

The Ch'in Unification in Chinese Historiography

Chun-Chieh Huang *

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* Professor of History, National Taiwan University
Research Fellow, Academia Sinica

Abstract

This article attempts at scrutinizing the peculiarities of Chinese historical thinking via a study of the Chinese reflection on the Ch'in experience. We survey the Chinese intellectuals' and historians' reflections upon the Ch'in empire and argue that Chinese historical thinking is essentially moral thought; traditional Chinese historical scholarship is the study of ethics in its own right. To better analyze the ethical concerns of Chinese historical thinking, the second section of this paper begins with a study of the characteristics of Chinese thinking; the third section deals with the negative and positive moral judgments that the Chinese intellectuals had extrapolated from their reading of the Ch'in experience; the fourth section inquires into the two-foldness of the notion of *tao* in Chinese historical thinking; the final section concludes with some reflections on the difficulties in Chinese historical thinking.

Key words : China Historical Thinking, Ch'in, Tao

I. Introduction

“Six warring states seized to complete the unification of great lands and far seas; great forests on Mt. Shu balded only to erect A-fang Palace,” bemoaned the T'ang dynasty (618-907) poet Tu Mu 杜牧 (803-852). The Ch'in state, located in the savage west of China, with its “*Sturm und Drang*” militant power, conquered the disparate land and unified China in 221 B.C. However, this very first Chinese dynasty prospered for only 15 years before it melted into thin air. The rise and decline of the Ch'in dynasty (221-206 B.C.) is a major turning point in Chinese history, marking the transformation from classical China to imperial China both in historical reality and in the Chinese mentality. The Chinese have since then often returned to the experience of the unification and downfall of the Ch'in Dynasty as a source of guidance and possible inspiration.

What does the Ch'in experience expect to convey to readers so late in history? Is the rise and decline of the Ch'in empire taken as an imminent mirror? And why so? This article discusses the particularities of Chinese historical thinking through an analysis of Chinese reflections upon the Ch'in as a turning point in history.

Chinese historians in the twentieth century generally agree that the unification of the Ch'in dynasty made a major contribution to the development of Chinese culture. For example, Lü Ssu-mien 呂思勉 (Ch'eng-chih 誠之, 1884-1959) pointed out in 1924 that, “China before the Three Dynasties was a feudalistic world, and China after the Ch'in and Han dynasties became an imperial one, which is essentially different. It was the Ch'in dynasty that unified China.”¹ Ch'ien Mu 錢

¹ Lü Ssu-mien, *Pai-hai Pen-kuo-shih* (Vernacular History of the Nation) (Taipei: Lan-t'ing

穆 (Pin-ssu 賓四, 1895-1990) also nominated in 1939 four historical significances of the Ch'in Dynasty: a) establishment of the imperial realm of China, b) unification of the Chinese people, c) the enactment of the Chinese political system, and d) the founding of Chinese scholarship. Such opinions are generally held as true by twentieth-century Chinese scholars regarding the historical status of the Ch'in dynasty.²

Cho-yün Hsü 許倬雲(1930-) expressed a similar opinions in his recent retrospective comments upon the development of Chinese culture. According to Hsü, there are two periods in the long-term evolution of Chinese culture, one from ancient China to the Ch'in and Han Dynasties, which signifies the emergence of the first "universal order," and the second from the Ch'in dynasty to modern China. The first universal order collapsed during the period of disunion (A.D.220-589), which led to the consequent second universal order, to be established after the Sui (A.D.581-618) and Tang (A.D.618-907) dynasties. The second universal order was modified through the Sung (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) times. When it arrived at the Ch'ing (1644-1912), the second phase of Chinese culture was darkened by black clouds.

The universal order in the Ch'in and Han dynasties included political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Politically, this universal order included an imperial and bureaucratic system; economically, there was a national market operating along small-scale agricultural systems. Culturally, there was a prevalent mixture of Chinese thought from Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, and Yin-yang thought, and an intention to put together a philosophical system that could be

Bookstore Photo-reproduction of 1924 edition, 1973), p. 201.

² Ch'ien Mu, *Kuo-shih Ta-kang* (An outline of Chinese History) (Taipei: T'ai-wan Shang-wu Yin-shu-kuan, 1966), Vol. I, pp. 116-120.

carried out throughout the world. Hsü also noted that there were intellectuals endeavoring to preserve Chinese culture.³

Historians in pre-modern China, though agreeing that the unification of the Ch'in dynasty is a crucial turning point in Chinese history, have read a moral judgment into the rise and fall of the Ch'in dynasty as the beginning of China's autocracy; hence, the decline of the Ch'in empire was a necessary result of the emperor's moral corruption. The historical experience of the Ch'in dynasty is regarded as a history of degradation of the principle (*tao* 道) of morality.

