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Salient Features of Chinese Historical Thinking

Chun-chieh Huang*

In this article I argue that history occupies pivotal position in the worldview and philosophy of life in the Chinese tradition. Chinese civilisation is deeply imbued with historical consciousness and its people are homo historiens in every sense. Historical thinking in traditional China is infused with a moral meaning. The notion of dao, that is, heavenly principle and human norm, stands at the centre of this consciousness. In view of its practical operation, Chinese historical thinking is on one hand concrete, and on the other, analogical; it enables communication with the past and extrapolation of meanings from history. In this way, historical experience in China becomes a library where contemporary readers may engage in creative dialogues with the past.

Since time immemorial, China has been noted for her historical consciousness. Chinese people and their society have been living under the tutelage of history. The founding emperors in imperial China always sought to legitimise their dynasties by invoking past glories. In the same vein, Chinese people have always turned to history to justify revolutions in the nation's politics and culture. This article explores the peculiarities of Chinese historical thinking. The following section considers the significance of history in China, and second section delves into the significance of historical thinking in Chinese life, followed by concluding observations.

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The Significance of History in China

The writing of history has been prevalent in China since at least 841 B.C. In course of the centuries, Chinese people have been able to 'look at the past from the present', judge and shape the present in the light of the ideal past, and judge the past in the light of the present ideals thus shaped. Such judgement and judgemental description were taken with absolute seriousness. To get to the real facts has been an all-consuming passion of Chinese historians, so much so that some of them sacrificed their lives to protect their rulers' pressures on them to write against their view of facts. For instance, in 548 B.C. (the twenty-fifth year of the reign of Duke Xiang 襄公 of the State Lu 魯), a 'grand historian' who was an official of historiography, recorded, 'Cui Shu 崔杼 assassinated his ruler.' Cui Shu had the historian executed. Then his younger brother took over the office of grand historian and recorded an identical statement, and was likewise executed. Next came the second brother, who recorded the same statement again and so on, up till the fourth brother! At this point, Cui Shu had to give up the idea of rewriting or 'erasing' history.¹ Historians in China are indeed the incarnation of conscience who devote their lives to recording and preserving the facts.

This is the reason that historians' words were taken quite seriously in traditional China. 'To receive [the historian's] single word of praise is to be glorified beyond high emolument; to be accused by his slightest word of blame is to be punished beyond [hacking of] axes', asserted the literary critic Liu Xie (劉勰 456?–520?) in his *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon* (*Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龍).²

In traditional China, history is as much shaped by human pathos in reflective and often tragic living as the Chinese people are integrated in or disintegrated from the vicissitudes of Chinese history. This is because, as the great historian of twentieth-century China, Qian Mu (錢穆 1895–1990), said in *The Spirit of Chinese History* 'National history awakens the soul of a nation,' for 'history is the whole experience of our life, the whole life past. We can understand our life by referring ourselves to history. History can thus allow us to appropriately project our life into the future'.³

¹ Yang Bojün, *Chunchiu Zozhuan Zhu* 春秋左傳注: 1099. For the English translation, see Burton Watson (tr.) *The Tso Chuan*: 147.

² Pu Qilong, *Wenxin Diaolong zhu*: 1.

³ Qian Mu, 'Chung'guo Lishi Jingshen' ('The Spirit of Chinese History'). The nationalistic sentiment in Qian Mu's historiography reminds us of Jules Michelet (1798–1874)

In other words, history in China is taken as the crystallisation of past personal life experiences, which means that the meaning of personal life is discovered, interpreted and shaped by the history within which one is situated. In the Chinese context, to live humanly is to be historically oriented.

All Chinese historians believe that history lets us understand ourselves and plan our future because history as seemingly neutral is the description of what happened, and precisely because of that it provokes us to formulate some universal principles of life. Ironically, this becomes most apparent when historical facts challenge our initial facile convictions. The grand historian Sima Qian (司馬遷 145–?86 B.C.) was deeply troubled as he confessed in his classic, *Historian's Records* (史記 *Shiji*),⁴

Some say, 'Heaven's way favors none, but always sides with good men.' Can men such as Bo Yi and Shu Qi be called good then, or bad? They accumulated such virtue, kept their actions this pure, and died of starvation.

Of his seventy disciples, Confucius recommended only Yen Yüan as 'fond of learning.' But Hui (Yen Yüan) was often poor, and did not get his fill of even rice dregs and husks, finally dying young. How then does Heaven repay good men?

