

has listed (see p. 26) “inadequate supplies of water, the brevity of growing seasons, edaphic problems, and difficult terrain” as being “the most important physical-geographic impediments to the development of sedentary agriculture” there. To be sure, in suitable and relatively small areas farming has been and is being practised, but it has played only a marginal role in the economy of the whole region. The vast stretches of the steppe – the only natural region in Central Eurasia capable of supporting a polity of some sophistication and power – are favorable only to extensive animal husbandry, which has remained the most characteristic occupation of the Inner Asian peoples down to modern times. But, in the words of Rhoads Murphey, “Rivalry between the steppe and the sown, between nomads and sedentary farmers, may well be one of the oldest conflicts of modern civilization.”² The natural conditions prevailing in the three other Inner Asian zones – the arctic tundra, the forest region (*taiga*), and the desert – do not allow the formation of powerful states, as none of them can provide food for a population large enough to muster the political power necessary to initiate conquest.

In political conflicts humans oppose humans and the motives for action are multiple and difficult to define. Yet the complexity characteristic of such actions should not be allowed to obscure the basic nature of the opposition between Inner Asia on the one hand and any of the sedentary civilizations on the other. In its essence, it was one between haves and have-nots, the latter trying to reach the proverbial flesh-pots defended by those who had been lucky enough to place themselves close to the hearth. First and foremost, the conflict was thus economically motivated, one group trying to improve its living conditions at the expense of the other, the outsiders’ attacks being contained or repulsed by those inside: the natural course of action of the two opposing segments of human society, if – indeed – those who are “outside” may really be considered “human.” The *fundamentum divisionis* is the relative economic standard of the two areas, one being Inner Asia, any of the sedentary civilizations the other. The fear that the Barbarian may come and take away the fruits of sedentary toil permeates these civilizations, well aware of the lure of their own riches, which had to be protected from Barbarian greed, a favorite *topos* of statesmen and historians, whether Chinese or Roman.³ The great Chinese historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien called the Hsiung-nu greedy and avaricious (*t’an lan*), thus echoing an opinion recorded in the *Tso-chuan* as early as the third century B.C.: “The Barbarians of the west (Jung) and of the north (Ti) are ravenous wolves who cannot be satiated.” According

² Murphey, Rhoads, 1961, p. 505.

³ See Sinor, 1978, pp. 171–82, with exact references to the texts cited.

to the *Hsin T'ang-shu* "The Northern Barbarians are greedy and grasping; they care only about profit." The Huns, in the words of Ammianus Marcellinus (XXXI,2,11), "burn with an infinite thirst for gold," and in his *Strategikon* Maurice describes the Avars as "dominated by an insatiable desire for money." The adjective *ἄπληστος* ("insatiable") is often used to qualify the Barbarians' character. It is favored by the emperor Constantine II Porphyrogenitus in his manual of statecraft normally cited by the Latin title *De administrando imperio*. On the Pechenegs he has this to say: "Now these Pechenegs, who are ravenous and keenly covetous of articles rare among them, are shameless in their demands for generous gifts."⁴ He gives some vigorous advice to his son: "Know therefore that all the tribes of the north have, as it were implanted in them by nature, a ravening greed for money, never satiated, and so they demand everything and hanker after everything and have desires that know no limit or circumscription."⁵

Here, as in many other testimonies, what appear to be standard comments were rooted in personal experience. When, in the 13th century, John of Plano Carpini described the Mongols as "most grasping and avaricious, exacting in their demands, most tenacious in holding on to what they have and most niggardly in giving"⁶ he was not following literary conventions but writing from bitter, first-hand knowledge. This was true also of his contemporary, the Dominican Simon of Saint-Quentin who stated: "Such greed burns in them [the Mongols] that when they see something that pleases, they will immediately either obtain it through forceful insistence or they will take it away from the owner with violence, whether he likes it or not."⁷ Greedy they certainly were, those Mongols who created an empire greater than any which had existed before them, yet even at the height of their power, they were poor, often lacking in basic commodities. The Franciscan Rubruck, himself no stranger to poverty, could truthfully report to Louis IX of France: "I say to you with confidence, if your peasants, I will not say kings and knights, were willing to go as do the kings of the Tartars and to be content with the same kind of food, they could take possession of the whole world."⁸

What, it may be asked, were the reasons for such poverty, why could Inner Asia not give its population a living standard similar to those enjoyed in the surrounding civilizations? The key to the problem is the absence of substantial farming caused, as already mentioned, by a combination of physical-geographic factors, perhaps first of all the climate, which, in simple terms, is too cold and too dry to allow a thriving agriculture. To characterize Inner

⁴ Moravcsik, 1967, p. 54. ⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 66–7. ⁶ Dawson, 1966, p. 16.