This article attempts at scrutinizing the peculiarities of Chinese historical thinking via a study of the Chinese reflection on the Ch'in experience. We survey the Chinese intellectuals' and historians' reflections upon the Ch'in empire and argue that Chinese historical thinking is essentially moral thought; traditional Chinese historical scholarship is the study of ethics in its own right. To better analyze the ethical concerns of Chinese historical thinking, the second section of this paper begins with a study of the characteristics of Chinese thinking; the third section deals with the negative and positive moral judgments that the Chinese intellectuals had extrapolated from their reading of the Ch'in experience; the fourth section inquires into the twofold-ness of the notion of *tao* in Chinese historical thinking; the final section concludes with some reflections on the difficulties in Chinese historical thinking.

II. Chinese Historical Thinking as Moral Thinking

³ Hsü, Cho-yun, *Chung kuo Wen hua ti fa chun Kuo cheng* (The Developmental Process of Chinese Culture) (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1992), preface, p. 22, p. 47.

Before considering the Ch'in experience, I have to clarify the moral essence of Chinese historical thinking from two aspects. (2:1) The Chinese often establish moral imperatives through historical narrative and the interpretation of history. Chinese historical narrative is more the often "exemplary,"⁴ based on solid examples with its end in extracting moral lessons from the deeds of historical events. The concrete mode of thinking in traditional China seeks to contextualize itself in solid examples. (2:2) There is never a *l'histoire pour l'histoire* in the Chinese tradition; the Chinese write history of the "past" for the betterment of the "future." Chinese historians focus their historical narrative in the moment of the here and now so that it can serve as guidance for the coming future. For guidance of life, they extract universal moral ideals out of concrete historical facts. The following paragraphs will explore these two aspects in further detail.

2:1 As I argued elsewhere,⁵ the so-called "cognitive" activity in Chinese historical thinking actually moves back and forth in time, first going to the past for information, then coming back to the present with lessons to pattern ourselves by. Then it goes back once again to ascribe meaning and signification to the past, then it comes back with inspirations for living accordingly in the present moment. And this "back and forth" movement is itself self-consciously historical. Although this is not a full-fledged theory of history, it is undoubtedly a dynamic view of history particular to the Chinese people, which is constantly exhibited and practiced in their daily thinking and living. Mencius (371-289 B.C. ?) was most explicit in stating and executing this back-and-forth movement in historical thinking.

⁴ Jörn Rüsen, "Historical Narration: Foundation, Types, Reason," *History and Theory*, XXVI: 4 (1987), pp. 87-97.

⁵ Chun-chieh Huang, "Historical Thinking in Classical Confucianism ... Historical Argumentation from the Three Dynasties," in Chun-chieh Huang & Erik Zürcher eds, *Time and Space in Chinese Culture* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995).

Mencius noted that as no artists or artisans can perform their tasks without squares, compasses, and pipes, neither can benevolent rulers govern without historical precedents. The Way of the Former Kings and the sages were the compasses and squares for benevolent governing.⁶ Mencius cited many historical examples of famous people—Shun 舜, Fu Yüeh 傅說, Chiao Ke 膠鬲, Kuan Chung 管仲, Sun Shu-ao 孫叔敖, and Po-li His 百里奚—to indicate that Heaven tests one's fortitude through starvation, hardship, and frustration before placing on him an even greater task. Mencius extrapolates the principles that men flourish in adversity and wither in comfort.⁷ It is not far-fetched to say that historical narrative in China was made for extrapolating moral universal principles.

Ancient Chinese historians, including Mencius, demonstrate a concrete mode of thinking. This concrete mode of thinking refers to taking historical facts as the basis for abstract theories. Chang Hsüeh-ch'eng 章學誠 (Shih-chai 實齋, 1728-1801) said, "Ancient sages never argue the principles without solid examples."⁸ This is an exemplary concrete mode of thinking which argues on the basis of solid and specific examples instead of metaphysics. In this sense, the "universal" in Chinese thought is "concrete universal."

2:2 It is precisely because Chinese tend to extract universal ethical principles from historical narrative that Chinese historical thinking is never far-fetched from the here and now or from the coming future. The grand historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷 (145-86 B.C.) had distinctly expressed this idea. In his magnum opus *Shih Chi* 史記 (or the *Grand Scribe's Records*), Ssu-ma Ch'ien comments on several

⁶ D.C. Lau tr., *Mencius* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979), 4:A:2., p. 137.

