

Conceptions of the World in Twentieth-Century Chinese Historiography Conference Report

Dr. Xin Fan

The rise of China at the turn of the twentieth-first century has had a crucial transformative impact on global economic and political order. From this background, scholars and policy makers have been debating how the political elites in China imagine this country's future in a globalized world. Some historians look back into China's rich legacy of historical writing of the twentieth and even beyond, and attempt to make sense of how certain traditional concepts and transnational ideas together shaped the changing conceptions of the "world" in China.

On October 26 and 27, the Centre for Modern East Asian Studies organized an international conference on the conceptions of the world in twentieth-century Chinese historiography at Göttingen University, Germany. With the generous support of the Volkswagen Foundation and the Andrew Mellon Foundation as well as the Academic Confucius Institute Göttingen, a cohort of leading scholars from China, North America, and Europe discussed aspects of the conference and presented their own research. Using historiography as its primary field of inquiry, they investigated a variety of ways through which Chinese historians constructed and deconstructed temporal and spatial possibilities to place China in the globalizing world. In that manner, the workshop established an exchange between the field of China studies on one hand and global and transregional studies on the other hand, and it opened a dynamic dialogue for the continuous exploration of this topic.

On October 26, Ge Zhaoguang (Fudan University) delivered a keynote speech on conceptions of the world in traditional Chinese historiography. He argued that although the world awareness was by and large absent in China prior to the nineteenth century, three opportunities for critical change still occurred, from the introduction of Buddhism in the Middle Period and the change of international environments during the Song Dynasty to the influence of Muslim world historical knowledge under the Mongol occupation. From elite politics to popular knowledge, he developed a bird's-eye view and concluded that only after knowledge about the world became common knowledge in textbook education did the world awareness become truly compatible with late Qing Chinese society.

From an overview of traditional Chinese historiography, the panel discussions on October 27 moved to the twentieth century. Speakers on the first panel explored various ways in which Chinese intellectuals made sense of the world in the early twentieth century. Hon Tze-ki (City University of Hong Kong/SUNY Geneseo) discussed how the rise of print capitalism in Shanghai played a significant role in spreading the knowledge about the world at the opening of the twentieth century. Julia Schneider (University of Göttingen) examined how eminent Chinese thinkers in the early twentieth century debated the nature of Chinese nation through the lens of ethnicity. Kristin Stapleton introduced how a lesser-known

Sichuan writer Li Zongwu 李宗吾 in the 1930s creatively re-interpreted Confucian ethics in the context of coming world conflicts and invented the “Thick-Black Studies.”

From newspapers and textbooks to popular literature, the two papers in the next panel returned to the professional studies of history. Yet, they also raised new questions about the tension between localism, regionalism, and universalism in China’s world-historical tradition. Han Xiaorong (Hong Kong Polytechnic University) surveyed the state of Southeast Asian Studies in China and analyzed how the China-centered bias prevented the development of the field. Focusing on the case study of Liu Yizheng 柳詒徵, Axel Schneider (University of Göttingen) delved into the epistemological challenges which some Chinese historians were facing when turning to the field of universal history.

The linear view of world-historical development in Marxist historiography certainly affected Chinese conceptions of the world, which was the theme for the next panel. Fan Xin (SUNY Fredonia; Global Fellow in Göttingen) discussed how world historians in 1950s-China adopted an ambiguous Marxist concept, the Asiatic Mode of Production, and struggled to propose an alternative, less Euro-centric path to global modernity for countries in the non-Western world. In the meanwhile, as Liu Xiaoyuan (University of Virginia) demonstrated in his case study of Chinese communist leaders’ view of Tibet, these spatial concepts were by and large adopted to serve the geo-political concerns of the emerging communist state and open to various interpretations.

Chen Huaiyu (Arizona State University), in the next panel, spoke about the dynamic scholarly exchange between Chinese historians and their foreign counterparts in the early People’s Republic of China, which, he contended, led to the rise of “Asian History” as a new historiographical field of inquiry, providing alternative to the Euro-centric world historical framework prior to the revolution. Q. Edward Wang (Rowan University/Peking University), by contrast, analyzed how the rise of China as a new mighty global power affects the relationship between world history and Chinese history in this country. It seems to him that the flourishing of world-historical studies in China today might register a resurgence of nationalist discourse in the writing of history. Concluding the panel, Antoon De Baets (University of Groningen) returned to semantic issues in historical writing. Surveying historical samples, he contended that historical analogies are templates for conversation and action under oppressive regimes, and they are the signs of historians’ small victories against autocratic power.

