

Introduction

If the history of a civilization has its own self-conscious trajectory of growth and internal motive force, and has made abstract time into a concrete historical self-consciousness and into an autonomous capacity and a model for creative doing—this kind of history then has historicity.¹ This sense of historicity is very close to the notions of “the way” (*dao* 道) and the “propensity of things” (*shi* 势) used to reference historical change in the way China conceives of history. Thus, we can say that history is the “doings” done by a civilization, and that historicity is the propensity of things that constitute the “way” of a civilization. The historicity of any civilization gives rise to three basic questions: Why is it like this? How did it come about? And what will it be like in the future? Paul Gauguin has a famous painting, the title of which expresses the same structure as these three questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?² These three questions help to explain each other. In fact, they can be combined into one question that draws together both ontology and the philosophy of history. How is an “existent” created? With respect to an entity that is self-conscious—such as a human society or a civilization—existence is no longer the natural existence of how something is as it is, but the historical existence of historicity. For this reason, the question of “being” is changed to become equivalent to the question of being made to be. “Making” or “doing” is to go and create a history of existence, that is, it ensures that an entity becomes a historical entity that cannot be reduced to the ordinary concept of mere existence.

The historical narration of doings is always a matter of subjective interpretation. Short of completely rejecting the human significance within the narration and writing a narrative for natural history or for zoological history, such subjectivity is inevitable. But to proceed in this

way amounts to failing to explain the historicity of human history and thus fails to say anything meaningful about life at all. It would definitely not be the history we try to understand. Indeed, historical interpretation is not a private pursuit, for it has guarantees relevant to a collective destiny. Thus, the subjectivity of historical narration must be restricted to an analytical framework that has objective constraints. This means that historical interpretation must chose—or acquiesce in—a philosophy. Principles that cannot be doubted are a priori in nature. However, historicity directly rejects the a priori. This is a problem, even a contradiction, though fortunately not a logical contradiction, and thus is not insoluble. Wittgenstein said that the way philosophy solves questions is precisely the same as how to show a fly the way out of the neck of the fly bottle.³ The way out of the neck of the bottle that I hope to find for historicity is the constraint on ontology.

No form of existence can reject the purpose implied by existence itself. We may call this purpose the basic meaning of existence, that is, what existence itself must imply, or the demand that existence analytically implies. Analytical implication suggests a logical standard, namely, the rejection of any added meaning. That is, the nature that *x* necessarily implies is only deduced from the meaning of *x* itself. When analytical implication is used for ontology, we find that the basic meaning of existence is to continue to exist and nothing else. Therefore, we can say that to be is to be forever. Given that the narrative and the destiny of the existence of any historicity is accidental, we must then seek an eternal continuity that transcends history.⁴ By virtue of their demand for ongoing continuity, all accidental narrations and their destiny have meaning.

In seeking to understand the many requirements of an existing entity, the demand for a constraint on ontology takes existence itself as the rule. When the ontological question is restricted to the question of the existence of human beings, existence is realized as “doing.” Where there is no doing to be done, there is no existence. What doing seeks must be the greatest resources and profit that will be advantageous for an existing entity. Economics and game theory generally understand the greatest profit as referring to material profit. Material good confirms the root of life, but it cannot wholly express the demands of life. In fact, there are always some spiritual demands that are equally necessary, that is a spiritual life that one cannot do without, and for which one would prefer to die rather than suffer deprivation. Therefore, what is most advantageous and the greatest resource for an existing entity must

be understood as the conjunction of both material and spiritual benefit, where there is a proportionate balance found between the two depending on what is best in the situation, and the changing circumstances.

In human life, a restraint on ontology is expressed concretely as human conduct being guided by rational choice. On the surface, events that are clamorous or that cause trouble are what are most evident in history. Hence, it is easy to produce a misapprehension that irrational conduct creates history. In fact, what is most advantageous to guaranteeing existence is rational conduct. This proceeds from the real meaning of existence. People usually select rational conduct. Reality shows that the means of production, technological discoveries, establishment of institutions, and the determination of norms and shaping of customs that have a long-lasting decisive influence on human life are the result of collective rational choice. According to Thomas Schelling and Ken Binmore, the doings that thus shape the human experience are all focal points produced by consistency in the choices made by human beings.⁵ Therefore, rational conduct, far from being an incidental matter of mere words, is what is really needed to understand historical questions. Collective rational choice is a construction of historicity. Its rationality is expressed as a form of conduct that can be imitated and repeated. Only a form of conduct that can serve as a universal model and that is constantly repeated can shape the way of existence or, we might say, can shape the way of humankind over an extended period of time. What gives a form of conduct the status of serving as a constantly repeated universal model that is effective as a way of existence lies in the fact that it will not lead to resentment—to self-inflicted calamity. Or at least, with the tendency for producing resentment being at a minimum, it can shape a stable and ongoing historicity.⁶

