



History: Translation or Recording of the Facts

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Abstract

Is the writing of history a subjective translation of the past or a truthful recording of the facts? Some theorists suggest that historiography is a geo-political space to expand power and control while others insist that history is no more than a fiction. Through the comparison of different textual descriptions of the same Chinese historical events in the late 19th and early 20th century, the author of this article contends that although the historiographers should keep an eye towards updating the source material with newly discovered evidence, the past is a once existent reality and therefore has a compelling and distinctive form which a postmodern fiction can never replace; and although the interpretation of history cannot ideally avoid the possibility of bias shaped by individual discourses of a given culture, readers have the right to know the facts as such; otherwise, what Hegel once worried about might come true though in a different version: “the only thing we can learn from history is that no one learns anything from history.”

Keywords: History, Historiography, Misrecognition, Facts, Bias

1. Cases of different textual descriptions of the same Chinese historical events

Mark T. Gilderhus (2000) once said that “without memory, we would have trouble functioning and making do in the world” (P. 8). But if this memory is wrongly written or purposefully translated, what will happen?

The late 19th and early 20th century is a special period in Chinese history, filled with military and ideological conflicts. China, with an imperial history of more than one thousand years, suddenly became the object to be civilized or carved up by the industrialized countries. Gunfires, foreign capitals, and the concepts of nation, democracy and science were fundamentally shaking the foundation of this feudal empire. For the first time, the historiography of whether China was being colonized or modernized became a political as well as linguistic issue, touching the cornerstone of Edward Said’s critique on oriental theories, that is, the colonizers invented false images and myths of the colonized to justify their exploitation and domination. Inspired by the studies of Said and other contemporary theories, this article is to question those discrepancies written separately by western and Chinese scholars on the same historical events during the late 19th and early 20th century. A comparative and empirical approach is adopted.

Case 1: The cause of the Second Opium War

The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia (6th edition) says that

In 1856 a second war broke out following an allegedly illegal Chinese search of a British-registered ship, the Arrow, in Guangzhou. (“Opium Wars”)

However, the Database of the Fundamental Education on China (Note 1), which has the same content as the textbook for grade 8 does in all China’s primary schools, says that

On October 8, 1856, the Qing government officials boarded the Arrow, a Chinese-owned ship which had been registered in Hong Kong and was suspected of drug smuggling. Several pirates and Chinese sailors were arrested and imprisoned. This was known as the “Arrow Incident”. This was completely an interior affair, having nothing to do with the British Empire, but the British officials in Guangzhou demanded for the release of the sailors and pressed for apologies from the Chinese officials in that the Arrow was flying a British flag and the Qing officials had insulted the flag. Ye Mingchen, the Commissioner of Guangdong and Guangxi, argued violently first but later set free the prisoners in order to settle the affair in a compromising way. However, the British official refused by every means to get this incident settled. On October 23, the British warships barged in Humen and attacked Guangzhou. The second Opium War broke out. (para. 3)

Case 2: The Tai-ping Rebellion

In *The Romance of the Old New England Rooftrees* Mary Caroline Crawford (1908) wrote that

The great Tai-Ping rebellion, that half-Christian, wholly fanatical uprising which devastated many flourishing provinces, had, at this time, attained alarming proportions. (P. 48).

However, in the Chinese Youth Encyclopedia (Note 2) it is written that when Hong Xiuquan's Tai-ping Rebellion broke out

Guangdong, Guangxi and many provinces in China had been continuously hit by floods, droughts and locusts that the peasants had almost been driven to the last ditch...During this period (from 1840 to 1850), Hong Xiuquan, attracted by the Christian idea of monotheism and equality, wrote several pamphlets advocating 'great peace under heaven' and 'every one is equal'. (para. 1)

Case 3: The Boxer Rebellion

In *China: the Roots of Madness* - "a sample of the modern documentary technique" (White, 1967, P. 7) - the Boxers were described to "begin to kill in early 1900 with the Empress' consent" (P.19). Similar descriptions could also be found in Helen Foster Snow's *Women in Modern China* (1967) that

