

# World History in China as Seen in the Historiography of MA Keyao 马克垚

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Printed in Beijing daxue Lishixi Gudaishi jiaoyanshi ed. 北京大学历史系世界古代史教研室 2012 *Shenmo shi fengjianzhuyi* [Festschrift in honour of Professor MA Keyao's eightieth birthday]. 什么是封建主义? 中西古代社会研究学术会议 Beijing: 香山饭店 2012-06-01/03 pp. 10-35.<sup>1</sup>

World history is part of the Chinese way of finding her role or position in the world, or in other words, to make order out of the sometimes bewildering mixture of the Chinese past and present and the geographical location. It has been so for the most part of the 1900s, and perhaps before, and it continues. At least that is what historians tend to think and they are rather outspoken about it and even get the attention of the political leadership.<sup>2</sup> What the general Chinese public think may be different. Their interest in the history of their own surroundings is probably very much like that of people in the rest of the world. The good story or narrative, told in the market place or the electronic media.

World history in China has over the years been a mixture of Chinese nationalism or patriotism, and the Marxist view of historical development, either in the more materialistic or the more idealistic brands. The role of world history studies in the Soviet Union, particularly the multi-volume world history from the 1950s, had a considerable influence on the study of world history and the production of text books for public or educational use. It was translated into Chinese with the last volumes appearing in 1978.<sup>3</sup>

The first attempt at a Chinese counterpart to this Soviet world history was the 1962 world history in four volumes with ZHOU Yiliang 周一良 and WU Yujin 吴于廑 and as the chief editors.<sup>4</sup> It was followed in the 1970s and 1980s by several attempts to prepare text books, in fact a great many, but none of them so far have been as programmatic as the Soviet version.

Plans in the 1980s under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to publish a multi-volume world history were shelved. After careful considerations the conclusion was that Chinese historians were not yet prepared for this task.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version was prepared for the panel "Chinese Concepts of World History and World Order: Relocating China in a Changing World" at the The XVIIth Biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies, Lund, Sweden, 2008

<sup>2</sup> One example, on modern history, was when Professors QI Shirong 齐世荣 and QIAN Chengdan 钱乘旦 on 2003-11-24 lectured to a collective study session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party with the title: A historical investigation of the development since the 1400s of the important countries in the world 15 世纪以来世界主要国家发展历史考察. China was not included. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-11/26/content\\_1198416.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-11/26/content_1198416.htm) 2014-04-17

<sup>3</sup> ЖУКОВ Е.М ред. Всемирная история (10 томов) Москва 1955-1965 --- 苏联科学院编 Soviet Academy of Sciences, ed. *Shijie tongshi* 世界通史 第 1—13 卷, 北京: 三联书店, 1958-1990 --- German edition: SHUKOW J.M. et al. eds. *Weltgeschichte in zehn Bänden* 10 vols. Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaft: 1962-1968

<sup>4</sup> Zhou & Wu 1962

The plans were revived in the late 1990s and in 2002 the launching of multivolume world history was announced at a conference with the head of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, LI Tieying 李铁映, as keynote speaker.<sup>5</sup> A report from the Academy in 2003 informs that over 100 historians should be working on the project under the direction of WU Yin 吴寅 and YU Pei 于沛, former heads of the Institute of World History of the Academy. I understand that publication is expected in May 2012. Waiting that, it may be useful to mention some of the anticipated key features.

The plan is an 8-volume world history, in thirty-eight parts, totalling twelve million characters. It will, contrary to many previous attempts, be more in line with historical materialism with detailed theoretical exploration of

environment and ecology and the historical development of society; the formation of nationalities and origin of religion; the shape of the origin of states and their early development; philosophical reflections on the history of the birth of industrial civilisation; technological and scientific revolution and social development; the historical process of development of socialism and capitalism etc.

The great historical questions will get Marxist answers from Chinese historians, and by means of historical materialism the abuse of "Euro-centrism 欧洲中心论" will be corrected. Euro-centrism had a relatively large influence in China from the 1920s and 1930s and there is still "a certain market for it." Behind the programme we also find a clear nationalistic tone about the role of China and the Chinese people in world history. By no means unpleasant but a bit more than I would expect explicitly in an announcement for such an important publication to be based on solid historical work.<sup>6</sup>

### **Biography**

Ma Keyao, born 1932, is still a very active pensioner from the History Department of Peking University, which he entered as a student in 1952. His education included a very thorough training in Chinese history and upon graduation in 1956 his own idea was to go on with the study of ancient Chinese history but because of his relatively good command of foreign languages he was assigned to teach world history.<sup>7</sup> First modern world history but after a year in the countryside it became Ancient and Medieval world history under the direction of QI Sihe 齐思合 (1907-1980) with whom he worked until the latter's death. In a recent interview he mentions that the training of historians of his generation was considerably behind that of the older and also the younger generations. They

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<sup>5</sup> LI Tieying 2003

<sup>6</sup> TA Na 2003

<sup>7</sup> Yi 2000: 24

could and can study abroad and get a better knowledge of the basic books and material, and their work has not been interrupted by political campaigns etc.<sup>8</sup>

His chosen field became the Middle Ages of world history, a path that was not easy to follow in China of the 1950s and 1960s with precious little material on non-Chinese history available in Chinese collections at the time and few acquisitions, with the occasional additions of material from the Soviet Union and her satellite states in Europe and Asia at least as long as friendly relations lasted.

