Huang, Chun-chieh and John B. Henderson, eds. 2006. *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press. 223 pages. ISBN 962 996 222 5 (hardback)

The past is never past:
making sense of Chinese time

Gregory Bracken

Is there a characteristic Chinese conception of historical time? *Notions of Time* attempts to answer this question by comparing notions of time in Chinese and Western historical thinking. Nine essays are divided into four sections – an introductory 'Setting the Stage' and three sections dealing with time as perceived in ancient, traditional and modern China. In their attempt to cover everything from macrocosmic characterisations on the level of civilisational discourse to microcosmic comparisons between particular Chinese and Western thinkers, they progress from the universal to the particular, from the classical to the modern.

As Chun-chieh Huang states in his introduction, while 'Sino-Western cultural comparisons are common currency in a number of fields, they are particularly appropriate in historiography, given the unsurpassed richness of both the Chinese and Western historiographical traditions, as well as their relative independence and isolation from one another before modern times'. Huang also suggests that while other civilisations 'might reasonably claim to have produced the "first" or "greatest" academic-style historians…a good case can be made for Chinese historiography's having developed the most profound sense of time'.

This book is a follow-up to *Time and Space in Chinese Culture* (Huang, Chun-chieh and Erik Zürcher, eds. 1995. Leiden: E. J. Brill), and the essays in it were first presented at a conference in Taiwan in May 2000. One of its main arguments is that Chinese notions of time are peculiarly concrete; that they developed not so much from 'processes of theoretical abstraction or philosophical reflection as from the lived experience of people in history', which is all part of China's rich sense of historical connectedness with its past. The Chinese approach to history is to see it as a normative pattern and not a series of discrete and disconnected events; the past and present engage in a complex dialogue where the past is never static but is part of a living tradition that continues into the present.

Space, time, 'supertime': temporal perspectives

'Time, History, and *Dao*' by Q. Edward Wang is perhaps the most stimulating essay in the whole book. It compares the work of Zhang Xuecheng (a late-Qing historian) with Martin Heidegger, who, despite the dissimilarity in their backgrounds, both emphasised the everydayness of *Dao* or being. By reintroducing the notion of time into ontology, Heidegger, according to Wang, adopted a spatio-temporal approach similar to Zhang Xuecheng's, namely, the ultimate relation between cosmos and man. But in challenging the entrenched idea of the mind/matter split in modern Western philosophy, Heidegger also had to overcome more hurdles than Zhang. Wang reinforces his argument by citing the excellent *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (Parkes, Graham, ed. 1987. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), where Heidegger's relationship with Eastern philosophy is examined in detail.

John B. Henderson's essay 'Premodern Chinese Notions of Astronomical History and Calendrical Time' deals with the history of astronomy, where we come across the distinctive terminology of French sinologist Henri Maspero (Ma Bole), who is cited as differentiating 'sidereal' and 'tropical' time, which 'separated two things that the Chinese had always believed to be two faces of the same reality, the calendar and astronomy'. In pre-modern China astronomy was the science of time *par excellence*. The heavenly bodies were conceived primarily as visible markers of the invisible order of time, and not so much as objects in three-dimensional space. Accurately regulating the calendrical system (*shoushi*) was one of the top priorities of the ruler, who was, after all, known as the Son of Heaven; and remember, if his calculations did not reflect the celestial patterns, he could lose the Mandate of Heaven.

Chun-chieh Huang's essay '"Time" and "Supertime" in Chinese Historical Thinking' posits that time in Chinese historical thinking consisted of two elements: the temporal and the supratemporal. He takes a reconstructive approach that contrasts ancient Greek and Chinese conceptions of historical time, and states that 'the concrete and particular events that constitute the temporal aspect of the Chinese notion of time are distinguishable yet inseparable from the abstract and universal principle that is what we call in this paper Supertime'. This 'Supertime' can be discerned only in history, and is best exemplified in the works of the historical sages. Unlike the ancient Greeks, who regarded history as something 'against Time', time in China is not clock time (*chronos*) but humanly lived time. The Chinese believed that time helped shape history; it was humanly lived, shaped and achieved by individuals, sometimes disastrously, sometimes admirably. Chinese people, especially their historians, capitalise on this latter conception of time, calling it 'sagely', and worthy of being re-enacted and re-lived today.

An overly Western bias

Time is a basic dimension of human life, but, as Jörn Rüsen points out in 'Making Sense of Time', it is difficult to compare treatments of the past without thinking through an intercultural perspective. The problem is that such a perspective has been distorted because comparisons have tended to take the Western form of historical thinking as a parameter and then considered other cultures in terms of their similarities or differences from it. To a certain degree, the book under review is no exception.

This collection of essays makes good use of the ancient Chinese classics, notably the *Lunyu* (*The Analects*), the *Yiching* and Sima Qian's *Shiji* (*Records of the Great Historian*), as well as interesting though lesser-known scholars such as Zhang Xuecheng. But there is copious use of Western sources as well, from Herodotus to Heidegger; Husserl, Nietzsche and Benjamin; not to mention the more esoteric choices of Herbert Spencer, Paul Ricoeur and Stephen Hawking. Heidegger, in particular, is a useful and fruitful link, particularly given Wang's citing of *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. This reliance on Western scholarship probably stems from the fact that every one of these academics has received their training in the West. However, as highlighted by Rüsen, one has to question the efficacy of examining Chinese notions of time using so many (and varied) Western examples.

