

World History in the People's Republic of China

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WORLD history in China faces some of the same challenges as in America: how to make sense out of the larger historical patterns that have shaped our interconnected modern world, and how to relate one's own national identity to those patterns. But the very different historical experiences of modern China make it start with premises that are unfamiliar and arrive at conclusions that are unacceptable to most western historians.

For China, modern history has witnessed the collapse of a traditional civilization and its world view under the irresistible impact of modern western industrial civilization. The legacy of those three or four thousand years of Chinese history before the "coming of the west" has been important in shaping modern Chinese views of the world and of world history. But so has the traumatic experience of the last 150 years—a period of unprecedented national humiliation, cultural loss and desperate attempts to catch up and assert equivalence with the all-intrusive west. Americans and Westerners in general have had the luxury of contemplating a modern world history that, for all its turbulence and uncertainties, is largely of their own making. Chinese, heirs to a long tradition of historical autonomy and cultural superiority, have to view the "rise of the west" with less equanimity even when they acknowledge that it has remade the world they live in.

In other words, while it has been a challenge for American world historians to counteract western assumptions of cultural superiority stemming from the expansion of Europe, Chinese his-

torians have faced the task of constructing a world history that restores a sense of the worth and dignity of non-western peoples, but especially China, on a world scale. The efforts in that direction by modernists and reformers go back at least as far as the end of the nineteenth century when Liang Qichao and other modernizers of that generation tried to stimulate political reform and national consciousness by encouraging the study of "world history."¹ In fact, the creation of a new historiography inspired by western concepts and theories was an important part of the intellectual, and ultimately the political, revolution that took place in the first half of this century.² But this article will concentrate on how world history has been conceived, and propagated, in the People's Republic of China since 1949. The history of world history in pre-Communist China and its variations in Taiwan and Hong Kong deserve separate treatment elsewhere.

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Although weakening somewhat in the last few years, during most of the existence of the People's Republic, the study and teaching of world history has been dominated by two forces—insularity and ideology. The insularity comes partly from the traditional self-centeredness of "the Middle Kingdom," especially strong with regard to the study of the past and in some ways reinforced by modern nationalistic sentiments. More important, however, is the recent experience of political isolation from the rest of the world, particularly the intellectual life of Europe and North America, during the first thirty years of the People's Republic. This is what has made most Chinese intellectuals, including historians, very poorly informed about the history and the historiography of the rest of the world except as filtered through Russian-style Marxism.

¹ See Liang's own effort at "world history," i.e., the history of foreign countries. Also for a recent Chinese appraisal of this period, Zhang Chengzong and Chen Yangfang, "Jianlun wuxu bianfa shiqi waiguoshi de jieshao yu yanjiu" ("A simple discussion to the introduction and study of the history of foreign countries at the time of the 1898 reforms"), *Shijiu lishi* (World history) 1 (1987): 116–21.

² Two important western studies of early twentieth-century Chinese historiography, in its historical setting, are: Laurence Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's New History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), and Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

This isolation, or insularity, can be seen in the way history is organized in China. There is “national history,” which treats China, and “world history,” which deals with everything else. There are numerous broad-gauged surveys (mostly textbooks) that attempt to encompass, within a Marxist framework, the major developments of world history, but they pointedly exclude China. As the preface to a recent contemporary world history textbook explained, China is important for the modern world, but it has not been included because of the way the university history curriculum is organized.³ So, organizationally and perhaps conceptually, history in China is neatly divided between their own and that of others—national and foreign, although the latter is often put under the rubric “world history.”

The simple division between national and foreign, ours and theirs, is somewhat reminiscent of the old Confucian dichotomy between *nei* and *wai*, inner and outer. It also resembles the modern Chinese practice of dividing many areas where there has been a significant western cultural impact into “Chinese” and “western.” For instance, there is a Chinese or national painting and a western painting, a Chinese medicine and a western medicine, even Chinese food and western food. Perhaps it is significant that they refer to the alternative to Chinese history as “world history,” not “western history,” even if most of it is in fact western.

In practice, most of Chinese historiography is still China-centered. This is evident in the marked preponderance of Chinese over world history in terms of numbers of researchers, teachers, and publications. For example, a survey of the two leading historical journals, *Lishi Yanjiu* (Historical research) and *Lishi Jiaoxue* (History teaching), shows that the articles on foreign history make up only 17.5% of the total in the research journal and 27% of the total in the teaching journal. Moreover, there is no discernable long-term trend towards a higher proportion of foreign, or world, history (see figs. 1 and 2). To be sure, this crude statistical measure and simple Chinese–foreign division obscures some significant trends in the 1980s, such as a shift from Communist bloc and revolutionary history to the history of western capitalist countries

³ Xia Jingcai, *Shijie xiandai shi* (World contemporary history) (Jilin, 1985), p. 4. This impression is reinforced by the recent research of Leif Littrup, “World History with Chinese Characteristics,” *Culture and History* 5 (1989): 39–64. Littrup found only two recent university texts that included China in world history and none at the high school level.

