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## Intellectual Journey: The Spread and Resonance of Hegel's Philosophy of History in Modern China

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### Abstract

The defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War intensified external pressures on the Qing Empire, and the prevailing sense that “national extinction was imminent” galvanized various social strata in China to pursue sweeping reforms. This atmosphere of crisis prompted both traditional literati and emerging intellectual elites to undertake a structural re-examination of China's classical knowledge system, seeking to identify the roots of national weakness. At the same time, these elites actively introduced, translated, and debated Western theories—particularly those of the social sciences and Philosophy of History—as potential intellectual resources to confront the turbulent political situation. Within this broader intellectual transformation, The Philosophy of History functioned as a crucial medium through which Western ideas entered China. Over a period of nearly half a century, its reception underwent several distinct phases: an early stage of direct “transplantation,” followed by selective and partial “acceptance,” and ultimately a phase characterized by critical assimilation and reinterpretation. This intellectual journey not only reshaped Chinese understandings of history, society, and the state, but also reflected the evolving conceptual efforts through which modern China sought to construct a modern nation-state. Examining this trajectory reveals the diverse paths and orientations that Chinese thinkers envisioned as they attempted to articulate a viable modern national framework.

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Hegel; Philosophy of History; dissemination; influence.

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## Intridution

The contemporary world is undergoing what has been frequently described as a new “great transformation unseen in a century”. As global structures shift and the international order undergoes profound realignment, questions concerning the direction of world history and the future of humanity have once again risen to the center of intellectual and political debate. Against this backdrop, the dialogue with history, the reflection on historical consciousness, and the confrontation between history and philosophy remain essential modes through which societies attempt to understand both their present condition and possible futures. From the tumultuous upheavals of the modern era to the complexities of today’s globalized world, the pursuit of historical meaning has never ceased to shape intellectual life.

Within this broader landscape, Hegel occupies a singular position. His philosophical system is deeply rooted in historical reasoning—indeed, “Hegel’s entire system was conceived almost entirely in the terminology of history” [Löwith, 1964].

Hegel aimed to establish a knowledge of history akin to that of the natural sciences, one that would provide “objective” understanding rather than knowledge “dependent on personal interpretation,” a form of knowledge “based on objective facts.” Yet, for Hegel, such objectivity can only be “guaranteed within the concept of the state.” If one were to view history “solely as the activity of individual persons,” he argued, “we would ultimately end up in a world of history that is entirely chaotic and meaningless.” Thus, social and ethical institutions—and above all, the organized state—serve as the foundation for sustaining the rationality and coherence of historical development.

This is humanity’s attempt to create a subjectively indisputable understanding of history, in a way similar to our sciences (such as physics and chemistry), seeking “objective” knowledge—knowledge that depends on objective facts rather than personal interpretation [Patios, 2014]. However, this objectivity is guaranteed within the concept of the state. Hegel argued that if we try to view history purely as an individual activity, we will ultimately end up in a completely chaotic and meaningless historical world. Social and ethical institutions, as well as the primarily organized state, can guarantee our necessary “objectivity.” [Leighton, 1896].

As the culminating figure of German classical philosophy, Hegel’s thought—like “stars scattered across the night sky”—played a crucial role in shaping Germany’s path toward modernization and the formation of its national cultural spirit. In early twentieth-century China, however, the situation was dramatically different. The Boxer Uprising and the late Qing reforms destabilized longstanding structures, while Western culture entered China in an overwhelmingly “powerful” manner. The resulting confrontation between Chinese and Western systems of knowledge forced Chinese intellectuals to reconsider their inherited conceptual frameworks regarding history, philosophy, and the nation, marking a significant turning point in the development of modern national cultural consciousness.

In this intellectual context, Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* occupies a distinctive and complex role. Although Chinese scholarship [Yang He, Deng Anqing, 2011; Huang Jiande, 1991; Zhao Dunhua, 2002; Shu Yuan, 2005; Chao Ke, He Yude, 2004; Yang He, 2001; Zhang Zhongmin, 2012; Xiang Gang, 2011] has long paid attention to Hegel’s philosophy—particularly his logic, metaphysics, and the *Philosophy of Right*—*The Philosophy of History* itself underwent a relatively uneven process of reception, characterized as a transition “from coldness to increasing warmth” . Its influence has often been underestimated, and its role in shaping modern Chinese conceptions of history has remained a relatively marginalized topic. Yet, the translation, dissemination, and reinterpretation of this text reveal significant insights into how modern Chinese thinkers grappled with concepts such as “world history,”

the “modern nation-state,” and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Revisiting the intellectual journey of *The Philosophy of History* in modern China therefore allows us to better understand the formation of modern Chinese historical consciousness and the broader trajectory of China’s engagement with modernity.

### **The Introduction and Repercussions of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895**

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a substantial number of Western works were compiled, translated, and introduced into China, opening up an unprecedented intellectual horizon for the Chinese scholarly community. As interactions between China and the Western world intensified in the modern era, Chinese intellectuals sought to understand and assimilate Western thought, making use of newspapers, journals, and various publications to facilitate the circulation and integration of knowledge across cultures.

During this evolving process, the dissemination of Western culture in China underwent several distinct phases: an initial stage of enlightenment and curiosity in the early twentieth century; a subsequent period marked by efforts to localize and synthesize Western ideas within Chinese intellectual frameworks; a phase during which enthusiasm waned under the impact of shifting social and political conditions; and, eventually, a revival followed by the emergence of more pluralistic and diversified developments from the mid-twentieth century onward. It was within this dynamic historical context that the introduction and reception of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* unfolded, exerting a profound and lasting influence on modern Chinese thought.

The period from 1895 to 1925 was a period of transformation for modern China, a crucial era in which Chinese thought and culture transitioned from tradition to modernity, bridging the past and the future [Wang Fansen, 2007]. New forms of social media—the intellectual class—emerged alongside these intellectual and social changes. Therefore, in 1903, Mr. Ma Junwu published “The Doctrine of Hegel, the Giant of the Reform Movement,” in the 27th issue of *Xinmin Congbao*. The article, divided into five sections, introduced Hegel’s life, academic style, absolute idealism, ethics, and Philosophy of History. This was the earliest introduction of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* to Chinese soil. Initially, it failed to cause a stir in academic circles; it wasn’t until 1916, when Yan Fu first published “On Hegel’s Idealism” in the *Global Student Journal*, that this progress was truly significant [Ma Junwu, 1903], Zhang Yi’s *Hegel’s Ethical Teaching* (1924) [Zhang Yi, 1924], That year, Mr. Zhang Yi returned to China and became a professor and head of the Department of Philosophy at Peking University, where he lectured on the history of Western philosophy and the philosophies of Kant and Hegel. This played a significant role in the acceptance and absorption of *Hegel’s Philosophy of History* by the Chinese academic community in the 1930s.

However, the Chinese people know very little about Hegel and despise metaphysics. During the transition period, attention began to be paid to Hegel’s life and works, but the introductions were still superficial, very short, and accounted for a small proportion of the imported Western books. There was also no continuous or long-term introduction. However, it can be seen that while initially serving the purpose of national salvation, the direction of the eastward spread of Western learning changed at the beginning of the 20th century. The proportion of practical and technical cultural readings declined, while works on politics and law reached their peak. The introduction of German speculative philosophy, characterized by its intense critical spirit, marked a crucial step forward [Yang He, Deng Anqing, 2011]. It is important to note that in the early stages of knowledge dissemination,

misinterpretation of knowledge was common. However, such misinterpretation can be seen to some extent as an attempt to understand and comprehend Western culture from the perspective of existing knowledge systems. Therefore, in the 1930s, in addition to absorbing foreign scholars' analyses of Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, scholars also considered the accuracy of knowledge dissemination and the circulation of different versions as an important task.

