



10.2 Page from the graphic history of Tinajones, depicting narrator (Courtesy of the Fundación del Sinú).



10.3 Peasants at a Montería workshop reading the graphic history of Tinajones, 1973 (photo 1398 in the photographic collection of Orlando Fals Borda, courtesy of the Centro de Documentación Regional Orlando Fals Borda, Banco de la República, Montería).

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Chinese History as a Constructed Continuity

The Work of Rao Zongyi

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Cycles in Cathay

THE FIRST THING THAT NEEDS TO BE SAID about Chinese history is that there is a great deal of it. Contrary to early beliefs in Europe, it does not extend back that far, since precise dates only begin to show up in records of the early first millennium BCE, and though we may calculate some from the preceding millennium and even have a substantial archive of inscribed material, the so-called 'Oracle Bones', retrieved from more than three thousand years ago, it is to the Fertile Crescent that we have to look for the really early recorded history of mankind. Even for the period of European classical civilisation, the record for China is not that copious, but with the introduction of paper and the early employment of printing, sources swell gratifyingly until once again Europe begins to provide much more for the historian in late medieval and early modern times. Where China remains unchallenged is in the continuity of the record, a continuity that allows for the contemplation of a long-term historical process in a way that was probably unrivalled elsewhere until quite recent times. That this could possibly have made Chinese history worth studying was at first vigorously denied, on the grounds that it was all the same thing—nothing 'really' happened in China. The first Chinese scholar to realise that they were regarded in this light immediately rejected the very thought, which was based on almost complete ignorance of Chinese sources.¹ For that matter, the notion that China was trapped in a dynastic cycle of endless repetition, while a variant of the 'nothing happened' thesis somewhat closer to Chinese ways of thought, was promptly applied by the same scholar to non-Chinese history:

¹ Paul A. Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 151–2.

if one wants to discover patterns of rise and fall, or pulses of ebb and flow, then China is not the only place where such schemes can be constructed.²

In fact, by the nineteenth century the classical Chinese cosmology that had supported such a notion was already being rejected within the Chinese tradition.³ But it cannot be denied that it had a good run up to that period. That dynasties rose and fell according to the sequence of the Five Phases or Agents (earth, water, wood, fire, metal—the exact sequence was subject to variation) was an idea that sunk quickly and apparently readily into the mainstream Chinese view of history—in origin it would seem that the scheme is even pre-dynastic, and certainly it attracted considerable debate during the two centuries BCE and two centuries CE of the Former and Later Han dynasties.⁴ Certainly, too, when the time came to dispose of the Han, the succeeding dynasty took every step possible to appear to be acting in accordance with their manifest destiny in taking up the succession within this framework.⁵ This dynasty was not, however, entirely successful in managing the succession without opposition, since regional regimes continued to hold out against them in the south and west, giving rise to the long-remembered struggles of the Three Kingdoms period, which eventually prompted the appearance of one of the first vernacular Chinese novels to highlight the martial (especially the strategic) arts. And for all their desire to be seen to be doing the inevitable thing, we know that when the tale of the Three Kingdoms was already related to popular audiences in the eleventh century, in West China at least the victories of the self-appointed successors of the Han were received with loud indications of distress.⁶ The notion of the succession of the Five Phases in history was evidently accepted as perfectly natural in the environment that produced these novels, yet it seems that the Chinese population even so did not see themselves historically as trudging around unreflectively in circles like Pooh and Piglet on the trail of woozles.⁷

This eleventh-century record also shows, incidentally, what we know from earlier vernacular manuscripts: that Chinese audiences were in medieval times exposed to quite detailed accounts of the history of late antiquity (and indeed earlier antiquity) based on the work of professional historians writing in a literary language, unlike their western counterparts, who might have had some names like Macsen or Atli from the troubled times of late antiquity to marvel at, but

² Cohen, *Tradition and Modernity*, pp. 132–3.

³ John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), chs 5–9.

⁴ Michael Loewe, 'Water, Earth and Fire: The Symbols of the Han Dynasty', *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Kultur und Geschichte Ost und Sudasiens* 129 (1979), 63–8.

⁵ These efforts are reviewed in Howard L. Goodman, *Ts'ao P'i Transcendent: The Political Culture of Dynasty-Founding at the End of the Han* (Seattle, WA: Scripta Serica, 1998).

⁶ Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang, *History and Legend: Ideas and Images in the Ming Historical Novels* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 37–8.

⁷ Chang, *History and Legend*, pp. 158–9, recapitulates the Five Phases scheme as an essential ingredient in the worldview of the Ming vernacular novel.

nothing resembling true history.⁸ And already by medieval times the best Chinese scholars, especially those who achieved the greatest erudition in the sources at their disposal, took all the cyclical schemes with a pinch of salt, remarking on the great difference in the circumstances of the rise and fall of dynasties, while tracing steady institutional development over time, well aware that ancient society, however idealised as a golden age, was much less diversified and thinly spread out, due to lower population density.⁹ Even so, if we look at the operation of the idea of the correct succession of dynasties, we find that in fact, despite the hurt feelings of West China audiences, it could be used precisely to deal with the most perplexing and dispiriting cases of the discontinuity of power. What I mean by this is simply the sad truth that sometimes in history the wrong side seems to win. If one is English this aspect of history is unlikely to obtrude much in one's historical consciousness, unless one is excessively Anglo-Saxon in outlook, or perhaps of a Jacobite disposition, but historians of smaller nations, however objective and rational, will probably know the feeling.

