unification. Should circumstances change, the balance of power shift, or relations cease to be properly maintained local tribes were free to pursue of their own interests as an autonomous entity. The khan’s lack of institutionalized power and resources limited his ability to control the actions of individual tribes and commoners within his confederation should his leadership not benefit, or in the least maintain their wealth and wellbeing.



<sup>121</sup> George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 19.

<sup>122</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 19-20.

A tried and true method of retaining allies and followers, among the Iroquois and Mongols alike, is the redistribution of wealth through gift exchanges, trade, and ritual giving. Ceremonial exchanges, similar to “robing,” as described by Stewart Gordon created networks and established social relations, including hierarchies. “The practice connected individuals to a particular patron as well as to a broader political area. Investiture bridged ethnic and familial divisions.”<sup>123</sup> Although the term “investiture” is not typically used in reference to the Iroquois, historians studying the Five Nations all agree on the centrality and importance of reciprocity in all their relations. As was briefly discussed earlier, personal relationships were defined by the nature of gifts exchange, and not necessarily the quantity. The individual bestowal of gifts demanded appropriate reciprocal obligations whether it is in social decorum, political recognition, future exchange of equivalent goods or supplies, or some combination of these. Iroquois political relations, like personal interactions, were based on reciprocal giving and obligations serving to unite groups in multilayered networks involving social, political, and economic exchanges. “Reciprocal exchanges of presents sealed relationships—between the man who gave the meat he hunted and his wife’s longhouse, between the longhouse matron who distributed that meat and ‘the other Persons in the Family according to their Age,’ and between the man and those who gave him gifts of tobacco, knives, or awls when he invited them to his lineage’s feast.”<sup>124</sup> In this way, gifts transcended mere redistributive economic functions intertwining kinship ties, reverence for social standing based on age, and lineage and clan alliances and friendship.

Among the five nations of the Iroquois League a continual exchange of symbolic gifts, often in the form of wampum, reaffirmed feelings of friendship and alliance obligations.

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<sup>123</sup> Gordon, *Robes and Honor*, 15.

<sup>124</sup> Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 22.

Timothy Shannon, like Daniel Richter, acknowledges the importance of the *act* of giving amongst the Iroquois. “Just as the maintenance of healthy social relations within an Iroquois community required constant attention to communal obligations, so too did keeping the peace with outsiders depend on regular participation in diplomacy and gift exchanges.”<sup>125</sup> The Condolence Ceremony and annual Grand Council meetings were a means for the five nations to transform one another from “outsiders” to “insiders” through the facilitation of exchange directly tied to political relations. These methods, originally designed to unite the Iroquois themselves, was manipulated and altered by the Iroquois to accommodate and include relations with European nations and other Native American polities.

Ming and British officials, alike, recognized the importance of kinship and gift giving amongst the Mongols and Iroquois, respectively, and in many ways attempted to plug into these systems, albeit on terms they themselves could understand and justify. For the Ming dynasty, this manifested in “allowing” the Mongols to participate in trade-tribute relations in which titles and trade/gifts were exchanged. Although the Ming depicted this as a “traditional” Chinese system, the benefits and protocol of trade-tribute relations were similar to ancient Mongol customs. Though the Ming maintained Altan was accepting their superiority and adopting “their” parameters for relations, Altan obviously did not see the relationship in the same way. Thomas Allsen claims investiture, which was a part of the trade-tribute system, was not adopted by the Mongol’s due to their neighbor’s expectations. “The great investment the Chinggisids made in robing and the profound importance they attached to it had in fact very deep roots in steppe society: more specifically, gifts of clothing were integral to the nomad’s patrimonial

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<sup>125</sup> Shannon, *Iroquois Diplomacy on the Early American Frontier*, 23.

notions of state and society.”<sup>126</sup> Therefore, Altan’s interpretation of the ceremonial exchanges were based on Mongol beliefs and practices rather than, exclusively influenced by the Chinese.

Similarly, the British ensconced themselves in the Covenant Chain thereby partaking in the use of kinship terms and seemingly continuous gift exchanges, if only to acquire a military and economic ally in the Iroquois. In this way, the British accepted some Iroquois traditions as a means to solidify an alliance, they believed, gave them all the rights and status inherent to any European alliance. British officials believed adopting the familial term “father” in relation to their Iroquois “children” established their superiority within the context of Iroquois sociopolitical relations. However, like the Mongols, the Iroquois had a much different view of the arrangement as a mother’s brother(s) played a more integral role in boy’s life than his father, thereby reducing the role of the British in their minds. Both the Ming and the British attempted to utilize sociopolitical processes familiar to their “peripheral subjects,” to their own advantage, but as we have seen the nuances of confederacies, cultural differences, and geopolitical circumstances made exploitation of the Mongols and the Iroquois near impossible while the relative balance of power remained in doubt.