His foreign languages are, to my knowledge, English and Russian but no Latin, French, German, or Japanese, at least not beyond a rudimentary knowledge. It has been quite common for Chinese historians of foreign history only to have the modern language of the country they study. There are exceptions, particularly among the younger generation, but as historians we must accept that history of foreign countries often is, and will be, written on the basis of printed and translated sources. In the case of Ma Keyao I believe that he would be the first to acknowledge that his work might have benefited from more languages.

Over the years he has participated in the publication in a number of general world histories which have appeared in China. He may have been too old to participate in the teaching material for general world histories written by students at the time of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. They attempted to use the periodization of Chinese history and did, according to Ma Keyao, not succeed.<sup>9</sup> He wrote the chapter on Babylon in the standard 1962 world history by ZHOU Yiliang and WU Yujin but he was probably too young to have had any substantial influence on it. In the early 1970s he was one of the unnamed contributors of the *Concise world history* 简明世界史, written by members of the History Department at Peking University, and widely used during the following period.<sup>10</sup>

My own studies of Chinese world history started with the reading of this *Concise world history* in three volumes,<sup>11</sup> written in the waning years of the Great Cultural Revolution when class struggle was still dominant in the explanations by Chinese historians as the motive forces of history and the transitions from one social formation to the next. I can testify that any hope of seeing a world history written from the point of historical materialism, or even materialism, was quickly disappointed. It was a history of events and persons, with lip service to materialism when it came up in connection with class relations and class struggle. I still recall that I saw names of a number of

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<sup>8</sup> Ma & Zou 2008: 21, 25

<sup>9</sup> Ma et al. 2008: 23

<sup>10</sup> Ma et al. 2008: 21

<sup>11</sup> Beijing daxue 1974

Greek philosophers and others who had not been part of my regular training in European history and civilisation.

The next step was to contact Ma Keyao in 1988 when he was head of the History Department at Peking University. He helped me to meet a number of historians all over China and thus to give me a solid impression of the dedication of Chinese scholars in the field of world history, their learning and open-mindedness, but also the restrictions on their work. A year later Ma Keyao spent some months in Copenhagen with his wife, GENG Yinzeng 耿引曾, a historian in her own right.<sup>12</sup> The daily contact with him was very rewarding for my understanding of how Chinese historians work with world history and contact and friendship is still very much a part of my life.

During his stay in Copenhagen he gave three seminar papers which I subsequently had the honour to publish.<sup>13</sup> A review in the *Journal of World History* said something about the work of Ma Keyao but probably more about the conditions of comparative medieval history and his courage in entering this field. It ended as follows:

Professor Ma makes a significant and original contribution to comparative medieval history when he discusses the Chinese half of his material; this is clearly the better and stronger part of the study. His coverage of the western half is much weaker and questionable, because of serious omissions and misconceptions. Nevertheless, as the first serious attempt at comparative medieval history by a Chinese scholar, this book can be viewed as a harbinger of good things to come from the east.<sup>14</sup>

### **Feudalism**

Chinese historians have since the 1980s published a great numbers of articles and books on world history. An important purpose has been to inform their colleagues and the Chinese public about the history of the world to supplement and, at times, to correct the concepts of the development of human societies that had dominated the historical circles in China for so many years. The writings of Ma Keyao have, of course, been produced with this in mind but knowing his inquisitive mind it is clear that the main purpose of his research has been to clarify for himself and others how the historian work in a Chinese and global setting. Fortunately we have in the last few years seen clear statements from Ma Keyao to this effect.

As one of the editors of the *Concise World History* in the early 1970s he got the opportunity to follow the international debates in the 1960s and 1970s on the Asiatic Mode of Production. The most important outcome of this work was his own realisation that Marx and Engels had not

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<sup>12</sup> Her publications on Chinese-Indian relations and Chinese sources to Indian history include GENG Yinzeng 耿引曾 1990 *Hanwen Nanya shiliaoxue* 汉文南亚史科学 [Chinese historical material on South Asia] Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe --- GENG Yinzeng 耿引曾 1997 *Zhongguoren yu Yinduyang* 中国人与印度洋 [The Chinese and the Indian Ocean] Beijing : Zhengzhou : Daxiang chubanshe

<sup>13</sup> Ma 1990

<sup>14</sup> Guzman 1991: 245

dogmatised their own theories but, on the contrary, they had revised them on the basis of newly discovered historical material and the results of historical research. He could at the time not speak or write about this. After the end of the Cultural Revolution when these things were discussed in the open, Ma Keyao was not tempted to enter the purely theoretical discussions on social formations; he would rather start from the study of concrete problems and then make theoretical conclusions. He found that there were many similarities between the slave systems of Rome and China, and also that they changed over time.<sup>15</sup> The results were published in 1980.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the subsequent research of Ma Keyao has been on European feudalism with an emphasis on English feudalism. Two of his books are directly related to this topic, and for a foreigner it is probably the book on English feudalism that is the most important.<sup>17</sup> Some of the issues raised in these works will be dealt with in the following. In addition there have been a steady flow of articles in leading Chinese journals, some included and slightly revised in his latest book where he sums up his research so far.<sup>18</sup>