A Discourse of Discontinuity

We generally do not think of the great Chinese people as susceptible to such sentiments until the perceived humiliations of modern times.¹⁰ But in fact there have been some quite spectacular discontinuities in Chinese history, though of late only a few outside observers have been impolite enough to point them out. Perhaps the most forcefully expressed is a brief essay by the Japanese Mongolist Hidehiro Okada. In the course of arguing for seeing the Chinese empire after the end of the period of Mongol domination in 1368 as in fact a local successor state to the world empire of the Mongols, he gives a brief survey of Chinese history from pre-imperial times.¹¹ For Okada it is not until the composition of the first great history of China, the *Shiji* of Sima Qian, completed circa 100 BCE, that the Chinese world achieved its first full imperial articulation—a state not of nationhood but of relative unification under central control. In eschewing such anachronism he is of course not alone: the rather remote relationship in Okada's view of this entity to any modern form of polity is in more recent scholarship treated in fact with even

⁸ David Johnson, 'The Wu Tzu-hsü pien-wen and Its Sources: Part I', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40:1 (June 1980), 93–156; the second part of this study points out, however, that in this instance much material also derived from a cultic tradition of the hero not recorded by historians.

⁹ See pp. 36, 56 of Hoklam Chan, "'Comprehensiveness" (*T'ung*) and "Change" (*Pien*) in Ma Tuan-lin's Historical Thought', in Hok-lam Chan and W. Theodore de Bary (eds), *Yüan Thought: Chinese Thought and Religion under the Mongols* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 29–87.

¹⁰ Though as Paul A. Cohen shows, such feelings prompted instant and sustained historical analogy: see his *Speaking to History: The Story of Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹¹ Hidehiro Okada, 'China as a Successor State to the Mongol Empire', in Reuven Amitai-Preuss and David O. Morgan (eds), *The Mongol Empire and Its Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 260–72.

greater caution.¹² Okada goes on to describe the fall of the Han as reducing the original fifty million strong population of the empire to a mere five million whose ranks were then augmented by outsiders, chiefly from the north. True, when the last successor state to the Han was driven out of its northern heartland in the early fourth century, it was able to establish itself in the region of present-day Nanjing, where a further succession of refugee regimes in semi-tropical exile lasted until a newly unified and reinvigorated north finally swept down and snuffed out the direct Han legacy in 589.

For Okada it was a mere lack of an alternative model that at this point caused the conquering Sui and the subsequent, more successful Tang regime to describe their empire in the terms of the template embodied in the *Shi ji*, though the polity they put together in fact only accorded far from neatly with this pattern, since it preserved strong links with Inner Asian culture at the far from trivial level of political symbolism—links that are now beginning to be explored in some detail.¹³ To accept Okada's implicit point that the classic heritage of the Han had now been completely barbarised rather glosses over the fact that the fourth to sixth century rulers of north China had always used Chinese as a chancery language and indeed employed Chinese speakers to run their civil government, even if their armies continued to use a non-Chinese tongue, and so offered easy advancement only to those Chinese who mastered it.¹⁴ Indeed, though we hear of some small portions of the national literature (*guoyu*) of the north finding written expression, in general to write (as opposed to give brief verbal orders) was to write in Chinese.¹⁵ This linguistic continuity, bearing as it did an important literary heritage, ensured that the date of 589 did not linger in the psyche of adherents of the Han legacy in the same way as, say, would have been the case had a barbarised Western Europe extinguished Constantinople at this point. Even so, Ogawa is in some ways justified as seeing it as a turning point with comparable implications.

He has considerably more foundation to his assertion, moreover, that this second period of empire in China spanning two relatively stable dynasties separated by a couple of generations of fragmentation in the tenth century did, after a second, briefer episode of retreat to the south, give way to the incorporation of the entire territory of China into the much larger world empire of the Mongols in 1279, though his argument that this gave rise to a late imperial period in China that owed much to its origins as a Mongol successor state is lightly sketched in a polemical fashion, rather than worked out at great length. The acknowledged

¹² See the introductory remarks of Michael Nylan in Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (eds), *China's Early Empires: A Re-appraisal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3, where the very use of the term 'China' for this period is rejected.

¹³ Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ See Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian* 157 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1957), p. 4882, for the importance of ability in a non-Chinese language in the army.

¹⁵ Lu Yaodong, *Cong Pingcheng dao Luoyang* (Taipei: Lianjing chubun jingye gongsi, 1979), pp. 71–3.

major turning point in Chinese history that took place in 1644 when the Manchus broke into the heart of China and captured Beijing lies in any case outside the scope of pre-modern Chinese historical thought, in that by the time, whatever the private views of scholars, that it became possible to theorise openly as to why it had happened, the framework of that analysis had become the modern one of nationalism.¹⁶ It is at least true that at the level of institutions the Mongol conquest had some indelible consequences. For aside from the later administrative innovations to which Okada points as betraying Mongol influence, one can also point to earlier institutional traditions such as the use of frequent amnesties to ameliorate the theoretical harshness of the law, which were a conspicuous feature of the administration of justice under China's middle empires but drastically reduced by the non-Chinese successors to the Tang in the north and thereafter by the Mongols and all subsequent regimes.¹⁷ Another Mongol period innovation that deeply affected at least half of the Chinese population during late imperial times was the removal of the legal control by women over their marriage dowries, though in this case the move conformed to the ideals of at least one portion of the Chinese male population, the hard-line Neo-Confucians who believed that putting women in their place would restore the ideal world of antiquity.¹⁸

