

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

### I. THEORY

Intonation matters, in English as well as in Chinese. We may describe an item in the human record as historically (really) significant, or as (merely) historically significant. The distinction is between an empirical judgment of fruitfulness in time and a normative judgment of aridity in the here and now.

The ambiguity of “historical significance” is a virtue, not a flaw. To resist the taxonomical zeal for precision, the literalist’s restriction of one phrase to one concept, is both an intellectual and moral requirement for the historian. For, as a whole man, the historian indeed has intellectual and moral requirements—he must know that he stands on shifting sands, yet he must take a stand—and the tension implicit in “historical significance,” the strain between neutral analysis and committed evaluation, must be acknowledged and preserved if history, the records men make, and history, the records men write, are to come close to correspondence.

### I. INTELLECTUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AMBIGUITY

Historical understanding precludes restriction of the vision to literal meanings. What, for example, does the character *te* (pronounced like

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the French *de*) denote in a Chinese text? During the many centuries of Confucian and Taoist intellectual prominence in China, *te* suggested a cluster of meanings around the concept “virtue” or “power” (of virtue). But when Ch’ên Tu-hsiu (1879–1942), a hater of the old intellectual culture in which *te* was profoundly imbedded, summoned “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” to root it out, his “Mr. Democracy” was Te Hsien-sheng, “Mr. *Te*,” the old character drained of its Confucian substance, tamed as a mere phonetic (in a foreign language, at that) to an anti-Confucian purpose.<sup>1</sup> And yet its old associations were still there; significantly so, for they lent the term its sterilizing force, appropriate to its new associations. Virtue, power, were delivered over to an iconoclastic ethic. At one and the same time the old *te*, with the old culture, was being proclaimed merely *historically* significant—that is, dead to modern men—and historically really *significant*, confirmed as such by its very selection as the literal point of departure for a metaphoric drift.

Historical process is captured in such transitions from literalness to metaphor. As some commentators remarked, Chiang Kai-shek “lost the mandate” in 1949, when Mao Tse-tung supplanted him as the ruler of mainland China. Reference to the “mandate of Heaven” would once have had a literal quality, as a live Confucian assumption about dynastic successions. But passing time reduced it to archaism, a metaphor with a period air that would call attention to passing time. One could hardly contemplate Chinese history without realizing how historically significant Confucian political theory had been; and one could hardly seize more surely the fact of its displacement than by savoring “historical significance” in its full range of meaning. It is historical consciousness that attunes the ear to the changing ring of “mandate of Heaven”—from the ring of current coin, to a knell.

In time, then, words will not stand still. Moralistic theories of history, like the praise-and-blame Confucian, or idealistic theories of antihistory, like the Platonic, dwell on timeless pattern or being, not process, and therefore deal in absolutes. But a concern with process, becoming, ousts the language of fixity for the language of movement—the language of relativism. Absolutism is parochialism of the present, the confusion of one’s own time with the timeless, a confusion of the categories of reasonable and rational. This is the confusion one fosters when he

1. Fukui Kojun, *Gendai Chugoku shiso* (“Recent Chinese Thought”) (Tokyo, 1955), p. 15.

judges other times by his own criteria, without acknowledging that he himself, not the culminator of history but the latest comer, has only what his subjects have—ideas, aesthetics, morality that may be reasonable, pleasing, commendable in his own day and age, but surely not rational, beautiful, or mandatory as transhistorical absolutes. No one has the norm of norms.

## 2. MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AMBIGUITY

History, however, is not all. The present is precious in every generation. True, historians meet their subjects through a chastening acceptance of their common relativity, but they all have something else in common, the human prerogative to hold their own convictions. The moral dilemma suggested by historical relativism has often been noted: if to explain seems to excuse, an abyss opens. Or as Nietzsche, speaking of value in its aesthetic dimension, sardonically described its dissolution: "We can feel that one thing sounds differently from another, and pronounce on the different 'effects.' And the power of gradually losing all feelings of strangeness or astonishment, and finally being pleased at anything, is called the historical sense or historical culture."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, history and value need not be taken to confront each other so blankly. Abdication of standards, far from being the price of historical insight, precludes it. There is more than one way to diverge from relativism.