Since the 1930s, intellectual circles have gradually and systematically disseminated Hegel's ideas, and attention to Hegel has been increasing during this period. Learning from the West and extensively absorbing new achievements in modern natural science, as well as new ideas from sociology, psychology, law, political science, and philosophy, constitutes the basic theoretical framework and prominent feature of modern historical philosophy [Yang He, Deng Anqing, 2011]. That is, positivist Philosophy of History and social Philosophy of History have replaced the traditional Philosophy of History that has lasted for thousands of years.

There were two main factors that triggered the surge in the dissemination of Hegel's philosophy. The first was the in-depth study of Kantian philosophy, and the second was the spread of Marxist philosophy, both of which inevitably propelled the surge in the dissemination of Hegel's philosophy. In 1931, the 100th anniversary of Hegel's death, at the initiative of Mr. Qu Junong, papers by Qu Junong, Zhang Junmai, He Lin, Zhu Guangqian, Yao Baoxian, and others were published in the journal "Hegel". The centennial commemoration activities prompted the active participation of many scholars. For example, Zhang Yi read essays commemorating the centennial of Hegel's death by scholars such as Kroner, Zhang Junli, Qu Junong, and He Lin, published in the literary supplement of the *Ta Kung Pao*, issue 207, 1931. Zhang Yi studied abroad for ten years starting in 1912, first at the University of Michigan in the United States, where he was most interested in the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. In 1919, he received his doctorate with a dissertation entitled "Hegel's Ethics." He then studied at Oxford University in England, where he was taught by Professors B. Caird, Joachim, and A. Smith. In 1921, he went to Germany, Hegel's birthplace, to study Hegel's philosophy, where he met Dr. Larsson, the editor of the Complete Works of Hegel and a renowned German expert on Hegel. Zhang Yi thus became a prominent Hegel scholar and a Fellow of the Royal Society. Spurred by this earliest Chinese special issue on Hegel, academic interest in Hegel grew daily. According to incomplete statistics, over 100 papers on Hegel's philosophy were published between 1928 and 1937 [Huang Jiande, 1991], this was the most prevalent among the philosophers who disseminated it at the time. The establishment and further expansion of newspapers and periodicals, scholars' concern for current affairs and politics, and the communication networks and channels formed around newspapers and periodicals provided a media platform for this clash of ideas. In the early 1930s, scholars' existing knowledge systems were insufficient to deeply understand the true meaning of the Philosophy of History. Scholars began to turn to the understanding and analysis of Hegel by foreign scholars (Japan and Germany), such as Wei Zhi's translation of *The Historical Significance of Hegel's Philosophy*. Guang Tao's translation of Hegel's *Philosophy of History*; Zhu Qianzhi's analysis of Japanese students' evaluations of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* was published in *Modern Scholarship*. Chen Quan translated in full German scholar Kroner's "The Significance of Hegel's Philosophy for Modernity," and Peng Fangcao translated German scholar Wittwölger's "Hegel's Philosophical Thought and China." [Wittwölger, 1931]

Hegel's thought cannot be separated from its historical context; Yi Cao and He Lin focus on the study of Hegel himself [Yi Cao, 1931]. With a deeper understanding of the West, we can see the peak period and scope of Hegel's Philosophy of History in terms of both time and space. Scholars' introductions to it still retain a strong traditional historical experience: "The people of Qin had no time to mourn themselves, yet later generations mourned them; later generations mourned them but did not

learn from them, thus causing later generations to mourn again.” [Du Mu, 2016] This respect for learning from history was evident in the top-down “revival” of Prussia after the devastation of the French Revolution in Germany. The role of the state and the revival of the nation were entrusted to the translation, drafting, and commentary of articles and works.

Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* plays a pivotal role in understanding his historical views, and since its publication, translation, and dissemination, it has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Numerous textual studies based on Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* have emerged, [Xu Baokui, 1932; Chen Gongyu, 1933; Zhang Junli, 1933; Zhang Pengnian, 1933; Chen Gongyu, 1933; Zhu Qianzhi, 1936; Guan Qitong, 1940; Zhang Zhan, 1943]. In addition, monographs also saw significant development. In 1932, Shenzhou Guoguang Press published Wang Linggao’s translation of *An Outline of Hegel’s Philosophy of History*. This translation, related to Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, was based on Wang Linggao’s Introduction to the Philosophy of History (translated by Kaneda Takechiyo in Japanese), and also referenced a section of the 1917 Leipzig Press edition of *Philosophy of History*. In 1933, Zhang Mingding translated Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, based on the work of German scholar K. Leiser [Xu Baokui, 1932]. In 1936, the Commercial Press published a Chinese translation of *The Philosophy of History*, jointly produced by Wang Zaoshi and Xie Yizheng. Their translation—based on J. Sibree’s English version—was largely a literal and indirect rendering of Hegel’s original work. Given the dense conceptual structure and technical terminology of Hegel’s philosophy, and the fact that the translators relied primarily on an English intermediary text rather than the German original, Chinese scholars inevitably encountered difficulties and potential misunderstandings when engaging with *The Philosophy of History*. Nevertheless, this translation represents one of the earliest and most influential systematic introductions to Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* in China, laying essential groundwork for its subsequent dissemination.

At the same time, Zhu Qianzhi—often described as a “semi-Hegelian”—played a pivotal role in introducing and interpreting Hegelian thought. His monograph *Hegel’s Philosophy of History*, published in 1936 by the Commercial Press in Shanghai, offered a systematic exposition of Hegel’s historical philosophy and, to some extent, compensated for the limitations in scholarly understanding at the time. Thus, the year 1936 witnessed a confluence of translation and interpretive efforts, forming a crucial starting point for modern Chinese engagement with Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*.

The institutionalization of philosophical studies further strengthened the foundation of Hegel scholarship in China. In April 1935, China established its first philosophical society, marking a significant step in the formal development of modern philosophical research. In 1941, He Lin founded the “Association for Translating Western Classics,” which facilitated the systematic introduction of major Western philosophical works. Journals such as *New Youth*, *The Eastern Miscellany*, and *Philosophical Review* also served as vital platforms for disseminating Western ideas. From the 1940s onward, the establishment of research institutions, the expansion of the academic community, the sustained publication of scholarly periodicals, and the growing systematic nature of research collectively strengthened the intellectual environment. These developments constitute essential scholarly resources that later generations could not bypass when studying Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* in China.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the focus around 1949 was primarily on introducing Neo-Hegelianism. Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* as a whole found itself in an extremely awkward position. This was because the establishment of the PRC consolidated the status and influence of Marxist theory in China, leading to the neglect of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*. It became a tool for demonstrating the rationality of Marxist theory and an object of criticism. Therefore, Chinese

scholars' research on Hegel's Philosophy of History was significantly influenced by the political environment, resulting in relatively few research achievements during this period. The publication information of the book was published in the Reading Monthly. In 1956, Beijing San lian Bookstore republished Wang Zaoshi's translation. During the 1956 revision of Philosophy of History, Xie Yizheng's translation was removed. In 1963, Beijing Commercial Press republished Wang Zaoshi's translation, known as the "New Edition," which is also the most widely accepted version in Chinese academia. The six-year Cultural Revolution, which began in 1976, brought political turmoil and academic chaos, resulting in almost no progress in research on Hegel's *Philosophy of History* during this period.

The "recovery" phase mainly refers to the period from the reform and opening up to the early 1990s. In the 30 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the enthusiasm for studying Hegel was greatly reduced due to the influence of left-leaning ideology. However, the "spring breeze" of reform and opening up in 1978 allowed Chinese scholars to remove the "shackles" that confined their thinking, and the academic atmosphere became more free, which once again sparked a surge of interest in studying Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. In 1982, Hou Hongxun's book "On Hegel's Philosophy of History" pioneered research on Hegel's Philosophy of History [Hou Hongxun, 1982], It is also the first monograph in China to systematically discuss Hegel's "Philosophy of History". Based on Marxist viewpoints, the author conducts a meticulous study of Hegel's historical views and other aspects, offering a realistic assessment and pointing out that "Hegel's understanding of history is entirely consistent with his entire objective idealist philosophical theory." [Kusada, 1983] Following that, in 1983, Taipei's Dalin Publishing House published Xie Yizheng's translation of "Philosophy of History," which is another major work on the study of Hegel's "Philosophy of History."

