

Historical Discourses in Traditional Chinese  
Historical Writings: Historiography as  
Philosophy  
中國歷史寫作中的史論：  
史學與哲學會通的平臺

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**關鍵詞：**史論、中國史學、司馬遷、朱熹

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## Abstract

During the long course of Chinese history, Chinese historians always added comments after narrating historical events in order to draw didactic lessons from the forge of history. From "the gentleman says" of the *Zuozhuan* to the "Grand Historian says" of *Historian's Records*, the "measured discourses" of the official *Han History*, the "assessments" of the *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*, the "Your Servant Sima Guang says" of the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* to Wang Fuzhi's (1619-1692) *Reading the General Mirror of Historical Discourses* and *Discourses on Song History*, these historians all examined the concrete "events" of history in detail in order to discourse on the "principle" or "moral norm" at stake. They thus followed the traces of history in order to seek the root causes; they followed upstream in order to reflect on the well-spring, the source, thus producing the synthesis of history and philosophy that characterizes traditional Chinese scholarship. This paper examines the complex relationship between "events" and "principles" in traditional Chinese historical writings, and discusses how traditional Chinese historiography orchestrates a synthesis of history with philosophy in which history operates as the function of philosophy.

The present paper consists of five sections: besides section one, the introduction, section two traces the development of the relationship between "events" and "principles" in Chinese historiography, stressing that before the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. (Northern Song), principle was regarded as parasitic on real events, i.e., as not really essential for understanding. After the rise of Song Neo-Confucianism, the principles identified in history gradually came to be viewed as the driving forces of historical events. This change reflected the gradual immersion of Confucian values into historical reflection, by which events and principle became ever more intimately connected. Sections three and four analyze two main uses that Chinese historical discourses started to have. Section three discusses how the forge of historical particularity was thought to produce universal significances, thus making the generalities in the works of Chinese history start to take on the appearance of Georg W. F. Hegel's (1770-1830) so-called "concrete universals."

Section four discusses the second use of the discourses in Chinese historiography; that is, the synthesis of the historian's "factual judgments" and "value judgments" or "moral judgments." Chinese traditional historical narratives

mostly tended to be what Jörn Rüsen calls "exemplary narratives." The Chinese historians fully approved of the notion that the actors in history were exercising their free will, that the movers and shakers in history held ultimate historical responsibility for the fruits of their actions and the broader historical impact. In Chinese culture, historians used historical judgment in place of the Final Judgment which is fundamental in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Section five summarizes the main points made in the paper, stressing the special feature of the unity of literature, history, and philosophy in traditional Chinese learning, through which the traditional discourses of Chinese historiography revealed a Gospel for their own tradition.

## 摘要

中國史學源遠流長，史家常在歷史敘述之後撰寫史論，以提煉歷史教訓或道德命題，從《左傳》的「君子曰」、《史記》的「太史公曰」、《漢書》之「論贊」、《三國志》之「評」、《資治通鑑》的「臣光曰」，到王夫之的《讀通鑑論》、《宋論》，都即「事」以言「理」，循跡以求本，沿波以討源，呈現中國傳統學術中史學與哲學之貫通。本文之主旨在於析論中國史學著作的「史論」中的「事」與「理」之複雜關係，並探討「史論」所發揮之融貫史哲、亦史亦哲之功能。

本文共分五節，除第一節前言之外，第二節分析中國「史論」中「理」「事」關係之發展，指出在公元第十世紀北宋以前之中國史著中，史「理」多半寄寓於史「事」之中。宋代理學興起之後，史「理」逐漸凌駕於史「事」之上，此與宋代以降史學思考浸潤在儒學價值理念之氛圍之中，有其深刻之關係。本文第三節分析中國「史論」所發揮的第一種作用，乃在於從歷史事實的「特殊性」(particularity)中提煉出其具「普遍性」(universality)之涵義，使中國史論作品中之「共相」，呈現近似黑格爾(Georg W. F. Hegel, 1770-1831)所謂「具體性的共相」(concrete universals)。

本文第四節分析中國史論作品所發揮第二種作用，在於融貫史家之「事實判斷」與「價值判斷」或「道德判斷」。中國的歷史敘述多半具有余森(Jörn Rüsen)所謂「例證式敘述」(exemplary narrative)之傾向，史家充分肯定歷史行為者之「自由意志」，對歷史當事人及其行為之後果，課以歷史之責任。在中國文化中，中國史學家以「歷史的審判」取代猶太基督宗教文化中之「最後的審判」。本文第五節則綜論本文主旨，申論中國學術之文史哲融貫之一體之特質，在歷史寫作之「史論」作品最能透露其消息。

