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# Revisiting Thirty Years of Chinese Historical Studies<sup>1</sup>

Guido Samarani

## 1. INTRODUCTION

THE original version of this volume was published in China in 2008, marking the thirtieth anniversary of China's reform and opening up. The English translation was presented at the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences (ICHS) held in 2015 at Jinan, China (the first in Asia) and was prepared to provide new instruments for an international readership to better and deeper understand the extraordinary progresses of Chinese historiography during the 1978-2008 period.

This fundamental volume, thus, presents an updated introduction of China's historical studies during that period, during which – as Zhang Haipeng indicates in his introductory essay – “there has been a wide range academic interaction between Chinese historians and historians in many countries and regions of the world”.<sup>2</sup> According to Prof. Zhang, “history studies was one of the fields that had been most seriously devastated by the extremist ‘leftist’ dogmatism of the ‘Gang of Four’[...]”<sup>3</sup> As the result, there was not only grave resentment prevailing among ordinary people; there were also strong repulsion against such misdirected historiography among the intellectuals and historians. It was in this context that the initiation of discussion on the criterion of truth,<sup>4</sup> followed by the ideological liberation movement after the Third Plenary Session,<sup>5</sup> led directly to reflections by the historian on the dogmatic use of the Marxist theory of class struggle and historical materialism, and to the recification of a series of misconceptions in the field of history studies”.<sup>6</sup>

In the volume, 22 authoritative scholars and experts in the field offer a wide range of overviews about topics like archeological discoveries and ancient Chinese history, modern and contemporary history, world history, local and regional history, historical geography, social history, etc.

<sup>1</sup> *Thirty Years of Chinese History Studies*, edited by Zhang Haipeng (Beijing: China Social Science Press - Chicago, MCM Prime (USA), 2015), XII + 826 (original version 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Zhang Haipeng, “A Bird's-Eye View of Contemporary Chinese Historical Studies”, in *Thirty Years of Chinese History Studies* (hereafter TYCHS), 1-21 (quotation is at 6).

<sup>3</sup> Here the reference is to the radical group of 4 people, headed by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, which was one of the main protagonist of the Cultural Revolution and which in the first half of the Seventies, when Mao's health was deteriorating and the problem of the succession to the Chairman became urgent, used historical cases and examples to attack moderate political ideas and personalities.

<sup>4</sup> The criterion of truth was the main instrument Chinese historians utilized, especially after Mao's death and Deng Xiaoping's return to power, to attack the dogmatic and oversimplified radical vision – which had prevailed during the previous years – to associate every historical phenomenon to class struggle and use the latter as a tag to every event in history.

<sup>5</sup> The Third plenary session of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee, held in December 1978, represented the first important political step towards the revision of some key policies adopted in the last years and the the critical discussion of some major political events during the Cultural Revolution and certain historical questions left over from earlier periods .

<sup>6</sup> Zhang Haipeng, “A Bird's-Eye View”, in TYCHS 2.

In the following pages we will discuss, with a basic reference to this outstanding work and also to others important contributions published in the last years, some general trends and aspects related to the progress and achievements of Chinese historiography during the 1978-2008 period.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. ARCHEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES AND CHINA'S ANCIENT AND IMPERIAL HISTORY

The oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions represent the primary data for the studies of the Yin, Shang and Zhou history, before the birth of the imperial system in China in year 221 a.C. About 1.500.000 pieces of oracle bones inscriptions have been discovered and about 5.000 characters have been recognized, of which about 1/3 could be interpreted. Bamboo tablets and silk scripts, being the career of ancient Chinese characters after the bronze inscriptions, have made possible the deeper understanding of nearly a thousand years of history providing – together with other sources – outstanding progresses in the research on the origins of Chinese civilization and the state formation, stressing both its universality and distinctiveness. Generally speaking, historical studies have agreed on the fact that China's ancient culture was characterized by indigeneity, uniformity and diversity, inseparable from the geographical environment. Independent development was the main pattern in the progress of ancient Chinese culture from the Paleolithic age and through the Neolithic and Bronze age; however, this does not mean that Chinese ancient culture was a closed and self-sufficient culture, because exchanges with other parts of the world never came to a complete halt, despite of the barriers of high mountains, desert and oceans.<sup>8</sup>

