

The Social Responsibility of Chinese Scholars of World History: *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* and the Study of World History in the New Era

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近代中国世界史研究的萌生，始于19世纪中叶，这和中国“救亡图存”的时代主题联系在一起。中国世界史研究的特点是与时代的脉搏同时跳动，在各个历史时期，它研究方向的主流，从不曾脱离时代的主题，表现出一种强烈的社会责任。在改革开放新的历史条件下，中国世界史研究的社会责任，从根本上要在坚持为人民服务、为社会主义服务的方向上体现出来。

关键词：中国世界史研究 中国史学 中国社会科学

Modern Chinese study of world history began in the middle of the nineteenth century and was closely related to the main theme of the times, that of saving the nation from subjugation and ensuring its survival. Its chief feature was that it was attuned to the pulse of the times; in all historical periods, the main current of its research has never deviated from the main theme of the times, showing a strong sense of responsibility to society. Under the new historical conditions of reform and opening up, this sense of social responsibility should be reflected in fundamental adherence to the direction of serving the people and socialism.

Keywords: study of world history in China, Chinese historiography, *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue*

During the three decades since reform and opening up, the most profound change in the development of the study of world history in China is its transformation from translation, compilation and general introduction into in-depth, systematic and independent research. Chinese study of world history as an independent discipline has its own scientific form and indispensable theories and methodology, like any other scientific discipline. The discipline as a whole is an important branch of Chinese historical science, one whose status and influence have grown continuously in line with the growth and expansion of its research institutes and personnel and a series of landmark achievements. To be more specific, in China today the

study of all fields of world history, including general history, history of a period, regional history, history of individual countries, specialized history, historical figures and historical documents, can be described as unprecedentedly fruitful, whether in terms of quantity or quality.

In expounding the statement that “we must keep to the orientation of advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development,” the Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China put forward the line that “we will develop philosophy and social sciences and promote innovation in academic disciplines and viewpoints and in research methods. We encourage people working in these fields to serve as a think tank for the cause of the Party and the people, and we will introduce related outstanding achievements and distinguished scholars to the world arena.”¹ This has greatly encouraged world history scholars in China, who at the same time feel a heavy responsibility. At this new historical starting point, we must, by combining theory and practice, give a clear answer as to how to make study of world history in China follow the requirements of the times and play its due role in the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.

One of the fine traditions of Chinese historiography is the attention it has always paid to foreign history studies. Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*, or *Shiji* (史记), classifies its contents into five categories, i.e. *Benji* (本纪) or Imperial Biographies, *Biao* (表) or Tables, *Shu* (书) or Treatises, *Shijia* (世家) or Biographies of the Feudal Houses and Eminent Persons, and *Liezhuan* (列传) or Biographies and Collective Biographies, a hundred and thirty volumes in all. Introductions to and studies of foreign countries are mainly contained in the *Liezhuan*; among them are *Treatise on the Dawan* (大宛传) and *Treatise on the Xiongnu* (匈奴传) and so on, including Korea, Vietnam, India, Dawan (大宛), Wusun (乌孙), Kangju (康居), Yancai (燕蔡), Darouzhi (大月氏) and Anxi (安息).² The core aim of Sima Qian’s historical writings was to “investigate the relationship between Heaven and Man and try to understand the laws of history so as to establish a distinctive theory.” To achieve this purpose, it was necessary to understand “foreign countries outside China”—some of which have now long been part of China, but which at that time did not fall under the rule of the central government. Among the twenty-five dynastic histories, all except the History of the Chen Dynasty and the History of the Northern Qi Dynasty touch on introductions or studies of foreign countries, and all the biographical chapters in the official histories cover foreign lands, including many important regions and countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Southwest Asia, Europe and West Africa.

In modern China, the study of world history was initiated in the middle of the nineteenth century and was closely related to the theme of the times: saving the nation from subjugation and ensuring its survival. To save the Chinese people from its national crisis, progressive elements began to “open their eyes to observe the outside world.” *The Four Continents* (Si

1 *Documents of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, p. 33.

2 “History of the Former Han Dynasty: A Biography of Sima Qian,” p. 618.

Guo Zhi 四国志) compiled by Lin Zexu and *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* (*Haiguo Tuzhi* 海国图志) compiled by Wei Yuan were masterpieces of this period.

