

SOME NOTIONS OF TIME AND OF HISTORY IN  
CHINA AND IN THE WEST  
WITH A DIGRESSION ON THE ANTHROPOLOGY  
OF WRITING

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There has been much discussion about the Chinese conception of history. Central questions were these: was the traditional Chinese concept of history cyclic, was it linear, or was it both cyclic and linear? Did the Chinese think of history of something with a beginning and an end, or as an unending series of cycles, or as both these things?<sup>2</sup> I shall ask more fundamentally: did the pre-Buddhist Chinese have a concept of history in the first place?

Marcel Granet argued in *La pensée chinoise* that the Chinese did not have an abstract notion of time at all, and in this he was followed by many. But if Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 (ca. 145-ca. 85 B.C.) did not have this abstract notion of time, how could he have written his *nien-piao* 年表 “Chronological tables?” The notion of synchronicity of unrelated events only makes sense within a conceptual scheme that does involve an abstract notion of universal, abstract time in which even in two unrelated and spatially completely separate events one must either precede, be contemporaneous with or follow upon the other. The *nien-piao* do relate various reigns in different states in one overall temporal pattern. Without such an overall pattern there can be no overall temporal sequence.

BEGINNINGS OF HISTORY

There are various references—playful or otherwise—to the beginnings of Chinese history:

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<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank H.U. Vogel, Heidelberg, for drawing my attention—at the last minute—to the useful unpublished draft by Masayuki Sato.

<sup>2</sup> Juri Kroll 1984 has made a comprehensive survey of such discussions. For a wide-ranging philosophical discussion on the concept of time in the Western philosophical tradition see Richard M. Gale 1968 which provides a wide selection of relevant philosophical texts from Aristotle and Plotinus to modern analytical philosophers.

天地設而民生之。當此之時，民知其母而不知其父。“When Heaven and Earth were established the people started to live there, and at that time the people knew their mothers but did not know their fathers.”<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to explain the phrase *t'ien ti she* 天地設 as referring to anything other than origin of the world. The notion does not—significantly—refer to an act of creation of the world. Interestingly, the *Chuang-tzu* 莊子 plays with the thought of a creator of mankind who like a potter forms the shape of men.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps fair to point out that none of these myths of creation or of the beginning of the world became in any way culturally dominant in pre-Buddhist<sup>5</sup> China. But it would seem profoundly wrong to say that the idea of a beginning of the world was completely alien to Chinese thinking.

#### THE ABSTRACT CONCEPT OF TIME

It is still often repeated that the Chinese had no abstract notion of time.<sup>6</sup> This may be generally true for a highly theoretical notion of time and detailed discussion such as Aristotle's Book IV of the *Physics*:

Next for discussion after the subjects mentioned is Time. The best plan will be to begin by working out the difficulties connected with it, making use of the current arguments. First, does it belong to the

<sup>3</sup> *Shang-chün shu* 商君書 “Book of the Lord of Shang” attributed to Kung-sun Yang 公孫鞅 (390–338 B.C.) but containing a great deal of later material, though certainly none later than early Han, ed. Kao Heng 高亨 1974, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Various myths on the origin of the world are traced in Eduard Erkes 1931. It is significant that John B. Henderson 1984, an excellent work with a rich bibliography, does not mention this work and does not emphasise Chinese speculations on the origin of the universe.

<sup>5</sup> I shall speak of pre-Buddhist Chinese *hsien-fo Han-yü* 先佛漢語 and pre-Buddhist literature *hsien-fo wen-hsüeh* 先佛文學, and by these terms I shall refer not to the language and literature dating from before the time of the Buddha but, from a Chinese perspective, to the time before Buddhism became a significant cultural factor in China. (In a similar vein I shall speak of pre-Westernised Chinese language and literature (*hsien-Ou Hanyü* 先歐漢語, *hsien-Ou wen-hsüeh* 先歐文學).) As it turns out, the time when Buddhism became important in Chinese culture was also the time when paper became widely available in China. As I shall argue in the following chapter, it might be historically less misleading to refer to pre-Buddhist China as China before the wide availability of paper, as pre-paper China, or as bamboo-and-silk China. Arguably, the Chinese invention and the wide-spread use of paper as a writing material had at least as profound an effect on Chinese literary history as the introduction from India of the Buddhist religion.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. in Liu Shu-hsien 1974.

class of things that exist or to that of thing that do not exist. Then secondly, what is its nature? To start then: the following considerations would make one suspect that it either does not exist at all or barely in an obscure way. One part of it has been and is not, while the other is going to be and is not yet. Yet time—both infinite time and any time you like to take—is made up of these. One would naturally suppose that what is made up of things which do not exist could have no share in reality. ... Aristotle, *Physics* 218af

Aristotle continues in this spirit for thirteen pages of English translation (218a–224a in the Greek Bekker edition). There is no reason to go into the detail of Aristotle's disquisitions, but my point is that they very obviously treat the problem of time at a very high level of abstraction. On the one hand time is discussed in highly abstract terms by philosophers, while on the other it is personalised and indeed deified by mythographers into the god of time, Khronos.

We have no deification of time in ancient China, indeed there is a much weaker tendency towards the personification of abstract entities in ancient China compared with contemporary Greece and Rome. Moreover, there is no extensive abstract and philosophical treatment of time from ancient China, but in point of fact, we do have the results of what must have been a very intensive intellectual concern with such abstract questions about time. In the *Mohist Canons* A40 we have as abstract a definition/time of duration as one could hope for:

久，彌異時也。

字，彌異所也。

“Duration: what fills out different times (i.e. moments of time).

Extension: what fills different locations (i.e. points in space)”

Graham, *Later Mohist Logic* p. 293.

The Later Mohists clearly distinguish between *shih* 時 “concrete point in time” and *chiu* 久 “duration”.

