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Ji Chaoding's Key Economic Areas: a discreet challenge from a Chinese Marxist to Eurocentrism in historiography

As áreas econômicas-chave segundo Ji Chaoding: o desafio discreto de um marxista chinês ao eurocentrismo historiográfico

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Abstract

Historiographical Eurocentrism is an obstacle to study the past and, therefore, the future of many regions in the world. Great Marxist intellectuals and militants offered original perspectives on their countries' history, such as Caio Prado Jr. in Brazil and Ji Chaoding in China. Ji Chaoding's main work, *Key Economic Areas in Chinese History as Revealed in the Development of Public Works for Water-control* (1936), gave a discreet solution to Comintern's official position – "feudal mode of production" – with implications for the revolutionary project, especially in terms of class alliances. At a very difficult time for his home country, the economist proposed a detailed description of Chinese economic history until 1842. He used the concept of Key Economic Area, thus rating positively the wealth and sophistication of social organization in classical China, especially as far as managing *res publica*, including in rural areas, against considerable environmental challenges. Such preoccupation echoes debates in the international communist movement and even today in academia.

Keywords

Ancient China. History of Theory and Historiography. Marxism.



Ji Chaoding's¹ work in his time

One of the great originalities of Ji Chaoding's (1903-1963) thesis is to present a subtly distant version from the qualification of Imperial China as an immense period under feudal mode of production. Such a designation was used for China since the 19th century as well as for other regions under some form of European colonialism (Dabat, 1995, p. 208).

In this article, I will first recall the genesis of such 'feudal' interpretation in international circles of the communist movement. Then, the discussions within China itself will be evoked, especially after the dramatic defeat of left-oriented groups (Communist Party of China – CPCh, and left-oriented fractions of the nationalist party Guomindang, apart from a large number of trade-unions, and peasant associations, especially in Hunan and Guangdong provinces) as they confronted a coup by Chiang Kai-shek and colonial powers, from 1927 on.

Finally, I will focus on Ji Chaoding's thesis as it shows a subtle way to save the Middle Kingdom's history from Eurocentric norms, which condemned it axiomatically to an inferior place. The concept of Key Economic Area (KEA), suggested by the economist, offered a creative solution, avoiding the subjection to Euro-normativity and better appraising the long, original experience of Chinese society.

As a matter of fact, the solution offered by the new concept permits redeeming the wealth and sophistication of classical period's experience in matters of public administration. The author details the challenges faced and responded to, one dynasty after the other, about large works as well as public management itself, thus valuing a past which the official Comintern version qualified as just 'feudal'. Furthermore, he explains changes in power centers, if not in political terms, at least as shifts in economic predominance.

However, as a disciplined member of the Communist Party, Ji Chaoding maintained his implied 'heresy' low key, using official designations, although in a discreet and original manner. Recent scholars have emphasized the daring and relevance of this innovative thinking, which waited long to be valued in his own country, whereas major intellectuals among his contemporaries recognized its worth.

Mode of production: a topic with practical political implications

Eurocentric principles organize universal history's conception, in its generally accepted form, and imply underlying diffusionism (Blaut, 1993, p. 1-49) as well as cultural evolutionism

¹ Pinyin transcription of the name Chi Chao'ing. This system will be used here except for the names Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen. According to Chinese tradition, the family name comes first.



aiming at 'progress' and development (Rist, 2008, p. 11 et ss), using concepts transfer as a tool. (Perrot & Preiswerk, 1975, p. 234).

Such a perspective condemns axiomatically to subalternity on the development scale, whatever other region of the world: history's famous "train" remains unreachable. Thus, justifying European powers' dominance over other continents (Latin America, Asia and Africa).

Starting from the principle of man's unity, evolutionist paradigm pretends to address at the same time the diversity in peoples' historical outcome (stages in evolution) and the superiority of European 'civilization'. (Schulte-Tenckhoff, 1985, p. 59).

The consequences of this operation affect periodization and, therefore, the struggle strategies of revolutionary movements, because it determines the 'stage' of a precise society – placed on this fixed scale – commanding class alliances to be obeyed imperatively in order to reach the next stage.

Strangely, Marxism had joined in such a vision. Present day trends in historiography show how the "old" Marx, in his writings, considered more favourably societies (particularly Russia) apart from Western Europe as compared to the *doxa* of the Second and Third Internationals. As a matter of fact, this author never claimed to extend his conclusions on Western Europe to the rest of the world, as he explicitly wrote to the editor of *Otechestvenye Zapiski*:

[...] to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historic-philosophic theory of the *marche générale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which will ensure, together with the greatest expansion of the productive powers of social labour, the most complete development of man. But I beg his pardon. (He is both honouring and shaming me too much.). (Marx, 1877).

Regions then colonized by Europeans, as India and China, were treated by him as a journalist, with a strong anti colonialist stance, however his analyses suffered from "difficulties" and "contradictions associated with the lack of data", as mentioned by several analysts (Gaulard, 2018, p. 45).



Marx, the feudal mode of production and its “Asiatic” alternative

In a typical manner of concept transfer, ‘feudal’ (or ‘feudalism’ or ‘feudal mode of production’) was attributed to societies which, during the 19th century, seemed to colonizers too “developed” to be classified as “primitives”.

India and China, civilizations historically revered by the same Westerners and considered their “chosen ancestors” (Dabat, 1993, p. 25) – Herodotus affirmed: “Everything comes from India” – were thus qualified. Such a supposed quality was even staged during the enthronement ceremony of the Viceroy of India, in 1877. The ridiculous scene described by Cohen (1992, p. 209-210) – which startled even Lord Lytton himself – only made any sense for the colonialists, watching a “feudo victorian” set, with coats of arms designed for the Indian princes by Rudyard Kipling’s father and soldiers given “medieval attire” at the very time of one of the major famines affecting the region (Davis, 2002, p. 37-72).

Precisely, famous medievalist Marc Bloch stated in the last part of his acclaimed *Feudal society* (1939) that such an approach of “transferring concepts” (*avant la lettre*) left him worried. Likewise, made him uneasy the professed “moral supremacy linked to the function of professional warrior, a preconception totally foreign to other civilizations, the Chinese, for instance” (Bloch, 1968, p. 617).

