

Barbarians at the Gate

Raiders, Rulers and Traders - The Horse and the Rise of Empires

Guest: David Chaffetz

Jeremiah Jenne (00:00) Hello and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. This is Jeremiah Jenne, broadcasting from Switzerland. With me, as always, my intrepid co-host, partner in crime, partner in academia, partner in life, David Moser. How are you doing?

David Moser (00:15) Yeah, howdy partner. I'm doing great here. I'm in a more optimistic mood because yesterday, I spent the full day judging or evaluating what they call the capstone projects, which is just basically a master's degree thesis, a master's thesis defense at Tsinghua at the Schwarzman program. The Schwarzman program has been up for many years. I used to be the associate dean at the Yanjing program, which is a rival, but they're very similar. And I have to tell you, the judges were blown away. The talent, the intelligence, the creativity of the next people who are graduating from these programs and coming out into the world are just absolutely incredible. I hope that their countries, governments are willing to use them, to make use of them because they are already incredibly knowledgeable and very aware and very united with each other despite their various backgrounds. So the area of Chinese studies and diplomacy is looking good, at least potentially if these people graduate and go out in the world and are able to fulfill their promise or their potential. I think we have something, a group of people that might be able to solve all these problems that we're suffering under.

Jeremiah Jenne (01:30) I love your optimism. And I also, I've given some talks at Schwarzman. I've met the students on many occasions, different cohorts, and I've always been really impressed by the caliber of the students. And I agree, I think a large part of that program isn't just about what they're learning in the classroom. I think a lot of it too is getting a chance to network with other exceptionally bright young people from China, from around the world. And you always wonder if at some point there'll be a trade negotiation or something more serious and it'll be two Schwarzman scholars looking across at each other and on the sidelines of the convention saying, "Hey, remember that time we got really drunk and puked outside Propaganda," and then all will be well.

David (02:06) Absolutely.

Jeremiah Jenne (02:11) Well, with us today, joining us in the studio is David Chaffetz, an independent scholar with a lifelong passion for Middle Eastern and Inner Asian history. He is a regular contributor to the Asian Review of Books, has written for the South China Morning Post and the Nikkei Asian Review. And his new book is *Raiders, Rulers and Traders, The Horse and the Rise of Empires*. This is a subject near and dear to my heart. I love all things empires, particularly Inner Asian. Welcome to Barbarians at the Gate. David, how are you doing?

David Chaffetz (02:42) It's good to be here Jeremiah and David. It's also good to know that the future of American-Chinese relations may be looking up.

Jeremiah Jenne (02:49) We grab those silver linings or I guess do you grab silver linings? We appreciate those silver linings in whatever form they may take. David, I really enjoyed your book and I've always really been fascinated by histories that are about—and if you permit a broad definition of things, for example, whether it's a commodity or even an idea—but the notion of doing a book, a history, if you will, centered around this particular animal, the horse, which you argue is one of, if not the most important domesticated animal in human history. I've got to ask, what first gave you the idea of tracing the evolution of the horse and its relationship with humanity?

David Chaffetz (03:30) It started off when I took a horse to travel across Afghanistan in 1976. And I did this in a very non-intermediated way. I didn't have camera, I didn't have a notebook, I didn't have anything to distinguish me from anyone else that I would come across in a village or on a road or in a nomad encampment. And it was a complete immersion in the culture horse in Central Asia, and you understood just how damn important a horse is in a pre-modern situation, which by the way, prevailed in a lot of Afghanistan in 1975. There were no radios, there were no cell phones, obviously. In many places, there was no other form of transportation. And then when I subsequently traveled in other parts of Inner Asia and Western China, I saw this kind of palimpsest of the importance of the horse everywhere. In China, it's not possible not to recognize how important the horse is in Chinese culture even today. By the way, I was born in the Year of the Horse in 1954, and I celebrated my 60th birthday not in China, but in Singapore, so that, you know, Chinese cultural place. The horse is just so important in Chinese history, but I wasn't quite sure why. So the book was my personal discovery to understand the mechanism by which the horse became such an important element in the construction of the Chinese state and in the construction of the relationship between this Chinese state and Inner Asia.

