

HISTORY AND EPICS IN CHINA
AND IN THE WEST

A STUDY OF DIFFERENCES
IN CONCEPTION OF THE HUMAN STORY

My study cannot give more than some comments on a very extensive theme that requires a number of studies which have not even been precisely formulated, as yet. I should like to show that the specific thought pattern, the specific perception of reality, intrinsic to a specific cultural category—that which is the predominant one in the given cultural complex—influences all other categories and determines their nature. I want to illustrate my thesis on the relationship between literature and history. With some exaggeration I would formulate my thesis as follows: as literature is, so is history; the same perception of reality is in the background of both and determines their form. I will

limit myself to this theme and I will not deal with the causes determining the differences of pattern in various fields of a certain culture; I will not attempt to solve the philosophical and sociological problems, neither will I seek for further connections in the total cultural complex, with which I illustrate my thesis, that is the Chinese cultural complex, although it would not be too difficult.

When I confront the phenomena of Chinese culture and the culture of Europe—as far as history is concerned I cite specifically examples of Greek history—I do not intend to speak of their basic differences or collate material to prove such differences. I am more inclined to think that similar differences could be found in any two cultural spheres. The European material serves only for a better understanding of the basic features of Chinese literature and history.

I do not speak about anything entirely new, as the connections between Greek historiography and the epics have been pointed out time and again. To refresh your memory I cite the example of the characterization of Herodotus' *History* by the outstanding Czech scholar on Greek literature, Professor Ferdinand Stiebitz:¹ "The structure of [Herodotus] history resembles the epic technique. Just as a large number of epic events are piled around the main narrative line in the *Iliad*, so it is in the *History*, especially in the first volume. Although the leading motif links all these narratives, it often does so very freely, so that despite the unifying idea the result is not a homogeneous whole. It is similar with the *Iliad*. The motif of the *History* itself is also related to the motif of the *Iliad* (the hostilities between two sides) and in some details Herodotus also imitated the epic technique. Even his style leans heavily on the epic mode. To a certain extent the work of Herodotus can be described as an epos extended into prose."

To fully elucidate the meaning of this characterization of Herodotus' *History* as an epic work, we quote the definition of epics given by Hirt in his book *Das Formgesetz der epischen, dramatischen und lyrischen Dichtung* (Berlin, 1923), pp. 43-44:

¹ Herodotus, *Zdějin východních národu* (From the History of the Eastern Nations) (Praha 1941), Preface, p. 14.

“Das Problem des Epikers heisst daher: Haltung haben, Einheit schaffen, damit nicht Atome aller Zeiten und Räume durcheinander wirbeln, sondern womöglich doch auch eine *Art fließender Handlung von gleichmässiger Stete*, Dichte, Konkretheit erreicht wird.” And elsewhere (p. 28) he elaborates his idea as follows: “Wer möglichst auf Darstellung dringt, muss den Treppenabsatz meiden, muss Stete, ununterbrochenen Fluss auch der Zeitstufe suchen und daher so komponieren, dass von einem kräftigen Ausgang ab ununterbrochen weiter geführt werden kann, ohne Plusquamperfekthandlung...”

Herodotus' *History* certainly presents a good example of a narration which flows as a powerful stream from the very beginning. An even more perfect example of a grand epic composition is Thucydides' history. From its famous beginning “Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it;”² it develops a great drama of struggle which according to the historian's words “was the greatest movement yet known in history.”

If we turn to Chinese history, we find nothing of the kind; the basic structure of Chinese historical works is the direct opposite of the homogeneity and continuity demanded by Hirt for an epic work. I would say, that in Chinese works the “Treppenabsatz” is emphasized rather than the “ununterbrochener Fluss,” to employ Hirt's terminology. Let us take as an example two chief works of ancient Chinese historiography, which originated only a few centuries later than the above mentioned Greek works: *Tso-chuan* “The Commentary of Master Tso” of the third century B.C. and Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih Chi* “Records of the Historian,” of the first century B.C.

The former was conceived as a commentary to the chronicle of the small State of Lu supposedly compiled by Confucius. The narrative embodying the history of China from 722 to 481 is divided into sections corresponding to the respective entries of

² Quoted from the English translation, R. Crawley, *Thucydides' Peloponnesian War* (Everyman's Library, London-Toronto, 1929), p. 1.

the chronicle of Lu. Naturally, we cannot even speak of a homogeneous stream in a work of this nature. It is said—but I personally do not share this view—that the original work had a more homogeneous character and that it was divided into sections only later to form the commentary to the chronicle of the State of Lu. There is no doubt whatsoever that the second book has been preserved in the form in which it emerged from the author's hands—at least as far as its basic conception and structure are concerned. And this work is even less of a homogeneous nature than the *Commentary of Master Tso*. The material of the *Records of the Historian* is organized in a very intricate system of chapters, constructed according to two divergent points of view to create an impression of a homogeneous stream. Of these viewpoints the most important one, apparently, is the social importance of the material, that is the application of a specific social hierarchy; the most important material—at least in the author's opinion—is placed in the foreground. The next viewpoint is the similar nature of the material; related matters, belonging to the same category, are attached to each other. Only then comes the postulate of chronological succession to arrange matters in chronological order. Thus, the first place is held by the annals of the individual dynasties (*pen-chi*) followed by the chronological tables (*piao*), the treatises (*shu*) on various economic and cultural matters, such as canals, ceremonies, economy, etc.; then the history of various principalities, the "hereditary families" (*shih-chia*), and finally the biographies of prominent individuals (*lieh-chuan*). This part comprises several histories and descriptions of various foreign peoples as well. This survey in itself shows that the author was aiming at the systematic classification of the material and not the creation of a continuous whole.

