Barbarians through Chinese Eyes: the Emergence of an Anthropological Approach to Ethnic Differences

Michel Cartier
Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
BARBARIANS THROUGH CHINESE EYES: THE EMERGENCE OF AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

Michel Cartier

The Chinese classical literature - and particularly the monographic sections of the Twenty-four Standard Histories and the geographical encyclopedias - hoards a wealth of first-hand information concerning many cultures and countries that would have completely slipped out of mankind’s memory or that would have survived only through the scanty evidence of a few epigraphical documents or archaeological remains. The fact is that early Chinese accounts of “barbarians” have since centuries attracted the attention of Western scholars as providing invaluable clues for the identification of several Central or East Asian kingdoms and the reconstruction of their past history. From the nineteenth century onward a great number of these accounts have been carefully edited and translated into Western languages and numerous attempts have been made at recovering the social reality lying behind them.

At the same time, one should frankly admit that these documents are more than often very difficult to tackle with and that some identifications are based on impressionistic deductions rather than on sound evidence. It will suffice here to offer two well-known examples demonstrating the ambiguous character of many of these early descriptions. The Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth century were quick to discover that the Chinese did possess a definite knowledge of the West since antiquity; they pointed to a series of accounts of Ta-Ch’in - the Great West - starting with the excerpt of Chang Ch’ien’s report on the Western Regions (end of the second century B.C.) transmitted in the Shih-chi which clearly refers to the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Near-East and the Mediterranean world. These accounts, however, fully edited and translated in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Hirth, nevertheless convey the bizarre impression that whereas some notices adequately apply to the Mediterranean world or even the Roman empire as a whole, other pieces describe the Near-East and more specifically the Bagdad Khalifate. Hirth was probably right in pointing out that the specific country referred to as Ta-Ch’in would indeed correspond to Syria and that the same denomination could in turn by used to denote every
larger political entity to which Syria belonged through the ages, whether the Hellenistic world in Chang Ch’ien’s time, the Roman empire during the Latter Han or the Bagdad Khalifate in more recent days after the Arab conquest. This way of solving the problem may be acceptable to an historian but it is definitely to be rejected when one examines the documents with a more anthropological eye. In fact, what is really puzzling is to realize that a Chinese geographer of that period did not actually possess a conceptual framework enabling him to distinguish between Christianity and Islam or between the Roman imperial institutions and the Islamic conception of statecraft. Hence the confusion. It may well be argued that neither Chang Ch’ien nor his successors of the Han to the T’ang dynasties had an effective opportunity to visit these remote Western Regions and that they could only rely on hearsay. It is even more puzzling to discover that Chinese mediaeval “ethnographers” were in no way better equipped with adequate concepts when dealing with nations living much closer in the space but very alien to them as far as institutions or customs were concerned.

Let us for a while examine the famous Liu-ch’iu case. For more than one century, scholars have been rather inconclusively arguing about the problem of the identification of the Liu-ch’iu kingdom described in several Standard Histories from the Sui-shu onward and generally assumed to correspond to Taiwan or part of the island. Maps drawn in the late Ming period usually included two small round islands respectively termed as the Big and the Small Liu-ch’iu and roughly occupying the positions of Okinawa and Taiwan. There is little doubt that from the beginning of the Ming dynasty onward the name Liu-ch’iu gradually came to apply solely to the present-day Ryukyu archipelago which soon after its unification in 1429 by the Okinawan king Shō Hashi established tributary relations with the Chinese empire. On the other hand the Liu-ch’iu island or “kingdom” which had been the aim of the military expeditions first of the Sui, in 607-610, then of the Yuan, in 1297, is more likely to represent Taiwan. A solution similar to that proposed in the case of Ta-Ch’in, that is the identification of Liu-ch’iu with the whole area comprising the Ryukyu archipelago, Taiwan and, possibly, part of the Philippine Islands, could of course provide an explanation for the many contradictory assertions concerning both the position of the “country” and various cultural features of its population. On the other hand, it would fail to explain why some of the characteristics noted by the Chinese do not really match with what we can learn about this area from archeological excavations as well as from modern eth-
nographic descriptions. First of all, there is no clear evidence of an organized state structure on any of these islands existing as early as the beginning of the seventh century. The failure of both military expeditions of 610 and 1297 to bring the native population to submission or even to establish some sort of diplomatic or tributary relation with them is an obvious indication that these people lacked a proper political organization or authority. Moreover, when in the course of the sixteenth century the Chinese, then confronted with a possible occupation of Taiwan by the Japanese pirates and their followers, started to gather more reliable information about the island, they did not fail to note the conspicuous absence of "rulers" or of a state hierarchy (with the exception of some temporary leaders in time of war). Should we conclude that a Liu'ch'iu kingdom actually existed during the Sui but completely vanished in later days or, more simply, that what early Chinese observers did perceive as a political entity was just an illusion? It is of course difficult to give an appropriate answer.