David (05:00) You take an evolutionary approach, because the horse was not the same that we have the horse now. What is it about the evolutionary step before the modern day horse? And by the way, I was also 1954, so I'm also a horse.

David Chaffetz (05:14) So it's a very important question to answer because you say ontology recapitulates destiny or something like that. The way in which the horse evolved from a small forest creature about as big as a dog to a very tall, fast, powerful, long-legged creature was all about the horse's need to find something to eat when the ice ages descended upon the Northern Hemisphere. And first it had to learn how to eat grass, which is its main habitat today for the horse in nature. They have to live in grasslands. And in search of those grasslands, it had to migrate from the original home, which is North America, across the Bering Straits into Northern Asia and all the way down to Iberia, to Spain and Portugal. Because in those days, the environment was basically the same as what you might find today in Alaska. It was cold. In the summer, there was grass. The horses were quite shaggy, like the shaggy mammoth. But they were pervasive across this vast area. As the ice ages receded, the horses receded with it to the areas which were cold and grassy, which is essentially the Eurasian steppe, which stretches from the Yellow River, where you are, David, all the way to the Danube Basin. It stops before you get to the Alps. The Alps is sort of the limit of where the horses can live in their native habitat.

Beyond that habitat, the horse has to be fed, which is a really important part of our story. So the horse is a very expansive animal because it's big, it's tall, it eats a lot, and for it to feed itself in a natural environment without fodder, it needs an enormous amount of territory. And it's sort of the history of why the horse is so expansive and why horse breeding peoples have a reputation for being aggressive or warlike—it's because they need land to feed their horses. And a lot of the history between Inner Asia and China has to do with the horsemen needing more pasture for their horses.

Jeremiah Jenne (07:11) Yeah, when we think about China's relationship with the horse and China's relationship to Inner Asia, two things occur to me. One, really, one thing I like about this book is in recent years, research has really started to look at Inner Asia, Central Asia, not just as a place that people cross through or a place that simply erupts with these, if you will, barbarian hordes periodically, but also as a place that has its own culture of innovation. And it does seem, for example, in animal husbandry or the development of technologies to harness the power of animals, that was very much the case. But the advantage of having all that land and all those horses is something that was not shared with China. China had a lot of land, but they also had a lot of people that needed that land. You argue that that really inhibited China's ability to develop its own, if you will, program of breeding, developing horses, or using horses in the way that their Inner Asian neighbors did so well.

David Chaffetz (08:09) There's three kinds of land. There's land which is only good for grazing. There's land which is only good for farming. And then there's land which could be used for both. So, Northeastern China, Shaanxi, around Xi'an and stuff, is sort of an intermediate zone where when the horse breeding people predominated the land was used for pasture. When the Chinese state controlled those areas and wanted to colonize them with tax paying farmers, then the frontier of the steppe got pushed a little bit further west. But the core problem with China is that even if they had wanted to consecrate a lot of land for raising horses, the horses would not have grown up to be war worthy. The major reason for that is that China is poor in selenium, which is a trace mineral. We all need it. Horses need it both to grow tall and also to metabolize rapidly to be able to run. So you see this constantly in observations of the differences between horses raised in China and horses raised in Mongolia. That Mongolian horses are running rings literally around the Chinese horses. And until very recently, until the 20th century, there was no scientific explanation for it. And you know in Chinese literature, there's this kind of meme where the Chinese deprecate that, you know, they're not good at this, they're not good at that as part of humility. But in this case, it turns out it was a scientific impossibility for China to raise horses with the power of the Mongolian horse, steppe horses.

David (09:42) Yeah, I was a little bit surprised and maybe, I don't know, confounded by the notion that these horses would also have a ritual aspect. And it seems strange to me that so many horses would be buried or given as gifts in a ritual sense when they would seem to be so essential to the governing of country, especially in war.

