2. Historical Thinking as Humanistic Thinking in Traditional China

1. Introduction

This article sets out to argue that historical thinking in traditional China is humanistic thinking with Chinese characteristics. Traditional Chinese historical thinking centered upon Mankind as the agent of change in history. Both the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese historical thinking are rooted in this strongly humanistic orientation. In the following, I “unpack” this thesis.

However, before discussing Humanism as the foundation of Chinese historical thinking, an overview of Humanism in China and the West is in order.

Humanism in the Chinese context underwent a different development than in the West. As pointed out by the anthropologist Zhang Guangzhi 張光直 (1931–2001), Chinese civilization is a civilization of continuity. Moreover, after the philosophical breakthrough of the axial period pointed out by Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), while major changes occurred in the relations between people and between the ruler and his subjects in China, the relations between humanity and nature and between humanity and the supernatural were not ruptured but continued as before. As the poem, “Teeming Multitude” (“Cheng min” 稟民), from the Book of Odes (Shijing 詩經) reads:

“Heaven produces the teeming multitude;
As there are things, there are their specific principles (ci).
When the people keep to their normal nature,
They will love excellent virtue.”

This ode expresses the archaic Chinese view that people inherit the will of Heaven at birth, stressing that each person’s mind-heart is fully interactive with the so-called mind-heart of Heaven. Chinese Humanism flows from this sentiment of the teeming people’s life journey at the intersection of heaven and earth, uplifted by limitless regard for the benign Mandate of Heaven. Oriented on this sort of humanistic stance, traditional Chinese historians paid scant attention to colorful, rebellious heroes, but rather had the utmost concern for the weak and downtrodden. For example, the first of the seventy biographies in the Grand Historian Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (c.145–86 BCE) Shi ji 史記 (Historian’s Records), discusses Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊, who were unknown to society, and the first chapter of the “Eminent Clans” (“Shi jia 世家”), opens with the story of the humble Wu Taibo 吳太伯.

In contrast to archaic China, the axial breakthroughs in the ancient western world were associated with technological breakthroughs and trade activities which led to their civilization of rupture, in which humanity and nature, as well as humanity and the supernatural, were trapped in eternal conflict. For this reason, Western Humanism differs in orientation from traditional Chinese civilization’s quest for harmony between nature and humanity. This can be witnessed in ancient Greek Humanism’s emphasis that human beings must struggle to free themselves from the shackles of the fate decreed by the gods. The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles (ca. 496–406 BCE) provides a vivid example of this in his tragedy, Oedipus Rex, the fascinating depiction of a courageous hero of the western mythic tradition who’s fate is to challenge the Fates.

2. Humanism as Manifested in Chinese Historical Thinking (1):
Anthropo-centric Explanation / Interpretation of History

The first humanistic feature displayed by Chinese historical thinking is that it regards human beings as the leading actors in all sorts of historical events. Since early antiquity, Chinese historians focused on depicting historical personalities. The Grand Historian Sima Qian in particular took “good and the lofty while blaming the bad and vulgar people” as the operant principles of historical writing. The most colorful part of his Historian’s Records is the seventy biographies. Although the added treatises, chronologies and tables contribute to our understanding of pre-and-early dynastic China, the most vital contents surely are Sima’s descriptions of key individuals.

In marked contrast to the Chinese historians, Western historians describe overall historical events. For instance, the celebrated “Father of History”, the Greek Herodotus (ca. 484–425 BCE) objectively narrates the whole process of the
Persian War (490–480 BCE), giving a balanced account of the advantages and breakthroughs of the opposing armies of the East and the West. Moreover, in The Histories, Polybius (203?-ca. 120 BCE) describes broadly how Rome expanded from a city state to become the world’s greatest empire, how the Aegean Sea became a Roman lake, stressing the impact of collective agency in historical developments. This linear sort of account, constructed on impersonal chains of causes and effects contrasts sharply with the mosaic approach taken by Chinese historians.

3. Humanism as Manifested in Chinese Historical Thinking (2): Affirmation of the Free Will of Man in History

The second humanistic feature of traditional Chinese historical thinking is the affirmation of the free will of human beings exercised throughout history. In explaining the causal relationship of historical events, traditional Chinese historians always emphasized human ingenuity, considering that thought and will are determining factors in the production of historical events. This feature is closely related to the above-mentioned feature that human beings are the agents of action in history. A vivid example appears in the Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu Zuo zhuan 春秋左傳), which reports an intrigue which occurred in 607 BCE.³

“Chaou Ch’uen [Zhao Chuan 赵穿] attacked <and killed> duke Ling in the peach garden, and Seuen Xuan [Xuan, i.e. Zhao Dun 趙盾], who was flying from the State, but had not yet left its hills behind him, returned to the capital. The grand historiographer [Dong Hu 董狐] wrote this entry, – ‘Chaou Tun [Zhao Dun] murdered his ruler’, and showed it in the court. Seuen Xuan [Xuan, i.e. Zhao Dun] 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 [Dong Hu] was a good historiographer of old time – his rule for writing was not to conceal. Chaou Seuen [Zhao Xuan] 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’”.

