

Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking. Edited by Chun-chieh Huang and John B. Henderson. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006. Pp. xix + 223. \$42.00.

This reviewer is a historian, not a philosopher of history. That difference alone may account for much of the criticism registered here. As a historian, I prefer people, things, and events to be securely located within time and space, and fear the methodological risks incurred by leaping too freely over such boundaries. This collection of nine essays attributes ideas and events to long spans of time stretching over, in several cases, nearly three millennia. Most of the essays also attempt comparisons of East and West that are painted in the very broadest of strokes. That combination proves dizzying in essays averaging some 20 pages long.

The topic of this book—perceptions of time—is one that has compelled historians in China ever since Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? B.C.E.). What are the relations between *shi* 時 (“timeliness” or “fate”), *wen* 文化 (“pattern”; “ornament”), *shi* 事實 (“substance”), *shi* 歷史 (“scribe,” “archivist,” or “historian”) and *shi* 事 (events), as viewed from the classical Ru 儒, neo-Confucian or Daoxue 道學, and modern nationalizing projects? The questions driving this particular volume—“Is there a characteristic Chinese conception of historical time or “a conception of time with Chinese characteristics” or even a “peculiarly Chinese style of historical thinking?”—are well worth considering, but these are difficult questions (plural) begging for additional research. Only parts of this book are sufficiently grounded to suggest working hypotheses on such complex matters, in part because several authors have chosen to approach their inquiries about time from less than obvious starting points. Ricardo Mak’s study of Yan Fu 嚴復, for example, bears the signs of stretching the topic of time to cover not only evolution, but Social Darwinism, with the result that we are soon learning about Yan’s theory of a “single track of temporal development toward an uncertain but desirable end” (p. 166). Similarly, Chan Wing-cheuk’s “Time in Wang Fuzhi’s Philosophy of History” concedes that Wang wrote no systematic treatise on his concept of time (p. 115). It is apparently enough, when considering such a seminal figure, to note that “he thought time played an important role in history” (*ibid.*).

Development in time, rather than time itself, lies also at the heart of another essay by Jörn Rüsen, which asks whether one can trace a “developmental logic of change in time concepts” that can be applied to “the history of the human species” (p. 13), to somehow correlate recent advances in cognitive neuroscience with the limited experience of time in any given human life and a subjective sense of “what lasts through time as meaning” (elsewhere, on p. 24, dubbed “Supertime”). Liu Shu-hsien meanwhile would have us study the *Yijing* (which he dates to early Zhou), “from a developmental point of view” (p. 77), even though we know little about its early history and interpretative frameworks. Such approaches strike me as profoundly ahistorical—and not only because they presume that meaning generally *does* last well through time, even unaided by massive printing runs.¹

¹ Chan Wing-cheuk’s statement, “I view Wang as the only genuine philosopher of history in premodern Chinese philosophy” (p. 115), is puzzling, since it ignores the masterworks by Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 (Han) and his admirers. For ahistorical questions posed by good historians, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historian’s Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970).

Worrisome to this author, as well, are constructs built upon notions of an enduring China, inhabited once by “traditional Chinese” (p. 82) who supposedly confronted stable ethnic identities (as when Wang Ming-ke’s makes the first stage of the Qiang 羌 “historical process” last from at least 1300 B.C.E. to 1700 C.E.).² (Trained in Bourdieu, I stress the time and effort that it takes to form any habitus, and analogize all works of cultural transmission to acts of translation. For me, “the past is a foreign country,” because “they do things differently there.”)³ Many of the book’s authors have taken statements about time made in specific times to be “authoritative” (p. 49), without probing further to ask, “Authoritative, in what context, for whom, and for what purposes?” Nor are the cross-cultural comparisons always illuminating. Q. Edward Wang, for instance, compares Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738–1801) and Martin Heidegger, writing in 1919, in his essay on “Time, History, and Dao.” By my count that’s two people, two eras, and three concepts to elucidate—something suitable for a monograph, perhaps, if “the temporal dimension of Being” (Dasein) and a “developmental perspective on gradual changes” in the meaning and function of the Five Classics were not already apples and oranges.

Several essays in the book, however, make valuable distinctions likely to advance the general reader’s understanding of what passes for “common wisdom.” Chen Ch’i-yun, for example, distinguishes concepts of time from dynastic cycle theories, and he argues, quite correctly, that “Chinese historians were aware of the artificiality and the limitation” of the dynastic history format (p. 50).⁴ John B. Henderson notes the steady progress in astronomy made from the Han through the eighteenth century, considering the potentially damaging effect that this progress may have had upon faith in correlative cosmological systems positing exact correspondences between heaven and man. Wang Ming-ke’s essay astutely notes that the modern Qiang ethnic identity is an artifact of political movements in the last few decades. And Q. Edward Wang reminds us of the profoundly conservative impulses “to save the Classics” that undergirded the so-called “school of empirical studies” during the Qing.

Despite the frequent lack of focus in these pages, this book ostensibly devoted to time often proves to be a fascinating read, less for what it tells us about the pre-modern modes of thinking than for what it reveals about contemporary fashions in the framing of Chinese history and philosophy.

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² Such constructs lead to a host of faulty generalizations, such as the claim that “in Western causal explanation, history is a mechanical push and pull of social, political and economic forces,” without “a shred of human agency” (pp. 24–25).

³ See David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. xvi.

⁴ However, I remain unclear why Chen Ch’i-yun chooses “transcendence” (defined as the “timeless” and “divine”) to describe Xunzi’s talk of “constants” (*chang* 常) whose operations may be mastered by humans (p. 61). If all things are thought to be made up of *qi* 氣 (configured energy), including the gods and heaven itself, why apply this concept to Zhanguo theories? I further suspect that we cannot speak of a well-defined “orthodoxy” prior to the Mongol’s adoption of Daoxue.