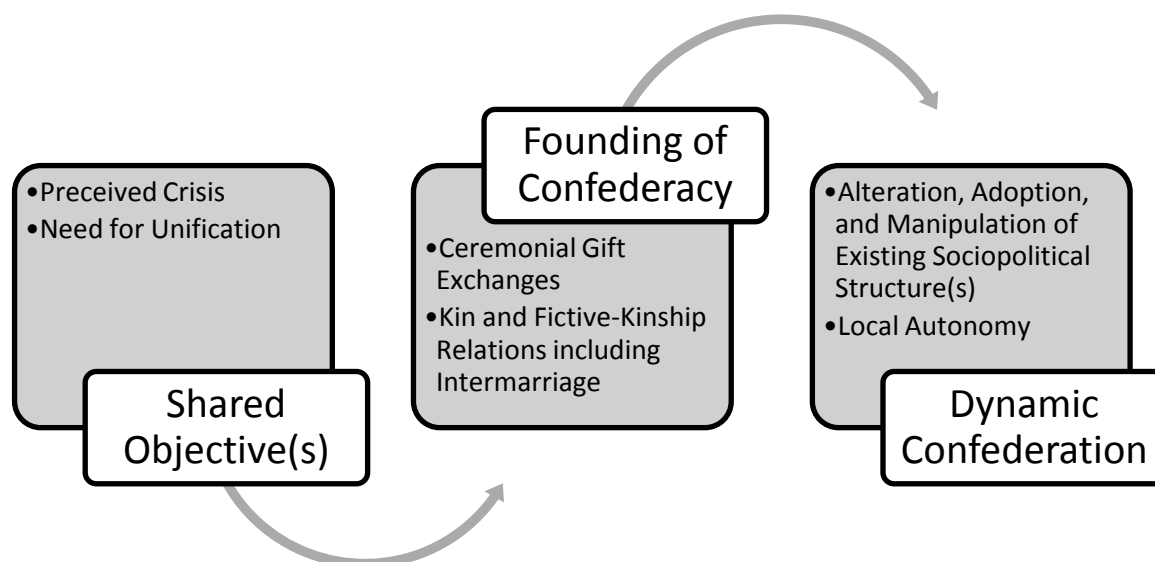
## **Conclusion**

So, “How did ‘peripheral’ peoples use confederacies in relations with ‘core’ polities?” In my estimation, the kin based societies of the Mongols and the Iroquois did not develop hierarchical forms of government to deal with more centralized governmental structures, like the Ming and British, initially. Rather, in the case of the Mongols and Iroquois internal or external threats led to the creation of a more ordered, but still kin or fictive-kin based, networked confederacy to provide for needs beyond the local nature of traditional tribal chieftains. These

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<sup>126</sup> Allsen, “Robing in the Mongolian Empire,” 309.

institutional creations, based on traditional sociopolitical structures and coated in an air of continuity were manipulated and adjusted to meet the more nationalized “core” governments on equal footing, all the while maintaining “native” characteristics. The decentralized nature of these polities gives them freedom to “submit” to the authority of “core” empires without actually sacrificing their autonomy, as the nature of their networked structure will not allow for universal “submission” of the confederacy to occur. Without group consent from each local tribe, band, or kinship network throughout the “peripheral” confederacy submission is limited to linguistic overtures, designed to maximize trade advantages and enhance their status against rivals. In this way rhetorical acceptance of “core” superiority led to social, political, economic, or militaristic benefits.



