

Distinctive Features of Chinese Hermeneutics

A Review of
Ching-i Tu ed., *Classics and Interpretations:
The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*
(New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000)

中國詮釋學的特質

評 涂經詒編： *Classics and Interpretations:
The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*

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A scholarly and informative volume edited by Professor Ching-i Tu, came on the market in 2000. Provocatively titled, "Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture," it is a hefty volume of 468 pages with a helpful index. It contains twenty-one essays that are classified into seven Parts. Just citing those Parts is enough to offer a glimpse into what the volume contains.

"Part 1: The *Great Learning* and Hermeneutics," "Part 2: Canonicity and Orthodoxy," "Part 3: Hermeneutics as Politics," "Part 4: Chu Hsi and the Interpretation of the Chinese Classics," "Part 5: Hermeneutics in Chinese Poetics and Non-Confucian Con-texts," "Part 6: Reinterpretations of Confucian Texts in the Ming-Ch'ing Period," three essays, and "Part 7: Contemporary Interpretations of Confucian Culture". Professor Tu's "Preface" offers an apt description and overview of the whole volume.

This volume offers readers the insights of today's most representative scholars on Chinese classics and interpretations. The best way to appreciate it is to confess in this reader's own manner what he has learned from the volume, in this case on what "Chinese hermeneutics" is and how it differs from Western hermeneutics. Hermeneutics in China can resolve the West's interpretive dilemmas and benefit from the West's hermeneutics.¹ This volume indicates how Chinese and Western hermeneutics will come together.

We shall proceed as follows. In "A. Subjective/Objective Quick-sand in the West's Hermeneutics," we observe how the objective penchant of the Western hermeneutics paradoxically has it mired in the quicksand Labyrinth of subjectivity. In "B. Philosophical Archeology of 'Hermeneutic Circle'," we dig and expose the cause of this dizzying circle of subjectivity in our reading to lie in subject-object dichotomy, and return to the pristine human situation of inter-subjectivity, where to read is to read a story, pure and simple. In "C. Four Levels of Story-Hermeneutics," we rehearse how reading a story, story-hermeneutics, involves no less than four levels, textual, exegetical, expository, and hermeneutic.

In "D. China's Story-Hermeneutics," we see how the Chinese people live on the story-hermeneutics focused on the hermeneutic level-[d]. In "E. China's

¹ I have, however imperfectly, executed the latter important task in Ching-i Tu ed., *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), pp. 291-314, as did Dr. Ng in pp. 341-370.

Story-Hermeneutics on Level-[d],” we cite concrete examples of how China’s lived story-hermeneutics transpires in history. In “F. China’s Intra-Historical Hermeneutics,” we learn on how China’s intra-historical hermeneutics contrasts with the West’s surveying hermeneutics. Finally, in “G. Distinctive Features of Chinese Hermeneutics,” we sum up the six distinctive features of Chinese hermeneutics and urge it to join the West’s to learn from and enrich each other.

A. Subjective/Objective Quicksand in the West’s Hermeneutics

To read is to interpret, as we say we “read the situation,” and in fact the writing is the obvious text that aptly and perceptively “reads” the actual life-situation; it is as distinctive an ideal of Chinese writings as it is a goal of all writings. Moreover, since history is an accumulation in time of our life-situations and their records, historical writings treasured age after age called “classics” and their interpretations, become crucial in our readings of them in directing our life decisions today. This crucial point is one central predominant theme in pondering Chinese hermeneutics below.

Now, things get complex once we realize that reading is situational interpretation. Writing the text and reading it now appear contextual, packed with levels of subjective contexts, writers’ and readers’, whose interpretations are an interpolation of interpretations, ad infinitum, into the text, and the object of the text is seen to involve layers of subjectivity, writers’ and readers’. No wonder *deconstructionism* came along to deny any “objective truth” to the reading of the text, for writing and reading is seen as imbued with pure subjectivity all over.

