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Traditions, Temporality, and Narrative in
Chinese Historiography





Special Issue | Traditions, Temporality, and Narrative in Chinese Historiography

Intercultural Historical Thinking and its Sense in the History of Civilization

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of intercultural historical thinking in the age of globalization and its significance to the historical study of civilization. The article points out that in the context of globalization, human beings are still faced with different understandings of heterogeneity, otherness and homogeneity. Historical research is an important way for societies to realize their cultural functions and cultural orientations, while intercultural historical thinking and historical research are particularly valuable because of their practical significance. The article emphasizes the major role of historical consciousness in intercultural historical thinking, and believes that historical consciousness is not only about the cognition of the past, but also a historical interpretation of the present. Through the mutual communication of historical consciousness, we can better understand the conceptual type and cultural background of others, so as to rebuild the consensus of the community of humanity in the age of globalization. In addition, the article also explores the ontological construction of historical consciousness, regarding that this helps to introduce grand concepts such as "civilization" into a concrete and practical context, and promote mutual understanding and mutual learning among different civilizations.

Keywords

Interculture Historical Thinking. Historical Consciousness. Globalization.



Today, We Humans Have Entered A Globalized Living Situation, Which Is An Indisputable Fact. Even In this situation, we are still accompanied by different kinds of, even completely opposite, understandings of heterogeneity, otherness and homogeneity. Historical research is one of the most important ways and means for various countries and societies to carry out their cultural functions and cultural orientations. In this case, the value orientations and interpretative methods of historical research are basically the understanding of the world and others according to their respective cultural types and social systems. Different value orientations and interpretative methods of historical research represent different understandings about the globality and the global situation. Because through rationalization by historical research, the historical experience and the living experience of the world are transformed into a set of conceptual patterns and academic discourses. It is precisely because of this that intercultural historical thinking and historical research should be considered significantly valuable - they are practically meaningful, making it possible and easier to understand the way others make sense and reflect on the world in a given social situation.

In the respect of theory of history, such intercultural mutual learning between (or among) civilizations is achieved through the mutual understanding of historical consciousness. In this context, historical consciousness not only indicates "the consciousness about history (or the past)," but rather refers to "the consciousness of historically interpreted present." In other words, to put the "present" in a historical condition, historical understanding explains how the very life and institutions of today are possible. This is the key to intercultural historical thinking, which not only means the thorough knowledge of others' historical process and past experience, but also means that we should take their historical consciousness as the kernel of understanding the specificity and historicity of the others' current situation, which is a historical and dynamic status (not a fixed one). Historical consciousness drives this dynamic status and makes itself an individual conceptual element, existing in various types of global historical thinking. Since the status quo is a product of historical consciousness, then through the change and transformation of historical consciousness in the future, it can be further changed. This "plasticity" is the central feature of historical consciousness.

While in the collective memory of a nation-state, historical consciousness can shape national identity by emphasizing certain uniqueness, it can also play a role in the global nature of intercultural historical thinking, eliminating harmful fundamentalism and exclusive nationalism by emphasizing the universality of historical understanding. History is the most important cultural resource of a nation, and historical consciousness is the contemporary understanding and interpretation of this resource. In intercultural historical research, when scholars from one



cultural type or nation study and interpret the history of another one, it is, in any case, a process of understanding the other culture. This is the most important value of intercultural historical thinking. In the age of globalization, understanding each other's way of historical thinking makes consensus possible, through which a consensus about the community of humanity can be rebuilt.

In historical research, we can develop a theoretical system of historiography based on the ontology of historical consciousness. With the ontology of historical consciousness which requires a historical understanding expanding from the past to the present, we not only interpret the past as the historicity of the present, regarding the latter one as the inevitable result of the former, but also take the perspective of present to understand its historical genesis, learning that the status quo is the result of the dynamic multi-factorial interaction. In this way, when we try to make sense of the present without the burden of history, we can carry out creative conceptual work, guide new cultural development, and thus strengthen and realize the social function and cultural orientation function of professional historical research.

In fact, the ontology of historical consciousness may create new categories in the theory of history, in which there will be a paradigm shift in our knowledge of not only the empirical nature, expression, and socialization of historical research, but also the concept of history itself. This shift can be as significant a change in historical thinking and meaning construction as the one brought about by the professionalization of historiography in the 19th century. The ontology of historical consciousness will allow us to enter a new historical world.

What is the meaning of this great change happened in the way of understanding history for the history of human civilization? The ontology of historical consciousness will bring such a grand yet indefinable concept of "civilization" into an individual, practical and feasible context. Such grand categories as "history" and "civilization" are often interpreted in regard to different cultural characteristics. Through the lens of the ontology of historical consciousness, the "differences in civilizations" and the "clash of civilizations," which are materialized in the process of socialization, are no longer an expression of a grand narrative, but provide the possibility of mutual understanding and mutual learning. How is this achieved? The ontology of historical consciousness reminds us that the differences and conflicts of civilizations happen at the collective or individual level of consciousness. Therefore, we need to further study historical consciousness as a conceptual element, and study its functioning mechanism, cultural dynamics and its possible distortion and deformation.

