

Teaching Chinese History: The Issue of Approach

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Abstract

In China, the study of history has never been a detached academic pursuit, as it has always been indistinguishable from political directions. Chinese political leaders have been unable to adopt a disinterested approach towards history, be it distant or contemporary. On the other hand, Western historians interpret Chinese history from their own point of view, and they often view Chinese history as an extension of Western history. Often, they have been preoccupied with the concern to explain or justify their own record or involvement rather than to produce an objective account, especially in regard to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' history of China. This study questions the conventional approach to China's past, be that of a Confucian, a Communist or a Western ethnocentric historiographer. It explores the possibility of establishing a "Chinese experience-based" approach while maintaining "impartiality and neutrality", looking to historical studies outside of China to achieve this.

Key words: Chinese history; Historiography; History teaching methodology

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INTRODUCTION

When we teach Chinese history and explore China's past, we are always faced with the issue of "approach". A useful method to help students learn history is to present it as a set of questions, instead of a set of answers. What we are able to say about a period or an event depends not only on the sources available, but also on the questions we ask (Ebrey, Walthall & Palais, 2006). Most of the questions, even those that look quite simple, are not easy to answer, and students should not be able to answer them simply by reading the set materials handed to them in the classroom. They are "real" questions, interesting and exciting enough to motivate historians to go through knotty materials in order to find answers.

People who are not historians often think of history as the facts about the past. Yes, while facts are a large part of history, they have to be interpreted from conflicting and sometimes unintelligible voices. It is the task of the historian to reach back into the past through this incoherent clutter of facts to attempt to figure out an object account. Although there are rules of evidence to keep historians honest while trying to present historical "truth", it is inevitable that subjective element enters into all historical scholarship. Which facts we choose, which documents we rely upon, and indeed what questions we ask and under what assumptions we operate all influence and taint our interpretation and the subsequent teaching and learning in the classroom.

1. IS CHINESE HISTORY BEST KNOWN IN CHINA?

The first question we ask our students is a "real" question that still puzzles us to this day: Is Chinese history best known in China? All our students would unanimously say: Yes, of course, just like Australian history is best known in Australia and American history is best known in the

USA. While we quite agree, the question is not as simple as it seems to be.

The Chinese people have been obsessed with their history for as long as the history itself. In all dynastic primers, a key component was to pass the knowledge of this history to the young succinctly and efficiently. A thorough knowledge of history was crucial to the success in the imperial civil service examinations, but history was not to be *studied* but *memorized*. For example, the most commonly used elementary textbook in dynastic China, the *Three Character Classic*, written by a Song dynasty scholar Wang Yinglin (1223–1296) contains the following summary of nearly four thousand years of Chinese history:

The classics and the philosophers mastered,
read the histories.
Examine the connection between the eras;
know the ends and the beginnings.
From Xi and Nong, to the Yellow Emperor,
they are called the Three Sovereigns,
who lived in ancient times.
Tang and Yu, called the Two Emperors,
one abdicated after the other
and theirs was called the Age of Prosperity.
The Xia dynasty had Yu,
the Shang dynasty had Tang,
the Zhou dynasty had Wen and Wu;
they are called the Three Kings.
The Xia handed the throne from father to son,
starting a making a monarchy system.
After four hundred years, the Xia ended.
....
King Wu of the Zhou dynasty
slew the Shang emperor Zhou Dixin.
And established the Zhou dynasty,
which lasted eight hundred years;
the longest dynasty ever.
When the Zhou made tracks eastwards,
the royal bond loosened,
shields and spears flaunted,
wandering advisers held in high esteem.
Beginning with the Spring and Autumn Period
it ended with the Warring States Period.
....
The Qin of the Ying clan,
started to annex all the states.
The throne passed for two generations,
and Chu and Han contended.
Gaozu rose, and the Han dynasty ruled.
....
The power of the eunuchs unchecked;
bandits flourished like a forest
Li Chuang revolted, divine artefacts burned.
The great ancestor of the Qing
received destiny's call;
Peace flourished in the four directions,
thus achieving great stability.
The twenty one histories are complete.
They record government disorder;
and unveil prosperity and decline.
Read the history books, examine the records,

