

3. The Ch'in Unification (221 B.C.) in Chinese Historiography

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I. Introduction

"Six warring states seized to complete the unification of great lands and far seas; great forests on Mt. Shu balded only to erect A-fang Palace," bemoaned the T'ang Dynasty (618-907) poet Tu Mu (803-852). The Ch'in state, located in the wild west of China proper, with its "*Sturm und Drang*" militant power, conquered disparate kingdoms and unified the land in 221 B.C. However, this very first Chinese Dynasty prospered only fifteen years before it melted into thin air. Nonetheless, the quick rise and decline of the Ch'in Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) constituted a major turning point in Chinese history, marking its transformation from classical China to imperial China both in historical reality and in the Chinese mind. The Chinese have since then often returned to the experience of the unification and downfall of the Ch'in Dynasty as a source of guidance and inspiration. It seems as if the impressive rise and quick collapse of the Ch'in Dynasty became an immanent mirror, in which the Chinese could constantly reflect their own pains and gains. The question is: What exactly did the Ch'in experience offer to the Chinese? To answer this question, namely how and why the Chinese dwelled on the Ch'in experience, we need to consider certain characteristics of Chinese historical thinking.

But first, let us take a look at how Chinese historians approached the importance of the Ch'in unification in Chinese history. In general, Chinese historians believe that the unification of the Ch'in Dynasty made a major contribution to the development of Chinese culture. And this belief has been shared by historians in both imperial and modern China. In 1924, for example, Lü Ssu-mien (Ch'eng-chih, 1884-1959), an acclaimed historian known for his Classical learning, observed that "China before the Three Dynasties was a feudalistic world, and China after the Ch'in and Han Dynasties became an imperial one, which was essentially different. It was because the Ch'in Dynasty unified China."¹ In 1939, Ch'ien Mu (Pin-ssu, 1895-1990), a

famous Confucian scholar and historian, expressed a similar viewpoint. Ch'ien summarized the historical significance of the Ch'in's unification as follows: a) mapping out the imperial realm of China; b) unifying the Chinese people; c) laying the foundation for the Chinese political system; and d) establishing a basis for the future development of Chinese scholarship.²

Lü and Ch'ien's observation of the position of the Ch'in Dynasty in history went unchallenged among many Chinese scholars throughout the twentieth century. For instance, more recently Cho-yün Hsü, an American-trained social historian of ancient China, offered his view of the role of the Ch'in Dynasty in developing Chinese culture. According to him, in the long evolution of Chinese culture, there have been only two periods, demarcated by the Ch'in. The time from the ancient period to the Ch'in and Han Dynasties was the first period, which was characterized by the emergence of the first "universal order." From that time onward to the present day was the second period. The first universal order, established in the Ch'in-Han period, collapsed during the period of disunion (220–589), which consequently led to the establishment of the second universal order in the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) Dynasties. The second universal order was modified through the Sung (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) times. However, it collapsed during the Ch'ing (1644–1911) Dynasty. From that time onward, or in the second period, Chinese culture was darkened by thick clouds.

The universal order in the Ch'in and Han Dynasties included political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Politically, this universal order was founded on an imperial and bureaucratic system. Economically, there was a national market network operating together with small-scale agricultural systems. Culturally, there was a prevalent form of Chinese thought that blended elements of Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, and Yin-yang thought. It was soon to be developed into a philosophical system that could be applied throughout the world. Hsü also notes that at a social level, there was a group of intellectuals who endeavored to preserve and promote Chinese culture.³

Historians in imperial China, though believing that the unification of the Ch'in Dynasty marked a crucial turning point in Chinese history, assessed the significance of the event mainly from a moral perspective. As the rise of the Ch'in Dynasty marked the beginning of autocratic rule in China, its decline was regarded as an unavoidable outcome of moral corruption at the imperial court. To some, the historical experience of the Ch'in Dynasty even suggested a degradation of moral principle (*tao*).

This essay attempts to scrutinize the peculiarities of Chinese historical thinking via a study of the Chinese reflection on the Ch'in experience. We will review the opinions of Chinese intellectuals and historians about the Ch'in empire, especially their moral perspective. We argue that Chinese historical thinking is essentially moral thought; traditional Chinese historical scholarship is a study of ethics. To better analyze the ethical concerns in Chinese historical thinking, we will discuss some general characteristics of Chinese thinking in the second section. In the third section we will review both the negative and positive moral judgments that Chinese intellectuals

passed on to the Ch'in experience. The fourth section will inquire into the twofold-ness of the notion of *tao* in Chinese historical thinking. In the last section we will conclude the essay with some reflections on the characteristics of Chinese historical thinking.