If the history of a civilization is unable to respond to the question of its own historicity, this would mean that either it is unable to form its own independent historicity because its history lacks a sufficient capacity to interpret itself, or that it has lost historicity because there is no way to recover a history that has been terminated. This happens when its history has been subordinated to another guiding force, or when another history with a greater capacity obscures it. Clearly, the ability of a civilization to continue to exist lies in it having its own self-sufficient order of being, with this expression “order of being” coming from Eric Voegelin, from which it can shape a self-sufficient historicity, and is an order that cannot easily be deconstructed. A self-sufficient order of being

must come from a home-grown and inner dynamic structure and be such that it can continue to operate without interruption. The question to be discussed here is: What is the inner dynamic structure that has shaped China's historicity?

China in terms of history and China in terms of geography are not exactly the same thing. On the piece of land that is called China today, various histories have occurred that do not fully belong to the concept of China. Some of these events, at certain times, have occurred on land that is China today, but they do not belong to the history of China. On the other hand, at certain times in history, some parts of China lie outside the territory of today's China. Although some areas no longer belong to modern China, what happened there does belong to Chinese history. For this reason, when we discuss the concept of China, it is difficult to avoid the problem of a confusion of nomenclature. Speaking of the realities of today, China is simultaneously a state, a civilization, and a history. But in terms of time, the China that is a state, the China that is a civilization, and the China that is a history did not all happen at the same time. Rather, they happened in stages and came together to produce this unity in the end. What force was it, and what destiny or cause brought it about that the China that is a state, the China that is a civilization, and the China that is a history coalesced into one rich concept? This narrative must have left some traces that we can pursue.

First of all, we need to clarify some concepts and the analytical framework. Xu Hong proposes the idea of "the earliest China" (*zuizaode Zhongguo* 最早的中国).⁷ This is a concept that must be clarified; it is also a very meaningful question. In recent years there have been alternative proposals and many debates regarding the site of the earliest China. Currently there is no agreement, and we must wait upon further evidence. Perhaps from an archaeological point of view, the question of this site has real importance, but given the problem we wish to discuss here, the significance of the concept of the earliest China is what matters most, since it implies a starting point in terms of spirituality. The geographical site is merely of symbolic significance. First of all, we define the earliest China as the starting point of a Chinese civilization that can be recognized as Chinese. This, of course, does not refer to the earliest material objects or technological civilization found on Chinese soil. The first steps in China's technological civilization are several tens of thousands of years earlier, but such steps do not yet constitute a normative spiritual world. Hence, simply being able to say that some discovery on Chinese

soil is the earliest civilization does not suffice to clarify the concept of the earliest China. Indeed, the concept of the earliest China must have a sufficiently discernible form and must suggest the propensity of China's growth, that is, it must already include the direction of China's growth.

I want to use the idea of Gestalt from Gestalt psychology to explain the formation of the concept of China, where "Gestalt" is very close to the Chinese idea of the "propensity of things" (*shi*). China is an entity that has been growing constantly. Even while not yet mature, it already had developed some basic spiritual principles and had formed the propensity toward a Gestalt. While still having space for further evolution, the propensity in the direction of the Gestalt already anticipated the concept of the whole. In order to attain its final form, China needed to meet at least the following three overlapping conditions: (1) The myriad peoples occupying the territory of China begin to have a commonly shared history. This commonly shared history does not preclude each ethnic group or political community having its own exclusive history outside the commonly shared history. The commonly shared history referenced here is a history created and shaped together at the place where their forking histories converged and is not a linear history forced unilaterally on others by one among them. (2) The foundation of the commonly shared history is a competitive game in which everyone takes part. And the peoples from the four quarters all have an interest in participating in this common game because of the benefits they can derive from it. (3) There are sufficient conditions to guarantee that this shared game of contest will continue to take place. The compounding of these three conditions can more or less anticipate the complete formation of the concept of China. At the same time, the Gestalt of Chinese civilization perhaps had to satisfy the coincidence of three conditions: (1) the first steps in the Gestalt formation of the basic principles of a spiritual world; (2) this spiritual world becoming the spiritual resource for which players in the game must contend; (3) this spiritual world having an open and shared nature where, because of this, it could serve as resource used by all. If the preceding conditions had not been met, the myriad people on Chinese soil could not have coalesced into one Chinese people, and the land of China could not have become China.