In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese scholars generally attached great importance to the theoretical connection and historical inheritance between materialism and Marxism in Hegel's "*Philosophy of History*". At the same time, they paid attention to the dialectical thought, the concept of historical necessity, the concept of human freedom, the concept of labor in Hegel's "Philosophy of History", as well as the nature and status of Hegel's Philosophy of History. It can be seen that Chinese scholars gradually began to deal with the core issues in Hegel's "Philosophy of History". In 1985, scholar Teng Yusheng, in his work "An Exploration of the Materialist Elements in Hegel's Philosophy of History," primarily argued from the perspectives of "acknowledging the objective laws of social and historical development" and "social existence and social consciousness" that "there is a direct intellectual connection between Marx's and Hegel's materialist elements of history." [Zhang Xiaohua, 1984]. In her paper "A Great Transformation in the Philosophy of History—From Hegel's Philosophy of History to Marx's Materialist Conception of History," scholar Zhang Xiaohua points out that the endpoint reached by Hegel in his view of history is precisely the starting point for the study of Marx's historical theory [Zhang Xiaohua, 1984]. In 1985, scholar Li He examined different views on historical inevitability in different periods, arguing that Hegel viewed historical inevitability as a timeless logical entity, thus leading to teleology and fatalism, while Marxist materialism could scientifically explain historical inevitability [Li He, 1985]. In 1986, scholar She Shusheng, in his "On the Overall Constitutive System of Historical Science—An Introduction to *The Philosophy of History*", argued that the Western school of historical philosophy had rejected the rational essence of historical philosophy as revealed by Hegel [She Shusheng, 1986]. Marx, through his critique of Hegel, established the scientific nature of his Philosophy of History. However, the connection between Marx and Hegel remains a subject of debate: the main focus is whether their ideas are fundamentally aligned or completely opposed.

In 1988, scholar Ding Changchun pointed out in his article “The Dialectical Thought of History in Hegel’s Philosophy of History” that Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* contains rich ideas of the dialectical thought of history [Ding Changchun, 1984]. The main approach is to explore this topic from the perspective of Hegel’s fundamental view of history, arguing that historical dialectics is highly beneficial for enriching and improving the methods of historical research. In 1981, Chen Shifu stated in “The Historical Status and Role of Hegel’s Dialectics—Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Hegel’s Death” that dialectics is the highest form of thought, and that it achieved its most developed expression in Hegel [Chen Shifu, 1981]. In 1989, Chen Yaobin and Du Zhiqing, in their book “Hegel’s Dialectical View of History,” argued that Hegel’s great achievement in philosophy was his systematic exposition of dialectical thought on the basis of idealism, especially his introduction of dialectics into the field of history [Chen Yaobin, Du Zhiqing, 1989], viewing human social history as a constantly developing and dynamic process.

Furthermore, the evaluation of Hegel has become more scientific and objective. For example, in 1989, scholars Yang Geng and Chen Xiaoping argued that the evaluation of Hegel should acknowledge the harmful aspects of his thought without denying his greatness; In 1984, scholar Gao Tingtai evaluated Hegel’s Philosophy of History primarily from two aspects: his view of war and his theory of geographical environment. He argued that Hegel’s theory of geographical environment was “significantly limited, and he did not reach the level of Marxist theory on geographical environment.” [Gao Tingtai, 1984].

Since the 1990s, with the increasing exchanges between China and the West, a large number of foreign works have been introduced, such as Walsh’s “Introduction to the Philosophy of History,” which has gradually led to some critique of Marxism. Chinese scholars have focused more on the Philosophy of History itself when studying Hegel’s Philosophy of History, and have redefined its status and nature.

In 1990, Li Jianping quoted a philosopher, saying, “Hegel denies the future, but the future will not deny Hegel.” [Li Jianping, 1990]. In 1993, Mr. Li Rongtian from Taiwan, in his book *The Reason of History: An Analysis of the Introduction to Hegel’s Philosophy of History*, described and evaluated the introduction to the text from the perspective of historical reason and the intrinsic connection between the viewpoints in the Philosophy of History and logic. In 1994, Renmin University of China published Li Qiuling’s *History in the Eyes of German Philosophers*, and in 1998, Beijing Normal University published Guo Xiaoling’s *History of Western Historiography*, both of which provided dedicated discussions of Hegel’s Philosophy of History. Although brief, these discussions demonstrate the importance that Chinese scholars attach to this text. In 2001, Guangdong People’s Publishing House published Dr. Wang Lianxi’s book, *Hegel’s Philosophy of History*. This book is a monograph interpreting Hegel’s Philosophy of History from a Marxist perspective, but it also touches upon Hegel’s later Philosophy of History, offering a comprehensive and profound reflection and study of Hegel’s dialectical view of social history [Wen Xianyuan, 2001].

From the mid-to-late 1990s to the beginning of this century, Chinese scholars gained a new understanding of the value and status of Hegel’s “Philosophy of History,” gradually affirming the core ideas and value of the text. In 1994, scholar Yi Yun, in his work “Two Questions on Hegel’s Philosophy of History,” argued that the Philosophy of History contains an extremely rich treasure of dialectics [Yi Yun, 1994]. He Jiannan’s “A Critique of Hegel’s Historical Reason and Philosophy of History” interprets the Philosophy of History from the ontology and epistemology of historical reason, arguing that Hegel’s intellectual legacy is worthy of attention and further study [He Jiannan, 1994]. In 1997, scholar Liu Xiuming proposed in “Historical Research and Philosophy of History” that the deeper

connotation of history is the Philosophy of History, and that Hegel's Philosophy of History is the first self-contained work of historical philosophy in the history of human civilization [Wang Guishan, 2002], holding an important position in the development history of the Philosophy of History. In 2002, Wang Guishan's "A Brief Discussion on Hegel's Philosophical Legacy of History" argued that Hegel's Philosophy of History was the highest generalization of social history before the emergence of Marxism. Hegel was also the first person to try to prove that there is a kind of development and an internal connection in history [Wang Guishan, 2002], his rich philosophical legacy of history and his magnificent basic views on social history can still give us a lot of inspiration today.

Furthermore, the research focus has shifted significantly. In 1995, Yu Wujin, in "Re-understanding the Relationship between Marx's Philosophy and Hegel's Philosophy," pointed out that "the research focus gradually shifted from epistemology to worldview." [Yu Wujin, 1995] In other words, Liu Zhaoming's "Hegel's World History View—An Interpretation of the Introduction to *Philosophy of History*" interprets the introduction to Hegel's *Philosophy of History* from the perspective of Hegel's world history view. Wang Lianxi, in "On Hegel's View of the End of Historical Development," explains the core content of Hegel's Philosophy of History from the perspective of the Philosophy of History itself, praising and affirming Hegel's thought. Regarding Hegel's view of historical progress, Lü Xiang argues that Hegel's Philosophy of History does not neglect material and human factors, which constitute an indispensable dimension of Hegel's Philosophy of History.

In 2012, scholar Chen Fei affirmed that Hegel's ideas on the relationship between freedom and world history had a significant influence on Marx's concept of freedom [Chen Fei, 2012]. However, Marx clearly differs from Hegel in his period. In his work, "On the Dual Dimensions of Hegel's View of History: Variations on Reason and Freedom," Yu Yongcheng argues that Hegel explicitly refers to his view of history as the history of philosophy [Yu Yongcheng, 2014], and that reason and freedom achieve an intrinsic unity within Hegel's historical perspective. These two elements constitute two important dimensions for understanding Hegel's view of history. Similarly, scholar Liu Jingdong points out that the concepts of reason and freedom represent the fundamental spirit of Hegel's Philosophy of History [Liu Jingdong, 2002]. In his master's thesis, "On Hegel's Philosophy of History," Tan Zhiguang argues that, in Hegel's view, reason is the foundation and source of history, and history is the manifestation of the development process of reason itself; freedom is the essence of the absolute spirit, and world history is nothing more than the progress of free consciousness [Tan Zhiguang, 2018]. Humanity "expects history to possess a certain objectivity—an objectivity suitable for itself," [Ricoeur, 1965] therefore, the interactive relationship between human rational spirit and freedom runs throughout Hegel's Philosophy of History, a point on which many scholars have reached a consensus.