The later Mohists take a hard-nosed theoretical view of durations, and they certainly do not start from the subjective point of view of a present or of an experiencer of seasons and the like. The discourse is on a completely different theoretical level.

Systematically, the later Mohists distinguished between times with and without duration:

動時或有久或無久。始無久。“Of the times in a movement some have duration, others do not have duration. The beginning does not have duration.” A44, Graham, *Later Mohist Logic* p. 295

In terms of abstract discussion and definition of the concept of

time this is practically all that has come down to us from these remarkable Later Mohist sources. And it is quite impossible to find a parallel anywhere else to Aristotle's disquisition on the subject.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien does make a neat abstract distinction within the conceptual field of "time":

吾所謂時者非時日也。人固有利不利時。“What I call time is not the passage of time. Men inherently have propitious and non-propitious times [i.e. points/moments in time, *kairos*]”: *Shih-chi* 45, ed. *Wang Li-ch'i* p. 1375

But this does not amount to an abstract theory of time.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that what we have in the Mohist sources is the tip of an anthropological iceberg. The Mohist definitions must have been the result of very extensive deliberations and discussions on time. They are definitely not initial stray thoughts on the notion of time. The problem is that we do not have these broader early Chinese deliberations. We have only summaries and conclusions. Suppose that instead of the works of Plato we only had the pseudo-Platonic *Definitions*. This is the position we are in in the case of the Later Mohist logicians. We do not have their deliberations, only a garbled version of some of their results.

The position of our sources is intimately connected with the cultural anthropology of writing in ancient China versus ancient Europe, I therefore add here a digression on this subject.

#### *Digression: The Cultural Anthropology of the Writing Process: From Summary to *mimēsis**

Consider the case of *aposiōpēsis* “falling silent in mid-sentence” in rhetoric. This is a clear symptom of a mimetic style where the writer tries to give the impression that he simply transcribes actual speech or actual thought. For in actual speech we do discontinue certain sentences that we have already begun, and in thought we do discontinue lines of thought that we have started out on. *Aposiōpēsis* is generally absent from pre-Buddhist Chinese prose, as far as I have been able to ascertain.<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon is readily illustrated from Cicero's letters, and it is worth dwelling on in

<sup>7</sup> Ulrich Unger 1988 vol. 4, p. 54 assumes an *aposiōpēsis* in *Analects* 14.16 如其仁。如其仁。 But D.C. Lau translates in accordance to many of the traditional commentaries: “Such was his benevolence. Such was his benevolence.” Certainly the K'ung An-kuo 孔安國 (A.D. 130–190) commentary interprets this as a complete sentence. Cf. Ch'eng Shu-te 1990 p. 982ff. There is, however, a conditional clause

some detail:

*Si autem... sed nihil opus est reliqua scribere.*

“If on the other hand... But there is no need to write the rest.”<sup>8</sup>

Cicero habitually breaks off after a sentence connective and simply starts a new sentence, thus posing as an extremely spontaneous writer who begins to write down his thoughts before he has even finished thinking them:

*Velim ita sit. Sed tamen...*

“I wish it was so, but still... [scil. I am worried]” (*Ad familiares* 2.16.6).

In his rhetorical writings Cicero makes Crassus say:

*Dicam enim vere, amicissimi homines, quod sentio: saepe ego doctos homines—quid dico saepe? immo non numquam; saepe enim qui potui, qui puer in forum venerim neque inde umquam diutius quam quaestor afuerim. Sed tamen audivi...*

“For I shall tell you truly, my dearest friends, what I feel: often I have [heard]—why do I say ‘often’. Rather: ‘sometimes’. For how could I have heard it often, I who have come to the forum as a boy and never was away from it for a longer time than as a quaestor. But still: I have heard...” (*De oratore* 2.90.365).

I do not imagine for a moment that this text was some kind of stenographic record. The spontaneity of diction is artistically formed and planned. Cicero was nowhere less spontaneous than in his rhetorical writings. But Cicero uses his art to create an illusion of spontaneity when depicting direct speech. Similarly, he creates an illusion of spontaneity when he speaks/writes with his own voice. In his letters particularly, but also elsewhere, he pretends that he thinks as he writes, that he begins to write (or dictate—that detail makes no difference) before he has thought through a sentence. This effect is largely absent in pre-Buddhist Chinese.

Even in Virgil's hexameters, we have the famous case of *aposiōpēsis* when the god Neptune, outraged by Juno creating storms over the seas, calls up his subordinates, swears at them and continues:

with omits the main clause, as Unger suggests: 所不與崔變者。。。 “If we do not side with Ts'u and Ch'ing...” *Tso-chuan* Duke Hsiang 25.

<sup>8</sup> Menge 1914 par. 551, p. 500. Cf. also Raphael Kühner and Karl Stegmann 1955 vol. 2, p. 555 for a selection of further examples.

*Quos ego—! Sed motos praestat componere fluctus.*

"And you I will...! But it is more important to stop the floods" (*Aeneid* 1.135). Neptune interrupts himself in this verse. He starts to say something but stops. Something like *puniam* "I shall punish" he finds he does not have the time to say although he is not grammatically free to leave the word understood. He is in a hurry to stop the storms. We have perhaps the most resounding case of *aposiōpēsis* in Latin literature, resounding because it comes in highly polished verse. And upon closer reading of Virgil I find that the case is not isolated or limited in this author to divine speech. I come across a passage in which a miserable and treacherous prisoner interrupts himself in mid-sentence:

*Nec requievit enim, donec Calchante ministro...*

*Sed quid ego haec autem nequ quam ingrata revolo?*

"And he did not rest until with the aid of Calchas...

But why do I pointlessly bring up these unpleasant things?" *Aeneid* 2.100

For all I know someone may be able to come up with such incomplete sentences in pre-Buddhist literature. But the writing culture was such that phenomena like *aposiōpēsis*, if they existed at all, had to remain marginal and were certainly not cultivated as part of the standard rhetoric of the time. They would appear so extraordinary that one might attribute them to scribal error rather than authorial intension.