The question arises then: are we to accept at face value what the ancient Chinese travellers say of the outer world or should we first take into account the fact that every detail is first filtered, that foreign realities are always seen through Chinese eyes? Our first task is to try to define as precisely as possible what Chinese of different times would perceive with sufficient intensivity to retain attention. In this article I shall restrict myself to the investigation of two different but closely related kinds of materials: the monographs on foreign countries in the Twenty-four Standard Histories and the accounts or notes on foreign peoples in encyclopedias or specialized geographical works such as the Chu-fan chih by Chao Ju-kua and the Tung hsi yang k'ao.

Since traditional Chinese historiography is "cumulative," it is not always easy to determine whether a specific trait in a description is not just a quotation from an earlier work - possibly lost - or something added to keep up with a new situation. From the point of view of the philologist, a large part of the accounts of foreign countries or peoples actually amounts no more than to a kind of patchwork. Nonetheless, there is a certain degree of consistency in these descriptions inasmuch as they reflect a way of looking at an exotic reality. It is possible to reconstruct the unique conceptual framework underlying them. As images of the outer world these accounts are to be treated globally.

To be more precise, each description of a foreign country found in the Standard Histories is a well-organized "entry" providing information of the following subjects:

1. Geographical position. The country is characterized in terms of
relative position - the kingdom of X lies to the West of, to the North of Y - with a precise distance expressed in li (miles), but occasionally in days or keng (watches) in the case of an island or a distant continent.

2. Political characterization. The notice states the kind of the political régime and gives a broad description of the geographical features with a brief account of the administrative divisions. One finds, as well, some information concerning the ruling family, court etiquette and the administrative or aristocratic ranks.

3. Customs. The emphasis is on such traits as the way of life, justice and criminal law, food and dress, family organization (with special attention given to marriage and burial rituals), and, finally, the economy.

4. History. This section - in many cases the largest part of the monograph - especially stresses past relations with China, usually giving a wealth of information about the wars and military expeditions conducted by Chinese forces, alliances, peace treaties and agreements which specify the kind of tribute to be sent and the frequency of diplomatic missions.

Initiated by the Han historiographers, this pattern is left unaltered through most of the literature. It is interesting to notice that the section on "customs" eventually disappears in the case of countries having close or regular relations with China but that, on the other hand, post-Sung geographical treatises or trade encyclopaedias often include more specific information about commerce - commodities, money, prices, monopolies and trade regulations - and even, in the case of the Tung hsi yang k’ao, brief descriptions of "tourist spots" and curiosities.

By and large, monographs on foreign countries and barbarians offer the very kind of information which is now provided in guide books or dictionaries. It is quite natural to expect them to produce enough material to enable modern ethnographers to identify and characterize many ancient or mediaeval societies and cultures. Yet, as it has been pointed out earlier in this paper, it is often impossible to reconcile what is stated by Chinese geographers with the evidence gained from other sources, whether the archaeological remains or descriptions by Arab or Western travellers.

This paradox can be easily explained. The fact is that when they came to a systematical exposition of what could be learned at the time about foreign countries, Chinese mediaeval historiographers had at their disposal a conceptual spectrum much too narrow to allow for the perception of many cultural differences. The following - still very sketchy - remarks should not be taken for an elucidation of this notional framework but, more simply, as a preliminary exploration into a field left
hitherto untouched by the sinological research. In doing so, however, I shall restrict my investigation to a few aspects of social life as described in some mediaeval or pre-modern texts such as the “Monographs on foreign countries” of the Sui-shu (History of the Sui) and a set of geographical encyclopaedias.

