

# Socio-Philosophical Aspects of “Hey Da Shi Lue”: Meeting of Barbarism and Civilisation

S. I. Sulimov<sup>a</sup>, D. D. Tregubova<sup>b</sup>, R. A. Cherenkov<sup>c</sup>, I. V. Chernigovskikh<sup>d</sup>, V. D. Chernykh<sup>e</sup>, <sup>a</sup>Voronezh state university, Russian Federation, Voronezh, Revolutsii-Avenue, 24, <sup>b</sup>Center of civilisation comparative study at the Institute of scientific information for social Sciences, Russian Federation, Moscow, Nakhimovsky Avenue, 51/21, <sup>c,d,e</sup>Voronezh state university of engineering technologies, Russian Federation, Voronezh, Revolutsii Avenue, 19.

This work is devoted to comparative analysis of the barbarism phenomenon perception by Chinese and ancient authors. The reports of Chinese diplomats on the way of life of the 13th century Mongols, known as “Hey Da Shi Lue” are compared with similar Roman sources (“Notes on the Gallic War” by Guy Julius Caesar, “Germany” by Publius Cornelius Tacitus, and “Roman History” by Ammianus Marcellinus). Much attention is paid to comparison of the historical and cultural situation of late Rome and China during the Mongol invasion.

**Key words:** *Barbarism, Civilisation, Roman Empire, Imperial China, Cultural Expansion.*

## Introduction

“Hey Da Shi Lue” or “Brief notes on the Black Tatars” is the monument of medieval Chinese literature, representing the travel notes of two diplomats and, judging by the style of writing, Peng Da-ya and Xu Ting were scouts who visited the headquarters of the Mongol khans in the 1230-ies, shortly after the Mongols conquered North China. Both authors were the subjects of the South China Song empire and positioned themselves as the representatives of a more developed and civilised society, although China had already suffered a number of defeats from the nomads, and its rulers were wary of the Mongols. This explains the increased attention of both authors to the military and administrative organization of the Mongols, and not to their family life or religious beliefs. “Hey Da Shi Lue” was first translated into Russian in 1970 by N. T. Munkuev, but, unfortunately, until recently, it has

been studied only by Orientalist historians. This is not only a chronicle, travel notes or espionage report, but one of the few detailed and frank views of a civilised, mature society on the inner life of its younger neighbour that is not exposed. Those whom the representatives of an ancient culture call snobbishly “barbarians” or even “savages” appear on the pages of such books in their true form, without labels and bias. That is why there are very few such reliable works – basically, these are the works of late Antique authors, telling about the life of Germanic tribes outside the borders of the Roman Empire. Many Western and domestic researchers, striving to discover the mechanisms of interaction between civilisation and barbarism, usually turn to the works of Publius Cornelius Tacitus or Ammianus Marcellinus, as if forgetting that Roman authors write specifically about their new and old neighbours, and the nuances indicated by them can only be true for a specific historical situation. Is it so? In this paper, we will attempt to answer this question by drawing parallels between “Hey Da Shi Lue” and the Late Antique works in search of general patterns of a young society’s perception which began its historical life as more ancient and civilised, but also managed to become old.

### ***Barbarism and Civilisation - Phenomena or Terms?***

Before talking about the specific characteristics given by highly cultured diplomats and historians to their less civilised and more direct and simple-minded neighbours, it is necessary to determine the terms. The terms “barbarism” and “civilisation” we will use without any derogatory connotation and, conversely, without excessive reverence, simply following the tradition that has developed in social philosophy and historiosophy, for example, when the British philosopher A.J. Toynbee, whose works we will cite more than once, speaks of the border between civilisation and barbarism. According to Toynbee it does not mean at all that one society is full and the other is not. It’s just that usually such descriptions are compiled precisely by the representatives of “civilisation”, and they, not modern scholars, perceive neighbours as “undeveloped,” and “uncultured,” etc. For example, in the medieval Chinese chronicle tradition, it became the rule to divide conditionally the Mongols into “white” and “black” Tatars, based on whether the described Tatars cultivate the land or not. Thus, the Mongols, being nomads and not practicing agriculture, were automatically recorded by the Chinese authors in the category of “black” Tatars and were considered less civilised than the “white” Tatars, who cultivated the land according to the Chinese model. That is, an indicator of “culture” and “civilisation” for the Chinese chroniclers was the similarity of the economic life of foreigners with the analogues from the life of imperial China. A similar situation is with the understanding of “civilisation”: undoubtedly, “axial” societies and their analogues from other continents and from other eras had considerable achievements in all spheres of life, but their superiority over other peoples is not absolute. Otherwise, they (each in its turn) would not have become the prey or tributaries of their younger and less sophisticated neighbours.