connect the ancient with the present,
and you'll be as close as an eyewitness.¹

This synopsis of the general history of China, in an enumeration of the successive dynasties, although mostly factual, was obviously revised and updated during the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The lines about the Qing dynasty try hard to justify its invasion and subsequent minority rule by emphasizing the Confucian concept of “the Mandate of Heaven” and their role to maintain peace and stability. Historically, it was true that under the Manchu rule in the Qing dynasty, there was a tendency to place more emphasis on Confucianism as orthodoxy. Naturally they liked to paint themselves as the genuine heir and defender of the true tradition of the Chinese culture, hence legitimising themselves as successor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The Manchu rulers were more fearful of intellectual ferment and ideological change than the Han Chinese literati. There was no room for anyone to challenge the orthodox Confucian view of history.

When pupils (notably boys only) finished the three most elementary primers, the *Three Character Classic*, the *Hundred Family Names* and the *Thousand Character Essay*, their literacy level was high enough to enable them to read classic Chinese novels. One of the most well known of these novels was *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*), traditionally attributed to Luo Guanzhong (1315–1400) in the late Yuan to the early Ming periods. Consisting of 800,000 words, nearly a thousand dramatic characters in 120 episodes, it is written partly in vernacular and partly in classical Chinese. The author made use of available historical records, which covered the political upheavals from the Yellow Turban Rebellion in 184 AD up to the amalgamation of the three kingdoms under the Jin dynasty in 280 AD.

Like most traditional novels and stories, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was mostly history-based. The lasting appeal of this genre is evidenced by the number of the plays based on these novels in the traditional theatre, which were retold by storytellers, the one-man theatre and enjoyed by adults and children, educated or illiterate. Traditionally in dynastic periods, the majority of the Chinese population were illiterate, and it was through the street theatre that they gained knowledge about their past and strong historical consciousness was maintained in this way. But, is their knowledge of history obtained through the street theatre reliable?

We estimate that, approximately, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* consists of 70% history and 30% non-history. The “non-history” parts have different sources, besides unofficial historical records and folk stories; some were created by the author. Nonetheless, the description of the social conditions that the author made and the logic

¹ Our own translation. For the original and annotations, see Wu Meng, 1991, pp.47-75.

that the author used to solve the problems that arise in the plot is accurate to the Three Kingdoms period, creating “believable” situations and characters, even if they are not historically accurate. Notably, the historical research that went into producing *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a rarity amongst narratives and plays of this genre, as most of them were almost entirely fictional, based on thin threads of actual history.

These days, education levels in China are a lot higher than ever before, and so thus is the literacy rate. The curriculum is modern. History is taught in primary and secondary schools. But the official history, be it Confucian or Communist, is always inclined to be dominated by the official ideology, and therefore history functions as an instrument to consolidate the legitimacy of the government (Bi, 2012). This element is central to the understanding of the official Chinese historiography, which can never be described as neutral. Whoever controls the compilation of history basically has the right to decide who was a hero, and who was a villain. In Chinese history, almost every dynasty won its power through some kind of devious means. The rulers of dynastic China, just like their present-day successors, were particularly concerned with how they would be portrayed in history. They took a strong interest in how the record of the past was compiled and how the future record of the present was kept. So historical compilations can be extremely sensitive, and consequently, elements of distortion are not uncommon, especially in the more recent history of that country.

It is far too sweeping to generalise that none of the historical books written in China are reliable. In fact, the Chinese official record keepers, especially in the early part of Chinese history (3000–85 BC), were known for their bravery to preserve faithful documentations. They received no immunity by virtue of their position. Some were decapitated for writing down the murders among royal family members in their power struggle to become the next king. Others even received “gifts” of a silken cord or a lump of raw opium from the emperor, thus conveying the imperial desire that they commit suicide for criticizing the emperor’s policy in the official record.

