**history/历史(Lì Shǐ)**

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| Chinese Perspective | ZHAO Tingyang | 28 Feb 2022 |

**1 A Word for Events and/or Records**

The original meaning of the Chinese word for history (Shi,史) was “event and/or record”. In the earliest writing, it was, to be exact, the same one character used in two ways, or as two words of same pronunciation: event (事,Shi), and record (史,Shi). This homonym makes a metaphor that indicates events and records are essentially the equal. Or it suggests that deeds matter, whilst records of deeds matter as well. Or it otherwise tells the truth of history that events only exist in records, since history is what we see rather than what it is. My first question is that, is there a history of equal significance to all of us?

If asking for one best example of intercultural misunderstanding, I would bet on history. One may cogitate a universal concept of history of all people or of the whole world, yet a history de facto always tells the stories and experiences of a nation or a civilization, the narrative that makes the images of a nation or a civilization, somewhat similar to an autobiography. A few takes so much interest in the histories of others, except special scholars, and no one would understand the histories of other nations as that accepted by others themselves, again the similar case that we do not trust anyone’s autobiography so much. There are few “common sense” or consensus in the matter of history.

It is nothing to do with the epistemological problem about the truths of history, instead, it relates to the matter of cultural or political recognition. Actually there are less truths in a history than expected, so that the epistemology of truth does not explain much of historical care. As the matter of fact, even in name of the investigation on the truth of the past, history is more of the stories that tell our fate and spirit, or the interpretation of the making and becoming of a nation/civilization, which is what I call the historicity of a history. Therefore, the concepts of history differ, since histories have their culturally different variables, which depend on what events or deeds be recognized as the things that really matter. I admit that my understanding of history is rather conservative, far from the modern concept in terms of progress or the contemporary perspective of global history or world history. But the point is, the *world* does not exist so far.

**2 A History-based Civilization**

A historian Zhang Xuecheng (1738-1801) fostered his general interpretation of Chinese civilization, which claims “the Six Great Classics are essentially histories”[[1]](#footnote-1), and well accepted as the best decipherment of the code of Chinese thinking. The “Six Great Classics” consisting of *I Ching*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Poems*, the *Norms and Rites*, the *Music*, and the *Springs-Autumns* (the earlier name for any historical work[[2]](#footnote-2)) , all before 4th century BC and some up to 12th century BC, have laid the foundation for Chinese spirit or established the Chinese mindset, like the Bibles for Western mind. In terms of modern taxonomy, I Ching discusses philosophy, the Book of Documents are about political ideas, the Poems are no doubt the poems, the Norms and Rites is concerning ethical or social rules, the Music studies music and songs (this book is lost), and the Springs-Autumns is the first chronological history (from 722BC-481BC). Zhang Xuecheng otherwise sees the “essence” or the code of all of them as histories with a discovery that “all Chinese theoretical arguments never going beyond historical events”[[3]](#footnote-3). It means history explains theories, and not vice versa. And it is a good picture of Chinese mind, which argues by practical evidences more than logical truths a prior.

To follow his idea, I would claim that Chinese civilization is based upon history, structurally different from the many that are based upon religions, or Greek upon philosophy, or Roma upon laws, or the modern Western upon individualism. But it seems to me the Jewish civilization might be unique, based upon the unity of history and religion.

**3 Why History Made to Be the Basis of Chinese Civilization**

This question relates to a cultural reform in the very early China, approximately 4,500 year ago, an event of “cutting off the communication between men and the heaven”[[4]](#footnote-4). Once upon a time, the early Chinese were so fascinated by magic divinations so that a large population loved to do shamanism more than to work, and created the religious disorder with too many kinds of shamanisms. The king was disappointed and determined to rebuild the social order and the religious authority. So he enacted a law to stop all the improper or wrong communications between men and the heaven, then the divination had been limited to king’s privilege and interpreted by the king’s authority. Modern historians estimate this event as an action that destroyed the social condition and spontaneity for shamanism to evolve into a genuine religion. So this event led China to the secularization in its very early days.

Afterwards, the royal divination went to professionalization, with details studied and experiences recorded. Almost 90% of the early writings carved on bones or shells are found the archive of divinations. Historical consciousness was sneaking in minds through the “historical” archive of divinations. Nevertheless, the early kings and people had thought divinations could tell the future until the change of humanism.

The final success of humanism over divination came about 11th century BC, when the respected king Zhou (?-1043 BC) defeated the powerful king Shang who sincerely performed divinations and sacrifices to the heaven so often. King Zhou saw the explicit fact that Shang had failed to receive the patronage of the heaven in return even he did the best divinations and sacrifices. The Shang’s failure evidently proved the failure of magic divinations, so it inspired Zhou to fabricate a theory of humanism that claims the heaven is essentially ethical and appreciates virtues more than sacrifices. The theory of virtues favored King Zhou for his reputation as a king of virtues. And it argues that deeds matter more than beliefs, dedication more than prediction, and the “will of the Heaven” is no more than the approval of the “hearts of people” (民心) which tells the truth of the real “conditional situation”(形势). Therefore, historical experiences or “lessons” in politics, economy and governance have thus been considered of more teachings and practically more helpful. So it well explains that humanism of Zhou Dynasty should have fundamentally cut off the way to religion and introduced history into the highlight. And it was the “shift from shamanism to history”, as a contemporary philosopher Li Zehou calls it. Most amusing is, the royal experts for divinations naturally became the earliest historians, yet this roles exchange not so surprising, since the divination experts as well as the early historians were the only scholars at that time. And the most significant, divination tells the inevitable future therefore the past has meanings, whereas history recognizes the past therefore the uncertain future is meaningful.

