

Historein

Vol 10 (2010)

History between Reflexivity and Critique



The Power of Paradox: The Double-Edged Effect of the Postcolonial Challenge to Modern Historiography

Q. Edward Wang

doi: [10.12681/historein.8](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.8)

Copyright © 2012, Q. Edward Wang



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Wang, Q. E. (2011). The Power of Paradox: The Double-Edged Effect of the Postcolonial Challenge to Modern Historiography. *Historein*, 10, 82–93. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.8>

***The Power of
Paradox:
The Double-
Edged Effect of
the Postcolonial
Challenge to Modern
Historiography***

Q. Edward Wang

Rowan University, USA/Peking University, PRC

Postcolonialism, like its kindred spirit postmodernism, is born into and reared in a paradox: it is at once an offshoot of cultural developments in the modern West and a critical engagement with these developments. The postcolonial critique of the formation of the modern historical discipline is a notable example. As postmodernism introduces a forceful epistemological shake-up of the foundation of modern historiography – its use and reliance of language to reconstruct historical reality – postcolonialism challenges ferociously its focal point around which the work of modern historians (since the nineteenth century, if not earlier) has centred: the writing of national history and the discipline of historical study in general. Yet given the paradigmatic influence of national history-writing around the world, the postcolonial critique of modern historiography has also, perhaps paradoxically, benefited from the worldwide formation of academic disciplines in modern times after the western model. Indeed, scholars have already noted that many leading figures of postcolonialism often not only received substantial training in western scholarship but also excelled in their respective area of study, by which they obtained opportunities to launch and establish their careers *in* the western academes. The examples of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Edward Said, the leading advocate and patron of postcolonialism, are all too well known to require more belabouring.¹ That these scholars have been steeped in the western scholarly tradition has exerted a positive influence on their career development: compared to most of their colleagues in the western

academia, they are able to cruise freely between cultural traditions, which helps at times yield a new perspective and, more significantly, a critical edge. The fact that postcolonialism has received such ample attention in the academic worlds across the globe speaks volumes of this cross-cultural effect. The efficacy of postcolonial critique of the modern West, or western modernity, seems to have derived in the main from the fact that the scholars are at once “insiders” and “outsiders” and are able to present both the emic and etic viewpoints. Notwithstanding their cross-cultural perspicacity, postcolonial scholars, it seems to me, also run into a theoretical paradox in their seemingly gallant endeavour to confront and challenge western hegemony in the academe. This paradox is most apparent in the postcolonial criticism of modern historiography, especially in rejecting the prevalence of national history-writing in modern times. In the following pages, I shall present my argument by discussing the origins of the Subaltern Studies in India, a landmark development in postcolonial theory and study, from a different angle. It will be followed by an observation that though nationalist historiography is currently under siege in western academies, it retains its persistent influence and palpable relevance in today’s seemingly “postnationalist” world, especially in parts of Asia. I shall then end my article with a more detailed explanation of how the postcolonial rejection of nationalist historiography has turned around to have weakened its resistance to western cultural hegemony, a key area where postcolonialism claims its importance and exerts its influence across worldwide academe. I shall illustrate my discussions and present my argument by using examples mostly from Chinese history and historiography.²

It has been relatively well noted that in its challenge to the established academic discourses around the world, which derived from the Enlightenment tradition in eighteenth-century Europe, postcolonialism has benefited from its alliance with postmodernism. Postmodernism and postcolonialism seem to share one commonality, which is the notion that knowledge is not only power, but also that power produces knowledge and helps its spread and dominance. Postcolonial scholars have produced a number of insightful works that reveal how western political and military dominance, from the eighteenth century onwards, came to aid the establishment of modern western cultural hegemony. It became a cultural norm against which other cultures are evaluated, often critically, and diagnosed for their inability to embrace the modern world. Particularly, it was argued that in contrast to the West, most nonwestern cultures lack a historical consciousness or historical mindedness. This historical consciousness was critical to the idea of nationalism and the building of modern nation-states as shown in Europe from the seventeenth century. It also helped elucidate the process of nation-building as a logical historical development and present it as the prevalent form of political government for and in the modern world.³ To claim that historical consciousness is unique in European culture is, of course, a biased observation, for a sense of history is found among many cultures in the world, even though its manifestation might have taken different forms.⁴ It is legitimate, therefore, for postcolonial scholars, along with postmodern thinkers, to argue that historical practices of modern times, centring on the writing of national history, extended and justified the western dominance of the world because it originated