## I. Introduction

Traditional Chinese culture was deeply imbued with a profound sense of time,<sup>1</sup> hence time consciousness was highly developed there. Many of the classical texts of the Western Zhou (1045-771 BCE) such as the books of *Odes* and *Documents*, served as mirrors for reflection on the historical events of the Yin and Shang periods (?-1045 BCE). Even more, Confucius (551-479 BCE), who considered himself a "transmitter and not a creator, who trusts in and enjoys antiquity," held the historical cultural tradition in profound respect. In the political struggles throughout Chinese history, historical interpreters were often in conflict with the court authorities. History often became an Armageddon of ideological war in the transfer of political power or outbreaks of political conflict. For instance, after the establishment of the Han empire (206 BCE-220 CE), Han rulers and ministers always discussed such question as the decline of the Qin and the rise of the Han.<sup>2</sup> The rulers and their ministers always paid attention to the rise and fall of their predecessors in order to draw insights and wisdom therefrom. For them, history served as a guide to the strategy and tactics of rule. The Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) from its beginnings inaugurated the tradition of official historiography.<sup>3</sup> Since that time, the official historian would stay near the emperor and keep a journal of his every movement called *Diary of Activity and Repose*. Chinese official historians regarded safeguarding historical truth as their sacred mission. Zhu Suiliang 褚遂良 (596-658) went so far as to

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1 Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (eds.), *Time and Space in Chinese Culture* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995).

2 Chun-chieh Huang, "The Ch'in Unification in Chinese Historiography," in Q. Edward Wang and Georg Iggers (eds.), *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), pp. 35-44.

3 Lien-sheng Yang, "The Organization of Chinese Official Historiography: Principles and Methods of the Standard Histories from T'ang through the Ming Dynasty," in W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (eds.), *Historians of China and Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 44-59.

reject emperor Tang Taizong's 唐太宗 (r. 627-649) request to read his *Diary of Activity and Repose*. During the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in twentieth-century China, while on the surface the Anti-Confucius Campaign was launched to criticize Confucius, in fact it was aimed at the political target Li Biao 林彪 (1908-1971). In Postwar Taiwan, the interpretation of the February 28 Incident has been a bone of contention between historians of different political camps. In the development of Chinese politics from antiquity, struggles have broken out between historians and the authorities over the interpretation of history down to the present day; in fact, one could claim with authority that the Chinese have always possessed a highly developed historical consciousness.

Because of this deeply engraved sense of time, the study of history was especially well-developed among the traditional Chinese humanities.<sup>4</sup> While Chinese historians stressed establishing knowledge of the facts of past experience, they also always kept a watchful eye on present and future trends. They always glorified golden ages of the past, such as the Three Dynasties, and exemplary personages, sages and worthies such as emperors Yao and Shun, in order to criticize the present and to chart a better course for the future.<sup>5</sup> We could say that Chinese historiography had a sort of didactic bent, for Chinese historians liked to draw moral or philosophical lessons from their narratives to serve as lessons and warnings to their readers, rulers in particular.<sup>6</sup> Because traditional Chinese historians used historical narrative as a means to advance other ends, and

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4 For an earlier accounts of Chinese historians, see W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (eds.), *Op. cit.* For a recent study of Chinese historiography, see On-cho Ng and Q. Edward Wang, *Mirroring the Past: the Writing and Use of History in Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

5 Chun-chieh Huang, "Historical Thinking in Classical Confucianism: Historical Argumentation from the Three Dynasties," in Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (eds.), *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, pp. 72-79.

6 Chun-chieh Huang, "The Philosophical Argumentation by Historical Narration in Sung China: The Case of Chu Hsi," in Thomas H. C. Lee (ed.), *The New and the Multiple: Sung Senses of the Past* (Honk Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2004), pp. 107-124. Cf. Conrad Schirokauer, "Chu Hsi's Sense of History," in Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer (eds.), *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 193-220.

ultimately aimed to draw moral lessons or philosophical themes after narrating a historical event or describing a historical personage, they would append a critical discourse. Such appended critical historical discourses can be seen in the "the Gentleman says" remarks of the *Zuozhuan*, the "His Honor the Grand Scribe says" remarks of the *Historian's Records*, the "in eulogy we say" remarks of *History of the Han*, the "Comments" of the *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*, Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019-1086) "Your Servant Guang remarks" of the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (*Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑), Wang Fuzhi's 王夫之 (1619-1692) "in Eulogy we say" remarks on *Reading the General Mirror of Historical Discourses* (*Du Tongjian Lun* 讀通鑑論) and *Discourses on Song History* (*Song Lun* 宋論), and the remarks of Northern Song literati like Su Xun 蘇洵 (1009-1066) and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) critiquing historical events and personages. They all seized upon events in order to expound on principle. They all followed the traces to seek the root; they travelled upstream to trace the well-spring, thus producing a rich synthesis of history and philosophy that runs through traditional Chinese scholarship. The present paper focuses on the complex relationship between events and principles in traditional Chinese historical discourses. It also explores how these discourses produced such a rich synthesis between history and philosophy, with history operating as a function of philosophy.

