The Eternal Principles of the Past:

A Hermeneutical Approach to Confucian Philosophies of History

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Chinese historical thinking shuttles between the past and the present for mutual enrichment. Past experiences form a continuous five-thousand-year history from which present-day readers may engage in creative dialogues with historical figures and texts. To be human in traditional Chinese society is to be a historical creature.[[1]](#footnote-1) Li Dazhao, the first Marxist philosopher of history in China, reflected on this theme: “The future and the past are unlimited, so if I do not examine clearly the nature of history, to understand its tendencies, my life will be meaningless… Interpretation of history is therefore truly a standard for measuring human life.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In this paper, I aim to reconstruct the nature of Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history through a hermeneutic reading of classical Confucianism, linking the principles of historical meaning forward by Kongzi 孔夫子 (551-429 BCE) and Mengzi 孟子 (c. 371-289) to the metaphysics articulated by the neo-Confucian tradition. For Zhu Xi, the paramount philosopher of the Southern Song dynasty, the study of history was vital but ultimately subservient to his central philosophical concern with the eternal, timeless pattern *Li*理 that gives moral meaning and intellectual comprehension to factual judgments about the past. For this reason, Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history claims that the essential substance of historical meaning is constitutive of a personal investigation of the heavenly pattern *Li* observable through a form of historical materialism rooted in the metaphysical substance *qi* 氣.

Zhu Xi did not outline an explicit philosophy of history. But as Conrad Schirokauer stresses, Zhu Xi’s consciousness of history permeates his entire philosophical system – the most complex and developed of his era.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is from this system, informed by the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, that I extract Zhu Xi’s vision of the past. A discussion of my use of hermeneutics will preface the construction of a Confucian philosophy of history through the classical tradition, with the teachings of Zhu Xi interweaved.

I do not intend to argue that Song dynasty Confucianism and nineteenth-century German literary theory share some principle beyond form, eternal across geography and time. The purpose of this paper is not to develop a Confucian hermeneutics, but to read the Confucian philosophy of history hermeneutically. This is a novel approach to Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history – a rather untouched subject. Past applications of hermeneutics focus entirely on Zhu’s interpretations of the Five Classics, not his vision of history.[[4]](#footnote-4) But Confucianism is, after all, a tradition of extended and extending interpretations marked by creative engagement with a body of canonical texts. Mengzi reconstructed Kongzi, as did Xunzi. Zhu Xi did not hesitate to interpret Kongzi, Mengzi, the Cheng brothers, or even shape neo-Confucianism out of dialogues with Taoist and Buddhist influences.

In this sense, Confucianism embodies an intellectual heritage of philosophers and classics under constant theorization.[[5]](#footnote-5) *The Great Learning* encourages one to be “As though cut and filed, / As though carved and polished. / Solemn – oh, exacting!” – to be learned and refined with a balanced mind to realize the moral truths in everyday practices.[[6]](#footnote-6) Creative and constant practice of these moral truths is like, according to Zhu, climbing a pagoda: “If you climb one story after another, you’ll personally get to know the top story, without inquiring of anyone else. If you don’t actually walk up it but just fantasize about it, you’ll be incapable of understanding even the lowest story.”[[7]](#footnote-7) And Kongzi argued: “Imagine a person who can recite the several hundred odes by heart but, when delegated a governmental task, is unable to carry it out…no matter how many odes he might have memorized, what good are they to him?”[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, it is only through practice that authentic understanding and scholarship of Confucianism grows clear and deeper insights come to light. To borrow the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, in practice, “understanding means a growth in inner awareness, which as a new experience enters into the texture of our own mental experience. Understanding is an adventure.”[[9]](#footnote-9) It is essential to the self-identification and self-understanding of Confucianism to think of the tradition in terms of its canonical texts and commentaries.[[10]](#footnote-10) To learn Confucianism is to embed oneself in the interpretative tradition of the Four Books and Five Classics.[[11]](#footnote-11) In this sense, a hermeneutic approach positions the Confucian philosophy of history as both a constituent and manifestation of the historical context in which Confucian discourse evolved. It for this reason that a reconstruction of Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history requires the interspersion of the classical Confucian tradition found in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*.