from and was modelled on European historical and cultural experiences. Postcolonial critics have also rightly observed that the emphasis on the rise of nation-states in historical writing favours an essentialist configuration of a national past and that the way in which historical (re)presentation generally takes a written form reflects a cultural bias for the West.⁵

But should we disregard the value of historical study and overlook the persistent influence of nation-states in our lives? Or, to put it figuratively, should we throw out the baby along with the bathwater? My answer is no, which, I would argue, is a position that would be shared by the Indian scholars who pioneered the Subaltern Studies in the 1960s and 1970s which gave rise to postcolonial theory in more recent decades.

Marxism and postcolonialism

With respect to the emergence of the Subaltern Studies collective, many have credited, for the right reason, the western education and cultural influence (for example, poststructuralism and postmodernism) most of its members have received that subsequently shaped their early career.⁶ Little, however, is known or pronounced (professed?) that the Subaltern Studies, in its formative stage, was an integral part of the leftwing and socialist movement, tinged with a discernible nationalist sentiment, in the third world during the post-Second World War period. In particular, I would emphasise the influence of Mao Zedong (1893–1976), the Chinese communist leader, who founded the People's Republic of China in 1949 by mobilising poor peasants and turning them into the vanguard of the communist movement in the country. On many occasions throughout his career, Mao shared his revolutionary views of history, emphasising such points as that “people are the motive force in history”, which were propagated through the dissemination of his many works, especially the famous “Little Red Book” (*Quotations of Chairman Mao Zedong*) around the world during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). As China's neighbour, India became one of the notable places where Maoism exerted a visible influence among its intellectuals and on college campuses. Perhaps more than other peoples in the world at the time, Indian scholars and students kept a watchful eye on the unfolding of the Cultural Revolution in China.⁷ Among college students, there emerged various factions and organisations that modelled themselves on their counterparts in China, or the much-famed Red Guards who, consisting mostly of college and high-school students, were among the most enthusiastic in responding to Mao's ideas. It is worth noting that the late 1960s, when the Cultural Revolution was in full swing in China, was also the period when most early Subaltern scholars began their college life in India. Ranajit Guha could be an exception, for he is apparently older than David Arnold and Partha Chatterjee and the rest of the members of the collective. But as a fellow Marxist and an erstwhile Communist Party member in India, it is without doubt that Guha was interested in and receptive to Mao Zedong's writings. In Guha's introduction to *Selected Subaltern Studies* (1988), which he coedited with Gayatri Spivak and which came with a foreword by Edward Said, he quotes with ease some of Mao's remarks, suggesting his familiarity with Mao's work.⁸ That the Subaltern Studies owed a certain debt to Mao Zedong has been noted by Prasenjit Duara, a China scholar from India, thanks to his knowledge of modern Chinese history and historiography.⁹