The author, on the contrary, tried to emphasize the dividing lines between the individual sections, because a number of the individual chapters not only have independent conclusions in which the author expresses his evaluation of the recorded facts, but independent prefaces as well. The 26th biography, dealing with the "knights of the dagger" is an especially characteristic example. The chapter contains the biographies of five men who attempted to assassinate rulers. Each of these biographies is

freely linked with the preceding one with the words: "And in so many and so many years, in this and this place, an event took place..." The entire chapter is then ended with the author's conclusion which presents a general characterization of these personalities.

It is evident that the basic structural method is a loose linking of material with certain common features, a method which could be designated as categorization or systematization, and no attempt was made at achieving internal homogeneity by means of a specific manner of presentation. Homogeneity is created in fact from the outside, the whole is concluded with an ending which contains an evaluation of the mentioned facts. Two parts stand in sharp opposition to each other; the historical material of a highly *objective* character—as we will see later—and the *subjective* evaluation of the historian. Hirt's demand for unifying the facts is fulfilled, what he calls "damit nicht Atome aller Zeiten und Räume durcheinander wirbeln," but not in the method which he finds most appropriate for this aim, namely by means of the creation of "eine Art fließender Handlung." Undoubtedly we are coming to the important characterization of the differences between Chinese and Greek historiography.

We realize the absolute difference between Chinese historical works and epic works according to Hirt's conception when we analyze the Chinese attempts at a literary classification, at delineating various literary categories. We can use any such work from the oldest attempts at a classification of Chinese literature in the 6th century A.D., the well-known work by Liu Hsieh *The Heart of Literature in a Carved Dragon*,³ to the latest efforts. (For practical reasons, in the following, I use Kojima Kichiro's work translated into Chinese under the title *Chung-kuo wen-bsieh t'ung-lun*, Shanghai 1935, which summarizes all the preceding literature of this type and at the same time retains the traditional viewpoints and does not bring European criteria into his thinking.) We find that for Chinese

³ *Wen-bsin tiao lung*, translated into English by V. C. Y. Shih, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons by Liu Hsieh. A Study of Thought and Pattern in Chinese Literature* (New York, 1959).

classifiers not an entire historical work is a unit, as we see it, but its individual sections and chapters. Kojima, for example, includes the genre *chuan*, of which he says its main function is the recording of the deeds of persons and their preservation for their descendants, in the second basic category *hsü-chi* which we can characterize as "narrative prose." At the same time he notes that in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih Chi* there are over 70 *chuan*, but not even these *chuan* have a homogeneous structure, and he regards *chih* "treatises" as a separate category. In other words, he considers the chapters of the *chuan* type as one literary type, while other above mentioned parts of *Shih Chi*, such as the annals of the dynasties (*pen-chi*), the tables (*piao*), and the treatises (*shu*), etc., he regards as belonging to other categories. It is undoubtedly correct to consider these individual parts as independent self-contained works, such as the above mentioned example of the chapter about the "knights of the dagger." The independence of the chapters is given both by the homogeneous nature of the material included in them, and even more by the prefaces and conclusions, which firmly enclose them; figuratively speaking, I would say they are the full stops after the material that has been collated. Individual chapters appear also as independent works in various anthologies.

It could be refuted that such a division of material into completely independent sections, and their arrangement in a system according to hierarchical viewpoints, was enforced by the material itself, because Ssu-ma Ch'ien's work deals mainly with the period when China was divided into a number of almost completely independent states and it was not possible to present these varied facts as a unified whole. This is the opinion of Burton Watson, who recently published a book on the first great Chinese historian.⁴ Burton says (p. 102): "If the Chinese historian were not, like Herodotus, to allow himself long digressions to fill in background and considerable freedom in disposition of material, it was obvious that he must find some more suitable form to deal with the complex history of a broad and disunited China." Yet at the same time Watson does not

⁴ Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien Grand Historian of China* (New York, 1958).

ask the question why, on the one hand, Herodotus had such a predilection for the "long digressions"—we are all acquainted with them and we know how absurd a tangle his narration becomes sometimes—and why, on the other hand, Ssu-ma Ch'ien does not present, for example, the facts pertaining to a certain person in his biography but in an entirely different place, as Watson points out (p. 183). It is obvious that the Greek and Chinese historians were guided by entirely different patterns in their works; the historical facts they collected were distributed in quite different categories and relations.

It seems to Watson that "simple chronological order" is the most natural principle for anyone working on historical material (p. 101), so that any diversions from this norm can be explained only by the special character of the material. Yet it seems that this "simple chronological order" was not so natural a thing for the Chinese, as we shall point out with an example which is quite explicit.