Tracing the Way

The emulation of antiquity was a goal first clearly formulated in the sayings attributed to Confucius that provided, of course, one ready method for escaping the misfortunes of history. If the entire story of mankind as known in China was one of steady decline from a Golden Age, then any specific upsets and disjunctions in the succession of dynasties counted for little compared with the steady attrition of ancient truth that was built into the passage of time anyhow. Given the strictly limited amount of information that survived concerning antiquity, the urge to reconstruct could incorporate without strain considerable intellectual innovation, even in areas such as mathematics.¹⁹ Finding ways of recapturing the essential

¹⁶ Covert analysis, however, might take place disguised as analysis of Mongol rule: cf. John D. Langlois, Jr, 'Chinese Culturalism and the Yüan Analogy: Seventeenth-Century Perspectives', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40 (1980), 355–98. One or two more overt and hence unpublished analyses that only came to wider attention in modern times are touched on below. The risks run by those who ventured to articulate any criticism of the Manchu state are cogently illustrated in Jonathan Spence, *Treason by the Book* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

¹⁷ Brian E. McKnight, *The Quality of Mercy: Amnesties and Traditional Chinese Justice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1981), pp. 94–111.

¹⁸ Bettine Birge, *Women, Property and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Thus Karine Chemla, 'Antiquity in the Shape of a Canon: Views on Antiquity from the Outlook of Mathematics', in Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl (eds), *Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization* (Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 2008), pp. 191–208.

values of the past formed one of the chief diversions of Confucian thinkers from at least circa 800 onward, leading to the eventual formulation of the concept of *daotong* or 'Transmission of the Way', the dogma whereby it was affirmed that the true mindset of the ancient sages embodied by Confucius and the rulers of old to whom he looked back could by strenuous moral and mental effort be recreated in the lives of his devout later followers.²⁰ Entire eras of Chinese history such as the complete Han and Tang periods could then be discarded as no more than a sorry tale of ignorant armies clashing in a crepuscular world on which the shining light of the Confucian Way had yet to break.

These ideas may sound somewhat mystical, but they may even so be read as one way in which individual scholars were able to respond to the implications of the reunification of 589. In the intellectual sphere these had been somewhat ameliorated by the favouring of southerners and the old southern heritage by the son and successor of the conqueror, and by similar policies under the Tang.²¹ But the great An Lushan Rebellion of 755 saw another wave of Inner Asian influence break upon the Tang and imperil yet further the transmission of the Han cultural legacy, causing a period of intense soul-searching that faded only as the overall security situation started to crumble irretrievably in the late ninth century. The Song, who emerged from the subsequent chaos in the late tenth century, from the start faced powerful Khitan rulers to their north-east who had as much right to the inheritance of the Tang imperium as they did, so the reinforcement of such ahistorical claims to have re-established direct communication with antiquity made a certain political sense.

In fact the vicious factionalism of court politics in the late eleventh century can be seen as fuelled by differing approaches to the problem of recreating a truly Chinese China, either by radically interventionist or more gradualist approaches, while the consequent loss of power for some—and perhaps just as much the rewards of seeking merely local influence in a rapidly developing society—favoured cultural rather than political pursuits. One can see, for example, how for those seeking to convert wealth into prestige, high office might be less attractive than success in the expressive arts valued by the Chinese high cultural tradition, chiefly poetry, painting and calligraphy. No wonder that some have detected in the late Song a 'turning inward' that made China the product of the scholar's study, immune to any changes in the political landscape, up to and including rule by foreign autocrats.²² Cultural production may indeed seem more appealing than

²⁰ The origins of the notion—though not of the eventual term—are considered in T. H. Barrett, *Li Ao: Buddhist, Taoist, or Neo-Confucian?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 139–49. For subsequent developments leading to the establishment of the term *daotong* as a convenient way of encapsulating the idea, see Christian Soffel and Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Cultural Authority and Political Authority in China: Exploring Issues with the Zhongyong and the Daotong during the Song, Jin and Yuan Dynasties* (Stuttgart: Hans Steiner Verlag, 2012).

²¹ For the attitude of the second Sui emperor, see Victor Xunrui Xiong, *Emperor Yangdi of the Sui Dynasty: His Life, Times, and Legacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 121.

²² James T. C. Liu, *China Turning Inward: Intellectual and Political Changes in the Early Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

spiritual emulation of Confucius, but we should recall that the figure of Confucius embodied the very idea of transmitting tradition through passing on learning, and this gave the zealots an edge over the aesthetes in seizing intellectual control over the processes of education, and ultimately the examination system that gave access to office. No family could afford to support its more talented members in cultural productivity without some office holder somewhere in its ranks to protect its interests, with the result that late imperial China acquired a sheen of what we term Neo-Confucianism, a way of thought that placed the aspiration to the superhuman status of sage at the heart of its goals, confident that history could be redeemed by the appearance of another Confucius capable of renewing the Chinese tradition once again.