The Bandit Zhi killed innocent men daily, made delicacies from men's flesh, was cruel and ruthless, wilful and arrogant, gathered a band of thousands of men and wreaked havoc across the world, yet finally died of old age. From what virtue did this follow?

These are just the most notorious and best known examples. As for more recent times, men who do not follow what is proper in their actions, and do nothing but violate taboos are still carefree and happy for all their lives and wealthy for generations without end; men who choose carefully how they tread, wait for the right time to offer their words, in walking do not take shortcuts, and except for what is right and fair do not vent pent-up emotions, still encounter disaster and catastrophe in numbers beyond counting. I am deeply perplexed by all this. Perhaps this is what is meant by 'the Way of Heaven.' Is it? Or isn't it?

或曰：「天道無親，常與善人。」若伯夷、叔齊，可謂善人者非邪？積仁累行如此而餓死，且七十子之徒，仲尼獨薦顏淵為好學。然回也屢空，糴稜不厭，而卒蚤夭。天之報施善人，

when he said in his introduction to *The People*, 'This book is more than a book—it is myself. That is the reason it belongs to you. Yes, it is myself; and, I may venture to affirm, it is you also. All our various works have sprung from the same living root—the sentiment of France, and the idea of our country': See Stern, *The Varieties of History*: 109. For a discussion of history as 'national epic' in twentieth-century China, cf. Ying-shih Yü, 'Changing Conceptions of National History'.

⁴ Nienhauser, Jr, *The Grand Scribe's Records*: 4.

其何如哉？盜跖日殺不辜，肝人之肉，暴戾恣睢，聚黨數千人橫行天下，竟以壽終。是遵何德哉？此其尤大彰明較著者也。若至近也，操行不軌，專犯忌諱，而終身逸樂，富厚累世不絕。或擇地而蹈之，時然後出言，行不由徑，非公正不發憤，而遇禍災者，不可勝數也。余甚惑焉，儻所謂天道，是邪非邪？

Like Sima Qian, we are also deeply troubled by the unfolding of ‘the Way of Heaven’ in history. History’s display of such affronts to our sense of justice provokes in us our profound value judgement. Reading the historical account of how good people fared and how evil ones did, we hate the evil fellows with intensity and cherish the sagely good with yearning—no matter how they fared, and in fact precisely because they fared against our conscientious expectations! This is not to prove any law of retribution in life, but to confirm in a heartfelt manner our deep moral conviction.

Specifically, the Chinese historians believe that historical provocation of intense indignation at how the evil have prospered leads us to realise the intrinsic value of the wise and of the lack of value of the evil, independently of how they fared. Importantly, it is through ‘how they fared’ that we are provoked to righteous indignation at the unfairness and the injustice of evil ones prospering and good ones dying young in starvation or in misfortune.

In other words, it is by thus negating the negative that the positive is manifested, which is the *dao* (道 *way*) or the *li* (理 *principle*) that is both the law of the universe and the norm of humanity, for we would now scorn people who plan their lives just in order to prosper as the Bandit Zhi did, and we loathe enemy informants although we may grudgingly pay them for the convenience they give us. This is how Chinese people come to ‘praise the good and blame the evil,’⁵ and formulate intrinsic and universal values independently of what would actually happen.

Values are first hypothesised and then applied to judge realities both of the past and of present situations. In this way, the so-called ‘hermeneutic circle’ is actualised in traditional Chinese historical thinking. First,

⁵ This is as Sima Qian quoted Dong Zhongshu’s (c. 179–104 B.C.) words in Sima’s celebrated ‘The Grand Scribe’s Preface’: 3297. The very process of quotation here is history, and Sima personally experienced this sentiment when he received a tragic punishment (castration) for assuring the emperor of his devoted friend’s loyalty to the state who then ended up capitulating to the enemy. His punishment occasioned the writing of the *Shiji*, which is the Chinese version of *Historia Calamitatum*, to vindicate his sense of ‘historical justice’.

we get the sense of the universal principle (*dao*) of justice from history, then apply it to history in which the present is situated and the circle of the history of understanding is completed. Let us see how the procedure goes.

The intense sense of meaning of history can be extrapolated and appropriated from historical facts. As Mencius (371–289? BC) said,⁶

After the influence of the true king came to an end, songs were no longer collected. When songs were no longer collected, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were written. The *Sheng* of Jin, the *Dao Wu* of Zhu and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of Lu are the same kind of work. The events recorded concern Duke Huan of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin, and the style is that of the official historian. Confucius said, ‘I have appropriated the didactic principles therein.’

