**time/时间(Shí Jiān)**

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| Chinese Perspective | ZHAO Tingyang | 22 Feb 2022 |

Time encompasses two faces: *changes* as they are experienced, and the unperceivable, irreversible *passing* or *flowing* through these changes. Time is considered the oldest and most mysterious problem in metaphysics and is still open to interpretations, despite the modern physics since Einstein disapproving of the metaphysical concept of time. In the Paris debate in 1922, Einstein told Henri Bergson, who claims time is the *Duration* in mind, that the “philosophical time” does not exist at all, nothing but a mistake. Given that the “scientific time” is the real one or almost the true understanding of time, the point is that, we do not see that time, and we need “our time” in organizing or arranging our duration. “our time” or the human time remains a philosophical or cultural problem.

Many Chinese words concerning time have been found in early inscriptions on bones including words like *spring, autumn, day*, *month,* and *year –* marking natural changes – as well as *gone, coming, the old days,* and *nowadays –* marking historical changes. Even the general concept of temporality, *time*, makes an appearance along with the metaphysical or cosmological concept of time, *the infinite duration,* found later on.

The character for time (时), composed of “being fixed” and “date”, initially referred to the four special dates of the spring and autumn equinox and the summer and winter solstice. Later, it would come to refer to the four seasons of the modern era. Guan-zi (732-645BC) gave the earliest definition of time: Time is that of the chronological order[[1]](#footnote-1). Mo-zi (476-390BC) philosophically interpreted time as an “infinite duration”[[2]](#footnote-2). And Chuang-tzu (369-286BC) defined time more metaphysically as “the infinite duration of neither beginning nor ending”[[3]](#footnote-3). The most popular definition of time is ascribed to Huainan-tzu (179-122BC): The infinite totality of all past and all possible futures[[4]](#footnote-4). All these intuitional interpretations have something more or less in common with Plato’s understanding of time in terms of the “image of eternity” in form of infinite sequential “chronos”.

The eternity of time expresses itself as infinity, so that many love to liken the concept of infinite time to the image of ever-running water, but this comparison is often vague and puzzling. Confucius had a famous thought by the river: gone forever in this way![[5]](#footnote-5) The question is, what is gone forever? If time is already gone just as it arrives, every present occasion should be filled with the same amount of time and, therefore, time is never lost; instead, events are “lost” when they are over. Similarly, there is the famous metaphor of a river by Heraclitus, found in Plato’s *Cratylus*: “Heraclitus is supposed to say that all things are in motion and nothing is at rest; he compares this to the stream of a river and says that you cannot enter the same water twice”[[6]](#footnote-6). What is gone are the events rather than time.

A calendar describing the year, month, and day speaks external time, while consciousness of the past, present, and future explains internal time. It is believed that markers of external time, i.e., the physical time, are useful for recalling events, yet do not suffice as an explanation for the truth of time. Unfortunately, intuition of the past or future is only a self-explanation for consciousness; therefore, it also fails to see time itself. The past or future does not exist in reality but rather as subjective projections of consciousness. Augustine, who could not answer the question of time, was aware of time as a process pertaining to cogito. Kant defines time as the inner form of consciousness, and Husserl further argues that ego cogito cogitatum qua cogitatum in the internal time of consciousness. Briefly explained, it can be said that the consciousness of time is a condition a priori of self-consciousness. Consciousness of internal time, however, is not enough as it is in default of the truth of time. We still seek “true time” that can explain the existence or the situation of everything and the world.

Chinese philosophy also examines the ego as well but without taking into consideration pure internal time. Chinese philosophy instead takes more interest in “historical time”, or in historicity more than temporality, that is, time as it exposes itself through significant changes rather than through a meaningless passing or flowing. Time itself is almost incomprehensible, yet the changes in time act as comprehensible signifiers of time or, rather, the values of the humanized “functions” of time because the meaning of life explains the value of time. Therefore, history makes time meaningful, and the meaningful changes make the time a question of life. For human, the passing of time beyond us does not pose a problem in need of a solution, but changes do as they make our histories and futures into ones of suffering or surviving, declining or thriving. Time is a state of being void of meaning if it does not speak historicity and futurity. In short, time is a physical matter if questioned as it is, but a philosophical question if it relates to historical significance. The oldest Chinese book,*I-Ching*, develops a philosophy of changes which views the meaning of time as historicity of life. It states: To foresee the future by spirit, to capture the past by knowledge… the opening or closing of an event is a change; endless changing from the past to the future is continuity[[7]](#footnote-7)… this book of changes claims to contain the methodology of investigating the origin and the finale of events[[8]](#footnote-8).

In ancient Chinese, “the gone” (昔) was used to indicate big changes that happened in the past and should be kept in mind, while “the coming” (来) presented the expectation of possible changes in the future. Both indicated the beginning of a historical consciousness. As a pictograph carved on bones, *the gone* is written as, a composition of huge water and days, a reminder of a disastrous flood, thus making it a symbol of the past. *The coming* is written as , a pictography of wheat which served as a metaphor for the harvest in due season, thereby a symbol of the future in prospect. Obviously this concept of future means more than just physical time. Different from the dawn or dusk that will come in spite of our decisions or effort, crop farming suggests a human claim of a due future, but only if the weather is nice and cooperative. Wheat metaphorizes that expected yet uncertain future.