It would be wrong to suppose that such a conception met with universal acclaim, especially from those more concerned with changing the world we live in than rising above it.²³ A number of similar schemes to the classic Neo-Confucian one emerged in intellectual circles not simply in China but in Japan, where Chinese culture was seen as part of the legacy that Japan had inherited, and they likewise found reasons for finding discontinuities in cultural or spiritual life that did not hinge on specific historical upsets. These tended, also in like fashion, to allow some ages to be downgraded, especially against the glorious prospects of renewal in the present: the great tradition in East Asia was rich enough to erect various types of segmentation of history. In the long run therefore it fell to institutional historians to protest that this type of approach ignored the continuous if gradual change in institutions that they discerned in the record.²⁴ So for those who did not feel free to rise above the sordid details of history, turning points such as 589 and 1279 remained much more visible, and one is obliged to ask how they coped.

Rao Zongyi and the Narrative of China

It is here that the research of Rao Zongyi (1917–) provides a very useful conspectus of the possibilities. But before passing from preliminaries to address the main aim of this chapter, we must first pause to introduce this scholar and his work, concentrating on the book that provides us with a very convenient shortcut to research within an all too vast field. For were we to review in any detail the range of accomplishments of this long-lived and highly creative embodiment of the Chinese tradition, we would have to pause to compile a very substantial tome. Suffice it to be said that the one brief biographical notice that I have to hand passes over entirely his contribution to historical research, celebrating instead his

²³ See notably Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch'en Liang's Challenge to Chu Hsi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), ch. 5.

²⁴ T. H. Barrett, 'China and the Redundancy of the Medieval', *The Medieval History Journal* 1:1 (1998), 73–89, deals with these schemes; note p. 82 for the deployment of a concept from institutional history to query one such construct.

contributions to artistic production.²⁵ Rao, however, has not only sustained the Chinese cultural tradition through his own talents but also studies the languages of the ancient Middle East and South Asia, so that he has been equipped with the broadest possible framework within which to consider the succession of dynasty after dynasty throughout Chinese history. It is unfortunate that his masterwork on this subject, *Zhongguo shixue shang zhi zhengtong lun*, or *Theories of Correct Succession in Chinese Historiography*, is unlikely ever to be translated into English, in that it consists primarily of a fifty-nine-page overview followed by over three hundred pages of original materials.²⁶ But even the overview, and indeed the brief initial preface explaining the origins of the work in the Yale comparative historiography seminar of Arthur Wright (1913–1976), are all written in an economical but fluent Classical Chinese, so that would-be experts on China who believe that learning some Mandarin will be enough to grant them access to all they need to know will find it impossible to use.

This might strike us as a somewhat quixotic way of affirming tradition at the expense of intelligibility—a defence of the values of our own classical civilisation written in Latin would have had, one fears, little impact in 1976, let alone now. But the analogy is far from perfect. This may be illustrated by the invaluable recollections of Frederick Mote (1922–2005), the only Anglophone scholar to have undertaken a course in history in a pre-1949 Chinese university.²⁷ In the early 1940s university teachers could assume that their students could read historical sources in Classical Chinese with complete ease, so that for professors of the day the practice of presenting their ideas in the medium of commentary on collections of materials—for reasons of concision and for stylistic consistency also writing the commentary in Classical Chinese—was one that constituted a perfectly natural continuation of existing intellectual traditions. During the course of the 1940s this situation changed, so that by 1960 this medium had become a foreign language to students, even in Taiwan. It was, however, still a language widely used and even more widely understood. Even in the People's Republic of China, where in 1971 political circumstances demanded greater study of some early ninth-century writings, radical elements were quite happy to publish a major work on their author that had been produced by one of the greatest twentieth-century practitioners of Classical Chinese style, and that was also therefore written in Classical Chinese, and also primarily in the form of commentary on Classical Chinese materials.²⁸

²⁵ Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 133.

²⁶ Rao Zongyi, *Zhongguo shixue shang zhi zhengtong lun* (Hong Kong: Longmen shudian, 1977).

²⁷ The following remarks are based on Frederick Mote, *China and the Vocation of History in the Twentieth Century: A Personal Memoir* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 55–61.

²⁸ The political interpretations affecting Cultural Revolution period interest in Liu Zongyuan (773–819) are briefly explained in Tien-wei Wu, *Lin Biao and the Gang of Four* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 4, 57–8, and 137–9; Zhang Shizhao (1881–1973); *Liu wen zhiyao* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1971), pp. i–ii, is provided with an editorial preface briefly lamenting his lack of Marxist perspective, but seems to have otherwise escaped

Rao's intellectual home at New Asia College, now the Chinese University of Hong Kong, was associated with a commitment to the Chinese tradition that eschewed the more revolutionary options available in mid-twentieth century Chinese historical thinking, but it was by no means for that reason reactionary or obscurantist.²⁹

The following remarks, then, are intended to make Rao's compilation better known by drawing in a highly selective fashion on some of the patterns that emerge from its contents; no pretence is made here to do justice to the possibilities that it offers; the hope is simply that others may be stimulated to make more use of it. This is not the first occasion upon which his materials have been deployed to illuminate matters of legitimacy in East Asia, since the late Hok-lam Chan (1938–2011) drew on both Rao's work and other Chinese writing in the same vein to examine some sources from the twelfth-century Jurchen Jin dynasty. Though Chan gives an excellent summary of the relevant non-Jin material as part of the background to his main focus, his work is chiefly addressed to fellow scholars working on the northern opponents of the Song.³⁰