王者之跡熄而詩亡，詩亡然後春秋作。晉之乘，楚之檮杌，魯之春秋，也：其事則齊桓、晉文，其文則史。孔子曰：「其義則丘竊取之矣。」

Ever since the time of Confucius (551–479 B.C.), Chinese historians have made efforts to appropriate didactic principles from history. This became especially true since the tenth century. For example, Sima Guang (1019–86) in his *Records of the Ancient History* (稽古錄 *Chigulu*),⁷ said, ‘The ruler’s *dao* is one, his virtues are three, his talents are five Since the beginning of peoples and throughout the ultimate recess of Heaven and earth, there is nothing other than these to ones who possess the state through its ups and downs’. The Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130–1200) systematised this informal expression in a more perceptive manner, by proposing *li* (principle) that describes the way things operate and prescribes the norm humanity should live by. More often than not, the philosophical argumentation in China was made possible by historical narration.⁸

Li or *dao* obtained by observing history became the concrete general norm and lever whereby historians judged, admonished and even remonstrated with the rulers, both in the past and at present. Zhu Xi boldly declared,

⁶ Lau (tr.), *Mencius*, vol. II, Bk ivB: 165.

⁷ Sima Guang, *Chigulu*: 75–78.

⁸ See my ‘The Philosophical Argumentation’.

Fifteen hundred years are all like this, going through days merely patching and fixing the status quo. During this period [days of] ‘small peace’ were not lacking, but not a day passed without the Way transmitted by Yao, Shun, Three Kings, Duke Zhou, and Confucius being neglected in practice in the world. Yet, nobody has anticipated the permanent presence of the Way. This is the only thing that has been everlasting, in ancient days and today, always present, never perishing, indestructible despite fifteen hundred years of deeds of destruction by humans.⁹

千百五年之間，正坐如此，所以只是架漏牽補過了時日。其間雖或不無小康，而堯舜三王周公孔子所傳之道未嘗一日得行於天地之間也。若論道之常存，卻又初非人所能預。只是此箇，自是亙古亙今，常在不滅之物。雖千五百年被人作壞，終殲滅他不得耳。

Although worldly affairs are in the thousands and hundreds of thousands, really there is but one single way, principle. This is what is called one principle many manifestations.

世間雖千頭萬緒，其實只一箇道理，「理一分疏」之謂也。¹⁰

According to Zhu Xi, the *li* derived from history became the standard for the critique of history, past and contemporary. The standard embodies historical flesh and blood, filled with tears of suffering people, labours of workers in the searing sun, lived devotion of loyal subjects and filial sons, brutalities of insensitive officials, virtuous lady’s courageous chastity, and so on. The law and principle are both solidly based on the facts of history and universally applicable as norms of humanity and dynasties. In China, politics as an academic subject is basically history; as strategic deliberation it is based on history. Legal decisions in the court must consult records of precedents in history.¹¹

The ‘circle’ of understanding and interpretation came about in this manner. Historians in China observed historical processes to obtain from them some universal principles—both descriptive and prescriptive—so as to apply them as prescriptions and judgements to history itself, both in the past and at present. This is the ‘hermeneutic circle’ that solidifies our concrete universal ‘historical thinking’, which guides the daily comportment of each individual on the one hand, and the vast cosmic

⁹ Zhu Xi, *Hui’an xiansheng Zhu Wengong wenji*: 2306.

¹⁰ Li Jingde (ed.), *Zhuzi Yülei*: 3243.

¹¹ Lau (tr.), *The Analects*: ch. 17, p. 81.

ongoing of the entire world on the other. This expresses the ultimate essential importance of history in China.

The Sense of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking

The discussion of the significance of history in China has much to do with the sense of time in Chinese historical thinking.

In the Chinese mind, history describes how aware we are of being in time that flows as we engage in various activities in the world. Since the 'flow' includes its direction, to be aware of being in time means to have a sense of direction. This direction of time flows from what has passed through what is now to what is coming; our activities clearly go from the past through the present to the future in an unmistakable direction.

Moving in a definite direction provides the prospect and purpose of living. Chinese people are particularly sensitive to this sense of time. To have a sense of time is to have purpose in life. Confucius stood at the bank of the 'river of time,' and sighed, 'Oh, how it flows day and night, without ceasing!' In contrast, to lose this sense of time and direction is to be exiled out of living itself, to feel 'out of place,' unspeakably lost and lonesome in the world. Chen Zi'ang (陳子昂 662–702) of T'ang Dynasty (618–907) sighed long, saying,

Beholding no ancients,
Beholding no one's coming,
Vainly thinking how vast the skies and broad the earth,
Being alone, I lament, shed tears.