In general, through the theoretical construction of the ontology of historical consciousness, we bring "history" and "clash of civilizations" into detailed contexts. As a result, historical research becomes an effective social practice, which is unlocked from the original form of an academic



discourse and gains practical and empirical implications. In this way, history can regain its social function, just like the social role it played in the process of professionalization in the 19th century. Intercultural historical research is the best way to realize this interactive historical consciousness, through which we can reshape the social and cultural functions of historical research and construct humanism in the age of globalization.

Academic Practice of Intercultural Historical Research

In fact, this special issue, "Traditions, Temporality and Narrative in Chinese Historiography", is an academic practice carried out under the aforementioned background. Moreover, as far as I know, this is the first time that intercultural historical thought exchanges have been carried out in two academic circles with their own characteristics, Brazil and China. Going through the standardization of knowledge and the transformation of the nation-state, China has accepted the historical research paradigm from the West. But this doesn't mean that China has lost its original characteristics of historical research. Despite the modernization of the traditional Chinese way of historical research, it is preserved as a cultural tradition and penetrating into modern China's understanding of the world. China's ancient cultural traditions have been understood modernly and temporally, and have been transformed into a conceptual form relevant to the modern world. Such conceptual form has been realized in the form of historical narrative and represented in textual or non-textual historical characteristics. This is what the three keywords of this special issue, "Traditions", "Temporality" and "Narrative," indicate. It refers to the question of "how traditional China is understood and narrated temporally", which is carried out from the perspective of contemporary China and in a intercultural way. The meaning of this topic is to tell current Chinese historians and Chinese readers how Brazil, which also comes from the so-called "Third World," views the history of this distant Eastern country, considering that Brazil has also experienced Western colonization, has also struggled for national independence, and is also facing the challenge of rethinking its national positioning in today's era of globalization.

From the Xia Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty (approximately 2070 B.C.-1912.AD), China has always been a dynastic state. However, the century-long suffering of the colonization and fight for national liberation in modern times also set the tone of China's historical narrative today. The traditional way of historical narrative and writing were also cast off in this process, indicating that the once major source of political culture, ritual, and ethical thinking was transformed into a modern system of historical research with westernized methodology.



André da Silva Bueno's article *New Perspectives for the Historiography of Ancient China*, on the one hand, introduces the phased characteristics and major works of the history of Chinese historiography accurately and explicitly. On the other hand, the author makes a detailed analysis of Qu Lindong's project *History of Ancient Chinese Historiography Criticism*. He regards *History of Ancient Chinese Historiography Criticism* as "innovatively articulate the reading of the Chinese past with an interpretive method that combines elements of tradition with a conceptually contemporary reinterpretation of Chinese history" in modern China. At the same time, André da Silva Bueno believes that Qu Lindong's "nine themes" is an attempt to connect Chinese classical historiography and traditional culture with contemporary Chinese society and historical understanding. Qu Lindong's project aims to summarize the theoretical and conceptual system of Chinese historiography, and present it in the current context to reflect the conceptual nature of Chinese historiography, which makes it a reinterpretation against the background of the globalization of historical research and the Westernization of Chinese historiographical methodology. In other words, such reinterpretation of the conceptual nature of Chinese historiography doesn't make it essentialist, because any historian today is working in a global conceptual context, which means that the uniqueness of Chinese historiography and theory can only be discovered in comparison with Western historiography. Here, "western historiography" has always been a beneficial other, whose existence highlights the conceptual nature of Chinese historiography.

Raúl Ramírez Ruiz's article *Chinese historiography serves as an exemplar of endogenous evolution profoundly influenced by Western interactions* starts from the political system, social theory and social structure of traditional Chinese society and managed to understand the genesis of traditional Chinese historiography. He believes that Confucian tradition, scholar-officials, and the moral formation of bureaucracy are the three major factors that shaped traditional Chinese historiography. It is also the political and social motives behind these factors that stimulated the genesis of ancient Chinese historiography. The focus of Raúl Ramírez Ruiz is the collapsing view of China as "the center of the world" and the following end of the traditional Chinese historiography as well as its way of understanding the world. The new surroundings brought new demands for historical thinking to provide conceptual solutions for the conflicting and chaotic Chinese society at that time. From the "Self-Strengthening Movement" absorbing western technology, to the modern thinkers and social activists with a global perspective such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong, and Yan Fu, to the generation of scholars of Gu Jiegang, Hu Shi, and Wang Guowei, Raúl Ramírez Ruiz believes that the traditional Chinese historiography was almost reshaped and modernized — finally, Marxist historiography became the orthodoxy of Chinese historiography. With the progress of "Reform and Opening-up," Chinese historians began to understand the ideas



of Western theorists such as Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood, gradually entering into the global discourse of historical research — such a process is still ongoing.

