

# A Reflection on the Spirit of Historiography\*

## 역사서술정신에 관한 하나의 성찰

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Upon reading Prof. Li Youzheng's essay I was initially curious as to why Prof. Li placed so much emphasis on the history vs. literature(art) dichotomy. But this focus falls into place in the context of his concerns regarding the character of traditional Chinese historiography. His argument is that what he refers to as modern, objective, scientific Western historiography can benefit by negative exposure to the long and elaborated historiographical tradition of an alien pre-modern culture – China. Chinese traditional historiography is not scientific or objective, it is driven by a metaphysical-moral world view(or discourse, as Foucault would say) that contains strong cyclical elements(historical time understood in terms of 5 phases cycles) and causality understood in terms of the moral motivations of the actions of the historical protagonists with the results also judged in moral terms. Prof. Li's discussion is expressed in very abstract terms, but he does not seem to explicitly refer to correlative(and thus inherently non-causal) thinking common in the astrological and omenological sections of the dynastic histories(zhengshi). I believe that this is strongly implied, though. In pursuit of a history immanently governed by metaphysical-moral driving forces pre-modern Chinese historians had a distinctive concept of what comprised valid data which included documents which may or may not have corresponded to the historical data reported and the willingness to construct contrived narratives(indeed, fictional accounts) to provide linkages to data pieces all of which resulted in making manifest the validity of the driving meta-

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\* A review on Youzheng Li, "Modern Theory and Traditional Chinese Historiography," *MOAC*(2000-2001), 181-204.

physical-moral “discourse.” This explains Prof. Li’s concern with “fiction” vs. “history” and truth vs. falsity. Prof. Li feels that not only can Western historiography inoculate itself against a “literarization” of the field by observing the “errors” of the Chinese tradition with its non-objective, non-scientific orientations, but we can also come to a clearer objective understanding of Chinese history by having an acute awareness of these drawbacks to the Chinese historiographical tradition. On a practical level, I think that most historians(Western and East Asian) working with classical Chinese documents, particularly the standard dynastic annals, are aware of many of the pitfalls and dangers noted by Prof. Li.

Pages 181-183 outline Prof. Li’s broad conceptual framework, with which I only partially agree. Prof. Li feels that we can develop a more precise historiographical theory ultimately capable of providing a “universal framework to deal with theoretical problems in human history.”(181). This agenda likewise demands that we strongly differentiate history from literature. Is this the equivalent of wanting to develop a “unified field theory” of history? Is this even possible? Certainly, what is missing from Prof. Li’s discussion is his understanding of what comprises “science” and the relation of history and historiography to science.

Prof. Li notes that history and literature “share content” or “describe objects”, however, history is “representational” and literature is “fictive.” History deals with the “actually occurring in reality” and literature deals with the “fictively creating by imagination in our daily experience.” I understand this to mean that the historical discourse is constantly checked for validity by reference to its congruence with the available and relevant(objective) historical data while the literary discourse is not subject to this specific verification procedure. In fact, the literary discourse is not subject data verification at all. I agree with this series of propositions as far as they go.

Where I disagree with Prof. Li is what appears to be his objectivistic, empiricist understanding of history. For example, he states regarding the “realistic character of historiography” that, “Historical processes are preserved through the direct memories of historical heroes and the indirect recordings of historians. This historiographic representation is certainly incomplete and imprecise. It seems natural to maintain that people can never grasp historical reality in its entirety first owing to a variety of technical weaknesses in historiographic practices. Still, we cannot

reject a quasi-objective presupposition of historical processes at an epistemological level.”(182).