⁷ Lau tr., *Mencius*, 4:B:15, pp. 261-263.

⁸ Chang Hsüeh-cheng, *Weng-shih Tung-i* (Comprehensive Meaning of Literature and History) (Taipei: Hua-shih Publishing Co., 1980), p. 1.

“truly extraordinary men” and their writings in history:⁹

All these men had a rankling in their hearts, for they were not able to accomplish what they wished. Therefore they wrote of past affairs in order to pass on their thoughts to future generations...

I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in one hundred and thirty chapters. I wished to examine into all that concerns heaven and man, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family. But before I had finished my rough manuscripts, I met with this calamity. It is because I regretted that it had not been complete that I submitted to the extreme penalty without rancor. When I have truly completed this work, I shall deposit it in some safe place. If it may be handed down to men who will appreciate it and penetrate to the villages and great cities, then though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret would I have?

As Ssu-ma Ch'ien said, Chinese historians recorded “past affairs” for the sake of “future generations.” Historians investigate the principles behind success and failures in history so that history can serve as a guidance for now and for the future.

III. The Ch'in Empire as a Negative and Positive Mirror

In this section, we consider the unification and downfall of the Ch'in empire as (3:l) a negative mirror that manifests the eternal principle in history—that any

⁹ Wm. Theodore de Bary et al. comp., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 235.

empire is doomed to decline if it fail to rule with humanity and righteousness; and (3:2) a positive mirror that reflects the principle that unification brings peace and prosperity to the people. These two points are further analyzed in the following passages.

(3:1) Why did the Ch'in dynasty decline? This question, roused by reflection on the Ch'in experience, has been central to the Chinese historical thinking since Han times. During the Tien-an Meng Square Incident on April 5, 1978, citizens in Peking mourned Chou Eng-lai and put up signs with slogans such as, "The Age of Emperor Ch'in Is Vanished" and, "Folks Today Are No Longer Simple-Minded." Over the past two millennium, the Chinese folks have grunted and sweated under a weary life as a result of the oppressor's wrongs and insolence of office in the monopoly of power. The Chinese who suffered under the slings and arrows of this monopoly politics often take a retrospective visit to the Ch'in experience as their dream of a better life possible out there. To this extent, the Ch'in experience has never vanished and all the historical experiences have never gone with the wind of Time. History becomes an endless dialectic cycle and a continuous interaction between the Present and the Past. Such arguments are often challenged by Post-Modernists.¹⁰ However, what history becomes of today is actually formed and engendered by the past; what seems past is never passed away.

The Ch'in as a negative mirror rendered tremendous historical lessons for the Chinese since the founding of the Former Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 8). This was simply due to the fact that the emperors and ministers wanted to establish the legitimacy of the Han dynasty, as a successor of the Ch'in, through negating the

¹⁰ e.g. Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History?': Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

Ch'in experience.¹¹ As the story goes, the founding emperor Han Kao-tsu 漢高祖 (r. 202-195 B.C.) considered his own empire as "spear-won land," and once blustered to a Confucian scholar Lu Chia 陸賈 (216-176 B.C.), "I established my empire on horseback. Why should I study the Book of Odes and the Book of History?" However, after he had been on the throne for a short period, he soon realized the problem of legitimation of his regime. He soon became very much fascinated with the "reasons why the Ch'in lost of control of all Under Heaven."¹² Lu Chia's *Hsin Yü* 新語 (New Discourse) was written to explain the failure of the Ch'in and to draw historical "lessons" therefrom. In the case of the Ch'in and to draw historical "lessons" therefrom. In the case of the Ch'in, all rationality. Chia Yi 賈誼 (201-169 B.C.) of the Former Han spelled out this principle powerfully:¹³

Ch'in beginning with an insignificant amount of territory, reached the power of a great state and for a hundred years made all the other great lords pay homage to it. Yet after it had become master of the whole empire and established itself within the fastness of the pass, a single commoner opposed it and its ancestral temples toppled, its ruler died by the hands of men, and it became the laughingstock of the world. Why? Because it failed to rule with humanity and righteousness and to realize that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has thereby won are not the

¹¹ Cf. Wang, Chien-wen, "Li-shih chieh-shih ti hsien-shih i-yi —i Han-tai jen tui Ch'in cheng-ch'üan hsing-wang ti ch'üan-shih yü li-chieh wei li," (Historical Explanation in the Actual World—Understanding the Ch'in Experience in Han China), *Hsin Shih-hsüeh* (New History), vol. 5, no. 4 (Dec., 1994), pp. 79-124.