It is not surprising that Indian intellectuals could be intrigued by Mao's works and the Chinese communist movement in general, for both countries shared a notable similarity with regard to their historical development in modern times. For instance, they both established their current forms of government in the late 1940s – India in 1947 and China in 1949, which was marked by Mao's victory over his nationalist adversaries, who had ended China's imperial system in 1912. Prior to independence, India had been ruled as the jewel in the British colonial empire for about three centuries, whereas China had maintained its nominal independence under the faltering Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and the fledgling republic (1912–) whose government, after being defeated by the communists, retreated to Taiwan in 1949. After gaining independence, Indian nationalists did not suffer a major defeat like their Chinese counterparts at the hands of the communists. Yet in light of the rising social instability and glaring rich–poor disparity in postindependence India, questions arose with respect to the efficacy of their rule and the legitimacy of their government in serving the Indian people of all social walks. One of the major issues that motivated the Subaltern Studies collective in its formative stage was exactly how and whether the nationalist movement, or the national elite, in India could represent “India” and establish a holistic and overarching nation-state following the western model in the subcontinent, well known for its cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity and social class/caste difference and stratification. A glance of the major works published in the *Subaltern Studies* series suggests that Guha and his comrades focused their studies on two areas: first, the role the suppressed, voiceless subaltern group, consisting mostly of peasants, had played in the struggles against the British Raj that was either overlooked or looked down on by the national elite and nationalist historians; and second, how to amend and rectify the elite-oriented national history-writing prevalent both before and after India's independence by according proper attention and giving due credit to the actions of the Subaltern group – which were driven by various factors other than nationalist sentiment yet nevertheless exerted an indelible imprint – in the course of change in modern India. The latter eventually led these scholars to question the usefulness and relevance of national history-writing in India as well as in other nonwestern countries, and expose the problems in establishing a modern nation-state following the Enlightenment notion of a progressive modernity and its universal appeal.¹⁰ That is, Subaltern scholars strive to search for an alternative history, or an alternative way of writing history, to the paradigm of national history-writing prevalent in the modern world.

These two foci shown in the works of Subaltern scholars ran a notable parallel to the primary concerns that animated the historical discussions and debates among Chinese Marxist historians from the 1940s through much of the 1960s. In fact, compared with the Subaltern group, Chinese Marxists had even a stronger motivation to explore the limits and faults of nationalist historiography because it was regarded as antithetical to their practice and advance of Marxist historiography. They charged that, in contrast to the people's approach advanced by Marxist historians, nationalist historiography was elitist and hence failed to represent divergent social groups in its call for social change and progress. In particular, Chinese Marxist historians emphasised, nationalist historians overlooked and slighted the remarkable role Chinese peasants and their uprisings had played in changing Chinese society for the better over China's long feudal period. They regarded it as an urgent task to ensure that in their historical works, the masses, instead of the elites, receive focal attention. The study of Chinese peasant wars and rebellions

thus coincided with Mao's communist revolution in which the peasants not only participated but also played a heroic role. It attracted attention from Chinese Marxist historians because it enabled them to draw useful lessons as well as insightful analogies between past peasant wars and the one led by the communists. During the 1950s and the early 1960s, after the communists took power in mainland China, the study of peasant wars or uprisings flourished, commanding great attention among historians across political persuasions and educational backgrounds. It became one of the "five golden flowers" in the field of history of the age. Given its direct relevance to the success of the Chinese communist revolution, the study of peasant wars was also undoubtedly the most popular among the five.¹¹

If the Chinese study of peasants and their rebellions is anterior to and possibly also inspiring for the Subaltern Studies collective (after all, both countries' economies, before the 1990s, were agriculturally based and have a significant peasant population, demanding the historian's attention), Chinese Marxist historians also seemed to have faced a similar methodological and theoretical challenge to the one that later confronted the Subaltern scholars in their effort to give voice to the silent subaltern by reading and interpreting "the prose of counter-insurgency".¹² As Chinese Marxist historians strove to figure peasants and peasant wars centrally in their historical writing, not only did they have to comb through the existing body of historical literature for any traces of potentially useful records, which was a mammoth task given its incredible size, but they also needed to develop an ingenious technique in reading and interpreting these records, for few of them could be used directly to portray peasants as "revolutionary" and their wars as "heroic and progressive" as intended by Marxist historians. To accomplish the first task, Chinese historians compiled several volumes of historical sources pertaining to peasant rebellions from different historical periods, which became indispensable to their research. They also spent considerable time and energy on discussing the techniques of reading and interpreting those sources in order to gain a good understanding of how peasant rebellions became a driving force for historical change. In other words, like the Subaltern scholars, Chinese Marxists were also perplexed by the question later posed acutely by Gayatri Spivak: "Can the subaltern speak?" Namely, they had to tackle a similar task of how to give voice to the peasants if they hoped to correctly portray their conditions as causes for their uprisings and properly interpret the historical significance of their violent and rebellious behaviour.¹³