One way, the one we have noted as the antihistorical way, is to appraise the past, insofar as it fails to accord with one's own standards, as the product of fools or knaves. (Such was the way, for example, of many early twentieth-century unhistorically minded critics of the traditional literary examinations for the Chinese bureaucracy. These critics, with the modern world's criteria of professionalism, explained as aberrations, from their standpoint, what was actually the triumph of a non-specialized culture's amateur ideal).<sup>3</sup> But there is another way, safely historical—indeed, indispensable for historical explanation—to take one's own day seriously, retaining the moral need to declare one's

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York, 1957), p. 45.

3. See Joseph R. Levenson, "The Amateur Ideal in Ming and Early Ch'ing Culture: Evidence from Painting," in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago, 1957), pp. 320–41; and Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: The Problem of Intellectual Continuity* (Berkeley, 1958), chap. ii.

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self and stand somewhere, not just to swim in time. For the historian's own day is his Archimedean leverage point outside the world of his subject. By judging as best he can (*not* by denying himself, out of intellectually relativist scruples, the right to indulge in judgment), he raises to his consciousness the historically significant question. Why should a generation comparable enough to his own to be judged in his vocabulary not be analogous to his own? Why (since he also should not deny, out of morally absolutist scruples, the right of his subjects to be seen as living out the values of their culture, not aiming at and falling short of his), why should earlier men, who deserve to be taken as seriously as he himself, diverge so far from his standards? He must articulate his own standards in order to find the rationale of his subjects', in order—by raising the question he could never recognize if he lacked his own convictions—to find what made it reasonable for the earlier generation to violate its historian's criteria of rationality. The relativism which gives the past its due can really be arrived at only by men who give the present its due.

Relativism, then, is essential for historical understanding, but it is a relativism which depends on, not banishes, a contemporary acceptance of norms. If it seems merely wilful paradox, a violation of rationality, to suggest that it is proper to be absolutist in order to be properly relativist, that may be because rationalism is not sufficient for historical knowledge. As we indicated at the outset, the basic term for expressing such knowledge, the quality attributed to the subject of the historian's statement—historical significance—has paradox built into it. For, on the one hand, many things are granted historical significance without distinction of value: of two eighteenth-century Chinese novels, it is possible to say that *Ju-lin wai-shih* ("The Scholars") is as historically significant as *Hung-lou meng* ("The Dream of the Red Chamber"). Each one yields to the modern reader many insights about eighteenth-century China and the course that lay before it. But we can say, on the other hand, that "The Dream"—and here all value-neutrality vanishes—is a splendid work of art. Historical knowledge, knowledge of the conventions of its society, may make it more accessible to moderns and foreigners, but these are simply annotator's aids: it speaks directly to us. Except for historians on duty, the historical status of "The Dream" is just a detail, irrelevant to the sense of appreciation. Though it comes from long ago and far away, we do not read it *because* of that fact. To say now of

“The Scholars” that it has historical significance is not to equate it with “The Dream”—both novels contributing to historians’ explanations—but to distinguish it from “The Dream” and the latter’s supra-historical aesthetic significance. The historical significance of “The Scholars” is “mere.” The phrase is a phrase of relativism, but the voice is the voice of value.

To judge a work as one of high value is to praise its creator and maintain one’s own contemporary standards as the measure; to dismiss a work as of little or no contemporary significance is tantamount to saying that “history” created it, determined it, making any evaluation superfluous. Something reduced to historical significance, without being granted the quality of transcending its function of helping to explain its time, is left to be explained by its time, since no suprahistorical artistry, the proper object of praise, is perceived to inform it. It is here that historical significance has its relativist associations; in the draining away of the personal element, so that “history” is the creator, the implied determinism precludes the intrusion of value. Perhaps this is what gives a grain of meaning to Acton’s bromide, “Power corrupts. . . .”—it expresses the truth that historicism (with relativism attending) is tied to amorality. For really impressive power is the gift of a society sufficiently complex to bear the weight of historical study, and the holder of power, certainly the holder of absolute power, through his very freedom to affect the destiny of his milieu, may identify his decisions with the destined course of history.

