

# **Commentary on World History without Worldliness<sup>1</sup>**

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## **I. Europe-centered world history**

World history, as the name implies, should be about the history of the world as a whole and should have a global character. In fact, all the world history textbooks, progressive or not, up to today, almost all of them are centered on Europe, just like European history, which is manifested in several aspects.

1. Borrowing from the ancient countries of Asia and Africa as a beginning. European history is a late development, not qualified to constitute the center. Bourgeois scholars writing world history considered only Asia's ancient countries such as Babylon and Africa's ancient countries such as Egypt to be the beginning of European history; calling them the ancient countries of the Near East. On a broader range, they added China and India, the ancient countries of the Far East, and going one step further they included Yucatan at the Gulf of Mexico in Central America, the so-called ancient country of the Far West; or they removed the region of Central America and used a common designation of the ancient Orient that included the ancient countries of Africa and Asia and presented them as the beginning (of European history). The countries in Asia and Africa that appeared earlier should be discussed first. But European bourgeois scholars, guided by their Eurocentric thinking, do not describe these countries simply as ancient Asian and African countries, but as the beginning of European history, to which they added the designations of the Near East, Far East, and ancient Orient. Being themselves in Europe they position the history of these ancient countries temporally before the history of their continent and thereby create a world history with Europe as the center, which makes the use of these designations indispensable. These are only a few words I present here, but they show a special way of thinking.
2. Europe as the center of world history. For example, ancient history is only about Greece and Rome. In the Middle Ages, Christianity, feudalism, the Renaissance, nation-states, authoritarian governments, and geographical discoveries were discussed, all of which were limited to Europe. Now that there were great discoveries in geography, these are, according to common sense, to be described as newly discovered geography. However, on the contrary, though the "discoveries" of geography have been described, the "geography" of discovery has been omitted, as if talking about it would shake the center of Europe. The entire Middle Ages of Europe, from the fifth century to the seventeenth century, more than a thousand years, is almost entirely confined to Europe. This is true of world history written by bourgeois scholars, but it is also true of world history written by progressive

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<sup>1</sup> Note of translator: Source: Zhou Gucheng (1961), Ping meiyou shijixing de shijieshi 评没有世界性的世界史, in: Zhou Gucheng quanji (Vol. 6): 255-261 (originally published in *Guangming Ribao*, 7 February 1961). This translation has been made possible by the Volkswagen Foundation.

scholars. When I read two books on the history of the Middle Ages, the contents are almost exclusively about Europe; there is very little beyond Europe. In terms of land area, Europe has only 11 million square kilometers, while Asia has more than 41 million square kilometers; in terms of population, Europe has only 500 million people, while Asia has more than 1.5 billion people. However, the history of Asia occupies very little space in these two books: one has 328 pages, but only 18 pages on Asia; the other has 371 pages, but only 23 pages on Asia. If we want to explain this phenomenon, we can only say: because Europe is the center of world history, too much attention to Europe, thus hindering the emphasis on Asia.

3. After the Great Geographic Discoveries, Europe is still the center. The Great Geographic Discoveries are a sign of the great transformation of world history. Before this, the scope of the world was limited to the Old World; after this, it was expanded to Asia, Australia, Europe, Africa, North and South America. Before that, the dominant people in world history were the yellow race; after that, the dominant position in world history gradually shifted to the white race. Previously, the scope of activities of the white race was mainly limited to Europe; since then, their activities have expanded to various places outside Europe. These people were mostly wealthy merchants and bourgeoisie; they colluded with their respective governments and roamed around outside Europe without any fear. They either established commercial hegemony in Southeast Asia and extended their power in India, China and Japan, as the Portuguese did. Or they invaded Central and South America, and transported gold and silver from Mexico and Peru back to Europe, as the Spaniards did. Or they moved around the southeast coast of Asia, inheriting the hegemony of the Portuguese and monopolizing the trade of China, Japan and the Spice Islands (the Moluccas), as the Dutch did. Or they colonized North America and opened up new territories, and at the same time set up trading houses in India as a base for commercial activities in Southeast Asia, as the French did. Or they set up commercial activities in North America, Central America, and South America, in the southeast coast of Asia, and in the southwest coast of Africa, and established the so-called "empire on which the sun never sets."<sup>2</sup> All Europe-centered world historians only focused on Europe's outward expansion, and did not provide correct accounts on the newly invaded places.
4. As for the invasion of various places to subject them to European influence or to turn them into colonies, it is said that it is "the burden of the white race." This is to support the invasion, and not simply to ensure Europe as the center of it. Before the European bourgeoisie invaded places outside Europe, the indigenous people everywhere had their own livelihood and their own cultures. Since the invasion, indigenous peoples have been oppressed and exploited, and their lands have been divided and occupied to become European. For example, in America, the original indigenous peoples were almost wiped out, and America became European. In Africa, except for the original indigenous people who were trafficked to America as slaves, they were divided up and Africa was turned into Europe. As for Asia, the peoples of all the ancient civilizations were mostly oppressed and exploited, and their lands were mostly divided and occupied, and the Asian countries also almost became European. The process of Europeanization, which was imposed on the