The debate on the economic and social forms of ancient and imperial China have developed a critical evaluation, for instance, on the concept of “feudalism”, covering the period from the Warring States (ca. 475-221 b.C.) to the final period of the Qing dynasty (XVIII-XIX centuries), as applied to Chinese history. Various scholars have stressed that the concept of “feudalism” is strictly related to the history of Europe and that in the case of China the pre-imperial period can be classified as “feudal” but when coming to the long millennial history of imperial China it is more correct to speak of “imperial autocracy” or “patriarchal landlord autocratic society”.

During the last years, more and more attention has been paid, for instance, to the economic and social history of ancient and imperial China. The concentration of land and the rich-poor polarization caused by it led to sharp social contradictions, which was one of the most important factors of China's past dynasties' unrest and transformation. Regional economic history studies represent a new trends which started to become relevant from the 1980s. As for social history, research on the grass-root society has been one of the main hot topic, with a focus on the organization of grass-root regimes, nongovernmental social organizations, beliefs and daily life, covering quite all the range of the history of imperial China.

<sup>7</sup> For an update, however limited to some topics, to this volume edited by Zhang Haipeng, see among others Xie Wei, “Thirty years of modern Chinese history studies: past experiences and prospective trends”, *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 4, 1 (June 2010): 91-104.

<sup>8</sup> Chen Xingcan, “Archeological Discoveries of New China and Their Contribution to the Understanding of the History of China”, in TYCHS, 23-37; Bu Xianqun, “Several Features of Contemporary Research in Ancient Chinese History”, in TYCHS, 39-72.

## 3. MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

During the last decades, fundamental changes have been brought about the concept of the modern and contemporary history of China. The start of modern Chinese history in 1840, with the outburst of the First Opium War, seems to be a largely shared view, and it is today identified with the period of semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. Different approaches however did emerge about the demarcation point of modern and contemporary history: while in the past most Chinese historians tended to mark the May Fourth Movement of 1919 as the demarcation point, emphasizing its role in the development of the struggle against imperialism and the old society and also in the start of mass participation in national politics, during the last years the periodization has been changed. Now the modern period is extended to 1949 (that is the birth of the People's Republic of China, PRC) and the starting point of contemporary history has been set just in 1949, thus linking strictly the end of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal era with the birth of the "new China", the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the start of the building of a socialist system in China.

A symbol of such a new historiographical (but also political) approach is the establishment in 1990 of the Institute of Contemporary China Studies whose aim, as indicated by the Central Committee (CC) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is the "compilation, research and publication of the history of the People's Republic of China".<sup>9</sup>

In 1991 the Contemporary China Publishing House was created, under the direction of the above mentioned Institute, with a commitment to publishing book series of contemporary China and of contemporary history studies. In 1994, the academic bimonthly *Contemporary China History Studies* was founded, in 2001 the Department of the History of the PRC was created within the organization of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and in the following years more and more universities established programs for Masters and Ph.D. degrees in the field.

Within the debate developed during the last years some points of disagreements among historians and scholars regard:

- 1) the positioning of the history studies of the PRC: some believe it is a subdiscipline of History of China while others focus on its distinctiveness in respect to the general field;
- 2) the historical stages of the PRC: here there are 4 main approaches, which propose different periodization to the post-1949 historical phase (five stages, four stages, three stages and two stages);
- 3) the mistakes and setbacks during the PRC period: here the focus as in the past is largely put on the Great Leap Forward (late 1950s) and the Cultural Revolution (mid 1960s to mid 1970s).

