

The 22nd Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences  
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## **Opening of the International Congress of Historians in Jinan**

### **Transnational contacts**

On behalf of the International Committee of Historical Sciences It is my great pleasure and honor to welcome you all to the 22nd Conference of Historians. This moment is very important. The conference of the International Committee of Historical Sciences/Commiss e Internationale des Sciences Historiques has never before had its conference in Asia. The conference is being held here for the first time. I would like to warmly thank the Chinese Ministry of Education, Shandong University and the Organizing Committee of the conference for very effective work. Thanks to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Association of Chinese Historians

“History Olympics Come to Shandong” is the title of the article by Wang Quian published in the China Daily on the 14th of April 2015. The 22nd conference of Historical Sciences has been described as the world’s most influential academic event of Historians. The president of Shandong University, Professor Zhang Rong, who was interviewed for this article, emphasized the importance of the conference, which is displaying the vitality of Chinese civilization and promoting cultural self-confidence, as well as raising China’s international image.

In my presentation I’ll focus on two issues: firstly, on transnational contacts between Chinese culture and other countries in the long run and on channels for distributing the knowledge gained. Secondly, I will be looking at the role of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS/CISH) in creating platforms for transnational contacts across national borders. At the end of my presentation I will raise some questions and point to some challenges for the future.

### **Contacts with Chinese Culture**

One of the main revolutions in the history of mankind has been the development of transportation and the acceleration of communication. As new innovative means of communication, we first saw the telegraph, then the telephone and most recently the Internet, which has brought people close

together regardless of their place of residence. At the moment, distances have lost their meaning when we can receive important information via the Internet in real time. This has also facilitated the organization of this conference.

From the beginning of the 19th century the building of railways and steamships made possible the increasing mobility of people and speeded transportation of goods and raw materials. The invention of the automobile made travelling possible to places that were far from any railways. Since 1920, airplanes have

united towns and countries on all continents. During recent years, China as well as Japan have provided examples of just how the newest technology can be adopted in building high-speed trains and long bridges.

This year we have read in the newspapers that the Chinese government has drafted and published Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road “Economic Belt” and the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” to promote the implementation of the Initiative by Chinese President Xi Jinping. These two long silk roads will extend 10,000 kilometers. Symbolizing communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world. The last stop for both silk roads is planned to be in Venice. The building of new Silk roads could help to promote the economic prosperity and regional economic cooperation of the countries along the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Road.

The Silk Road Economic Belt will be focused on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe, as well as the Baltic, linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central and Western Asia, and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st Century Maritime Road is planned to leave from Fuzhou and go to Indonesia. From there it is to continue toward Calcutta in India,, Sri Lanka ´s Colombo and Nairobi in Kenya and run via the Suez canal to the port of Pireus in Greece, and once again end in Venice.

The original silk route, opened by the Han dynasty in 133 before Ch, was a network of several routes. The main road followed the old road built by the Persians to Turkey and to the Mediterranean Sea, and these roads continued up to Britain. The main export products were silk, paper, gunpowder and spices.

Many of us read in primary school about Marco Polo´s travels. Marco Polo was born in 1254 and grew up in a merchant family in Venice, which was the center for commerce in the Mediterranean. Marco Polo is probably the most famous Westerner to have traveled on the Silk Road. He was only 17 years old when his father and uncle took him with them to China. The Polos passed through Armenia, Persia, and Afghanistan, over the Pamirs and along the Silk Road to China. Marco Polo´s journey through Asia lasted 24 years. He reached further than any of his predecessors, beyond Mongolia to China, and became a confidant of Kublai Khan. In his travelogue we can read how amazed he was at China´s enormous power, great wealth and complex social structure. A canal-based transportation system linked China´s huge cities and markets in a vast communication network. Citizens lived in prosperous cities, could purchase paper books with paper money, eat rice from fine porcelain bowls and wear silk garments. In China he met with phenomena that were totally new to him, for example paper currency, which substituted for gold, silver and coal. He was impressed with the efficient communication system in the Mongol world. From his later history we can be sure of his interest in natural resources, in the ways of people, as well as in strange and interesting plants and animals. It would be wonderful to hear what kind of picture of Europeans was transmitted to the Chinese people!