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<sup>2</sup> Note of translator: This expression was used to describe the geographical scope of extensive empires. For the first time, it was used for the first time in the Habsburg Empire of Charles V (1500-1558) and the Spanish Empire of Philip II (1527-1598). In the nineteenth and early twentieth century it referred to the British Empire after it had expanded on a global scale.

people everywhere, was described by the English poet Rudyard Kipling as “the burden of the white race.”<sup>3</sup> The bourgeois historians, who embraced the invasion, were astonished by the novelty and adopted it into their own works, while Chinese scholars also translated it and allowed it to be used and popularized!

## **II. World history should not be centered on Europe**

When European bourgeois historians talk of world history they take Europe as the center, and do not insist on aggression or take Europe as the center of aggression, there is nothing wrong with this approach. However, if we ourselves speak about world history, it is not possible to take Europe as the center. In terms of patriotic thinking, it is not right; in terms of geographical orientation, it is wrong. If we ourselves, in China, call Babylon and Egypt the Near East, then the hearers will not know what we are talking about, except for the assumption that we are in Europe. The Near East, the Far East, and the Ancient Orient are correct for others, but not for us. Therefore, we cannot follow the Eurocentric thinking.

1. Greece and Rome are not the most ancient cradle of world culture above all other places. This is not a one-sided statement; progressive archaeologists have already seen this. For example, Bedřich Hrozný<sup>4</sup> cites West Asia, India and Crete together, while Greece and Rome are not included. Another example is V. Gordon Childe<sup>5</sup>, who cites Egypt, Babylon, and India together, while Greece is only one of the three centers nearby. Therefore, it is said that around the third millennium BCE, there were already many cities in the Nile Valley, the Euphrates and Tigris valleys, and the Indus Valley. Urban civilizations developed from these three major centers and their vicinity, such as Crete, the Greek peninsula, Syria, Assyria, Iran, and Baluchistan. The views of Hrozný and Childe may not be conclusive yet, and our views may not be exactly the same as theirs. But one thing is certain: Greece and Rome were not cultural centers above all others in the ancient history of the world. We do not have to speak only of Greece; India, China, Greece, and Rome can be mentioned as well.
2. The feudal society in the Middle Ages was not the first to appear in Europe. The beginning of feudal society in Europe, generally speaking, began at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE, it is generally believed that feudal society had already entered. However, the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries was not the only time when feudal society appeared in the world history, and Europe was not the only place where feudal society appeared. If we talk about European history, if we must follow the stages of social development, we can use the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries as a line to divide the ancient and the middle ages; but if we talk about world history and divide the ancient and the middle ages, we

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<sup>3</sup> Note of translator: “The White Man’s Burden”, a poem composed by Rudyard Kipling 1899, supported US invasion of the Philippines as part of an assumed need to engage in a civilizing mission.

<sup>4</sup> Note of translator: Bedřich Hrozný (1879-1952) was a Czech orientalist and linguist who deciphered the ancient Hittite language and who is regarded as one of the founding fathers of hittitology.