¹² Ssu-ma Chieh, "Biographies of Li sheng and Lu Chia," in *Shi Chi* (Taipei: T'ai-shun Bookstore photo-reproduction of new punctuated edition), chüan, p. 2699.

¹³ Chia Yi, "The Faults of Ch'in," in Cyril Birch compiled and edited, *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), p. 48.

same.

Chia Yi' comments represents, to a very large extent, Chinese intellectuals' general visions since Han dynasty. What the Chinese intellectuals meant by "Ch'in failed to rule with humanity and righteousness" is to be understood in the following contexts:

(3:1a) *Ch'in's sovereign with strict law and heavy punishment*: the most prevalent stereotype against the Ch'in empire lies in its rigid laws and inhuman punishment. Chia Yi wrote:¹⁴

The First Emperor of Ch'in, harboring an avaricious heart and following a self-assertive mind, not trusting his meritorious vassals or keeping close to intellectuals and commoners, abolished the kingly way of ruling, established his personal authority, banned writings and books, stiffened punitive laws, promoted craft and power, neglected benevolence and righteousness, and made tyranny the first rule of the world.

For Chinese historians, "rigid enforcement of harsh punishment" has become collective about the Ch'in. In *Shih Chi*, Ssu-ma Ch'ien quoted Emperor Shih-huang's (of Ch'in) contemporaries' words to picture Ch'in empire's dependence upon cruel punishment:¹⁵

¹⁴ Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *Shih Chi* (Taipei: T'ai-shun Bookstore photo reproduction of new punctuated edition), ch'uan 6, "Basic Annals of Emperor Shih-huang," p. 283. English translation adopted from William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., *The Grand Scribe's Records* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), vol. 1, The First Emperor of Ch'in, Basic Annals 6, p. 168.

¹⁵ Ssu-ma Chien, *Shi Chi*, ch'uan 6, "Basic Annals of Emperor Shih-huang," William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., *The Grand Scribe's Records*, vol. 1, The First Emperor of Ch'in, Basic

The way the First Emperor is, he has a disposition to be obstinant and self-willed. Arising from a feudal lord and having united the world, all he intended has attained, all he desired, fulfilled. He thinks no one who ever lived is his match. He exclusively employs legal officials, and they are close to him and favored by him. The Erudites, although there seventy of them, vainly fill their positions but are not used. The chancellors and other great vassals all receive assignments for tasks His Highness [alone] determines and rely on him to accomplish [things]. His Highness enjoys establishing his prestige through punishment and killing. As [the officials in] the world are afraid of offending him and what to keep their salaries, none would venture to devote their loyalty to him. Since His Highness has never been informed of his mistakes, he becomes more arrogant gaily. And his subordinates either submit in awe of him or deceive him to win his acceptance.

Pan Ku 班固 (Meng-chien 孟堅, A.D. 32-92), author of *The History of Former Han*, also criticized emperor Shih-huang for his relaying solely upon punishment.¹⁶ *The Treatises on Punishments and Laws* in Chinese official dynastic histories agree on the unrighteousness of Ch'in Dynasty overloaded harsh punishments.

However, interestingly, historians of later ages often take Ch'in's experience as negative mirror while emperor Shih-huang took the unification of China as his bestowal. He inscribed his travels and visitations throughout the lands on the atones, in which he perceived himself as having "set up imperial etiquette and social graces,"¹⁷ putting "social relationships in order and the society in peace,"¹⁸

Annals 6, p.149.

¹⁶ Pan Ku, *Han Shu*, chüan 23, "Treatise on Punishments and Laws," p. 11a.

¹⁷ Ssu-ma Chien, *Shi Chi*, chüan 6, "Basic Annals of Emperor Shih-huang," p. 249.

¹⁸ *Shi Chi*, chüan 6, p. 261.

and making "politics and bureaucratic system operate smoothly."¹⁹ A grand canyon lies between emperor Shih-huang's self-image and later historians' perception of his deeds.

(3: 1b) Destroying cultural heritage and abandoning traditional values: the second "lesson" the Chinese learn from the experience of the rise and decline of the Ch'in empire is that Ch'in fell because it casted off traditional values. Chia Yi described emperor Shih-huang as a ruler who "discarded the ways of the former kings and burned the writings of the hundred schools in order to make the people ignorant."²⁰ "Burning the books and burying scholars" has ever since become common memory among Chinese against emperor Shih-huang. Ssu-ma Ch'ien also denounced emperor Shih-hung for destroying the ceremonies,²¹ and Pan Ku takes emperor Shih-huang's banning the Confucianists' scholarly career as the major impetus that triggered the movement in which the Confucianists helped the rebel Ch'en She to overthrow the Ch'in dynasty.²² Dynastic histories thereafter have generally agreed on this point of view.