## **II. The Evolution of the Relationship between Events and Principle in Traditional Chinese Historical Writing**

In traditional Chinese historical discourses, the historians set up a bridge between fact or event, on the one hand, and principle or norm, on the other. The historians quietly observed the main trends of history – the rise and fall of dynasties and the heights and depths of humanity – extrapolating and distilling

the principles and/or norms implicit in historical facts and events. Consequently, the historical discourses expressed from the writing brushes of traditional historians were not mummy-like and frozen but more like a living library. People of later generations could enter this historical library and engage in dialogue with personages of the past in order to access the insights and wisdom garnered by those sage/historians from the experience of the ancients.

Generally speaking, prior to the Northern Song dynasty, which arose in the tenth century C.E., the principles and/or ethical norms appealed to in historical discourses were presented as embedded in historical facts. The writings of the Grand Historian Sima Qian (145-86 BCE) are most representative in this respect. Unlike the Greek historians Herodotus (c.484-425 BCE), and Thucydides (ca. 460?-400? BCE), who placed stress on the outstanding heroes of important battles, Sima Qian in *the Historian's Records* stressed personages who had vanished in the tide of history, such as Boyi and Shuqi, and cultural heroes, such as Confucius (551-479 BCE) and Mencius (371-289? BCE) etc. In his *Historian's Records*, Sima Qian included the biographies of Boyi and Shuqi as the first chapter of the division of biographies in narrating the transfer of power after the fall of the Shang dynasty in 1027 B.C.E. He stressed the historical fact that Boyi and Shuqi had rejected the new Zhou authority and for this starved to death atop Shouyang (首陽) Mountain. Regarding this event, Sima Qian reflected that, "Heaven's way favors none, but always sides with the good man." This adage reflected the ancient Chinese faith in principle or ethical norm in the world. In Sima Qian's historical writings, the intimate relationship between heaven and humanity was to be discerned and discovered only in historical facts, such as in the fate of Boyi and Shuqi.

However, after the tenth and eleventh centuries that witnessed the rise of Neo-Confucianism, Confucian values penetrated the historians' perceptions of and reflections on history. Therefore, historical principle or ethical norms began



to drive and then transcend historical fact, ultimately becoming inherent in the historian's interpretations of historical movement and change.

The Northern Song historian Sima Guang (1019-1086) applied strict historical methodology and the careful application of critical techniques<sup>7</sup> in compiling the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*, which covered 1,392 years of Chinese history. He carefully narrated the chronology of historical events from 403 B.C.E. to 959 C.E. but at the same time used the theory of "titles and duties" as a standard for critically assessing the events and personages of history.

In the Southern Song dynasty, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) began using the idea of "principle" (*Li* 理) at the core of his philosophy as a completely transcendent foundation and standard for interpreting history. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> traditional historians' moral interpretations of history were based on principle (*li*) or the Way (*dao* 道). They regarded principle at once as a cosmic norm and a standard of human conduct—which was ultimately one and the same in both contexts and roles. For this reason, Zhu Xi is a representative figure who read and interpreted history in the perspective of his philosophy of principle under which factual judgment and moral judgment were integrated as one and the same. In this way, history came under the control of abstract transcendental principles to such an extent that human affairs also came under its power, and all of the concrete facts of history came to be judged as positive or negative according to this eternal paradigm of principle. In this way, the philosophy of principle gave critical historians a sort of spiritual leverage in wielding their craft of writing history.

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7 E. G. Pulleyblank, "Chinese Historical Criticism: Liu Chin-chi and Ssu-ma Kuang," in W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (eds.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 135-166.

8 See supra note 6.

Zhu Xi, as a representative Song Confucian interpreter of history, adopted a sort of supra-temporal moral stance when observing the events of history. In this respect, we could say that he brought an ahistorical or even anti-historical attitude to his discourses on history.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that this was Zhu Xi's purpose; it simply characterizes his methodology and approach to history. This sort of view of history assumes that historical knowledge serves for morality under which the autonomy of historical knowledge becomes blurred and enslaved by the rigid template of ethics and morality.

