

New Historical Thinking in China's Reform Era (1979-Present): Background on Establishment Historians

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The late 1970s brought momentous change in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The deaths of the first generation of Communist Party leaders, the end of the Cultural Revolution, and the emergence of Deng Xiaoping as China's new leader, all happened during the years 1976 to 1979. The Eleventh Party Congress is universally praised for launching the era of "opening and reform" (*gaige kaifang*), signaling China's opening to world intercourse and reform of internal policy. Now, two decades later, the phrase "opening and reform" retains its power in a society that has been oriented to political and economic slogans, even as sloganeering has largely stopped. This guiding policy now has served longer than any other in the half-century of PRC history, and it is the major reason why China has undergone internal economic reform and now seems poised to become a major world power in economic productivity and trade.

It is less widely appreciated that "reform and opening" has also brought significant change in the realm of academics and scholarship. While outsiders assume that such an episode as the disaster of June Fourth 1989 reflects unmitigated repression by Chinese authority, the everyday actuality is that there is greater openness in opportunities to express individual views and to circulate them in a surprisingly open publishing market. Opportunity does not mean complete freedom, and the authorities still step in when challenged directly, but the atmosphere is indeed much more open today than in 1980. My purpose in this paper is to survey the more open environment in the field of history, which has produced the "new thinking" in my title. It should be noted at the start that this more open environment has brought similar change in every field of study.¹

A brief summary will suggest developments in the field of history. Almost immediately after the Eleventh Party Congress in 1978 there were expressions of relief and jubilation that the "extreme leftism" and dogmatism that had characterized public life since the late 1950s had finally

1. For an excellent study on conditions in one field, see Gregory E. Guldin, *The Saga of Anthropology in China: From Malinowski to Moscow to Mao* (Armonk, N.Y., 1994).

ended. Historians felt free, or much freer than before, to discuss and debate the major historical issues that had occupied the profession for many years. The *Yearbook of Chinese Historical Studies* (*Zhongguo Lishixue Nianjian*) started publication in 1979, and a series of conferences on historical theory also began in that year. Decisions regarding party history made in 1981 brought a new effort by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to study its own development. As of the early 1980s, however, there was still hesitance to think boldly. The "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" campaign of 1983 reflected a backlash against progressive policy by the conservative old guard of the Party leadership.² Thus while formal policy remained one of "opening," intellectuals understandably still feared the possible consequences for anyone who might express an unusual view. As historians continued to reflect on and discuss theory at their annual conferences, there was a succession of new approaches: the slogans "return to the Sixties," "return to Marx," "return to the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras" reflect a series of approaches to developing constructive historical theory. By the middle 1980s historians began to talk about a "crisis in history" (*shixue weiji*) that partly reflected their frustrations over these various approaches to theory. In 1987, the same year as another conservative backlash brought a crackdown on students and their hero Fang Lizhi, the journal *History and Theory* (*Shixue Lilun*) began to publish. This experimental quarterly provided a forum for new historical thinking; it became the journal that most directly paralleled the broader "culture fever" (*wenhua re*) trend among intellectuals. Whether or not the action should be seen as part of the general crackdown that followed June Fourth 1989, *History and Theory* ceased publication at the end of 1989. (A new, more strictly academic version of this journal began to publish in 1992 under the title *Shixue Lilun Yanjiu*, and continues to the present.)

2. This campaign was launched in October 1983; see the chronology, p. 293, in Chen Fong-ching and Jin Guantao, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy: The Chinese Popular Cultural Movement and Political Transformation 1979-1989*, Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 1997.

The general effect of June Fourth over the next several years is well understood; the crackdown had the same effects on historical studies as it did on so many other aspects of Chinese life. Deng Xiaoping's "tour of the South" in 1992 brought a general relaxation and a resumption of economic development. The new tacit deal for intellectuals was that a measure of openness could return as long as no one challenged the leadership directly. Of course it is difficult to make a brief summary of developments over the most recent decade. As already suggested, the growth of the market economy has been reflected in a "creeping openness" for history and other academic fields. Thus today historians may present almost any sort of idea or theory as long as the views are put forward in a systematic discussion and the writer suggests that Marxism is China's guiding theory in historical work.

Before surveying these developments in greater detail, I should point out that most of the historians with whose work I have some familiarity are establishment-oriented rather than independent. Also, they are professional historians rather than scholars or writers in other fields. As this is true, it might seem superfluous to suggest that they would be anything other than establishment-oriented. Yet it remains true that some who hold academic positions also speak independently, at least sometimes. In any case, there is an interesting variety of views, and more importantly, the writing and activities of establishment historians over the past two decades also accurately indicates general trends.