⁷ Richard, 1965, p. 35. ⁸ Dawson, 1965, p. 220.



Asia, Chinese sources often use the phrase “where the killing frosts come early.”⁹

The economy of the tundra, the northernmost natural zone of Inner Asia, could never provide its inhabitants with more than a subsistence-level existence, and this only on condition that they lived dispersed over vast territories. The political power of the population (usually only a dozen or so families operating within each circumscribed area), which was all the limited

⁹ On *topoi* relative to the Barbarians' land see Meserve, 1982.

hunting and reindeer-breeding economy of the tundra could support, was negligible. The gap between the minimal population figure (below which a group cannot go without danger to its survival in a hostile environment) and the maximal one (above which it cannot go because the environment cannot then provide for even its basic needs in food) was very narrow.

The situation prevailing in the forest belt (*taiga*) was, in some ways, analogous but here the natural resources could support a hunting-fishing-gathering population with relative ease. When practiced on a large enough scale to provide for the basic needs of a community, hunting and fishing both require tools of considerable sophistication, technologically more advanced than those used in primitive agriculture. Also, collective fishing and hunting, especially the latter, demand a social organization capable of carrying out joint actions of some complexity. However, because a hunting economy is essentially predatory, it cannot serve as a basis for high-density populations, and so by definition it cannot muster the collective power required for conquest. In 17th-century Siberia, Tunguz hunting clans numbered between 15 and 25 men, though there are records of clans 300–700 head strong – still a minuscule force.¹⁰

So it is the steppe which is the key to the understanding of the role of Inner Asia in world history. On this vast pasture-land, cattle-breeding, whether of horned cattle, camels, sheep, goats or horses (the five categories of domestic animals, *tabun qosiyun mal* of the Mongols), was always extensive. To ensure economic self-sufficiency, and to avoid overgrazing, the herds had to be continually on the move, normally within a given perimeter but, on occasion wherever grass could be found. “They follow the grass and water” is the Chinese stereotype used to characterize the nomad. But, unlike the inhabitants of the tundra or the taiga, the nomads could congregate with great speed and important masses of men and beasts could stay together for relatively long periods of time. In other words, the population-carrying capacity of the steppe, within a fixed area, is superior to that of either the tundra or the forest. The environment could and did allow the creation of strongly centralized states and was able to maintain such a political superstructure for as long as the community could complement its basic production with commodities obtained from other, mostly agricultural regions. In Owen Lattimore’s words, steppe life

is based on an economy which is capable of being entirely self-sufficient. Its own resources provide the essentials of food, housing, clothing and transport, even fuel

¹⁰ Dolgikh, 1960, p. 619. See also Sinor, 1965.

(from cattle dung). Nor does it prevent the mining and working of metals on a small scale, as is known from archaeological evidence. The steppe-nomad can withdraw into the steppe if he needs to, and remain completely out of contact with other societies. He can; but so rarely does he so that this pure condition of nomadic life can fairly be called hypothetical. For every historical level of which we have any knowledge there is evidence that exchange of some kind, through trade or tribute, has been important in steppe-nomad life.¹¹

If the steppe-based state no longer enjoyed the quasi-autarchy of a small-scale pastoralist tribe, it had the capability of compensating for any deficiency either by trade or by military means. Horse breeding on a large scale provided the basis for both activities.

The exceptional qualities of the Inner Asian horse have been praised by all, beginning with Herodotus, who never had the opportunity to become acquainted, directly or indirectly, with its powers of endurance, its resistance to cold, its frugality. These animals are rather ugly to western eyes but they are capable of digging their food out from under the snow and, in case of need, can survive by eating twigs, tree bark, or any other vegetal matter. At the height of their power the great nomadic states disposed of huge horse herds; in fact it may be said that their might depended on the number of mounts they could command. Foreign travelers were amazed by their multitude. The Mongols had – as John of Plano Carpini put it – “such a number of horses and mares that I do not believe there are so many in all the rest of the world.” There is a fairly rich documentation on the number of horses sold at various times to the Chinese, and the figures are impressive. The sale of 10,000 head on any one occasion was a routine transaction, but much more substantial deals were also common. Thus for example in A.D. 222 the Hsien-pi sold 70,000 head to the kingdom of Wei.¹²

The horse was the mainstay of steppe economy, the principal commodity produced, and in it lay the wealth of the nation. Unless some natural disaster struck – such as the dreaded *jud*, the freezing of the pastures – the steppe could and did produce horses far in excess of domestic needs, which were rather modest; the level of effective internal demand has always fallen short of productive capacity. In the non-monetary society of the steppe, within one social group the determinants of domestic consumption were quasi constant, producers and consumers were the same, and in the absence of technical progress, the law of diminishing returns was fully operative. The continuous

¹¹ Lattimore, 1938, reprinted in Lattimore, 1962, p. 253.

