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# Global History in China

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Xin Fan  
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern  
Studies  
University of Cambridge  
Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, UK

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## PREFACE

On September 28, 1980, Xiao Qian 蕭乾 (1910–1999) wrote to the British economist Joan Robinson (1903–1983). In this letter, this septuagenarian Chinese journalist and writer, who had studied and worked in Cambridge and London during the Second World War, expressed optimism for his country’s future. After a decade-long Cultural Revolution and years of chaos caused by political movements and ideological campaigns, he celebrated the prospect that “China at long last is on the right track.” He noted that intellectuals were “mobilised” and “received much better treatment,” and writers like himself also enjoyed “much more freedom” to publish and to travel around the world. He expressed a desire to reconnect with his friends in Cambridge, promising in China “[overseas] relations are no longer taboo.” China had ceased treating Western countries as enemies. Drawing on the example of America, he observed a shift in discourse. Only one out of the recent ten articles published in *The People’s Daily*, he counted, was critical, while the rest were “about their merits.” “No one dare do so in the past,” but now people in China knew, as he reflected, “America had nothing to lose by our distortions.” He sighed, “We are the losers.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Xiao Qian’s Letter to Joan Robinson on September 28, 1980,” Joan Robinson Collection, King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge, vii/214/1.

Reading this letter in a chilly early autumn morning at a Cambridge college archive, I was deeply moved by the energy radiating from it—a spirit that captures the vigor of Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s rejecting past isolationist policies, reconnecting with the outside world, and embracing the new opportunities brought by the budding movement of globalization. To some extent, writing this book on global history in China is my way of paying tribute to several generations of Chinese scholars who exerted tremendous efforts to integrate the study of China’s past within the globalized world from the 1980s to the present day.

This is a book about historiography. Global history is an emerging field of scholarly studies in China. Despite a growing number of scholars claiming it as their research interest in recent decades, challenges persist in its development. One major challenge lies in the lack of a designated place in the Chinese classification of academic disciplines. In other words, it is an intellectual movement without its own “discipline.” But the movement itself remains significant.

In this book, I invite the reader to trace the origin of global history in China and to examine its current state. I argue, rooted in a warm appreciation of globalization during the era of Opening-up and Reform and presented as a trendy transnational intellectual movement at the beginning of the twenty-first century, global history, on the one hand, claims the identity of the “new,” eager to criticize the Eurocentric bias inherent in narratives of the “old,” such as those found in world history; on the other hand, as an emerging field, it faces competition from national histories and area studies, both of which are supported by the latest state initiatives with explicit political agendas. Thus, I contend that global history, as a whole, reflects Chinese scholars’ tenacious interest in studying globalization through the lens of history.

Transitioning from theory to practice, Chinese historians have also embraced global history to explore China’s place in world-historical time and space. In this book, I present case studies on three promising approaches, including conceptual history, global history as a critique of Eurocentrism, and studies of global moments. Global history is still under developing in China, and the future of global history is contingent on a critical examination of temporal and spatial aspects of historical inquiries, as well as a reconsideration of the relationship between secondary scholarship and primary sources in historiography.

Written for a wider audience with an interest in global history extending beyond the China field, *Global History in China* provides a

succinct narrative accessible to non-Chinese readers. I am actively working to synthesize both Chinese and non-Chinese language scholarship, aiming to facilitate a viable exchange of knowledge between scholars in China and their international counterparts in the post-pandemic era. Moreover, this book serves as an ideal reference for graduate seminars on world history and global history at research universities in East Asia, North America, and Western Europe.

Writing a book on global history in China in English poses a challenging task in transcultural and translanguaging practice. It requires researchers not only to introduce a body of non-English scholarship to an English-speaking audience but also to contextualize the significance of these works within both Chinese and global historiographies. This challenge is particularly pronounced as global history remains a fluid intellectual movement, yet to find its place in China's national system of disciplinary classification. If studying historiography is akin to "nailing jelly to the wall," studying global history in China involves the preliminary task of determining what this elusive "jelly" actually encompasses.<sup>2</sup>

To surmount these cultural barriers in studying global history in China, access to Chinese-language scholarship proves pivotal. As someone who has studied, worked, and lived outside the country for nearly two decades, I am especially grateful for my friends, colleagues, and mentors in China, including Cao Shengsheng, Cao Yin, Chu Zhuwu, Fan Shitao, Ge Zhaoguang, Geng Yuanli, Huang Jiangjun, Jin Qianwen, Li Danhui, Li Xuetao, Li Yongbin, Liu Jiahe, Liu Xian'ge, Ni Tengda, Niu Dayong, Shen Zhihua, Yang Gongle, Zhang Ke, Zhang Xupeng, Zhang Yang, and others. Some of them helped me to acquire publications and sources for this research project, while others shared their experiences as world/global historians through enlightening conversations and dialogues. Without their invaluable contributions, writing such a book is an insurmountable task. Special thanks also go to Tan Shengguang at Tsinghua University, Yao Baihui at Capital Normal University, and Marc Matten at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg for their assistance in obtaining permissions to include valuable images in this book. At Palgrave, my editor Jacob Dreyer has been an outstanding cheerleader,

<sup>2</sup> Peter Novak compares writing historiography to "nailing jelly to the wall" in *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

demonstrating exceptional patience with my multiple requests for deadline extensions and generously providing unwavering support. It has been a great honor to collaborate with him and with Palgrave.

