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HORSES FOR PASTURES: EXCHANGE, NEGOTIATION, AND POWER ON THE KAZAKH-QING FRONTIER

This article examines the “horse-rent” system (zuma), practiced by the Qing government in relation to Kazakh nomads during the middle period of the Qing dynasty, as a specific form of frontier economic and social interaction. In contrast to conventional interpretations that treat this mechanism as an element of fiscal policy or an instrument of imperial control, the article proposes to conceptualize it as a hybrid regime of exchange in which commercial practices, negotiation strategies, and elements of regulated access to resources were closely intertwined.

The study is based on an analysis of archival materials from Kazakhstan and China, as well as Chinese written sources. From the mid-reign of the Qianlong emperor (particularly after 1767), Qing authorities annually collected from Kazakh nomads – who utilized winter pastures in the regions of Ili, Tarbagatai, and Kobdo – a proportion of livestock corresponding to the scale of grazing. For Kazakh nomads, this mechanism functioned as a form of “equine rent for land,” ensuring access to vital pasture resources and enabling the preservation of economic mobility. For the Qing administration, the system of “pastures in exchange for horses” served both as a means of acquiring a strategically important resource and as a tool for maintaining stability in frontier regions.

Particular attention is paid to the everyday practices through which the system operated, including informal arrangements between Kazakh clan leaders and frontier guard posts that allowed for the partial circumvention of established regulations. These practices demonstrate that the actual functioning of the frontier regime rested not only on formal prescriptions, but also on flexible mechanisms of negotiation, mutual benefit, and local adaptation.

The article concludes that the “horse-rent” system functioned less as an instrument of direct imperial control than as a form of negotiated frontier order, within which trade, exchange, and elements of governance coexisted and complemented one another. This perspective makes it possible to reinterpret Kazakh–Qing relations as a dynamic space of interaction rather than a model of one-sided subordination.

Keywords: Kazakh–Chinese trade relations, horse rent, frontier regions, Qing dynasty, negotiation.

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Жайылым мен жылқы «рентасы»: қазақ-цин шекаралық кеңістігіндегі айырбас, келіссөздер және билік тетіктері

Ұсынылып отырған мақалада Цин империясының орта кезеңінде қазақ көшпелілеріне қатысты қолданылған «жылқы арендасы» (цзум) жүйесі шекаралық экономикалық және әлеуметтік өзара әрекеттестіктің ерекше формасы ретінде қарастырылады. Қалыптасқан тарихнамада бұл механизм фискалдық саясаттың элементі немесе империялық бақылау құралы ретінде қарастырылса, бұл мақалада ол сауда тәжірибелері, келіссөз стратегиялары және ресурстарға реттелген қолжетімділік элементтері өзара тоғысқан гибриді айырбас режимі ретінде талданады.

Зерттеу Қазақстан мен Қытай архив материалдарын, сондай-ақ қытай жазба деректерін талдау негізінде жүргізілген. Цяньлун императорының билігінің орта кезеңінен бастап (әсіресе 1767 жылдан кейін) Цин билігі Іле, Тарбағатай және Қобда өңірлеріндегі қысқы жайылымдарды пайдаланған қазақ көшпелілерінен мал санына пропорционалды түрде жыл сайын белгілі бір үлесті жалдау ақысы ретінде алып отырған. Қазақ көшпелілері үшін бұл механизм өмірлік маңызды жайылым ресурстарына қол жеткізуді қамтамасыз ететін және шаруашылықтағы мобильділікті сақтауға мүмкіндік беретін «жер үшін жылқы рентасы» формасы ретінде қызмет етті. Ал Цин әкімшілігі үшін «жайылымдарды жылқыға айырбастау» жүйесі стратегиялық маңызды ресурс алудың және шекаралық аймақтардағы тұрақтылықты сақтаудың құралы болды.

Мақалада жүйенің күнделікті қызмет ету тәжірибелеріне ерекше назар аударылады, соның ішінде белгіленген ережелерді ішінара айналып өтуге мүмкіндік берген қазақ ру басылары мен шекаралық қарауылдар арасындағы бейресми келісімдер талданады. Бұл тәжірибелер шекара-

лық режимнің нақты қызмет етуі тек нормативтік ережелерге ғана емес, сонымен қатар келіссөздерге, өзара тиімділікке және жергілікті бейімделуге негізделген икемді механизмдерге сүйенгенін көрсетеді.

Мақалада «жылқыны жалға төлеу жүйесі» тікелей империялық бақылау құралына қарағанда, сауда, айырбас және басқару элементтері өзара ұштасқан келісімдік шекаралық тәртіп формасы болғаны туралы қорытынды жасалады. Мұндай тәсіл қазақ-цин қатынастарын біржақты бағыныштылық моделі емес, өзара әрекеттестіктің динамикалық кеңістігі ретінде жаңаша түсіндіруге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: қазақ-қытай сауда қатынастары, жылқыны жалға төлеу жүйесі, шекаралық аймақтар, Цин әулеті, келіссөз тәжірибелері.

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Лошади за пастбища: обмен, переговоры и власть в казахско-цинских приграничных взаимодействиях

В представленной статье рассматривается система «аренды лошадей» (цзума), применявшаяся цинским правительством по отношению к казахским кочевникам в середине периода династии Цин, как особая форма приграничных экономических и социальных взаимодействий. В отличие от традиционных интерпретаций, трактующих данный механизм как элемент фискальной политики или инструмент имперского контроля, статья предлагает рассматривать его как гибридный режим обмена, в котором переплетались торговые практики, переговорные стратегии и элементы регулируемого доступа к ресурсам.

Исследование основано на анализе архивных материалов Казахстана и Китая, а также китайских письменных источников. Начиная с середины правления императора Цяньлуна (особенно после 1767 г.), цинские власти ежегодно получали с казахских кочевников, использовавших зимние пастбища в районах Или, Тарбагатай и Кобдо, долю скота пропорционально численности выпаса. Для казахских кочевников данный механизм представлял собой форму «конской ренты за землю», обеспечивавшую доступ к жизненно важным пастбищным ресурсам и возможность сохранения хозяйственной мобильности. Для цинской администрации система «предоставления пастбищ в обмен на лошадей» выступала способом получения стратегически важного ресурса и поддержания стабильности на приграничных районах.