The flexible nature of indigenous politics gave the Mongols and the Iroquois a large amount of agency in diplomatic negotiations with the Chinese and the British, respectively. The “ascribed empires” of the Mongols and Iroquois used their decentralized nature and potential

military capabilities to exacerbate the fears of either the Ming or the British, as the case may be. The Ming dynasty feared Altan's martial prowess and the potential for the re-establishment of the Yuan dynasty. Altan's attacks and threats played on Ming fears leading to the establishment of trade-tribute relations. In addition, Altan and several Iroquois sachems astutely used their lack of authority within their confederacies in tandem with their military capacities to bring about greater titles and rewards, as we have seen. Likewise, the Iroquois refused to concede their right to treat with the French playing on British fears of a French-Iroquois alliance, which could potentially threaten Britain's entire North American empire. Furthermore, Iroquois sachems insisted, like Altan Khan, that they could not control their allies when it was politically or economically expedient to do so. In this way, the Mongols and the Iroquois, alike, could demand greater numbers of gifts to placate disenfranchised entities within their confederacies, as we saw in the case studies. So long as their potential military might kept the Ming or the British more fearful of losing their lives and empires than parting with lucrative manufactured goods, the confederacies were able to use their divisions advantageously. So long as the relative balance of power favored, or seemed to favor, the confederacies they had flexibility and agency in dealing with more centralized powers, but this faded when the balance of power shifted in favor of the "core" polities.

The dual nature of this work has forced me to be selective with my use of sources, events, and the historiography included in these intricate and complex cross-cultural relationships and historical processes. Space confinements hinder every historian, but unfortunately perhaps more so in my endeavors here, as I tried to balance, compare, and delineate clearly Iroquois and Mongol relations with the British and Chinese respectively. I acknowledge there are gaps in which further discussion could have provided helpful background information serving to

enlighten the discussion, particularly the impact of King Philip's War and Pontiac's Rebellion on the Iroquois and further analysis and repercussions of the devastating Ming defeat at Tumu. Likewise, outlining in detail the geopolitical position of each confederacy as it relates to competing polities and rival alliances would have helped further inform the discussion. For example, an extensive examination of Dutch, French, British, and American foreign policy debates and strategies could shed more light on their actions or reactions to events involving the Iroquois. Similarly, there are wide-ranging studies dedicated to Ming foreign policy debates and the history of Chinese foreign policy in general, that while discussed above, could benefit from elaboration.

Local studies of individual villages and/or clans are needed to develop our understanding of periphery-core relations, as well. Historian Joshua Piker argues, "Historians have, to begin with, been slow to appreciate—and even slower to investigate—the local level of Native life. Scholarly tardiness notwithstanding, Natives were profoundly influenced by events and processes that centered on their towns and villages."<sup>127</sup> Although this argument is presented in his introduction of a study dedicated to a Creek town in colonial America, I believe it can also be applied to the study of Iroquois history as well as the mobile "villages" of Mongol polities. My argument throughout this paper hinges on the advantages reaped by both the Iroquois and Mongols in their relations with a centralized state due to the decentralized nature of their confederacies and their reliance on local politics and initiatives. Further study of a particular village or local polity in this regard, would provide detail to the broad constructs of my scholarship herein. Scholars of Native American history have begun this process, while the field of Mongol history has yet to reach this stage of development. Despite the fact that historians in

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<sup>127</sup> Joshua Piker, *Okfuskee: A Creek Indian Town in Colonial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1.

these fields are usually hindered by a lack of written sources, creative methods and the use of cross-disciplinary scholarship can help bridge the gap serving to enhance our understanding of local processes that invariably comprised the larger framework of these confederacies. This structural apparatus, or lack thereof, served the Iroquois and Mongols well until developments like gunpowder, mass production of manufactured products, railroads, and innovations in communications, like the telegraph, rendered expanding modernized nation-states too powerful for these confederacies to negotiate successfully, in order to retain their land and autonomy.

A comparative study of this nature is beset by methodological problems from the outset. In trying to make meaningful comparisons, one tries not to gloss over unique elements comprising the structure of the individual histories themselves. Although I have genuinely tried to avoid such a fate, I fear I too am guilty of this. Nevertheless, when the subjects are comparable, I believe it is a worthwhile exercise. Engaging with primary documents and existing scholarship from diverse fields can offer new perspectives and, perhaps, provide useful insights. Established theses from one field can be borrowed and applied to another, hopefully illuminating the latter area of inquiry, but in the least, the effort furthers our understanding of the original scholarship. Even when comparisons fail to materialize, it brings the distinctive circumstances and individual texture of each history into focus. In comparing the Mongol and Iroquois confederacies, I attempted to bring a fresh perspective to both fields in this way. It is my hope my comparative efforts here will lead to new areas for analysis, as well as inform our understanding of Altan Khan's Mongol confederacy, the Iroquois Confederacy, and the development and nature of confederacies more generally.

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