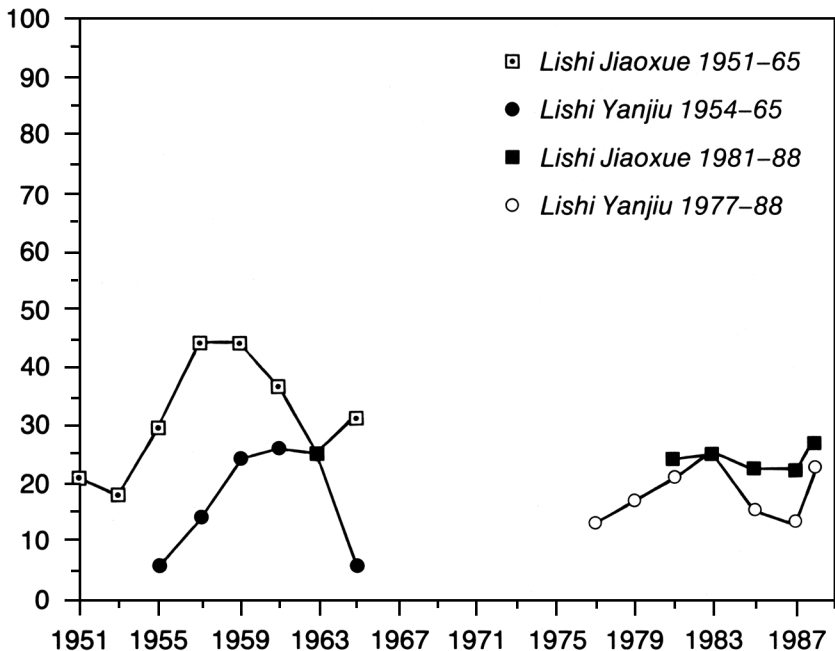


Figure 1. Percentage of articles on “world history.”

and also various kinds of comparative history not confined within the strictures of Marxist historical determinism.⁴

But the plain fact that, at the publication level, Chinese topics predominate over foreign (all the rest of the world) by almost a four-to-one ratio suggests that a certain insularity, or at least a preoccupation with home concerns, has not disappeared.

When we move to the classroom, especially below the university level, the imbalance is not so striking. In fact, recent curriculum changes for the high schools now call for three semesters each of Chinese and world history at both the junior and senior high school levels. This clearly is a reflection of the political and educational leadership’s concern in the 1980s that the “open country” policy extend into the schools.

⁴ For instance, in recent years the editors of *Shijie lishi* (World history) have openly solicited comparative articles, and the June 1988 issue of the journal had six of its fourteen articles on such comparative themes as “Inheritance Systems of China and Western European Nations,” “Comparative Policies Discouraging Commerce in China and Western Europe,” and “History of Industrialization in England and Japan.”

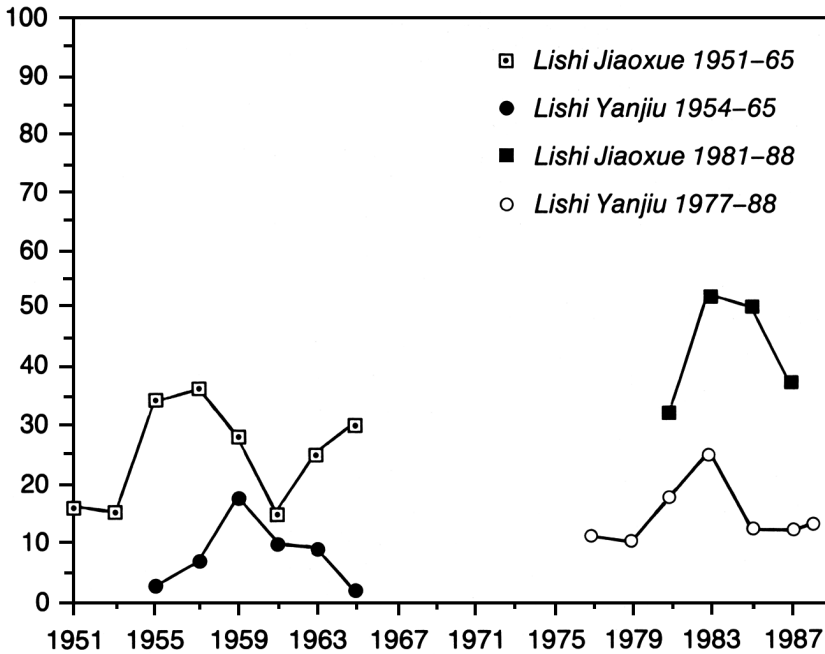


Figure 2. Number of articles on “world history.”