“Hermeneutics” reflects on interpretation; it interprets interpretation that is reading. Hermeneutics, as any interpretation, is a Russian doll and a Greek Labyrinth combined. Once entering into them, we have no “out.” For once we *think* we understand a text, the text we read, we would be left unsure if we have got it “right.” We are then led to go into interpreting interpretation of interpretation of, and so on, of our initial “understanding,” layer after layer, level after level, in an infinite regress of interpretations. Worse, we think that in order to interpret a text, we must have its interpretive principle, and in order to have the principle, we must interpret. When the text out there cannot be

reached, such quest of self-recursive coherence betokens imprisonment in subjectivism. We thus go forward and return, roam back and forth, forever locked inside ourselves, ad nauseam.

Thus paradoxically, in attending to objective truth of what really transpired, as to whether the story told is objectively factual, we get trapped in the quicksand of subjectivity we have called a Russian doll and a Greek Labyrinth. This is a Russian doll of interpretations, one doll within another, ad infinitum, to compose a Labyrinth in which to lose our way. We today call such dizzying progresses and regresses of interpretations “hermeneutic circle,” “deconstructive trap in subjectivity,” and the like. Unwittingly we have just described the typical cul-de-sac of Western hermeneutics. It’s no fun at all.

B. Philosophical Archeology of “Hermeneutic Circle”

Fortunately, here is an Ariadne’s thread in China, quite straight-forward, that leads us out of interpretive nausea, of being trapped in the West’s hermeneutic Labyrinth. It is this. First, we take a step back, take a breath, and look around the whole situation. Then we see that this hermeneutic problem came out of taking “truth” as “objectivity” that, in turn, came out of subject-object dichotomy, literally a cutting-in-two of human actuality. The result is that each of us is locked in one’s self, yearning to heal our interpretive nausea, trapped in a hermeneutic Labyrinth in a Russian doll of subjectivity. We struggle in vain to break out into the Platonic Truth of Objectivity out there somewhere. The harder we struggle for objectivity, however, the deeper trapped we are, hopelessly lost in the Labyrinth of subjectivity. Such an irony!

The “hermeneutic circle” of the subjective Russian doll describes how we merry-go-round into the quicksand (to change the simile) of ourselves. “Deconstructionism” then comes to announce solemnly what we have known in our interpretive bones, that reading is an eternal monologue of the self with the self within the self, as if we did not know it in our painful bones. Here truth is objectivity (hermeneutic circle), *and* truth is also subjectivity (deconstructionism); they strangely join hands as synonymous, and there is no way out. All this inter-pretive pain appears clearly in front of us as we step back and look back at our whole interpretive pursuit. We have dichotomized, cut into two, our pristine inter-subjective situation. We have locked ourselves in our own

subjectivity, eternally yearning after subject-less objectivity, a pie in a Platonic sky.

C. “Reading” on Four Levels

Now that our hermeneutic dilemma and its cause is exposed, we must *return* to our human actuality itself, and we find that the original truth is our original “intersubjectivity,” neither pure objectivity nor pure subjectivity, both resulting from mutual severance from our holistic reality.² In this primal situation that is non-dual—not one, not two, irrelevant to unity or duality—“reading” takes on a new face.

Here emerges a new physiognomy of reading, that is, a pristine phenomenology of the hermeneutics, of our spontaneous “understanding” of the text, as reading a story. Here we simply look, look at the text *and* look around our situation; here to understand “reading” is to stand-under the reading situation, to receive whatever impacts the reading gives us. We take the text straightly as telling us a story, which it is, and accept various elements that the story reveals to make up our reading of the story-in-the-text, our understanding of it. This story-reading is surprisingly rich and varied in significance.

Reading a text-story gives a fourfold intelligibility. Reading a story involves understanding on four levels: how the story goes (textual level), what it amounts to (exegetical level), what it means (expository level), and how it affects us today (hermeneutic level). Each level involves and points to all the others to comprise an original organic *whole*³ called “reading,” to attain an “understanding.” Reading a story requires all four levels. Failure to cover *all* four levels courts all sorts of disasters.⁴ Let us now read four stories, in the order of ascending difficulty, to understand these four levels of understanding-and-reading.

² Interestingly, English “history” is related to “story,” something impersonal, while Chinese “shih 史” originally meant “bamboo strips (in a bamboo box) handled” by the historian, recorder of events with interpretation of their significance, their morals. Records are impersonal in the West, quite personal in China.

³ An original whole is not a unity out of separate disparate units, not a unity opposed to duality, triplets, and so on.

