

Modern Theory and Traditional Chinese Historiography*

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0 Introduction: Significance of Cross-Cultural Historico-Theoretical Studies

With the dynamic changes in the composition of all disciplines and recent developments in multicultural studies world wide, interdisciplinary tendency in the humanities needs a cross-cultural dimension (cf. LI You-zheng, 1997(3), 47–48). Not only will this expand domains of research, but it will bring about more original theoretical progress as well. The recent hermeneutico-semiotic turn in comparative studies in the humanities suggests that current theoretical reflections on traditional non-Western scholarship can also expand the theoretical horizon of the humanities in the West, including historiography. This interdisciplinary/crosscultural development will more relevantly and energetically stimulate a further elaboration of present-day Western theoretical practices. The point is not merely in enriching cultural experiences in studies, but rather in the intellectual encounter between modern/post-modern Western theoretical approaches and cultural materials in non-Western historical traditions. Needless to say, Chinese is one of the most important cultural *strangers* for the Western humanities. Western historiography can greatly benefit from examining Chinese-Western comparative historical theories which have three main aspects. One is an effective expansion of the historical experience, namely, a greater knowledge of the characteristic non-Western historiographic tradition. Another is increasing the relevance and precision of theoretical practices in Western historical science. The third is the development of a universal framework to deal with theoretical problems in human history.

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0.1 The Necessity to Distinguish the Historical from the Literary Operative Domains

The main achievements in historical science today have been made by scholars of modern Western historiography. But this scholarly success is restricted by two geographic-historical conditions. They are: the European historical processes and the related Western historiography. Since history is a universal phenomenon, its recorded experience is much larger than just a European one. Therefore treatments of mankind's historical experience is based primarily on European history which is not comprehensive enough to develop a general science of history. The first goal of cross-cultural historiography lies in enlarging the historico-observational scope of study. An expanded and enriched historical experience logically requires readjusting and refocusing current historical theories. However, this presupposes a "quasi-objective" historical process regardless of whether this is the case or not. Without this presupposition the so-called expansion of historical experience is meaningless since any added historiographical content can be produced arbitrarily. From an operative point of view, it is first necessary to make a distinction between history and literature. On the one hand, modern studies emphasize shared and overlapping aspects of the two disciplines; but on the other there is still a gap between the two at the strategic/operative level. Despite sharing content or described objects in their respective discourses they have different intellectual goals with one being the representative and the other being the fictive. This realistic character of historiography as a discipline has nothing to do with its lack of practical capability for completely attaining its scholarly goal. Historical processes are preserved through 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 weakness in historiographic practices. Still, we cannot reject a quasi-objective presupposition of historical processes at an epistemological level. For example, we cannot deny the current reality of our own personal past experience, nor can we easily deny the existence of our close relatives or friends. Because our existence itself implies the inlaid function of memory, we cannot help but distinguish the actually occurring in reality from the fictively creating by imagination in our daily experience. Therefore, what is called the objectivity of historical processes should not be examined by our capability to attain them; it should be dealt with according to the trait of our operative goal: an intellectual direction towards an objective reality. This can be shown indirectly or dialectically by contrasting it with the literary operation which has a different epistemological status. According to Paul Veyne and many others, history seems to be only an art. But there is still a division between available materials and the subjective operation in the historiographic work. The point is that the objective part is the main goal for historians' construction. Moreover, historians cannot arbitrarily construct this part in a literary or artistic way without paying attention to the restrictions imposed by

objectivity which becomes the criterion a historian must obey. This epistemological distinction between history and literature is first established by their operative goals and intellectual frameworks, not by historical data riddled with descriptive details.

0.2 The Relevance of the Chinese Historiographic Alien to Western/Modern Historical Theory

While a historiographic work combines the real and the unreal, the historian seeks to enlarge the scope of the real and decrease the scope of the unreal. In short, the historian seeks to know more “truth” about history. Without this yearning a historian is little more than a literary man. For a science of history, the picture of human historical processes should be made as complete as possible by historians. Historiographic works come about through different historiographic patterns formed in different cultural traditions. It is obvious that there are differences in the way scholars of different historical traditions represent and evaluate human history. This historiographic divergence is primarily caused by different historiographico-strategical procedures formed in different historical stages of a civilization or, more seriously, in different civilizations. Therefore, before embarking on modern comparative historical studies, there should be a strengthening of comparative historiographic methods. This would lead to a greater understanding of the relationship between non-Western historiographic patterns and non-Western historical processes, as well as to enlarge and precise our understanding of both non-Western and Western histories. Thus, for Western or modern historico-theoretical studies, an advanced knowledge of non-Western historiography and its theoretical practice is more and more relevant and useful today.

For the past two centuries Western learning has already successfully contrasted the differences between the West and the Orient. But we should recognize that Said's Orientalism remains within a pan-Western intellectual framework. After all, both the European and Arabic traditions had sprung from the same Mediterranean origin. But for Westerners, China's case is completely different. This genuine *stranger* has existed outside the European circle and maintained its strangeness in linguistic semantics, artistic rhetoric and mental typologies. The distinction is far from being expressed only in the language. That is why translating traditional texts literally into English cannot overcome its strangeness. If one works within its *strange* semantic frame, there is still a lack of a thorough understanding. China is said to be the unparalleled “historiographic power” in the world. If this is true, modern Western historical theory is still without a solid basis without effectively including its Chinese counterpart. China as one of the major non-Western civilizations is habitually called a land of history or historiography not only because of its long history but also because of its deep-rooted custom of organizing historical writings. It is obvious that without a Chinese component a general history of mankind is incomplete and less than comprehensive. Developing a dialogue between non-Western and

Western historiography would meet a two-fold powerful *alien* in China: both her history and her historiography. As is the case with all ancient histories, traditional Chinese historical representations are conditioned by uniquely formed historiographic patterns. Traditional Chinese culture is first of all characterized by a continuing interest in maintaining its historiographic tradition. But the pre-modern character of Chinese historiography makes it very different from that of Western historiography, be it the classical or the modern era. On the one hand, a modern understanding of Chinese history is still based on traditional Chinese historiographic records which are less than scientific and therefore provide a much less precise picture of historical processes. On the other, traditional historiography, with different goals and methods in its practice, is embodied in a Chinese writing system still strange to most Western scholars. In order to understand the function of Chinese historiography in modern scientific terms, it is not enough merely to master the language and to unquestionably accept Chinese historiographic representations. Because of linguistic and organizational differences between Western and Chinese historiography, a direct dialogue is difficult to establish in the present framework which is compartmentalized by our academic system. The current academic situation in fact causes a scholarly barrier between the two approaches. In Chinese studies, the more philologico-practical-oriented historiography is carried out primarily at a less systematic and less theoretical level. The present-day discussions in the West about historical theory and historiography are limited by a less than inclusive informative horizon.