II. Chinese Historical Thinking as Moral Thinking

Before considering the Ch'in experience, I have to clarify what I meant by the moral dimension of Chinese historical thinking in two respects. (2:1) It seems to me that the Chinese often establish moral imperatives through historical narrative and historical interpretation. Chinese historical narrative is more than "exemplary."⁴ It goes beyond supplying solid examples for extracting moral lessons from the deeds of historical characters or historical events. The Chinese mode of thinking is also concrete; it seeks to contextualize itself in solid examples. (2:2) There was never a *l'histoire pour l'histoire* in the Chinese tradition; the Chinese wrote history of the "past" for the betterment of the "future." Chinese historians focused their historical narrative on the moment here and now, so that it could serve as guidance for the future. For this didactic purpose, they extracted universal moral ideals from concrete historical facts. The following paragraphs will explore these two aspects in further detail.

(2:1) As I have argued elsewhere,⁵ the so-called "cognitive" activity in Chinese historical thinking actually moves back and forth in time, first going to the past for information, then coming back to the present with lessons to pattern our own actions by. Then it goes back once again to ascribe meaning and significance to the past, then it comes back with inspirations for living accordingly in the present moment. And this "back-and-forth" movement is itself self-consciously historical. Although this is not a full-fledged theory of history, it is undoubtedly a dynamic view of history particular to the Chinese people, which is also frequently exhibited and practiced in their day-to-day thinking and living.

Mencius (ca. 371–289 B.C.) was most explicit in stating and executing this back-and-forth movement in historical thinking. He noted that just as no artists or artisans could perform their tasks without squares, compasses, and pipes, no benevolent ruler could govern without historical precedents. The Way of the Former Kings and the sages were the compasses and squares for a benevolent government.⁶ Mencius also used the historical examples of the famous figures—Shun, Fu Yüeh, Chiao Ke, Kuan Chung, Sun Shu-ao, and Po-li Hsi—to suggest that Heaven often tests one's fortitude through starvation, hardship, and frustration before placing on him a great task or responsibility. Hence he concluded a principle: men flourish in adversity and wither in comfort.⁷ This example shows that Chinese thinkers not only extract moral principles from history, they also use historical examples to expound these principles, hence, the back-and-forth movement.

Mencious' use of history suggests that Chinese thinkers, as well as historians, follow a concrete mode of thinking, which refers to an approach that regards historical facts as the basis of abstract theories. Chang Hsüeh-ch'eng (Shih-chai, 1728–1801), a Ch'ing historian, once remarked, "Ancient sages never discuss principles without giving solid examples."⁸ Chang's observation offers a good example for the concrete mode of thinking—it reasons with solid and specific examples rather than with metaphysical speculation. Of course, while based on specific examples, the principle it draws from also points to the "universal." However it is the "concrete universal."

(2:2) It is precisely because the Chinese tend to extract universal ethical principles from historical events, Chinese historical thinking is never very distant from the present, nor from the future. The grand historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145–86 B.C.) expressed this idea in an exemplary manner. In his magnum opus *Shih Chi* (or the *Grand Scribe's Records*), Ssu-ma Ch'ien comments on several "truly extraordinary men" and their writings of history:⁹

All these men had a rankling in their hearts, for they were not able to accomplish what they wished. Therefore they wrote of past affairs in order to pass on their thoughts to future generations. . . . I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in one hundred and thirty chapters. I wished to examine all that concerns heaven and man, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family. But before I had finished my rough manuscripts, I met with this calamity. It is because I regretted that it had not been completed that I submitted to the extreme penalty without rancor. When I have truly completed this work, I shall deposit it in some safe place. If it may be handed down to men who will appreciate it and penetrate to the villages and great cities, then though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret would I have?

As Ssu-ma Ch'ien said, Chinese historians record "past affairs" for the sake of "future generations." Historians seek to find the principles behind successes and failures in history, so that their historical records can serve as a guidance for the present and for the future.