David Chaffetz (10:04) So at some point in Chinese history, people began to agree with you because if you look at the tomb of the first emperor in Xi'an, they didn't bury—they buried a few horses, but they primarily buried statues of horses. And in the Han dynasty, you see these wooden funeral offerings of horses. And in the Tang dynasty, the beautiful terracotta funerary

offerings. The idea was that the deceased needed to be accompanied on their journey in the next world by transportation. So they're very practical. You have to give the ghosts a form of transportation. The origin of this goes way back because in the steppe 2,000 years ago, we already see burying notable people with their horses. The steppe people like the Mongols and the Kazakhs continued to do that until the 19th century. The Chinese inherited that tradition from their steppe neighbors who brought horses to China and horse riding to China around the turn of the first millennium BC. And the Shang dynasty started burying horses. But eventually, because horses were so important from a practical point of view, they substituted artwork instead of real horses.

Jeremiah Jenne (11:12) You mentioned the Shang dynasty and one of the things about the archaeological records is we do see the progression of military technology, particularly in the use of chariots. It's something that's always fascinated me, mainly because I focus so much on, if you will, the China side of the world. I've always been kind of interested to know how did the military technology involving horses evolve from chariots to cavalry? Was there a different process in China as opposed to other parts of the world or was there some kind of evolutionary steps that almost all militaries went through at different points in this progression?

David Chaffetz (11:47) I think it's a central evolution from a group of people who understood chariots and cavalry. These would have been the Scythians. The Scythians, well, or ancestors of the Scythians, earlier ancestors of the—

Jeremiah Jenne (11:59) Just give us a very quick description. Who are the Scythians in relation to the steppe?

David Chaffetz (12:04) Right. So before we see the emergence of people who originate in northern Asia, like the Mongols, the Jurchens, the Xiongnu—all these people who must have come from somewhere around today's Manchuria, Korea and Mongolia—most of the steppe between the Black Sea, southern Russia and Ukraine and China were Iranian-speaking nomads who the Greeks called the Scythians. That's why we call them the Scythians in English. The Chinese called them the Sai. And these people are descended from the earliest peoples who broke the code about how to create a battle chariot. A chariot that had spoked wheels that was drawn by horses and the battle chariot was used as a battle platform for archers. So you rode into battle and you shot your arrows and then you rode away. And these are the warriors that you see in the ancient Chinese songs. There's lots of descriptions of these very bloody battle scenes in very early Chinese poetry, and they all have to do with fighting on chariots.

At some point, the horses became powerful enough and used to war enough, and people got good enough at controlling horses properly for driving them that they took the step of trying to ride horses into battle, which was a big step because controlling a horse in combat is a lot more complicated than controlling a horse in a yoke behind a chariot.

So this transition happened in Western Asia around 800 BC and 500 years later, it was brought to China, I think by the same people, by the Scythians. The Chinese, the Shang and then the Zhou began recruiting these horsemen. There is a famous incident where somebody had a fight with the princes of Zhou, so they recruited mercenaries, the Dog Rong, the Quan Rong, to come in

and sack the capital of the Zhou. And that's the first incident I know of where cavalry was very important in Chinese battle. And eventually all of the warring states that emerged from the decadence of the Zhou realized that you had to have cavalry. And one person in particular decided that he would go full on in cavalry and that was the dynasty of the first emperor, the state of Qin. Cavalry clearly made the creation of a unitary Chinese empire possible in a way that these aristocratic warriors fighting on chariots would never have been able to do.

David (14:32) This may be a simplistic question. The chronology is probably a problem because the Great Wall was built in succession, not immediately, but over many hundreds of years. To what extent was the Great Wall a response to this technological architectural response to the mobility and tactical advantages of mounted nomadic raiders?

David Chaffetz (14:54) The Great Walls, different parts of the Great Wall, definitely served two purposes. I think they definitely served as military fortifications to protect individual settlements and forcing the invaders from the steppe to go through certain well-defined places in order to get into the Chinese heartland and carry out their plundering and their kidnapping. But the other important service provided at the Great Wall, they were trading stations whereby the horse breeding people sold their horses to China. And because these markets were very big, with a huge number of horses being sold, they had a potential for becoming military incursions because the horsemen would show up with 5,000, 10,000 horses and a lot of horsemen. And so if the Chinese didn't have the ability to kind of corral these people physically and provide very strong rules and protocols as to how things would happen in the market, a dispute over a stolen horse or over price haggling could have easily turned into a riot and then turned into a raid and then turned into a war. So a lot of the big trading points are actually found at these important gates in the Great Wall, like Datong, I think was a well-known example.

