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Central Asia and the Middle East in the tributary system of the Ancient World

In the first chapter, I proposed considering the societies of the ancient world for the whole period of 2,000 years as an ensemble of societies that had common characteristics, which I called the central and peripheral forms of the tributary mode of production, articulated between themselves in a system of flourishing exchanges of all kinds. I refer the reader to that chapter for the conceptual systems proposed for analysing the specificity of this tributary mode, in contrast with that of modern capitalism, as well as for the analysis of the function of inter-regional trade. I summed up my conclusion in a diagram and two tables. The volumes of trade between the centres and peripheries, as designated in this diagram, and that of the transit through Central Asia (the Silk Routes) were estimated for each of the great routes, indicated by the 11 arrows of the diagram.

This period stretches over almost twenty centuries, during the course of which it is clear that there was an evolution in the relative importance of each of the defined regions (centres A, B and C and the peripheries), as also, therefore, in their foreign trade. The indices both for the volume of the surplus generated in the region and for trade as well as the distribution of these according to the arrows in the diagram varied over the course of time. I will therefore now present the justification of the averages retained to describe this long historical period.

1

China was not only the most important centre over the whole period, but the one whose development was the most continuous, in spite of the disorders that occurred in the inter-dynastic periods.

The population of China was 70 million inhabitants at the beginning of the Christian era (28 per cent of the world population at the time, which was 250 million). It grew regularly to reach 200 million in 1700 (which was still 28 per cent of the world population, estimated at 680 million). Between 1700 and 1800 the demographic trend accelerated and the Chinese population reached 330 million, representing 35 per cent of the world population, estimated at 950 million.

Over the course of this long period, China was the most advanced in all fields. It had the greatest agricultural productivity per capita, the largest number of towns that provided a base for an educated administrative population, with skilled artisans. It was considered by everyone as something of a model: when the Europeans discovered it in the 18th century, which was the century of its greatest splendour, they were greatly inspired by it (see Étiemble, *L'Europe chinoise*). Much earlier, the peoples of the Middle East were aware of its wealth and power (see the *hadith* of the Prophet Mohamed: "go and seek science in China").

For this reason I chose 100 as the index to indicate the volume of foreign trade of China throughout the period. On the hypothesis that this trade would have taken up 10 per cent of the surplus generated in China, the latter could be given an index of 1000 (for a population that regularly grew from 50 to 330 million).

2

Over the whole of this period China maintained close, continual and substantial relationships with the Middle Eastern centre (Hellenistic, then Byzantine and Islamic – Arab, Persian and Turkish). I suggest estimating this volume of trade at two-thirds (65 per cent) of all Chinese trade for the whole period, as against 20 per cent with Japan, 5 per cent with South-East Asia and 10 per cent with Europe. What are the indices on which I have based these estimates?

The Middle East centre had a very different history. In 200 B.C. it had a population about the same as that of China (50 million) and probably its general level of development was at least equal. But at the beginning of the Christian era its population was only 35 million (as against 70 million for China), using a limited definition of the region (Greece-Anatolia, Egypt, Syria-Iraq-Iran). If one adds Italy and the Maghreb, which constitute its prolongation towards the west, associated with the construction of the Roman Empire, the population would come to 50 million. For the following centuries the population of the Middle East centre (Byzantium plus the Caliphate) remains relatively stagnant. The population of the heirs of the Ottoman Empire as from 1500, the Persian Empire and the Emirates and Khanates of Turkish Central Asia hardly exceed 50 million as against more than 200 million for China and as many for India in 1700. The relative decline of the Middle East has been virtually continuous since the Christian era, in spite of brilliant, but short, moments when efforts were made to renew it (in the Justinian era, the first two Abbasid centuries).

In contrast, the relative position of the Middle East in still older times had been dominant at the world level. During the two thousand years preceding the Christian era its population represented perhaps 30 per cent of the world's total inhabitants (which grew very slowly from 100 to 250 million during this period) compared with only 18 per cent at the time of the Christian era and 7 per cent in 1700. Ancient Egypt had a population that exceeded 10 million, but this figure fell to 2 million in 1800, only recovering its level of pharaonic times in the contemporary period, in the 20th century. This is not the place to discuss the reasons of this relatively early and inexorable decline, but it has to be mentioned that it was accentuated by the enormous devastation in central Asia, Iran and Iraq caused by the Turko-Mongolian invasions that reduced Iran and Mesopotamia, one of the cradles of universal civilisation, to desolate steppes. Russia and the Islamic Orient were the main victims of these invasions, China having been far more capable of resisting them. Nevertheless it is a fact that, as from the Christian era, the Middle East centre never experienced a dynamism comparable to that of China.