We must read ancient Chinese texts as organic parts of culturally determined and largely ritualised scribal processes. We need to see them not as stative texts, but as results of culturally defined writing activities, not as a *ergon* but as *energeia*, or—to be just slightly more fashionable—not as *énoncé* but as *énonciation*. And the relevant culturally sanctioned scribal act is that of condensation and recapitulation of results for the initiate. That is why so much of Chinese written culture is *in nuce* "in a nutshell" before we need to put it in a nutshell through interpretation. Our converse problem is to get the thought out of the nutshell. The culture of the writing process has put the content there: in a neat nutshell, for the initiate, the connoisseur.

The almost obsessive production of literally thousands of different *chéngyǔ cídiǎn* 成語詞典 in our time is symptomatic of this endemic penchant for the nutshell resume in Chinese culture. Given the vast vocabulary which is loan translation from Western languages it is significant that the Chinese throughout the ages

have felt very little need to borrow any large number of condensed sayings from any other culture. These condensed sayings are manifestly felt to be a strong point of the indigenous culture.

The cultivated form of the condensed summary of speech in China is expressed through what we find ourselves construing grammatically as unambiguously direct speech. The pre-Buddhist Chinese have no need for summary through indirect speech, simply because summarising and reducing a message to the essentials is part of the *overall cultural mode of writing* in the first place. If writing does not purport to be mimetic of the actual flow of speech then there is less need to mark off the non-mimetic character of the summary.

At later stages of Chinese history the matter becomes more and more evident. If the traditional Chinese reader sees a wry direct speech classical Chinese dialogue in a 19th century historical source he naturally takes this as a summary or condensation of the upshot of that conversation. That is why he does not need indirect speech mechanisms to mark such summary, that is why there is no sustained indirect speech in classical Chinese. At the very least the traditional reader has to translate the dialogue for himself into sayable nineteenth century Chinese. But the point is, he has to do more than that. And his culture accustoms him to doing more than that. His reading of a classical Chinese text is a very active, by Western standards extraordinarily hypersensitive and *in that sense* hyperactive, hermeneutic cultural activity.

I must stress: The act of writing is mediated in all cultures. One *never* "simply" writes down what one thinks. In one strict sense no one ever directly writes down anything whatsoever that he or she thinks. Writing is a mediated activity. One always considers exactly which parts of the thought are to be articulated in speech or in writing. Nonetheless, I want to claim that there is a crucial difference between a writing culture which encourages one to write *as if* one were simply recording one's thought, or certain spoken words, and another writing culture which enjoins on the writer a clear conventional reticence and encourages him to write *as if* he was in a summarising mode.

I wish to argue that the act of writing literature in ancient China is different from the act of writing literature in ancient Greece. Writing conventionally *pretends* or *purports* to do different things in these two cultures.

Assuming that pre-Buddhist Chinese writers aimed to summarise rather than mimetically represent speech then the absence of

*aposiōpēsis* becomes explicable, and so does the absence of the parenthetic mode of writing which might be regarded as a case of temporary *aposiōpēsis*. It seems that a great many salient features of ancient Chinese literature may indeed be explained on the basis of the hypothesis that pre-Buddhist Chinese writing is summarising rather than mimetic, when describing speech.

Assuming again that pre-Buddhist Chinese writers aimed to present summaries, results and digests of thought rather than to represent faithfully the actual processes of thought that lead to these results, then the Mohist reticence about the background of their results on the notion of time is understandable. Deliberations like those presented by Aristotle were not so much absent in the culture: scribal conventions did not encourage the writing down of such deliberations.

True enough, these conventions could be broken, as in the case of the *Lun-heng* 論衡 by Wang Ch'ung 王充 (27 B.C.–A.D. 100). But even in his case we have summaries of his “weighings” rather than what purports to be a transcription of his train of thought.

Let me continue in my distant emulation of Chinese reading culture and return to the study of the concepts of space and time in that culture.

#### *The temporal/spacial universe*

The pair *yü-chou* 宇宙 “the universe of space and time” is current pre-Buddhist Chinese, and the combination abstracts completely from what is inside space and time. It is hard to see how this could be fitted into Marcel Granet's scheme of things according to which the Chinese always thought of space and time as occupied and specific rather than in an abstract way. The term *yü-chou* is not mentioned in the index of his book *La pensée chinoise* (Paris; Albin Michel, 1934) and is certainly not in his chapter “Le temps et l'espace” (pp. 86–114) which became a most important inspiration for all later debate.

Kao You 高誘 (ca. A.D. 170–ca. 220) is quoted in standard dictionaries as commenting on *Huai-nan-tzu* 淮南子 (submitted to the emperor in 139 B.C. by Liu An 劉安 (179–122 B.C.)):

四方上下爲宇；古往今來曰宙。“The four directions and the above and the below are called *yü*; the past, the present and the future are called *chou*.”

It so happens that *yü* 宇 by itself is defined for us in the *Chuang-tzu* 莊子, albeit in an awkward way:

有實而無乎處者宇也。“Reality without anything in it is space” (*Chuang-tzu* 23.56, to which Ch'eng Hsüan-ying 成玄英 (fl. A.D. 631–650) comments: 宇者四方上下也。“*Yü* refers to the four directions and the above and below.”)