His ambition is to understand the universal laws of historical development and to explore how the historian can reconcile these ambitions with the realisation that such an understanding is not possible with our present knowledge of the history of mankind. His contribution to this endeavour is to study the concept of feudalism as a universal law by challenging the existing understandings of this concept. One is the traditional Western European concept as a lord-vassal relationship that has been applied to much of Europe but with a concentration on the area between the rivers Rhine and Loire.<sup>19</sup> The other is the Marxist concept as a social formation or stage of historical development between slave society and capitalist society, which in a dogmatic form dominated Chinese historical research for a long time after the founding of the People's Republic of China. The method he has used is to study cases of feudalism, first of all in China and Western Europe, to see what is particular of the local situation in different places, and from such results reach conclusions of what is particular and what is universal in the concept of feudalism.

Comparative history is one of the methods he uses and he always, at least so it seems, starts from the assumption that there are more similarities between different societies than generally assumed by established tradition. But comparative research is not the only method, or rather it has to be built on and supplemented by a thorough understanding of particular societies, based on empirical research in interplay with the universal theories. His more cautious understanding may be that "As a kind of society, the basic points of Chinese and Western feudalism are similar, both are societies

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<sup>15</sup> Yi 2000: 25

<sup>16</sup> Ma 1980

<sup>17</sup> Ma 1992, the other is Ma 1985

<sup>18</sup> Ma 2010

<sup>19</sup> Ma 2002: 290

where large landownership and small peasant economy coexist”<sup>20</sup> and in a more sweeping and universal understanding:

The economic essence of feudalism - large land ownership combined with small peasant production - was a universal category of pre-capitalism all over the world. It is loose and broad because the universal law of historical development must be very simple in order to be applicable everywhere. If one should add its universal superstructures on it, they would be domination of monarchy and religious ideology.<sup>21</sup>

He examines theories that have been developed on the basis of local experience in relation to the empirical data related to the development of such theories, both the empirical data and the intellectual surroundings in which they developed. With the result from such examinations he then believes that it is possible to reach the level of universal theories.

It is also noteworthy that Ma Keyao indicates that his work should not only be seen as China versus the West but rather as a contribution to endeavours in all countries and civilisations, he specifically mentions the Third World, to supplement the dominant views that are often based on Western experience. He is very much aware of Euro-centrism and in 2006 he wrote a major article on it and revealed, in my opinion quite convincingly, some of the ‘myths’ and ‘magical power’ on which this concept is based.<sup>22</sup> It was the basis for a paper he contributed in 2007 to a conference in Korea of East Asian historians on Euro-centrism where he sums up:

In short, criticizing Eurocentrism by Chinese historians revolves around two items: despotism and underdevelopment. We Chinese historians have made our efforts for many years to reject the Eurocentric orientation in historical studies, but many works have yet to be accomplished. We have not established the conceptions of our own about the democracy and despotism, and we still take the Western model as ours. We have not established our own model of modernization independent of the Western ideology and still took the Western model of modernization as ours.

and

But first, we should establish historical conceptions, models and theories without the discrimination and bias of Eurocentrism, and only then can we reach our goal of rewriting history. It is a great work and needs several generations to do. It gave us a great pleasure that many scholars in the world, including the scholars from Europe and America, have begun this work. We, the scholars of China, Korea and Japan, should do

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<sup>20</sup> Ma 2012: 220

<sup>21</sup> Ma 2002: 289

<sup>22</sup> Ma 2006: 15-16

our best to form a new system of world history and new theories of history. It is our duty and obligation.<sup>23</sup>

The study of Western Europe in the feudal period is to study, in the context of world history, a rather secluded area as she from the 800s was shielded by the Eastern countries and no longer vulnerable to attacks by the nomads.<sup>24</sup> England was, of course, further isolated although the cross Channel connections continued to play a role in the development of English society for some time after the Norman Conquest. There were other influences from the outside on the development of the English state structure, including the possible influence from China through the Arabs on the English Exchequer.<sup>25</sup> However, although Western European and the English experiences may seem to be particularistic, we must remember that they have played a significant role for the ‘universal’ concept of feudalism, and that many scholars outside Europe tend towards the same areas of study with the material predominantly in English.