Trade between China and the Middle East was relatively greater in the ancient times, then subsequently declining, with the difference being made up – for China – by increased trade with Korea and Japan, Vietnam and South-East Asia and, finally, Europe, at first along the Mongolian route (13th century), then by sea (in modern times).

The relative stagnation of the Middle East indicated that the surplus generated in this region was comparable to that of China at the beginning of the period under consideration (as from 50 B.C.), but it was barely one third of China's surplus towards 1300 – 1500, taking into account the demographic evolutions of both populations. The median between these two extreme indices – 1000 and 350 – at around 700, is slightly less than the 800 figure indicated in our diagram for the whole period.

The declining position of the Middle East has nevertheless been partially offset by its geographical location which is that of a crossroads, an obligatory intermediary for almost all transcontinental trade in the pre-modern epochs. This is the reason for the degree of commercialisation of the economy and a volume of external trade that is relatively impressive: about 20 per cent, perhaps, as opposed to 10 per cent for China. This proportion – of 2:1 – is consistent with the comparative estimates of trade between the Middle East region and the other regions of the pre-modern world (see below).

The extent of trade between China and Middle East, although in decline in relative terms, remains the outstanding characteristic of the system of relations between the regions of the pre-modern world. This transfer of goods, technologies, ideologies and religions facilitated, with the Middle East as intermediary, the dissemination of the most advanced Chinese science and techniques, particularly towards Europe.

The route that they followed from time immemorial was known as the Silk Route, which left China through the Gansu corridor, passing south of the Tian Shan mountain range, running alongside the desert of Taklamatan, either to the north of it (Hami-Aksu-Kashgar), or to the south of it (Kokand-Kashgar) and then going towards Persia through the south of former Soviet central Asia (Samarkand-Bokhara-Khiva).

The enduring nature of this vital route explains many phenomena that would otherwise be difficult to understand, like the early and deep penetration of religions coming from the Middle East: Christian Nestorianism, Zarathustrian Manicheism (people forget that central Asia was Christianised before the German tribes), then Islam (which immediately put down solid roots in this region, in the Khorezm) and from India (Buddhism). This penetration accompanied the early settlement of the local populations: as from the 9th century eastern Turkestan (now the Uighur Autonomous Region) was completely settled. From the frontiers of China itself to those of Persia, the route was studded with large commercial towns, centres of intellectual activities, surrounded by zones of intensive irrigated agriculture.

It is thus easy to comprehend that the main geostrategic conflict of pre-modern times aimed at the control of this route. It is in fact striking that the military frontier between the region under Chinese control and that under the control of the Middle East (the Caliphate and Persia) remained remarkably stable, close to what are now the Chinese frontiers. It is also remarkable that, in spite of its Islamisation, eastern Turkestan has always been under Chinese political and military control, while western Turkestan was under the control of the Middle East (when it had not actually taken over power in that region) before being conquered by the Russians.

The relative decline in trade between China and the Middle East was, as we have said, offset by the increase, late but considerable, in trade with Korea, Japan, Vietnam and South-East Asia. At the beginning of the Christian era, these regions were only thinly populated (1 million for Korea and Japan, 6 for South-East Asia – altogether less than one tenth of the Chinese population at the time). It was not before the second half of the first millennium that centralised states were established in this region, inspired, in fact, by the Chinese model. But progress was rapid, even though the demographic increase remained inferior to that of China. Working on the hypothesis of a growing volume of trade that paralleled the statistics of the populations concerned, at the end of the period (which extended beyond 1500 up to almost 1800) one gets an index that is equal to that of the trade between China and the Middle East. On the other hand these latter relationships stretched over the 20 centuries under consideration (gradually declining in relative terms), whereas the former relationships developed in the six last centuries of the tributary period. The average index is therefore about a third of that affecting the first ones, some 25 (against 65), distributed mainly to the benefit of Japan (20), then to South-East Asia (5). The index for China/Europe trade (without passing through the Middle East) was 10 and will be justified later on.