Modern historical theory, with its Western-centrist orientation, should be extended to all geographico-historical areas, including those least Western in outlook. For the sake of better understanding a historiographic *alien* such as the Chinese, modern historians should first explore the structure of non-Western historiographic patterns by employing recent interdisciplinary theoretical achievements emerging within contemporary Western humanities. This can help overcome the communicative barrier between different academic traditions. In the case of Chinese, scholarly contact between classical Chinese (material) and modern Western (theory) has an important epistemological as well as a practical significance, considering the unparalleled rich source of Chinese history and its historiography. After a fruitful interdisciplinary and cross-cultural interaction between Western and Chinese intellectual traditions, the deep chasm between Western ideas and Chinese ones will diminish. Our global village in the 21st century certainly requires a more comprehensive and more coherent knowledge about a genuine universal history. Multiculturalism should not exclude efforts for intellectual commensurability between different cultural traditions. Quite simply, pluralism cannot be an excuse to give up making consistent different types of human knowledge. If there is an order in society and natural science, we should expect the same in the humanities, although in the latter an intellectual order belongs to another type. If we still feel it is useful to call history or historiography a science, that only means we insist on a linguistic and logical order in our discourse. But, of course, poets have a right and reason to destroy

this kind of order. Is there any necessity to make every historian become a poet in the post-industrial era?

1 The Western Realistic Historiographic Tradition and the Traditional Chinese Moral-Pragmatic Historiographic Tradition

There is a sharp contrast between the ideologico-pragmatic tradition of ancient Chinese historiography and the realistic-positivist tradition of ancient Greek historiography. According to Le Goff's analysis, there are principles of Greek historians such as "evidence" (Herodote), "intelligibility" (Thucydide), "causal analysis" (Polybe) and "truth" (until Cicero) (cf. LE GOFF 1988, 267). In contrast, Chang Hsüeh-cheng's description of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a masterpiece of traditional Chinese historiographic theory, is significant since it illustrates "deleting and rearranging material" (*pi-hsiao* – literally: to cut off with a knife pen) (CHANG 1985, 470). Out of these two very different intellectual origins have come two different historiographic traditions. In fact, Western cultural history has a realistic tendency to emphasize observation and representation, explained not only by its unique scientific history (logic, mathematics, biology, and physics) but also by its style in the arts grounded in a perspective principle. Western scholars have had a scientific/realistic orientation since the time of the ancient Greeks. In contrast, the Chinese artistic tradition has continued to employ a "spirit-expressing" or "literary-symbolic" principle regardless of the representational criteria. In general, Chinese culture stresses the principle of expressing spiritual-philosophical and moral-ideological contents in a variety of artistic ways. Chinese scholarly activities are also more artistically inclined than their Western counterparts (cf. LI 1997(3), 204). This artistic/moral/pragmatic scholarly tendency can be contrasted with the scientific tendency originating in the Western tradition. Since the time of modernization in the 20th century, Chinese scholars have increasingly moved in the direction of Western scholarship both in natural and social sciences. With this remarkable modernization movement, Chinese historiography has made a conscious attempt to become more scientific and to critically evaluate traditional non-scientific styles in its traditional scholarship. This movement has placed a responsibility on historiography to be as objective as possible about the historic past; namely, historians want to search and grasp for more historical "reality and truth" in contrast with fabrication and distortion in formulating historical discourses. If people are unable to determine absolute truth, they still have reason to obtain more, rather than less, rationally acceptable knowledge as to what "really" happened in the past. Unless this is done, modern Chinese historiography cannot undertake a new scientific direction which differs from its own tradition. The different composition and style of the Chinese historiographic tradition, weak in realism and positivism in historical writing, can provide reversibly a justification for the necessity of maintaining the concepts of reality and truth in historical representations.

1.1 Historical Truth and Historiographic Distortive Representation

China has preserved its systematic historiographic literature over 2000 years and 24 dynasties with a continuous, officially authorized, and edited historic works. The main academic historical works, or *cheng-shih* (authorized and official historical works), are the compilation of narrative records, causal analyses, moral judgments and ideological predictions about Chinese history which was required, organized and supervised by dynastic rulers and imperial officials. Those historiographic organizers had a united Confucianist view of history, humanity, society and the world. This traditional historiographic system provides the basic writings about social, cultural and political experience of China through which we can, in differing degrees, understand the historical processes and imaginations of the Chinese people. *Cheng-shih* is, with a few exceptions, the only “window” to peer into the past life of Chinese. This writing system was developed in China's pre-modern period and has a unique organizing principle and style of writing historical texts. This “window”, with its particular perspective and way of thinking, is characteristic of the traditional Chinese social and psychological framework. The reflected pictures and written texts were first determined by the organizing (administrating and editing) and writing (semantically and grammatically interweaving) principles set out by the ruling political system of imperial China. It is obvious that the historiographic system was first devised to serve the security and welfare of traditional Chinese political regimes. This indicated its strong socio-political pragmatic tendency in the way it worked. In other words, the relationship between the principle of writing historiographic texts and political ideology played a crucial role in the constitution of the writings. The historical pictures obtained in reading the historiographic texts had to accord with a previously fixed ideological direction. In our modern scientific approach, we have to take into account various constitutive aspects, ranging from the ideological to the substantial and to writing-procedural, in order to be able to intelligibly judge the quality and utility of traditional Chinese historiographic writings. When Ku Chieh-kang said, “Such a kind of historical material cannot be safely used by us modern scholars until it is sufficiently re-organized scientifically” (cf. TONG 1963, 101), his main concern was with the less than scientific principles and customs of writing history in the traditional period.