Chinese silk was very expensive and in the middle of the 6th century the Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, Justinianus I, sent two monks to spy on the silk production in China. They brought silk worms back to Byzantium and thus began silk production in Europe. When the Ottomans conquered Byzantium in 1453, they closed the Silk Road and regular contacts between China and Europe were broken off.

We had to wait until the 18th century before Europeans became fully aware of China´s rich Culture. Designers in the Rococo style found Chinese decorations so attractive that these became a part of newly created tapestries. The production of Porcelain with Chinese symbols was diffused from China´s factories to England.

## Transnational Contacts and ICHS/ CISH

As I have indicated, transnational contacts across national borders is not a new phenomenon in history, nor has it been in the circles of the International Committee of Historical Sciences, ICHS/Comité International des Sciences Historiques or during the earliest conferences.

In its conferences the CISH has opened the gates to multicultural sessions and crossed borders between different cultures. The Congresses of the CISH, which take place every five years, are the biggest world meetings of the international community of historians. Karl Erdman, who wrote the book *Die Ökumene der Historiker* in 1987 which was translated into English with help of Jürgen Kocka and Wolfgang Mommsen<sup>1</sup> under the title *Toward a Global Community of Historians*, wanted to make the discipline more “ecumenical”.

Since its inception in 1926, the ICHS has been for decades, and is still today, a fine forum for scholarly debates and an arena for the most innovative themes, methods and approaches. The structure of the ICHS consists of three types of members: At the moment we have 53 national committees and 30 internationally affiliated organisations and 12 internal commissions. The latter can be described as thematic organisations. They originally had their own sessions but from the Amsterdam conference on they could cooperate with national committees, propose joint sessions and become part of the main program.

In the founding year, 22 countries were accepted as members, among them the committees of large countries, such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as three Scandinavian countries. China became a member of the CISH in 1938. From the beginning the main structure of the ICHS/CISH consisted of national committees and in 1929 thematic commissions (today internationally affiliated organisations ILOs) were accepted as full members of the ICHS.

The transnational character of the CISH can be analysed by looking at the themes of conferences. The founding of national committees and internal commissions as well internationally affiliated organisations shows the interest in international cooperation. The distribution of participants in conferences according to countries and continents can also tell something about the transnationalism and globalisation to be found within the International Committee of Historical Sciences.

The period from the end of the 19th century to the First World War has been called the first global age, where the mobility of educated people was high. The first conference of historians was held in 1898 in The Hague, the following one was in Paris (1900), the next in Rome (1903), then in Berlin (1908) and after that in London (1913). The participants, from approximately several hundred to one thousand, came from bigger European countries and from North America. Japan was the only country from Asia along with Iran which participated in the conferences of The Hague and Paris, which gathered individual participants from many Latin-American countries, such as Argentina, Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Venezuela. From Africa there were representatives from Egypt already in 1898, and from Libya and South Africa in 1900. The Paris world exhibition also attracted historians to Paris. There were 800 registered participants

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<sup>1</sup> Erdman, Karl Dietrich, *Die Ökumene der Historiker*, 1987; in English, *Toward a Global Community of Historians. The International Historical Congresses and the International Committee of Historical Sciences 1898-2000*, edited by Jürgen Kocka and Wolfgang J. Mommsen in collaboration with Agnes Blänsdorf, translated by Alan Nothinagle, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford 2005.

for the Paris conference. but only a fourth of those registered participated in the conference. The main theme was comparative history, e.g. comparative religious history.

When we look at the programs of other early conferences, we see that national historiography was the dominant content of those congresses. In most countries the role of historians has been to write the history of their own country in their local language, based on national or local sources. At the same time, however, interest in comparative and world history increased and has increased even more since then. The discussion concerning theory and methodology gained importance even during the interwar period when debates between historians emphasizing structural history like the Annales School and historians who emphasized narrative methods were hotly fought. Another major trend has also been born. Topics and sessions of the conferences have expanded since the 1990s, from political history to economic and social history, to the history of churches, the history of gender and that of everyday life.

In the History of the ICHS three phases can be identified: During the interwar period the main function of the ICHS was overcoming nationalism and bridging the gaps between historians from different nations who had fought against each other in the First World War. During that period, the number of national committees more than doubled (from 22 in 1926 to 46 in 1939). Among the national committees we can find countries outside Europe: Egypt, Turkey, India, Indochina, Japan, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Mexico. The number of participants at conferences did not increase to more than 1200 participants in Zürich (1938).