Egyptian, Achaean, Chinese feudalities: so many word conjunctions (...) inspire discreet worries to historians of the West, because they could not ignore the diversity of definitions attributed to this famous word, even at home. (Bloch, 1968, p. 603).

European medievalists explicitly mention how the word was abused, all the more so since it referred to a supposedly “sombre” period in Europe’s history, which is not well understood apart from the tiny circle of specialists, thus provoking semantic misunderstandings (Fourquin, 1987, p. 11 *et ss*).

“Crucified China”²

Ji Chaoding’s central objective while examining the past according to his economist’s expertise, in order to find solutions for the future, corresponds to a terrible period – the 1930’s, when China was divided: on one side, several warlords under a vague coordination by

² Expression coined by Gernet, 1972, p. 519.



Chiang Kai-shek; on the other side, progressive organizations under the upper guard of the Communist Party of China (CPCh), then refugees from the drastic repression of the former in regions known – at the time he wrote his dissertation – as the Soviet Republic of China. However, the main soviet, in Jiangxi, was coerced to a military retreat – the Long March (1934-35). The new safe haven was in another soviet, in Shaanxi province, near Xi'an, the former imperial capital.

In those hard times, recent history in China, such as the large Taiping rebellion (1851-64) – evoked by those who did the Long March (Walter, 1982) – strengthened the hope for a change caused by peasant revolts, as taught by the millenary Chinese tradition of 'heaven's mandate'.

However, with the then success of Russia's Revolution, it was imperative to determine a modern direction for the Chinese revolutionary movement. Henceforth, the inspiration, if not the model, came from the West. The Bolshevik experience, based on Marxism according to the Third International (Comintern), opened new perspectives, which were adopted by the most brilliant intellectuals of the first years of the 19th century: Li Dazhao (1888-1927) and Chen Duxiu (1879-1942).

Debates on Marxism and 'feudal' countries in the Third International

The Second International did not dedicate much attention to the question of non-European societies, with notable exceptions. However, the Russian Revolution and the failure of new victorious movements in Germany, Austria and Hungary, after WWI, changed the geographic axis of attention.

At the time of its creation, Comintern experienced an openness of mind that subsequent periods may have obscured. At the beginning of the 1920's, various currents debated openly in meetings and large venues as the Congress of the Peoples of the East, in Baku (1920). In these meetings, the determination of the stage at which important Asian countries (such as the Ottoman Empire, Persia, India, and China) could be classified, was central. The term 'feudal' was the most common designation. It implied class alliances on a nationalist basis, that is, proletarian and peasants together with supposedly anticolonial "national bourgeoisies".

Among the most prominent voices in such debates was that of Indian delegate M. N. Roy (1887-1954). His role was so important that he was sent to China in order to help Guomindang (still under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), whom he had met in 1915, in Japan) and the Communist Party of China to organize the struggle. A founding father, with Mikhail Borodin (1881-1951), of the Communist Party of Mexico (the first one to join the Third International, after its soviet



counterpart, in 1919), Roy enjoyed an ample view of the political situation not only in his native Bengal, or even in the British Raj, but also in other non-European countries.

His main disagreement from Lenin's position, for instance, amounted to his numerous doubts about a united front between proletarian and peasant masses and the so-called national bourgeoisie.

Roy, to the contrary, maintains the specificity of the "backward" social domain (reduced differentiation between bourgeoisies and 'feudal' classes) and the fragility, if not plain absence, of revolutionary dynamic in "bourgeois" nationalism. Better was to stay with alliances (peasantry and lower classes) according to the letter of the Russian model. (Chevrier, 1983, p. 50)

He proposed that it was impossible to precisely trust those who exploited these masses, since the bourgeoisie would follow its own interests, even towards colonial forces, in case it felt a threat from the exploited. Initial experience in China proved him right.

Scholars have studied in detail certain hesitations in the first few years of Comintern. Thus, in July of 1920, the XIth thesis on "feudal" or "patriarchal" societies suggested a "temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in colonial and backward countries, but without merging with it. In all circumstances it is necessary to maintain the independence of the proletarian movement, even in its rudimentary form". However, there was a consensus about the fact that

treason or adaptation, the strategy applied by the Comintern to China in the 1920's is a Russian model, already developed, according to which a doctrine established for the urbanized and industrialized West tries to adapt to a lesser development in traditional societies of the East. (Chevrier, 1983 p. 42)

As far as China is concerned, Guomindang and Sun Yat-sen's weight was decisive to create the alliance with the communists (and left leaning forces) and a supposed "national bourgeoisie". The last agents of resistance to bolshevism were located in Siberia, and many "white" armies took refuge in the country. Therefore, Comintern's efforts aimed at strengthening the Chinese nationalist movement were prevalent next to a small (in terms of membership) CPCh (Studer, 2021, p. 336 *et ss*). Consequently, the directive was given to communists to join individually Guomindang, as proposed by Comintern envoys Maring and Borodin (Saich, s.d. p. 12).



In June 1922, before its 2nd Congress, the CPC's Central Committee issued its "First Manifesto on the Current Situation", which declared that the Chinese proletariat's urgent task was to act jointly with the democratic party to establish a united front of democratic revolution [...] to liberate the Chinese people from a dual yoke – the yoke of foreigners and the yoke of powerful militarists in our country – a war which is just as urgently needed as it is inevitable." (Liu, 2000, p. 342-343).

This first United Front, whose purpose was to reunite territorially the Republic against several warlords – the Northern Expedition, under Chiang Kai-shek –, was considered a necessary stage, although, since December 1926, the heir to Sun Yat-sen was identified by a plenary session "as a representative of the big bourgeoisie but decided nevertheless to continue the United Front" (Dirlik, 2005, p. 48). Particularly, the so-called "excesses" of peasant movements were denounced and repression was suggested by forces of the United Front.