In the Sui-shu, as in previous historical compilations, foreign peoples are first classified into the four broad categories of Ti (Northern barbarians), I (Eastern barbarians), Man (Southern barbarians) and Hsi-yü (Western regions). It seems unnecessary to stress that this classification, slightly at variance with the old model of the “Four barbarians,” is probably a reflection of the fact that a number of the statelets along the Silk Road, being already Indianized, could no longer be perceived as “barbarian” and could not be referred to using the deprecatory term of Jung (Western barbarians). Actually this change of the nomenclature was not really very meaningful. These classical denominations had since long lost their ancient “ecological” connotation and were probably no more than “directional” references indicating the position of the various countries in respect to China. On the other hand, it is important to notice that the 39 countries described in the Sui-shu do not account for the totality of the world known to the geographers of the T’ang dynasty. They do not include, for instance, India and several places or countries in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean which were already familiar to Buddhist pilgrims and had regular trade relations with the great harbours of South China but were still outside the Chinese sphere of influence. In other words, these 39 countries constitute a kind of “commonwealth”, a definite set of political entities maintaining diplomatic or tributary relations with the Middle Kingdom. In this respect we should pay some attention to the exact meaning of the term kuo, a concept which did not just convey the sense of “state” or “kingdom” but had come to denote more specifically, since the imperial unification, a “feudal statelet” or an “apanage” subordinated to the authority of the Son of Heaven. Thus the automatic rendition of kuo by “kingdom” which is commonly found in most translations is actually misleading since, to a certain degree, this term refers more to the possibility of establishing diplomatic or tributary relations than to a specific state organization or régime. In fact the perception of a state or even a society as a kuo by the Chinese should simply be equated with the recognition of the simultaneous appearance of the following distinctive features:

- subjection to a “king” (wang), usually a hereditary monarch but with no reference to a definite form of power or transmission line;
- existence of a “royal residence” (tu) in the sense of a place where
political power is exercised through the performance of a ritual;
• a body of officers (kuan) - either civil servants or aristocrats - with an elaborate hierarchy of ranks and titles.

Any foreign nation showing a combination of these three distinctive features is to be considered as a kuo and as such is likely to enter in relationship with China. A further distinction should be introduced at this point inasmuch as some countries may lack one of these characteristics. The question should then arise whether or not they could be classified as kuo. If we look at the 39 nations described in the Sui-shu we discover that only one-third do correspond to the above definition. Another third -13- are ruled by “wangs” but fail to show the existence of a civil or military hierarchy. A small number - 5 - lack a proper “ruler” and are termed as having “no king” (wu wang) although, in two cases, the Sui-shu mentions a “master of the city” (ch’eng-chu). Of the remaining eight nations, two - the T’u-ch’üeh and Western T’u-ch’üeh - have a permanent ruler - a qaghan (k’o-han) - and a military hierarchy, the other six being described as having only “chieftains” (ch’iu) or temporary “captains” (shuai, ch’iu-shuai) or even totally lacking a ruler of any kind. The following table clearly demonstrates a correlation between political form and geographical location:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I (East)</th>
<th>Man (South)</th>
<th>Hsi-yü (West)</th>
<th>Ti (North)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full kuo</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuo (without specification)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-kuo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the conspicuous exception of the nomads who, in spite of their having centuries of close association with the Chinese culture, are still outside the “civilized world,” the vast majority of nations which Sui dynasty officials had to deal with could be considered as kuo or “kingdoms.” It is significant to oppose, on the one side, the small number of countries lying to the East or to the South beyond the sea - most of them kingdoms with an already long history of diplomatic or tributary relations with China - with the relatively large figure of the so-called Western Regions kingdoms - in many cases small oases along the Silk Road - about which the historiographer was sometime quite unable to tell more than a few stereotyped sentences but which are nevertheless considered as kuo even when they did not have “kings” or permanent rulers. This political configuration reflects, of course, the diplomatic trend of the period. Countries and peoples were not automatically recorded in the monographic section of the Standard Histories and they keep appearing
or disappearing in accordance with the fluctuations of diplomacy. It would certainly be very informative to trace the rationale underlying these successive shifts. On the other hand we would not probably get a very different image of the world: a savage North opposed to various levels of "civilization" in the three other directions. It is not my purpose to discuss the problem of accuracy or to examine whether this representation did correspond to reality. What is of prime interest at this point is to assess the "power of resolution" implicit in this image. Chinese explorers of that time were quite able to discern many specific features of the societies living on their fringes. They knew for instance that some nations did not have another organizational principle than "kinship" - a fact which was expressed by an equation of the kinship groups with the Chinese patronymic clan or hsing. On the other hand, they were not yet ready to accept the very idea of a state having institutions at great variance with their own feudalistic/bureaucratic model. Hence their inability at correctly assessing the characteristics of primitive "kingdoms" such as the early Japanese principalities of the Ryukyuans state.

