

“Time” and “Supertime” in Chinese Historical Thinking

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We have called history “the science of men.” That is still far too vague. It is necessary to add: “of men in time.” The historian does not think of the human in the abstract. His thoughts breathe freely the air of the climate of time... Historical time is a concrete and living reality with an irreversible onward rush. It is the very plasma in which events are immersed, and the field within which they become intelligible. Marc Bloch (1886-1944)¹

2:1. Introduction

That Chinese culture is humanistic through and through is nowhere more evident than in the fact that the Chinese people are imbued with profound historical consciousness. In China, to be human is to inherit history, i.e., to live up to the paradigmatic past today.

“To be human in China is to be historical.” It behooves us to unpack this statement. We have to discern the Chinese chiasma of Time, Supertime and historiography, in order to understand the Chinese mode of historical thinking.

To begin with, “time” in China is not clock time (*chronos*) but humanly lived time. Unlike the ancient Greeks, who regarded history as something “against Time the all-destroying in order to save the memory

¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Peter Putnam trans. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 27.

of events worth being remembered,”² the Chinese historians believed that time helped to shape history.³ Time in Chinese culture is situational timeliness (similar to *kairos*), not of impersonal events but of a humanly shaped milieu,⁴ the vectorial nisus (勢 *shi*) pulsating in the lives and performances of historical individuals. Time viewed thus as humanly lived, shaped and achieved by paradigmatic individuals⁵ is History, sometimes disastrously, some other times admirably. Chinese people, especially their historians, capitalize on the latter sort of times, and call them sagely, worthy of being reenacted⁶ and re-lived today. These historic times came and went, to come again and go away again. We call such historic time, “Time”. In Chinese culture, our task of life today is to discern the historic paradigm in history, called *Dao*道, *Li*理, etc., to let it come alive and usher in its reign in our times today. We discern it, calling it, collectively, “Supertime”.⁷ To study such Time in the past is to begin to capture such Supertime and to recapture it in our lived time today.

“Time” in Chinese culture is human timeliness. “Time” threads its way into historic time, and “Supertime” is the paradigmatic in Time, patterning Time into the human tapestry called “history”. In short,

² Arnaldo Momigliano, “Time in Ancient Historiography,” *History and the Concept of Time, History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, Beiheft 6 (Middle-town: Wesleyan University Press), p. 15.

³ Qingjia Edward Wang, “Time Perception in Ancient Chinese Historiography,” *Storia della Storiografia*, 28 (1995), pp. 69-86.

⁴ Kurita Naomi 栗田直躬 has documented how Chinese time is timeliness, cosmic, natural, or sociopolitical, in his *Chûgoku Shisô ni okeru Shizen to Ningen* (中國思想における自然と人間, Nature and the human in Chinese thought) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996), pp. 149-187.

⁵ Although “paradigmatic individual” is Jaspers’ expression, he may not have realized that notorious individuals are negatively “paradigmatic” just as sages are positively so. Cf. D. C. Lau, “Appendix 4: Ancient History as Understood by Mencius,” in D. C. Lau tr., *Mencius*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 324-333. For simplicity’s sake, however, we follow Jaspers here by confining “paradigmatic individuals” to sagely ones.

⁶ Chinese historical consciousness infuses ethico-social significance -- significance of the entire existence -- into Collingwood’s doctrine of “re-enactment”. See: R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946, 1993).

⁷ “Supertime” is not atemporal or supra-temporal but a crystallization of “time” in Chinese historical thinking.

Supertime patterns Time, threaded out of times past, into history. To parody Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-1996),⁸ we may say that historiography in China consists in a humanization of natural “Time”.

To discern how times thread themselves into Time, and how Supertime patterns Time into history, is thus never an idle dabbling in ancient irrelevancies. This sort of historical discernment involves embodying momentous ancient Time and patterns into Supertime in our times today. The historian’s task is to weave out historiography,⁹ exhibiting Supertime, which patterns time, exhorting us to live it out. Historiography is the sages’ flowchart or blueprint of ethics, socioeconomics, and sociopolitics. History is normatively contemporary. This is what we call “Chinese historical thinking”. All Chinese thinking is humanistic and normative, because it is thus “historical”. Chinese historians are at the socioethical cutting edge of Chinese society.

Therefore, for the historian, no task is more urgent and momentous, personally and socially, than to study the sagely past to compile historiography. Chinese humanism is exhibited in capturing Supertime to inherit its historic paradigms today. Chinese historical thinking is the backbone of Chinese historical consciousness. Now let us unpack what this means.

China is often characterized as the land of “humanism”. It is crucial to understand what “humanism” in China means, and a good way to understand Chinese humanism is to contrast it with the Western version. Westerners take “humanism” either as opposed to God, as in the Renaissance, or as fulfilled in human conquest of Nature as in modern technology, or both. Such thinking itself typifies the West. Wing-tsit Chan (陳榮捷, 1901-1994) was aware of this point when he began his *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* by stressing that Chinese humanism harmonizes with Nature.¹⁰

⁸ Lévi-Strauss says that religion consists of a humanization of natural laws. See his *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 221.

⁹ “Historiography” here means historical writings.

¹⁰ Chan’s unassuming yet important declaration is noteworthy: “If one word would characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that word would be humanism -- not the humanism that denies or slights Supreme Power, but one that professes the

In this article, we claim that humanism in China is Nature-harmonious because it is basically the “human, all too human” in all our human affairs that lingers on through time. After all, both respect for God and harmony with Nature belong to human affairs. How this is so would take us too far afield to consider here. What we need to stress here is that Chinese humanism -- human intensity of life through time -- is the Archimedian point by which we can understand Chinese culture. Thus, the first business of Sinologists should be to discern the Chinese mode of historical thinking, i.e., to explore what constitutes Chinese historical consciousness.

