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A Comment on Professor Chun-chieh Huang's 'Salient Features of Chinese Historical Thinking'¹

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In the process of globalisation, we are witnessing intensifying intercultural communication. Here every nation and culture has to present itself vis-à-vis its cultural difference from others. History is the medium of articulating one's own cultural identity with respect to its difference from that of others. It is the voice of peculiarity in the dialogue between the self and others. This is what Professor Huang demonstrates in his article. He claims an essential historicity for Chinese culture and describes it by referring to classical texts.² His reading discloses a basic logic of historical thinking in Chinese tradition which is claimed to be valid even today. At first glance, this seems to be only an empirical description, but it is much more: it is a claim of cultural peculiarity, an emphasis on cultural difference from others. The paradigmatic 'other' is not very often specified in Professor Huang's text, but in the last part of the article, it becomes apparent that it is the West in opposition to which Chinese historical thinking is defined.

Professor Huang is clearly objecting to western dominance in the field of historical thinking. Indeed, in the modernisation process, all cultures around the world have been brought within its ambit; and the specific

¹ The article appeared in the *Medieval History Journal*, vol. 7 (2), 2004: 243–54.

² His interpretation follows a general line of distinction between the East and West by East Asian scholars. Cf. Sato, 'Cognitive Historiography and Normative Historiography'; and Lee, 'Must History Follow Rational Patterns of Interpretation?'.

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modern way of historical thinking—at least in the form of history as an academic discipline, as a ‘science’, originated in late Enlightenment in western Europe. This has become the dominating form of doing history. Professor Huang’s text turns the concept of western dominance of history on its head: we learn that there is no other culture in the world which is more historical than the Chinese. How should a western scholar respond to this claim?

First of all, western scholars would have to learn about the substantial historicity of Chinese culture. The culture of historicity is not a privilege of the West, and therefore the western paradigm of historical thinking should no longer be used as a standard and parameter of intercultural communication and comparison.³ But should one simply replace a dominant western paradigm by a dominant Chinese one? Besides the simple fact that there are other cultures in the world with their own specific ways of doing history (for example, the Islamic world), the confrontation between western and Chinese historical thinking leads to a logical dilemma: both modes of doing history claim to be universal. How should we come to terms with differing universalisms in historical thinking? Western and Chinese scholars ought to agree that there is no third position beyond this difference; instead, they have to come to terms with their differing universalisms within the horizon of their own traditions and their own understanding of what historical thinking is about.

In order to solve this dilemma, one should follow Professor Huang’s argument and refer to basic logical principles of historical thinking. He describes the logical principles of Chinese historical thinking as being concrete, analogical-metaphorical and as synthesising empirical evidence and normative intentions. This synthesis is brought about by a specific interrelationship between concrete historical facts on the one hand and universal laws of human life on the other. Historical thinking leads to general rules out of the observation of historical facts. By doing so, it enables people to apply these general rules (based on concrete historical experience) to problems of the present-day situation and the future. This is precisely *the logic of exemplary sense-generation in history*.

It is my main argument that this logic is not exclusive to Chinese culture, but can be observed in many other cultures as well, including in the West. The logic of historical thinking described by Professor Huang has been observed and explicated outside of China, in western Europe, as

well. It dominated historical thinking from Antiquity till the rise of modern historical thinking in the second half of the eighteenth century. Cicero has described this logic with the slogan *Historia vitae magistra*,⁴ and it can be found in most of the paradigmatic examples of western historical thinking, in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* as well as in Machiavelli’s *History of Florence*,⁵ just to give two examples. It is not difficult to present western examples and explications for all the features Professor Huang describes as typical of Chinese historical thinking.⁶ He says, for example, that in China politics as an academic subject is basically history. The same can be said about one of the most influential theories of politics in the West. In his *Discorsi*, Machiavelli developed his idea of what politics is about by interpreting the ancient historiography of Livius.⁷ Livius gives the historical examples that Machiavelli uses to unravel the nature of politics. This logic of history can easily be found in other cultures as well. The most famous historian of the Islamic Arabian world, Ibn Khaldun, has significantly called his great work *The Book of Examples* (ca. 1377).⁸

Professor Huang is well aware that there is exemplary historical thinking in the West as well. But he argues that in contrast to China, in the West historical *exemplum* is only an illustration of theoretical knowledge that there is a dominance of abstract universalistic rules over the empirical evidence of historical facts. This is definitely not the case in the realm of western historical thinking. ‘Historia’ has for centuries been known to the West, meaning ‘empirical evidence’.⁹ And history served as a huge reservoir of experience which enabled people to know the general rules that they could use to master the problems of their present-day lives and to develop a perspective of the future. The logical superiority of general rules and theoretical knowledge over singular facts and events is a matter of the natural sciences, but not of history in the West.

If it is true that the exemplary mode of historical sense-generation so convincingly described by Professor Huang is valid for western historical

⁴ Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2,26.

⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*; Machiavelli, *History of Florence*.