III. The Ch'in Empire as a Negative and Positive Mirror

In this section, we will analyze the unification and downfall of the Ch'in empire as (3:1) a negative mirror that manifests the eternal principle in history—that any empire is doomed to decline if it fails to rule with humanity and righteousness; and (3:2) a positive mirror that reflects the principle that unification brings peace and prosperity to the people. These two points are further analyzed in the following passages.

(3:1) Why did the Ch'in Dynasty decline? This question, which readily arose from observing the Ch'in experience, has been central to Chinese his-

torical thinking ever since the Han times. During the Tien-an Men Square Incident on April 5, 1978, for example, Peking citizens mourned the death of Chou En-lai and put up signs with slogans such as, "The Age of Emperor Ch'in Is Vanished," and "Folks Today Are No Longer Simple-Minded." It shows that the Ch'in experience remains a vivid memory for the modern-day Chinese. Over the past two millennia, indeed, the Chinese people by and large grunted and sweated under a weary life, due largely to the oppressors' wrongs and insolence and their monopoly of power. The Chinese who suffered under the slings and arrows of this monopoly politics often pointed to the Ch'in Dynasty and regarded it as the source of their suffering. In the meantime, they also longed about a new departure from the Ch'in experience. Thus viewed, the Ch'in Dynasty has never completely vanished from one's memory, nor have all the unpleasant experiences associated with it. History therefore becomes an endless cycle of memory and a continuous interaction between past and present. Despite the postmodernist challenge, I would still like to say that what history becomes today is actually formed and engendered by the past; what seems past is never passed by completely.¹⁰

The Ch'in as a negative mirror rendered tremendous historical lessons for the Chinese since the founding of the Former Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–8 A.D.). This was due to the fact that the Han emperors and ministers had to deal with the legitimacy question of their dynasty.¹¹ As the story goes, the founding Emperor Han Kao-tsu (r. 202–195 B.C.) considered his own empire as a "spear-won land," and once blustered at a Confucian scholar Lu Chia (216–176 B.C.): "I established my empire on horseback. Why should I study the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*?" However, after Han Kao-tsu had been on the throne for a short period, he quickly realized the importance of the legitimacy question. In fact, Han Kao-tsu later became almost fascinated with the "reasons why the Ch'in lost control of All Under Heaven."¹² It is because as the immediate successor to the Ch'in Dynasty, the Han rulers must develop a good explanation for the Ch'in's fall in order to prove that the establishment of the Han Dynasty was not only legitimate but also necessary. Lu Chia's *Hsin Yü* (New Discourse) was written exactly for that purpose. It explained the failure of the Ch'in and drew historical "lessons" from its experience. The most important "lesson" drawn from the Ch'in experience was the principle that any emperor has to rule his subjects with humanity and rationality, which was espoused most eloquently by Chia Yi (201–169 B.C.), another well-known Confucian in the Han period:

Ch'in, beginning with an insignificant amount of territory, reached the power of a great state and for a hundred years made all the other great lords pay homage to it. Yet after it had become master of the whole empire and established itself within the fastness of the pass, a single commoner opposed it and its ancestral temples toppled, its ruler died by the hands of men, and it became the laughingstock of the world. Why? Because it failed to rule with humanity and righteousness and to realize that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has thereby won are not the same.¹³

Chia Yi's comments, to a large extent, suggested the attitude of Chinese intellectuals toward the Ch'in experience throughout the imperial period. What the Chinese intellectuals meant by "the Ch'in failed to rule with humanity and righteousness" is to be understood in the following contexts:

(3:1a) *Ch'in's application of strict laws and heavy punishment*: the most prevalent stereotype against the Ch'in empire lies in its rigid laws and inhuman punishment. Again, let us quote Chia Yi:

The First Emperor of Ch'in, harboring an avaricious heart and following a self-assertive mind, not trusting his meritorious vassals or keeping close to intellectuals and commoners, abolished the kingly way of ruling, established his personal authority, banned writings and books, stiffened punitive laws, promoted craftiness and power, neglected benevolence and righteousness, and made tyranny the first rule of the world.¹⁴

For Chinese historians, "rigid enforcement of harsh punishment" has become a collective memory about the Ch'in's Dynasty in Chinese history. In *Shih Chi*, Ssu-ma Ch'ien quoted the words of the Ch'in Shih-huang's contemporaries to describe the cruel punishment under the Ch'in:

The way the First Emperor is, he has a disposition to be obstinant and self-willed. Arising from a feudal lord and having united the world, he attained all he intended and fulfilled all he desired. He thinks no one who ever lived is his match. He exclusively employs legal officials, and they are close to him and favored by him. The Erudites, although there are seventy of them, vainly fill their positions but are not used. The chancellors and other great vassals all receive assignments for tasks His Highness alone determines and rely on himself to accomplish things. His Highness enjoys establishing his prestige through punishment and killing. As the officials in the world are afraid of offending him and want to keep their salaries, none would venture not to devote their loyalty to him. Since His Highness has never been informed of his mistakes, he becomes more arrogant daily. And his subordinates either submit in awe of him or deceive him to win his acceptance.¹⁵

Pan Ku (Meng-chien, 32-92), author of *The History of Former Han*, also criticized Emperor Shih-huang for relying solely upon punishment in government.¹⁶ His criticism was shared by official historians of later periods. In the section called "The Treatises on Punishments and Laws" of many dynastic histories, we find the same criticism of the "unrighteous" use of harsh punishment in the Ch'in Dynasty. However, what is interesting was that although historians regarded the Ch'in political experience as a negative mirror for later rulers, they were more or less impressed by Emperor Shih-huang's success in unifying China proper. After the unification, Emperor Shih-huang inscribed his travels and visitations throughout the land on the

stones, in which he perceived himself as having "set up imperial etiquette and social graces,"¹⁷ putting "social relationships in order and the society in peace,"¹⁸ and making "politics and the bureaucratic system operate smoothly."¹⁹ Nonetheless, it seems that historians could not excuse the emperor's cruel rule despite his military success. A grand canyon, therefore, lies between Emperor Shih-huang's self-image and later historians' perception of his deeds.

(3:1b) *Destroying the cultural heritage and abandoning traditional values:* the second "lesson" the Chinese learned from the experience of the rise and decline of the Ch'in empire was that the Ch'in fell because it neglected traditional values. Chia Yi described Emperor Shih-huang as a ruler who "discarded the ways of the former kings and burned the writings of the hundred schools in order to make the people ignorant."²⁰ From that time on, "burning the books and burying scholars" became the most memorable scandal associated with the reign of Emperor Shih-Huang and registered permanently in the minds of many Chinese, especially among historians. Ssu-ma Ch'ien, for instance, considered Emperor Shih-huang responsible for destroying time-honored ceremonies.²¹ Pan Ku went even further. He suggested that Emperor Shih-huang's hostility toward the Confucianists was a major cause for the fall of the Ch'in Dynasty shortly after the emperor's death. The Confucianists were so alienated that when Ch'en She rebelled against the Ch'in, they offered their help to him.²² Other dynastic histories echoed Ssu-ma and Pan's criticisms of the Ch'in Dynasty.

Again, what was generally agreed upon by Chinese historians contradicted to Emperor Shih-huang's self-perception of his position in history. Emperor Shih-huang thought that in unifying China, he also unified the thoughts and opinions of the Chinese people, upon which he could establish a "political and bureaucratic system." It would "operate smoothly and bring forth an economic boom." Moreover, this system was so perfect that "the great way of ruling manifests itself and never needs changing."²³ In other words, Emperor Shih-huang hoped that the thoughts he had unified would be passed on to later generations without alteration. What happened after his death showed that he was totally wrong.

(3:2) Although the Ch'in system did not become perpetual as Emperor Shih-huang had hoped, its impact proved to be far-reaching. In the Chinese tradition, there was another consideration of the Ch'in experience, which regarded it as a positive mirror. Chia Yi, the same Han scholar who vehemently criticized Emperor Shih-huang's hostility toward intellectuals, praised the emperor's contributions to unifying China at that time:

After this the First Emperor arose to carry on the glorious achievements of six generations. Cracking his long whip, he drove the universe before him, swallowing up the eastern and western Chou and overthrowing the feudal lords. He ascended to the highest position and ruled the six directions, scourging the world with his rod, and his might shook the four seas. In the south he seized the land of Yueh and made of it the Cassia Forest and Elephant com-

manderies, and the hundred lords of Yueh bowed their heads, hung halters from their necks, and pleaded for their lives with the lowest officials of Ch'in. Then he caused Meng T'ien to build the Great Wall and defend the borders, driving back the Hsiung-nu over seven hundred li so that the barbarians no longer dared to come south to pasture their horses and their men dared not take up their bows to avenge their hatred.²⁴

