

Zeitschrift: Traverse : Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue d'histoire
Herausgeber: [s.n.]
Band: 14 (2007)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Debates on World History and Global History : the neglected parameters of Chinese approaches
Autor: Sachsenmaier, Dominic
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1727>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Debates on World History and Global History

The Neglected Parameters of Chinese Approaches

Dominic Sachsenmaier

Conceptualizing History on New Scales

Terms such as world history, trans-cultural history and global history have become more common in recent years, but often they still are seen as a challenge to mainstream understandings of the past.¹ Indeed, our primary access to the past is local. It is tied to regions, nations and other geographically confined areas. According to many dominant interpretations of history, the timelines of the past are necessarily connected to territory, and history does and can only take place within confined spaces. Such notions of history are not only part of popular historical memory but rather deeply engrained in most academic traditions around the globe. In fact, in almost every society in the world, modern historiography was a product of the nation-building process, and originally its disciplinary structures and cultures were geared towards creating images of the past that were compatible with the nation state.² It was usually the modern state that endorsed and enabled the professionalized academic study of history, and in this capacity it greatly influenced the contours of this discipline. In that sense historiographical traditions in most societies all over the world have many disciplinary features in common, even though factors such as the formation of national public spheres certainly led to very different accentuations and variations of the field. The fact that current academic cultures share many common elements and traditions is very important when trying to situate the rising interest in global history within a wider, trans-cultural context.

While the vast majority of historians no longer see themselves as advocates of the nation,³ their discipline remains very much influenced by its heritage as a state-entrusted endeavor. The field, which historically paid most attention to detailed source work as a key to understanding local conditions, still has some difficulties accepting trans-local research agendas.⁴ In many countries fields such as world history or international history have only played a rather marginal role within the academic community.⁵ Even in cases such as China, where world history can look back at rather long disciplinary and institutional traditions, most narratives

tended to take the nation state as the key unit of analysis in research projects.⁶ Furthermore, in most cases world history and – to a lesser extent international history – tended to be viewed primarily as fields producing macroscopic syntheses and textbooks rather than studies based on primary source-based research. Particularly during the past decade this situation has begun to change, since debates among historians on how to gain apt trans-cultural perspectives have intensified. A growing number of scholars with a background in more area-specific research, or fields such as economic or diplomatic history, have become active in the discipline.⁷ A rising number of historians in different parts of the world have come to regard the main trajectories of their own fields as somewhat limited. They point out that particularly the 19th and 20th centuries, ages of unprecedented global interactions and entanglements, have so far largely been viewed through the lenses of the nation state. While there have been mounting critiques of national perspectives, they did not lead to a resurgence of universalizing master narratives à la modernization theory or certain currents of Marxism. The challenge for the future will be to maintain the appreciation of local details while at the same time opening the field to wider, more daring spaces of exploration.

In Western societies it is often mistakenly assumed that the more recent movements towards trans-cultural and global history largely emerged from the United States as well as – to a lesser extent – Europe.⁸ However, also in East Asia, South Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world there have been strong tendencies to move the disciplinary boundaries of the field so that it can encompass topics across and between the realms of the national, the regional and the local. The rather simultaneously rising international interest in trans-cultural history has certainly been conditioned by the overall global, political and intellectual context of our time. Important factors were certainly the international debates on globalization, which after the end of the Cold War grew in many neighboring fields as well as in the general public.⁹ Discussions on related topics such as the debates on migration, the pressure on the nation state, a globalizing economy or the advent of trans-national popular cultures have certainly encouraged historians in many parts of the world to take a position in these debates. In many cases this trend has occurred through rethinking local history in a wider, global context¹⁰ and has started to widen or even deconstruct national tropes by emphasizing modes of interaction and entanglements with the rest of the world. Many debates related to the global history movement in Germany, for instance, seek to change conceptions of German history by exploring the significant colonial and other trans-cultural connections that have traditionally been under-explored by academic scholarship. Likewise, in China a new generation of historians often associates “world history” with attempts to break through some hitherto dominant tendencies to separate the study of Chinese history categorically from international history.

What is considered to be “world history” or “global history” remains largely conditioned by local particularities, which in turn are contingent upon peculiar modes of historical memory, disciplinary traditions, political factors as well as the general intellectual environment. Of course this observation should not suggest that these locally specific debates are largely homogenous within their own parameters and completely unrelated to each other. Everywhere the field is characterized by a variety of methodologies and schools of thought, yet at the same time the central themes and parameters of the debates on world history remain locally, or – in some cases – nationally specific. If we look at the current landscapes of scholarship on world history and global history, we can see a relatively close connection between researchers on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet this Atlantic exchange remains largely imbalanced, since scholarship in the United States is still more influential in European societies than vice versa. Asian approaches to world history, however, have so far been almost completely neglected in the European debates. They have also played only a marginal role in the United States where, for example, the *Journal of World History* has at least published some reports about research in the other parts of the world.¹¹ Yet, just as in Europe, in the United States there are so far hardly any sustained, intensive dialogues with non-Western historians.