The metaphors of *the gone* and *the coming* were based upon the experiences of natural changes. They remained the naive consciousness of historicity in the prehistoric period. There are other two concepts of historical tenses completely based upon the significance of human deeds – the *old day* (古) and the *nowadays* (今) – which illustrate historicity overstepping temporality. The pictography of these two concepts is even more graphic and expressive. The *old day* had its original pictograph as. The top part is a device for measuring time and land and indicates “everywhere” while the bottom part is a mouth that speaks, and is therefore a metaphor for old stories collected from all places worth being told or formerly established and respected traditions. The earliest pictography for the *nowadays* was which depicted the king’s bell for enacting a new law, saying “from now on”. This suggests a new start in history or a new beginning of time. In other words, it indicates the use of contemporary *kairos* to build a new future with a new form of life or regime, one that has richer implications than the present. Generally speaking, it is contemporariness that implies a possible future, more than the presentness of a consciousness fixed on *this* present. Historical tenses do not include the concept of future, since future does not yet exist but a variable of contemporariness of nowadays. According to historicity in terms of the *old day* and the *nowadays*, if a society has never been structurally changed by contemporary inventions or reformation, it remains in the historicity of the *old day* even if it is going on in the actual present tense. If a tradition has been active and strong throughout all changes up to present day, its then‑contemporariness is living in the now‑contemporariness; therefore, in the tenses of historicity, a very long natural duration could have a short history, or, on the contrary, a short natural duration might boast of a very long history.

The historical tenses in terms of *old day* and *nowadays* seem to have something in common with the “regimes of historicity” defined by Francois Hartog[[9]](#footnote-9). The concept of historical tenses comments on perspective change when interpreting change. It was a historical turn from “happening” to “becoming” that focused on historical moments of critical turning or beginning which also the bases for reloading or revival of traditions. The events of “becoming” include technological or scientific innovations, revolutions, the establishment of a political regime, a nation, or a religion, reformation of forms of life, and philosophical changes. The great moments of becoming are times of creating or choosing the future. Metaphysically speaking, “making history” has something akin to God’s creation of the world which serves to address the origin or the beginning event and to which the answer is the philosophy of time: the selection of a possible time for a possible world. Making history reveals the secrets of creation of time and world, however, comes across as quite trivial when compared to God’s Genesis.

Since historical tenses are identified with civilizational creations, Chinese philosophy takes “creating” or “originating” (作) as the key concept for interpreting historical time. The earliest pictography of *creating* (作) was. Its prototype was most likely a most impressive invention that had led to a new life. Two best speculations based upon its shape: (1) a palaeographer Xu Zhongshu guessed it was “the shape of collar”[[10]](#footnote-10), a symbol of a piece of clothing that was apparently a great invention for early civilization. (2) Alternatively, another palaeographer Zeng Xiantong proposes that it is more likely an agrarian tool for farming, perhaps a plough[[11]](#footnote-11). I support a tool for farming with a philosophical argument. Agriculture was no doubt the greatest invention for early civilizations as human survival and development depends on it. Farming “creates” the future of crops; therefore, an agrarian tool would be the best symbol to represent “making a future”. Ontologically, the exact meaning of “creating” or “originating” is to make a future for a new world or new life. It transforms natural temporality into human historicity, bringing things from their physical time into historical time so that it could be said that it remakes the order of time. In *I-Ching*, we find the earliest historical overview of the inventions in Chinese early civilization, among which are political regimes, writing, fishing and hunting nets, farming tools, markets, boats, uses for horses and cows, weapons, methods for housebuilding, etc.[[12]](#footnote-12). Modern archaeology has also identified that some of these inventions, such as uses for horses and some weapons, were actually learnt from the Middle East.

Vastly different from the trichotomy of *past-present-future* of our natural consciousness of time, the dichotomy of *old days-nowadays* defines the historical order of time where the future is not included since it is not-yet. The past poses an epistemological question, but the future poses an ontological question beyond knowledge, asking what is becoming instead of what there is. It is *creating* that results in the uncertain moments, the ups and downs of the constant flow of time. Herein, the meaning of time is historicity. Chinese metaphysics takes less interest in the pure being lack of historicity, instead leading its way ahead to the philosophy of history.

In his fiction *The Garden of Forking Paths*, in which the subject is the forking time, Borges fabricates a labyrinth designed by an ancient Chinese architect who did not believe in linear time but rather believed in “an infinite series of times, an ever-spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time embraces every possibility”. In my opinion, Borges best understands the Chinese metaphysics of time.

1. 《管子·山权数》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 《墨子·经上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 《庄子·杂篇》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 《淮南子·齐俗训》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 《论语·子罕》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Plato: Cratylus, 402a. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 《周易·系辞上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 《周易·系辞下》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Francois Hartog: Regimes D’ Historicite: Presentisme et Experience du Temps. Edition du Seuil 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 徐中舒主编：《甲骨文字典》，成都：四川辞书出版社，2014年版，888页. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 曾宪通：“作字探源——兼谈耒字的流变”。《古文字研究》，第19辑，1992年，第408-421页。 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 《周易·系辞下》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)