В статье особое внимание уделяется повседневным практикам функционирования системы, включая неформальные договорённости между казахскими родоначальниками и пограничными караулами, позволявшие частично обходить установленные правила. Эти практики демонстрируют, что реальное функционирование приграничного режима основывалось не только на нормативных предписаниях, но и на гибких механизмах переговоров, взаимной выгоды и локальной адаптации.

В статье делается вывод о том, что система «аренды лошадей» представляла собой не столько инструмент прямого имперского контроля, сколько форму договорного приграничного порядка, в рамках которого торговля, обмен и элементы управления сосуществовали и взаимно дополняли друг друга. Такой подход позволяет по-новому осмыслить характер казахско-цинских отношений как динамичного пространства взаимодействия, а не одностороннего подчинения.

Ключевые слова: казахско-китайские торговые отношения, аренда лошадей, приграничные районы, династия Цин, договоренность.

Introduction

The history of Kazakh society in the 18th and 19th centuries presents a complex and multilayered picture. While some of the Kazakh zhuzes formally recognized the protectorate of the Russian Empire, other groups remained under the influence of Central Asian khanates; at the same time, Kazakh rulers actively made use of their transboundary position and maintained relations with the Qing Empire. Relations between the Kazakh Khanate and Qing

China (the Western Region/Xinjiang) took different forms across periods – from notions of dynastic kinship and alliances reinforced by marital ties to the emergence, during the Qing period, of a relatively “loosely connected” model of suzerainty, within which Kazakhs preserved both the institutions of steppe authority and the nomadic way of life.

This broader context is essential for understanding the imperial stage of Kazakh-Qing interaction. Within it, trade relations acquire particular importance, developing not merely as economic exchange

but as a product of the interaction between political interests, frontier security concerns, and the economic needs of nomadic societies. Trade thus functioned simultaneously as a channel of circulation and as a mechanism for structuring relations between Kazakh elites and the Qing administration along the northwestern frontier. These interactions contributed to the formation of relatively stable economic and social connections that were not imposed unilaterally but emerged through ongoing processes of negotiation, accommodation, and mutual adjustment.

Initially, it is necessary to briefly outline the foreign political relations of the Kazakh Khanate in the period under consideration, and in particular the relations between the Kazakh Khanate and the Qing Empire. After the incorporation of Xinjiang into the Qing state, interaction between the Qing Empire and the Kazakh Khanate intensified: part of the Kazakh elite expressed readiness to recognize Qing subjecthood, and the Qing court granted titles to rulers, seeking to construct mechanisms of indirect rule (Satenova, 2023). Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the Kazakhs remained an important element in the security system that the Qing were forming on their northwestern frontiers. According to the *Qing shi lu* – the official chronicle of the Qianlong emperor's reign, which recorded court decisions and events – by 1755 a certain approach had already taken shape in Qing policy: in the case of voluntary recognition, an audience for individual leaders in the capital and the granting of official ranks and titles were envisaged, while the population was to remain on its former pastures without resettlement; in the case of refusal, military subjugation was not regarded as the preferred option. Such a line was connected with the Qing government's desire to stabilize the northwestern frontiers after the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate while at the same time maintaining contacts with the Kazakh steppe elite. Kazakh rulers retained traditional forms of power in the Steppe (Qing Gaozong shilu, 1985, vol. 1408).

At the same time, it was emphasized that the decision to recognize subjecthood was a matter of the Kazakhs' voluntary choice; however, observance of the border and the prevention of unauthorized crossings remained a mandatory condition. Within the Middle Zhuz, positions differed on the question of rapprochement with the Qing, but Ablai, presenting himself as leader, emphasized his readiness to "bring the entire Kazakh people into submission (to the Qing)" (Khafizova, 2019). It should be noted that Ablai also declared a similar subjecthood to the Russian Empire. At the same time, the Qing government

did not equate such "submission" with the administrative-legal integration of the Steppe. Qianlong specifically noted that the Kazakhs "should not be excessively constrained," since they were located at a distance and were not comparable to the Khalkha Mongols; the acceptance of their submission was understood as a form of nominal dependence for the sake of order on the frontier and symbolic recognition, but not as a course toward the establishment of county-district administration, the appointment of officials, or a model of direct control such as that applied in Mongolia (Khafizova, 1995). Thus, the political situation of Kazakh society is difficult to describe within a single framework, since the Kazakh khans of that time, especially Abulkhair and Ablai, pursued a subtle policy of dual submission to two empires while in reality preserving their independence (Guo, 2016).

Literature review

In Kuznetsov's interpretation, Qing policy toward the Kazakhs took the character of "external frontier governance": the empire relied on embassy contacts, ritual order, and the symbolic recognition of titles in order to maintain loyalty and order along the border. At the same time, by resorting to displays of force and regulated reception procedures, the Qing authorities sought to discipline the behavior of the steppe elite (peace on the frontier, fugitives, prevention of conflicts), but in general avoided deep interference in the internal affairs of the Kazakhs and the costs of direct rule (Kuznetsov, 1983).

In post-Soviet historiography, studies of Kazakh-Qing relations have mainly been conducted from the perspective of analyzing Steppe political structures and mechanisms of imperial rule over borderlands (Lin & Wang, 1991), (Li, S., 2004). The Kazakh scholar K. Sh. Khafizova, in the monograph *Steppe Rulers and Their Diplomacy in the 18th–19th centuries* (Khafizova, 2019), drawing on materials on the activities of Steppe rulers and their embassy contacts, reveals the mechanisms of the foreign-political functioning of the Kazakh Khanate under conditions of multi-imperial rivalry. The author shows that the Qing government formed a hierarchical model of relations with the Kazakh elite through ritual reception, the system of imperial bestowals, and the regulation of embassy ranks, and also records a stable practice of frontier interactions in Ili connected with state horses and cattle theft (Khafizova, 2019. 67). The Russian scholar V. S. Kuznetsov, in *The Qing Empire on the Frontiers of Central Asia*, considers

