

# Introduction: Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking

Chun-chieh Huang

and

John B. Henderson

Is there a characteristic Chinese conception of historical time, or perhaps a conception of time with Chinese characteristics? As far as such metahistorical issues are concerned, the *title* of this volume is noncommittal. It does not claim, for example, that there was a unitary conception of time in Chinese historical thinking, or that notions of time that developed in China differed essentially from those that appeared in other cultures. Nor does it even necessarily indicate that there was a peculiarly Chinese style of historical thinking. However, most of the articles in this volume do adopt a more pronounced position on some of these issues. And, even those that do not do so can be seen to address them indirectly.

The majority of the articles draw comparisons and contrasts between notions of time in Chinese and Western historical thinking. These comparisons run the gamut between macrocosmic characterizations on the level of civilizational discourse and microcosmic comparisons between particular Chinese and Western thinkers, such as Zhang Xuecheng and Martin Heidegger. Although such Sino-Western cultural comparisons are common currency in a number of fields, they are particularly appropriate in historiography, given the richness of the Chinese and Western historiographical traditions, as well as their relative independence and isolation from one another before modern times.

On the question of the unity of notions of time in Chinese historical thinking, there is also some divergence among the various articles in this collection. While some incline toward a broad conception of the grand unity of all notions of time under heaven, others present more provincial perspectives. But, whether or not their primary orientations are macrocosmic or microcosmic, metropolitan or local, most of the articles present some version of an historical dialectic of

interdependence between concrete and universal, time and supertime (Chun-chieh Huang), immanent and transcendent (Chi-yun Chen), historical and suprahistorical (Wing-cheuk Chan).

The articles in this volume can be said to progress from the universal to the particular (and from the classical to the modern). The most universalistic essay is the first by Jörn Rüsen, which wends its way towards “a universal typology of conceptual foundations of historical consciousness,” as its title indicates. To achieve such universalism, it is necessary to avoid the distortion in perspective, which might arise from working from Western historical thinking as a model: one aspect of Western philosophies of history that does seem to fall short of universalism is the teleological tendency, the idea that historical time is moving toward a definite end. Nevertheless, a certain irreversibility of change in conceptions of time can be observed from earlier to later stages of cultural development. Based on this, as well as on indications of a developmental logic in this long-term historical change in time concepts, a new more universalistic philosophy of history, one that is reconstructive rather than teleological, emerges as a possibility.

Conceived in the broadest terms, Chun-chieh Huang takes just such a reconstructive approach in his article on “‘Time’ and ‘Supertime’ in Chinese Historical Thinking.” Drawing a general contrast between ancient Greek and Chinese conceptions of historical time, Huang remarks that, “Time in Chinese culture is situational timeliness... not of impersonal events but of a humanly shaped milieu” (p. 20). “‘Supertime,’ in turn, is the paradigmatic in time, patterning Time into the human tapestry called ‘history’” (p. 20). This “supertime” can be discerned only in history, and is best exemplified in the works of the historical sages. For “Supertime is concrete, all too historically concrete” (p. 39). “Without Supertime in Time, history in China collapses into blind senseless chronicles” (p. 37), because it would not exude the normative pattern or the sagely imperative that makes history valuable for understanding the past and patterning the present.

Time and Supertime are related to one another in a dialectical way, the result of which is that Chinese historical thinking is at once “concrete-and-universal,” “factual-and-normative” (p. 31). Characteristically, philosophical argumentation in China is made through historical narration. The past thus narrated is alive in the present in the sense

that “History is normatively contemporary” (p. 21), or that contemporary morality is historical (p. 36). Hence, “Chinese historians are at the socioethical cutting edge of Chinese society” (p. 21), as in a sense were the ancient sages who “created history” in the first place (p. 37).