The Chinese' general comments upon emperor Shih-huang are on the contrary to his own self-image. Ch'in Shih-huang thought he had unified the thoughts and opinions. He regarded his unifying China as having made "political and bureaucratic system operate smoothly which brought forth an economic boom;" therefore, "the great way of ruling manifests itself and never needs changing."²³ hd

¹⁹ Shih Chi, chüan 6, p. 262.

²⁰ Chia Yi, "The Faults of Ch'in," in Cyril Birch compiled and edition, *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, p. 47.

²¹ Pan Ku, *Han Shu*, chüan 88, "Biographies of Confucian Scholars." p. 16.

²² Ssu-ma Chien, *Shi Chi*, chüan 6, "Basic Annals of Emperor Shih-huang." p.

²³ Appear in "Inscriptions on the Mt. T'ai" in *Shih Chi*, chüan 6, "Basic Annals of Emperor Shih-huang." p. 243.

hoped, to no avail, that the thoughts he had unified would be passed on to the following generations without being altered.

In conclusion, we find that being the ruler of the Ch'in dynasty which stands out as the crucial turning point in Chinese history, emperor Shih-huang's conception of his deeds and his status in history is deviant from that of the Chinese historians since Han dynasty. This case reminds us that the meanings of historical characters or historical events would only manifest themselves after pontooning a long way down the river of Time and history.

(3:2) In the Chinese historical thinking, another aspect of the Ch'in is taking the Ch'in experience as a positive mirror. Though leaving us negative evaluation of the emperor Shih-huang, Chia Yi also praised the emperor's contributions to unifying China at that time:²⁴

After this the First Emperor arose to carry on the glorious achievements of six generations. Cracking his long whip, he drove the universe before him, swallowing up the eastern and western Chou and overthrowing the feudal lords. He ascended to the highest position and ruled the six directions, scourging the world with his rod, and his might shook the four seas. In the south he seized the land of Yueh and made of it the Cassia Forest and Elephant commanderies, and the hundred lords of Yueh bowed their heads, hung halters from their necks, and pleaded for their lives with the lowest official of Ch'in. Then he caused Meng T'ien to build the Great Wall and defend the borders, driving back the Hsiung-nu over seven hundred li so that the barbarians no longer dared to come south to pasture their horses and their men

²⁴ Chia Yi, "The Faults of Ch'in," in Cyril Birch compiled and edited, *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*, p. 47.

dared not take up their bows to avenge their hatred.

The Ch'in empire unified China and put an end to slings and arrows across five hundred years during the Spring and Autumn Period (722-464 B.C.) and the Warring States period (463-222 B.C.). Butchery Of common people was commonplace before the unification of Ch'in. "In wars to gain land, the dead fill the plains; in wars to gain cities, the dead fill the cities," described Mencius.²⁵ And these war disasters were always followed by years of great famine. Modern historians' statistics tell us that 468.5 wars were fought in 242 years of the Warring State Period, counting a big war between big states as, "1" a small battle between small states as, "0.5."²⁶ Significantly, the frequency of war and bloodshed increased as the years went on. It was Ch'in, Ssu-ma Ch'ien aptly indicated, who unified "the measurements of capacity, weight, and length. Carts: all had the same width between wheels, and writings all used the same characters,"²⁷ and brought peace and prosperity to the common folks.

This image of the Ch'in has continued to prevail since Ssu-ma Ch'ien. For example, when wars and rebels shook the late Later Han (25-220 A.D.) dynasty, Pan Piao 班彪 (3-30 A.D.) analyzed for Hui Hsiao 隗囂 (?-33A.D.) the reason why the Han dynasty was able to prosper for hundreds of years. Pan Piao thought that Han dynasty's strengths lie in the fact that "Han inherited new administrative divisions from Ch'in empire in which no feudal lords could be in power for

²⁵ D.C. Lau tr., *Mencius* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979, 1984), 4A14. Vol. I, p. 149.

²⁶ Cho-yün Hsi, *Ancient China in Transition: An Analysis of Social Mobility, 722-222 B.C.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 24-52.