Furthermore, Chinese scholars have gradually begun to correct and analyze the biases in Hegel's description of China in *The Philosophy of History*. In 2009, Liu Jiahe, in his article "On the Continuity and Unity of Historical Development—A Refutation of Hegel's Misinterpretation of the Characteristics of Chinese History," argued that Hegel's writing on Chinese history in *The Philosophy of History* seriously distorted Chinese history. Hegel called Chinese history "non-historical history," denied that China's unity was a unity of multiple elements, and went further to say that Chinese history was an "abstract unity." [Liu Jiahe, 2009].

In 2015, scholar Zhang Xiping, in his work "The Reversal of Sino-Western Relations in the 19th Century and a Study of Hegel's Views on China" [Zhang Xiping, 2015], "pointed out that Hegel's views on China reveal how European thinkers viewed China in the 19th century, thus revealing China's status in Europe and misunderstandings about Chinese history. For example, Hegel's view that "history must begin with the Chinese Empire" [Hegel, 2001] seems to be an acknowledgment of China's place in

world history, but in reality, it reflects a “Western supremacy” mentality. In 2017, scholar Wu Ge, in his work “An Analyze of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of History’ on China—Taking ‘Three Limitations of Understanding’ as the Object of Examination,” examined the highly controversial sharp criticisms of classical Eastern culture by Hegel. Using philological research methods and focusing on the basic viewpoint of “one position, three limitations,” [Wu Ge, 2017] Wu Ge clarified Hegel’s perspective on Chinese culture, thus objectively evaluating Hegel’s correct views and their limitations.

In addition, some Chinese scholars have begun to study Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* from other perspectives. For example, in 2017, Zhuang Zhenhua proposed in his paper “The Logic of History and the Historicity of Logic: On the Logical Foundation of Hegel’s Philosophy of History” that understanding Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* should be based on logic, abandoning existing prejudices, and then “truly standing on Hegel’s position to understand him sympathetically.” [Zhuang Zhenhua, 2017]. He suggested examining the logic of history and the historicity of logic under the premise of logic, explaining the intrinsic connection between history and logic, and looking at Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* from a new perspective.

In summary, recent studies of Hegel’s Philosophy of History have exhibited characteristics of multifacetedness, multi-angle, and multi-methodological approaches. Furthermore, these studies have primarily been incorporated into two distinct frameworks: first, the important ideas in Hegel’s Philosophy of History are mainly regarded as crucial theoretical premises and foundations of Marxism, thus integrating them into the overall framework of Marxist studies; second, Hegel’s Philosophy of History is primarily viewed as a stage in the development of Western Philosophy of History, thus incorporating it into the overall framework of the history of Western philosophy [Yang He, 2001].

The transplantation of theories from modern China neglected the historical research inherent in the nation itself, viewing it as a product of the interaction between historical continuity and evolution and subjective active construction. After all, historical facts such as the separation of some ethnic groups from modern China cannot be effectively explained solely by general historical evolution theory [Huang Xingtao, 2017].

As Chinese scholarship on Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* has continued to deepen, research has increasingly taken on a more diversified and critical character. On the one hand, scholars acknowledge the significant position of Hegel’s work within both intellectual history and the broader tradition of the Philosophy of History. His grand narrative concerning the ontology of history, the concept of freedom, and the structural unfolding of world history remains an indispensable reference point for modern historical theory. On the other hand, Chinese scholars have maintained a critical perspective toward certain aspects of Hegel’s system that reflect its inherent historical limitations. In particular, his linear and unidirectional conception of world-historical development, his elevation of the “Germanic Spirit” as the culmination of world history, and the unmistakably Eurocentric orientation of his civilizational framework have all been subject to rigorous critique. Moreover, Hegel’s interpretation of Chinese history and culture often relies on conceptual generalization and imaginative projection, leading to misreadings or distortions that do not correspond to historical reality. For these reasons, while affirming Hegel’s philosophical contributions, Chinese scholars simultaneously seek to reinterpret his historical philosophy through a critical and localized lens, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of his thought.

### **Themes, Translations, and Expressions of the Philosophy of History**

The primary task in studying Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* is to clarify the concept of the Philosophy of History. Philosophy possesses a macro-level consciousness that encompasses everything

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[Zhuang Zhenhua, 2017]; when philosophy connects with history, the *Philosophy of History* is born. This concept was first used by Voltaire in 1765, who understood it as “a rational description of the cultures of all nations.” *Philosophy of History* is beneficial for understanding the profundity of Hegel’s dialectical thought and for understanding how history, elevated to the philosophical level, uses reason as a vehicle to demonstrate the transformation from static to dynamic. Hegel’s “reason” is not a static logical activity. As Arthur Berndtson stated, “Hegel’s reason is not fixed or transcendent; it is an internal process that creates logic, nature, and thought.” [Berndtson, 1959]

The object of inquiry in the Philosophy of History—namely “history” itself—carries an inherent duality. On the one hand, it refers to the objective reality of historical events and processes; on the other hand, it encompasses the subjective dimension of historical understanding, narrative construction, and historical consciousness. Thus, the Philosophy of History is neither mere empirical description nor pure philosophical abstraction. Rather, it applies philosophical methods to the study of history, employing conceptual analysis and rational inquiry to explore historical tendencies, internal patterns, and overarching laws. In this respect, the Philosophy of History plays an irreplaceable role in illuminating the nature and meaning of historical development.

Semantically, the term *Philosophy of History* contains two logically intertwined components: first, a metaphysical discourse about history itself—its essence, structure, and mode of movement; and second, a theoretical reflection on historiography as a form of knowledge, concerning the nature of historical narrative, the structure of historical cognition, and the methodologies employed in the study of history. In this sense, the Philosophy of History is simultaneously a Philosophy of History and a philosophy *about* historiography.

Within this tradition, Hegel’s speculative Philosophy of History holds a particularly prominent position. Rather than confining himself to the empirical enumeration of events, Hegel seeks to uncover the ontological principles that govern the unfolding of history. Employing a speculative form of philosophical discourse, he interprets history as the process by which Spirit realizes itself according to the principle of freedom, thereby endowing world history with purposiveness and rational structure. Hegel thus elevates the study of history to a conceptual enterprise governed by internal logic, establishing a theoretical paradigm with lasting influence on subsequent developments in the Philosophy of History.

Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* is primarily divided into five parts: Introduction, The Eastern World, The Greek World, The Roman World, and The Germanic World. The main theme revolves around the idea that “world history is nothing but the development of the concept of freedom [Hegel, 2006], which refers to the mind or reason. The book constructs a philosophical system of world history, attempting to deduce the outline or framework of world history based on philosophical premises. Therefore, in his depiction of human history, Hegel believes that the driving force of history is the development and expansion of reason, ultimately achieving the purpose of world history. This book does not aim to describe world historical events and phenomena, but rather to reveal the essential nature behind them.

Although the “Introduction” to Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* is widely regarded as the most abstruse and conceptually challenging section of the work, it nevertheless provides the guiding principles and foundational premises upon which the entire book is constructed. It serves as the theoretical point of departure for Hegel’s historical philosophy and offers the conceptual framework necessary for understanding the main body of the text. The Introduction focuses primarily on two aspects: a systematic classification of the various methods of writing history, and an examination of the geographical basis upon which world history unfolds.