Early Developments after 1978

Historians, like all other groups and the entire nation, rejoiced over the decisions of 1978 that formalized the end of the Cultural Revolution (CR). If freedom had not been introduced, at least oppression had ended, and all society could relax and begin to return to normal. For historians, normality seemed to suggest that they should leave behind the dogmatism of the previous two decades. But it was not so clear where to go next. Many assumed that they should "return to the Sixties" in historical work, which meant restoring respect to Jian Bozan and his historicist approach

to history.³ Jian had been an innovative historian, but he became an early target of dogmatic left-wing trends and he ultimately committed suicide (1968). Historicism emphasized applying broad principles presumably learned through historical development, which virtually everyone in China's leadership wished to do as of the early 1960s. But Jian's historicism conflicted with that of the ultra-left CR leaders. As of the return to normal in 1978, historians sought to return to the concerns of Jian and other advocates of historicism, but to do this systematically and without political influence. As conditions had changed, however, this approach also proved unproductive, and it did not last long

The next major approach was to "return to Marx." This phrase also meant more than it suggests on first hearing. The basic thrust came from a decision made at a major historical conference, held in Chengdu in February 1979, to encourage study of the question of the major driving force in history. This issue had long been regarded as important, but earlier discussion of it had been limited to views based on the dogmatic establishment interpretation of Marxism. During the year after the Chengdu conference, more than 200 papers were published on this question. The "return to Marx" meant that historians went back to the classical works of Marx and Engels in their quest for understanding of this major issue. This discussion was liberating in an atmosphere in which even discussion of issues based on an orthodox system of thought had been so limited. Twelve major theories emerged from the discussion, including these: productive force is the major driving force in history; contradictions internal to productive force constitute the key; the "sum result of the forces" of society decide this question; human desire is the major driving force in history; science and technology mean most; and, again among others, ethnic struggle is the driving force of history.⁴ This intense discussion suggests one of the major attractions of Marxism in the Chinese intellectual environment: traditional historiography had not asked such basic questions, yet these were vital in Marxist thought.

3. The following discussion of early post-1978 trends is based on an Wang Xuedian, "Historical Trends in the New Period," trl. Huang Jisu, *Chinese Social Sciences*, Spring 1996, pp. 95-105. Wang is a younger scholar of trends in historical thought in post-1949 China; he is at Shandong University in Jinan.

4. Ibid., p. 97.

The "return to Marx" was followed by a "return to the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras." This approach harked back to a time-honored method in scholarship that had been the major emphasis during the reign of those two emperors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵ Also known as "examination and verification" (*kaozheng*), this method was comfortable to most Chinese historians. It resonated with the Rankeian approach to history that had been introduced in China earlier in the twentieth century. It also resonated with Deng Xiaoping's appeal to "seek truth from facts" (*shishi qiushi*). Further, its re-emergence was appropriate because of an important debate on the issue of "history vs. theory" (*shihun wenti*) that occurred during these same years.⁶ To emphasize the factual aspect of history would be to de-emphasize the rigid version of Marxist theory that had dominated for the previous two decades. Still, this "return to Qianlong and Jiaqing" proved unsatisfying because it did not offer or encourage historians to reach for broad-scale interpretations of history.

These early years of reform also brought the CCP leadership to a quest for understanding of the causes for the disaster of the Cultural Revolution. Although the disaster had been brought to an end in 1978, the Party was serious enough in its efforts to learn how it had been possible to go so far astray. This quest led to a "Resolution on Party History," promulgated in 1981.⁷ While such a resolution was much concerned with consensus among those who specialize in Party history, the willingness to consider the long-term development of the CCP signaled an encouraging level of openness. Thus various subjects and kinds of projects were now possible, opening not just attitudes but also the range of topics for historical study. Over the past two decades, new material has been collected and published, making it possible for both Chinese and foreign scholars to do

5. This scholarship is the theme of Benjamin Elman's *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard, 1984).

6. For a discussion of the "history vs. theory" debate, see Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedzik, "On *Shi* and *Lun*: Toward a Typography of Historiography in the PRC," *History and Theory*, 35:4 (December 1996), pp. 74-95.

7. The full title is "Resolution on Some Questions Concerning the History of the Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China." The resolution was prepared at the Sixth plenary session of the Eleventh Party Central Committee in summer 1981. See Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedzik, "Party Historiography," in Jonathan Unger, ed., *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China* (Armonk, N.Y., 1993).

much better informed studies of anarchism in China, and on a vast range of other subjects from the Republican period.

Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng and Systems Theory

One of the first major impacts on China's historians took the form of a manuscript written by a young chemist turned journalist, Jin Guantao, and his wife, Liu Qingfeng. The couple wrote a thesis entitled "The Ultra-Stable System of Chinese Society," first published in a Guiyang newspaper in early 1980 and the following December in the first volume of a new series of publications called *Youthful Manuscripts*. Jin and Liu like many of the current generation of activist intellectuals had been students during the Cultural Revolution, whose experiences outside formal education and personal reflections on the problems of Chinese history and society provided both their views and their motivation for reformist careers.⁸ Jin developed a view of Chinese society inspired by the concept of stability in the natural world. His thesis maintained that Chinese society had remained stable for many, many centuries because of a set of mutually reinforcing forces including Confucian morality, a landed class, and a monolithic government. This long article had great impact; over the next several years many historians sought to incorporate the perspectives of natural science and an all-inclusive view appropriate to the study of entire systems, into their historical work.