Historical consciousness in Chinese culture is crystallized and expressed in historiography, which portrays history as an interweaving of Time and Supertime. Time threads human events in time; Supertime, as the meaning of those events, patterns Time. In the following, we consider in Section 2 how *Time* in China exudes Supertime, then in Section 3 how *Supertime* as the pattern of Time depends on Time to form. Lastly, Section 4 concludes with reflections on the concrete chiasma of “Time” and “Supertime” in Chinese historical thinking.

2:2. “Time” Exuding “Supertime” in China

In Chinese culture, history as a series of events is the trend (*shi* 勢) of Time which is dynamically and objectively there for sages to manage and steer into Supertime. Events are threaded through an eventful trend. We consider first the time-trend, which via sages leads us to consider Time that, with various features, exudes Supertime.

Chinese sentiment is thoroughly pervaded by human affairs in the arena of Nature that is also human, all too human. Human beings live interpersonally to constitute human affairs. Continuing our human living, we get a sense of coherence we call “Time” within the milieu of Nature. This is the descriptive-cosmological part of time-sequence, the “Unity between Heaven and Man”¹¹ in Time. Noticing such Time and

unity of man and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese philosophy from the dawn of its history.” See: Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 3.

¹¹ For recent explication of this homo-cosmic continuum in Chinese civilization, see

recording it in China is not just for the sake of recording it, but in order to re-live and re-enact now those Ideal Ages of the Past, the Sagely Time. Confucius (551-479 BCE) often cited the “old days” as a model for “today.”¹² As Mencius (371-289 BCE?) said (4B: 21),¹³

After the influence of the true King came to an end, songs were no longer collected. When songs were no longer collected, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were written. The *Sheng* of Jin, the *Tao Wu* of Chu and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of Lu are the same kind of work. The events recorded concern Duke Huan of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin, and the style is that of the official historian. Confucius said, “I have appropriated the didactic principles therein.”

王者之跡熄而詩亡，詩亡然後春秋作。晉之乘，楚之檮杌，魯之春秋，一也：其事則齊桓、晉文，其文則史。孔子曰：「其義則丘竊取之矣。」

This sagely ideal in Time is Supertime discerned as paradigmatic “meaning” in Time. This is the normative part of time-sequence. Putting Time and Supertime together, we get “history”.

Importantly, Time -- not ordinary time but time threaded together as a coherent series -- exudes Supertime, which is taken simply as a blossoming of the inner thrust of Time itself, for “coherence” bespeaks “meaning”. The entire process begins with Time’s inchoate meaning-“thrust”, which is called in China the “propensity”¹⁴ or “trend” (勢 *shi*) of things.

Chang Kwang-chih (張光直), “Lianxu yu duanlie -- yige wenming qiuyuan xinshuo di caogao 連續與破裂：一個文明起源新說的草稿,” *Jiuzhou xuekan* (九州學刊), no.1 (Sept. 1986), pp. 1-8; Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 350.

¹² *Analects* 17/14, etc.

¹³ D. C. Lau tr., *Mencius*, 4B: 21, Vol. 1, pp. 164-165.

¹⁴ François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, Janet Lloyd trans. (New York: Zone Books, 1999) explains “*shi*”. Subtle and careful in explaining the unanalyzable *shi* in space and in time, the book unaccountably neglects the element of active human agency in *shi*. His explanation turns intent into impersonal efficacy. Our exposition here fills in this critical lacuna.

The Chinese historical mode of thinking is multi-layered. Let us begin by considering *shi*-trend briefly. This historical *shi* has several characteristic features that deserve our attention. At the outset, let us observe two interrelated points.

First, historians study events, not because they are interested in events per se, but because they want to discern the *shi* stretching among the events. *Shi*, importantly, is no mere “propensity of things”, as if things themselves have their own inherent propensities and nothing else, but the dynamic trend of events. Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元, Zihou子厚, 773-819) said that the feudal system in ancient China was not intended by the sages, much less eternally settled, but was due to situational dynamism, *shi*.¹⁵

Secondly, in all this inexorability of the *shi*, there operates a crucial human agency. Although the character *shi* can be found in such early texts as the *Book of Change* and *Sunzi's Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa*, 孫子兵法), it became prevalent only from the Warring States period (403-256 BCE). There are fifty-one occurrences of the character *shi* in the *Intrigues of the Warring States* (*Zhanguoce* 戰國策) and eighty-four occurrences in the *Xunzi*. The notion of *shi* is most prevalent in texts from the state of *Qi* (齊), which was located in modern Shandong (山東) province.¹⁶ Both the situational *shi* (形勢, *xingshi*) and the timely *shi* (*shishi*時勢) were expressions used by thinkers of the Warring States period. Mencius (371-289 BCE) and Xunzi (fl. 298-238 BCE) never tired of insisting that *shi* are formed in the course of human events and interactions.¹⁷ Heroes mold *shi* just as *shi* shapes heroes.¹⁸ The Song (960-1279) Neo-Confucianist Zhu Xi 朱熹 (Huian晦庵, 1130-1200)

¹⁵ Liu Zongyuan, *Liu Hedong Ji* (柳河東集, Literary corpus of Liu Zongyuan) (Taipei: Helo tushu gongsi, 1974 photo-reproduction of the *Liaoshi shicai tang* wood-block edition), zhuàn 3, pp. 43-48.

¹⁶ Cf. Kanaya Osamu (金谷治), *Shin Kan Shi-sô-shi Kenkyû* (秦漢思想史研究, Studies in Qin-Han intellectual history) (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoden, 1992), pp. 607-608.

¹⁷ Lau tr., *Mencius*, 2B: 1, vol. 1, p. 73; Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi Jijie* (荀子集解) (Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 1969), passim, esp. p. 72, where Xunzi urges that a gentleperson must behave in accord with the changes of time.

¹⁸ This was a time-honored proverb in pre-modern times.

was clear and explicit on this point, saying “following *shi* to guide and lead on -- of this only sages are capable.”¹⁹ That is, sagely people participate in molding *shi* in history. Timeliness in situational flux, *shi*, is steered by humans, whose destinies in turn are decided by *shi*. Such inter-moldings constitute the history to be taught in later generations.

