

余英時：中國史學的現階段——反省與展望

The Study of Chinese History: Retrospect and Prospect

By Ying-shih Yü

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HISTORY HAS ALWAYS BEEN the most glorious of all branches of knowledge in the scholarly tradition of China. However, it has declined markedly nowadays. This decline is not an isolated or unusual phenomenon; it is merely a part of the poverty of the Chinese scholarly world in modern times. Not only natural sciences, but social sciences and the humanities have not had adequate opportunities for development in the last fifty or sixty years. Even in philosophy, a subject that has the most to do with raising the intellectual level of the average educated person, research and instruction have not gone much beyond the rudimentary stage. History is a knowledge of a synthetic and comprehensive nature and must constantly absorb all kinds of sustenances from other disciplines to flourish. It is no wonder that Chinese historiography has withered under these circumstances. Nonetheless, it still stands out in achievement among all the scholarly disciplines in modern China, if only because it has a long and rich tradition to fall back on.

The development of modern Chinese historiography has seen the emergence at one time or another of a number of schools; of which two have been particularly influential. The first may be called "the school of historical data," whose work consists mainly of the collection, analysis, collation and criticism of the source materials of history. The second one may be called "the school of historical interpretation," which takes as its central task a systematic interpretation of the entire

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is translated from the inaugural issue of Shih-hsüeh p'ing-lun (Chinese Historical Review), Taipei, July 1979, an independent scholarly journal published quarterly by and for students of Chinese history. The article incorporated the views of a group of young historians who organized and edited the publication, and was originally intended as an Inaugural Message for the journal,

hence the use of the editorial "we". But since it was written by Professor Yü, and does not necessarily reflect the editors' views in every respect, the decision was reached to publish the article under the name of the author and labelled "in lieu of an Inaugural Message". In the present English version, the sub-headings are supplied by Renditions.

course of Chinese history. In theory these two schools have each identified themselves with an essential element of modern historical scholarship: the search for historical data lays the foundation of historical study, while interpretation constitutes its superstructure. Without foundation, one cannot begin any historical study; but without a structure, historical study will remain incomplete. As such, historical data and historical interpretation are complementary endeavors: together, they reinforce each other, separated, they work to each other's detriment. In practice, however, it has been most unfortunate that these two schools have been polarized to the point of mutual exclusion. As a result, the "Data school" accuses the "Interpretation school" of engaging in the building of castles in the air whereas the latter mocks the former as seeing only the trees and not the forest.

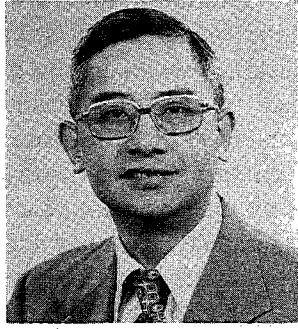
This is not the place to pass judgement on the rights and wrongs of these schools. It is necessary, however, to call attention to some of the unfortunate consequences that continue to flow from their work. An investigation of them is meaningful because it may serve as a useful guide to the future development of Chinese historiography.

Objectivity and Subjectivity in Historical Studies

The "Data school" is most strikingly characterized by its total indifference to its own times. Owing largely to their limited understanding of the issue of "objectivity," historians of this school assume that all facts available to us are one hundred per cent objective, capable of revealing to us their authenticity if scientific criticism is applied. Once all facts are investigated, then the "*ultimate history*" will emerge by itself. Based on this assumption, they deny that historical studies are in any way relevant to the times of the historian. They are committed to the belief that the subjective elements derived from the times in which a historian finds himself eventually will all have been eliminated, since purely objective facts could be established by strictly following a kind of scientific procedure of evidential investigation.

We admit that the truth or falsity of some of the concrete conclusions arrived at by way of evidential investigation are not likely to be affected by time. For example, identification of objects, institutions and geography in antiquity, dating of historical events and personages, and philological explication of a text are all concrete studies. Conclusions about them, once established, do not usually change with the change of time. However, investigations of these topics are only related to what historians regard as "basic facts", and are not to be treated as pertinent to "historical facts."¹ Basic facts provide only a set of framework to historical studies, they do not carry any intrinsic significance, and cannot account for historical changes. Moreover, even investigations of this nature cannot completely escape the influence of the historian's own times. We might legitimately ask: why did historians of a particular time become interested in investigating into a particular kind of

¹ Author's note: I owe these two terms to E. H. Carr. See his *What is History?* New York, 1962, pp. 7-11.



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The English text of this article, as originally prepared by Drs. Thomas H. C. Lee and Chun-chieh Huang, is a remarkable achievement in the art of translation. It has met all the three classical *Principles of Translation* set forth by A. F. Tytler two centuries ago: to give a complete transcript of the original ideas; to imitate the styles of the original author; and to preserve the ease of the original text—the three principles that have been immortalized by Yen Fu in China since the

turn of the century in terms of *hsin* 信 (“faithfulness”), *ta* 達 (“comprehensibility”) and *ya* 雅 (“elegance”).

No one is more aware than the author of the numerous pitfalls and difficulties that must have been encountered in the course of undertaking this formidable task. I cannot thank the translators enough for their invaluable contribution.

As I was going through the translated text, however, it suddenly occurred to me that the original article should not be presented to an entirely different audience without changes. I felt that some of the things I said in my Chinese original need not be said in translation, and a good deal of them could be said better by saying differently in a different language. These considerations eventually led to a revision of the text to an extent that I had not expected in the beginning. As a result, a few passages have been omitted, several paragraphs completely rewritten, and many expressions cast anew. In addition, a minimum of footnotes has also been provided. I am therefore solely responsible for the discrepancies that now exist between this English version and its Chinese original. Hopefully, in this case, a violation of the principle of faithfulness on the linguistic level will be compensated for by a better representation of the original ideas.

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objects, institutions, documents, people or geography in history?

