A Confucian Interpretation of History

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INTRODUCTORY

That the Chinese people have been conscious of the passage of time, and that they have distinguished between events in their history, attributing greater significance to some than to others is abundantly clear from the remarkable sequence of official histories compiled during successive dynasties as well as from the several important historical compilations made by individual historians. However, when we examine these histories we soon notice, as historians are never tired of reminding us, that they are essentially annalistic in structure, so that events and biographies included within them appear to be isolated cameos, or descriptions of "particular events" within "discrete particles of time",(1) lacking in any overarching interpretation of history which would weave separate years or items dealt with into a single tapestry. If we turn to China's traditional histories in the hope of discovering whether events recorded were interpreted by the compilers in terms of a clearly enunciated economic or political theory we shall be disappointed. The question therefore arises: Have the Chinese in the past possessed no theory or view of history which could serve as a "control" over their writing of history? Do we have to wait until modern times, when the Marxist understanding of history for example, was taken over from the West, to see Chinese history treated in the light of a coherent theory? The answer, I think, is suggested by the histories themselves which indicate, through the inclusion of bibliographical sections, that Chinese historiography is only one form of writing among other important forms. If one wants to gain a rounded view of the Chinese people and to arrive at the understanding of the nature of Chinese history, an understanding which governs the minds of the historians themselves, it is necessary to supplement one's reading by examining all literature, including both material which the historian has selected as worthy of inclusion in his own work (always bearing in mind the judgements passed on the categories into which this literature is divided) as well as that deemed unworthy of mention. When we do this, we find that interpretations of history do in fact exist. I propose, therefore, to begin by summarizing three of them.

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The first view of history to which I shall refer appears in a popular Chinese novel and undoubtedly reflects the opinion of the "man in the street". This novel is *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* composed by Lo Kuan-chung in the fourteenth century

1. 0. B. van der Sprenkel, "Chronology, Dynastic Legitimacy, and Chinese Historiography". Published in French in *Melanges publies par L'Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises*, Vol. 2, Paris, 1960, pp. 407-421, under the title "Chronographie et historiographie chinoises".

and represents a type of literature which finds, significantly, little or no place in the bibliographies of the official histories. This work, which is a kind of historical novel based on the *History of the Three Kingdoms*, opens with the statement: "The general course of events in the world is such that when there has been a long period of division unity must follow, and when there has been a long period of unity division must follow. When the rule of Chou weakened seven contending principalities sprang up, warring one with another till they settled down as Ts'in, and when its destiny had been fulfilled Ch'u and Han arose to contend for the mastery. And Han was the victor. The rise of the fortunes of Han began with the slaughter of the White Serpent. In a short time the whole empire was theirs and their magnificent heritage was handed down in successive generations till the days of Kuang-Wu, whose name stands in the middle of the long line of Han. This was in the first century of the Western era, and the dynasty had then already passed its zenith. A century later the emperor Hsien came to the throne, doomed to see the beginning of the division into three parts, known to history as the Three Kingdoms."(2)

That we have here a philosophy of history is obvious; moreover, it is a philosophical view which would seem to accord with all that we have been told about the Asian tendency to impose on history, or to extrapolate from it, a cyclical interpretation of events. This interpretation of history, which takes little or no cognisance of cultural achievements, we may term "empirical" in that it is deduced from an observation of objective historical shifts in power over a given period of time. European history too, if looked at in this rather limited fashion could, conceivably, be viewed as a succession of dynasties with the hegemony over Europe passing from one ruling group or family to another.

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Our second interpretation of history is found in the *Huang Chi Ching Shih* of Shao K'angchieh (1 0 1 1-77). Shao, one of the more speculative neo-Confucianists of Sung times, based his theory on the Hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*, and employed four terms (*Yuan, Hui, Yun, Shih*), to embrace the movements which he maintained the Hexagrams imply. According to his interpretation *Yuan* symbolises the Sun, *Hui* the moon, *Yun* the stars, and *Shih* the planets. He then went on to equate one *Yuan* with one year, twelve *Hui* or moons with one *Yuan*, thirty *Yun* or days with one *Hui*, and twelve *Shih* or hours with one *Yun* (one Chinese hour being the equivalent of two Western hours). Extending this scheme to an even longer