Narratives of Correct Succession

Rao's book opens with a consideration of the relationship between theories of correct succession and the chronicle form. In fact, though there had been chronicles in early China, and the First Emperor had famously tried to ensure (with some success) that only the version of history written in his own native state survived, allowing no other perspectives on his rise to power, the template for later histories created in Sima Qian's *Shi ji*, already mentioned, was by no means so straightforward. Court chronicles are included, but so are treatises on technical matters such as the calendar, tabulated information, separate narratives for the states eliminated by the First Emperor and a whole wealth of biographical and even ethnographical information, in all a massive assembly of half a million characters (over thrice as much if later commentators are included) that had to be read *in toto*, or preferably memorised, in order to grasp the full contours of any particular event.³¹ Memorisation would not have been impossible—the King James Bible, formerly memorised by the devout, is under eight hundred thousand words, though in China one would probably have committed at least a hundred thousand characters

unscathed—thanks no doubt to sound personal connections with Mao Zedong himself.

²⁹ See Mote, *China and the Vocation of History*, pp. 115–51, for a magisterial survey, and note that Rao's interest in archaeology marks him as to a degree rather less narrowly a traditionalist than Qian Mu (1895–1990), the founding figure in New Asia College.

³⁰ Hok-lam Chan, *Legitimation in Imperial China: Discussions under the Jurchen-Chin Dynasty (1115–1234)* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981).

³¹ This work has so far defeated complete translation into English, though a project is under way under the direction of William H. Nienhauser Jr that should see a complete version appear in due course from Indiana University Press with the title *The Grand Scribe's Records*.

from the 'Confucian Classics' to memory first before starting on history.³² It is not surprising therefore that histories built around a single narrative should have maintained their appeal: one particularly influential early example from the second century CE is prefaced by the information that it was drafted using the new technology of paper, a medium that allowed plenty of scope for scissors and paste editing to construct that continuous thread.³³ The disadvantages of the chronicle form were of course also understood, and Thomas Lee has noted that by the twelfth century the practice had arisen of reshaping chronicle material so as to follow particular topics through 'from beginning to end' *jishi benmo*.³⁴

Tying a narrative to calendar time in any case allowed for a certain wriggle room over questions of legitimate succession, since the lunar element in the Chinese calendar required the insertion of an intercalary month from time to time to adjust to the solar year.³⁵ This provided a handy analogy to account for occasional usurpations, such as that which divided the Former and Later Han dynasties, which were dealt with as 'intercalations' in the regular progress of the correct sequence of powers. Rao finds an example of this usage in the evaluation of the Han usurpation by the next historian after Sima, writing not long after the events described.³⁶ He immediately notes too, however, that the same historian also reaffirms the legitimacy of the dynasty by claiming its genealogical descent from a god-like sage. This sort of affirmation of legitimacy is quite familiar from other cultures, and had a firm place in Chinese political practice, encompassing also invaders from the north, who liked to point to some remote Chinese sage as a forefather, and it even perhaps provided a model for Japan that has proved yet more enduring.³⁷ There is, however, a suspicion that in earlier, pre-imperial China such claims were made with a frequency that brought them and indeed mythology as a whole into some disrepute.³⁸ This would no doubt account in some degree for the alternative type of 'legitimacy by period' here described.

³² Estimates for the memorisation required for the Confucian curriculum were made in seventeenth-century Japan and are translated in X. Zhou, *The Wisdom of the Confucians* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), pp. 174–5.

³³ Chi-yun Ch'en, *Hsün Yüeh: The Life and Reflections of an Early Medieval Confucian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 84.

³⁴ See Thomas H. Lee (ed.), *The New and the Multiple: Sung Senses of the Past* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p. 188.

³⁵ Ho Peng Yoke, *Li, Qi and Shu: An Introduction to Science and Civilisation in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1985), p. 153.

³⁶ Rao, *Zhengtong*, p. 5.

³⁷ T. H. Barrett, 'Shinto and Taoism in Early Japan', in John Breen and Mark Teeuwen (eds), *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 13–31. As Chan notes, however, *Legitimation*, p. 32, the usurper who divided the Han in half made the first move during the imperial era in claiming genealogical justification for his supplanting of the ruling house—not a very encouraging precedent for China.

³⁸ See David Hawkes, 'The Heirs of Gaoyang', as reprinted in his collected essays, John Minford and Siu-kit Wong (eds), *Classical, Modern and Humane: Essays in Chinese Literature* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980), pp. 205–228.

In any case, the notion of intercalation was such a useful ploy for ignoring regimes of which one disapproved that we soon find it being recycled again. The West Chinese audiences of the eleventh century referred to already were anticipated in their disapproval of the ostensible successors of the Han by at least one historian living under the regime that effectively supplanted them by a military coup in the late third century; for all their efforts at securing a public legitimacy, the Han successors were now simply dismissed as a mere intercalary episode. It was their rivals, by this point safely defeated, and incorporated into the empire of the family who had launched the coup, who had had right on their side in their day.³⁹ When that empire split up into a southern refugee court and a wild profusion of competing non-Chinese regimes in the north, the latter seem to have believed for the most part that might was right. Southerners sometimes asserted their legitimacy on the basis that they had supposedly inherited the great imperial seal of the First Emperor.⁴⁰ Such concrete tokens of imperial succession were highly regarded but all too easy to forge; their use has continued into modern times in China and in Inner Asia too, without settling any historical uncertainties over correct succession.⁴¹ At the same time, trying to fit one's dynasty into the five-part sequence amongst a welter of competing claims was by no means easy, especially in the more fragmented North.⁴²