To be sure, divinations have afterwards symbolically remained for a long time, but lost its role.

**4 What Events Count as Great Changes?**

In the philosophy of a history-based civilization, deeds matter more than words, experiences tell more than theories, the past leads to the future, or philosophically, *facio* transcends *cogito*, while *facio* includes *cogito* as it should do. A basic reason is that, no change, no history, and it is *facio* that makes changes. So it is no surprise that I Ching (the book of changes), the primary of the six classics, develops the philosophy of changes, and it must be the first philosophy of history in the world, considering it is at least dated back to 12th century BC. According to Zhang Xuecheng, it might be one of earliest books of history as well, for it records the “greatest” events that makes history.

Now the third question is that, what kind of events could count as the great changes? The Chinese philosophy of history examines events with the historical coordinate of reference made of two sets of concepts, the “creations” (zuo, 作) and “narratives” (shu, 述); the “old days” (gu, 古) and “nowadays” (jin, 今)[[5]](#footnote-5). Times means passage of changing, while history means significant changes----examined due to *creations*----not referring to God’s deeds, but rather the groundbreaking human actions that establish new orders of things or inventing new things to reshape the forms of life. Several oldest texts, such as I Ching and The Making[[6]](#footnote-6), write down a list of great inventions before 12th century BC, including agricultural tools, wheels, netting, boats, cloth-making, weapons, houses, calendar, etc., as well as the most important, writing system and political-social systems or regimes----not a word about religion, so it indicates Chinese concept of history inclines to a sort of pragmatism, even not mentioning the water engineering that is supposed a help in developing a Chinese collective society ---this is strange and surprising, hard to explain it. May it be possible that the early historians ignored the importance of the technology of water engineering? Unknown. Anyway it is believed that only the “great inventions” that lead to great changes are worthy of being “narrated”.

In Confucian time (551BC-479BC), China were going through a fundamental turning, from the “golden ages of three dynasties” (Xia, Shang and Zhou) that had lasted more than 1,300 years, to a Hobbsian world of battles. Confucius was conscious of the undeclared changes in depth, the lurking but serious changes in political, social and even civilizational concepts and systems, which had never happened before. Confucius recognized these changes as the “collapse of norms and orders” (礼崩乐坏). Most of the changes were small things but suggesting the serious breaks of far-reaching consequences.

It was the new change in quest of redefining the concept of history. The history had been used to be the records of the constructive or “positive” events that establish great order or develop wonderful technologies until Confucian times, then came the destructive events that betray the good Way (Dao) of Heaven for all times and destroy the decent order rested on the human Way in accord with the Way of Heaven, practically remaking the history with something anti-history. Confucius took the new experience seriously, and he developed an ethical concept of history. That is, historical narrative should be edited to be a proper one with ethical interpretation for good purposes. Confucius himself took action to edit the first chronicles titled “Springs-autumns”. The narratives of events with ethical interpretations has become a most popular format of historical writings in China even today.

**5 Sima Qian’s Theory**

Sima Qian (145BC -? BC) establishes his reputation as the most famous and influential Chinese historian by his huge work *the History* (史记)*,* develops a new style of historical writing, an “inclusive history” about all significant events, important figures and great ideas until his times. It is an inimitable genius work with the “shifting” focuses in his narrative, changing from the objective contextual description of the events in given situations to the subjective dramatic depiction of the characters and their behaviors. He tried to speak the history, rather than speak any ideology.

Sima Qian was well conscious of his ambition to write a comprehensive grand history. He said that “I have collected all accessible records and stories, carefully studied what people pursued and how they did, investigating the reasons and inevitable causes for successes and failures, ups and downs, so finished a work of 130 chapters. And I have developed my theory of history to analyze how human actively responds to the heaven, and figure out the passages and traces of the historical transitions”[[7]](#footnote-7). He examined the far-reaching effect of critical moments, and aware of the mystery that history goes on with the unexplainable correspondence in paces of changes: “by the invisible force of heaven, the world would most likely witness some small changes in every thirty years, and a greater change in every century, and a greatest change in every five hundred years. Three greatest changes would make a period, then three periods make a long duration, which is found the utmost accessible distance for historical sight”[[8]](#footnote-8). I guess Braudel would be pleased to learn this somewhat foreshow for his great theory on long duration from so far distance in space and time.

If Hume is right, then history does not tell the future. I am afraid Hume is not quite right, for it is evident that the fundamental problems of human world are recursive from its beginning to the present. Maybe a better saying could be that, history tells what will recursively happen in the future, but cannot tell what *will not* happen.

1. 章学诚：《文史通义》，卷一，易教上。上海古籍出版社，2008年版，p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The earliest Chinese calendar had been divided into only two seasons, spring and autumn, so that spring-autumn became the general name for historical works. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 章学诚：《文史通义·卷一，易教上》，上海古籍出版社，2008年版，p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 《尚书·吕刑》；《国语·楚语下》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Also see the interpretations in the article on Time. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 《周易·系辞下》；《世本·作篇》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 《汉书·卷62·司马迁传》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 司马迁：《史记·卷27·天官书》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)