And yet, to recapitulate, the relativism to which historians of process are drawn does not condemn them to the corrosion of their own values. There is all the difference in the world between acknowledging no creators but history (and thus inviting such corrosion) and valuing creativity, to the effect that relativistic “historical significance” actually acquires normative significance. This is not the relativism, the historical consciousness, which makes the contemporary man impotent, in the Nietzschean sense. Rather, it can free men from the impotence of feeling under the dead hand of the past. Such has been its function in recent Chinese history, from which we have brought up a few details to clothe the theory of historical significance. It is now time to bring theory down to history.

## Historical Significance

### II. HISTORY

#### I. MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AMBIGUITY

An eighteenth-century “proto-Western” Chinese thinker, Tai Chen, had little influence in his own day but was taken up and celebrated by Chinese thinkers in the 1920’s.<sup>4</sup> With what shade of meaning was he historically significant?

Paradoxically, this latter-day assertion of Tai’s historical significance, in our first sense of the phrase, confirmed him as historically significant only in the second sense. Tai’s modern admirers, granting his ideas a formal philosophical importance in themselves, dramatized the fact that they had had no effective importance in the history of Chinese thought; their historical importance really consists in their historical *unimportance* (that is, in the circumstances—provocative to the historian of thinking but irrelevant to the analyst of thought—that Chinese thinkers of one age should ignore thought which a later age would value). For Tai Chen was endowed with importance only when it was too late for him to have any objective influence, when Chinese intellectual life was being molded by other, Western authority. Twentieth-century Chinese honored him not really because he was intellectually important to them—it was Western thought which had persuaded them to be “modern”—but just because, in his historical context, he had never been important at all. Had he been thus important, historically *significant* for the future, young Chinese modernists would have inherited their values and would, therefore, not have been emotionally pressed to unearth a Chinese precedent in order to mask their defection from traditional Chinese civilization. He was merely *historically* significant; what that defection implied was submission not to his, but to an outside intellectual influence, which alone made intellectually possible (and thus made psychologically necessary) the discernment of any significance in a figure like Tai Chen.

And yet, by these moderns, Tai was esteemed, endowed by their own criteria with value quite the reverse of the “merely historical.” They were trying to raise a historical Chinese utterance to more than histori-

4. See Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, “Tai Tung-yüan sheng-jih erh-pai nien chi-nien hui yüan-ch’i” (“The Origins of the Conference To Commemorate the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Tai-Chen”), *Yin-ping-shih ho-chi* (“Collected Works of the Ice-Drinker’s Studio”) (Shanghai, 1936), *wen-chi* XIV, 38–40.

cal significance because they, with so many of their contemporaries, were increasingly deaf to historical Chinese utterances in general. They were unhappily persuaded that, for their own day, harsh judgment of an unreconstructed Chinese culture was required of them. They could not oust the suspicion that the values coming down to them from Chinese history were, to a staggering degree, of merely historical significance, dead in the modern day, a blight on creativity.

Thus Lu Hsün (1881–1936), most searing and powerful of all Chinese writers in this iconoclastic century, saw the famous Confucian classical virtues, *tao*, *te*, *jen*, and *i*, as “eaters of men,” old figures still loathsome alive, for their partisans were even then the “establishment”<sup>5</sup> (like Nietzsche’s proponents of “monumental history” with their hidden motto, “Let the dead bury the—living”<sup>6</sup>).