Another point that mentioned by Ma Keyao that distinguishes Western Europe from the rest of the world, at least from China and India, is the difference in extensive and intensive farming and the existence of serfs in Europe:

In my opinion one of the reasons we should emphasise is the low productive forces of England and the system of extensive cultivation. Because of the low productive forces the feudal lord had to carve out a self-managed piece of land [demesne] exclusively for his own supply and use the surplus manpower of the peasants to till it, and thereby guarantee his livelihood. In this way the pattern of land rent was labour service land rent. However in Western Europe and England in the Middle Ages agriculture continuously practiced extensive cultivation, with a small harvest in relation to the acreage and simple work in the fields. It was easy to manage and supervise, and this created a prerequisite for the use of forced labour through serfs. If England had practiced intensive cultivation as for example like in China, the management would have been complicated, supervision not easy, the enthusiasm of serf labour not high, rather passive and slow. It would have resulted in a great decrease in production from the demesne so that the feudal lord would feel that the labour service land rent was difficult to uphold, and therefore there was no need to use the serf system with its forced procedure to bind the people. Only in this may we understand that in England, the manor, serf system, and labour service land rent are closely connected.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ma 2007

<sup>24</sup> Ma 1989: 3

<sup>25</sup> Ma 1992: 93

<sup>26</sup> Ma 1992: 219

In 2002 he makes the same connection between extensive cultivation and serfdom:

Serfdom was a distinct phenomenon in Europe. I don't think we can limit the understanding of serfdom as a compulsory attachment of the peasants to the soil only. The essence of European serfdom was a survival of slavery - legal - and a kind of labour service/economic. In the medieval West, extensive farming was the principal method of cultivation.<sup>27</sup>

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In feudal China and India, the method of cultivation was intensive farming. The land was tilled minutely every year. Fertilisers, irrigation and advanced equipment were used in the agrarian production. The form of rent was mainly rent in kind, *metayage* or fixed amount. The producers were given more freedom and were independent in their actions. Supervision over them was unnecessary in most cases. The serfdom was not needed here. So only some minority people like the *Buqu* in China held a status very close to that of the serfs and serfdom was never an important factor in matters pertaining to production.<sup>28</sup>

But in 1997 he acknowledges that the research of WANG Yuanming 王渊明 in his contribution shows that this difference has been exaggerated. In the West we find tendencies towards intensive cultivation but it was more backward and did not reach a large scale. The significance of the extensive agriculture for the development of 'modernisation' was mentioned by BRAUDEL but should not be exaggerated.<sup>29</sup> For my part I think that Keyao MA probably has an important point here but I am not convinced that Chinese and Indian agriculture throughout the feudal period may be characterised as intensive agriculture. Sure, in some parts of China - and perhaps India - cultivation was as described but we must always remember that it was not until the 1400s that the population of the Chinese empire reached figures as high as ten per cent of the present population. There are in Chinese history numerous instances of empty land and of migration in great numbers that do not immediately support this view of Chinese agriculture although farmers may, of course, have practiced the familiar techniques of intensive cultivation even if they were not required. There are also, at least in Japanese research, contentions that some peasants in China lived under serf-like conditions until late in the imperial period and perhaps even later. This does not detract from the important observation that serfdom, and the degree of bondage/servitude connected with it, may be related to the form of farming. Only, and I have a feeling that he would agree with me, that we need

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<sup>27</sup> Ma 2002: 295

<sup>28</sup> Ma 2002: 296

<sup>29</sup> Ma 1997: 23 in his 概述 Outline to the first section on 农业 Agriculture where WANG Yuanming wrote Chapter 1: 中西封建社会中的农业耕作制度 Agricultural cultivation systems of Chinese and Western feudal societies.



to know much more about agriculture in different countries before we can give a more definitive statement.

Ma Keyao does not automatically assume that the serfs, or other social classes, were subject to more or less predefined or predetermined conditions of living and oppression. The serfs were not necessarily the poorest in the villages of England.<sup>30</sup> In another place he makes it quite clear that he expects evidence before he is ready to characterise the economic and social conditions of a particular group of people:

Above we have only listed the burdens of the *ger* (*ceorl*). We have no exact material to explain what influence these burdens had on their economic production. On one thing we can agree, that already from the time of written records the English peasants were not of an egalitarian united class but there were poor and rich people. The influence of these burdens on the poor and the rich were not the same but we have no way to make it clear whether they caused the poor to become poorer and the rich to become richer. We can only say that the difference between poor and rich among the peasants existed throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>31</sup>

Ownership to land, to the means of production, or what in some terminology is termed productive relations has of course attracted some attention in the works by Ma Keyao. Was all land owned by the sovereign as is found in Asia, Africa, and Europe?<sup>32</sup> For England he gives the clear answer that, unlike France, no one had private land (*allod*), all land in the end belonged to the king.<sup>33</sup> With the feudal system came a system of ownership/propriety rights at different levels that may be compared to the forms of land ownership that developed in China with ownership to topsoil and subsoil. At least an analysis along these lines may be fruitful to pursue.

The study of ownership and the legal aspects very early became one of the focal points of his research. One of the impetuses for this was that there was little understanding of the concepts of ownership in Western Europe used as references by Marx and Engels. In the WITTFOGEL article 1993 this research is brought together.<sup>34</sup>

According to Ma Keyao, the question of ownership to the means of production was discussed in China in the 1950s and 1960s primarily by historians and in the 1970s and 1980s primarily by economists. Legal scholars have not participated. In the early 1990s the question came up again