¹² See Sinor, p. 175. On the trade in horses, spontaneous or imposed, see e.g. S. Jagchid–C.R. Bawden, 1965; Rossabi, 1970; Serruys, 1975.

growth of herds could not directly improve the (individual or collective) owner's living standards, though it most probably added to his prestige, and in the case of collective ownership may have led to economic or political control of other groups. But whatever the size and potential power of the social unit, the non-diversified economy could not by itself bring about a substantial improvement in its members' living standard. The traditional Inner Asian economy was not gain-oriented; the aim was not the accumulation of wealth but the acquisition of goods which, for one reason or another, it was unable to produce. To obtain them, recourse had to be had to external trade, mainly with the sedentary civilizations.

In principle, commercial prospects between the steppe and sedentary civilizations seemed ideal. The former could provide the latter with a commodity of prime importance, the horse, and could receive in exchange much appreciated goods such as textiles (silk and linen), tea and, quite often, grain, desperately needed when the herds had fallen victim to some natural catastrophe. Of course it was possible to raise horses outside Inner Asia, but these, compared with the pony of the steppe, were of inferior quality and insufficient in number. In his description of Darius' campaign against the Scythians Herodotus stated that, "In these combats the Scythian horse always put to flight the horse of the enemy,"¹³ and the truth of this opinion was confirmed in countless other encounters. Over many centuries lack of horses plagued successive Chinese administrations. The problem was insoluble not only because the Chinese lacked the expertise in horse-breeding but also, more importantly, because the pastures of their land could not provide for all the horses needed for civilian as well as military purposes. Thus, apparently, there was a constant equilibrium between supply and demand with a commodity needed by the buyer and available to a willing seller. It might seem that circumstances favored the latter who had a virtual monopoly on high quality horses, deemed essential by the Chinese military. Yet in fact the Barbarian's bargaining power was severely limited by the absence of any competition in the bidding for what he had to offer. The steppe was the sole supplier of a distinctive product and thus, in theory, he could have set whatever price he chose had he not been dependent on a monopolist market with economic reserves vastly superior to his own. His case can be compared to that of a hungry man trying to sell a diamond to the only jeweler of a small town. Yet I have referred to the horse-breeding pastoralist's ability to obtain by force what he could not procure through trade. In this aforementioned, imaginary

¹³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, IV. 127.

jeweler's shop a gun in the hand of the hungry man would completely alter the picture.

With the horse, the steppe-nomad possessed not only a commodity which was not only of steady use-value and high, though fluctuating, exchange-value, but which was also indispensable in war. Horses were used generally in all wars fought on Eurasian soil, and they were still in service until at least the earlier stages of World War II. Until firearms became generally available, an important mass of nomad light cavalry, if properly led, was virtually irresistible, provided that it was backed by relay horses, essential for the fast troop movements characteristic of its distinctive mode of operation. For each warrior the number of mounts needed varied, according to our sources, between 3 and 18.

The unavoidable reliance of the Chinese military on the horse produced a curious situation in which, to resist the attacks of the steppe-nomads, China needed the horses which only they could provide. At the same time, by purchasing these horses and thereby offering the potential enemy the means to buy the goods they hankered for, the attacks became, as it were, superfluous, and could altogether be avoided. Conversely, to obtain goods needed or coveted, two courses of action were opened to the nomad. In both the horse was the key factor; he could barter it for other commodities or use it to obtain them by force of arms.

The military efficiency of a nomad cavalry force was a function of its size, but the relationship between the number of horses and their military value was not a mathematical constant but a geometric progression. The maintenance of such an army was dependent on the availability of adequate pasture, and so military victory could not resolve the conflict between the pastoral and the sedentary civilizations. The nomads were able to invade but were unable to maintain their hold permanently over the conquered territories without relinquishing their trump card, their strong cavalry. Usually this meant the erosion of their power base with, ultimately, absorption and assimilation into, or ejection by the people they conquered. For their part, the sedentary peoples could not support on a permanent basis a significant force of cavalry and so, for the supply of horses, remained dependent on the pastoral nomads.