The second phase was from 1950 to 1990 when the Congresses served as a major forum for historians from Communist and non-Communist countries. The conferences of the CISH occurred regularly from 1950 on. Historians who were frequently in strong conflict with each other exchanged their ideas and views at conferences. During the cold war debates between historians surviving from the historicist tradition and historians of the “neo-historicist” directions and Marxist –Leninist historicism became common. International tensions caused by events in Hungary, Poland and the Suez in 1956 were still fresh in people’s memory when once again a German problem gave rise to international tensions. Historians tried to defend the scholarly character of the conferences. In the congresses from the 1960s to 1985, from Stockholm to Stuttgart, the basic political configuration of international relations under which these events were held, remained constant. The antagonism between two political systems had its impact on the congresses. During the Cold War period national committees were founded in Eastern European countries like Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania.

There were not only debates concerning the interpretation of historical development, but also concrete problems to be discussed. At the congress in Rome (1955) many historians directed a most urgent appeal to the Soviet Union to permit the study of documents that were indispensable for research into contemporary history, e.g. concerning the failure of the British-Soviet negotiations in August 1939, the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the attached secret protocol on the demarcation of mutual spheres of interest in the Baltic States, Poland and South-Eastern Europe. Emotions ran high at the Conference in Rome, when a committee accepted the invitation to organize the General Assembly in Moscow in 1957. Later the conference in Moscow in 1970 was boycotted by the USA and Great Britain for political reasons.

Participants in conferences during this period varied from 1,100 (Paris) to 2,700 (Bucharest). The conference in Bucharest in 1980 gathered participants from 43 countries, among which were participants from India, Iraq, Lebanon, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Ghana, Kenya and the Cameroon as well as from Saudi-Arabia, and included representatives from North and South Korea. The conference in Montreal fifteen years

later attracted participants from 50 countries, many outside the so-called Western World, and among those were representatives from many African, Latin American and Asian countries.

The third phase in the History of the ICHS began in the 1990s and continued into the first years of the twenty-first century. That was the period when many Eastern European countries became independent. National committees were founded in Latvia, Lithuania, Belorussia, Croatia, Georgia, the Ukraine, Slovakia and Slovenia. New national committees were also born in Latin American Countries such as Brazil, Uruguay, Peru and Chile; and in African countries like Tunisia, Morocco, Guinea, South Africa and Nigeria. In Asian countries Vietnam joined the ICHS 1990.

The program of conferences of the ICHS has reflected trends towards transnationalism and globalization. At the conference in Montreal one of the major themes was Peoples in Diaspora: Changing Sources, Forms, and Meanings, in Oslo Global Perspectives on History: Concepts and Methodology. At the conference in Sydney the CISH supported the emergence of new approaches to transnational history by choosing two major themes : Environment, Humankind and Nature , and the second, War, Peace and Society and International Order. At the Amsterdam conference in 2010 the major themes, The Fall of Empires and the City as Culture, Religion and Power, attracted participants from all continents.

The above-mentioned conferences (in Madrid in 1990, Montreal in 1995 and Oslo in 2000) gathered approximately 2,000 participants. Many representatives of African nations also participated in the conference in Montreal.

The strength of History among other disciplines lies with its chronology and with its need for a space. Historical events always need a place, which could be a village, a region or a country. Already in the 1950s the first regionally organised internationally affiliated organisations were founded. The *Comité Internationale des Etudes Historiques Slaves* and the *Instituto Panamericano de Geografía y Historia*, Later the *Association Internationale d'Etudes du Sud-Est Européen* and the *Association des Historiens Africains* were founded.

## **ICHS**

My first experience at a conference of the International Committee of Historical Science dates back to the Bucharest conference in 1980. The Bucharest conference displayed smooth organization, generous hospitality and strong participation of representatives of the government, the Party, the academies, and the Church, as well as benefitting from lively reporting in the press. That ensured that for a week the historical profession was present in the public life of Romania. Eastern Europe was a major theme as was the subject of peace. Five impressive volumes of reports, including discussions on the Congress, were published by the Romanian organizers<sup>2</sup>. Please permit me to recount one concrete result from the Bucharest conference. As I listened to the presentation by Jan Vansina on oral history, I received the idea of founding an oral history project in Finland. We started our oral history project in 1987 after long preparations, which required me to visit the oral history collections at Columbia University and at the London School of Economics. During this project our team has interviewed hundreds of veteran parliamentarians about their careers and experiences, and the project has received permanent status. The interviews are digitalized and kept at the archives of the Parliament of Finland. Researchers need

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<sup>2</sup> XV Congrès International des Sciences Historiques, Bucarest, 10-19. Août 1980: Rapports, 5 vols, Bucarest, 1980.

permission to use this material. I am sure that there are many similar individual projects stemming from the 21 earlier conferences which could also be mentioned.