⁶ For the collection of texts representing the humanistic theory of history in early modern western history, see Kessler, *Theoretiker humanistischer Geschichtsschreibung*.

⁷ Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (*Speeches over the first decade of Tito Livio*), cited in Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*.

⁸ Rosenthal, *Ibn Khaldun: The Muqaddimah*.

⁹ Seiffert, *Cognitio Historica*.

³ Rüsen (ed.), *Western Historical Thinking*.

thinking as well, then we have to ask the question about the peculiarity of Chinese historical thinking and its difference from the West in a new way. It is not the Chinese exemplary mode against another one, but *a specification of this mode which matters*. We thereby get rid of the highly problematic confrontation between two universalisms. In fact, the West and China share the logical universality of the exemplary mode of historical sense-generation in their historical culture. Their difference is a difference in the manifestation of this universalism, brought about by different conditions under which it has developed, like concepts of humankind, nature, religion, etc.

I would like to conclude my comment with some questions which would still have to be asked with respect to the Chinese and western traditions of historical thinking. Additionally, I wish to propose a new mode of doing history which may help to answer them. Cultural difference at the level of logical principles ought to be framed in a way that manifestations of these differences in the logic of historical thinking do not exclude each other, but interpret each other. So the difference could be treated under the rule of mutual recognition. This recognition can be based on an agreement about a logic of universalism and universalisation in historical thinking which comprehends cultural difference. Within this universalism, cultural difference does not vanish, but instead gets its clear feature. By sharing this universalism of interrelating universalisms in a discursive and inclusive way, scholars from different cultural traditions can communicate their specific historical identity peacefully and with mutual respect—beyond the ‘clash of civilisations’ perspective which raises the question of which culture possesses real historicity.¹⁰

The first question we have to ask concerning different cultural traditions in historical thinking is whether they contain other logical elements within them than only those of the logic of exemplary sense generation. I think that this is indeed the case. In all cultures we find more than one logic of making sense of the past. The peculiarity of cultures can be explained by different constellations of logical elements that most cultures have in common (like the exemplary mode of historical thinking).¹¹ These modes can typologically be distinguished at the level of a general theory of history.¹²

¹⁰ Rüsen, ‘Culture—Universalism, Relativism—or What Else?’

¹¹ Idem, ‘Some Theoretical Approaches’.

¹² Idem, ‘History: Overview’, esp. p. 6860. I have explicated my typology of historical sense generation in different texts. The most extended one is Rüsen, ‘Historical Narration:

The second question is related to modernity. In the West, the long-lasting dominance of exemplary thinking in history has come to an end with the emergence of modern historical thinking. It has replaced the exemplary mode of doing history by a genetical one. Here the issue is not the logic of judgement mediating concrete empirical facts and universal rules, but the logic of an internal temporality of these universal rules themselves.¹³ This new logic meets the challenge of accelerating change in the basic organisations of human life. And it is this change that problematises the validity of super-temporal rules to guide changes in human affairs by the modernisation process and its multiple ramifications around the world.

The paradigm shift of historical thinking I am referring to can be described as an essential temporalisation in the realm of those universal principles history has derived from the concrete facts of the past. It is an open question whether there are no potentials of this essential temporalisation of the general principles concerning human life in the Chinese tradition as well. In this case, the change from the logic of exemplary sense generation to the logic of genetic sense generation in history cannot be understood as simply being an import from the West. Within the concept of ‘multiple modernities’,¹⁴ it can be interpreted as a change at least partly going along the line of one’s own cultural potentials.¹⁵

At least this temporalisation is a chance of attaining a new outlook on cultural difference concerning universalistic approaches to history. Through temporalisation these universalisms can be mediated in a new way: they can be put into a processual order in which their interrelationship can be understood as a movement towards mutual recognition of differences and mutual enrichment through this recognition. In this new realm of temporalised universal principles of historical thinking, the East and West may meet in a discursive way. The struggle of mutual exclusion is replaced by a culture of recognising differences. And the competition among different traditions and their validity is related to the potential of recognition.

Professor Huang has described the typical Chinese way of doing history as being guided by non-aggressive argumentation. Here, he says, an argument is not a weapon in a semantic war, but a help in gaining valid knowledge. If this is true, western scholars will have no problem in agreeing with this principle. But they will keep in mind that it was Socrates who

Foundation, Types, Reason’ (also see Rüsen, *Studies in Metahistory* and idem, ‘History: Narration—Interpretation—Orientation’).

¹³ Koselleck, *Futures Past*.

¹⁴ Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’.

¹⁵ Schmidt-Glintzer and Mittag, ‘“Aufklärungshistorie” in China?’.

characterised his way of arguing by referring to the role of a midwife. I am very happy that Professor Huang has used the metaphor of a midwife for what he thinks is typical Chinese historical argumentation. Thus, we actually agree, and the difference between China and the West furnishes peculiar identities which can communicate with each other in a common commitment to respect and recognition.

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