²⁷ Ssu-ma Ch'ien, in his *Shih Chi*, ch'uan 6, "Biography of Emperor Shih-huang," p. 239; Nienhauser, Jr. ed., *The Grand Scribe's Record*, 6, "The First Emperor of Ch'in," *Basic Annals* 6, p. 137.

hundreds of years."²⁸ As Wang Chien-wen 王健文 allegedly points out, intellectuals in the Han times were ambivalent toward the Ch'in experience. They seemed to criticize and comment negatively against the monopoly of power in the Ch'in empire; nevertheless, the bureaucratic and administrative systems in the Han dynasty were more than often imitating or inheriting that of the earlier Ch'in empire.²⁹

The Ch'in empire unified China and did paved the way to stable life and economic revival after hundreds of years of wars in China. This fact, despite Ch'in's subscription to harsh punishment, strikes later historians as a positive mirror which becomes alluring and invites further dialogue for twentieth-century Chinese historians against chaotic backdrop of wars in modern China.

IV. The Two-foldness of the *Tao* and Its Problems in Chinese Historical Thinking

The foregoing description of the Ch'in as both negative and positive mirror naturally give rise to a question: If the Ch'in did subscribe harsh laws and destroy traditional culture, how can the Ch'in unify China as a whole? This question leads us to ponder over the central notion, the *tao*, in Chinese historical thinking. To many Chinese historians, (4:1) history is best taken as the concrete manifestations of the abstract and transcendental *tao* in this mundane human world; (4:2)

²⁸ Wang Hsien-ch'ien, *Hou Han-shu Chi-chieh* (Collected Annotations of History of Later Han) (Ch'ang-sha: Hsü-shou-i'ang 1879 woodblock edition), chüan 30 a, p. 16.

²⁹ Wang Ch'ien-wen, *Fung-t'ien Ch'eng-yün: Ku-tai Chung-kuo ti Kuo-chia Kai-nien chi ch'i Cheng-tang-hsing Chi-ch'u* (Providence and Fortune: Foundation for the Legitimacy and Conception of State in Ancient China) (Taipei: Tung-Ta Publishing, Inc., 1995) pp. 271-76.

however, the *tao* is both the *modus operandi* of the universe (the “to be”) and the moral guiding norms of human affairs (the “ought to be”). (4:3) Therefore, the Chinese historical thinking fails to offer satisfactory explanation of the “evils” in history.

(4:1) It is a commonplace among the Han people to launch attacks against the Ch'in for being turning against the *tao*, the general governing rule of the universe. Li Yi-chi 酈審其 (?-177 B.C.) and Chang Liang 張良 (?-189 B.C.) in their conversation with Liu Pan 劉邦 (r. 202-195 B.C.), the founding emperor of the Han dynasty, all characterized the Ch'in as a regime “without *tao*” 無道 (*wu tao*).³⁰ In the Former Han times, many a intellectuals further took the lack of the *tao* as the major reason why the Ch'in was overthrown by the people.³¹ In other words, the *tao* is understood as transcendental and eternal “natural laws” that govern the evolution of history. In this sense, history is nothing but the manifestations, in positive or negative manners, of the *tao* in the humm world. This *tao*-centered view of history can be found in Ssu-ma Ch'ien and came into a full-fledged form in Neo-Confucian thinkers.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien claimed that his *Magnum Opus* was written to inherit the noble cause of Confucius (551-479B.C.). Ssu-ma Ch'ien quoted Tung Chung-shu 董仲舒 (179-104 B.C.) in saying that Confucius' *Spring and Autumn Annual* “has commented on major event during the 242 years to offer a universal norm and guidance for moral actions; (it) has also criticized the Son of Heaven, the feudal lords, and the marquis, only to picture the kingly *tao* (or the Way).”³² It is evident

³⁰ Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *Shih Chi*, chüan 8, “Biographies of Emperor Kao-tzu,” p. 358.

³¹ Wang Hsien-ch'ien, *Han-shu Pu-chu* (Annotations of History of Former Han) (Ch'ang-sha: Hsü-shou-t'ang 1879 Woodblock edition), chüan 45, pp. 1-20.

³² Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *Shih Chi*, chüan 130, “The Grand Scribe's Preface,” p. 3297.

that the Chinese historians, most notably Ssu-ma Ch'ien, wrote of the past with an eye on the future. Therefore, the tao or the Way became the yardstick that the Chinese historians employed when judging on and narrating the facts in the past.

However, it is not an easy task to combine factual judgment with value or moral judgment in historical narration. In his "biography of Po Yi 伯夷 and Shu Ch'i 叔齊," Ssu-ma Ch'ien had already encountered with the difficulty in his explanation of history which is supposed to be governed by the righteous heavenly *tao*. Ssu-ma Ch'ien lamented:³³

Some people say: "It is Heaven's way, without distinction of persons, to keep the good perpetually supplied." Can we say then that Po Yi and Shu Ch'i were good men or not? They clung to righteousness and were pure in their deeds, as we have seen, and yet they starved to death.