Our account of *shi* underscores the centrality of human activities in history. The point is not that events are unimportant; rather, events are important *because* they are human-shaped and humanly lived. Events express and exhibit paradigmatic individuals, positively as in sages or negatively as in notorious villains. We learn from sages to manage our times; we learn from villains to avoid repeating their mistakes. What is learned and lived, positively and negatively, in this way is *meaning* that lasts through time (Supertime) and can be discussed only within Time, i.e., only in terms of these historical individuals and their lives.

This human-centeredness – humanism -- is clearly expressed everywhere in Chinese historiography. For instance, in the *Grand Scribe's Records* (*Shiji* 史記), Grand Historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (Zizhang 子長, c.145-c.90 BCE), wrote history by compiling seventy biographies of notable individuals underlining the lessons of history in order ‘to “good” the good, “evil” the evil, “wise” the wise, and despise the unworthy.’²⁰

All this is in sharp contrast to the West’s typical historical treatment of events as factual occurrences in impersonal waves of vicissitudes. We remember how the father of Western historiography, Herodotus (484-429 BCE), considered the Persian War in the late fifth century BCE in the context of political conflicts between Occidental democracy and Oriental despotism. We remember also that Polybius (203? –c.120 BCE) described how the city-state Rome developed into the worldwide

¹⁹ Zhu Xi, *Huian Xiansheng Zhu Wengong wenji* (晦庵先生朱文公文集, literary corpus of Zhu Xi) (*Sibu congkan* cubian soben edition; hereafter cited as *Wenji*), zhuan 12, p. 723, p. 736; zhuan 72, pp. 5316f. See also Li Jingde 黎靖德, ed., *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), vol. 8, zhuan 139, p. 3303. For discussions of the notion of *shi* in Zhu Xi’s historical thinking, see: Miura Kunio (三浦國雄), “Kisu do Kisei: Shushi no rekishi ishiki 氣數と氣勢：朱熹の歴史意識,” *Tōyōshi Kenkyū* (東洋史研究), 42:2 (March, 1984), pp. 29-52.

²⁰ Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Taipei: Helo tushu gongsi photo-reproduction of new punctuated edition, 1979), preface, p. 1979.

Roman Empire, and how that development turned the vast Mediterranean Sea into an inland lake of the Empire. Not a shred of human agency can be seen in the account.

Human agents in history carry, for Chinese historians, some immense value implications. The historians constantly pass moral judgments on the decisions made by historical individuals. One of the typical examples is a story from the second year (607 BCE) of the reign of Duke Xuan (宣公, r.608-591 BCE) recorded in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), saying,²¹

Zhao Quen attacked [and killed] Duke Ling in the peach garden, and Xuan, who was flying from the State, but had not yet left its hills behind him, returned to the capital. The grand historiographer wrote this entry, “Zhao Dun murdered his ruler,” and showed it in the court. Xuan said to him, “It was not so”; but, he replied, “You are the highest minister. Flying from the State, you did not cross its borders; since you returned, you have not punished the villain. If it was not you who murdered the marquis, who was it?” Xuan said, ‘Ah! The words (*Shi*, I. iii. ode VIII.1),

“The object of my anxiety
Has brought on me this sorrow,”

Are applicable to me.’

‘Confucius said “Dong Hu was a good historiographer of the old time; his rule for writing was not to conceal.’

趙穿攻靈公於桃園，太史書曰：「趙盾殺其君。」以示於朝。宣王曰：「不然。」對曰：「子爲正卿，亡不越竟，反不討賊，非子而誰？」宣子曰：「嗚呼！我之懷矣，自詒伊感。其我之謂矣！」孔子曰：「董狐古之良史也，書法不隱。」

²¹ James Legge trans., *The Chinese Classics: V - The Ch'un Tse with The Tso Chuen* (Taipei: Southern Materials Center, Inc., reprinted from the Oxford University Press ed., 1983), BK. VII, pp. 289-290.

Dong Hu’s董狐 description and Confucius’ critical comment here are both value-imbued. Both attribute Zhao Dun’s趙盾 failure to attack the regicidal assassin to Zhao’s personal decision, who thus should bear the ultimate responsibility for the regicide. The modern scholar Qian Mu錢穆 (Binsi賓四, 1895-1990) pronounced, “The world rises and falls, people wise, people devious,” in characterizing the thrust of Chinese history.²² This saying indicates that the world’s ups and downs are correlated with human decisions and deeds.

In contrast, Herodotus took the inevitability of the Persian War to have originated in the incommensurability between Greek democracy and Persian monarchy, while Thucydides (c.460-c.400 BCE) took the inevitability of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) to be due to their commercial conflict in profit making.

In sum, in Western causal explanation, history is a mechanical push and pull of social, political and economic forces. In contrast, Chinese history is personal, with human agency blending in with and influencing, if not creating, these factors.

In traditional China, reading history as a series of personal responsibilities for the events redounds to taking our study of history as a crucial guide to managing our contemporary world. Studying the past is not just an activity enjoyable for its own sake -- as Herodotus was reputed to have enjoyed a disinterested contemplation of his historiography. Rather, studying the past at its best is a learning experience, which helps us to manage our world of human affairs today. All this is expressed in the momentous resolution of students of history to serve as a “social conscience”, as did historians of the past with such words, or by making courageous concluding “Comments”.²³ By judging how the past transpired and how it should have transpired, the historians conscientiously offered to their “society today” a blueprint of how we should manage our

²² Qian Mu, *Shixue Daoyan* (史學導言, Guide to historiography) (Taipei: Zhongyang Ribao, 1970), pp. 32-33.

²³ The *Zuozhuan*, Sima Qian’s *Shji*, Sima Guang’s *Zizhi Tongjian*, as well as Ban Gu’s *History of the Former Han*, etc., are filled with such critical and evaluative comments by the serious historians who authored them.

affairs “now”, as a result of having learned the lessons of the past.²⁴ We are wiser after having examined the events. We should utilize such post-facto wisdom to steer the contemporary world.