A further demonstration of this kind of selective perception of foreign realities may be offered through a careful examination of the "ethnographic" accounts in the Sui-shu concerning kinship and marriage. As I have already pointed out, Chinese geographers did pay attention to several aspects of material culture such as housing, food, daily life implements and the ecological environment of foreign societies. They made clear distinctions between agriculturists and nomads, herdsmen and hunters, producing long lists of plants and mineral resources. Furthermore, they did try to be as accurate as possible as far as techniques and weapons were concerned. Thus it is natural to expect them to provide reliable data about customs and social habits.

A superficial inspection of the 39 notices of foreign countries or peoples included in the Sui-shu seems to confirm the above remark. The geographical chapters in question do supply us with a wealth of ethnological descriptions concerning many aspects of kinship, specifically marriage patterns, wedding ceremonies, taboos or attitudes toward sex and adultery. Concerning, for instance, the three kingdoms later united under the Korean dynasty, the Sui-shu makes a very clear distinction between Paekche (Pai-chi) where marriage customs are quite similar to those of China and the two other kingdoms. In Silla (Hsin-lo) it is not customary for the bridegroom's family to send a "bride price" (ts'ai-p'in) to the bride's parents. As far as marriage is concerned riches and statutes are completely disregarded. Relatives of the young couple con-
tent themselves with a banquet of "pork and wine". The same lack of formality is noted in the case of Koguryō (Kao-li), the inhabitants of which seem to be prone to laxity whenever sex is concerned. Young people marry there of their free choice; a mere gift of pork and wine is sent by the bridegroom’s family to the bride’s relatives. Conditions in Wo (Japan) are obviously very similar to those in Koguryō. Here too young people marry of their own initiative without even sending presents. On entering her husband’s home, the bride is simply requested to show respect first to her new in-laws. On the other hand the rule of clan exogamy⁹ is to be strictly enforced. A combination of these two patterns is to be recognized on the island of Liu-ch’iu where marriages are either concluded at the free will of the young people without any parental interference and gifts, or, more formally, include the sending of a present of jewels and food to the bride’s family. Among the Eastern barbarians (Tung I), the Mo-ho, a Tungusic tribe living in present day Manchuria, seem to be the most unruly. The Sui-shu, although it does not elaborate on their wedding customs, stresses the fact that married women are licentious and that vendettas frequently arise on their behalf. The four Southeast Asian kingdoms listed among the Southern barbarians (Nan Man) are quite specific in the sense that they belong to the Indian Buddhistic world, a characteristic which is made clear throughout the accounts. These are highly civilized countries showing much resemblance to China itself. It is evident in the case of Lin-i (Vietnam), Chen-la (Cambodia) and Po-li (North Sumatra) where marriages are arranged with the help of a go-between (mei-jen) and preceded by the sending of a bride price. In Lin-i the ceremony further requires the participation of a brahman priest. Intermediaries and presents are unnecessary in Ch’ih-t’u (Cochinchina). On the other hand, this country shares with Cambodia and Sumatra the custom of dividing the family estate between the father and his newlywed son. People of different generations are not to live under the same roof. The Sui-shu is much less explicit about the 23 states or peoples listed in the Western Regions (Hsi-yü) section. If we except three kingdoms (Kao-ch’ang, Yen-ch’i and Kuei-tzu) with customs very close to the Chinese customs, eight (T’u-ku-hun, K’ang-kuo, Fu-kuo, Shih-kuo, Shih-kuo, Ho-kuo, Wuna-ho and Mu-kuo) with marriage patterns reminiscent of the T’u-chüeh (Turcs) and four (Shu-le, P’o-han, Mi-kuo and Ts’ao-kuo) unspecified, the Western Regions present some very extraordinary cases. Three peoples (Hsiang-tang, Yü-t’ien and Ts’ao-kuo) are characterized as having no moral standard. In two other (T’u-huo-lo and I-ts’u) brothers share
the same wife but the children belong to the elder one. Two countries (P'o-ssu and An-kuo) allow marriage with one's own sister. Last but not least, there exists somewhere a country called Nü-kuo (Kingdom of Women) where everything is upside down, married women being valued at the expense of their husbands. The situation among the Northern barbarians (Pei-ti) is simpler, most of these tribes adhering to the T'u-chüeh custom of inheriting one's father's secondary wives and brothers' wives. This habit, however, by no means amounts to laxity or immorality since the T'u-chüeh fiercely punish adultery. On the other hand, customs similar to those of the Mo-ho of Manchuria prevail among the Ch'i-tan (Khitan) and a curious form of marriage by kidnapping - but with the consent of both families - is practiced by the Shih-wei, possible ancestors to the Mongols.

