In the past two decades, aided by the seminal scholarship of William H. McNeill and the founding of the World History Association, not only has interest grown in world history, also, a new dedication is evident to “de-Eurocentrize” or “humanocentrize” world history, that is, to no longer see world-historical changes as various extensions of European history, but to conceive and articulate such changes in ways which give all peoples and all parts of the earth their appropriate, unprivileged place. This has raised a call on specialists in the study of non-European parts of the world, especially areas of ancient and advanced civilizations such as China, to formulate their scholarship and employ vocabularies that are more accessible to non-specialists who are interested in world-wide trends and comparative studies. Scholars in Chinese studies, partly in response to this call, and desiring to participate more in world-historical and comparative discourses, have been searching for less parochial, more generally-shared historical terms to use in characterizing Chinese phenomena.

Among the most important of such terms have been those used for periodization, since period-terms so heavily condition our thinking about all that occurs during a certain span of time. If we are to abandon use of parochial dynastic terms, such as Ming or Qing, in order to more easily communicate with scholars outside Chinese studies, then what other terms are we to use? Many have adopted “late imperial” for Ming-Qing (or unspecified portions thereof), but others feel that this phrase overly emphasizes the end or exhaustion of something in an era that was full of new developments.
Moreover, the word imperial stands for a particular set of meanings among China specialists which is not shared by historians in other fields.

Are we to adopt the usages of European historical discourse? “Early modern” is an increasingly popular term for the Ming-Qing era, but many object that it is inherently teleological and leads us to imagine too much modernity in premodern times and too many parallels between China and the West. Others advocate defining a universal, non-Eurocentric early-modernity which would include China, but such efforts to date have had to ignore important aspects of trends that led to modernity in Europe, especially in civic activity and the history of thought. Still others feel that any period-terms inevitably call disproportionate attention to certain kinds of phenomena; thus, we should use them only for the presentation of certain themes, and stick to using just numerical dates for more general discussions, eschewing broad period- or era-names.

In any case, these trends and debates have led many specialists in Chinese studies to reassess the general significance of broad spans of time in Chinese history and to envision the dynamics of that history in ways that make sense in world-historical terms. For instance, a conference held in California in 1997 examined the period from Sung through Yuan and early Ming as a distinctly significant phase in Chinese history. The purpose of the Conference on the Qing Formation in World and Chinese Time was to call attention, even more explicitly, to the crucial nature of the changes that occurred in China during the seventeenth century for our general assessments and characterizations of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries in both Chinese and Eurasian history. The word “formation” was chosen to avoid the leading connotations of such words as “rise” and the political focus of “dynasty”, and to welcome consideration of all sorts of patterns that became discernible by the early part of the eighteenth century. An emphasis was placed on changes that came about under early-Qing rule in the latter part of the seventeenth century, because it was felt that scholarship to date has focussed very heavily on either late Ming or middle (“high”) Qing, somewhat neglecting the important temporal span between those two times.

The planners also felt that, while engaging ourselves in abstract discussions of how we, today, should understand China’s past using academic, world-historical concepts, we also are obliged to ask people of that day in China about how they saw their world in their time. This is not just a matter of imaginary human courtesy or historical curiosity. Rather, it serves