The British researcher A.J. Toynbee describes the process of interaction between civilised and barbarian societies in the most general terms: “When the curtain rises, both sides are opposed to each other in alienation and hostility. In the course of the play, alienation turns into intimacy, but even this does not bring peace. Time works in favor of the barbarians, and finally, the moment comes when they break through the border and rush along the vast possessions of a universal state, crushing the military formations of the ruling minority of the empire” (Toynbee, 2010, p. 367). In the early stages of such an acquaintance, a civilised society, using economic and political superiority, tries to either win over its young neighbours or turn them into an appendage of its own economic system. Battle-hardened professional armies of veterans invade wild lands; cunning, accustomed to fraudulent transactions merchants base their trading posts, but no one thinks to be interested in the way of life of peoples included in the orbit of civilisation. For example, Plutarch openly credits the conquest of the peoples of Central Asia to Alexander the Great: “If we turn to the affairs of Alexander, we will see that he raised the Hyrkans for marriage, taught the Arachosians agriculture, persuaded the Sogdians not to kill their fathers, but to feed them, the Persians to respect mothers, not marry them.

The philosophy is astonishing, thanks to which the Indians worship the Greek gods, the Scythians bury the dead, and do not eat them . . . Plato, having written the “state” (*The Republic*), did not convince anyone to use this book because of its extreme severity. Alexander, having founded more than seventy cities among barbarian tribes and developed Greek customs in Asia, defeated a wild and brutish way of life there” (Plutarch, 2008, p. 440). In contrast, the Chinese dignitary Wei Zheng, in the 7th century, deciding the fate of the Turks defeated by the imperial army, reasoned that barbarians cannot be civilised: “In essence, Wei Zheng's proposals are based on the traditional Confucian concept of barbarians as not quite people: they have only human faces and the hearts of wild animals. The inherent qualities of the barbarians cannot be changed, and therefore the subjugated barbarians will never be able to become real subjects. They cannot be influenced by the categories of duty and justice. Hence the conclusion follows: it is better not to have business with them at all and not to enter into any kind of relationship with them” (Kryukov, 1984, p. 267). Thus, while the bearers of civilisation surpass barbarians in strength and wealth, they perceive the way of life of foreigners not as a cultural identity, but rather as a sign of dementia - a “wild and bestial way of life”, in the perception of which the grotesque fantasy is not separated from brief impressions.

The attitude begins to change only when a solid border is established between civilisation and barbarism that civilisation cannot overcome. A special circumstance awakening the interest of civilised researchers is the defeat inflicted by barbarians on the troops of “cultural” peoples. Only after that, researchers begin to distinguish between barbarian tribes and notice the real details of their lifestyle: now it becomes clear that this “backwardness” and

“savagery” cannot be canceled or “cultivated”, it will have to be dealt with every day (at least for trade and diplomatic issues). It is curious that the representative of each civilisation believed that he was painting a portrait of his own barbarian neighbor, but in the end he got a collective image that differs little on both edges of Eurasia. What kind of barbarians appear in the works of civilised authors?