2. San Kuo or Romance of the Three Kingdoms, trans. by C. H. Brewitt-Taylor.

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period of time Shao made one Shih equivalent to thirty years (this was the length of time traditionally ascribed to a Shih), twelve Shih equivalent to one Yun (i.e. three hundred and sixty years), thirty Yun equivalent to one Hui (i.e. 10,800 years), and twelve Hui equivalent to one Yuan (i.e. 129,600 years). This one Yuan, according to Shao, represents the full life-span of one world system. According to this theory, then, Heaven and Earth have a beginning and an end because they are "things" or phenomena. Shao maintained that the first Hui of 10,800 years was the period during which Heaven and Earth came into existence and was to be correlated to the Fu Hexagram (Hexagram 24). By the time the sixth period of 10,800 years arrived, or fifty-four thousand years after the emergence of Heaven and Earth, we are at the Zenith of the world's existence, and therefore in the period of the sage-rulers Yao and Shun which is equivalent to the Ch'ien Hexagram (Hexagram I). From this time on there is a steady decline, and we, at the present time, are in the eighth period of the cosmic cycle. The final, or twelfth period, will witness the complete annihilation of this world system. However, a new world system is expected to arise once again to repeat the whole process, so that what we have here is a scheme of cosmic cycles repeating each other from eternity to eternity. However, when we come to actual human history in this world, which is the only history that can have any interest for us, we find that although it is caught up in the great cosmic cycle, its own lifespan resembles something more akin to a wave which reaches its zenith in the perfect government of Yao and Shun and then declines. It is a history which, under the control of cosmic forces moves willy-nilly to its final doom --extinction. We can detect in Shao's writings a distinct note of pessimism concerning humanity. Thus he says: "From emperor Yao until today there have been more than 3000 years, covering, from beginning to end, more than one hundred generations, for which clear records are provided by transmitted writings. During this time, within the four seas and among the nine domains, there has sometimes been unity and sometimes division, sometimes good order and sometimes disorder, sometimes strictness and sometimes laxity, sometimes leadership and sometimes a mere following of others, but never yet has there been anyone who could give a [real] unity to its manners and customs for a period of more than one generation."

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The third interpretation of history first finds expression in the writings of Tung Chung-shu (179-104 B.C.) and in the Kung Yang school of Confucianism. According to this theory the succession of dynasties in Chinese history is to be seen in the light of the "Three Epochs".

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These three epochs, which represent the normative pattern for all future dynasties, were equated with the Hsia dynasty (2205-1766 B.C.), the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 B.C.) and the Chou dynasty (1122-221 B.C.), the three dynasties together representing one cycle in the evolution of history. After the Chou dynasty, the pattern was expected to repeat itself.

As Tung saw it, these three dynasties, each of which was represented by a different colourblack for the Hsia dynasty, white for the Shang dynasty and red for the Chou dynasty--were only different from each other according to the degree of stress laid by them on certain virtues, the point being that as each dynasty came to overstress one virtue, the succeeding dynasty would have to redress the balance by emphasizing another. The three virtues were "Loyalty" (chung), "Reverence" or "Respectfulness" (ching) and "Refinement" (wen). Thus a new king, on receiving the Mandate of Heaven and on founding a new dynasty, was said to effect certain external changes, such as the colour of his official clothing and the location of his capital, thereby indicating that a shift in emphasis had been brought about. What he was in fact doing, according to Tung, was bringing government, which had deviated to some extent from the underlying principles of society, into accord once again with those principles. These principles, he held, are nothing less than the *Tao*, the eternal constant, and Tung is quoted as saying (in the History of the Former Han dynasty Ch. 56.): "The great source of *Tao* derives from Heaven; Heaven does not change, nor does the Tao". Once again, then, we have what appears to be a cyclical interpretation of history. However, Tung links his theory of the "Three Epochs" with a unique interpretation of the Spring and Autumn Annals (Ch'un-ch'iu), which was originally a chronicle of Confucius' home state of Lu, but which Confucius was believed to have edited in such a way as to turn it into a document expressing his political theory and judgements. According to this theory, neither the Ch'in nor the Han dynasties were the direct successors of the Chou dynasty. It was, rather, Confucius who received the Mandate of Heaven to succeed the Chou. Of course he did not reign in fact, but he was king de jure: a king who would have ruled over an ideal society, the principles of which are made known to us through the edited Spring and Autumn Annals. Thus, Tung says, "there are things that cannot be brought to pass through [human] effort, yet happen of themselves. Such was the hunt in the West which captured the lin (female unicorn)--an omen of [Confucius'] receiving of [Heaven's] mandate. He then made use of the Ch'un Ch'iu to correct what was incorrect and to reveal the meaning of the changing of [a dynasty's] institutions. In it he attempted to unify [the world] under a ruler,