The trend toward "systems theory," as it came to be called, became an early example of the influence possible for someone who was not a professional historian. Really, the Jin-Liu discussion did not present much natural science. Its appeal seems rather a result of the comprehensive view of Chinese history and society that the authors used in their analysis. It offered a non-Marxist interpretation of China's macro-history that in itself was both refreshing and disorienting. Over the

8. For the early form of the treatise and personal background on Jin Guantao and his wife Liu Qingfeng, see the book that Jin wrote with Chen Fong-ching, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy*. An updated version of Jin's thinking on this subject appears in Gloria Davies, ed., *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); see ch. 8, "Interpreting Modern Chinese History through the Theory of Ultrastable Systems."

next few years historians were encouraged to apply systems theory to such questions as the nature of Chinese feudalism. Many historians attempted to augment their knowledge with crash courses in natural science. Frustration with such basic efforts at retooling gradually undermined this enthusiasm for systems studies. Here again, however, this fresh approach to analyzing China's historic culture encouraged historians to consider new, broader perspectives than had been encouraged by the rigid Marxism of the previous two decades. And although the enthusiasm for systems studies had passed by about 1987, its influence was positive.⁹

Reintroduction of Theory from Abroad

As the environment opened up in the early 1980s, a number of projects were undertaken to introduce historical theory from abroad. By this time, "abroad" meant mostly Europe and the United States. While there was lots of catching up to do, much of this theory from abroad was being reintroduced rather than introduced for the first time in China. This was especially the case with material from the period before World War II. Despite the gap in ideology after 1949, there had been some effort to learn of postwar developments in Western Europe and the United States, and to translate some discussions on historical thought from these later years (see below). Although as already noted most of these foreign influences in history came from the West, until the beginning of the reform period "abroad" had meant the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Influences in historical thought had come from both these sources, with both orthodox and reform Marxist views being translated and discussed. Open-minded Chinese historians had been especially interested in reform thought from Eastern Europe, in all fields including history.¹⁰

Once begun, translation of a great variety of articles and books from Western Europe and the U.S. quickly became a flood of materials. But this flow began almost haltingly, and the poignant

9. This assessment of the impact of the Jin-Liu article and the appeal of systems theory is in Wang Xuedian, "Historiographical Trends in the New Period," pp. 100-101.

10. For an excellent survey and evaluation of these Soviet and Eastern European influences, see Ma Xueping, "A Study of the Historical Destiny of Marxist History in East and West" (*Makesi zhuyi Shixue zai Dong-Xifang Lishi Mingyun de kaocha*), *Historical Studies (Lishi Yanjiu)*, 1989, no. 3.

story surrounding one of the early small volumes of translations suggests the intellectual and spiritual cost of the Cultural Revolution in this particular endeavor. The preface to a collection published in 1984 begins,

Near the end of 1961, to carry out the spirit of the Ministry of Higher Education's concern on the writing and editing of teaching materials, in Shanghai we convened a conference on the writing and editing of materials on Western historiography.

After agreeing to produce a collection on historiography from abroad, this committee chose an editor, who developed serious health problems and could not finish the work. Then,

... Just as the manuscripts were ready and we were preparing to contact a publisher, the 'Great Cultural Revolution' suddenly changed everything, and it all was dragged out for nineteen years.

After the 'Gang of Four' was brought down, we of the Materials Room at Fudan University made a search and finally found the draft that fortunately had been preserved, and the Shanghai People's Press, which also was back at work, included it in their publication plans.

... After the ten years' catastrophe and that change in human affairs, Wang Zaoshi, Lei Haizong, and Chen Quansan, who were involved in translation work from the beginning, all have passed away, and we remember them with heartfelt grief.¹¹

Once it became acceptable again, by the late 1980s many indeed became "involved in translation work," and by the late 1990s so many translations of books and articles on historical thought had been published that it would be a challenge just to draw up a bibliography of these materials. This and other early anthologies of translated writings by Western historians included Leopold Ranke, Arnold Toynbee, Bertrand Russell, Benedetto Croce, George Collingwood, Lucien Febvre, Raymond Aron, Charles Beard, Carl Becker, and the French Annales School and its individual representatives. Even before the end of the 1980s such methodological approaches as systems theory (mentioned above), quantitative history, and psychological history were introduced.

11. Quotations are from the preface to *Selections from the Schools of Contemporary Western Historical Study* (*Xiandai Xifang Shixue liupai wenxuan*), ed. Tian Rukang and Jin Chongyuan (Shanghai Yiwen [Translation] Chubanshe), 1984.

The "Crisis in History"

By the middle 1980s many Chinese historians were beginning to be concerned about and to discuss a "crisis in history" (*shixue weiji*) that they themselves perceived. They were not always clear about what made up this crisis. Certainly there had been much to deal with in the field of history during the few years of the "open" policy: Welcome as was this change, the removal of earlier limits on subject matter and historical interpretation had been disorienting. There had been a series of new approaches, none of which had been satisfying. Of the new theoretical approaches, the most challenging was the attempt by Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng to apply principles and paradigms from the natural sciences. This had implied that historians should "retrofit" themselves with expertise in the natural sciences, a daunting, time-consuming project. At the time, this succession of new experiences in itself was regarded as sufficient cause for the "crisis in history."¹²

For some historians a major sign of crisis was that the numbers of students majoring in history seemed to be declining. Even though the many opportunities that would later become available in business had not yet developed, too many students seemed to be choosing to major in fields other than history. Thus, given the difficulties for those already working as professional historians and the apparent lack of interest among new generations of students, the field of history did indeed seem to be facing serious problems.

