

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 his-

torical 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.

Gregory Bracken is a PhD researcher in the Architecture Theory Department of Technical University of Delft, The Netherlands. [gregory@cortlever.com](mailto:gregory@cortlever.com)

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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 reinforcing 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

by invoking defamation laws to silence critics.

### 'Nothing but a cock fight?' The Philippine free-for-all

The political stability and territorial integrity of the Philippines are threatened by a number of sub-national conflicts, including the world's longest standing communist insurgency, a separatist rebellion centred around the Muslim Moro Community on the Island of Mindanao, and Al Qaeda-linked terrorist groups pursuing national and regional objectives. The rebellion was initially led by the secular Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), before hard line Islamist elements broke away in 1977 to form the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MNLF entered mainstream politics through a 1966 peace agreement according to which parts of Mindanao became autonomous, but the MILF has continued an armed struggle for full independence, operating in highland and rural areas covered in thick jungle. Since 2002 the MILF has sought a negotiated peace settlement with the government; the parties agreed to a ceasefire, but it's been broken many times.

After 11 September 2001 some of these conflicts were drawn into the American War on Terror when the State Department placed the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New Peoples Army (NPP), the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Pentagon Gang (a criminal gang specialising in kidnap for ransom) on its list of foreign terrorist organisations. While all groups currently engaged in conflict with the Philippine government are able to exert considerable influence over the media through violence, they have struggled to do so to their fullest advantage.

In chapter four, 'The Philippines Media: Agent of stability or restraint?', Benjamin Cole assesses how the media has reported sub-national conflicts in the Philippines since 2000, the extent to which various groups and communities engaged with the government to influence media coverage and the impact that the media has had on these conflicts. Cole states that the quantity of reporting on conflict-related stories is huge, having considerably increased since 2000, but that its quality is seriously flawed. In 2000 the media was acting as an agent of stability with respect to these conflicts. Its reporting of the Moro rebellion, for example, was largely one-sided in favour of the government, with many news reports simply reiterating official statements. The press did develop some contacts with the ASG, but most reporters were dependent on military and government sources.

Since then, however, there has been some improvement. The Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) analysed reports in the five most circulated newspapers and found that roughly three-quarters of articles that appeared in 2000 were government-sourced. By 2003 this had fallen to 60% and the number of sources had doubled. This included a better distribution of sources: over 13% came from civil society, while almost 35% of articles cited more than one source. In 2000, the media was also accused by some sections of civil society and opposition parties of being superficial and failing in its duty to explain the Moro rebellion. The media was reporting the conflict as 'nothing but a cock fight – who's losing, who's winning', without posing the crucial question of how government policy was being crafted. This was

confirmed by CMFR, whose studies found that just over 1% of stories published in 2000 contained background information, insight into the history of the violence, details about the ceasefire or statistics that fleshed out the bigger picture. By 2003 that figure was close to 5%.

Despite improvement between 2000 and 2003, media in general were still not up to the task of explaining the complex and multi-faceted character of contemporary political violence, or of advocating citizens' rights. By 2003, some media elements were increasingly playing the role of agent of restraint, but as a whole the media was still acting as an agent of stability. Since 2003 there have been encouraging signs that the media is striving to correct these flaws, gradually improving its performance and increasingly adopting the role of agent of restraint.

### Struggling to restrain, daring to change: Indian blood, Chinese silence

In chapter five, 'Shooting the messenger? Political violence, Gujarat 2002 and the Indian news media', Prasun Sonwalkar states that the level of media access that a group or community has tends to vary between different sections of the media, which can have a significant impact on determining which audiences see their messages. In Gujarat, for instance, a strong pro-Hindutva bias has challenged the media's role as an agent of restraint. Addressing the spring 2002 political violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat, which was widely seen as a pogrom against Muslims, Sonwalkar explores some of the ethical, political and professional dilemmas faced by journalists covering such events. Gujarat, the land of Gandhi, is likely to be long remembered for this anti-Muslim rampage, during which a mob perpetrated some of the most gory acts of violence since independence. The nature of the media coverage was as newsworthy as the political violence itself. Although most media (both English and Hindi) reported the violence boldly and independently, the two local newspapers, which were the most likely ones to have been read by those sections of the Hindu community who had formed the mob, exercised a strong pro-Hindutva bias. This limited the media's ability to act as a restraining influence on those perpetrating the violence.