So much for abstract definition. Within the context of historiography it is very obvious that the *nien-piao* in *Shih-chi* are very clear evidence that Ssu-ma Ch'ien was concerned to match a regular series of years that proceed at a perfectly mechanical pace with events in the various states that made up China. He was aware that year X of the duke of one state was the same as year Y of another duke in another state and so on. Years and times were manifestly not thought of exclusively defined in terms of their official definitions within one's own state: Ssu-ma Ch'ien did conceive of an overall time scheme within which unrelated things could be contemporary and which he described in his *Chronological Tables*. The notion of contemporaneity assumes a notion of time that is not exclusively determined by reigns. The ancient Chinese certainly could place the concrete reign period in a more abstract time scheme. They did not need any linear notion like that of *anno domini* “he year of the Lord” for that. When they were interested in the question of what was contemporary with what, they were beginning to be interested exactly in the abstract notion of time.

Granet confused the way years were publicly referred to in official documents with the way they were essentially thought of in real terms. It is not at all self-evident that whenever the emperor changed the name of an era everyone within the realm who knew that the emperor had made this decision considered that a cosmically new era had really begun. The perfection of astronomical calculations of heavenly movements proceeded effectively in complete disregard of imperial decisions about eras. The fact that astronomers would use the official names of years do not affect this feature of their professional behaviour.

At the time X happened, Y could be said to have also happened. The time (*shih* 時) as such is not identical with the events which may have occurred in it in Chinese eyes any more than it is in our eyes.

*Tempus fugit* “time flies” is a well-known sentiment in pre-Buddhist China, and it became a cliché in later times. 日月逝矣，歲不我與。“The days and months pass, the years are not on our

side" (*Analects* 17.1 ed. Ch'en Shu-te p. 1176). What passes, here, are the days and months as such, not the events that make them up. It is time as such that is seen as passing in the Chinese.

I do not imagine that Confucius' talk about days and months shows any particular interest in the heavenly bodies (*jih* 曰 "sun" and *yüeh* 月 "moon"). What is at issue is the passage of time as symbolised by days and months. *Carpe diem* "Make use of the short time you have" is a message that reverberates through the *Book of Songs*. For example, the following three synonymous couplets emphatically reiterate the same idea which again is certainly no emphatic calendrical observation about days and months but an observation about time in the abstract:

今我不樂，

日月其除。

"If we do not now enjoy ourselves, the days and months (i.e. time) will be passing."

今我不樂，

日月其邁。

"If we do not now enjoy ourselves, the days and months (i.e. time) will be passing."

今我不樂，

日月其慆。

"If we do not now enjoy ourselves, the days and months (i.e. time) will be passing" (*Shih-ching* no. 114).

*Jih-yüeh* 日月 "days and months > time" is used to refer quite generally to what we call time as such. Not time as belonging to a reign of a king, but time as something lived through, *temps vécu*.

*Shih-kuang* 時光 is not a current abstract term for time in pre-Buddhist Chinese. Neither is *shih* 時 "season; period of time, point in time" itself. But the thought from the *Book of Songs* became commonplace all over the place and was later proverbially expressed like this:

時光如箭，日月如梭。

"Time passes like an arrow, days and months go back and forth like a shuttle" (*Ching-pen t'ung-su hsiao-shuo* 京本通俗小說, *Nien-yü Kuan-yin* 碾玉觀音). *Jih-yüeh* 日月 "days and months > time" does not refer to any content of the times, and when Han Yü 韓愈 (A.D. 768–824) says *jih yüeh pu wei pu chiu* 日月不爲不久 "that certainly was a long time" he may still be thinking of "days and months" for all we know. There is no way of reconstructing his thoughts in this re-

spect. My point is that he could never have said anything like *shih pu wei pu chiu yi* 時不爲不久矣。The word *shih* 時 though canonically translated as "time" is never used in this way until much later.

In Liu Chih-chi 劉知幾 (A.D. 661–721), *Shih-t'ung* 史通 we find an observation in which *shih* "the times" is regarded in analogy to the seasons:

自是爲國史者皆用新法。然時移世異。

"From this time onwards those who were in charge of accounts of the states all used the new method. And in this way as the times changed, generations differed" (*Shih-t'ung hsin chiao-chu* 史通新校注 ch. 1, ed. Chao Lü-fu 趙呂甫 p. 22). The general idea was so popular that we have a wide range of similar proverbial sayings of roughly the same age and import.<sup>9</sup>

The current *shih pu k'o shih* 時不可失 "the opportunity must not be missed" from *Chan-kuo-ts'e* 戰國策, *shih pu tsai lai* 時不再來 "a lost opportunity will not come again" from *Kuo-yü* 國語, *shih lai yün chuan* 時來運轉 "when the right time comes fortunes change" and *shih pu yi ch'ih* 時不宜遲 "one must not be slow to take an opportunity" are all not concerned with time but with opportunities afforded by time. *Shih ho nien feng* 時和年豐 "mild seasons and abundant harvests" talks about the seasons rather than time as such.

*Vita brevis* "[time passes], life is short" is a current ancient Chinese sentiment: 人生在天地之間。若白駒之過隙。“Man's living between Heaven and Earth is [brief] like the passing of a white colt past a small crevice” (*Chuang-tzu* 22.39).

This *jen sheng* 人生 "man's being alive" is not to be confused with the notion of human life as the product of human action, the Greek *bios*.

### *The concept of life*

In classical Greek there are two concepts translated into the English "life": firstly, the mainly biological term *zōē* "the fact of being alive, aliveness," opposite *thanatos* "death," and secondly, the more cultural term *bios* "life, way of life, life as a cultural product, description of a life." Plutarch wrote the *bioi parallelētoi* "Parallel Lives," and he could not have called his book *zōai parallelēlai*. The pre-Buddhist Chinese notion of *jen sheng* 人生 "life" was close to that of *zōē*, and not at all to that of *bios*. In pre-Buddhist Chinese

<sup>9</sup> 時移世變，時移事改，時移事遷，時移世易，時移俗易，時異事殊，時異勢殊，時殊風異。

your *sheng* 生 “life” was not something that you form, live and *diageis* “act through.” Ssu-ma Ch’ien 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 85 B.C.) wrote not *vita philosophorum* “lives of philosophers” but *chuan* 傳 “accounts” and *shih-chia* 世家 “[accounts of] a hereditary houses.”