In an effort to deal with both aspects of the "crisis in history" suggested above, a number of historians set about writing "introductions to history" (*shixue gailun*). Actually this project was a concern to all who taught history at the university level, and it began soon after the reform era itself—that is, it began even before this perceived "crisis in history." Among the first of these textbooks was one written by Ge Maochun and Xiang Guanqi of Shandong University in 1983.¹³ Thus the

12. Wang Xuedian, "Historical Trends in the New Period."

13. This introduction was entitled *Guide to Historical Science (Shixue Kexue Gailun)*; it was published in 1983 by Shandong Educational Press. Another of these works, intended as university texts, was also published in 1983 by Bai Shouyi: *Shixue Gailun*, Ningxia People's Press. Ge and Bai were highly respected senior historians at that time.

historical profession had indeed anticipated the need to offer sound preparation to a new generation of historians. Their underlying concern was to develop an intelligent approach to the teaching of history in the new dogma-free environment.¹⁴

While the notion of this "crisis in history" persisted for several more years, most of the specific concerns that had contributed to the sense of crisis did indeed pass by the late 1980s. Perhaps one should say that historians generally became accustomed to working in a mood of crisis, or of modest depression. The late 1980s was a period when intellectuals felt pressure from several directions, including fixed salaries that would buy less in an expanding economy and a sense that their historic place in society was no longer as secure as in earlier decades. Still, for those who remained devoted to their field, historians found much in the new environment to be excited about, for those same years brought great activity in discussions of culture and, by implication, of politics.

History and Theory, Vehicle for New Thinking

Launched in the spring of 1987, the journal *History and Theory* (*Shixue Lilun*) quickly became a source of excitement to Chinese historians eager to seek new ways to understand history. Theory had been discussed regularly from the beginning of the reform period. It had been the topic of the annual historians' conferences several times over the course of the decade, and again was the major topic at the conference of 1986. The new journal was to be a quarterly, jointly sponsored by two divisions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Institute for the Study of Modern Chinese History and the Institute for World History. The first issue appeared in March 1987. *History and Theory* became the journal that many had hoped to see. It provided a forum for the

14. It seems not to have been a foregone conclusion that these introductions to history necessarily incorporate the materialist conception of history. As Ge and Xiang stated this point in their preface to an accompanying book of selected readings, "But whether or not we should teach the use of the theory and methods of the materialist conception of history, our general understanding was not sufficiently in agreement." This was only a passing doubt or perhaps a pro forma statement; both the basic introduction and the readings volume--like the entire profession--made the materialist viewpoint basic. Still, this question occurred even to these establishment professionals as they sought to launch a new era on a sound basis. See *Reference Materials for Guide to Historical Science*, "Preface" (*Xuyan*), p. 2. This preface is dated February 1982, still early in this process of developing teaching materials. The *Reference Materials* volume was also published by Shandong Educational Publishers, 1985.

discussion of all sorts of ideas about theory and methodology in historical studies. The enthusiasm never ended during its life of three years, which ended apparently as an indirect effect of June Fourth 1989.

History and Theory regularly offered symposia by some of China's most respected historians. Topics for these included "Reform in Historical Studies and Historical Theory," "Theoretical Reflections on China's Traditional Historical Study," and "The Way Out for History Lies in Renewing Ideas."¹⁵ The journal also was concerned to introduce theory and research activity from abroad. As noted above, the notion of "abroad" now meant Europe and the United States more than the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, although the latter were not excluded.¹⁶ Articles and comment from Chinese graduate students in the United States also appeared often, so that this part of the journal's content was first-hand and practical.¹⁷ To put it briefly, *History and Theory* was like a blast of fresh air.

Publication of this new journal coincided very closely with the period of "culture fever" (*wenhua re*), the most open few years in the history of the People's Republic. The high tide of "culture fever" indeed came between the repression of student activity in late 1986 and June Fourth 1989. This "culture fever" has been the subject of much discussion, even of book-length studies, so it is difficult to summarize.¹⁸ It was a period of great openness and lively discussion, generated by devotion to creating a modern, progressive society in China. Both the intellectuals who expressed themselves on a broad range of subjects and most of their audience assumed that this class or element in society held a special role, given by history, as informed moral leaders capable of guiding

15. For these symposia see respectively 1987:1 (the inaugural issue of the journal), 1987:2, and 1988:3.

16. *History and Theory*, 1987:4 carried an interview with Philip C. C. Huang of UCLA, and also a symposium on "The Development of Contemporary Soviet Historical Theory."

17. See "Voices from the Other Side of the Ocean: Chinese Doctoral Candidates in the U.S. on the Reform of Historical Studies," 1988:2.