Luiz Gabriel Ribeiro Locks's article *Genres of writing History: its literary interpretation at different moments in Chinese historiographical production* first uses "Western" literary theory to analyze the internal structure and conceptual nature of classical Chinese historical texts, as well as their corresponding political implications and social-cultural functions. Then, Luiz Gabriel Ribeiro Locks turns his attention to the issue of China's modernity. In an in-depth description (factually and theoretically), he analyzes the key role played by Liang Qichao's *The New Historiography* and the famous periodical *New Youth* in China's transition between the modern and contemporary periods. Such transition contains linguistic, conceptual, historical and social elements, which play a role of "paradigm shift" in modern China's self-understanding and worldly understanding. Luiz Gabriel Ribeiro Locks regards history (in a dual sense) as a cultural mechanism, and its social practice as well as theoretical renewal provided the necessary conditions for China's modern transformation. This article exemplifies how to use Western literary and social theories to analyze the Chinese historiographical tradition.

Otávio Luiz Vieira Pinto's article *To narrate everything that is under Heaven: the idea of ti ān 天(Heaven) in the formation of pre-Modern Chinese historiography* first traces the development process and conceptual nature of Chinese historiography. The author analyzes the ontology and conceptual patterns in the classical historical texts of early ancient China, regarding "Heaven" as the structural framework of traditional Chinese historiography, with all other empirical and conceptual historical elements unfolding in this framework. In traditional Chinese thinking, "Heaven" was basically understood both physically and spiritually. The latter and its derivative categories "Way of Heaven" and "Heavenly Mandate" are actually the metaphysical foundation of traditional Chinese society, the manifestation of history in this metaphysical category. Otávio Luiz Vieira Pinto believes that "Heaven" is the epistemological origin of traditional Chinese historiography. Here, he identifies with Sima Qian's renowned quotes, "to study the relationship between the heaven and the mundane, and to understand the changes from the past to the present." The long-term evolution of these ideas can be said to have claimed the key and fundamental conceptual dimensions of traditional Chinese historical understanding, including its driving force, dialectics, and the relationship between human and the world.

Christine Paulette Yves Rufino Dabat's article *Ji Chaoding 's Key Economic Areas: a discreet challenge from a Chinese Marxist to Eurocentrism in historiography* conducts a case study on Ji Chaoding, a Chinese Marxist scholar. Christine Paulette Yves Rufino Dabat first introduces the historical background of Ji Chaoding's entry into academia as an economist: a war-



torn Chinese society with a bleak future in the 1930s. The author regards that the most important feature of Ji Chaoding's thinking is, instead of the description of traditional Chinese society as "feudal," he reinterpreted it economically with the theory of Key Economic Area (KEA), which, as the author argues, disregarded and challenged the Eurocentrism since the 19th century. In fact, the contemporary Chinese scholars are encouraged to develop theory with Chinese subjectivity and originality, and to continuously advance the construction and innovation of disciplinary, academic and discourse systems, thereby breaking the Eurocentric interpretation and establishing China an independent position in global culture interaction.

Above all, there are some commonalities in the analysis of all these articles. The most prominent feature is the study of the traditional-modern transformation of Chinese historical research. Liang Qichao, post-colonialism, equal discourse and knowledge hegemony are the common lexicon. This represents the contemporary commonality of postcolonial countries: to make our voice heard in the global culture of today. The materialization and realization of the Western-centrist academic discourse influence how we understand and feel the world. Therefore, intercultural research in a global context is particularly urgent and meaningful, because it relates to our ability to claim autonomy and the right to the interpretation of cultural discourse.

Conclusion

In modern times, Chinese and Brazilian societies have many things in common. Both are large societies that had experienced Western colonization and strived to establish independent discourse in a globalized context. This interpretation of Chinese historical thinking from the perspective of the Brazilian cultural community is a beneficial intercultural academic practice. In the global cultural context, the cultural interaction of "third world" countries will help us re-examine and understand the "West" proper, each other, and the globe in the new age and with the new academic discourse.

In almost every cultural type and language, "history" basically has two meanings: "what happened in the past" and "the description of what happened in the past." Our description of past events would itself become part of the empirical world. Today, the rise of historical discourses such as the "Global South" helps to shift the focus of understanding world history from Europe to the Global south and previously neglected cultural systems. In this way, the discourse of the Global South will gradually be materialized, and then become an effective component of the world we live in. This is not to replace Eurocentrism with another one, but to bring the discourse of world history into a conceptual context where "universal consensus" may be reached through a



diversified understanding of the world, thereby reconstructing humanistic thinking in the age of globalization. Intercultural historical research is necessary both conceptually and practically and is the best conceptual means for us to understand the world.

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Additional Information

Academic biography

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Peiyun Yu's main interests lie in historical consciousness, historical culture and the disciplinary nature of history. Recently, he had also been interested in the social function of the cultural function of theory of history, as well as historical writing in the era of globalization.

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