With regard to methodology, Hegel distinguishes three fundamental types of history. The first is “original history,” which consists of accounts written by historians who record events they have directly witnessed or experienced. Figures such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon exemplify this category. Yet Hegel emphasizes that such historians often lack reflective depth; their narratives remain descriptive and experiential rather than analytical or conceptually informed.

The second type is “reflective history,” produced by later historians who interpret past events from the vantage point of their own time. These works necessarily incorporate the author’s personal perspectives and critical reflections, thereby reshaping historical events through a contemporary lens. Hegel further subdivides reflective history into four forms: universal history, special or particular history, critical history, and what he terms pragmatic or “experimental” history. This mode of history-writing reconfigures the past within a conceptual framework that confers new meaning upon historical developments.

The third type, and the one Hegel considers most essential, is “philosophical history.” Hegel devotes considerable attention to explicating this category, for it is through philosophical history that he seeks to demonstrate his overarching view of how world history is formed. He begins by situating world history within the domain of “Spirit” (Geist), arguing that the essence of Spirit lies in its consciousness of freedom, and that its fundamental nature is the idea of freedom itself. From this standpoint, Hegel advances three central propositions: that Reason governs the world, that Reason fulfills a particular mission, and that world history follows a rational course. Together, these propositions articulate Hegel’s claim that world history is the progressive realization of Spirit’s freedom, and that the task of philosophy is to grasp the inner logic of this historical process.

The second proposition, concerning the mission of reason, is elaborated in three points: First, the characteristic of the spirit is freedom. In the Eastern world, freedom is the freedom of the individual, while in the Greco-Roman world, the freedom of a minority belongs to the entirety of the Germanic peoples. Second, the means of the development of consciousness relies on human activity, the driving force of which stems from passion. In this process, the passion needed by the spirit interacts with itself, with the spirit playing a dominant role, thus propelling historical development. Third, the form of spiritual realization is the state. Reason, in order to achieve its own goals and to achieve its fullest development, needs to utilize the concrete reality of the “state.” The third proposition states that the course of world history is a process of spiritual self-growth; therefore, the spirit must overcome itself and struggle with itself. “The development of the spirit is a serious, undesirable, and self-opposing process.” [Hegel, 2006].

According to Hegel, the human spirit continually realizes itself throughout different stages of world history and, in doing so, gradually frees itself from conditions of unfreedom. Toward the end of the introduction to *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel further argues that natural geography exerts a profound influence on the formation of civilization and the development of spirit. In regions subject to extreme cold or extreme heat, he contends, spirit is unable to construct a world in which it can freely actualize itself and therefore cannot become a true subject of history. By contrast, the temperate zone—endowed with moderate and favorable natural conditions—constitutes the genuine stage upon which world history unfolds.

Structurally, Hegel divides world history into four periods according to the degree of freedom manifested by spirit: the ages of childhood, youth, maturity, and old age. These correspond respectively to the Oriental world, the Greek world, the Roman world, and the Germanic world. This typology reflects not only the developmental logic of spirit but also a historical trajectory in which freedom becomes increasingly explicit and self-conscious.

In Hegel's examination of world history, history is situated within the domain of spirit; thus, an understanding of the nature of spirit is indispensable. Freedom is the defining characteristic of spirit, and the realm of spirit is simultaneously the sphere in which reason operates. In this sense, spirit may be understood as reason in its dynamic unfolding. Consequently, for Hegel, world history is essentially the history of the progressive realization of freedom—namely, the self-development of spirit or reason. It is on this basis that Hegel delineates the four major stages of world history: the Oriental, Greek, Roman, and Germanic worlds, each marking a distinct phase in spirit's movement toward the full actualization of freedom.

China, India, and Persia are the main representatives of the Eastern world. In the section on China, China is depicted as having a patriarchal political system, where the supreme ruler enjoys absolute power and authority, governs by virtue, and the spirit of the Chinese constitution is based on the "spirit of the family." Therefore, the "characteristic of the Chinese state is objective family filial piety," emphasizing practicality and "lacking inherent independence." Furthermore, Hegel believes that Chinese people live in small families, which together form a large family headed by the emperor. Everyone obeys the emperor's rule, bound by moral constraints, and is expected to obey both their own fathers and the emperor, considering this a natural obligation and responsibility. This ensures the stable operation of China's large and complex political system. "Such a patriarchal system inevitably leads to a monarchical autocracy," [Li Qiuling, 1994] which Hegel argues is a form of government that oppresses the people, devoid of any freedom, and whose laws are also oppressive, lacking democracy. In this context, China is portrayed as a society where everyone is equal. Moreover, the establishment of the emperor means that freedom and all privileges belong solely to the monarch; everything else is subordinate to the monarch, and everyone else is considered lowly and without dignity.

In Hegel's account, China appears as a unified and cohesive entity, whereas India is portrayed as a realm of imaginative abstraction. In comparing China and India, Hegel argues that although the Indian spiritual world is rich in imagination, such imagination remains abstract and lacks both genuine freedom and the grounding of rational principles. China, while also not having reached the stage of fully self-conscious freedom, nonetheless possesses a more coherent political and social structure with a strong sense of unity and order.

Hegel's assertion that "the history of Persia is the true beginning of world history" stems from his belief that the element of "universality" first emerges in Persian civilization. This universality is manifested in the separation between human beings and "the universal," a separation that China and India, in his view, do not yet exhibit. In these two civilizations, spirit remains in an immediate unity with nature; it has not yet detached itself from the natural order to become an independent, self-reflective subject.

In the early stages of spiritual development, spirit first expresses itself through a gradual differentiation from nature. This differentiation is grounded in the opposition between objective existence and subjective activity: spirit must distinguish itself from the natural world in order to realize freedom. It is precisely this separation—this initial movement toward universality—that Hegel identifies in Persia. For this reason, Persia marks, in his conception, the true starting point of world history, as it inaugurates the emergence of a spirit capable of transcending the natural unity characteristic of China and India. The rise of such universality, in Hegel's framework, is the essential driving force behind historical progress.

In the Greek world: Hegel begins by saying, "Coming to Greece is like coming home." [Hegel, 2006], The Greek world represents the youth of world history, bearing a serious and anticipated mission, representing a vibrant and joyful life; Greece embodies a spirit of genius and beauty. When

discussing the elements of the Greek spirit, its fundamental characteristic is that, primarily under external and internal “stimuli,” the freedom of the spirit was, on the one hand, limited by nature, and on the other hand, this freedom was itself. Although it underwent a transformation propelled by external forces, this transformation stemmed from within, leading to breakthroughs in certain aspects of the inherent elements bestowed by nature. However, many aspects remained in their initial stages, awaiting refinement, and thus still existed in a limited form.

Furthermore, the author divides the development of Greek history into three periods. In the first period, the “freedom” of the spirit was prominently reflected in works of art, concentrated in subjective, objective, and political works. The achievements of the Greek “spirit” in art realized “its essential existence.” The second period mainly involved contact between the Greek people and the Persians, primarily manifested through war. The outcome of war provided the possibility for the brutal “stimulation” of the growth of the Greek spirit. The Greek “spirit” was no longer bound by “nature,” but it regarded “nature” as the most important and fundamental element of the spirit. In this process, the Greeks were glorious and are still praised today. They upheld their principles and left behind great works in the course of world history. The third period was the decline of the Greek spirit. “The Greeks of the end times began a glorious and noble cause, but were already destined to fail.” After experiencing the deception of the “savior” who liberated Greece from Macedonia, and the debate between the pro-Macedonian and anti-Macedonian factions, Greece eventually came under Macedonian rule. But in the end, it was taken over by Rome. The emergence of the Romans opened the next stage of the spiritual development.