Beyond Simple Intercalation

Such rapid supposed rotation of the cycle of the Five Phases in fact seems to have prompted the notion of more drastic remedies. One can well sympathise with the historians of the Tang dynasty who concluded that perhaps it would be best to consider themselves the direct successors of the Han dynasty.⁴³ Dismissing four centuries as amounting to nothing more than an intercalary moment was a bold move, but by the eighth century a necessary one, since by then the Tang too had suffered a usurpation, and that by a woman, Emperor-Empress Wu, who had instituted her own dynasty from 690 to 705. This of course was unprecedented, and something much worse than an intercalary episode, so it was simply excluded from consideration and passed over in silence. Fortunately her sons through whom she had initially exercised her rule survived her reign, so it was just affirmed that the elder had continued his reign throughout her dynasty and

³⁹ See the essay on this topic in Rao, *Zhengtong*, pp. 61–2; cf. Chan, *Legitimation*, pp. 33–4.

⁴⁰ W. F. J. Jenner, *Memories of Loyang: Yang Hsüan-chih and the lost capital (493–534)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 201.

⁴¹ Françoise Aubin, 'To Impress The Seal: A Technological Transfer', in Isabelle Charleux, Grégory Delaplace, Roberte Hamayon and Scott Pearce (eds), *Representing Power in Ancient Inner Asia: Legitimacy, Transmission and the Sacred* (Bellingham: Western Washington University, 2010), pp. 161–207. I am most grateful to the author for sending me a copy of this fascinating essay.

⁴² Chan, *Legitimation*, p. 34, gives a quick overview.

⁴³ Rao, *Zhengtong*, p. 25; Chan, *Legitimation*, p. 36.

resumed it thereafter. Invaders from outside might be brought into consideration within the Five Phase scheme, especially if they claimed some ancient Chinese ancestry, but a female dynasty was simply not a possibility, and so the usurpation was, as far as I am aware, with the slight exceptions touched on below, never acknowledged or discussed in this context. A general policy of 'least said, soonest mended' seems to have been applied to the entire episode, with the result that the Empress-Emperor's dynasty to this day may be sought in vain in most listings in textbooks, Chinese or foreign.

After a further swift rotation of dynasties following the collapse of the Tang, the term 'intercalary' began to look somewhat forced, rather far from its original meaning of a short adjustment inside a smoother and more regular sequence. Thus 'intercalary status', in a government-sponsored institutional encyclopaedia of the early eleventh century put together to preserve documentation from earlier ages, turns out to cover ten dynasties worth of material—and even this did not include local regimes not deemed worthy of dynastic status, whose documents were placed in yet another section.⁴⁴ One well-known historian in 1040 therefore proposed in a lengthy review of the situation that a term signifying 'severance' or 'interruption' should be used instead, frankly acknowledging past periods when no government could be considered legitimate; fiddling about with Five Phase theory was a late development not sanctioned by antiquity that should be abandoned.⁴⁵ But prompting autocracies to abandon handy political devices of this sort was not something that any scholar could succeed in overnight, whilst, as indicated already, historians writing in the chronicle format also found the convention useful in fixing a main thread for their narrative. The most prestigious model adopted in this context was to run legitimacy through the southern dynasties during the period of disunion up to 589, and then declare that the Sui and its successors had picked up the thread. This was arguably the case in terms of cultural history, but as a solution it glossed over the fact that Sui-Tang institutions were in many cases innovations made by non-Chinese northern rulers.⁴⁶

But there was more to the doctrine of correct succession than mere narrative convenience. Political expedients also weighed heavily during a period when rival emperors divided China between north and south, though of course the device of declaring a dynasty 'intercalary' was open to anyone to use, and the materials studied by Hok-lam Chan show that the Jurchens did not hesitate to put the Song in that category.⁴⁷ He is probably right to suggest, however, that when the Mongols brought this situation to an end they found the whole scheme of 'Correct

⁴⁴ Rao, *Zhengtong lun*, pp. 28, 71.

⁴⁵ Chan, *Legitimation*, p. 39; Rao, *Zhengtong lun*, pp. 82, 83.

⁴⁶ Denis Twitchett, *Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui-T'ang China, 589-906*, Part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 10-11. On the histories involved, see briefly Chan, *Legitimation*, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Chan, *Legitimation*, p. 81, and cf. p. 159.

Succession' theory too parochial for their visions of world domination, and probably too open to contestation for their tastes also.⁴⁸

This did little to discourage private historians from continuing to toy with the matter for several centuries, producing, as Rao's corpus of materials shows, enough relevant discourse to satisfy the requirements of several doctorates. The continued value of a conception of the historical succession of dynasties that allowed some to be discounted proved, for instance, extremely useful after 1449, when the Mongols, though ejected from their rule of China in the preceding century, took the opportunity of capturing a particularly rash emperor of the Ming dynasty who had been indulging in pointless campaigning away from his capital. Anti-Mongol sentiment flared into life, leading to a distinct shift in the contemporary historiography of the period of foreign domination. For one historian of the sixteenth century, however, expressions like 'intercalary' were not strong enough: for all the unity that the Mongols may have brought China, theirs was a 'history beyond history', in the sense that it just did not count.⁴⁹ Hegel would no doubt have been proud of him, woozle hunter or not. But the very possibility that some Chinese historian might promote such a notion after the Manchu conquest of 1644 seems to have prompted the new rulers to encourage the doubts about the long-established cosmological basis for such assertions that were now gaining ground. Or this at least is one construction that may be placed on the imperial comments from the late eighteenth century that one finds prefaced to the republication of the debates held in Jurchen times, which reaffirm the eleventh-century suggestion that the scheme cannot be found earlier than the Han and so lacked the authority of antiquity.⁵⁰