In Chinese tradition then, the sense of history is the warp and weft of life, an important indicator of how society should be managed, how politics should be conducted for social stability and prosperity. Concretely, every time a dynasty replaced another, often at a considerable cost of bloodshed, a question about the legitimacy of the new regime was earnestly raised in terms of history. 'Why did the Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.) lose the world, why did the Han Dynasty get it?' was hotly debated at the dawn of Han Dynasty (B.C. 206–220 A.D.).¹² At the same time, based on this legitimacy of concrete causes of Qin losing the 'Mandate of Heaven' and Han obtaining it, people in and out of the royal palace

¹² Sima Qian, 'Biographies of Li Sheng and Lu Jia': 2699.

eagerly discussed concrete measures of how best and most appropriately the new regime should govern and manage the world.

In all these debates and deliberations, history served as an important weathervane and concrete guide. History justified the legitimacy of Han to overthrow Qin¹³ and provided guidance to the current Han administration to back up its legitimacy through ‘good governance’ and to keep a watchful eye over the ruler to stick to their vows and declarations of enforcing good governance. Since the T’ang Dynasty, such historic responsibilities of watching and warning over the throne fell on the writing brushes of the office of the historiographers who compiled the emperor’s *Qijū zhu* (起居註 diaries of activity and repose). The historiographers kept such a daily journal of comments in strict confidentiality and with meticulous conscience. They never wavered in their duty, kept the comments out of the emperor’s eye, and literally devoted their lives to fulfilling the duty. Such has been the Chinese devotion to history.

Two Outstanding Aspects of Chinese Historical Thinking

Now we are in a better position to appreciate the defining characteristics of Chinese historical consciousness. In traditional Chinese historical thinking, history is created as people think *analogically* and *concretely* about the events of life. We proceed to explicate these two salient aspects of Chinese historical thinking.

In the first place, the Chinese believe that history is formed in and by our *analogical thinking*. Analogy is not an abstract logic that cuts us off from concrete details. It is neither wild imagination that is baseless and haphazard, nor sporadic reports of isolated events without rhyme or reason. Analogy is instead concrete, systematic, open-ended and comprehensive. Analogy has two features: it is metaphorical and it takes a part for the whole (*pars pro toto*).

First, analogical thinking is ‘metaphorical’. Liu Xiang (劉向) of the Han Dynasty in his *Shuo Yüan* (說苑) quoted the famous logician Hui Shi (惠施 380–305 B.C.) as saying, ‘Pi 辟 is to analogise the unknown by the known’¹⁴—as the ‘Appended Remarks’ of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) says, ‘taking what is close by our bodies, taking things from afar’ (近取諸身 遠取諸物)¹⁵ to know and judge things far and unknown.

¹³ See my ‘The Ch’in Unification’.

¹⁴ Liu Xiang, *Shuo Yüan* 說苑: 51.

Chinese people keep to representative historical cases in drawing generalisations. The factual case is the ‘knot’ of the ‘cord’ of actuality. This relation is depicted in different usages of *exemplum*, that is, a short story as metaphor. Whenever Chinese thinkers want to ‘argue’ some universal principles or draw some moral codes, they always return to concrete historical examples or experience. Mencius is a good representative thinker in this context. In ‘articulating’ his moral philosophy, Mencius cited many historical examples of famous people such as Shun (舜), Fu Yüe (傅說), Jiao Ge (膠鬲), Guan Zhong (管仲), Sun Shu’ao (孫叔敖) and Boli Xi (百里奚). Then he said that heaven exhausts one’s frame in starvation, hardship and frustration before placing on one a great burden and thereby provoking innovation.¹⁶ *Exemplum* in the West is an illustration, dispensable, decorative, of an abstract thesis, ‘conditioning’ that stands by itself; Pavlov’s dog is just its decoration, its illustration. In contrast, Chinese notions collapse when abstracted from the *exempla* they point to. Zhuangzi’s (399?–295? B.C.) ‘double walk’ (兩行 liang xing) is senseless without the monkey story, to the effect that, since the ‘morning, three [nuts], evening, four’ bananas that the monkey keeper proposed was booed by monkeys, the keeper switched to ‘morning, four, evening, three’ to win their approval, thereby did the ‘double walking’ of fulfilling both desires, his and the monkeys’.¹⁷ Again, on hearing the story-notion of ‘spear, shield,’ Chinese eyes are glued to its concrete story of a vendor of ‘unstoppable spears’ and ‘impenetrable shields’ who was rendered unable to answer the question, ‘What would happen if you used your spears against your shields?’. Here the story is about the notion of contradiction. These concrete stories are indispensable notables (that is, notions) that actually ‘knot’ the ‘cord’ of actuality as no abstract concept can.