A similar dialectic is at work in Chi-yun Chen’s article “Immanent Human Beings in Transcendent Time.” Like Professor Huang, Professor Chen draws a sweeping civilizational contrast between the ancient Greeks who “tried their utmost to think transcendently” and the ancient Chinese who “tended to think immanently” (p. 60). For the classical philosopher Xunzi, in particular, “human beings cannot but act immanently, and it is futile for them... to seek to understand the transcendent” (p. 64). But, matters did not rest there. Even while ‘knowing that “transcendent time” may be beyond their empirical reach, the Chinese nonetheless made endless trials to figure out their respective standing in time’ (p. 68). They were not unaware of the “realm of the transcendent as well as its ontic importance, but thought that this (the transcendent) could better be hinted at, or alluded to, rather than clearly represented and expressly discussed in mundane human terms” (p. 70). Thus, the ancient Chinese chose to deal with the realm of the transcendent (also transcendent time) indirectly by way of the immanent medium of historical time.

A common interpretation of traditional Chinese notions of historical time is that it revolved in cycles. But, as Professor Chen points out, ‘the Chinese never claimed that real history (even dynastic history) or time ever “repeated” itself’ (p. 49). The impression of cyclicity, however, might well arise from the fact that the devices and symbols utilized for marking time are exhaustible, and thus have to be repeatedly used. While recurring patterns do indeed exist in Chinese history, an idea of cumulative cultural progress may also be discerned in the canonical appendices to the *Book of Changes*. But, the richness of the Chinese historiographical tradition is perhaps best illustrated in the “composite format” of the *Shiji* (Historical Records) of Sima Qian, which “exemplifies as well as ingrains the traditional Chinese vision of the multi-dimensional, multi-layered, and multi-centered world of history” (p. 68).

In his article “On the Formation of a Philosophy of Time and History through the *Yijing*,” Shu-hsien Liu deals with the question of

whether or not the *Book of Changes* teaches a cyclical philosophy of history. Like Professor Chen in the previous chapter, Professor Liu gives a “yes and no” answer to this question, remarking that “each cycle gives a new content, which cannot be seen as a mere repetition of the past or going by circles” (p. 94).

Like Professors Huang and Chen, Professor Liu discerns a dialectical interdependence of opposites in Chinese historical thinking: it is historical but also transhistorical; immanent as well as transcendent; subjective as well as objective; concrete as well as abstract. But, the kinds of abstraction present in Chinese historical thinking are not the same as those employed in the mathematical and natural sciences in the West. Rather, they are more appropriately characterized as “concrete universals”, inasmuch as the Way can be apprehended only through concrete things. Conversely, “apart from the Way there cannot be concrete things. What is immanent cannot be separated from what is transcendent” (p. 89).

A dialectical interdependence of opposites also appears in the works of prominent Western philosophers of history, such as Hegel and Marx. But, at least two substantial differences mark Chinese dialectics off from Western dialectics. “The former is much more fluid, and also open-ended in nature, while the latter follows much more strict rules, and has a definite end in view” (p. 93). The dialectic with Chinese characteristics “offers us a wisdom tradition, not science as claimed by Hegel and Marx” (p. 93f.).

With John Henderson’s article on “Premodern Chinese Notions of Astronomical History and Calendrical Time,” we descend from the realm of philosophy and metaphysics to that of the history of science, more specifically, the history of astronomy. It is rather ironic that, while the conception of cycles of time may have first entered Chinese historical thinking *via* the medium of astronomy, the *history* of Chinese astronomy from the Han has been widely regarded as a progressive movement. With the accumulation of knowledge over time, greater astronomical precision became possible. But, the movements of the heavens -- as the majority of post-Han astronomers believed -- are too inconstant and subtle to be captured fully by human observations and calculations. Because we can examine the ways of the heavens only through empirical observations, our astronomical investigations can

never exhaust the reality. Thus, in astronomy, there will always be some discrepancy between the paradigmatic and the particular, that is, between human conceptions and cosmic patterns. But, because astronomy by late imperial times had become a rather arcane science, this finding did not become common currency in the realm of philosophy and metaphysics.