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<sup>30</sup> Ma 1992: 189

<sup>31</sup> Ma 1992:47

<sup>32</sup> Ma 1992: 71

<sup>33</sup> Ma 1992: 128

<sup>34</sup> Yi 2000: 24-25

with the publication of the Chinese translation of Wittfogel's "*Oriental Despotism*".<sup>35</sup> Ma Keyao took the opportunity to write an important article where he summarises his views on ownership and makes it quite clear that he sees ownership to the means of production as a dynamic process, as relations between persons as well as between person and commodity, whereas at least some economists regard it as a static situation only between person and commodity. In classless society when a person cultivated a piece of land others only saw his/her relation to the land and it was only with the formation of states and legal systems that ownership rights were created.<sup>36</sup> Roman law early developed the concept of unlimited ownership (to movable objects) but private property was not developed. Land in Italy and other places became public land, only to be appropriated by Roman citizens but not with property rights.<sup>37</sup> When Roman Law in the 1200s was applied to feudal land there was a range of interpretations as the same property, contrary to Roman law, could have several 'owners' in keeping with the ladder of infeudation. Only with the Code Napoleon in 1804 was ownership again made absolute, but with limitations, and the same has been applied in other countries.<sup>38</sup>

Wittfogel says that the Orient has 'weak' property and the West has 'strong' property. Here Ma Keyao makes three points: 1) Property rights in the East were layered with state, community etc. and it was not the same in the West. This is not correct as layered property rights existed in both Roman and feudal society. 2) Tax in the Orient was used for the benefit of the ruling class, in the West there was some kind of security that it was used for necessary purposes of the state or the community, which Ma Keyao refuses as the ruling class was the main beneficiary also in the West. 3) In the West the power of property and enterprise owners was sufficient to restrict the power of the state but this was not the case in the Orient. Primogeniture and limited inheritance were powerful elements in this. Ma Keyao recognises these features but downplays their significance as it was where martial feudalism played a substantial role that the larger fiefs were not divided, and, in any case, even if there was primogeniture there were incessant fights over land so this did not guarantee as powerful counterbalance to the power of the state.<sup>39</sup>

Land holding was thus, in his view, a much more dynamic and even fluid process with constant changes and, at the same time, he questions the ideas of manors as more or less self supporting productive units as many of the larger landholdings were by no means units. They could be scattered over several villages and counties, but there is evidence of a few instances of model manors with serf labour. The larger manors were mostly concentrated in the west and south of

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<sup>35</sup> WITTFOGEL Karl 1957 *Oriental Despotism; a Comparative Study of Total Power* New Haven CN: Yale University Press = 魏特夫 1989 东方专制主义--对于极权力量的比较研究 Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe

<sup>36</sup> Ma 1993: 5-7

<sup>37</sup> Ma 1993: 8

<sup>38</sup> Ma 1993: 9-10

<sup>39</sup> Ma 1993: 10-12

England. The former Danelaw areas of the north and east had far fewer but there were very few places without manors of any kind.<sup>40</sup> But the development of manorial production and manorial organisation was not at all a necessary condition for the development of feudal society and feudal production.<sup>41</sup>

As he mentions he pays considerable attention to the study of law in the feudal period. His conclusion after he has shown the development of English law and its many particularistic aspects he states quite clearly his position as follows: "If we think that medieval England was a country ruled by law it is to have too much confidence in the propaganda of the Whig historians."<sup>42</sup>

He mentions that Chinese law did not have the same particularistic features (which perhaps he should doubt) but in the execution of the law he finds an innovative similarity as the English County Courts could perhaps more appropriately be seen on the same terms as the Chinese District (county) Yamen 衙门. They were not only courts of law but also had duties with regard to military, administration, litigation, complaints, and finance.<sup>43</sup>

The research of Ma Keyao focus on the period before the 1500s but his interests have also come to include the period up to the 1700s. In his introduction to his edited volume from 1997 on Chinese and Western feudalism he wrote:

I believe that because the level of productive forces was low and development slow feudal society cannot be too short but should be somewhat longer. Western European feudal society should not end neither by the 1400s nor by the 1600s but by the 1700s. Now people often realise that the travel of Columbus connected East and West together, capitalism rose gradually in the West, and textbooks talks entirely about the sprouts of capitalism, the Renaissance and the Reformation. However, Western European advance was by far not so fast, until before the Industrial Revolution Western Europe was still mainly a backward agricultural society.<sup>44</sup>

and he later explained that it is a way to get rid of the control of Westerner by means of Orientalism that is shaping feudalism only to fit Europe, and he finds similar tendencies to prolong the feudal period with Western scholars.<sup>45</sup>

His view is perhaps best summarized in the last paragraph of his introduction to Section Two on Cities/Towns of the 1997 collective publication:

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<sup>40</sup> Ma 1992: 168-171

<sup>41</sup> Ma 1992: 188

<sup>42</sup> Ma 1992: 85

<sup>43</sup> Ma 1992: 103

<sup>44</sup> Ma 1997: 9

<sup>45</sup> Ma 2000: 22

The origins of Western European feudalism is a very complicated question. Most Western scholars recognises that capitalism is a phenomenon that has always existed in human society, there is no question of its origins and, of course, no need to research it. Most scholars who research this problem are Marxists or scholars under the influence of Marxism. From the changes in the structure of society they investigate the origins of capitalism, with emphasis on Western European capitalism. Among these some like DOBB and HILTON research from the inner structure of society and changes in industry and agriculture, while others like WALLERSTEIN and BRAUDEL emphasise aspects of world systems and world markets for their research. The former stresses the role of class struggle and the latter stresses the role of trade and the market. I think with regard to the origins of Western European capitalism we cannot use these two frameworks as points of reference. We need to open new paths, and in particular we must recognise that the emergence of Western European capitalism was a complicated and difficult process. For example the capitalism of Firenze (Florence) decayed by the 1500s which goes to show that autonomous towns could not at all save themselves from the fate of decline. We must see the profound mystery of its origins in productive forces (technology), population, demand, capital, market, prices, etc. and we must consult the conditions at places outside Western Europe with the hope that we may gradually acquire some understanding.<sup>46</sup>