Correct Succession Reconsidered

Now if we look back from this point at which the idea of correct succession received its official stamp of disapproval from an emperor whose ancestors had in 1644 interrupted Chinese history in the most traumatic of ways, forcing on the Chinese the wearing of a hairstyle that signified their subjection, we find very little in Rao's collection of sources to suggest that any earlier conquest had been regarded as marking a major discontinuity. But there is one significant exception, for a work was discovered in 1639 that purported to be the testament of an artist who had lived through the Mongol conquest and who was known to have continued to express elliptically in his art opposition to the new regime. Doubts as to the authenticity of this document are by no means resolved, but if it does not

⁴⁸ Chan, *Legitimation*, p. 125.

⁴⁹ This episode is treated on p. 253 of T. H. Barrett, 'Qubilai Qa'an and the Historians: Some Remarks on the Position of the Great Khan in Pre-modern Chinese Historiography', in Reuven Amitai-Preiss and David O. Morgan (eds), *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 250-9.

⁵⁰ Chan, *Legitimation*, pp. 144-5.

reflect on the events of 1279, then it must have been written in strong anticipation of the events of 1644.⁵¹ Here we find a plain acknowledgment that in history winners are not necessarily right, and losers are not necessarily wrong; historical writing is like litigation (i.e. things can go against you); it is the Confucian Classics that are like laws (i.e. immutable).⁵² We also find a continuous history in which, after the Han dynasty, only the recently defeated Song is given full approval as legitimate: the rest is a sorry tale, in which the victory of barbarism in 589 and even the usurpation of the Emperor-Empress Wu are all confronted with complete frankness.⁵³

Here, then, we find an almost complete concord between history writing and the Neo-Confucian 'Transmission of the Way'. History is not bunk, but it can be unedifying, for century after century. Given their common aim of privileging the rule of the Song, the sole difference that now separates the historian's concept of 'Correct Succession' from the philosopher's 'Succession of the Way' concerns the status of the Han period. The Neo-Confucians, oriented towards self-cultivation and the achievement of a correct consciousness as a precondition for the reform of society, could afford to ignore the entire imperial period before the Song; for those who took the institutional embodiment of China seriously, and especially an embodiment that had successfully discovered how to fend off external aggressors in the first part of its dynastic span, the Han provided a template for government that could not be ignored.⁵⁴ With this exception, the concept of 'intercalation', introduced to account for the passing anomaly of usurpation, has now swallowed up half of Chinese imperial history.

And yet Rao Zongyi's remarks on this bold, original and profoundly pessimistic patriot are full of approbation, even if he does quote a later critic who points out that the Song seizure of power at the start of the dynasty was, as a mere military coup of a praetorian elite, scarcely a glorious moment. The vision this text presents of a China that achieves 'Correct Succession' only with the achievement

⁵¹ See Herbert Franke (ed.), *Sung Biographies: Painters* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976), pp. 18–19, for the artist. Since first drafting this essay, I have consulted two articles in English that have sought to cast doubt on the authenticity of the source and an unpublished doctorate that argues for the likelihood of it being a genuine reflection of late thirteenth-century thought. Rao himself provided the title calligraphy for a 2001 work in Chinese that supplies both an edition of the text and a very detailed case for accepting its reliability. While it seems unlikely that Rao was mistaken in his judgment, an admittedly cursory reading of the 2001 study—kindly provided to me by Christoph Harbsmeier—does not entirely persuade me that the text cannot have been tampered with between rediscovery and publication, so I have not altered my summary of the matter.

⁵² Rao, *Zhengtong lun*, p. 36, citing a passage reproduced on p. 109.

⁵³ Rao, *Zhengtong lun*, pp. 107–9.

⁵⁴ For the importance of the Han as creators of a textual template that made the reconstitution of empire possible, see Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 351–65; for the Han success against aggression, see Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ch. 6.

of sagely rule seems to him so appealing, so uninfluenced by speculations later than the Song dynasty, that he cannot see it as inauthentic.⁵⁵

In fact there would seem to be at least one figure of the early sixteenth century who does discuss female rule and the identity of the viewpoints of the historians and philosophers in discarding large sections of bad history, and whom Rao duly notes in passing.⁵⁶ After 1644, too, among the opponents of the new regime whose works had to await the overthrow of Manchu rule in 1911 to be published at all, we find the vanity of any concept of succession in the face of the fact of foreign rule more or less admitted, something Rao describes as deeply painful.⁵⁷ But in shifting away from summarising one or two of the strands of thought that he touches upon in his own summarising to focus on his reactions, we have to turn, finally, to the date of the composition of his collection.