while expressing sorrow for the world's sorrows. He laboured to rid the world of its evils, wishing with the [Ch'un Ch'iu] to penetrate [the principles of] the 'five emperors' in early times and reach [those of] the kings of the three [dynasties] of later times. In this way he came to comprehend the principles of a hundred kings and to accord with Heaven's course from beginning to end."

Tung divides the centuries covered by the *Ch'un Ch'iu* (722-481 B.C.) into three periods, which he calls the "three ages". These are: 1. the age that was personally witnessed by Confucius; 2. the age which he heard of through the oral testimony of older living contemporaries; 3. the age which he heard of through transmitted records. According to Tung Chung-shu, Confucius, when writing the *Ch'un Ch'iu*, used differing words or phrases to record the events occurring in these three periods. It is by studying the way in which these words or phrases are used that one may discover the esoteric meaning of the Ch'un Ch'iu.

Of the three commentaries on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* it is the *Kung Yang Commentary* in particular which accords with the theories of Tung Chung-shu. Thus in this commentary we find the same theory of the "three ages". This commentary was followed in turn by a further commentary composed by Ho Hsiu (129-182 A.D.) in which the Kung Yang theory is elaborated still further.

According to Ho Hsiu, the *Ch'un Ch'iu* is a record of the process through which Confucius ideally transformed the age of decay and disorder into that of "approaching peace" and finally into that of "universal peace". He identifies the earliest of the three ages, "the age of which Confucius heard through transmitted records" as one of "decay and disorder". In this period Confucius devoted his whole attention to his own state of Lu, and took Lu as the centre of his reforms. The next period, "the age of which Confucius heard through oral testimony" is identified by Ho Hsiu as that of "approaching peace". It is an age in which Confucius, having given good government to his own state, next brought peace and order to all the other Chinese states lying within the "middle kingdom". Finally, the last of the three periods, "the age which Confucius personally witnessed", is identified by Ho Hsiu as that of "Universal Peace". It was an age in which Confucius, having brought all the Chinese states to peace and order, also civilized all the surrounding barbarian tribes. In this period, Ho Hsiu said: "The whole world, far and near, great and small, was like one." Ho Hsiu knew, of course, that these things had not been accomplished by Confucius in actuality. What he was trying to show was that this was the

ideal world which Confucius would have brought into being had he been king in fact, and that the *Spring and Autumn* was a blueprint drawn up by Confucius to show how the ideal state was to be achieved.

The ideal of the "Great Unity" or "Universal Peace" as well as the three stages of social progress is also found in the *Li Yun* (Evolution of Rites) chapter of the *Li Chi*. According to this treatise, the first stage of human history is a stage of "universal disorder", the second of "small tranquility" and the third the "great unity". The *Li Yun* tells us that the final stage is the stage in which "the great *Tao* is in practice, the world is common to all; men of talents, virtue and ability are selected; sincerity is emphasized and friendship is cultivated. Therefore, men do not love only their own sons. A competent provision is secured for the aged till their death, employment is given to the able-bodied, and a means is provided for the upbringing of the young. Kindness and compassion are shown to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who are disabled by disease, so that they all have the wherewithal for support. Men have their proper work and women have their homes. They hate to see the wealth of natural resources undeveloped, [so they develop it, but this development] is not for their own use. They hate not to exert themselves, [so they work, but their work] is not for their own profit . . This is called the Great Unity."(3)