But what is the content of this expanded “world history” education? This brings us to the second force influencing the study of world history in China: ideology. We know there has been a crisis of faith in the prevailing Marxist ideology in the 1980s, especially among younger intellectuals. But, perhaps because of this, there has been considerable effort to preserve a strong Marxist interpretation in the world history curriculum. The nature of that interpretation and the reasons for it deserve some attention before looking at its implementation in the textbooks.

Actually, the Chinese communist historical orthodoxy is more Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist than simply Marxist. That means it is the standard communist world historical view as defined in the Stalin era with a Maoist emphasis on popular and anti-imperialist struggles. The reasons for fiercely nationalistic Chinese communists insisting on the Russian-defined line of historical progress require some explanation. From the 1930s on, a Chinese communist leadership that was no longer directly controlled from Moscow defined a party line on history that, like Stalin’s, insisted on the universal stages of development from primi-

tive communist society to slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism—inevitably in that order and without skipping any stages. Deviant Marxist historians, mostly balking at the problem of fitting this rigid framework on Chinese history, were censured. After 1949 the party could enforce this line. Some argument about dating the various transitions could continue, but the five-stage universal periodization was settled, and still is.

Paradoxically, the Chinese communists were defending the autonomy of Chinese history by insisting on its participation in a universal process. If all societies had to go through the same five stages of development, China might be a stage behind the west, but it was headed toward the same universal future. And, more significantly, that future was not a western monopoly, nor was the road to it a peculiarly western road. Thus, to Chinese intellectuals desperate for revolutionary change but emotionally resistant to the idea of abandoning a Chinese history to follow a western model, Marxist universalism offered a way out. The more China changed, the more it caught up with the west, and possibly would pass it, on humanity's universal road to the future. A teleological universalism could salve the conscience of Chinese intellectuals about abandoning their own history. It was not a sellout to the west.⁵

Therefore, problematic Marxist ideas like the "Asiatic mode of production" had to be purged from the new faith, for they suggested that China (and other Asian societies) might have been different from Europe, might have gone off that universal track sometime before feudalism and therefore could not expect to end up, on their own anyway, at the future socialist stage. Asiatic mode equals despotism—even worse, equals stagnation and no movement to higher stages without stimulus from western capitalism. No wonder the Chinese communists rejected such a heresy, and not just out of loyalty to Stalin. Western imperialism could not be the deliverer that woke China from its Asiatic stupor. Chinese history was already on the road to the future, too; it was just a little behind. So Chinese historians in the 1950s labored to discover "sprouts of capitalism" in early modern China that would have blossomed even without the coming of the west.⁶ The

⁵ This is the interpretation of Marxism's appeal to Chinese intellectuals that is so eloquently developed in Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 1:134–45.

⁶ The extensive discussion of indigenous capitalist development in early modern China, mainly Song through Ming dynasties (960–1644), by Chinese historians during the 1950s and early 1960s is summarized in Albert Feuerwerker, ed., *History in Communist China*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969).

process, and the stages, of historical development had to prevail everywhere.

In short, the universality of Marx's five stages has been vital to the Chinese communist world view and world history. This is apparent in a first-year high school textbook (grade ten equivalent), *Modern and Contemporary World History*, published in the mid-1950s.⁷ The bias is clearly modernist as "ancient history," comprising the primitive, slave, and feudal stages, is omitted.⁸ The text concentrates on the rise and decline of capitalism since the seventeenth century. "Modern history" is, to quote the two main section headings of volume one, "The Victory and Establishment of Capitalism in Advanced European Countries," followed by "The Metamorphosis of 'Free Capitalism' into Imperialism and the Beginning of Socialist Revolution." The Paris Commune and founding of the Second International mark the dividing line between "free capitalism" and "monopoly capitalism." "Modern history" ends with World War I so that "contemporary history" can begin in volume two with "The Victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution" and "The First Stage of the Crisis of Capitalism." Contemporary history carries on through World War II to "The Strengthening and Expansion of the Socialist Camp" and "The Second Stage of the Crisis of Capitalism." The book ends very close to the present, in the early 1950s.

The purpose or general law of world history, from the birth of capitalism in seventeenth-century England to the rise of socialism in the Soviet Union, is defined as follows: "From the victory of the great October socialist revolution, the road travelled by the Soviet Union—the road of building socialism and moving towards communism—has pointed out to mankind the road it should take in casting off oppression and exploitation. . . . Mankind establishing Communism is the necessary conclusion of historical development."⁹

This strongly teleological history certainly supported the new political orthodoxy in China, but by concentrating on the rise and

⁷ Li Chunwu, *Shijie jindai xiandai shi* (World modern and contemporary history), 2 vols, (Beijing: People's Educational Publishing House, 1956).

⁸ Even in later ancient and modern world histories the preponderance of the modern period is maintained. Three stages of social development—primitive, slave, and feudal—and all of history up to around 1600 can be compressed into the first half of the course, whereas capitalism, "modern," and "contemporary" history, occupies the rest. But then most two-semester world histories in North America do the same, or even break the two halves later.