In this matter, the *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan or Inquiry into the Peasant Movement of Hunan*, written after extensive visits to the region by Mao Zedong and Yang Kaihui, is singular (Mao, 1982, pp. 37-57). From this work, emerges a more comprehensive approach about the people, like another leader's Peng Pai (1896-1929) (Galbiati, 1985). Accustomed to rural life, they represent a far cry from most other leaders of the CPCh as well as Comintern, at that time more attentive to the debates between Trotsky and Stalin.

So much so that the Thesis on the situation in China (February 1927), under title IV, *National Revolution and peasantry*, stipulated: "In China, in given circumstances, the proletariat is the only class that can lead a radical agrarian policy", which is indispensable for the success of the revolution (Broué, 1965, p. 39). Nevertheless, in June of the same year, the evaluation *Resolution on the Chinese question* denounced "Chiang Kai-shek's coup", responsible for "the execution of workers and peasants", and suggested that "the bourgeoisie had [become] counterrevolutionary" (Broué, 1965, p. 211). But there was no change in the deep understanding of the situation, just an emphasis on the mobilization of peasants "on grounds of agrarian revolution" (Broué, 1965, p. 214).

The disaster of Chiang Kai-shek's coup, with the active help of colonial powers, was evaluated during the Sixth Congress of the Third International, and the policy of the United Front was abandoned just in order to enter into other catastrophic adventures for the Chinese revolutionary movement.



Debates in China

The 1920's and 1930's were a particularly troubled period in China, which was suffering from territorial fragmentation among warlords, the 1927's coup following the growing fascism,³ and a furious repression against all democratic and revolutionary forces. These facts, however, mobilized people, in spite of the suppression they were suffering, to transform the old society and expel imperialist powers – among them Japan, which attacked Manchuria in 1932 and proper China in 1937, dates considered sometimes as the beginning of WWII.

In the aftermath of the coup, Chinese communist leadership could rethink the basic elements of some of Comintern's directives, as far as class alliances strategy, in order to conduct the fight. CPCCh won, little by little, *de facto* autonomy towards Moscow's directives. During the Second United Front (1937-1945), and having learned from their soviet experience, an extraordinarily efficient movement from Yan'an allowed them to consolidate sufficient forces to defeat Chiang Kai-shek, supported by the USA, and proclaim the People's Republic of China, in 1949. That is to say, ideas and objectives that dictated tactical decisions and strategies favoured unforeseen developments on the continent. However, *doxa* was not revised. Certainly, bare survival occupied a good portion of the strength of those who managed to escape so many ordeals.

Li Dazhao, "the first Marxist" in China (Meisner, 1967, p. xiii) among most eminent theoreticians and leaders, was one of the most explicit defenders of peasants' potential for revolution. Early on, he encouraged Chinese intellectuals to "go to the villages" (Meisner, 1967, p. 237) and upheld his views, based on Marx's "own writings on China to support his nationalistic interpretation of the Taiping Rebellion" (Meisner, 1967, p. 175). In *Land and the Peasants* (1919), he exposes his ideas on the necessity of mobilizing the peasantry through Land Reform, a perspective close to Chinese tradition, including in the dimension of secret societies. Nothing 'feudal' in this.

His original viewpoints rendered him misunderstandings and retaliations even before the coup, when, after Sun Yat-sen's death (in March of 1925), he was expelled from the Central Committee of Guomindang.

Chen Duxiu, another important pioneer of Marxism in China, did not agree exactly with Li Dazhao's and Mao Zedong's (1893-1976) or Peng Pai's (1896-1929) viewpoint, but he wrote about his revolt in the face of the occurred catastrophe. His *Letter to all members of the*

³ Guomindang's right wing had features close to its fascist equivalents in Europe (Italy, Portugal, Germany, Spain). Chiang Kai-shek had military help from the Third Reich against the Soviet Republic of China in Jiangxi. As Franco, he had a youth movement of blue shirts and ordered his inner circle to read *Mein Kampf*, at least until the publication of his own *China's Destiny*.



Communist Party of China, published in August of 1927 (Broué, 1965, p. 293 et ss.), vents anger at the policy of alliance with Guomindang, rejecting all responsibility of successive disasters on Comintern and its local allies – in spite of his position as general secretary of the Communist Party until 1927. He defended with precision how much he tried to oppose Moscow's directives, in vain. Expelled in 1929, he did not hesitate to denounce the responsible leaders.

Soviet influence

As a matter of fact, soviet influence could not be underestimated. It revealed utter "ignorance of reality" (Mamigonian, 2008, p. 171) with serious consequences. In organizational terms, it operated through Irkutsk's bureau, with Voitinsky, and had contacts with Li Dazhao in Beijing and Chen Duxiu in Xangai since the beginning of 1920. Various exchanges were materialized, including sending students to Moscow (Broué I, 2007, p. 349) and, in the following year, the Communist Party of China's foundation occurred again with the assistance of Comintern's agents, such as Maring (Henk Sneevliet).

At that time, the southern region, especially Guangdong province, was under the influence of republican movements, including Guomindang, which was still presided over by Sun Yat-sen. Then, Comintern furnished organizational means (Vischnyakova-Akimova, 1971, p. 140 et ss.) and other forms of help to promote an enlargement of the nationalist party to which PC members were instructed, as mentioned, to enlist individually (Broué I, 2007, p. 355) in spite of the opposition of eminent leaders such as Peng Shuzhi (1896-1983) and Zhang Guotao (1897-1979).

In November of 1927, just before another catastrophe in Canton (Serge, 1977, p. 131),

the provisional Politburo, headed by soon-to-be deposed Qu Qiubai, proclaimed adherence to the Asiatic interpretation of China, meaning that historical development could and did follow different courses depending on the physical environment. (Lewis, 1999, p. 65)

Chiang Kai-shek's coup – described by Roy as a "leader of the rightist wing bourgeois-feudal" (1972, p. 144) – and the belated search for a new direction for the struggle to continue were factors which fed the hesitations as well as new defeats – especially in cities – which resulted in the death of thousands of militants, including among the most eminent, such as Li Dazhao. The weight of the soviet model and its influence on leaders such as the "28 Bolsheviks", or Otto Braun (1900-1974), was only discarded for a sheer lack of alternative after all the defeats in urban-industrial surroundings. Finally, even the most stubborn among the communists surrendered to the option of nationalism with Chinese characteristics, that is, rural.