4

India constituted the second centre of human concentration and civilisation, after China. Its civilisation took off very early, during the third millennium B.C., in other words in the same period as Egypt and Mesopotamia with which, in fact, the civilisations of the Indus Valley were perhaps in contact.

Like China and unlike the Middle East, India experienced a continuous dynamism from its origins up to 1700. It had a population of 45 million at the dawn of the Christian era and 200 million in 1700 (the same as China at that time). But then it entered into crisis. By 1800 it had made no headway, remaining at about 200 million and it did not pick up again until later, in the 19th century. The Indian [sub]continent still today constitutes the largest concentration of humanity after China.

For the period we are considering (from 500 B.C., with the appearance of Buddha, up until the 16th century which saw the beginning of European maritime control over the Indian Ocean) one can therefore accept the hypothesis of the surplus generated in the region as equivalent to that produced in China (the same index of 1000), because of the high productivity of its agriculture and its flourishing towns.

Nevertheless the history of India is more chaotic than that of China. It was frequently invaded (always from the west) and it was difficult to unify (this only happened in the ancient period of the Mauryan Empire, in the early part of our period). According to all the historians it was less open to foreign trade than China. Its trade was in fact above all with the Middle East, partly by land through Iran and Afghanistan and partly by sea. As for its trade with South East Asia, this did not become important until the Hinduisation epoch of the latter, between the years 600 and 1000, which was then followed by the Islamisation of Indonesia and Malaysia and intensifying penetration by the Chinese.

If, as we justify later on, the index of India/Middle East trade can be estimated at 50 for the whole period under consideration (half of the trade carried out on land and half by sea), and that of India/South-East Asia estimated at 10, the foreign trade percentage of the surplus would come to 6 per cent, less than that of China which, as we saw, was 10 per cent. This result is consistent with the views of the historians referred to earlier.

5

Europe did not participate in the general development of the pre-modern system until very late, after the year 1000. Up until then it had remained a backward and barbarous periphery.

At the dawn of the Christian era the population of Europe, including Italy, was about 20 million (8 per cent of the world population, less than 30 per cent of that of China, 50 per cent of that of the Middle East). Half of the Europeans lived in Italy and in Gaul. At first, the take-off of Europe was very slow because in the year 1000 there were hardly more than 30 million inhabitants, including Italy. After that, however, the increase was rapid: between the year 1000 and 1350 the population reached 80 million (18 per cent of the world population, estimated at 440 million). It then diminished to 60 million in 1400 (because of the Black Death), but increased again to reach 120 million in 1700 (18 per cent of the world population, calculated at 950 million). The European population then began to rise rapidly, exploding in the 19th century.

Until the year 1000 the productivity of European agriculture was greatly inferior to that of the civilised regions of China, India and the Middle East, and the continent still had no towns. The take-off was however rapid from then on and two centuries later Europe was covered with lively towns and monuments that showed the growth of the surplus that its agriculture had generated. For the two or three last centuries of the period we are considering, which closed in 1492 with the start of the world hegemony of modern and capitalist Europe, the continent represented a new centre, with a relative weight equal to half of that of China and it was already the double or triple of that of the Middle East. This is if one accepts the hypothesis, which is probable, that agricultural productivity is equivalent to the degree of urbanisation.

In contrast, for some 15 centuries preceding this time, Europe was hardly present in the world system of the period because the low productivity of labour made it impossible to extract much surplus: the index of this surplus could have been close to zero, but it rose quickly to an index of 350 (a third of that of China) for the centuries, 1200-1500. The median (or weighted average) of 100 in the diagram for the whole of this long period could be misleading here, as for Japan and South-East Asia, and even more so than for the latter because it claims to illustrate rapid, though tardy growth.

The volume of Europe's foreign trade, estimated at an index of 20, does in fact apply only to the period of four centuries, 1100 – 1500, as trade before then was negligible. In this period the population of Europe was between a third and a half of that of China. It is therefore possible that this index is somewhat underestimated if one takes only that period of four centuries into consideration. However it is certainly greatly overestimated if it is applied to the long period of 300 B.C. to 1500 A.D.