In the Roman world, Hegel points out the unique nature of Roman spiritual elements: “Rome was not a natural growth from the beginning, but the result of artificial and violent growth,” and Rome bore more of a fate of submission. Similarly, the Roman world can be divided into three periods. The first period analyzes Roman virtues, ethics, written laws, deities, and public entertainment, concluding that internal Roman rule was harsh, because only greater harshness could suppress and effectively manage Rome. Furthermore, it recounts the struggle between the Roman aristocracy and the plebeians; through the persistent efforts of the plebeians, the aristocracy was forced to make corresponding concessions. Even so, the confrontation between the two sides seemed to reach a balance, but there was no central core to rule the entire territory. The second period, from the Second Punic War to the reign of the emperor, saw Rome expand its territory through war and come into contact with neighboring peoples. While its territory expanded, Rome’s internal contradictions and confrontations became more prominent, creating an autocratic system and sowing the seeds of its demise. The third period, the Roman Empire, saw power concentrated in the hands of the emperor, and Christianity flourished during this time, gaining widespread popularity and dissemination in Rome.

In the Germanic world, Hegel believed that the Germanic people embodied the highest ideals pursued by the world and by world history. He pointed out the unique nature of the Germanic people, unlike the Greeks and Romans, who only began to expand outwards when they were sufficiently mature and powerful. The Germanic people, however, were at a relatively mature stage, and in their interactions and clashes with different peoples throughout world history, backward and decadent civilizations would yield to them. Thus, the Germanic world was “incited by the laws of a foreign culture and a foreign religion». [Li Qiuling, 1994] The Germanic world only began to develop on the basis and premise of absorbing the achievements of other cultures.

Germanism represents a new “spirit,” the highest level of spiritual development, with Christianity being the most convincing and representative example. Germanism, on the one hand, underwent religious reformation; on the other hand, the Enlightenment, the intellectual liberation movement that

swept across Europe after the Renaissance, spurred the emergence of consciousness, leading to the realization of self-freedom. Hegel believed that history has its own internal logic and is rational. From a Christian perspective, history has historically proven the existence of God; the continuous development of spirit in world history has truly proven God, and all of this is God's work. Based on the inherent nature of things and the historical need to reach maturity, this usually manifests in different people in different regions, even though they are unaware of each other, and usually strives to satisfy them in a more or less perfect form [Croce, 2005]. The Germanic world is a new spirit formed after the transformation of the previous three, at which point more people realize that the spirit is free.

The narratives of the Roman and Greek worlds share a largely consistent form, summarizing the stages of spiritual development during this period, then exploring its spiritual elements, and dividing it into three developmental periods. The basis for this division is primarily the period of initial spiritual accumulation, the period of outward expansion and contact with world history, and the period of decline and influence. This tripartite structure arises because Hegel applied dialectics to this text. Philosophical dialectics, seemingly confined to the realm of logic, is not only inherently syllogistic but also part of a super-syllogism. Nature constitutes the antithesis of this super-syllogism, while spirit constitutes its synthesis. "For an idea to fully become itself, it needs to be concretely manifested; thus, it finds this manifestation by externalizing itself as nature and returning to itself as concrete spirit." [Walsh, 1991]. Therefore, Hegel's Philosophy of History fully utilizes philosophical logic, basically employing a three-part argument to vividly present the development of reason from the East to the West in Germanic countries.

A close reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* reveals that he elevates the very concept of world history to a distinctly philosophical level. For Hegel, world history is not a mere succession of empirical events but a rational and internally coherent process. This rationality is manifested primarily in the progressive unfolding, expansion, and self-realization of Spirit, as well as in the distinct characteristics that Reason assumes at different stages of historical development. The dialectical evolution of Spirit and Reason provides the fundamental basis for what Hegel calls the philosophical conception of world history.

In Hegel's framework, history advances not through external contingencies but through Spirit's movement from being "in itself" to being "for itself," ultimately achieving the unity of being "in-and-for-itself." This dialectical maturation of Spirit can be observed in the different historical worlds he identifies. In the Oriental world, Spirit remains embedded in an undifferentiated unity, and freedom exists only in an abstract or limited sense. In the Greek and Roman worlds, individual self-consciousness begins to emerge, and Reason gradually takes shape in political and cultural institutions. Finally, in the Germanic world, Spirit attains the universal realization of freedom, reaching its most mature and self-aware form.

Thus, the world history depicted in Hegel's text is essentially a philosophical narrative of Spirit's self-generation, differentiation, and return to itself—an attempt to grasp the totality and inner logic of historical development through reason. This conceptualization lays the foundation for Hegel's influential position in the intellectual tradition of Western philosophy and world historiography.

### **Tracing and Reflecting on Hegel's «Philosophy of History»**

Speculative Philosophy of History originates from the broader tradition of speculative philosophy represented by Kant and Hegel in the modern era. This tradition seeks to investigate the fundamental relationship between history and philosophy from an ontological standpoint, emphasizing that history

is not merely a succession of events but a rational and structured process with intrinsic meaning and direction. Speculative historical inquiry therefore raises essential questions: What is the ontology of history? Does history unfold according to rational principles or identifiable laws? And in what ways do human beings—through action, reason, and will—participate in and shape the making of history? Such questions provide the theoretical foundation for the later development of historical theory, including both positivist historiography and historical materialism.

Within this intellectual lineage, Hegel's *Philosophy of History* occupies a pivotal place. It not only systematized speculative approaches to history but also furnished a grand interpretive framework that profoundly influenced subsequent generations of philosophers and historians. Yet evaluations of Hegel's historical philosophy have long been divided. Some scholars praise the breadth and depth of his system, arguing that his conception of world history as the realization of freedom established a lasting paradigm for philosophical historiography. Others criticize the abstractness of his approach and its tendency to overlook the empirical complexity and contingency of actual historical events.

A fair assessment of Hegel's historical philosophy must take into account the intellectual and cultural milieu in which he lived. Hegel belonged to the golden age of German philosophy, immersed in the intellectual atmosphere shaped by Kant, Schelling, and Fichte—an environment that deeply influenced his thinking. Moreover, as the Enlightenment swept across Germany, intellectuals could not remain indifferent to its banner of "Reason." Some lamented the superficial tendencies of the movement, while others were inspired by its ideals of rational progress. Additionally, the French Revolution, embodying the spirit of freedom and the political realization of rational principles, exerted profound influence on the European intelligentsia. During this period, Hegel was a university student, and he was powerfully drawn to the Revolution's ideals of liberty, rationality, and human progress. These experiences provided crucial intellectual resources that ultimately shaped his mature *Philosophy of History*.

Regarding the evaluation of Hegel, M.C. Lemon once said that many historians hate it because it is the worst speculative philosophy built on abstract principles that have nothing to do with history—this statement ignores the fact that Hegel never claimed to be writing history, but rather that he was dealing with history "philosophically." As long as the history he dealt with did not contain empirical errors, he could avoid being accused of ignoring or even distorting the "facts." Furthermore, historians cannot directly interact with the events themselves. They only have access to relevant records of the events [Meyerhoff, 1959].

Hegel's work, grounded in a profound understanding and critique of modern capitalist society, possesses contemporary relevance. The concepts of nation and people rose to the level of idealist philosophy during Hegel's time. Hegel emphasized that the state is "the ethical whole, the realization of freedom." Many criticize Hegel's concept of reason, which he argued was most ideally developed in the Germanic world, even reaching its zenith, believing it to be a glorification and praise of Germany, as history peaked in the Prussian state for which Hegel served [Walsh, 1991]. However, this zenith, within the rational framework Hegel constructed, did not signify Germany's ultimate end, but rather that reason, as the representative of world history—the spirit—developed to a mature and complete state, achieving transcendence and transformation. Simultaneously, the Germanic people learned from Christianity that all people are free, and freedom is the essence of humanity [Li Qiuling, 1994]. Human free will is constantly being developed and explored, which is why Hegel came to this conclusion.

