

**“History-Writing as the Fabrication of Moral Communities:
Conditions of Inclusion and Narratability”**

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I’m not the first literarily-trained person to take an interest in history-writing. To be true to my profession and accurate in estimating my own limits, let me say at the outset that what I will be looking into is not, in general, whether historians got the facts right. That I leave to actual historians who are dealing with other kinds of evidence. Nor am I going to concentrate on a formal analysis of the narrative devices of different pieces of history-writing, an enterprise from which I’ve learned a lot, as it’s been performed by innovative scholars on the order of Hayden White and Jan Vansina.¹ To ease into the jargon of my trade, I’d say that my interest in this body of texts is neither referential (it’s not about the things history talks about) nor structural (it’s not about the internal properties of these narrations *qua* narrations), but performative and interactional.² That is, I’m interested in the effects that a historical narrative may have on its audiences over history. These effects can be emotional, social, legal, ethical; they can stir up considerable passions and create convictions that supersede the known facts of a matter. One such effect is to make up a national identity through telling stories about what a nation is, who belongs to such-and-such a nation and what it has done and suffered. I call this effect the building of moral community. It doesn’t only relate to the people who are “covered” (if I may use an insurance term) by the communal identity. It involves determining what the covered class of individuals is or has been over time, and how to treat those who are outside that class; and both these considerations belong to the core of debates about nationality.

By attending to the question of how histories create moral communities, we don’t push aside the questions of historical veracity or narrative structure; rather, we attend to the purpose for which historians in the past must have made decisions about what facts to consider true and how to organize their telling. Thus, by changing the emphasis, we don’t necessarily lose the other dimensions of history-writing. On the other hand, community-building cannot supersede veracity or coherence, unless we are willing to have our history be ideological and instrumental through-and-through. (Example: “America was the first nation in human history founded upon an idea, the idea of political freedom.”³ The cherry-picking of both facts and narrative frame required to make such an assertion is evident.) My aim is to make distinctions in order to get the relationships among the dimensions right. A historical narration always accomplishes a set of perlocutionary effects (*perlocutionary* meaning “which are achieved through the speaking of certain words”). But we often mistake this dimension for one of the other dimensions of a

¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: Aldine/Transaction, 1961).

² For the “performative” and its subspecies the “perlocutionary,” see John Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

³ The Claremont Institute, “The Theory of the American Founding,” part 1, available at http://www.pbs.org/georgewashington/classroom/theory1_2.html .

history—as following, that is, from the matters of fact it enunciates or the internal coherence of its narrative presentation. I think there is an advantage in separating them for analysis. There is a further advantage to taking one's examples from times and places distant from one's own: the interests may be less vivid and impartiality therefore easier to attain.

To illustrate what I mean by “moral community,” there is no better example than an apocryphal story about Confucius told by Gongsun Longzi, whom you may know as one of the rare representatives of the class of sophists, or semantic analysts, in Warring States China.

The king of Chu once took his “Ornate and Yielding” bow and a set of “Never Turn Back” arrows and went to shoot snakes and rhinoceroses in the Yunmeng Preserve. While on the way home, he lost his bow. His attendants asked to go find it, but the king said, “Stop. A person of Chu lost a bow, a person of Chu will find it, what need is there to go looking for it?” When Confucius heard of this, he said, “The king of Chu showed benevolence and righteousness, but not to the point of fulfillment.” He said further, “If a man finds it, that is good enough; why must it be a man of Chu?”

