

Conceptual History and History Textbooks

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I

Conceptual history has recently become a popular subject within Chinese academia, and its methods are being applied to various fields in the humanities and social sciences. I was invited to give a keynote speech in the academic seminar “History Education in Schools,” hosted by Yangzhou University, and asked to write a paper about “Conceptual History and History Textbooks.” As one who studies history, it goes without saying that I am deeply affected by the immense importance of history education. I still remember that the “Cultural Revolution” was just ending when I was in my first year of junior high school. The line, “Classes struggle, some classes triumph, others are eliminated. Such is history; such is the history of civilization for thousands of years,” was printed on the front page of my *History of Social Development* textbook (社会发展史). This sentence comes from Mao Zedong’s article, “Cast Away Illusions, Prepare for Struggle,” which was my first lesson in history. The concept of class struggle has infiltrated every aspect of Chinese society and has influenced the perspectives and attitudes toward history of several generations of Chinese people. So, is conceptual history related to history textbooks? Yes. By history, we mean today’s representations of what happened in the past, while the past events written in history textbooks are the representations of a representation, twice removed from the events themselves. Readers understand the representation through the re-representation, and thus approach the reality of history. History textbooks, as re-representations, are compiled based on certain, non-universal purposes and methods. Without conceptual support, the narratives would be pedestrian, just as *Veni, Vidi, Vici*—“I came, I saw, I conquered”—is a chronicle of events. Conversely, if you would like to understand the internal structure of history textbooks, you must start by analyzing their conceptual bases.

The re-represented knowledge in history textbooks can be divided into three categories. The first is public knowledge. History textbooks respond to a nation's need for "history," and the "history" written in them should seek common ground while retaining necessary differences, reflecting the requirements of the nation's greatest common denominator. Of course, it is impossible for everyone to accept the public knowledge written in history textbooks, especially after this knowledge develops a real and imaginary connection with the individual. The second category of knowledge in history textbooks is official knowledge. There is overlap between official and public knowledge, yet I discuss them separately to emphasize the differences between them. To appear acceptable to most people, public knowledge must transcend the constraints of party groupings and general attitudes of a specific time, while official knowledge acts in a diametrically opposite way, attempting to carry out the will of contemporary powers in textbooks. The third category is general knowledge. Historians aim to foster a historical narrative that transcends "ethnocentricity," as is championed by global history, while also promoting mutual understanding and reconciliation. In the light of these three points, history textbooks in China are a mixture of the first and second categories of knowledge. If the second point were to override the first one, the "history" in the textbooks would amount to a reformulation of Benedetto Croce's well-known saying: all history is the Party's history.

The knowledge in history textbooks is represented by various concepts, and the method of conceptual history can be used to study and analyze history textbooks. Regarding the method of conceptual history, Reinhart Koselleck has said: "Historical basic concepts are not only indicators of turning points in history, but also factors that influence the course of history." (Koselleck, 1972) Concepts vary in size. The reason why some have become historical basic concepts is that their accumulated "history" reflects not only past historical changes, but also affects subsequent historical trends. Koselleck believed that most historical basic concepts have undergone democratization, temporalization, politicization, and ideologization. Based on China's recent experience, I propose four standards to measure Chinese historical basic concepts—standardization, popularization, politicization, and derivatization (Sun, 2018). The position of history textbooks in conceptual history research seems suitable to being surveyed based on these four standards.

II

Those who start to dip into Chinese history textbooks from the late Qing Dynasty and the initial period of the Republic of China will certainly ask the question: Why do most of the original sources that were used to draft Chinese history textbooks come from Japan? These include the Chinese reprint of Naka Michiyo's *General History of China* (支那通史), the translation of Kuwabara Jitsuzō's *Middle School History of the Orient* (中等东洋史), and various other history textbooks compiled by Chinese scholars. Counting them up, we know that they are indeed not small in the number. In the final analysis, this phenomenon occurred because Japanese editors were immersed in Chinese culture, proficient in Chinese language, and familiar with Chinese history, and they shared the same historical knowledge system as the intellectuals of the late Qing Dynasty. The new history textbooks compiled by Japanese editors were a coveted and convenient reference for intellectuals of that period. When Luo Zhenyu wrote the preface to the reprinted copy of *General History of China* (although it was actually Wang Guowei who wrote it on his behalf), he showed both admiration and frustration between the lines: "We are not able to write the history of our country, and it is shameful that we let others do it." (Naka, 1899) Of course, the intellectuals of the late Qing Dynasty harbored no illusions when they absorbed history textbooks from Japan. The new science of history, which they regarded as reflecting the characteristics of a modern country, was only a formal matter. Virtually no one could distinguish the difference between the Japanese "History of China" and "History of the Orient." The former followed the writing tradition of Zeng Xianzhi's *A Concise History of Eighteen Dynasties* (十八史略), which was popular in the Edo period and centered on Chinese culture; the latter placed the "History of China" in the framework of "the Orient" and described the history of relations between ethnic groups. A fundamental change in this situation did not occur until a few years after the establishment of the Republic of China.