At the moment scholarship faces a very remarkable situation, in which the internationally growing interest in global and trans-cultural history is not paralleled by a significant rise of international cooperation in the field. Particularly a field such as world history or global history cannot be academically and publicly convincing if it is global in scope but local in structure. The very fact that there is no given, objective world history and that our interpretation of the global past largely depends on local standpoints, makes exchanges between different nationally and regionally specific research approaches even more important. Particularly the West has to learn to break through its Eurocentric heritage and take the debates in East Asia, India and elsewhere absolutely seriously – seriously enough as to allow for a genuine dialogue and even some conceptual carryovers. Whereas historians in other parts of the world cannot become leaders in their fields without being familiar with Western scholarship, the equivalent is not true for scholars in Europe and the United States.

Global history will be a rather awkward and intellectually unstable endeavor if it continues to be based more on a rising interest in scholarship *about* the world rather than scholarship *in* the world. To start fulfilling the promises and expectations of new multi-faceted, pluralistic forms of world history, new academic landscapes have to be cultivated as well. The field has to become more ecumenical in terms of international cooperation and the general flow of scholarly concepts and ideas. First and foremost, there needs to be a rising awareness of

concomitant scholarship in other parts of the world. For example, the Chinese debates on world history, which will be outlined in this article, need to be treated as a major facet of the current global and transnational turn in historiography. In the past, world historical conceptions in China were heavily influenced by the torpid, rapidly changing currents of Chinese politics since the late 19th century. Today the great themes, which Chinese historians debate in conjunction with world history and trans-cultural history, are significantly different from the spectrum of Western discussions. Regarding the Chinese debates on world history is absolutely essential when trying to situate the current impulses and movements within the field in a larger, global context. In the following sections this article will provide an overview of the historical development of modern academic world historiography in China. Subsequently, it will discuss some of the key issues in the Chinese debates surrounding the wider parameters of the field.

Past Trajectories of World History in China

Like many other cultures, pre-modern China also had a long tradition of “universal histories”, which tried to offer a full gaze at the known world. However, these histories typically painted China as the cultural and historical center of the world and used Confucianism as the prime doctrine to assess other cultures. These Sino-centric conceptions of history certainly did not remain unchallenged – one may think of some early Buddhist works, which treated India as the center of the world,¹² or the great success of Matteo Ricci’s world map,¹³ which was published in China during the early 17th century. Nevertheless, the main currents of pre-modern Chinese historiography tended not to treat other cultures as equals to China.

This situation started to change during the middle of the 19th century when the Middle Kingdom was ravaged by a series of international and domestic crises. Scholars often point to the *Haiguo Tuzhi* (*Illustrated Treatise of the Maritime Countries*), a world account published in 1844 that openly abandoned Sino-centric visions, as the slow beginning of a more extroverted tradition of Chinese social scientific scholarship.¹⁴ A few decades later the search for world historical perspectives was closely tied to attempts at developing a new historiography of China, which could support the nation building process. Around the turn of the 20th century prominent scholars such as Liang Qichao and Yan Fu were fore-runners in the effort to build a national historiography, which – they believed – would no longer focus on dynastic cycles but reveal the forces of development and dynamism inherent in the Chinese past.¹⁵ For this purpose it seemed necessary to copy the national histories of countries such as Britain, Germany or France,

and to detect the forces, which made the industrialized West as well as Japan allegedly so triumphant on a world stage. From the very beginnings of modern academic scholarship in China, “the world” figured as an important stage on which an apt history for a new China could be grounded. The Chinese nation-building project was quite consciously carried out as both, a reaction to outside forces and a transfer process of identities and institutions. Modern Chinese historiography was never fully conceptualized as an autochthonous development but always as closely entangled with international academic currents.

Modern Chinese world history was supposed to act in a close relationship with national history. Among other tasks, the field was expected to help find the allegedly universal principles by which a new China was to be built. Given this official mission of Chinese world history as it unfolded during the late empire and the early republic, it is thus hardly surprising that the field paid high levels of attention to themes such modernization and the expansion of the West. This did not change during the aftermath of World War I when the political and cultural visions of a future China started to polarize in a country facing great intellectual insecurities. Some Chinese scholars started to write world history from a Socialist perspective¹⁶ while others continued to portray Western Europe and the US as the models for China. Some world histories treated Social Darwinism as the predominant logic of the international system whereas others were closer to liberal ideologies.¹⁷ Yet another group of world historians sought to defend cultural perspectives against the waves of Western approaches.

From its beginnings, Chinese world historical writing was thus very closely linked to political struggles – arguably far more so than world history in the West, where the debates among experts were usually centered on academic concepts with mostly indirect political connotations. In spite of their rivaling approaches, most Chinese world historians shared the idea that one guiding principle was underlying the history of the human community. World historians were expected to uncover this principle and thus pave the way for a more prosperous and dignified future of China. It is thus hardly surprising that varying degrees of cultural iconoclasm characterized large parts of the field during the period before World War II. Most Chinese world historians largely accepted Eurocentric discourses and believed that Western history could provide the keys for development while core aspects of Chinese tradition were seen as impediments to progress. In the midst of a climate, which Mao Zedong described as the “search for truth from the West”, the contested issue was not *whether* to learn from more advanced societies, which in the eyes of many Chinese observers included Japan, but *what* to learn from them.

