

*Chinese Studies in History*, vol. 43, no. 3, Spring 2010, pp. 3–5.  
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ISSN 0009–4633 / 2010 \$9.50 + 0.00.  
DOI 10.2753/CSH0009-4633430300

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## **China Encounters the World: In Memory of Zhang Zhilian (1918–2008)**

### Editor's Introduction

For many centuries, China was perceived by Westerners not only as a mysterious empire but also as a secluded one. This image has been challenged by new scholarship. Some have argued that China was an “open empire” during most of its imperial period. What seems less disputed is that during late imperial China, or from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese empire under Manchu rule was closed, by and large, to the Europeans. It was reconnected to the Western world only after the Opium War (1839–1842), which forced the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to reopen its doors. After this opening, a variety of foreign influences (mostly from the West) flooded into China. They left indelible marks in the development of Chinese history.

This issue presents works in the study of China's relations with its neighbors, both near and far. The focus is not on China's long imperial past but, rather, on its most recent exchanges with the outside world. Starting in 1949 when the communists took over the country, China once again became inaccessible to the Western world. It was not until the end of 1978, when the country, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, ushered in the period of “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*), that academic and cultural exchanges between Chinese scholars and their counterparts became possible. Like the post–Opium War period of the nineteenth century, this recent opening has also seen high enthusiasm among the Chinese for learning about the world and engaging with its various developments. To a great degree, this enthusiasm has been reciprocated. This issue is testimony to that.

As indicated by the issue's subtitle, we dedicate this issue to the memory of Zhang Zhilian, a professor at Peking University and a distinguished historian of

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The editor would like to extend his sincere thanks to Professor Gao Yi, a former student and colleague of Professor Zhang Zhilian's at Peking University, for his help in editing this issue.

contemporary China. From 1978 until his death in 2008, Zhang was arguably the ambassador of the Chinese historical community to the world. He was fluent in both English and French, elegant in demeanor, and erudite in knowledge. He also pursued broad interests and published widely in historical study, ranging from French and European history—the French Revolution in particular—to European intellectual history, historiography, and Sino–Western relations. Thanks to all this, Zhang befriended many eminent historians around the world. Through his arrangement, these historians visited China and gave lectures at Peking University and other institutions. Meanwhile, as China opened up to the world, foreign students also sojourned there for the improvement of their studies of Chinese history and culture. Some of them were educated at Peking University, thus becoming Zhang’s students.

The contributors to this issue are a select group of Professor Zhang’s friends and former students. We begin with “The Problem of Politics in the French Revolution,” by Lynn Hunt, Eugen Weber Professor of Modern European history at UCLA and ex-president of the American Historical Association. During the mid-1980s, Professor Hunt, then teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, visited China and gave lectures and hosted seminars at Peking University. As president of the Chinese Association of French History, Professor Zhang hosted Hunt in China. From then on, Professors Hunt and Zhang became good friends and frequently exchanged ideas on the study of the French Revolution, one of the major areas in the study of world history among Chinese historians. Upon hearing of Zhang’s passing in 2008, Hunt reminisced about her friendship with him: “Zhang Zhilian lived simultaneously in the past, present, and future. His irrepressible curiosity, his remarkable facility for foreign languages, and his ease with people no matter how different from him, made him a peerless scholar and teacher. . . . I will never forget the seamless way in which he continued conversation with me in Berkeley, Beijing, Paris, Dublin—wherever our paths crossed.”

Our second contributor is Jacques Gernet, a renowned French sinologist. Over his long career, Professor Gernet, who was chair professor of the social and intellectual history of China at the Collège de France before 1992, has published a number of works covering various aspects and spanning a long period of Chinese history. Gernet and Zhang had a long friendship that traced back to before World War II, and they kept in close touch over the period. Gernet’s essay, “Language, Mathematics, Rationality: Categories or Functions Concerning China and Our Age-Old Traditions,” originally written in French, is his reflection on the cultural differences and similarities between Chinese and European civilizations, a subject that figured centrally in both Gernet’s and Zhang’s scholarship.

Starting in 1978, when Chinese historians began communicating with their counterparts around the world, they displayed great enthusiasm for updating their knowledge of developments in worldwide historiography, especially changes in Western historiography. Zhang was instrumental in facilitating this exchange. In this capacity, he befriended our third contributor, Georg Iggers, Distinguished

Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo and an internationally recognized authority in the field of historiography. Since 1984, Iggers has visited China a few times and has lectured at Peking University and other higher education institutions. His work on European historiography has also appeared in Chinese and was well received. Iggers's article, "The Role of Professional Historical Scholarship in the Creation and Distortion of Memory," reflects critically on the professionalization of history and its pros and cons in preserving our memory of the past.

The next two articles were written by two of Zhang Zhilian's former students at Peking University. Vera Schwarcz and Mechthild Leutner went to China, from the United States and Germany respectively, in the early 1980s, just when the country began to accept foreign exchange students. They are now prominent China specialists: Schwarcz is Freeman Professor of East Asian Studies at Wesleyan University and Leutner is teaching at the Free University of Berlin. Schwarcz discusses Zhang Zhilian's historical works by situating them in the Chinese tradition of historical study and the Chinese pursuit of truth in particular. Leutner presents her study of cultural exchanges between Germany and China in the early twentieth century, focusing on Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), a renowned sinologist, and his career and friendship with Chinese scholars.

Shigeru Akita, our last contributor, is a professor of history at Osaka University and a specialist in European and world history in Japan. His research interest thus overlaps with Zhang Zhilian's. In both China and Japan, historians who specialize in histories of regions and countries outside their own country are called "world historians." However, due to the residual animosity between the countries caused by Japan's aggression against China before and during World War II, Chinese and Japanese "world historians" have not been in close contact over the past several decades. However, there are exceptions, such as Zhang Zhilian and Shigeru Akita. Akita's article discusses the transition from the study of world history to that of global history in Japan. The study of world history in China also exhibits a similar trajectory in recent years.

We end the issue with a sample of Zhang Zhilian's own writing, "China and France: The Image of the Other." Zhang wrote it in English, as he frequently did, and presented it while he was a research fellow at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina in 1991. It is followed by his obituary, which was supplied by the Department of History at Peking University. Both will give our readers a glimpse of Zhang Zhilian's education and accomplishments and help them appreciate the important and memorable role he played in facilitating China's encounter with the outside world. To a great extent, our journal pursues the same aim.

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