In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that the interest and concern of Chinese Marxist historians in studying Chinese peasants and peasant wars paralleled and overlapped with that of the Subaltern Studies collective. Both groups started as Marxists (the Chinese were much more insistent than their Indian counterparts for an obvious reason), only to find that in their study of peasants, they had to "capture the difference", put eloquently by Prasenjit Duara, "between the orthodox Marxism of mature capitalist societies and the conditions of colonial society where the subject of history was not the fledgling working class of the modern industrial sector, but the vast majority and variety of the oppressed or subaltern classes".¹⁴ In the Chinese case, it is quite obvious that, although the peasants represented unmistakably the "proletarian class" in imperial China, their behaviour and actions were markedly different from that of the working class in industrial societies described and analysed by Marx in his works. Consequently, how to properly interpret the historical meaning of those past peasant rebellions and make a plausible connection with

the peasant participation in the communist revolution became a critical as well as a knotty issue. Though similarly interested in peasants, Subaltern Studies has focused more on their conditions and actions in a recent period, or before and after India's political independence from British colonial rule. This difference gave rise to the collective's critical examination of the nationalist movement and nationalist ideology in India, which has broad implications that resonated well across the world. It became a key component in the postcolonial critique of the received notion of modernity and its paradigmatic influence in today's world. Compared with the Chinese Marxists, the Subaltern scholars identified this essentialism more clearly as a main reason accounting for the nationalist leaders' indifference to the needs and interests of the subalterns. Yet the scholars in both China and India charged that nationalist leaders overlooked the importance of mobilising the peasants in promoting social change, which subsequently caused social unrest and political instability. In fact, many of the problems that confronted India after its independence, discussed and analysed by the Subaltern scholars, were also observable in Republican China during the first half of the nineteenth century, after the nationalists effectively put an end to the country's long dynastic rule. The difference was that unlike India, where the nationalists have more or less maintained their political power to this day, the government in China changed hands in 1949 when communists chased the nationalists from the mainland to Taiwan. As the task of rebuilding China under the communists became a priority, it entailed that the new government develop new strategies to work with the peasants, hence the study of peasant rebellions by historians. In other words, as Indian scholars set out to prove that the essentialist and elitist approach embedded in the nationalist ideology was inadequate and deeply flawed in solving the problems of postindependence India, this inadequacy had already proven fatal to the nationalist cause in China, causing its loss of power on the mainland. Modern Chinese and Indian intellectuals, therefore, tackled a different challenge in postwar years, for the two countries' history followed a different trajectory.

Yet in both India and China, as the two countries entered the modern age, historians seemed to share a common experience in experimenting with the writing of national history because the genre was most helpful for them in reorganising and reinventing their traditions. Buoyed by the nationalist sentiment, they showed great pride in their rich, though also increasingly quaint, cultural legacy and hoped that by adopting the writing of national history, they could renew and revive it, providing a foundation on which a new nation could be built. In other words, while adopting the genre of writing national history, nationalist historians of nonwestern regions showed no intention of uprooting or displacing completely native culture while embracing and instating modernity. Instead, they made a tremendous effort to preserve the native and the traditional as much as they could, even though, on first glance, their endeavour appeared iconoclastic.