Although all the high Chinese literature is of an extremely subjective nature, that is concerned predominantly with the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the creator, literary autobiographies were a very rare phenomenon in old China. Until a short time ago it was believed that with the exception of a few autobiographical sketches, they did not exist at all. (Let us keep this fact in mind as we shall return to it in our further discussion.) When the first literary autobiography was written in the dawn of the 19th century it was not narrated in "simple chronological order," according to Watson, and as every European author would find quite natural, but the biographical facts were divided into certain categories in the same manner as the historical facts by Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Shen Fu, the author of this first Chinese literary biography,⁵ arranges the events of his life, as indicated by the title, into six "histories" and he did this according to their internal character; thus he arranges them into specific categories. The first chapter "The Wedded Bliss" depicts the happy events of the author's married life. The second

⁵ Fou-sheng liu-chi, *Hsin wen-hua shu-shem*, Shanghai s.a. Translated into Czech by J. Prušek under the title *Šest historii prchavého života* (Six Histories of Fleeting Life) (Praha, 1956).

chapter "The Little Pleasures of Life" tells of the author's various pleasures, such as caring for flowers, gay meetings with his friends, etc. The third chapter "Sorrow" portrays the illness and death of his wife and the author's indigence and poverty, while the fourth chapter "The Joys of Travel" describes the trips made in his youth and his later journeys in China. The last two lost chapters had a similar arrangement. The division into individual sections is not carried out consistently, of course; much of one chapter seems to fit into another and vice versa. In some parts the author attempts a chronological order, in other parts he ignores it entirely; and it would be extremely difficult to use the material he collected to write a biography of our type, in which the events were presented in chronological succession. Apparently the similarity of the material, as in historical works, and the emotional aspect of either pleasant or sad facts, is decisive for the arrangement of these records. From this point of view the book is very close to lyrics. On the other hand, it is necessary to note that some things are combined in certain units which would have disintegrated if presented in chronological sequence, for example, the history of the author's marriage, or his gradual impoverishment and so on. The Chinese order also corresponds with the way reminiscences usually arise in our memory, that is by their similarity.

From this example alone we already see that the compiling of historical facts in chronological order is not absolutely natural, and there is much in favor of the Chinese organization of material.

But let us try to answer the fundamental question of the cause of these divergent approaches to historical phenomena in Greece and in China. It seems to me that the main difference lies in the element that constantly recurs in Hirt's definition, and finally in all our descriptions of older historical works: that is in our conception that history—what actually took place as well as the depiction of what took place—is some sort of stream, a continuous flow. It is repeated again and again in Hirt's definitions, in the terms "eine Art fliessender Handlung," "ununterbrochener Fluss," et. al. This concept appears whenever we think about history; Professor Stiebitz, mentioned above, for example, in describing Herodotus' style, speaks of a "flow of

narration," etc. We will not solve the problem here of whether we really perceive social events as a continuous flow, we only want to point out that the historian does not come into contact with the historical process—whatever the nature of the process is—but only with its reflection in the human mind, and at that, with a reflection that is somehow objectified, with sources, relics, etc. Thus the historian basically encounters only individual facts and not processes. This is an exceptionally important starting point and we must fully realize it for our further discussion.

Our historians presuppose that what these sources reflect is a certain stream and therefore on the basis of their sources they attempt to form a continuous chain of ideas that would correspond to the anticipated nature of the described reality—with its continuation and homogeneity. This is the epic depiction of a certain period of time as a stream, as Hirt speaks of it. It is basically an artistic activity, the evocation of a certain concept, which has an exceedingly complicated relationship to the supposedly depicted reality.

This tendency of describing a specific period of time or a specific sequence of events as a homogeneous stream has brought about a certain fictionalization of European history. The result of this is, as we have pointed out above, that in many cases European historiography has resembled epic works, or even novels. These relationships are also emphasized in describing our older historiography and its affinity with novel-writing has been pointed out. When the oft-quoted Professor Stiebitz, for example, speaks of Herodotus' work he underlines the common points of ancient Greek historiography and story-writing. He says (p. 9): "Thus their nature strongly resembled narrations, sometimes even novels and they had the folk spirit of Ionian story-telling. We must never forget that the elders looked at a work of history predominantly as a work that was artistic in form and entertaining and instructive in content. This point of view was generally applied, rather than any effort to search for and write the truth."

The historian achieves homogeneity in depicting a chosen historical period by formulating a certain theme, in literature we would say "subject" (*sujet*), and then selecting and organizing

his material accordingly. Thus, for example, the "subject" of Thucydides' history is the Peloponnesian War. Of course, what the late sharp critic of the traditional novel form, B. Shklovskij, wrote about the literary subject, can often be applied to the historical subject. (*Theorie prozy* [The Theory of Prose], translated from Russian, Praha 1948, p. 243): "The subject (sujet) is the picklock, not the key. The subject schemes are only in very approximate correspondence with the life material they mould. The subject already harms the material by selection on the basis of quite arbitrary characteristics." An example of a subject picklock of this kind in historiography certainly is the outline of Herodotus' work; the perpetual struggle between the Greeks and the barbarians. He had to deform and by force press his material into this mould which was very unsuitable for his varied and rich material. Compared with this example we have to appreciate certain methods of Chinese historiography.