Metaphor in China is thus an essential part of thinking; metaphor in the West is a dispensable decoration. We may describe different uses of metaphor in two cultures with a rather dated metaphor. The West inserts metaphor as a feather onto a hat, while China fits metaphor as a feather onto an arrow. A Chinese arrow of idea cannot fly straight to its targeted intention without its feather, metaphor, which is just a feather on a Western hat of idea to call our attention, having little to do with the function of a hat itself.

¹⁵ Gao Heng, *Zhouyi Dazhuan jinzhu* 周易大傳今注: 558–59.

¹⁶ Lau (tr.), *Mencius*, 4B: 261–63.

¹⁷ Watson (tr.), *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, ch. 2, ‘Discussion on Making All Things Equal’: 36–49, esp. 40–41.

Second, such analogical thinking often takes a part for the whole (*pars pro toto*), for example, taking ‘bread’ as ‘food’ in general, taking ‘flag’ as ‘the entire nation.’ By the same token, historians often pick one event, one view, ancient or modern, in whose terms and in whose perspective to describe the entire situation. They use one point of view to confirm or even protest the entire situation of the past. The last extreme case is of Sima Qian who in his *Historian’s Records* protested as unfair the facts of righteous Bo Yi (伯夷) and Shu Qi (叔齊) having had to starve to death in his perspective that ‘Heaven is always on the side of good people.’ Again, the West often takes argumentation as ‘war,’ as ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ an argument. Such an attitude does not regard argument to be midwifery dialogue,¹⁸ or exhortation and persuasion to be metaphors, as often happens in China.

In general, we inevitably pick one perspective to comprehend the whole situation, and so our comprehension is inevitably restricted to one aspect of the situation highlighted by that perspective (argument as war) and turns blind to other aspects (argument as midwifery, as persuasion).

Another feature of analogy in Chinese historical thinking is *coherence*. To think is to think coherently, of course, and history is created as we think coherently. We re-walk, re-enact, and re-describe the days gone by and form our story of life and our history.

‘History’ means truthful, straight and objective description. Even ‘feigned’ history has its root in ‘the soil of experience’. All this sounds like the confessions of a conscientious journalist. In fact, today’s journalist is exactly like the official historiographer in traditional China who was a solitary brilliant star in the brutal glorious or gloomy past of bygone dynasties. Both the journalists now and the historians then have/had their historical conscience. They determine(d) to report what actually happened to readers—contemporaries or later—to let them form their own opinions and apply the lessons they draw to their own times and circumstances. This is how historians in China look at the past in terms of the present, namely, by way of metaphorical analogical thinking, and thinking by operating on a part to coherently cover the whole.

Conclusions

I have argued that history occupies pivotal position in the make-up of the worldview and philosophy of life in the Chinese tradition. The Chinese people are *homo historiens* through and through. They have a profound

¹⁸ Cf. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*: 3–13.

sense of time in their historical consciousness. Facts, events and personages are considered and evaluated against the context of the 'flow' of time. At the very core of Chinese historical thinking lies the notion of *dao* or *li* with which the Chinese historians pass value or moral judgments upon historical actuality. In this sense and to that extent, Chinese historical thinking is a kind of moral thinking. However, ethics in Chinese historical thinking is grounded in metaphysics, which is centred upon the notion of *dao* or *li* that comprises both *principle* and *norm*. This two-foldedness of metaphysics in Chinese historical thinking is, on the one hand, a very powerful lever by which historians can judge historical figures; but it is on the other hand, a double-edged sword that cuts short historians' explanatory power in accounting for the evils in history.

Moreover, Chinese historical thinking shuttles between the past and the present, enriching the experience and understanding of both. The past is not dead and wrapped like mummies in museums, but alive and interactive like the library in which present-day readers may enter to engage in creative dialogues with historical figures. All these 'conversations' were made possible by analogical as well as concrete thinking which constitute the two outstanding constituents of Chinese history.

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