1.2 Historiography: Scientific or Literary?

There is an extreme relativist historiographic point of view which blurs the distinction between historiographic and literary writings; namely, both truth and fiction, and representation and fabrication in historic writings are so extensively mixed that a science of history becomes almost impossible. If the concept of a historical truth is discarded, the problem is of little concern to the historian. However, this extreme relativist historiographic rhetoric first confuses two different oppositions: that between truth and falsehood in historiographic writings

as well as between actual events and wrongful recording of events. The word "truth" can refer to the description as well as to the real process. However, the rejection of one does not automatically lead to the rejection of the other. While the actual occurrence of a process is one thing, the verbal description of the same process is another. Therefore we should be concerned about establishing a relationship between the two despite the technical difficulty of doing so. Being conscious of the distinction increases sensitivity to the quality of verbal descriptions. If we can understand the distinction and its effect on historiographic writings by first understanding the principles of producing the writings, we can better know the function and semantic potential of traditional Chinese historiographic texts. Since this kind of reflection is usually neglected in modern scholarship the traditional texts are readily used to provide reliable records of historical processes and as main sources of material for modern historical inquiry.

The distinction between (actual) process and its (verbal) description and that between (verbal) description or recording and (verbal) fabrication or imagination belong to different ontic levels. While rejecting the possibility of exactly describing the process, one should not reject the existence of process in historiographic writing. However, we are able to ignore the existence of the described content in literary writing. Although the same signifier in both cases can have the same signified, they would have different referents. They are the actual process for the former and the imaginative process for the latter although the expression units used in both kinds of discourse can have the same referents in their semantic function. The tricky point in this analysis is expressed in the way that verbal representation of the actual process can be employed in both the positive-directed and fabricative-directed operations; or rather, the verbal record of the former can become the semantic material for building up the latter. With the same story material, the ontic status of the same event, with the same description, the historiographic text and the literary text differ although it is difficult or unnecessary to actually make this distinction. According to the above explanation a distinction has to be maintained between the historiographic operation and the literary operation in writing. The two disciplines are distinguished not by materials used but by their operative strategies. A consequence is that the concept of truth in historiography is both necessary and justified. But this truth should not be confused with metaphysical or philosophical truths, since it possesses a definite operative meaning. In contrast, truth as an epistemological concept in literary works is unnecessary (of course, its metaphysical or religious meaning can be kept as well). Accordingly, one is justified to ask how much truth in the above sense can be expected from traditional Chinese historiographic writings? With regard to truth, historiographic epistemology should be able to safely avoid the semantic ambiguity of the term. "The word truth itself is only a verbal operator to be manipulated in one way or another. How can the term truth 'itself' be opposed?" (LI 1997(3), 65). If we have no doubts about the everyday use of the term, we should not question its historiographic

use. Different from the metaphysical discourses, the historical and the everyday discourses function at the same epistemological level.

1.3 Moral-Ideological Restrictions to the Historiographic Direction

Traditional Chinese historiographic texts are replete with ideological restrictions which purport to manipulate historical material in a certain utilitarian direction (*pi-hsiao*: to keep the useful and to cut off the useless in the editing and writing) rather than to straightforwardly express an objective historical truth. This is the case even though truthful documents and records can also largely be kept in the texts if they accord with ideological requirements. A historian's honesty is basically expressed by the person's loyalty to the regime, rather than in a loyalty to historical objectivity. Traditional historiography allows, and even encourages, a desirable representation of objective processes. But this function of truth is multiply restricted. In our use of truth we distinguish between the actual process and "faith or worship" which is also often called "truth". This paper indicates why those principles blur, distort, and hide historical truths in certain ways. In a negative sense, if it is recognized there is distortion in historical writings, whether deliberate or not, it points one in the direction of a certain truth. Simply put, ideological preconditions and related intellectual techniques predetermine the nature and function of traditional Chinese historiographic writings by systematically mixing factual, fictive and axiological elements together.

2 The Axiologico-Ideological-Directed Description of Historical Processes

2.1 Historical and Literary Aspects in Historiographic Writing

The origin of Chinese traditional historiography was due primarily to the practical needs of ruling groups who invented and used divinational, ritual, and other practical records. Scribing practice was undertaken by feudal officials to meet those practical needs. According to Wang Kuo-wei, a leading modern Chinese historian, ancient Chinese historiographic praxis originated with the official recording of rulers' practical matters (WANG, 1983, v.6 "Interpreting *shih* (history)"). However, the recording of historical narratives began much later in China than in the Mediterranean. Despite a long history, ancient China dating back to long before the late Chou had few narrative records which were kept because of this pragmatic-oriented tradition. The formation of Chinese historiographic practice was due less to intellectual curiosity for recording and understanding events than it was for practical concerns. There are few narrative texts found in Chinese archaeological relics. Instead, there are more relatively short texts about the simple records of rituals as well as other kinds of practical activities. In the later Chou period, there was a further development of written records about the court life of various levels of the ruling class for practical and aesthetic purposes. But generally, ancient Chinese people were still less conscious in organizing a narrative form of writing. Accordingly, China has a

longer tradition of lyrical poetry but lacks an impressive tradition of epics. It was quite late before there was a maturity of consciousness in recording and describing historical events. Ancient narrative poems stressed a lyrical and moral nature while ancient historiographic narratives stressed the moral/ideological and emotional/aesthetic tendency. In both cases, stories were the means to be used much more for pragmatical and emotional expressions than for scientific or positive representations.

As Ku Chieh-kang points out, ancient historians, namely, scribing officials, did not have a “scientific” interest in honestly recording and carefully analyzing historical processes (cf. Ku 1963, v.3, 134). In other words, they were the users rather than the researchers of historical processes and materials despite the fact that many other intellectual operations were added to the same practice. Scribing officials, especially those in the pre-Ch'in period, were mainly technicians since they organized, edited and wrote historiographic texts according to a fixed pattern of an ideological/pragmatic way of writing. Not only did they serve rulers in this way, but they worked according to the same principles as the ruler since they shared the same values. In other words, the huge reservoir of Chinese historiographic writings was strictly controlled by a fixed ideology of a despotic system. The products of those principles, namely, the historiographic texts, are basically a combination of historical materials (the eventual, the material and the verbal) and axiological selection (the writing-traditional, the pre-conditional and the scribing-operative).