The Chinese historian was naturally confronted with the same historical phenomena as the European historian. Only he never thought of working his historical facts into a unified structure that would be in some accordance with reality, of trying perhaps to "evoke," "revive," "conjure" past events before our eyes. And if he thought of it—abundant examples can be found both in *Tso-chuan* and in *Ssu-ma Ch'ien*—they are only isolated short episodes. The Chinese historian knew that he had before him sources and relics which stood in complicated relationship with real happenings and that these sources and the facts included in them were a category of their own, the mutual connections of which were not defined—or at least not exclusively—by the relations between the phenomena these sources reflected. First of all, historical sources, in any event, represent a reflection of only a very insignificant part of real processes, moreover they appear regularly elaborated in specific synthetic complexes or structures. Basically, it always is a complex of individual facts.

Thus the Chinese historian does not work up his historical sources, he does not combine the facts he has found in successive chains, he does not fictionalize them, but he arranges them into certain categories. He does not strive at creating some sort of artistic picture of the past, but in presenting the material

that has been preserved in the most accessible form to the reader.⁶

Thus, he does not create, but he arranges. This was expressed very precisely by the oft-quoted Ssu-ma Ch'ien in the preface to his Historical Records: "My narration is only a classification of the material that has been preserved. Thus there is no creation here, and it is a mistake to compare my work with that of Confucius."⁷

The tendency to preserve the sources in the original form rather increases after Ssu-ma Ch'ien's time. Any chapter of his immediate successor, Pan Ku (32-92 A.D.) who wrote *Han-shu*, the History of the Han Dynasty, during which Ssu-ma Ch'ien lived, would suffice as an example. Let us look at the chapter dedicated to the usurper Wang Mang who overthrew the Han Dynasty for a time.⁸ Certainly few personalities could be more suited for the subject of a dramatic, epic narration than the history of the rise and fall of this person who was able to sacrifice everything for his ambitions. Not even a trace of this, however, can be found in Pan Ku's work. Painstakingly, but practically without any internal relationship, he recorded one fact of Wang Mang's life after another. Throughout we feel the official records in the background; the author drew upon them and even more often he directly quoted the official

⁶ This difference between European historiography was characterized very appropriately by Ch. S. Gardner in his work *Chinese Traditional Historiography* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1938), in which he says (p. 69): "We in the West demand that an historian analyze and classify his facts for presentation in that logical sequence which shall seem to his individual brain best calculated to expose, not merely their order in time, but also the concatenation of cause and effect. We demand, moreover, that he create a faithful and lifelike reflection of past times, strange places, and unfamiliar personalities. The Chinese, on the contrary, conceive of the past as a series of concrete events and overt acts; and of history as a registration of them which should be exact and dispassionate, without any projection across the scene of the registrar, who must punctiliously refrain from garbling his presentation by his own perhaps imperfect appreciation of the true sequence of causation." And later on (p. 105) he adds: "that it may almost be said of Chinese history that it consists exclusively of primary sources."

⁷ See *Shih Chi*, chapter 130, Ku Chich-kang's edition, vol. 3, p. 8.

⁸ This biography was translated in the work of O. H. Stange, *Die Monographie über Wang Mang* (Leipzig, 1938).

documents, memorials to the throne, edicts, etc. It is really nothing more than a collection of material on the history of this person without any attempt at working it up.

It was obvious that the aims of Greek and Chinese historiography were entirely different. In Europe it had in mind a reader who read a historical work with aesthetic interests—almost like an epos or a novel.

Yet what was its aim in China? It evidently did not aim at gratifying the desire for exciting and thrilling plots, as in Europe, because Chinese history did that only in very exceptional cases.

The purpose of Chinese historiography was probably indicated in the author's prefaces and conclusions, mentioned above, at the end of certain historical material. They show that this material mainly served for general political and moral discussions and it was the subject of certain evaluations. It is clear that this was the real purpose of historical material as the same name *ch'un-ch'iu* "Spring and Autumn" or "Chronicles, Annals" was used for the real chronicle, the above mentioned Annals of the State of Lu, as well as for the book of explicitly political and moral essays, compiled by order of the statesman Lu Pu-wei, *Lu Pu-wei ch'un-ch'iu*. The common denominator was most likely the fact that this book contained the same *material*, substance for reflection and evaluation, as the chronicle ascribed to Confucius. An identical orientation is apparent in a whole series of the oldest works of Chinese historiography; the subject of their description is not an event or act but a reflection. Thus the very oldest book of Chinese prose *Shu-ching* "The Book of Documents" contains in great part no more than the statements and dialogues of eminent rulers and men of Ancient times. The contents of other works of this kind, such as *Kuo-yu* "Discourses on the States" and *Chan-kuo-ts'e* "Plans of the Warring States," etc. are conversations exclusively.

Throughout the ages history was the main storehouse of material for Chinese treatises and Chinese rhetoric, both actual speeches or written essays—*wen-chang*, which were the primary creative field of Chinese men of letters—as far as we can

speak of creation at all.⁹ It was necessary to illustrate each thesis with examples taken from history.

