

China's World View and World Historical Studies*

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China is a country which enjoys a long history and a brilliant civilization. As an advanced civilization, it is perhaps the only ancient culture to have survived in recognizable form until the present day. The Chinese are proud of what they see as their 5000 years of civilization and 7000 years of culture. What was the most representative ancient Chinese world view? Are there any implications of this world view on world history studies in China today? How has world history been studied in China? This paper aims to present a summary of the ancient Chinese world view and the evolution of world history studies in China.

By and large, the development of the Chinese world views and world historical studies can be divided into four periods. In the first period, which extends from about 3000 years ago to the mid-19th century, the ancient Chinese held to their typical world view, that is, the idea of “all-under-heaven”. The second stage covers the period from the late 19th century to the founding of the People's Republic of China (Prc) in 1949. The third period begins in 1949 and continues into 1980s. The fourth runs from the 1980s to present.

I

The World View in Ancient China

I.1

The All-under-Heaven World View

In ancient Chinese classics, such as *The Analects*, *Daodejing*, *The Book of Mencius* and *The Book of Xunzi*, one of the most frequently used terms is *Tian xia*, which literally means “all-under-heaven”. It was used by the ancient Chinese to refer to the whole world as they knew or imagined it. It indicated how people in ancient times viewed the world. According to a contemporary Chinese philosopher, Zhao Tingyang, the term “all-under-heaven” encompasses three meanings.

First, it has almost the same meaning as “the world” or “the universe” in Western languages. It refers to “all the lands under heaven” or earth

(*Di*) in the geographical sense. To the ancient Chinese, the sense of the world was made up of places which could be physically reached, such as Japan, Korea, Siam, Vietnam, and the other neighbouring countries. In this world or universe, China was the center of the earth, and thus the word for China in the Chinese language means the Middle Kingdom. The emperor, who held the power to rule the land, was known as “Son of Heaven”. He usually claimed that his sanction to rule derived from a broader, impersonal deity, Heaven (*tian*), whose mandate (*tianming*) might be conferred on any family that was morally worthy of the responsibility. «This doctrine asserted the ruler’s accountability to a supreme moral force that guides the human community. Unlike a Western ruler’s accession through the doctrine of the divine right of kings, which rested on birth alone, the Chinese theory of Heaven’s mandate set up moral criteria for holding power»¹.

Second, “all-under-heaven” contains a psychological connotation which refers to the “hearts of all people”, or the “general will of the people”². The world is the home for people. To really enjoy his empire of “all-under-heaven”, it was not enough for the emperor simply to conquer a large piece of land. He sought to receive sincere acceptance and support from the inhabitants on the land. An emperor, as the philosopher Xunzi (331-238 B.C.) put it, should «satisfy all the people with a good way of governance»³. Confucius once compared people to “water” and a regime to a “boat”. He said: «While water can carry a boat, it can also overturn it»⁴. This echoes an old Chinese saying: «He who wins the support of the people will flourish; he who loses the support of the people will perish». Only after the emperor had won the support of people on earth and under heaven, could he successfully rule the world.

Third, there is also a political connotation to the term “all-under-heaven”. It refers to the Utopian ideal that all those who dwell under heaven should treat each other like members of a single family. The ancient Chinese thought highly of such Confucian precepts as «All-under-heaven is one family; 10,000 countries are as one person» and «All within the four Seas are brothers». These basic philosophical principles stress the harmony and peaceful coexistence among all the peoples under heaven. These ideas not only laid the foundation for Chinese culture but also greatly influenced Western Christian missionaries, who encountered many similarities between the teachings of Jesus and Confucius. According to this sense of the world-as-one-family or brotherhood, harmony and stability were important to guarantee the happiness of people in the big family. What is special about this particular valence of the term of “all-under-heaven” is the ideal and aspiration inherent in it for a certain “world institution” or “world government” based on this ideal.

«All-under-heaven is a profound vision of the world, defined by the trinity of the geographical, psychological, and political worlds»⁵. Compared with the Western idea of “the world”, the Chinese idea of “all-under-heaven” is a philosophical rather than a scientific idea, a conceptually completed world that contains all the possible meanings of the world and excludes none of them.

In ancient China, the theory of “all-under-heaven” was not developed in full detail, but it still had great potential. According to Zhao Tingyang, the philosophical principles of “all-under-heaven” could be summarized as follows:

- a) the world should be the highest political entity if a political system is composed of different levels of governance;
- b) the general governance of the world should be a world institution. The most effective form would be an universal empire;
- c) the political principle must be able to be universalized and transitively run throughout all political levels;
- d) the legitimacy of political institutions must be rooted in the ethical, and the ethical justification of political governance is the representation of the general heart-mind of peoples⁶.