Now, although this ideal image of a universal society is placed in the past by the author of the *Li Yun* chapter, and although it is quite possible to fit it into a cyclical pattern of history, it is equally true that as time went by and this utopian society failed to materialize once again, those who did not subscribe, for example, to Shao's theory of cosmic cycles or to his pessimistic determinism, came to view this utopia as a distant goal, a social ideal which could only be achieved in the future, and therefore at the end of a linear development of history. This was especially the case towards the end of the nineteenth century. Nor did this distant goal have to be an exact replica, in material terms, of the golden age described in the *Li Yun* chapter, for just as the Sermon on the Mount has a timeless quality about it, because it lays out for Christian society those ideals underlying human relationships, irrespective of the complexity of social organization at any particular period in history, so too does the *Li Yun* chapter set out those principles which a Confucianist can regard as basic to Confucian Society.

3. For the whole of the preceding section on the Kung Yang school and for the translations of Classical texts, see Fung Yu-lan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, trans. by Derk Bodde, Vol. 2 and Fung Yu-lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, trans. by Derk Bodde. See also Woo Kang, Les trois theories politiques du Tch'ouen Ts'ieou, interpretees par Tong Tchong-chou d'apres les principes de 1'ecole de Kong-vang.

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THE CHINESE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Present-day Confucian theorists frequently point out that the essential difference between the Chinese and Western traditions is that in the former man is primarily concerned with the understanding of his own nature and its right externalization (moving from the subjective to the objective) whereas in the latter, and especially in the Greek tradition, man seeks first to know the objective world, and then to bring his own nature into line with the abstract concepts which have been created out of this objective investigation (moving from the objective to the subjective). Whatever the truth of such a generalization, it does mean that no matter whether a Confucianist is trying to understand the history of an individual or of mankind as a whole, he cannot study these histories merely as objective data, but must view them from the standpoint of a participant. Clearly, then, a genuine Confucian interpretation of history must begin with an analysis of man himself.

According to the Confucian view, man is a duality of principle and material-energy. Principle in man is seen in terms of moral obligation, whereas material-energy embraces all those qualities in man which may be said to be amoral in themselves, such as his emotions and talents. In actual life, man experiences the sense of moral obligation, which is ever sharpened and found to be more demanding as he scrutinizes and probes his actions and his motives. These moral obligations, in short, are absolute, and are found to be part of the equipment of all men in all ages. These moral obligations or principles, therefore, clearly transcend rnan's physical being and are eternal. Whereas man's material-energy nature comes into being, reaches its apogee, and then declines, to be absorbed back into the physical universe, the absolute moral principles persist, informing succeeding generations. These moral principles in their transcendent aspect have been variously described as Heaven, the Supreme Ultimate, Mind and Good Knowledge (i.e. moral intuition), and in their human aspect as man's nature or fundamental nature. The individual who is able to display this heaven-derived nature in all its clarity is termed a Sage. But the Confucian Sage can never cut himself off from the world and phenomena; indeed, to do so would be to turn one's back on the true nature of things, forcing one's heaven-derived nature to behave unnaturally, for this nature, though transcendent in its absolute aspect, yet eternally expresses itself through the medium of material-energy. The Sage,

of course, cannot look for eternal life after death as a distinct being, because his fundamental nature in its absolute aspect is the undifferentiated whole.

Although the Sage, according to the laws of his physical nature, must decline and die, it does not follow that he must experience a decline in his sagely qualities too. Indeed, if we look at the life of Confucius, we find that his inner or spiritual life increased in depth and stability the older he grew. Hence the well known passage in which he said: "At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I had no doubts; at fifty I was conscious of the decrees of Heaven; at sixty I was already obedient to these decrees; at seventy I just followed my heart's desire, without over-stepping the bounds [of the right]". An important point to notice in this passage is that there is no sudden illumination for Confucius, nor an easy accommodation of his feelings and talents to what he had learned of the decrees of Heaven. Indeed, it is not until he reaches the end of his life that he is able to claim to be a man in the fullest sense of the word.