The politicized nature of Chinese world history and its mission to find universal principles did not come to an end after the Communist Revolution in 1949. The

Chinese Communist Party greatly narrowed down the range of world historical interpretations circulating in China, but it continued some of the main trends of the Republican Period.¹⁸ The division of history departments into institutes of Chinese history and world history was turned into a nationwide system, which basically lasts until the present day. During the 1950s and 60s Soviet historiography started to dominate Chinese world historical research – most notably the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, which had been developed under Stalin and quite randomly defined the stages of historical development Marx had outlined in his *Preface to a Critique of Political Economics*. The task of fitting Chinese history into a set of stages, which Marx had derived from European history, provided a significant challenge to Chinese scholars.

During the 1950s and 60s Chinese world history moved within a range of conceptual approaches, which was much narrower than during the Republican Era. Marxism became the sole and only doctrine to explain the history of the Chinese nation and the world at large. In any case, theory was clearly given priority over narrated history. Rather than following Marx in deriving theories from the study of history, Chinese historians tried vigorously to apply a set methodological framework to the Chinese and its surrounding context.¹⁹ Yet Chinese scholars also resorted to interpreting Marxism in ways that would make the Chinese experience compatible with an ideology, which had been largely created from a European context. Due to government censorship, the development of Chinese world history became more closely entangled with the rhythms and changes of Chinese politics. For example, the field was significantly influenced by the political crackdown following the intellectual opening during the Hundred Flowers Movement. Also the fallout with the Soviet Union during the late 1950s and the subsequent increased efforts to turn China into the power center of a global leftist countermovement had a strong impact.

The main world historical text from this period was the *Shijie Tongshi* (*General History of the World*), a volume edited by Wu Yujin and Zhou Yiliang, both Harvard-trained scholars teaching in Beijing.²⁰ Since the *Shijie Tongshi* tried to trace back universal developments in single societies, the text almost completely neglected trans-regional interactions, or topics such as the emergence of trans-national cultural spaces. Wu not only relied on Soviet methodologies but also drew heavily on Geoffrey Barraclough's *History in a Changing World*, which he regarded as a Western alternative to Eurocentric approaches.²¹ Furthermore, the edited volume was clearly centered on the West but also included other world regions. However, it excluded one major part of the world: China itself. The fact that Chinese history was omitted from a comprehensive history of the world is a mirror reflection of the clear division

of labor between world historians and historians of China at that time. Stages of development could and had to be applied to the history of China, yet at the same time the national boundaries stood conceptually so firm that scholars did not often apply trans-national perspectives to the cities and regions of China. In spite of the period's relatively narrow spectrum of methodological options, many Western world historical texts were translated into Chinese during the 1950s and early 60s – officially in order to demonstrate the superiority of Marxism to the Chinese audience but in reality to foster a quite lively and at times rather open debate as well.²² During the Cultural Revolution that started in 1966, however, leading figures in world history were persecuted and sent to work in the countryside. Even after its high tides were over during the 1970s, scholars remained extremely cautious, which – in addition to material factors in a crisis-ridden society – greatly reduced publication levels in the field. Only after the death of Mao in 1976 did the field slowly start to reconstitute itself.

The experience of the Cultural Revolution, including the humiliations and personal hardships most Chinese intellectuals had suffered, greatly changed the intellectual climate of China. These traumatic experiences, which were shared by a majority of scholars and intellectuals, were one of the key factors behind the emergence of a profoundly different trend that rose to prominence during the 1980s. “Culture fever” (*wenhua re*) became a key designation for the intellectual climate during the Deng-era, particularly the 1980s,²³ which also had great ramifications for the academic sector. The term “culture fever” may be somewhat misleading since what characterized the intellectual atmosphere of the 1980s was much less a renewed respect for Chinese tradition than a new wave enthusiasm for Western learning. For example, large parts of the scholarly community were eager to absorb the facets of American and European scholarship that had been developed during the past generation when intellectual flows into China had been reduced to a trickle. One of the main trends of the time was a sense of disillusionment with Chinese culture in general and the Communist Party in particular. Many scholars started to argue that the Mao Period had not broken with Chinese culture but continued a long tradition of isolationism and despotism. Parallel to this new discourse, there was a growing trend to understand Western history as successful history again and the Chinese past as a past shattered by domestic failures and foreign intrusion.²⁴ As a popular and intellectually influential Chinese TV series, which had been produced with the support of party reformers, expressed it, a blue, ocean-oriented culture would need to replace the yellow, isolationist traditions of China.²⁵ In this series, parts of which were centered on a historical narrative, the sea-faring nations were portrayed as more open, dynamic and hence superior to the allegedly introverted civilization of China. Like many portraits of Chinese history published at the time, this series either downplayed or largely ignored the

complex and multi-layered interactions between China and the outside world. In that sense it clung to a monolithic, holistic vision of Chinese history and paid hardly any attention to the great differences between regions such as the inner Asian provinces or the Southeastern coastal areas – differences, which were partly conditioned by their foreign connections.

The new intellectual paradigms of the culture fever period also affected world historical scholarship. A wide range of texts by world historians, such as William McNeill's *Rise of the West*,²⁶ were translated into Chinese and generated intensive discussions.²⁷ Another important change was the introduction of new Marxist theories such as world systems theory or E. P. Thompson's work,²⁸ which started to include cultural factors into the study of class-related movements. During the 1980s an increasing number of Chinese scholars managed to spend significant research times abroad while at the same time prominent Western world historians visited China.²⁹ The methodologies applied by Chinese world historians were still grounded in historical materialism, but scholars started to operate with a wealth of new perspectives ranging from cultural history to oral history.