This kind of ideal concept of the world was supported by Confucianism⁷, which stressed the importance of social and moral order. There were six key elements in Confucian doctrine: *li*, “ritual,” an understanding of proper decorum and etiquette; *ren*, “love or human-heartedness”; *shu*, “reciprocity”, that is, «Do not do to others what you do not like yourself»; *zhong*, “loyalty”; *xiao*, “filial piety”; *yi*, “faithful friendship”. Confucianism emphasizes kingcraft and humane government. It holds that men are by nature good but that perfecting them requires work. Rulers and elites should set good examples for the common people. The concepts of loyalty and filial piety discouraged the Chinese from leaving their homes in search of adventure. This conservative ideology prevented them from exploring unknown areas of the world.

In ancient times, the world was in an isolated state. Like the other great nations in the world, such as Greece, Rome, and India, China was marked by ethnocentrism. The Chinese considered China was the center of the world. In their view China was far superior to that of the surrounding nations. Chinese culture seemed universal so it seemed obvious that all the other States derive knowledge and inspiration from the Middle or Central Kingdom.

Central Cultural Florescence [flowering] is another term of Central Kingdom. When a people subjects itself to the Kingly Teachings [i.e. Confucianism] and subordinates itself to the Central Kingdom; when in clothing it is dignified and decorous, and when its customs are marked by filial respect and brotherly submis-

sion; when conduct follows the accepted norms and the principle of righteousness, then one may call it [a part of the] Central Cultural Florescence⁸.

The diplomatic strategy of the ancient Chinese empire was the tribute system, which was a reciprocal foreign relationship between China and the other countries. The «non-Chinese tribal chieftains acknowledged China's superiority by bowing down before the emperor, who held the Mandate of Heaven to govern China and whose magnificent benevolence and compassion naturally attracted outsiders to come and also be transformed by civilization»⁹. Presentation of tribute offerings was normally reciprocated by lavish gifts from the Chinese emperor. Reciprocity was an important aspect in this kind of diplomatic relationship.

1.2

Traditional Chinese History Studies

In traditional China, the Chinese people, especially the rulers, officials and intellectuals, attached great importance to the study of history. Ancient Chinese historians believed that history involved cycles of repetition and that to know the past allowed people to learn from it and to predict the future. Chinese authors wrote a large number of historical books. One of the most influential series of works was the Twenty-Four Histories, which is a collection of historical books covering a period from 3000 B. C. to the Ming Dynasty in the 17th century. It is often considered to be an authoritative source of traditional Chinese history and culture, and is used for research on literature, art, music and other subjects.

Traditional Chinese scholars emphasized the usages or functions of history. They believed that history should serve as a mirror for the present. A knowledge of the history could serve emperors in their task of ruling, aid them in mastering the arts of statecraft and governance and provide them with useful lessons from previous dynasties. For example, the great Han Dynasty historian, Sima Qian, claimed that the purpose of his *Records of the Grand Historian* was «to probe the relationship between human beings and nature, and to understand the causes and the consequences of historical changes»¹⁰. Another widely read historical work written by Sima Guang in the 11th century, *History as a Mirror*, was a general history meant to be studied by emperors and officials so that they could rule with wisdom and foresight.

The traditional Chinese Civil Service Examination system was the most important way to select officials in ancient China. This system was in operation from 606 during the Sui Dynasty into the very early 20th century. To pass different levels of examinations and to be chosen as

officials, candidates were required to study the classical and historical works. As for the ordinary Chinese, history was learnt from folk tales, story-telling and operas.

2

The Beginning of World History¹¹ Study in China. Learning from the West

In the celebrated Confucian classic *The Great Learning* the concept of “all-under-heaven” is located at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of ideas: *tian xia* (the world), *guo* (states or nations), *jia* (families), *shen* (individual persons). «Though the word “*guo*” or state is mentioned here, the ancient Chinese minds typically cared more about “all-under-heaven” or the world, that is supposed to be shared by everybody under Heaven, than about the nation»¹². «As systemically ranked, “all-under-heaven” requires a highest form of governance, while the states are always the sub-units inside the framework of all-under-heaven, something like the “sub-sets” in the “general set”»¹³. “All-under-heaven” was an ideal and vague concept. In reality, for thousands of years, both state and individual existed for the family. That is to say, in ancient China, the real tie that held society together was not patriotism but the blood tie. Consequently, China was extremely vulnerable to foreign invasions in the age dominated by a system of nation-states first developed in the West. In the face of foreign invasions the Chinese were as loose as sand and not united enough to mount serious opposition.