The ethnographic value of these accounts should not be minimized. We should nevertheless remember that they constitute as a whole a Chinese perception of the people surrounding the Middle Kingdom and that they should be interpreted by contrasting the facts depicted with the prevalent Chinese customs.

By the time the Sui-shu was being compiled a clear definition of what marriage should be was given in the new T'ang Code. In addition to the ancient ideal expressed by the "six rites" (liu li) (which could be aptly summed up in the three following principles: 1. an alliance is not to be negotiated through a direct agreement of two families but necessarily requires the intervention of a go-between (mei-jen); 2. the sending of a gift or a bride-price is an inescapable condition for validity; 3. the prospective bridegroom and bride should not be acquainted with each other), the T'ang custom emphasizes three more elements, namely the strict interdiction of marriage between two people having a common male ancestor, the impossibility of intergenerational alliances between relatives bearing different clan names, and, thirdly, the preference for the chastity of widows. If we read carefully the accounts summarized here above, it becomes clear that what is actually described in them is a set of definite deviations or transgressions of the Chinese orthodox model. Moreover, these deviations appear to be distributed according to a geographical or, more precisely, directional pattern. Roughly speaking, each group of barbarians is related to a specific form of transgression such as 1. free love and the selection of a partner without parental intervention (Eastern barbarians); 2. economic independence of the new couple and (implicit) lack of filial piety (Southern barbarians); 3. violation of the generational and kinship taboos (Western Regions and Northern barbar-
ians). Somewhere in the Northeast a few tribes of hunters (Mo-ho and Ch‘i-tan) constitute a pole of amorality. These features can be summarized as below:

- **North**
  - Amorality

- **West**
  - Transgression of kinship
  - Free love

- **East**
  - Family fragmentation

- **South**

Chinese of the T’ang dynasty were surely able to perceive differences in kinship patterns. They had a notion of matrilinearity (the Country of Women), know about polyandry (T’u-huo-lo and I-ts’u) and were aware of the possibility of preferential alliances (marrying one’s “sister” - or parallel cousin? -: An-kuo and P’o-ssu). Transmission of wives, either father’s or brother’s spouses, although abhorrent to Chinese tradition, was sometimes practiced by the T’ang aristocracy in accordance with the T’u-chüeh custom. It is worth mentioning that these obvious “deviations” were not ascribed to individual amorality or vice but were correctly considered as “rules.” Curiously enough, perception of these transgressions of the kinship norm is clearly circumscribed to Central Asia. When Southeast Asia or the islands of the Eastern Sea are concerned the Chinese observers become blind to kinship. They fail to notice the existence of matrilinearity and wrongly describe the Japanese system as “clan exogamy”. Just as in the case of the assessment of political régime their vision of the outer world can be completely distorted. At this point the question of the reliability of these accounts inevitably arises. The perception by the Chinese of a specific element is in itself no valid proof of its existence whereas its absence may mean no more than the very fact of its being overlooked. In my view, the solution to this kind of problem lies in a correct appreciation of various “thresholds of visibility.” Some cultural features which can be perceived under certain circumstances disappear in another environment. In other words, a Chinese description should never be taken in itself but is to be necessarily related to similar accounts and contrasted with both the Chinese norm and various images of foreign countries.