Jeremiah Jenne (16:12) It's an interesting point because your book talks a lot about what we, what many people call the Silk Road or the Silk Roads. And of course just like the Great Wall, a lot of mythology around the Silk Roads. That is to say it wasn't usually silk. It wasn't really one road. People didn't really go from one end to the other in one long continuous journey. They kind of went point to point to point. It's a great name. And apparently it was a 19th century German cartographer that gave us the naming rights for the Silk Road. But you make an interesting point that if we're not gonna call it the Silk Road, we should call it the Horse Road. How else did the trade in horses or the horse itself create the system that we later on would know as the Silk Road or the Silk Road system?

David Chaffetz (16:55) So I think the most important element of the Silk Road, particularly viewed from China, is the fact that under the Han Dynasty, China expanded its military slash diplomatic influence very far west. They created the so-called Western garrisons. And the myth of the Silk Road was interpreting their installation of military garrisons in the Western provinces, Xiyu, I think it's called, as a way to protect the silk trade because they were going to sell all this silk to the Romans. So there's two things wrong with that. First of all, most of the silk that the Romans bought came via the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Alexandria and Egypt was the major emporium for silk, not a land destination like Byzantium or Antioch. So the silk road didn't go by land, it went by sea. The second problem is this explanation about silk ignored the reason why the Han dynasty went through this huge effort to build these Western garrisons. They

were there to buy horses from the horse traders in Western Asia. Again, the Scythians under successively different tribal names or early state names, but the Chinese found that the people of Western Asia, which is roughly, it was Pakistan to Tajikistan today, were very eager to sell horses to the Chinese. And this enabled the Chinese to bypass buying horses from the states of Northern Asia, Mongolia, Manchuria because they were often hostile. The Han fought a hundred year war with the people living in the North. And so they were very happy to be able to trade with people living far to the West who were not a military threat to China itself. So that's why the Chinese literally built this road, which is marked by all those forts going out from the Jade Gate at the end of the Gansu corridor all the way across the Taklamakan Desert and to the frontier today of China.

David (18:49) I was struck by a quote from Matteo Ricci. They included evaluating the horses. I'll just quote, it's very short. So the Chinese have countless horses in the service of the army, but they are so degenerate and lacking in martial spirit that they are put to rout by the neighing of the steppe steeds. So they're practically useless in battle. First of all, I mean, it's pretty amazing that a Jesuit monk would be so savvy, would be able to notice this even. But this is not so early. This is not the Qin dynasty. This is the Ming dynasty. And I'm wondering what in the world, I mean, haven't they solved this problem yet? How could this happen so late as the Ming dynasty?

David Chaffetz (19:31) So the Ming had various politics vis-à-vis the steppe. But compared to other Chinese dynasties, they were very much a defensive policy rather than a forward policy, to use the British expression in India. They retreated from the Western provinces. They didn't try too many campaigns on the steppe. I think one of the—I can't remember which one, but one of the Ming emperors tried to wage war on the steppe and he was captured and that was very embarrassing for a very long period of time.

So relative to earlier Chinese dynasties and notably the Tang, the Ming really were lacking in good horses. This is one reason why the Ming continued to buy horses from Iran, which is very far away, and they brought them by sea. They were acutely aware of the fact that they were lacking good horses. You know, Jesuits are very, very clever people and they acted at all levels of Chinese society. So it's not at all surprising that he would make that assessment. And it's completely consistent with things, with the judgment on Chinese horses that Chinese intellectuals and men of the pen have been making for centuries, which is that the horses raised in China cannot compete with the horses raised on the steppe because of the selenium, as I mentioned.