Chang and Li are contemporaries. Chang has learned some classical allusions for his writing, and Li has learned them too in order to read what Chang has written. It seems to me that classical allusions were contemporary events for the ancients, and if we want to know what happened in the past we have to look them up. But two contemporaries ought to speak simply, so that one can understand the other straight away, and neither need trouble to learn classical allusions.<sup>7</sup>

Some foreigners are very eager that China should remain one great antique for them to enjoy forever. Though this is disgusting, it is not to be wondered at, for after all they are foreigners. But in China there are people who, not content to form part of a great antique themselves for those foreigners to enjoy, are dragging our young folk and children with them.<sup>8</sup>

Here was an iconoclasm, then, a bitter value judgment, expressed as resentment of the absolute presentness of a past which should be relative—or, *historically* significant, that is, a proper subject of study but not a basis for present action. The concept of “antique” implies the historical sense, a feeling for the piquancy of the contrast between antique and the living contemporary. To feel that one’s self or one’s culture is an antique is to see the self as a means, something to furnish observers with a delicate *frisson*, something used and therefore dead.

5. See Lu Hsün, “A Madman’s Diary,” *Selected Works of Lu Hsün* (Peking, 1957), I, 8–21.

6. Nietzsche, p. 17.

7. Lu Hsün, “Random Thoughts (47),” *Selected Works*, II, 47.

8. Lu Hsün, “Sudden Notions (6),” *Selected Works*, II, 122–23.

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When the old culture was indicted as a dead stifler of life, the indictment was moral, with “historically significant” implied as an epithet in the realm of value, not as a relativist acknowledgment of process. It was a desperate assault on a traditional culture seen as very much too much in being, tragically not becoming something else, or modern.

And yet, the traditional culture which Lu Hsün criticized so absolutely was in fact in process; it had become traditionalistic. Men who resisted the new as foreign were adhering to the old in a new way, advancing essentially romantic (relativist) arguments from “national essence” rather than rationalistic arguments from universal validity. These were no longer plain Confucian arguments for conservatism but conservative arguments for Confucianism—the change was the measure of Confucian moribundity.<sup>9</sup> And it was just this moribundity, this death-in-life, which imparted such passion to Confucianism’s assailants.

Latter-day Confucianists and their hostile contemporaries were equally modern, symbiotically fitting together, and it was “historical significance,” an ambiguous term but a single term, which both linked them and distinguished them. Together, traditionalistic Confucianists and antitraditional iconoclasts violated the traditional assumptions of Confucianism, which were anti-relativist in the extreme. Confucianists had always traditionally studied the past, but from the conviction of its eternal contemporaneity and world associations, the absolute applicability of the fixed standards and sequential patterns of classical Chinese antiquity. Now, however, modern Confucianists relativized Confucianism to Chinese history alone, and modern anti-Confucianists relativized it to early history alone. The traditional feeling for history as philosophy teaching by example was dissipated equally by the traditionalistic “history” as organic life and the iconoclastic “history” as a nightmare from which men should be trying to awake.<sup>10</sup>

But by this same token, the traditionalistic Confucianists and the anti-Confucianists, equally modern, had a genuine confrontation of their own. The radicals, trying to break the grip of the old ideas and institu-

9. See Levenson, “The Suggestiveness of Vestiges: Confucianism and Monarchy at the Last,” in David S. Nivison and Arthur F. Wright (eds.), *Confucianism in Action* (Stanford, Calif., 1959), pp. 244–67.

10. See Joseph R. Levenson, “Redefinition of Ideas in Time: The Chinese Classics and History,” *Far Eastern Quarterly*, XV (May, 1956), 399–404; and Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, pp. 90–94.



tions, thought in terms of the “merely” historically significant and thus devalued history. History, however, was far from being devalued by the romantic conservatives, for whom reason or pragmatism were “mere.” The evolution of a diffuse, generalized Chinese radicalism to Marxism may be interpreted as a transition of “historical significance” from normative to relativist usage, in the historicism (hardly a devaluation of history) of the Marxist way of thinking. And this transition came about when the hated traditionalistic opposition could be seen as merely historically significant itself—that is, broken so completely that living, indeed dominant, champions of the old order existed no longer. Iconoclasts in power could do what iconoclasts struggling for power could not do: adopt the relativism of their bested opponents and turn from blasting the old with hatred to explaining it coolly away. The conversion which the radicals made, from a moral to an intellectual stance, changed the tone of “historical significance” and, in the very act of ripping across the Confucian historiographical premise (“process” piercing “reality”), exorcised the ravages, the violence of the tear.

