

“The World Awareness” in Traditional Chinese Historiography

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Part I. Records of the Grand Historian and the Image of the World in Chinese Historiography

How far had the Chinese reached out in their exploration of the world during the pre-Qin era (i.e. prior to the third century B.C.)? We do not yet have an answer. The depiction of the world in Chinese sources prior to Qin and Han was primary based on hearsay plus imagination. In ancient China, there was an assumption. That is, the “Tianxia” [All under Heaven] was imagined as 1). The “Nine States” plus their peripheries; 2). Their own country plus “Four Barbarians”; 3). The “King’s Capital” as center surrounded by “Five Tributary States.”

Regarding this issue, there are three pieces of important document. The first was the chapter of Yugong in the Book of Documents (Shangshu), according to which there were the Nine States inside China and barbarians outside. The peripheries followed the order of the Central State, and paid tributes. The second was the chapter of Wanghui from the *Yizhou shu*. It documents the fanfare when neighboring peoples paid tributes to the central state in Western Zhou. According to it, Zhou’s tributary states included the Yi in the East, the Yue in the South, the Rong in the West, and the Di in the North. The third is the chapter of Zhouyu in *Guoyu*. According to it, the Tianxia of the time included the five tributary states, including Dian 甸服, Hou 侯服, Bin 宾服, Yao 要服, and Huang 荒服, which register the different levels of cultural developments. These documents are based half on hearsay and half on imagination. Yet, they all reflect the belief that China occupied the center of the world in ancient times. According to ancient authors, the four barbarians paid tributes to China because they respected the Chinese culture and considered their own cultural development lower than the Chinese.

By the time of Qin and Han (after the third century B.C.), China by and large came into being, and thus the historical sources started to have more concrete records of the world outside of “China.” *Records of the Grand Historian* was the first historical work that had a clear intention to record China and its neighboring areas. It covered both the “Self” (the Han Empire) and the “Other,” of which included the strongest Xiongnu in the North as well as Korea, South Yue, East Yue and Southwest Yi (even India) in the East and South. Meanwhile, the

chapter on Dawan records the states in the West (nowadays Central and West Asia). This historical “world” during the time roughly covered the majority of today’s Asia.

Sima Qian, the grand historian, is an extraordinary historian and was well aware of the world. However, we also need to understand:

(1). Historians in traditional empires were unable to transcend their national standpoint and that they were used to seeing the outside world through their inside perspective. Their research was primarily based on the official records on foreign exchanges, and they had a limited scope of knowledge (some of which was even hearsays). Thus, the world in their works was like concentric circles with their own country being placed in the center.

(2). Han historians in historical records often emphasized foreigners being less civilized. The Han Dynasty maintained a sense of cultural superiority regarding their enemies such as the Xiongnu as barbarians, although they had to treat them on equal terms in politics.

(3). Historians during this period believed that the outside world merely contained the “four inferior groups” of the “empire,” and that these peoples were uncivilized barbarians. Their very existence was to prove the high culture of China, and their tribute would bring glory to and boost confidence of the central empire.

Thus, it became a tradition in Chinese historiography that historians regarded “the central dynasty as the center and the neighboring peoples as peripheries.” This tradition lasted more than two thousand years.

Part II. Three Opportunities for Change in the World Awareness in Chinese Historiography

In comparison with Sima Qian, later official historians paid more attention to national and dynastic history of their own times, and did not expand much to the outside world. Sima Qian’s model that treated China as the center and neighboring peoples as the peripheries became the paradigm for traditional historiography. Over the course of the lengthy traditional era, China’s portray of the “world” remained roughly like this.

Despite the lack of fundamental changes, I, however, would like to point out, with the changes in foreign communications, international environments, and imperial boundaries, the world awareness in traditional historiography had encountered three opportunities to change, and yet these opportunities failed to bring the final breakthrough.

The first opportunity was the widening of the world vision in the Middle period and the introduction of the Buddhist worldview.

In the Middle Period, there were the two most important sources for world knowledge in China. The first was the expansion of the geographical range of Chinese activities, along with the entering of the foreign peoples in the West and South into China Proper. These encounters dramatically increased China's knowledge about the world. The second was the introduction of Buddhism, which brought the most important impact on China's knowledge about the world. It is because Buddhism came from outside China and it brought very rich information about foreign lands.