<sup>5</sup> Note of translator: Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957) was an Australian-British archeologist who formulated the theory that civilization had diffused from the Near East northwards and westwards into Europe. He is also considered to be the first Marxist archeologist in the West who applied historical materialism to the interpretation of archeological data (see McGuire, Randall G. (1992). *A Marxist Archaeology*. San Diego: Academic Press).

cannot use this as a line if we do not intend to follow the Eurocentric thinking. In the case of China, the emergence of feudal society is thought to have occurred at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty (11<sup>th</sup> century-770 BCE); if this is the case, it is more than 1,500 years earlier than in Europe. Some think it began at the turn of the Spring-Autumn-Era (770-476 BCE) and the Warring States era (475-221 BCE), also a thousand years earlier than Europe. Some think it began at the turn of the Qin (221-207 BCE) and the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), also about five hundred years earlier than Europe. Some people believe that it began at the turn of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-581 CE), still half a century earlier than Europe. The fact that Chinese feudal society appeared many years earlier cannot be denied. Even though we cannot ask scholars of history from all over the world to take the emergence of feudal society in China as the beginning of medieval history, taking the turn of the fifth or sixth century as the beginning of medieval history can only be applied to European history but not to world history. If we speak of world history, we cannot follow the Eurocentric thinking if we are faithful to the facts.

3. Overseas activities are not limited to Europeans. The expansion of the world scope was conditioned by overseas activities. The world before the fifteenth century was limited to the Old World, that is only a part of Asia, Europe and Africa. Without overseas activities, its scope could not be extended to Asia, Australia, Europe, Africa, North and South America. Although the overseas activities of Europeans were very early, they reached North America, Central America, and South America in the 1590s. The Chinese overseas activities were even earlier; for example, Zheng He's missions to various countries occurred from the beginning of the 15th century to the 1530s.<sup>6</sup> Zheng He made seven missions, from the third year of Ming Emperor Yongle (1405 CE) to the fifth year of Emperor Xuande (1430 CE), visiting more than thirty countries. As a result, the coastal countries of India, such as Calicut, Cochin, Kulam, Soli, Cail, Pattanapur, Comarin, Ceylon, the Maledives, Bengal, etc. all had trade relations with China. The coastal states near the Persian and Arabian sea, such as Hormuz, Zufar, Mukalla, Aden and Arabia, had trade relations with China for this reason. The eastern coastal countries of Africa such as Mogadishu, Malindi, Barawa, parts of Yemen and Somalia, etc. all had trade relations with China for this reason. It is difficult to say, but although the overseas activities of Europe were a little later than Asians, their impact was far greater than that of Asia. Since the great geographic discoveries of the former, overseas trade flourished, forming the so-called mercantilism, causing a domestic industrial revolution, so that capitalism developed by leaps and bounds. As a result, the dominant position in world history shifted from Asia to Europe, that is, from the yellow race to the white race. This is true: before the fifteenth century, the dominant position in world history was indeed occupied by the Asians, that is, the yellow race; after the fifteenth century, this position gradually shifted to the Europeans, that is, the white race. But because of this, we cannot follow a Eurocentric ideology. We should be faithful to the historical facts, and we should talk about the earlier overseas activities first, in order to see the truth of the shift of the world trend.

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<sup>6</sup> Note of translator: Zheng He was an explorer, fleet admiral and court eunuch during the early Ming dynasty who commanded several voyages from 1405 to 1433.

4. We cannot let the white race “bear the burden of Europeanization” for us, that is, the so-called “white race’s burden.” Since the discovery of geography, rich European merchants and magnates, in collusion with their respective governments, have enslaved the vast working people of Asia, Africa and Latin America, gradually europeanizing Asia, Africa and Latin America and turning them into Europe. European bourgeois scholars expressed all kinds of emotions, calling it “the white man’s burden”. What can be tolerated, and what cannot be tolerated? If there is slavery, there is anti-slavery; if there is invasion, there is struggle against invasion. The aggression in the era of mercantilism, entered the era of imperialism after the era of capitalism, and became more and more cruel day by day. When we talk about world history, we cannot only talk about aggression without talking about not anti-invasion, and only talk about the outward expansion of the European bourgeoisie without talking about anti-expansion; moreover, we cannot only let them take over the “burden of Europeanization” without lifting the “burden” for them. But this is incompatible with a Eurocentric ideology. If we only pay attention to expansion and aggression, there will naturally be a Eurocentrism; if we want to fight against expansion and aggression, we cannot help but give a positive account of the history of Asian, African and Latin American countries themselves.