Historians of the "Data school" not only mistake all basic facts for historical facts, they are also prone to treat individual facts *in vacuo*. They stress the importance of "criticism," at the expense of "explanation." Belief in the doctrine of "history as the study of historical data" has led them to confine "criticism" to the mere determination of the authenticity of source materials. Real historical investigation is impossible under such circumstances. Recent progress in historical knowledge has shown that a historical fact appears to us as such because that is the way historians understand it. Historical facts with which a historian must initially deal in order to carry out a research project are always innumerable. However, after careful examination and repeated scrutiny he will be able to distinguish among them those which are relevant from those which are not relevant to the particular historical phenomenon he is investigating. Moreover, he will also be able to establish the complicated hierarchical relationships among a multitude of relevant facts. Recognition of these hierarchical relations constitutes *par excellence* explanation of a historical phenomenon. It is in this sense that the *Classic of History* (*Shu-ching* 書經) has been defined as "to interpret so as to know the past," and the purpose of the *Records of the Historian* (*Shih chi* 史記) is described by Ssu-ma Ch'ien himself as "to comprehend the changes of the past and present." Therefore, while we are sympathetic to the emphasis placed by the "Data school" on critical examination of evidence, we do not take this as the end and all of historical studies. A modern-day historian must, on the one hand, establish the authenticity of facts by employing the most rigorous critical methods and, on the other, utilize both the new achievements in various related disciplines and the fresh point of view of his own derived from time to illuminate the relations among various historical facts.

Historians often differ in their approaches to history. They may offer different explanations of the same historical change according to their various conceptions of the historical facts and their interrelationships. A consensus is hard to achieve. It is especially true that historical interpretations change with the changes of time. This is so for two obvious reasons. First, since every period of human history has its own particular problems, the historian's attention must necessarily shift according to the changing problems of the times. Second, as learning advances with the passing of each day, the historian's understanding of past events also becomes ever-increasingly profound. One example will suffice for the purpose of illustration. The initiation of a tax on the acre in 594 B.C. by the state of Lu is a very important historical event which has been emphatically noted in all three commentaries to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Attention to this event was also called by later institutional historians. And yet, its full significance is only understood after modern social and economic historiography has advanced enough to enable historians to place it in the proper perspective. But the rise of modern social and economic historiography is exactly where the problem of our age lies.

If historical studies change with the changing times, and historians often disagree in their interpretations, then is there such a thing as objectivity in history after all? In reality, there is no basis at all for doubting the objectivity of historical knowledge. Observed by historians of different viewpoints history can only become ever more objectively evident. As the scenic wonders of Mount Lu are proverbially

described—"Looked at horizontally, it appears to be a mountain range; sideways, it assumes the shape of a peak. It can be all things to all men, according to whether they are far or near, high or low." Indeed the "true face" of Mount Lu can objectively exist in the eyes of travellers approaching it from various directions. We are of course not to conclude that Mount Lu has numberless forms or that it has no form at all. As early as two thousand years ago, Ssu-ma Ch'ien stated that the purpose of historical inquiry was "to comprehend the changes of the past and present and to propose one school of interpretation." In so saying, he touched on the very center of the issues relating to objectivity and subjectivity in historical studies. "The changes of the past and present" are objective history; Ssu-ma Ch'ien's attempt to "comprehend" them was of course a subjective interpretation by the historian. In the case of the *Shih chi*, one can see that the subjective interpretation by Ssu-ma Ch'ien not only does no violence to objective history, but has actually illuminated for us those "changes of the past and present."

Ssu-ma Ch'ien allowed that his own book was but "one school of interpretation." Though his interpretation was challenged by Pan Ku, the latter had to concede that the *Shih chi* was an "authentic record." That this should be so is because the "interpretive" effort we find in the *Shih chi* was soundly based on a critical investigation of evidence: "I have gathered up and brought together the scattered old traditions of the world and compared them with the deeds and events of the past as known to us," as Ssu-ma Ch'ien put it.² The *Shih chi* represents the union between "interpretation" and "criticism" in the tradition of Chinese historiography: it is an excellent model for combining subjectivity and objectivity in historical writing. That Ssu-ma Ch'ien should have such a remarkable achievement is attributable in part to his profound empathy for his own times. Pan Ku criticized Ssu-ma Ch'ien, saying: "His moral judgements stray greatly from those of the sages; in discussing the great Way, he places the teachings of the Yellow Emperor and Lao Tzu ahead of the Six Classics; in his account of the Wandering Knights, he honors the wicked and disparages the worthy, and in his treatise on economic affairs, he gives precedence to the powerful and the wealthy and holds in contempt the poor and the lowly."³ These criticisms, however, only serve to show the admirable qualities of Ssu-ma Ch'ien as a historian: His history was completed in the time when the court was carrying out the policy of making Confucianism the philosophy of the state. Yet these official policies did not blind him to the variety of active social and cultural forces which a monolithic government was not pleased to condone. The *Shih chi* made a point of presenting the activities of the Huang-Lao Taoists, the Wandering Knights and the merchants. On the one hand, the author was committed to the goal of "one school of interpretation," and on the other, he succeeded in faithfully reflecting his own times. The subjectivity and objectivity of historical studies are here unified, and not contradictory to each other.

²See his "Letter in Reply to Jen An," in *Han shu* 漢書 (Chung-hua Shu-chü 中華書局 edition, Peking, 1962), vol. 6, p. 2735. Cf. Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Grand Historian of China* (Columbia Univer-

sity Press, 1958), p. 66.

³See *Han shu*, vol. 6, pp. 2737-8; Cf. Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

“Historical Laws” and the Needs of the Times

If we characterize the attitude of the “Data school” toward its own time as being deliberately indifferent, then we might say that the “Interpretation school” is just the opposite. There is too close a connection between an interpretation and the times in which the interpretation is made, so much so that at times the distinction between the past and the present is blurred. That these two schools should run counter to each other to such an extent is understandable, as they each hold to their own way of dealing with history. The “Data school” pursues history for its own sake; it does not consider elements not directly related to historical studies at all relevant, including what we may call the “times.” They take satisfaction in examining one isolated historical fact after another. The “Interpretation school” in modern China, on the other hand, has all along not been studying history from a purely scholarly viewpoint. Their idea is mainly to make the past serve the present—in more concrete terms, to seek historical justification for their political activities. I must add that there is nothing wrong in such an idea; on the contrary, it is a virtue if one is purely motivated by love of his country and his people in his study of history. We see this in late Ch’ing historians, such as Chang Ping-lin and Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, who arrived at many important conclusions in Chinese history from their anti-Manchu, revolutionary viewpoint. Indeed, there has been a long tradition of interpretative historiography in China, and Marxist historical materialism is but one of them. Today, however, in examining the “Interpretation school,” we have no choice but to take Marxism as our main object.