A MODERN CONFUCIAN VIEW OF HISTORY

When we come to examine modern Confucian interpretations of history, we find that a linear view of history tends to become ever more prominent. This does not mean that present day theorists fail to recognise twists and turns in history, or even temporary regressions, but it does mean that history is viewed by them as moving inevitably in the direction of its own goal. The chief premise upon which these Confucianists base their thinking is that just as each individual possesses a life of the spirit which has its own reality, so also mankind in general undergoes a spiritual existence which is intimately related to that of the individual. To put this in a more traditional Chinese way, all men possess heaven-derived natures which are a unity at the transcendental level. This unity, called Heaven, the Supreme Ultimate, and by the idealist wing of neo-Confucianism, Mind, must objectify itself on the level of phenomena. It must express itself via material energy which is not equally tractable in all men, and this accounts for the twists and turns of history. Nevertheless, the transcendent spiritual reality does not manifest itself haphazardly, rather, it objectifies itself according to certain basic principles, for it is a moral reality, it is moral mind. By degrees, the total content of the moral mind will become objectified, and when this takes place, its partial objectifications among different peoples and in different cultural traditions will be transcended, and there will then be complete spiritual and cultural intercommunion between all the peoples of the world. On this view, the achievements

of Western culture, especially in the fields of science and democratic government, must be taken seriously, but so too must the Chinese tradition with its awareness of the supremely moral character of spiritual reality, with its great experience in the nurturing of this spiritual reality as it is found in each individual and in society as a whole, and with its stress on the objectification of the moral mind in terms of government and economics. The Chinese experience can be summed up in the phrase *Hsiu te ai min* "To cultivate one's virtue and to love the people".

Like the Kung Yang school of Confucianism, our modern Confucianists discern various stages in the unfolding of the moral mind in Chinese history. According to Chinese tradition as expressed, for example, in the *Lu Shih Ch'un Ch'iu*, the early Chinese peoples lived communally in primitive promiscuity so that children knew their mothers but not their fathers. Society was matriarchal (or perhaps we should sav mother-centred), and the family had not yet emerged as the basic social unit. Hence, in the *Pen Chi* section of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Historical Records (Shih Chi)* great attention is paid to the mothers of China's earliest rulers, and little or no information is provided concerning their fathers.

The second stage, which may have taken place about the time of king Yu, the founder of China's first dynasty, the Hsia, was the change from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society. This must be understood as a great advance since it represents a widening of human concern and feeling. Whereas a primitive matriarchal society is concerned only with a direct biological relationship, the relationship between a mother and her child, a patriarchal society implies the growth of family feeling and a concern on the part of each individual in a family for the family as a whole. In Shang times we see an extension of family feeling to the members of a whole clan, but this development is still centred on flesh and blood relationships, and the fact that the throne is passed from brother to brother indicates that feeling for other people is still very much subordinate to the feeling for the immediate family. In fact it is not until a clan can develop a sense of period and a feeling for both past and future generations that a genuine objective governmental system can arise. This was the contribution which was to be made by the Chou dynasty.

The first three Chinese dynasties, in the light of this analysis, exhibit a movement from the simplicities of mere biological existence to the complexities of civilization, from reverence for the immediate family to respect and concern for the body-politic, from private concern to public concern. The movement from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal society was one immense

step, and the movement from government by members of the immediate family to the practice of royal succession, with rulers handing down government from one generation to the next, was another.

These two epoch-making developments in society--the family and an objective government system--brought into being, according to our theorists, the concepts of filial piety and ministerial loyalty, and from these two concepts came the ideals of "treating relations as relations" and "honouring those deserving of honour". These twin ideals were stressed repeatedly by the Confucianists in terms of *Jen* and *Yi* (Humanity and Righeousness or Morality).

Now it is with the possibility placed before man of working either for personal or for the public good that the human spirit becomes conscious of moral choice, and thus becomes capable of expressing its humanity to the fullest extent. In the body-politic, it is natural that those who achieve moral eminence through their concern for their fellow men should rise above their fellows, but, alas, if a constant vigilance is not maintained, such class distinctions based on moral values can all too easily harden into class structures based not on spiritual accomplishments, but rather on material wealth and the like. If this takes place on a large scale, society can only take a downward turn, and this is precisely what happened during the period of the Warring States and the Ch'in dynasty (481-221 and 221-206 B.C.).