From the Sung dynasty onward the Chinese seem to become keener observers of the outside realities. Encyclopaedias such as the Chu-fan chih not only provide information about countries that do not entertain tributary relations with the Chinese empire but contain more accurate descriptions of both the political and cultural aspects of many states. This change will be made evident through a few quotations. As was shown above, Chinese of the T’ang dynasty did content themselves
with a superficial characterization of foreign political systems. Aliens were divided in two broad groups: peoples with or without a state structure. On the other hand, we were never told about the inner structure of these “states”. On receiving a Japanese tributary mission in 984, the second Sung emperor inquires about Japanese institutions:

On hearing from him [the Japanese envoy] that their kings formed an uninterrupted line of rulers, all of the same family name, and that the high offices in the country were hereditary, the Emperor sighed and said to his ministers Sung Ch’i and Li Fang, “These are merely island barbarians and they have a line of monarchs for such a long time, and even their officials form an uninterrupted hereditary succession; this is indeed the way of the Ancient!”

This is perhaps no more than a casual remark preferred during a formal audience but what seems really interesting is that the Court historiographers felt the necessity of quoting the Emperor’s words although they were acknowledging the superiority of some barbarians. The next quotation concerns the mythical “Country of Women” considered this time to be an island in the Western Sea (the Indian Ocean). In contrast with the very brief account in the Sui-shu which really did not go further than characterizing this kingdom as an upside down society, Chao Ju-kua clearly relates institutions with the kinship structure and demography:

In the Western Sea there is also a Country of Women where only three females go to every five males; the country is governed by a queen and all the civil offices are in the hand of women whereas the men perform military duties. Noble women have several males to wait upon them but the men may not have female attendants. Where a woman gives birth to a child the latter takes its name from the mother.

This passage is probably the first description of matrilinearity.

As time passes, Chinese accounts assume more and more the character of true ethnographic descriptions. The next quotation, from the Ying-yai sheng-lan, a geographical compendium dating from the Ming period, demonstrates a genuine interest in customs and rituals:

When a man [of Java] marries, he goes first to the house of the bride to conclude the marriage and three days afterwards he brings his wife home, on which occasion the relations of the bridegroom beat copper drums and gongs, blow on coconut shells, beat drums made of bamboo and burn fireworks whilst a number of men armed with small swords surround them. The bride has her hair loose; the upper part of her body and her feet are naked; round her waist a piece of green flowered cloth is fastened; on her head she wears strings of golden beads and on the wrists bracelets of gold and silver nicely ornamented. The relations, friends and neighbours bring penang and betel, whilst with garlands of flowers and leaves they adorn a little ship, which they carry along with the newly married as a form of congratulation. Arriving at
the house they beat drums and gongs and rejoice for several days after which they go away."

What is worth noticing here is not the accuracy of description or the multiplicity of details but the very fact that the author of the account does not satisfy himself with a characterization of those elements which obviously deviate from the Chinese custom. Foreigners here are no more viewed as "barbarians," in the sense of people liable to be graded according to their distance from a norm. They have become a subject of astonishment and of observation. To a certain extent what is experienced here is the slow emergence of a conception of the relativity of culture. In some cases, this epistemological revolution may lead to a thorough reevaluation of the old stereotypes. A good example is provided by the successive accounts of the Liu-ch’iu islands (or Taiwan). Throughout out the medieval literature the island is depicted as a "kingdom" (kuo), with an overlord (wang) and a hierarchy of "marshals" (shuai) and "petty chiefs" (niao-liao). It seems to have a homogeneous culture but, as in the case of other Eastern barbarians, the stress is not on kinship but on the freedom to chose one’s mate. From the Ming dynasty onward the picture changes radically. Taiwan is now completely dissociated from the Ryukyu archipelago and is perceived as an island without an organized state and much ethnic diversity. Aborigine societies are described as "segmental" with temporary leaders in time of war. The importance of hunting is emphasized as well as the feminine character of agriculture. As far as marriage is concerned, the Chinese observers distinguish two different patterns: a free love pattern with courting and premarital sexual relations and a system wherein the bridegroom to-be is required to work for his father-in-law for a certain period before he is allowed to marry the girl of his choice. Residence is described as uxori-local and kinship assessed as matrilinear.