After the eleventh century two problems emerged from the Neo-Confucian subverting of historical fact to moral principle: 1) in the Neo-Confucian historical writings, the term principle (*li* 理) covered both objective principle and ethical norms. So, how could this eternal, unchanging principle be deployed to interpret, say, the dark side of politics or culture? How could principle be made relevant and brought to bear on evil in history? We must respond that their moral approach to interpretation had no way to face and account for the problem of evil in history. 2) In light of principle, Zhu Xi and the other Song Neo-Confucians tended to praise and to extend the heavy responsibility placed on the shoulders of the sages, worthies and heroes of history. This tendency resulted in the focus of history turning to the character and feats in the biographies of a few outstanding personages to the exclusion of records about the contributions of the nameless, faceless people who actually lived and drove history. This sort of history must face one deeply serious problem: if the sagesworthies and heroes had not appeared, how could these historians affirm that history would still have been consistent with principle or progress on track with the Way (*dao* 道)? As a matter of fact, the Neo-Confucian "Principle" tended to serve as a sort of "Procrustean bed" in some interpretations of history proposed by Song Neo-Confucian thinkers.

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9 Cf. Benjamin I. Schwartz, "History in Chinese Culture: Some Comparative Reflections," *History and Theory*, 35, 4 (December, 1996), pp. 23-33.

In short, Chinese historical discourses reached a high water mark in the eleventh century with Song Neo-Confucianism, when principle became viewed as inherent in historical events rather than just extrapolated and distilled. The relationship between event or fact and principle or norm seemed to be confirmed and provided a complete platform for integrating history and philosophy in the tradition the Chinese learning.

### III. The Use of History (1): From Particular to Universal

Traditional Chinese historical discourses took many forms. As to their objects of critique, they assessed the good and evil of the personages of history and weighed the factors in the rise and fall of dynasties. As to their contents, they sometimes sought and analyzed a certain meaning in history, sometimes they inquired more broadly into the larger meaning of history. The different forms of historical discourse were used to play different roles. Nonetheless, all of them provided bridges or platforms which brought history and philosophy together, thus producing the traditional Chinese humanities' synthesis of history and philosophy.

The first major use of historical discourse was to extrapolate and distill universals from particulars. The traditional historians never regarded collecting historical data or revisioning historical facts as history's highest objective.<sup>10</sup> Rather, their reworking of concrete, particular facts of history was for the purpose of extrapolating and distilling the abstract, general principles they assumed to be

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10 For example, Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1730-1801) insisted that historiography aimed at statecraft, not at collecting date, see his *Wenshi tongyi ciao zu* 文史通義校注 (General meaning of historiography), annotated by Yeying 葉瑛 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), vol. 5, pp. 523-524.

latent in history. The Grand Historian Sima Qian gives a paradigmatic expression of the mission:<sup>11</sup>

I studied the events of history and set them down in significant order; I have written 130 chapters in which appears the record of the past – its periods of greatness and decline, of achievement and failure. Further, it was my hope, by a thorough comprehension of the workings of affairs divine and human, and a knowledge of the historical process, to create a philosophy of my own.

Starting with Siman Qian, traditional Chinese historians regarded the achievement of comprehensiveness as their highest goal. This ideal is exhibited particularly well in the Tang dynasty historian Du You's 杜佑 (735-812) *Comprehensive Statutes* (801), Southern Song historian Zheng Jiao's 鄭樵 (1104-1162) *Comprehensive Treatises* (1161), and Ma Duanlin's 馬端臨 (1254-1324/5) *Comprehensive Survey of Literary Remains*. These three institutional encyclopedias best exemplify the trend to write a "comprehensive" history of the concrete facts or institutional material.<sup>12</sup>

However, it is also noteworthy that the ideal of "comprehensiveness" in traditional historical writings in essence was the extrapolation and distillation of abstract, universal principles or norms out of complex, changing concrete events, particularity of historical events and personages, thus combining historical narrative with philosophical reflection.

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11 Ssu-ma Ch'ien, "Letter to Jen An," in Cyril Birch (ed.), *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteen Century* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), p. 101.

12 Hok-lam Chan, "'Comprehensiveness' (Tung) and 'Change' (Pien) in Ma Tuan-lin's Historical Thought," in Hok-lam Chan and Wm. Theodore de Bary (eds.), *Yüan Thought: Chinese Thought and Religion Under the Mongols* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 27-88.