The fundamental limitations of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* lie first in its unavoidable idealist orientation. Hegel regards the development of "Spirit" as the ultimate driving force behind world

history and human progress, thereby minimizing—or even severing—the connection between historical processes and concrete social practices, material conditions, and power structures in the real world. In his system, history is not shaped primarily by economic relations, social institutions, or political dynamics, but by the self-unfolding of the Absolute Spirit. Thus, when Hegel discusses the conversion of the Germanic world to Christianity, he argues that its epochal significance lies in two aspects: on the one hand, it enables human beings to recognize themselves as free subjects for the first time; on the other, Christianity “finds the basis for its realization” in the Germanic world, as exemplified by the Reformation, through which ecclesiastical theocracy and the Germanic monarchical order could “coexist harmoniously.” While such arguments have had substantial influence in the history of ideas, they reveal the abstract nature of Hegel’s framework, which interprets historical development primarily through the realization of religious and philosophical concepts rather than concrete social forces.

Furthermore, Hegel’s tripartite classification of world history in *The Philosophy of History* also contains notable shortcomings. He divides historical writing into “original history,” “reflective history,” and “philosophical history.” According to his definition, “original history” is written by eyewitnesses or contemporaries who directly describe historical events without deeper reflection. Due to the limitations of their temporal and spatial perspectives, such accounts remain confined to local changes and fail to uncover the internal connections among historical phenomena. “Reflective history,” in contrast, is produced by historians who reorganize, compare, and interpret events, thereby attempting to reveal the underlying relations and patterns that lie behind appearances.

However, Hegel’s classifications do not fully align with the actual development of historiography. Historical writing has never existed as three rigid and isolated forms. Even among the texts that Hegel “classifies as original history,” not a single one consists merely of simple descriptions of particular events; rather, they invariably combine elements of both “original” and “reflective” history, and some even contain embryonic forms of what Hegel calls “philosophical history.” Historical narratives always involve both experiential observation and reflective interpretation. By dividing history into three fixed categories, Hegel oversimplifies the complexity of historiographical practices and overlooks the dynamic interrelations among different modes of historical writing.

In sum, the limitations of Hegel’s Philosophy of History stem both from its highly abstract idealist methodology and from its overly schematic classification of historical writing. While its systematization possesses philosophical value, its explanatory power remains constrained when confronted with the empirical richness and methodological diversity of actual historical scholarship. These shortcomings subsequently became productive points of critique and reinterpretation for later generations of scholars.

«He was not the first to propose the theory of Western primacy, but he was the first to provide a detailed argument for it.» [Guo Xiaoling, 1998]. In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel grounds the differences among human civilizations in the particularities of their geographical environments. He classifies the natural spaces in which human societies develop into three principal types—highlands, river plains, and coastal regions—and argues that these physical settings profoundly shape the lifestyles, spiritual dispositions, and state-building capacities of different peoples. The highland regions, characterized by scarce water resources and limited arable land, tend to foster patriarchal forms of social organization, a lack of fixed dwellings, and a high degree of mobility. For these reasons, Hegel concludes that such groups “are comparatively unimportant elements.” By contrast, the river plains, endowed with abundant water and fertile soil, provide favorable conditions for the emergence of great ancient civilizations such as China, India, and Egypt. In such environments, the rise of legal systems,

hierarchical structures, and the consolidation of the state becomes historically possible. Coastal regions, meanwhile, are defined above all by the sea. In Hegel's depiction, the sea operates as a dynamic force in human history, endowing coastal peoples with qualities such as adventurousness, intelligence, commercial talent, and fearless freedom. It is in this context that Hegel famously asserts: "The Mediterranean is the heart of the Old World... Without the Mediterranean, 'world history' could not be conceived."

Yet this mode of reasoning—one that elevates geographical difference into the principal determinant of civilizational development—ultimately distorts the essence of history. Hegel's attribution of an overwhelmingly central role to Mediterranean civilization overlooks the internal diversity and structural complexity of the societies he describes. Modern scholarship has shown that the Greeks were, fundamentally, an agrarian people: their political communities, social structures, and economic foundations were rooted in agriculture. Although certain Greek city-states developed relatively advanced commerce and craftsmanship, these sectors still depended on the stability of an agricultural base. This picture differs markedly from Hegel's claim that maritime conditions alone cultivated the freedom-loving and enterprising spirit of the Greeks.

More crucially, Hegel's entire narrative rests on an unmistakably Eurocentric presupposition. He elevates Western civilization to the status of the culmination of "world history" and constructs a unilinear narrative in which history begins in the East and achieves completion in the West. In his view, China and India constitute only the "prelude" to world history, setting early patterns but subsequently falling into a state of "unchanging" stagnation; Greece and Rome, by contrast, serve as the primary agents through which "Spirit" grows, matures, and becomes universal. The historical "climax," in Hegel's account, occurs in the Germanic world, while the peoples of the frigid and torrid zones are excluded altogether from the realm of "world history."

These assertions reveal Hegel's tendency to treat European civilization as both the measure and the destiny of historical development. They also reflect a broader inclination within modern European intellectual discourse to project geographical differences onto hierarchical models of civilization. Consequently, in modern China, the reception of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* has been marked by both deep theoretical engagement and critical reflection. Chinese scholars not only recognized the intellectual power of Hegel's system but also identified its limitations, particularly its reliance on geographical determinism and civilizational hierarchy. This dual response opened an important space for rethinking and reinterpreting world-historical narratives in the context of China's own modern intellectual transformation.

Hegel's achievements and influence in the field of the Philosophy of History are even more remarkable and cannot be overlooked. Within his systematic philosophy, the logical structure of "Absolute Spirit" integrates metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, religion, the state, and world history; yet it is in the Philosophy of History that his theoretical contributions exerted an especially enduring impact. On one hand, Hegel's conception of world history and national history is grounded in the belief that human history is "a rational and law-governed process," rather than merely "a reflection of divine intentions or arrangements." In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel formulated a comprehensive philosophical theory of the evolution of world history, thereby securing a central position for himself within the discipline.

By applying dialectics to historical inquiry, Hegel became, up to the mid-nineteenth century, the most successful thinker in articulating and employing a dialectical method of history. He maintained that history is the process through which the world spirit realizes itself by "tending toward freedom," and that each historical stage contains within itself elements of self-negation. These negative forces

constitute the essential driving power behind the transition from one historical phase to another. Because history continually sublates itself, human civilization advances “according to the will of reason, constantly renewing and transcending its former stages.” Thus, history is not a contingent accumulation of events but the necessary unfolding of spirit through conflict, negation, and reconciliation on its path toward freedom.

On the other hand, Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* exerted a profound influence on Marx, even though their ideas diverged in crucial respects. Marx not only “inherited and developed many of Hegel’s insights” but also, by critically transforming Hegel’s dialectics, established the doctrine of historical materialism. Hegel, following the legacy of Immanuel Kant, regarded the core of the *Philosophy of History* as the pursuit of “consciousness of reason and freedom.” Marx, however, reframed this pursuit through the material conditions of human production and the structural dynamics of society. Despite their differences, both thinkers regarded history as a process governed by internal logic and developmental necessity. With its commanding theoretical vision and sweeping sense of historical magnitude, Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* unfolds before the reader like an immense panorama of world history, becoming a true “art of thought” and leaving an indelible mark on the tradition of speculative historical philosophy.

As a theory concerning the entire developmental process of human history, the *Philosophy of History* addresses fundamental questions about the meaning, nature, and laws of history, as well as the extent to which history is knowable to human beings. Since traditional historiography alone cannot fully address these ontological and metaphysical concerns, philosophical reflection becomes indispensable. As one of the highest expressions of human spirit, philosophy enables historiography to engage deeply with metaphysics, logic, and ethics. Together with the rise of the natural sciences since the eighteenth century, these developments created the intellectual conditions for the emergence of the *Philosophy of History*.

Against this intellectual backdrop, Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* synthesized the insights of his predecessors and established a complete and highly systematic framework for understanding world history, pushing Western *Philosophy of History* to unprecedented heights. Within this system, historicism and historical dialectics receive extensive elaboration and justification. Hegel’s analyses—ranging from the notion that “reason governs the world,” to the motives of historical action, the structural logic of historical development, the trajectory of world history, the formation of national spirit, and the geographical foundations of world-historical processes—present a series of original and influential insights. These ideas have profoundly shaped subsequent developments in historiography, philosophy, and political theory.