Kazakh-Qing contacts as a mechanism of imperial frontier regulation, arguing that through diplomatic procedures, ritual practices, and a system of imperial bestowals the Qing secured the nominal loyalty of the Kazakh elite and maintained stability on the northwestern frontier while minimizing the costs of direct administration (Kuznetsov, 1983). In the monograph *The Dzungar Khanate and the Kazakhs (17th–18th centuries)*, V. A. Moiseev analyzes the transformation of the Steppe political space under the impact of the Dzungar factor and Qing intervention (Moiseev, 1991). In *The Qing Empire, Dzungaria, and Eastern Turkestan*, A. Khodzhaev, on the basis of the events of 1864–1878, emphasizes the colonial character of Qing policy in the region and links the intensification of social contradictions with tax pressure, trade restrictions, and ethnopolitical differentiation (Khodzhaev, 1991). Overall, post-Soviet historiography has advanced significantly in the study of the diplomatic, geopolitical, and frontier aspects of Kazakh-Qing relations; however, the mechanisms of functioning of specific frontier institutions remain insufficiently illuminated. What is meant here above all are the concrete mechanisms of interaction between the Qing frontier administration and Kazakh nomadic groups. In the existing works, the main attention is paid to diplomatic contacts, the system of imperial bestowals, and the general geopolitical aspects of relations. Meanwhile, the practices of everyday frontier regulation and the role of local actors – Kazakh clan elders, frontier officials, and trade intermediaries – remain much less studied. In the present study, the “horse-rent” system is examined as one of the mechanisms of such frontier interaction.

Alongside post-Soviet studies, interpretations of Kazakh-Qing trade relations among Chinese scholars are also of importance for this study. Contemporary studies by Chinese scholars on Kazakh-Qing relations can generally be divided into two directions: the first analyzes contacts at the level of high politics and the Qing system of imperial bestowals and tributary relations toward the Kazakhs (Guo, 2016); the second examines the so-called “tea-horse trade” between the Qing and the Kazakhs. Li Sheng has systematically studied relations between the Kazakh Khanate and Chinese Xinjiang from the 15th century to the mid-19th century, paying particular attention to Kazakh-Qing tributary ties and administrative measures, and also touching upon the influence of the incorporation of Kazakh lands into Russia on the frontier configuration of Xinjiang (Li, S., 2004).

In Western historiography, Peter C. Perdue, in the monograph *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, using approaches from comparative imperial and frontier history, shows that the rivalry among the Qing, the Russian Empire, and the Dzungar Khanate radically changed the balance of power in Inner Eurasia. In his view, Qing expansion was accompanied by the formation of a multi-level complex of governance – military, diplomatic, financial-logistical, colonizing, and commercial – which gradually transformed the mobile Steppe-oasis space into a governed frontier zone. At the same time, Perdue’s work pays comparatively little attention to the concrete institutional practices of Kazakh-Qing interaction, including the policy of horse rent (horse collection), which makes this direction an important subject for further study (Perdue, 2005). In contemporary Western historiography, it is increasingly noted that the rigid administrative regulation of trade in Xinjiang had contradictory consequences for the regional economy. James A. Millward, analyzing Qing economic policy in Central Asia, notes that the Qing administration’s attention to trade in frontier regions was determined above all by the tasks of imperial control. In *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864*, he shows that trade contacts with the Kazakhs were closely linked to the provisioning of military garrisons and the functioning of the administrative system in Xinjiang. Thus, trade with the nomadic groups of the Steppe was regarded not only as economic exchange, but also as an element in maintaining political stability and control over frontier territories (Millward, 1998). Under these conditions, trade flows served as a source of supply for garrisons and the maintenance of the administrative apparatus; at the same time, however, the Qing authorities sought to restrict transregional mobility through normative barriers, ethnosocial differentiation, and frontier surveillance. Thus, the structure of frontier trade was embedded in the system of imperial control, which increased transaction costs and to a certain extent restrained the economic integration of frontier space. In this context, the analysis of the concrete mechanisms through which such a policy was implemented – specifically, the “horse-rent” system – is of particular interest.

In this connection, the restrictions on Russian-Xinjiang trade in the second half of the 18th century should be considered not only as a reaction to external competition, but above all as an element of the Qing strategy to strengthen control over Xinjiang and regulate flows of population and resources.

In other words, acting as mediator and regulator of frontier interactions, the Qing administration was guided primarily by its own strategic and fiscal-administrative interests rather than by the task of maximizing regional trade efficiency.

The “horse-rent” system represented a specific form of interaction between Kazakh nomadic groups and the Qing administration. Following the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate, the Qing incorporated former Dzungar lands into imperial space. Under these conditions, Kazakh nomads, by transferring a proportion of livestock, obtained regulated access to winter pastures within frontier territories. At the same time, the Qing authorities employed this mechanism not only to monitor mobility but also to structure relations with nomadic groups in a manner that balanced administrative interests with the practical realities of Steppe life.

In this sense, the system should not be understood solely as a unilateral instrument of control. Rather, it functioned as a negotiated framework of frontier interaction, within which access to resources, obligations of payment, and patterns of mobility were continuously shaped through the interaction of imperial regulation and local practices.

Within the system of relations between the Kazakhs and the Qing, there existed a special form of interaction combining political and economic functions – the so-called “horse rent” (Li, S., 2004). In general terms, the Qing government annually sent officials to the northwestern frontier regions to collect from Kazakh nomads, who temporarily used winter pastures within the border and near the guard posts (karuns), a certain proportion of livestock according to the number of animals grazed, in the form of a specific payment within a regime of regulated access to pastures. The appearance of some Kazakh nomadic groups within Qing territory was conditioned both by the seasonal mobility of the nomadic economy and by the changing spatial-political situation after the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate. After the victory over the Dzungars, the Qing government began to regard their former nomadic lands as part of imperial space, which strengthened control over transboundary grazing. After some Kazakh nomads moved into the interior territories during the Tongzhi reign, the Qing authorities continued to collect “horse rent” from the Kazakhs who nomadized within the empire. Thus, this policy, introduced in the Qianlong era and preserved until the end of the Qing dynasty (although in certain years of the Tongzhi and Guangxu reigns rent was not collected), became a channel of interaction between the Qing and the Kazakhs (Kuznetsov, 1983. 89).