On multiple occasions, both in person and online, I had the privilege of presenting chapters from this manuscript. At Peking University, my dear mentor and esteemed colleague in Cambridge, Hans van de Ven, organized an excellent panel on “China in a Global WWII” in November 2023, during which I presented the chapter covering “global moments.” Questions and feedback from Joseph Esherick, Niu Dayong, and other panelists inspired me to delve deeper into the examination of the national versus the global in Chinese historiography. I also presented two chapters at online conferences organized by scholars from Beijing Normal University and Capital Normal University. Engaging with scholars in China was truly a blessing, providing invaluable assistance in navigating research beyond Eurocentric academic settings.

While completing the book manuscript at Cambridge, I am immensely grateful for the help provided by a group of scholars. Tom Barrett shared his insightful perspectives on Japanese scholarship, enabling me to incorporate this significant dimension into my study of global historiography. Adam Yuet Chau chaired a workshop where I presented the chapter on the rise of area studies, and the daily conversations with him contributed to a source of inspiration throughout the book project. Toshihiko Aono provided valuable comments on several chapters and offered excellent suggestions on framing the introduction. Lynn Zhang, Lang Chen, and several others read certain chapters, and their feedback proved to be instrumental. I also gained tremendous benefits from the scholarly discussions with Roel Sterckx, John Nilsson-Wright, Bill Hurst, Mary Brazelton, Dan Knorr, Rachel Leow, Jeremy Adelman, Tom McBride, Sam Meston, and others. Barak Kushner, the energetic chair of the Department of East Asian Studies, is always there to help with all my urgent requests for assistance and support. Elena Fulgheri and Miki Jacobs at both the University Library and the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies also offered enormous help. Last but not least, I am truly grateful to Lucy Cavendish College for offering me a fellowship. Many of the great ideas for this book project were first tested at the dinner table of Lucy’s extraordinary formal halls.

In Europe, Dominic Sachsenmaier hosted me during my multiple visits to Göttingen where the idea of this book was first conceived



through conversations, seminars, and debates. He also provided constructive feedback on several chapters of the manuscript. So did Marc Matten at Erlangen. I appreciate Marc's continuous interest in this project. I feel privileged and grateful to be invited by him to visit the SASS Collection. It was during his workshop I first planned to write about the rise of area studies. The chapter on global conceptual history is a product of a working group coordinated by Margrit Pernau and Alp Eren Topal in Berlin, and I appreciate insightful comments from Lisa Mitchell and Martin Plot during our several online meetings. In Barcelona, Carles Brasó Broggi showed great hospitality when I presented this book project at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. David Martínez-Robles, Xavier Ortells-Nicolau, Maria Iñigo, Andrés Burbano, Enrique Mora, Ferran de Vargas, Javier Borrás, Carles Prado, and others offered useful feedback and helpful suggestions. It was my first time presenting the project as a book manuscript, and the positive response encouraged me to pursue it further.

Scholarship in world history and global history in North America continues to be a profound source of inspiration for my research. The Pittsburgh world history dissertation workshop in 2010 organized by Pat Manning, the late Adam McKeown, and Heather Streets marked the inception of my scholarly journey into writing on Chinese historiography. As I send this draft to my mentor, I hope that Pat enjoys reading it. I have also had the privilege of collaboration with Kristin Stapleton and Els van Dongen, thanks to another project on historiography. Their extensive knowledge of Chinese history has significantly broadened my understanding of the field. The long walks and late summer dinners with Rebecca Karl have been enjoyable, and her kindness in encouraging me to appreciate both my strengths and weaknesses in both life and work is invaluable. Q. Edward Wang remains my dear mentor and intimate friend, a towering figure in historiography whose support justifies all the hard work. The same sentiment holds for my dear friend Chen Huaiyu, whose prolific publications on nearly every subject in history establish him as a true "global historian" of our generation.

Some of the ideas presented in this book were initially introduced in other publications or will be featured in upcoming works. A section of Chapter 2 was originally published as "International Law in Ancient China?: Eurocentrism and the Rethinking of Case Studies in Chinese Intellectual History" in *Global Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2022): 265–281. I express my sincere gratitude to Taylor & Francis Group

for granting permission to republish it in this volume, and I appreciate the chief editor of the journal Rosario López's support. Chapter 1 is a commissioned contribution to Q. Edward Wang's edited volume on East Asian historiography. However, it is important to note that all these prior publications have undergone careful revisions to ensure consistency within the context of this book.