楚王張繁弱之弓，載亡歸之矢，以射蛟兕於雲夢之圃，而喪其弓。左右請求之。王曰：「止。楚人遺弓，楚人得之，又何求乎？」仲尼聞之曰：「楚王仁義而未遂也。亦曰人亡弓，人得之而已，何必楚？」⁴

The differences between the views expressed by the attendants, the king, and Confucius turn on the question of what counts as a loss, with a definition of community as the deciding factor. For the attendants, the king as individual is the subject of loss or gain. They respond to the lost bow by wanting to go back and restore it. The king, more generous-minded, says that his personal loss will be compensated by the gain of another person of Chu, if another person of Chu should find it. The subject of loss and gain for him then is the community circumscribed by the designation, “person of Chu.” This touching enlargement of moral community, however, is followed by Confucius's rebuke to the effect that, while it goes in the right direction, it is inadequate for the “fulfillment” of the virtues of a perfect king: such a king would define the community as consisting of all of humanity, and would treat the losses and gains of that larger set as the relevant field of evaluation. This story pattern will be familiar to readers of the *Mencius*, where many of the philosopher's dialogues set up a king who thinks he is pretty good for the chilly realization that he is falling far short of perfection.

Let us imagine the point of the anecdote *in situ*. Despite the seemingly infinite distance between a king and his humblest subjects, a king is willing to describe himself as just another “man of Chu” and to share his precious bow with any random inhabitant of his state, rather than order his servants to go search for the object. The finder being a “man of Chu” qualifies the recovery of the bow as a transfer among friends, not a loss. The king seems to feel the pleasure of the future finder of the bow, or to allow that the use that man will get out of it is as valuable as the use he himself might have got out of it.

⁴ Luan Xing 樂星, ed., *Gongsun Longzi chang jian* 公孫龍子長箋 (The *Gongsun Longzi*, with extended commentary, Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou shuhuashe, 1982), p. 3.

There is community of interests where we might have expected (given the usual behavior of kings) personal selfishness. For Confucius, however, this is too narrow-minded. If the king had wanted to show genuine and full *ren-yi*, he should not have cared about the nationality of the finder, but been happy that some other human being had got the use of that fine bow. Confucius faults the king for having an inadequately broad definition of moral community, or of his community of interest. For him, *ren-yi* is realized (*sui* 遂) only when we act on the interests of humanity at large, treating their losses and gains as our own.

Analogously, in history-writing, a moral community is fashioned—note that I use this intentional-sounding, manufacturing-like word—by acts of naming, narration and representation. The king didn't have to use the word “man of Chu” in the way he does; he could have used it differently and established himself as a moral community of one. Or, as Confucius points out, he could have used it in yet another way and established himself as a member of the limitless human community. The story told by Gongsun Long with its two acts of naming reminds us that our acts of narrative representation are choices among alternatives, and that the choices reflect on ourselves as much as they do on the external objects we suppose we are talking about.

The argument, going from the local to the universal, is a common story-shape for early Chinese philosophical tales. The *Mencius* is the storehouse of examples. A king likes to listen to music; Mencius asks him why it is that he knows that music is more enjoyable when you listen to it in a large group, but then denies the other pleasures of life (or the necessities of survival) to the other people in his state. Another king thinks he has helped his people by moving grain reserves from one part of the territory to another during a famine. Mencius tells him that if he really wanted to benefit all his people, he would leave them alone so that they could grow their own food in plenty. The problem, expressed again and again, is that “The Sage Kings no longer arise. Feudal lords do as they please; people lacking official positions are uninhibited in the expression of their views; and the words of Yang Zhu and Mo Di fill the empire” 聖王不作，諸侯放恣，處士橫議，楊朱、墨翟之言盈天下。⁵

Wan Zhang asks Mencius what would happen if in his small state of Song the Kingly Way were practiced according to Mencius's prescriptions. Mencius answers: “If you should practice Kingly government, all within the Four Seas would raise their heads to watch for your coming, desiring you as their ruler. Qi and Chu may be big in size, but what is there to be afraid of?” 苟行王政，四海之內皆舉首而望之，欲以為君。齊楚雖大，何畏焉？⁶

In such passages Mencius prescribes an enlargement of the moral community, similar to Confucius's correction of the kindly gesture of the king of Chu. The result of such an enlargement, he predicts, will be the foundation of a universal monarchy—what later Chinese history would know as an Empire. In the dreamed-of empire of the philosophers, in strong contrast to the then-current state of affairs, there will be no inconsistency in the laws, no arbitrariness in going from one jurisdiction to another, and the correct standards will apply everywhere. This is, I insist, an imaginary community

⁵ *Mencius* 3.B.14, as translated in D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 73.