In this sense, without changing the denomination, a model was created mixing Chinese traditions (such as the way to pursue the war or the esteem for peasants' valour) and, according to some authors such as Yves Chevrier, something of a Bolshevik legacy. The combination of both traditions – Leninist as far as organization goes and Chinese for considering (in practice) the countryside and its workers as a privileged area of mobilization, instead of or added to urban industrial proletariat – resulted in the United Front Against Japan and, afterwards, victory over Chiang Kai-shek, in 1949.

In theoretical terms, the Maoist tendency opted to maintain the official position. Yet, some restiveness appears in Mao's writings about the qualification of the supposed 'feudal' period in China.

Although China is a great nation and although she is a vast country with an immense population, a long history, a rich revolutionary tradition and a splendid historical heritage, her economic, political and cultural development was sluggish for a long time after the transition from slave to feudal society. This feudal society, beginning with the Chou and Chin Dynasties, lasted about 3,000 years. (Mao, 1939).

Nevertheless, the word 'feudal' continued – until now – to depict what happened in China until colonial aggression, which added the prefix "semi" to "feudal". Sinologists themselves recognize that the use of the term covers something generic, all-encompassing, to qualify what is backward and conservative. Sofri quotes Hungarian sinologist Etienne Balazs, who remarks how vague the term is: "The word 'feudal' is deprived of precise meaning. It simply refers to 'reactionary' and qualifies whatever is linked to land owning, something like 'hobereau' in French or 'Junker' in German". (1987, p. 366).

Obviously, geopolitical changes affected historiography.

As long as revolutionary socialism was one and indivisible (...) Soviet Russia was a great chain which linked China to world history. But as the split grew more serious (...) [t]o many Chinese intellectuals, this was the time to reaffirm the fundamental relevance of an autonomous Chinese past. Certainly the lack of an alternative to the Soviet view of world history in the years 1960-2 provided them with an opportunity to practice more freely their skills in Chinese history and even their use of traditional historical analogies. (Wang, 1975, p. 15).



Ji Chaoding: eluding directives

Ji Chaoding, a politically active economist, was a member of PCUS and CPCh. After participating of the May 4th (1919) demonstrations against the Versailles' Treaty, which granted Shandong province (a former German colonial possession) to Japan (although China had participated in the war effort against Germany, along with the allies during WWI), he graduated in Beijing, at the famous Tsinghua institution. He was active in the New Culture Movement and devoted his time to study – in English – literature, art, economics, and law, without foregoing physical activity. He was vocal in defending the use of vernacular Chinese. During this period, he “converted” to Marxism (Lewis, 1999, p. 15).

In 1924, he went to the USA to continue his studies and completed them with a master's degree at the University of Chicago and doctorate at Columbia University. In both cases, he was granted a scholarship funded by the indemnizations paid, according to the Boxer Protocol, by China to Western powers after the outcome of the siege of the Legation Quarter in Beijing, in 1900. These considerable sums provided scholarships – of small individual amounts – to young Chinese in the countries involved, particularly the US.

During this period, he joined the Communist Party of the USA and met eminent Comintern envoys such as Mikhail Borodin (1884-1951) and Willi Münzenberg (1889-1940), while suffering from the anti-Chinese atmosphere that lasted since the end of the previous century. He was an active participant in events such as the Anti-Imperialist League's Congress, in Brussels, as well as the Comintern's Sixth Congress, where he acted as secretary of the Chinese delegate Deng Zhongxia. During these travels, he spent some time at the Communist University of the Working People of China, currently called Sun Yat-sen's University, in Moscow. Thence, his action was partly clandestine and implied extensive traveling.

As a consequence, he had the opportunity of meeting intellectuals akin to the Third International, including Karl Wittfogel, “Comintern's sinologist” (Chevrier, 1983, p. 96), at that time a member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), during the Second Congress of the Anti-Imperialist League in Frankfurt-am-Main, in 1929.

The significance of the Frankfurt Congress for Ji Chaoding lay in his meeting with the German communist Karl Wittfogel and their discussion of the Asiatic mode of production (AMP). Ji had first been exposed to the Asiatic mode of production while studying Marxist theory at Sun Yat-sen University in Moscow in 1928. His teacher Ludwig Magyar, a leading proponent of the theory, had recently published a



provocative monograph, *Analysis of Chinese Village Economy* (*Zhongguo nongcun jingji yanjiu*), in which he identified China as one of the stagnant, stable Asiatic societies that did not obey the universal laws of economic development Marx had posited in his studies of Europe. (Lewis, 1999, p. 64).

Wittfogel's original work (1931) is important to understand Ji Chaoding's within Marxist thought at the time. But it is not tainted by McCarthyism as his famous *Oriental Despotism* (1957), published after his conversion to an anti-communism militant.

Back in the USA, Ji Chaoding helped Philip Jaffe publish *Amerasia*, among other editorial and cultural activities, such as his collaboration with Sergei Tretyakov for a theatre play. In 1935, he presented his dissertation at Columbia University, in New York.

Ji Chaoding's professional career has various dimensions, especially in the field of international economic relations. In 1938, financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, he was invited to investigate economic war from the point of view of China (already in conflict with Japan). Among other important contacts, he shared housing with John Stewart Service, an important person in Dixie Mission, working as liaison between Chongqing's government (Guomindang's capital during WWII) and Yan'an (CPCh's capital at the same time).

Ji Chaoding's career was discreet but efficient in terms of financial administration of economic exchanges between continental China, nationalist and then communist, and the West. His sudden death in 1963 was marked by an official acknowledgement of it, an impressive move, for it was never done while he was alive. In particular, it was noteworthy an eulogy delivered by Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), revealing his long-time membership in the CPCh.