Jeremiah Jenne (20:46) Well, I'm glad we jumped forward to the Ming because that's just a very short step to one of my favorite subjects, which is of course the Qing and we think of the Qing, we have to talk about the whole series of conquest dynasties. You know, pre Ming we have the Mongol empire. And of course, after the Ming we have the Qing dynasty. And I was wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about the relationship of the horse with the first the Jurchens and then the Manchus who at least claim somewhat tenuously descent from the Jurchens because they are coming out of a slightly different ecological zone in what we call today, you know, Dongbei, that great Northeast region of China. It's not really steppe, it's more like forest and mountains.

David Chaffetz (21:23) So you're quite right that what we call today Manchuria does not have the same ecological advantages that Mongolia had in terms of raising horses. But the people living there did two things to make up for the disadvantage. First of all, they cleared a lot of forest land. And they went into the horse-raising business big time because they took advantage of the fact that different Chinese regimes were reluctant to buy horses from the people living in Mongolia because of the traditional threat of being invaded by those guys. And they wanted to diversify their supply. Like I said, the Ming had to buy horses even from Iran. So, of course, the Ming also bought horses from the Manchurians. But the Manchurians were clever because not only did they raise horses and sell them directly to China, but they also bought horses from the Mongols and resold them to the Chinese.

Nurhaci, who's the founder of the Qing dynasty, what was he originally? He was a horse trader. His father was a horse trader. They made their money as horse traders. They were given Chinese titles as a reward for faithful services to the Ming in supplying them with horses. And through this business of trading with China and getting to know the Chinese, they began to recognize what were the military, political, and social weaknesses of the late Ming. So when this bottom's up revolt overthrew the Ming, the Manchus found themselves with a huge army, couple hundred thousand horsemen, right on the frontiers of China, with Beijing just completely wide open for them. So they followed the playbook of the Jurchens, their putative ancestor. They followed the playbook of the Liao, who the Jurchens had thrown out. They followed the playbook of the Mongols, and they occupied Beijing. Now, you know, if the Ming had been a little bit more resilient, they probably could have limited the Manchus to northern China in the same way that the Song limited the Jurchens to northern China. But, you know, as history turned out, the Manchus wind up being able to conquer all of China, which is really not a story about horses because once you cross the Yangtze River, you're not waging massive cavalry battles anymore. You're fighting on boats.

Jeremiah Jenne (23:40) Yeah, that was one of the debates that the Qing, the Manchu military commanders had was, do we try to take all of it or are we just so happy with the northern part? And it turns out it was their sort of captured Chinese officials who were working for the Manchus who said, listen, you got to take all of it, because otherwise it'll just be this northern dynasty. And that's never worked out well. But you bring up a good point, which is that one of the challenges that the Manchu commanders, the Qing commanders quickly identified was once we get down past this particular point, a lot of our advantages that we used to come this far now go away. And as you said, we have to do boats, not horses. It's a whole different kind of warfare. I seem to remember a story that under maybe it was Kublai Khan, maybe it was a bit earlier, but when the Mongols first advanced into China, one of their advisors suggested that this would all make great pasture land, but for the farmers and had even floated this idea to like depopulate North China and turn it all into grazing land, which would have been, what's the correct term these days, a mass deportation on a level heretofore not seen in history. I can't imagine it working, it does seem like the need for pasture land, the need to keep the horses fed, the need to keep the horses at the ready was such a big part of any military strategy if you're going to try to conquer China.

David Chaffetz (25:02) Yes, so the Manchus solved that problem by taking a much deeper control of Mongolia and Western China than any other dynasty. The Mongols, the dynasty of

Kublai Khan, they conquered China. As you said, they went all in and they took all of China. But in doing so, they kind of left their cousins to rule in Mongolia and they soon found themselves in the same position vis-à-vis horses that the previous Chinese dynasties encountered. The Manchus spent a huge amount of time making sure that their Mongol allies would never revolt and they turned the Mongols into, first of all, with a Mongol-Manchu condominium. They were complete equality between Manchus and Mongols. Documents were written both in Mongolian and in Manchurian and of course in Chinese and they embarked on a huge welfare program to keep the Mongolians onside in when there was bad weather when they would lose their flock because previously when the Mongols were pushed to a wall they would raid China or they would revolt. So Manchu understanding the psychology of the horse breeders really well made sure to have a program in place that was an iron rice bowl, if you like, or an iron nose bag to make sure that the Mongols would never separate themselves from the dynasty. And this gave them so much horsepower that I would argue they managed to save the Chinese Empire in the West from any encroachments from either the British or from the Russians. If they had not done that, you could easily imagine today a very different situation in Central and Inner Asia.