⁴ See Kuang-ming Wu, “Chinese Philosophy and Story-Thinking,” *DAO: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* (Summer, 2005).

Story One: A young lady said cheerfully, “Hi, Charlie, we stay friends; here is my email address. Keep in touch, OK? Bye!” Now, how do we read this short story? We read it on four levels. We read

[a] *How* the story went. Here is a straight *textual* reception of a story. Textual criticism is here; the story is my invention just for fun, to see how many levels a story involves. We then read

[b] What it *amounts* to. Here is *exegesis*; this story tells us about dumping Charlie. We then read

[c] What it *means*. Here is an *exposition* of the story; it describes a *soft* dumping. Finally, we read

[d] What it means *for us*. Here is the story’s life-significance; the story tells us to be *kind* unconditionally, even in dumping trash. This is a *hermeneutic* task on the story.

We are now in a position to read other harder stories likewise, as follows.

Story Two: [a] I once asked my granddaughter of three, “Tessie, how come a fish has no umbrella?” “Cause it has no hands!” Wow!⁵ Her Mom was ecstatic, “See, she is so logical!” That led me to thinking,

On level [b]: How “logical” Tessi was (no one with “no hands” can have an umbrella!),

On level [c]: What sort of “logic” Tessie gave me (for that was why I wowed), and,

On level [d]: What Tessie taught me.⁶ And then I nod; I now *understand* this story.

Story Three: [a] A Japanese scholar began his 1960 Wright Lecture at

⁵ To a long-faced fellow without “wow,” Whitehead said, “There are no whole truths; all truths are half truths. It is trying to treat them as whole truths that plays the devils” of failure to “wow.”

⁶ We *could* say here that, on an exegetical level [b], of course a fish has no hands to hold an umbrella, so it has no umbrella; what else is new? On an expository level [c], we could say that Tessie is so fresh as to surprise us into laughter. On a hermeneutic level [d], we could say that unless our logicizing is as fresh to surprise people into laughter as Tessie’s does, we are not *really* “logical” yet, as her Mom proudly teaches us. I said we “could,” because this is only one of many other possible readings of this story.

Yale with this story.⁷ A Company CEO strolled in a park on Sunday, and found several bums sleeping on the grass. He tapped one on the shoulder and said, “My friend, wake up. You look healthy, intelligent. Why don’t you report tomorrow at my office?” “What for?” “I’ll give you a job.” “What for?” “To make money, don’t you know?” “What for?” “Well, to buy a house and have a wonderful family.” “What for?” “O, come on, to be happy! Don’t you know?” “To be happy, eh?” The bum slightly raised himself. “Mister, that’s what I am. By the way, would you step aside? You are blocking my sun.” Now, [b] What does this story amount to? [c] What does it mean? [d] We uncomfortably feel here a challenge to our conventional ideals, but what is it, precisely? It all eludes us.

Story Four: [a] Chuang Tzu (2/38-40) told us that an offer of “morning, three, evening, four” to monkeys made them furious, so their Uncle Monkey changed the offer to “morning, four, evening, three,” and they all applauded. This story is cited because it is one of the “simplest and dumbest” of all his stories; he even appended its explanation, and we all talk about it as if we knew it all. I myself tried several times to see what it amounts to [b], what it means [c], and what it means for us [d].⁸ However, the more I searched for its significance, the more impossibly lost I become. I had better keep quiet now. Chuang Tzu gives us a lifetime challenge of “reading” his story.

In short, we now realize that to “read” a story involves *all* these four levels: textual, exegetical, expository, and hermeneutic. Lacking in any one level, or in inter-level involvement, means we have not “read” it, and such a rash “reading” that is no reading can court disaster.

D. China’s Story-Hermeneutics

All the above depiction of what it means to “read” a text serves to explicate the Chinese interpretive tradition, richly described in Professor Ching-i

⁷ Someone asks, on level [a], where I got the story. Well, I was a student in the audience at the time.

⁸ I tried my interpretive hand on this story in Kuang-ming Wu, *The Butterfly as Companion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 178, 387, 419, and Wu, *Chuang Tzu: World Philosopher at Play* (NY: Crossroad and Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 73-74. I have now come to realize that the story has deeper implications than I first suspected, and its unfathomable depths are revealed only as we try to plumb it.

