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## Alexander von Humboldt in China<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The dissemination of Alexander von Humboldt's ideas in China can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty, where a few articles in English-language newspapers served as the earliest means of exposure. However, the reach and availability of these articles were highly limited. It was not until the Republican era that Humboldt gained a relatively broader publicity through the translations of foreign academic works. The general public's acquaintance with Humboldt mostly came from the extensive distribution of textbooks as well as biographical dictionaries of renowned scientists and explorers. Nevertheless, Humboldt's reputation coexisted with a lack of comprehensive academic research. While his ideas were referenced in various fields, such as geography, social sciences, and humanities, there was a notable absence of in-depth exploration. The underlying reason can be the disparity between Humboldt's global perspective and encyclopedic knowledge and the gradual subdivision of academic disciplines in the modernization process of Chinese universities. In recent years, Chinese literary researchers have taken the lead in revisiting Humboldt's works, signaling a renewed interest. It reflects the growing recognition of interdisciplinary research in China and the significance attributed to holistic knowledge in fields like philosophy of science and anthropology. These developments offer an opportunity to dismantle the barriers that have impeded the blending of Humboldtian knowledge into the Chinese intellectual landscape.

**Keywords:** Alexander von Humboldt, Humboldtian studies, China's reception of Humboldt, Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies

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During his expedition to Central Asia in 1829, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) deviated from his planned route and arrived at the 豁尼迈拉虎 (Huonimailahu) in Zunghar, where he briefly interacted with 清福 (Qing Fu), a member of the Imperial Guards. This encounter served as a starting point for Humboldt's academic and intellectual influence, which began a long and gradual journey in China over the subsequent two centuries.

When Alexander von Humboldt published *Fragmens de géologie et de climatologie asiatiques* upon his return from Central Asia, his reputation began to spread in China through the efforts of European and American missionaries. In 1832, an English newspaper called *The Chinese Repository* featured a series of critiques authored by Robert Morrison (1782-1834), the first British Protestant missionary to China and a key figure in the cultural exchange between China and the West during the early 19th century. Morrison's critiques focused on the map 大清万年一统经纬舆图 (Daqing Wannian Yitong Jingwei Yutu; "A General Geographical Map, with Degrees of Latitude and Longitude, of the Empire of the Ta Tsing Dynasty—May It Last for Ever") by Li Mingche, an astronomer and cartographer of the Qing Dynasty. Established in 1832 by Elijah C. Bridgman, the first American Protestant missionary to China (1801-1861), *The Chinese Repository* aimed to serve Western immigrants in China, commercial groups, and missionaries in Southeast Asia. Morrison, who translated the entire protestant Bible into Chinese and introduced it to the Chinese people, drew inspiration from Humboldt's theories in his article. Specifically, he critiqued traditional Chinese geography and cartography concerning the Altai and Tian Shan mountain ranges, aligning them with Humboldt's ideas regarding these mountains.

On April 30, 1853, *The North China Herald*, the first English-language newspaper in Shanghai after the opening of its port, published a short note titled "A Philosopher's Feelings on Occasion of an Earthquake." This piece provided a brief commentary and quoted Humboldt's vivid description of an earthquake. This newspaper was the prime source for the history of the foreign presence in China from around 1850 to the 1940s. In 1873, also in Shanghai, which had already become a significant economic and trade hub in the Far East, saw the publication of a book review on Humboldt's biography in *The Shanghai Evening Courier*. Founded by British journalist Lang Hugh, this newspaper served as a source of news and information for the foreign community residing in Shanghai at that time. The book review was dedicated to commemorating the 100th anniversary of Humboldt's birth and centered on the biography titled *Alexander von Humboldt: eine wissenschaftliche Biographie*.



Figure 1: Book review on Alexander von Humboldt in *The Shanghai Evening Courier*