Since “Interpretative” historians are dictated exclusively by the demands of political reality, they inevitably fail to distinguish between the past and the present, and as a result, deny the possibility of historical objectivity. Because he is writing history to meet an immediate need, an “Interpretative” historian may appear to be analyzing the past but is in reality ever concerned with its application to present conditions. Thus the past becomes merely a storehouse for historians to dip in for selective information, and whatever objective existence and development history might claim to have becomes completely meaningless. Moreover, this attitude towards history is in direct proportion to the urgency of political commitment; when political demands are great, all rules and regulations governing search for historical truths can be relegated to the ash can. In the past few years, the dominance of what is called *History by Innuendo* (*Ying-she shih-hsüeh* 影射史學) in mainland China is an extreme example.⁴

In principle we are sympathetic to the belief that historical studies should answer to the needs of the times, but we must also make it clear that a historian should try to keep a distance between historical inquiry and the reality in which he finds himself. History enlightens us, passes on lessons to us, but it can never directly serve reality. Historiography as a discipline should be respected for its integrity. Not to respect it will not only destroy history itself but also confuse us in our understanding of our own times. Take natural science for example: there is basic or

⁴On this subject see Ying-shih Yü, “Chinese History at the Crossroads,” in Ying-shih Yü, ed., *Early Chinese History in the People’s Republic of China*, University of Washington, Seattle, 1981.

theoretical research in any branch of science, and this is the primary requirement for a scientific discipline. Naturally we hope that basic researches will eventually prove to have practical usefulness, but we should by no means interfere with the disciplinary requirements of science in our haste to seek its practical application. This is equally true in the study of history. Without basic researches, history cannot stand as an independent scholarly discipline. As to when and how these basic researches could be applied, and what kind of use they could generate, no one can say beforehand. What we do know is that, like any other science, history cannot be totally useless if researches are carefully conducted with the needs of the times in mind.

The "Interpretation school" has its own theoretical dilemma. We have pointed out the inadequacy of the "Dataist" conception of historical objectivity, but the "Interpretation school," especially its Marxist branch, fails to give a clear account of the so-called "historical laws." "Interpretation" historiography carries with it the responsibility of supporting political movements, and the strongest support historiography can give to any political movement is to proclaim that it represents an irresistible historical tide. Any such declaration could easily dissolve the will to resist on the part of all opponents. The effect is similar to the mandate theory with which a new dynasty in China's past always proclaimed that it "was acting according to the will of the Heaven." But the mandate theory has long since been declared bankrupt, and in this day and age only science has the persuasive force that is irresistible. And so the "tide of history" presents itself to us under the guise of scientific inevitability.

The "inevitability theory" is founded on the basis of "historical laws." It claims that a certain historical trend is irresistible because the law of history dictates so. Modern science has already proved beyond a doubt that all things in nature develop according to natural laws. Now that historiography has proved to its own satisfaction that the development of history also follows certain laws, then any historical trend that follows these laws must of necessity be irresistible. Let me cite historical materialism as an example to see how "historical laws" are defined.

In Marxist materialism, there are two basic components which carry with them the meaning of "law," or, more appropriately, are emphatically declared as "law" by Marxists: First, chronologically, human society must necessarily go through five stages, viz, primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. Secondly, in terms of structure, modes of production in our material life are the bases which determine the superstructure of political, social and cultural achievement.

In the first place, Marx based his five-stage theory on what he observed to have occurred in Western Europe, and he did not consider it to be universally applicable. He was strongly opposed to having it applied to Russia, as suggested by his followers. He clearly pointed out: the particular historical experience of Western Europe could not be transformed into a historio-philosophical theory of the general path every people is fated to tread. He further pointed out that anyone attempting to apply a general historio-philosophical theory does not understand history because such a theory is by nature supra-historical.⁵ He once even declared angrily in French,

⁵See Marx's "Reply to Mikhailovsky," (1877) in Torchbook, 1971, pp. 135-136.
David McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx*, A Harper

"Je ne suis pas Marxiste," frustrated by the zeal of his followers in their loose application of his historical theories. Since Marx did not claim that his historical generalizations should be extended beyond Western Europe, then this five-stage theory cannot be said to have the universality of a scientific law.

As to the second point, Marx indeed stated it in universalistic terms. However, modern philosophical analysis shows that the relationship between modes of production and the so-called "superstructures" still lacks clarity and thus cannot be recognized as even close to what scientists would define as "law." If all the superstructures such as philosophy, art and religion are determined by modes of production, then a given mode of production could at best determine one kind of philosophy, art, or religion. In reality, however, each historical era has various types of philosophy, art and religion. How then are we to determine which one of them is typical? How are we to explain the modes of production on which other types are based? When we say "determine," how is it defined? Questions like these are never clearly spelled out. Generally speaking, it is indeed a profound observation to say that there are inner affinities between material and spiritual lives, and this observation has had a tremendous impact on the development of modern historiography and sociology. Nonetheless, until now we are still at a loss as to how those affinities can be formulated as precise laws. Actually, Engels made some revision in his old age concerning this point. In a letter he wrote to Joseph Bloch on September 21, 1890, he had the following to say:

According to the materialist conception of history, the determining element in history is *ultimately* the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase.⁶

Therefore, according to Engels' definitive thinking in his later years, the second component of historical materialism did not qualify as scientific law in the strict sense of the term.

Models Based on Western Experiences

"Interpretationist" historians have subjected modern Chinese historiography to another negative influence, and that is their use of models based on Western historical experience to comprehend the actual development of Chinese history. The Marxist five-stage theory, discussed above, is a case in point. But this trend is by no means limited to those who advocate historical materialism. For example, the once fashionable practice of periodization, dividing Chinese history into ancient, medieval and modern periods, is obviously a reflection of Western historiography. Naitō Torajirō 内藤虎次郎 once compared the Sung with the Renaissance, and

⁶See *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Correspondence, 1846-1895*, International Publishers, New York, 1934, p. 475.

regarded the Sung as the beginning of modern China. While this "Naitō hypothesis" has taken every possible effort to incorporate the special characteristics of China's historical development, it remains basically modelled on the West.