In the mid-19th century, when China began suffering defeats at the hands of the Western powers Chinese intellectuals were forced to discard their ethnocentric point of view. They began to look beyond the familiar places they knew and open their eyes in order to learn from the West. They came to see that China should have her own sense of national identity and national dignity defined according to the game rules of this world of nation-states, rather than remaining defined according to the traditional understanding of “all-under-heaven”. In order to save and to develop China, salvation and enlightenment became the two dominant themes for the Chinese from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century.

The traditional Chinese Civil Service Examination system was abolished in 1905. Before its abolition, some new types of schools and colleges were established as a result of the Hundred-Day Reform in 1898. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, hundreds of Western history books were translated and introduced to meet the demands of the new schools and the urgent need for the ruling class and elites to know more about the world outside China. Translating and introducing the Western

history books would not only broaden the vision of the Chinese but also alter their world view.

At that time, most Western history books in China were translated from Japanese and some from Europe and the United States. For one thing, Japan had become a rising power after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, especially after it defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. Because of Japan's successful reform and development, and also because Japan is China's neighbour, many Chinese youth went to Japan to study its advanced ideas, including Western history. For another, after the Meiji Restoration, Japan laid great emphasis on education. They commissioned many Westerners to translate history books and to compile some comparatively complete world or European history textbooks.

Though most world history books in China were translated from the Japanese, some scholars were not content to learn world history second-hand from Japan. They hoped to learn Western history directly from Europe and the United States, which showed the eagerness of the Chinese intellectuals to acquire more knowledge about the outside world and to access information about the West.

The publication of a large number of Western history books, histories of diverse countries and world history has been significant to the Chinese. Even though the Chinese, in particular Chinese intellectuals, had inherited the idea of "all-under-heaven", the concept of the real "world" was quite vague in their mind. The introduction of Western world history changed the world view of the Chinese. At the turn of the 20th century, under the influence of Western historical study, a famous Chinese scholar, Wang Guowei (1877-1927), emphasized the importance of "relationship" and "system" in the study of world history. He held that the development of history in the human world was a dynamic process. These were entirely new ideas to the Chinese.

Darwin's Theory of Evolution was introduced in late 19th century and has become a key to understanding and interpreting historical development. In spite of its numerous flaws, it provided Chinese scholars with a totally new perspective for the purpose of explaining world history and human development.

They realized the cruelty of the principle of "survival of the fittest" and advocated studying the history of other countries in order to push the Chinese towards reform and progress. The elites were eager for people not only to learn from the West but also learn from those countries that had been subjugated by Westerners. They found that the condition of China was similar to Egypt and India. They began a process of reflection on the reasons for the decline of these nations. Such historical works as the rise and fall of civilizations were popular in China at that time.

The introduction of Western history works opened up new perspectives and provided new ideas to the Chinese scholars. Yet at the same time it also had the effect of shocking and wounding their sensibilities. Chinese scholars learnt that what was supposedly world history and the histories of many countries, was actually the history of Europeans and their progress. Europe was assumed to be the center of the world and the history of the other countries was hardly touched on in those books. Chinese scholars strongly opposed the Eurocentric world view and felt it was unfair to the peoples in other countries, who were seen as peripheral to those with “real” history and often labeled “underdeveloped”, “Non-Western” or “asleep”.

Chinese scholars in this period attacked both traditional historical studies and Eurocentric world history. A good case in point is Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a reformer and an outstanding scholar. Liang's historiographical thought represents the beginning of modern Chinese historiography and reveals some important directions of Chinese thinking about history in the 20th century. For Liang, the major flaw of the “old historians” was their failure to foster the national awareness necessary for a strong and modern nation. Liang called for new history to shoulder the responsibility of national salvation, and to educate Chinese people to love and to save the motherland. His call not only pointed to a new nationalist orientation for historical writing in China, but also indicated the rise of modern historical consciousness among Chinese intellectuals.