However, as depicted in the provided newspaper page, the name of Alexander von Humboldt remained largely unknown among the Chinese populace during the 19th century. It was confined to sporadic and abbreviated reports that were published exclusively in English-language newspapers and suffered from limited dissemination and insufficient coverage. Notably, it was not until the Republican era (1912-1949), known as the *Zhonghua Minguo* period, that Humboldt's name began to gain widespread recognition through extensive publication in various forms such as books, translated works, textbooks, essays, and newspapers. This shift in recognition can be primarily attributed to the return of overseas students who had pursued education in Europe, America, Japan, and other countries since the late Qing Dynasty.<sup>2</sup> Upon their return to China, these educated individuals ardently embraced their aspirations to serve their country and made significant contributions by engaging in various realms such as Chinese educational institutions, government establishments, and commercial enterprises. Many of them assumed pivotal roles as prominent administrators and reformers. Capitalizing on the Western scientific knowledge, institutional frameworks, and intellectual assets they had acquired during their overseas education, they became catalysts for China's modernization and played a crucial role in the introduction and dissemination of Western knowledge systems in China. Consequently, the intellectual and cultural exchange provided an auspicious opportunity for Alexander von Humboldt to make inroads into China. His observations, experiments, and theoretical contributions across diverse fields resonated with the nascent intellectual landscape of modern Chinese academia, shaping and enriching its development.

Chinese geologists were among the early proponents of the significance of Alexander von Humboldt and offering preliminary evaluations of his theories. Renowned geologist Mr. Weng Wenhao (翁文灏) acknowledged Humboldt as the preeminent scholar among Western researchers who explored Chinese mountain ranges during the early 19th century (1819). Weng Wenhao, who graduated from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium in 1913, was the first Chinese geology PhD holder to receive academic training in the West. As a pivotal figure in the advancement of modern geoscience disciplines in China and later served as the Prime Minister of the Kuomintang Government (1948), and he held positions as a professor and department head at prestigious institutions like Tsinghua University, making substantial contributions to the establishment and development of the geology discipline after his graduation. Furthermore, he played a pivotal role in founding 中国地质调查所 (*Zhongguo Dizhi Diaocha Suo*; the Geological Survey of China), the largest and earliest-established research institution in the country, renowned internationally for its contributions to geological studies. In his writings, Weng Wenhao compared traditional Chinese geography with Humboldt's research of Asian mountain ranges, which inadvertently made Humboldt a benchmark for evaluating traditional Chinese geography.

In 1928, Zhu Jiahua (朱家骅), a geologist who had also received academic training in Europe, including a PhD in geology from Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany, in 1922, exerted his influence to advocate for the establishment of geography departments within the science colleges of national universities, or at least in key universities. After he served

as Minister of Education (1930) and Minister of Transportation (1931), his influential role extended to the organization and personnel management of the ruling Kuomintang. Under his impetus, geography departments were established in Central University in Nanjing, Tsinghua University in Beijing, and Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou starting from 1929 which also marked the beginning of a rapid development of modern geography in the 1930s (Zhang 571). The recognition of Humboldt's contributions had extended beyond a select group of renowned geologists to the entire discipline of geoscience, with particular field of geography and meteorology. For instance, 中华地学会 (Zhonghua Dixuehui; the Chinese Geographical Society), founded in 1931 by those who engaged in geographical teaching, research, and publishing in Shanghai, was the second academic organization dedicated to geoscience in China. The inaugural issue of the society's journal, *Dixue Jikan* (*Geoscience Quarterly*), prominently featured pictures of the four renowned German geographers on its cover, with Humboldt occupying the first position. At this juncture, Humboldt had become a significant symbol within the discipline of geoscience, being revered within the pantheon of geography history.