The historical debate also put a particular emphasis on some hot issues which – as Prof. Zhang Xingxing stressed – in part are but academic controversies but in part are "no more than disseminating sensational erroneous views drawn from partial gen-

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Xingxing, "An Introduction to Chinese Research on the History of the People's Republic of China", in TYCHS, 105.

eralization and distortion of facts".<sup>10</sup> These include: the historical evaluation of the Korean War, with many scholars refuting some "false ideas" like that the dispatch of Chinese troops was Mao Zedong's own personal decision at the instigation of the leader of the Soviet Union or that the war had its gains outweighed by its overall losses; the mistake of the expansion of Anti-Rightist struggle in late 1950s, which see a majority of scholars criticizing some views which maintains that at that time there was no bourgeois attack that needed to be beaten off; the ten years of the Cultural Revolution: here the large majority of the historians base themselves on the official evaluation made by the CCP in 1981,<sup>11</sup> emphasizing the disasters brought about, but at the same time during the last years new studies have maintained that in those years there was also to a certain extent development in economic construction.

Regarding the pre-1949 period, Wang Chaoguang indicates that the huge progress in the field have largely benefited from the large-scale openness of the archives and the convenient availability of the historical data. In particular, many archives have been opened and quite a few archival materials have been published: for instance, the archives of the Republican era (1912-1949) and especially regional archives and the archives of important historical personalities of the period. The previous studies of the Republican period mainly concentrated on traditional historiographical fields like political, diplomatic, economic and military history. Now new fields of research and analysis have been added: social history, cultural history, urban history, etc. Besides, new research methods have been introduced strenghtening the pivotal role of historical documents, as in the case of socio-psychological approaches.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN SOCIAL HISTORY

Social history has been incorporated into modern Chinese history studies only from the 1980s. According to Prof. Wang Xianming,<sup>13</sup> three phases can be identified: first, that of the "resurrection" in the late Eighties, during which it was made clear that social history "mainly revolves about 'human', but not as individuals but "human history of certain class, stratum or group that varies with time"; second, that of "construction during the Nineties, during which social history showed some discipline chracteristics; third, that of "steady development" (from the start of the new century), which has seen social history becoming a popular topic in academia. Particularly interesting are new fundamental trends and achievements in three fields of research: a) regional history, which represents the main aspect of Chinese modern social history; b) rural history, whose growth was strongly stimulated by the tremendous changes in the Chinese countryside; c) gender history.

According to Wang, the rise of social history is "of epochal significance for the study of modern Chinese history" and its emergence can be used "to divide Chinese historical research as a whole into three parts":<sup>14</sup> first, it moves research from the

<sup>10</sup> Zhang Xingxing, "An Introduction to Chinese Research", 124.

<sup>11</sup> See "Resolution on Certain Questions in Our Party's History since the Founding of the PRC", approved in June 1981 by the Sixth Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CCP; in [www.china.org.cn](http://www.china.org.cn)

<sup>12</sup> Wang Chaoguang, "An Overview of Contemporary Research on Chinese Republican History", in TYCHS, 73-97.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Xianming, "The Emergence of Modern Chinese Social History", in TYCHS, 416-419.

<sup>14</sup> Wang Xianming, "The Emergence of Modern Chinese Social History", in TYCHS, 433-434.



history of elite to the history of ordinary people, overcoming the traditional historiographical concern on the leading actors on the stage of history; second, it represents a shift from political history to the history of daily life; third, it shifts the focus of research from general historical events to significant social problems.

##### 5. REGIONAL AND LOCAL HISTORY AND NATIONAL HISTORY

The studies on regional and local history in China go back to ancient times but their importance was strongly enhanced at the turn of the nineteenth century by the new historiographical influences produced through the contact between China and the West. Liang Qichao is considered the pioneer of that “history revolution” in China and his fundamental contribution is considered as the basis for the rise of a modern Chinese historiography. Similarly, ancient local chronicles already recorded the origins and customs of local people containing the basis for ethnographical research.