Indeed, it was because the Ch'in Empire unified China proper, it put an end to slings and arrows across five hundred years during the Spring and Autumn Period (722–464 B.C.) and the Warring States Period (463–222 B.C.). Butchery of common people was commonplace before the unification of Ch'in. "In wars to gain land, the dead fill the plains; in wars to gain cities, the dead fill the cities," described Mencius.²⁵ And the terrible warfare was often followed by years of great famine. Modern statistics tell us that if we count a large scale warfare, namely a war fought between two big states, as "1" and small scale warfare as "0.5," then 468.5 wars were fought during the 242 years of the Warring State Period.²⁶ What is more alarming was that the frequency of war and bloodshed increased as the years went on until the Ch'in put an end to it. Ssu-ma Ch'ien, another critic of the Ch'in, also recorded that the Ch'in unification resulted in a standardization of "the measurements of capacity, weight, and length." In the Ch'in Empire, "all carts had the same width between wheels, and all writings used the same characters."²⁷ All this helped bring peace and prosperity to the common people.

Following Chia Yi and Ssu-ma Ch'ien, more people in the later periods evaluated the Ch'in experience favorably. Pan Piao (3–30 A.D.), for example, who witnessed the chaos associated with the transition from the Former Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–23 A.D.) to the Later Han Dynasty (25–220 A.D.) in the first century, explained to his friend Kui Hsiao (?–33 A.D.) that according to his observation, the Han would last a long time. Pan's optimism was based on the fact that "the Han inherited new administrative divisions from the Ch'in Empire in which no feudal lords could be in power for hundreds of years."²⁸ In other words, Pan believed that the Ch'in unification had destroyed the feudal warlords, the potential challenger to a centralized empire, and had laid the foundation for a unified dynasty. In his recent study of Han intellectuals, Wang Chien-wen points out that in regard to the Ch'in experience, the attitude of the Han intellectuals was ambivalent. On the one hand, they loathed the dictatorial rule of Emperor Shih-huang and his successor. On the other hand, they credited the Ch'in for creating a bureaucratic and administrative system, the very first in Chinese history, that, after inheriting it with some modification, the Han rulers used to keep their Dynasty together for a long period of time.²⁹

Thus viewed, the Ch'in Empire's unification did put an end to the bloody Warring States period of hundreds of years and pave the way for a stable life and economic revival. This fact, despite Ch'in's favoring of harsh punishment toward its subjects, strikes later historians as having a positive

impact, especially when they consider other difficult times in Chinese history. For modern historians, the Ch'in experience often helps them to reflect critically their own war experience in the twentieth century.

IV. The Twofold-ness of Tao and Its Problems in Chinese Historical Thinking

The foregoing description of the Ch'in as both a negative and a positive mirror in Chinese historiography gives rise to a question: If the Ch'in did apply harsh laws and destroy traditional culture, how can the Ch'in unification have a positive impact on history? In order to answer this question, it seems that we must consider *tao*, the central concept in Chinese historical thinking. To many Chinese historians, (4:1) history is best taken as a concrete manifestation of abstract and transcendental *tao* in this mundane human world. (4:2) In the meantime, *tao* is both the *modus operandi* of the universe (the "to be") and the moral guiding norms of human affairs (the "ought to be"). (4:3) Given this emphasis on the "ought to be" in history, Chinese historical thinking becomes inadequate to offer a satisfactory explanation for the role the "evils" played in history. In the following, we will explain why this is so.