Different from literary practice, historical writing has to have factual sources. Although any description must contain referents from the actual world, there is a distinction between what actually occurs and what is actually possible. All effective referents in historiographic texts should be immediately (rather than indirectly or imaginatively) directed to the actual processes involved. A qualified historiographic signifier must have a dual semantic direction and deal with the signified in the texts and facts in the world, regardless of how much the historian reaches the latter. It is worth noting that this point only pertains to the ideal historiographic text. In fact, what we have is a mixed type; i.e. a historical-literary type. More precisely, a historiographic text contains both historical and literary aspects as well as the factual and the imaginative. The distinction between the two genres has nothing to do with shared writing/expression techniques, since it is a function of the intentions of the writer and the person's operative goals. Historiographic writing is actually formed by factual representation and imaginative filling-in of historical voids. The point is that the imaginative role, a literary technique, is intentionally and structurally employed in a historiographic-operative framework. Compared with the Western tradition of historical writing, the mental inclination of ancient Chinese historians resulted in less positivist composition of historical texts with a mix of both historical and literary elements. If ancient history at its legendary stage was only the blending of fact and fiction, or as Wang Kuo-wei has said, “facts and legends cannot be split” (KU 1963, v.1, 264), the polished historiographic writings of the Han

scholars were still full of fabrications. As Ku notes, they fabricated names, actions, documents, and mixed the truthful with the wrongful to gain the confidence and praise of the rulers (KU 1963, v.5, 6). Or, put another way, “The wisdom of ancient Chinese historiographic art is expressed in blending the true and the false; or pragmatically to use the true of the broken documents to support the false of the fabrications...” (LI 1997(4), 12).

2.2 The Fictive Operation is Ideologico-Pragmatical-Oriented

The two kinds of fictive operations in traditional Chinese historiographic writings are technical and ideological. Historians would frequently be imaginative in writing because their documents were invariably insufficient and their scholarly methods were less than scientific. For example, narrative links were widely fabricated to form complete, impressive, and readable stories. There were many such stories created during the pre-Ch'in period when the official system and the technical capability for historiographic writings were not yet developed. We are more interested in the second type of these imaginative operations; the ideologically distortive, whether intentional or not.¹ In this kind of writing the factual elements are systematically combined with the axiological ones, or, the factual elements are developed in the axiological framework. On the one hand, the historiographic agent was attentive to the actual processes and their records; while on the other, he had to use both in a pre-determined way guided by axiological or ideological principles. The principles for organizing historiographic texts fall into two categories, general preconditions and practical methods.

3 The General Preconditions of Historiographic Writing

A newly emerging discipline, “Chinese historiographic semiotics”, has connection with many historico-theoretical attempts. Among other things, the most original is an “institutional analysis of historiographic writings” which is helpful in analyzing the Chinese historiographic system. We attempt here to outline a few pertinent examples for discovering structural-functional patterns of Chinese historiographic writings.

3.1 The Metaphysical Framework

a. The Cosmological Rule

According to the primitive cosmological philosophy of ancient China there is a system of natural circulation or circular evolution. Particularly important, human history is said to change with natural circulation. Behind this historical

¹ There is a mixture of politico-pragmatic and axiologico-ideological operations in historiographic-epistemological discussions. Nevertheless, the intentional political manipulation and the attitudinal determination in writings should be distinguished in order to make explicit the pertinent semantic organization.

change there is said to be a determinative force of a supernatural nature. Thus, there is a parallel evolution between the cosmological and the historical. The theory not only provided the writing with a metaphysical framework for ordering historical events but also a way to morally judge the actual processes. The historical process unfolds in a predetermined temporal line arranged by a supernatural power. This then becomes a theoretical basis for producing causal inferences in historical processes or for providing rules to understand history. With this metaphysical framework, historical causality is systematically distorted, although the primitive theory provides a working frame for organizing an initial Chinese history-writing.

b. Heaven's Intention and Judgment

A Heaven with a supernatural but less religious origin played a major spiritual role in the society and culture of ancient China. Heaven in the traditional Chinese earthly-mentality played the twin role being substantial-symbolic and empty-symbolic. The former represents an imaginative guiding force over humanity, while the latter is a source for an imaginative moral-centrist interpretation. As a void sign it can be morally referred to for any purpose. Dialectically, it can even strengthen a general empiricist spirit or a humanist position. This is because Heaven can only function within an anthropocentric frame. It is used empirically, although it adopts a supernatural signifier. It is only a pseudo-supernatural source because it is humans who define and use Heaven, rather than the reverse (cf. LI 1997(1), 82–84). More precisely, the image of Heaven functions as a pseudo-religious rhetoric to strengthen what many consider to be mundane practices.

Speaking historiographically, Heaven plays a convenient role in Chinese moral ideology. For it is a sign of moral judgment with the morality organically interwoven with a humanist utilitarianism. The relationship between benefit/loss (utilitarian) and good/evil (moral) becomes the most important and most ambiguous phenomenon in Chinese reasoning. During all of Chinese history moral doctrine has served the political system, while by contrast, Confucian ethics attempts to separate moral doctrine from the political system. Thus, we see a constant disharmony in Chinese ethical logic; in the same sense we say China is a pragmatic-minded nation. The power-holders and intelligentsia always use morality-hermeneutics to strengthen power and social stability and use Heaven as a supernatural source of moral authority. Therefore, the power of humans and their morality have dual supernatural support consisting of the dynamic and ethical, or, the physical and spiritual. The power-holders arranged themselves ideologically so they would be stronger in both the aspects of force and morality. Therefore power is operated in both physical and spiritual dimension. The military-political and the moral-ideological are combined to play a synthetic role in historical situations. In historiographic writing a Heaven-hermeneutics plays a determinative role in various aspects. The more direct role is played by reading “the signs of the strange natural miracles and disasters”.

Many natural and fabricative phenomena of both negative and positive natures were regarded as signs from Heaven of praises or warnings. Examples were natural disasters, legendary appearances of strange animals, stars in abnormal positions, and meteor showers. The link between humanist affairs and a supernatural judge is imaginatively embodied by physical symbols which become also hermeneutic key-nodes in organizing and interpreting historical narratives. Consequently, historiographic writings were widely interwoven with superstitious expressions, producing various kinds of pseudo-causal analyses. Causal analysis also fell under the sway of supernatural hermeneutics. As a consequence, the Chinese “hermeneutics of the Heaven” had the dual function of being quasi-metaphysical/quasi-religious and politico-ideological. The latter is extensively influenced by the former. This pragmatic-oriented causal scheme in the writing of history substantially influenced Chinese historiographic representation.