Mode of production in Key Economic Areas

During his lifetime, Ji Chaoding was recognized by academics and other important people, such as Joseph Needham, who qualified him as a "brilliant intellectual" and judged his work *Key Economic Areas in Chinese History as revealed in the Development of Public Works for Water-control*⁴ as "maybe the most outstanding book in the West at that time about Chinese

⁴ Dissertation published in London by Allen & Unwin, American Council, Institute of Pacific Relations, in 1936. In New York, it was published by Paragon Reprint Corp. in 1963, as the second edition. This is the version used in this article. A translation was published in Italian: *Le zone economiche chiave nella storia della Cina* (Milano: Einaudi, 1972). The last edition in English was published by Routledge in 2019.



history's development" (Zou, 2013, p. 182). Anna Louise Strong dedicated to him her book *One Fifth of Mankind* (also published in Portuguese in 1944):

Thanks are due to many Chinese friends who helped in securing and preparing this story of their country, and especially to Dr. Ch'aoting Chi, whose expert critical editing of the facts of Chinese history was invaluable. (Strong, 1938, p.1)

Recent academic studies mention him as "one of the earliest Chinese Marxist theoreticians in the West, he explored the Asiatic mode of production enroute to a Ph.D. degree in economics at Columbia University" (Lewis, 1999, p. 1). This statement by Lewis, the author of an important biography of Ji Chaoding, although might be justified, can also lead to some misunderstanding, because it was never Ji Chaoding's expressed goal to challenge Comintern's orders, as the biographer himself recognizes:

Jaffe registered his surprise, therefore, when Ji appeared "disturbed and somewhat angry" that Jaffe had mentioned his debt to Wittfogel after the review came out. He surmised that because of the review, Ji would probably be criticized for his writing on the Asiatic mode of production by both the Comintern and the Chinese Communist Party, who had specifically rejected it several years before. (Lewis, 1999, p. 82)

Asiatic mode of production

An alternative to the feudal mode of production, adopted by Comintern without much hesitation, was however rapidly debated in the early 1920's, a period so complex and of fighting for sheer survival of the soviet project itself, that the matter did not gain much echo in face of concrete emergencies of various orders.

Some scholars tried to find alternatives to the feudal qualification, aiming at a more respectful attitude towards the singularity of many societies' past (China, but also India, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, etc.), bundled up without much ado into the feudal mode of production. The Asiatic mode of production is one of these alternatives. Among many notable recent authors on the topic are Gianni Sofri (1977 and 1987), Ferenc Tokei (1969), Maurice Godelier (although he lost confidence in the potential of this alternative) (CERM, 1974 and 1991) as well as Mylène Gaulard (2018).



On the contrary, sinologist Jean Chesneaux remained more orthodox, although he showed impatience towards the Eurocentric conception of history, as exposed in *Du passé faisons table rase? A propos de l'histoire et des historiens* (1976).

Innovation without head-on challenge

Ji Chaoding's main virtue was to avoid Comintern's imposition, while salvaging all elements that would lead to a different conclusion from the absurd thesis of 'feudalism'. Absurd because, as mentioned already by Marc Bloch, elementary features of the European model do not correspond to, and even contradict, the observed and abundantly documented historic reality of the Middle Kingdom. Furthermore, even if the same mode of production were identified, then the model should be identified as Chinese simply by its incommensurable precedence!

Key Economic Areas treats all the imperial period from 255 BCE until 1842 CE. The book is composed of seven chapters with well-articulated sub-chapters from the quantity of two to twelve. All of them have precise titles that conduct the exposition from a geographical topic to some case-study on Huang Ho or Yangtze valleys, and political matters, as well as whatever concerns public administration with eventual correspondence with philosophical roots, Mencius for instance. Drawings and maps illustrate the subject matters for a better understanding by the reader.

Ji Chaoding's book main concern is the state's forceful efforts around water control (irrigation drainage, dikes to contain rivers, hydraulic installations to regulate currents at the mouth of big rivers, or even floodgates and locks to allow transfers between water ways with different levels) and corresponds to changes in the successive pre-eminence of distinct important territories within the empire.

[T]he unity or centralization of state power in China could only mean the control of an economic area where agricultural productivity and facilities of transport would make possible the supply of a grain tribute so predominantly superior to that of other areas that any group which controlled this area had the key to the conquest and unity of all China. It is areas of this kind which must be designated as the Key Economic Areas. (Ji, 1963, p. 5).

From the beginning of the book on, the author lists these successive areas, since Antiquity (Ji, 1963, p. 9). He emphasizes the central role of tribute (that is, taxes) since its collection was an important task of local agents of the state, recruited according to a secular practice of meritocracy, which provoked some illuminists' admiration. Still, financing and maintaining these works permanently did not dispense the use of armed force.



Subtle heresy

Ji distanced himself from 'feudalism' or 'feudal' mode of production without, however, leaving the term aside. Its use is rare and always refers to the period before the foundation of the unified empire under the Qin dynasty (3rd century BCE), a major shift in his vision of long duration in China's history. Thus, "the feudal barriers between the warring states" are mentioned (Ji, 1963, p. xii) when describing the situation of the first emperor's accession to power. Similarly, he stipulates "the passing of classical feudalism in the third century b.c." (Ji, 1963, p. 3). At most times, he uses the word "semi-feudal" (Ji, 1963, pp. xiii; 12; 124, 135, 142, etc.) to qualify private property as well as bureaucracy or simply a period (during the Ming dynasty).

Counting the frequency of the word in the book, "feudal" is mentioned about a dozen times: "feudal states" (Ji, 1963, p. 60); "feudal struggles" (Ji, 1963, pp. 64, 115); "feudal lords" (Ji, 1963, p. 80). Whereas "feudalism" is used four times, especially to qualify its decline after the Zhou dynasty (Ji, 1963, pp. 3, 59, 60, 78). The word "seigniorial", which reminds the French term "seigneurial", appears twice (Ji, 1963, pp. 59, 60; Fourquin, 1987. Sometimes the term "serf" is found in combination: "peasant-serf" to qualify families (Ji, 1963, pp. 54, 56, twice at p. 58), "serf family" (Ji, 1963, p. 56), "peasant serf" (Ji, 1963, twice at pp. 57, 60 and once at p. 63), or "serf" alone (Ji, 1963, pp. 56, 57, six times at p. 59, and p. 108).