It is of some interest to note that in the provision of arms a similar situation obtained, favoring this time the sedentary manufacturers. Although the pastoral nomads were capable of producing the bulk of their armament, there are many instances in which their desire to obtain Chinese or Roman weapons is clearly documented. As a countermeasure, the export of war material was frequently prohibited, as for instance in Han times when strict regulations

forbade the export of strategic goods to the Hsiung-nu, or in the 6th century, when a Byzantine embargo was put on the sale of swords to the Avars. Between Barbarian and Civilized, even more than among modern nations, trade and war were but two aspects of the same policy, and governments were frequently faced with the choice of one or the other.

If was far from easy to take the right decision and quite often emotion rather than reason determined the course adopted. Depending on the temperament of the decision makers, the Barbarians' request for goods was sometimes rejected on the grounds that "if they do not get what they need their power will crumble, they may perish, victims of a famine";¹⁴ an argument prompted by wishful thinking which led to innumerable armed conflicts. Proponents of another policy, that of appeasement, argued that by satisfying the Barbarians' "reasonable" demands peace could be obtained. The success of such a course of action depended very much on whether the demands were genuinely prompted by necessity, and proportionate both to the needs of the applicant and to the resources of the prospective donor, or whether they were dictated by the greed which we have recognized as an essential trait in the Barbarian's portrait. The history of Inner Asia is full of examples of both success and failure resulting from each of these contradictory policies. Sechin Jagchid, who studied with great insight and in detail the consequences of the two types of policy as practised in China towards requests for aid, expressed the view that in many instances the Chinese "failed to discover that poverty and famine caused the nomads to invade China to supply their needs by force."¹⁵ He also showed, by specific examples, that the provision of food could, and on many occasions did, avert invasions. Yet, giving in to the demands of the Barbarian often amounted to nothing else but paying him tribute. The humiliating aspect of such a policy were clearly perceived and resented by many, and perhaps no one was more vocal in his indignation than Salvianus of Marseille:¹⁶

The Romans were of old the mightiest of men, now they are without strength; of old they were feared, but now they live in fear, barbarous nations paid tribute to them, but to these same nations they are now tributary. The enemy sells us the very daylight, almost our whole safety is purchased for a price. Alas for our misfortunes! to what a pass we have come! For this we give thanks to the barbarians, that we are allowed to

¹⁴ See for instance the remark quoted by Serruys, 1975, p. 222, from the *Wan-li wu-kung lu*: "The fact that among the Barbarians, clothing, food, and habitations are all the same as in China is like a Heaven-sent support for China: it gives control over life and death."

¹⁵ Jagchid, 1970, p. 40.

¹⁶ *De Gubernatione Dei*, VI, 98–99. Translation by Eva M. Sanford, *On the Government of God*, (New York 1930), p. 188.

ransom ourselves from them at a price. What could be more abjectly wretched than to live on such terms? Yet after all this we think that we are living, we whose lives depend on tribute! We even make ourselves additionally ridiculous by pretending that the gold we pay is merely a gift. We call it a gift, yet it is really a ransom – but a ransom paid on unusually hard and wretched terms . . . we are never free of the payments due: we pay ransom constantly in order to have the privilege of continuing endlessly to pay.

The merits and demerits of providing “foreign aid” to impoverished nations is, in our time more than ever, a subject of constant controversy, a circumstance which ought to induce us to view with some indulgence efforts made by previous generations to solve an insoluble problem.

In the preceding pages, I have tried, however imperfectly, to sketch some basic characteristics of Inner Asian economy in so far as these affected the region’s relationship with the sedentary civilizations. It would be a mistake to imagine that at a remote period of prehistory the forest or steppe zones were somehow “backward” in comparison with the sedentary, peripheral areas. One can almost say that the opposite would be true, since sophisticated hunting or stock-breeding demand at least as much ingenuity as primitive farming. The main difference between the three modes of production lies in agriculture’s capability to almost unrestricted development, whereas – at least until modern times – neither hunting nor stock-breeding could boast of essential improvements in their methods of production. Also, while hunting is a predatory occupation and stock-breeding relies mainly on the natural instincts of the animals, agriculture adds to the natural resources available to man and in the process often alters the physical environment or harnesses the forces of nature. Through the clearing of land for cultivation, the building of irrigation channels, the use of windmills, or similar activities, the Civilized invests labor in the improvement of a definite piece of land to which he is attached and which he cannot leave if he wishes to see, quite literally, the fruits of his labor. More often than not the Barbarian exploits the natural world which the Civilized tries to improve; there is between the two a basic difference in outlook, rooted in distinct evolutions extending over millennia. There was a time, probably in the late Paleolithic, when differences between the technological levels of various civilizations did not ensure a definite advantage to the one over the other though, as time has shown, they carried in them differing potentials for further development. After the domestication of the horse – wherever this may first have happened – those peoples whose habitats were on the steppe (or who moved there to take advantage of the newly acquired skill) were able to profit from the rich pastures first to increase

their herds, then to adopt them for military use. It is to the credit of the earliest nomad warriors (in recorded history first represented by the Scythians) that they brought virtually to perfection a method of warfare which, for almost two thousand years, held its own against other military systems, without undergoing significant improvements. Yet excellent though it was, it did not contain within itself the possibility of further development: very early in time technological evolution on the steppe reached a dead end.