Chinese history in the geographical sense can be traced back to the Neolithic era. At that time in the region of China, from the Liao River, Mongolia, Qinghai, and Gansu to the Central Plain and the Yangtze River valley, there were many early civilizations that flourished

contemporaneously with each other. Roughly speaking, this was the pattern of the “sky full of constellations” (*mantianxingdou* 满天星斗) suggested by Su Bingqi. This was a time of a plurality of forking histories that had not yet coalesced into one commonly shared history. Although there was interaction and movement among the civilizations of these various places, there was as yet no political game in which they all shared. They had not yet integrated into one common political order. The key lay in the fact that until a common game was formed, it was quite impossible to shape a common history or common political order. In other words, even if there were mutual exchanges in culture, news, and technology, this was not enough to give rise to a commonly shared history and a common polity because cultural exchange is not a sufficient condition for cultural unity. It was probably only in the beginning of the civilization of the three dynasties of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou that Chinese history truly formed its civilizational core and its centripetal force for growth. A key question to be explained is how the Central Plain became the core of the civilizational system toward which the various peoples turned. Xu Hong sees Erlitou as the earliest China. This is a very persuasive symbolic starting point. Erlitou may very well have taken the first steps in shaping the Gestalt of the concept of China, though further evidence is required. However, the China of the three dynasties is not the great, unified model of China. Rather it was a global *tianxia* (All under Heaven) world with “no beyond” (*wuwai* 无外). It was a *tianxia* system that, in theory, potentially included the myriad polities of the whole world, or said another way, it was a one-world political order. Even though China at that time was only part of the world, it was imagined to be the whole world and existed as a global structure. Thus, the history of the three dynasties is Chinese history, and yet at the same time it is world history. Strictly speaking, the world history of *tianxia* only belongs to the Zhou dynasty. The Xia and Shang may well have already possessed the *imaginaire* and outlook of *tianxia*, but they had not yet, in fact, established a *tianxia* order that was worldwide in nature. The legally determined order of the *tianxia* system was the creation of the Zhou dynasty. Even so, in a spiritual tradition that values the past, the name if not the fact of the *tianxia* order may be traced back to Yao and Shun, Tang and Wu, and even symbolically back to the Yellow Emperor. The idea of a large, unified China emerged in the Qin dynasty and was consolidated by the Han.⁸ The Qin dynasty laid aside the old law of the *tianxia* order and

replaced it with the organization of a great, unified state. From that time on, China's world history was over, and China's Chinese history began.

Although with the Qin and Han dynasties, the historical construct was no longer that of world history but was reduced to Chinese history, the great, unified China still retained the relics of the idea of *tianxia*, converting the spirit of *tianxia* into a national spirit, and reducing the world construct into a state construct. For this reason, China became a state that contained the structure of *tianxia*. This China that contained all of *tianxia* inherited the capacity for inclusiveness of the “no beyond” (*wuwai*) idea of *tianxia*. Or we might say that “no beyond” became an internalizing capacity. The sacredness of *tianxia* lies in its having an all-inclusive nature and in its being of the same structure as the all-inclusive heaven above. Therefore, the all-inclusive *tianxia* suffices to be a match with heaven.⁹ Because the *tianxia* that is a match with heaven has the same structure as heaven, so also it is sacred. As the *Daodejing* says, “Matching heaven has been a principle since ancient times.”¹⁰ Precisely because China has the structure of *tianxia*, “China” became a sacred concept that could match heaven and was called the Sacred Continent. Mencius says, “What is full and brilliant is called ‘great.’ What is great and transforms things is called ‘sagely.’ What is sagely and cannot be known is called ‘sacred.’”¹¹ The China that has the structure of *tianxia* cannot be reduced to being some commonplace national state or empire. The political implications of these latter notions in comparison with the China that has *tianxia* are far too simplistic, and even a category mistake.

There are three things about China that are taken to be virtually axiomatic. First, Chinese civilization is a civilization that has never been interrupted since the time it emerged. This supposes that Chinese civilization has a very strong sense of continuity. Second, Chinese civilization has always been constituted by many peoples and cultures. This supposes that Chinese civilization has a broad spectrum of inclusive compatibility. Third, Chinese civilization has not given rise to a universalist monotheism. At the most, it has some localized folk religions, most of which are not transcendental religions. For this reason, Chinese civilization is considered a highly secularized civilization that lacks religiosity. These axioms only give expression to phenomena, are based on a tacit deduction from such phenomena, and have not received a fully satisfactory interpretation. Therefore, I will try to turn these tacitly accepted axioms back into questions, not by doubting the phenomena that can be seen

by all, but by seeking to explain why things are like this. At the same time, I will seek a novel understanding of these phenomena.