This is why the more turbulent the age is in Chinese history, the busier Chinese historians are and have been, poring over the historical past, discerning and culling worldly prudential wisdom for our urgent praxis. Conversely, when Chinese historians are sluggardly, their sluggishness reflects social turpitude in Chinese history.

Notable Chinese historians of the past devoted their lives to undertaking *the* sacred task of protecting and promoting something historic, inviolable and deeply valuable. They risked their lives in performing this mission. In the *Zuozhuan*, in the Year 25 (548 BCE) of Duke Xiang 襄公 (r.572-542 BCE), for instance, the grand historian commented, “Cui Shu 崔杼 committed regicide,” whereupon Cui Shu had that historian put to death, and appointed his brother to the job of grand historian. That brother put the same words down in the history book, and was executed as well. *His* brother then, undeterred, arose to fill the task, putting down for the third time the very same words in the book. At this point, Cui Shu realized the futility of trying to have them re-write a whitewashed history as he had wished. “What I have written I have written” was proclaimed with the blood of three brothers. Later, Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626-649) of the Tang dynasty (618-907) wanted to read the *Qiju zhu* 起居注 (Diaries of activity and repose) and was met by daring protest and stern prohibition from his historians.²⁵ This was the sacred tradition of Chinese historians as protectors of

²⁴ Sima Guang 司馬光 (Junshi 君實, 1021-1086), *Zizhi Tongjian zhu* 資治通鑑注 (Comprehensive mirror for the aid of governance) (Taipei: Shijie shuju photo-reproduction of new punctuated edition, 1970), “Preface for Presenting the Book,” p. 9607.

²⁵ Sima Guang, *Zizhi Tongjian zhu*, CE 643, zhuan 10, p. 6203. Cf. Yang Liansheng, “The Organization of Chinese Official Historiography: Principles and Methods of the Standard Histories from the T’ang through the Ming Dynasty”, in W.G. Beasley and E.G. Pulleyblank eds. *Historians of China and Japan* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1961), pp. 44-59; Wang Gungwu, “Some Comments on the Later Standard Histories,” in Donald D. Leslie et. al. eds., *Essays on the Sources for Chinese History* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), pp. 53-63, esp. p. 54.

fact-as-value, value-as-fact judgments. Nothing, not even execution, could sully the honor and conviction of generations of historians.

Behind this intense unity of historical fact and humanistic value is the no less intense unity of factual knowledge and moral subjectivity. Here, to learn the historical facts is to begin to become the authentic person one should be. And so, writing down historical facts promotes an irresistible education and hortatory milieu wherein to build personal integrity. This trend is indicated in the *Shujing* (書經, *Classic of Documents*). The *Chunqiu* (春秋, *Spring and Autumn Annals*) also declares its purpose of writing history as ‘to “good” the good, “evil” the evil, “wise” the wise, and despise the unworthy.’ Ban Gu 班固 (Mengjian 孟堅, 32-92 CE) chimed in, saying that “The *Chunqiu* transmits events so as for us to tally [our lives] faithfully [with them].”²⁶ “Events” here have strong evaluative, moral and hortatory power.

How do these historians perform their self-appointed task? Their historic mission is fulfilled on two fronts -- on individuals (a) and on dynasties (b).

(a) *On individuals*: The historians have been preoccupied with reading judgments via innocent-sounding descriptions of historical individuals. The Grand Historian’s *Shiji* includes a collection of personal biographies attended with abundant doses of evaluative adjectives, such as the “lone loyalty”, “tragic courage”, “official cruelty of exploitation”, and “righteousness” among knight errants, and the like. Moreover, the “Gujin Renbiao” 古今人表 (Table of ancient and recent personages) in the *Hanshu* (漢書, *History of the Former Han dynasty*) has 1,998 names classified into nine categories of people from “high-high” to “low-low”, according to their moral attainments.

In China, past emperors were given posthumous titles (*shihao* 諡號), which amounted to evaluative judgments on the accomplishments of their lives, as to how brutal, tragic or benevolent their rulerships had been. These titles, “Wen 文”, “Wu 武”, “Ai 哀”, “Li 厲”, etc., which are

²⁶ This statement appears in the “Yiwen zhi” chapter in Ban Gu’s *Hanshu* (History of the Former Han).

ascribed to emperors, carry ultimate absolute pronouncements as final and serious as religious judgments.

(b) *On dynasties*: At the same time, Chinese historians have been concerned with the legitimacy of various dynasties, according to how much force was used, whether the dynasties were stolen, usurped, inherited, hegemonic, sidetracked, etc. Those dynasties were given definitive “names” accordingly. These names tend to stick and endure through history, giving us lasting impressions of the respective dynasties. Such historical judgments, albeit evaluative, are ultimate and everlasting. It can be argued that this is because, since very early periods in history (about the 12th century BCE), China had developed a stable and complete political structure and concept of “empire”, and this precocity gave the historians some evaluative standards by which to judge dynasties. “Early maturity” means that the historical longevity of notions or structures gave historians enough time to ponder and develop evaluative standards, such as unification to be counted as “orthodox”, disunion as “abnormal”. Chinese history facilitates historical evaluation.

Historical evaluation, taking factual description as imbued with evaluative judgment, goes hand in glove with other trends in the Chinese tradition. One is to take academic studies, absorbing information, in short, “knowledge” (*zhi* 知), as inseparable from “virtue” (*de* 德) and its cultivation. To know the facts is to become human. Otherwise, even if we attain some knowledge, unless we act on it in becoming more fully human, that knowledge will eventually disappear from our minds, as Confucius carefully pronounced.²⁷ Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (Shi-zhai 實齋, 1738-1801) said that since the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BCE), the conscientious writers’ brushes formulated the pattern (規矩, *guiju*) for the regulations of Heaven and human that go through history to form the Great *Dao*.²⁸ This is the root of the unity of historical and classical writings.

²⁷ *Analecets* 15/33.