In the long history of China, there have been numerous outstanding historians, and the most famous was Sima Qian (135–85 BC). Sima Qian’s father, Sima Tan, served the Han dynasty government from 140 BC to 105 BC, holding the office of the “Prefect of the Grand Scribes”, (*Taishiling*, also translated as “Great Historian”). Among his duties were the supervision of sacrifices and of calendars, the investigation of astrological questions and taking care of the Imperial Library. He also collected historical records, thereby laying the foundation for the work of his son. Sima Qian was already well versed in old writings at the age of ten, and at the age of twenty he set out on a major journey through the empire. He visited the reputed graves of the ancient sage kings and studied in the hometown of Confucius. Upon his return, he served

as a palace attendant. Upon his father’s death, Sima Qian inherited his office and took on an ambitious project started by his father – the production of the first full history of China, the *Shiji* (*Historical Records*). This broad ranging work extended over 130 chapters covering various aspects of history, such as annals, chronicles, treatises (on music, ceremonies, calendars, religion, and economics) and extended biographies. In this way, the grand history book covers the period from the five sages of prehistoric times, through the Xia, Shang, Zhou, and Qin dynasties to the Han dynasty of Sima Qian’s own time, laying down the foundations for historiography in China. His influence is evident in Chinese history books, including the elementary readers for children as shown above. Archaeological evidence has also confirmed some of Sima Qian’s claims.

The *Shiji* and other chronologies compiled before and during Sima Qian’s time have proved to be amazingly precise. For example, they have been verified by checking the eclipses and sightings of comets recorded in them against what mathematical calculations conclude that they must have occurred. By 444 BC, Chinese astronomers had calculated the length of a year to be 365¼ days, a remarkable achievement given the technology of the times. Halley’s Comet was observed regularly in China from 240 BC on (Dreyer, 2010, p.26-27).

2. WHAT IS THE RELATION BETWEEN HISTORY AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA?

In China, the study of history is not a detached academic pursuit and it is indistinguishable from politics. Chinese political leaders cannot adopt a disinterested approach towards history, distant or contemporary, as it intrudes too closely to their current political space. History has to be forced, if necessary, into servicing the present politics. Often, the value of history is judged by its usefulness as a guide to current circumstances. For example, MAO Zedong constantly turned to a thousand-year-old historical account, *Zizhi tongjian* (*The Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*), for guidance on the policies he should follow in twentieth century China.

Moreover, a traditional way to undermine a political adversary, especially those in power, was not by direct criticism, but by linking his actions, policies or circumstances to well-known cases in the past. This was a very potent weapon in Chinese politics. Given such a tradition, historians in China were extremely cautious to avoid trouble caused by their unintended hints, suspected by the political authorities. Nevertheless, persecutions against historians were a frequent occurrence, for no reason other than the interpretation of their publications as hidden attack on the political leaders. The best example to illustrate this point is the case of WU Han and his play *HAI Rui Dismissed from the Office*.

WU Han (1909–1969) was one of the most important historians in the development of modern historical scholarship in China, particularly through his works of the 1930s and 1940s. After 1949, he also served as Deputy Mayor of Beijing. In November 1965, at the start of the Cultural Revolution, he came under severe attack for his play about an upright Ming dynasty official, HAI Rui (1514–1587). WU Han wrote a series of articles on the life of HAI Rui published in the 1950s. In 1960, his play *HAI Rui Dismissed from Office* became a great success. MAO Zedong suspected this play of being an indirect condemnation of his removal of the former Defence Minister Peng Dehuai, who had criticized Mao's Great Leap Forward policy in 1959. The consequence was devastating. Just like under the dynastic rule, WU Han died in prison, as did his wife, a fellow historian specialized in Ming dynasty history. Their daughter couldn't escape persecution either, and eventually died at the age of twenty-two. The persecution involved all WU Han's relatives and friends, and many died. Meanwhile, some historians, most likely pressured by the government, came out to write and publish their research on Hai Rui, concluding that he had never been an honest and upright official, but a hypercritical reactionary official. Hai Rui's tomb in his hometown Haikou was subsequently destroyed.