(4:1) First of all, let us see how the Ch'in experience was viewed from the perspective of *tao*. In the Han period, it was commonplace for people to attack the Ch'in for turning against *tao*, the general governing rule of the universe. This was often done to justify the Han replacement of the Ch'in. For instance, in a conversation among Li Yi-chi (?-177 B.C.) and Chang Liang (?-189 B.C.), two scholar-officials, and Liu Pang (r. 202-195 B.C.), the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty, the Ch'in was characterized by them as a regime "without *tao*" (*wu tao*).³⁰ This assessment by and large went unchallenged through the Han times; some even took it as a major reason for the quick downfall of the Ch'in.³¹ In other words, *tao* was understood as transcendental and eternal "natural laws" that governed the movement of history. In this sense, history is nothing but the manifestations, in positive or negative manners, of *tao* in the human world. This *tao*-centered view of history could be found in Ssu-ma Ch'ien. Yet it was the Neo-Confucians from the Sung Dynasty onward who developed it into a full-fledged form.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien declared that his *Shih Chi* was written to carry on the noble cause of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). He quoted Tung Chung-shu (179-104 B.C.) in stating that Confucius' *Spring and Autumn Annual* "has commented on major events during the 242 years to offer a universal norm and guidance for moral actions; [it] has also criticized the Son of Heaven, the feudal lords, and the marquis, only to picture the kingly *tao* (or the Way)."³² It is evident that Chinese historians, most notably Ssu-ma Ch'ien, wrote about the past with an eye on the future. *Tao* or the Way therefore became the yardstick Chinese historians employed to narrate and judge the past in order to help construct a better future.

However, it is not an easy task to combine factual judgment with value or moral judgment in historical narration. In his "biography of Po Yi and Shu Ch'i," Ssu-ma Ch'ien already encountered the difficulty in convincing people, including himself, that history is always governed by the righteous heavenly *tao*. He shared his doubts with readers by giving two famous examples:

Some people say: "It is Heaven's way, without distinction of persons, to keep the good perpetually supplied." Can we say then that Po Yi and Shu Ch'i were good men or not? They clung to righteousness and were pure in their deeds, as we have seen, and yet they starved to death. Of his seventy disciples, Confucius singled out Yen Hui for praise because of his diligence in learning, yet Yen Hui was often in want, never getting his fill of even the poorest food, and in the end suffered an untimely death. Is this the way Heaven reward the good man?³³

Indeed, if the heavenly *tao* (or the Way) really rewarded the good man on a fair basis, how could it be Emperor Shih-huang who accomplished the task of unifying China in 221 B.C., given his cruel character? More often than not, history did not move in accord with the righteous heavenly *tao*. As the twelfth-century Neo-Confucian philosopher Chu Hsi (Hui-an, 1130–1200) acutely observed, "the regulations of Ch'in are all affairs of honoring rulers and demeaning subjects, and so later generations could not change."³⁴ In Chu Hsi's view, all the emperors in Chinese history since Emperor Shih-huang of the Ch'in were motivated by "selfish desire" instead of the "Heavenly way."³⁵ The Ch'in experience demonstrated most powerfully the fundamental incongruity between the world of "to be" and the world of "ought to be."

(4:2) The passe-partout of this problem is the Chinese tradition of incorporating value judgment in historical narrative. To traditional Chinese thinkers, history was a manifestation of moral principles. What were considered heroes in history were those who supposedly understood *tao* in history and acted accordingly. Due to the influence of this kind of thinking, Chinese historiography also focused on the moral issue in history; namely the way in which the Chinese came to understand *tao* or Principle in different historical periods. From that perspective, we can see both the breakthrough and the limitation of Chinese historical thinking.

Let us take Chu Hsi as an example to see this affinity of morality and history. Chu Hsi provided a systematic explanation for the development of Chinese history. His explanation could be considered a "regressive view of history" and could be summarized as follows:

1. The development of Chinese history was divided into two major periods, with Ch'in's unification as the turning point.
2. The golden age of Chinese history occurred during the Three Dynasties (Hsia, Shang, and Chou Dynasties) before the Ch'in uni-

fication. After the Ch'in, ancient politics and culture were in a steady decline.

3. These two periods were differentiated by whether or not the rulers' abiding to the Way or Principle: the heavenly Way prevailed during the Three Dynasties, whereas after Ch'in and Han times only "human desires" took command.³⁶

Hence, Chu Hsi denounced the Ch'in experience:

The regulations of Ch'in's administration are all matters of venerating rulers and downgrading subordinates. That is why later generations did not wish to change them. Moreover, the Three Rulers titled themselves "Huang," the Five Rulers titled themselves "Ti," while the Ch'in ruler [went so far as to] title himself both "Huang [and] Ti." [In view of] this single event alone, how could later generations be willing to change?³⁷

From Ssu-ma Ch'ien to Chu Hsi, Chinese historians agreed that the Ch'in empire ruled against *tao*, the Way or Principle.