The Tiananmen crackdown was only followed by a brief period of tight intellectual and academic control, even though its impacts on intellectual life were certainly profound.³⁰ During the 1990s the range of methodologies applied by world historians continued to grow wider.³¹ Nevertheless, the culture fever period came to an end, and the intellectual mood grew more in favor of nativist discourses. An increasing number of academics in China no longer regarded copying Western methodologies as an attractive option. Many world historians started to believe in the necessity to develop specifically Chinese perspectives of world history, that would differ from the interpretations of the alleged centers of the modern international system. There was a certain agreement that alternative approaches to European and American world histories could be based on Sinified versions of Marxist and other Western methodologies. One of the driving forces behind the effort to develop trans-cultural histories with Chinese characteristics was actually Wu Yujin, the *grand seigneur* of Marxist world history and editor of the landmark publication in 1962. Wu Yujin tried to exemplify his new emphasis on cross-cultural entanglements and pluralistic visions in his edited *World History*, which appeared in 1994, a year after his death.³² The book depicts the 20th century as an unresolved global competition between socialism and capitalism, even though it stresses that both sides had started to evolve into different forms.

Important for the pluralization of Chinese scholarship were the growing levels of interaction between historians from the Chinese mainland and their colleagues in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Due to its local historical experience Hong Kong has certain research traditions, which concentrate on themes such as “marginality” and “hybridity” as well as on the history of global migrations, diasporas and

colonialism.³³ Taiwanese scholars placed more emphasis on conceptualizing Chinese tradition in new cultural, regional and global contexts,³⁴ which was often part of the attempt to gain a new Taiwanese identity.³⁵ In spite of such new methodological impulses, the institutional parameters of world history in China have been slow to change. Almost all history departments are still split into institutes of world history and Chinese history, and on paper about 40 per cent of all Chinese historians qualify as world historians. But this number actually hides a more problematic situation: world historical institutes actually comprise all non-Chinese history. This means that most historians of Japan, Europe, Africa and other parts of the world qualify as “world historians” for the mere reason that their own research actually focuses on one part of the outside world. Furthermore, the regional expertise of the vast majority of “world historians” is either Western and – especially among an older generation of Chinese scholars – Russian/Soviet history. A certain number of Chinese historians do research on neighboring societies ranging from Japan to the Central Asian republics but only a small fraction covers other world regions.³⁶

Modernization versus Revolution

In a country experiencing a rapidly changing position in the international system, world historical research is tightly interwoven with more general debates on the future of China. Due to China’s enormous transformations, historiography in general and world history in particular tend to enjoy higher degrees of public attention than in most Western societies. As a consequence, most developments in the field need to be seen in the context of wider intellectual movements and political contestations over the future of China and its place in the world. Academic discussions tend to be ardent, which has been often noted by outside observers. During a lecture tour in China in 2001 Jürgen Habermas even expressed some envy of the dense intellectual atmosphere in a country where academic institutions still serve as the central forums for cultural and societal debates. A significant number of Chinese historians do not see themselves solely as academic experts but also as intellectuals whose work carries a wider significance for the public sector. Among the debates, which also affected the field of world history, are the discussions on the concepts of “modernization” and “revolution”.³⁷ During the 1980s a growing number of world historians started to investigate the history of China and other developing societies under the aegis of “modernization” – a concept endorsed by the Deng government and its successors. Many Chinese scholars even referred to the classics of modernization theory such as the works of W. W. Rostow or Cyril E. Black, which in Western academic discourse after

the cultural turn had come to be widely regarded as methodologically obsolete or even as instruments of neo-imperialism.³⁸ By contrast, during the 1980s quite a few Chinese social historians started to use the concept of “modernization”³⁹ in order to confront earlier government-endorsed interpretations of history, which had ascribed progress almost exclusively to revolutionary movements. Many proponents of the modernization paradigm challenged this revolutionary trope by arguing that many facets of communism in China had not truly broken with the Chinese past but rather continued many problematic elements of Chinese “tradition”. The proponents of the “feudal communism hypothesis” pointed to hierarchical social structures, the worship of party leaders or the corruption in the bureaucratic apparatus as examples of allegedly “pre-modern” facets of life under Mao.⁴⁰

In conjunction with the rising interest in historical continuities, many scholars came to question the year 1949 as the clear historical watershed, as which it had been described in previous Chinese scholarship. For example, some studies focused on modernizing processes initiated by the Guomindang government prior to World War II, while others dealt with the beginnings of a modern Chinese civil society during the late Qing-dynasty (before 1911) and the Republican Period (1911–1949). In such studies many central tenets of the Mao years appear implicitly as relapses of traditional elements destroying many of the modern seeds that had started to grow before the Communist Revolution.⁴¹ Similar developments can be observed in the periodizations in more recently published world historical accounts. For example, important works such as Wu Yujin’s world history edition of 1994 abandon the year 1917 as a world historical landmark,⁴² which undermines the central position of revolutionary changes in world history. Rather than choosing the Russian Revolution as a temporal demarcation line, Wu’s *Shijie shi* treats the year 1900 as an approximate transition between the periods of contemporary and modern history. From a slightly different perspective also Qian Chengdan, a prominent world historian based in Beijing, has argued that during the past few 100 years modernization processes constituted the core of world historical developments.⁴³ Under the rising influence of modernization as a lead paradigm, many standard world history texts in China now tend to portray European history as advanced and progressive while they depict East Asia, Africa and other parts of the world as previously rather stagnant cultures.⁴⁴ Such discourses of modernization do not necessarily need to be understood as endorsements of developmental models following a “Western” path. In fact, many Chinese social historians have pointed out that the latest developments in Western theory can be used to enhance local approaches, which may eventually provide a globally recognized spectrum of alternatives to Western models of world history.⁴⁵ The potential alternative

Chinese perspective, many intellectuals assume, have been profoundly shaped by socialism.