Shortly after MAO Zedong's death in 1976, WU Han's innocence was declared, as was his wife's and all those involved. Peng Dehuai was exonerated. Hai Rui's tomb was rebuilt, and a new monument was erected in Haikou. History as well as history compilation repeated exactly the same way in the past thousands of years. The emperor can never be denounced, and it is always the woman beside him to be blamed for his wrong doings. Mao's widow was arrested and sentenced to death, later reduced to life imprisonment. Mao's huge portrait is still hung on the gate of Tiananmen. His head appears in the China's bank note as the founding father of the People's Republic. The Chinese Communist Party-government does not wish historians to research cases like WU Han's. They have a slogan, "*Xiangqiankan* – Looking forward". Still, an obvious question, from the perspective of a historian remains unanswered: What was WU Han's real intention of writing a historical play *HAI Rui Dismissed from Office*? He would be thought a lot more courageous if it had been indeed an allegorical work with the upright official representing the disgraced former Defence Minister Peng Dehuai for his outspoken criticism of Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward, and the unapproachable emperor representing Mao.

3. HOW MUCH DO OUTSIDE RESEARCHERS KNOW ABOUT CHINA'S PAST?

Historical research and writing on China is highly developed in Japan, Russia, especially in the former

Soviet Union, and in the West, predominantly in the USA. American research has produced some outstanding scholarship and a momentous outcome. Among these outstanding American scholars is John King Fairbank, who established what is known in the circle of historians as the "Harvard school" of China historiography. *The Cambridge History of China* is the largest and most comprehensive and authoritative history of China in the English language at the very least, and arguably in all languages including Chinese. Planned in the 1960s by the late Professor Fairbank of Harvard, Denis Twitchett, Professor Emeritus of Princeton, the series covers the grand scale of Chinese history from the 3rd century BC to the death of MAO Zedong. Consisting of fifteen volumes, the history embodies both existing scholarship and extensive original research into hitherto neglected subjects and periods. The contributors, all specialists from the international community of Sinologists, cover the main developments in political, social, economic and intellectual life of China in their respective periods. Collectively they present the major events in a long history that encompasses both a very old civilization and a great modern power. Consequently, the published volumes have constituted being an, if not *the* essential readings of Chinese history.

During the Japanese occupation of parts of China from 1931 to 1945, Tokyo's growing belief that Japan and China had a joint future as Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere led to the rapid development of a deep interest in Chinese affairs among government officials and academics. This interest continued even after the Japanese defeat in the World War II. By the early 1970s, Japan could reasonably claim to possess a fuller collection of sources on Chinese history in the twentieth century than China's own collection.

Russia's collection of sources is also considerable, although narrowly concentrated in one aspect – an important one – the history of the Chinese Communist Party. Their archives are full of exciting files and revealing documents of the CCP leaders and their secret communications with the USSR.

Naturally, all these interested foreign parties, the West (predominantly the USA), Japan and Russia have tended to interpret Chinese history from their own point of view. Sometimes, they have been preoccupied with the concern to explain or justify their own record or involvement rather than to produce an objective account, especially in regard to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' history of China. There is always a serious "approach" issue, and hence many debates. The traditional and dominating theory of Harvard school of China historiography under John King Fairbank, with its hallmarks of the conceptual framework of "impact-response" approach, attracted harsh criticism from the mid-1980s, for being one of "ethnocentric distortion", which emphasized that "the West – our West – has played a direct and vitally important part in recent Chinese history" (Cohen, 1984,

