

The Questions of World History Books: Spence and Frank

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Introduction

There are numerous ways to observe the world, and these two books may contribute to our comprehension of the chaotic dynamism of the world which keeps changing for centuries even though their methods and attitudes are totally different. Some humanities scholars seek rules in their fields and try to simplify them by turning the chaos of diversity into linear logic. Within the humanities, world historians have one of the most difficult jobs. Researching on pre-modern world history which entails foreign trades and personal exchanges, historians face the lack of historical materials and the imbalance of available sources between multiple cultures. Two eminent historians, however, daringly challenge thinking about human history. In *The Question of Hu*, Jonathan D. Spence provides the story of a Chinese gatekeeper John Hu who traveled between China and France in the 18th century. This personal story can be categorized under micro-history. On the other hand, as macro-history, Andre Gunder Frank had written the controversial history book, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, which deals with pre-modern world trade from the 15th century to the 20th century. Comparing and contrasting these two books, world history could be researched by both macro-scopic and micro-scopic points of view though as previously noted the historical materials are limited or imbalanced. Also, both books have raised the question of how the East and West had been interchanging in the pre-modern world.

The Question of Hu

The Question of Hu ¹⁾ is the story of one Chinese gatekeeper John Hu, a forty year old widower. Hu accompanied Jean-François Foucquet, a French Jesuit priest, on a journey to France, staying temporarily in several places in France such as Vanne, Nantes, Blois, Orléans and Paris. Later he is committed to the asylum of Charanten, as a “mentally ill patient.” After living in captivity for more than two years, Hu is released and finally returns to China. In *The Question of Hu*, Jonathan D. Spence writes a diary-style historical account of Hu’s experiences on his journey from China to Paris and back to China. While Spence writes about Hu’s journey based on historical materials, he fleshes out the story with some knowledge and imagination to complete this book with a quasi-fictionalized account. The important thing in this book is not necessarily historical accuracy in the 18th century, but Spence’s messages indirectly written in the story.

This is obviously an atypical history book. Since Spence is one of the eminent historians in Chinese history, he writes more than just a simple story. Although Spence deals with only fragmental historical records about Hu’s journey, the historian keeps an omniscient attitude presenting the story diaristically. In a review, Standarest describes its style as a “free-flowing and compelling narrative” is “arranged as a diary” and “based on detailed historical research.”²⁾ In Spence’s historical research, the

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primary sources are mostly letters and diaries written by European – mainly French – monks. Therefore, he created this story mostly with both primary and secondary sources written by Europeans. Since Hu left only one distraught letter addressed to Father Fouquet as historical material, he does not have enough say in conveying his own life to people of later periods. Spence uses Hu as a taciturn storyteller.

In the first chapter, Spence introduces the question of Hu, “Why have I been locked up?”³⁾ This question leads to other broad questions: How did the European people interpret Hu’s behavior in Paris?, Why were there differences between Hu and people in Europe?, Why and how are they different? Each question poses another question like a chain reaction.

Although Hu could read and write Chinese, his behaviors in the new environment revealed that he was presumably from the working class rather than from a cadre of Chinese society. When Hu arrives in Paris, he loves everything about it and tells Fouquet “it’s a paradise on earth.”⁴⁾ But later he has to accept the fact that this paradise is not for him. Admittedly Hu’s behavior in Europe is quite strange and incoherent. Although Fouquet prepares a coach and a horses for Hu, he declines and “wants to be a begger” and “walk all across France, begging his way.”⁵⁾ Hu might not know how to behave as a guest in Paris, or just follows the Chinese rule in France. Later, in the asylum of Charenton, the suburb of Paris, when one of the staff gives Hu a warm blanket to ward away the night cold, he “tears the blanket to shreds.”⁶⁾ This action can be interpreted as a defiant attitude claiming that he wants freedom, not a warm blanket. Who knows?

In the last chapter, Hu finally returns to Canton, the south-east region of China. When children ask him “what it’s like over there, in the West,” he closes his eyes and answers “...It’s like this.”⁷⁾ The end is left open ended. Hu’s suggestive comment leads readers to another question: How did he talk about his journey by himself? As Spence is an eminent researcher in Chinese history, the historian could have imagined this story from the alternative view of French monks. Unfortunately, as Standest points out that “further information is lacking” to reveal the unclear and incomprehensible parts of the story. Obviously he could not talk with the people in Europe because of the language barrier. Also, in his home country, China, the other barrier of social class didn’t allow him to talk to people of the aristocracy who might have officially recorded his opinions. Hu just told his story to the children in the farm village.

Jonathan D. Spence’s *The Question of Hu* is a short and simple story, and written in plain language, but this story puzzles readers with the questions Spence poses. It provides the readers with more riddles than historical facts. This simple book makes the readers have complicated thoughts unless they conclude that it is just the story of one crazy man. The interpretation is up to the readers.

ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age

Compared to *The Question of Hu*, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*⁸⁾ is a much larger book not only in words or pages but also in a concept of boldness and scale. In *ReOrient*, Andre Gunder Frank writes about the world economy from 1400 to present. The first half is full of information about economic conditions of the world. And the second half mainly consists of arguments about how the regions of the world are interconnected with each other. The author insists that world history is horizontally – or spherically – integrated. At least after the year 1400, the world developed as one group of people even though there were regional imbalances and waves of ups and downs between the East and West. Throughout this book, he consistently claims the superiority of Asia, especially China, and the backwardness of Europe until the eighteenth century. Europeans used silver to trade with Eastern countries, while Asian people were producers of goods. European people were just exploiters of people in the Americas and traders with people in Asia. Considering the transition of the world economy, Frank

somehow uses Kondratieff Wave⁹), a 50-60 year economical cycle discovered by research based on the Euro-American economy, to explain the fall of Asia and “temporary” rise of Europe.

The first half of the book – chapters 2, 3 and 4 – contains the narratives of the economic conditions of the world. In these chapters he makes convincing explanations of how Europe was economically peripheral in the international community, and the rest of the world was advanced in the trading business. The provided maps and lists of each region in this book convey the flows of world trades.¹⁰ Unfortunately, however, there is no citation pertaining to the information such as trading routes and traded goods. China might have been a fountain of wealth and resources, and the Americas might have been Europe’s magic wands. Frank tends to disagree with Eurocentrism, but the achievement of Europeans is exceptionally successful and effective. They seem to have exploited the rest of the world. Europeans chose to benefit by trading not fighting because they knew they could not conquer. They invented plundering trade and colonization in the fifteenth century. Can we apply the Europeans’ new inventions to Kondratieff’s long term cycles ?

In the second half of the book – chapter 5, 6 and 7 – Frank starts commenting on the world even more personally because those chapters seem to contain his grand hypothesis about world history rather than answers to the question of how the world’s ebbs and flows were driven by economics. In chapter 5, Frank points out that Fernand Braudel separates the Boston Tea Party from the rest of the world, and Emmanuel Wallerstein also fails to explain that “the intervening recession in the 1770s” “sparked the American Revolution.”¹¹) Frank insists that simultaneity is no coincidence¹²) by quoting and criticizing eminent world historians.

As a world history resource, *Reorient* is boldly a framed book. Interestingly, in the preface, Frank admits: “this book is full of holes”¹³) In this respect, Subrahmanyam criticizes Frank’s bold attitude in his review which is written in French, pointing out that Frank arrives at the conclusions without mastering the basic ideas. ¹⁴) Because of the broad topics and bold hypothesis, indeed, there are many holes in this book. Without his anti-Western attitude, he maybe could have filled more holes in his book. Also, Frank admits his book lacks explanation about the fall of Oriental countries as follows: “We are able to say very little about why the Asian economies and Ottoman, Safavid, Mugal, and Qing empires declined.”¹⁵) Frank says that “the European bought themselves a seat”¹⁶) to trade with the rest of the world. Then he explains about trades of slaves and silver, the other controversial issues.

Andre Gunder Frank’s *ReOrient* is a masterpiece of world history, and the legacy of twentieth century’s historiography of macro-history. The criticisms from readers would contribute to *ReOrient* even though they disagree with Frank. This is because he needs a broader view and deeper understanding in order to describe pre-modern world history even more precisely. It is safe to say that he had left the work for historians of the twenty-first century to ask the question of how world trade worked in the pre-modern era and currently.

Conclusion

Since those deceased eminent historians, Jonathan D. Spence and Andre Gunder Frank, had left inspiring books, by comparing and contrasting the research styles of *The Question of Hu* and *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, world history could be analyzed by both macro-scope and micro-scope points of view even with only scarce and partial primary sources available to us. It is not only simple but also terribly naïve to criticize them as idealists or megalomaniacs. As some regional conflicts or personal decisions can influence the rest of the world economically and politically even more rapidly than previous centuries, world history is worthy of serious consideration.

Notes

- 1) Spence, Jonathan D. “The Question of Hu”, Vintage Books, 1989
- 2) Standarest, Nicolas, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Feb., 1990), p136
- 3) Spence, p4
- 4) Spence, p70
- 5) Spence, p55
- 6) Spence, p118
- 7) Spence, p134
- 8) Frank, Andre Gunder, “ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age”, University of California Press, 1998
- 9) Frank, p xxi
- 10) Frank, p69
- 11) Frank, p253
- 12) Frank, p228
- 13) Frank, p xxix
- 14) Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales, 55e Année, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 2000), p946
- 15) Frank, p264
- 16) Frank, p277

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