Let us return to the question of form in Chinese history, to the fact, as Ch. S. Gardner says, that Chinese history appears to be only a collection of raw primary sources. We have said above that European history accepted the form of the dominating European genre, that is epics, its model being narrative ballads such as Homer's and later on the novel. It is necessary to ask whether or how Chinese historiography is related, as far as form is concerned, to certain Chinese literary genres, the question we formulated at the very outset of this study.

It is sufficient to go through the collected works of any man of letters, what the Chinese call *chi*, to find the same rough material, from the European point of view, as in Chinese history. These collected works usually consist of various types of poems in the first place, then letters, various essays and finally a huge mass of what the Chinese designate as *pi-chi*, notes. They are records of everything that caught the writer's attention in one way or another. There are, for example, quotations and various notes from his reading, records of the most diverse facts, for instance, miraculous stories the author heard or read, remarks about various interesting personalities, further on there are often diaries, or notes of diverse experiences, such as accounts of trips and wandering, etc. We feel that we have before us something similar to what is contained in the posthumous writings collections of European writers: the author's letters, diaries, and numerous notes the author made to use as material for his future work. In China, however, this material was never worked up, it was only classified according to its form or content, like the material of the historical works. The reasons for compiling this, from our point of view, un-worked material¹⁰ will be understood with the help of modern European criticism

⁹ B. Watson calls attention to the connections between Chinese historiography and rhetoric, he says (p. 137): "In the hands of these early thinkers, expounding their particular theories and panaceas, history became the handmaiden of rhetoric."

¹⁰ It is unworked only from our "epic" point of view, of course, always aiming at creating inclusive entities. As far as the individual pieces are concerned they are worked out very artistically.

of those works in which all material is subordinate and becomes a part of a subject composition. After the above quoted Soviet literary theoretician B. Shklovskij had pointed out that the traditional subject theme deforms the literary material, he asked what can take the place of the subject. He then introduced the type of literary material analogous to that which fills the collections of Chinese authors. He writes:¹¹ "Now the question arises, what will take the place of the subject in prose. The most elementary substitution is the method of transferring the point of view from which one narrates, the substitution of spatial narration into a travelogue, or from temporal narration into memoirs. Here we have pure interest in the material and a conventional method of going from the fact to another." Preceding this Shklovskij quoted the Russian writer Rozanov who pointed out further similar fields of literary material and at the same time gave his evaluation which would not appear to be very far from the opinions of the Chinese authors of the quoted works (p. 237): "Instead of the 'nonsense in novels' (understand: nonsense written in the form of novels, Prusek) all the modern novels should be thrown out of the journals and in their place...Well, publish something more fundamental: science, treatises, philosophy. And elsewhere, best of all in independent books reproduce a suitcase full of old letters...and it would be 'read with thought' by other readers, some serious people."

That is, most likely, precisely the way the old Chinese men of letters regarded everything that was not supported by facts, all that appeared to them as mere fiction. They evaluated it as *hsu* "empty" as compared with facts, which they called *shih* "that which is full." As long as novels and stories, for example, were not based on historical facts they were evaluated as empty; we repeatedly find that the authors of old Chinese novels tried to present actual figures, events and existing scenery in their works, obviously to avoid being accused of writing "empty" works, that are mere inventions.¹²

¹¹ *The Theory of Prose*, p. 246.

¹² I deal with this complex of questions in detail in my introduction to the translation of *Lao Ts' an yu-chi* by Liu O, *Putování Starého Chomce* [The Travels of Lao Ts'an] (Praha, 1960), p. 105 and p. 128.

Thus the thought that historical facts should be presented in the form of a work of art, the conception of which would be an independent creation of the author's would have been undoubtedly rejected with indignation by the Chinese writer as incompatible with the solemnity of history and the great responsibility of the historian.

The polemic on the acceptability or nonacceptability of the creative invention in literature, which the great writer Lu Hsün was forced to conduct in the twenties with another, otherwise a very good writer of New China, Yü Ta-fu, is unusual evidence of this disparaging attitude to artistic invention and creative fantasy.¹³

In Yü Ta-fu's opinions there obviously is a trace of the traditional attitudes of Chinese men of letters, the above-mentioned scepticism and disregard of imagination and creative activity. Yü Ta-fu insists that every literary work is of somewhat autobiographical nature. When a work of this kind deals with a third person and the writer, for example, gives too detailed a description of the mental states of his hero the reader necessarily asks how come the author knew them so well. He then supposedly loses his illusions and that leads to a loss of literary genuineness. Therefore Yü Ta-fu considered diaries and letters to be the most appropriate literary form.¹⁴ Here we come across the basic idea that determined the nature of all high Chinese literature and historiography as well, in this late formulation. Writing should be truthful, it should depict something real, invention arouses suspicions and is condemnable. For that reason writing should be mainly a record of facts and events, of the mental states of the writer. The author should give an exact description of what and how it happened, and not add anything to it or invent. In this way reality is reduced to a record of individual facts; insofar as the author works with sources, they are only to be reproduced and arranged.

It is interesting how near the descendant of the old Chinese

¹³ See Tsem-mo hsie, *Yeh chi chih yi, Lu Hsün b'üan-chi* (Peking, 1956), Vol. 4, p. 15.

