

Book Review 【書評】

Chun-Chieh Huang and John R. Henderson eds.,  
*Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking*  
(Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006)

Kuang-Ming Wu\*

This book zeroes in on the unique "type of thinking" in China on history, how history guides us now who in turn enrich it, how history appears in China's change-gazing (Ijing), its star-gazing (astronomy), and its images of history among Wang Fuchi, Chang Xuecheng, Yan Fu, and the Qiang tribe.

The book has informative concrete details, even "typology" and "super-time" "universal" or "transcendent" are concrete. Introduction is a valuable eye-opener. The book (A) informs us on China's historical consciousness; it is not meta-historical or theoretical despite the title, which shows the book is oddly warped in a West-frame. (B) But offing the frame needs hermeneutical sensitivity; (C) we have a delicate fabulous job on hand.

A. The Book is West-Warped.

This book has Preface, Introduction, Setting the Stage (Chapters 1, 2), Part One: "Time" in Ancient China (Chapters 3, 4), Part Two: "Time" in Traditional China (Chapters 5, 6, 7), Part Three: "Time" in Modern China (Chapters 8, 9), Glossary of Terms, Bibliography, and Contributors. Chapters 1-4 are general, vari-

---

\* Professor Emeritus of Comparative Culture and Philosophy, Michigan State University.

ously repeating past-now interaction, Chapters 5-9 are specific-chronological, and all are concrete, informative.

I noted two sorts of desiderata in the book. First, some miscellanies are missing in the book. Here "ancient China" is not "traditional China"; why not? The book has no Index; why not? Nor does it have conclusion. Its editors may have assumed that Introduction is conclusion and/or an edited book needs no conclusion; both assumptions are questionable.

Conclusion should, but does not, give three points the book missed. One, the book does not define history, e.g., as the past-related-to-us-now, not the mere past, what has passed and gone. Two, the book says history is the norm to guide us who enrich history, but does not say why so, e. g., because we are history in the making. Three, no one in the book reflects on how crucial China-on-history is to everyone, everywhere, every-when. Conclusion is where these three crucial points should be supplied, but it does not.

Secondly, the book's theoretical title indicates how oddly warped this informative (though verbose) book is. China has no "notions," no "time"-as-such, no "historical thinking" but historical awareness. "Time" in this book is a rhetorical proxy for "history," itself in need of careful description as peculiarly Chinese. So, the book describes in West-way how history functions in "China"-as-a-place-in-the-West, not in China as China, not a familiar place in the West.

If we want to describe China, we should describe China. We should not clothe China in Western garb — "typology," "time-super-time," "transcendence-immanence," "Einstein's time-warp," "dialectics of opposites interdependent," "evolutionism," "cyclicity-progress," and "science of astronomy" that is no Chinese stargazing. Etc. Kicking up such Western dust, we see just an exotic West. Wrapping China in the West, we see just the Western wrapping, strangely warped. No China is here.

### B. The Frame Must be Off—Carefully.

So this book is shaped oddly Western, reading like an exotic version of loose Western philosophy of history with China-data fitted in here and there. As a result, the book is too spotty for Western philosophy of history, and too scanty for Chinese history.

Is this book wholly hopeless, then? O, no, not at all. What I insist on is a methodological necessity to search out a fitting frame for China, into which to organize all basically sound information in this book—we need more, though—on China's awareness of historical timing and distinctive timeliness, i.e., Chinese historical consciousness.

Some may think this book's comparisons with the West—Wang Fuchi with Pythagorus (Chapter 6), Zhang Xuecheng with Heidegger (Chapter 7), Yan Fu with Spencer (Chapter 8)—bring out the distinctness of China. Far from it! Even a most careful comparison with the West tends to turn readers to the West. In my *On Chinese Body Thinking* (Brill, 1997), Merleau-Ponty was criticized whenever quoted, to highlight "Chinese body thinking," and people say, "Wu follows Merleau-Ponty." My *Autobiography* describes this sad situation in *China-West Interculture: Toward the Philosophy of World Integration: Essays on Wu Kuang-ming's Thinking*, edited by Professor Jay Goulding, NY: Global Scholarly Publications, (forthcoming).

By the same token, the Chinese frame is missing in this book despite informative pieces on China. So if we want information, this is a book to read, but be warned that its frame must be taken off before we can open the precious treasures inside, warped out of shape by their alien frame that smothers them.

### C. Our Task: China Released Alive!

Luckily, China is one oldest and most vibrant of all world cultures. This is why and how China is proudly historic, classical. Chinese culture has been waiting

patiently long—for so many millennia now—to soar high afresh as soon as it is freed into itself.

If the West should not help China grow glowing 助長, how could we allow these pristine China-data, having weathered myriad crises of millennia, to breathe vast today as cosmic cyclone 浩然之氣, as they did so many yesterdays? How could we just let them soar hawk-high to the ends of the cosmic skies, so as to plunge into the depths of the historic oceans international, ever jumping fresh as quivering fish?

Such a releasing of classical China ever alive and refreshing, into our intercultural world today, is our five-millenary mission for its historic vitality, as pleasant, exciting, and glorious as it is delicately monumental. The release can happen only by supplying the Chinese frame for Chinese historical information. What is this "Chinese frame?"

Looking closely, we find that this book's missing frame for Chinese history is Chinese history itself, described in Introduction of this book and Chapters 1 through 4, properly and explicitly clarified as the "Chinese frame." And then interculturalism augurs well, portrayed in Chapters 5 through 9, as indicated also by worldwide distribution of authors in Canada, Germany, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and USA.

So, we would just gently shift the frame from theoretical "time" to concrete "history," and China's rich millenary blood will at once throb into our veins, to flood our pages. We will engage in lively inter-communications with all the historic Wise, popular and academic among our celebrated Five Chinese Races. We learn from ancient Sages, to revise and add to them.

Our historical inter-befriending then leads to meditating on what all this life-reenactment means, on how our friendship with the ancient (以古人為友) overflows our brethren in all Four Oceans. We quivering fishes, diving deep into China's historic ocean, will turn into hawks soaring up to intercultural skies!

"Hasn't this book already done historical and intercultural conversations?" Not quite yet. Its historical conversation was not heart-to-heart probes; its comparisons with the West were juxtapositions, not inter-learning inter-enrichment. Worse, the frame was Western that eviscerates China. Thus, this book provokes us to undertake this historic task; the book is an indispensable launchpad, the first of its kind. *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking* is taking off toward "Chinese Historical Enrichment Intercultural!"

This crucial point bears repeating. *Notions of Time* is our timely pad underfoot to walk out of, five millennia into ever fresh and vibrant China today, and further on into the world intercultural tomorrow. Thanks to this book, our China in future intercultural is fish-fresh in the history-ocean and hawk-vast in the intercultural skies.