p.1). The “impact-response” paradigm and its amplified variation, the “tradition-modernity” paradigm (both being suffused with the same basic assumptions about China and the West), tend to depict China as passive and the West as active, portraying China as a “traditional society stuck in the past”, capable of being stirred up from its eternal repose only by the “life-giving force of a dynamic and modern West”, who “plays Beauty to China’s Beast, transforming by its kiss the torpor of centuries, releasing with its magical power the potential for ‘development’ that must otherwise remain forever locked up” (Cohen, p.151-152). Paul Cohen (1984), formerly trained under Fairbank at Harvard, argues in favour of a new approach, characterized by “a vigorous effort to see the history of any given non-Western society in its own terms and from its own point of view rather than as an extension – actual or conceptual – of Western history” (p.7).

Cohen’s argument is not that the actual Western historical role was unimportant in China’s process of modernisation, but rather that it has been blown out of proportion in comparison with other factors, and is hence misstated. Both the overstatement and misstatement are largely the consequence of the conceptual paradigms with which Western scholars have approached China and her history. Furthermore, Cohen maintains that the problem with “impact-response” approach is not that it is wrong, but it is that it has a limited range of applicability – it “can account for some things, but it cannot...tell the whole story” (p.11-12). He points out that changes or adjustments in some areas were clearly and unambiguously responses to or consequences of Western presence. These areas include such diverse phenomena such as treaty ports, sending students overseas to study modern arsenals and shipyards, Christian converts, institutions like *Zongli yamen* (the foreign affairs department of the government), Maritime Customs Service, and dispatch diplomatic envoys abroad. The last three could be seen as an evidence of the Chinese adjustment to the new Western idea of a modern nation-state.

Located in the innermost area of Chinese society and culture were those facets that were not the products of the Western presence, including the tradition of the social responsibility of intellectuals, especially at time of crises, who contributed, possibly in decisive ways, to the change in modern Chinese history, through their continuous search for social and ideological remedies mainly from, but not limited to, the West (Bi, 2012). These intercultural influences came from the West, Japan, Russian Bolsheviks, and other places like India – Rabindranath Tagore. If Yan Fu (1854–1921, also spelt as Yen Fu) being sent to Britain to study the navy technology at the Navy Academy in Greenwich from 1877 to 1879 is seen as a Manchu Qing government’s passive response to the Western impact of the Opium War to modernise its national defence, then his return to China with the theory of social Darwinism ought to be viewed as a Chinese intellectuals’ active initiative to modernise thinking.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

For historians to put their thoughts into writings, there must be proof behind their thoughts. In other words, the tales historians spin are only as sound as their foundational evidence. What follows is just like Benedetto Croce’s (1966) description: the tale and the fact become mingled and the fact now takes on an additional richness. As time passes, the narrations and judgments made by historians themselves become facts or “documents” requiring to be interpreted and judged – “History is never based upon narrations but always upon documents – it may be upon narrations reduced to the status of documents, and used as such” (Croce, p.497-498).

The most important feature of the new approach put forward by Cohen is to reduce ethnocentric distortion to a minimum, accounting for the fact that eliminating all such distortion is almost impossible. In the process, we are “freeing ourselves to see Chinese history in a new, less Western centred ways”, moving towards a China-centred approach (p. 153-154). But, the problem with Cohen’s “China-centred approach”, as discussed so far, is that Chinese historiography is itself either Confucian or Communist, lacking impartiality and neutrality. Since critical work is always informed by the writer’s own ideologies, as mentioned above, any historical inquiry can never be absolutely objective. Thus, objectivity is more likely to be achieved in a liberal academic environment outside China, where access to materials of different political stands is the norm. Such an environment encourages the establishment of a detached approach required of any serious study. How to establish a “Chinese experience-based” approach while maintaining “impartiality and neutrality” is still the biggest question for those who teach and research Chinese history.

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