3.2 The Ideological Preconditions of Power-Lineage

According to ancient China's world view there were two power hierarchies, consisting of the supernatural and of humans. Heaven and the Yin-Yang system belong to the former, while the royal lineage belongs to the latter. In fact, the secular spirit of China made it easy for people's imagination to serve the political power structure. There were also two orderly sequences consisting of the lineage within a dynasty and the lineage between different successive dynasties. The rules are contradictory for the transition of power for the two, since one is based on absolute loyalty and the other on brutal revolt. A hermeneutics of power based on the supernatural-ideological system was developed to unite the two contradictory theories. Historic events were explained in such a way as to justify the two-fold lineage theory which was the underlying determinative mechanism for superficial historical processes.

3.3 The Hermeneutics of Morality-Determinism

Humanist theory, as it pertains to the sequence of power, is based on a complex dual structure consisting of the cosmological/metaphysical and moral/ideological determinism. The mechanical force of the former was said to be the physical support for the spiritual force of the latter. Thus, force and spirit could be pragmatically united in order to play a coordinating role in maintaining political order. Nevertheless, the spiritual component had an independent effect, best capsulized as a form of moral determinism. This theory of power-morality could be ambiguously and arbitrarily used by both the ruler and the ruled, namely, the absolute loyalty of the ruled to the ruling class and the love and mercy of the ruling few for the masses. Historical debates about this complicated dual theory were frequently about which one was more predominant. Theoretically, the Confucians came down on the side of the ruled and the Legalists on the side of the rulers. Then after the Ch'in Dynasty, the Confucianist despotic system at-

tempted to harmonize the two moral-political lines to ensure both the security of the regime and the happiness of the people. Accordingly, Confucianist intellectuals' and historians' writings were enveloped in this academic-ideological framework. For a pragmatic-oriented Chinese historiography, this theoretical point of view becomes a hermeneutic technique providing guidance in organizing and explaining the principles in writing history.

After the establishment of the First Empire, the Ch'in Chinese moral system was institutionally interwoven with a despotic system comprising an orthodox lineage of royal power. Ever since, moral ideology has been found in the political system. Moral concepts were transformed into politically operative ones and the ethical good was transformed into political loyalty. Historiographic morality became an ideological tool in order to better serve and influence the ruling class. Scholarly honesty, or historiographic morality (*shih-te*), eventually was defined in terms of the politico-ideological system, namely that morality is not defined in ethical but in political terms. This highly ideologico-pragmatic historiography paid much more attention to performing the morality-directed historiographic procedures than to search for scientific truth. Writing practice in observing, recording, composing, and editing historical stories was determined by this ideology-guided pattern.

What emerged was a special form of dual logic of morality/utility in Chinese historiography and philosophy. The pragmatic-bent Chinese mind tried to unite two diverse systems of rule, one based on a moral good, and the other on a profitable good. This dual system has been used in various ways by a variety of people for a multitude of purposes. Its diverse moral aims and methods are found in the historiographic texts and became the basis of a particular form of politico-ideological practice. The dual logic is also divided into a forward (profitable) and backward (moral) direction. While the latter is said to be the source of the former, in fact, a moral direction becomes the means to search for a profitable direction. Historiographic writings attempted to demonstrate the unfolding of this convoluted historical logic. According to this ideologico-pragmatic logic, historiographic writings are highly utilitarian in character. One can speculate that this great but ideologically guided tradition of Chinese historiography resulted in a loss of a great number of correct recordings and writings on historical events. This of course has adversely affected the quality of present-day history in reconstructing the past. Although there is never a complete reconstruction of the past, certainly there are both better and worse historical reconstructions.

4 Factual Material and Historiographic Pragmatism

4.1 Pressure out of Factual Occurrences

With a pragmatic mentality, Chinese intellectuals in ancient times were attentive and interested in historical facts and events and grasped at them as empirical occurrences. The Chinese term *shih* means “history”, “events”, and “historians”

alike. Early on, historiographic practice was based on much less sophisticated metaphysical speculation. Consequently, the recording of historical facts tended to be practical and technical in nature, with less intellectual expressions. During the pre-Chou period (ca. three thousand years ago) facts were chosen pragmatically and used for governing and divination practices. But, as society developed, particularly in the late Chou period (ca. 1200 B.C. – 200 B.C.), gradually it was necessary to treat factual and theoretical components in a more coordinated manner. Put another way, factual material needed to be interpreted theoretically. Quite simply, the mechanism of power required an ideological means to confront both positively and negatively the increased intellectual requirements of the time. It became necessary then to synthetically and pragmatically employ factual material and theoretical ideology in historiographic practice. Within this ideologico-hermeneutic framework, historians, if not all the intellectuals, continued to have an instinctive interest in more honestly recording historical facts as true occurrences. Thus, the historiographic profession was intellectually restricted by observational conditions despite its ideological preconditions.

Tension between this positivist imperative and ideological rule began to play a major role in historical writings. Indeed, among ancient historians, loyalty to a ruler and loyalty to professional morality was in constant conflict, although both might theoretically be required by the ruling class. This is because there were two levels of benefit for the rulers, one to the individual ruler and the other to the lineage system. These two kinds of loyalty to the power-holder later became the primary source of debate about the professional morality of intellectuals.²

Since the Han Dynasty, techniques for recording historical events have substantially advanced and enriched classical literature. However, there was still a strong tension between the factual and the ideological in historiographic practice because of its pragmatic nature. On the whole, this tension occurred at several points including scholarly honesty, ideological restrictions, loyalty to an individual ruler, loyalty to the lineage system, and the self interest of the historian. These factors have strongly influenced the representational capability of Chinese historiography.

4.2 The Use of Historical Fact

When dealing with historical facts in Chinese historiographical writings the two major issues involved are how to record facts and how to arrange them in a historiographic writing structure. For each issue there are two aspects, namely, the technical and the ideological, both of which set limits on historiographic writing. The technical limitation of recording historical facts and events did not hamper the progress of Chinese historiography. In fact, any of the components referring to facts were effectively employed in historiographic constructions. The purpose of historiographic writing is primarily moral-ideological rather

² In contrast, for pre-Ch'in Confucian ethics, this theoretical tension exists between loyalty to ethical principles and loyalty to the power-holder.

than quasi-scientific. On the one hand, there is a problem of historiographic technique, on the other there is a problem of historiographic pragmatics. Chinese traditional historiography relies on the latter rather than on the former. In other words, under pre-modern intellectual conditions any number of historical facts could be equally employed in serving Chinese historiographic pragmatism.