From a contemporary viewpoint, Confucius’ comment on Dong Hu’s chronicle is simply his value judgment and not a factual judgment. However, Confucius considered that Zhao Xuan’s not mentioning the son’s murder of his lord was

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determined completely by his own will; so he had to take the final responsibility for this murder of the ruler of the state. The sorts of explanations given in Western historical studies differ from those given in traditional Chinese historiography. For example, Herodotus thought that the breakout of the Persian War was inescapable when in fact it arose from the tension between Greek (Occidental) democracy and Persian (Oriental) despotism. Thucydides (ca. 460-400 BCE) analyzed the problems between Sparta and Athens and concluded that the two sides’ trade and economic interests were decisive factors triggering the Peloponnesian war. As a rule, Western historians generally stress non-human factors such as political life, economic interests, etc. in explaining historical events. In contrast, the twentieth century Chinese historian Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990) maintained that Chinese history arose from “the vicissitudes of the trends of the world” and “the goodness or wickedness of man”.

That the vicissitudes of the trends of the world should be considered in the context of the goodness and wickedness of man is clearly illustrated in Chinese historians’ emphasis on the free will exercised by the movers and shakers of historical events.

Because traditional Chinese historians affirmed human autonomy and human free will, they always passed moral judgment on historical personages. Ever since Confucius, traditional historians have followed the principle of praising the good while blaming the wicked, upholding the worthy while condemning the unworthy in their writings. Traditional authoritative dynastic histories always classified historical personages as loyal ministers, wicked ministers, unsullied ladies, and so on. After the passing away of the dynastic emperors of China, later readers would examine their achievements and bestow them with posthumous titles, such as literary (cultural), martial, benevolent, harsh. While the Judeo-Christian tradition has God’s “final judgment” of people’s achievements and sins, we could say that the Chinese cultural tradition has the “judgments of history” to weigh people’s lifetime conduct.

4. Humanism as Manifested in Chinese Historical Thinking (3): Historiography as Statecraft

The third humanistic feature of traditional Chinese historical thought is its taking on of historiography as statecraft and of saving the world as its goal. These traditional historians not only aspired to explain the world, even more, they aspired to change the world. For this reason, traditional Chinese historiography tended to develop more in times of chaos and suffering in Chinese history. For
example, in the seventeenth century, when the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was being overthrown and replaced by the Qing (1644–1912), described by historian Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) as “a chaotic age” when “Heaven collapsed and Earth eroded” was precisely a time when historiography developed and flourished. On the contrary, peaceful times witnessed declines not only in historiography but in the indices of humanism. In his preface to Historian’s Records, the great historian Sima Qian cited Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 (ca. 179–104 BCE) remark that in writing the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu 春秋) Confucius had endeavored to “praise or blame what happened in the 242 years so as to set up a model for the world”. Later, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) of Northern Song (960–1126) wrote a “memorial for submitting the book”, i.e. Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government (Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑), which reads: “This book just concerns the principles of rise and fall of the empire, the keys of the people’s ease and woe. The good can be managed by models, the bad must be held in check by prohibitions”. Both of these illustrate the historians’ concern with statecraft. In Comprehensive Discussions of Literary Writings and Historiography (Wenshi tongyi 文史通義), Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738–1801) exclaimed that, “Statecraft is the purpose of history. It is certainly not just empty accounts of events”, considering that the collecting and arranging of data does not measure up to solid historiography. Traditional Chinese historians all believed that authentic history and historiography certainly must dovetail with the pulse of human affairs. Consequently, the traditional historical discourses of historians – from the “Gentleman says” of the Zuo zhuan, the “Grand Historian says” of the Historian’s Records, the “in eulogy we say” remarks of the Han History (Han shu) and the “comment” of the Annals of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo zhi 三國志), to “your servant Sima Guang observes” in the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government all manifested the traditional historian’s passing moral judgment on historical events and personages. In sharp contrast to Herodotus’ writing of history to win the cash prize and manifesting as sort of hedonistic attitude toward the writing of historical narratives, Chinese historians held a more rigorous attitude toward their life work.