⁹ Li Chunwu, 2:161–72.

fall of western capitalism, it had little space for the history of most of the world, including the part that China belonged to. By page count, there are only about 40 out of 350 pages devoted to Asia, Africa, and Latin America—the whole Third World. Although the heroic struggles of non-western peoples could be praised, going back to such unlikely champions of national liberation as the Mahdi of the Sudan in the nineteenth century, modern world history—the most important and decisive transition from one stage to another—was largely a western story.

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The deep-seated Chinese sense of their own importance in history, plus the pressures of an aggrieved modern nationalism, were not likely to let such a western-centered world history prevail for long. It began to weaken with the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s and underwent major revision during that massive assertion of Chinese superiority, Mao's Cultural Revolution, in the second half of the decade.

In one sense, the Cultural Revolution was a violent and puritanical withdrawal from a world contaminated by capitalist imperialism, Soviet revisionism, and petty bourgeois nationalism. In another sense, it was a messianic assertion of China's importance to the world as the sole legitimate guardian of the historical revolutionary process.

In historiography, it meant an even more vehement assertion of the universal five-stage path to the future, but with the Russian role diminished in the contemporary period and more attention given to the area that was especially relevant for the Maoist model, the Third World. In other words, world history became less centered on the west. It also became less academic and even more political, as simplification, vulgarization, and emphasis on mass struggle became the order of the day for the new world history books that started cautiously to emerge after the draconic "re-education" of academic experts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Marxist framework remained, but the flavor was now Maoist populism. History is made by the masses, through class struggle, and it is to be written for the masses at a popular level.

This is clear in the new books on world or foreign history that started to appear in the mid-1970s. Even the little treatise *Feudal Society*, from the Shanghai People's Publishing House in 1973, stressed exploitation and peasant revolt throughout the world but

especially in China, while sprinkling its sixty-seven pages with eighty documented quotes from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao.¹⁰ No other sources are cited. Another little book for mass consumption, entitled *Hegemonism Cannot Decide the Fate of World History*, linked global history even more directly to current global struggles.¹¹ Appearing in the "Study a Little History Series," it began with Mao's quote to the effect that only the people were able to determine history, and then devoted chapters to "The Overthrow of the Spanish Empire," "The Collapse of the British Empire," "The Decline of American Imperialism," and the present-day payoff, "The Inevitable Defeat of Soviet Socialist Imperialism." Mao's slogan, "Make the past serve the present," was absent in words but overwhelmingly present in spirit.

These were popular books for the "worker-peasant-soldier masses," and simplicity might be expected. The tentative products of China's elite university departments of history were, however, not that different. In 1974, Beijing University's history faculty published *Talks on Modern World History*, a series of popularized and politicized essays on episodes in world history between 1640 and 1917.¹² The title of one of these essays, "When the Wolf Leaves by the Front Door, The Tiger Enters by the Rear" (on the American acquisition of the Philippines), gives an idea of the scholarly and objective tone taken by the scholars from China's most prestigious university. But apart from this extreme simplification and politicization, the most significant aspect was the shift toward more Third World history. Of the sixteen essays, seven were on colonial peoples' struggles against western imperialism. It was also stressed that the labor of those non-western peoples made possible the west's accumulation of capital.¹³

In Shanghai, the leading teacher training university put together a two-volume textbook that shows some of the same shift away from European social and economic history toward Third World resistance to imperialism.¹⁴ But being almost four times as

¹⁰ Shi Xiany, *Fengjian shehui* (Feudal society) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1973).

¹¹ Wu Chun, *Baquan jue ding bu liao shijie lishi de mingyun* (Hegemonism cannot decide the fate of world history) (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1976).

¹² *Shijie jindai shi jianghua* (Talks on modern world history) (Beijing: Basic Reading Materials on Philosophy and Social Sciences Series, 1974).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. i.

¹⁴ *Shijie jindai shi* (Modern world history), 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai Normal University, 1973-74).

long as the Beijing University hook, the Shanghai Normal University text included more of the standard Marxist account of European capitalism. Yet the authors made clear from the very beginning that this would not be any dry and dispassionate history of capitalism. The first paragraph on early European capitalism begins: "Capitalism grew out of the womb of feudal society. Under the spur of the vilest and most shameless greed, the bourgeoisie in its two- or three-century struggle for power used cruel and remorselessly barbarous devices to suck the blood of millions of laboring people, so as to nourish its growing strength."