The formation of the “horse-rent” policy was directly connected with fundamental changes in the spatial-political situation in Central Asia following the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate in the mid-eighteenth century. The study examines the period from the middle of the Qianlong reign, when the practices of collecting rent livestock began to take shape (especially after the 32nd year of Qianlong, 1767 r.), to the end of the Qing dynasty, when the system underwent noticeable transformations under conditions of a changing frontier environment. Such a chronological scope makes it possible to trace not only the emergence and institutionalization of the “horse-rent” policy, but also its evolution as a flexible frontier mechanism shaped by the interaction between Qing administrative priorities and the economic needs and mobility of Kazakh nomadic groups. In this context, the system is best understood not as a fixed instrument of imperial control, but as a negotiated frontier order in which exchange, regulation, and local adaptation were closely intertwined.

At present, studies devoted to the “horse-rent” system are mainly concentrated on the change in the Qing government’s position regarding the transboundary migrations of the Kazakhs around the 32nd year of Qianlong’s reign (1767) and on the preconditions for the formation of this policy (Yingkaer, 2022), whereas the concrete mechanisms of its implementation, its institutional evolution, and its administrative functions remain insufficiently studied. The present exploration relies primarily on materials from the First Historical Archives of China, the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the holdings of the National Library of Kazakhstan, and aims to systematically trace the formation, mechanisms of functioning, and dynamics of the development of the “horse-rent” policy. The article argues that this practice was not only a peripheral phenomenon of frontier trade, but that these trade ties also constituted a flexible instrument of control intertwined with the economic needs of the Kazakhs who practiced transboundary nomadism. In this way, the study deepens our understanding of the social relations within this phenomenon of horse rent in exchange for pasturelands, between Kazakh clan leaders and karuns on the territory of Qing possessions.

Materials and methods

Methodologically, the study used historical-documentary, comparative, institutional-historical, and actor-oriented approaches. The research involves the systematization, textual interpretation,

and cross-analysis of archival materials in order to reconstruct the preconditions for the emergence and the practical implementation of the “horse-rent” policy.

The actor-oriented approach is particularly central to this study, as it allows for the reconstruction of frontier interaction not merely through imperial prescriptions but through the practices of specific participants – Kazakh clan leaders, frontier officials, and guard-post personnel (karuns). This makes it possible to analyze how formal regulations were interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes reconfigured in practice. In this perspective, the “horse-rent” system is examined as a socially embedded institution emerging from the interaction between imperial policy and local agency.

The study also employs the concept of the “dual imperial frontier,” which conceptualizes the Kazakh steppe as a space of interaction between the Russian and Qing empires. This situation became particularly evident in the second half of the 19th century during the Russo-Qing delimitation of Central Asia. The Treaty of Beijing (1860) confirmed the boundary between the two empires, while the Treaty of St. Petersburg (Ili Treaty) of 1881 defined the framework of frontier relations and economic contacts. Under these conditions, Kazakh groups, making use of the mobility of the nomadic economy, maintained connections with both empires. The “horse-rent” policy took shape within this specific frontier environment and functioned not only as an instrument of Qing regulation, but also as a form of frontier interaction in which economic interests, mobility, exchange, and local negotiation practices were closely intertwined.

Research results

The Formation and Gradual Refinement of the “Horse-Rent” Policy

From the outset, the emerging system should be understood not simply as an administrative mechanism imposed by the Qing state, but as a frontier arrangement that took shape through the interaction between imperial needs and the adaptive strategies of Kazakh nomadic groups. The formation of the practice of “horse rent” should be understood in the context of the profound transformation of Qing frontier policy in the second half of the 18th century. After the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate and the incorporation of its pastures into the sphere of Qing control, the imperial administration in the Ili region faced the urgent task of regularly supply-

ing garrisons, relay-post service, and state horse-breeding establishments with the necessary number of horses and draft animals. Under these conditions, the Kazakh horse trade and related forms of extraction gradually acquired not an auxiliary but a strategic significance for the Qing.

An analysis of archival and trade materials shows that the emerging system of supply primarily involved the tribal groups of the Middle Zhuz that nomadized near Ili, Tarbagatai, and the line of frontier guard posts (Khodzhaev, 1991). Their spatial proximity to Qing frontier points, as well as their participation in the early forms of Ili trade, made these groups the most active participants in the emerging supply mechanism, including the Naiman, Uysun, Matai, Suwan, and others. At the same time, what was taking shape was not merely an economic exchange, but a durable space of frontier contact in which economic interests, seasonal mobility, and administrative regulation were closely interconnected from the outset.

From an economic and political perspective, the practice of “horse rent” created a relatively stable system of mutual benefit. For the Qing administration, it ensured a comparatively steady inflow of horses used to equip garrisons, replenish relay-post transport, and maintain state horse-breeding establishments in Ili and Tarbagatai, thereby reducing dependence on costly internal supplies. At the same time, through the regulation of trading conditions, routes, and points of exchange, frontier authorities obtained an additional instrument for controlling the transboundary mobility of nomads. For the Kazakh side, participation in this system also had practical advantages. The delivery of horses made it possible to convert traditional nomadic resources into highly desired Chinese goods – above all silk fabrics, tea, and cotton textiles – which were then redistributed within Steppe communities and partly re-exported to the markets of Central Asia. Regular contacts with the Ili authorities simultaneously strengthened the negotiating position of particular clan leaders and expanded their access to the commercial sites of Xinjiang (Qing Gaozong shilu, 1985, vol. 1408).

The functioning of this practice was thus accompanied by stable forms of frontier social interaction: regular caravan contacts, negotiations with Qing officials, and the development of channels of communication between the Steppe elite and the frontier administration. Within these contacts, not only economic ties but also specific models of local interaction between Kazakh clan leaders, frontier officials, and guard-post personnel took shape. It

was precisely at this level that official prescriptions encountered the economic needs of nomads, the seasonal mobility of steppe groups, and the realities of frontier regulation in practice. The gradual advance of the Russian Empire into the Steppe also constituted a significant external factor, further increasing the importance of flexible mechanisms of frontier regulation on the Qing side.

After the completion of the Qing incorporation of Xinjiang, the Qing Empire pursued a comparatively mild policy of indirect rule toward the Senior and Middle Zhuzes (Li, S., 2004). The Qing court interpreted their tributary practices as a form of voluntary recognition of vassal dependence, understanding it primarily as nominal loyalty aimed at including the Kazakhs within the orbit of the “cultural influence of the Celestial Empire,” rather than as grounds for the introduction of direct county-and-district administration (Guo, W., 2016). In this sense, Kazakh–Qing relations developed not according to a logic of full administrative integration, but within a more flexible model that allowed for a combination of symbolic subordination, commercial interaction, and limited frontier control.