That is, once historians in nonwestern regions such as China and India saw that nationalism provided a useful and powerful weapon for their country to shore up its strength and fend off the incursion of foreign powers, they became very enthusiastic and deeply committed. In the case of China, the first generation of modern historians was, arguably, nationalist. They were attracted to the genre of national history, hailing it as a "real" form of historical writing (a similar observation was also made by early Indian nationalist historians). Some Chinese nationalist historians, such as Liang Qichao (1879–1927), went as far as to proclaim that although China had a long tra-

dition of historical writing, what it had produced were mostly dregs because it failed to enhance national pride and adumbrate national evolution. Other historians stated emphatically that if there was no (national) history, then there could be no China (as a nation). But when they set out to write national histories of China, these historians became heavily reliant on the Chinese historiographical tradition. When writing his famous *Zhongguo lishi yanjiufa* (Methods for the study of Chinese history), the same Liang Qichao, for instance, presented many examples from the Chinese historiographical tradition to explicate that in the area of historical methodology Chinese historians in the past had developed sophisticated *and* scientific techniques comparable to those advanced by modern western historians. Hu Shi (1891–1962), another well-known “iconoclast” with a PhD from Columbia University, was instrumental in introducing the philosophy of John Dewey (1859–1952), his Columbia mentor, into China. He believed that Dewey’s work on modern western science and scientific method crystallised its spirit. But Hu also maintained that, with respect to the development of scientific method, Chinese scholars of the past were not so far behind their western counterparts, even if their research goals and foci were apparently different. During the 1920s and 1930s, Hu Shi played a leadership role in launching the “National Studies” movement, whose aim was to “reorganize the past and recreate (Chinese) civilization”.¹⁵ This goal was readily identifiable in many nationalist projects launched similarly in other parts of the world – including India – around the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

National history: its position and persistence

The goal defined by Hu Shi for the “National Studies” movement – to “reorganize the past and recreate civilization” – not only outlines the main interest pursued by Chinese nationalist historians, it also characterises the endeavour by nonwestern historians to adopt the genre of national history generally. That is, in order to recreate civilisation, or to bring it up to date so that it could keep pace with the more advanced countries, they must “reorganize the past”, which entailed that they reconfigure their knowledge of the past, if not the knowledge system *in toto*. This could be and has been at times a distressing process because it could possibly lead to cultural displacement, causing people to abandon the familiar and the traditional in order to embrace and instate the new and the foreign. In the case of historical writings in India, it meant that the Indians had to learn about their country’s history by reading historical texts authored mostly by European scholars, for both the concepts of nation (or the idea of “India” as a nation-state with clearly drawn borders) and of national history (tracing this India’s past by describing various political powers that once ruled the land in various historical times) were then unfamiliar and foreign to the Indians.¹⁶

The Chinese experience with the intrusion of modern western historiography fared no better. Over the course of the twentieth century, there were incessant debates among them on the need of updating and modernising their historical knowledge pursuant to the western model, and of the necessity of importing modern western culture in general. But as time went on, it became more and more clear to them that there was no better alternative. As Wei Yuan (1794–1856), a reform-minded historian in the late Qing dynasty, sagaciously put it: the best way to deal with the “barbarians” was “to learn from the barbarians in order to rein them in” (*shiji zhiyi*). Here the “bar-

barians" referred to the Europeans who were then pressing on the Qing borders and threatening its sovereignty. Pejorative as it was, the term reflected the Sinocentric way of thinking prevalent among the Chinese literati at the time. But on another look, by forcing open China's door, what the Europeans did there as well as elsewhere could hardly be called a civilised mission either, even if many of them did believe that they were spreading "civilisation" to the world. All the same, the end result was that having imported nationalism, China, India and other countries outside Europe freed themselves from the yoke of European domination and gained political independence one after another, which effectively put an end to the era of colonialism and ushered in the age of postcolonialism.¹⁷ To be sure, political independence does not necessarily lead to cultural independence, which is a powerful argument put forth by postcolonial scholars. Postcolonial study has aptly revealed and called due attention to the fact that, although colonialism has by and large come to an end, its influence has been both pervasive and persistent. (In writing this paper, I have chosen to use the example of China, which was never formally colonised by western powers, to discuss the relevance of postcolonialism exactly because I want to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the far-reaching influence of European colonialism in the world.) But it seems atavistic and has certainly gone too far for some postcolonial scholars to argue the need for disowning the nationalist heritage in order to cleanse the residual influence of colonialism. Indeed, though an import, nationalism has become an integral part of the cultural legacy for many countries in the world, western and nonwestern alike. Likewise, it could not be so wise and tactful to call for the disuse of history and the death of the historical discipline simply because the genre of national history, undoubtedly an overarching form in modern historiography, failed in its part to portray the diverse traditions in a given country. Nor should nonwestern peoples reject and renounce history, or "History" with a linear view and truncated characterisation of the past, simply because it was something from the West.¹⁸ It is one thing to depict and denounce the distortion of a cultural past by nationalist historians; it is quite another to reject the need for historical study and relinquish historiography as an important way of remembering the past. The latter is not only atavistic, but also, as Dipesh Chakrabarty observes astutely, unrealistic.¹⁹