Tu's edited volume, an excellent presentation of the four levels of reading, understanding, and interpreting the texts of the Chinese Classics. These texts are called "classics" because they are the texts that best understand the actual situation, that is, perceptively "read" it, *and* movingly convey, by realistically evoking, their situation-reading to the readers over and over again throughout the ages.

The effectiveness of evocative conveyance amounts to this. Level [a] of the text-story is infused with its levels [c] and [d]; there is no "objective fact" without "subjective significance." Here, "how the story goes" in the past is understood, interpreted as what it amounts to such and such"-[b], in the light of "what it means"-[c] to "affect us"-[d], that is, to guide us today toward our risky puzzling tomorrow. This is a matter of course, seeing that "reading" is an inter-human event, human readers entering, understanding, a text created by a human writer. Reading is intrinsically intersubjective.

Further, here is a vibrant *Chinese* hermeneutic circle, no longer the West's invidiously subjective Labyrinth where we lose our hermeneutic way. The circle of the West is a dizzying Russian doll locking us in subjectivism. The Chinese circle is intersubjective conversation—going forward and returning—of a vivacious organic whole of human communication, a sinuous mythological⁹ Snake interpersonally coiled fourfold into its own interpretive tail.¹⁰ This point is particularly telling in understanding Chinese story-texts. Our solidity of discernment ([c] and [d]) of a story is based on the solidity of our textual criticism of it ([a], [b]), as was tried by the Ch'ing "evidential school" (k'ao-cheng 考證) and "new text" classical learning (chin-wen 今文) of the eighteenth century.

Even here, China's textual criticism is not out to seek colorless texts indifferently out there; it has a passionate apologetic goal, to "correct" the mistaken views of the day to go back home to the orthodox "true tradition."¹¹

⁹ "Mythological" here is synonymous with "hermeneutic."

¹⁰ They say that professional historians of ideas excoriated Heidegger as all wrong in interpreting pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, and the Medieval thinkers. Heidegger could have easily retorted, saying that it is *they* who need to examine their assumptions as they spin out their "orthodox" interpretations, and that Heidegger was simply keen to expose and correct their wrong assumptions.

¹¹ A salient example is Tai Chen (1724-1777), whose "An Evidential Study of the Meaning of the Meaning of Terms in the Mencius 孟子字義疏證" (1772) was his passionate apologetic to re-

Conversely,¹² our “accuracy” of textual criticism ([a]) and exposition ([b]) of a story-text is directed and guided by how apt, penetrating, and discerning our understanding of its meaning ([c]) and its significance ([d]) is. Besides, reading the text reads the “tea leaves” of the past as the reader drinks its tea, the text, to decide on the now for the future; we read to return to yesterdays so as to go forward to tomorrow. Such is what it means to “read a story,” to “read” a situation presented by the story-texts.¹³ In China, textual philology is life philosophy, and reflective philosophy is human history in the historical texts. We call it story-hermeneutics.

China’s story-hermeneutics includes *all* four levels of understanding the story-texts, with a stress on the latter two, [c] and [d], without which reduces us “*Analects*-read, *Analects*-ignorant,” eternally out of touch with the text.¹⁴ “Facts” in China are facts-plus-significance, personal-ethical and sociopolitical. The historians’ different modes of reporting the facts show their diverse readings of those facts in diverse degrees of “moral approval” of those facts, such that “objectively the same” facts are often treated quite differently for their different significance. They are *different* facts in China, although “identical” in the objective eyes of the West.

Ancient historians in China described in different ways how similar events transpired; they reported “objectively identical facts” differently for their differing significance.¹⁵ We cite three ways of such hermeneutic reading/recording. *One* way is to use *different* words to describe the “same sort of acts and facts.” For example, “Chou-yü of Wei *assassinated* (弑 *shih*) his

store Mencius-orthodoxy. See Ann-ping Chin and Mansfield Freeman trs., *Tai Chen on Mencius: Explorations in Words and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹² Here is the hermeneutic “con-versation” mentioned a while back.