Both "laws" and models share a common assumption that all nations in the world go through a universally similar process of historical development. There are two sides from which to view this assumption, the theoretical and the practical. On the theoretical side, we can neither affirm nor deny this assumption. Analytical philosophers and professional historians alike tend to reject it on the theoretical level, because they have been frustrated by the difficulties encountered in the speculative philosophy of history. However, the rejection may be taken more as a revelation of their profound sense of frustration at this stage than as a definite indication of a "dead-end street." The present state of historical studies varies greatly from country to country, and comparative historiography is still in its infancy. In short, we are unable as yet to make a final pronouncement with any degree of assurance.

On the practical side, because historical and social sciences are better developed in the West, many people tend to accept the conclusions derived from studies of Western historical experiences as a universal "law" or model. Is capitalist society a necessary stage of every social development? Strictly speaking, Western Europe (with the United States as its extension) is the only historical example of this proposition; Marx's cautious attitude in this connection is, therefore, still appreciated today. One or two examples do not make for universal laws, nor do they set up any models. Bertrand Russell once remarked, only half seriously, that "China seems to be an exception to all rules." Even if this is true, I am afraid the problem does not lie with China but with all those rules. Russell was undoubtedly talking about rules derived from Western experiences.

However, China cannot actually be an exception to all rules. I quote Russell only to remind historians that any attempt in the search for a universally valid law in the realm of human affairs cannot do without taking Chinese experiences into account in the first place. The problem with historians of the "Interpretation school" does not lie in their commitment to seeking universal laws or models; it lies in their failure to adequately understand the concept of "law" as rigorously defined in science. They have mistaken certain partially effective generalizations about Western history for universally valid historical laws. Thus, instead of searching for a pattern of historical development based on the rich Chinese data, they have chosen to make the Chinese evidence fit Western theories. Such a Procrustean approach has aroused strong nationalistic feelings of historians who value Chinese tradition. In their eyes, to hold up the West as a model is indicative of a total psychological capitulation to Western culture. Some of them even question the very wisdom of introducing Western historiography to China. Though China has lagged behind in natural sciences, they ask, is there any reason why we should have to follow the West in historiography in which China has had a glorious tradition of her own?

We respect such feelings of national pride. However, what have been involved here are not just simple emotional issues. "Models" and "laws" are attractive not merely because they are Western in origin: a more important reason, perhaps, is

that they have come marching under the banner of science. Science has had an immense power of persuasion since the nineteenth century, and historical studies have constantly been under its pressure. The impact is still visible today with not a few Western positivist philosophers and social scientists believing that history is concerned merely with the investigation and organization of facts and that theoretical work should be left to the social scientists. Professional historians in the West feel equally hard-pressed to face up to this kind of challenge. We might say that it is against this background that we have seen the rise of the critical philosophy of history in the past thirty years, with the problem concerning the nature of historical knowledge at its center. It is also against this background that the growing influence, in recent years, of the Collingwoodian and Hermeneutic theories concerning historical understanding must be understood. So, in the final analysis, this is a dispute of a crucial nature between modern natural science and the humanities. Therefore, it would be grossly misleading to identify this as a dispute between Western theories and Chinese data, and allow excessive nationalistic feelings to be aroused over the question of historical research.

Beyond the Positivistic Confines of Dataism and Interpretationism

Above, we have tried to delineate the main trends of modern Chinese historiography through a critical review of the two major historical schools. But we are not primarily interested in criticizing the past, much less in denying the achievements of Chinese historiography since the beginning of this century. Historical thinking today has reached a new level of sophistication. The time has come to pause and reconsider for a moment. In order to seek new breakthroughs in Chinese historical studies, we cannot do without first reflecting, theoretically as well as practically, on the course that we have so far travelled. Reflection provides the point of departure for a new journey.

However dissatisfied we are with the "Dataists" and the "Interpretationists," due recognition must nevertheless be given to their respective contributions to the study of Chinese history. They will undoubtedly constitute the base for future development. As science, history must also be founded on the shoulders of giants. Even if there have been only ordinary people and no giants, we still must stand on their shoulders so as to have a better vision of the road that lies ahead of us. As a matter of fact, both schools of Chinese historiography have their own strong bases. Though blown out of proportion on a massive scale, their core beliefs will nonetheless stand the test of time. After all, as pointed out in the beginning of this article, "data" and "interpretations" are the two essential elements of historical inquiry.

In terms of origins, Dataism and Interpretationism in Chinese historiography can be demonstrably shown to have been deeply rooted in two different approaches in the West seeking to transform history into science. We have already noted that concepts like "laws" and "models" of the "Interpretation school" are borrowings from natural science. But we need to be further reminded that the Dataist emphasis on "data" and "facts" also derives its inspiration from science. According to

nineteenth-century positivists, every natural science must begin with collection of data and establishment of facts. However, in the positivist programme, one finds a symbiotic relation between facts and laws, for the ascertaining of the former would necessarily lead to the discovery of the latter. In general, late nineteenth- early twentieth-century European, and especially German, historians were divided into two opposing camps with each having been exclusively concerned with one part of the positivist programme. Thus we see, on the one hand, Leopold von Ranke's method dealing with the criticism of historical documents evolved into a tradition known as "scientific history," and, on the other hand, Karl Lamprecht led an anti-Rankean movement in quest of general historical laws. (Whether Ranke was really the founder of "scientific history" or still in the tradition of German idealism is of course another matter and need not concern us here.) The dichotomy between Dataism and Interpretationism in China is quite reminiscent of this German scene. As a matter of fact, evidence shows that while the Chinese Interpretationists owe a heavy spiritual debt to Hegel and Marx, the Dataists are no less a true intellectual heir of the Rankean school than of the Ch'ing philological tradition. In criticizing the mutually exclusive attitudes held by the Dataists and the Interpretationists, however, we are not suggesting some kind of *modus vivendi*. It would be naive optimism, for instance, to think that one can discover the general historical laws as advocated by Lamprecht with the help of Ranke's "scientific method." Instead, we believe that we can now transcend the positivistic perspectives of both Dataism and Interpretationism. It is an indisputable fact that Clio has been steadily gaining scientific respectability in the modern world without becoming Mr. science. Once we break through the positivistic confines of Dataism and Interpretationism, our expectations as to the prospect of historical inquiry in China will also be of a different kind. With this understanding in mind we wish to make the following, perhaps all-too-common, observations:

I. We have all along stressed that history is a knowledge of a synthetic and comprehensive nature and that it must thrive on results achieved in other fields of knowledge. We should now give a clearer explanation. Many scholarly disciplines are directly or indirectly related to history; these include, in the past, diplomatics and philology, and, now, social sciences and even some branches of natural sciences. Now, in the face of the evergrowing sophistication and specialization of knowledge, how are we to expect historians to first familiarize themselves with all branches of knowledge before they engage in historical research? A few special branches of historical studies now require very specialized knowledge and have long gone beyond what we normally consider to be within the bounds of history proper. For example, economic history in the strict sense has become a branch more of economics than of history. Similarly, history of science has long declared its independence. Therefore when we speak of the synthetic and comprehensive nature of historical knowledge, all we are saying is that historians, in investigating a historical phenomenon of a certain period, should take into account not only the chronological perspective in which this phenomenon is related to its antecedents and consequences but also the structural perspective in which the phenomenon is related to other events of the same period. This activity is quite different from that of the social scientists, who are primarily concerned with the search for abstract principles common to all similar

phenomena or with understanding a certain type of phenomenon by referring it to some established laws. Take for example the study of the aristocratic clan system (*men-ti* 門第 or *men-fa* 門閥) in medieval China, historians have to consider on the one hand its evolutionary changes both before and after and, on the other, its place in the context of contemporary political, social, economic and cultural developments, in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding. As such, we find that the historian's task is different from that undertaken by sociologists or anthropologists in their study of the kinship system in medieval aristocracy. An historian will unavoidably touch upon the problem of the kinship system or whatever problems other social scientists are interested in, but he "touches upon" them only as and when historiographic needs dictate. He does not have to go into the study of any social science systematically. Any historian with some training in modern scholarship is capable of doing this, even as a sociologist merely refers to some basic historical findings to explain a certain historical background in the process of his research, without finding it necessary to conduct an independent historical inquiry. Indeed, this is what has been much discussed in the Chinese scholarly tradition as the issue of "erudition vs specialization." As Chang Hsüeh-ch'eng 章學誠 (1738-1801) aptly put it: "Of all the things in the universe, there are those which are of our immediate concern, and we will not miss even the tiniest particle of them. There are also those which are of no immediate concern to us, and we will not worry about them even if they are as big as Mount T'ai."⁷ Thus, individual historians all have their auxiliary sciences; these sciences are, however, dictated by the "immediacy of concern" of their specialized fields.

"Method" as Understood by Chinese Historians

II. There is the question of methodology. Both the Dataist and the Interpretationist schools in China emphasize methods, and each claims that its own method is the most scientific one. As a result, the idea has prevailed among modern Chinese historians that the progress in historical studies depends mainly on the progress in historical methods. There is some truth in this, but what are historical methods? Nobody seems to have given the question much thought.

A careful examination of the term "method" as understood by modern Chinese historians will show that it contains two meanings. The first is to think of it as merely an extension of scientific method in historical inquiry. The famous dictum of the late Dr. Hu Shih, "boldness in doubt and hypotheses coupled with a meticulous care in seeking verification," belongs to this first kind of meaning.⁸ The concept of "hypothesis" started with the publication of *La Science et l'hypothèse* by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré in 1902; Poincaré suggested that since the word "law" connotes something immutable, it would help to reduce confusion by

⁷ See his essay "Chia nien" (假年) in *Wen-shih t'ung-i* 文史通義, (Ku-chi Ch'u-pan she 古籍出版社, Peking, 1956) p. 190.

大膽假設，小心求證。See Hu Shih, "The Scientific Spirit and Method in Chinese Philosophy," in Charles A. Moore, ed. *Philosophy and Culture—East and West*, Honolulu, 1962, p. 221.

⁸ This is Dr. Hu's own translation of his dictum

replacing it with the term "hypothesis," for the so-called "laws" in science are often overthrown by new discoveries. This conceptual change naturally affected social sciences and history as well. Those nineteenth century "laws of social development" or "historical laws," including that of historical materialism, are now merely considered "hypotheses." In any case, call it "law" or "hypothesis," neither belongs uniquely to historiography.

The second meaning of "method" is to understand it as the analytical techniques in various special disciplines, such as astronomy, geology, archaeology and biology, that can often be useful in solving problems in historical studies. Obviously, these techniques are not methods unique to history. In fact, even those methods which are closely related to traditional historiography, such as diplomatic and textual criticism cannot, strictly speaking, be regarded as unique to historical researches. A person who specializes in the criticism of documents is a philologist; he is not a historian, even though historians must necessarily devote some time to textual studies. It is not hard to imagine a situation, especially in the study of modern or contemporary history, in which a historian does not have to face any problem requiring serious textual criticism, much less the employment of philological knowledge to collate texts. Naturally, a historian has his own unique procedure of work, such as ascertaining evidence, establishing the authenticity of facts, discovering the relations between historical facts, and interpreting changes, but these tasks are closely related to the development of other scholarly disciplines. The rise of new scholarship sometimes opens up a new vista for the historian, leading him to a new understanding of "evidence" or "fact." What did not use to constitute "evidence" or "fact" may now become some very important "evidence" or "fact." The rise of "psycho-history" in the West in recent years is an immediate example.