The continued prominence of quite uni-linear master narratives among many historians in China marks a major difference from main currents of Western historiography in recent decades. Nevertheless, a growing number of Chinese scholars have pointed to the great diversity of approaches within their field in order to suggest that social history actually challenges the search for a coherent set of methodologies⁴⁶ and, by implication, sociopolitical models allegedly covering the entire world. Indeed social historians introduced a wealth of new topics to Chinese historiography ranging from the study of urban milieus and trans-national networks to research on migrant communities. In this context some scholars came up with new trans-cultural perspectives that were incompatible with older lead paradigms such as revolutionary progress or tropes equating globalization with modernization.⁴⁷

New Spatial Parameters

Chinese researchers often position themselves as reform Marxists who moved the research focus from the structure of societies to their transformations.⁴⁸ This paradigm shift opened the gateways to alternative interpretations of the Chinese past and its entanglements with the world beyond. For example, parts of the rapidly growing literature on China's modernization have led to spatial concepts, which add new facets to the understanding of China's interconnections with its neighbors and the world beyond.⁴⁹ Studies of urban modernization, for instance, have started exploring the tight networks among Chinese coastal, Japanese and Korean cities as distinct trans-national spaces characterized by a high intensity of exchanges.⁵⁰ Generally speaking, Mainland Chinese historians studying cultural hybridization processes have drawn heavily upon scholarship in Hong Kong where the study of inter-cultural encounters can look back on a long tradition.⁵¹ Under the impact of such new research China no longer appears as a historical space that can be clearly demarcated. Conceptualizing Chinese history, many scholars have come to agree, has become increasingly complex and impossible without embedding it into macro-regional or world historical perspectives.⁵²

To a certain extent the growing presence of neo-humanist,⁵³ postmodern and post-colonial thought in China further stimulated the search for new ways of conceptualizing the interplay between the global and the local in the Chinese case. Furthermore, these theories or ideas derived from them proved to be important tools to further deconstruct Marxist and other Western master narratives. Many intellectuals associated with the somewhat ill defined school of "post-ism"

(*houxue*) referred to Chinese “otherness” when arguing against the claim that China’s historical experience could be measured by Western standards and be understood through the lenses of Western concepts.⁵⁴ This is very often presented as a direct challenge to Western world histories, which – scholars belonging to this group argue – are based on the alleged universality of Western values and concepts.⁵⁵ Yet at the same time postmodern and post-colonial elements were also used as essential ingredients of new intellectual nativisms and academic nationalisms, which rebelled against attempts at deconstructing and internationalizing hitherto dominant tropes of Chinese history. Unfortunately a significant number of neo-conservative or “post-ist” scholars do not use postmodern doubts to equally deconstruct discourses of Chinese national belonging but have rather turned to advocate certain cultural essentialisms.⁵⁶

Parts of these more right-wing interpretations of post-colonial and postmodern thought in China are related to an intellectual wave generated by the so-called “national studies fever” (*guoxue re*). This movement had initially been promoted by the government but then took a life of its own through its connections to growing forms of grassroots nationalism.⁵⁷ Many scholars affiliated with this trend called for national identity as a major principle for the Chinese humanities and social sciences. In this context they started to actively defend nation-centered perspectives against historiographical trends that could – in their eyes – potentially undermine the cause of state building. Efforts to deconstruct the idea of a contingent, largely autochthonous Chinese past are seen as a threat to Chinese historical integrity. Yu Pei, the director of the World History Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, for instance, published an article in which he defended patriotism as the leading paradigm in world history. Yu’s understanding of national history is characterized by the idea that Chinese nationhood can be traced back several millennia in the past.⁵⁸ Some scholars have argued that China should study the world primarily because it can be expected to rise to a great power status by the middle of the century.⁵⁹ Others have resorted to advocating strict civilizational perspectives in the spirit of Oswald Spengler as the main parameters for world historical writing in China.⁶⁰

Chinese World Histories and the Global Scholarly Community

A crude look at the current intellectual context of world historical research in China necessarily passes by a whole range of additional theories that have played an important role in China during the past few decades.⁶¹ Yet as evidenced by the examples above, the current debates on world history are tied to larger issues faced by the general public as well as government circles.⁶² In a country

experiencing epochal changes, debating new forms of world historical thinking or internationalizing the study of Chinese history has implications for such essential problems as the meaning of being Chinese, China's place in the world or the role of Marxism as a state orthodoxy and lead paradigm. The intellectual positions surrounding such burning issues are certainly very complex and characterized by conceptual overlaps, shifting alliances and individual theorizing. Yet it is possible to discern several idealtypical intellectual divides and polarizing questions, which are being debated in academic circles and the public beyond. Among these core problems is the issue to what extent China needs to develop alternatives to the main currents of Western theory and conceptions of history. Furthermore, there is the question whether such alternative approaches should be strictly confined to Chinese visions of the past or whether they may become more influential in other parts of the world. Related to this issue, an opinion gap separates those who defend strictly national, or even nationalist visions of the Chinese past from those who proceed to deconstruct the idea of China as a coherent historical arena by shedding light on the multifaceted entanglements of its regions with the world beyond.