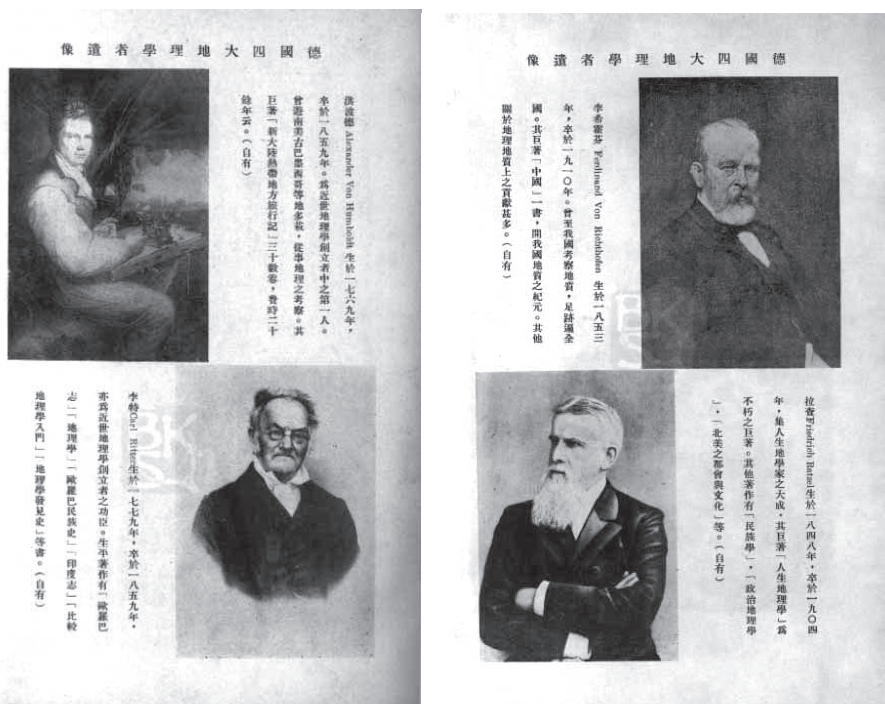


Figure 2: Pictures of the Four Great German Geographers: Alexander von Humboldt, Carl Ritter, Ferdinand von Richthofen, and Friedrich Ratzel (Illustrations on the cover page of the first issue of the *Geoscience Quarterly*, vol. 1, 1932).

It must be emphasized that Humboldt's entry into China was not solely the result of the budding and development of modern geography in China. Rather, it was part of a wider phenomenon of 西学东渐 (Xixue Dongjian; Western learning advancing to the East) in the first half of the 20th century and facilitated the exposure of scholars from diverse fields to

Humboldt's fame. The bibliographic data in the Republican era provided a compelling evidence of the widespread dissemination of Alexander von Humboldt's ideas, and theories in China. Commencing in the 1930s, his influence permeated translated works, textbooks, compilations, and publications across a wide range of disciplines. This proliferation of Humboldt's intellectual legacy underscored the enduring impact he had on Chinese academia and highlights the recognition and resonance his ideas found among scholars and practitioners in various fields (see Table 1).

Table 1 List of Books mentioning Humboldt in the Republican Era (Non-Geographical works)

Academic divisions	Untranslated	Translated
Social science	1. <i>Shehui Kexue Dagang (Outline of Social Sciences)</i> by Sun Hanbing (1932)	1. <i>An Introduction to Social Anthropology</i> by Clark Wissler (1935) 2. <i>The Living Past: A Sketch of Western Progress</i> by F. S. Marvin (1929)
History	1. <i>Chuji Zhongxue Waiguoshi (A Primer of Foreign History for Junior Middle Schools)</i> by Chen Zuyuan (1935) 2. <i>Shixue Tonglun (General Introduction to Historiography)</i> by Yang Honglie (1939) 3. <i>Xiandai Kexue Jinhuaoshi (A History of Modern Scientific Evolution)</i> by Xu Shouzhen (1932)	1. <i>A History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century</i> by John Theodore Merz (1931) 2. <i>Modern and Contemporary European History, 1815-1940</i> by Jacob Salwyn Schapiro (1933) 3. <i>A Political and Social History of Modern Europe</i> by Carlton Joseph Huntley Hayes (1935) 4. <i>The History of Creation</i> by Ernst Haeckel (1936) 5. <i>A History of World Civilization</i> by James Edgar Swain (1943)
Literature	1. <i>Deyizhi Wenxue (German Literature)</i> by Yu Xiangsen (1931)	1. <i>Modern Literary Trends in Europe</i> by Soma Yukyo (1930) 2. <i>A Short History of Comparative Literature From the Earliest Times to the Present Day</i> by Frédéric Loliée (1935)
Culture	1. <i>Xinwenhua Cishu (New Dictionary of New Culture)</i> by Tang Jinggao (1924) 2. <i>Wenhua xue Gaiguan (Overview of Cultural Studies)</i> by Chen Xujing (1947) 3. <i>Xiandai Xinsixiang Ji (Collection of Modern New Thoughts)</i> edited by Lu Xiang (1921)	
Philosophy	1. <i>Xitong Jinhua Zhexue (Philosophy of Systematic Evolution)</i> by Shen Runshen (1925)	1. <i>The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century</i> by Ernst Haeckel (1920) <sup>3</sup> 2. <i>Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution</i> by Peter Kropotkin (1921) 3. <i>Dialectics of Nature</i> by Friedrich Engels (1940) 4. <i>Comparative Legal Philosophy</i> by Luigi Miraglia (1940)