Kazakh society was based on a nomadic economy closely tied to natural and climatic conditions and to seasonal mobility. Under conditions of a shortage of winter pastures, some nomadic groups living near the Qing frontier regularly entered the former Dzungar lands, which after the destruction of the Dzungar Khanate the Qing had begun to regard as part of their imperial space (Kuznetsov, V. S., 1983). Despite repeated prohibitions, such crossings continued to occur. Already here an important contradiction became apparent: on the one hand, the Qing administration sought to assert control over the new frontier space; on the other, it was compelled to take into account the economic necessity of winter migrations among Kazakh groups and the impossibility of eliminating their seasonal mobility entirely by force.

At the initial stage, the Qing administration relied primarily on coercive measures – expelling violators and confiscating livestock. Over time, however, the Qianlong emperor came to the conclusion that an exclusively military approach was insufficiently effective and began moving toward more institutionalized forms of regulation (Jian, Q., 2026). After the thirty-second year of Qianlong’s reign (1767), Kazakh nomads were, in exceptional circumstances – above all in years of severe winter disasters – permitted temporarily to enter inside the line of guard posts on condition that the authorities were

informed and that the prescribed levy was paid. On this basis, the Ili general Agui established the norm of “one head per hundred,” which was subsequently approved by the emperor and became the foundation of the “horse-rent” system (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). This decision marked an important shift: from the practice of simple expulsion to an attempt to incorporate the seasonal movements of Kazakh groups into a regulated frontier order.

This decision rested on several factors: the high valuation of Kazakh horses, the acute need of Qing garrisons and the tuntian system for draft resources, and the desire to develop a more flexible regime for controlling Kazakh groups wintering near the frontier line (Jian, Q., 2026). For the Kazakh side, the new practice also had pragmatic significance, since it facilitated access to winter pastures and frontier trade. Thus, the emerging system from the outset combined elements of economic advantage, frontier regulation, and negotiated adaptation to the real conditions of nomadic life.

It is telling that soon after the introduction of the new policy, Tarbagatai units detained a group of Kazakhs who had crossed the line of guard posts without authorization. In the subsequent negotiations with the Kazakh leader Esengkeledi, the Ili general Agui officially clarified the order of application of the new system: in winter the line of guard posts was temporarily withdrawn inward, Kazakhs were permitted to graze in the foothills of Tarbagatai on condition of paying the levy at the rate of “one head per hundred,” while in spring they were obliged to leave Qing territory. After the official announcement of the policy, the detainees were released, and the regular collection of the corresponding levy in fact began already in the winter of that same year (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). This episode is particularly important because it shows that the “horse-rent” system was formed not only as a top-down normative decision, but also as the result of concrete frontier negotiations involving both representatives of the Qing administration and Kazakh leaders. It is precisely at this level that its social dimension becomes visible: through the negotiation of conditions of access, the seasonality of grazing, the order of payment, and the limits of permitted movement.

An important external factor shaping the formation of the “horse-rent” policy was the steady advance of the Russian Empire into the Steppe zone and Central Asia. As studies show, from the 18th century onward Russia regarded the region not only

as an object of economic penetration, but above all as a key link in its geostrategic expansion aimed at securing its southern frontiers and expanding its influence in Eurasia (Li, S. Y., 2004: 56). In the first half of the 19th century, the strengthening of Russia's military presence, the construction of fortified lines, and the expansion of trade with the Kazakh elite significantly altered the balance of power in the Steppe. Under these conditions, flexible mechanisms of frontier regulation acquired particular importance for the Qing Empire, allowing it to retain Kazakh groups within its sphere of influence without direct administrative incorporation.

In this context, the policy of "rent horses" formed part of a broader strategy of stabilizing the northwestern frontier (Li, S. Y., 2004: 78). Through the institutionalized admission of nomads inside the line of guard posts and the proportional collection of livestock, the Qing administration sought simultaneously to address the needs of military supply, the regulation of transboundary mobility, and geopolitical containment under conditions of growing Russo-Qing rivalry in Central Asia. Yet the actual functioning of this policy was shaped not only by the designs of the central authorities, but also by concrete frontier practice, in which norms, interests, and local arrangements were in constant interaction. For this reason, the "horse-rent" system should be viewed not merely as an administrative institution, but as a particular form of frontier relations in which exchange, control, mobility, and social negotiation were intertwined.

The gradual refinement of the policy became visible already in the first years of its practical implementation. In the twelfth month of the 32-nd year of Qianlong's reign (1767), Agui first put into practice the policy of collecting "rent horses," gathering 20 horses from 20 households of the Kazakh clan Ajibai wintering in the Kharatal area, a pasture zone in the Ili Valley of present-day Xinjiang. Only one month later, the Tarbagatai canzan-dachen Uleden got 1,040 horses from the Kazakhs in the areas of Cahan-Hujir and other localities. Thereafter the system was rapidly institutionalized: by the end of the following year, 105 horses had been collected in Ili, and at the beginning of the next year Tarbagatai received 1,142 (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). No later than the 59th year of Qianlong (1794), collection had also extended to the western regions of Kobdo. Before the Russo-Chinese boundary delimitation, the principal zones of collection remained Ili, Tarbagatai, and Kobdo.

Agui's original project established only the basic principles – the winter character of collection and a norm of about 1 percent of the total herd. As practice accumulated, however, the Qing authorities elaborated the procedures, the system of regulation, and the forms of registration in greater detail. Although the Kazakhs raised five principal kinds of livestock, the sources usually record only the number of horses collected, which appears to have been connected with the conversion of other livestock into a "horse equivalent" in view of the special value of horse resources for garrisons, tuntian settlements, and transportation. It is important to emphasize that at this stage the practice of "rent horses" had not yet assumed the character of classical taxation. In essence, it represented a particular form of administrative agreement between the Qing authorities and Kazakh nomadic groups (Jian, Q., 2026). The scale and regularity of collection depended to a considerable degree on the specific military-political situation on the frontier, the needs of the garrisons, and the degree to which frontier migrations could be managed, which gave the system a distinctly flexible and situational character.