An early example of this kind of historical discourse that proceeds from particular to universal is found in the *Mencius* 6B:15:<sup>13</sup>

Mencius said, "Shun rose from the fields; Fu Yüeh was raised to office from amongst the builders; Chiao Ke from amidst the fish and salt; Kuan Chung from the hands of the prison officer; Sun Shu-ao from the sea and Po-li Hsi from the market. That is why Heaven, when it is about to place a great burden on a man, always first tests his resolution, exhausts his frame and makes him suffer starvation and hardship, frustrates his efforts so as to shake him from his mental lassitude, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies. As a rule, a man can mend his ways only after he has made mistakes. It is only when a man is frustrated in mind and in his deliberations that he is able to innovate. It is only when his intentions become visible on his countenance and audible in his tone of voice that others can understand him. As a rule, a state without law-abiding families and reliable Gentlemen on the one hand, and, on the other, without the threat of foreign invasion, will perish. Only then do we learn the lesson that we survive in adversity and perish in ease and comfort."

Mencius extrapolates and distills a principle of universal necessity from the particularity of historical personages, i.e., the thesis that people thrive in adversity, but weaken and perish in ease and comfort. This form typifies the style of historical reflection adopted by most traditional historians.

When Chinese historians pointed out universals they had derived from the particulars of their historical narrations, they were most concerned with drawing valid generalizations and establishing general laws. Besides the Grand Historian

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13 D. C. Lau (tr.), *Mencius* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1979, 1984), vol. 2, BK IV, Part B, chap. 15, pp. 260-262.

Sima Qian's pointing out of many general laws and viewpoints in *Histoian'l Records*, the same practice is exhibited in the Wang Fuzhi's 王夫之 (1619-1692) *A Treatise on Song Dynasty* of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Zhao Yi's 趙翼 (1727-1814) *Classified Notes on the Twenty-two Standard Histories* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and even Chen Yanke's 陳寅恪 (1890-1969) *A Draft Political History of the Tang Dynasty* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They all point out general laws and viewpoints they had derived from the particulars of their narratives of Chinese history.

Interestingly, Nakamura Hajime 中村元 (1912-1999) did not register this tendency of traditional Chinese historians to draw universals from particulars in his analysis of the patterns of Chinese thinking. In his study, he said the traditional Chinese had placed emphasis on the perception of the concrete. They had not developed abstract thought but laid special stress on the particular.<sup>14</sup> Nakamura further claimed that the Chinese "were concerned with particular instances. This meant that they were little interested in universals which comprehend or transcend individual or particular instances, thus seldom creating a universal out of particulars."<sup>15</sup> I am afraid that Nakamura's view is somewhat one-sided and requires reconsideration.

Naturally, I am not making the claim that traditional historians had a model of inference along the lines of Carl Hempel's (1905-1997) idea of deductive-nomological explanation, for the reason that the explanadum used in traditional historical discourses did not necessarily trace the steps of the inference and thus lacked a Hampelian "covering law."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the traditional historians would have agreed with Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) who asserted that while scientists place stress on similarity and universality, historians emphasize

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14 Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan*, edited by Philip P. Wiener (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 175-203.

15 Hajime Nakamura, *Op. cit.*, p. 184.

16 Carl Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," in Patrick Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 344-355.

dissimilarity and particularity.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, traditional historians established an interpretive philosophy of history, not an analytic philosophy of history, and that the general laws they pointed out were not a sort of logical compact but were more like heuristic principles. By learning and pondering such heuristic principles, the readers of the historical discourses could take the hand of the ancients and walk together with them.

The narratives of the traditional Chinese historical discourses bear another theoretical problem that warrants our attention. We might characterize the universals that the traditional historians derived from the particulars of history as "concrete universals," as defined by the philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831).<sup>18</sup> Still, does such a "concrete universal" as philosophical or ethical theses still have unconditional universality and necessity? I would argue that because the principles derived by traditional Chinese historians from particularity are concrete and tempo-spatially-determined substance, it follows that while they have the autonomy of historical knowledge, they are not universally applicable abstract principles. This issue is worth further consideration.

#### **IV The Use of History (2): Synthesizing Factual Judgment with Moral Judgment**

The second use of Chinese historical discourses is to synthesize the factual judgment of historical events and personages with moral judgments. This process

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17 Isaiah Berlin, "History and Theory: The Concept of Scientific History," in Alexander V. Riasanovsky and Barnes Rizrik (eds.), *Generalizations in Historical Writing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), pp. 60-113.

18 Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, translated and edited by George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 537 and p. 585. Hegel takes the idea of "five elements" in ancient China as the "concert universals," see Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6, vol. 1*, in Robert F. Brown (ed.), translated by R. F. Brown and J. M. Stewart with the assistance of H. S. Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 110.

involved uniting the historians' goal of establishing truth with the philosopher's goal of establishing goodness, and is a characteristic of the craft of traditional historical narrative.