Since Chinese visions of world history have been decisively shaped by international intellectual currents and modes of global consciousness it would be wrong to exoticize them as worldviews of the "Other". Quite to the contrary, Chinese perspectives of world history are largely outcomes of international exchanges, translations, reactions as well as intellectual adaptation processes to outside trends. This is not to suggest that Chinese historiography in general and world history has melted into a supposed homogenous international community of academic historians. The spectrum of world historical approaches remains locally specific and is partly shaped by particular historical experiences, political factors, academic traditions and intellectual forces. Yet the peculiarities of world history in China need to be understood as the products of global dynamics rather than as the outcome of an almost independent tradition of conceptualizing the past.

It is especially because the debates of world history in China have gained shape in complex international nexuses that they should receive more attention in the Western discussions about possible new paths to world history.⁶³ Like scholarship in other societies, the great issues debated by Chinese historians offer new perspectives on the processes of globalization as well as the challenges, historical memories and expectations they evoke. In the future, the changing global research landscapes may actually strengthen the Chinese voice in international historical dialogues. Recently Chinese academia has already experienced a spectacular growth in financial resources, which made it possible to start transforming a fairly large number of Chinese universities into centers of higher learning endowed

with substantial library holdings and other resources. Institutions such as Beijing University or Fudan University in Shanghai are arguably already in the process of becoming globally significant intellectual transaction hubs. Particularly during the past decade, a rapidly growing number of Chinese historians were either able to go abroad on a regular basis or host international conferences in China. Changes in global funding structures may suggest that less Western-centric international research communities might be in the offing.

The field of global history could greatly benefit from more international dialogues, which may be one of the best ways to ensure the growth of multi-faceted, dialogical perspectives on world history. The sides in such dialogues will not be neatly structured around Western and alternative non-Western epistemologies. For example, as this article has shown, developmental models such as modernization theory tend to be far more influential within parts of Chinese academia than in most Western societies. International discussions pertaining to trans-cultural, global and world histories will need to go beyond academic issues in the narrow sense and be open to discussing *problematiks* ranging from historical memory to the hierarchies in the international landscapes of knowledge. Academic exchanges on these questions will necessarily entail a wider debate on the values and world-views within which historical scholarship is embedded.

Notes

- 1 In this essay I will use the terms “trans-cultural history”, “world history” and “global history” as largely synonymous to each other. Even though there are debates over the advantages and disadvantages of each term, the ways these terms are being used by researchers do overlap to such a degree that a categorical distinction is not possible in a study assessing parts of the current research landscape.
- 2 See, for example, Erik Lonnroth, Karl Molin, Bjork Ragnar (ed.), *Conceptions of National History*, Berlin 1994.
- 3 More general on the social sciences see, for example, Peter Wagner, *Sozialwissenschaften und Staat: Frankreich, Italien, Deutschland 1870–1980*, Frankfurt a. M. 1990.
- 4 Akira Iriye, “The Internationalization of History”, *American Historical Review* 94/1 (1989), 1–10.
- 5 Compare Jerry H. Bentley, *Shapes of World History in Twentieth-Century Scholarship*, Washington 1996, vol. 14: *Essays on Global and Comparative History*.
- 6 On various traditions of international history see Wilfried Loth, Jürgen Osterhammel (ed.), *Internationale Geschichte: Themen – Ergebnisse – Aussichten*, München 2000.
- 7 See, for example, Jan Luiten van Zanden, *On Global Economic History: A Personal View on an Agenda for Future Research*, 2004 (<http://www.iisg.nl/research/jvz-research.pdf>, accessed 22. 5. 2007). Also, Ursula Lehmkuhl, “Diplomatiegeschichte als internationale Kulturgeschichte: Theoretische Ansätze und empirische Forschung zwischen Historischer Kulturwissenschaft und Soziologischem Institutionalismus”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27 (2001), 394–423.