What is more problematic, as this author tries to show, is that those attempts mentioned above are inconsistent with and even contrary to the original goal introduced by postcolonial scholars, namely those in the Subaltern Studies collective, in the first place. The collective's initial effort was to give a proper and legitimate voice to the subaltern classes or groups, which is laudable and still much needed, for it could effectively expose the limits of nationalist historiography and open our eyes to various forms of historical consciousness and manifestation. Yet this search for alternative history, or alternative ways of writing and representing history, seems to have been overshadowed by the project of revealing the deficiency and flaws in the practice of nationalist historiography.²⁰ Meaningful as it is, the project of criticising nationalist history has generated a great amount of interest among postcolonial scholars, as shown in the popularity of Homi Bhabha's works. But it has also diverted attention from the collective's initial focus on studying the subaltern. This shift of interest has been evidenced in the writings of some postcolonial scholars, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, who started as a social historian only to focus in more recent years on examining critically the legacy of European modernity in the world.²¹ Some others have decided to leave the collective. A notable example is Sumit Sarkar who, thanks to his continuous and excellent research on social history, has become one of the best historians of

India in our times. It is not my intention to criticise, much less to chastise, the moves taken by these postcolonial scholars, for what they have accomplished has a value and importance in its own right. By expounding the idea of “hybridity”, Homi Bhabha, for instance, writes beautifully and characterises vividly the ways in which nonwestern nationalists and intellectuals absorbed and appropriated the influence of nationalism, revealing and portraying a common syncretism that had animated and driven the nationalist projects in many parts of the world.²² (By drawing attention to the alliance between communism and nationalism in modern China, this article tries to explore a similar point.) But the irony is, the more we spend time on examining the persistence of western cultural dominance and hegemony (regardless of how critical our position may be), the further we are away from the valuable task set for us originally by the Subaltern Studies to find an effective way of depicting and defending the interest of the subaltern. The development of postcolonial study thus has run a circular course of development. It started as an attempt to challenge and deplete western cultural hegemony, only to have generated more interest in it, adding more longevity than it perhaps deserves.

By way of concluding, I would like to add that it would be more meaningful and consequential for postcolonial scholars to focus on denouncing the genre of national history-writing and disowning history if we were indeed living in a postnationalist world in which nationalist historiography and the idea of nationalism have been rendered extraneous. But many recent developments in today’s world seem to have pointed to the contrary. Not only has nationalism as a powerful political and intellectual force continued to exert its influence in many parts of the world, actually more so in developing countries than in the developed ones, but even in the latter where critiques of nationalism have gained major ground among the academes in recent decades – the rise of global history has amounted to an effort to look for an alternative to nationalist historiography – it is also quite visible in the government policies and the behaviours of the peoples.²³ In today’s Europe, the increase in xenophobic attitudes and actions towards immigrants from Asia and Africa is a case in point. In the US, much of the policy made by the Bush administration and supported at the time by the public after the September 11 attacks has also been unmistakably nationalistic, tinged with an imperialist interest. Clearly, if nationalism remains a vital force in shaping today’s world – in today’s China, it has been a major driving force in the country’s explosive economic growth in recent years – it suggests that national history-writing will not be done away with easily, nor can it be readily relegated to the status of something belonging to the bygone era of colonialism. In fact, since the history curriculum in many countries is designed nationalistically (again, more so in developing than in the developed countries), the idea of national history remains the most important form in organising and presenting our knowledge of the past. Having said that, I do not mean to disparage the importance of postcolonial scholars engaging critically with the practice of national history, nor to discredit the significance of their effort to search for an alternative to the European notion of history. But the criticism of nationalist historiography should not blind us to the relevance and even vitality of national history, just as the search for new ways of studying history should not lead to the conclusion that the only alternative to historical writing is no-history.