New trends emerged in these fields and produced important results during the last decades and years, in particular: a) the compilation of general local and regional history grew fast, with special attention to the history of nationalities at the regional and local level; a great development occurred in the field of monographical history studies focusing on specific local and ethnic aspects regarding politics, economy, society and culture; c) great and growing attention has been paid to micro-history with researchers working more and more on cities, countryside and communities; d) references of theories and methods among multi-disciplines and the integration of professional knowledge became increasingly remarkable.

##### 6. A YOUNG DISCIPLINE: WORLD HISTORY IN CHINA

It was only from the latter half of the twentieth century that world history started to flourish in China as an important discipline. The first step was the introduction of the works of western historians within the country, an event which later produced a first critical approach toward what was called “the Eurocentric approach” and at the same time gave birth to the first efforts to create Chinese scholars’ own vision of world history. In his talk at the Symposium on Chinese Historiography held in Beijing in September 2007, organized in cooperation with the International Congress of Historical Sciences (ICHS), Prof. Chen Qineng indicated that in the second half of the twentieth century basically no book on general world history written by Chinese historians was published in China.<sup>15</sup> However, with the new century the situation started to change and steady progress has been made in almost every area. According to incomplete statistics, in the first part of the twenty-first century an average of 100 books and 700 journal articles per year has been published in China and during the last years the trend became more and more consistent.

One of the field which most benefited from this change is that of ancient world history. According to the same Prof. Qi,<sup>16</sup> within the field “the studies of western classical antiquity remain the key areas of strength, involving a great number of scholars

<sup>15</sup> Chen Qineng, “The Development of World History Studies in Recent Years: A Survey”, Beijing: Symposium on Chinese Historiography, 2007, [www.cish.org](http://www.cish.org).

<sup>16</sup> Chen Qineng, “On the Recent Developments of Chinese Scholarship on World History”, in TYCHS, 154.

and large quantity of achievements”. On the contrary, the study of medieval world history remains in China “relatively weak”.<sup>17</sup> Regarding the studies of modern and contemporary world history, they have continued to flourish during the last decades with a special attention to contemporary world history. In the study of regional and national history, Western European history and North American history remain the focal areas together with Asian history; however, during the last two decades a strong growing attention has been dedicated to the history of Russia and Eastern Europe, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the last years, weak areas of research like that of African and Latin American history have registered important progress.

One of the hot topic in the field has become during the years global history and globalization. Some scholars maintain that global history does not represent a new approach accounting for history nor a new comprehensive and thorough theoretical system; many others, while recognizing the relevance of the new trend, consider that the global view of history constructs a new theory of centralism and thus does not really discard, as was indicated in the West, historical centralism; again, others point out that a globalized world history does not exist, just as there does not exist “cultural globalization”. In fact, many put a special and strong emphasis on the concept that each nation and people have their own “global history” in their minds and that “questioning ‘Eurocentrism’ and ‘Western Centralism’ is not a denial of the historical fact that Europe and Western countries once played a central role in a particular time period of world history development, but a denial of the perspective centered on Europe and Western countries for studying world history [...] in serious ignorance of endeavors and accomplishments in creating history in other parts of the world [...]”.<sup>18</sup>

## 7. HISTORIOGRAPHY IN CHINA: RESEARCH AND TEACHING

About 40 years ago, in 1977, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) was established on the basis of the former Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences under the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Under the CASS, which is under the leadership of the State Council (that is the executive power), the Academic Division of History includes 5 institutes and one center: the Institute of Archeology; the Institute of History, which basically oversees through its departments the history of imperial China from the pre-Qin period to the Qing dynasty; the Institute of Modern History, whose focus is the history of China from 1840 to 1949; the Institute of World History; the Institute of Taiwan Studies; the Research Center for Chinese Borderland History and Geography, whose main area of research are the borderland and boundaries in Chinese history.<sup>19</sup>

According to TYCHS,<sup>20</sup> originally there was also the Institute of Contemporary China Studies, which is engaged in the history of the People’s Republic of China and which now is part of the Academy of Marxism.