- 8 For an extensive summary and interpretation of the status quo of US world history see Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*, New York 2003.
- 9 See Mauro F. Guillén, "Is Globalization Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble? A Critique of Five Key Debates in the Social Science Literature", *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001), 241.
- 10 For the United States see, for example, Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Berkeley 2002. For Germany see, for example, Sebastian Conrad, Jürgen Osterhammel (ed.), *Das Kaiserreich Transnational*, Göttingen 2004.
- 11 An overview of debates in the United States is provided by Manning (cf. note 8).
- 12 Still relevant: Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, Leiden 1959, 13–25.
- 13 See Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Die Aufnahme europäischer Inhalte in die chinesische Kultur durch Zhu Zongyuan (ca. 1616–1660)*, Nettetal 2001, chapter 4.
- 14 For more details see Edward Q. Wang, "World History in Traditional China", *Storia della Storiografia* 35 (1999), 83–96, particularly 91 ff.
- 15 See, for example, Tang Xiaobing, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao*, Stanford 1996. See also Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago 1995.
- 16 For more details see Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–37*, Berkeley 1978.
- 17 An overview of Chinese historiography during the 1920s is provided by Edward Q. Wang, *Inventing China Through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography*, New York 2001.
- 18 See Edward Q. Wang, "Between Marxism and Nationalism: Chinese Historiography and the Soviet Influence, 1949–1963", *Journal of Contemporary China* 9/23 (2000), 95–111.
- 19 See Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "On Shi and Lun: Towards a Typology of Historiography in the PRC", *History and Theory* 35/4 (1996), 74–95.
- 20 For more details see Xu Luo, "Reconstructing World History in the People's Republic of China Since the 1980s", *Journal of World History* 18/3 (2007).
- 21 Four volumes, published by Renmin Chubanshe in 1962. For a discussion in a Western language see Leif Littrup, "World History With Chinese Characteristics", *Culture and History* 5 (1989), 39–64. Wu criticized Barraclough for not recognizing that Western capitalism was doomed whereas the socialist societies had found a key to the future.
- 22 See Edward Q. Wang, "China and Its Other(s) in Historical Narratives", *Journal of World History* 14/3 (2003), 327–357, particularly 335 ff.
- 23 For more details see Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Berkeley 1996. See also Edward X. Gu, "Cultural Intellectuals and the Politics of Cultural Public Space in Communist China, 1979–1989", *Journal of Asian Studies* 58/2 (1999), 389–431.
- 24 Wang (cf. note 22), 343 ff.
- 25 See Su Xiaokang, Wang Luoxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, Ithaca 1991.
- 26 See William McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, Chicago 1963.
- 27 See Xu Luo (cf. note 20).
- 28 Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London 1963.
- 29 An interesting account can be found in the essays of the prominent Chinese world historian Zhang Zhilian who is fluent in English and French and introduced the Annales School to China. See Idem, *Cong tongjian dao renquan yanjiu* [From Studies on the Comprehensive Mirror to the Study of Human Rights], Beijing 1995.
- 30 A good depiction of the transition of intellectual life from the 1980s to the 1990s is Wang Chaohua, "Introduction: Minds of the Nineties", in Idem (ed.), *One China, Many Paths*, London 2003, 9–45.

- 31 For example: Wang Side (ed.), *Shijie Tongshi*, 3 vols., Shanghai 2001; Qi Tao (ed.), *Shijie tongshi jiaocheng*, Jinan 2001; Ma Shili (ed.), *Shijie Shigang*, 2 vols., Jinan 1999.
- 32 Wu Yujin, Qi Shirong (ed.), *Shijie shi*, 6 vols., Beijing 1994. See also Xu Luo (cf. note 20).
- 33 See Kwok Siu-Tong, "Ideologie und Historiographie in den Regionen Chinas im Vergleich", *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte* 4/2 (2003), 87–102.
- 34 See Wang Qingjia, "Taiwan shixue wushi nian: chuancheng, fangfa, quxiang" [Taiwanese Historiography During the Past 50 Years: Heritage, Methodologies, Trends], Taipei 2002.
- 35 Hsiung Ping-Chen, "Ein China im Wandel auf Weltreise: Überlegungen zu einem Jahrhundert Weltgeschichte im Kontext des Modernen China", *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte* 4/2 (2003), 69–86.
- 36 See Zhang Haipeng, "2000 nian zhongguo jindaishi yanjiu xueshu dongtai gaishu" [Research Report on Modern Chinese History in the Year 2000], *Jindaishi yanjiu* 1 (2002), 200–244.
- 37 A critical discussion of modernization as a new paradigm in Chinese historiography is Arif Dirlik, "Reversals, Ironies, Hegemonies: Notes on the Contemporary Historiography of Modern China", in Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl, Peter Gran (ed.), *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*, Oxford 2000, 125 f.
- 38 For historians applying the concept see, for instance, Xu Jilin, *Zhongguo yu Xiandaihua* [China and Modernization], Shanghai 2000.
- 39 Compare Tao Dongfeng, "Cong huhuan xiandaixing dao fansi xiandaixing" [From Calling for Modernity to Reconsidering Modernity], *Ershi shiji* 53 (1999).
- 40 See Lawrence Sullivan, "The Controversy over 'Feudal Despotism': Politics and Historiography in China, 1978–82", in Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*, New York 1993. In the West this view has become very popular through the largely autobiographical account of Chang Jung, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, London 1991.
- 41 See, for example, Yuan Weishi, "Jiusi yisheng de zhongguo xiandaihua" [The Nine Deaths and One Life of Chinese Modernization], *Dongzhou Yanjiu* 18 (1996).
- 42 Xu Luo (cf. note 20).
- 43 Qian Chengdan, "Yi Xiandaihua wei zhuti guojian shijie jinxiaidaishi xinde xueke tixi" [Creating a New Theoretical Structure for Modern and Contemporary History Around the Theme of Modernization], *Shijie Lishi* 3 (2003), 2–11.
- 44 For example: Wang Side (ed.), *Shijie Tongshi*, 3 vols., Shanghai 2001; Wu Yujin, Qi Shirong (ed.), *Shijie shi* [World History], 6 vols., Beijing 1994.
- 45 For example: Wei Zemin, "Makesizhuyi zhongguohua de quanqiuixing yihan" [The Global Implications of Sinified Marxism], *Gongdang wenti yanjiu* 28/12 (2002); Yu Danchu, "Jiaqi-ang shijie lishi yu jindai zhongguo wenti yanjiu de jianyi" [Strengthening the ties between research topics on modern China and the World], *Lixue lilun yanjiu* 4 (1992).
- 46 See Mechthild Leutner, "Chinese Historiography and (West-)German/Western Historiography: A Dialogue? The Social History Turn in China Since the 1980s", *Berliner China-Hefte* 26 (2004), 63–77, particularly 72 ff.
- 47 For more details see Zhao Shiyu, Deng Qingping, "Ershi shiji zhongguo shehuixue yanjiu de huigu yu sikao" [Backward Perspectives and Thoughts About Social Historical Research During the 20th Century], *Lishi yanjiu* 6 (2001), 157–172. See also Mechthild Leutner, "Die sozialgeschichtliche Wende in China seit den 1980ern. Chinesische und deutsche/westliche Historiography: ein Dialog?", *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte* 4/2 (2003), 103–120.
- 48 Compare Yue Qingping, "Nuli tuozhuan shehuishi yanjiu de shendu he guangdu – zhongguo shehuishi disici yantaohui shuping" [Eagerly Driving Forward the Deepening and Broadening of Social Historical Research – Report on the Fourth Conference of Chinese Social History], *Zhongguo yanjiu dongtai* 1 (2002), 3–9.

