1 Pre-Modern History: Some Trends in Writing the History of the Song (10th-13th Centuries)

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During the Cultural Revolution period (1966–76), there were some bold efforts to integrate a few sinicised Marxist concepts with selected bits of pre-modern Chinese history and to use them to conduct political campaigns. Two attempts were especially striking: adapting the idea of class struggle to a very Chinese ‘Two-line struggle’, in this case, the struggle between backward Confucians and progressive Legalists; and modifying the idea of restoration to explain how that struggle swayed back and forth through the centuries until the present.¹ After 1977, these efforts were condemned as having gone totally astray; it was said not only that politics had overwhelmed history-writing, which was not surprising, but also that the political struggle of the time had led to the abuse and distortion of key Marxist ideas themselves. The pent-up anger against that particular development in ‘political’ history as inspired by the Gang of Four and epitomised by the writings of Liang Xiao and Lo Siding came across with great vehemence. Since then, nothing published between 1966 and October 1976 is considered to have had any merit in it whatsoever. One aspect of that ‘political’ history which aroused the greatest indignation among some orthodox Marxists, was the way the writing of pre-modern history between 1973 and 1976 had turned economic base and superstructure upside down. History had been written as if ideas and moral and political values were the moving force and economic and technological changes were secondary.²

The dust has now settled. Many contacts between historians inside and outside China have led to further clarifications and we have seen the several reports that have resulted from such contacts, most notably the reports by Frederic Wakeman, Jr (1978), Alex Volkoff and Edgar
Wickberg (1979), Anne F. Thurston and Jason H. Parker (1980), Liu Kwang-ching (1981) and Albert F. Feuerwerker (1982). Each of them has added to our understanding of what is now going on among the historians in China. This essay will try to avoid going over the same ground. The relative openness of the profession today, the willingness to hear different views from the outside world and to admit shortcomings in China, and the new-found confidence in the pursuit of facts and data and in non-dogmatic analysis have been refreshing after the years of high-pitched and monotonous sloganeering. In particular, the essay by Liu Kwang-ching published in the Journal of Asian Studies in 1981 has been most enlightening. It argues that there are even bolder efforts afoot to reinterpret history and that the internal debate about the significance of Marx for any new interpretation has become increasingly sophisticated. What had begun as a retreat from over-emphasising the place of peasant rebellions in Chinese history has turned into a deeper disagreement about the relative importance of class struggle and productive forces in the story of human progress. Although this debate has simmered down, the implications of the debate on this and other related issues have influenced much history writing since April 1980, Professor Liu’s cut-off date.4

The first thing to be said about history writing since 1978 is that it is voluminous and wide-ranging. Older and established scholars have been prolific and there are now hundreds of younger scholars firming up their reputations with increasingly thorough research. For this essay, at least three different approaches have been considered. Firstly, whether to take one major journal, like Lishi Yanjiu (Historical Research) through the past ten years and examine what has and has not changed in historical methods and attitudes. The journal could be compared or contrasted with a select number of social science journals to see if Lishi Yanjiu reflects a dominant establishment trend (even a new orthodoxy) or whether there is a genuine, albeit only partial, liberalisation in academic research that has left scholars largely to pursue topics and themes that they each believe to be important and relevant for the times. A second approach could be to pursue the full implications of the debate on Marxist historical theory and practice. For example, whether historians should get Marx right first before proceeding with research or simply get on with the facts and let the facts determine which parts of Marx are universal and still valid today, or even to ask what Marx, Engels and Lenin really meant in their many writings. The first approach can be very systematic but deals with too many subjects and covers the whole length of Chinese history. This is