<sup>17</sup> Chen Qineng, “On the Recent Developments”, in TYCHS, 157.

<sup>18</sup> Zhang Haipeng, “A Bird’s-Eye View”, in TYCHS, 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> See the CASS website (english language), [casseng.cssn.cn](http://casseng.cssn.cn).

<sup>20</sup> Jin Yilin, Yang Hong, “China’s Historical Research Institutions and Their Research”, in TYCHS, 739-745.

A special mention should be made to the Party History Research Center, an institution directly under the control of the CC of the CCP whose main task is to carry out research on the Party history, to collect and edit important historical data on the CPC history.

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the organization and structure of course of history had obviously undergone many great changes. According to the overview presented by Zheng Shiqu and Lu Yi and related to year 2006,<sup>21</sup> there are 181 colleges offering the speciality of history. In the decade 1997-2006, the total number of graduates of colleges and scientific research institutes specializing in history was about 145,000 with more than 3,500 Ph.Ds and more than 13,000 MAs. While the progress made is outstanding, the two authors indicate 4 main questions which will need a careful analysis and appropriate initiatives by the academic and political circles: first, the development of history education in different areas of the country is very different, under the impact of market economy “utilitarianism has influenced specialty selection among potential teachers”, and “although the colleges are expanding enrollment, the enrollment of history major has been declining year after year”; second, history textbooks compiling still has shortcomings; third, it is still open the question of a truly armonious interaction between higher education and elementary education of history; fourth, according to some investigations, on the one side popular interest in history is still very high, but on the other hand many believe that it would be necessary to strenghten history education for the public, that historians “should write more straight-forward history book”, and that “historical films and TV programs function as a second classroom, where the public acquires historical knowledge”.<sup>22</sup>

#### 8. CONCLUSIONS. MARXISM AND CHINESE HISTORIOGRAPHY

I have tried in my short contribution to highlight some of the main trends and aspects which characterized the development of Chinese history studies during the last decades, taking as the main reference the volume *Thirty Years of Chinese History Studies*, edited by Zhang Haipeng. We have seen that Chinese history studies have made a great “leap forward” in many fields and for many aspects, basically recovering their fundamental role within the international community of historians, a role which was largely lost in the Sixties and Seventies due to internal political problems and to the dominant influence of ideology on historiography.

As Prof. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, one of the most outstanding scholars worldwide in the field of the studies on Chinese historiography, indicated:<sup>23</sup>

While [Chinese] historians still believed in the 1980s that they could regain public confidence if they fulfilled their task as historians in a more appropriate way, by the 1990s they started to understand that the role of historiography in society was undergoing massive change. Even though history was still a topic of public concern, academic historiography was marginalized.

<sup>21</sup> Zheng Shiqu, Lu Yi, “Historiography and the Teaching of History in China”, in TYCHS, 789-826.

<sup>22</sup> Quotations are from TYCHS, 819 and 821.

<sup>23</sup> Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Chinese Historical Writing Since 1949”, in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*. Volume 5: *Historical Writing Since 1945*, ed. by Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 629.

New forms of history-writing were developed, and a group of historians started to enter the field who had not gone through proper academic training [...].

Thus, under the influence of unofficial historiography, and as a result of gradually internationalizing the field,

Chinese historiography has become a more diversified, open, and uncontrollable field. Quantitatively, the source-oriented version of history writing is the most productive sector, as many historians engage in editing sources, dictionaries, and encyclopedias, and in compiling sources of regional and local histories. Social history, gender history, economic history and other fields of specialized historiography are gaining momentum. Whereas oral history was first introduced to circumvent the close control of the CCP [...], it is now often used to complement written sources [...] Simultaneously, historical understanding and consciousness among the younger generation is influenced by films, cartoons, and computer games[...] This highly internationalized media disseminate a version of Chinese history that is globalized by its form and in particular by its content.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Chinese Historical Writing", 630.

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