An exploration of the philosophical view of history in Confucianism must begin with the *Analects* 論語, a collection of teachings and anecdotes attributed to Kongzi, better known as Confucius in the West, and his disciples. Early Confucian philosophy of history searches for meaning by drawing moral lessons from the past – in other words, history is an ethics guidebook. Kongzi’s interest in historical knowledge arises from its pedagogical and didactic uses. To be a teacher, the Master argues, means looking to the past as a source of examples for the present.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is for this reason Kongzi believes that he transmits ancient ways rather than innovates new moral rules, rules which define“the Way” 道 *Dao* as the universal principle of history.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is within history that the *Dao* – the ideal model and repertoire of proper social, ritual, and moral conduct – found complete realization, its meaning drawn forth from the total trajectory of historical changes: “The common people today are the same people who allowed the Three Dynasties to put the upright Way into practice.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Immanent to this passage is a selective treatment of historical patterns which Kongzi uses to supply examples of declining moral attitudes. Kongzi not only references historical periods to rebuke the present for insufficient commitment to the *Dao*,[[15]](#footnote-15) but wields specific historical figures as part of a need to emulate the legendary sage kings: “How great was Yao as a ruler... How majestic in his accomplishments, and glorious in cultural spender! Shun had five ministers and the world was well governed… Virtue flourished as never before after the reigns of Yao and Shun.”[[16]](#footnote-16) To ward his audience away from excesses at court, Kongzi stresses that Shun, an ideal king, ruled the world with only five ministers. The *Analects*, in this way, positions the meaning of history as the tracking of virtue – the deterioration of the *Dao* – that manifests in the moral behavior of leaders.

But the presence of the universal principle *Dao* also extends into rituals *li* 禮. Through ritual, Kongzi develops what the *Dao* consists in and of:

[Kongzi] said, “When the Way prevails in the world, rituals, music, punitive expeditions, and attacks against foreign powers issue from the Son of Heaven. When the Way does not prevail in the world, these things issue from the feudal lords. When they issue from the feudal lords, it is seldom more than ten generations before the lords lose control of them.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In this passage, essential to Confucian political philosophy, Kongzi forms an inextricable bond between the survival of a kingdom, and the flourishing of the *Dao*, with the continuance of the rituals set by the ancient sage kings. Kongzi suggests that the historical role of ritual is to transmit the *Dao* and combine with moral attitudes to form the *Dao* itself. This is possible because humanity, by observing the cultural practices of the Three Dynasties, broadens the *Dao* and thereby forms continuity across Chinese history.[[18]](#footnote-18) With this historical knowledge, it is possible to know what will happen in the future.[[19]](#footnote-19) In this way, the *Analects* realizes the “hermeneutical circle” conceived by Martin Heidegger, as one must envision the *Dao* in terms of how moral attitude and rituals interact with each other, and how they feed back into the *Dao*.[[20]](#footnote-20) This cycle becomes a definitive characteristic of the Confucian philosophy of history as one learns the *Dao* from examples of the past, then extrapolates general moral norms to form value judgments about historical and present situations, which in turn enriches one’s sense of the *Dao*.

Zhu Xi identifies the purpose of history with the broadening of self-knowledge, of moral cultivation, for everything the process of history mediates is mediated along with the self. Under the metaphysics of neo-Confucianism, the *Dao* became equivalent to the notion of principle *Li*, which is the pattern of the universe – a sort of cosmic order or norm that defines the standards of human conduct. For Zhu Xi, *Li* is the intangible essence of the historical process, the basis of the blooming or declining *Dao* from the investigation of which facts of history come under the moral judgment of this eternal paradigm of principle. As Zhu Xi explains, “in reading history, you should examine the great moral principles [*Li*], the great opportunities, and the periods of great order and disorder, success and failure,” so as to see things as concrete manifestations of the cosmic-historical pattern.[[21]](#footnote-21) This philosophy of history does not separate fact from moral value; instead, it situates moral value within the realm of fact, for the purpose of history is moral education.[[22]](#footnote-22) In other words, Zhu Xi characterizes historical knowledge as *moral* knowledge derived from an epistemic pursuit of *Li* through the concept of *ko wu*, or “the apprehension of the principle in things.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