Liang believed that translating Western works into Chinese was «the most essential of all essential undertakings to accomplish»¹⁴ because he believed Westerners were successful economically, technologically and politically. Liang had studied the works of Western philosophers of the Enlightenment period, namely Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume and Bentham, translating them and introducing his own interpretation of their works. His essays were published in a number of journals, drawing interest among Chinese intellectuals who had been taken aback by the dismemberment of China's formidable empire at the hands of foreign powers. Nevertheless, Liang was also resentful toward the exponents of Eurocentrism. He once said: «The Westerners were very self-conceited. They thought the world only belonged to them»¹⁵.

In their study of Western works, the Chinese intellectuals attempted to find the answers to such questions as why the world's center of gravity had shifted from the East to the West and how China could become stronger. Though China had lagged behind, they were confident that China would rise among the nations in the future. Some intellectuals hoped that in time a new culture might arise which would absorb the strengths of both the East and West¹⁶.

3

Marxist and Soviet Interpretation of World History

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China underwent radical transformation. In the 1950s, especially during and after the Korean War, China's foreign policy leaned heavily towards the Soviet Union as historians looked to that country as a model for inspiration and emulation. Several domestic political movements, especially the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) almost destroyed historical study in China. It was a period in which China found herself isolated and practiced self-reliance.

Under the strong influence of the official historiography of the Soviet model and the Marxist theory of historical materialism, the history of the world was periodized according to the «five modes of production»: primitive, slavery, feudal, capitalist, and socialist modes. The history of different societies supposedly follows the linear pattern of one mode succeeding another. The periodization of different societies is based on an “advanced” region or country entering a higher new stage. For example, the collapse of the Western Roman Empire marks the beginning of Feudal Society; the Capitalist Society begins with the British Bourgeois Revolution in 1640; and the Russian October Revolution of 1917 marks the beginning of Socialist Society. The history of the different regions, countries, and nations is fit into such modes.

According to this theory, the actual historical process is not predetermined but depends on class struggle, especially the organization and consciousness of the working class. Social progress is driven by the conflict between productive forces and production relations. The uprisings of the slaves and peasants and revolutions have played critical roles in the development of society. Therefore, all world history is a history of class struggles and revolutions. Inspired by this theory, much emphasis was put on the study of economic history, class struggle and the history of revolution. The capitalist revolutions, international workers' movements, international communist movements and the influence of the liberation movements of the colonial and semi-colonial countries on international relations have been extensively studied. This kind of historical view played a dominant role before the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and it still has a strong influence on the study of world history in China today.

In this period, the study of world history in China was also oriented around China's political activities. For example, in order to support the liberation and revolution of the people in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 1960s, Chinese scholars were asked to devote particular

attention to the study of the history of these areas, especially to struggles for national liberation. The study of other parts of the world, especially Western countries, became marginalized. Scholars did not possess a global or a general view of world history and they paid little attention to the creation, adjustment, reform, and development of the capitalist countries in the 21st century. They also ignored the transformations resulting from economic globalization.

The Soviet model and the Marxist theory of historical materialism have created all kinds of problems in the development of world history study in China. They are dogmatic, rigid, oversimplified and ossified. Above all, they lack creativity and are unconvincing. To a certain extent, this model of world history study has given a distorted interpretation of the real history development.

4

Searching for the New Theories and Interpretations of World History

With the implementation of the Reform and Opening Policy in 1978, scholars in China have become aware of the pitfalls of the dogmatic Soviet historiography model and have searched for new ways to investigate world history. They began to eliminate the dominance of the Soviet model and tried to search for new ways to study world history. After 1980s, world historical studies have made some progress and researchers are encouraged to learn from the West, to explore and to develop new historical theories and systems.

From the mid-1980s till now, the two most influential approaches to the study of world history are China's Modernization Paradigm and "from isolation towards an organic whole" historical view.

4.1

China's Modernization Paradigm

This paradigm was put forward by a group of scholars at the History Department of Peking University. The leading scholar was professor Luo Rongqu (1927-96), the founder and first director of the Center for Studies of Modernization Process at Peking University. Beginning in 1980, professor Luo published a series of articles and books on modernization, his most influential work being *The New Theory of Modernization: the Modernization Process of World and China*, which was published in 1993. Professor Luo was influenced by both Western Modernization Theory and Marxist Theory and came up with a new Modernization Paradigm

which can be applied to explain the social transformation of China and East Asia, and their relationship with the world.

As mentioned before, for more than 30 years, Chinese historical studies had been influenced by the official historiography of Soviet Union which described the history of different societies as a linear chronological succession of “five modes of production”. Historians of the new paradigm have tried to break through this uni-linear thinking in their research, by proposing a multi-linear form of historical development based on the notion of “productivity”. According to this theory, productivity is at the core of development, but there are different models of development and social forms, the Western model of modernization being only one among them. Using an interdisciplinary approach they have formulated a theoretical, multi-faceted structural framework of modern social development, broken away from the emphasis on class struggle that once dominated Chinese historiography, and have advanced new concepts with regard to social transformation in modern China and other East Asian countries.