By the turn of the 20th century, under the impact of major historic events such as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the Revolution of 1911, the study of world history in China had developed from its embryonic stage to seeking a path to China's independence, freedom and liberation through study of other nations' "history of subjugation," "revolutionary history" and "nation-building history." So it is understandable that around the time of the Revolution of 1911, the full translation of the American Declaration of Independence had been published five times in the *National News* (国民报), *Republican News* (民国报) and other publications. The introduction of historical materialism into China in the early twentieth century had a revolutionary and far-reaching influence on historiography in China, especially the study of world history. In 1920, in an article entitled "Marx and Rickert's Philosophies of History," Li Dazhao gave a simple explanation of the basic principles of historical materialism. He stressed that "you cannot really understand history if you interpret the history of social change only from the perspective of the superstructure and have no regard for its base. Changes in the superstructure depend entirely on changes in the economic base, so history can only be interpreted rightly through economic relationships." "Marx's historical materialism has raised the science of history to a status equal to natural science. This has in fact opened a new era for historiography."³

In addition to Li Dazhao, early leaders of the Communist Party of China such as Chen Duxiu, Cai Hesen, Li Da, Qu Qiubai, Yun Daiying and others also began to analyze Chinese and world history from the perspective of historical materialism. Under the guidance of this theory, people's rational understanding of "changing the world" attained a new development. So Marxist historiography in China is an important part of a cultural struggle led by the proletariat against imperialism and feudalism rather than an abstract "academic discipline." One of the characteristics of the Chinese study of world history is that it is always attuned to the pulse of the times, its research is oriented toward the mainstream and it never deviates from the themes of the times. This feature has been evident since its very beginning. After the founding of new China, and especially since reform and opening up in the 1980s, this tradition has been further developed and has acquired new social significance and new contents of the times.

January 1980 saw the launch of *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue*. This was a milestone in the development of Chinese research on philosophy and the social sciences. As a journal representing China's national academic standard and published at a critical juncture when the Party and the country realized a historic transformation and started on the new historical period of reform and opening up, it was charged with task of leading the healthy development of philosophy and the social sciences in China. The image of *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* is closely linked with China's national image of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.

3 Li Dazhao, "Marx's Philosophy of History and Rickert's Philosophy of History," pp. 343-344.

In 1980, China finally ended the hesitant forward movement that had lasted since October 1976 and entered into a new epoch. Chinese study of world history also ushered in its own spring and entered a period of rapid development, as shown by a series of events. These included the full restoration of the research work of the CASS Institute of World History; the offering of world history as a subject in departments of history in colleges and universities like Peking University; the admittance of graduates in world history for Master's and Ph.D. degrees in universities and research institutions; the publication at home and abroad of the national-level journal *World History*; the successive establishment of more than ten national associations of world history studies (history of individual countries or of particular subjects); and the setting up of a world history group within the National Social Sciences Fund, which began its review of world history research project proposals and assessment. Despite all these encouraging facts, an urgent and immediate practical problem remained unsolved: the question of how, in the new historical period, to inherit and carry forward the fine tradition of the study of world history in China and consciously hold to the correct direction. It needed time to really set things right in the face of the ideological confusion caused by the ten-year long chaos of the "Cultural Revolution." Although the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Party had reaffirmed the ideological line of emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts, this did not mean that the ideological line could be implemented without any obstacle.

In the early period of reform and opening up, Western academic thought, including a large number of theories and methodologies from Western historiography, were introduced into China without differentiating the good from the bad. Various strange theories and absurd arguments appeared, and some people even openly advocated that China's study of world history should take the path of "internationalization," "value neutrality," "total Westernization" and so on. All of this made the problem of "direction" more important.

As the academic banner of social sciences in China, *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue*, through its editorial policy and in each publication reflecting this policy, unequivocally tells people what it is to uphold and develop Marxism, what it is to uphold the correct political orientation, what it is to inherit the best of Chinese culture, what is the mission and responsibility of Chinese research in philosophy and the social sciences and what is the quality work that represents our cutting-edge research. When reading each issue, in addition to enjoying specific gains in knowledge, readers can also be educated and enlightened by reflecting on these issues. Needless to say, each of the excellent papers published is of irreplaceable importance to the growth of contemporary social sciences in China, but more importantly, the overall spiritual strength and air of the times of the academic study they reflect has a special significance as the "foundation" and "orientation" of academic growth in contemporary China. In the world history field, not many articles have been published in *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue*; this may relate to its level of development and to the fact that many excellent papers have been published in *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue*'s sister journal, *Historical Research*. However, the

influence of *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* on the study of world history in China over the past thirty years has been far-reaching and unforgettable. This is first of all a matter of the social responsibility of Chinese scholars of world history. Not only scholars of world history but also scholars in other research areas are in fact facing the same problem. As for how research on philosophy and the social sciences research should embody social responsibility, *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* has been a brilliant example over the last thirty years. “Social responsibility” involves the question of the purpose of academic research. That is, for what purpose is academic research undertaken? Is it just for the sake of research or fame, or is it for the benefit of the country and the people? This is a cardinal problem of basic standpoint. It is true that the subjects and objects of world history and other disciplines have their own specific content and norms, but these are not in conflict with the direction of serving the people, serving socialism and serving the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics; on the contrary, the social responsibility of the study of world history in China should be fundamentally carried on in this direction.