Every section of the text reveals Hegel’s profound and expansive historical spirit. *The Philosophy of History*, with its rigorous logical structure, penetrating conceptual depth, and sweeping vision of world history, has drawn sustained attention from Chinese historians and philosophers since its formal introduction more than sixty years ago. As noted earlier, scholarly inquiries into Hegel’s dialectics, the “China chapter,” and his conception of world history shed light on the far-reaching influence of *The Philosophy of History* on the transformation of Chinese historical studies in the modern era.

On one hand, Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* offers a completely new vantage point for historical inquiry, elevating the study of history to a higher theoretical plane. His ideas concerning historical development, the movement of Spirit, and the integrality of world history have exerted a lasting impact on the modernization of Chinese historiographical narratives and the discipline’s intellectual structure. On the other hand, *The Philosophy of History* has provided crucial inspiration for the construction of China’s own historiographical theories. Hegel’s demonstration of the unity of “history and logic”

constituted a direct theoretical foundation for Marxist Philosophy of History—namely historical materialism—enabling humanity to examine its ideas and actions with a critical eye and to reflect upon its historical and present existence through new modes of thinking and new value systems. This critical spirit forms the essential content of philosophical inquiry.

Every era's thought implicitly contains the fundamental beliefs of its age, and such beliefs often manifest themselves in the form of philosophical ideas. The presuppositions of thought constitute the basis of its own construction and serve as the logical fulcrum upon which thinking rests. Thus, thought possesses both implicitness and logical compulsion. Implicitness refers to the invisible role that foundational assumptions play in enabling the development of thought, while logical compulsion denotes the hidden manner in which such assumptions structure and regulate all modes and contents of human thinking and action.

Philosophical critique of these presuppositions aims to uncover hidden assumptions, deconstruct their logic of necessity, and reconstruct the foundations and principles upon which thought is built. Through this process, human modes of thinking, value orientations, aesthetic sensibilities, and ultimate concerns undergo profound transformation, which ultimately translates into changes in practical activity. This shows that philosophical reflection does not merely revise the *content* of thought, but instead interrogates the *inner presuppositions* that structure thinking itself.

For this reason, the philosophical dimension of human thought is indispensable. Immanuel Kant, the founder of German classical philosophy, believed that the purpose of philosophy is to “clear the ground,” revealing the inner contradictions of human reason through critical inquiry. Georg Hegel, in turn, defined philosophy as “thinking which becomes conscious of its own nature,” and termed philosophical thinking “speculative thinking,” distinguishing it from representational thought and formal reasoning. When thought takes itself as its own object, it realizes self-consciousness of its nature. Edmund Husserl, the phenomenologist, argued that cognition is taken for granted within the “natural attitude,” whereas in philosophical thinking the very possibility of cognition becomes a fundamental problem. All these philosophers direct their critiques toward the presuppositions through which human thought constitutes itself, seeking to uncover the deep structures and internal mechanisms underlying human rationality.

## Conclusion

In every historical era, philosophy acquires its own distinctive temporal meaning and thus develops its own set of philosophical themes. The fundamental problems of philosophy do not exist independently of their time; rather, they gain their significance through the historical themes of the age. Conversely, these historical themes deepen and reshape the enduring questions of philosophy. Individual cognition and reflection, however abstract they may appear, evolve synchronously with the broader development of human intellectual civilization and remain closely linked to the historical characteristics and cultural currents of their time. In this sense, all philosophical inquiry emerges from the interplay of temporal content, national intellectual forms, and the stylistic individuality of thinkers. Philosophy is therefore intrinsically historical; it is never detached from history nor situated beyond the flow of time.

If philosophy may be regarded as a form of “historical ideology,” then the history of philosophy cannot be reduced to a chronological account of ideas. Instead, it must be understood as a form of *Philosophy of History* for the history of philosophy is constituted by the history of philosophical development itself. From this perspective, the history of philosophy can be seen as a record of battles

among “heroes of thought,” as a chronicle of the transformation of “noble ideas,” and as an account of the evolution of the “spirit of the age.” By taking historical ideology as its central focus, the history of philosophy provides subsequent generations with the conceptual frameworks through which problems of historical consciousness and human self-awareness are articulated, thereby serving as the scaffolding upon which new philosophical developments are built.

Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* is marked by powerful imagery and a distinctive speculative imagination. On the one hand, in Hegel’s narrative, “The Germanic World” represents the culmination of rational spirit and stands in sharp contrast to those peoples and regions he considered “left behind.” For Hegel, these areas possess an “unbridgeable ontological difference” relative to “the final purpose of history.” On the other hand, his depiction of “other worlds of peoples” is fragmented and internally inconsistent, often presenting contradictory elements and resting upon a psychological presupposition grounded in an idealized German self. Thus, in Hegel’s account, empires such as China appear to have “stabilized at the limits of history,” while Africa is portrayed as a “condensed childhood,” reflecting eighteenth-century European ways of perceiving and representing the complexity of China and Africa. This narrative structure, Hegel’s philosophical interpretation of historiography, and his conceptions of the state and nation left a lasting imprint on modern Chinese intellectual transformation. A clear example is Liang Qichao’s essay *On the Relationship Between History and Race*, which explicitly adopted elements of Hegelian theoretical frameworks—testifying to the profound reach of Hegel’s influence.

The transmission of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* in modern China was far from smooth. Its meanings traveled across German, English, and Chinese linguistic worlds, undergoing reinterpretation and reconstruction at each stage of cultural translation. This process unfolded alongside Chinese intellectuals’ growing engagement with Hegel’s philosophy and, subsequently, with Marx’s *Philosophy of History*. Meanwhile, China’s own concepts of history and philosophy were shifting in response to the pressures of modernization and the rise of nationalism, forming a dynamic interplay between foreign ideas and domestic transformation. The broader movement of “Western learning spreading eastward” marked a significant watershed, signaling the emergence of China as a modern nation-state in the true sense. Yet it also introduced deep social and cultural tensions: the continuity of historical tradition was disrupted by warfare, while the banners of freedom, idealism, and nationalism guided China into the new intellectual landscape of the twentieth century—often under the conditions of “Eastern dependence and Western dominance,” which characterized much of the era’s trajectory.

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## **Интеллектуальное путешествие: Распространение и резонанс философии истории Гегеля в современном Китае**

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**Аннотация**

Поражение в первой японо-китайской войне усилило внешнее давление на империю Цин, а распространившееся ощущение, что «гибель нации неизбежна», побудило различные социальные слои Китая к проведению широкомасштабных реформ. Эта атмосфера кризиса заставила как традиционную литературную элиту, так и нарождающуюся интеллектуальную элиту предпринять структурный пересмотр классической системы знаний Китая, стремясь выявить корни национальной слабости. В то же время эти элиты активно внедряли, переводили и обсуждали западные теории — особенно в области социальных наук и философии истории — в качестве потенциальных интеллектуальных ресурсов для противостояния нестабильной политической ситуации. В рамках этой более широкой интеллектуальной трансформации «Философия истории» выступила в качестве важнейшего медиума, через который западные идеи проникали в Китай. На протяжении почти полувека ее восприятие прошло через несколько различных этапов: ранний этап прямой «трансплантации», за которым последовала избирательная и частичная «адаптация», и, наконец, этап, характеризующийся критическим усвоением и переосмыслением. Это интеллектуальное путешествие не только изменило китайское понимание истории, общества и государства, но и отразило эволюцию концептуальных усилий, посредством которых современный Китай стремился построить современное национальное государство. Изучение этой траектории раскрывает различные пути и ориентации, которые китайские мыслители представляли, пытаясь сформулировать жизнеспособную концепцию современного национального устройства.

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**Ключевые слова**

Гегель; философия истории; распространение; влияние.

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