All of these have shed some light on the possibility that China and other Asian countries have modernized themselves along new routes different from the Western model. They also help to explain the «mixed economic systems» that many developing countries practiced during the late 20th century and the variety of social economic formations all around the world. The productivity curve does not rise sharply but waves or oscillates sometimes bounding upwards. The so-called “latecomers’ advantage” means that the underdeveloped countries can obtain the short-term, high-speed, and leaping momentum in the development of productivity through acquisition of know-how and introducing new advanced technology¹⁷.

The modernization paradigm based on monistic multi-linear theory pays more attention to the modern development of non-Western societies, to the particularity of each process, and to the different patterns of modernity. According to this theory, non-Western societies have accepted some universal ideals such as democracy, science, freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law, but not all Western values and systems. The new modernizing models are the results of the interaction of these universal ideals and factors specific to different societies.

While there is some value in this theory, the concept of modernization is not very clear. According to the supporters of the theory, modernization is mainly about productivity. Other economic, political, cultural factors have not been given much attention in this theory.

4.2

“From Isolation towards an Organic Whole” Historical View

The second influential historical view in contemporary China is “from isolation towards an organic whole”, advocated by a famous historian Wu Yujin (1913-1993). Since the 1980s, many of Wu’s articles have provided new ideas and interpretations of world history. Wu insists that world history should be a very important branch of history. It should probe and study how the world has evolved from the ancient to the present stage and how it has developed from a situation of primitive, isolated and scattered nations into a closely integrated whole. It is inappropriate to regard world history as a concourse (or concatenation) of the history of all nations and regions. According to Wu, world history is different from the history of one country or one special area of study and should be examined as a whole or as an integrated system. It should have its own object, task and range of study¹⁸. Wu Yujin’s view of world history is somewhat influenced by the traditional all-under-heaven system, which implies a philosophy of globalism rather than nationalism.

Another important aspect of Wu’s world view is the importance of studying both the vertical and horizontal integrations of world history. Vertical development refers to the transformation of all nations and regions from the primitive to the advanced constitutes vertical development; while the interplay and integration of these societies, and the process from isolation to close connection is horizontal development. The task of world history is to study this evolution and these processes. Wu’s theory of horizontal development is significant in that it represents a break with the traditional idea of world history as a concourse of the history of nations¹⁹. The vertical and horizontal developments of world history are two inseparable aspects and themes of one historical process. As early as the 1980s, Wu put forward a notion similar to global history and transnational history.

Wu edited a six-volume *World History* in 1994, with another famous historian, Qi Shirong. The book was reprinted in 2001 and has been widely used as a textbook for college students in China in recent years. Containing two million Chinese characters, this work provides a systematic look of the development of human beings from the beginning to the 1990s. It looks at the world’s progress from isolated elements towards an organic whole while offering new perspectives and opinions that have never been presented in works on Chinese world history. It not only includes political and economic history but also social history and is representative of world history from the general historical perspective.

5 Conclusion

From the late 19th century to the present day, the study and teaching of world history in China have undergone dramatic changes. In my opinion, there are three themes of world history study in China. First, learning from the West and opposing Eurocentrism; second, striving to establish the Chinese theories of interpreting world history; third, trying to build a real global system or an “all-under-heaven” world history system. Chinese historians have been struggling to find their own voices and to make contributions in the field of world history.

Nevertheless, the study of world history in China is beset by some difficulty. First, the effects of the Cultural Revolution and strong ideological control have meant that the study of world history in China has lagged behind other countries. It has taken a long time for Chinese historians to catch up with the quick development in this field. Second, in world historical studies, there are far from enough non-Chinese historical materials, let alone primary documents, available. Most historians are using Western historical theories to interpret second-hand world history materials. Third, the mastering of the languages of the target countries has also created great difficulty in the study of world history.

Over the past twenty years a great deal of progress has also been made in world history studies in China and Chinese historians have become more active and dynamic. They are more open to the new theories and approaches of historical study. There are also more opportunities for them to communicate and exchange ideas with historians in other parts of the world. Rooted in the long and brilliant Chinese civilization and looking at the new exciting world, Chinese historians can be expected to make some significant contributions to the study of world history.

Notes

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