### **III. The shaking of the European center and our hope**

Since the discovery of geography, the European center has been a center of aggression for the purpose of economic interests. This center, once it entered the age of imperialism, entered a desperate situation; now it is shaking and further destroying itself.

1. After two world wars, the European center began to falter. Before 1914, there was only one so-called world, a united world ruled by imperialism. During the First World War, the Russian working people, under the leadership of the Communist Party, turned the international war of aggression into a revolutionary war at home; in October 1917, a cannon shot caused the beginning of the socialist revolution. Since then, the united world has evolved into two opposing worlds: one is the capitalist world, and the other is the socialist world, which is the exact opposite of capitalism. Since the world had become two, the so-called European center was naturally shaken, and indeed it was: for example, during the First World War, the economic center of London was transferred to New York. The so-called Allied Powers, such as Britain and France, borrowed money from the United States to fight the war, and at the end of the war, they had to pay their debts to the United States; the so-called Central Powers, such as Germany and Austria, were defeated and had to pay reparations to the United States. Thus, the American imperialists made a fortune, and the economic center was transferred from London to New York; the so-called European center was taken over by American imperialism. American bourgeois historians, especially the so-called cultural school, such as Clark Wissler (1870-1947), have always referred to Europe and America as one and the same unit; they have become even more aggressive. However, all this could not conceal the shaking of the European center. During the Second World War, the British, American and French imperialists instigated the German, Italian and Japanese fascists to fight first against the socialist Soviet Union, hoping that the fascists would be defeated and that they would enjoy the complete victory. The result

was not what they had hoped for: the fascist countries were defeated, and Britain and France were weakened, while the socialist Soviet Union stood still, and with the help of the Soviet Union, the socialist countries of Eastern Europe emerged. The center of aggression of the capitalist world was even more shaky.

2. The process of shaking the center of aggression is no different from the process of strengthening the anti-invasion forces. Since the invasion of European aggression into Asia, Africa and Latin America, the people of these countries continued to struggle against aggression; with the intensification of aggression its strength grew increasingly. The same is true for the case of the Asian countries, the African countries, and the Latin American countries, which are dominated by the U.S. imperialists in addition to the European suzerainty, and their anti-invasion forces are growing in strength. After more than a hundred years of struggle against foreign aggression, the Chinese people, under the wise and correct leadership of the Communist Party, were finally liberated from the imperialist powers and have become a socialist power today. The founding of the People's Republic of China was an epoch-making event in the development of world history: it strengthened the socialist camp, inspired the national liberation movement, and combated the power of imperialism. The U.S. imperialists, in particular, were increasingly disturbed by the vigorous development of the building cause of the People's Republic of China.
3. The U.S. empire is increasingly uneasy, but cannot sit still; it is making a dying struggle when it is not yet completely lost. At home, it is destroying the normal life of the people and making the activities of the whole country devoted to the expansion of the army and preparation for war; abroad, it is destroying the independence of all nation-states and forcing them to accept the so-called U.S. aid policy. But this is not enough to undo the doom of the American Empire. The expansion of the army and the preparation for war will only strengthen the will of the people to resist in the struggle against becoming cannon fodder for the monopoly capital. As for U.S. aid, it is something that is self-defeating. If they don't receive help, the reactionary ruling class of the nation-states will collapse; if they are helped, it will suppress the people and obstruct their liberation movement, which in fact will only accelerate the people's resistance and make the helpers and the helped die together at an early date. But this is not easy either. We still have to work hard. Today, we should rely on the unity of the socialist camp and the unity of the international communist movement to work for world peace, national liberation, democracy and the victory of socialism. Today's universities offer the history of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which is of struggle significance. It would be the beginning of a new system if the history of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were also described in a positive way in world history books. The objective history is changing; the subjective history must also be changed in order to accelerate the great change in the objective history. The time has come to reject the Eurocentric world history and to build a world history with a new perspective and a new system.