From World History to Global History:

China's Changing Perception of the World Order

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Taking a *longue-durée* approach, I examine and analyze the Chinese conception of the world in modern times from the mid-19th century to the present. This perception has experienced notable twists and turns during the period, which was reflected in the vicissitudes of world/global history as a subfield of history. In the Chinese historical community, foreign histories are customarily referred to as “world history,” whose coinage itself in the 19th century was an indication of a changed worldview. Toward the end of the 20th century, “world history” is being increasingly replaced by “global history,” which suggests another significant change in the Chinese perception of the world by both its historians and leadership.

The writing of world/global history reflects the change of the Chinese conception of the world, which experienced three distinct periods over the past two centuries.

*First*, “China vs. the world,” covering the period from the mid 19th century to the early twentieth century when the Chinese intellectuals were prompted to look at the world beyond their own, or the Sinic world, with the recognition that the outside world was markedly different, as well as separated, from their own.

*Second*, “China in the world,” or more accurately, “China in the [Western centered] world,” acknowledging the West as the center which the country needed to follow and catch up. During this century-long period, world history generally took a Eurocentric approach in seeing and interpreting the historical development in the world, reflecting the sentiment shared by many political forces that the West was the exemplar for China’s survival and success in modern times.

*Third*, “China leads the world”; or more precisely, how to make China a new center of the world that could radiate its influence across various regions, near and far. The introduction of global history from the 1990s provided an opportunity for the country to reposition itself on the world stage. The elevation of “world history” as a first-class academic field in 2011 was another, suggesting that China was to present itself as a new center in world history. In other words, this is an ongoing project pursued by both Chinese leadership and the historical community, deserving our attention on its ambitious presumption and protentional challenges in the years to come.