I do not contend that this new image is anthropologically correct. It is true that here perhaps we have one of the first elaborate descriptions of the dynamics of a matrilinear society. Modern anthropological evidence establishes clearly, however, that only a small proportion of the aborigines show definitely matrilinear elements. It is thus probable that the Chinese ethnographers of the seventeenth century deliberately ascribed to the whole population of the island features specific to only a part of the tribes with which they had become acquainted. Here is not the place to discuss the broader question of the reliability of these accounts. Suffice it to stress the fact that the Chinese became gradually able to perceive cultural differences that had escaped the eyes of their medieval compatriots. The emergence of this new conception of the relativity of
culture is very probably to be related with the development of the maritime trade and large scale - according to the standard of the time - migration into Southeast Asia. It is of course easy to understand that adventurers setting foot on many hitherto unknown islands or countries felt faced with the necessity to enter - often through marriage - into the recipient society and that they became more aware of the specificity of kinship or marriage rites than the officials in the Ministry of Rites whose profession was to accommodate tribute missions during their stay in China and who used to compile the material reproduced in the Standard Histories. We have already noticed the general concern of the later encyclopedists for trade, economic conditions and the attitudes of the natives toward Chinese merchants. I would not, however, go as far as ascribing this new trend to the emergence of a bourgeois ideology or to capitalistic "sprouts." At any rate, it is certainly possible to relate it to the intellectual crisis made evident in the evolution of Ming Neoconfucianism.

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

Notes

1. The geographical value of the Chinese accounts of foreign countries was already recognized by early writers such as Father Amiot and several pieces were translated in the nineteenth century by Abel Rémusat, Stanislas Julien, Gustav Schlegel, the Marquis d'Hervey de Saint Denis and W. P. Groeneveldt. For a new approach of the subject, see Edward H. Schafer and his treatment of T'ang literature (The Golden Peaches of Samarkand, The Vermilion Bird, and other studies).

2. Friedrich Hirth, China and the Roman Orient: Research into Their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in the Old Chinese Records. Leipzig, 1885.

3. The problem of the identification of Liu-ch'iu has, of course, deep political implications since the Sui-shu description is usually quoted as a "proof" of the Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. In the latter part of the 19th century, several European and Japanese scholars, argued, rather inconclusively, on the matter. The actual issue was the right to colonize the island . . .


6. A *keng*, or watch, is equivalent to the sixth part of a day, roughly four hours. Until the Sung dynasty, maritime distances are quoted in *li*.

7. In the *Chou-li*, characteristics of the various “barbarians” are related with their natural environment. Before the empire, however, the “four barbarians” are tribes living inside what is now considered as China proper.

8. Pre-Taika Japanese principalities could hardly be described as “states”. Anthropologists prefer to use the term “chiefdom.” In the case of “Liu-ch’iu,” whether Okinawa or present day Taiwan, it is very doubtful that there was any “state” before the Ming period.

9. This statement sounds very strange since we do not possess any evidence of an exogamic system in pre-Taika Japan.

10. As a matter of fact, a provision of the T’ang Code insists that slaves should assume their master’s clan name for fear that their descendants might intermarry inadvertently.

11. There are in fact some traces of the custom of “inheriting” relatives’ wives among the T’ang aristocracy. The famous episode of Hsüan-tsung taking his son’s spouse, Tang Kuei-fei, is very significative inasmuch as it aroused the wrath of the common people. Anyhow the Li clan way of life was probably much influenced by that of the “Western barbarians”.


14. *Ying-yai sheng-lan*, “Chua-wa” (Groeneveldt’s translation).

15. The sense of the relativity of culture is clearly expressed at the beginning of the 17th century by the author of the *Tung-fan chi*, a description of Taiwan aborigines. See “La vision chinoise du monde.”