*Jen chih sheng* 人之生 in *Analects* 6.19 does not refer to “the *bios* of man” but to the fact that a man is alive.

The one text that is most interesting in the notion of life is the *Chuang-tzu*. For this text, life is a biological function which can be nourished, *yǎng* 養 (*Chuang-tzu* ch. 3; and 28.28) or injured *shāng* 傷:

可謂不以國傷生矣。

“This may be called not injuring life on account of a country” (*Chung-tzu* 28.18).

The definition is one of *zōē*, not of *bios*:

人之生氣之聚也。

“Man’s being alive is the assemblage of ether *qi*” *Chuang-tzu* 22.11.

In *sheng wu suo yü yeh* 生吾所欲也 “being alive [rather than dead] is something I want” (*Mencius* 6A10) the speaker wants to stay alive. This is what is most desired: survival. Not any particular kind of *bios*, like Aristotle’s *bios politikos* “life dedicated to politics,” *bios theoretikos* “life dedicated to contemplation,” and *bios apolaustikos* “life dedicated to pleasure.” (*Ethica Nicomachea* 1097b9). Life was not regarded as a product of human action in pre-Buddhist China, although there was a lively discussion of life-styles. There are many interesting reasons why the following Elisabethan epitaph, composed by the deceased person himself, could not have been found in China:

*Life is a jest, and all things show it.  
I used to think so, but now I know it.*

### *The abstract concept of history*

In the rest of this paper I turn to the conceptions and notions related to the word *li-shih* 歷史 “history.”

The English word “history” is used in at least two fundamentally different senses. It may refer to either the record of events (Augustine: *narratio historica*), or to the events (Augustine: *historia ipsa*) themselves, the course of history. This is a point to keep in mind for what follows.

The ancient notion *ku* 古 “ancient times” does not include contemporary history and certainly not future history. Ssu-ma Ch’ien has the term *ku shih* 故事 “matters of the past” (*Shih-chi* 130, ed. Pe-

king, Chung-hua, 1962, p. 3299) which undoubtedly refers to the facts of history as described and transmitted in historical records. The notion of history, on the other hand, crucially involves the notions of development, evolution, process: the change from a cave-dwelling to city-dwelling human societies and so on. Historians and philosophers were interested in such changes, but the question is whether they had a general term to refer to these dynamic historical developments.

I once read about the events of June 1989 in Peking that they 改變了整個人類未來的歷史。“It transformed the whole future history of mankind.” (*Chung-yang-jih-pao* 中央日報 19.5.90, p. 5). In the West, the notion of “history” came to include the future as well as the past from the late 18th century onwards. Since when is there such a thought as that of a future “history” in China? Since when has the historicity of the concept of “history” itself, as we apply it, been recognised and discussed in China? Since when has it been discussed by sinologists?

I note in passing that the notion of “historicity” in Europe is young. *Le Petit Robert* knows of no case of *historicité* before 1872, the newest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* has no examples of “historicity” before 1880. But, of course, the concept of historicity is not necessarily tied to the term historicity. Conceptual history is not the same thing as terminological history.

Jacques Le Goff is said to have said (I did not hear him): “History needs historians, not authorised scribes.” Le Goff’s stance shows up historicity of the notion of “historian.” We need to historically reconsider a term like *shí* 史 “archivist, astronomer.” We shall need to reflect deeply on such word-formations as *li-shih* 歷史, *shih-chia* 史家, *li-shih-chia* 歷史家, and *li-shih-hsueh-chia* 歷史學家, all of which would appear to be loan translations. But let me begin with Nietzsche.

When Nietzsche distinguishes between antiquarian history, monumental history, and critical history, this involves a degree of abstraction in the concept of history, a recognition of the historical conditioning, the historicity of history-writing itself. And in China, this historicity of historiography was recognised, as we shall see, by Liu Chih-chi 劉知幾. But there was no concept of “historicity” as such.

Ambrosio Calepino’s *Dictionarium Latino-Lusitanum ac Iaponicum* of 1593 has the following glosses the Latin word *historia*:

1. *yurai* 由來 “origin”
2. *coji* 故事 “matter of the past (as told)”

3. *raireki* 來歷 “background”
4. *dengi* 傳記 “biographic account”
5. *yengui* 緣起 “origin”

Significantly, his informants did not come to think of *rekishi* 歷史.

*Li-shih* 歷史, in any case, is not in Kao Ming-k'ai 高名凱 et al. eds., *Han-yü wai-lai-tz'u tz'u-tien* 漢語外來詞詞典, but neither is it in the new *Tz'u-yüan* 辭源 which covers current pre-Opium war expressions, i.e. expressions that were current before 1840. *Chung-wen-ta-tz'u-tien* 中文大辭典 p. 7629 uses the English word “History” to explain the entry *li-shih* 歷史 and significantly this very large dictionary provides no traditional examples under this entry. The dictionary (p. 2309) does not recognise a meaning “the historical facts” for *shih* 史, only a meaning “historical book,” as in *shih-pu* 史部 “bibliographic division of historical writings.”

However, there is an isolated occurrence of the combination *li shih* 歷史 in the commentary to *San-kuo-chih* 三國志 by Pei Sung-chih 裴松之 (A.D. 372-451):

博覽書傳歷史

“He widely read books and biographies and the history books throughout the ages” (*Han-yü ta tz'u-tien* 1986ff, 5.362).

For the meaning “historical facts” the dictionary is unable to come up with anything better than a quotation from Mao Tsetung, *Chung-kuo jen-min t'uan-chieh wan suei* 中國人民團結萬歲, “Long live the solidarity of the Chinese people:” 中國的歷史從此開辟了一個新世代。“Chinese history opened up a new era from then on.”