### ***The Image of Barbarian in Roman and Chinese Sources***

First of all, both Chinese and ancient authors note their unpretentiousness and endurance. For example, Peng Da-ya writes about the Mongols: “As for their awards and punishments, according to their custom fulfilling their duty is taken for granted, and no one dares to take it as a merit. Mutually convincing each other, they say: ‘If my master sends me into the fire or into the water, I will go for him.’ When it comes to hunger, cold and severe deprivation, they only say *dai* (italics of the author) [‘dai’ means ‘not good’] (Khadyrbaev, 2016, pp. 37-38). It would seem that the thing is about the behaviour of medieval Mongol warriors, and nothing more. However, Ammianus Marcellinus, as if copying from his Chinese colleague through the ages, speaks of the Huns: “They never hide in any buildings; on the contrary, they avoid them, like tombs, far from the usual environment of people. They haven't even a reed-covered hut. They roam the mountains and forests, they are accustomed to endure cold, hunger and thirst from the cradle” (Ammianus Marcellinus, 2005, p. 538). The point here is not whether this is true or not, but the attention that civilised authors devote precisely to barbaric endurance. It is unlikely that both the Huns and the Mongols ever rejoiced in cold or hunger. But both of them endured such natural conditions, from which their empire neighbours had lost their habit long ago. It is rather not about some special power of the nomads, but about the effeminacy of the imperial citizens.

Also, ancient and Chinese authors unanimously note the dislike of the barbarians for agriculture and, in general, for creative work. Peng Da-ya characterizes the Mongols as hunters with little knowledge of plant foods: “Their food is meat, not bread. They hunt hares, deer, wild boars, ground squirrels, wild rams [they made spoons from the vertebral bones of rams], antelopes [which have yellow backs and a tail the size of a fan], wild horses [which look like donkeys], fish from rivers and streams [which can be caught only when the ground freezes]” (Khadyrbaev, 2016, pp. 24-25). Ammianus Marcellinus writes the same about the Huns: “Nobody plows and they never touched the plow. Without a fixed place of residence, without a house, without a law or a sustainable way of life, they roam like eternal runaways, with wagons in which they spend their lives; their wives weave their miserable clothes to them, unite with husbands, give birth, feed their children to maturity” (Ammianus Marcellinus, 2005, p. 539). Maybe we are talking specifically about the features of nomadic life? After all, it is not surprising that the Huns and Mongols did not engage in agriculture: both were nomads, and the pasture for horses is the same both in Khalkh and in the northern

Black Sea region. But, approximately, the same thing is written about the German tribe of the Suebs by Julius Caesar! The Suebs never were nomads - they are forest dwellers, hunters and robbers, sometimes, however, planting gardens. But tillage nevertheless remained exotic for them: "They eat relatively little bread, but mainly milk and meat from their livestock. Besides, they spend a lot of time hunting. Hunt develops their physical strength and gives them tremendous growth, thanks to special food, daily exercises and complete freedom, since they are not accustomed to obedience and discipline from childhood, and they only do what they like" (Gaius Julius Caesar, p. 2007). That is, it cannot be said that barbarians lead a disordered lifestyle: their life is subject to a clear rhythm, only this rhythm is not agricultural, but hunting. From the point of view of the imperial inhabitants, firmly attached to the land and market trade, it is really wild, but, due to hunting, barbarians had their physical endurance and freedom-loving disposition.

Also, ancient and Chinese authors note that barbarians do not have much interest in trade. Chinese intelligence officer Xu Ting remarks: "Ting, I saw that the Tatars kept everything on sauya gifts and there was not one among them who could trade . . . Their daily needs are limited to clothing and food. When the Chinese, Muslims and others come to the steppe on commercial matters, the Tatars exchange their sheep and horses (for their goods)" (Khadyrbaev, 2016, p. 35). The same is said by Publius Cornelius Tacitus, who wrote at the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> -2nd century AD, after the battle in the Teutoburg Forest, and therefore perceiving the Germans not as savages, but rather as dangerous neighbors: "They have silver vessels received as gifts by their ambassadors or princes, and they value them like those molded from clay. But those closest to us value gold and silver because of trade relations, know and distinguish some of our coins, but those living inside the country have a simpler and more ancient way of trading - the exchange of goods" (Tacitus, 1886, p. 43).