Jeremiah Jenne (26:41) I absolutely love that phrasing, the Manchu Mongolian condominium. It almost seems like some sort of Qing era housing project on the outskirts of the old town of Beijing. When was the point in which militaries had where horses were really no longer essential on the battlefield and even the horses have played a role in almost every major conflict. In fact, I seem to remember there's a story that in the most recent of many wars in Afghanistan, there were instances where even the US army was occasionally on horseback. But when, when did, when were the horses phased out of an active involvement or a decisive factor in, in warfare?

David Chaffetz (27:17) So I think there's kind of two dates we need to look at. The first date is when it became obvious that horses would not be essential going forward. And the second date is when they were no longer used. In 1918, now we're turning away from China for a second. In 1918, the British Army, together with the Indian Army, threw the Turks out of Palestine and Syria. And they did this with a kind of a blitzkrieg where they used armored cars and airplanes to attack in coordinated fashion and to bomb the Turks behind the lines and to kind of cut off their retreat by bombing them. When you read the descriptions of that attack by T.E. Lawrence, by Lawrence of Arabia, it sounds very much like the first Gulf War, the so-called, you know, highway of death.

Everyone who studied that understood that armored carriers and airplanes would be decisive in the future. And a British cavalry expert wrote an article in the Times of London after the war saying that cavalry has had its day. It's obvious that airplanes and cars are more efficient. And let's remind ourselves why horses get sick. If you lose your horses, it takes years to replace them. Learning to drive a truck is a lot faster than learning to ride a horse properly for battle. There's all kinds of reasons why cavalry is a somewhat fragile resource that once you lose it, it's very hard to get it back. Whereas look at the losses that the military sustained in World War II in terms of planes and tanks. And we just kept turning them out and training people and putting them in them and sending them out. So the writing was on the wall after World War I. However, the industrial capacity of the Eurasian powers of Germany, of the Soviet Union, of China, were not such that they could produce enough planes and tanks to replace their cavalry. So cavalry played a decisive role in the Russian Civil War, in the Soviet takeover of Mongolia, in the Chinese Civil

War. So you constantly have massive cavalry battles throughout the 20s, 30s, and 40s. But that's because these were economies that could not produce tanks, trucks, and airplanes. You look at the American Army in World War II, and we didn't have any cavalry because we had a seemingly infinite supply of tanks and trucks.

My late father-in-law, his job after World War II was to blow up our tanks and trucks because we had delivered so many to the battle zone that when the war was over there was nothing to do with them. They just destroyed thousands and thousands of vehicles. So by the end of World War II there was no major power that is using horses for strategic purposes and the major powers completely turned off their horse studs, their cavalry armies. What you see progressively in the Olympic Games is that in the 1940s and 50s, all of the competitors are cavalry officers, they're men, they're all military. And the last Olympic Games in Paris last year, 70% of the competitors were women. So you see a complete change in the sociology of horsemanship in the world.

Jeremiah Jenne (30:30) You know, even on the Mongolian steppe today or on the Tibetan plateau, it's striking to see how many of the people who still follow a nomadic lifestyle, they do their herding on dirt bikes and ATVs. There are still horses around, but a lot of it is now done through motorized transport.

David Chaffetz (30:44) That's a really good point.

Jeremiah Jenne (30:51) Well, David, thank you so much for joining us. We really appreciate it. And I encourage everyone to check out David Chaffetz's new book, *Raiders, Rulers and Traders, The Horse and the Rise of Empires*. There's so much detail in this book. I had a great time reading it. Hope you do too.

And thank you all for joining us. You can find us wherever podcasts are given away for free. And on that note, we shall cue the drums from across the plains.