Although the concept of modern statehood gave rise to divergent interpretations, this situation did not prevent this concept from entering history textbooks. In 1904, there were new terms such as Aiguo (爱国, be patriotic), Xianzheng (宪政, constitutional government), Guocui (国粹, the quintessence of Chinese culture), Hequn (合群, be gregarious), Jinhua

(进化, evolution), and Zili (自立, self-reliance) in the text of the advertisement that the Commercial Press used to recommend *The Latest Chinese Textbook* edited by Jiang Weiqiao and others. These terms translated from Western languages were all concepts and, following the “standardization” of their translations, were included in various Chinese textbooks. For example, the *Textbook of Moral Education* (修身教科书) and *The Citizens’ Reader* (国民读本) demonstrate the qualities that citizens should exhibit. The *Geography Textbook* (地理教科书) demonstrates embodied physical space. The *Chinese Textbook* (国文教科书) included encyclopedic, up-to-date knowledge, and the *History Textbook* (历史教科书) aimed to strengthen a citizen’s self-identity. Based as they are in the general principles of historical writing—to write about people and events in a specific time and place—history textbooks involve questions of conceptual history in many aspects. These textbooks place the “history” formerly dominated by natural time (as the years are designated by the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches), and the emperor’s time (or reign title) into the chronology defined by the Gregorian calendar, and hierarchically divide it into an ancient, medieval, and modern period. Antiquity can be subdivided into remote antiquity, middle antiquity, and late antiquity, while modern times are divided into Jinshi and Jindai (which both mean modern times). Just as Kant said in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*), history was subordinate to the annals (natural time) in the past, but now the annals are subordinate to history (Koselleck, 2002: 115-130). “Within these shores, all territory belongs to the king.” This ambiguously immense space is clearly defined by textbooks as hierarchical territory wherein sovereignty is exercised. Ethnic groups living within hierarchical time and space, regardless of the boundaries they recognize or inter-group hatreds they may hold, are all classified into a collective singular, a “nation.” There were three Chinese translations of the word “nation” in the 19th century: Naxun (那逊), Guomin (国民) and Minzu (民族). I believe that “Guomin (国民)” as a politicized unit, best reflects the nature of this collective singular, and the term “Minzu (民族)” can cause ambiguity in terms of understanding “nation” to be a unified country composed of multiple ethnic groups because it implies both consanguinity and provenance. In order to homogenize the actual and symbolic community of a “citizenry,” it is indispensable to have a common understanding of what history is. A

master narrative arises out of the need to hold in common an historical understanding that allows people to imagine the shared identity among themselves in the collective memories which the master narrative constructs.

Once a history textbook is published and adopted by schools, it becomes a mechanism that promotes the “popularization” of the concepts it contains. In this process, the function of the textbooks is to transform external and past knowledge into internal and present knowledge and to transform knowledge as “wisdom” into knowledge as “faith,” building an imaginary link between the dead and the living as well as between the other and the self. In reference to the four aspects of historical writing mentioned above, once time was hierarchized, the concept of “civilization” came into general use. While intellectuals in the late Qing dynasty lamented the “unstable situation that had never been seen in three thousand years” after the invasion by Western forces, later generations said that there had existed a continuous civilization of five thousand years. When time was “politicized” into civilization and its opposite “barbarity,” civilization was divided into five stages: primitive society, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, and socialist society. Territorial space came to be modified by terms such as “since time immemorial,” sacred, and inseparable. “Since time immemorial” emblemizes authenticity; “sacred” emphasizes transcendence. The collective singular symbol “national citizenry,” owned by plural peoples or ethnic groups, is specifically referred to as “Zhonghua Minzu (the Chinese nation).” Finally, concepts that describe the unfolding process of history, such as class, feudalism, revolution, and republic, were also popularized in history textbooks.

The “popularization” and “politicization” of concepts in history textbooks have run parallel to one another, eventually allowing these concepts to become “Chinese” historical basic concepts. Furthermore, after revolutions and wars, many “derivative” concepts that are related to the concept of class appeared in history textbooks, including “national bourgeoisie” and “landlord,” as well as those related to the concept of revolution like “Chinese Soviet Council” and “counterrevolution.” The biggest “derivative” concept that transcends ideological oppositions among party groupings is undoubtedly “Zhonghua Minzu (the Chinese nation).” This concept was originally derived from the upper-level concept “Minzu (nation),” but in the course of Chinese history, it has changed

from a lower-level concept to an upper-level historical basic one. The concept of Zhonghua Minzu (the Chinese nation) was invented by Liang Qichao, and it first referred to the Han ethnic group. The Chinese nation in history textbooks is always a collective singular that encompasses all ethnic groups. At approximately the same time, Liang Qichao invented another concept, Zhongguo Minzu (中国民族, the Chinese nation state). Compared with the concept of Zhonghua Minzu (the Chinese nation), the “Zhongguo” of the concept Zhongguo Minzu refers to the state, and the “Minzu” refers to the nation. When the two are combined, the resultant corresponds to the Western concept of the nation state.