Michael Dillon's chapter six, 'Uyghur separatism and nationalism in Xinjiang', finds that media coverage of the conflict in Xinjiang has been patchy, to say the least. Xinjiang is the contested region of Western China, administered by the PRC as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. But many Uyghurs, who comprise the region's largest ethnic group, and other non-Chinese residents consider this illegitimate and refer to it as Eastern Turkistan. The Uyghurs are a Turkic people who have been Muslims since at least the 15th century and their language is closely related to that of the Uzbeks and distantly to other Turkish languages. In China, positive news from Xinjiang is reported regularly, particularly when it supports the picture of successful economic development that the government wishes to present. Coverage of separatist activities was extremely rare until the 1990s, when there was press and television coverage of the trials of those accused of separatist activities. The political case for independence is never allowed to appear in the official media in China, and virtually all media remains under state control. Alternative sources of information include newsletters published

by Uyghurs themselves and, more recent, websites of Uyghur organisations based outside of Xinjiang, but these don't have the resources of professional press and television organisations and their access to first-hand information is often limited.

The Chinese government has strongly discouraged journalists from visiting Xinjiang for many years; Western journalists based in Beijing were even barred from the region on pain of losing their accreditation. As a result, Xinjiang has appeared only rarely in Western media, when there have been major disturbances. The authorities have carefully managed visits for groups of journalists since China's declaration of its support for the War on Terror in an attempt to garner international support for the suppression of sentiment among Uyghurs that they really belong to East Turkistan, but access to ordinary Uyghurs, particularly those living in outlying areas, has been severely restricted.

This silence was broken by a number of books published in Chinese by the separatist movement in the 1990s, which take a very confident attitude towards Beijing's suppression of the Uyghurs and provide an unprecedented amount of detailed information both about the separatist movement and the methods used by Beijing to contain it. The Internet is becoming more widely available in Xinjiang but is subject to regular monitoring by the Public Security Bureau, which filters Internet content throughout China. Because of this the Internet has not been used as a major vehicle for transmitting information about

the separatist cause, but it has increased the availability of information from outside Xinjiang. Although the media has played a role in the development of the independence movement in Xinjiang, it has not been a major player. Since the movement is considered illegal and all of its operations are clandestine, it has no access to mainstream state-controlled media.

### Access isn't everything: influencing the media influences little

In the book's conclusion Cole tries to understand how groups and communities engaged in, or suffering from, violent political activity are attempting to access the media to highlight their grievances; to publicise their objectives or ideology; to influence public opinion; and to build popular support both within and outside of their natural constituency, including international support from governments or militant groups. The ability of any group or community to achieve these purposes depends upon the nature and extent of the reporting of their conflict, and in Asia this varies widely.

All of these groups and communities have been able to successfully access the media and influence its agendas. But the level of access that different groups and minority communities have to the mainstream media varies widely from state to state and even from group to group within the same state. Since most of these governments work to deny these groups and communities media access and attempt to control media coverage, the level of access that

each group or community has is primarily determined by the extent of media freedom in each state. At one end of the spectrum, the Filipino media provides MILF and CPP spokesmen extensive access, and similarly the majority of the Indian media objectively reported the politically inspired anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat. At the other end of the spectrum, China has the most restrictive media, providing no direct access to the Xinjiang separatist movement. But whatever level of access any of these groups has falls far short of the access accorded to their respective governments and other elites.

The media's impact on the conflicts identified in this book has been varied but generally limited. In particular, the book demonstrates no relation between media coverage and the spread of militant ideologies, nor has media reporting generated widespread public or political pressure to accede to the demands of any of these groups. Even where the media has articulated the root causes of violence and the objectives of combatant groups and communities (as in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines), those conflicts have not widened. The possible exception is in Gujarat, where local pro-Hindutva newspapers have complemented the work of the Sangh Parivar in spreading the Hindutva ideology.

**Naresh Kumar** is a Research Scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Naresh\_jmu@yahoo.com