These great developments in Chinese social progress which, as we have seen, are not merely the haphazard rearrangement of bodies of people, but rather the expression of a moral principle moving towards its goal in human history, took place naturally and without any conscious attempt on the part of the people involved to discern the principles underlying this development. Like the Kung Yang tradition, our modern Confucianists insist that it is with Confucius himself that the thread which runs through all this natural development is brought to light and turned into a *conscious* tradition. Confucius, then, is regarded as the pivot of Chinese history, conserving all that he deemed important as external social expressions of the inner moral principle of history, but enriching these traditions with his penetrative insights into the nature of this principle. These insights are to be found supremely in the *Confucian Analects*, which lays emphasis upon *Jen* (Humanity) as the moving and creative force in society, and in the *Ch'un Chiu*, in which *Yi* (Righteousness) is revealed as the moral standard by which all governments and governmental systems are to be judged.

The fact that Confucius is regarded as completing and crowning a significant development in Chinese history does not mean that there is a cyclic return to the beginning of the story. Nor does it imply that all meaningful history came to an end with Confucius. What Confucius has

What Confucius has done, according to our theorists, is to discern the nature of the forces at work in history, and to insist that they are moral. But it is one thing to do this, and another thing altogether to occupy a position in government and to translate these moral insights into political policies and governmental institutions. Nevertheless, this is precisely what Chinese history subsequent to Confucius is all about. It is an attempt to realize moral principles in government and society. It is an attempt to objectify the moral mind, consciously made manifest by Confucius, and of course Mencius, in all spheres of human activity. However, because moral mind is absolute and therefore infinite, its total expression must lie in the future when all mankind has been united into one family and one great cultural tradition, and when all areas of human society become perfect external expressions of their inner resources.

So far in Chinese history, through the example of Confucius, men have possessed inner moral freedom consciously to attain to the highest levels of sageliness, but despite the undoubted existence of the seeds of democracy in Confucian thought, and notably in Mencius, the Chinese people have so far been unable to achieve complete objective political freedom, although an important step in that direction was taken when, through the development of a civil service, scholars, trained in the Con fucian moral tradition, and to so me extent the representatives of the interests of the people, were able to participate in government. But, say our theorists, the Chinese people are consciously working towards the kind of constitutional democracy which will guarantee this freedom as well, and there is no doubt that one day this demand for political freedom, which is inherent in the Chinese tradition, will be fulfilled. Similarly, science too, which is the technique necessary for the implementation of Confucian concern for the welfare of the people in a modern world, will assuredly reach full expression as history progresses. To this extent, according to Confucianists, China is more fortunate than the West in that her scientific achievements will come about under the control of her moral insights, thus ensuring their employment for the benefit of mankind.

CONCLUSION

If this is the true pattern of Chinese history how then can we account for the cyclic or rhythmical interpretations of history which are undeniably to be found in the writings of Confucianisis of the past? The answer, our modern Confucianists would maintain, lies to some extent in the infection of Confucian thought by the notions of Taoism, the school of Yin and Yarg, and Buddhism. However, even if these accretions be accepted, it should be remembered that the dual principles of Yin and Yang, for example, were usually regarded as on the level of material-energy so that their fluctuations represent the inevitable processes of material pheno mena. If history is viewed merely on this level, and as something external to the student of history, then it is true that Chinese history gives the impression of being nonprogressive and cyclical, but if it is judged through participation in its inner spirit, it will be found that this spirit transcends the succession of dynasties, and that it expresses itself ever more fully through, for example the neo-Confucian movement in Sung times, and more recently, in the removal of the monarchy, so that the way could be cleared for the eventual emergence of constitutional democracy. This latter form of government will, it is believed, externalize the truth that all men have the inherent right, not only to freedom of personal moral growth, but also to the manifestation of their moral sense for the public good through participation in government. Constitutional democracy, moreover, will be the technique, so far lacking in Chinese politics, whereby government can be continued without the inevitable resort to ar med rebellion.

Chinese cultural history commences at the point when conceptual thinking emerges, but her practical history begins with the movement from a matriarchal to a patriarchal societ y. Chinese history has been a moral saga. It has been concerned with politics, economics, social organization and so on, but all ways in terms of moral obligation. The histories were written not so much to explain economic or political processes as to provide moral lessons, as these were to be discerned in single events and in the individual lives of the persons whose biographies are included. In short, history was written as an aid t *Good* government.

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