Wing-cheuk Chan's article on "Time in Wang Fuzhi's Philosophy of History" introduces a series of three articles on particular prominent historical thinkers of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the last imperial dynasty of China. Although the scope of these studies is somewhat narrower than the more philosophical essays in the first half of this volume, they sound some of the same themes. Chan, for example, draws comparisons between Wang Fuzhi and the Pythagoreans' accounts of time and temporality. After noting some significant similarities between the two, Chan proceeds to point out that, while Wang held the time of change to be mathematically representable, his conception of mathematics was more primitive than was that of the Pythagoreans. Wang was not in a position to relate his theory of the time of nature to contemporary astronomy. Moreover, while the Pythagoreans emphasized the priority of number, "Wang Fuzhi insisted on the primacy of time" (p. 122f.).

Chan points out that Wang Fuzhi's position in Chinese intellectual history is in some ways unusual, if not unique. Wang is arguably "the only genuine philosopher of history in traditional Chinese philosophy" (p. 115). Moreover, Wang himself claimed that he was living in an unprecedentedly tragic time in Chinese history. Yet, echoes of a perennial dialectic (with Chinese characteristics) of the interdependence of opposites may also be found in his works (especially those monographs or commentaries focusing on the *Book of Changes*). Wang Fuzhi emphasizes, for example, that there is an "inseparability between heaven and man." Accordingly, the eternal *Dao* can only manifest itself "by entering into the historical dimension" (p. 123). Thus, in complying with the universal principle of duality, besides the sphere of supra-historicity there must be the sphere of historicity (p. 123). But, this latter sphere is perhaps more contingent and precarious for Wang Fuzhi than for other Chinese historians. Living in a time of dynastic collapse and barbarian conquest, Wang saw the historical continuity as "vulnerable", in spite of the presumed succession from past to present

(p. 125). There is no universal law governing the development of history, or even one that guarantees its continuity. On the other hand, Wang rejects the Buddhist notion of radical historical discontinuity, which seemingly denies both memory of the past and consideration of the future (p. 124f.).

In the next article, Q. Edward Wang compares speculations on time by a later Qing historian, Zhang Xuecheng, with those of a modern Western philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Despite the vastly dissimilar backgrounds of these two thinkers, both emphasized the everydayness of the ultimate “*Dao*” or “being”, which naturally inclined them to the study of history. History, in fact, “becomes an effective means by which Heidegger and Zhang can replace the metaphysical approach to the study of ontology” (p. 150). For both of them, “ontological study must follow the change of time and deal with each occurrence of being, or *Dao*, individually in life” (p. 147).

Whereas Heidegger’s views on the temporality of being created a stir at the time of their presentation in the early twentieth-century West, Zhang Xuecheng’s speculations on time and history had precedent in the perennial Chinese dialectic of interdependent opposites. Zhang, however, does tilt the balance in his dialectic more toward the historical (as opposed to the suprahistorical) and the concrete (as opposed to the abstract). According to Zhang, the *Dao* cannot be abstracted from the material world. It is, after all, not abstract but concrete, not distant but immediate. “More importantly, *Dao* is changeable” (pp. 140). It is, therefore, most fully manifested in history, which records how “the *Dao* gradually expands and manifests itself as required by the progress of time” (p. 142). Among the histories that record changes in the *Dao* are the classics, which are not eternal and immutable, but rather products of their own time and space, like all other histories.

In the penultimate article in this sequence, Ricardo K. S. Mak compares conceptions of time and evolution in a third pair of Chinese and Western thinkers, Yan Fu and Herbert Spencer. Unlike Pythagoras and Wang Fu-chih, and Heidegger and Zhang Xuecheng, however, Spencer and Yan were contemporaries, and the former exercised a great influence on the intellectual development of the latter. In fact, Yan had the reputation of being “the first Chinese disciple of [Spencerian] social evolutionism” (p. 165). Yan, however, broke away from Spencer’s

views on time and evolution under the influence of Daoist natural philosophy.

