

I



Introduction: the concept of Inner Asia

Unless they coincide with clearly defined physical boundaries – as is the case, for instance, with Australia – the borders of a cultural area can rarely be established with ease and accuracy. To some extent the problem lies with the highly subjective and often purely emotional criteria by which a civilization is defined. Thus, for example, as these lines are written, many nations would place themselves within a larger community which they call the “free world,” while no attempt is made to define what freedom may mean to human beings with a cultural background different from their own. If there is a “free world” then, presumably, there must exist, in the minds of those who use the term, another world, “not free,” and the differentiation is contingent on an emotionally charged interpretation of the ill-defined term of “freedom.” It is a well-known rule of logic that classifications made on the basis of a single attribute are artificial and of limited use. So there must be a cluster of attributes by which a human group is defined, and these must be specific and essential, if they are to serve a useful purpose. Yet what is essential to one observer is not to another. Some would opt for language, others for race, religion, or shared destiny in the past or the present. It is also quite common to find that individuals tend to identify their own community by criteria which may be different from those used for the same purpose by outsiders. Particularly artificial are distinctions made on the basis of, often ephemeral, political arrangements which are given priority in defining an area over more lasting, deeply rooted national or cultural traits. The virtual disappearance from public consciousness of the valid cultural concept of Central Europe is a good modern case in point. Prompted by short-term political motives, and on the basis of one single attribute, Europe has been divided into an eastern and western part, and in the process the cultural entity of Central Europe has all but disappeared. This has led to the ludicrous situation in which the two Germanies are now considered by the public at large to be on the opposite sides of a divide whereas, of course, they share the same culture.

The problem of establishing the limits of cultural areas is not one that has

only recently emerged. Europe and Asia are also correlative terms neither of which can be understood without reference to the other. The division of the Old World into Asia, Europe, and Africa predates Herodotus, who was puzzled by the seeming illogicality of such division and could not conceive “why three names . . . should ever have been given to a tract of land which is in reality one.”¹ The impossibility of drawing any clear, logical dividing line between Europe and Asia rests to some extent on the fact that the latter term is not autochthonous in origin, and until recently was not used by the Asians themselves. Quite understandably, no group solidarity existed among peoples living in a territory whose unity was not perceived. The slow emergence of a concept called Europe – for a long time closely associated with Christendom – brought about the gradual crystallization in European minds of the concept of Asia. The geographical delimitation of that continent is purely conventional and, even today, is subject to fluctuations. Very few Americans would think of Israel as an Asian state.

If the continents of Europe and Asia are conceptual entities, Eurasia – the combined land mass of the two – is a physiogeographical one. A cursory glance at any map of Eurasia will show that the major, sedentary civilizations developed on the periphery of the huge continent, while the cultural evolution of its heartland remained slow. Each of the sedentary civilizations – in loose terminology Europe, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia and East Asia – is a unique combination of cultural features. Some of these may appear in more than one area; yet an association of various components, moulded by a unique historical process and greatly influenced by national environment, made each of these regions different from the others. The definition in geographical terms of some of the cultural spheres is not always easy. Such is the case, for example, of the Muslim and Hindu civilizations, flourishing simultaneously in the Indian Subcontinent. In the course of time the sphere of any civilization is subject to change; it may expand or shrink for reasons sometimes known and sometimes unknown; new civilizations arise while others disappear or undergo changes so substantial that their very core is affected. Yet there is one, constant, special mark, characteristic of all the cultural areas located on what we may call the external boundaries of Eurasia, namely their agricultural economic basis. Between them, in the central part of the Eurasian continent, and distinct from them in this respect, lies the cultural area with which we are here concerned: Central Eurasia or, to use a less cumbersome though less accurate term, Inner Asia.

¹ *The Histories*, Book IV, 45.

The frontier of Inner Asia is unstable; it has varied from age to age, shifting according to the balance of power between its own population and that of the surrounding, sedentary civilizations. The Roman province of Pannonia and the Greek territories in Asia Minor became “Inner Asia” when occupied respectively by the Huns (5th century A.D.) and the Saljuk Turks (11th century A.D.). Northern China became, for a while, “Inner Asia” under occupation by the Kitan, the Jurchen, the Mongols, and the Manchus.

The manner and the length of the process by which each Inner Asian attack was neutralized varied from case to case, but the sedentary people’s victory was seldom achieved by brute force. Rarely was the successful invader and occupier overcome decisively by arms and expelled: in most instances he was assimilated, absorbed by the local population. One might say that, almost invariably a superior fertility rate was the crucial factor in the outcome of the confrontation.