¹⁴ It must be noted that Lu Hsün, well versed in literary theory, thoroughly shattered this opinion.

writers, Yü Ta-fu, and the theoreticians and writers formed by the European literary avantgarde, such as Shklovskij and Rozanov are to each other. Similar opinions meet on the crossroads of such diverse roads of development, defending purity of material, its non-deformation, and rejecting the subject of a literary work as a picklock. Naturally, if these theoreticians had turned to the problems of history, they would have defended the Chinese concept of history as collections of "non-deformed" material in contrast to the working up of this material according to the demands of a certain theme, subject, as was customary in European historiography.

We cannot deal here with the aesthetic problems of the Chinese collections of rough material, the question of the aesthetic influence of such structural principles as contrasts, variety, etc. (Unquestionably, Chinese material collected in histories or in the collections of specific writers, from this point of view, has the qualities of our journals, newspapers, or calendars, the aesthetic effect of which lies specifically in the fact that the most varied material stands side by side.) Let us point to one simple thing: Certainly Chinese histories, like the collected works of writers or any collection of records even by several writers—China is a country of anthologies—were often read as artistic works, similar to European history. The aesthetic grace, however, was not in the excitement of the thrilling events described—this excitement is absent in Chinese works—but almost exclusively in artistic style. Whether they were writer's notes or historians recording the action of rulers or situational reports, accounts of trips to foreign countries, or the most varied memorials to the court which formed the factual content of the histories, or summarizing judgements of the historian himself, which were set in his prefaces and conclusions, all were written in the old written language—the literary language par excellence—and in polished style. Why, they were created by the best men of letters of the day who had been practising the art of writing for many years. In addition, the bulk of the material contained in the histories, the various memorials and treatises belonged to the literary genre the Chinese designate as *wen-chang* which we, not precisely, call essays. For centuries *wen-chang* were the purpose of life for Chinese writers, as

Kojima aptly stated (*op. cit.*, T. I, p. 1): "China is a country which evaluates writing highly and the Chinese are a nation that has always paid most attention to *wen-chang*, since ancient times. Therefore a majority of them have identified *wen-chang* with their own lives; not only did they learn them in youth and seek to enter the Dragon Gate (Imperial Throne) with their help when they grew up, but when they found they could be of no use they wanted to become famous with *wen-chang* for hundreds of generations." Chinese readers thus found in the histories a selection of the literary creations of a certain period, and of the type they held in highest esteem. Undoubtedly this enhanced the aesthetic attraction of historical works for the Chinese scholar, probably in the same way that political speeches in the works of Greek and Latin historians held the interest of the intellectuals of antiquity, each of whom was somewhat of a rhetorician. The difference was that the material contained in the Chinese histories was authentic, it really was created by eminent writers and political figures of the past, while the speeches of the antique authors were compiled by the author himself and could hardly offer a proper picture of the deeds of great orators.

It would be wrong, of course, to imagine that the value of the material gathered in Chinese histories was limited only to the value of the source, that this material was used only for discussion and political speculations, as described above. At the same time, it would probably also be incorrect to imagine that the material was evaluated only as a specimen of excellent style or political cleverness, and that it had nothing, or little to say about what is foremost in historical works that is the past. In China, too, the main goal of historical works was, definitely, comprehending the past, but it was a method of comprehension different from that in Europe. The Chinese historian did not strive for any of the things Gardner states are the aims of European history and which we discussed in detail above, that is analyzing and classifying historical facts, placing them in chronological order, forming a graphic and vivid picture of the past, etc. The Chinese historian obviously aimed at something else with his selection and his placing of certain facts near each other; most likely he wanted to evoke

a certain impression of the past and he tried to give the reader a feeling for these facts and make the atmosphere of the past familiar to him. Thus he appealed more to the reader's intuition and emotional facets than to his intellect and logic, as we have shown above in analyzing Shen Fu's autobiographies "Six Histories of Fleeting Life."

This tendency is explicitly evident in some biographies, especially those in which the author tries to penetrate the character and spiritual anatomy of his hero rather than give a dry account of titles and specific actions. In this case the writer of the biography usually gathers a few anecdotes from the life of the given person, often of very problematic historical value, and on the whole without an attempt at chronological order. He selects, however, the kind of stories that are in accordance with the general image and stylization the given person has created or which was created by tradition. It is not a description of a concrete life, be it real or created out of fantasy, but the creation of a certain impression, the placing of this person in a specific pattern of thought and emotion. The anecdotes the author uses to build his work on—we could also speak of individual motifs—are not just cut to fit the chosen person, but they correspond to a certain pattern which involves an entire category of similar personalities. These anecdotes are of no real characterizing value, but they are surcharged with traditional emotion. The individual, special and unrepeatable, gives way to the general and emotional; we could say directly to the literary pattern. A clear-cut example of such a biography—where these qualities are even over-emphasized, because it is the biography of a very original lyrical poet—is, for example, the biography of T'ao Ch'ien, *T'ao Yuan-ming* by prince Chao-ming.¹⁵ The entire biography contains only three motifs: love of wine, of flowers, and disgust with an official career rather than which he prefers the ingenious, abstracted life of the sage in retreat. This biography undoubtedly is not too historical but its emotional effect and poetic impression are all the greater.