²⁸ Zhang Xuecheng, *Wenshi Tongyi Jiaozhu* 文史通義校註 (Comprehensive meanings of literature and historiography) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), zhuan 5, niepian 5, “Dake wenshang 答客問上,” p. 470.

Now, what have we learned here? We saw the Chinese historians collecting records of past events, especially events in the Golden-Age Dynasties, and of individuals including the Former Kings, evaluating and judging them, then telling us “today” to conform to this or that model individual and avoid this or that behavior of other evil individuals. They *treasure* such critical compilations of past events, individuals, judgments, and the recommendations derived therefrom. We see that this “treasuring” is of a normative, even moral, sort.

Does this mean that Chinese historians presuppose some eternal moral principle in terms of which they compile and judge the past? This way of construing historical inquiries is foreign to China. Those Chinese historians do not appeal to one sole abstract Good or Truth under which to subsume past events, individuals, and behaviors. They appeal to past affairs *concretely* when they counsel us.

We note in the first place that those past matters are made into “paradigms”. What does “paradigms” mean here? They are models too enmeshed in the concrete past in a way to deserve the epithet, “eternal principle”, yet they remain relevant across time and space and cannot be simply buried and forgotten in the past never-never-land.

No abstraction from the concrete past, no simple chronicling of something buried in the past, Chinese historical exhortation is ever from past to present, concrete to general, factual to evaluative, descriptive to normative. In all their hortatory activities, Chinese historians have no “eternal return”²⁹ of primal religions or flowing-forth from the One, much less the Absolute Spirit that unfolds in time or the mechanical and automatic causal process of impersonal physical nature in natural science.

How should we understand this strangely concrete-and-universal factual-and-normative historical thinking in a positive and coherent manner? The answer can be variously put. One helpful consideration is to regard notable events and individuals as weaving themselves into Time-trends (*shi*), which in turn continue to exude, bleed forth and mani-

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*, Willard R. Trask trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954, 1991).

fest their inherent paradigm-Meaning. We call such Meaning-in-Time, “Supertime”, which is neither out of touch with Time nor a mere part of Time.

For lack of a better terminology in China, much less in the West, we coin and adopt the term, “Supertime”, somewhat echoing Nietzsche’s “Superman”³⁰ who is intended to typify and epitomize our human nature. Nietzsche’s Superman is human, all too human, yet he is in a normative sense over and beyond simple ordinary humans. Likewise, Supertime is time, human time which is humanly historical, yet is normatively beyond Time, concretely proposing the historic sagely Pattern for us today to emulate and embody.³¹ Thus, Supertime as the sagely Paradigm of life is never an abstract categorical imperative carved in the rational heaven, but is ever historically beckoning us today to live up to the historic Pattern or Paradigm, in a concrete, flesh-and-blood, and blood-and-sweat manner. Thanks to such historical Supertime, the “yesterday” in Chinese historical thinking is also our “today” and our “tomorrow”. What, then, is the relation between Time and Supertime that makes up Chinese history in its historical thinking?

2:3. “Supertime” Exhibited in “Time” in China

Let us now proceed in the other direction. If Time exudes Supertime, then Supertime exists only in Time. Let us begin with Mencius who is vocal in expressing how reverently indispensable human agency is in carving out the shape of Time to exude Supertime. He was as explicit in stressing the human contribution to the formation of Supertime as he was in admitting the inexorability of Supertime over humans. For instance, just to cite one example out of so many, Mencius said in 7B: 38,

From Yao and Shun to Tang it was over five hundred years. Men like Yu and Gao Dao knew Yao and Shun personally, while those like Tang knew them only by reputation. From Tang to

³⁰ Apropos of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, we would have adopted “overtime” were it not for its colloquial meaning, which is foreign to its original intention and ours.

³¹ Huang Chun-chieh, “The Philosophical Argumentation by Historical Narration in Song China: The Case of Zhu Xi,” *Bulletin of the College of Liberal Arts, National Taiwan University*, no.51 (Dec., 1999), pp. 55-78.

King Wen it was over five hundred years. Men like Yi Yin and Lai Zhu knew Tang personally, while those like King Wen knew him only by reputation. From King Wen to Confucius it was over five hundred years. Men such as Taigong Wang and Sanyi Sheng knew King Wen personally, while those like Confucius knew him only by reputation. From Confucius to the present it is over a hundred years. In time we are so near to the age of the sage while in place we are so close to his home, yet if there is no one who has anything of the sage...

由堯舜至於湯，五百有餘歲；若禹、皋陶，則見而知之；若湯，則聞而知之。由湯至於文王，五百有餘歲，若伊尹、萊朱，則見而知之；若文王，則聞而知之。由文王至於孔子，五百有餘歲，若太公望、散宜生，則見而知之；若孔子，則聞而知之。由孔子而來至於今，百有餘歲，去聖人之世若此其未遠也，近聖人之居若此其甚也，然而無有乎爾，則亦無有乎爾。

The entire passage expresses the inter-involvement of historic personages with Supertime. Mencius said that historic men have inherited what the previous sages had undertaken -- to form the Time-pattern that exhibits the Supertime of sociopolitical Virtue. Human agency is indispensable in Supertime. According to this venerable Supertime he discerned in the Time-pattern, it is about time for someone sagely to appear (perhaps himself) to put the world in order, for we are now so close to that stage.³² Yet “if there is no one who has anything of the sage, well then, there is no one who has anything of the sage.” This saying indicates that he must submit to whatever Supertime ordains. Here is an expression of the inexorability of Supertime.

Ye Shi 葉適 (Zhengce 正則, Shuixin 水心, 1150-1223) of the Yongjia (永嘉) School of Song Neo-Confucianism was explicit in stressing the indispensability of the human contribution to the formation of

³² This point is strongly brought out in *Mencius* 7A18. Mencius said, “Those who are provoked to make effort only by depending on a King Wen are common people. Heroic people make the effort even without King Wen, [to produce kingly sages themselves].” (My translation.) King Wen here symbolizes Supertime—to be made by the heroic people.