According to the *Xiyu wenjian lu* – an 18th-century Chinese work describing the peoples and administration of Xinjiang – the Ili administration annually dispatched an official with a detachment of 500 men to inspect the Kazakhs and Buruts and to levy tribute according to the norm: "of every hundred head of cattle and horses, one; of every thousand sheep, one" (Wu, F., 1777). This shows that cattle and horses were counted as approximately equivalent units, while sheep were converted at a rate of ten to one horse, whereas the coefficient for camels is not specified in the sources.

In procedural terms, each winter the Qing authorities sent inspection detachments to the frontier in order to detect unauthorized crossings through the guard posts (*kalun*) and to settle pastoral disputes. By the thirty-ninth year of Qianlong, the procedure had been further refined: the forces of Ili and Tarbagatai first inspected their respective sectors, then assembled in the Lepusi area and proceeded to the Kazakh winter-grazing districts for collection. Nomads entering for winter grazing were subject to mandatory registration according to tribal affiliation, population size, and herd numbers; those not registered were persuaded to return. In spring, after the guard posts returned to their former positions, the Kazakhs were required to leave Qing territory; in addition, mountain valleys and concealed localities were inspected in order to prevent the ap-

pearance of groups outside administrative control (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). What emerged, therefore, was not merely a mechanism of collection, but a broader regime of seasonal surveillance, registration, and regulation of mobility closely tied to the functioning of the frontier line.

To ensure implementation of the policy and prevent abuses, a strict system of rewards and punishments was introduced. On the one hand, officials and soldiers were categorically forbidden to conceal Kazakh nomads or to exchange livestock with them in secret. The Qianlong emperor emphasized that those who accepted livestock and arbitrarily admitted nomads were to be severely punished. In the 42nd year of Qianlong (1777), the Tarbagatai guardpost zoling Chaobao – the head of one of the Tarbagatai frontier guard posts – and the herd official Alejing’a were punished for secret exchange and the admission of nomads; in the same year, the Ili Elet warriors Elezhe and Ihotok also received penalties (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). The emperor stated that such actions undermined the official order and could provoke horse theft, and therefore ordered that the guilty be dismissed and punished. These measures show that already at an early stage the Qing administration encountered a divergence between official prescriptions and actual frontier practice, in which personal arrangements and exchange interests could come into conflict with state order.

On the other hand, those who successfully carried out collection were rewarded. Thus, the “rent horses” collected in the districts of Kercin and Halyutu (Kobdo) were usually transferred to state horse-breeding establishments, while the responsible officials and soldiers received rewards in silk, tea, and tobacco. In the third year of Tongzhi (1864), the Kobdo units successfully collected 40 horses: the bodyguard Dezhen and the assistant taiji Samushen each received a piece of small penduan, while five Mongol soldiers received tea and tobacco (Qing Gaozong shilu, 1985, vol. 1408). At the same time, this practice also performed the function of a kind of compromise mechanism. For Kazakh nomadic groups, participation in the “horse-rent” system meant not only a fiscal burden, but also an institutionalized opportunity for legitimate winter grazing within the line of guard posts, the preservation of seasonal mobility, and expanded access to frontier trade. In this way, the policy operated not as an instrument of one-sided coercion, but as a form of regulated coexistence of the interests of the empire and the Steppe communities.

At the same time, the Qing administration developed measures against evasion of payment. If deliberate evasion was confirmed, the nomads were required to pay horses at double the normal rate (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). In the thirty-ninth year of Qianlong’s reign (1774), Tarbagatai collectors in the Kara-Usu area discovered a group of Kazakhs led by Maletabaral who falsely claimed that they had already paid horses in Ili. By imperial decree, a double levy was imposed on them, and the corresponding order was extended to other regions as well (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). During the Daoguang period, this stricter line remained in place. In the 5th year of Daoguang (1825), the Kazakhs Uyanbai and others, wintering in Kercin and Halyutu (Kobdo), evaded payment of six horses by migrating into Russian territory; the Qing authorities ordered the search to be intensified and instructed that if they reappeared they were to be detained and severely punished.

In addition, premature entry inside the line of guard posts was regulated. In the 8th month of the 43rd year of Qianlong (1778), some Kazakh nomads entered inside the line for grazing without waiting for the snowy season, but withdrew on their own when inspection units appeared. The Qing court recognized this as a violation, but in view of their voluntary withdrawal limited itself to a warning and ordered that in future both people and livestock be detained in cases of unauthorized entry before the prescribed time (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). At the same time, because of climatic variability the exact onset of winter was difficult to determine, so a certain flexibility remained in practice. If early entry was brief and was not accompanied by conflict, the authorities often tolerated it in order to avoid aggravating the frontier situation (Jian, Q., 2026). This again shows that the practical functioning of the system was determined not only by the norm, but also by situational decisions dependent on the concrete circumstances along the frontier.

In the 55th year of Qianlong’s reign (1790), the Kazakh khan Hankhozho – the ruler of the Right Zhuz of the Kazakhs – moved more than 100 people into Tarbagatai for wintering because of a shortage of water and pastures in the Qingjis area. The matter was reported to the emperor, who indicated that if the established rules were observed, partial exemption from the surrender of horses might be considered. Such concessions, however, were not treated as ordinary practice. The emperor emphasized that the established norm – one head per hundred – was

already sufficiently moderate, and that excessive concessions could weaken collection discipline and provoke new petitions from other nomadic groups (FHAC, Translations of Manchu Rescripts from the Qianlong Era, 2002). Thus, even in cases of concession, the Qing authorities sought to preserve a balance between pragmatic flexibility and maintenance of general order.