This led to the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, directed against the Chinese Christians and the foreigners. In this Christian women were a special target for attack, and were singled out by unbound feet in some cases. The Empress ordered all foreigners to be killed [...] Scores of Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries and thousands of Chinese Christians were done to death... (P. 17)

However, in the book *History of Boxers' Fighting against Eight Power Alliance* written by Anshi Mu (1997), a different story is found that (Note 3)

On May 31, 1900, a troop composed of 356 soldiers and officers of the United Kingdom, Russia, the United States, France, Japan and Italy marched into Beijing. [...] Before the foreign troops came to China, the boxers' slogan was "Fu Qing Mie Yang" which means "support the Qing Government and destroy the foreign religions"; therefore, no missionaries were persecuted or killed. Instead, they were threatened or compelled to leave China. Before May 31, 1900, no single foreigner was killed by boxers anywhere in China. (P. 146)

2. History and historiography

In the earliest Chinese tradition, history, literature and philosophy were categorized as different genres. History was defined as a narration without polemical purposes. Its earliest form was a memo like recording of what the ruler said and did for a later checkup. According to the earliest Chinese characters inscribed on oracle bones, Shi (events or what the ruler said and did) and Yin (the official who is in charge of documentations and the record of Shi) had already been in existence in Shang Dynasty which started around 1723 B.C. and ended around 1046 B.C.. When it came to the Spring and Autumn Period (722 B.C. – 481 B.C.) of Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770 B.C. – 246 B.C.), "jun ju bi shu" (every movement and action of the ruler should be recorded) became the essential part in the establishment of the great learning for the ruler and Confucian scholars; more specific and institutionalized divisions were made in the responsibility and commitment for those who did documentation or historical recording works, for example, the following positions were set up in charge of different affairs: Da Shi (Big Affairs, concerning laws and rituals of how to rule a state), Xia Shi (Small Affairs, concerning the management of affiliated tributaries), Nei Shi (Internal Affairs, concerning the drafting and publication of the rulers' orders or decrees), Wai Shi (External Affairs, concerning the relationship with other states or border ethnic groups), Zuo Shi (Speeches, concerning the recording of speeches) and You Shi (Events, concerning the recording of deeds or events). Whatever affair was to be written down, an authentic recording of who, where, when and what was the basic obligation. If anything resembling philosophical reasoning took place, the historical work would be taken as in danger of unreliability. However, gradually the need to interpret rather than to record history developed and there appeared such works as Zuo Zhuan (*Zuo Commentary Tradition*, covering the years from 722 B.C. to 463 B.C.) which was the exegetical commentary to Chun Qiu (*Spring and Autumn Annals*, covering the years from 722 B.C. to 481 B.C.). The same tendency could also be found in other countries, for example, in Greek history, in 1909, Felix Jacoby published an article titled as *Über die Entwicklung der Griechischen Historiographie und den Plan Einer Neuen Sammlung der Historikerfragmente* trying to provide a new edition of the fragments of the previous Greek historians and, although his "work represented a revolutionary step" (qtd. in Kraus, 1999, P. 283), his interpretative reorganization had been widely criticized. Despite the development of hermeneutics to the historical works, emphasis on eyewitness or reliable testimonies was still the main trend. A wide destructive effect to the traditional antiquarian approach came from the Enlightenment in Europe of the 18th century which advocated the rationalization of history without much evaluation of evidence and facts. Although Leopold von Ranke's "writing history as it essentially was" gained wide recognition and due to his influence history had become an independent academic discipline, more Eurocentric historical discourses spread as more colonies appeared. As the matrix of world

powers was renegotiated after World War II and the previously colonized nations gained independence one after the other, more voices were heard to question and re-evaluate the old “master narrative”, and the tendency of “only X can speak about Xs” (Brettschneider, 1996, P. 80) stood out with the assistance of postmodernism which, with an iconoclastic and resurrecting force, challenged what had been taken-for-granted and pulled the peripheries to the centre of attention. History, which was supposed to be a faithful record of the fact, was turned into a battle field where the reestablishment of one’s identity was carried out and the credibility of the process was put in question. Besides Jean-Francois Lyotard’s identification of “performativity” (1984) in the preference for “petites histories” or “micronarratives” as a postindustrial desire characterized not by acquiring new facts, additional information, or truth but “the best possible input/output equation” (P. 46) the following phenomena should arouse the attention of historical writers.