The relation of barbarians to gifts should be emphasized. This topic was presented in Tacitus "Hai Da Chi Lue" and "Germany" by surprising tone. The Roman, speaking of the hospitality of the barbarians, takes this phenomenon as the consequence of innocence and spontaneity: "With respect to the law of hospitality, no one makes a distinction between acquaintances and strangers. If a guest, leaving asks for something, it is customary to give it to him; with the same unceremoniousness, an owner can ask for something mutually. The Germans love gifts, but they don't charge theirs with anything else, nor do they consider themselves to be obliged to others: gentleness reigns in the mutual relations between the guest and the owner" (Tacitus 1886, p. 52). Peng Da-ya writes less enthusiastically about a similar Mongolian custom: "If they see someone else's things and want to get them, they call it Sahua (here and below - the author's italics). If [the owner] gives them away, they say: na-sha yin; in the Tartar language this means "good." If [the owner] does not give them away, they say: mao-u; in the language of the Tatars, this means "bad." Sahua in Chinese means "to beg" (Khadyrbaev, 2016, p. 38). That is, Peng Da allegorically hints that the Tatars are the nation of beggars, but they don't



dare say this openly, because by the time of his embassy the "beggars" had managed to defeat and seize the Tangut state of Xi Xia and the Jurchen Jin empire.

A logical question arises: where is the source of such generosity? After all, undeveloped craft and situational exchange trading could hardly seriously enrich the Germans or the Mongols. Both Chinese and ancient historians unanimously note that war was one of the most popular activities with barbarians. Moreover, their military operations did not resemble the carefully planned and costly operations of the imperial regular armies, but were a nationwide affair. Here is how, for example, Xu Ting speaks perplexedly about the Mongolian military affairs: "As I, Ting, saw how the Tatars fight, there is nothing but one solid wild and reckless youth in them" (Khadyrbaev, 2016). According to the Chinese intelligence officer, it turns out that the Mongols are just a gang of rampant robber-raiders. But Peng Da-ya gives detailed descriptions of their tactical combinations used in battles, and the picture of the crowd of half-naked savages immediately disperses. The eastern barbarians fought not like the troops of the emperors Jin and Xi Xia, but, nevertheless, did not lose the war. Tacitus describes the warlike character of the Germans in a similar way: "If the community in which young people were born is immersed in a long peace and tranquility, many of the noble youths voluntarily go to those nations that perform any kind of war at that time, since on the one hand, peace is unpleasant for these people, on the other - they more easily achieve glory among dangers, and a large retinue cannot be maintained except by violence and war" (Tacitus, 1886). And the Roman historian, like Peng Da-ya, describes the fighting tactics of the German troops, refuting the idea of them as an unorganized gang of thugs.

### ***Meeting Barbarism and Civilisation: Barbarian - A Warrior and a Winner***

Barbarians almost always at first lost when they met the regular troops of civilised states on the battlefield. However, they learnt very quickly, and soon the imperial armies will face defeat equivalent to the catastrophes in the Teutoburg Forest (9 A.D.) or under Adrianople (378 A.D.). This was the case with the Romans, and centuries later it was repeated with the Chinese (the battle at the Ehulin ridge in 1211). At the same time, neither the Germans, nor the Huns, nor the Mongols outnumbered the troops of the Roman or Jin emperor. The secret of their victories was, rather, in dexterity and mass, than in simple covering up the enemy with bodies. Thus, the regular armies of empires were made up of the representatives of various nations, not all of whom were eager to die for the honor of a dynasty that was distant and deaf to their needs. Besides, regular imperial troops had many means that were indispensable for the war against the armies of the same civilised states, but were useless in battles with barbarians (siege weapons in the absence of fortresses from the barbarians, heavily armed cavalry during the battles in a wooded area).