18. Comments on the "culture fever" of the late 1980s appear in several of the essays in the excellent book edited by Gloria Davies, *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

the whole of society toward desirable goals. The enthusiasm for new ideas, especially those from abroad, was not necessarily matched by a comprehensive understanding of those ideas, if only because it had only recently been possible to introduce ideas from abroad. All in all, this was a most exciting period, fertile in ideas and full of hope for the future.

"Culture fever" was possible partly because of restraint by the authorities. Despite repression at certain critical points in the previous few years, most notably against the student movement of 1986, China's political leadership was surprisingly tolerant of "culture fever" and the discord it implied.¹⁹ This forbearance suggests that for a few years after 1986, Deng Xiaoping as supreme leader did indeed wish to see what might result from broad-scale open discussion. At least he and his fellow leaders restrained their authoritarian instincts for a surprisingly long time. There can be no doubt that this extended period of restraint was important in the leaders' decision to carry out the brutal crackdown of June Fourth.

The television series "River Elegy" (*He Shang*) of 1988 proved to be the culminating expression of "culture fever." As this TV series made a particular analysis of traditional Chinese society, it also provoked widespread discussion on the nature of Chinese history and thus meshed with the present subject. So it provided the kind of specific link that I have suggested between the broader themes of "culture fever" and concerns within the community of professional historians. "River Elegy" became a reprise of sorts for Jin Guantao, whose earlier discourses on the ultra-stable nature of traditional Chinese society had set off the interest in systems theory as an approach to history, but also had set in motion some of the anxieties that led historians to perceive a "crisis in history."

19. The student activity of 1986 had been brought to an end by the dismissal of Hu Yaobang as premier, an open-minded man associated with the aspirations of China's youth throughout his career. Hu was succeeded by Zhao Ziyang, another progressive individual, who was premier at the time of June Fourth, and who in turn became the scapegoat for the Party's perceived loss of authority through this tragedy at Tian'anmen Square.

The development of "River Elegy" came about independently of Jin Guantao, however, and he became involved very late in preparations for this television series.²⁰ It took shape as the project of Xia Jun, a young editor at China Central Television (CCTV) during 1987. Xia engaged two like-minded writers and with the support of a sympathetic CCTV leader began working on this project in October 1987. They were ready with their material by April 1988 and at that point engaged Jin Guantao and his wife Liu Qingfeng, along with a few other cultural activists, to appear as commentators. The six-part series first ran in mid-June 1988, after easily clearing the scrutinizing process for material to be aired; leaders simply overlooked the possibilities for a series that appeared to be about the Yellow River.

"River Elegy" struck immediate and emotional responses of both approval and disapproval. It used the Yellow River, the dragon, and the Great Wall as negative images of traditional Chinese culture, all playing a role in limiting the aspirations of the Chinese people over long centuries. Color symbolism played an important role: yellow represented earth and the inhibiting Chinese culture; blue represented the ocean waters and foreign cultures, presumably all more progressive than China's. The producers had assumed that the series would be welcomed by intellectuals but did not anticipate the flood of popular response as well. The widespread public discussion provoked by "River Elegy" aroused the concerns of conservatives in the Party and the leadership. The progressive premier Zhao Ziyang, who liked the series, fended off criticism by insisting that "River Elegy" was only cultural and without political meaning--this the essential test for literary and artistic productions. Despite Zhao's assertion, those who loved the series did so because of its contemporary message; the comments and implications about history and traditional culture were welcome because they rang true for China in the 1980s. The series actually was aired a second time,

20. An excellent account of the background to "River Elegy" is given in Chen and Jin, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy*, ch. 7. Also see the article by Edward Gunn, "The Rhetoric of *River Elegy*: From Cultural Criticism to Social Act," in *Chinese Democracy and the Crisis of 1989: Chinese and American Reflections*, ed. Roger V. DesForges, Luo Ning, and Wu Yen-bo (Albany, SUNY Press, 1993).

in August 1988; this was supposed to follow editing of some spots in response to the initial criticism, which actually was not done.²¹

It took awhile, actually some years, for professional historians to respond with their own opinions on "River Elegy." This seems to be one effect of Zhao Ziyang's successful deflection of official discussion and judgment. The various levels of authority in the Party and government could not immediately agree on an assessment of the TV series. Actually, the historical elements of the series were not particularly accurate. History was used as it so often is in similar television productions in the United States: to present an interpretation rather than to offer a fully accurate account. One article representative of the views of many professional historians appeared as the first item in *Historical Studies (Lishi Yanjiu)* early in 1990. Its writer, Lin Ganquan, a senior historian, observed that the developmental problems of Chinese society were of concern to the fields of cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, and ethnic studies as well as of history, and that it was difficult to get agreement. The problems involved in the historical evolution of Chinese society had been the subject of a great deal of research, Lin said, but it was very difficult to reach a comprehensive understanding why this evolution had been stultified.²² While it was easy enough to deal with the apparent historical assumptions of those who produced "River Elegy," historians also had to appreciate how the series stimulated such intense interest in the kinds of questions that interested many of their own number.