Because traditional Chinese historians took statecraft as their mission in writing history, they created a collective memory of never being able to avoid the

9 For a discussion of this point, see Chapter 1 of this book.
interference of political authority. Traditional Chinese historians also always served as imperial officials. Sima Qian and his father held the position of “grand historian”. In the Tang dynasty, the system of compiling official history was established under which historians became even more subject to the imperial power structure, serving no longer as individuals but as group members in the writing of history. The relationship between their narrating of history and the imperial power structure became inseparable, but it was also always characterized by mutual tensions. How to maintain a dynamic equilibrium between writing history and imperial power had been, in striving to carry out their writing of history with integrity, a highly formidable challenge for historians in traditional China.

5. Humanism as Manifested in Chinese Historical Thinking (4): Preserving Factuality

The fourth eminent humanistic feature of traditional Chinese historical thinking is its strict adherence to the facts as they actually occurred. Throughout Chinese history, historians maintained the tradition of writing history as it really was, about which they would then add their own moral judgments. Consider, for example, the record for 548 BCE in the Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals. The Grand Historian commented, “Cui Zhu 崔杼 killed his lord”,¹¹ Cui’s son had the Grand Historian killed. The Grand Historian’s younger brother then wrote the same fact, and was also killed. His younger brother again recorded the fact. In the end Cui Zhu had to give up on twisting the historical record of his deed. Tang Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649) intended to read the imperial historian’s record of the emperor’s activities in Diary of Arising and Repose (qijuzhu 起居注), but was sternly rejected by the imperial historian. The historian’s purpose was to preserve the tradition of authentic documentation. Because traditional historians had statecraft as their mission, they regarded themselves as guardians of truth, and so developed a tradition which combined factual judgment and value judgment in their tradition, particularly in their passing of historical judgment. Consequently, historians were very much mindful of accuracy in the wordings of their writings.

Naturally, the historians of traditional China were not aware of the postmodernist challenge to the ‘factuality’ of history of the 1980s. Sima Qian wrote in a letter to his friend Ren An 任安.¹²

“I have gathered up and brought together the old traditions of the world which were scattered and lost. I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their successes and failure, their rise and decay, in one hundred and thirty chapters”.

Sima Qian leaned toward the belief that once sufficient historical data had been gathered, in the words of Lord Acton (1834–1902), “definitive history” could be written. He would have been hard pressed to accept Hayden White’s position that, “the historical text is [simply] a literary artifact”.

6. Conclusion

The reason why traditional Chinese historians were able to embrace Humanism was established on the supposition that in narrating the facts they could extrapolate from the principles therein. Traditional historians considered that the eternal Way was inherent in the events of history, hence they endeavored to narrate history so as to draw conclusions from the existence and content of this eternal Way. For example, the Grand Historian narrated the story of Boyi and Shuqi to express his own perplexity of the value that “Heaven’s way favors none, but always sides with good men”. He disproved this value in reflecting on the perplexities of the problems of human life. He hoped that by analyzing the specific features of this case he could seek general answers to the eternal problems of human existence. This sort of supposition shows that, in the eyes of Chinese historians, truth was static and not dynamic. Peering into the specific complexities of concrete human affairs, the historian sought to achieve deeper understanding. Holding this sort of supposition, historians regarded history as a mechanism for deducing eternal truth, which gave Chinese history a sort of ahistorical import. This trend has become even more evident since the time of the Song dynasty.

From the eleventh century, Neo-Confucianism dominated and deeply influenced Chinese historiography. From that time, Chinese historians explicitly narrated historical events or deeds of historical actors in order to extrapolate moral or philosophical theses. This practice is eminently humanistic, for their historical narratives come very close to what Jörn Rüsen calls “exemplary narrative”. This sort of exemplary narrative differs from other sorts of narrative,

such as traditional, evolutionary, and critical narrative, in that in exemplary narrative natural time is transformed into a sort of humanistic time. Its special characteristic is the drawing of universal, abstract principles or norms of conduct from concrete historical events or cases, which introduces the general necessity of putting such regulations on conduct. On this basis, we could say that the sort of humanistic thinking involved in the thought processes of traditional Chinese historians reflects a universality planted deep in the midst of historical particularity and an “abstraction” established in concreteness. However, some tensions remain between universality and particularity and between abstraction and concreteness because, more often than not, the “particular and concrete” cannot become “universal and abstract”. The way to resolve this sort of tension is precisely the core problem for reflection on traditional Chinese historiography.

A final question remains: does historical thought in traditional China have the potential of developing the new humanism envisioned by Jörn Rüsen as defining culture “as something more open, something that goes beyond this mutual exclusion”?16 My answer is positive. Traditional Chinese historians combined moral judgments with factual judgments. They all upheld the notion of free will in man. They agreed that men are morally autonomous when taking any action in history. Traditional Chinese historians’ affirmation of the dignity of man that transcends the boundaries of states and races has the potential to develop some varieties of an open-minded, inclusive new humanism for our age of globalization.