Pedagogy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Ziran Kexue Ji Qi Jiaoshoufa (Natural Science and Its Teaching Methodology)</i> by Zhou Changshou (1925)</li> <li>2. <i>Xiaoxue Dilike Jiaoxuefa (Teaching Methodology of Elementary School Geography)</i> by Liu Huru (1931)</li> <li>3. <i>Xiaoxue Ziranke Jiaoxuefa (Teaching Methodology of Elementary School Natural Science)</i> by Hu Yanli (1934)</li> <li>4. <i>Jiaoxue Fadashi Dagang (Outline of the History of Educational Development)</i> by Lei Tongqun (1934)</li> <li>5. <i>Xiaoxue Geke Jiaoxuefa Jiangyan Ji (Collection of Lectures on Teaching Methodologies of Various Subjects in Elementary School)</i> by Zheng Zhenwen et al. (1935)</li> </ol>	
Economy		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Land Economy</i> by Shiro Kawada (1930)</li> <li>2. <i>Der moderne Kapitalismus. Historisch-systematische Darstellung des gesamteuropäischen Wirtschaftslebens von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart</i> by Werner Sombart (1936)</li> </ol>
Biography	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Shijie Mingren Zhuan (Biographies of World Celebrities)</i> by Wang Changmo et al. (1933)</li> <li>2. <i>Xin Renming Cidian (Dictionary of New Personal Names)</i> by He Jingwen (1933)</li> <li>3. <i>Da'erwen (Charles Robert Darwin)</i> by Ma Junwu (1930)</li> <li>4. <i>Makesi Zhuan (Biography of Carl Marx)</i> by Li Ji (1931)</li> <li>5. <i>Shijie Tanxianjia Liezhuan (Biographies of World Explorers)</i> by Zhu Jijun and Huang Haihe (1941)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Experiment in Autobiography</i> by H. G. Wells (1936)</li> <li>2. <i>Darwin: tema elu ja õpetus</i> by Adolf Heilbornv (1933)</li> </ol>
Others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Dafu Quanji (The Complete Works of Yu Dafu)</i> by Yu Dafu (1928)</li> <li>2. <i>Gei Nianshaozhe (To the Young)</i> by Feng Sha (1935)</li> <li>3. <i>Qingchun Shengli Tan (Discussions on Youth Physiology)</i> by Cao Guanlai (1936)</li> <li>4. <i>Dushu de Fangfa (Methods of Reading)</i> by Han Wen (1947)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Neubegründung der Psychologie von Mann und Weib: Die weibliche Eigenart im Männerstaat und die männliche Eigenart im Frauenstaat</i> by Mathilde Vaerting (1934)</li> </ol>

The above table reveals the broad reach of Humboldt's influence during the Republican era. Chinese intellectuals of the time encountered Humboldt's ideas through a diverse array of disciplines, encompassing social sciences, history, literature, culture, philosophy, education, economics, and biography. These multifaceted engagements notably underscore the academic nature of Humboldt's work, which transcended the boundaries imposed by the subdivision of modern academic disciplines. As Humboldt himself emphasized, the investigation of human activities was an integral part of geoscience, surpassing the factitious boundaries between the

natural sciences and the humanities. Such interconnections served as a comprehensive and holistic perspective that encouraged the exploration of the universe without artificial divisions or disciplinary constraints. While Humboldt's influence pervaded various domains, it is important to acknowledge that all these works were published against the backdrop of the scientific movement that emerged in 1930s China which sought to democratize science, directing scientific knowledge from the realm of elites to the general public (Tang 11-12; Xia 116-118). Among these books, those related to education and biographies in particular played a significant role in disseminating Humboldt's ideas and nurturing a wider understanding and appreciation of his intellectual legacy.