This uniting of factual judgment and moral judgment in traditional Chinese historiography began very early. It can be seen in the "Gentlemen says" sections of the *Zuo zhuan*. In an entry for the 11<sup>th</sup> year of Duke Yin's 隱公 reign (712 BCE) of Lu 魯 state, after narrating the process whereby Duke Zhuang 莊公 of Zheng 鄭 state had handled a political dispute between the states of Zheng and Xu 許, the author of the *Zuo zhuan* critiques this matter as follows:<sup>19</sup>

The superior man may say that in this matter duke Zhuang of Zheng (鄭) behaved with propriety. It is propriety which governs State and clans, gives settlement to the tutelary altars, secures the order of the people, and provides for the good of one's future heirs. Because Xu (許) transgressed the law, the earl punished it, and on its submission he left it. His arrangement of affairs was according to his measurement of his virtue; his action proceeded on the estimate of his strength; his movements were according to the exigency of the times: so as not to embarrass those who should follow him. He may be pronounced one who knew propriety.

There are two points to notice in this comment by the author of the *Zuo zhuan*. First, the historian's account of this political dispute between the states of Zheng and Xu is a sort of tool for distilling the historical discourse in a way to pass moral judgment as the ultimate purpose of historical knowing. Second, historical fact is placed in the context of moral value so that it may be weighed and judged appropriately. The author of *Zuo zhuan* selected the most morally significant and enlightening historical events and personages from among a wide range of cases

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19 English translation is slightly adapted from James Legge (tr.), *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 33.



so that after presenting his account of the facts he could investigate, develop and discuss the positive and negative moral lessons involved. This sort of tradition of historical writing is consistent with the principle adopted by Confucius in compiling and editing the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. As *Mencius* 4B:21 reads:

Mencius said, "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 Chin, the *T'ao U* of Ch'u and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of Lu are the same kind of work. The events recorded concern Duke Huan of Ch'i and Duke Wen of Chin, and the style is that of the official historian. Confucius said, 'I have appropriated the didactic principles therein.'<sup>20</sup>

Confucius' "appropriation" mentioned in this quotation is precisely the extrapolating and distilling of historical principle whereby the narration of historical facts becomes a tool of historical moral reasoning, and consequently the craft of writing history and ethics become one and the same. As Yu Ying-shih 余英時 (1931- ) said, "History writing in the Chinese tradition is an act of political and moral criticism."<sup>21</sup>

Examples of this tendency to extrapolate and distill moral principles from the narration of historical facts abound throughout the history of traditional Chinese historiography. At the beginning of the Former Han dynasty, Jia Yi 賈誼 (200-168 BCE) wrote "The Faults of Qin" in which he narrated the process whereby the state of Qin grew from a minor state on the western frontier into the power that formed the first fully united Chinese empire (221-206 BCE), followed by the decline and destruction that concluded from the violent 15 years of *Sturm*

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20 D. C. Lau, *Mencius*, 4B:21, vol. 1, p. 165.

21 Yü Ying-shih, "Reflections on Chinese Historical Thinking," in Jörn Rüsen (ed.), *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), p. 161.

und Drang Qin imperial rule. Jia Yi then proceeded to extrapolate and distill important moral lessons from the story of the rise and fall of the Qin empire. For example, he wrote:<sup>22</sup>

Ch'in, beginning with an insignificant amount of territory, reached the power of a great state and for a hundred years made all the other great lords pay homage to it. Yet after it had become master of the whole empire and established itself within the fastness of the pass, a single commoner opposed it and its ancestral temple toppled, its ruler died by the hands of men, and it became the laughingstock of the world. Why? Because it failed to rule with humanity and righteousness and to realize that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has thereby won are not the same.

Thus, according to Jia Yi's interpretation of history, it was Qinshihuang's (r. 221-210 BCE) 秦始皇 inability to rule by humanity (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義) caused the collapse of the Qin empire. This sort of historical interpretation is based on a theoretical assumption, i.e., the *modus operandi* of the outer realm is tantamount to the *modus operandi* of the inner realm such that the outer realm is nothing but the extension of the inner realm.

This type of logic of argument also appears in the *Historian's Records*. After Sima Qian narrated an event involving Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202 BCE), he criticized Xiang Yu, saying,<sup>23</sup>

All power was delegated by Hsiang Yü, who proclaimed himself Hegemon King. Even though his reign did not come to a natural end,

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22 Chia Yi, "The Faults of Ch'in," in Cyril Birch (ed.), *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, p. 48.

23 William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (ed.), *The Grand Scribe's Records* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 208.

since ancient times there has never been such a person. By the time Hsiang Yü turned his back on the land within the Pass to embrace Ch'u and banished Emperor Ti to enthrone himself, it is difficult to see how he could resent the feudal lords rebelling against him. He boasted of achievements, asserted his own mind, but never learned from the ancients. He called his enterprise that of a Hegemon King, intending to manage the world by means of mighty campaigns. After five years, he finally lost his state and died himself at Tung-ch'eng, yet even then he did not come to his senses and blame himself. What error! To excuse himself by claiming "Heaven destroyed me, it was not any fault of mine in using troops!" How absurd!