Rather than take the continuity, inclusive compatibility, and areligiosity of Chinese civilization as answers, it is much better to treat them as questions that need to be analyzed and explained. First of all, the key to why continuity and an inclusive compatibility came about lies in a motive force as its source. Why is it that Chinese civilization continues without interruption? Why is it inclusive? Clearly, the actual outcomes are not an explanation of the causes. If it was lacking in an irresistible and competitive gaming drive, then no game could possibly have been a continuing attraction. That a tradition can continue to exist is not because it is a tradition, but because there must be some kind of an objective drive with a certain degree of stability that makes it never want to stop. In the same way, the inclusive compatibility evident in a civilization cannot be wholly due to ethical ideas such as good intentions and tolerance—if ethics is unable to benefit humankind, people will lose any interest in ethics. Rather, there must be an irresistible drive toward benefit that causes them to all adopt a method of inclusiveness in which lies the greatest benefit for all. In sum, the reason why an entity exists as it does and the ultimate reason for its existence must be what gives the most benefit to its existential drive and the way it exists. This is the deepest reason why a tradition can become a tradition. Moreover, the reason for a survival based on ontology is especially helpful in understanding the subjective behavioral choices in history. We are unable to return to the past and survey the thoughts of the ancients. Rather than merely imagining what they might be like on the basis of our contemporary views on politics, if we take what interests are greatest for their survival as the starting point for understanding their choices, it at least allows the possibility of coming close to the truth of history. Understanding the ancients on the basis of what benefits their survival is a hermeneutical model that may help in clarifying many disputes dealing with the past: for instance, the disputes concerning the *New Qing History* and the *New Yuan History*. Why is it that the Yuan and Qing dynasties are Chinese royal dynasties? It has nothing to do with what people think today, but it is intimately related to what was of benefit for survival of the ancients. To become a Chinese dynasty is the most reliable guarantee for becoming lord of China. To guarantee the basis for lasting rule, the Yuan and Qing had to choose to become Chinese dynasties. Survival is the only certainty.

Therefore, I seek to explain the reasons by which China became China by taking the reasons of ontology and linking them with the methodology of game theory. I will argue that the gaming activities in which in early times the many peoples surrounding China on all four sides competed for the greatest material benefits and greatest spiritual resources produced a whirlpool model of drive that took the Central Plain as its core. Once the whirlpool was formed, it had an irresistible centripetal force that was self-strengthening, so much so that most participants not only had difficulty in withdrawing but did not want to withdraw. This ultimately led to a massive whirlpool that determined the scale of China's existence and made the concept of China real. The whirlpool model can explain why ancient China was not an expanding empire and yet did continue to expand. The secret for this is that the expansion of China was not due to the lure of loot gained through expansionist behavior but due to the gifts given by the surrounding contenders as they were constantly being drawn into the core of the whirlpool. The formation of the Chinese whirlpool has, on the one hand, to do with the game of contending for the core and, on the other, with inventing the order of *tianxia*. The *tianxia* order was able to dissolve the fierce contention for the whirlpool and to ensure acceptance of the common institutions of the myriad peoples. It created the common model of many cultures and many peoples, and it created the model of one system with many forms of governance. Even after the end of the *tianxia* system, the *tianxia* spirit was a legacy that was transformed into the internal structure of China as a state. Thus, it was able to shape a great unified country of many cultures and peoples. In fact, what is meant by the unified rule is a state that has *tianxia* as its internal structure.

Precisely because China's inner structure always maintained the *tianxia* construct of being a match with heaven, China became a sacred entity, a belief. This can answer the question of China's spiritual belief. Any civilization requires some kind of spiritual belief. It is where the civilization settles and lives out its destiny and is the basis for its confirmation of itself. Generally people think that China lacked a religion in the strict sense and so lacked a spiritual belief.¹² This understanding is very much open to question. If China truly lacked a spiritual belief, then how can we explain the wholeness and stability of the Chinese spirit? This is a mystery that has never yet been satisfactorily resolved. The more common explanation is to take Confucianism as a proto-religion to explain the consistency of the Chinese spirit, but this explanation

clearly cannot fully explain the whole spiritual world of China. Maybe an appeal to Confucianism can roughly explain the social structure and lifestyle of ancient China, but it has difficulty in explaining China's spiritual belief because what Confucianism establishes are ethical principles. If ethics is said to be what constitutes religion, then it is hard to avoid a confusion of terms. In Chinese culture, there is no covenant model between human beings and God, and so there is indeed no religion in the Western sense. However, there are other types of belief, such as the congruity between the human way and the way of heaven, and of being a match with heaven. Any entity that attains a match with heaven is a sacred entity and becomes a belief. The reason why China's spiritual belief is hidden and not manifest is because it is tacit and unknown. In fact, China's spiritual belief is China itself. In other words, China is the spiritual belief of Chinese people. The China that is a match with heaven as its principle is the sacred idea of China.

I would like to interpret the structure of China's historicity as a way of paying respect to the ancestors. The construction of historicity means inviting the contemporaneity of the past time to become present again and to engage with the contemporaneity of the present time so as to understand how the contemporaneity of the past foreshadows, or prepares the way for, the contemporaneity of the present. This is to narrate the past so as to show respect for the ancestors.