*Global History in China* was completed during the time my family transitioned from the United States to the United Kingdom. I am truly grateful for my wife Yan He's intellectual companionship. She now oversees one of the most prestigious Chinese studies collections in the world. Her tireless pursuit of knowledge in history and great devotion to the profession of librarianship continue to serve as a tremendous inspiration to me. Without her encouragement, this project would be impossible. So, I dedicate the book to her. My son Eric is currently studying ancient Greek for his GCSE tests, a language I once dreamt of commanding. I hope that through him, the love for the shared legacy in humanity will persist in the next generation. Of course, both my parents Fan Songli and Chen Shuhua and my in-laws He Zhiqiang and Zhang Yujie always support our work. Any tiny little progress we make brings immense joy to them. Therefore, we will continue our family's global journey to pursue love, knowledge, and a genuine understanding of humanity.

Cambridge, UK

Xin Fan

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## Introduction

**Abstract** This chapter serves as an introduction to the book. It provides the central argument, asserting that global history endeavors to incorporate China's historical narrative into the broader tapestry of human experience while maintaining a dialogue with Chinese historiography. Despite transcending national boundaries, the emergence of area studies poses a challenge to the scholarly integrity of the field. This chapter critically assesses existing literature in the field while outlining the book's dual methodology: an intellectual history of historiography and a sociological examination of disciplinary formation. Furthermore, it delineates key personalities, events, and themes to be explored in subsequent chapters.

**Keywords** Global history · Intellectual history · Sociology of knowledge · Critique of Eurocentrism · Historiography · Area studies

Global history is a subject of scholarly examination within contemporary global historiography. Similar to its counterpart in North America and Western Europe, the field of global history in China challenges Eurocentric biases, underscores global connections, and utilizes contextual

comparisons.<sup>1</sup> Originating from the enthusiastic embrace of globalization by Chinese scholars in the 1980s, the concept of global history has evolved into a prominent topic among historians in the past four decades. In present-day China, global history signifies cutting-edge scholarship that aligns with scholarly trends in the West. Yet its relationship with world history remains an open-ended question. As *Global History in China* traces the development of this field, it attempts to define global history in China by contextualizing its entangled relationship with world history.

“World history,” referred to as “shijie shi” (世界史), stands as a well-defined scholarly discipline in China. According to the most recent state classification, world history holds the status as “a first-level discipline” (*yiji xueke*, 一級學科) within the broader field of historical studies, running parallel with disciplines such as “Chinese history,” “Museum studies,” and “Archaeology.” As of now, world history is further categorized into five “second-level” disciplines (*erji xueke*, 二級學科),—historical theory and foreign historiography, ancient and medieval world history, modern and contemporary world history, world regional and country histories, and specialized topics in world history. Despite the absence of a clear definition in official documentation, world historians in China seldom incorporate Chinese history into their studies due to the distinct disciplinary division between “Chinese History” and “World History.” In other words, world history in China is effectively regarded as the study of “foreign history.”<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, global history, known as “quanqiu shi” (全球史), remains an intellectual movement without a clearly defined place within the state-sanctioned disciplinary structure. Most historians who claim global history as their research interest hold their primary disciplinary affiliations with either “World History” or “Chinese History.” Additionally, individuals from backgrounds in language education, foreign culture studies, and international studies also contribute to the field. As a result, global history

<sup>1</sup> For recent English-language scholarship on global history, see Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Pamela Crossley, *What Is Global History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Q. Edward Wang, “World History on a Par with Chinese History? China’s Search for World Power in Three Stages,” *Global Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2022): 303–324; Xin Fan, *World History and National Identity in China: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

in China lacks standardized educational curricula, unified professional assessment standards, and dedicated funding sources. Students interested in studying global history often navigate through curricula that may not prioritize global historical education. Scholars pursuing global historical research face evaluations from colleagues who may even be resistant to global history's research agendas. This sociological void within the knowledge production system poses a significant challenge to the development of global history in China.

Yet while China's world history discipline continues to maintain a separation between "Chinese history" and "the world," global history in China emerges as a commendable intellectual endeavor to bridge this cultural dichotomy. The concept of incorporating global perspectives into historical studies took root in the 1980s when Chinese intellectuals enthusiastically embraced the era of "opening-up" (開放) to the world. Scholars characterize globalization as the defining spirit of the contemporary world. Since then, global history has welcomed both world historians and Chinese historians, emphasizing the importance of embracing global interconnectedness in historical studies. As underscored in this book, the inclusion of the Chinese perspective has been a prominent feature of global history in China.