3. Fallacies history faces in its identification

Norman J. Wilson (1999) once defined history “as a continual, open-ended process of argument, which is constantly changing [...] Thus there are no final answers, only good, coherent arguments” (P. 3). Obviously, this is a too idealized interpretation of history as something void of any possibility of bias shaped by various discourses of a given culture represented by the historiographers, and his replacement of “the facts” with “continually changing bodies of evidence” (P. 3) in the definition of history rationalized the fallacious phenomenon that as more advanced technology made more accurate and unified interpretation of the evidence possible, there were, on the contrary, more diverse interpretations to the same historical phenomenon. Besides

3.1 Subverting force of language

To make this process of retrieving truth from the past more complicated was the language. From the very beginning language was a self-contained system of signs and symbols translating reality but also subverting from the inside, especially when deconstruction theorists and postmodern extremists advocated the interchangeability between the surface and deep structure or between the signified and the signifier so that in a metaphysical world biased interpretation itself might be turned into a canonic source for reference and the real world became “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard, 1999, P. 381). This somewhat explained why Edward Said interpreted history as an instrument of the control of power and why Homi Bhabha argued that misrecognition of one culture by another was a way to extend political and social domination in the world order (Bhabha, 1992, P. 438). This linguistic adaptability in the justification of political intention also led to the emergence of a so called third space where “cultural signs are not fixed but can be appropriated, rehistoricized, translated, and reread” (Childs and Williams, 1997, P. 142).

3.2 Political interference as nationalism

In September 2004 a conference titled ‘Nationalism, Historiography and the (Re)construction of the Past’ was held at the University of Birmingham. In its call for papers was written that (Note 4):

The teleological nature of history encourages historians to retroactively imagine or construct past communities in accordance with contemporary cartographies. Today these cartographies are dominated by the nation-state and its territorially oriented mapping of geo-political space.

Even from the title of the conference, readers can tell the inseparability between the writing of history and politics embodied in nationalism. As a set of political or social philosophy in which the welfare of the nation as an entity is considered above any personal or other nation’s welfare, nationalism is usually incorporated in the nationalized ethics and infused in the working institution of individuals. Sometimes it might be the only precondition for citizenship or political right if dictatorship happens to exist. Therefore, the historiographers are apt to fall in the trap that the duty and loyalty to the nation is above everything else. Thus, the concern with national self-interest to the exclusion of the rights of other nations might lead to a biased historical writing or national conflicts.

3.3 Postmodern fictionalization of history

Another trap that a historiographer might easily fall in is the reciprocal relationship between history and fiction. Either as an advocator that “literature, as an allegorical mode of interpretation, bears witness against history’s claim to monopolize reality” (Braester, 2003, P. 6) or as a compromiser with the big “I” embodied in the postmodern theories, Yomi Braester does represent a trend that no objective reality exists. However, this rejection of objective truth paradoxically conjured up an overall suspicion including the challenge to the “master narrative” in terms of which human society or history was being historicized and understood. If the suspicion to the inner structure which prescribed the role of a “master” or “non-master” emerged, what kind of new criteria should be established based on a more interactive, reliable and globalized background? Maybe the recognition of a “master narrative” in history is in itself a problem. Readers can tell the difference between the following two statements. One is Napoleon’s “history is but a fable agreed upon” (qtd. in Imperato, 2000, P. 249) and the other is Sir Robert Hart’s justification of whatever account might be made on the Eight Power Alliance’s doings in China in the year of 1900:

[I]t would be interesting to get a really reliable Chinese account of Palace doings – and Peking doings – during 1900. As it is, we are all guessing and inferring and putting this and that together. As time has gone by, fires, deaths, forgeries, and revolutions – cultural or otherwise – have rendered finding such an account even more unlikely. (qtd. in Preston, 2000, P. 335-336)

Whether Napoleon's history was a fable or not, at least the modifier "agreed upon" indicated a mutual respect and a temporarily reached agreement - if it was not a permanent non-reducible truth. However, Sir Robert Hart's conclusion that there might not be reliable Chinese account of Palace doings has already been overthrown as more pictures and the western witness' memoirs got published online or in the book market.