The scholars in the previous generations have outlined these changes. Both Chinese scholar He Changqun and Japanese scholar Jitsuzō Kuwabara have pointed out that after the introduction of Buddhism, China had to face its neighboring areas, as in the eyes of Buddhists, the center of the world was not China but India and the highest civilization was not Chinese but Indian. In the meanwhile, they compiled a good number of works such as *Records of the World* and *Books on Foreign Countries*.

However, during the Middle period, Buddhism did not conquer China. It, by contrast, became assimilated into the Chinese tradition. Thus, the impact of Buddhism did not change the historiographical tradition where historians regarded the central dynasty as the center and the neighboring peoples as peripheries.

The second opportunity was the change in the international environment in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), which gave rise to the awareness between "internal" and "external."

In contrast to Tang times, the territory controlled by Song had shrunk by a half. There were Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongol in the North, Goryeo and Japan in the East, West Xia founded by the Qiang of Dangxiang in the West, Turpan and Dali in the Southwest, Annam in the South. The shrunken Song Empire gradually became one of the many countries, and the self-conceited feeling as the center of the cosmos in ancient times had become remote memory.

It was about the same time that the intellectual class in the Song dynasty gradually realized the difference between the "internal" and "external," and historians started to clearly distinguish the external world from the internal world. The former was apparently the "foreign countries," and they were countries independent of China; the latter was "barbarians," who were the non-Chinese groups inside China. This idea of the divide between "internal" and "external" gradually became the consensus, and three new phenomena appeared in Chinese historiography:

(1). People were leaning towards recognizing the legitimacy of the existence of foreign countries. It became common sense during the Song dynasty that as the cosmos had Yin and Yang, there were "Chinese" and "Foreign" under the Tianxia.

(2). People abandoned the old view that the Nine States constituted the maximum space and the “Twenty-Eight Constellations” were matched with Chinese geography. From the traditional conceptions of heaven and earth, they acknowledged that China was not big, and that there were vast territories outside. There were many foreign countries between heaven and earth. (3). Song people changed their attitude of indifference to foreign peoples as they gathered more information about them. Based on personal experiences, Song delegates to foreign lands left a great deal of literature concerning their visits. Song port authority officials also left some documents about foreign countries.

The third opportunity was the Mongolian Yuan period. Within the Eurasian world empire, the Huihui (the Chinese Muslims) introduced new ideas about world history.

During the Yuan period, the “world awareness” appeared in Chinese historiography indeed, which promised an attempt to comprehensively narrate world history and geography. This “awareness” was probably introduced by the Mongols who crossed the Eurasian continent and the Huihui who hailed from areas like Persia. In 1285, after Mongol’s conquest of entire China, the secretariat office of the Yuan dynasty prepared for editing the records of the unification of the empire and world maps. And this “unification” included not only Han China but also the “myriad territories” conquered by Mongol. A Huihui scholar Jamal-al-Din once submitted a petition to collect historical documents and maps about “the territories from afar” to the capital Dadu (today’s Beijing) and to recruit scholars from both south China and north China to edit. In 1286, the year after the petition, Jamal-al-Din reported to the emperor again, stating “Our empire was vast, from the place of sunrise to it of sunset.” Thus, “We have to compile not only the historical books about the empire but also the complete set of maps covering the Mongolian empire. Although the grand history and the complete map set do not exist today, we can still find their influence in the *Map of Integrated Lands and Regions of Historical Countries and Capitals* 混一疆理历代国都之图, a collection covering almost entire Africa, Arabia, that was made by the Koreans and preserved in Japan today. By 1294, the *Record of the Grand Unification of the Great Yuan* under his supervision had gathered 755 volumes, and by 1303 it was added to 1300 volumes. However, this majority of the book was lost during the Qing, and only dozens of volumes survived today, of which the *Preface to the Record of the Grand Unification* still exists.

It is a pity that the “New Beginning for World History” during the Mongolian Yuan only lasted less than a century, and the historical thinking covering the great Eurasian continent shortly disappeared in China, too. From the remainder of historical materials, one can find that in the process of compiling the record of great unification, Huihui scholars only paid special attention to the recently

annexed territories such as the ones in Yunnan, Gansu, and Liaoyang, and they still regarded “the central dynasty as the center and the foreign lands as peripheries.” The wider world conquered by the Mongol Empire was not recorded in the historical narratives, although the *Map of Integrated Lands and Regions of Historical Countries and Capitals* covered areas in Central Asia, West Asia, Arabic Peninsula, Africa, and Europe.