The history of the concept *li-shih* 歷史 in modern Chinese is part and parcel of international global conceptual history. The influence of English and German, via Japanese, was dominant. Chinese tradition played but a small part.

It is often said and it is probably correct to say that *li-shih* 歷史 in modern Chinese is a loan from the Japanese. On the other hand I do find that there is a Ming dynasty work, an outline of Chinese history, entitled *Li-shih kang chien pu* 歷史綱鑑補 by Yuan Huang 袁黃 (1533–1606), first printed in 1606. The book was reprinted in Japan in 1663 and remained influential in Japan until the Meiji period (1868–1912). Exactly how are we to understand the term *li shih* 歷史 here? Until further notice I translate: “A supplement to the overall mirror of the history books through the ages.”

The traditional concept of history, *narratio historica*, in China is tied up with that of an institution, that of the Court Astronomer,

Archivist, or Scribe, *shih* 史, whose functions varied greatly in the course of early Chinese history. In similar ways the concept of liberty in Greece and Rome is linked to the social institution of slavery. Conceptual history is inseparable from institutional and social history.

*Shih* 史 were literary records, not the reality described in these. Thus we have the common *shih pu chüeh shu* 史不絕書 “the history books write about this all the time” and in the equally current *shih wu ch'ien li* 史無前例 the idea is not that there are no precedents in history but only that there are no precedents in the history books. Lu Hsun is, as far as I know, the first author who uses *shih li* 史例 to refer to concrete historical, factual examples. (*Han-yü ta tz'u-tien* 漢語大辭典 vol. 3, p. 49).

Just as in Rome the genre of *annals* was distinct from the of *historiae*, so in ancient China we have the *Ch'un-ch'iu* 春秋, *Chu-shu chi-nien* 竹書紀年 and in *Shih-chi* 史記 we have the *chi* 紀 “annals.” Of course, *ch'un-ch'iu* 春秋 as well as *chi* 紀 always remain a kind of text or book. The term never refers to the facts of history. Saint Augustine's distinction between *narratio historiaca* “historical narrative” and *historia ipsa* “history itself”<sup>10</sup> was surely made in China. But one would like to know exactly how and when and by whom, and on what historical occasion.

Of course, the ancient Chinese could talk about what we would describe as the fact of history, as when we have:

述而不作

信而好古

“I transmit and do not make.

I am faithful to and love antiquity.” *Analects* 7.1

Pao Hsien 包咸 (6 B.C.–65 A.D.) explains this as  
好述古事。

“He liked to transmit ancient events.”

And we do have the proverbial *hao ku wen hsin* 好故溫新 “be fond of antiquity and familiar with what is current.”

But note incidentally that Chu Hsi 朱熹 (A.D. 1130–1200) in his *Ssu-shu chi-chu* 四書集注 (p. 120) takes the *ku* 古 of the *Analects* to refer to ancient books which Confucius edited.... History as dynamic development is not part of the conceptual content of *ku* 故 or of *ku* 古.

Édouard Chavannes thought that the concept “historique” is as old as the title *Shih-chi* 史記, which, of course does not go back to

<sup>10</sup> Augustinus, *De doctrina christiana*, 2.28 (44).

Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 (ca. 145-ca. 85 B.C.) himself. Chavannes translated *Shih-chi* 史記 as “*Mémoires historiques*,” and he is followed in this by R.V. Vyatkin in his series of carefully annotated translations *Syma Tsyane*, *Istoričeskie zapiski*. “Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Historical Records.” The translation has shown a remarkable tenacity throughout sinological history. It is as natural to take *shih* 史 as “historical” for a Westerner as it is for a speaker of modern Chinese.

We are so prone to read our own conceptions into Chinese book titles that even the *Shu* 書 “Writings” has been translated on the basis of the later title *Shu-ching* 書經 as “Books of History.” Such current translations pervert the conceptual scheme of the student of China.

The history of the word *shih* 史, and of the problematisation of the subject indicated by the word *shih* 史 needs to be investigated in more detail than there is room for here. (An obvious starting point being *Han-yü ta tz'u-tien* 漢語大詞典 3.48). The definition ubiquitously quoted in the literature is by Hsü Shen 許慎 (died ca. 149 A.D.) who defines in *Shuo wen chieh tzu* 說文解字:

史，記事者也。

“*Shih* is a person who records things” (Tuan Yü-ts'ai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), *Shuo wen chieh tzu chu* 說文解字注 p. 116).

其事則齊桓，晉文，其文則史。

“The matter [recorded in the Spring and Autumn Annals] is that of duke Huan of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin; the style is that of the Archivist” (*Mencius* 4B21, ed. Chiao Hsün 焦循 (1763–1820), *Meng-tzu cheng-yi* 孟子正義 p. 574).

*Shih shih* 史事 are not the facts of history but the task of writing history books in a memorial by the Song scholar Tseng Kung 曾鞏 and again in the *Sung-shih* 宋史, *Shen-tsung-chi, san* 神宗紀, 三. The meaning “historical facts” represents a twentieth century development. *Shih shih* 史實 “historical reality” is first attested in Lu Hsün.

*Shih huo* 史禍 are never ever historical disasters. On the contrary, they are misfortunes that an archivist incurs as a consequence of carrying out his duties.

*Shih-chi* 史跡 first comes to mean “historical relics” in the twentieth century.

*Shih-chi* 史績 first comes to mean “historical achievements” in the twentieth century.

The dictionary *Han-yü ta tz'u-tien* 漢語大字典 p. 571 refers to Ssu-ma Ch'ien's own preface where he mentions that the *shih chi*

史記 have been dispersed. We are invited to read this in the spirit of Chavannes as “historical records,” but there is reason to take this as anything other than “records by the archivists/recorders.” *Shih-chi*, ed. Wang Li-ch'i p. 10ff has a detailed account of the use of the term *shih-chi* 史記 “records of the archivists.”