The collected “rent horses” were used in three principal ways. First, they were directed to replenish the local state horse-breeding establishments in Ili, Tarbagatai, and Kobdo: suitable horses were allocated to garrisons and postal stations, while weakened ones were fattened separately; in Kobdo they were branded and registered in the Board of Revenue, and similar practices were applied in Ili and Tarbagatai. Second, some horses were redistributed to Gansu, Shaanxi, Urumqi, Huijiang, and Kobdo for military-administrative and transport needs (Jian, Q., 2026). After the Daoguang period, as receipts declined and quality deteriorated, interregional transfers were sometimes reduced in favor of local needs. In a broader perspective, the evolution of the policy after the Qianlong period reflected the gradual transformation of the entire Qing frontier administration. If initially the “rent horses” served as a relatively flexible instrument of adaptation to nomadic mobility, then in the 19th century, as the international situation grew more complex and Russian expansion into the Steppe intensified, the system assumed an increasingly regulated and protective character. This indicates a transition from a phase of experimental frontier regulation to a stage of more formalized imperial control.

Third, some of the horses were sold in order to finance frontier expenses. In the 24th year of

Guangxu (1898), 386 horses were collected in Tarbagatai, of which 117 were sold, yielding 936 taels of silver. From the 25th year of Guangxu (1899) onward, Ili annually increased its collection by 700 horses above the previous 160 and sold them, receiving about 8,000 taels per year. In the thirty-fourth year of Guangxu, 800 horses were collected in Kobdo, of which 120 were sold for 960 taels, mainly for the maintenance of officials and attendants. By the end of the 19th century, therefore, the “horse-rent” system was increasingly being incorporated not only into the provisioning infrastructure, but also into the financial infrastructure of frontier administration.

After the Qianlong period, the policy of “rent horses” underwent two notable changes. First, the number of horses that could be collected regularly declined sharply, and their quality deteriorated. Second, after the Russo-Chinese delimitation on the northwestern frontier during the Tongzhi years, the Qing Empire moved from indirect control over those Kazakhs who had attached themselves internally to more direct administrative rule, continuing the collection of “rent horses,” while Kazakhs under Russian jurisdiction no longer paid this levy to the Qing (Kuznetsov, V. S., 1983). During the Qianlong period, because a considerable number of Kazakhs annually entered inside the line of guard posts for winter grazing, the volume of collection remained high. For example, in Tarbagatai “officials were sent every autumn to the wintering Kazakhs and collection was carried out according to the size of the herds,” with the total usually amounting to 700–800 and sometimes 1,400–1,500 horses (Lin, Y., & Wang, X., 1991).

Table 1

Statistics on the Number of “Rent Horses” Collected from the Kazakhs in the Tarbagatai Region of the Qing Empire in Selected Years (head)

Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.
1803	241	1817	215	1833	137	1845	97
1804	236	1821	210	1834	132	1846	90
1805	230	1822	207	1835	134	1847	91
1806	228	1823	194	1836	129	1849	91
1807	199	1824	174	1837	116	1852	91
1809	214	1825	181	1838	102	1853	91
1810	216	1826	159	1840	106	1854	89
1811	222	1828	163	1841	103	1856	75
1812	219	1829	156	1842	97	1858	77
1814	219	1830	129	1843	98	1859	73
1816	216	1831	137	1844	95	1860	74

Note: compiled from (Wang, X., 1992)

In the 29th year of Daoguang's reign (1849), local officials reported that in recent years the Kazakhs had become noticeably poorer and often suffered losses of both people and livestock. Because of heavy winter snows, some wealthy nomads moved to more distant wintering grounds, while those who remained near the frontier were mainly poorer people incapable of long-distance migrations. As a result, the volume of "rent horses" delivered declined substantially: in autumn only about 80–90 head were collected, and many of them were of low quality and poorly suited for service. In that period, cold weather arrived early, pastures were quickly exhausted, and many Kazakhs were forced to undertake long crossings through the desert. As payment, they often presented old and emaciated horses, so a significant portion of the animals received were already in an exhausted condition. After transfer to the state administration, some of the horses required fattening and recovery, while many of the old and sick soon died, which was regarded as almost inevitable. According to the statistics, in this period about 400–500 "rent horses" were collected annually overall. These data show that the effectiveness of the system depended directly not only on administrative discipline, but also on the condition of the nomadic economy, natural and climatic circumstances, and the social differentiation of the frontier groups themselves (CSARK. F. 64, Inv. 1, Bk. 1).

According to the established rules, the permissible annual mortality rate for horses was 6 percent, while losses above the norm had to be compensated by the herd keepers. However, as the quality of the horse stock declined and mortality increased, they became increasingly unable to cover the losses. For this reason, in the 9th year of Daoguang (1829) the rules were softened: the death of a horse within one month as a result of overexertion or injury no longer required compensation, while if a horse died within six months the compensation was reduced to 30 percent (Chen, H., 2014). Here too one can see that the Qing administration was compelled to adjust the normative regime in response to the practical difficulties of the system's functioning.

During the Tongzhi years (1862–1874), the large-scale Muslim uprising in the northwest and the invasion of Yaqub Beg led to the temporary suspension of the collection of "rent horses." At the same time, the Russian Empire continued its expansion into Central Asia, abolished khan power in the Middle and Junior Zhuzes, and extended its influence over the Senior Zhuz, something to which the

weakened Qing could no longer effectively respond. After the signing in the third year of Tongzhi (1864) of the "Protocol on the Delimitation of the Northwestern Frontier," by which China lost more than 400,000 square kilometers of territory east and south of Lake Balkhash, some Kazakhs unwilling to pass under Russian rule entered Qing subjecthood. The collection of "rent horses" from them was preserved and to some extent turned into an internal instrument of governance. In the 17th year of Guangxu (1891), collection was resumed in Ili, yielding 600 head; in the 24th year of Guangxu (1898), 386 head were collected in Tarbagatai. According to the report of Siheng, assistant to the Kobdo amban, for the 32nd year of Guangxu (1906), the Kazakhs of Ili and Tarbagatai continued to deliver horses annually; for example, the Altai Kazakhs delivered 400 head, of which one-tenth was transferred to the Torgut prince, while nine-tenths remained under the jurisdiction of the campaign administration and were sent to Mongol soldiers for grazing.