Part III. The Changes in Traditional Chinese Historiography under the Influence of Western Learning in Late Qing

The works that really account for the rise of the “world/global” awareness appeared in China after the Daoguang, Xianfeng, and Tongzhi eras (1821-1874) in Qing.

The reason was simple. – During the time, China was forced to open up and had to learn more about the politics, history, and geography of the world. Especially under the coercion of modern Western empires, historians who were previously only focused on the core area of the Chinese Han people started to care about the wider neighboring world.

As we discussed before, the Chinese historical tradition since Sima Qian regarded “the central dynasty as the center and the neighboring peoples as peripheries.” Thus, the chapters on “Four Barbarians,” “Man and Yi” and “Foreign Lands” in Chinese official history were all listed by the end of the historical works and covered only a few pages. However, this new era witnessed some great changes, and three of them deserve our special attention:

First, the knowledge about the non-Chinese world gradually attracted attention. Works touching upon world geography and history were being published, including the ones such as Lin Zexu’s *Sizhou zhi* 四洲志 [Records of the Four Continents] (1839), Xu Jiyu’s *Yinghuan zhilue* 瀛寰志略 [Concise History of the World] (1849), and Wei Yuan’s *Haiguo tuzhi* 海国图志 [Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime]. Only during this period did Chinese historians intentionally narrate the knowledge about the history and geography of the world and the entire globe.

Second, with the crises in the frontiers of the empire, scholars after the Daoguang and Xianfeng emperors changed their scholarly attitudes, leading to the rise of works on the history and geography of Northwest China. In the meanwhile, as the Qing dynasty retraced the history of their ethnic origins, historians started to pay attention to Mongolian and Yuan history again. It became a hot topic to edit Yuan history. By doing so, Chinese historians had to deal with historical materials concerning non-Chinese territories, which widened the scope

of their research.

Third, during this period, foreign missionaries translated and compiled quite a few books on world and European history in China, and these books became popular among the enlightened intellectuals in late Qing. Among them, *Taixi xinshi lanyao* 泰西新史揽要 [The Summary of the Recent History of the West] used to be enormously influential. It had great impact on not only important scholars such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao in late Qing but also politicians such as Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong.

Part IV. Becoming Common Sense and Textbook: The Final Change in the World Awareness in Chinese Historiography

It is well known that the late Qing and early Republic at the turn of the twentieth century was a time of “the biggest change that the past three thousand years had never witnessed.” With the failures in Chinese domestic and international politics, the change in world geography and historical conception appeared at an accelerated velocity. From Liang Qichao’s *Zhongguo shi xulun* 中国史叙论 [The introduction of Chinese history] in 1901 and *Xin shixue* 新史学 [New Historiography] in 1902 to Xia Zengyou 夏曾佑’s *Zuixin zhongxue Zhongguo lishi jiaokeshu* 最新中学中国历史教科书 [The Latest Middle-School Chinese History Textbook] (1904), Chinese historiography underwent some profound changes. Under the double impact of the translated Japanese works on Chinese history and the sentiment that “China has no historiography,” Chinese historians started to reexamine and rewrite Chinese historiography within the world context. Entering into the twentieth century, the Chinese historical writing could not dismiss the world awareness any more.

It deserves our special attention that the government accepted this changed view of history and applied it to school education. It indicates that the world historical view had been commonly accepted. In 1867 the Qing dynasty founded the Tongwenguan where “The Reading of the Histories of Various Countries” became a school subject. After the failures in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, the Reform of 1898 and the Boxer Uprising of 1900, the government in late Qing had no other choices but reforms in politics, system, and education. In this process, the new concept of history was adopted in the public school education. In 1904 during the most significant event, scholar-officials such as Zhang Baixi and Zhang Zhidong drafted the *Royally Approved Memorial on School Regulations* 奏定学堂章程 requiring the universities and colleges must offer “the History of Myriad Countries” along with Chinese history. By this time, world history entered China, and the Chinese historians had to face the entire globe/world.

It may well be said, only after the historical knowledge about the world became “common sense” and “textbook” could Chinese historiography nurture the “world awareness.”