Supertime to pacify the world. He said,³³

If one desires to govern all under Heaven without looking at its *shi*, then nothing under Heaven can be ruled.... [Now] such ancient rulers as Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, [Emperors] Gaozi and Guangwu of the Han, and [Emperor] Taizong of the Tang, all individually accomplished the *shi* of all under Heaven. Although their merits and virtues differed in greatness, [hence] their differences in the effectiveness of governance, they still wanted to shoulder the *shi* of all under Heaven onto themselves, not on anything outside.... Later generations saw *shi* to lie in things outside, not in oneself. Therefore, when the *shi* came, it came as if it were a flood and could not be stopped. Rulers, on the contrary, had to raise all their powers to help advance its tide. [This was done until the *shi* receded, and then fell] so that we could only sit and [idly] see [its recession], and no one could stop it, and the nation followed it to perdition. In fact, being unable to personally accomplish the *shi* of all under Heaven, vainly trying to solicit private safety by using petty laws of penalties and punishment to follow the *shi* of all under Heaven, this I your subject have not seen to work [at all].

欲治天下而不見其勢，天下不可治矣。.....古之人君，若堯、舜、禹、湯、文、武、漢之高祖光武，唐之太宗，此其人皆能以一身爲天下之勢；雖其功德有厚薄，治效有淺深，而要以爲天下之勢在己不在物。.....及其後世，天下之勢在物而不在己，故其勢之至也，湯湯然而莫能遏，反舉人君威福之柄以佐其鋒；至其去也，坐視而不能止，而國家隨之以亡。夫不能以一身爲天下勢，而用區以刑罰以就天下之勢而求安其身者，臣未見其可也。

Ye Shi declared that human agency and courageous shouldering of such responsibility lies at the core of the formation of the irresistible *shi*-trend of the world, and that once this responsibility is shunned in accord with things' fatalistic workings, no one can stop its coming or its

³³ Ye Shi 葉適, "Zhishi 治勢," in *Shuixin xiansheng wenji* 水心先生文集 (*Sibu zongkan* cubian soben edition), zhuan 4, p. 53a-b.

going. While one can ride on the unstoppable *shi* and rise to rulership, such riding or rising lasts only as far as one’s ruin, unless one strenuously partakes in the formation of this *shi*. Never take advantage of the *shi*-trend of the world. One must instead take on the responsibility of accomplishing the sagely formation of the *shi*-trend.

Similarly, the great Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi said,³⁴

Changes ancient and contemporary, going to extremes, must return, as mutual birthings of day [and] night, and mutual successions of cold [and] heat. This is how Principle ought to be; it is not what human power can create. Thus through the Three Dynasties, in their mutual inheritings [sometimes] no changes obtained. [Some other times] there were [also] mutual benefitings and damagings, an inability to be constant. Only the sage can discern where their Principle [is] and alter things accordingly. Because of this, human principles [and] human regulations have been transmitted for hundreds of generations without being ruined.

[If this were] not so, then because of its already going to extremes, destruction would spread everywhere, and we would not be able to know whether the change is good [or] bad by merely judging from the trend of the change...

若夫古今之變，極而必反，如晝夜之相生，寒暑之相代，乃理之當然，非人力之可爲。是以三代相承，有相因襲而得不變者，有相損益而不可常者。然亦惟聖人爲能察其裡之所在而因格之，是以人剛人紀，得以傳之百世而無弊。不然，則亦將因其既極而橫潰四出，要以趨其勢之所便，而其所變之善惡，則有不可知者矣。

While admitting the irresistible cosmic or causal *shi*-trend in history, Zhu Xi resolutely announced that “only the sages are able to discern where its *Li* 理 (principle) lies and accordingly to change (因革 *yinge*)

³⁴ Zhu Xi, “Gushi yulun,” in *Wenji*, zhuan 72, p. 5316.

it.” For, he said,³⁵

In affairs of [all] under heaven, the root lies in one person, and in the affairs of the one person, the fundamental lies in one heart-mind. Therefore, once the heart-mind of a people’s lord or ruler [is] upright, then nothing among the affairs of [all] under heaven [will] not be upright. Once the heart-mind of a people’s lord or master [is] evil, then nothing among the affairs of [all] under heaven [will] not be evil.

天下之事其本在於一人，而一人之事其主在於一心，故人主之心一正，則天下之事無有不正，人主之心一邪，則天下之事無有不邪。

Clearly, the root of the *shi*-trend of the world lies in the heart-mind of the ruler. It is the ruler who makes or unmakes the trend of the world. The heart of the trend of world affairs lies at the heart of human beings.³⁶

Let us now draw all of these points together. As human Time exudes Supertime, so Supertime is Time’s normative pattern. In the minds of Chinese historians, “normative pattern” in history spells human morality. It is not that history is moral but that morality is historical, i.e., it is history that defines and demonstrates what it means to be moral, not the other way around. Still, historical “objectivity” is not to be mocked, as Zhu Xi asserted. Morality is the historical categorical imperative, with ineluctable consequences. The word, “categorical” in the imperative elucidates so-called historical “objectivity”. “Virtue” does not define, but *is* itself how or what the paradigm-sages did and how what they did transpired. And, if we want to know what paradigm sageliness is, we must look at those specific deeds and consequences. Historic events define the sagely imperative, as the sages created history

³⁵ Zhu Xi, *Wenji*, zhuan 12, p.723. Cf. Li Jingde 黎靖德, ed., *Zhuzi yulei* (朱子語類) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), zhuan 130, p. 3135.

³⁶ For Zhu’s interpretation of Chinese history, see my “Imperial Rulership in Cultural History: Zhu Xi’s Interpretation,” in Frederick Brandauer and Chun-chieh Huang, eds., *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), pp.188-205. Also, see my “Zhu Xi dui Zhongguo lishi di jieshi,” in *Guoji Zhuzi xuehuiyi lunwenji* (Taipei: Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Zhongguo Wen-zhe Yanjiusuo Choubi chu, May, 1993), pp. 1083-114.

worth reenacting. Likewise, hegemons and sycophants played havoc to make tattered history. These anti-sages negatively demonstrated the ineluctability of the historical-moral-categorical imperative.

