

From Braudel to the Chinese-Western Rivalry

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Braudel's *La Méditerranée* was published at a historical juncture when the decline of European colonial empires and the disastrous consequences of intra-European strife triggered bold political imaginations and sweeping political reconfigurations: the creation of the post-World War II international order with the United Nations at its center, of course, but also projects of regional integration such as the EU as well as large-scale, transcontinental projects such as Eurafrika and Afroasia.¹ Going hand in hand with the political imagination and reconfiguration were searching historico-philosophical reflections and grand historiographical reconstructions. Alongside monumental works in the philosophy of history such as Arnold Toynbee's *Study of History* (1934–61), Karl Jaspers' *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949), and Eric Voegelin's *Order and History* (which began to appear in the 1950s and culminated in *The Ecumenical Age* in 1974), there was Braudel's *La Méditerranée*. The definition of the Mediterranean as an entity with its own history—a coherent historical world—makes this historiographical masterpiece a philosophy of history as well. As Braudel put it in the preface to the first edition of the work, “Woe betide the historian who thinks that [...] the Mediterranean as an entity needs no definition because it has long been clearly defined, is instantly recognizable and can be described by dividing general history along the lines of its geographical contours. [...] The question of boundaries is the first to be encountered; from it all others flow. To draw a boundary around anything is to define, analyze and reconstruct it, in this case select, indeed adopt, a philosophy of history.”² As a philosophy of history, *La Méditerranée* shares with the other monumental works

¹ On the now almost forgotten transcontinental projects, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrika, Afroasia* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

² Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 1:17–18.

of the philosophy of history what Braudel, in his 1950 inaugural lecture given at the Collège de France, characterized as “a consideration of the whole destiny of mankind.”³

Seventy-five years later, with the post-World War II world order under siege and new planetary challenges looming, the political imagination is again at work, and political reconfiguration is again underway. The political sea change comes with a new wave of historico-philosophical reflections and historiographical reconstructions that reconsider the “whole destiny of mankind”—for example, the renewed interest in world history,⁴ the projects of global history⁵ and “big history” (David Christian), and the invocation of a new “climate of history in a planetary age” (Dipesh Chakrabarty). In light of the political reconfiguration of the world today, my current book project—*Two Worlds: The Idea of the West vs. The Idea of China Across Time*—undertakes a historiographical reconstruction of a particular kind: a comparative study of the idea of Europe, as well as the associated idea of the West and the idea of China from the “the Axial Age” (Karl Jaspers) to the present. I’d like to highlight three aspects of this book project, which are inspired by Braudel but at the same time go beyond him.

First, following Braudel, *Two Worlds* approaches history on the scale of large, expansive regions, analyzing long-term, enduring structures—what he called “collective destinies and general trends.” The regions examined are Europe/the West and China. Like the Mediterranean, Europe/the West and China are entities in need of definition, all the more so because their respective boundaries keep shifting across time. The need for definition and redefinition makes the analysis and reconstruction of the two regions an exercise in the philosophy of history. Among the “collective destinies and general trends,” my project focuses on a dimension that Braudel curiously omits, namely the system of multiple political entities, something usually called “world order” in international relations and beyond. By “Europe”/the “West” and “China,” I mean two more or less territorialized systems of multiple political entities, i.e., two world orders.

Second, *Two Worlds* is concerned with ideas and visions as an integral dimension of collective destinies and general trends. Braudel’s discussion of collective destinies and general trends includes economies, empires, societies, civilizations, and forms of war. But he pays scant attention to the ideas and visions undergirding every society, or what Cornelius Castoriadis would call “the imaginary institution of society.”⁶ My project, by contrast, focuses on the imaginary, that is, the ideas, narratives, and images that configure a society and forge its collective identity, including those that define its ontology, those that locate it in time, and those that distinguish it from other societies. This means studying two traditions of political thought that articulate what Europe/the West is and should be and what China is and should be; two traditions of historical thought that articulate what and how shared pasts and futures bind Europe/the West together and what and how shared pasts and futures bind China together; two traditions of alterity discourse that articulate how Europe/the West differs from and relates to others and how China differs from and relates to others. Above all, it means studying two traditions of imaginative literature that articulate the idea of Europe/the West and the idea of China in all these aspects.

³ Fernand Braudel, “The Situation of History in 1950,” in *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6–22 (here 6).

⁴ On the renewed interest in world history, see the seven-volume *Cambridge World History* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and the six-volume *History of the World* (Harvard University Press, 2012–2025).

⁵ See Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Polity Press, 1987).

Finally, *Two Worlds* takes a comparative approach. Although Braudel now and then referred to different world regions, and although his *La Méditerranée* has inspired historical studies of comparable regions such as the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic, his work is generally not comparative by design. In contrast, my project is designed to be comparative, studying Europe and China synchronously in five pivotal periods: the beginnings of the idea of Europe and the idea of China in the so-called Axial Age, the idea of Europe/the West and the idea of China as two regional world orders in the centuries between 1000 and 1300 and then in the long eighteenth century, the general reorientation in the short twentieth century (roughly 1910–1990), and the idea of the West and the idea of China as two global world orders in the present age.

Concluding with a preliminary account of two competing visions of global order, one Western and the other Chinese, *Two Worlds* is a reconstruction of the past meant to illuminate, if not explain, a key aspect of the political configuration of the present. If the political configuration of the present is radically different yet nonetheless evolving from that of seventy-five years ago, this book radically departs from—yet is nonetheless inspired by—Braudel. A