Rao's Narrative in Retrospect

In the years between the inception of his project in 1970 and its publication in 1977, China had been in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, culminating in the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four, a period of ever deepening uncertainty and chaos during which the past heritage of China had been denounced and destroyed, along with all too many of its citizens, including many of the brightest and best. Domiciled all too close to this chaos in Hong Kong, and deeply concerned about the fate of the cultural tradition that his own art and scholarship continued to uphold, the fate of Chinese civilisation was of more than academic concern to him. Even in the late twentieth century the issues raised but never resolved by the concept of 'Correct Succession' remained pressing.⁵⁸ A glance at Google shows that they remain important even today, though within the especially barbarous environment of our own times the term for 'Correct Succession' is also used as a translation for concepts such as 'orthodoxy' or 'traditional' as used in a number of other contexts from religion to cooking. How are we to make sense of all this ceaseless Chinese activity attempting to make sense of the past?

In a time of acute social change and political disintegration, Confucius—or at least the Confucius retrospectively constructed by the surviving texts—defined the cultural legacy that was worth preserving and passing on. This was in part

⁵⁵ Rao, *Zhengtong lun*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ See the essay in Rao, *Zhengtong lun*, pp. 152–3, and Rao's summary, p. 4; for the author, see L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 1531–5.

⁵⁷ Note Rao, *Zhengtong lun*, p. 46, commenting on pp. 192–3. But note also, however, that one monograph on this figure, examining his deep interest in cyclical change, finds him much more positive: Alison Harley Black, *Man and Nature in the Philosophical Thought of Wang Fu-chih* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), pp. 53–4. Wang's dates are 1619–1692.

⁵⁸ Note that Hok-lam Chan, *Legitimation*, pp. 132–7 and notes, covers the use of the terminology of succession into the twentieth century as far as Taiwan in 1980.

textual, in part a matter of performing music and ritual, and its guiding principles were humanistic and ethical. Somehow, despite everything, enough survived into a new era of political integration to form the core of a well-defined curriculum, something that the new empire could subscribe to as a high culture opposed both to the culture of its alien enemies and even more to its many subjects who adhered to local cultures that lacked the linguistic and literary base to challenge the mainstream. When the empire fell, even when substantial population movements changed East Asia considerably, that curriculum—perhaps due to the introduction of paper, which made anything worth copying easier to transmit—remained the concomitant of empire, even when empire spoke with new and alien accents. Yet by the start of the ninth century it became clear that imperial patronage was not enough, and the curriculum came to be reformulated as the possession of its upholders as individuals, something that made it stronger than any regime, stronger than anything but a rival culture of greater sophistication and depth.⁵⁹ This proved a formula that worked well into the twentieth century, even as the old political concomitant of that culture, the empire first associated with it in Han times, emerged as all too vulnerable to conquest. It is the story of empire that Rao tells, but in tandem with a story of culture that in the long run absorbs it, leaving the 'Correct Succession' something subject to the ebbs and flows of history rather than an ever-transmitted imperium.

Now the great wave of European culture has broken upon China, dissolved into a materialistic frenzy without humanistic values, what next? Some of the generation that witnessed the cataclysm of 1644 seem to have put their faith in the cycles of history, broadly and (for reasons of political prudence) none too specifically conceived, especially since in retrospect all looked fairly negative since the First Emperor.⁶⁰ Cyclical ways of thinking are doubtless not extinct, but the unidirectional thrust of Marxism has conquered Chinese history for now at least, both in Beijing and Taipei. But one way of reading Rao's materials is to see the hypnotically attractive notion of 'Correct Succession' as a thread to tie all Chinese history together, detaching itself progressively from outdated cosmological and quasi-calendrical schemes, to exist at some invulnerable ideal level. And the very reason why both the Communists and Guomindang applied so much energy to adapting the Marxist scheme to Chinese history in the middle of the twentieth century perhaps lies with the efficient manner in which it disposes of bad history ever since primitive communism, making even Confucius a mistake and allowing for a fresh yet deeply ancient new start.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Charles Hartman, *Han Yu and the T'ang Search for Unity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). ♦

⁶⁰ W. Theodore De Bary, *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 6–11.

⁶¹ Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

Now, though, Confucius is back. How much history shall we have? For a great civilisation, surely nothing less than five thousand years will do? And what should be done about those invaders? Should we not declare them in hindsight a mere secondary phenomenon, less culturally advanced and hence easily Sinicised minorities, forerunners of those destined to tag along behind the Han race? If we live long enough, we shall all find out.⁶² Meanwhile perhaps a few doctorates on Rao's materials will help to fill in the time usefully. For any doctoral candidate to learn Classical Chinese is a massive undertaking, especially given the financial constraints now undermining historical research. Yet some have achieved it, against all the odds. More now need to join them, if we are to make any sense of what the past is now in the process of becoming for our fellow-historians in Chinese lands, and for all their compatriots who seek their present identity in the Chinese heritage. The work of Rao Zongyi does, however, mark a good place for historians coming from outside that heritage to start. His study is not the only one of its kind, but it was specifically carried out at the prompting of a non-Chinese historian of China. That is why it has been introduced here, in the hope that Arthur Wright's original purpose in asking for its compilation, so that non-Chinese might secure a better-informed understanding of how Chinese history was understood, might one day be fulfilled.

⁶² And if we find such banal rewriting of Chinese history an unappealing prospect, the first forty pages of Naomi Standen (ed.), *Demystifying China: New Understandings of Chinese History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), are designed to provide a corrective to undue oversimplification.