3.4 Biases caused by egoism

The greatness of Sigmund Freud lies in his analysis of "id", "ego" and "superego" which is actually another version of the explanation of how an individual is socialized as life matures. It is a process of the demise of the true self and the institutionalization of a social individual. When we see ourselves as egos, we lose the joy of being true to ourselves or Nature but evaluate our behaviors based on the social norms and put others in the position of accessories depending on their utilities in our struggle for power. Egoism ranges from individualism to nationalism or racism, which can easily lead to bias, ignorance or innocent misinterpretations of other cultures. Take for instance, when Pearl Buck said in Theodore H. White's *China, the Roots of Madness* that Jiang Jieshi's personal charm was so radiant that he should have been the emperor if the empire had not been overthrown by the 1911 Revolution she did not realize that she was doing a "documentary" as a "historical witness" and she was doing a commentary based on her own likes or dislikes. Her following description was also worth suspicion without special context provided:

[T]hey were a very practical sort of soldiers, those warlords. When they fought a battle, they would notify us that they were going to have a battle the next day [...] they never fought if it rained-they thought it was foolish to go out in the rain and fight [...] they always took off for lunch and then by sunset, it didn't matter how hot the battle had been, when the sun set everything stopped and quieted down for the night so you could get a good night's sleep. (White, 1967, P. 37)

No similar description was ever found in other writings or personal recalls on such a religious war behavior associated with Chinese warlords in an era of military chaos, and it completely fell off the popular Chinese military philosophy that had been cherished and handed down since the birth of Sun Zi Bing Fa (*Art of War*) written around 515 B. C. - 512 B.C. - that is, the most valuable tactic to win a war was "changeability" or "action in sudden". Even in the same book, Pearl Buck's description was also in conflict with Theodore H. White's in that "[on] April 12, 1927, in Shanghai was the night of terror, as Chiang's troops rounded up and butchered hundreds of Communists [...] And when the sun rose, Chiang was in complete control of all the lower Yangtze valley" (White, 1967, P. 72).

3.5 Lack of empiricism in the writing of history

As everyone knows that history and science were traditionally taken as competing disciplines with the former studying the human past in a qualitative way trying to interpret each individuality while the latter studying nature in a quantitative way to discover the underlying principles or laws that control or guide things as they are. In recent years, groups of social scientists were trying to use quantitative method to databank the works of historians so that a governing pattern might be discovered or constructed to be used as a conceptual framework for further studies of the differences or similarities among different information suppliers separated in time and/or in space. The problem they met was not technical but the vast varieties of available historical accounts so much so that it was impossible to decide which were objectively valid enough and which were not.

When in 1991 Norman F. Cantor published his provocative *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*, an embarrassing result was revealed that each of the twenty major historians he examined had produced a different picture of the Middle Ages so that no single "historical record" could be derived for the social scientists to rely on for a typology or a background framework to test the credibility or reliability of other sources. Although Cantor was reviled by many for his mock on the giant medievalists in the 20th century, his research proved a prevalent practice in the field of historical writings that the imaginative constructions of lives and events, when woven into particular overarching narratives, seemed so natural and convincing that the political or historical configuration had become a useful vehicle for the claims the historians wished to advance (Cantor, 1991: 37).

3.6 Boundary and aesthetic changes of different eras

When the revision of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* was made for its second edition, policy was given that "no one who was originally featured is to be excised [...] many entries will be cut, re-organized, 'corrected' and otherwise refashioned [...] above all, they need more women [...] Meanwhile, the main things that are being 'corrected' and cut are to do with military men and imperialists" (Lee, 2000, para. 10). This passage has at least two implications: war or colonization related information might not be accurate and different ages have different aesthetics or desires. However, whose burden the controversial past is and in what way a mutual progress is to be established which should be beyond the

patriarchal boundaries of Eurocentric concerns and its presumptuous universalism when the dichotomy between the east and the west and the colonized and the colonizer is collapsing?