What then is the "Principle" in Chinese historical thinking? As I have previously suggested,³⁸ *tao* or the "Principle" in history is the consistent One throughout the ages. This "One Principle" manifests itself in various ways throughout history and remains undisturbed by time and space. At the same time, this Principle depends on the sages' enlightened leadership to prosper and expand in this world. The Principle in history is the unity of both the cosmic principle of operation and the moral norms for human conduct.

The final characteristic of *tao* in history is of paramount importance. As Chu Hsi said, the Principle or the Way is the "natural course of the Heavenly principle" (*t'ien-li chih tzu-jan*). However, Chu Hsi also took the Way to be the "required norms of human world" (*jen-shih tang-jan chih li*).³⁹ In other words, *tao* was perceived of both as an objective, neutral, natural *principle*, and as subjective, moral *norms* in Chinese historical thinking. Moreover, many Chinese thinkers, such as Chu Hsi, asserted that *tao* "always exists independently of human expectations, imperishable throughout the ages. Not even thousands of years of human abuses can destroy it, nor can any so-called wise rulers help it prosper."⁴⁰

Taking the Chinese interpretation of the Ch'in experience as an example, we find that *tao* serves the sole abstract yardstick for Chinese historians in interpreting historical changes. All the concrete historical facts only serve to illustrate, positively or negatively, the eternal essence of *tao*. Therefore, *tao* becomes an ideal transcending historical facts. It is a "spiritual leverage" for Chinese historians when interpreting or making judgments on history.

In this sense, traditional Chinese historical interpretations are, to a certain extent, characterized by an ahistorical or even anti-historical way of thinking. A supra-temporal moral stance is taken when interpreting temporal history. Chinese historians illustrate the only regulative and normative *tao* or the Way by offering explanations for the rise and decline of dynasties as

well as for cultural changes in different times. Finding historical facts per se is never the only goal of Chinese historians in studying history. Rather, reading history is taken as a means to achieve their goal in manifesting and espousing *tao*. Historical knowledge provides service to moral judgment. In the intellectual pursuit for Chinese historians, historical studies were inevitably diminished to become a handmaiden of ethics and moral teaching.

V. Conclusion

The Ch'in as a turning point in Chinese history has left an imprint in the minds of the Chinese that is not easy to eradicate. Since the Han, Chinese historians and thinkers kept drawing moral lessons from the Ch'in experience. In this sense, the Ch'in unification and downfall is not a dead mummy in the museum but an accessible library from which one can enjoy reading and extrapolating "lessons."

Our study of the Chinese reflections upon the Ch'in experience also shows that *tao* in Chinese historical thinking is both moral principle and norm. This *tao* is eternal. Thus defined and viewed, how are we to interpret the cultural diminution and political abuse during certain historical periods? *Tao* does not always find its best representation in the human world, as seen in the Ch'in experience. And it is unfortunately often the case that evil gets its way. When that happened, the good was abused, politics was mistreated, and civilization was darkened. How are we going to offer a "reasonable" interpretation for these historical occurrences, particularly the rise and fall of the Ch'in? Chinese historians had their way; they looked up to certain heroes, such as the legendary sage-kings (King Yao, Shun, Yü, Duke Chou, and Confucius), to take the responsibility of reviving and persevering *tao*. Traditional Chinese historiography, therefore, became sheer biographies of a few "heroes" rather than the records of the people as a whole, as charged by modern historian Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (1873-1929).⁴¹ However, such "history for the heroes" in traditional China is challenged by a problem: if the cultural well-informed sages or politically *tao*-aware rulers do not come to power in a timely fashion, how could history operate in order to correspond with *tao*?

To conclude, Chinese historical thinking as exhibited in the interpretations of the Ch'in Empire is a sort of ethical thinking. However, ethics in Chinese historical thinking is grounded in metaphysics, which is centered upon the notion of *tao* that comprises both principle and norm. This twofold-ness of metaphysics in Chinese historiography is, on the one hand, a very powerful leverage by which historians can judge any historical figures, but it is, on the other hand, a double-edged sword that cut short historians' explanatory power in accounting for the evils in history.

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