NOTES

- 1 Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", *Critical Inquiry* 20:2 (1994): 328–56. Edward Said wrote a foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds), Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988, v–x), which helped draw considerable attention to the work of the Subaltern Studies collective in western academia.
- 2 I want to enter a caveat here because, unlike India and other regions, China did not become a colony of any western power. But the Chinese experience remains relevant to our discussion because even though China kept its territorial integrity throughout the modern era, it encountered the brunt of western colonialism and imperialism no less severely or painfully than did other countries. As a matter of fact, it was several times on the verge of collapse and losing its political independence. I want to draw on the Chinese experience also because, from the early twentieth century, nationalism and national history-writing both exerted a dominant influence, impacting on the life of the people well to this day.
- 3 A typical example is Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. Leopold von Ranke, Hegel's contemporary, also remarked that "India and China" had "a lengthy chronology", which at best was a "natural history". Cited in Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Hanover/London: Wesleyan UP, 1997, 30. As late as the mid-twentieth century, J.H. Plumb, a Cambridge historian, remained insistent in his *Death of the Past* that Chinese historians were unable to distinguish the difference between "past" and "history", hence failing to display a real historical consciousness. What is interesting is that Plumb's book was recently republished and foreworded by Simon Schama and Niall Ferguson, two contemporary historians, who clearly endorse Plumb's view.
- 4 In more recent years, efforts have been made to present the development of historical writing across the globe. Examples are Kelly Boyd (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999; Daniel Woolf (ed.), *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, New York: Garland, 1998; and Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, London: Longman, 2008.
- 5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, observes that "why is history a compulsory part of education of the modern person in all countries today including those that did quite comfortably without it until as late as the eighteenth century? . . . It does not take much imagination to see that the reason for this lies in what European imperialism and third-world nationalism have achieved together: the universalization of the nation state as the most desirable form of political community." "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (1992): 1–26 (19).
- 6 See, for example, the editors' introductions to Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London: Routledge, 2000 and Saurabh Dube (ed.), *Postcolonial Passages: Contemporary History-Writing on India*, New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2004.
- 7 Mohan Ram, *Maoism in India*, Delhi: Vikas, 1971; and from a different perspective, Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, *Mao Tse-tung and Gandhi: Perspectives on Social Transformation*, Bombay: Allied, 1973. A more recent study by Sanjay Seth, "From Maoism to Postcolonialism? The Indian 'Sixties', and Beyond", has examined Mao's influence in the leadership of the Communist Party of India and in the latter's strategy for mounting peasant rebellions. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7:4 (2006): 589–604.
- 8 For example, Ranajit Guha writes in his "Historiography of Colonial India" that "Let a hundred flowers blossom and we don't mind even the weeds," which is from Mao. See Guha and Spivak (eds), *Selected*

Subaltern Studies, 43.