What kind of opposition could barbarians pose to regular armies? Or rather, why did they manage to defeat them? Surprisingly, both Chinese and Roman historians believe that it is the matter of mass character and fighting spirit. Both the Mongols and the Germans, as already mentioned above, considered the robbery and gifts handed out from this "inexhaustible fund" to be a completely natural male affair. And so every male barbarian prepared for war from early childhood.

Peng Da-ea eloquently describes the preparation of the Tatar horsemen who terrified medieval China: "As for their riding and shooting, from an early age they tie [children] to the board and strengthen them on the horse. So they constantly ride with their mother (on this very horse). At three, they tie them with a rope to the saddle so that they can hold on to something with their hand. After that, they gallop along with the rest. At four to five years old, they wear small bows with short arrows under their armpits, and when they become adults, they hunt during all four seasons of the year" (Khadyrbaev, 2016). That is, from a very early age, a boy was told the fate of a warrior, and it is not surprising that he subsequently saw not hard work, but his life mission in battles and predatory raids. Tacitus records a cruel, but popular among Germans, custom of age-related initiation: "What is rare among other German peoples and is the courage of individuals, among the Hutts [one of the German tribes – author] is a common custom: as soon as someone grows up, he grows hair on his head and beard, he is deprived of this species, which serves as a vow and a guarantee of courage, only after the killing of an enemy" (Tacitus 1886: 57). Of course, not all fights and raids ended in victory for the barbarians, and not all Mongolian and German warriors returned home alive, but in their midst this was taken for granted, a kind of lottery in which it is equally interesting to win and lose.

The opposite attitude was observed among the representatives of civilised peoples. If a military defeat is an extra reason for a new campaign for barbarians, fueled by a thirst for revenge, then for the inhabitants of the empire, the disaster in the Teutoburg forest is the day of mourning and an extra reason for fear of an unknown but formidable enemy. The victories over barbarians are gained not by the millions of citizens on whom imperial public opinion depends, but by a special caste of regular soldiers who no longer mix with the civilian population. Moreover, it is much more difficult to make up for casualties in a professional army than in a barbarian army, which is a cross between a volunteer squad and a popular militia. If the training of Roman legionnaires or Chinese imperial soldiers cost a lot of money, required special institutions like training camps and took a lot of time, then each German or Mongol warrior, as was noted above, was practiced from childhood independently and comprehended military affairs in hunting and in predatory skirmishes. Each barbarian could replace his murdered fellow, unlike the representatives of the Roman or Beijing urban mob, completely useless in place of the dead veterans. The Irish historian D.B. Burie writes about the Roman civilian population: "The men there were civilised and spiritually



developed, but physically too weak to engage in hand-to-hand combat with uncivilised barbarians” (Burie, 2013). This statement is also true for medieval Chinese citizens.

However, it cannot be said that barbarians completely abandon borrowing and inheritance, only robbing and enslaving their civilised neighbors. It is true that the vandals deliberately destroyed any trace of the Romans in the occupied lands, and that the Mongol Khan Guyuk proposed to kill the sedentary population of Northern China and turn its lands into a huge pasture. However, this attitude towards civilisation has always remained exotic. It's just that the barbarians did not inherit the entire cultural complex of the defeated empires, but only those parts of it that they considered useful to themselves. Here is how A.J. Toynbee describes this process: “A barbaric society, alienated and devoid of illusions, begins to neglect the culture of its neighbour, but at the same time it can continue to borrow its social institutions and technological achievements” (Toynbee, 2010). So, the Chinese officials Khitan I-la Chu-cai and the Jurchen Nyan-he Zhong-shan made a brilliant career at the court of Genghis Khan, and the Uigur Chinkai did business with Muslims. Each of them was a competent, educated person and used administrative skills acquired during the imperial service. The same applies to the retinue of Attila, whose close associate was Flavius Orestes, the father of the last Roman emperor Romulus Augustulus. Therefore, it cannot be said that barbarians are not at all amenable to assimilation and in no way assimilate the culture of the defeated highly developed peoples. Another thing is that this is mutual assimilation, during which none of the participants remains the same. And, of course, this is not a quick process. For example, Genghis Khan never learned to write for his whole life. But Kublai (1215-1294) already ruled China, relying on the Chinese bureaucracy, patronizing Buddhism and graciously accepting the Venetian merchant Marco Polo. It can be assumed that Alaric and Attila did not proclaim themselves Roman emperors only because this title became an empty phrase long before the defeat of the legions under Adrianople.