The only other reference given in this excellent dictionary is to a clearly Westernised passage from Liang Ch'i-ch'ao 梁啓超 (1873–1929) entitled *Hsin shih-hsüeh* 新史學 “New History” where, rather unsurprisingly, there is talk of *shih-chia* 史家 “historians.” Masayuki Sato considers that the concept *rekishi* in Japanese acquired the meanings *historia narrata* and *historia ipsa* as late as 1873 in Japan, under strong Western influence. From Japan, the concept was transferred to China. When Liang Ch'i-ch'ao used it in his *Chung-kuo li-shih yen-chiu-fa* 中國歷史研究法 of 1922 he was under the strong influence of European historians. This was not an autochthonous Chinese development.

The term *shih-hsüeh* 史學, in any case, is old. In Tang times we might say that it refers to the study of history, but this is still understood as the study of history books. The Tang syllabus of the examination discipline *shih-hsüeh* 史學 consisted of *Shih-chi* 史記, *Han-shu* 漢書, and *Hou Han-shu* 後漢書.<sup>11</sup>

A crucial term of Chinese historiography for my present purpose is the bibliographic category *shih-p'ing* 史評 which has been current at least since Sung times. This literally means “appreciation of histories.” *P'ing* 評 is a technical term from the history of aesthetics. An outstanding example of the genre *shih-p'ing* 史評 is Liu Chih-chi 劉知幾 (A.D. 661–721), *Shih-t'ung* 史通.

Take the very book title of the *Shih-t'ung* 史通, which was compiled in 710 A.D. We have Masui Tsuneo, “Liu Chih-chi and the *Shih-t'ung*,” in *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Tōyō Bunkō*, 34 (1978) 113–162; David L. McMullen translates “Generalities on History”; Stuart H. Sargent translates “Understanding History.” But how exactly are we to understand “history” here? I think this is a point worth discussing. And any detailed discussion must be based on the use of *shih* 史 in that crucial text.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The history of the expression *shih-hsüeh* 史學 “archival/historical studies” is well worth tracing in detail. The term goes back to *Yen Chih-t'u* 顏之推 (531–after 590) *Yen-shih chia-hsün* 顏氏家訓, 勸學 8.18, ed. Kao An-tse 1993, p. 211: 昔吾嘗共人談書。言及王莽形狀，有一俊士，自許史學名價甚高，乃曰。。。Once I was talking about literature/books with some people, and we came to talk about the appearance of Wang Mang. There was one formidable scholar who thought of himself as a specialist in history books and whose fame was very great, and he said....”

<sup>12</sup> For this one must consult G. Gagnon 1977. Cf. also E.G. Pulleyblank's arti-

In any case Hsieh Ling-yün 謝靈運 (385–443 A.D.) in his *Shan-chü-fu* 山居賦 does use the expression *kuo shih* 國史 to mean “state history books” and not “the state historical facts.” It is significant that he did not mean anything like “historical development of the state.”

#### *The concepts of “development” and of a “process”*

Modern Chinese *fa-chan* 發展 “development; to develop, evolve” is first attested, as far as I can make out, in ch. 28 of the early twentieth century novel *Nieh-hai-hua* 藝海花 which received its final form in 1930 at the hands of Tseng P'u 曾樸 (1872–1936), but which was begun before 1906.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese notion of history was in any case one of events, of actions and of interactions, not of processes and developments. Historical developments through time were certainly described in Chinese works of history, but not as “developments.” They were characterised in terms of significant events. Indeed, the abstract notion of a *kuo-ch'eng* 過程 “process” versus a state of affairs or the event consisting in some change in the state of affairs is again a very recent conceptual development which would appear to have been influenced by Western languages.

A word like *lai-li* 來歷 refers to the origin and background of something rather than to its development as such. The emphasis is on the facts of the background, not on the continuity of the development. I have not been able to find a word that focuses on this development as such in pre-modern Chinese.

#### *Concluding reflections*

I shall consider next Western notions of history.<sup>14</sup> But I recall first that the Greek word *historeō* “inquire into the truth of” has a

cle “Chinese Historical criticism: Liu Chih-chi and Ssu-ma Kuang,” in W.G. Beasley and E.G. Pulleyblank 1961, pp. 135–166. The titles of the 24 dynastic histories are an interesting indicator of the use of *shih* 史. From the *Han-shu* 漢書 onwards we have *shu* 書 (and one *zhi* 志) until we get to the *Sui-shu* 隋書 which is followed by the *Nanshih* 南史, *Pei-shih* 北史, two *shu* 書 on the T'ang, and then a series of seven *shih* 史 down to the *Ming-shih* 明史. It would be nice to know what the traditional reason given for this terminological development is. In particular: do we read *Ming-shih* 明史 as “Historical Record of the Ming,” or is it “The History of the Ming”?

<sup>13</sup> For the history of the notion of “development” in Western thought see L. Mariupolski 1897 and G. Richard 1903, E. Brandenburg 1941; and on the early history of the notion H. Meyer 1909.

<sup>14</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck 1985. The conceptual history of “history” in Greece and Rome, in Europe, and particularly in Germany is told with consummate at

pretty exact equivalent in ancient Chinese: *k'ao hsin* 考信 “investigate the truth (about) things.” *Li-chi* 禮記 already speaks about *k'ao ch'i hsin* 考其信 “investigate the truth of something,” and in *Shih-chi* 61, a chapter which is of special importance for the history of Chinese historiography, has the crucial phrase:  
夫學者載籍極博，猶考信六藝。

“As for the scholars, the records they transmit are extremely wide-ranging, and one still has to investigate the truth in the Six Disciplines” (*Shih-chi* 61.5, ed. Wang Li-ch'i p. 1605).

