

Beijing Forum 2019 Civilizational Communication from the Perspective of Global History (I)

On the morning of November 2nd, the panel session “Civilizational Communication from the Perspective of Global History” was inaugurated in the Meeting Room No.1, Yingjie Exchange Center. Seven speakers gave speeches during the meeting. Professor Li Bozhong from Peking University hosted the session.

Professor Danny Wong, from University of Malaya, was the first scholar to present his paper, titled “The Maritime Silk Road in Southeast Asia: Views from Southeast Asia— Perspectives and Commemoration”. Professor Wong argued that Chinese fleets visited many parts of South Asia during the 15th century, but it was in Southeast Asia where active contacts and communications between the Ming Court and the rulers of the various kingdoms in the region created the strongest imprints and impressions and contributed to the Maritime Silk Road’s longest legacy. It was also in Southeast Asia, especially along the Straits of Malacca, that the Chinese fleet maintained garrisons to safeguard the passage for sailing. It was partly due to these garrisons and their long interaction with the local people that continued throughout the period and beyond the time when the Zhenghe voyages ended that the knowledge and memories of the voyages in Southeast Asia and the notion of a Maritime Silk Road was sustained.

Mark Frost, Senior Lecturer from University of Essex, was the second scholar to present his paper, titled “A Port City Enlightenment? Transnational Publics in the Indian Ocean World, 1860–1920”. He challenged certain assumptions concerning the relationship between print capitalism, the circulation of knowledge and information, and the ‘inevitable’ rise of imagined communities of the nation. He argued that structural transformations in the second half of the nineteenth century enabled intensified flows of print and correspondence along the coasts of the Indian Ocean world. Some publics communicated through English, some through ancient languages such as Sanskrit and Pali, while others were constituted through diasporic languages such as Tamil and Chinese, or Malay. A great number of these publics became multilingual, launching extensive translation activities in what was frequently a conscious effort to widen the participation in them.

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Yang Bin, from the University of Macau, was the third scholar to present his paper, titled “Exodus to China: Nezha Born from Lotus.” Professor Yang Bin pointed out that in the past, research on the origin and changes of the Nezha mainly was regarded as an artifact of Sino-Indian cultural exchange, which is also from the perspective of Buddhist communication. China’s Nezha originated from Hindu Buddhism, and its roots in China have evolved from Buddhism to Taoism and down to folk beliefs. Yang emphasized that the key factors of carrying and symbolism, such as resurrection and healings, can not only be found in ancient India and Buddhism, but also was basically formed in the ancient Egyptian civilizations, and they are transitive and continuable in terms of time and space.

Professor Wan Ming, from the Chinese Academy of Social Science, was the fourth scholar to present her paper, titled “The Historical Logic of the Rise of Malacca Strait—And a Further Analysis of Zheng He’s Voyages to Malacca at Every Time.” She pointed out the rise of the Malacca Strait was inseparable from the rise of the Melaka Kingdom, and the rise of the Strait was closely related to Zheng He’s seven voyages to the Western Sea, namely, the Indian Ocean. She argued that Zheng He’s seven voyages to Melaka at every time, and it’s not only five times to reach Melaka. From the perspective of global history, our research on Zheng He’s voyages is not only to follow the trajectory of Ming China’s unveiling of the great voyage of mankind, but also to involve the major issues of how to view and understand global history. The rise of the Strait was the result of the heyday of the maritime Silk Road at the early of the 15th century and was a successful example of cooperation and mutual win of international relations in history. The far-reaching significance was to become an inflection point of global history, and profoundly affected the progress of human history. It not only meant that the center of human interaction had turned from the Eurasian continent to the sea, symbolizing the irreversible ocean trend of the community of human destiny, but it also indicates that the transition to the Pacific era based on the rise of the Strait did not depend on the Westerners’ voyages coming from the east after nearly a century.

Professor Chen Zhongping, from the University of Victoria, was the fifth scholar to present his paper, titled “The Maritime Silk Road and Multicultural World Networks in Zheng He’s Era.” He argued that the relationship between Zheng He’s seven voyages to the Western Sea and the Maritime Silk Road has recently gained much more attention. However, the changes in the Maritime Silk Road caused by Zheng He’s voyage and its impact on the historical development of globalization

still need further study. As of the Zheng He era, one of the main contents of the Maritime Silk Road activity was the tribute trade between China and the Indian Ocean world, or tribute diplomacy centered on the Chinese Empire and the international exchanges supplemented by relevant official trade. The institutionalization, expansion and a certain degree of diversification of this dual tribute-trade relationship have brought China and the countries and people along Maritime Road into a multicultural world network, and it also was the driving force behind the spreading of Buddhism in South Asia and Islam in West Asia.

Francois Gipouloux, from French National Centre for Scientific Research, was the sixth scholar to present her paper, title “Capitalist Entrepreneurs or Wealthy Merchants? Preliminary Reflections on the Role of Economic Institutions in Late Ming and Early Qing China.” Professor Gipouloux first raised an important question, “A trade revolution occurred twice during China’s long history, under the Song and at the end of the Ming dynasty. But why did it not bear fruit? What were the factors that inhibited its development into an industrial revolution, similar to what occurred in Europe, or even a Japanese-style industrial revolution?” She argued that although there were plenty of wealthy merchants in late imperial China, they should not be confused with capitalist entrepreneurs. She also expressed her belief that the economic institutions of pre-modern China were not in favour of capital accumulation, but one has to observe that this was not their objective. The purpose of the Chinese system was not to accumulate capital, or to produce wealth on an unlimited scale. Rather, it was preoccupied by absorbing labor and preventing sharp social differentiations. Once opulence had been achieved, the merchant could only turn to administration to perpetuate his status. She concluded that rich families tended to transform themselves into gentry and state elites. Conversely, the reluctance of the gentry to turn itself into entrepreneurs impacted the growth of the elite power over generations as well as their successful link with accumulated financial wealth.

Dennis O. Flynn, director of the Pacific World History Institute, was the seventh scholar to present his paper, titled “Globalization Origins, End-Markets, and Laws of Supplies and Demands.” He pointed out that there are currently two explanations for globalization origins in the economic history literature. One argument is that globalization began in the 1820s with a clear emphasis on European centrality. A second argument claims that globalization began in 1571 CE, when the Americas became connected to the ‘Old World’. He argued that Europeans improvements in ocean navigation were motivated, in part, to gain better access to lucrative trade goods produced in Asia.

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Yet Chinese end-market customers played an equally decisive role in propulsion of long-distance trade. He believed that prominent economists today are making excellent progress in documenting and calculating trends in wealth creation in addition to deteriorations in wealth distributions. Yet crucial recent empirical studies of wealth and wealth distribution would clearly benefit from background theoretical support. He concluded that if economic historians were to redirect attention to investigation of the creation, accumulation and distribution of wealth throughout historical time, then economic history's slide into irrelevance could perhaps be reversed.