This study particularly concentrates on two essential aspects to comprehend global history as an evolving scholarly discipline in China: intellectual history and the sociology of knowledge. By "intellectual history," I mean an examination of evolving concepts, ideas, and thoughts concerning China's relationship with the world and China's existence in the world. Its component provides a narrative that traces the rise of global perspectives in historical thinking throughout the twentieth century and even into the late Qing dynasty. Over this period, a prevailing trend emerged among Chinese historians, aiming to construct a global narrative of the collective community of humanity. In contrast, by "sociology of knowledge," I mean studies of the social dimensions in the production of knowledge concerning interpersonal relations, institutional structures, and state-society dynamics. This study particularly highlights the institutional development that facilitates the rise of global historical research in China. As a scholarly approach, it adds a unique dimension to the



understanding of how global history has taken shape within the expansive academic landscape in China and within the world.<sup>3</sup>

Positioned as an intellectual history project, *Global History in China* contends that, for numerous scholars, global history signifies a profound acknowledgment of China's integrated place both within the global space and world-historical time. This book examines diverse dynamics within modern Chinese intellectual thought that propel the rise of global history in Chinese historiography. First and foremost is the Chinese historians' quest for a common humanity in the collective past of human beings.

Historically, mainstream scholarship has emphasized the discourse of cultural differences between China and the rest of the world. As well documented the debates on Hua-Yi differences (華夷之分), some scholars once strongly argued that Chinese scholar-officials perceived a fundamental distinction between Confucianism tradition and Western modernity.<sup>4</sup> Many Chinese scholars in the May Fourth and during the 1980s held a similar view criticizing China's cultural tradition for its lack of dynamics and isolationist tendencies attributing them to its decline in the modern world order. Throughout this book, I challenge this assumption and document how certain Chinese historians are embracing shared values among cultures. They are actively working to bridge the gaps between China and the wider world through the promotion of global history. These scholars sometimes might be the minority within the Chinese intellectual community, but their perspective represents a persistent trend in modern Chinese thought.

In my previous work, *World History and National Identity in China*, I examined the resistance exhibited by certain world historians against cultural nationalism. The rise of global history presents new prospects for connecting Chinese history with broader world history narratives, as scholars from both realms actively contribute to this burgeoning field.

<sup>3</sup> Dominic Sachsenmaier also underscores this sociological aspect in his comparative studies on the rise of global historical views in China, America, and Germany. Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have widely discussed this tension. To just cite one post-colonial critique as an example, see Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Among them, those scholars specializing in Chinese history are particularly bold in asserting that China is an integrated part of global historical analysis.

As articulated by Fudan historian Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 (1950–), a distinction exists between “telling global history from China” (從中國出發) and “telling global history with China being at the center” (以中國為中心). Scholars like him reject a Sinocentric perspective and boldly embrace their positionality in advocating for global history from China. Ge argues that, on the one hand, global history is not all-encompassing, necessitating scholars to acknowledge the inherent limitations in their knowledge and experiences. On the other hand, recognizing that each country occupies a unique geographical vantage point, Chinese perspectives, when combined with those from other parts of the world, contribute to a more comprehensive global understanding.

The impact of this school of thought has extended beyond the confines of academic research. Global historians such as Ge actively engage in global history education through social media, emphasizing the importance of avoiding alienation of popular audiences. Ge in collaboration with a team of scholars successfully organized a lecture series on global history, making significant strides in popularizing the subject in China.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of two and a half years, the series has captured the attention of more than 100,000 audiences, who have accumulatively engaged with the program millions of times.<sup>6</sup> This collective effort has transformed global history into a dynamic movement that not only connects professional historians with broader audiences but also strives to instill a global perspective on human history among the Chinese public.

The second aspect delves into Chinese intellectuals’ ambivalent stance toward Eurocentrism. Deeply entrenched in a self-perceived tradition of

<sup>5</sup> Ge Zhaoguang collaborated with public intellectual and journalist Liang Wendao 梁文道 launched a 200-episode podcast series *Cong Zhongguo chufa de quanqiu* [Global History Starting from China]. The series includes six seasons including, the first on the common beginning of human civilization, the second on war and migration, the third on merchandise, trade, and material exchanges, the fourth on religions and beliefs, the fifth on disease, climate, and environment, and the last one on the age after the Great Geographical Discovery. [https://zt.vistopia.com.cn/page/?page\\_id=bVIRr](https://zt.vistopia.com.cn/page/?page_id=bVIRr).

<sup>6</sup> Li Jing, “Ge Zhaoguang: Quanqiu shi shi bici lianxi de lishi” [Ge Zhaoguang: Global History Is a History of Connectedness], *Nanfang renwu zhoukan* [People in the South Weekly], no. 12 (April 28, 2023): <https://www.infzm.com/contents/248149?source=131>.