2024 Journal of Social Science Humanities and Literature, Vol.7, Issue 2, (Apr)
ISSN 2277-842X
DOI: 10.53469/jsshl.2024.07(02).06

Expanding Perspectives in the Study of Chinese Social History

Chen Xuan

School of History,Culture and Tourism, Liaocheng University, Liaocheng 252000, Shandong, China

Abstract: ***Over the past 20 years, the study of social history has become the most remarkable direction in the field of modern Chinese history. The research of modern Chinese social history has gone through three stages: disciplinary revival, system construction, and steady development. The era features of modern Chinese social history research mainly manifest in: prominent achievements in regional social history, with increasingly deepening theoretical research; the burgeoning research on modern rural history, moving towards in-depth exploration; and the attention-grabbing study of social gender history under new concepts. For traditional disciplines of modern Chinese history, the perspective of social history research has greatly expanded, mainly manifested in: breaking through traditional dogma, exploring new fields; shifting the perspective of observation, returning to the people themselves; and paying more attention to small events in the macro background, emphasizing a micro perspective.***

Keywords: Social history; Historical anthropology; People's history perspective; Micro perspective.

1. "NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY" AND THE INCUBATION OF CHINESE SOCIAL HISTORY RESEARCH

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese culture and academia encountered difficulties, leading to a dual crisis of "internal" and "external" in modern Chinese historiography. It was therefore necessary to construct "new historiography." [1] Liang Qichao advocated for a "historiographical revolution," pointing out in "New Historiography" that the old historiographical records not only failed to promote but also hindered the development of national consciousness. He identified four fundamental shortcomings: first, "knowing about the court but not the country"; second, "knowing about individuals but not the collective"; third, "knowing about past events but not present affairs"; and fourth, "knowing about facts but not ideals." Due to these four shortcomings, two further maladies arose. Liang Qichao hoisted the banner of new historiography by emphasizing a historical perspective of the lower classes, a multidisciplinary research approach, and a view of historical materials. At the same time, he also laid a solid foundation for the early study of Chinese social history [2].

1.1 Broadening the field of vision in "New Historiography"

In "A New Study of History," Liang Qichao defined history as "the narration of the evolution of the masses, seeking its general principles and precedents." This definition differed from that in "Chinese Historical Research Methods," where he emphasized, "What is history? It is the narrative of human continuous activities, the examination of their overall outcomes, the pursuit of their causal relationships, and serves as a reference for the activities of modern individuals in general." The former definition clearly reflects the influence of the evolutionary thinking of that era, while the latter emphasizes the "law of causality" in natural science. Although Liang Qichao's understanding of history changed over time, his pioneering work in the new history of China and the development of early Chinese social history were of great importance. Liang Qichao believed that geography, geology, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, politics, religion, law, and metrology were all directly related to history, which also highlighted the breadth of his historical perspective. He advocated for the new history, emphasizing the study of the evolution of states and groups, shifting the focus of historical research from the lofty court to the common people at the grassroots level. He also emphasized the adoption of viewpoints from other social sciences, thereby giving the new history of China a broad perspective from the outset and facilitating the exchange of historical studies with other social sciences, effectively laying the foundation for the development of Chinese social history. Wang Fansen pointed out that "A New Study of History" reflects Liang Qichao's emphasis on the history of "nations," "citizens," "groups," and "society," and these conceptual tools shaped the revolution of historiography. The late Qing intellectual community "implicitly all agreed that history should be a 'people's history,' a 'public history,' a 'social history,' the history of groups," which had a significant impact on the subsequent development of historiography [3].

1.2 Chinese Social History Debate and Early Social History Research

"The pioneers of the new historiography did not become specific practitioners of social research, but their consciousness of issues - summarized as the features of societal change and focus on the bottom - formed the two main lines in the practice of social research. This large-scale practice began with the Great Debate on Chinese social history. The Great Debate on Chinese social history began in 1927 with the rupture of the relationship between the Nationalist and Communist parties and the failure of the first great revolution. This led to diverse opinions from the Communist International and within China on the nature of Chinese society, sparking a debate on the historical development process and the nature of Chinese society. The judgment of the nature of Chinese society at that time would determine the judgment of the nature of the Chinese revolution and thus determine the strategic decisions of different political forces.

