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*China and Historical Capitalism:
Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge*
Edited by Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue (Cambridge
University Press, 1999). ISBN: 0-521-64029-6.

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In *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge*, the contributors have two objectives: to describe how a Eurocentric judgement led to the widely-accepted idea that pre-twentieth century China was despotic, feudal, and stagnant; and to re-examine that period of China from a Sinocentric point of view in order to refute those conclusions. While the authors have achieved their first goal, their Sinocentric analysis fails to show that China was not despotic, feudal, and stagnant during that historical period.

Emphasizing the necessity of a new perspective to guide interpretation of Chinese history, the contributors to this volume point to the dangers and negative consequences of examining China within the framework of European history, particularly the development of capitalism. In addition to racism and a justification for Western imperialist aggression, these consequences include the illusion that only Western culture and institutions can lead to economic development and the rejection of China as a model of civilization. According to the authors, such an Eurocentric view has led the study of Chinese history to a dead end because it focuses on what is missing in China instead of on what has happened and because it ignores the fact that a nation's history is often shaped by its unique cultural, political, and economic circumstances.

In Chapter Two, Immanuel Wallerstein, the sociologist who developed the world-system theory, refutes the argument that modern capitalism is a natural outgrowth of a superior Western socio-political system and of a "capitalist spirit," unique only to European culture. Far from being an offspring of a successful system, Wallerstein shows capitalism to be a result

of the cumulative collapses of various systems in Europe between 1250 and 1450, specifically the collapse of seigniors, the collapse of the states, the collapse of the Church, and the collapse of the Mongols. By viewing capitalism as a product of crisis and a historical accident, Wallerstein not only points to the fragility of such a system and the un-predictability of historical change, but also questions the notion that capitalism is the best and universal economic system.

Continuing with Wallerstein's critical re-examination of Western history, Gregory Blue and Timothy Brook offer accounts of how changing cultural and political trends in Europe changed Europeans' perception of China from positive to negative, and how the military and economic strength of the West led Chinese intellectuals, including the Marxists, to reject their own culture and accept the verdict of China as feudal and stagnant. In Chapter Three, Blue points out that although there were no significant developments in the study of China between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the changing circumstances in Europe, particularly the Enlightenment and the triumph of capitalism, shifted people's perception of China from respect and admiration to disdain and rejection. Though not stressed by Blue, I found the most interesting part of this chapter concerned the way in which the increasing emphasis on individual rights during and after the Enlightenment, rights the Chinese rulers refused to recognize, affected scholars' classification and labeling of traditional China as despotic and backward.

In Chapter Four, Brook describes the historical circumstances under which Chinese and Japanese Sinologists began to agree with European scholars' negative assessments of China. After a military defeat in the Opium

War and the subsequent economic and political collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the Chinese and Japanese intellectuals attributed China's weaknesses to its lack of modern industry and technology. Since then, although many of these intellectuals, particularly the Marxists, rejected (until 1979) a capitalist solution to China's problems, they nevertheless embraced Western technology and production methods as the model of economic development. Eager to save their cultural traditions, Chinese scholars found it easier to explain China's decline in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century as a result of economic and political stagnation rather than the result of fundamental flaws in Chinese culture.

The final two chapters are re-examinations of Chinese history. Rejecting the idea that the lack of technological advances in the Ming and Qing dynasties was proof of China's stagnation and inferiority to the West, Francesca Bray argues that the small-scale, family-based farming and clothing production, preferred and insisted upon by the Chinese elite during that time, served the purpose of maintaining social order and gender roles. She points out that the elite valued technology not as means to increase production but as a way to foster cultural values and norms for the harmony and stability of their society. Adopting a similar approach, R. Bin Wong, in Chapter Six, maintains that capitalism failed to emerge in China not because the country lacked the necessary institutions and abilities, but because its economic system prior to the Opium War adequately met both the state's and people's needs.

While Bray and Wong persuasively show that the pre-twentieth century China was not inherently defective, their analyses does not refute the fact that

those inward-looking, self-satisfied Chinese rulers and elite had blocked the country's economic growth and made it poor and vulnerable. This problem aside, I found the materials presented in this book informative and the contributors' intentions and efforts laudable. More importantly, the authors get students of Chinese history and Chinese society to review their subject through new lenses. Their book is an ambitious and provocative study, interesting both in its general arguments and its detail.