

THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF HISTORY IN CHINA

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I am very happy and honored to be present at the thirteenth annual meeting of the Georgia Association of Historians. I would like to thank the Georgia Consortium and the Georgia Association of Historians for giving me the opportunity to visit the United States and to share with Americans some ideas about the study of the past. This morning, I want to discuss the teaching and study of history in China.

The History Department at Peking University offers two areas of specialization: Chinese history and world history. Both programs require four years of study. Each includes three essential areas: theoretical training, historical training, and technical training.

Theoretical training is considered essential for all who study history. As you know, the People's Republic of China is a socialist country and the theoretical basis guiding all of our thinking is Marxism-Leninism. The victory in the Chinese Revolution was won under the guidance of Marxism-Leninism. Marxism-Leninism is a scientific doctrine which we consider correct for the interpretation of the past. We pay great attention to this theory and give it an important place in our curriculum. It is a required course, not only for history students, but for all college students. Theoretical training includes three courses: Marxist philosophy, Marxist political economy, and scientific socialism.

The second essential area, historical training in either Chinese history or world history, requires intensive study for two years, with courses covering the span from ancient to modern times.

The third area, technical training, includes study of a foreign language, writing techniques, and use of basic research tools such as dictionaries, maps, and specialized encyclopedias. In recent years, we have placed great emphasis on foreign language study in China. Students take such courses in middle schools and must have good grades in them if they expect to attend a university. In our department, we ask all students studying world history to take a foreign language and require them to acquire four abilities: reading, writing, speaking, and understanding. Students must demonstrate proficiency in at least one foreign language.

We also consider writing techniques to be very important. In the first year, history majors write book reviews. During their second year, they write research papers, and they must complete a graduation thesis in their final year. The student's advisor critiques all these papers.

History majors may take numerous electives. For example, students of Chinese history can choose from several dynastic history courses. World History majors may choose to study a particular nation. For example, we offer a number of elective courses in United States history like early American History (1607-1775), early Sino-American Relations, Modern Sino-American Relations, History of American Foreign Relations, Contemporary American History, Afro-American History, and several others.

The History Department at Peking University has nearly four hundred students. Some forty of these are graduate students. The history faculty numbers around one hundred, forty-five of whom teach world history and forty of whom teach Chinese history. The remainder are administrators. Generally, a professor lectures twice a week for two hours. This allows ample time for research and study.

The study of history has changed greatly in the years since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. There were severe setbacks and losses during the period known as the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976. In the last decade, the general situation has improved. I believe that Chinese historians are now following the correct path and are speaking more and more truth. This means that we are now upholding the basic elements of historical materialism. In recent years, we have published many new books and papers, established a number of new journals, and founded several historical societies. The latter includes the Chinese Association of Modern World History, the Association of Ancient Chinese History, the Chinese Association for the Study of American History, the Association for Local History, as well as organizations for the study of English, French, German, Russian, Japanese, and Latin American history. Each of these groups holds annual or biennial meetings.

As you know, Chinese civilization is one of the world's oldest. Our country has found valuable remains of its ancient cultures and has almost four thousand years of written history. Chinese books recorded the appearance of Halley's Comet more than three thousand years ago and have noted its appearance forty-one times. Of course, China is famous for our large number of historical records. We were the first country to preserve official records and compile local records. We now have over eight thousand different kinds of local records collected in more than one hundred thousand volumes. Our ancestors wrote local history during the fourth century B.C.. China produced the first urban history in the world, written in the sixth century.

Since the Chinese people have always had deep respect for their ancestors, there are many families who have compiled their own histories. For example, my own family history has gone through several editions, the latest of which was published in 1932 and traced the family's development from 1368. There are forty volumes in my family's history. One of the most famous family histories is that of the famous philosopher, Confucius (552-479 B.C.). That work traces the eighty-four generations since Confucius' death and includes information about many generations before his birth. Confucius's family goes back to remote antiquity, at least to the seventeenth century B.C. This is probably the most complete family history existent and the oldest in the world.

Today, under leadership from the Association for Local History, historians are collecting local history, urban history, family history, and oral history in every province, county, and city. In fact, the large number of people engaged in such work necessitated the creation of the Association.

Chinese historians have also paid great attention to the study of women's history. A national committee has been established to compile the history of Chinese women. In the history department of Peking University, we have started to work on a great dictionary of American women's history. Some American historians have joined us in this effort.

In summary, the general situation of historical study in China has been good in recent years and we are enjoying perhaps the best period since 1949. In fact, the present time is the best time for all academic areas. I am delighted to find that historical study in the United States is also flourishing. There are many things which you are doing which are well worth imitating. I hope to learn from your experience in order to push forward the study of history in my country, and I invite you to visit China and Peking University so that you can share your knowledge and experience with us.