¹³ Cut such inter-involvement of *all* four levels, and we harvest a disaster. With no [c] or [d], Wing-tsit Chan’s correct translations, stuck on [a], are coke de-zinged, and his explications of notions on [b] are as insipid. Waley and the Ames/Rosement team over-interpret and add/cut too much. Lau and Yu-tang Lin waver between Chan and Waley, sometimes missing too much, sometimes adding too much. The fact is that Chinese sentences mean with their rhythm and cadence; their sense ties in with their sound-resonance, and so a literal translation mistranslates, and a literary one over-translates. Heidegger cannot be translated, they say; *Tao Te Ching* and *Analects* are even less translatable.

¹⁴ This is a well-known Japanese saying. “論語讀みの論語知らず。”

¹⁵ The following examples (from *Ch’un-ch’iu*) are adapted from Wang’s quotations of them in Ching-i Tu ed., *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*, p. 163, pp. 166-167.

Duke Wan,” and then “The people of Wei *killed* (殺 *sha*) Chou-yü in P’u.”¹⁶ The first killing by Chou-yü was a regicide, and the second killing of Chou-yü amounted to an execution of the regicide; they differ. So, two different words (*shih*, *sha*) were used to describe two different homicides. After all, all homicides are not committed alike, as our legal common sense testifies.

Another way to express the significance of an event is just to *omit* describing it, as omission shows moral disapproval. For example, “In 631 B.C.E. Duke Wen of Jin [under] the Zhou dynasty summoned the Zhou king Xiang. . . for a meeting [assembled by Wen] with other feudal lords.” It greatly humiliated the Zhou royal to be forced to go to his vassal. So, the event was simply recorded, “The King of Heaven went on a hunt.” This is a simplification to the extent of “distortion” in the eye of the West, to show the historian’s utter moral disapproval.

A *third* expression of significance of fact is an outright “distortion of objective fact.” A famous example is that historian Tun Hu recorded Chao Tun a minister of Duke Ling of Chin to be the Duke’s assassin. Actually, however, it was his brother Ch’uan who assassinated the Duke. Tun objected to Hu, who replied, “You are the chief minister. When you fled you did not cross the border. Now you have returned and yet you do not punish the culprit. If you are not responsible, who is?” Confucius approved of the historian’s decision. This has so upset Watson (wrong assignment of the assassin, going beyond the border as relief of the blame, Confucius’ approval of all this) that he pronounced this story a “dark” one.¹⁷ This is an extreme case of letting the “moral point” override the “true fact of the incident.” To be upset over this case originates in assuming that “history” is primarily and *exclusively* a pursuit of bare, straight, chronological, and sense-less “objective fact.”

E. China’s Story-Deliberation on Level-[d]

All this fuss over the significance of the events on levels [c] and [d] is not just academic hairsplitting but a matter of life and death for the Chinese people. What Confucius said (12/11) is actually fulfilled in history, that is, “the ruler is

¹⁶ *Ch’un-ch’iu*, Yin Kung, Year Four (718 BCE).

¹⁷ *Ch’un-ch’iu*, Hsuan Kung, Year Two (607 BCE). See Burton Watson tr., *The Tso chuan: Selections from China’s Oldest Narrative History* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 76-80.

a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, the son a son” is the necessary condition for life to go on, both at the personal level and at the communal one. This is the base and the criterion of the historian’s judgment of events; to wit, we must deliver in actual living what we profess, on pain of disasters. In the last case just cited, to be the chief minister and fail to prosecute the assassin, as the minister should, amounts to colluding with the killer and, in fact, it is equivalent to being the killer yourself. By the same token, to be a vassal and behave like a king is serious usurpation of the legitimate throne, equivalent to regicide, and punishable by death.

The following story underscores how serious a business it is to record history; events loaded with significance must be recorded literally with dead accuracy. Three brother-historians braved executions by their lord, who assassinated *his* lord, to record, “Ts’ui Shu assassinated his ruler.” These historians chose to die rather than falsify the record. Their extraordinary bravery finally made their lord relent and stop further execution, and let the record stand!¹⁸

We turn serious ourselves as we confront these no-nonsense records of the events. Seriously studying such a serious account of classical historiography enables us to face the harsh reality today. How? Ng (Tu, 2000: 341-369) cited two historians, Gong Zizhen (1792-1842) and Wei Yuan (1794-1856). In the Classics they sought understanding and resolution of their anxieties, and advocated reforms for exigencies of their days via a hermeneutic scrutiny of the Classics. “Discovering” practical meaning in the Classics, they pledged allegiance to the Classics while renovating the hermeneutic tradition, an objective cultural *habitus* of historical dispositions of Chinese community. This “tradition” is a definitive frame generative of free creative thinking.¹⁹

We can now see why Chinese people take history with such dead seriousness, and so should we. Here is why. We study history to learn how ac-

¹⁸ *Ch’un-ch’iu*, Hsuan Hsiang, Year Twenty-five (548 BCE). See Ching-i Tu ed., *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*, p. 162 and Burton Watson tr., *The Tso chuan: Selections from China’s Oldest Narrative History*, pp. 143-148.