Most of the commerce passed through the Middle East, even if many of the products imported by Europe came from further afield, from China or India, and only transited the Middle East. In the 13th century, however, for the first time, a direct contact was established between Europe and China by the Mongolian land route, avoiding the Middle East. The after effects of Genghis Khan's conquests occurred at precisely the time when Europe was taking off and rapidly catching up the three more advanced regions constituted by the three oriental centres. Trade between Europe and China was therefore intensive although the period when the Mongolian route was used was very brief – less than a century. In fact, as from 1500 the sea route supplanted the old land routes. The index for this trade (10) would certainly be overestimated if one had to establish the volume over the whole of the long period being considered. Hence the misplaced appreciation of the conquests of Genghis Khan by the Europeans when they discovered the existence of China. For the dominant discourse, Eurocentric as always, attributed the positive role of the Mongol Empire in establishing the East-West contact which had already been in existence for a long time, even if the Europeans were unaware of the fact. On the contrary, the negative effect of the Turko-Mongolian conquests, which impoverished the most important trade partners of the past, through the massive devastations in northern China, south-west Central Asia, Iran and Iraq, as well as Russia, has always been underestimated in this Eurocentric viewpoint.

On the whole the Mongolian conquests were more negative than positive as far as East-West trade was concerned.

Even during the last centuries of the long period we are considering, Europe, which was on the periphery of the old system, lagged behind. This is evident from the European balance of trade which was also greatly in deficit, as the continent did not have much to offer: for its imports of luxury goods and technology from the East it could only make up their deficit by exporting metal.

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The estimate proposed for the indices of the volume of surplus generated in the peripheries of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia is based on the estimates of the population statistics for these regions: it had about half the European population at the dawn of the Christian era, not a very dynamic demographic growth, low agricultural productivity and no urbanisation worthy of the name, as in Europe up until the year 1000.

As we did for Europe, we consider that the low productivity rate meant that the surplus generated was, compared with the more advanced regions, less than proportional to the population statistics. On the other hand, it is precisely because the modest surplus is traded for luxury goods that are foreign to local production, that the degree of extreme commercialisation of this surplus is higher, for distant trade is relatively more important than that closer to home. This is why the figure is around 20 per cent (as against 10 per cent in China and 6 per cent in India) for Europe (surplus: 100, foreign trade: 20), 20 per cent also for Africa (surplus 50, foreign trade: 10) and even 30 per cent for South-East Asia (surplus: 60, foreign trade: 20).

Sub-Saharan Africa was not, as Arabic writings show, a periphery that was more miserable than Europe before the 11th century. Africa began to fall behind later, in comparison with Europe when the latter took off and the lateness of the former was exacerbated by the massive destruction wreaked by the Atlantic slave trade – not only the devastating effects on the demography of the continent, but also the political degeneration that accompanied them (destruction of the large states that were being formed, which were substituted by military predator states).

South-East Asia started, at the beginning of our long period, from a peripheral position comparable to that of Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. It initiated a certain progress before Europe, with its Hinduisation (succeeded by Islamisation), as from the 7th century, which brought about intensive trade with India and more modest trade with China and the Middle East. This growth was not brutally interrupted until the 16th century when the European maritime hegemony began to break up the old commercial ties. However, perhaps because it did not undergo the ravages of slavery like Africa, its position did not deteriorate like that of Africa.

7

We can now return to the Middle East, the crossroads of pre-modern trade, to recapitulate its flows, the indices of which were then the following: trade with China (65), India (50), Africa (10), Europe (10) and South-East Asia (5). The total amount of these flows – 140 – represented 20 per cent of the surplus generated locally, if the index 800 is accepted. If this index is too high, taking into account the relative stagnation of the region in comparison with the permanent dynamism of China and India, as well as the late but vigorous growth of Europe, the percentage of the surplus commercialised in foreign trade would be still higher. In fact this relationship is stretching it somewhat because part of the merchandise was only in transit. In ancient times, when the Middle East was a centre comparable in weight to China and India, most of the trade (and it was at that time most of the trade at the world level) was not transit commerce. On the other hand, when Europe began its take-off after the year 1000 certainly a good part of the trade coming from China and India only transited through the Middle East.