In all, the author gives much more attention to the organizational competence of the state through its central bureaucracy as well as the imperial clan.

Debt towards the first Wittfogel

Ji Chaoding recognizes his debt toward a book by an author who could be called "the first Wittfogel" (Ji, 1963, p. 11). He also notes how much he owes to the concept of central or main Key Economic Area (Ji, 1963, p. 96). His objective is to study "the question of territorial expansion, together with changes in the economic and political centre of gravity, but without structural change in either social or economic forms, becomes a problem of the shifting of Key Economic Areas" (Ji, 1963, p. 3). He thanks his friend Joseph Pachtman for the oral translation of parts of the book and Wittfogel himself for the quotations in English.

Nevertheless, political changes in the former German communist's attitude, in later times, obscured somehow Wittfogel's first book, his doctoral dissertation *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas: Versuch der wissenschaftlichen Analyse einer grossen asiatischen Agrargesellschaft* (Leipzig, 1931). In 1938, he also published a somehow akin work, *Die Theorie der orientalischen Gesellschaft*, which evokes the frequent question of the supposed "stagnation" of Oriental societies.



Ji Chaoding's work

With precise geographical details, the author undertakes the description, in each region, of state intervention such as irrigation projects in loess areas. There again, he quotes Wittfogel when referring to the crucial importance of watering crops:

Everywhere in China an indispensable condition for intensive agriculture, on the basis of which Chinese agrarian society had been constructed, just as the industrial society of modern capitalism has been constructed on the basis of coal and iron. (Wittfogel *apud* Ji, 1963, p. 12)

Recent historiography with an interdisciplinary perspective offers parallels. Geography, as far as topography and climate, gives a strong basis to the proposed regionalization, precisely in this sense. Accordingly, the author emphasizes the importance of deposits left by rivers causing a danger of silting of their beds, as well as technical challenges in order to regulate currents in the estuary of the Yellow River. He even quotes the famous Ming dynasty engineer Pan Xijun, whose work is a reference to this day (Rego, 2016).

Emphasis is also given to the complex network of rivers and canals "advantageously distributed over an immensely large and continuous land" (Wittfogel *Apud* Ji, 1963, p. 28) and, for the southern region, so to say the bread basket of China, the importance of drainage systems. The author even uses literature to argue these points, such as the legend of Yu and the Flood. (Ji, 1963, p. 46 *et ss.*).

Maintaining those works adequately guarantees centrality to a given key economic area, whereas their decay provokes "a drastic decline in agricultural productivity", as shown with the example of the Shaanxi province in the second millennium (Ji, 1963, p. 24).

Some methodological considerations are also explicit, such as the large number of documents used by the author: apart from official texts: reports, news, and ancient maps. Only the confrontation of diverse sources allows to reach conclusions, ponders the historian (Ji, 1963, p. 50).

He also stipulates the importance of geology and proceeds with affirmations suggesting that it should be tested by new research. At the end of the Warring States, a change in landownership systems provoked a large freeing of the workforce, which in turn allowed for large public works. He focuses on the Han dynasty (Ji, 1963, p. 62). A new scale in these undertakings is illustrated: to open large canals as well as build reservoirs (Ji, 1963, p. 68). As an example, he mentions the Zhengguo canal, in the Chin's valley, which "made central Shaanxi the first Key Economic Area in China" (Ji, 1963, p. 69).



The resulting unification of China by Qin opened a new epoch in Chinese history, and ushered in a period in which the development of public works for water-control played an outstanding role in the political unity and division of China for twenty centuries, and greatly influenced the southward shifting of the centre of gravity of economic life from the Huang Ho valley to the Yangtze basin. (Ji, 1963, p. 69)

Dealing with this question was bold in as much as, according to Marx, water control systems proved that this civilization was at too low a level while located in a too large territory to suppose the advent of voluntary association, instead of intervention of the state, as mentioned. Eurocentric perspective was explicit in this argument, comparing China to Flanders and Italy (where the phenomenon was conducted by private enterprises).

Ji Chaoding could not escape the sequence of stages, the official designation, because he was not in a militant position only. In the 1930's, it was difficult to voice doubts, since rising fascisms (including Chiang Kai-shek's) did not allow much margin for digression from the smallest common denominator in the bosom of United Fronts and Popular Fronts, which opposed them.

Nevertheless, following immediately an affirmation of orthodox Marxian or Marxist position, the author details how the system worked at the village level first and on a growing scale, until the general coordination of the state (Ji, 1963, p. 71). He details carefully the perspective of the official state agent as the guardian of common welfare. This perspective emphasizes that only this objective and its success gave legitimacy to the power of a reigning dynasty. The agent of the state had as his duty to worry about the situation of systems to control floods and droughts: "The magistrate is an official close to the people, and flood and drought should be of as much concern to him as pain or sickness of his person" (Ji, 1963, p. 72).

Ji Chaoding also took great care in detailing the mishaps involved in such a function (of various kinds: unwillingness to comply, eventual resistance in various scales and forms, etc.), as well as the answers that were given by the hierarchy at different levels of responsibility. He illustrated his perspective by quoting official texts that mentioned a "weighty and difficult task" challenging the state representatives. One of them mentioned, during the Ming dynasty, that "building embankments on the Yellow River is like constructing defences on the frontier, and to keep watch on the dike is like maintaining vigilance on the frontier" (Ji, 1963, p. 73).

Some irony could be detected towards the official narrative in comments such as:

The vastness of the territory mentioned by Marx naturally accentuated the difficulty of the task. It should be obvious why works of such magnitude and



gravity are beyond the capacity of the peasant or private merchants, and cannot be accomplished except by use of the centralized resources and authority of the state. (Ji, 1963, p. 73)

Ji Chaoding also mentions Max Weber, who stresses the importance of irrigation for Egypt, Western Asia, India, and China and the reliance of common people towards “the functioning of the bureaucracy” (Ji, 1963, p. 73). On the origin of the Qin dynasty, he quotes the famous historian Sima Qian (145-86 AEC), who wrote on the importance of grain collecting and, therefore, of production increase for the success of a dynasty, although “it neither guarantees success, nor insures against subsequent defeat after a temporary victory” (Ji, 1963, p. 77).