Of his seventy disciples, Confucius singled out Yen Hui for praise because of his diligence in learning, yet Yen Hui was often in want, never getting his fill of even the poorest food, and in the end suffered an untimely death. Is this the way Heaven reward the good man?

Indeed, if the heavenly *tao* (or the Way) really rewarded the good man on a fair basis, why the Emperor Shih-huang unified China in 221 B.C.? More often than not, history did not move in accord with the righteous heavenly *tao*. As the twelfth-century Neo-Confucian philosopher Chu Hsi 朱熹 (Hui-an 晦庵, 1130-1200) aptly indicated, "the regulations of Ch'in are all affairs of honoring rulers and demeaning subjects, and so later generations could not change."³⁴ In Chu

³³ Burton Watson tr., "The Biography of Po Yi and Shu Ch'i," in Cyril Birch ed., *op. cit.*, p. 104.

³⁴ Li Ching-te, ed., *Chu-tzu Yü-lei* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1981), chüan 134, p. 3218.

Hsi's view, all the emperors in Chinese history since emperor Shih-huang of the Ch'in were all moved by "selfish desire" instead of the "Heavenly way."³⁵ The Ch'in experience has struck powerfully upon the fundamental incongruity between the world of "to be" and the world of "ought to be."

(4:2) The *passe-partout* of this problem is the Chinese tradition of incorporating factual judgment and value judgment in historical narrative. History then became a manifestation of moral principles, and heroes in history were simply those who can apprehend and live along with the *tao* in history. Therefore, Chinese historiography is concluded on the problem of how the Chinese minds come to understand the *tao* or Principle, wherein both the breakthrough and limitation of Chinese historical thinking lie.

Now let's take Chu Hsi as an example to analyze this problem. Chu Hsi provided a systematic explanation for the Chinese history which could be named as "regressive view of history" that manifested in the following key statements:³⁶

1. The development of Chinese history is settled upon emperor Shih-huang's unifying China as a turning point.
2. The golden age of Chinese history emerged during the Three Dynasties (Hsia, Shang, and Chou dynasties) before Ch'in unifying China; politics and culture have declined after Ch'in dynasty.

Hereafter cited as *Yü-Wei*.

³⁵ Li Ching-te ed., *Yü-Wei*, chüan 135, p. 3219.

³⁶ Huang, Chun-chieh, "Chu Tzu Tui Chung-Kuo li-shih ti chieh-shih," in Chung Ts'ai-chun ed., *Kuo-chi chu-tzu-hsüeh hui-i lun-wen-chi* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1993), pp. 1083-1114.

3. The difference of such two major periods lies in the rulers' abiding to the Way or Principle; during the Three dynasties, the heavenly Way prevailed, but after Ch'in and Han times only "human desires" took command.

Chu Hsi emphatically denounced the Ch'in:³⁷

The regulations of Ch'in's administration are all matters of venerating rulers and downgrading subordinates. That is why later generations did not wish to change them. Moreover, the Three Rulers titled themselves "Huang," the Five Rulers titled themselves "Ti," while the Ch'in ruler [went so far as to] title himself both "Huang [and] Ti" [In view of] this single event alone, how could later generations be willing to change?

From Ssu-ma Ch'ien to Chu Hsi, Chinese historians against the *tao*, the way or the principle.

What is the "principle" in Chinese historical thinking, then? As I have previously indicated,³⁸ the *tao* or "Principle" in the history is the consistent One throughout the ages. This "One Principle" manifests itself in various ways throughout history and remains undisturbed beyond time and space. At the same time, this Principle depends on the sages' leadership and awakening to prosper and develop in this world. The Principle in history is the unity of both the cosmic principle of operation and the moral norms for human conduct.

(4:3) The final characteristic of the *tao* in history is of paramount importance.

³⁷ *Yü-lei*, chüan 134, p. 3218.

³⁸ Chun-chieh Huang, "Imperial Rulership in Cultural History: Chu Hsi's Interpretation," in Chun-chieh Huang et. al. eds., *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), pp. 185-205.