First and foremost, Humboldt's recognition within the wider Chinese society was facilitated by the widespread dissemination of textbooks and educational works within the formal education system. Between 1933 and 1935, a number of educational books prominently featured Humboldt's contributions in dedicated chapters on the development of geography teaching. Particularly noteworthy was the inclusion of references to Humboldt in the influential middle school history textbook *Foreign History for Junior Middle Schools* in 1935, authored by Chen Zuyuan (陈祖源), a history PhD who graduated from the University of Paris. Furthermore, in 1936, the educational research journal *Teaching and Learning* devoted a special issue to geography teaching, acknowledging Humboldt as one of the founding masters of the discipline, aptly titled 饮水思源 (*Yinshui-Siyuan; Never Forget the Source When You Drink Water*). Additionally, in 1939, a significant textbook on teaching methods for elementary natural science, titled *Elementary Natural Science Textbooks and Teaching Methods*, featured quotations from Humboldt in its opening chapter. The textbook aimed to guide primary school natural science teachers nationwide and emphasized the importance of accurate scientific views in effectively guiding students' learning and cultivating their appreciation for the subject. The first chapter specifically highlighted Humboldt's views on scientific concepts and the teaching goals of natural science: "[The] purpose is to teach students that physical and chemical sciences arise from the unity of all natural phenomena, while the sciences of botany and zoology, among others, arise to explain that all life phenomena are governed by the laws of nature. This thinking was advocated by the German scientist Humboldt" (8). This pedagogical resource effectively disseminated Humboldt's scientific views to practitioners of elementary natural science education nationwide. It further suggested that, akin to his brother, Humboldt was a figure deserving of exploration in the realm of educational thought.

Furthermore, biographies emerged as a significant medium through which the general public gained insights into the life and achievements of Humboldt. During the Republican era, many sought to inspire Chinese youth and foster their interest in science by acquainting them with the eminent scientists (Wang and Nie 46-47). Humboldt, being an explorer and an inspirational figure, had his life story disseminated more widely than his scientific works. Notably, two prominent biographies from the 1930s, namely *Biographies of World Celebrities* (1933) and *New Biographical Dictionary* (1933), featured dedicated entries on Humboldt. These entries provided a comprehensive account of his life, with particular emphasis on his travel experiences and

contributions to the field of science. Intriguingly, they also shed light on aspects of his personality and hobbies. For instance, they highlighted his inclination towards a solitary and tranquil life, instructing his servants to feign his absence when visitors called, aiming to ensure an undisturbed environment for his scholarly pursuits. Humboldt's extensive travels and meticulously recorded observations provided ample material for inspiring narratives. *Biographies of World Explorers* (1936) recounted his expedition through the Americas from 1799 to 1803, underscoring some captivating new discoveries he made along the way. Works such as *To Young People* (1935) and *The Youth of Great Figures* (1947) depicted Humboldt's formative experiences during his youth. It is noteworthy that even in contemporary times, Humboldt continues to be portrayed as an inspirational figure among scientists. A notable example is the four-volume set titled *Stories of Scientists* (2004), targeted at young readers, wherein Humboldt shared the limelight with renowned scientists like Isaac Newton, Charles Robert Darwin, and Albert Einstein. Through his unwavering diligence and vast knowledge, Humboldt leaves a lasting impression on readers, inspiring them to pursue scientific endeavors.

To some degree, Humboldt's reputation achieved a certain degree of dissemination in China. However, as depicted in Figure 2, the Chinese populace of that era exhibited a dual response to Humboldt's fame, simultaneously captivated by his renown yet maintaining a certain degree of distance. During this period, none of Humboldt's works were translated into Chinese, and there existed a dearth of dedicated monographs examining his research. People talked about Humboldt, but there was little scholarly study dedicated to him. This trend persisted amidst the tumultuous era of the 1940s and extended into the post-establishment phase of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

In 1959, a commemorative event was organized in Beijing to mark the centenary of Humboldt's death which was orchestrated by China Science Community in collaboration with civil organizations like the China-German Friendship Association and so on. At the same time, *The Geographical Journal*, a prestigious publication in China's geographical sphere, featured special columns penned by three influential geographers: Zhu Kezhen (竺可桢), Xu Changju (许昌菊), and Huang Bingwei (黄秉维). These articles, providing comprehensive and informative accounts of Humboldt's life and contributions, were the first dedicated column promoting Humboldt within China. Among the three scholars, Zhu Kezhen held a PhD in meteorology from Harvard University in 1918 and played a pivotal role in establishing the Department of Geology at Southeast University in 1921 which became the first academic institution in China to encompass the entire domain of geography. He was one of the pioneers of modern geography and meteorology in China and served as the Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences during that period. In his article, Zhu Kezhen not only explored Humboldt's manifold contributions to geography, botany, minerals, and geomagnetism but also acknowledged his evaluation of Chinese culture. Zhu Kezhen, on the one hand, commended Humboldt's meticulous and precise depiction of Chinese geography in the ancient work 禹贡 ("Yugong") in 尚书 (*Shangshu*) and recognized China's historical achievements in technologies such as the compass, movable type



printing, and advanced astronomical knowledge, and on the other, elucidated certain limitations in Humboldt's research on Chinese geography. This commemorative column represented the incipient stage of Humboldt studies in China and marked a significant milestone in progress. It not only provided a comprehensive and panoramic overview of Humboldt's research and contributions but also, for the first time, explicitly emphasized Humboldt's impact extending beyond the realm of natural sciences. By citing examples of his humanitarianism, liberalism, and philosophy, the column illuminated the broader scope of Humboldt's influence.