From archive-based historical research to question-driven intellectual and philosophical inquiries, the speakers in the conference adopted various approaches to the discussion on the changing Chinese worldview over the course of the twentieth century. Not only did they follow the past debates such as Ge Zhaoguang’s reflection on Fairbank’s impact-response thesis but also they posited new questions, especially from the perspectives that were neglected in the previous scholarship. For example, some scholars have identified the significant role of the popular culture in shaping the modern identity in China and the necessity to reevaluate the world-historical traditions in order to be able to reflect the nuanced changes in our

views of the world. Thus, the conference received wide attention within the international scholarly community. Aside from the speakers, scholars from China, Europe, and America attended the event.

List of Speakers and Panel Chairs

De Baets, Antoon

The University of Groningen, Holland

Chen, Huaiyu

Arizona State University, US

Ge, Zhaoguang

Fudan University, China

Han, Xiaorong

Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Hon, Tze-ki

The City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Liu, Xiaoyuan

The University of Virginia, US

Stapleton, Kristin

The University at Buffalo, US

Wang, Q. Edward

Peking University, China/Rowan University, US

Göttingen Based scholars

Fan, Xin (SUNY Fredonia; Global Fellow)

Sachsenmaier, Dominic

Schneider, Axel

Schneider, Julia

Conference Program

26 October 2017

KWZ 0.603

18:00 to 20:00

Keynote Speech

Ge, Zhaoguang (Fudan University)

Title: *Global Elements in Traditional Chinese Historiography* (in Chinese)

20:00 to 21:00 Conference Dinner

27 October 2017

Historische Sternwarte

Geismar Landstr. 11, 37083 Göttingen

9:00 to 9:15: Opening Remarks, Fan Xin & Dominic Sachsenmaier

9:15 to 11:15 Panel I

Making Sense of China and the World During the Early 20th Century

Chair: Dominic Sachsenmaier (Göttingen University)

Hon, Tze-ki (The City University of Hong Kong)

Title: *Locating China in the World: Newspapers and Textbooks in Late Qing Period*

Schneider, Julia (Göttingen University)

Title: *Writing a General History of China (Zhongguo tongshi): Thinking about Ethnicity in Early Nationalist Historiography*

Stapleton, Kristin (University at Buffalo)

Title: *Popular History from the Pope of Thick-Black Studies*

11.15-11.45 Coffee Break

11:45 to 13:00 Panel 2

Problems of Regionalism, Universalism and Localism

Chair: Xin Fan (SUNY Fredonia; Global Fellow)

Han, Xiaorong (Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Title: *Southeast Asia in Twentieth Century Chinese Historiography*

Schneider, Axel (Göttingen University)

Title: *Universal progress and particular history: Chinese engagement with concepts of universal history*

13:00 to 14:15 Lunch Break

14:15– 16:00: Panel 3

Chinese World Historical Outlooks and Marxism

Chair: Kristin Stapleton (University at Buffalo)

Fan, Xin (SUNY Fredonia; Global Fellow)

Title: *The Forced Analogy: Marxism, Historiography, and the Chinese Worldview*

Liu, Xiaoyuan (University of Virginia)

Title: *Tibet and Beijing's View of the World*

16:00 – 16.30 Coffee Break

16:30 – 18:30 Panel 4

Challenges and Opportunities of Global Historical Scholarship

Chair: Dominic Sachsenmaier (Göttingen University)

Chen, Huaiyu (Arizona State University)

Title: *The Rise of the "Asian History" in Mainland China in the 1950s: A Global Perspective*

Wang, Q. Edward (Rowan University)

Title: *World History on A Par with Chinese History? — China's Search for World Power*

De Baets, Antoon (University of Groningen)

Title: *The Subversive Power of Historical Analogies: A Global Approach*

18:30 – 18:45. Closing Remarks

19:00 Conference Dinner

List of Outside Guests (Incomplete)

Büttner, Clemens

Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

Chen, Yarong

Aarhus University, Denmark

Chu, Sinan

Visiting fellow at the University of Hamburg, Germany

Syracuse University, US

Liu, Ning

Free University Berlin, Germany

Liu, Shihua and Yexia Sun

Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

Yang, Alvin

The University of Kassel, Germany