What we have discussed above is not to prove that there is no historical method; we wish only to point out that there are no permanent or fixed methods. On the technical level, history is constantly appropriating methods from other related sciences for its own use. This is in accord with what we mentioned above as the synthetic and comprehensive nature of history as a discipline. If there is no permanent or fixed method in historical studies, does that mean history relies completely on other sciences, and has lost its own identity? This is an unnecessary worry. As pointed out by Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., himself a strong advocate of social science methods in the study of history, a historian's attempts to study man's past holistically and his interest in historic time as a total dated system distinguish his "concern as to both goal and method from those of the social scientists."⁹

However, as the saying goes, "Scholarship is like assisting a drunkard to walk, no sooner you help him move to the right, he falls to the left." Although we think it important to be always open-minded about new historical methods, we should at the same time warn against blind acceptance of every new method because it is fashionable. Any method that is derived from empirical science has its limits, and therefore if we are to borrow their use, we must take into consideration the different results that may obtain because of the differences in empirical background.

⁹See Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis*, The Free Press, New York, 1969, esp. pp. 265-7.

Furthermore, it takes repeated experiments on the part of experts before a new method could fully develop. The best works in psychohistory are written by psychologists rather than historians. Up to now, we have had more failures than successes in the writing of psychohistory, a fact that has caused Jacques Barzun to raise his voice in serious criticism of certain unhealthy tendencies in the development of this field. What Barzun has to say is a useful rectifying warning to historians who tend to fancy methodological fashions.¹⁰

There are no fixed methods for the study of history, and every new method brings with it numberless pitfalls. This fact alone is enough to show that there is no short cut in historical inquiry, and historians have to grope laboriously and patiently for their own methods. It has always been like this, and it is nothing new. A century ago Theodor Mommsen said: "It is moreover a dangerous and harmful illusion for the professor of history to believe that historians can be trained at the University in the same way as philologists or mathematicians most assuredly can be. One can say with more justification of the historian than of the mathematician or the philologist that he is not trained but born, not educated but self-educated."¹¹ This is the testimony of a great practitioner of our craft. Herein lies the difficulty of the study of history, and herein lies its attraction.

The Basic Pattern of Chinese Culture

III. Since we do not accept the concept of "law" advanced by the "Interpretation school" and are equally dissatisfied with the departmentalized and fragmentary approach represented by the Dataist historians, then what do we wish to see in terms of the future of Chinese historiography? What kind of direction should we follow? As to the first point, to put it in the simplest terms, we hope that historical researches will help us to gradually understand from various angles the basic pattern of Chinese culture and its process of development. At the same time, we hope that a clearer knowledge of the past will enlighten us on our present historical situation.

We cannot deny that in thus phrasing our expectation as to the future of Chinese historical studies, we are already advocating something. First, we affirm that cultures have patterns, and Chinese culture likewise has its own unique pattern. This is a hypothesis now largely shared by scholars, especially historians, anthropologists and sociologists, but it still needs to be reemphasized. The reason is that there are people who under the severe influence of the Western model of thinking, regard the difference between Chinese and Western cultures as to lie not in different patterns but in different stages of development—that is to say, that the West has moved into the modern era while China is still in the middle ages. Conceptions like this are still very influential today, and the Marxist periodization of Chinese history is founded on this basis. Secondly, we reaffirm the belief that history is a develop-

¹⁰See Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors, Psycho-History, Quanto-History and History*, The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

¹¹See his "Rectorial Address," translated in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History*, A Meriden Book, 1956, p. 193.

mental process. This is to say that we believe that history is not just an accidental aggregation of disconnected events; history is rather a continuum and manifests itself in what historians speak of as trends, currents or tendencies. In traditional Chinese historiographical terms, this continuity is called "shih" 勢 (potentiality or momentum). Behind the trends or currents, however, we do not see such things as "providence," "reason" or "law" which are hypotheses neither proven nor disproved, at least as of the present. We cannot therefore be certain whether any trends or currents in history are "inevitable" or "irresistible." We only believe that, if there are historical trends or currents, they can be found through historical researches and can be interpreted rationally. On this point we differ basically from both the Dataists and the Interpretationists. Finally, we recognize that it is possible to have a dialogue between the past and the present (and to some extent even the future), a recognition that receives its strongest support from the fact that there are indeed continuities in history. We stress the need to maintain a proper relationship between historiography and the times mainly because we are aware of the importance of continuity. The Chinese present is naturally not just determined by the Chinese past, but the unique pattern and process of development of Chinese culture had created enough "momentum" (*shih*) to provide the dynamics for China to come into its present form. The same "momentum" has not died out and shall continue to pressure us to move forward. Historians nowadays no longer believe that the past serves as a mirror to reflect a knowledge of the future, and prediction in the strict scientific sense indeed lies outside the province of historiography. Nonetheless, thanks to the insightful studies of historians, we are better able to understand the nature and impact of the "historical momentum," and this understanding sometimes does help indicate the way out of our present condition. The great French medievalist, Marc Bloch, wrote a book entitled *Strange Defeat* in the agony of the Second World War; his analysis of the fall of France is profound and powerful because "the tragedy is seen through the eyes of a man who has traced with affectionate attention more than a millennium of his country's history."¹² There is no example more vivid and moving than this of what E. H. Carr called "the dialogue between the past and the present." Even if historical studies do not enable us to predict, historians after all cannot help constantly reminding themselves of what may happen in the future. The more we understand the past by that much more will we add to the basis on which to judge the development of the future. The famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga hit the nail on the head when he said: "As for history, the question is always 'Whither?'"¹³

What then is the road that lies ahead for Chinese historiography? It is difficult to give a concrete answer to this question. We rather wish again to discuss some principles.

The Dataist historians take the collection and examination of historical data as their main task, and consciously resist any attempt at "interpretative comprehension." As a result, there is no desire on their part to touch upon large issues such as the pattern and process of development of Chinese culture. By contrast, the Inter-

¹²H. Stuart Hughes, *History as Art and as Science*, Harper and Row, New York, 1964, p. 106.