This would be a good point to stop the description of his work on feudalism. It could go on but I hope this gives a fair an impression of a scholarly career that appears to have given a major contribution to our understanding of how human society developed in the period when agriculture provided the economic basis and how this economic basis interplayed with the gradual formation of the modern states, partly through a dynamic ownership to the land conditioned upon technological, economic, political and other changes. I am not sure that Ma Keyao will agree completely with this characterisation. Then I will just say with him: We need to know more before we are able to draw our conclusions.

### **World history**

Ma Keyao has over the years gained plenty of experience with the presentation of world history in China. As mentioned he was engaged in a collaborative work in the History Department of Peking University with the writing and editing of the *Concise world history*.<sup>47</sup> It became one of the best-selling world histories in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

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<sup>46</sup> Ma 1997: 182-183

<sup>47</sup> Yi 2000: 25

In 1989 he edited the volume on medieval history in a four volume world history from the History Department at Peking University. During the early 1990s he was together with ZHU Huan 朱寰 of North Eastern Normal University in charge of the medieval sections of the more official world history, initiated by the Ministry of Education (or State Education Commission).<sup>48</sup> The Editors-in-Chief were WU Yujin and QI Shirong 齐世荣. Ma Keyao participated in the discussions among the editors on the general ideas on how to develop the compilation of such world histories within limits that the professional community of historians was ready to accept at the time. He has been critical of the whole work, mainly the section on Modern History but I recall conversations at the time gave me the impression that he was not entirely satisfied with the volume on Medieval History and implied that he had left a good deal of the editorship to ZHU Huan who has participated in a number of similar publications. But I may be wrong.

And let us start with some remarks he made to an inquiry on scholarly issues to the newspaper *Beijing Evening News* on Christmas Eve 1999 with reminiscences on the past century and expectations to the new. His contribution under the title "World history seen through Chinese eyes" translates as follows:

Euro-American history still occupied a commanding position on the world history scene of the 1900s. The history of China did not have any weight at all. The new history of the Third World, including the history of China, is the result of the study and mirror-use of the advanced results of Euro-American history. When studying its general truth, we often received its particularistic things and even misconstructions of the Orient. This just means that we used the eyes of Westerners, the brains of the Westerners to recognise ourselves, our history. To change world history to become a real world history is a huge responsibility. First we must carry out a work of 'deconstruction' towards Western historical theory. Next we must connect the history of the Third World with general laws and seek its particularity. We must not only carry out down-to-earth large scale empirical research, we must also get high to theory. This will require the efforts of some generations. I wish that the historians of our country in this process may play a forceful role so that the historical studies of our country really may walk towards the world.<sup>49</sup>

The context and the quintessence of Ma's views on the development of world history, and the historical sciences in China in general after 1949, were formulated in an interview he gave in 2000 in the leading Chinese historiographical journal *Shixueshi yanjiu*:

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<sup>48</sup> Wu & Qi 1992-1994. Ma Keyao and Zhu Huan are the editors of volume 2 on medieval history

<sup>49</sup> Ma 1999

After the establishment of New China historians again emphasised theory. However, many did not understand European social sciences of the 1800s and mistook philosophical historical materialism for the theory of history itself and showed too many instances of empty talk on discussion of historical periods. After the reforms and the opening to the outside world [i.e. after 1978] scholars have endeavoured to criticise the ‘theory that Western Europe is the centre’ but they have not from a theoretical system come out with questions or solutions. In the main it has been the skill to place here and there historical material with a little less written about the West and a few sentences more about the East. So in my view, even if Chinese scholars have made all kinds of efforts, they have not built a systematic theory of history.<sup>50</sup>

When we take a look at these world histories the remarks by Ma Keyao may seem to be a little unfair, but just a little. The group of senior historians who together with him have undertaken these tasks have, indeed, worked hard on new ways to compile world histories, and Chinese history have received greater attention but we may still have to wait some time for an organic world history that gives Chinese, and for that matter, Asian history her proper place and attention.

One of the most significant attempts so far may, in fact, be the volume on medieval world history edited by Ma Keyao in the late 1980s.<sup>51</sup> It is part of a four-volume world history published by Peking University Press, the others being on Ancient History, Modern History and Modern Asian, African and Latin American History.