¹⁵ See A. Bernhardt, *Tau Yuan-ming*, Mitt. d. s. f. o. Sprachen, Berlin, XV (1912), p. 58 and on.

All these processes we have depicted are the direct opposite of the epic presentation, yet they are widely used in Chinese lyrics. The basic method of Chinese lyrics is that the poet does not try to express the exceptional and unrepeatable in a direct way but from the general stock of poetical themes he chooses a few motifs carrying the strongest emotion and juxtaposes them freely without any attempt whatsoever at close interlinking. His aim is to evoke a certain mood, usually not definable specifically. These motifs are general, they pass from one work to another. They are somewhat like vouchers worth a certain quantity of emotion.

We will illustrate this method with at least one sample, selected not from a lyrical poem but from an epic poem, to show the general extent of these methods. The example is taken from the poem *Pei-fen* describing the sad fate of the poetess Ts'ai Yen¹⁶ kidnapped by the Huns at the end of the second century. The passage portrays the invasion of the Huns:

From the general murder not even a cripple remained,
The corpses and bones supported each other,
From the sides of horses hung the heads of men,
In the rear, on horses, they carried the women and girls.

Here are four very expressive pictures, but they are not specific, one event as the poet saw it in reality or in his fantasy, but pictures that would be appropriate for any similar situation. Thus here it is not the absolutely specific and unrepeatable, that is the basis of epics; the first verse is even an altered verse from *Shih-ching* "The Book of Songs;"¹⁷ the second is common property of Chinese literature and parallels could be found for the two remaining ones.

What we see here is in correspondence with the methods we found in analyzing Chinese biographies. In the first place there is a loose chain of details, a method we find in all spheres

¹⁶ See *Pei-fen shih erh shou, Ch'uan Han San-kuo Chin Nōn-pei ch'ao shih* (Peking, Chung-hua shu-chu, 1959), Vol. 1, p. 51.

¹⁷ See Legge, *Chinese Classics*, Vol. IV, Part. II, p. 530: "Of the remnant of Chow...There will not be half a man left."

of high Chinese literature and which is completely predominant in history. Further there is a tendency to create a certain general impression, a feeling rather than the attempt at recording a specific, concrete reality, a tendency which we observed also in Chinese biographies. We can say that in Chinese literature as well as Chinese history we find certain general tendencies and methods, for which Chinese lyrics are the most explicit artistic example: This leads us to the conclusion that just as epics are dominant in European writing and their methods exert certain pressure on all other branches of European writing, so in Chinese literature the central position is held by lyrics which influence not only writing but all other fields of artistic creation. (Evidence could be found easily in painting, small sculptural worlds, architecture, especially garden architecture, etc.)

We are coming to the conclusion of our long discussion. I think that I have proved quite convincingly that epics and the epic perception of reality, which was so important in Greek literature and historiography and strongly influenced the entire later development of Latin, and European historiography as well, were on the whole of very minor importance in the corresponding branches of Chinese writing. Whereas in Greece literature begins with the epos, in China it begins with lyrical songs. In Greece historiography imitates the epic mode of expression; in China the categorization and systematization of facts by free linking of rough material reminds one of lyric methods. Early Chinese historiography is interested in action to a very limited extent, main attention is centred on philosophical, political and moral discussions. In Greece the biographies near to novels or even the novel itself started to develop early along with history, in China epics—a story or narration—have no place in the artistic prose (*wen-chang*) whatever, and even narrative folk prose is created much later. (Folk epic narration begins only in the T'ang period, 618-906, but the novel becomes a part of high literature only in the 18th century.) Furthermore in Greece highly developed dramatic creation develops early, whereas in China *lyrical* opera begins even later than the novel. We could continue with these contradictions until we had a long row of them.

It seems to me that from what I have stated one conclusion

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emerges: In China there was not the same intensive interest about the fate of the individual, about the colourful peripetia of the individual's lifestory as in Europe. (In Europe it usually was an extraordinary individual gifted with special abilities either mental or physical, or distinguished by birth or position. Let us not overlook the fact that to date the main figure of our novels and drama and all literature is designated by the term "hero.") In any case—even when an entire collective becomes the subject of an epic narrative—it is the individual, special and unrepeatable, that epics are concerned with; to depict and describe it as a homogeneous stream, as a firmly linked chain, is its main purpose and that also was the chief-aim of European literature and historiography.

In China, attention was obviously paid to something entirely different: not to the specific and unrepeatable, but to the general, the norm, the principle, the law, etc. We must not be misled by the numerous and entirely unrelated particulars we find, as we described above, in histories and literary works. Their purpose, as we have already stated, is not in itself, but in the conclusions, judgements, truths, and norms one can deduce from them, or which they can illustrate. Evidence of this is the strict division of facts and historical judgements in the earliest histories, as we have pointed out too, and the use of historical facts as the main material for political, philosophical and moral reflections and discussions. This inclination to the general and eternally valid, gave history the general character of Chinese literature and especially its dominating genre, lyrics. Even the Chinese lyric, with its unchanging written language, general images and endlessly repeated themes tried to express the general, typical, what is appropriate for every similar situation, and not the exceptional and special.