To return to the basic theme of this section, the journal *History and Theory* began publication during this period of "culture fever," which culminated with the showing of "River Elegy" in the summer of 1988. Over the months that followed, the posture of openness that Zhao Ziyang presented toward "River Elegy" emboldened many progressive intellectuals, whose activities

21. See Chen and Jin, pp. 233-34.

22. See Lin's "The Nature of Culture and Historical Development: A Critique of the Flawed Viewpoint of "River Elegy" on the Nature of China's Traditional Culture" (*Wenhua xingge yu lishi fazhan: Ping "He Shang" guanyu Zhongguo chuantong wenhua xingge de cuowu fazhan*), *Lishi Yanjiu*, 1990, no. 1.

in turn helped to stimulate the student movement of the spring of 1989.²³ Zhao's career ended when he cast his lot with the student movement during May 1989. *History and Theory* became a secondary victim of the crackdown of 1989. The journal was discontinued at the end of that year. The editors marked the demise of their project with a farewell statement, a pledge to produce a series of books that would continue the themes of the journal, and the publication of a number of letters from readers who recounted what the journal had meant to them.²⁴

After I started to work this subject and began to get some understanding of developments over the years, I asked several of my acquaintances why *History and Theory* had been discontinued. When it seemed desirable not to be too direct, I gradually led up to the question I really wanted to ask: Was *History and Theory* terminated because of June Fourth? One young historian with whom I felt free to ask this question directly, answered "Yes!" Almost all of the several others whom I asked said that the journal's work had been canceled because of financial difficulties. This would seem a strange condition for a new journal that had enjoyed an enthusiastic response. As noted earlier, the descendant of this journal, *Studies in History and Theory*, began publication in 1992.

Historical Epistemology: A Lively Topic

The issue of historical epistemology (*lishi renshi lun*) has been widely discussed in China, and may serve to suggest the nature of new historical thinking. While this subject is of interest to historians everywhere, it is easy to understand the special interest it has taken on in China. Historians seeking to liberate their profession from the dogmatic Marxism that dominated in earlier periods of the People's Republic have used historical epistemology to establish new criteria for historical truth. At the same time, however, the subject seems esoteric enough not to be dangerous to the continued health of the Marxist materialist conception of history.

23. For some of these activities, see Chen and Jin, pp. 230-237.

24. See *Shixue Lilin* 89:4.

Zhao Jihui, a senior historian at Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, has written on historical epistemology. Zhao's previous work had been in pre-Qin thought, a field in which he made great contributions. As historians took steps to deal with the "crisis in history" during the middle 1980s, Zhao, who is independent and non-Party, ventured into broader questions. He wrote one *Introduction to Historical Studies* himself and helped to write another; and he produced his own study on historical methodology.²⁵ Given this background, Zhao's interest in historical epistemology seems predictable.

Zhao's major article on historical epistemology led off an issue of *Historical Studies* in the summer of 1993.²⁶ One of his major concerns is the relationship between the historian processing historical materials and his understanding of the nature of history. He sees equivalency between Ranke and the Chinese textual studies approach (*kaozheng*). But by the middle nineteenth century, he points out, a budding idealistic view began to challenge Rankeian history in Europe.²⁷ This challenge had been continued notably by Benedetto Croce and George Collingwood. Like other Chinese historians, Zhao refers to Croce's axiom "all history is contemporary history." In his efforts to break away from the Rankeian dependence on facts, Zhao said, Croce emphasized that only history as reconstructed by historians is valid. But this too makes for subjectivism. Collingwood had gone even further than Croce by claiming that "all history is the history of thought."

Zhao discusses another basic problem, the gap between subjective and objective knowledge.²⁸ Objective materials appear in many forms, which the historian must evaluate. He also must try to dispel or at least take into account his personal biases, or those arising from the society to which he belongs. Having done all this to the greatest possible degree, the historian may finally

25. This is Zhao's *Lishi Fangfa Lun*, published by Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, Chengdu, 1987.

26. See "Reflections on and a Rebuilding of Contemporary Historical Epistemology" (*Dangdai Lishi Renshi lun de Fansheng yu Chongjian*), *Lishi Yanjiu* 1993:4, pp. 3-15.

27. Zhao, pp. 6-7.

28. For this discussion, see pp. 9-10.

get to the truth of history. Zhao's treatment of historical epistemology is systematic and refined, often reflecting his work in early Chinese thought in the subtlety of his arguments. Yet his discussion draws deeply from the Western historical theorists whom he introduces, and clearly he admires them. He respects the materialist view of history as appropriate for modern China, but also challenges the narrow assumptions of many of its recent advocates in the People's Republic.²⁹

He Zhaowu, a senior historian at Qinghua University, also has written on historical epistemology. His 1996 essay, "Reflections on Historical Studies," offers an enlightened understanding of the issues involved, and does so from an unabashedly liberal viewpoint.³⁰ This octogenarian thinks like an exuberant youth and writes with elegance and subtlety. He studied at Southwest United University (*Xinan Lianhe Daxue*, "LianDa"), the well-known wartime institution in Kunming. Presumably his sure grasp of ideas from abroad and the intellectual background for those ideas began during his early career there. His knowledge of Western intellectual background shows repeatedly in these "Reflections."