Part of a long-standing academic debate, the investigation of Chinese concepts through the lens of Western scholarship highlights other problems, notably the difficulty of translation (for example, in Chen Chi-yun's essay where *sui* and *nian* seem to be problematic). But even the notion of time itself is left hanging in this book, as seen by the difficulties with terminology such as sidereal, calendar and almanac time, particularly in some of the later essays that deal with time only in the most oblique way. Note also that the word 'time' itself is always in quotation marks in the different section headings, almost as a sort of warning that it is indeed a very slippery notion. Another issue is that of religion, which remains an often hidden element in these historical investigations; not enough is done to differentiate Chinese philosophy from religion, nor indeed to illustrate the unique blurring that occurs between the two in the Chinese tradition. While this book is undoubtedly a useful exercise, even an important one, its overly Western bias has to be considered somewhat misleading. Some stand-alone Chinese examples might perhaps have been beneficial – if there are any, that is, but even if there aren't, they will no doubt arise over time.

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Wagging the dog?
The media's role in Asian conflicts

Naresh Kumar

In states across Asia in recent years, separatist movements, perpetrators of inter-communal violence, and revolutionary and terrorist groups have increasingly tried to use the mass media to attain their political objectives. The contributors to *Conflict, Terrorism and the Media in Asia* attempt to assess how and to what extent non-state combatants in Asia access and influence the media; how the War on Terror influences the media's perspective of Asian conflicts; and how – or whether – the media influences those conflicts.

The book is a thorough examination of the media's role in conflict and terrorism in Asia. Focusing on conflicts in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, China and India, and showing how each involves the media as an interlocutor between combatants, government and society, it addresses how the media report political violence and conflict, and the media's impartiality in its relations with governments and insurgents. It also shows how the focus of the media, Asian states and America on the War on Terror has led to violence, notably by states responding to sub-national conflicts that, since 11 September 2001, have been increasingly portrayed in the West as part of a global terrorist threat.

Those engaged in political violence use violence to attract the attention of the public, political elites and policy-makers, and to spur debate on their objectives. Violence focuses media attention and attracts publicity, thereby enabling non-state combatants to set the media agenda. By setting the media agenda and influencing political debates, combatants transform their violence into political power. In the same way, governments communicate their own messages via the media to challenge the legitimacy of the methods, ideology and objectives of their opponents and to maintain popular and political support. This is typically achieved through mainstream negative reporting of their opponent's ideology and objectives, combined with the positive reporting of the political and security initiatives that the government is employing.

But the media can be more than just a passive conduit for relaying messages. In fact, the media is a political actor in its own right and is capable of playing a number of political roles, as an agent of stability, of restraint (through monitoring and challenging government) and of change. And yet, this book argues, while the media plays a major role in sub-national conflicts, its impact is generally limited.

From America to Malaysia to Indonesia: moulding mainstream public opinion

The book's first chapter, 'US Journalism: Servant of the Nation, Scourge of the Truth?' by Toby Miller, demonstrates how mainstream American media, notably network and cable television, have worked as effective spokespersons for nationalism in ways that coincide with the state's enunciated national interest. For example, almost three-quarters of Americans supported the invasion of Iraq. Miller argues that the American state and media mould public opinion in favour of government policy. In the service of the nation, he asserts, mainstream journalism has become a baying scourge on the truth.

Chapter two, 'Al Qaeda and the struggle for moderate Islam in Malaysia', by Benjamin Cole, attempts to explain the media's impact in Malaysian society. He argues that Malaysians are subject to numerous competing mainstream and new media (Internet) information flows from militants and governments. The impact on community action and the growth of militancy within Malaysia is difficult to assess, but it's important to bear in mind that Malaysia is not a fertile recruiting ground for militant groups because the majority of Malaysian Muslims follow a moderate view of Islam. Another reason why it is so difficult to assess media impact on community action is that there are so few opportunities for direct political action in Malaysia. The mainstream media acts as an agent of stability by reflecting and reenforcing the views of both the government and mainstream public opinion. The media is not, however, totally an instrument of government, and some media do attempt to perform a limited role as an agent of restraint in challenging the government, although there is little evidence of it having any impact.

The link between the media and political change remains ambiguous, even in Indonesia, where the media and the control of information clearly played a role in the creation, survival and collapse of President Suharto's New Order. The third chapter, 'Perning in the Gyre: Indonesia, the globalised media and the "War on terror"', by Jonathan Woodier, argues that while national censorship was formally defeated with the Suharto regime's collapse in May 1998, elements of the old power elite are seeking to use the media to further their ambitions and interests. The collapse of Suharto's system and the highly centralised state has 'opened the door for a new struggle to reforge coalitions and build regimes'. Though press freedom increased, which contributed to the emergence of a public sphere and civil society, Woodier maintains that at the edges of shrinking states many journalists, including the foreign media, are under threat. Today's political elites are trying to regain central control over the flow of information within and across state borders by criminalising the work of journalists and