8

What we have just said about the Middle East is even truer, if we consider the ‘central Asia’ region whose position was neither that of a centre or of a periphery.

Central Asia was an obligatory passage between the main pre-modern centres, particularly between China and the Middle East. It had always been sparsely populated, thus itself producing only a negligible surplus. Our index of 60, purely indicative here, is probably overestimated even if, at certain periods the region of south-west Turkestan, around the waterways of the Syr and Amu Darya, experienced brilliant development. Nevertheless the trade flows passing through the region were considerable, as indicated by their total indices (100). More than any other region in the world, central Asia benefited from this transit, as a proportion of its value, doubtless impossible to estimate but it must have been considerable, remained in the region.

Nevertheless it is important not to make too many generalisations about this region, which has never been either homogenous, or limited to nomadism. In fact central Asia is roughly divided by the Tian Shan range into a southern region – the real silk route – and a northern region which has only ever been marginal in East-West exchanges, which were intensive since at least the 6th century B.C.

The southern part of the region is itself clearly divisible into three distinct sub-regions: eastern Turkestan (the Chinese autonomous region of Sinkiang), western Turkestan, south of the present Kazakhstan, and Afghanistan.

Two-thirds of the trade flows crossing central Asia, corresponding to China-Middle East trade, always took the same route, passing through Sinkiang and the Syr and Amu Darya valleys. Any variations of this route, to avoid the desert of Taklamatan to the north or the south, used the Dzungaria route or the mountain passes leading to the Fergana Valley, which are all situated in this region.

The eastern part of this southern Central Asia (Sinkiang) is particularly dry, with only a scattering of oases, which hinders any density of population, except in urban areas. For these oasis towns were able to get their food supplies both from small irrigated land in their immediate proximity and from transiting long-distance commerce. It has therefore never been a question in this region of a social formation that was predominantly nomadic, but rather of urban/traders. But this would not exist were it not for the East-West relationships, onto which it had been grafted. Sometimes the local powers benefit from an autonomy that was close to 'independence'; at others they were strictly subordinated to Chinese rule. In both cases the social formation was only a sub-system of articulation between the tributary formations of China and the Middle East. This objective dependency did not impair the importance of the region and the brilliance of its civilisation, marked by an early and total sedentarisation (going back at latest to the 9th century) and by the intellectual life of its open urban centres (which, for this reason easily adopted the advanced forms of religion with a universalistic outlook, like Nestorianism, Manicheism, Buddhism and Islam).

To the west of the mountain barrier separating Sinkiang from western Turkestan, the geographical conditions permitted both a more numerous nomad population of the steppes and irrigated agriculture around the Syr and Amu Darya rivers. The region was a kind of prolongation of the Iranian plateau and the Afghan massif and an excellent example of contacts between the sedentary (cultivators and urbanites) and the nomads. According to the vagaries of history, the social formations of the region were therefore either urban-trading (supported by irrigated agriculture) or nomadic. Obviously East-West trade was more stimulated in the former case, hindered in the latter. The Turko-Mongolian invasions were never – contrary to a widespread belief – conducive to this commerce.

Afghanistan has a special place in this regional system. India always maintained close relations with the Middle East which, as well as the sea route, took a route passing through the north of the Afghan massif, thus joining, on the Amu Daria, the Chinese-Middle East highway. In this triple contact (Middle East-India-China), civilisations that were a particularly interesting synthesis (like the Quchan state) were able to flourish. Trade between India and China also passed through here to avoid

the uncrossable barrier of the Himalayas and Tibet, skirting around them to the west. This was the route taken by Buddhism.

The northern half of the Asian interior roughly corresponds to present Mongolia (to the north of Tian Shan) and the steppes of Kazakhstan (to the north of the Aral Sea and the Syr Darya), which stretch without hindrance to the centre of Europe, passing north of the Caspian and Black Seas. This region has only played a minor role in East-West relations for at least two reasons: the backwardness of Europe up until the year 1000 and the dominance of the turbulent nomadic population of the steppes. As we saw, this northern route was only taken during the short period between the European take-off, starting in the 12th century, and the conquest of the seas, starting in the 16th century, which corresponds to the conquest of the whole region by Genghis Khan.