In that volume he wrote Chapter 1 on the migrations on the Eurasian continent, Chapter 3 on feudal South Asia, Chapter 5 on the Arab empires, Chapter 6 on the Mongol empire, Chapter 10 on India under Islamic control, and Chapter 13 on feudal Eastern Europe. Chapter 1 started with the western migrations of parts of the Xiongnu 匈奴, - Huns in Western sources - in the early centuries of the CE period after they had been defeated by the Chinese, beginning in the centuries before CE. The chapter then included the Han dynasty of China and the following dynasties until around 600 CE. The deliberate attempt to regard China as the point of departure for a Chinese world history is perhaps best illustrated by the following chapter on East Asia. The first section on China was written by PENG Xiaoyu 彭小瑜 who also wrote chapters 4 and 12 on Western Europe. He is now, after further training in the USA, a prominent teacher of medieval history at Peking University with an impressive range of languages to study European history in the medieval period. It may be indicative of the possibilities and conditions for collaborative work of this kind in late 1980s that this section was not written by a specialist on Chinese history, and also that the editor, Ma Keyao, made the choice not to have the sections on Korea and Japan in the same chapter written for this

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<sup>50</sup> Yi 2000: 30

<sup>51</sup> Ma 1989a

work. He simply included similar sections written in the early 1970s for the *Concise World History* mentioned above, checked and with some additions by Zhou Yiliang, a specialist on China's relations with her neighbouring countries in the period and himself a noted contributor to the development of world history studies in China. The sections on Chinese and Mongolian history were also checked by specialists.<sup>52</sup>

The book covers the period from around 300 to the late 1600s CE, and it is clear that it is written and edited on the assumption that the medieval period was more or less equal to the 'feudal' period in world history. Most of the chapters, at least those dealing with the Eurasian continent, are concerned with feudal society but we already here see the hesitation by Ma Keyao to deal with the Islamic states of Western Asia and around the Mediterranean as feudal. Even when e.g. landholding is discussed with peasants cultivating state land, and the granting of this kind of land to warriors, feudal lords [*fengjianzhu*], judges, and governors<sup>53</sup> he seems to refrain from the use of feudalism, at least to the extent one would normally have seen in Chinese historical works of the period. This corresponds to his remark in 2000 that he wished to study the feudal system for the whole world but in China the material on Islamic civilisation was relatively scarce so the concentration has been on European and Chinese feudalism.<sup>54</sup>

This contrasts with the more explicit statements on Indian feudalism to which he has also recently made a contribution.<sup>55</sup> Already in the 1989 world history he is more direct than in the part on Western Asia perhaps because, as he make it quite clear, he had access to the works of Indian historians

When we exam the origins of feudalism in India from the point of view of social formation, we must emphasise the enormous inequalities in the development of ancient Indian society. Largely speaking, only some regions of the Ganges river basin were progressive areas of ancient India. The Maurya dynasty [320-180 BCE], centred here, developed a relatively clear slave society. In other extensive regions, particularly in southern India there remained in the CE period a number of states of primitive tribes or with many remnants of primitive society. So many places on the subcontinent went directly to feudal society. Another characteristic of the development of Indian feudalism was that conquests between tribes and states play a not insignificant role. There were constantly fierce battles between small states and countries, fighting for land and other riches. From the mountain passes of the northeast backward tribes and nationalities swarmed in, one upon another, and as conquerors they occupied the land and enslaved

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<sup>52</sup> Ma 1989: Pre/3-4

<sup>53</sup> Ma 1989: 132

<sup>54</sup> Yi 2000: 26

<sup>55</sup> Ma 2002

the people. War strengthened the power of chiefs and lords; they speeded up the granting of land and created a considerable land owning feudal class. But the conquests also retained blood relations, communal organisations etc. they continued to exist in India for a long time and formed the particularity about Indian feudal society.<sup>56</sup>

The ideas of Ma Keyao to organise world history radiating from - or perhaps centred on - China was not introduced in other volumes of the same series, not even the part on Modern Asian History. It is also indicative that these ideas were only partly taken into the Medieval Volume in the Wu Yujin & Qi Shirong world history. It is easy to get the feeling that Ma Keyao had come to the realisation that the time was not ripe to take the full consequences partly because there were still too many unsolved problems. As he said in 1999, and repeated later, it may take generations to solve.

With his editorship of the *Civilizational history of the World* 世界文明史 from 2004 he finally had a chance to shape a world history after his own ideas, or so it seems but he may not entirely agree. Three volumes with most of the contributors being his colleagues at Peking University. It is an attempt to write a civilizational history of the world, and the project has to a large extent succeeded. Questions are, of course, what civilizational history is and which parts of the world is it about. The answer to the last question is that it is about "some civilizations that historically have played large roles and made relatively large contributions and we cannot make a detailed enumeration of each civilisation."<sup>57</sup> What civilisations are seems much more diffuse, and this is realised by Ma Keyao. Civilisations are connected to states or nations but are not the same. Some civilisations have historically played large roles and made relatively large contributions, and the book cannot make a detailed enumeration of each civilisation. Each civilisation has its development and changes, its history. To explain the development of the civilisation is the central topic for civilisation researchers.