Now, we must note that anti-virtuous persons are bestial, less than non-personal animals, but not caught in impersonal fate (or “laws of nature”, whatever the phrase might mean in China). History is all-too-human, just as humanity is radically historical. In Chinese historical thinking, there are no “brute facts”. All facts have price tags of historical consequences purchased by human conduct, and this “purchase” makes the facts moral to the core.

By the same token, there would be no “Super“ or “time” in Supertime without Time, for Time constitutes Supertime. It is thusly that Supertime makes history. History is the pattern woven out by human conduct, without which history simply disappears. In Chinese historical thinking, history is our Pattern of living for today. Chinese historians insist that we must pattern ourselves on history’s lesson that is Supertime, on pain of perishing in this “objective” and ineluctable Pattern of history, i.e., Supertime, to make history worthy of re-living in later days.

Two points characterize Chinese historical thinking, which is human, all too human. Without Supertime in Time, history in China collapses into blind senseless chronicles. Without Time as a matrix, Supertime simply disappears in impersonal senseless fate. Neither option is thinkable in China.

Zhuangzi (c. 399-295 BCE) said, “A road is made by people walking on it” (*dao xing zhi er cheng*道行之而成).³⁷ Zhu Xi said, “The Principle is one while its manifestations are many (*liyi fenshu*理一分殊).”³⁸ One *Li* (principle) of Supertime spreads out in various historical

³⁷ Burton Watson tr., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968), chap. 2, “Discussion on making all things equal,” p. 40.

³⁸ Zhu Xi said: “Although worldly affairs are in the thousands and hundreds of thousands, really there is but one single Way, Principle”. This is what he expressed by saying, “Principle is One while its manifestations are many.” See: Li Jingde ed., *Yulei*, zhuan 136, p. 3243. For an explication of Zhu Xi’s philosophy of principle,

times. Zhu Xi said,³⁹

Fifteen hundred years are all like this, going through days merely patching and fixing the status quo. During the period there were [days of] "small peace", but not a day passed without the Way transmitted by Yao, Shun, the Three Kings, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius, being neglected in practice in the world. Yet, as to the permanent presence of the Way, no one considered. Only this thing has been forever present, whether in ancient times or today, always present, never perishing, indestructible despite fifteen hundred years of deeds of destruction by humans.

千五百年之間，正坐如此，所以只是架漏牽補過了時日。其間雖或不無小康，而堯舜三王周公孔子所傳之道未嘗一日得行於天地之間也。若論道之常存，卻又初非人所能預。只是此箇，自是亙古亙今，常在不滅之物，雖千百年被人作壞，終殲滅他不得耳。

The spread is history. Zhu Xi used the phrase "[naturally] flows out (*liuchulai* 流出來)"⁴⁰ to describe how the principle in the form of humaneness (*ren* 仁) naturally flows out to become many in numerous positions and levels of this world, variously called "righteousness" (*yi* 義), "ritual action" (*li* 禮), "wisdom" (*zhi* 智), and "sincerity" (*xin* 信). Wing-tsit Chan, the great Zhu Xi scholar of our contemporary world, used the analogy of "reflection (*fanzhao* 反照)", as one moon reflects itself variously in many lakes.⁴¹

The upshot of the whole matter, then, is that Supertime can be discerned only within history, that when we want to follow the eternal *Dao* and *Li*, we must refer to the historical sages and follow their exemplary ways. No Chinese historians say, "Follow *Li*," which is

see: Ichikawa Yasushi (市川安司), *Shushi Tetsugaku Ronko* (朱子哲學論考) (Tokyo: Kyuko Shoin, 1989), pp. 80-83.

³⁹ Zhu Xi, *Wenji*, zhuan 36, "Da Chen Tongfu 答陳同甫," p. 2306.

⁴⁰ Li, Jingde ed., *Yulei*, zhuan 98, "Yigang recorded 義剛 [錄]," p. 2527.

⁴¹ Wing-tsit Chan, *Chu Hsi* (Taipei: Dongda Tushu gongsi, 1990), p. 64.

ineffable. They say, instead, “Follow the Former Kings.”⁴² As Zhang Xuecheng indicated,⁴³ the *Dao* in the Chinese classics is expressed in terms of concrete situations, not in “empty words”.

Even Zhuangzi and Xunzi’s (fl. 298-238 BCE) objections to this historical rule of thumb amount to so many footnotes to it, saying, “Don’t be irrelevant to the present,” and their wise sayings against the tradition later became part of historical tradition. Without sagely praxis, there would be no eternal *Dao* or *Li*. That is the message delivered by Chinese historical consciousness. Let us see how this is so.

Here is the historical situation in China: every Chinese historian, every time he mentioned *Dao*, *Li*, *Shi*, etc., at once went on to cite historical events and individuals. Without historical paradigmatic events or individuals, there could never have been Supertime. There was not a single formal, theoretical and abstract treatise on *Dao*, *Li*, etc., as such, in China. Supertime is concrete, all too historically concrete, and nothing else.

Looked at in this way, examples are everywhere. *The Analects* reports that Confucius seldom mentioned profit-hoarding, destiny, and humanity as such (9/1, etc.), yet all his recorded sayings concern concrete details, rich with sagely examples in history, of those principles. His praises of model sage-rulers (8/18, 19, 21, etc.) praise and admirably describe the principles of *Dao* and Heaven *in concreto*. When Mencius talked about human nature being good, he always mentioned Yao and Shun, the paradigmatic rulers (3A1, 6B15, etc.). When talking about the *Dao* of how we should behave as ruler and as subjects, Mencius always mentioned Yao (堯) and Shun (舜) in meticulous historical detail (1A3, 7, 4A2, etc.). The *Dao* of rulership was always discussed in vivid concrete detail (3A1, 2, etc.).

⁴² For an explication of this mode of thinking with Chinese characteristics, see Hajime Nakamura, edited by Philip P. Wiener, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People: India, China, Tibet, Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964), chap. 17, pp. 196-203.