- 49 For a discussion see Kwok Siu-Tong, "Cultural Migration and Historiography in the Regions of China since the End of World War II", *Berliner China-Hefte* 26 (2004), 53–62, particularly 56–58.
- 50 For research in the United States see, for example, Leo Ching, "Globalizing the Regional and Regionalizing the Global: Mass Culture and Asianism in the Age of Late Capital", *Public Culture* 12/1 (2000), 233–257.
- 51 See also Kwok Siu-Tong, "Cultural Migration and Historiography in the Regions of China since the End of World War II", *Berliner China-Hefte* 26 (2004), 53–62.
- 52 See Yu Yujin, "Houxiandai shiye zhong de makesi" [Marx Seen From Postmodern Perspectives], *Tianjin Shehui xuebao* 5 (2002).
- 53 A summary of some positions is provided by Zheng Ruhui, "Zouxiang xiandaihua – ji ershi shiji zhongwai wenhua yu xiandaihua jiangzuo" [Moving Towards Modernization – Summarizing Lectures on Chinese Culture and Modernization During the 20th Century], *Mingbao yuekan* 39/4 (2004).
- 54 Compare Ben Xu, "From Modernity to 'Chineseness': The Rise of Nativist Cultural Theory in Post-1989 China", *Positions* 6/1 (1998), 203–237.
- 55 For more details see Axel Schneider, "Bridging the Gap: Attempts at Constructing a 'New' Historical-Cultural Identity in the People's Republic of China", *East Asian History* 22 (2001), 129–143.
- 56 Compare Li Shitao (ed.), *Zhishifenzi lichang: jijin yu baoshou zhi jian de dongdang* [The Intellectuals' Standpoints: Conflicts between Radicals and Conservatives], Changchun 2000.
- 57 About recent developments in Chinese nationalism see Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, Berkeley 2004.
- 58 Yu Pei, "Hongyang zhongguo shijieshi yanjiu de minzu jingshen" [Uphold the National Spirit in World Historical Research], *Shijie shi* 5 (2004), 4–11.
- 59 Hou Jianxin, "Xin shiji woguo de shijieshi yanjiu yao shang xinshuiping" [In the New Century World Historical Research in Our Country Must Reach a New Level], *Shijie lishi* 1 (2000).
- 60 Pan Guang, "Guanyu xin shiji zhongguo shijie shixueke fazhan de jidian kanfa" [Some Perspectives on World Historical Research in China During the New Century], *Shijie lishi* 1 (2000).
- 61 For example, the idea of multiple or alternative modernities, which in China was advocated most prominently by Luo Rongqu, has enjoyed significant levels of popularity ever since the 1990s. See Jin Guantao, Liu Qingfeng, "Duoyuan xindaihua jiqi kunhuo" [Multiple Modernization and Their Puzzles], *Ershiyi shiji* 66 (2001). Also: Luo Rongqu, *Xiandaihua xinlun – shijie yu zhongguo de xiandaihua jincheng* [New Theories of Modernity – Modernization Processes in the World and China], Beijing 2004.
- 62 A summary of recent contested issues is He Fangchuan, Yu Pei, "Shijie lishi yanjiusuo jiansuo 40 zhounian xueshu yantaohui zongshu" [A Summary of the Symposium on the 40th Anniversary of the Institute of World History (at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences)], *Shijie lishi* 1 (2005).
- 63 Dominic Sachsenmaier, "World History as Ecumenical History?", *Journal of World History* (forthcoming).

Abstract**Debates on World History and Global History.
The Neglected Parameters of Chinese Approaches**

In Western societies it is often mistakenly assumed that the more recent movements towards trans-cultural and global history largely emerged from the United States as well as – to a lesser extent – Europe. However, also in East Asia, South Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world there have been strong tendencies to move the disciplinary boundaries of the field so that it can encompass new topics between the realms of the national, the regional and the local. As the author argues, it is essential to pay attention to the Chinese debates on world history when trying to situate the current impulses and movements within the field in a larger, global context. The article provides an overview of the historical development of modern academic world historiography in China and subsequently discusses some of the key issues in the Chinese debates surrounding the wider parameters of the field.