Civilization as a unit for research is, of course, not the same as state or nation, so in our analysis we take into consideration the evolutionary signs of states and nations. But the existence of civilization must have a certain geographical space that has considerable relations to states and nations. Although a civilization is not a political entity, civilization and political entities have several connections that cannot be cut off, and the role of political entities towards the formation and development of civilization is very important. Civilization is not entirely the same as culture, but civilization and culture are closely connected. Language, religion, group mentality, and customs play a very large role in the development of a civilization. Perhaps the individual in the description

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<sup>56</sup> Ma 1989: 65

<sup>57</sup> Ma 2004: 1:Pre/8



and analysis of a civilization cannot hold a certain position, but no individual, no political entity is at all unimportant in the development of civilization. So as said by Braudel, civilization history includes all scholarly disciplines, it is difficult to separate it from general history, and in researching it we must use the methods of social sciences and anthropology. This demand is perhaps too high. We will make a risky attempt, giving all we can.<sup>58</sup>

The authors make no attempt to engage large theoretical models for the rise and fall of civilisations, they rather depend on what the evidence tells us, with the caveat that a periodization according to productive forces has the front seat. There are many elements to influence development and changes in civilisation but in the end they are connected to the productive forces, and the periodization that comes from it is primarily the agricultural and the industrial period, or the periods when first the sources of energy were reproductive and later the fossil energy in steam engines. Here the industrial period will be divided into two, the rise of industrialisation and the spread to the rest of the world.<sup>59</sup>

China has, at least in some parts a fairly prominent role, often placed at the beginning or the near beginning of a particular section. The chapters on Chinese history up to the Early Modern Period are written by Ma Keyao himself, a specialist on European medieval history, but with a lifelong interest in Chinese history. In the reading of his chapters one gets the feeling that he has really enjoyed writing about Chinese history. The emphasis is clearly on material culture, means and ways of production and their relation to population. Generally well done and in places also referring directly to the view of non-Chinese research as contrasted to Chinese, as

On the governing of the Ming and Qing period, there are different opinions among scholars. Chinese scholars seem to stress the strengthening of centralisation and despotism [or autocracy] and think that from the central to the local all is in the control of the emperor. In the West there are some scholars who stress that control was less efficient, and that the few officials and functionaries were insufficient to control a daily increasing population, so there must exist a kind of local self-governing, a space for public activity. China lacks the tradition of local self-government, with no self-government of towns like the West, nor with independence of the noble feudal lords etc. but there still existed all kinds of political power to oppose the emperor and political power, and they showed their strength.<sup>60</sup>

I tend to agree with this view, also when two years later in the article on Euro-centrism he writes in a subsection on society and politics "The main point is here Oriental [Eastern] despotism, the

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<sup>58</sup> Ma 2004: 1: Pre/8

<sup>59</sup> Ma 2004: 1: Pre/9-12

<sup>60</sup> Ma 2004: 2: 7

contrasting of Western democracy with Eastern despotism, from antiquity to the present. This is really a myth. But believers of this myth are still not in the minority.”<sup>61</sup>

I have, however, reservations about how China is treated in a world history context. China is throughout defined as one civilization while Mediterranean civilization is divided among geographical regions changing over time and the same could have been done to China, and for that matter for India. It would have been nice to see attempts to present China as different civilizations at different times, but perhaps this would be to expect too much.

The same problem I find in *An outline of the feudal economy and politics* from 2010. In the chapter on state managed economy and economy policies under feudalism we find

China has for several thousand years been a united centralised large country, controlling a vast territory where she established a sound, scientific, and complex bureaucratic system that exercised vertical management of the whole country.<sup>62</sup>

The work includes whole chapters and subchapters on Chinese history treating various aspects such as feudalism, feudal kingship, population and economic cycles, prices and wages, and legal relations where Ma Keyao demonstrates convincingly his command of Chinese history and he presents various views on Chinese state and society but, as far as I can see, he does not really challenge the more traditional view of China with a long history as a united centralised country.

He has recently expressed his concern with the inadequate training Chinese students of world history receive in Chinese history as a frame of reference, among other things, due to heavy demands to learn foreign languages. When Chinese study world history they must be able to view the issues with both Chinese eyes and world eyes, and he gives the prescription:

I think that the important in training in Chinese cultural tradition is to have a kind of cultural self-restraint and a comparative method to examine the issues, to be gradually cultivated from the social environment and not overnight.<sup>63</sup>

Not said directly but certainly an indirect encouragement also to dispute the traditional view of Chinese history and, knowing him, I am confident that he has challenged his students not only to equal their master but to try the next steps in the development of world history.

All in all the work of Ma Keyao has demonstrated that a lot can be achieved with the present knowledge of world history in China but also that there is still a lot to do, as he keeps emphasising. The next step will be to see the world history from the Academy of Social Sciences and how they solve the problems of Euro-centrism and how to give China her integrated place in world history, without forgetting the other great and small civilizations of the world.

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<sup>61</sup> Ma 2006: 15

<sup>62</sup> Ma 2010: 156

<sup>63</sup> Ma 2011

For foreigners the most exiting sections or volumes will perhaps be those on Chinese history hopefully written by specialists on Chinese history but here in a world history context. This may be one of the ironies of world history but thinking of the work and words of Ma Keyao, a true world historian, there is a good chance that this is exactly what he wants as a next step in the long journey towards a true world history.

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