⁴³ Zhang Xuecheng, *Wenshi Tongyi jiaozhu*, Vol. 1, “On the Book of Changes,” p. 1; “On *Dao* (II),” p. 139; “On Learning II,” p. 150; “Zhu Lu,” p. 262. Cf. David S. Nivison, *The Life and Thought of Chang Hsiieh-ch’eng* (1738-1801) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), Chap. 6, pp. 139-180.

Following Confucius and Mencius, Wang Anshi 王安石 (Jiefu 介甫, 1021-1086) of the Northern Sung (960-1126) was reported to have admonished his emperor Shenzong 神宗 (r.1067-1084) with concrete historical models, as recorded in the Classic of History (*Shangshu* 尚書). Throughout Wang Anshi's conversations with the emperor, he gave graphic articulations of the historical actualities of ancient times, when the sage-rulers knew how to maneuver through their difficulties by sagaciously selecting and acting according to the counsel of advisors they had carefully chosen. Wang Anshi's entire reform plan collapses without the historical details. But, the main purpose of historical details, looked at from the point of view of the sages who were involved in those situations, remained that of showing us who have eyes to see the principle shining through them.

As I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁴ philosophical argumentation in China is made typically through historical narration. Chinese "historical argument" is oriented to paradigmatic persons, and moves historically, narratively, in debate and exhortation. Historians in traditional China did yearn after principles, but the "one principle" (*liyi* 理一) in their mind manifested itself only pluralistically, severally, historically (*fenshu* 分殊), never in naked abstraction. The principle abidingly shines through refractions of legendary sages such as Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹, and is reflected in past paradigmatic events that historical narratives present.

The notion of time in Chinese historical thinking thus consists of two elements: the temporal and the supra-temporal. The concrete and particular events that constitute the temporal aspect of the Chinese notion of time are distinguishable yet inseparable from the abstract and universal principle that is what we call in this paper "Supertime". Benjamin I. Schwartz claims that we can find in China (particularly in the "Spring and Autumn" tradition, and elsewhere) both the kind of "unhistorical" history which regards history as a reservoir of meta-historical experience in ethical, political, and other aspects of life, and a view which projects something like the image of an inexorable and

⁴⁴ Huang Chun-chieh, "The Philosophical Argumentation by Historical Narration in Sung China: The Case of Zhu Xi," op. cit.

impersonal historical process involving both the flourishing and decline of the normative order.⁴⁵ These two seemingly opposing aspects in Chinese historiography combine into a harmonious whole in the notion of time in China.

2:4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that in traditional China, time without meaning is blind and so unintelligible, while meaning without time is empty and so, again, unintelligible. “Intelligibility” here lies in the interweaving of time and meaning that threads time. Such threading meaning is Time, patterned into “Supertime”. This spontaneous Time-Supertime chiasma is called “history”, on which Chinese thinking revolves as “historical thinking”.

This explicates and expands on Kant’s famous dictum, “Concept without percept is empty; percept without concept is blind,” for this saying refers to “experience”, and human experience is, the Chinese historians insist, incorrigibly historical.⁴⁶ Chinese thinking is historical.

Now, we are in a good position to appreciate what “Time” and “Supertime” mean in Chinese history. This question can be tackled from two angles.

First, because Time or Supertime each makes sense only in terms of the other, neither can exist apart from the other in abstracto. And so, we have considered -- thereby tacitly defining “Time” and “Supertime” -- how Chinese “history” and historiography are constituted, sometimes in the light of Time, at other times in terms of Supertime.

Second, we did not explicitly define them because, formally, to “define” Time or Supertime is *eo ipso* to isolate and abstract “Time” and “Supertime” from the concrete chiasma that is Chinese history, and thereby destroy their experiential vitality and significance.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Schwartz, “History in Chinese Culture: Some Comparative Reflections,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 35, no. 4 (December, 1996), pp. 23-33.

⁴⁶ Cf. Wu Kuang-ming, *On the “Logic” of Togetherness* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), esp. pp. 342-385, and his *History, Thinking, and Literature in Chinese Philosophy* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1991).

All this explication of such historical sentiment accords with the practice of Chinese historiography. First, Chinese history has been extremely bounteous in concrete reflections on persons who are paradigmatic individuals in history. In this sense, the Chinese people are so rich in their historical awareness that they are called the “historical people”. Their ideals and values, behaviors and conventions, categories and moral visions, and all their argumentations, are all steeped in history, or rather, constituted by history.

Yet, second, Chinese historians seldom have had explicit and formal reflection about the historicity of the meaning of life and principles we call “Supertime”. Supertime is Time’s organic tissue and bones, the spontaneous constitutive part of “history” in China. To consider historic individuals and events in order to draw lessons for our conduct today, amounts to discerning and striving at embodying Supertime in our life to continue the illustrious tradition of the time of those paradigmatic individuals.

History in China is concretely “historized” in us today as we study it, reflect on historic persons and their events (Time), discern their lessons (Supertime), and struggle to live them in our individual moral and sociopolitical life. Such historical praxis constitutes authentic “Chinese people” as they live. This is existential “Chinese historical thinking.” It is here in Time that Supertime is shaped and manifested as it shapes human nature, life and Time into distinctively “Chinese people”. This is not an automatic causal relationship but an historical, hortatory, and socioethical praxis particularly appropriate as the Chinese historical mode of thinking.

Let us make this point crystal clear. Human activities, events, trends (Time), and meaning (Supertime) -- all these items listed separately, appear trite and dull. Their interdependence, threaded through as “human”, however, is intensely significant. They together coalesce into a lived chiasma, “history”, to exhort men to live humanly and concretely, showing us how and now. History constitutes our categorical Norms or Paradigms that are a moral, sociopolitical and cosmic imperative. Thus, to be historical and that now, is to be truly human. And, this is to make “history”. History in China is humanism, and Chinese humanism is history. All this is distinctively Chinese historical thinking.