¹⁹ “Renovating” refers to changing the traditional progressive time-scheme of disorder-ordering-peace into the regressive time-scheme from order to decay (see Ching-i Tu ed., *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*, pp. 346-347). “Tradition” as cultural *habitus* generative of creativity refers to Ng (see Ching-i Tu ed., *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*, p. 363) quoting from Bourdieu. The latter reference indicates China benefiting from insights of the West.

tion-C in the past caused consequences-R and how this C-R sequence is to be judged as to its legitimacy, both moral and sociopolitical. The matter is quite serious, not to be mocked, because the C-R sequence has *actually* happened in history. We can deliberate today on what *sort* of C we should choose and what sort of maneuver we should devise to obtain what sort of R we desire or ought to desire, only in reference to what history tells us about a similar sort of C-R series that transpired back then. We cannot solidly deliberate and design, fact-based, our action plans, without studying history. Studying the past enables us to steer the present toward the desirable future. Thus the past is literally our crucial future prospect throbbing at present with clear warning and guidance.

Since the past is our future (Habermas, 1994), the historians have historically been engaged in recording the past, and should do so likewise today, to occupy a prominent normative position in the society equivalent to the position occupied by medieval priests and modern scientists.²⁰ The historians do no bare recording of bare events; they advise us on the morals, direction, and guidance those events embody, not to be mocked, and these significant morals and guidance invest the historical texts with such awesome authority. Those who neglect if not refuse to study history and its meaning are condemned to repeating it, to harvest disasters.²¹ Hermeneutics carries the historic authority of life itself, in which both China and the West do well to unite in serious engagement. Tu's edited volume has gone a long way to fulfilling this world-urgent desideratum.

F. China's Intra-Historical Hermeneutics vs. the West's Survey Hermeneutics

Let us now look around. Hermeneutics considers how we read the situation. We see three points in this simple statement. *One*, to read is to understand and to interpret a life-situation; *two*, the situation is presented in description; *three*, the situation is time-thick, and so the description becomes a classic and

²⁰ Organizations such as "Physicians for Social Responsibility" and "Society of Concerned Scientists" carry weight.

²¹ Bush the junior's recent invasion of Iraq is a salient example, to which Habermas' reflections on the Gulf War Bush the senior initiated have an ominous relevance. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Past as Future* (Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1994), pp. 5-32.

becomes history itself. These three points interweave to compose hermeneutics, which goes differently in the West and in China.

In the West, interpretation (point one) becomes “phenomenology,” a description of what appears to be as such. It is related to “philosophy of history” that Collingwood takes to be the business of “re-enactment” of past thoughts,²² nothing else, in human events. The description (point two) turns out to focus on the Bible at first, and the time-thick documents (point three) turn out to be classical literature.

In China, interpretation (point one) used to be the major task of the historians officially appointed by the royal court, and then relegated to Confucian scholars. They all read history to cultivate themselves to become sages, to defend moral significance of history in orthodoxy, and to reform the world, as they engaged in literary criticism that was itself wrapped in literary beauty. The life-situations that linger on are reflected and enshrined (point two and three) in historical classics, historic fictions, poetry, dramas, music, and even dances.²³

Surveying hermeneutics as above, we at once note three contrasts between hermeneutics in the West and that in China. *One*, hermeneutics in China is more complex and self-involved than that in the West. Strangely, however, *two*, China has no notion, “hermeneutics,” to summarize and classify these activities as interpretations.²⁴ China has, however, been consistently engaged in interpretive activities as the “wen-shih,” while the West turned to phenomenology to end up deconstructing the entire operation.