## 2. INTELLECTUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AMBIGUITY

The modern historically minded conservatives, with their “national-essence” incantation (covertly antitraditional) as their final, self-destructive charm against openly antitraditional influences, had the relativism of despair. Their opponents, like Lu Hsün, began by signing out of responsibility for the tradition whose current inanition bred despair; as modern men, they said, they rejected history’s claims. Yet these iconoclasts knew that they were not just modern men but modern Chinese, knew it in the fever of their revulsion—far from intellectual detachment—which bespoke their tie in history to the moorings they longed to slip. They had their own despair, not just the anguish of seeing their triumph deferred or problematical, but the anguish of having to seek such triumph at all.

In the circumstances, their assessment of traditional values under the aspect of “historical significance” tended to drift from the normative pole to the relativistic, a relativism of compensation for despair. In effect, the collapse of their opponents put an end to that “eternal contemporaneity” originally enshrined in their opponents’ values and released the new men from their compulsion to attack. Once a historic Confucian spokesman showed that he knew how to die (or after his

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death, at least, to lie down), he could be neutrally assigned to his own day and domesticated historically for modern China, even a China vastly removed from the old in spirit.

It was a resolution of an emotional problem (the need to alleviate the pain of a ruthless expression of value) by intellectualizing it; it was the disarming of absolute judgment by relativizing it. All manner of early Chinese achievements fell into place, acceptable as the Communist nation's worthy past, no longer necessarily the targets of present revolution. Relativistic history—admitting the historically *significant* instead of expelling the *historically significant*—was the sweet sterilizer of values, or the cauterizer of the wounds dealt in cutting them out.<sup>11</sup>

And so the Communist regime restores the old Manchu imperial "Forbidden City" in Peking, long dilapidated, and the tombs of the Ming emperors, with careful attention to historic décor and design. "It has been left, strangely enough, to a Communist government, ruling in the name of the People and under the slogans of anti-imperialism, to spend a great sum on a most complete and beautifully executed restoration of the tomb of Ming Yung Lo, the founder of Peking, and a whole-hearted autocrat."<sup>12</sup> Is it all so strange?

It is not strange that the republicans of 1912, who claimed metaphorically to be "restoring the Ming," the native Chinese predecessors of the Manchu conquest-dynasty of Ch'ing, should let the Ming tombs crumble. Factors of social demoralization aside, these early republicans were really "engaged" against monarchy as against a visible, contemporary foe; its monuments were symbols of something currently provocative. But the Communists could "restore the Ming" in another metaphorical sense, as museum keepers restore. They were freed from the earlier radicals' frustration at seeming to be museum dwellers. The Communists' act of restoration was a gesture of release, a recognition of a deadness

11. For a fuller discussion of historical scholarship as historical evidence, the "placing" of the Chinese Communists by their studies of the past (including—incidental to their concern with periodization, that is, process, and the isolation of a "people's tradition"—their rehabilitation of non-Marxist radical iconoclasts' old antipathies, like Chinese medicine and classically enshrined institutions), see Joseph R. Levenson, "History under Chairman Mao," *Soviet Survey*, No. 24, April–June, 1958), pp. 32–37; and Levenson, "Ill Wind in the 'Well-Field': The Erosion of the Confucian Ground of Controversy," in Arthur F. Wright (ed.), *The Confucian Persuasion* (Stanford, 1960).

12. C. P. Fitzgerald, *Flood Tide in China* (London, 1958), pp. 20–21.

in monarchy so final that its monuments could be relativized to historical significance.

It may be suggested, of course, that Mao Tse-tung was indulgent to the Yung-lo emperor because one good autocrat deserves another. Is the new Chinese regime just another dynasty, and yesterday eternal? Do the Communists, with all their concern for process and their apparent superseding of Confucianists, fall into a timeless Confucian historical pattern?

Intonation matters: the answer implied is, No. Whatever the Chinese Communists have won, it is not the "mandate of Heaven." Not the history, only the sketch of theory, has come full circle.