So long as the fires of the Cultural Revolution burned, all history, including world history, would be as much morality play as scientific Marxist theory. Heroes and villains are more prominent than objective forces; the masses are the real heroes and moving force of history; struggle is the dynamic of historical progress. The first page of the Beijing University volume summarizes the content and moral of modern world history: "Its main content is the *struggle* of the bourgeoisie and the broad masses against feudalism; the *struggle* of the proletariat and all exploited laboring masses against the bourgeoisie; the *struggle* of Marxist-Leninism against opportunism and revisionism; the *struggle* of colonial and semi-colonial peoples against colonialism and imperialism" (emphasis mine).¹⁵ The Shanghai textbook put it more succinctly, and irrefutably, by quoting Mao: "Class struggle—the victory of one class, the elimination of another—this is history, this is the story of several thousand years of civilization."¹⁶

Thus by the last years of the Cultural Revolution decade there was an attempt to construct a new radicalized version of world history that would serve the purposes of "the left" in its struggle against "bourgeois remnants" and "right-wing opportunists." But in this period of most direct politicization of history—in some ways the apogee of ideology's domination over scholarship-insularity also persisted, and perhaps even became stronger due to China's break with other communist countries and deepened estrangement from the west.

This can be shown in several ways. First, there was the complete severance of contacts with and access to any kind of foreign historical scholarship. Even more significant is the fact that all the major campaigns using historical issues for contemporary

¹⁵ *Shijie jindai shi jianghua*, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Shijie jindai shi*, frontispiece.

political purposes took place within Chinese history: the anti-Confucius movement of the mid-1970s, the revalorization of Legalism in the history of Chinese philosophy and politics, the reappraisal of historical personalities such as the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, and the traditionally notorious Empress Wu Zetian. When it came to really popularizing history—massive public campaigns where history became the subject for huge political rallies and intensive indoctrination within factories and communes—the lessons were taken from Chinese history. The little books on world history were dwarfed by comparison.

One more somewhat paradoxical factor emerged in the radicalized new history of the late Maoist period. Despite the overwhelming emphasis on current political relevance, world history in these years retreated somewhat from the present. The mid-1950s textbooks had taken “contemporary history” (*xiandai shi*) almost up to the present. In the 1960s and 1970s, “pedagogical materials” (there was too much chaos or uncertainty in educational circles for new editions of the standard textbooks) did not only fail to catch up with recent events, they stopped earlier, at the end of World War II. Now that the Sino-Soviet split had fractured the unity of world communism, the postwar years were apparently too hot for historians to handle, at least in textbook form. Mao’s famous injunction to historians, “more present, less past” (*houjin, boqu*) seemed to stop at 1945.

We know now, of course, that the lack of consensus at the top of the party hierarchy prevented any agreement on a standardized version of recent world history. Until Mao died, the historical-political struggles continued to be waged by historical analogy, but mostly on the home field of Chinese history rather than in the larger arena of world historical processes.

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After the Great Helmsman finally crossed the bar in late 1976, historiography began to change along with everything else. At first cautiously, and then with more confidence as Deng Xiaoping promised security for intellectuals, China’s historians started writing less polemical history. The change did not mean that Chinese historiography was suddenly free from the influence of present policies and present politics, as we shall see. It also did not mean that the basic Marxist structure of world history could be questioned. But it did mean that much of the Maoist emphasis

on struggle in simple black and white terms could be dropped, that the Leninist interpretation of the twentieth century as the last, imperialist stage of capitalism could be softened, that even the nature of the transition from one of Marx's stages to another (violent class revolution or peaceful development of productive forces) could be questioned. Not all at once, of course, and not without numerous protestations of faith in the inevitable and universal progression of history toward socialism. But, within the framework of Marx's five stages, world history slowly became much richer and more complex in its meaning for contemporary China.

One significant sign of this was the preface to a high school world history handbook published by Beijing Normal University in 1984. It acknowledged that the book was based on Marxist theory, but the previous incantation of "Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought" had disappeared.¹⁷ So had most of the quotations from Marxist classics, which were replaced by citations mainly from western bourgeois historians.

If the intellectual liberalization under Deng, "emancipation of the mind," as the slogan had it, loosened the ideological strictures on world history, the "open country" policy weakened the insularity factor even more. Chinese historians had more access to foreign sources and scholarship than at any time since 1949, and they had a government encouraging them to explore the outside world. Admittedly this did not lead to a stampede of historians rushing from Chinese into foreign fields, as our statistics on journal publications show (fig. 1 above). But it did give a higher priority to studying foreign or "world" history. As the preface to a semipopular book on modern world history put it, "Today when our intercourse with the world's countries is increasing day by day . . . knowing world history takes on even more importance."¹⁸ The "global village" metaphor may not have caught on in China, but the message had arrived.

This has been apparent in a revived interest in "world history" (i.e. history of foreign countries) at all levels. There have been more publications—the absolute number of world history journal

¹⁷ *Zhongxue lishi shangce shijie shi bufen* (Middle school history handbook, world history section) (Beijing: Beijing Normal University, 1984).