Take human geography as an example. It is a condensed embodiment of Humboldt's distinctive knowledge characteristics, placing emphasis on holistic perspectives and intrinsic interconnections between natural and social sciences, exemplifying its integrative and interdisciplinary nature. In 1931, a book titled *A Synopsis of Human Geography*, tailored for novices in the field, explicitly asserted that Humboldt and Carl Ritter were the founding figures of human geography, underscoring their significant contributions to exploring the intricate relationship between human activities and the natural environment. Notably, one of the authors of this seminal work was Zhu Kezhen, indicating his consistent recognition of Humboldt's scholarly legacy. Furthermore, Zhu Kezhen's subsequent endeavors to promote disciplinary integration and establish a comprehensive geoscientific research model unmistakably bore the imprint of Humboldt's ideas.

However, Zhu Kezhen was among a minority within the Chinese intellectuals of that era. One of the limitations of geographical studies during the 1920s and 1930s was caused by the fact that most scholars in this field predominantly followed French traditions (Zhang 573; Zeng 152-156). For instance, Hu Huanyong (胡焕庸), a prominent human geographer who made significant contributions to the study of population distribution in China, the proposer of Hu Huanyong-Line, pursued his studies in France at the University of Paris and the Collège de France, under the guidance of Jean Brunhes, a leading representative of the French school of human geography. Moreover, the initial development of human geography in China itself emerged from critiques of environmental determinism propagated by German scholars like Friedrich Ratzel, which were conveyed through Japanese textbooks. Consequently, Chinese human geographers were more acquainted with the works of Ratzel, Paul Vidal de La Blache, and Carl Ritter. In fact, it was their students, rather than those of Humboldt, who occupied geography teaching positions in universities in Germany and France, subsequently becoming the instructors of Chinese students studying abroad. Therefore, the prevailing attitude among Chinese scholars of that time was one of underestimating or even neglecting Humboldt's contributions to the field of human geography.

In an extensive treatise on social sciences titled *Outline of Social Sciences* (1932), a chapter dedicated to "Human Geography" authored by Wang Chengzu (王成组), a geography professor at Tsinghua University, presented a critical appraisal of Humboldt's seminal work *Cosmos*. While acknowledging Humboldt's prominent stature within the realm of modern physical geography, the chapter disregarded his contributions to human geography, asserting that *Cosmos* held little significance in that regard. This appraisal was indicative of a broader trend, as even

in contemporary times, some textbooks on human geography employed in Chinese universities continued to omit Humboldt from the annals of its history. Consequently, Zhu Kezhen's perspectives, as well as the noteworthy impact of his influential columns, failed to generate the expected resonance and endured a prolonged period of marginalization.

Undoubtedly, Zhu Kezhen's continued recognition of Humboldt deserves considerable attention. Within the traditional academic framework in China, geography held a subsidiary position to history, a perception that persisted even during the introduction of Western geography in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when emerging human geography retained certain traits of traditional Chinese geographical studies. This suggests a potential link between Humboldt and historical research in China. In 1939, historian Yang Honglie (杨洪烈) explored the close relationship between history and geography in his theoretical work, *General Theory of Historiography*. While discussing the influence of climate on national character, social systems, and laws, he highlighted Humboldt as the progenitor of associating these concepts (289). According to him, Humboldt established two fundamental principles for studying geography: the consideration of a phenomenon in relation to other natural and human phenomena, and the comparison of phenomena originating from specific locations with similar phenomena elsewhere. These principles augmented the breadth of geographic inquiry and expedited the establishment of "physical geography" as a bona-fided scientific discipline. It is worth noting that Yang Honglie was a student of Liang Qichao (梁启超), a foundational figure in modern Chinese historiography, and Wang Guowei (王国维), one of the pioneers of modern archaeology in China. Yang's perspective can be seen as an endeavor to establish a link between historiography and human geography.