In a democratic society where different voices are heard, the writing of history might be more prudent or based on objectively reliable evidence due to the pressure of further investigation coming from free spirits or rival parties; however, if it is a highly totalitarian government and its people are united under a homogeneous discourse, the person who writes the history might be more consciously or subconsciously guided by a political inclination, which should and might be able to be prevented through the writer's cultivation in critical thinking and a democratic cosmopolitanism. New theories such as feminism, psychological criticism, deconstruction or queer theory are more or less challenging the orthodox aesthetics and therefore the cultural discourse and social patterns. Nobody dared to expect for a law of the same-sex marriage before the 21st century and the first same-sex marriage legalized in the Netherlands in 2001 has already been recorded as a historical evidence of humanism and will further the aesthetic or ethic discussion of such technologies as cloning, test tube babies or surrogate pregnancies.

4. Preventions to the slipperiness of history as the fact is

When talking about the modernization of Chinese historiography, Dolezelova-Velingerova and his collaborators (2001) postulated that

the intention of redefining Chinese history from the perspective of world history was disrupted by the bitter conflicts between the Qing government and the western powers that a search for 'spirit' in Chinese history from a national point of view was introduced [...] Modern Chinese historiographies thus emerged as repositories of intentionally shaped 'cultural memory', which was frequently constructed and reconstructed according to a constantly changing understanding of the notion of 'literature' and 'history'. (P. 126)

This “intentionally shaped cultural memory” is not only specific to the Chinese historiography but a universal phenomenon. If taking a comparative look at the European historiography before and after Christianity gained legal status and dominated in personal and national lives, one can easily find how a created religion has left its traces in every corner of one's internal as well as the physical external world and thereupon changed the whole geographical world and human history.

Revisionists more than once present the problem of inaccuracy or misrecognition in front of historians, pressing for the revision to the wronged. Upon this, numerous excuses have been made emphasizing the limitation of “then” and “there” and how history is as fallible as every person is. The most watchable problem is that the term of “innocent mistakes” seems to be more welcome and reciprocal than the blaming terms of Nazism, colonialism, self-centralism or racism. However, if cultural ignorance, technical deficiency and moral innocence are all excusable for the historical misrecognition or misrepresentation, what else is left for the younger generation to rely on for what had really happened in the past and happened in this way rather than that way? Warning has already been given long time ago by Frederick M. Powicke (1938) that “history was full of the dead weight of things which have escaped the control of the mind, yet drive man on with a blind force” (P. 45). How blind this force will be depends on how open the eyes and mind are.

Nowadays when the dispute on real, unreal, surreal or hyperreal has become a fashion, the re-evaluation of history and its uniqueness in disciplinary construction becomes urgent; otherwise, what Hegel once worried about might come true, though in a different version, that “the only thing we can learn from history is that no one learns anything from history” (qtd. in Gilderhus, 2000, P. 2). Whether historical scholars should approach the source material with an eye of updating it with newly discovered evidence or stick to the principle that history is hard facts independent of individuals' will and therefore can not be approached in a fictional way, the past is a once-existent reality. It is “this quality of the past that makes it uniquely compelling and distinctive from fiction” (Wilson, 1999, P. 4) – “Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?” asked John Adams, “Nobody,” Jefferson answered, “except perhaps its external facts” (qtd. in Jensen et al, 1961, P. 96-97).

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Notes

Note 1. [Online] Available: http://www.cbe21.com/subject/history/html/080502/20012/2001226_283.html (November 19, 2006). The translation from Chinese to English is done by the author of this article.

Note 2. [Online] Available: <http://www.cycnet.com/encyclopedia/history/dynasty/991105029.htm> (Nov. 21, 2006). The translation from Chinese to English is done by the author of this article.

Note 3. The translation from Chinese to English is done by the author of this article.

Note 4. [Online] Available: http://www.ottoman-links.co.uk/2004_nationalism_conference.asp (December 1, 2006).