5 Typology of Ideologico-Pragmatic Determinism in Organizing Historiographic Writing

Another important theme is how the ideological/axiological/pragmatic-oriented historiography of China, the *cheng shih*, influences the potential of expressing or representing historical truth. In one sense all the ideological, pragmatic, axiological, and moral concepts refer to the same mind set of the time. In another sense, the four are based on a pan-moralist attitude. Usually we distinguish between the ethical and the moral to stress the behavioral and customary aspects of the latter as socially fixed value patterns. The ethical is a theoretical justification of ideological-moral reality. At the cognitive level the intellectual aspect and the ideological one are interwoven into a textual mixture. In one sense the semiotic approach is directed to splitting this semantically mixed textuality.

5.1 Moral Ideology and Moral-Ideologically-Organizing Principles in Historiographic Texts

This paper does not deal with the ideological content of traditional Chinese morality widely discussed during the modern period. Instead, our focus is the text-organizing principles in Chinese historiography. The two sets of principles are about preconditions and writing-practices which have been mentioned above of which the former has already been discussed. Those metaphysical factors, which are preconditions for the framework of Chinese historiographic writing, can also be called the ideological conditions of historiographic practices. The more elaborate principles are embodied in the writing technique, namely a second kind of guiding principle in writing and editing historical texts. They can be further divided into linguistic, descriptive, inferential, and predictive types. These four levels of historiographic discourses are based on special moral-axiological patterns.

a. The Linguistic Level

The pictoriographical tradition of Chinese language indicates a strong pragmatic trait mixing the reference-denotational, emotion-connotational, moral-axiological and stimulating-behavioral meaning/effects into a single verbal unit. This necessarily plays a multiple role in discourses involving the significative, communicational and actional layers of Chinese semantics. This semantic tendency hampers the precise expression of the denotational signifieds, although it enriches the connotational and pragmatic ones. According to the author's analy-

sis, this special function is realized by the ancient single-character/sound word system, but has been changed by a modernized system composed of two-character/sound word units (cf. LI 1997(4), 126–7). One word in a synthetic semantic unit can refer to a different ontic status (thing, action, value and stimulus). For example, the word *wang* refers not only to the ruler, but also his actions in becoming the ruler. It also implies a hierarchical higher position in both a physical and moral sense. Implicitly, it forms effects to stimulate the imagination with an impulse to act. Almost all noun and verb key words are a semantic mixture of factual and evaluative elements. As an example, *fa* refers to the action of attacking as well as the moral or hierarchical nature of the action. The mere description of the act also signifies its moral implication. Similarly, a political rival or an enemy is officially called a “bandit” or a “thief” (*fei*). This adds a moral-attitudinal dimension when referring to a fact meant, with a purpose to strengthen a moral-pragmatic stimulating effect. A word plays its role in different levels of indicating (cognitionally distinguishing), evaluating (axiologically selecting) and stimulating (actionably deciding).

According to this morally-selective pattern of naming and describing individuals, and actions and events, the precision of the linguistic function is hampered in both describing and selecting the observed objects in historical narratives. On the one hand, the historian works on the principle of ideological selectivity in observing and recording events, on the other the linguistic-semantic tools are moral-ideologically constructed for a fixed pragmatic purpose. At the descriptive level, traditional Chinese expressions of historic facts and events are inherently led by a writing technique which had been ideologically defined in the historiographic tradition.

With this pragmatic tendency, the Chinese conceptual framework exhibits a pragmatic flexibility and efficiency. Semantically, the single-character system has a one word function which is very flexible with its denotative, connotative and pragmatic referents/effects in different contexts. Semantic working in this way further strengthens the pragmatic trait of the Chinese conceptual system which is more oriented towards moral-hermeneutic than referential/cognitional signifiers. As a result, the same word can be differently interpreted. There is not a precise corresponding relationship between a verbal unit and the related concept. The same verbal carrier can refer to different conceptual compounds with different semantic focuses or layers. The philosophical debates in ancient China were primarily caused by a semantic character with the same word signifying different signifieds in a different context. This phenomenon is a function of the non-phonetic-centrism of Chinese. Instead of sound-determinism, Chinese semantics is based on written-centrism (cf. LI 1997 (3), 59).

The fragmented textual remains of the early Chou, as well as earlier periods, left later generations seemingly “true” historical records but no acceptable historical pictures. That is why it is impossible to compose a reliable pre-Chou history on the basis of its primitive-historical and archaeological material. Rather, there is a presentation of history mixing historical remains, legends, and

fiction. According to ancient Chinese historiographic logic, historical “facts” are accepted pragmatically. In ancient China, there is a pragmatic historiographic epistemology employing any kind of “genuine” historical documents or verbal remnants to bring about a “genuineness” in historical narratives. In other words, true historical documents formed pragmatically, were always fragmented and used as building material for narrative constructions without a clear guideline about the relation between true historical documents and related historical processes. The narrative gaps could only be filled with a fictive imagination. The genuineness of historical reconstruction depends on the nature of what is missing in historical narration as well as the nature of the fragmented documents. When reconstruction is shaped by the ideologico-pragmatic historiography, historical truth in a modern sense suffers. Nevertheless, a fascination with truly historical remnants (this archaeologico-aesthetic Chinese preference continues today and neglects the historiographic-epistemological distinction between narrative truth and archaeological truth) has certainly furthered traditional historiography. This linguistic tendency also explains the synthetic/pluralist character of semantic organization in Chinese. By dint of semiotic analysis, different semantic planes can be distinguished, ranging from the referential to the institutional. While the same word may have different semantic contents in traditional historiographic texts, the precise meaning of the word can only be further distinguished on the basis of modern micro-semantics.