In the endemic conflict between peoples of Inner Asia and the sedentary populations, the former have usually, though not always, taken the role of the aggressor. Military conquest played a relatively modest part in the gradual expansion of the sedentary world, a notable exception being, in modern times, the Russian advance into and permanent occupation of the lands which still remain within the cultural boundaries of Inner Asia. Though pre-emptive strikes or retaliatory campaigns against Inner Asian peoples were – mainly on the Chinese border – a constant feature of interaction, the gradual expansion from the periphery towards the heartland was, first and foremost, the result of the increase – either from natural causes or by immigration – of the sedentary populations. Thus, although the area of Inner Asia is subject to fluctuations, the general trend has been towards contraction, although the sedentary civilizations have suffered setbacks. Some of these remain largely unexplained as, for instance, the disappearance in the 2nd millennium B.C. of the flourishing urban life of southern Central Asia, as exemplified by the ruins of Altyn Tepe and other sites. Some encroachments by Inner Asia happened in historical times and are better documented, as for example the turcization of Anatolia, a region once imbued with Hellenistic culture.

In the preceding pages the fairly obvious point has been stressed that in the course of history the shifting nature of the borders of Inner Asia was due to interactions with the regions around it. The question now arises what caused Inner Asia to exist as a separate cultural entity and what made the conflict between it and the surrounding civilizations inevitable. As stated earlier, the most important common factor of the civilizations surrounding Inner Asia is their agricultural economy, whereas with regard to Inner Asia Robert Taaffe

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.

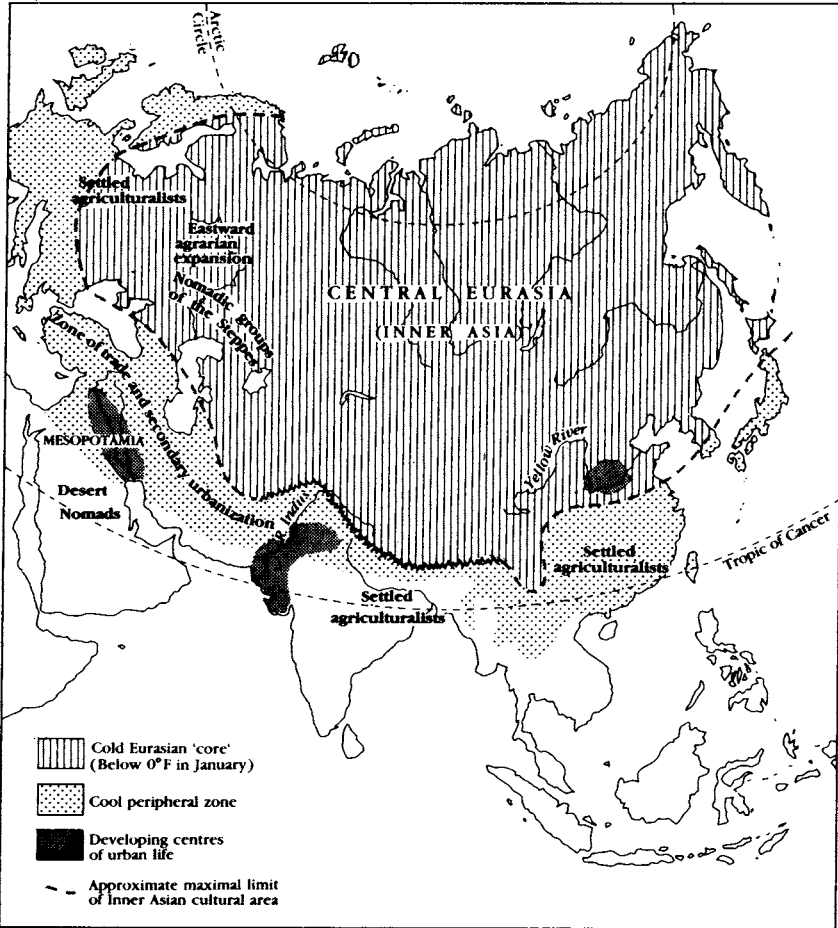
to the *Hsin T'ang-shu* "The Northern Barbarians are greedy and grasping; they care only about profit." The Huns, in the words of Ammianus Marcellinus (XXXI,2,11), "burn with an infinite thirst for gold," and in his *Strategikon* Maurice describes the Avars as "dominated by an insatiable desire for money." The adjective ἀπληστος ("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