Indeed, during the Republican era, a distinctive educational institution known as 史地系 (Shi-di Xi; the History and Geography Department) sought to merge history and geography. Departing from the logic of modern disciplinary specialization, this department tenaciously upheld the union of these two traditional disciplines. Established by Zhu Kezhen at Zhejiang University in 1936, the History and Geography Department encompassed four major fields: physical geography, human geography, meteorology, and history, with students from diverse majors attending shared courses. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the establishment of this department encountered significant opposition (He 152). The majority of faculty and students adhered to the principles of disciplinary specialization, emphasizing professional boundaries and expressing concerns about the challenges of simultaneously studying history and geography. By the 1950s, when China adopted the comprehensive university system modeled after the Soviet Union, the History and Geography Department was dissolved, ultimately representing a transitional phase in the modernization of Chinese universities. To some extent, the trajectory of the History and Geography Department mirrored the destiny of Humboldtian knowledge in China. While Humboldt, as an encyclopedic scholar, was acknowledged and referenced by scholars across various disciplines, the very universality of his work impeded its integration into specific disciplinary frameworks that emerged with the advent of disciplinary specialization. Consequently, this hindered the profound dissemination of his ideas within the academic

community. The Chinese emphasis on “adapting to the times” gave rise to a prevailing trend of disciplinary specialization and the fortification of disciplinary boundaries throughout the 20th century. However, this trend may not persist into the 21st century. Once overshadowed by the logic of disciplinary specialization, Humboldt’s contribution is ready to be reexamined within a paradigm underscoring the integrative nature of knowledge.

Fortunately, the process of reevaluating Humboldt’s legacy has already commenced in China. A significant contribution in this regard was made by Yang Junjie, a scholar of comparative literature at Beijing Normal University. In 2017, Yang Junjie reconstructed the encounter between Qing Fu and Humboldt at Huonimailahu in 1829. By meticulously analyzing German historical materials, Yang Junjie shed light on this historical meeting, during which Qing Fu presented Humboldt with a collection of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This connection between Humboldt and China held particular significance for Chinese scholars and readers. The article, which was published in *Dushu*, an intellectual and cultural review magazine in China, offers a fresh perspective on Humboldt, effectively igniting people’s imagination and curiosity regarding Humboldt’s relationship with China.

In September 2019 and June 2021, the Chinese academic journal 外国语言与文化 (*Waiguo Yuyan yu Wenhua; Foreign Languages and Cultures*) dedicated two special columns to the field of “Alexander von Humboldt Studies,” presenting the latest literature from international researchers on Humboldt’s multifaceted contributions in the humanities. These articles provided Chinese readers with valuable insights into the diverse scholarly investigations into Humboldt’s impact on disciplines such as the history of science (Ulrich Päßler), human geography (Kutzinski), politics (Kraft and Schnee; Kraft), and travel literature (Lenz). Notably, Markus Alexander Lenz’s contribution, “Between Nations and Beyond Borders: Alexander von Humboldt and French Literature” (2021), merits special attention. This article delves into the intricate relationship between Humboldt and French literature, underscoring the profound significance of Humboldt within the realm of literary history. It is worth noting that Chinese scholars have recognized the literary qualities present in Humboldt’s scientific works since nearly a century ago. Yu Xiangsen, a Chinese scholar of German literature, acknowledged Humboldt’s *Cosmos* and *Views of Nature* in the chapter on novels and prose in his seminal work *German Literature* (1931), regarding them as captivating prose works of the era (77). This early recognition by Chinese scholars marked the initial acknowledgment of the literary dimensions inherent in Humboldt’s scientific writings. While literary researchers have comparatively arrived at the recognition of Humboldt’s literary significance much later than their fascination with Jean-Henri Casimir Fabre’s *Souvenirs entomologiques* (Qin), there still remains considerable scope for further exploration in this regard.