¹⁸ Hu Yixiang and Xu Yongchang, *Shijie jindai shi wenda yi bai ti* (A hundred questions and answers on modern world history) (Henan: Educational Publishing House, 1984), p. 1.

articles has jumped in the 1980s, even if the ratio with Chinese history has not improved (see fig. 2 above). Also, new journals have been founded, the most significant being *Shijie Lishi* (World history) and *Shijie Shi Yanjiu Dongtai* (Developments in world history research), both published in Beijing since 1978. Textbooks have proliferated at all levels ranging from large multivolume series for university courses to short stories on exciting events and personages in world history designed for grade school children.¹⁹

The new interest in world history and the need for a new authoritative version were behind attempts at both the Academy of Social Sciences and the State Education Commission to produce a multivolumed, multiauthored world history that would supersede the standard works from the 1950s. But, as we shall see shortly, there has been too much controversy over too many fundamental issues for any such consensual work to appear.²⁰ The basic high school textbook has been revised, but it still follows the basic format of the 1950s version. Meanwhile, the increased importance of world history in the curriculum is shown by an increase of class hours from thirty-six to forty-one per semester, and it is now being made a compulsory subject in both junior and senior high school.²¹

So there is more world history in post-Man China than ever before, but how has the content and interpretation changed? We have already noted the relative depoliticizing and de-ideologizing. A number of new books invoked Deng Xianping's slogan, *Shishi qiushi* (seek truth from facts), to justify more straight history (names, dates, and facts) and less abstract theory or moral judgments. The Marxist theoretical framework was still there but less

¹⁹ As an example of the former, there is the four-volume set, *Shijie shanggudai shi* (World history of high antiquity), *Shijie zhonggudai shi* (World history of middle antiquity), *Shijie jindui shi* (Modern world history), and *Shijie xiandai shi* (World contemporary history) (Jilin: Jilin Literary and History Publishing House 1981–85). In total it runs to over 2,000 pages. On the popular level, for younger readers, there is *Shijie wugian man*, 6 vols. (Five thousand years of the world) (Shanghai: Children's Publishing House, 1981–83).

²⁰ Littrup, "World History with Chinese Characteristics" (n. 3 above), pp. 48–49. See also Leif Littrup, "China and World History" in Yu-ming Shaw, ed., *Reform and Revolution in Twentieth Century China* (Taipei: Institute of International Relations, 1987), pp. 16–29.

²¹ Yan Zhiliang, "Gao zhong 'shine lishi' xia ce xiuding ben can wen" (Various questions on the revised text for senior high school "World history," volume two), *Lishi jiaoxue* (History teaching) (February 1983): 47, and Wang Hongzhi, *Lishi jiaoxue* (January 1987): 4–5.

obtrusive, and the polemical tone of Cultural Revolution era books had virtually disappeared.

The “ancient” period of world history—from the beginning to about 1600—has been subject to fewer revisions than later periods.²² One example from “ancient” (i.e., late medieval) European history nicely illustrates the changed objectives in teaching world history. The 1982 revision of the basic high school history textbook eliminates most of the discussion of peasant revolts during the Hundred Years’ War and expands the section on Jeanne D’Arc because “this is good for teaching students patriotism.”

Thus incipient nationalism in medieval Europe could be good material for inculcating modern Chinese nationalism, and the Marxist theoretical flavor in world history textbooks could be watered down by adding more narrative detail.²³ But the early 1980s also saw the revival of a vexing issue that was much more threatening to the theory behind the orthodox world history of the Maoist era. That was the old puzzle of what Marx had meant when he referred to an “Asiatic mode of production.” Historians of ancient China were particularly interested—partly because the concept offered a way of taking Chinese history off the procrustean bed of European-derived stages of historical development (slavery, feudalism, capitalism) but also because it could be used to support the economic reform program of the 1980s. Chinese scholars of world history were less likely to welcome a theory that upset the comfortably coherent unilinear view of the human past. In the first serious book on world history in the post-Mao era, a two-volume *Outline History of High Antiquity* which appeared in 1979, the final chapter is devoted to a refutation of the Asiatic mode of production.²⁴ The authors could not dismiss outright a concept first proposed by Marx himself, but they gave it a minor role in the early transition from primitive to slave society and warned against “wasting our precious energy and time by falling into empty theorizing about the ‘question of the Asiatic mode of production.’”²⁵

²² The revisions of the early 1980s are discussed in Li Chunwu, “Gao zhong ‘shijie lishi’ shang ce siugai shuoming” (An explanation of the revision of senior high school, “World History,” volume one), *Lishi jiaoxue* (April 1982): 15–18.

²³ For example, Li Chunwu in 1984 asserted that “The basics must be the facts presented in the narrative, not abstractions about socio-economic development.” Littrup, “World History with Chinese Characteristics,” p. 50.

²⁴ *Shijie shanggu shi gang* (An outline history of world history of high antiquity), 2 vols. (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1979).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:354.

