

MAN AND THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY IN THE EAST

Of all the nations in the East, the Chinese have had and still have the keenest awareness of the function of history, influencing, to a lesser extent, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, etc.

The best evidence of this is the fact that events which occurred in China have been continuously recorded by the Chinese, chronologically and with accuracy as to dates, with greater and greater precision as time went on, up to today. We know that the First Emperor of the Ch'in Empire, the founder of United China, died on the 7th day of the 7th month of the 37th year of his reign, i.e., 210 B.C., just as we know that Sun Yat-sen died on March 12, 1925. We also know that the date of the T'ang Emperor Hsüantsung's retreat from his capital to avoid rebellious troops was the 13th day of the 6th month of the 15th year of T'ien-pao (if transferred to the Julian Calendar, July 14, 756 A.D.), just as we know that the date of the Empress Dowager's retreat from Peking to avoid the Boxers was August 15, 1900. Furthermore, we know that on that unfortunate morning in 756 it was raining.

Histories were always written by governmental institutions. It was the responsibility of a dynasty to collect and preserve its own data, and when the dynasty was destroyed it was the responsibility of the succeeding dynasty to edit this data into an authentic history of its predecessor. There were twenty-four or twenty-five such authentic histories, each comprising an enormous number of volumes. The earliest, *Shih Chi*, Historical Records de Ssu-ma Ch'ien according to Chavannes, although not written exactly in this way, was still compiled by a government official.

Of course, there also existed a number of private records in various styles. However, the accurate continuity of historical accounts depends, for the most part, on this series of governmental histories. The bureau of history was considered the most important governmental institution; and to become a member of this bureau was the highest honor a man of letters could achieve.

This means that in China the compiling of histories was considered the responsibility of the nation, or, if I may say so, of Man. This concept was most fully developed in China, and less satisfactorily, in other Eastern countries. In Japan, governmental history in the Chinese style existed only for a time. Even now, to fill in the gaps, Japanese historians must trace facts back through scattered source materials.

Why were the Chinese so concerned with history? For the reason that to the Chinese, history was considered the subject most meaningful to Man. It was frequently pointed out that morals should be derived from past events, things which had actually happened, and not from abstract sayings, although the Chinese have plenty of those. Ssu-ma Chi'en, the founder of authentic history, quoted Confucius as follows:

I have tried to express it in vacant words, but that would be less satisfactory than expressing it in terms of actual facts which are concrete and explicit.

Whether or not these words were actually uttered by Confucius is not the issue. According to Ssu-ma Ch'ien, it was in the light of such a conviction that Confucius wrote his *Spring and Autumn*, a chronological record, and Ssu-ma Ch'ien, his own book, *Shih Chi*.

Man and the Concept of History in the East

More concisely, history is the mirror of Man. In the 11th century, another outstanding historian, Ssu-ma Kuang re-edited authentic histories, re-examining them with great care and compiling, in 294 volumes, a chronological history from 403 B.C. to 959 A.D. entitled *A Throughout Mirror for Politics*.

I may be asked whether historical writings often tend to be didactic inasmuch as they are intended to serve as a mirror for Man. Yes, sometimes they do.

I will cite an example from *A Throughout Mirror for Politics*: In volume 218 where the downfall of the T'ang Emperor Hsüanzung in 756 is described, the author refers to a particular episode. One day, en route to His Majesty's retreat, the weather was terribly hot. One of his attendants brought a bottle of cool wine which he wished to serve His Majesty. His Majesty declined, saying: "I stopped drinking forty years ago, since the day I got drunk and mistakenly killed a servant." The author referred to this incident only in his notes and omitted it from his text. His explanation was, that giving up drinking wine is only a minor virtue, unworthy of being remembered as a deed of this Emperor who eventually led his state into a crisis as a result of his various vices: loving women, extravagance, etc.

Though tending, at times, to be didactic, the usual style of Chinese history is colorful rather than narrow. Since history is a mirror for Man it should depict the diversity of Man. These historians do portray Man's vices as well as his virtues, his weaknesses as well as his uprightness. The colorful pattern of the *Sih Cbi*, the first authentic history, is becoming known in the West through some recent translations. I would like to cite another, somewhat later, example also from Ssu-ma Kuang's *Mirror*. The Emperor Wen, founder of the Sui Dynasty in the 6th century, had an extremely jealous Empress. His Majesty, who had stolen the throne from the preceding dynasty and become Emperor wanted to be attended by some concubines. His wife, now an Empress, was displeased. In the summer of 599 A.D., she discovered His Majesty making love to a girl. She berated him so severely that His Majesty galloped out of the palace and fled to the mountains. The Prime Minister was troubled, pursued His Majesty to the mountain hideaway and

tried to persuade him to return. His Majesty said: "I am a man who cannot tame the shrew, although I am an Emperor."

The Prime Minister answered: "You should not abandon the world because of a female." His Majesty returned to the palace and was reluctantly reconciled with the Empress. When the Empress learned that the Prime Minister had called her a "female" she took an intense dislike to him and tried to have him dismissed. A series of intrigues occurred in the palace, ending with the murder of the Emperor by his son.