For the functioning historian the “memories” and “indirect recordings” are simply data for the research agenda. The more startling statement is that, by inference, if the “technical weaknesses in historiographic practices” could be overcome then we could “grasp historical reality in its entirety.” From a general Kantian/Weberian perspective this is impossible. The neo-Kantian/Weberian perspective is that reality (including historical reality) is a massive, rushing(perhaps meaningless in its aggregate) “manifold.” The necessity for and purpose of ideal-typical concept formation is to enable one to apprehend partial aspects of this infinite “manifold” and give it patterned, interpretive meaning. This interpretive meaning is constantly checked(as Prof. Li noted) against the available, relevant data. But then again, to a certain extent what comprises “relevant data” is often a function of the original interpretive perspective, or ideal-typical historical construct. Toward the end of the essay, Prof. Li discounts the statements of Nietzsche as too extreme. I think Nietzsche commented that what we call truth is really a function of the state of our digestion at the moment. If he did not say that then he should have said it!!! Nevertheless, it seems to me that the neo-Kantian/Weberian concern with “value relevance” in the process of constructing ideal type concepts may be a serious effort to incorporate the Nietzschean concern with relativistic values into the creation of an objectively oriented historical discourse.

It is very curious how, to a limited extent, the Kantian “critique of reason” sometimes approximates Buddhist Mahayana concepts of the nature of reality. However, in the case of history, once the interpretive construct is put to work articulating a specific historical understanding then this understanding is subject to rigorous “falsification”(as Popper argued) utilizing the available relevant data, or newly discovered data (perhaps revealed from a competing ideal typical construct, or, “discourse”). Thus, while the historical argument is teleological(we are all giving pointed meaning to our data) it is also completely open-ended, relativistic, and subject to incessant revision. Frankly, from a general neurological perspective I doubt if the human mind is capable of “grasping historical reality in its entirety.”

What the ancient Chinese were doing was quite proper – they first constructed broad hypotheses regarding the nature of reality(the metaphysical-moral driving

forces) applied it successfully to reality and constructed narrative documents based on these broad “ideal-typical” constructs. However, they were not writing history as we understand the term, they were composing ritually oriented theological texts. Perhaps Hegel’s “Philosophy of History” is as close as we can get to the ancient Chinese enterprise in modern times. Or perhaps the Old Testament is relevant insofar as it is a combination of a narrative demonstrating the hand of God in human time(a sort of history incorporating later interpolations and contrived, fictive narratives: the Red Sea parting) along with a compilation of ritual texts – very much like the Chinese dynastic histories or earlier Warring States texts quoted by Prof. Li. In many ways, the classical Western tradition is as alien to the modern sensibility as the ancient Chinese “historiographical” tradition.

As Prof. Li noted, literature and the arts are not subjected to objective data critiques since it is irrelevant to their purpose. In that sense the arts are teleologically absolute. Art work cannot be controverted by critical data, it stands absolute in its self-enclosed structured world view(even so-called “open art” is teleologically designed to be “open”). One cannot contradict Van Gough by arguing that his rendition of the afternoon sun over a field is inaccurate, or that the field did not have as many daisies in it as portrayed in the painting! However, one can critique an art work on the basis of aesthetic theory: the consistency and integration of the elements of the world- view expressed in the art work, related issues of balance, elegance of expression, etc. In so far as art can and is critiqued on the basis of aesthetic theory(I imagine there are actually competing sets of theories) then, in fact, the artistic expression is articulated in a law-like, nomothetic fashion that seems to make the arts akin to the mathematicized sciences and their penchant for physical “laws” than to the non-nomothetic practices of history. It seems to me that the artist and the physicist(and other mathematically oriented scientists) are reductionists(the Cubists reduced the physical world to geometric shapes!) while the historian inevitably goes in the opposite direction of elaborating unique contingent details. In fact, the pursuit of historical causality usually demands the elevation of the individual and the unique. At the most, the historian can pile up individual cases and construct broad generalizations based on accumulated historical specifics. But by doing so, the rigor of causal analysis is replaced by correlative generalizations. The correlative generalization can be sharpened with a statistical

apparatus, as in sociology or political science, but the causal relationship is lost or completely obscured. This again raises the issue of how Prof. Li understands “science.”

As an amateur, the above discussion is as far as I can venture into an increasingly philosophically complex subject. My basic references were taken from Kant, the neo-Kantians, Weber, and some material by Umberto Eco.