¹³J. Huizinga, "The Idea of History," in Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History*, p. 293.

pretationist historians place special emphasis on these questions, but unfortunately they have been entrapped by Western models of interpretation. Extremists among these Interpretationist historians even sought to fit Chinese historical data into one specific school of Western theory. This not merely narrows the possible range within which historians look for answers, but also severely limits the capacity of historians in asking new questions. The Dataist historians reject historiography on a theoretical level; the Interpretationist historians trade off their own productivity for foreign credits. The consequence is the same: both fall back on China's historical data and take pride in the wealth of them. Modern Chinese historiography as a result presents the strange spectacle of an abundance of materials but a paucity of scholarship. From here on we who are engaged in the study of history will have to proceed in two directions: to hold up the challenge of the aforementioned big questions as our ultimate goals, and to maintain an open-minded attitude toward all kinds of theories, methods or viewpoints. We are aware that big questions such as those raised above cannot have a once-and-for-all answer, but once we have made them the ultimate goal of our studies, historians will more clearly recognize the direction and significance of their endeavours. An open-minded attitude is especially important for it is with this kind of attitude that we could hope gradually to arrive at sensible judgements that are in accord with Chinese historical realities. In the process of historical research, competing interpretations are unavoidable, and indeed this is only normal in scholarly progress. There can never be one absolute historical interpretation, but it is not too much to hope that a common basis of discussion be established on the major issues of history. There, the results that are founded on reason and reliable data will have the power of lasting persuasion.

Comparison and Analogy in Historical Inquiry

The search for the unique pattern and developmental process of Chinese culture implicitly takes on a comparative viewpoint. Without comparison, we shall not be able to illustrate the special pattern of Chinese culture. By comparison we mean comparison in relation to other cultural systems, such as what is commonly referred to as Indian culture, Western culture or Islamic culture. The cultural categorization proposed by A. J. Toynbee is useful for reference here. Those who criticize Toynbee criticize his attempt to search for generalities or laws, but not his advocacy of comparative viewpoints.

Not only can historical developments of other cultures be used in our comparative studies, but community studies (not confined to primitive societies) conducted by social scientists (especially anthropologists and sociologists) which lead to better understanding of culture will also enlighten us. Max Weber once said that man is an animal suspended in "webs of significance" spun by himself. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz takes those "webs" as culture. Geertz further points out that the study of culture is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."¹⁴ There can be no doubt that historiography

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973, p. 5.

is much closer to sociology and anthropology than to experimental science. "Interpretation" as used by Geertz is at least partially similar to the "interpretative comprehension" that has characterized traditional Chinese historiography. Naturally, we are aware that we are not simply seeking to understand a static "web of significance"; rather, we are searching for the metamorphoses that culture experiences in historical time.

In the past several decades, the importance of the comparative point of view to the study of Chinese history has been clearly recognized among historians of all persuasions in China. Unfortunately, comparison in practice often turns into analogy of one dubious kind or another. Thus we find Confucius being compared analogously to Socrates, Mencius to Plato and Hsün Tzu to Aristotle. In this connection, a particularly notable example is provided by Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's influential book entitled *Ch'ing-tai hsüeh-shu kai-lun* 清代學術概論 ("A General Introduction to Ch'ing Scholarship"). Throughout this work, as rightly observed by Benjamin I. Schwartz, there is a "sustained and forced analogy between European Renaissance and the Ch'ing period."¹⁵ It may not be too harsh to say that analogies of this kind, when carried to extremes, serve only to conceal from view rather than reveal the salient features of Chinese history.

On the other hand, it must also be pointed out, analogy as a comparative method, with all its imperfections, is often unavoidable and, indeed, sometimes even necessary in the early stage of cultural contact. The Buddhist method of analogy known as *ke-i* 格義 is a case in point. As late as the fourth century, Chinese Buddhists still found it desirable to "equate the contents of the *sutras* with external writings in order to establish examples that would create understanding."¹⁶ The so-called "external writings" referred mainly to Taoist philosophical works. In other words, Indian ideas were explained in the familiar terminology of Chinese thought. It was only when the Chinese Buddhists were able to distinguish the various nuances of these imported concepts that they found the *ke-i* analogy too distortive to be useful, and therefore abandoned it. Nevertheless, the comparative perspective provided by Buddhism has since been firmly established in the Chinese intellectual tradition.

As of today, the introduction of Western learning to China has remained largely in the Buddhist *ke-i* stage. We are still far from being able to employ the comparative point of view in historical inquiry with confidence and ease. However, as we look back and reflect on the development of Chinese historiography in the past decades, we must admit that progress has been made in this aspect, even if the progress is relatively slow. As time goes on, we shall see that the period of independent growth of Chinese Buddhism will also come for Chinese historiography. There is thus no reason for us to lament the fallacious analogism in this early stage; there is even less reason for us to abandon the comparative perspective all together.

¹⁵ Benjamin I. Schwartz, "Foreword" to Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's *Intellectual Trends in the Ch'ing Period*, tr. by Emmanuel C. Y. Hsü, (Harvard University Press, 1959), p. xiii.

seng chuan 高僧傳, as quoted and trans. in Fung Yulan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, tr. by Derk Bodde, vol. II (Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 241-2.

¹⁶ "Biography of Chu Fa-ya" in Hui Chiao's *Kao-*

It is true that, in the philosophy of history, fallacies of false analogy are a topic constantly subject to extensive as well as intensive analysis. Philosophers and historians alike nonetheless admit that analogy has many uses when it comes to the methodology of explaining a concept or a phenomenon. Simply stated, an analogy not only tries to find similarity among diversity, it also attempts to find diversity in similarity. Metaphor is an abridged form of analogy often used by historians. A metaphor concentrates on the similarities of two entities and uses them to explain one another. However, a similarity in part cannot obliterate the dissimilarity in the whole, and even within the similar parts there is room for dissimilarities in detail. Therefore, if we are able to employ analogy appropriately, then continued progress in historical inquiry will be assured. Therefore, in the study of Chinese history, what we must guard against is not the use of analogy as a comparative method but its abuse. It is certainly misleading to speak analogously of the intellectual history of the Ch'ing period as a whole in terms of the Renaissance. However, on certain levels with reference to particular developments, such as the rise of philology and scholarship as the sure basis for faith, the Ch'ing scholars may indeed be fruitfully compared to the Christian Humanists of the Renaissance and Reformation. It is also questionable to draw an analogy between the rise of the "Hundred Schools" in classical China and the philosophical development in ancient Greece. But the notion of "philosophic breakthrough" as used by historians, philosophers, and sociologists today does provide us with a comparative perspective in terms of which transcendence in ancient China may be more intelligently explained in connection with a similar development in other ancient cultures such as Greece, Israel and India. Other Western concepts such as "despotism," "feudalism," "revolution," "class," "social mobility," "social structure" etc., also have been widely used in Chinese historical works, and though the empirical content of these terms is found in the Western experience, with appropriate definition, they could be employed to analyze Chinese history. Liu Hsieh 劉勰 once said in the "pi-hsing" 比興 chapter of his *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* 文心雕龍: "Things which are as far apart as Hu [in the north] and Yüeh [in the South] may through their similarities be as close as liver and gall." He further said: "Throughout all the varieties of the *pi*, its excellence lies in the aptness of the representation. A writer is valueless if, trying to carve a swan, he succeeds only in approximating a duck."¹⁷ What Liu Hsieh had to say here about the idea of *pi* (metaphor) in Chinese literature may be just as useful when borrowed to represent the basic attitude we hold about the comparative viewpoint in historical studies.