## **Challenges for the Future**

The main message of the ICHS/CISH is, and has been, to provide a forum for new innovative themes and for new methodological and thematic approaches. Both Karl Erdmann and recently Rolf Torstendahl in his book *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism* have emphasized that historical conferences have had an impact on the professionalization of history writing and on the profession of historians. The rules for professional historiography were partly created in conferences.

As I see it, the main success of the international conferences of Historians has been in gathering historians from different continents and countries to discuss new innovative themes, new methodological and thematic approaches and to undertake comparative research. Examples of these are the major themes of the 22nd conference in Jinan, China, from a global perspective: Historicizing Emotions; Revolutions in World History: Comparisons and Connections; and the Digital Turn in History.

I would like to finish my speech by pointing out some challenges for the future.

1. Today competition in all fields of science has increased. What will happen to professional historians and people in the liberal arts in the future as we compete with other disciplines like the natural sciences for research money? History research can be seen as useless because the practical use of history for the economy is difficult to demonstrate. Do we need to cooperate more efficiently with other disciplines of the humanities, cultural studies, social sciences and museum specialists in order to keep our own discipline alive? My reply is yes.

2. An even bigger problem and challenge for professional historians today is the question of the role of the media. Our academic research is competing with popular presentations, with films, videos and TV programs, often created by non-professional historians. I have to ask: Will the history of our time be written by filmmakers, producers, the BBC or CNN? Films, documents and discussion forums on the Internet might have more impact on the historical image than our articles, books and other publications. Often journalists or media people do not distinguish between professional and non-professional historians. We need to cooperate more efficiently with non-professional historians. We have to transmit our research results to broader audiences. We may need to ask journalists and media people to consult with us and read our newest interpretations concerning their topics, although for the new facts they obviously depend on us.

3. Even though we'll try to keep abreast of the newest trends, offer new research fields and new methods we have to ask ourselves: How can we attract scholars, especially younger scholars, to participate in the conferences and to listen to papers if they can find (in quotation marks) all important information via the Internet. We are optimistic, however; I, for one, believe that personal networking is the most important aspect of this world. Contacts and networking can be created at their best in conferences, meetings and in smaller groups, often in informal groups. At international congresses, like this one in Jinan 2015, participants have the possibility to listen to the most distinguished historians, whose books or articles they have read, and to participate in discussions. In my view, nothing else (not Facebook or Twitter) can replace face-to-face discussions with colleagues who come from different countries and continents.

I therefore wish you all a very fruitful and successful conference!

**Before we start our work, however, I would like to thank organizations, associations and the people behind of this conference**

Thanks to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Association of Chinese Historians, especially the President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Wang Weiguang , Vice President Wu Yin, Professor Zhang Haipeng, President of the Association of Chinese Historians, and Professor Wang Jianlang, Secretary General of the Association of Chinese Historians and Director of the Institute of Modern History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

I have the great pleasure of thanking professor Zhang Rong, President of the Shandong University as well as Professor Liu Jiafeng, Vice Dean of the School of History and Culture, and Liu Yuan, Director of the Department of External Affairs of S.D.G. Last but not least, I wish to thank Wang Zhaoli, who has done so much for the success of the Conference

The coming 22nd conference wouldn't be possible without the support of the Shandong Provincial Government. Thank you Guo Shuqing, Governor of Shandong Province, and Vice Governor Sun Wei for your efforts and support. You made the conference possible through close cooperation with the Academy of Social Sciences, with the Association of Chinese Historians and with Shandong University. We are happy that the conference has been organized here in Jinan, in the Shandong province which is a prominent cultural province and was home to the famous Chinese philosopher Confucious. 10

Lastly I want to thank my colleagues, the members of the Board of the ICBS for excellent cooperation. My special thanks go to Robert Frank, the general secretary of the ICBS and to Pascal Cauchy, both of whom have done an immense amount of work for the success of the congress.