The main issues discussed in the Great Debate on Chinese social history were: first, the issue of the Asiatic mode of production; second, the question of whether Chinese history passed through a slave society stage; third, the so-called 'feudal society' and the issues of historical limitations and characteristics of Chinese history; fourth, the issue of so-called 'commercial capitalism'; and finally, from history to reality, the recognition of whether modern China had a semi-colonial and semi-feudal social nature. The issues addressed in the Great Debate on Chinese social history are directly related to the influence of Marxist historiography in China, and one of the important consequences of the debate is the rise of materialist historical school of research."

2. THE ACADEMIC POLITICIZATION AND DECLINE OF HISTORICAL STUDIES IN CHINA

French renowned liberalist thinker Raymond Aron once said: "History is made by living people and by the rebuilding of the lives of the dead for the sake of the living." History shows that the development of Chinese culture and scholarship "changes with the times," and political changes often affect the overall trend of culture and scholarship. Regarding scholarship and politics, Xu Fuguan once said: "Historically, if academic thought is separate from current politics, its influence tends to be limited and slow. If it is in opposition to current politics and lacks strong social support to change the reality of politics at the time, then the impact of current politics on academic thought will be far greater than the impact of academic thought on current politics."

2.1 The Decline of Political Changes and the Tradition of "New Historiography"

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was an exhilarating event for the Chinese people. The change in regime had a profound impact on the academic community in China, particularly in the field of history. The founding of the new China led to the government's demand for scholars to serve socialism and to adeptly apply Marxist theory as guiding ideology for academic research. This brought about significant changes in the academic field of Chinese history.

The book "Family, Land, and Ancestors: Continuity and Change in Modern China's Social and Economic History" by Yi Laoyi breaks the research paradigm emphasizing political and intellectual history in the Western historical academic community. It examines the massive changes in Chinese society from 1550 to 1949 from a global perspective, covering economic foundations, social forms, and spiritual beliefs, providing a comprehensive presentation of modern Chinese economic and social history. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese society and economy have undergone tremendous changes. Starting in the 16th century, China's economic field opened up processes of commodification and monetization, allowing for the development of foreign trade and the breakdown of traditional social class divisions, leading to rapid population growth. Yi Laoyi uses a large amount of historical material to interpret the complex and profound changes in Chinese society, exploring trends and reasons for changes in population, changes in class structure, small-scale agricultural economies, the relationship between commodity trade and manufacturing and faith culture, and many other issues. Some of the content effectively engages in dialogue with Mr. Fei Xiaotong's "Peasant Life in China."

2.2 The abnormal coexistence of research on rural warfare history and research on Chinese history

Meng Xiangcai, an expert in the history of peasant wars, pointed out: "Due to the particularly severe interference of politics in academia from the founding of the country until the end of the Cultural Revolution, all scholars were conducting research within a wrong theoretical framework, hence, the achievements in terms of theoretical academia were very limited."[4] This viewpoint is reasonable to some extent. However, if we consider the overall trend of the development of world history theory, by excluding the elements of politics and ideology and extracting the important academic components, we will find that the study of China's history of peasant wars unintentionally

aligns with the overall development trend of world history. The renowned American historian Iggers once criticized Western traditional historiography: "It fails to see the entire realm of human existence, focusing instead on decision-makers, on outstanding figures who formulate and implement policies. The bias of the aristocracy dominates historical research. Popular history, daily life history, and the history of popular culture all lack historical value."