While Spencer's model theoretically "allowed ceaseless change in the process of social evolution," it "never ruled out a destination for mankind," one which the advanced Western nations were apparently closest to attaining (pp. 159 and 165). "In this sense, Spencer's evolutionism was still confined in a close-ended framework" (p. 165).

Yan's early evolutionism likewise postulated "a single track of temporal development toward an uncertain but desirable end" (p. 168). But, in his translation of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (1896), Yan began to pay "increasing attention to the heterogeneity of things and consequently developed his concept of the multiplicity of time" (p. 168). While not abandoning his belief in a grand macro process of evolution, he directed his interest more toward "the micro processes within the macro process" (p. 168). Each of these micro processes, moreover, had its "tempo, rhythm, and duration" (p. 171). Based on this revised micro-evolutionary hypothesis, Yan looked forward to "a world free of external intervention [that] allowed everything to find its own position in the universe" (p. 171), a world the classical Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi might have appreciated.

This autonomy and multiplicity of micro-evolutionary processes all but excluded a unitary historical teleology. In other words, Yan Fu saw history as an open-ended and creative process or collection of processes. Among these evolutionary processes, those related to human endeavors were not necessarily of paramount importance. For "Yan Fu's concept of time and evolution, stemming from Daoism, regarded men and things as minor parts of nature.... Those who understood the limitlessness of nature and the limitation of man attain peace, freedom, and tranquility. An open-ended historical process, in this sense, is not a bad thing at all" (p. 173).

Yan Fu's idea of micro processes furnishes a fitting prolegomenon to Ming-ke Wang's article on "What Continued in History? A Perspective from the History of the Qiang." Focusing on the historiography of a "national minority" (as opposed to the Han majority), Wang's article can be said to deal with one of Yan Fu's micro processes of historical evolution. By analyzing five heterogeneous histories

concerning the Qiang of western Sichuan province, Wang highlights the multiplicity of the concepts of history and time in societies, past and present.

According to Wang, “History or historical narratives... are kinds of collective memory used to reinforce blood ties among people” and to confirm the affiliation between them and the space they occupy (p. 178). The five histories of the Qiang recounted in Wang’s article accomplish these goals in different ways and from different points of view. The first two were written by great Han historians in the fifth century and in modern times; the third and fourth are genesis stories told by Qiang mountain villagers, and the fifth is a history told by Qiang literati. Although clear differences among these various narratives are apparent, Wang’s essay “does not suggest a clear-cut distinction between the ancient Han Chinese and the modern ones, between the Han and non-Han, and between the villagers and the literati, in respect of their concepts of history” (p. 198). This may suggest a sort of dialectical interplay of opposites as an aspect of the perennial Chinese worldview, in this case applied to a more empirical aspect of history writing.

From a “universal typology of the conceptual foundations of historical consciousness” (first article by Rüsen) to five heterogeneous histories of a particular “national minority” (last essay by Wang), the articles in this collection range over a wide gamut, from universal to particular, from national/cultural to individual, and from classical to modern. Still, a single thread unites most if not all of these otherwise diverse articles, that of a dialectic of interdependent opposites rooted in the Confucian and Daoist classics, and perhaps best exemplified in the canonical appendices to the *Book of Changes*. The distinctiveness of this dialectic is further accentuated by comparisons with Western notions of time and history in sources ranging from the Pythagoreans to Heidegger. This is not to say that there exists a unitary Chinese view of time and temporality or to attempt to force fit all of the diverse perspectives presented in this volume into a procrustean bed. The “single thread” winds through many diverse patches to make a coat of many colors. This thread, moreover, has at least one loose end: it does not end with a teleological knot. And so, we the authors whose works are included in this volume hope that our small contributions will stimulate open-ended discussion rather than closure