The dominant social formation here was different from those prevailing in the southern half of the region. Nomadism, which was predominant, was linked with impoverished trading – although it in no way compared with the intensity of such relationships along the real ‘silk route’. Mongolia has no traces of important towns and even at the time of Genghis Khan the capital Karakorum was a market town of possibly 5,000 inhabitants. There was also no comparison with the towns of southern central Asia, because the main East-West trade did not pass through Mongolia. Also, the trade between China and the regions situated to the north of Tian Shan – Mongolia and Siberia – continued to be extremely restricted, virtually limited to the importation by China of horses and furs. Control of the trade by China of the Qing, after the collapse of the Genghis Khanate of Mongolia, built a new nomadic articulation, Buddhist feudalism – Chinese mercantilism, which was dominant from the 16th to the 20th century. At the same time the Russian expansion in Siberia brought a new conflict of geopolitical control between the Russians and the Chinese. Russia however, did not then represent – it was already the modern epoch – the heart of European capitalism, but rather a poor semi-periphery. Its foreign trade was therefore of little importance.

The reference here to the role of Buddhism in Mongolian social formation raises an issue that deserves to be studied more in depth. It is striking to see the failure of Buddhism in the centres of Asian civilisations: in India, its country of origin, in China where Hinduism and Confucianism rapidly overwhelmed it and along the Silk Routes where Islam had established itself. However, Buddhism took definite root in the two marginal regions of central Asia, in Tibet and Mongolia.

To the west of Mongolia, the northern region of the Asian interior remained, as we have said without precise limits, including Kazakhstan and southern Russia. It is in this region that the invading nomads, who had all, or almost all, been gradually Islamised (but without this conversion, late as it was, having any deep cultural effects), came up against the no less invasive Russians.

The global structure of the tributary system over the twenty centuries under consideration was characterised by a remarkable stability, which legitimises our diagram as an illustration of this stability. This was of relative importance in each of the regional blocs, for in population and in wealth there were evolutions that gradually upset the relations between these blocs and created the new structure that was characteristic of modern capitalism., At risk of repeating myself, I stress that the index figures that I have used to quantify the listed trade flows represent the averages over the long period under consideration, which do not therefore correspond exactly to any of the sub-periods. For each of these we would therefore have to have a system of specific index figures, showing the relative importance of the regions at that epoch.

I recapitulate the most significant characteristics of this evolution, as follows:

(i) For this whole period of twenty centuries, China's progress was continuous and sustained. The position of this country-continent therefore remained remarkably stable (although not dominant, see above) in the system of the tributary ancient world. The same could be said, to a lesser degree, of India, the second country-continent of the system.

(ii) In contrast, the stagnation of the Middle East for the whole of the period fatally reflected the clear regression of its position in the system.

(iii) The most striking evolution was in Europe. A marginal periphery for 15 centuries, Europe made tremendous progress, in terms of its pace, during the five centuries preceding the capitalist revolution. This upheaval became even more marked in the two centuries following the period under study, through the conquest and shaping of America by Europe and the inauguration of the transforming of a system that had only concerned the ancient world into a total global system.

(iv) The evolutions in other regions (Japan, South-East Asia, Africa) also prepared, in their own way, for the setting up of a new, global capitalist system.

(v) The capitalist system which was established as from 1500 A.D. is qualitatively different from the preceding system. It was not only a question of the disruption in the relative positions of the regions concerned, to the profit of Europe. The latter constituted itself as the dominant centre at the global level, a centre that would be augmented by the European expansion in North America and by the emergence of Japan. The concept of domination that now characterises the new world system did not exist in the previous tributary system. I have stressed, in association with this transformation, the importance of another transformation, no less qualitative: the transfer of dominance in the social system of the politico-ideological instance to the economy.

(vi) Central Asia had been a key region in the ancient system, the obligatory passage linking the more advanced regions of the old epochs (China, India, the Middle East – to which Europe was added later). The studies of the region have emphasized the decisive importance of the interactions and commercial, scientific, technological exchanges which have passed through this key region. Central Asia lost these

functions in the world capitalist system and, for this reason, was to be definitively marginalised.