In periods of success the mounted warrior was happy with his lot; there is plenty of evidence to show that he thought disparagingly of farmers and, in general, of urban populations whom he viewed as prisoners within their own cities. But even at such times of prosperity, the lure of consumer goods, making life a little better, was too strong to resist. Some puritan men, such as the wise Türk minister Tonyuquq (see p. 312) warned in vain against the danger of adopting Chinese ways; his words in the long run went unheeded. It could not be otherwise, since the very *raison d'être* of the campaign was the desire to acquire goods not produced by and on the steppe. So the choice was really between living in "honorable" poverty – at the mercy of nature and in fairly constant conflict with other nomad groups vying for the better pastures – or asking for "admittance" into the civilized world, at the risk of losing one's national identity. Over the centuries, fairly constantly, the majority of those who had an option chose the second alternative. As mentioned earlier, the growth of the sedentary civilizations has been due less to conquest than to voluntary settlement within their borders.

Admittance, however, did not depend on the will of the Barbarian alone, it also needed the consent of the future host which – if it was to be given without constraint – was contingent upon a number of factors. These, besides the whim of the decision-maker, included the availability of free space on which to settle the newcomers, and the ratio of their number to that of the population of the host country. Most often there was no time to consider calmly the pros and cons of such an action, and negotiations had to be conducted in a hurry, frequently under duress. The ultimate outcome of such operations depended almost entirely on demographic factors: would the local, agriculturalist population absorb the newcomers – as it happened in China – or would the latter impose their own, often inferior, civilization on the host land, as happened in Anatolia, or on the Iranian frontier, where turcization resulted in a definite cultural regression.

In the foregoing strong emphasis has been put on economic factors which, so it would appear, are the basis of any definition that can and should be given of

Inner Asia. In them are rooted also the differences which set this region apart from the sedentary civilizations and, in course of time, caused a confrontational relationship to develop between the major division of Eurasia: the agricultural periphery and the central part supported – depending on the natural zones – by hunting/fishing or by pastoral economy.

The question should now be asked whether the region can be defined also in positive terms, i.e. not only by contrast with other cultural areas. Were there any objective criteria specific to Inner Asia taken as a whole? If they once existed, today they are no longer discernible, the links which usually hold together or create a cultural entity – such as script, race, religion, language – played only a very moderate role as factors of cohesion.

The important, often decisive, role of writing in the creation of cultural zones is often overlooked though no one would deny the solidarity created by the use of a common script. The spread of the Latin alphabet in modern times, and that of the Cyrillic script in the last century or so, show vividly the cohesive force which a common alphabet represents, and the official adoption of a new system by a government (as happened for instance in Turkey in 1926) can move a people from one cultural community to another. In some instances the use of a common script can even obviate the obstacle created by different languages, as is the case between China or Japan, or – to some extent – even within China. The peoples of Inner Asia have never shared a common system of writing and none of the various ones used at different times was widely adopted. Moreover, since illiteracy was general, the use of one way of writing or another affected only a minuscule number of people.

As regards physical anthropology, though Mongoloid and Tungusid types may now be considered typically Inner Asian, the presence of Europoid populations in the very heartland of Inner Asia is well attested in the Neolithic period. A case in point is the Afanasievo culture which appeared around 2000 B.C. in the steppe island around Minusinsk. The people of the Andronovo culture which spread from the Altai to the Caspian Sea were also of Europoid race. The first appearance of Mongoloids is possibly around 1200 B.C., when the so-called Karasuk people became dominant over the Europoid population of the Minusinsk region. During the latter part of the 2nd millennium B.C. first the Indo-Aryans and then most of the Iranian peoples moved south off the steppe to conquer and settle in the Indian subcontinent and Iran; but the presence of Iranians (notably the Scythians) is well attested on the steppe in the first millennium B.C., and it is not until the early centuries of the Christian era that the last Iranian elements there disappear, submerged by Turkic peoples. The task of outlining the racial history of Inner Asia cannot be