He Zhaowu begins by observing that history is both scientific and not scientific. This is one of his continuing themes in the essay. Like many others He hopes to speak in terms of science, which has been basic in modern Chinese experience, but he sets out from the start to maintain a valid understanding of the strengths and limitations of science. History has these two levels, first the scientific aspect of agreed-upon facts, and second, an understanding and explanation of those facts.

Historical science is science, and yet again it is not (or not *just*) science; it needs the quality of science, but it also needs certain things that are outside science.... Historians should not only emphasize this scientific quality; at the same time they should emphasize the elements of it that are outside science.³¹

29. Zhao Jihui told me that he greatly admires the work of Guo Moruo, whose Marxist-informed study of early Chinese society is a classic work of Chinese Marxism. And Zhao was not alone in being excited by Guo's book.

30. I have not yet met He Zhaowu. There could be little doubt that he suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution for his outlook, and probably for his earlier published views. The essay, "Dui Lishi Xue de Ruogan Fansi," appeared in *Studies in Historical Theory (Shixue Lilun Yanjiu)*, 1996:1, pp. 36-43. This is the journal that replaced *History and Theory (Shixue Lilun)*, which was discontinued at the end of 1989.

31. Quotation from p. 36.

This division between the materials of history and the role of the historian becomes He's major organizing theme in the essay. The first he calls History I, and the second, History II. He returns often to the point that the knowledge, experience, and finally the humanity of the historian are the most important elements in writing meaningful history. He also returns to discuss those factors that enter into History I. New materials for history are always developing. Other aspects of the process that changes our understanding of history lie between History I and History II. The historical realities of the past continue to influence us, he says. And the personal limitations of the individual historian also affect what he understands about history.

Arriving at truth in history is not the same kind of process as reaching a precise destination or attaining the kind of certainty necessary in a laboratory science. He compares the process of attaining to historical truth to trying to reach the North Pole:

The truth is not the North Pole, an ultimate. If you are walking toward the North Pole, you may walk toward the north, and when you reach a certain point you may say, See! This is the North Pole, and if we go a step further we'll leave the North Pole and begin heading southward. However, we probably will never be able to say, See, this is the Truth, and you walk a few steps further you will begin to depart from the Truth. Human knowledge is always advancing, is always a cumulative process that does not rest; it is unable to stop at a certain point and advance no further.³²

This analogy challenges the notion of a fixed truth, so essential to authority in Chinese society until recent years. He never hesitates in other such challenges, direct and indirect, as he presents his views on arriving at and presenting historical truth. "Our country's historians are isolated," he says, from "most of the viewpoints and methods of the natural sciences" and also from developments abroad in "the social sciences, the humanities, and the spiritual sciences." "History is a freely undertaken work of creation by free people; it is not an unavoidable course determined from the outset by nature." Something much more than an ability to apply a formula or to order facts is needed to understand historical truth. The historian must understand art, and must understand the

32. Page 37.

spiritual life of the time he studies; the historian must also understand the darker aspects of human nature, the blind desire for total power, in order to fulfill his mission. "An understanding of history has as its basis an understanding of life by the person involved in historical study."³³ He's assertions of the importance of a spirit of free inquiry are refreshing. If his years gain him license to make such assertions, clearly he has long been at ease with such thoughts.

Indeed, He's essay may be seen as a valedictory. He has advice for the community of historians in China today, some of whom "glibly talk about such things as the characteristics of Chinese history and universal principles of human history, but pay no attention at all to the preconditions for historical study...." We need a sound basis for historical study, He says, and to try to move ahead without this would be like "historical study being unbaptized, or without initiation into the temple of learning." He continues with this challenge:

The new history in our country's modern era, from the founding generation of Liang Qichao and Wang Guowei up to now, has occupied almost exactly a century, and it is just about half a century that Marxist theory has served as the main guide for our country's historical study (as to the claim to be Marxism or how much really has been Marxism, this is another question). Their contributions are universally acknowledged; their shortcomings and inadequacies await our continuous efforts to advance and transcend. Historians should not stop at the level of their predecessors' achievements; the first step in moving ahead should be to reflect earnestly on the questions of the nature of history and of historical research.³⁴

Zhao Jihui and He Zhaowu cover many of the same issues in their discussions of historical epistemology. Both present a solid rationale that Chinese historians should take history on its own terms rather than follow a strict Marxist interpretation of history. The way they and others have dealt with the topic of historical epistemology is suggestive of broader discussions within the field of history. The greater openness that has been achieved has resulted partly from the efforts of senior scholars like these two, and also from the continuing evolution of China's economy and

33. Quotations are from p. 38.

34. Quotations in this paragraph are from p. 42.

society. To conclude, I will outline developments after the events of June Fourth 1989 brought an intellectual as well as a physical crackdown.