Chinese novel-writing is especial proof of this interest in the general, the attempt of showing a certain situation or a common truth and not a pure description of the colourful diversity of human fates. Among these works, especially those meant for the broadest masses, we could certainly find specimens filled with the same fantastic adventures as the Greek adventure novels; or maybe the Chinese artist, from this point of view, had an even richer imagination than the Greek writer. But

the more the novel became an instrument of expression of a great artist, the more its aims deviated from mere satisfaction of an interest in individual adventures. Undoubtedly as early as in a book like *Shui-chu-chuan*, "Water Margin," the author did not only want to describe the adventures of the band of robbers but he tried to show how a bad government made honest and brave people escape to the forest, in other words, describe how a popular uprising was created, with a whole series of examples. In a similar way the mythological *Hsi-yu-chi* "Pilgrimage to the West" symbolically depicts the workings of human inclinations and passions through a chain of colourful and unbelievable scenes. This is even more obvious in those cases when the novel becomes the literature of the intellectual. In the 18th century a novel genre was created that influences even contemporary literature. Wu Ching-tzu wrote his *Ju-lin wai-shih*, "The Scholars," in which with the help of a large number of individual scenes, portraits, and sketches he tried to present a general characterization of an entire social group, the most important class in Chinese society, that is the scholars. His method was then copied extensively by writers at the turn of the 20th century.

It is most interesting that this tendency is clearly apparent in the new literature which developed in China under the influence of European literature, after the revolutionary May 4 Movement of 1919. If we ask, for example, how one of the greatest writers of his time, Mao Tun, changed the methods of the classical European realism he tried to apply in Chinese literature, we find that it is mainly in his effort to capture a certain general, political, and economic situation and not the detailed pursuit of the psychological development of his hero or his heroes and the thorough description of their fates. Further vivid evidence of this tendency is the fact that although this new Chinese literature was deeply influenced by European romanticism from the beginning of the 19th century, as well as by the second romantic wave in the second half of the 19th century (for example, Nietzsche), nowhere will you find an attempt to create a romantic hero, a superman, standing beyond human judgement and evaluation. On the contrary, the romantic hero in new Chinese literature appears chiefly negatively, as

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a person crushed by tragic fate. Above the individual there always are some general forces and laws. We find similar features among most of the writers of this era.

At the end of our discussion of the relationship between Chinese historiography and literature, we can say that the situation appears to us entirely differently than it appeared to B. Watson who did his research on the first, or rather the second great work of Chinese historiography, the oft-mentioned *Records of the Historian* by Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Watson comes to the conclusion¹⁸ that for this Chinese historian there was no such thing as a "general history" outside the lives of the individual men of history. The core of all his writing "Annals," "Treatises," "Hereditary Houses" and "Memoirs" alike is the life of the individual, and he refutes the idea of Professor Chen Shih-hsiang who wrote about Ssu-ma Ch'ien's biographies (*Lieh-chuan*): "The personalities of the sketches look oblique and lopsided, the focal interest being elsewhere on a much larger panel overhead, which is the whole corpus of a general history of several millennia."¹⁹

All our material definitely leads us to the conclusion that the "focal interest" not only of Chinese historians, but of writers as well, was usually "on a much larger panel overhead" than "the life of an individual." Most likely that is why both Chinese history and Chinese literature could adopt the views of Marxism-Leninism so rapidly.

At the very beginning I said I was not going to deal with the causes that determined the divergence of aims in historiography and writing in Greece and in China. But in order to avoid the possibility of doubtful conclusions from what I have said and speculations about the basically different metaphysical conceptions of the individual in China and Greece, possibly in the West as a whole, I want at least to mention the way to finding the solution. It was Marx who opened our eyes to the importance of the remnants of primitive communist society in the Oriental despotisms and showed that the ruler's power there depended on the village communities, that survived until

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁹ Chen Shih-hsiang, "An Innovation in Chinese Biographical Writing," *FEQ*, XIII (Nov. 1953), pp. 49-62.

most recent times in the East. We first comprehended what the remnants of these communities, the clan system and the patriarchal family meant for the individual and his freedom only when we have seen how much the Chinese revolution had to destroy to uproot these remnants and liberate the individual completely. It is unnecessary for me to point out further how different the historical situation appeared to the historian in the Greek republic who had taken part in the events personally, who knew all the leading figures, and how it appeared in the Oriental monarchies where everything was decided somewhere in the depths of the ruler's palace. In the Oriental despotisms there also usually was an absolute difference between those who made the decisions, held the power in their hands, and those who acted, and carried out orders. Usually it was not a hero in shining armour who was the maker of history. And finally it is, perhaps, necessary to realize fully the importance of the situation we constantly see in Chinese paintings: A tiny human being, somewhere in a corner, completely lost in the magnificence of nature, usually indicated by mountains reaching to heaven. How differently men in Greece and in China faced nature and its forces and how differently the social forces which also were a part of the world around them appeared! Let us remember the people's uprisings which flooded China from time to time like the streams of her overflowing rivers, the invasions of the barbarians, the civil wars. The feeling of inhumanity, the expression of the fact that man is dealing with blind and uncontrollable natural or social forces, that now often permeates art in the West, was not completely unknown even to the scholars and artists of old China.