At the same time, Kazakhs under Russian jurisdiction continued periodically to enter Chinese territory for nomadic migrations. The weakened Qing government was no longer able to collect so-called "rent horses" from them and was often compelled to provide them with protection. In the 9th year of Guangxu's reign (1883), Russia leased pastures in the Barluk Mountains in Tarbagatai for the wintering of Kazakhs; after ten years this tract was returned, although the leasing of land in Ili continued (Khodzhaev, A., 1991). In the 28th year of Guangxu's reign (1902), the Russian side requested the Huermodun area for grazing 10,000 horses. The Ili general Ma Liang ordered that the grazing boundaries be determined, that no rent be charged, that an appropriate agreement be concluded, and that protection be provided. In the following year, the Russian consul in Ili again petitioned for an extension of the lease. Ma Liang formally rejected the request, but taking into account the arrival of the herds at the frontier and the general condition of Russo-Qing relations, ultimately permitted grazing under the previous rules. In November, about 100 nomads with 15,000 horses entered through the Nalingole guard post into the Huermodun area and on the 28th day of the first month of the following year returned beyond the frontier; this arrangement was subsequently repeated annually (CSARK. F. 44, Op. 1, D. 1.). These episodes are especially important because they show that by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, access to frontier pastures was increasingly shaped not only by earlier imperial norms, but also by new forms of

inter-imperial coordination in which Kazakh mobility remained a significant factor.

In practice, such arrangements emerged not only as a result of decisions by central authorities, but also through the interaction of various participants in frontier life. These processes involved Kazakh clan elders representing the interests of nomadic groups, Qing frontier officials responsible for order along the border, and trade intermediaries through whom economic and personal ties were maintained between the steppe population and the frontier administration. The evolution of the “horse-rent” policy thus demonstrates that it was not merely a fiscal-administrative mechanism, but a complex form of frontier relations in which governance, exchange, local interests, mobility, and negotiated practices were intertwined. It is precisely in this combination that its significance lies for understanding Kazakh-Qing relations on the northwestern frontier of the Qing Empire.

Taken together, these materials demonstrate that the “horse-rent” system cannot be reduced either to a simple fiscal levy or to a purely administrative instrument of frontier control. Its historical significance lies precisely in its hybrid and negotiated character. For the Qing state, it functioned as a flexible mechanism for securing horses, monitoring seasonal mobility, and maintaining stability in a strategically sensitive frontier without resorting to costly direct administration. For Kazakh nomadic groups, it provided regulated access to winter pastures, opportunities for frontier trade, and a framework within which mobility could be preserved through negotiation rather than suppressed by force. At the same time, the archival evidence makes clear that the system’s operation depended not only on imperial directives but also on the actions of local actors – Kazakh clan leaders, guard-post personnel, frontier officials, and intermediaries – whose interactions continuously shaped the balance between formal regulation and practical accommodation. It is precisely this interplay that reveals the “horse-rent” system as a negotiated frontier order, rather than a model of one-sided imperial domination.

Conclusion

Some scholars have noted that, unlike a number of Eurasian empires whose histories were closely bound up with large-scale military expansion, Qing policy in Central Asia was, on the whole, more restrained and pragmatic in character (Kuznetsov, 1983: 101). The incorporation of Xinjiang was to

a considerable extent a defensive measure aimed at eliminating the Dzungar threat; after its destruction, despite possessing the necessary financial and military resources, Beijing did not demonstrate a clearly articulated course toward further expansion deep into the Central Asian steppe. Accordingly, in its relations with regional political forces, the Qing court generally adhered to a line of limited intervention, proceeding from the assumption that beyond the line of guard posts there was no need to establish a permanent administrative presence (Kuznetsov, 1983). Even while formally recognizing the dependent status of the Kazakhs and Kokand, the Qing primarily maintained relations through embassy contacts, imperial bestowals, and ritual practices, consciously avoiding deep involvement in intra-steppe conflicts. Their principal objective remained the stabilization of Qing rule in Xinjiang itself and the prevention of destabilization along the frontier.

Under these conditions, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, the Qing Empire did not attempt to create an extensive system of direct rule in the Kazakh steppe beyond the line of guard posts. At the same time, the seasonal transboundary migrations of the Kazakhs objectively conflicted with the Qing commitment to guarding the frontier and maintaining order along the northwestern borderlands. In order to mitigate this contradiction, the Qing government, drawing on already existing experience in regulating frontier movements and exchange relations, institutionalized the proportional collection of livestock, gradually shaping the system of “horse rent.” From the perspective of the Qing administration, this measure, on the one hand, ensured a comparatively stable supply of horse resources for garrisons, frontier settlements, and transport infrastructure, while, on the other, it served as an instrument for regulating the mobility of nomadic groups and maintaining the governability of frontier space.

At the same time, the present analysis demonstrates that the “horse-rent” system cannot be reduced either to classical taxation or to an exclusively one-sided mechanism of imperial control. In essence, it represented a hybrid form of frontier interaction in which exchange, regulation, economic necessity, and negotiated practice were closely intertwined. For Kazakh nomadic groups, participation in this system meant not only the obligation to surrender part of their livestock, but also an institutionalized opportunity for legitimate access to vital winter pastures, the preservation of seasonal mobility, and the expansion of ties with frontier trade. For the Qing administration, it made possible both the

extraction of a strategically important equine resource and the adaptation of the frontier regime to the real conditions of nomadic life without shifting toward the costly direct administration of the steppe.

Of particular importance is the fact that the actual functioning of this policy was shaped not only by the prescriptions of the central authorities, but also by practices of local interaction. The archival materials show that Kazakh clan leaders, frontier officials, guard-post personnel, and intermediaries all played an important role in the system, through whom concrete forms of access, registration, exchange, and dispute settlement were worked out. It was precisely at this level that the divergence between the normative model and the lived reality of the frontier became especially visible: alongside official rules there existed situational concessions, informal arrangements, attempts to bypass control, and pragmatic compromises. In this sense, the “horse-rent” system functioned not simply as an

administrative measure, but as a socially embedded mechanism operating within a space of constant negotiation between empire and steppe.

In a broader historical perspective, the analysis of the “horse-rent” policy allows us to understand more deeply the specific character of Kazakh–Qing relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to refine our understanding of the nature of governance on the northwestern frontier of the Qing Empire. The practice examined here shows that the stability of frontier order was ensured not only by imperial institutions as such, but also by their capacity to adapt to seasonal mobility, economic interests, and the local strategies of nomadic communities. It is for this reason that the “horse-rent” system should be regarded as an important example of how, under conditions of a dual imperial frontier, complex regimes of coexistence were formed in which control, exchange, and social negotiation were inseparable.

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