The Six Disciplines are those concerning the historical documents, ritual, music, poetry, the Book of Changes, and the Annals. These, for Ssu-ma Ch'ien were the sources of (historical) truth. It turns out that the notion of *k'ao-hsin* 考信 “investigating the (historical) truth” became particularly important in the eighteenth century, a representative example of this interest being a work by Ts'ui Shu 崔述 (1740–1816), the *K'ao-hsin lu* 考信錄 “Record of investigations into (historical) truth.” This translates pretty precisely Herodotus' *historia* “investigations.”

It turns out that in the West the concept of history first became a political/social “keyword” not before the eighteenth century. Before that, the notion played a relatively minor part in Western intellectual history.

A crucial meta-historical event occurred when man began to conceive of his own future history as something one can produce and plan for, that in a philosophical sense one can “make history.” But this is a very late stage, and it is partly linked to the history of Marxism.

It is interesting to contrast the classical Greek stage, where *historia/historie* is primarily “inquiry” into any subject, then the result of such inquiry “knowledge,” and thereafter an “account” of such knowledge acquired through an inquiry, then “narrative,” and then finally, more specifically, “historical narrative.”

The fact that *historia* came to mean “history” is something of a historical accident: The “father of history,” Herodotus, in the opening line of his book, speaks of his own inquiry (*historie*): “This is a report by Herodotus of Halicarnassus on [his] investiga-

tion to detail and philosophical theory in the article *Geschichte* in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart T. Koselleck 1972ff, vol. 2, pp. 593–717, on which *Futures past* is based. Cf. also the article *Geschichte* in Joachim Ritter 1971ff which gives an excellent and extensively documented philosophical overview.

tion." Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961) mistranslates: "In this book, the result of my inquiries into history...." There is no word for "history" in the Greek text. We only have historie "inquiry." It was the custom, in ancient Greece as in ancient China, to call books by their first words, or by their first important words.<sup>15</sup> Thus, by this bibliographic coincidence "enquiry" came to mean "history," and the earliest authority for this latter usage is Aristotle (*Poetics* 1451a36ff).

Something that is called *historikos* in ancient Greek is exact and precise. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (revised edition, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961) mentions Plutarch (first/second century A.D.) as the first writer to take *historia* to refer to the facts of history, as when he speaks of *historia Romaike* or *historia hellenike* "Roman or Greek history," not "Roman or Greek historiography," but I find that already the historian Polybius (second century B.C.) used the word in this sense.

Cicero spoke of *historia magistra vitae* "historiography as a teacher for life," as well as *lux veritatis* "the light of truth" and sees her as dependent upon oratory in order to achieve immortality. (*De oratore* 2.36). This contrasts interestingly with the notion of a *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien* 資治通鑑 "Comprehensive mirror in aid of government." History in pre-Buddhist China was certainly always in aid of government, *public* life, and only secondarily a *magistra vitae* a teacher for private life, although there are beginnings of the latter tendency already in *Shih-chi*. (I note in passing that the emergence of the notion of the private versus the public realm in our Chinese written sources deserves detailed attention).

As we have seen, Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430) distinguished explicitly between *narratio historica* and *historia ipsa*, i.e. historical narrative and history itself, the historical facts. We have seen that the Chinese distinguished very late between something like *shih shu* 史書 and *shih shih* 史事 "the facts of history."

Rousseau wrote his *histoire hypothétique* of the origins of inequality in 1754. Since when have the Chinese conceived of this sort of speculative or theoretical theory? Could such a book be called *shih* 史? We have *pieh-shih* 別史 "alternative histories" and *yeh-shih* 野史 "unofficial histories" in traditional China, and they did focus on subject matters that were beyond the scope of official histories, but it is significant that the famous accounts of Sung or Yüan history of philosophy could not be called *che-hsüeh-shih* 哲學史 be-

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Nachmannson 1941, p. 46ff.

cause there was no such abstract but specific notion as that of *che-hsüeh* 哲學. But my present point is that the notion of *shih* 史 in traditional China did not apply to such entities as intellectual movements. The relevant books have titles like *Sung Yüan hsüeh-an* 宋元學案 "Matters of scholarship from Sung and Yüan times."

In the eighteenth century we have a whole range of books on subjects like *Die Geschichte des menschlichen Verstandes* "The history of human understanding." The history of this new kind of history is neither the history of deeds, nor that of events, of political or social structures or of persons. Is such a type of history conceivable—was it conceived—in traditional China? If not, does this not indicate that there is a profound difference between our notion of history and that of the ancient Chinese?

Then, in the context of the French Revolution, the shape of history comes to be seen as a product of deliberate collective human action. Could *shih* 史 ever be regarded as the product of deliberate human action? Was it ever so considered before the Western impact? Surely not. Such ideas entered China together with ideologies like Marxism.

Let me end with some old-fashioned quotations on the study of language and of conceptual history. In 1795 the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel wrote: "The progress and the direction of the modern formation of man is determined by the dominating concepts." He continued: "Their influence is infinitely important. It is decisive."<sup>16</sup> The poet Novalis illustrated the historical importance of concepts in 1797/8: "The notation with sounds and with strokes of the pen is an admirable abstraction. Four letters designate God (*Gott*) for me—a few strokes a million things. How easy the handling of the universe becomes! How palpable the concentricity of the world of the spirit! Linguistics/conceptual analysis (*Sprachlehre*) is the dynamics of the realm of the spirit! One word of command moves armies—and the one word freedom—moves nations."<sup>17</sup> Novalis was, as it happens, the first to speak of the "process of history (*Prozeß der Geschichte*)," proving—unwittingly—that such notions as that of a "process of history" itself, and that of a "historical development" do indeed have their own—conceptual—historical development which may be well worth pursuing.

<sup>16</sup> F. Schlegel 1964, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> Novalis Werke 1987 p. 323, *Blütenstaub* no. 2.

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