To truly apprehended something is to go beyond its surface layer by scrutinizing the reasons for its existence.[[24]](#footnote-24) The same applies to historical events. All historical affairs come into existence in accordance with the *Dao* but it is only through an investigation into the *Li* of the affairs that one knows the *why* of things.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is not enough to know that one ought to follow rituals; a moral agent must know *why* rituals deserve proper observance. Zhu Xi’s view is that the relationship between historical facts or figures and morality constitute an interconnective moral web ordered by the *Dao*. Each event in the past and present has a specific place within this web, so too does each human being. It is within this place that the *Li* of things resides. To locate an event or person in this web requires comprehensive awareness and deep reflection of the “true meaning” of the Five Classics.[[26]](#footnote-26) As Zhu Xi explains: “Practice mental attentiveness and the myriad manifestations of [*Li*] will be complete in you,” suggesting that the *Dao* is identical with human nature.[[27]](#footnote-27) Understanding the why behind the historical manifestations of the *Dao* makes moral agents autonomous. By probing the classical and historical texts, “we’ll find that all of [the manifestations] were complete in us from the very beginning,” and “in this way moral principle [*Li*] and our own minds will be in perfect accord.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Within the context of a philosophy of history, the purpose of penetrating the *Li* of things is to locate the events and human beings in the moral web of the *Dao*. In doing so, students of history develop the ability to put into practice the moral principle, no matter the circumstance.[[29]](#footnote-29) To know, in this sense, is to find the *Li* so as to act morally within the holistic web of the *Dao*. It follows that a person’s hermeneutic experience of the Confucian canon, of Confucianism’s universal claims on humanity and virtue, constitutes the most fundamental source of the meaning of history.

Confucianism’s second sage, Mengzi, affirms this intense sense of a hermeneutical meaning of history as it relates to the extrapolation of historical facts and the idealization of past figures. As Mengzi said:

After the influence of the true King came to an end, songs were no longer composed. When songs were no longer composed, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were written. The *Sheng* of Chi, the *T’au wu* of Ch’u and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of Lu are the same kind of work. The events recorded concern Duke Huan of Ch’I and Duke Wen of Chin, and the style is that of the official historian. [Kongzi] said, “I have appropriated the didactic principles therein.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

A central preoccupation with the works of the *Mencius*, and a striking feature of Mengzi’s thought in general, is the idealization of the past, primarily the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and the ancient sage emperors Yao and Shun. For Mengzi, idealization meant that these dynasties and rulers observed the Confucian norms, rituals, and attitudes manifest in the *Dao*. Mengzi’s frequent appeals to ancient history give concrete shape to abstract moral problems. Yao, Shun, King Wen, King Wu – ancient personages serve as embodiments of moral qualities, their character envisaged in actual situations discussed in detail and in all earnestness. This is the second central feature of the classical Confucian philosophy of history on which Zhu Xi operated. Idealization was not simply a reflective practice bent on fostering a cohesive identity or tradition but a method to establish supra-temporal patterns of conduct which should be followed no matter the people nor time: “Shun was a man; I am also a man. Shun set an example for the Empire worthy of being handed down to posterity, yet here am I, just an ordinary man.”[[31]](#footnote-31) To Mengzi, this is the obvious purpose of historical thinking, which he describes as “looking for friends in history.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Mengzi applies a practical hermeneutics to his idealization, this idea of opening up a dialogue with past figures recognizes the context of these individuals and their worlds as the state of the *Dao* – be it flourishing or in decline – defines the qualities of an era. But it also, more importantly, emphasizes interpretation as understanding an ongoing conversation between authors of antiquity and present readers. In this way, the nature of human beings is deeply situated in history, as experiences of the past – the lives of legendary sage kings – represent an ideal rather than a simple historical fact or event.[[33]](#footnote-33)

There is no history without “change” – the present must replicate the virtue of Shun and Yao not simply because it is the past but rather because these norms, attitudes, and rituals embody the virtue of benevolence 仁 *ren*, the principle of historical process. Shun, Yao, and Yu ordered the world and differentiated the Empire from its “barbarian” neighbors because of a benevolent government.[[34]](#footnote-34) After their deaths, “the way of the Sages declined, and tyrants rose one after another…and the [*Dao*] fell into obscurity,” the decay of ancient principles giving way to chaos.[[35]](#footnote-35) For Mengzi, the presence or lack of *ren* sets the course of history, as it was, for example, by *ren* that the Three Dynasties gained the Empire, and by cruelty that they lost it.[[36]](#footnote-36) This leads to a linear approach to history as tracking the gradual decay of the *Dao* since the times of the ancient, so strongly stressed by Mengzi’s idealization, but also a cyclical approach as it places the potential for historical impact at an individual level. Rulers must adopt *ren* for the *Dao* to flourish, otherwise the path of morality “does not shine forth.”[[37]](#footnote-37) It is preciously this idea that makes Mengzi’s philosophy of history hermeneutic as it depends on the willingness of a person, specifically rulers, to engage in a conversation with the past to delineate the proper conduct necessary for *ren*.