Chinese traditional historiography, similar to it, emphasizes political history and military history, attributing many historical events that were not originally related to politics and the military to the typical expressions of the rise and fall of traditional dynasties at the end of the dynasty. Like Han Shurui's "Shandong Rebellion: the 1774 Wang Lun Uprising," previous views always attributed peasant uprisings to the social turmoil at the end of the dynasty, peasants losing land and becoming refugees, sharp social conflicts, and the lenient control of the uprising area by the gentry, with the emperor distant, leading to the outbreak of rebellion. However, the reasons for the outbreak of the 1774 Wang Lun uprising are not as mentioned above. The social background at that time was the flourishing era of Qianlong, and there were no factors that could have caused turmoil. The book "Shandong Rebellion: the 1774 Wang Lun Uprising" focuses on revealing the role of popular beliefs such as Maitreya Buddha and Wusheng Laomu in promoting the Wang Lun uprising, belonging to marginal narratives, with religious belief as the main focus. There is no causal relationship between peasant uprisings and natural disasters, official corruption, and other social issues. Han Shurui believes that the driving force behind the Wang Lun uprising is not social issues or national and class conflicts, but rather sectarian organizations and millenarian beliefs. Millenarian beliefs are official or folk beliefs of some Christian sects. The millennium is the second to last generation before the end of the world, and Wang Lun utilized the fervent and intense psychological commitment of the Pure Land sect believers to a future new order, initiating this rebellion. The millenarian ideology of the White Lotus sect prophesies the imminent arrival of the Pure Land world on earth under the guidance of gods and Buddhas, and violence is inevitable and imminent. These ideas, as a part of the religious tradition that easily stirs up fervor and determination, should not be underestimated. Without the White Lotus sect doctrine, the uprising would not have occurred. This clearly indicates that the relationship between the Wang Lun uprising and the social situation at the time was not significant. The reason for the outbreak of the uprising was simply due to the fervent belief in the White Lotus sect and the violent resistance against the government's unjust suppression. If there were no leaks of information or government repression, the rebellion might not have occurred. Ancient China had a polytheistic belief system, and the premise of autocratic imperial power was the belief in gods, with the people worshiping elusive gods rather than specific leaders. Religious uprisings did not only occur at the end of dynasties due to social crises. However, for any ruler, if religious belief develops to an uncontrollable extent, it will pose a serious threat to the political power. Capitalist countries have a separation of religion and politics, allowing the people's belief in gods. However, ancient China had a unity of religion and politics. Divine authority was the core element of the state ideology, gathering the people and giving rise to political intentions, and religious activities become rebellions. Rulers then naturally gained legitimate reasons for suppressing and eliminating rebellion. This remains true even today. Although religious belief is free, there is always a "limit."

From this, we can see that the outbreak of peasant wars does not necessarily have political and military factors. However, to maintain their rule, the rulers have attributed political intentions to the rebellion. Therefore, in exploring the essence of historical events, we should try to eliminate political and ideological elements as much as possible, strip away those important components that belong to the essence of history, and draw relatively objective conclusions.

3. "RETURNING THE CONTENTS OF HISTORY TO HISTORY": RE-SELECTING THE RESEARCH PATH OF CHINESE SOCIAL HISTORY

In the first half of the 20th century, two significant changes occurred in the rural areas of China: first, influenced by Western intrusion, there were a series of economic changes; second, the state made every effort to strengthen its control over rural society. The most representative work in this regard is Du Zhanqi's book "Culture, Rights, and State: North China Rural Areas 1900-1942".

3.1 The study of Chinese social history from a cultural perspective

Duzanqi proposed the concept of "the cultural network of power" in the first chapter. The cultural network of power refers to the framework composed of various organizational systems and symbolic norms through which the authority of rural society is manifested. This framework is the cultural network of power. "Organizational systems" include organizations formed in various aspects such as the market, clan, religion, and water control, as

well as various informal interpersonal relationships, such as kinship, protector and protected, and relationships between missionaries and believers. "Symbolic norms" refer to the "culture" in the cultural network, rooted in various organizational relationships as symbolic norms recognized by the members of the organization, including religious beliefs, emotions, family ties, and standards of right and wrong.

He viewed the relationship between the late Qing Dynasty and society as a kind of brokerage relationship, in which the state utilized "profit-oriented brokerage" and "protection-oriented brokerage" to fulfill its primary governing function. In addition, he also specifically discussed the interactive relationship between state power construction and rural society, including the penetration of state power into rural society, the structure of rural political power, and the changes in its leaders. This also shows us that the state power relies heavily on cultural networks to govern rural society, but gradually breaks free from its reliance on cultural networks.

One important viewpoint of this book is that the endeavor to deeply penetrate rural society in the first half of the 20th century was destined to fail due to the neglect or even destruction of the cultural network in state power construction. Embedded in this viewpoint is a theory that cultural networks generate power, and the stability of power depends on a certain cultural network. This provides us with a new perspective and method for studying rural China and offers a new explanatory model for studying the political operations in rural China. The cultural network of power integrates state power, gentry culture, and rural society into a common framework, connecting abstract concepts of power and rule with China's unique cultural system, thus revealing the process of authority formation and its manifestations in local society [5].