Concluding Comments

As suggested at the end of the discussion above on *History and Theory*, it is not completely clear whether the termination of this journal at the end of 1989 was carried out for administrative or for financial reasons. Many such actions were taken by the authorities in order to stem further protest after June Fourth, and despite the stated disclaimers of this motivation, this is the likely reason for the demise of *History and Theory*. Long before the end of 1989, Chinese institutions of all kinds were put under strict control, returning to the regular political meetings which were a standard means to maintain control.³⁵ The popular movement of that spring had begun with students from some of the major universities. The incoming freshman classes in September 1989 were ordered to spend the first semester in military training, again returning to a practice from earlier years, as a measure to assure control. Thus began the post-June Fourth period, and such severity remained the order of life for an indefinite period.

The tension and uncertainty that followed June Fourth affected all aspects of life in China, far more than the community of historians. Economic development, the single most important part of China's drive for national fulfillment, sagged during these few years. This ennui was brought to an end by Deng Xiaoping's "tour of the south" in 1992. References to the extended imperial era of China's history sometimes seem all too apparent. In imperial fashion, Deng as the key figure in authority had ordered the crackdown in 1989, and now in 1992 with this equivalent of an imperial inspection tour, his visit to and hearty approval of dynamic economic activities in Guangzhou,

35. My wife and I taught English in Xi'an during the spring term of 1989. We were located at the Xi'an Branch of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, where many of our students came from other cities throughout north and northwest China--Taiyuan, Lanzhou, and Xining. After June 4 we were uncertain whether we should leave China or stay to complete the term. Finally, late in the week following June 4, we decided we would simply ask the students what they thought we should do. In essence, they said, "No--if you leave, we'll have to leave." They preferred to stay away from their units as long as possible in order to avoid the old familiar routine, which they knew was being restored, and if they stayed in Xi'an they could close out the experiences of that spring with the people with whom they had shared them.

brought the post-Tian'anmen tension to an end. "Our policy will live for a hundred years!" he proclaimed. Shortly, economic growth resumed at an almost feverish pace and—for better or for worse--China's transition from socialist to market economy was off and running again.

Again, Deng's "tour of the south" affected life generally, not just in the economic realm. In intellectual life the positive effects came somewhat more slowly, because at least to an extent, economic activity is not so closely related to intellectual activity. It was true of this recovery period that as the market economy became ever more dynamic, China's intellectuals felt ever more threatened or displaced, as the rising business element in the society built wealth and influence.

For a year or two after Deng's trip to the south, those in the various scholarly fields gradually gained confidence in expressing their views. By the middle 1990s, however, the growth of the market economy also brought positive change for scholars, writers, and intellectuals in most fields. China's publishing market began to incorporate the positive effects of commercialization. One effect of this opening has been the continued introduction of historians and historical theory from abroad. Freud and Nietzsche were among those whose writings had been translated in the late 1980s. During the 1990s such figures as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Frederic Jameson have been regularly discussed even in the standard, more conservative journals.

The most obvious indication of this commercializing trend, however, has been the construction of a new kind of bookstore, often called a "Book City," in many cities large and small. The new bookstores are built on a grand scale, comprising four or five floors in some cases as opposed to two floors for the largest stores in earlier years. The mood of these bookstores changed from the earlier "bookstore sedate" to a cheery atmosphere created by rich lighting, impressive wooden shelving, and book displays, on and off these shelves, with great visual appeal. And books themselves are created with much more appeal than for many decades in China. Distinguished but drab book-covers from earlier decades have been replaced by covers of sophisticated, highly artistic design, with titles written in many kinds of imaginative calligraphy. Even the quality of paper is

higher than before in most cases, although this does not always apply to binding. All these changes reflect the growth of a market economy in publishing.

These changes in publishing form one of the most positive aspects of the great transition now underway in China. The truism is that the Chinese people have great respect for education; one of the contemporary manifestations of this is this greatly enhanced opportunity for reading by a broad range of consumers of books. This major change in the publishing market does not bring unmixed good news. For example, the book market today is beginning to resemble that in the United States, offering an ocean of subjects and more than a little frivolous information. And worse, the great tragedy that children and young people in the poor regions of China have little opportunity for the basic education that could enable them even to read these books that their conferees in the cities enjoy, much less to buy them. Still, the total effect of these changes in publishing is positive. Historians and scholars in all other fields generally enjoy more opportunities to publish and gain a readership for their work. The publishing market today is a key factor in the development of a marketplace of ideas probably more open than at any time since the 1910s and 1920s. Government has a difficult time merely keeping up with the volume of books being published, although it remains true that they will still intervene when they deem it necessary. Again, there is a creeping openness in the intellectual realm in contemporary Chinese culture.

The conditions just described suggest one of the many positive effects of China's Era of Reform. For the establishment historians who are my subjects in this paper, this era of past two decades has brought them from being modern equivalents of the scholars who served in the history bureau of a dynastic government, to somewhat more independent and outspoken scholars with opportunities to influence a growing urban reading public who are themselves making a gradual transition from subjects to citizens. A senior historian such as He Zhaowu made this transition during his career of almost sixty years; if near the end of his career he took advantage of the Chinese respect for age, it is clear that he was not crushed by those experiences that for a time shattered independent thought and a healthy intellectual atmosphere. Today, the prospects seem good that

younger historians might have much better opportunities. And we have barely mentioned the dangers of unofficial history and those who practice it, to the old established order.