As in the case of Mengzi, Zhu Xi inscribes the blooming and degeneration of the *Dao* in a linear trajectory of decline, as marked an inability to apprehend the *Li* of things.[[38]](#footnote-38) But *Li*, as the force of historical change,is impotent. The process of history relies on the material constitution of people. Instead of reusing the Mencian conception of *ren*, *Li* takes causal action through *qi*, the psychophysical matter that makes up all things. According to the idea that “principle is one but its manifestations many,” Zhu Xi suggests sages and regular people share the same moral principle, and that the differences in cultivation and action arise from the *qi* the individuates entities.[[39]](#footnote-39) To vitalize *qi* one must study antiquity. The sages have the clearest *qi*, their attitudes and actions most closely aligned with the *Dao*. For that reason knowledge, of history and historical context must not be a mass of information but a pathway into seeing history as sages did.[[40]](#footnote-40) It is best, Zhu Xi explains, to read the Four Books and Five Classics because “it’s like speaking with [the sages] face to face.”[[41]](#footnote-41) To study history from the sage’s perspective first requires the reading of the Classics. This form of historical engagement with texts imbues an idealistic quality to Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history, as “People are just these people, and Dao is just this Dao…If we now want to break the border and the wall dividing the old times from those present, we having nothing else but to explore the way of thought of Yao and Shun.”[[42]](#footnote-42) To Zhu Xi, reading of the canonical texts is essential. A failure to read the Classics, or to misstep by reading the histories beforehand, is like “opening a dike with a ladleful of water to irrigate the field. You can stand there and watch [the water] dry up.”[[43]](#footnote-43) To illustrate how the sages read history in proper form, Zhu Xi details a vivid account of their scholarly behavior:

Today's scholars have never understood the main point of learning. One should simply probe moral principle (*Li*); moral principle is the same as heavenly principle. Even if sages don't appear, this heavenly principle exists of its own… It simply avails itself of the sages to explain it to people. For example, the *Changes* treats nothing but the one principle of *yin* and *yang*. When Fu Hsi first drew [the eight trigrams], he was simply drawing this principle. King Wen and Confucius [in their work on the *Changes*] were both elucidating this principle. [The judgments of] "good fortune," "bad fortune," "remorse," and "humiliation" were all inferred from this principle. When Confucius spoke about it, he said: "The superior man abides in his room…through words and deeds the superior man moves heaven and earth.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Noteworthy here are the sages’ ability to discern the unintelligible through probing *Li*. Scholars of Zhu Xi’s day fail at this duty, and as a result, collapse the purpose of learning. For this reason. it is important to keep intact the tradition set by Fu Hsi, King Wen, and Kongzi: the unguided mind of the contemporary scholar fails to transmit through “words and deeds” the *Dao*. The relation of historical knowledge and the *Dao* is dialectical. *Li* is like the method of uncovering the past, *qi* is like the truth: it is a *yin*-*yang* force that mediates one another, completes one another, and enhances one another to infusing meaning to history.

The aim of this paper was the philosophical analysis of the Confucian philosophy of history, as represented by Kongzi, Mengzi, and Zhu Xi, through a hermeneutical approach. For Kongzi, history holds the fullest realization of the *Dao* – the Confucian Way which constitutes the model of social life, personal conduct, and governance. History is an ethics, a collection of stories and examples by which students and scholars deduce general moral norms. Mengzi furthers this approach, as his idealization of the past presents the sage kings of antiquity as physical incarnations of Confucian virtue, and ascribed *ren* (benevolence) as the casual mechanism of history. With neo-Confucianism engaging the intellectual exchange with Buddhism and Taoism, the form of Confucian metaphysics emerged. Zhu Xi applies these metaphysics to the notion of *Dao* as the historical principle and the *qi* of idealized sages. Above all else, however, Zhu Xi’s philosophy of history demands the extraction of *Li* – the cosmic norm of conduct – from the canonical Confucian texts so as to gain moral meaning. To philosophize the meaning or purpose of history is to embark on a creative engagement with the past and the present. An understanding of history, for these three Confucians, is an adventure that creates a critical dialogue with a complex tapestry of intellectual tradition so to expand self-knowledge and moral cultivation.

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