b. The Inferential Level

Historic texts mainly consist of narrative composites, historical events, and their linkages. Chinese historiography can be divided into pre-historiographical documents and historiographical narratives. The historical narratives were organized along three dimensions consisting of temporal (calendarial), motive-deductive and behavioral-causal. An event was arranged along this triple frame as the traditional calendarial system made it possible to organize events in a primitive fashion in a fixed temporal order. Pre-Ch'in historical documents and narratives were worked out by officials at both a central and local level according to a recording system arranged in temporal sequence. However, the pragmatic character of pre-Ch'in historiographic practices had written records organized at a lower administrative level. What we see in the historical narratives in the classics, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the *Historical Documents* are a combination of earlier broken records and a later narrative reconstruction, made up of a mixture of fact and fiction. Put another way, historical “facts” were employed in shaping historical stories fictively organized in a particular ideological way. There are at least two kinds of historical truths here, “broken bricks” which might come from true historical sources and tales linking with true narrative reality. In Chinese historiography the former cannot be used to sustain the latter. In this sense, we must reject the notion that the classic *The Book of Changes* is the oldest Chinese historical book. The earlier date of its broken “bricks” cannot be used to show the entire text was written earlier. Those “bro-

ken bricks” have only an archaeological value and not a historiographic one. In fact, the earlier divination remnants differ from later narrative components in the book which dates only from the late Chou period.

c. The Motive-Effect Deductive Logic

According to the ancients' straight-line inference about human behavior, the observers and analysts attempt to form a one-to-one corresponding relation between a psychological motive and its behavioral effect with an external result traced back to its origin. If this way of simplifying causal relations of historical narratives is technical in nature, the historiographic motive-psychology is highly influenced by ideological preconditions. Human conduct in ancient China can be described as twofold made up of the positive and the moral, of which the latter must be linked with motivation. With this inferential logic the causal links between related events are dimmed by moral-motivational speculation. This is because it was more difficult to ascertain moral motivational speculation under primitive intellectual and technical conditions even though the relatively simpler political conduct of earlier periods made it easier to carry out intellectual operations than in later periods.

This moral-motive directed historiographic logic functioned in a more systematically distortive way, because moral logic and utilitarian logic overlapped for ancient Chinese. As a result, the cause of success and failure was customarily reduced to the effect of good and bad. This kind of inferential logic widely misinterpreted historical events. Chinese morality-directed hermeneutics was pragmatic and utilitarian in character rather than directed towards historical truth. The historiographic interpretation served the ideological pragmatism of power-holders and conveyed a message for stimulating actions in the future rather than knowing positively the past which is claimed to be the goal of historiography. Pseudo-causal logic based on morality-hermeneutics dominates the Chinese mentality even today.

d. The Level of Causal Analysis

Less developed scientific practices of ancient Chinese had the effect of minimizing both inductive and deductive reasoning at a higher intellectual level. This weakness, also found in Chinese historiography, has prevented a more solid inquiry into problems of causal inference about related events. This is due to both intellectual and technical reasons. This pragmatic-oriented historiography based on the morality of the times and a ruling-class centrism in academic life, establishes the ideological and technical patterns of operative selectivity in observing, recording, writing, editing and stylizing historical processes, that leads to the establishment of a writing-pattern of distortive representation which weakens the historiographic capability for representing historical reality. Among other things, the imperial centrism in Chinese historiography neglected and excluded a great number of social and cultural events. Consequently, modern historians

can barely reconstruct a comprehensive history of the past on the basis of traditional historiographic texts. All modern sociological and economic historiographic efforts have the same difficulty with the reliability of written materials which originally were not collected and organized for scientific inquiry.

5.2 Causal Reality

Historical reality has basically two discursive layers, a nominal/descriptive and a causal/motivational one. The former deals with reports on features, things, situations, and occurrences of historic events, the latter deals with more complex causal networks of events. The so-called historical reality more properly refers to causal networks of events. In this sense, traditional Chinese historiography is weaker in its realistic representation because of a paucity of scientific spirit. A less than precise causal representation is mainly explained by its ideologico-pragmatic direction of carrying out historiography. In short, the scholars' priority is primarily one of moral-ideological utility rather than searching for scientific truth. Modern studies of traditional historiography still have little chance to remedy this past deficiency. Even less possible is a sociologically-directed approach confounded by a lack of accessible historico-sociological materials. Whatever can be done is based on written materials organized by pre-modern scribes with a less than scientific mind. If written historical documents are the main sources for reconstructing Chinese history, we are left with only an incomplete outline lacking rich, precise, and interconnected details. This basic shortcoming is even more damaging owing to the very structure of traditional Chinese historiography.

An important aspect of historical facts is the causal links between the precedent (both external and internal) and the consequence. Historical events, in particular, are related to causal networks of events making it possible to have a more complete description of historical processes. Nevertheless, the basic weakness of causal analyses in Chinese historiography is that it makes this part of historical facts less readable. So-called historical truth is in essence causal truth, which is exhibited in correct descriptions of the causal linking of factual events. Or to put it another way, it is a definite historical process containing both factual units and their causal links. For this central issue, Chinese historiography with its overriding function of ideological morality is especially weaker in its representational efficiency.

6 Problems of Historical Truth in Traditional Chinese Historiography

Both in a broad and a narrow sense, Chinese historiography occupies a central position in Chinese intellectual history. From the period of modernization early in the 20th century until now, Chinese scholars have been reconsidering the nature and function of traditional Chinese historiography. How to make Chinese historiography more "scientific" has been the prime concern of Chinese histori-

ans since their initial contact with the more positivist-scientific Western historiography. The goal of modern or Western-directed historiography has been to have a scientific orientation. One of the leading thinkers in the 20th century, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, wrote that "Chinese historians have not treated historical documents in a scientific way, so their writings are full of false and silly statements. We present-day historians should start renovating a new Chinese historiography, first trying to obtain the correct historical documents and then attempting intellectual and critical historical studies on the basis of the correct documents" (LIANG 1984, 147). With a less than scientific Chinese historiography and a more scientific Western one, Chinese historians, in order to obtain more truth about their historical past, have attempted to be more scientific in reflecting on their own traditional historiography. It is instructive to compare this situation with the current historico-epistemological discussions about historical truth in current Western Post-modernism. For present-day scientific-minded Chinese historians there are problems in determining what is acceptable as being true and what is unacceptable false in historiographic texts. There are problems with:

- a. True and fabricated ancient books;
- b. Honest and dishonest descriptions of historical events;
- c. Correct and incorrect descriptions and analyses of historical events;
- d. Positive and legendary written materials;
- e. True and fabricated events.

(Cf. LIANG 1984, 131–147)³

In modern Chinese historiographic criticism, the topic of fabricated and false books is crucially important. This is linked to another topic of historiographic epistemology about how to judge the quality and function of ancient historiographic writings.