In this regard, the papers published in *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* do not discuss the social responsibility of philosophy and the social sciences with abstract arguments or analysis, but in the spirit implied in the publication itself, thus rendering their message more convincing. Since reform and opening up, the outcomes of our study of world history have attracted widespread attention. But, needless to say, there are still some problems requiring an immediate solution. For example, a few people slavishly and blindly follow and copy Western theories of historiography with no analysis or discrimination, and even advocate giving up our own theoretical and discourse system to “keep in step” with the West. This kind of proposition will result in our research being controlled by others and losing basic academic dignity and national self-confidence; it is completely different in nature from our advocacy of selectively drawing on outstanding foreign achievements for our own use. At present, the frivolous atmosphere in society and speculative trends in business are eating away at scholarship. The study of world history is not in a vacuum, but encounters problems such as low-level repetition, shoddy work, counterfeit work and plagiarism as well as unhealthy sensationalism, exchange of favors and unprincipled hype. These have inevitably influenced our academic study, so that some people have cast our faith, ideals and mission to the winds. All these result from the absence of social responsibility. Academic research is a serious, arduous and noble undertaking that demands that researchers be consciously responsible to society. Many things need to be done in the study of world history in China, but the primary thing is that researchers should enhance their sense of social responsibility and keep in mind the purpose of their academic research.

The level of philosophy and social sciences reflects a nation’s intellectual ability, mental state and cultural quality, and its capabilities and achievements are important symbols of cultural strength and strategic resources. It is of practical importance for scholars of world history in China today to be fully aware of their social responsibility. Given the practice of

Zhongguo Shehui Kexue in promoting the development and prosperity of Chinese philosophy and social science research in the last thirty years and the reality of the study of world history in China, I think that we should enhance the social responsibility of workers in the study of world history in the following two respects.

First, we should put the study of world history in China under the command of the achievement of adapting Marxism to Chinese conditions and should pay more attention to major theoretical issues in this field, so as to create a situation in which our study serves the big picture and consciously adheres to the direction of serving the people, socialism and the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics, while at the same time fully realizing its function of scientific understanding and social responsibility. *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* has published several papers on the Marxist theory of social formations, a theory which is also a basic theory for the study of world history. Wu Yuqin and Qi Shirong discussed this issue respectively in *Encyclopedia of China: History of Foreign Countries* and *General History of the World* and discussion on this issue is currently deepening in world history circles.

According to Wu, development from human history to world history was a lengthy process in both vertical and horizontal terms. Vertical development “refers to the evolution of different modes of production in the material production history of humankind and the resulting changes in different social formations,” while horizontal development “refers to an objective historical process in which different areas gradually changed from being mutually isolated to opening up to each other and from being separated to being closely linked, whence they finally developed into the whole world. The study of world history must take the world as a whole to examine the whole process in which it developed from mutual isolation to close linkages and from separation to integration as a whole. This whole process is the history of the world.”⁴ The basis of Wu’s theoretical system for the study of world history is the Marxist theory of history. In “The German Ideology” and other works, Marx first proposed the concept of world history, and gradually formed his own theoretical system for it. He states that with the development of capitalist production and intercourse, “the further the separate spheres, which interact on one another, extend in the course of this development, the more the original isolation of the separate nationalities is destroyed by the developed mode of production and intercourse and the division of labour between various nations naturally brought forth by these, the more history becomes world history.”⁵ Marx stressed that “world history did not always exist; history as world history is a result.”⁶ Marx’s theory of world history is an integral part of historical materialism and is also the theoretical basis for our understanding of global history. In 2006, the Higher Education Press published a four-volume *General History of the World* with Qi Shirong as its chief editor. It is said in the preface: “In the light of the different nature of the basic contradictions between productive forces and relations of

4 *Encyclopedia of China: History of Foreign Countries*, pp. 1, 5 and 15.

5 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The German Ideology,” p. 51.