In Sima Qian's eyes, the cause of Xiang Yu's downfall and defeat was that Xiang Yu hadn't understood self-criticism and lacked the ability to reflect on himself and his deeds.

The first event included in Northern Song historian Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* took place in 403 B.C.E. It concerned the entitling of the great officials Wei Si (魏斯), Zhao Ji (趙籍) and Han Qian (韓虔) as "feudal lords" for the first time in history. Concerning this singular event, Sima Guang wrote a comment starting with, "Your Servant Guang says," maintaining that the rise and fall of dynasties was determined by the moral conduct of the ruling authority. For example, he wrote: <sup>24</sup>

Ever since antiquity, there are many wicked ministers and delinquent sons of families perished with surplus talent and a deficit of morality. [...] The solution is that if those who lead countries and clans were able to judge the difference between talent and morality and know their

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24 Sima Guang, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Taipei: Sizie Sucu, 1970), vol. 1, Chronology of Chou1, 403BCE, p. 15.

priority, then how could the loss of a person be enough to create calamity?

Moreover, Sima Guang wrote another clear passage describing the function of historical narrative as to instruct and transform. He wrote:<sup>25</sup>

Now your servant in his narrative ~~his~~ has sought only to trace the rise and fall of the various states and make clear the people's time of joy and sorrow so that the reader may select for himself what is good and what is bad, what profitable and what unprofitable, for his own encouragement and warning.

The reason why Sima Guang strongly emphasized that factual judgment was for the sake of seeking truth was because moral judgment becomes clear. In line with Sima Guang, Zhu Xi formulated a set of general rules for writing the outline and digest of Sima Guang's *Comprehensive Mirror*. Zhu Xi firmly believed that the moral implications and lessons of history might become clear only if the historical facts were reported accurately by a careful use of terminology.<sup>26</sup>

In ancient China, the tradition of combining factual narrative and moral judgment in the writing of history was made possible by the presupposition that the agents of action in history, the movers and shakers, had volition and free will and were responsible for their actions. The most classical expression of this assent occurs in the entry for the second year of Duke Xuan's 宣公 reign (607 BCE) in the *Zuo zhuan*, which reads:<sup>27</sup>

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25 Wm. Theodore de Bary et. al. (comp.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), vol. 1, p. 449.

26 Wm. Theodore de Bary et. al. (comp.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 452-454.

27 James Legge (tr.), *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), pp. 290-291.

Chaou Ch'uen 趙穿 (Zhao Quan) attacked [and killed] duke Ling in the peach garden, and Seuen 宣 (Xuan), who was flying from the State, but had not yet left its hills behind him, returned to the capital. The grand historiographer wrote this entry, – "Chaou Tun 趙盾 (Zhao Dun) murdered his ruler," and showed it in the court. Seuen (Xuan) said to him, "It was not so;" but he replied, "You are the highest minister. Flying from the State, you did not cross its borders; since you returned, you have not punished the villain. If it was not you who murdered the marquis, who was it?" [...] "Confucius said 'Tung Hoo 董狐 (Dong Hu) was a good historiographer of old time: his rule for writing was not to conceal. Chaou Seuen (Zhao Hsuan) was a great officer of old time: in accordance with that law he accepted the charge of such wickedness. Alas! If he had crossed the border, he would have escaped it.'"

The reason why Confucius praised the historian Dong Hu as "this ancient good historiographer" was because Confucius and Dong Hu agreed that the conduct of Zhao Dun was an expression of his free will because of this conduct he had to be charged by the final historical responsibility and accept the record of the historian's judgment that "Zhao Dun murdered his lord." Regarding the use of moral judgment in traditional Chinese historical writing, we could maintain that historical judgment in Chinese civilization replaced the role of final judgment in Judeo-Christian civilization. The concept of final judgment in Western civilization was established on the idea of a covenant between humanity and God; however, the idea of historical judgment in Chinese civilization was based on a sort of tacit moral duty among human beings. As Yu Ying-shih has said, "The notion that human history is an irreversible process guided by some trans-human forces, such as Providence or natural laws is wholly alien to indigenous Chinese historiography."<sup>28</sup> Traditional historians kept their hearts set

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28 Yu Ying-shih, *Op. cit.*, p. 153. Still, Chinese historians must have accepted the irreversibility of time, which is fundamental justification of all history writing in the first place.

on the long and winding road of the people's blood, sweat and tears in this mundane world; they did not establish the notion of an ideal Heavenly City or view some vague notion of collective agency as the driving force in history.<sup>29</sup> From Sima Qian's expressed sympathy for the defeated hero Xiang Yu, pity for the cultural heroes Boyi and Shuqi, and concern for the suffering, toiling masses in his writings, we could describe his book *Historian's Records* as branding the style of traditional Chinese historical writings as *Historia Calamitatum*.