The brilliant scholarly tradition of philological studies in Chinese intellectual history, because of its purely technical character, is not a part of modern studies about either historiographic writing patterns or ideological preconditions, although it instrumentally serves both of them. Nevertheless, it provides a technical means which is of help in unraveling the less scientific nature of Chinese historiography. This modern scholarly tradition has provided a foundation for the special study of distinguishing the true from false segments of the classical historiographic texts (*p'ien wei hsiieh*). Consequently, a number of what were thought to be ancient books were found to have been written or fabricated much later. Therefore, the veracity of the books and related historical facts are now in

3 In the first Chinese book dealing with a typology of written literature published some 1500 years ago, the author Liu Hsieh clearly shows that books about ancient history are replete with false records. He writes that "the older the period was, the more false stories its history contains". The main reason is the intentional fabrications which are meant to attract and convince the reader (LIU 1981, 171). For less than scientific historians, fabricating operation and rhetoric creation are not necessarily contrary to the principles of historiographic writing.

doubt. If there are “false” historical texts it logically follows that there are “true” historical texts. If we characterize traditional Chinese historical literature as being “unscientific” in terms of modern Western historiographic theory, there must be a “scientific” criterion upon which to base the discussions.

Deliberate fabrication of texts and events frequently occurred in Chinese history. Being aware of these fabrications that have taken place in the past is important in judging the quality of Chinese historiographic texts. Either for moral-ideological reasons or for practical ones, the history of fabricating texts justifies making a distinction between what is true and what is false in historiographic texts. Many contemporary historiographic fabrications, either for ideological reasons such as denying or distorting the Holocaust and the Nanking Massacre, or because of technical unavoidability of fictionalization in organizing narratives, belong to the same category. This further proves the existence of deliberate false descriptions of historical events. In such examples we must make a distinction between right/honest and wrong/dishonest historiographic descriptions. This proves that historiographic discourse can present truer and less true representations of history, as well as true and false ones. After all, historiographic discourse, different from the literary, is only a verbal medium to convey ideas which must have external referents separate from their verbal signifiers. In any case, historical fact cannot be reduced to its conceptual representation.

The principles of writing Chinese historiography outlined above are the primary reasons why modern Chinese historians are prepared to adopt a scientific methodology. In their mind, first and foremost, scientific historiography presents a higher truth of historical processes. Consequently, there is a distinction between historical process and historiographic description. This problem, found throughout modern Chinese history, becomes clearer because modern historians are now aware of :

- a. the historical process (objective);
- b. related historiographic descriptions (representational);
- c. the possibility of having better historiographic descriptions (more correct representational).

In addition, historians are constantly aware that they:

- a. cannot invent the process and therefore they must try to find the external object;
- b. are critical of unsatisfactory descriptions of the process;
- c. presume they can present better descriptions with better methods in order to better understand the external process.

The distinction between b and c is an epistemological rather than a rhetorical problem because of the referent-direction of historiographic semantics; its expressive freedom is limited by facts shared by different people. With the availability of rich information, today people have more confidence in reaching an

objective process. For example, there can only be a true and unique⁴ reality about the Kremlin leaders' international strategy during the Cold-War period. But there could be different reports of this strategy. Rejection of the objective existence of historical events is certainly wrong from a moral point of view, but it is even more wrong for historico-epistemological reasons.

The modern Chinese historiographic movement before World War Two which definitely distinguishes true from false ancient texts should be part of the current international historiographic-epistemological debates. The reason is that historians have multiple epistemological tensions and dilemmas. They are:

- a. methodological: modern and traditional; more and less scientific; more and less rational;
- b. material: evidence of fabricated and false Chinese historical literature implies the opposite, i.e. true materials and true historical processes;
- c. narrative causality: fictive and moral-ideological factors involved in weakening the reliability of historiographic texts.

Pre-scientific Chinese historiography logically implies there is a more scientific historiography. Flaws in Chinese historiography are also found to different degrees in modern Western historiographical works. This is particularly the case with ideological fabrications and professional ignorance of non-Western cultures and societies.

The above explanation just touches on the complexity of “historical truth” as a concept in modern discussions in historical theory. Since Nietzsche, Barthes and Foucault, a naive positivism has been more strictly criticized and the meaning of historical texts has been more elaborately analyzed. Simply speaking, we become more careful in believing and judging what is said in historical discourses. But on the other side, Nietzsche's perspectivism should not be employed in an extreme way. Nietzsche's writing is more critical than constructive, we should be careful about inferring anything positive from his words. In brief, all of those traditional philosophical terms are too broad to be employed without considering their relevant context. The same can be said about the concept of historical truth. The example of traditional Chinese historiography discussed here presents an opportunity for us to more precisely redefine historico-theoretical terms with a more suitable classificatory system based on an interdisciplinary/cross-cultural approach.

4 The term truth can be used either to refer to discourse or to reality. It is due to pragmatic semantics that, depending on the context, the same signifier can have different signifieds. When proclaiming a discourse to be true, the word “true” here means the description is “correct”. But when saying an event is true, the word “true” also means the description is “correct”. The representation involves both representing and represented. Therefore the term “true” can be used to characterize either side of the representational relationship. In essence, it refers to the relationship itself.

7 The Significance of Rereading Chinese Historiographic Writings

It is clear that Chinese historical documents are the major source for understanding Chinese intellectual history. They may not be the precise records of history, but they still qualify as intellectual history. It is possible we might have less useful knowledge of Chinese history than we might wish for after critically examining the quality of these documents. But, after all, we also inversely increase our knowledge of history by deleting improper material from documents. There are questions that need to be answered about the socio-political utility of historical documents. Living in a modern international world, we must approach the problem in a scientific manner. Politicians today appeal more and more to contemporary sources of wisdom than to historical ones. In such a rapidly changing world, historical records, especially ancient ones, are less valuable for solving today's practical problems.

Both in and outside China, historiography continues to be important intellectual material for ideological manipulation; it is a part of the foundation of modern nationalism. With traditional historiographico-ideological pragmatism, the scientific tendency of modern historiography requires a more reasonable historical realism and a more rational ethical judgment. This can help overcome social and political wrongdoings that a non-scientific-oriented historiography ignores along with many of the original referents outside of the discourses. Either the humanities in general or historiography in particular should cherish such a goal in promoting human welfare. This is perhaps the final reason why we should carefully reconsider the relationship between historical epistemology and social reality.

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