
The eighteen essays in this volume, divided into three parts, treat comparative historiography in many different ways. Part 1 in particular addresses the problem of historical truth, whether in premodern China or Europe. The essays in Part 2 explore the many faces of Chinese history-writing over time. Part 3 tries to tie together late imperial historiographical currents in China and Korea with contemporary historical writing and historical education in China today. It is difficult, however, to read a coherent vision from all the papers, although each essay explores the thin interface between historiography and ideology. The focus of most authors is on the role of ideology in historical criticism, particularly by presenting the political and cognitive dimensions of historical thinking. Overall, the essays point to the Chinese tendency—both premodern and modern—to produce single-minded, moralizing viewpoints of the myriad historical events and facts in official and unofficial narratives. Along the way, however, each author also occasionally conveys, through his or her own individual and often idiosyncratic take on “Chinese historiography,” how this simple, didactic mindset was not always dominant.

Petra Bahr’s opening essay compares religious claims and the use of critical methods in Western historiography. God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, she notes, presented European Christians with a narrative of historical revelation through contingency, which inspired a rich tradition of bible criticism. The changing configurations of religious truth and critical methods allowed Lorenzo Valla, for example, to establish rules for understanding the coherence of a text that were more analytical and philological. During the Renaissance, the historical reliability of a text became the key issue. The “new criticism” of sources that emerged defended religion with new tactics to save it from distortions. When the Vulgate was increasingly compared with original sources, however, scholars innocently—at first—unraveled the dogmatism of biblical criticism.

Bahr notes that Martin Luther contended that religious meaning was read into the Bible by a believing subject. This subjective turn, which reminds us of a similar turn in Wang Yangming’s (1472-1529) classical focus on the inner mind rather than on external things, produced Schleiermacher, Bahr argues, and the
rise of modern hermeneutics. Hermeneutics and criticism became “inter-referential.” The crisis of exegetics would be resolved through critical examination. Spinoza thus appealed to the religion of reason, in which religious truth was detached from historical facts. This new skepticism freed Europeans from perfunctory ecclesiastical teaching. Accordingly, Schleiermacher could present religion as an independent symbolic form of meaning, while history became the voice of witnesses. This split, according to Bahr, provided the preconditions for the modern break between revelation and history.

In the next essay, Wolfgang Behr shifts the discussion to perceptions of language change in premodern China. He first introduces A. C. Graham’s position on the structural simplicity of language in classical China and the comparative underdevelopment of a syntactically oriented philological tradition. Behr goes on to explore how, despite the extraordinary phonological stability of the classical language over time, some aspects of language change were reflected in the commentarial traditions of the post-classical periods, especially in terms of morphological change via graphic extractions or semantic shifts, which effaced many features of the original semantics of classical Chinese.

The process of demorphologization and the obsolescence or complete loss of derivational affixes characterized Old Chinese, according to Behr. These can be recovered through Middle Chinese reflexes, word games, glosses, and datable homophones. During the Shang-Zhou transition, the social or political consequences of this takeover were reflected in language change. The dialectical diversity evident during the Han expansion produced a shift from semantic and lexical accounts of the language to recognition of the sociolinguistic and phonological aspects of language change. Behr contends that such dialect diversity led to historical phonology in medieval China long before Qing “evidential” (kaozheng) studies.

He adds that it is unclear whether Lu Fayan (fl. ca. 600), for instance, had a concept of norms or any standards of language change. Indeed, it is unclear if there was a historical consciousness of language change in medieval times. Qing evidential scholars such as Yan Ruoji (1636-1704) and Qian Daxin (1728-1804) were clearly aware of diachronic changes and the possible retention of archaic features in conservative dialects. To bridge the gap, Behr presupposes a long development of phonological description and analysis from medieval to late imperial phonology. Phonological change and lexical horizons had to be integrated if pronunciation reassignments were not to be merely ad hoc. In the Southern Song, both Wu Yu and Zhu Xi accepted the notion of fixed natural standard pronunciations of a given period. They also noted that pronunciation changes over time disrupted the original rhyme schemes. Behr maintains that Zhu Xi entertained a sophisticated analysis of rhymes, which was based on rhyme groups similar to those developed by Wu Yu. So far so good, but can we agree with Behr that Zhu Xi was thus fully aware of sound change “despite all the inconsistencies in his analysis” (p. 36)?