- 9 Prasenjit Duara, "Postcolonial History", in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (eds), *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, Malden: Blackwell, 2002, 417–31, especially 419.
- 10 Ajit K. Chaudhury writes in his "In Search of a Subaltern Lenin" that "The focus of Subaltern Studies is on the consciousness of subaltern classes, specifically peasants. The analysis, therefore, deals with precapitalist society where the dominant structure is political, with relations inhering in the domination/subordination rule – the key concept of the subaltern model." Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi: Oxford UP, 1987, 237. This statement not only discusses the main interest of the Subaltern Studies collective but also suggests the Marxist influence in its work. This main interest also overlaps with the Chinese study of peasant wars because both studies focus on "domination/subordination" relations in a precapitalist society.
- 11 Several essay collections appeared in the period, which show that the Chinese study of peasants and peasant wars experienced an explosive boom in several stages. In the beginning, historians ploughed the field by presenting studies of peasant rebellions in various historical periods, as shown in Li Guangbi, *Zhongguo nonmin qiye lunji [Essays on Chinese peasant uprisings]*, Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1958. A decade later, historians began to engage in heated theoretical discussions on the nature and characteristics of peasant rebellions in China, in the hope of drawing historical lessons and making historical comparisons. See for example, Shi Shaobin (ed.), *Zhongguo fengjian shehui nonmin zhanzheng wenti taolunji [Discussions on the questions pertaining to peasant wars in Chinese feudal society]*, Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1962. For a useful survey of the main trends in modern Chinese historiography after 1949, see Wang Xuedian, *Ershi shiji houbanqi Zhongguo shixue zhuchao [Main trends in Chinese historiography during the second half of the twentieth century]*, Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 2000, especially 274–364.
- 12 In his famous article "The Prose of Counter-insurgency", Ranajit Guha discusses the techniques of reading and interpreting the historical records of peasant riots and rebellions. He also tries to argue that peasant actions were not as "spontaneous" and disorganised as they first appeared. Guha and Spivak (eds), *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 45–88. In the Chinese study of peasant wars, these were also issues that caught a good deal of attention among Chinese historians. See Shi, *Zhongguo fengjian shehui nonmin zhanzheng*.
- 13 In addition to Shi Shaobin's work cited above, interesting works were collected in Zhou Kangxie (ed.), *Zhongguo nonmin zhanzheng wenti taolunji (Discussions of questions pertaining to Chinese peasant wars)*, Hong Kong: Dadong tushu, 1978.
- 14 Duara, "Postcolonial History", 419.
- 15 For a more detailed discussion of Liang Qichao, Hu Shi and their followers, see Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.
- 16 In this aspect, Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, is most illuminating.
- 17 Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, and Prasenjit Duara (ed.), *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, London: Routledge, 2004.
- 18 Ashis Nandy writes that "the domination of that consciousness [historical consciousness] has now be-

come . . . a cultural and political liability. In a civilization where there are many pasts, encompassing many bitter memories and animosities, to absolutize them with the help of the European concept of history is to attack the organizing principles of the civilization." *The Romance of the State: And the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*, Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002, 108–109.

- 19 Dipesh Chakrabarty points out the "fact that today the so-called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive the social science departments of most, if not all, modern universities". As a result, he laments, "the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only matters of historical research for most – perhaps all – modern social scientists in the region. They treat these traditions as truly dead, as history." *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000, 5–6.
- 20 For the shift of interest in the Subaltern Studies, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Subaltern Studies and Post-colonial Historiography", *Napanla: Views from South* 1:1 (2000): 9–32. Also, John Hutnyk, "The Chapatti Story: How Hybridity as Theory Displaced Maoism as Politics in Subaltern Studies", *Contemporary South Asia* 12:4 (2003): 481–91.
- 21 Chakrabarty's first book is entitled *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989. But he is much more well-known as the author of *Provincializing Europe*, which is his second book.
- 22 See Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990. Also Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.
- 23 Some harsh critics of postcolonialism, such as Arif Dirlik, have charged angrily that by focusing on cultural hybridity, or adopting the approach of culturalism, postcolonial scholars have ignored and concealed "inequalities in the realm of economy and politics", and shifted the blame for problems "in development from the dominant to the dominated." "Is There History after Eurocentrism?: Globalism, Postcolonialism, and the Disavowal of History", *Cultural Critique* 42 (1999): 1–34 (24).