

THE MIDDLE EMPIRE,  
A DISTANT EMPIRE,  
AN EMPIRE WITHOUT NEIGHBORS

Among the many problems suggested by the theme of the symposium, there is one in particular which seems capable of shedding light on the fundamental attitude of Chinese historians to their documents: On what foundations does the notion of the Middle Empire—the counterpart of the Greek *ombilikon*—rest?

This notion is certainly familiar to anyone who examines the documents and who knows that a historian always attributes peculiar features to his own country. Basing himself on a long tradition, he sometimes contrasts the civilized with the barbarians, and sometimes he distinguishes the strong from the weak, arguing from ephemeral junctures of circumstances.

Theories of the origin of the world reveal this vision of the self, and theories of history bolster it up with egocentric sentiments. But inasmuch as this notion rests on intellectual, religious or political foundations, it seems fragile and, when the

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historian is forewarned, capable of yielding to a broader view. When the same notion rests on economic and military factors, it becomes a function of a complex play of events whose progressive or regressive value may lead the historian to revise his judgement. It certainly seems that the vicissitudes of history have bit by bit led the majority of authors to admit the plurality of cultures and to experience their civilization as part of a whole. Here I must leave it to others to confirm or disconfirm this proposition.

As far as China is concerned, I cannot recall a single instance of an objective view of man or of the world or a sense of the relativity of national creations before the introduction of Western science. The Confucian attitude, subjected to the traditionalist ideology, has undoubtedly done much to establish the Chinese feeling of superiority. But it is also possible that the facts have done their share to keep alive the feeling that the Chinese world is the center of the universe.

Throughout its history, China has presented the aspect of a central absorbing mass which is conveyed by the term "sinization." China is nevertheless a cross-road, and numerous contacts have affected its development before the inroad of the Europeans or even before the Mongolian occupation which brought nothing to China it had not already known—Christianity or a military hierarchy, the Uigur culture or Islam, tolerance or obedience, transportation or commerce. The historians of classical China, from about the beginning of our era to the Sung dynasty (eleventh to thirteenth centuries), first knew the cultures of the Romans, Parthians and Sassanids. All information traveled along the Silk Route. This open door to the West should have sufficed to demonstrate to the Chinese the greatness of their neighbors. But if the Silk Route constituted an important channel for Western contacts with China, it represented, especially in the sixth century A.D., a high commercial stake for the Tu-Kiu Turks and the Sassanids in their bid to supply the luxuries of Byzantium. The great exchange took place at the court of the Western Tu-Kiu. Ambassadors and merchants, monks and thinkers, from the West, Iran, India or China, could meet there, talk business or exchange ideas in an atmosphere of freedom and tolerance. The West of the middle

## *The Middle Empire*

ages reached China thus by way of the "barbarian" world of the Turks and was therefore neither more nor less appreciated than the latter. As a commercial route, the Silk Route should have played a decisive part in the Chinese awareness of the world. But it must be remembered that the Chinese themselves attached no great importance to commercial matters. It was much rather a diplomatic route followed by the tribute carriers, and especially a military route designed to check all attempts by the barbarians, whether Turkish or Mongolian, to encircle China.

Indian civilization suffered a fate analogous to that of the West. One of its manifestations, Buddhist religion, had been introduced into China by the inhabitants of the intemperate zones of Central Asia and imposed on the empire by the To-Pa Turks in 396. But while it penetrated Chinese thought, it always remained foreign and barbaric in the eyes of the historians who were by definition Confucian scholars.

Contrary to what has been maintained, the geographic isolation of China by the deserts of Central Asia and the chains of the Himalayas did not therefore prevent the values of foreign cultures, Iranian, Turkish or Indian, from penetrating into China. But this penetration was not, as elsewhere, the effect of pressures inherent in the proximity of neighboring cultures. It was effected by repeated injections. It all happened as if the great values of foreign cultures had been presented in small doses, partly because of the distance from their source and partly because of the extent of the Chinese territory. The changes produced by the injections were certainly never massive enough to suddenly reveal the cultural dimensions of the distant countries. In the minds of the Chinese, the whole of universal civilization rested firmly on the "Wen," the sign, even the essence, of the scholar, the source of history and written records, of the observation of the heavens and the calendar, of numerical, hierarchical and bureaucratic correspondences, of philosophy and literature, of ritual and family cult—the whole of the notions which were the envy of the heads of the surrounding kingdoms. All additions to this whole were only exotic touches and, though certainly exciting, only episodic and isolated. The distance separating China from the other great centers obscured the vision of the Chinese historians. Being an empire without

comparable neighbors, China could only be for them at the center of the universe, and nothing could make them aware of their egocentric attitude.

If the Middle Empire owes its definition in part to the historical conditions in antiquity and the middle ages, it also owes it to the prehistoric conditions presiding at its formation.

The settlement of China was due to the arrival of the Northern branch of the Asian pithecanthropus in this part of the Far East. At the end of the Early Paleolithic, the world of the Acheuleans was so constituted as to cover four large areas: Africa, a Western region consisting of Europe and the Near East, a Southern region comprising India and South-East Asia, and a fourth region constituted by Northern Indo-China, China and Korea. In the following period, the Late Paleolithic, when the races became differentiated, the Mongoloids occupied all of the Northern part of East Asia, and were in contact with the Europoids in the plains separating the Urals from the Yenisey. Through these plains arrived the first Western influences, and their encounter with Chinese influences accelerated the formation of the Siberian Paleolithic and the first cultures of the Baikal Sea. In spite of the radiation of these cultures—their expansion towards the Pacific and America—from the Neolithic on, the agricultural peoples of China outdistanced the forest dwellers of Siberia and created economic conditions favorable to the rapid development of metallurgy. In the South, the inhabitants of the jungles pursued a pre-metallurgic mode of life which changed only after the Chinese expansion towards the South and the radiation of the cultures of the Indus throughout the Indian subcontinent. In this immense geographic sector, China was then alone to develop a Mongoloid civilization. China should be compared to some hypothetical confederation of Indo-Europeans who overstepped their boundaries, conquered the Near East and Europe and kept an uncontested supremacy till the middle ages.

In the second millennium before our era the nearest center of civilization to the Chinese capital of the Chang dynasty was the civilization of the Indus which at that time was contiguous with Iranian civilization. And the latter was only a link in a chain, for in the late Bronze Age, Iran, the Near East, Egypt, the Aegean world and all the centers of culture between the

## *The Middle Empire*

Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Indian Ocean were in contact with one another. In the rest of the ancient world, China alone was without neighbors. The Andronovo culture in Central Asia and the Glaskovo culture of the Baikal Sea were no rivals to the Chinese.

Finally, the very basis of civilization, pictographic language, certainly did not, as elsewhere, undergo simplification for the sake of better communication with neighboring cultures. Hence a greater and greater differentiation, not only in language, but also in thought. The Chinese world rapidly became farther removed from the others than the others were among themselves. This is no doubt one of the reasons why the East can nowadays be best defined as China. The originality of the European, Indian and Muslim cultures rests on a common ground, consisting of systems of language, logic, religion and philosophy which allow for intercommunication. China with all its characteristics derives from fundamentally different criteria and different systems of values—different, but as valuable, as effective, as admirable as those of the others.

The notion of man as a civilized being has been given by the Chinese historians a unique habitation which was certainly chosen by the Confucian scholars in response to their ideological needs. But the Middle Empire rests, below the historians' level of awareness, on solid concrete foundations: the belt of adjacent cultures formed a filter which allowed the Chinese to choose for adoption whatever suited them and to keep up the impression that they were always the masters of their destiny.