The publication of the column in *Foreign Languages and Cultures* marks a significant milestone in the introduction of Humboldtian studies to China. The driving force behind this initiative is the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies at Hunan Normal University, established in 2019 on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Humboldt’s birth. This research institution stands as the first of its kind in China dedicated solely to Alexander von Humboldt

studies. Under the guidance of Professor Ottmar Ette, who is widely recognized for his expertise in Humboldtian studies, the center's primary objective is to explore Humboldt research from a Chinese perspective and with Chinese attributes. Since its establishment, the center has organized a series of activities to foster the exploration and dissemination of Humboldt's ideas and the latest international research in the humanities. Professor Ette himself has delivered lectures, including "Alexander von Humboldt Knocking on China's Door" (2020) and "Alexander von Humboldt: Life on the Move" (2023) at Hunan Normal University. Furthermore, in 2021, he and Dr. Ren Haiyan, the Associate Director of the center, were invited to participate in a global conference commemorating the 24th anniversary of the opening of the Alexander von Humboldt House Museum in Havana, Cuba. Ren's presentation on "Humboldt and China" marked the inaugural involvement of Chinese scholars in international discussions on Humboldtian studies, thus illustrating the growing engagement of Chinese academia in this field.

In fact, it is not only literary researchers who have sought to transcend disciplinary boundaries; a typical example in recent years is the increased attention given to natural history. Liu Huajie, a professor of history and philosophy of science at Peking University, believed that modern high technology has become highly specialized and alienated, far removed from the public sphere, and controlled by power and capital. He advocated for the revival of the ancient tradition of natural history and emphasized its historical and cultural significance, and its potential to contribute to the preservation of human civilization (4-10). Another prominent figure who recognizes the importance of natural history is the renowned Chinese anthropologist Peng Zhaorong. In a recent paper, he pointed out that the increasingly fragmented disciplines within the existing disciplinary system and organizational structure were unable to fully undertake the profound research tasks related to ecology, biology, and life. Faced with a crisis of fragmentation, he argued that what we truly need was an integrative discipline like natural history that emphasized holism and the interrelationships between disciplines (1-7), and it was precisely this paradigm of natural history that was pioneered by Humboldt.

To this day, Humboldt is no longer simply a revered symbol in disciplines such as geography or an intrepid explorer driven by passion and curiosity admired by the Chinese people. He has emerged as a figure of profound influence on modernity. His scientific perspective emphasizes the interconnection of all things not only resonating with the concept of "universal connectedness" ingrained in Chinese thought, as reflected in political textbooks for middle and high school students, but also holds a significant contemporary relevance in the context of dismantling disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, Humboldt's scientific view aligns closely with the Chinese cultural concept of 和而不同 (He'erbutong; harmony in diversity). In his work *Cosmos*, Humboldt stated, "Nature considered rationally, that is to say, submitted to the process of thought, is a unity in diversity of phenomena; a harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole animated by the breath of life" (24). The juxtaposition of unity and diversity, dissimilarity and harmony in this context carries profound implications from the perspective of Chinese philosophy. These shared understanding, coupled with the recent

contemplation by Chinese scholars, may pave the way for a broader acceptance of Humboldt in China's future intellectual landscape.

The acceptance of Humboldt in China has undergone nearly two centuries, from sporadic mentions in English-language newspapers in the late Qing dynasty to widespread references in various books during the Republican era, and now to a renewed interest in his works. However, despite this prolonged engagement, the reputation of Humboldt in China has not matched the depth of understanding his ideas. This can be attributed, in part, to the inherent mismatch between Humboldt's expansive global perspective and monumental works and the increasingly specialized disciplinary systems and professional requirements that have characterized the modernization process of Chinese universities. Despite the strong endorsement from geographers like Zhu Kezhen, Humboldt has encountered challenges in attaining prominence in the field of geography, let alone in social sciences, humanities, and other fields where his ideas hold value. Nevertheless, there is a positive development in the reexamination of Humboldt among Chinese literary researchers. In contemporary China, the increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary and holistic understanding and appreciation provides a promising opportunity to overcome the obstacles that have impeded the integration of Humboldtian knowledge into the Chinese intellectual landscape. As such, we anticipate the unfolding of new chapters in blending Humboldt's worldview with the intellectual discourse of China.

### Notes

1. This paper is supported by the Science Research Project of Hunan Provincial Department of Education: "A Multimodal Study of Alexander von Humboldt and Xu Song's Travel Writing" (no. 22B0098).
2. In response to the profound impact of the two Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion, the Qing government dispatched 14 students to the United States in 1872 to pursue studies in disciplines such as agriculture, engineering, and medicine. Subsequently, in 1874, approximately 120 students were sent to countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Japan to undertake diverse fields of study, encompassing politics, law, diplomacy, engineering, and agriculture.
3. The transliterated title is "Haeckel's Philosophy of Monism" which prioritizes the philosophical value of the book.

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