Three, we thus see how China lumps while the West chops. In China, the *Five Classics*, the *Records of History*, and the like, are all *both* historical writings and literary gems. In the West, Gibbon is a historian, Plato, a thinker, and Tolstoy, a literary figure, although they are all historians, thinkers and the literary greats combined.

²² Worse, the thought-reenactment is performed in the mode of repetition of ideas in geometry or legal thinking. See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 217-218.

²³ In a few words, the justly famous “Preface to the Classic of Poetry” (詩序) admirably unifies writings, poetry, dances, and social and political situations. China’s literary history bears out this unity.

²⁴ Hsün ku(訓詁) is critical-exegetical understanding, shih-i(釋義) is expository, but no Chinese phrase captures the whole four levels of hermeneutics.

Finally, the West by coining the notion of “hermeneutics” tends to objectively capture, assess, and judge the factuality and legitimacy of historical description and historical judgments “from nowhere and no-when,” that is, from a non-historical perspective. China in contrast by citing and appealing to more and more extensive citations of the allegedly “givens” (“data”) from actual happenings, as well as more authorities²⁵ widely recognized, to defend one sort of historical description and judgment against other sorts. Seen from outside, what seems a mere partisan bickering really originates in such historical apologetics from history; such apologetics is conducted *within* history.

China’s rationale for such intra-historical justification of historical description is presumably this. As more perceptions correct a perception and more reflections justify a reflection, so more historical descriptions straighten a historical description. World history is world judgment, not pronounced from the Hegelian judgment seat but performed within historical hermeneutics itself. World history is world correcting itself, befitting history the self-self dialogue, conversation, of humanity in time.

G. Distinctive Features of Chinese Hermeneutics

Six distinctive features of Chinese hermeneutics can now be seen. *One*, the Chinese people realize, deep in their hearts and their daily lives, the time before and the time after as crucially different from relative indifference of spatial front and back. What I have done I have done, and if I try to undo what I have done, it would be my all new deed, albeit related to what I have done.²⁶

Two, therefore, China takes planning, forecasting, and projecting with utmost historic seriousness, more than the West. *Three*, China plans for the future by using the time before as the mirror that reflects the future to deliberate on the moves now. Thus, *four*, history as the time-story must be carefully understood, that is, interpreted. That is, the [d]-level of the story is what is all-important. In China, historical hermeneutics is a matter of life and death now.

²⁵ Reflects on this intra-historical justification of history and justifies it. See Kuang-ming Wu, *On Metaphoring: A Cultural Hermeneutic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 411-422.

²⁶ The West, in contrast, often contrives to have time go backward, thus betraying its penchant to take time in spatial terms. China steadfastly sticks to our common sense view of time as a river that forever flows ahead.

Five, this way of thinking on life means that China uses [d] to determine and decide on [a], [b], and [c]. In contrast, the West uses [a], pure factual transpiring, how events happened, as the basis to decide on [b], [c], and [d]. *Six*, China uses the time before to survey the present, to obtain our psychic space, our inner room and milieu in which to freely roam and play, to repeatedly perform what the West calls “thought experiments.” We can say, then, that China uses the time after to history-deliberate. Confucianism does so explicitly; Taoism does so performatively, historically. The word “use” is used often in this description of Chinese hermeneutics. By to “use” history we mean to “dwell” in history, with historical “standpoint,” “stance,” and “life-pose,” in our history-deliberation about our moves now.

Tu’s edited volume instructively exhibits a rich variety of examples of such hermeneutic executions peculiar to China both in the past and today. This volume is commendable for the extraordinary amount of essays focused on level-[d], although some are fuzzy and tend to be mired in details to miss the [c]/[d]-forest for the [a]/[b]-trees in Chinese historical writings.

In all, to borrow Kant to our purpose, the West without China tends to become as empty as China without the West tends to be blind.²⁷ With such diversities, the two diverse interpretive approaches in China and in the West do well to learn from and enrich each other. Tu’s volume has delightfully initiated this important intercultural movement.

²⁷ Things are more complex and less neat, of course, but as a general trend of hermeneutics, this sweeping description holds. I have considered a similar sort of difference in terms of “pragmatism” that both the West and China share. See Kuang-ming Wu, *On the “Logic” of Togetherness: A Cultural Hermeneutic* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 313-142.