6 Karl Marx, “Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,” p. 48.

production within human society Marxism divides the development of human history into several modes of production—the primitive commune system, the slave system, the feudal system, the capitalist system and the communist system—and several corresponding social formations. They constitute a sequence of vertical development from lower to higher stages, but not every nation or country goes through all the process without exception. Some do not experience a certain stage while some others remain stuck in a certain stage for a very long time. Generally speaking, although, in the history of their development from lower to higher social formations, different nations or countries go through the stages at different times and in a myriad of different ways, the general course of this vertical development of human history is a universal rule.”⁷ Currently, discussion of the Marxist theory of social formations is deepening, a fact reflected in the combination of theoretical exploration with research on Marx’s “Notes on History” and “Notes on Anthropology.” That makes people understand the essence of the Marxist theory of social forms not only in theory, but also through the actual process of contradictions in human history.

Second, one of the consistent characteristics of *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* has been its integration of theory with practice and the dialectical unity of profound theoretical inquiry with a high degree of attention to reality. In the last thirty years, *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* has never published articles that were narcissistic, were much ado about nothing, or were empty or pretentious, thus contributing greatly to the academic growth of contemporary China; it is indeed the backbone of Chinese philosophy and social sciences. Chinese research on world history has a fine tradition of paying equal attention to both history and reality. Under the new historical conditions of reform and opening up, it has attached more importance to the spirit of the times in historical research and based its interpretation of history on a deep understanding of the reality of the contemporary world and of China. It is becoming a consensus among scholars of world history that the depth of one’s understanding of reality in a sense determines the depth of one’s understanding of history.

“At this new stage in the new century, the international situation is undergoing profound changes. The trend toward world multi-polarization and economic globalization is developing amidst twists and turns. Science and technology are advancing rapidly. Competition in overall national capability is becoming increasingly fierce. Different ideas and cultures interact. All kinds of contradictions become complicated. The strategic attempts of hostile forces to Westernize and disintegrate China have not changed, and we are still facing the pressure of the economic and technological dominance of developed countries. China’s reform and development is in a crucial period in which interests in society are more complex and new problems are emerging one after another.”⁸ The world today is undergoing tremendous changes and adjustments, and China’s drive to build socialism with Chinese characteristics

7 Qi Shirong, ed., *World History: Contemporary*, p. 1.

8 “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on Strengthening the Governance Capability of the Party,” p. 271.

is at a new historical starting point. Only by clearly understanding the international and domestic realities in which we meet opportunities as well as challenges can our study of world history stand on firm ground and be strong in spirit, and only thus can its scholars consciously take up their social responsibility. For example, a multi-volume academic work with Peng Shuzhi as its chief compiler—*A General History of Middle Eastern Countries*—came out in successive volumes from 2000. It consists of thirteen volumes, covering Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, Iran, Egypt, Afghanistan, Syria and Lebanon, Yemen, the five Gulf states, Jordan and Cyprus. This is the first multi-volume general history of the Middle East ever published in China. It is not only an excellent academic work that makes a constructive contribution to the disciplinary development of the study of world history in China, but also a strong criticism of Eurocentrism.

In another example, the American historian Karl Wittfogel, in his *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, put forward the theory of the “hydraulic-bureaucratic official-state” and the so-called “oriental despotism” concept. His book not only attacked the basic theory of Marxism and distorted the ancient history of China, Greece, India and Egypt, but also defamed socialist countries as “a variant of oriental despotism.” In order to expose the deceptive and reactionary nature of this “academic work,” in 1995, the *Historiography Quarterly* started a special column in which world history scholars in China exposed Wittfogel’s fallacies in historical theory and fact and his reactionary political intentions by systematically analyzing the character and nature of oriental society, comparing the authoritarian systems of the East and the West, reviewing the role of irrigation in Eastern social development, and carrying out a historical examination of the concepts of “Asiatic mode of production,” “oriental despotism” and so on.

The study of philosophy and the social sciences, including the study of world history, has its unshirkable social responsibility. We must take a clear stand on this issue and cannot be mute. The famous artist Wu Guanzhong, who passed away not long ago, once said: “Taking the path of artistic creation means sacrifice and pain, and my heart is always interlaced with pain.”⁹ In studying philosophy and the social sciences, we also need the spirit of sacrifice and must always keep in mind our everyday but noble mission. Philosophy and the social sciences are an important force in promoting historical development and the progress of society. Facing new situations and new tasks, we must fully realize our historic mission and set to our work with a high degree of social responsibility, so that we can innovate, temper ourselves, and win new and greater achievements.

Notes on Contributor

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9 Han Xiaohui, “Art, Life and Times: The Dialectical Relationship between Artists and Their Times as Reflected by the Wu Guanzhong Phenomenon.”

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