As Chu Hsi said, the principle or the Way is the “natural course of the Heavenly principle” (天理之自然 *t'ien-li chih tzu-jan*). However, Chu Hsi also took the Way to be the “required norms of human world” (人事當然之理 *jen-shih tang-jan chih li*).³⁹ In other words, the *tao* was perceived of both as objective, neutral, natural *principle*, and as subjective, moral *norms* in the Chinese historical thinking. Moreover, many Chinese thinkers, such as Chu Hsi, asserted that the *tao* “always exists independently of human expectations, imperishable throughout the ages. Not even thousands of years of human abuses can destroy it, nor can any so-called wise rulers help it prosper.”⁴⁰

Taking the Chinese' interpretation of the Ch'in experience as an example, we find that *tao* is the sole abstract yardstick for Chinese historians in interpreting historical Changes. All the concrete historical facts only serve to illustrate, positively or negatively, the eternal essence of *tao*. Therefore, *tao* becomes an ideal transcending historical facts. It is a “spiritual leverage” for Chinese historians when interpreting or making judgments on history.

In this sense, traditional Chinese historical interpretations are endowed with, to a certain extent, ahistorical or even anti-historical character. A supra-temporal moral stance is taken when interpreting the temporal history. Chinese historians illustrate the only, regulative, and normative *tao* or the way by offering explanations to the rise and decline of dynasties as well as cultural changes in different times. Exploring historical facts themselves is never the goals of reading history for Chinese historians. Rather, it is taken as a means to achieve their goal in

³⁹ Chu Hsi, *Meng Tzu chi-chu*, in his *Ssu-shu chung-chü chi-chu* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1982), chüan 3, p. 231.

⁴⁰ Chu Hsi, *Hui-an hsien sheng Chu Wen kung wen chi* (Collection of Writings of Chu Hsi) (Taipei: Chung-wen ch'u-pai-she photo-reproduction of the kinsei kanseki sokan edition), chüan 36, p. 2306.

manifesting the *tao* through reading history. Historical knowledge serve for moral judgment. In the intellectual pursuit for the Chinese historians, history studies are inevitably diminished to a handmaid for ethics and moral teaching.

V. Conclusion

The Ch'in as a turning point in Chinese history has left a print in the subtle minds of the Chinese which is not to be eradicated. Since the Han, Chinese historians and thinkers kept drawing moral lessons from the Ch'in experience. In this sense, the Ch'in unification and downfall is not a dead mummy in the museum but an intimate library where men can enjoy reading and extrapolating "lessons" from.

However, our study of the Chinese reflections upon the Ch'in experience shows that the *tao* in Chinese historical thinking is both moral principle and norm. This *tao* is eternal. Defined thus, how are we to interpret the cultural diminishment and political abuse during certain historical periods? *Tao* does not always incorporate itself with the human world, as seen in the Ch'in experience, and it is unfortunately more often the case that the evil gets its way while the good abused, politics mistreated, and the civilization darkened. How are we going to offer a "reasonable" interpretation of these historical facts, particularly the rise and fall of the Ch'in? Chinese historians take it the legendary sage-kings' (King Yao, Shun, Yü, Duke Chou, and Confucius) responsibilities to revive and persevere the *tao*. On that account, history becomes a sheer biography for few "heroes" instead of mutual records for the mass. Such "history for the heroes" in traditional China is challenged with a problem: if the cultural well-informed sages or politically *tao*-aware rulers do not come to power in a timely fashion, how could the history operate on the track which is corresponding to the *tao*?

To conclude, the Chinese historical thinking as exhibited in the interpretation of the Ch'in empire is sort of ethical thinking. However, ethics in Chinese historical thinking is grounded in metaphysics which centers upon the notion of *tao* that comprises both principle and norm. The two-foldness of metaphysics in Chinese historiography is, on one hand, a very powerful leverage by which historians can move the earth, but it is, on the other hand, a double-edged sword that cut short historians' explanatory power regarding the evils in history.

中國歷史思考中的秦帝國經驗

黃俊傑*

摘要

公元前 221 年，六王畢，四海一，秦始皇統一中國。秦帝國之興亡一直是二千年來中國歷史思考中的重要事件，中國知識份子從秦經驗中汲取「教訓」。本文以秦帝國為具體個案，分析中國歷史思想中的諸多問題。

本文共分五節，第一節是引言，說明本文之問題意識。第二節分析中國歷史思考本質上是一種道德思考，中國知識份子為「現在」及「未來」而「過去」。第三節探討漢代以降中國知識份子歷史意識中，秦帝國的正反兩面之涵義。第四節分析中國歷史思考中「道」既是「規律」又是「規範」之雙重性格，及其所引發的對歷史中的「惡」之缺乏解釋力之問題。本文第五節則綜合全文論述，提出結論性看法。

關鍵字：中國歷史思考、秦、「道」

*台灣大學歷史系教授；中央研究院中國文哲研究所合聘研究員