This endeavor to depict the diversity of Man is also shown by the fact that each authentic history consists, for the most part, of individual biographies. The first authentic history, Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih Chi* contains seventy chapters of biographies, including those of generals, statesmen, poets, as well as of doctors, concubines, fortune-tellers, assassins, actors, merchants, etc. Later historians followed Ssu-ma Ch'ien's example.

Since history is a mirror, in depicting the diversity of Man, historians are always conscious of the unity of Man. Biographies of individuals always suggest that they are presenting wider circles of the various types of Man. For instance, Ssu-ma Ch'ien devoted the entire chapter six of his biographies to a man named Wu-Tzu-Hsü. Wu was originally a native of Ch'u. When his father was killed by the King of Ch'u, Wu fled to an enemy country where he succeeded in persuading a tyrant to invade his fatherland. Wu dug the tomb of the King who had killed his father, lashing the corpse. In the epilogue attached to the biography, the historian says: "The effect of ill-will among human beings is dreadful." It would seem as if Ssu-ma Ch'ien meant to suggest the broader significance of Man's inter-relationship, not merely something which happened to Wu-Tzu-Hsü himself. Via this biography, the author wants to deal with certain human problems.

Another and final significant point is that, since it is a mirror, history should be correct in every sense. Historical facts are the sources from which Man derives his morals. If there were any errors, history would be useless, even dangerous, for Man. Historical accounts have been examined and re-examined by scholars. The historian's responsibility is not merely that of the scientist, but of the moralist.

Man and the Concept of History in the East

Such an attitude was already apparent in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's work. In the epilogue to the first chapter of his history, containing biographies of five ancient Emperors, he declared that, although there existed many myths or legends about them, he had used the most reasonable ones and dropped those which sounded irrational. This attitude was adopted by subsequent historians. The best example of this is Ssu-ma Kuang, editor of *Mirror*, who appended a number of volumes of detailed notes to his voluminous work wherein he indicated the methods he had employed in digging reliable facts out of his source materials, and how he had discriminated amongst various discrepancies.

His explanation, quoted above, of why he did not use the anecdote of the T'ang Emperor is rather an exception. A difference of dates given by two different sources for a single fact is rarely overlooked; perhaps because this may also have some bearing on the ethical conclusions Man may derive from it.

Such a concept of history in China brought about two other aspects of her civilization: 1) the early disappearance of myths: China has the fewest number of myths, while Japan and India, like Greece, have a great many. China also would have developed myths were it not for the fact that most of them were rejected in their early stages by Ssu-ma Ch'ien and other historians. Myths were considered meaningless to Man because they were not historical facts; 2) the tardy development of fictitious literature in China. In her early period China produced neither drama nor the novel. Drama appeared only after the Yüan Dynasty in the 13th century, short stories only after the T'ang dynasty from the 7th to the 9th centuries, and longer novels only after the Ming Dynasty in the 14th century when the history of her civilization had already encompassed more than two thousand years. In Greece Aristotle wrote:

The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary... Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.

¹ Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, tr. by Ingram Bywater, p. 27.

The Chinese concept is quite opposed to Aristotle's. Statements concerning the nature of universals and not of singulars belong rather to history than to poetry (in the Greek sense).

I do not claim that the Chinese concept of history has overwhelmed the East. India's concept is quite different. In Japan, fictitious literature was considered highly earlier than in China. The *Tale of the Genji* was written in Japan in the 11th century, while as yet, China had no such work. The author of the *Tale of the Genji*, Lady Murasaki, expounded on the superiority of novels to history through some of the conversations in her novel. For example: a conversation between Prince Genji and his adopted daughter, Lady Tamakatsura:

One day, Genji, going the round with a number of romances which he had promised to lend, came to Tamakatsura's room and found her, as usual, hardly able to lift her eyes from the book in front of her. "Really you are incurable," he said laughing. ... "I am sure that the book you are now so intent upon is full of the wildest nonsense... Now for a confession. I too have lately been studying these books and have, I must tell you, been amazed by the delight which they have given me.

It used to be thought that the authors of successful romances were merely particularly untruthful people whose imaginations had been stimulated by constantly inventing plausible lies. But that is clearly unfair...

Even its practical value is immense. Without it what should we know of how people lived in the past, from the Age of the Gods down to the present day? For history-books such as the Chronicles of Japan show us only one small corner of life; whereas these diaries and romances which I see piled around you contain, I am sure, the most minute information about all sorts of people's private affairs..."²

The Japanese attitude seems closer to the Greek. On the other hand, some Japanese historical works are also entitled "Mirror," as exemplified by *Okagami*, the "Grand Mirror," etc.

If I may arrive at a conclusion—conceiving history as the mirror for Man is an important and useful concept which can contribute toward a more comprehensive philosophy in the future when communication between East and West, or among the Eastern nations themselves, will have been more thoroughly developed.

² Tr. by Arthur Waley, *A Wreath of Cloud*, pp. 253-255.