Evidently there was energy to spare among historians after being confined in the straightjacket of Stalinist-Maoist orthodoxy for so long. During the 1980s, debate over the Asiatic mode and its implications for a multilinear, as opposed to unilinear, theory of world history became one of the most widely discussed issues in Chinese historiography.²⁶ No overall conclusion was reached, and most of the world histories of the decade, especially the textbooks, retained the unilinear theory. But the enforced unanimity that had characterized Chinese views of world history since the 1950s was clearly shaken, the early stages of the unilinear progression challenged by a Marxist alternative.

Closer to the present, in the modern and contemporary periods of world history, the theoretical challenge has not been so blunt, but the actual changes have been greater. First, the formerly glorified role of the Soviet Union and the whole teleological treatment of the world communist movement has come under widespread attack. For the most part, the October Revolution remains as a beacon to mankind, but the later history of the Soviet Union and Stalin's leadership of the Comintern has been opened to reexamination. In the high school curriculum, change proceeds more slowly. There still are units on the First and Second International, the Paris Commune, the October Revolution, and Soviet Socialist construction—about the same amount of coverage as in the 1950s, though less stridently proclaiming the imminent triumph of world communism.²⁷

Of course, that bright, glorious road from the October Revolution to world communism has had more than a few forks, detours, and switchbacks in the last thirty years, especially from a Chinese perspective. The other side of China's problem in reinterpreting "contemporary" (i.e., twentieth-century) history is the supposed fatal crisis and impending collapse of twentieth-century capitalism. Not only does that seem farther away than it did in the 1950s, but such predictions are also an embarrassment when China's foreign policy is now committed to long-term peaceful coexistence with and heavy technological borrowing from the advanced capitalist countries.

The high school textbook still ducked that issue by ending

²⁶ Timothy Brook, ed., *The Asiatic Mode of Production in China* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1989). gives an extensive bibliography of Chinese writings on the Asiatic mode during the period from 1978 to 1988, plus translations from eleven articles taking various positions in the debate.

²⁷ See, e.g., *Shijie lishi* (World history) (Beijing: People's Educational Publishing House, 1982).

“contemporary history” in 1945. But, as China’s involvement in world issues increased, this became less and less satisfactory. Li Chunwu, author of the 1956 text and advisor for its 1982 revision, called for the addition of “current history” (*dangdai shi*) in the curriculum, presumably bringing it up to the 1980s. This would bring to the fore all the problems of reinterpreting Marxist orthodoxy and squaring it with current policies. Above all, it meant that a world history suitable for China’s new needs must face the problem of twentieth-century capitalism’s surprising viability, and neither Maoist nor Leninist views on imperialism as the highest (last) stage of capitalism are much help with this. That new textbook writers felt this to be a problem could be seen in the discreetly vague apologetic note struck in the preface to Xia Jingcai’s university level text on contemporary history: “Due to the limitations of conditions, this book does not cover history after the second great war.”²⁸

Research historians have already challenged the previous orthodoxy on imperialism in ways that would have been impossible under Mao.²⁹ The textbooks here too are more conservative, but recent critics, such as the Academy of Social Sciences researcher Han Guoheng, complain that those textbooks are preserving an outdated 1950s interpretation based on Soviet historiography.³⁰ According to revisionists like Han, the very concept of contemporary history starting with the Bolshevik revolution is Soviet-centered and should be changed. Han and other younger historians, such as Liu Tong, assert that the general crisis of twentieth-century capitalism also is a Hawed concept, at least in its anticipation of imminent world revolution, and that contemporary history must recognize the fundamental role of the “second scientific revolution.”³¹

This emphasis on science and technology, in Marxist terms “the forces of production,” opens the way for a modification of

²⁸ Xia Jingcai et al., *Shijie xiandai shi* (World contemporary history) (Jilin: Jilin Publishing House for Literature and History, 1985), p. 4.

²⁹ As in a 1987 conference on the question of imperialism in world history, which is reported in *Lishi yanjiu* (Historical research) (January 1988): 124–33.

³⁰ Han Guoheng, “Shihjie xiandai shi daxue jiao cai” (Contemporary world history teaching materials at the university level), *Shijie lishi* (World history) (January 1988): pp. 151–56.

³¹ Liu Tong, “Dui shijie xiandai shi kaiduan ho ziben zhuyi ‘zong wei qi’ lilun de sikao” (Reflections on the beginning of modern world history and the theory of “the general crisis of capitalism”), *Shijie lishi* (May 1988): 66–73.

historical theory that is applicable to more than just twentieth-century history. As the development of productive forces becomes the motivator of historical progress, transition from one stage to another need not always be through violent revolution. Universal history becomes something other than Mao's story of universal class struggle. Thus, a more deterministic, but also more flexible Marxism, by stressing the objective factors behind social change, tends to pull the Chinese interpretation of world history away from its previous anchors of faith in class struggle and a rigid pattern of historical inevitability.