Still, we will not idealize the barbarians. Of course, they played the historical role of the grave diggers of decrepit and decaying empires and the founders of the new states, and the cautious ridicule by Xu Ting and Peng Da-ya, as well as Amman Marcellinus' poorly concealed disgust, are inappropriate. But with all their utilitarian selectivity, both the Mongols and the Germans quickly inherited many of the moral and social vices of the defeated peoples. Corruption in the state bodies and immorality in personal life easily passed from the vanquished to the victors, and if they did not enter the proverb, as before, then only because the young states had more serious problems. Talking about the continuity of moral vices, the domestic historian P.N. Bodyansky was amazed at the way the orgiastic sect of Dionysus's worshippers appeared in patriarchal Rome shortly after the Second Punic War, and made a curious conclusion: “There is no doubt that the Romans had very healthy instincts; but these instincts were not brought up, were not worked out. The healthy life of the Romans depended only on their long absence of negative influences, and not on the possession of the



moral temper which, as a result of the struggle between positive and negative influences, can guarantee the moral health of the people in an unhealthy environment” (Bodiansky, 2016). Thus, barbarians, although they are the carriers of simplicity and destroyers of the empires that they have outlived, nevertheless, they do not bring about a moral rebirth and, moreover, they quickly become the subject to all the same vices as their civilised opponents.

So far, we have drawn an analogy between the 13th-century Mongols who destroyed the Chinese states of Xi Xia, Jin and Song, and the Germans who put an end to the Western Roman Empire. It seems that, being true in essence, this analogy is still not entirely appropriate. The type of these harsh, almost wild conquerors is the same, but their civilised opponents are very different. The Roman Empire did not actually exist as a single state long before the barbarian invasion. No wonder every emperor in both its parts (Western and Eastern) had to begin his reign with internecine wars throughout the 4th century AD. The empire was doomed by the laws of its own development, and neither the Germans nor the nomads could be integrated into ancient society, only because it was rapidly disintegrating at that time. The Tatars attacked the quite viable empires of Xi Xia, Jin and Song, each of which was at least in the middle of its historical path, but not at its end. Therefore, Chinese society, albeit reluctantly, still accepted the conquerors into its ranks. Kubilai was an emperor from the Yuan dynasty no less than a khan from the Genghisids. The Vikings may be almost complete historical counterparts of the Mongol invaders in European history. The Vikings at first terrified the inhabitants of the kingdoms as robbers, then captured territories in France, England and Italy as Norman conquerors, and at the end entered royal citizenship as the vassals of Western European monarchs. Just as Kubilai was more an emperor than a khan, William the Conqueror was the duke of Normandy more than a Scandinavian king. Both the steppe barbarians of the Far East and the floating barbarians of Northern Europe have become not so much the destroyers of the civilised world but as their new, young part, full of forces.

### **Summary**

So, thanks to "Hey Da Shi Lue", we were able to draw a parallel between the Far Eastern and Late Antique perception of barbarians by the representatives of civilised, imperial societies (the Roman Empire and the Song Empire). If you do not take into account at least one of the sources - Chinese or Roman - you get only a story about specific historical events caused by the situation, which happened only once and no longer repeated. But the chronological and spatial independence of the ancient and Chinese authors from each other allows us to see barbarism as a cultural-historical phenomenon that is not tied to any single era or geographical area. "Hey da shi lue" is the missing link in the mosaic, without which the study of young societies would be fundamentally incomplete and doomed to one-sidedness.



### **Conflict of Interest**

The author confirms that the presented data do not contain a conflict of interest.

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