3.2 Historical study of Chinese society from an anthropological perspective

Fei Xiaotong's "From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society" can be seen as a study of Chinese social history based on Confucianism. Throughout the book, there are numerous comparisons between Chinese rural society and Western society, introducing the concepts of hierarchical structure and group structure, and providing in-depth analysis of Chinese rural society to demonstrate the basic structure and characteristics of Chinese society. The understanding and study of rural China were important topics that Fei Xiaotong pondered and explored throughout his life. In the early 20th century, theories, methods, and disciplinary systems of Western social sciences were introduced to China. Intellectuals' understanding and interpretation of Chinese society opened up new approaches and methods beyond the traditional knowledge systems. Against the backdrop of the historical turmoil, social disintegration, and rural distress in modern China, Fei Xiaotong combined the disciplinary characteristics of sociology and anthropology with the contemporary social reality, pioneering the method of conducting field investigations in civilized societies and founding the "anthropological era in China," breaking down the division between anthropology and human geography. In his later years, when reviewing his research journey in ethnic studies, Fei Xiaotong discussed how conducting investigations into the social reality in field research is more richly layered than understanding the current reality and requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines sociology, anthropology, and history [6]. He emphasized the importance of integrating sociology and anthropology with historical research, indicating the necessity of combining them. From his early methodological reflections to his later methodological consciousness, Fei Xiaotong traversed a path from detachment from history to re-encounter with history in his considerations of the methodology of sociology and anthropology. This shift demonstrates that understanding and studying rural China cannot be separated from history.

The perspective of research in the history of Chinese society is expanding and gradually shifting from focusing on the great deeds and major events of leaders and rulers to the daily lives of ordinary people at the grassroots level. With a micro-level approach, the study examines individual events within the grand historical context. Wang Di's book "Street Culture: Chengdu Public Space, Lower Class People, and Local Politics" is a historical work about the lower class, showcasing the rich and colorful daily life in micro-history, captivating street culture, and the grand narrative of modern Chinese politics, economy, and societal upheavals. It provides a bottom-up view of the experiences of people in reform, revolution, and social turmoil, expressing their lament for losing an old world without gaining a new one. In "The Narration of Sufferers: Ji Village History and the Logic of a Civilization," Guo Yuhua combines an understanding of the lower class with hegemony theory, revealing the fundamental nature of the lower class as its subordinate nature, especially in terms of being dominated by the ruling class. The essential nature of the lower class lies in cultural subordination, including subordination of ideology, adopting and accepting the ruling class's ideology and participating in the governance of the lower class. Guo Yuhua extensively records oral history, largely corroborating and recreating history, allowing us to more intuitively feel the attitudes and emotions of these "sufferers" towards the events at that time. She places special emphasis on the oral history of

lower class women, whose suffering is largely manifested in their bodies, with heightened sensitivity to bodily memories of ailments and prolonged hunger caused by labor. Thus, the research perspective of Chinese society not only shifts its focus to the people, but also delves into lower levels, seemingly even lower than the lower class, particularly focusing on lower class women, opening up a new angle for social history research and providing different objects of study for reference.

4. SUMMARIZE

Expansion from both theoretical and conceptual perspectives has had a significant impact on the study of Chinese social history, opening up richer research pathways than ever before. This enables us to uncover previously unknown aspects of social history, further discover new materials, raise new questions, and establish a solid foundation for reaching new conclusions.

REFERENCES

[1] Huang Jinxing: "The Dual Crisis of Modern Chinese Historiography: On the Birth of the 'New Historiography' and Its Dilemma," Journal of the Chinese Culture Research Institute, No. 6, Chinese University Press, 1997.
[2] Dai Hongliang: "Revival and Development: A Study of Chinese Social History from the Perspective of Academic History (1980-2010)," Shandong University, 2011.
[3] Wang Fansen: "Political Concepts in the Late Qing and 'New Historiography'," in the book "The Lineage of Modern Chinese Thought and Scholarship" by the same author, Hebei Education Press, 2001, pp. 195-196.
[4] Meng Xiangcai: "Research on the History of Agricultural Warfare Under the Dominion of the Uni-Dynamic Theory," Historical Review, 2005, No. 7.
[5] Fan Youlei: "Review of 'Culture, Power, and State: Narratives of Rural North China, 1900-1942'" in "Popular Literature and Art," 2010, No. 6.
[6] Fei Xiaotong: "A Brief Account of My Nationality Research Experience and Reflections," in "On Anthropology and Cultural Consciousness," Huaxia Publishing House, 2004, p. 160.

Author Profile

Xuan Chen (1997-), born in 1997, female, from Liaocheng, Shandong. A 2022 graduate student of Chinese History at the School of Historical Culture and Tourism of Liaocheng University, specializing in modern and contemporary Chinese history.