The Zhengguo Canal laid the foundation for the irrigation system in central Shaanxi for many centuries to come. It made central Shaanxi the Key Economic Area in China, the control of which gave Qin a weapon which in the end proved powerful enough to subjugate the rest of the country. (Ji, 1963, p. 77)

Thus, by undertaking a review of knowledge on each dynasty, he uses its official documentation. For instance, under the Han dynasty, water transportation allows sending grain and “supplies of food [for the army], thereby preventing a shortage” (Ji, 1963, p. 79). Another example is a 600 km (300 li) canal, planned “to connect Ch’angan,⁵ the capital, with the Yellow River, so as to shorten by two-thirds the distance to be covered in transporting the grain tribute and reduce the time required for the journey by one-half” (Ji, 1963, p. 81). This single work employed tenth of thousands of soldiers. The same phenomenon can be observed in the adaptation of the Ren River, in the north, from the Shandong province.

Management

The author does not hesitate to comment on the flaws of the system, even quoting contemporary critics. For example, Wu Ti promulgated decrees about the maintenance of water works, chastising some “for neglecting the welfare of the people of five or ten chiin (prefectures) by leaving the dike of the Yellow River unrepaired while devoting his attention to an enterprise that “only benefited a corner of the realm” (Ji, 1963, p. 84).

⁵ Xian.



He also gives attention to innovations such as locks, another one of the great successes of Chinese classical technology. In the same manner, he treats the expertise in drainage of marches, therefore extending agricultural land (Ji, 1963, pp. 91, 135).

All these public works meant intensive efforts and skills in order to control, for instance, floods, one of the reasons why the Huang Ho is called "China's nightmare". Ji Chaoding makes a list of examples (and their cost) in several regions: Henan, Southern Hopei, and Western Shandong (Ji, 1963, p. 92), but also Sichuan (Ji, 1963, p. 96). Furthermore, some of these works provided power to mills to polish rice, as well as for spinning and weaving, working throughout the whole year (Ji, 1963, p. 97).

On the lower Yangtze, the author focuses on the innovations of the Sui and Tang dynasties, the Grand Canal permitting the emergence of a new key economic area during the following dynasties Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing (Ji, 1963, p. 112).

Transport system was greatly improved under several of them, thus maintaining the Northern political capital provided although production in the South became predominant (Ji, 1963, p. 113). Complex works were also built by mobilizing *en masse* workers of both sexes (Ji, 1963, p. 120).

Although evidently appreciative of how clever these undertakings were, Ji Chaoding does not ignore the class dimension.

[T]he Chinese state was frankly based upon the theory of class rule, and class rule meant the concentration of surplus resources, very often including a large proportion of the necessities of life squeezed from the people, as an instrument of power and to satisfy the extravagant demands of the ruling group. (Ji, 1963, p. 121-122)

He emphasizes the implications of this forced labour in "semi feudal" conditions (a term used twice, as on p. 135), which "cannot be done without cruelty, and the degree of cruelty necessary is usually in direct proportion to the magnitude of the work involved" (Ji, 1963, p. 123) – owing the Grand Canal its fame to it. Again, he quotes an official document:

All men between the ages of fifteen and fifty were ordered to assemble by royal edict. All who tried to hide were punishable by decapitation... The labourers thus assembled numbered 3,600,000. Then each family was required to contribute a child or an old man, or woman, to prepare meals for the workers. Five thousand young and brave soldiers were ordered to be armed with sticks [to maintain discipline]. Together with section chiefs and other administrators, the whole number of people employed in the canal amounted to 5,430,000...



At the beginning of the eighth month of the fifth year of Ta-yeh's reign (609 a.d.) baskets and shovels were put to work; the workers were spread over several thousand li in a west-east direction. [After a certain sector of the work was done], when the workers were counted, two million and a half labourers and twenty-three thousand soldiers had been lost. (Ji, 1963, p. 123).

Then, he lists the original contributions to the system as inaugurated by each dynasty, from transport means to locks and other dispositives, apart from management questions in a complex system that allowed seven million tons of grain to be ferried to the North: the positioning of barns along the way, the deepening of river beds in the network of waterways, the specialized shipbuilding, etc. (Ji, 1963, 127).

In all, the system proved to be "safe and efficient" (JI, 1963, p. 127). The lack of adequate management during the Century of Humiliation⁶ caused immense suffering to the people living on the riverside and to all workers involved in its functioning (Davis, 2002, pp. 73-91, 351-357). Ji Chaoding highlighted the dire consequences for these populations of the mismanagement of such complex systems, in any region. He also emphasized how much the best managers understood the intertwined quality of these phenomena. Thus, according to the already mentioned engineer Pan Jixun:

Great benefit to the Grand Canal transport system can be gained by proper care of the Yellow River. Since the transport of grain tribute cannot be stopped for a single year, the Yellow River should not be neglected for a single year. To attain two ends by one act, the control of the Yellow River is indeed important. Thus, before the Sung and Yuan dynasties, the Yellow River changed its course often suddenly to the north and suddenly to the south, without a single year of peace. But under the present regime, it has not yet changed its course during more than two hundred years. This is due to the care it has been getting as a sector of the Grand Canal. (*apud* Ji, 1963, p. 142)

Next, he details the catastrophes occurred when these sophisticated systems failed because of flawed management. Risks could affect even the officials, like losing heaven's mandate. Without hesitation, Ji Chaoding listed the correct measures adopted by the Yuan dynasty (Mongol) as well as Qing's (Manchu): among the facts he commented upon, the action of the famous Lin Zexu (1785-

⁶ The period from the First Opium War, which started in 1839, until 1949.



1850), popular for his determined fight against drug trafficking of opium organized by colonial powers from invaded India, with the goal of subjecting the Chinese government. His zeal also encompassed the management of supplies and land reclaiming in Hopei (to provision army needs), among others.