The question of whether or not historical research should engage in moral judgment was a leading question in 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography. The renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century British historian Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979) made a strong case that the historian's primary responsibility was to describe historical facts, not to prescribe, that is, not to make moral judgments. He supported this view by observing that when the historical researcher engages in moral judgment, he muddies historical understanding.<sup>30</sup> The British philosopher and man of letters, Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) opposed Butterfield's view. He argued that it was difficult to demarcate the spheres of the objective and the subjective and, moreover, that every historical subject is an individual and every individual should know that he or she is responsible for his or her actions.<sup>31</sup>

Traditional Chinese historians would have tended to agree with Berlin's position and to oppose Butterfield's position. Sima Qian declared his purpose in conducting historical inquiry in saying, "by a thorough comprehension of the workings of affairs divine and human, and a knowledge of the historical process, to create a philosophy of my own."<sup>32</sup> Sima Qian was convinced that his own

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29 Peter Burke has indicated that the collective agency or collective agents are given unusual stress in Western historiography, see Peter Burke, "Western Historical Thinking in a Global Perspective: 10 Theses," in Jörn Rüsen (eds.), *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate*, pp. 15-32.

30 Herbert Butterfield, "Moral Judgments in History," in Hans Meyerhoff (ed.), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 228-248.

31 Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," in Meyerhoff (ed.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 249-272.

32 Burton Watson (tr.), *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

philosophy could comprehend the objective changes from past to present. In the historical world presented in *Historian's Records*, subjectivity and objectivity were fused, and past and present were regarded as intimately interactive. The notion of objectivity in historical research indeed matches the subjectivity of Sima Qian's historical mind-heart when it is engaged in reflection.

To sum up, in traditional Chinese historical discourses the facts are contextualized in morality such that the facts are not reduced to cold and empty physical phenomena but are viewed as vivid and reflective of the devotion and blood and sweat of genuine human endeavor. In the world of traditional Chinese historiography, history is presented as the vivid, engaging, existential experience of human beings. In such a world, factual judgment and moral judgment are inseparable and subjectivity and objectivity fused. Traditional Chinese historians would completely agree with R. G. Collingwood's (1889-1943) position that, "History is nothing but the re-enactment of the past thought in the historian's mind."<sup>33</sup>

The uses to which the writings of Chinese history were put led to the formation of the special characteristic of the Chinese intellectual tradition: history and philosophy were united as a single endeavor. Traditional historians and philosophers both sought to ameliorate human suffering by improving human life as their purpose. Therefore, they ramified the quest for truth with the quest for goodness, thus making Chinese history become as sort of "philosophy taught by example," and making Chinese philosophy stress "temporality and spatiality," and remain imbued with the spirit of historical concreteness.

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33 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 228.

## V. Conclusion

Drawing upon many highly representative examples of traditional Chinese historical discourses, we discuss the two main uses of discourses. First, they were used to infer universals from the particulars of history in a manner that placed fact or event and principle or norm in a dynamic dialectical relationship. Second, they were used to place fact in the context of morality in their narratives, assessments and judgments, thus infusing Chinese historical writing with a manifest unity of subjectivity and objectivity. In the circulation of the spirit of historical discourses, the people and events in the world constructed by the Chinese historians were not like rigid, silent mummies in a museum. Rather, they were like the open books and documents in a library. Readers of today can enter into the embodied experience of ancient peoples, taking these ancients by the hand and walking together with them, raising the questions of their own time for the ancients to answer. The world described by traditional Chinese historians was not the world of cold intellectual games. Rather, it was filled with the virtuous rule of sagely leaders, the loyal sincerity of worthy ministers plotting for the state, the wickedness of the autocratic, the sarcastic tongues of oppressive officials and above all the blood, sweat and tears of the common people.

The spirit of statecraft flowed in the traditional works of Chinese history so that the historiography was full of moral lessons on the meaning and value of human life. These features also influenced Chinese philosophy into taking on the characteristics of assessment based on models derived from history. Indeed, most Chinese philosophers were also historians of philosophy. Their modes of argumentation strongly stressed the temporality and spatiality of history, thus completing the fusion of history and philosophy in traditional Chinese humanities.♦

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