It is therefore hardly surprising that some of the most outspoken critics of the old world history orthodoxy came from historians like Luo Rongqu who was head of the Center for Studies of World Modernization at Beijing University.³² The new socio-economic policies of the 1980s reformers sanctioned and drew support from such historiographic revisionism. But there was more to it than simple justification for the policies of the reform faction. The general intellectual liberalization and opening to outside influences is also behind the new thinking. In short, these shifts in the Chinese version of world history are part of contemporary China's intellectual history as it attempts to come to terms with a much broader and more complex world.

The Chinese sense of where they fit into that world is in flux, and this inevitably affects the way they see world history. As science and technology, rather than struggle and revolution, come to dominate the view of the future, they also cast a long shadow back over the past. One more specific example: the world histories of the 1980s now include sizable sections on the history of culture and science, "superstructure" material that was mainly shoved aside in earlier versions. The 1982 high school textbook has added a final chapter on "European Scientific and Cultural Developments, 1917–1945." The very last sentence shows the struggle to come to terms with something as far outside of earlier Chinese experience as the formerly condemned "modernism" in western art and literature. It discusses Picasso's *Guernica*: "The painting is completely abstract-formalist [formerly the height of western bourgeois decadence], yet it forcefully expresses the painter's indignation towards fascism. . . ."³³

³² Luo Rongqu's views are summarized in Littrup, "World History with Chinese Characteristics," pp. 54–57.

³³ *Shijie lishi*, 2:294.

Ending with Picasso instead of Stalin might be seen as a kind of liberating change, but it underlines another problem in the emerging view of world history in China. It still ends, and for most of the modern-contemporary period centers itself, in the west. If too much emphasis on the west—"westocentrism"—was a problem in China's 1950s version of world history, is the new Deng era model any better? Moreover, the weakening of the comfortably universal doctrine of historical materialism as the one inevitable road to socialism might make China, and all Third World peoples, seem even more peripheral to the dynamics of world history as they are forced to westernize in order to join its mainstream.

In 1984, Li Chunwu, the doyen of world history textbook writers, put forth a five-point program for a new world history which called for inclusion of China and reduction of Europe to just one of several centers of world history.³⁴ But little seems to have come from this, at least with regard to textbooks. For example, a modern world text published for the Television University in the next year promised to "destroy 'Eurocentrism' by devoting appropriate chapters to Asian, African, and Latin American history."³⁵ It then went on to give three chapters to the Third World and thirteen to Europe.

Is there, then, the possibility of a new kind of narrowing beyond the earlier insularity and ideology? In the "age of the four modernizations," has preoccupation with the west focused Chinese world history too narrowly at the expense of their own self-esteem and of a broader view of the entire human community?

But here as with so many questions about China's view of world history and China's place in the world we are on the far edge of even *dangdai shi* (current history). As this is written, the situation in China is very unclear with the liberalizing forces of the 1980s apparently checked and in retreat. But the present ascendancy of "hard-liners" in Beijing does not necessarily mean that the old party line can be reimposed on world history, or on anything else, with the rigidity that characterized the Maoist years. Here, as elsewhere, the old Marxist certitudes (really more

³⁴ Li Chunwu, "Shijie tongshi, zhongguo qupai" (Comprehensive world history, Chinese style), *Shijie yanjiu dongtai* (Developments in world history research) (July 1984): 15-17.

³⁵ Qiao Mingshun, *Shijie jindai shi* (Modern world history) (Beijing: Central Television University, 1985), preface.

Leninist, Stalinist, and Maoist) about universal and inevitable patterns of historical development are unlikely to provide satisfying answers for examining the past or building the future.

For a time, China's rulers can fall back on a theory of global historical development that is dominated by insularity and ideology. But probably not for long. The Chinese, like the rest of us, are subject to the same dynamics of twentieth-century history that are driving us toward views of the past that are less insular, less dogmatic, less restricted by political and cultural blinders—in short, toward a new world history.

It would be naive to assume that this world history will more and more resemble ours. China's past and present history will continue to shape the patterns they see in the global past, and it is improbable that peoples, or historians, reaching out from their different cultures and historical experiences, will produce a consensual global history, Unesco-style, for the entire world.³⁶ For a long time, we are likely to have different world histories in different parts of the world. But it is encouraging that in the 1980s more open-minded Chinese historians started reaching out to their colleagues in America and elsewhere. If we hope to build toward a global world history, it is important that world historians everywhere have some idea of how their counterparts see the main contours of our human past.

³⁶ The most ambitious effort in that direction was the Unesco sponsored *History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Development*, 6 vols. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963–66). It brought together many historians from throughout the world, but whether this team effort by an international commission of over 120 members from 50 countries achieved any kind of coherent world history is another question. See Gilbert AHardyce, "Toward World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course," *Journal of World History* 1 (1990), especially pp. 26–40.