Ji Chaoding concludes his dissertation summing up his objective and listing with a few sentences the concepts he used, which did not apply for the Century of Humiliation.

As a conceptional device for the study of regional relations, the idea of the Key Economic Area so far has contributed to the illumination of the character of the regional relations in the semi-feudal epoch in China. It was an epoch in which agriculture, especially irrigation farming, was the leading industry, in which agricultural production was dependent upon the proper functioning of a great variety of water-control works constructed and maintained by the state, and in which the state, dominated by a landowning bureaucracy, used water-control activities as an economic weapon of political struggle and a chief means to develop and maintain a Key Economic Area as an economic base for the unified control of a group of more or less independent self-sufficient regional territories. (Ji, 1963, p. 148-149)

Recent developments

Happily, new historiographic tendencies escaped from the norms and directives which were prevailing in Ji Chaoding's time. For instance, Greg Lewis and Marylène Gauchard open innovative perspectives. In his monumental work on Ji Chaoding, the former proves daring when using the term "Asiatic mode of production" to describe the author's proposal. All along his own dissertation, he reiterates and supports his decision with corroborative elements.

Although he never used the expression himself and has taken shelter under the term "feudal" or "semi-feudal", Ji Chaoding, as Lewis notes adequately, seems to take a distance from Wittfogel at the end of his work: "The concept of the Key Economic Area becomes inapplicable to China after 1842 with the opening to world trade and the influence of industrialization" (Ji, 1963, p. 149; Lewis, 1999, p. 81).

Once peace recovered, historiography could produce, within the country and abroad, a greater variety of thesis. Several authors tried to apply the asiatic mode of production (sometimes hydraulic, sometimes tributary) to other civilizations apart from China with the explicit purpose of refusing "a Western-centered vision of orthodox Marxist thinking" (Gaulard, 2018, p. 9), which



reduces their specificity. The author also mentions Jean François Billeter (2006) and Kenneth Pomeranz (2006).

Chesneaux manifested a very orthodox tendency, stating that:

Chinese rural society is not organized around large seigniorial as those of Prussian Junker or English squire. But the deep fabric of this society is the same; therefore it is justified to qualify it as feudal in the ample meaning of the word, even without the absence of institutions peculiar to western medieval feudalism (such as serfdom). (Chesneaux, 1976b, p. 14)

However, the same author also mentions:

Modes of production don't succeed one to the other mechanically neither in a linear fashion, each people passing immutably through the same stages. This unilinear conception notably paralysed for a very long time discussions on the Asiatic mode of production, mentioned by Marx, but refused by Stalin and soviet Marxism. (Chesneaux, 1976a, p. 44)

He goes on in a surprising manner, stating the possibility of using "A.M.P.,⁷ defined by Marx as the association of state power with supreme command in the economic field, and peasant communities living in almost autarchic manner." (Chesneaux, 1976b, p. 44).

Gernet also expresses scepticism about the expletive capacity of the terminology inherited from Comintern. He stresses the lack of knowledge of many Western authors who are satisfied with generic denominations (and, it could be added, who often do not understand either the historical field that those terms are supposed to describe in Europe itself). Furthermore, Gernet affirms:

It is a grave methodological error to characterize in its entirety and for the whole duration of its existence, the Chinese imperial system, because political systems are living organisms which adapt constantly to social and economic transformations, when not, for some time, enter into contradiction with them. (Gernet, 1972, p. 25)

⁷ Asiatic mode of production.



The majority of authors choose a conciliatory position, however imprecise it turns out to be. Thus, Fan Wenlan, although he expresses more daring points of view towards a proximity with the Asiatic mode of production, ends up surrendering to the official version, with some reservations as a serious and meticulous historian:

Chinese "feudalism" differed from European feudalism in permitting the free alienation of land and in the degree of social mobility that was possible, and because it was characterized by the fusion of landlords and merchants. (Feuerwerker, 1969, p. 22)

Along with Fan Wenlan, Guo Moro, for instance, also referred to a definition of "feudalism" as being "essentially a landlord economy in which the exploitation of serf labour is the dominant form of agriculture" (Feuerwerker, 1969, p. 30). In the People's Republic of China, especially during periods of heated debates, "feudal" came to mean people or attitudes considered backward and conservative.

Maybe the spectacular ascension of the People's Republic of China, during the last period, has given more freedom to reconsider several aspects of its past, overcome any shadow of stagnation, and even more regression (Dirlik, 2005, p. 60).

Hence, heirs to Ji Chaoding, maybe as Gaulard and Lewis, do not hesitate to open, so to say, the conceptual curtains which masked and underestimated the incomparable wealth of Middle Kingdom's past, which Ji Chaoding managed so brilliantly, although discreetly, to save from circumstantial veils that were decided on the highest level of the revolutionary movement in order to better conduct the struggle then occurring.

Resuscitating the explicative capacity of the Asiatic mode of production, as noted by Gaulard (2018, p. 11), and admitting state intervention "outside Keynesian patterns", the eventual use of the concept in more recent periods leads to heated discussions. For instance, Arif Dirlik proposed, justifying in this manner the publication of his own book, "reintroducing into the contemporary discussion issues which, as I see it, are revived to provoke a new kind of discussion" (Dirlik, 2005, p. 4).

Ji Chaoding's biographer stresses the lateness of the publication of his work in China. Analysing his reluctance in "semantically adopting the forbidden concept of the Asiatic mode of production", Lewis assesses that Ji's work "remained too unorthodox for translation into Chinese during his lifetime". He concludes:



Ji Chaoding's dissertation continues to stir debate and admiration in China today; the prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences economic history section reprinted the original 1979 translation with a new introduction in late 1998. (Lewis, 1999, p. 83).

By revisiting Ji Chaoding's work, Chinese themselves, but also other people, among them Brazilians, may find inspiration to give renewed value to their own past, refusing the term "feudal", as suggested by Caio Prado Jr., and thus avoiding a devastating Eurocentrism without abandoning a critical perspective in terms of class.

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