A "Middle-range" Approach to Chinese Historiography

Finally, we wish to point out that in stressing the importance of "the unique pattern of the Chinese culture and its process of development" we are only suggesting that this should be taken as our ultimate goal in historical inquiry. In actual

¹⁷See Liu Hsieh, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, tr. by Vincent Y. C. Shih, (Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 198.

practice, however, we must emphasize that the study of history is a concrete and pragmatic endeavor, and has to be grounded on cumulative efforts. Without the effort of constant and adequate drilling, it is impossible to hope for any new breakthroughs either in approach or in conception. The "pure conversation" (*Ch'ing-t'an*) 清談 of the Six Dynasties has been known as "speculation" *par excellence*, but Yen Chih-t'ui 顏之推 found it necessary to give the following advice: "He who has not looked over all the books in the world should not thoughtlessly make corrections or criticisms."¹⁸ Of course, today, we cannot expect anyone to read all the books in the world, but a student of history should take upon himself to adequately grasp all the basic sources relevant to the topic he studies. Otherwise, he shall look very much like the kind of person Wang Seng-ch'ien 王僧虔 admonished his son against: "You have read only about five feet of the scroll of the *Lao-tzu*, have neither known what Wang Pi and Ho Yen had to say, nor the difference between the commentaries of Ma [Jung] and Cheng [Hsüan] and much less the meaning of various nuances and examples. But you have picked up the sambar-tail chowry and considered yourself a Pure Conversationist. Nothing is more dangerous than this."¹⁹ To engage in Pure Conversation without adequate scholarly maturity is dangerous enough, then what about historical studies which require solid and concrete researches? The revolutionary progress in modern Western historiography cannot be attributed entirely to new viewpoints or new methods. It is also a result of ever intensifying effort in basic training over a long period of time. This latter fact should command more of our attention. The discovery and collation of ancient inscriptions, the preservation and study of archives, as well as the collection and editing of all kinds of historical documents and publication of monographs and journal articles; these are concrete examples of the results of intensive hard work in Western historiography. Indeed, it is on this solid foundation that concepts and new methods were developed.

As the adage has it: "Keep your eye on what is big, but try your hand on what is small". We are now sure of the main task of Chinese historiography at the present stage; this is what is meant by "keeping your eyes on what is big". If we could indeed keep our eyes on the main issue, we shall not fall into the pitfalls of fragmentation and blindness as the Dataist historians did. But however important the target, it is no substitute for actual work. We should not let concepts such as "cultural pattern" or "process of development" become mere slogans, and work them into every single piece of historical writing. To do this is to be guilty of what the Interpretationist historians did—namely to replace history with interpretation. There is no short-cut in historical studies, and we must perforce start with "what is small". There are all kinds of critical problems in Chinese history which need continual analysis and synthesis and it is our responsibility to work on those that are close to our respective intellectual inclination and professional training. There exists a dynamic and dialectical relationship between analysis and synthesis. We have to try to synthesize when a problem of a specific time or subject has been analyzed to the

¹⁸See Yen Chih-t'ui, *Family Instructions for the Yen Clan*, tr. by Ssu-yü Teng, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), p. 84.

chüan 33: 10b-11a.

The "sambar-tail chowry" (*chu-wei* 麩尾) was always used by the Pure Conversationists in their discussions.

¹⁹See *Nan-Ch'i shu* 南齊書 (Po-na 百衲 edition)

extent of requiring primary synthesis. But, if in the process of synthesis we find that there are still inadequacies, then we shall have to start analyzing anew. It goes without saying that, oftentimes, the study of historical problems demands of the historian that he should simultaneously conduct analysis and synthesis on different levels. In any case, the value of a piece of historical work above all depends on the quality of its scholarship. From the practical standpoint, one naturally prefers that the range of the topic treated be small and easily manageable than big and tending to the speculative. The "middle-range theory" proposed by the sociologist Robert Merton probably could provide historians with the best guidance. Merton chose to propose such a "golden mean" probably because he had been troubled by some of the over-blown sociological theories which he felt could hardly admit of any empirical substantiation. His own scholarly achievement bears ample witness to such a principle, showing that it is both practical and workable. History is also an empirical discipline, and Merton's suggestion should serve its purpose well.

The field of Chinese historiography is immensely resourceful and should not be made a happy hunting ground for only a handful of bright and talented heroes. The need is to mobilize all earnest workers in the field so that they could devote their efforts to longterm and steady tilling to turn it into a fertile green-land. If we compare the study of history to drinking water, then the most a historian could hope for is to acquire the ability of a Li Te-yü who is said to have been able to tell the difference between the water of the upper Yangtze and that of the lower Yangtze. He should never dream that he would be able to acquire the magical power of a Zen Master Ma-tsu who claimed to have "swallowed all the water of the West River in one gulp." It is here that Chuang-tzu's wisdom has the best to offer: "When the mole drinks at the river, he takes no more than a bellyful."²⁰

Let this be the highest ideal of every student of history, and let us borrow this saying to symbolize our expectations for the future of Chinese historiography!

²⁰See the *Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, tr. by Burton Watson, (Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 32.