III

It is precisely because of the close relationship between history textbooks and modern countries that the political forces of every era try to control the narratives of their textbooks. In the late Qing Dynasty, the Board of Education reviewed textbooks. During the period of the Nationalist Government, the Ministry of Education did the same. The People's Republic of China has centralized the production of history textbooks. Although history textbook editors must adhere to officially sanctioned guidelines, they must still face the tension between fact and narrative, as well as between representation and re-representation, as they aim to reflect the will of the party.

In 1905, when Song Shu, a scholar from Zhejiang Province, was serving as a textbook reviewer in the Academic Affairs Office of Shandong Province, he found that the seventeen different history and geography textbooks that he was reviewing all “blatantly committed *lèse majesté*.” For example, he claimed, three different history textbooks “all directly write the name of our dynastic founder [Nurhaci], which is reckless and unbridled.” (Hu, 1993: 390-391) Recent history textbooks “tend towards nationalism at most, so far as to reveal the treasonous intentions of anti-Manchu revolutionaries.” (ibid.: 393) The history textbooks Song Shu mentioned were published by the Commercial Press and Wenming Books, a textbook publishing company. Neither the editors nor the publishers, both of whom wanted to promote the textbooks, would have wished to “commit *lèse majesté*” or show “anti-Manchu revolutionary sentiments.” They were unconsciously influenced by the narrative of the original textbooks (as, for example, Zhou Guoyu's textbook was translated from

Kuwabara's *Middle School History of the Orient*), leading their choice of wording to violate political taboos. Although the tension between editors and reviewers was avoided, the ban enacted about 20 years later by the Ministry of Education of the Nanjing National Government on the textbooks compiled by Gu Jiegang and others reveals that there exists an inevitable, fundamental contradiction between historical research and historical education. The *Middle School Textbook in Modern Chinese History* (现代初中教科书本国史, three volumes in total), edited by Gu Jiegang and Wang Zhongqi and proofread by Hu Shi, was successfully published by the Commercial Press in 1923. It was a perennial best-seller and followed Gu Jiegang's position as laid out in *Gushi Bian* (古史辨, *Debates on Ancient History*) toward the Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns, regarding them as *Chuanyi shidai* (the legendary times). In 1929, the Nanjing National Government, while promoting the party-state ideology, strengthened national identity education in schools. As a result, this history textbook was reported to the authorities by Zhonghua Academy in Caozhou Prefecture, Shandong Province. Dai Jitao, the Secretary of Education, immediately ordered a ban on the textbook on the grounds that "scholars can discuss it, but it can't be written in textbooks. Otherwise, it will shake the self-confidence of the nation and certainly do harm to the country." (Gu, 2000: 437-440) The Ministry of Education of the Nationalist Government regarded history education as a field more closely related to the state's interests, and distinguished it from the relatively less relevant or sensitive field of historical research. Lü Simian's *Vernacular History of China* (白话中国史), published in the same year as the *Middle School Textbook in Modern Chinese History* (现代初中教科书本国史), was written for readers to "study history on their own," but the author's personal opinions can be seen everywhere in the book. In 1935, under the circumstances of rising anti-Japanese nationalism, the textbook was accused of praising Qin Hui and demoting Yue Fei, which led to an academic incident. The *Vernacular History of China* is not a textbook, but the incident surrounding the book has taken on symbolic meaning. In a unified nation composed of multiple ethnic groups, when history textbooks are saddled with onerous practical burdens, the public knowledge that is in urgent need of expression often becomes the very root of disagreements over practical matters.

"Textbooks have molded the Japanese people," (Karasawa, 1956: 1) said a Japanese scholar of textbooks. When we look back at the Chinese

history textbooks of the late Qing Dynasty and of the period of the Republic of China, it is fair to say that history textbooks have shaped Chinese people's historical consciousness. Of course, the shaping process is not unilateral, and it may not always achieve the editor's or reviewer's intended purpose. One example is the *Latest Chinese History Textbook* (最新中国历史教科书) written by Yao Zuyi with the seal of "Liu Songlin" affixed on it. Liu Songlin has no interest in the accounts of the Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns, but he does have a fondness for Chinese history since the Southern Song Dynasty (before 1840), so he changes "this Dynasty" in the book to "the Qing Dynasty" and the phrase "Our Great Army" was changed to "Military of the Qing Dynasty," adding numerous notes and commentaries in the margins (Yao, 1906). This seems to confirm what Gu Jiegang said, that only a small part of the elite has persisted in their studies of ancient history, and this history has had nothing to do with the masses. This pertains to the question of how to compile a history textbook. We can adopt an "I will not say" attitude toward the content of the accounts in history textbooks, but the facts must not be reversed. If we disregard the facts and refer to the Great Cultural Revolution as an "arduous quest" rather than the "decade of calamity," the history textbooks themselves will be the biggest victims.

Notes

Proofread by Daniel Canaris, Sun Yat-Sen University.

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