⁶ *Mencius* 3.B.10; Lau, tr., *Mencius*, p. 69.

invented by the thinkers of early China, and it was so powerfully attractive an imagination that almost nobody stood outside it. Mencius is typical of the debaters of his time in holding up this universal monarchy as the goal of philosophizing.

Gongsun Long, born some fifty years after Mencius, became proverbial for his argument that “a white horse is not a horse,” seen by his contemporaries as paradoxical and destructive of common sense. Even a “sophist,” as Gongsun Long was later called, claims that his technique of semantic distinction will accomplish the universal political-moral reform that had eluded the other thinkers and doers. Let us step back and see the story of the King of Chu in its argumentative context.

[Gongsun] Long met Kong Chuan [a sixth-generation descendant of Confucius] at the court of Lord Pingyuan of Zhao. [Kong] Chuan said: “I have long heard tell of your talent, sir, and I would willingly become your disciple, but I am simply unable to accept your doctrine that ‘a white horse is not a horse.’ If you would only abandon that one argument, I would beg to become your disciple.” [Gongsun] Long said: “Sir, you are in error. What has made me famous is precisely this theory of the ‘white horse.’ If you made me discard it, I would have nothing to teach. Those who seek instruction from others do so because they are aware that their knowledge is lacking. If you were to cause me to abandon my teaching, you would be instructing me first and then seeking instruction from me. But to seek instruction from those whom one instructs is absurd. Moreover, the argument that ‘a white horse is not a horse’ was endorsed by Confucius himself. I have heard that the king of Chu once took his bow... ‘Why must it be a man of Chu?’ Thus, Confucius made a distinction between ‘a man of Chu’ and the qualifier ‘a man.’ And if Confucius distinguished ‘a man of Chu’ and the qualification ‘a man,’ and he denied the argument I promote, that a distinction must be made between a white horse and the qualification ‘is a horse,’ he would be in error. If you, sir, devote yourself to the Confucian doctrine and yet deny that which Confucius endorsed, if you wish to study with me and yet reject that which I teach, even if there were a hundred of me, we would have no reason to talk further.”⁷

According to Gongsun Long’s biographer, the interest of the “white horse” theorem is that “by extending this argument, one can set name and thing on their correct bases and change the world” 欲推是辯，以正名實而化天下焉。⁸ But how is this result possible? One of the earliest Western-language commenters on Gongsun Long complains that “what Kung Sun Lung says on the white horse is ingenious, but not of great philosophical value.” “One feels quite giddy, when reading it, and it requires much mental concentration to catch the meaning.”⁹ Luan Xing’s 1982 commentary supplements the “white horse” argument with a Venn diagram in which “white horse” occupies the space of the intersection of the circles “white” and “horse,” in

⁷ *Gongsun Longzi chang jian*, pp. 3-4.

⁸ *Gongsun Longzi chang jian*, p. 2.

⁹ Alfred Forke, “The Chinese Sophists,” *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34 (1901): 1-100; pp. 36, 33.

contradistinction to the picture Luan sees in Mencius's response, one in which the category "horse" is subdivided into the species "white ones," "black ones," etc.¹⁰ But if we take the response to Kong Chuan as reporting sincerely on the intended moral effects of the "paradox," the point of the argument is metalogical, rather than a matter of first-order reference.¹¹ To paraphrase: "By saying 'a white horse,' one is not doing the same thing as when one is saying 'a horse.'" Imagine that the attendants had reported to the king of Chu that a man of Zhao had picked up the bow, and the king of Chu had expressed delayed anger at its loss: this would be the proof in action that the king of Chu had used "a man of Chu" in contradistinction from "a man," and therefore that the scope of his benevolence was limited. What we should do, if Gongsun Long's narration of Confucius's reaction is to be taken seriously, is to condemn the kind of preference that causes us to remove the class of "men of Chu" from the class of "human beings in general." "A white horse is not a horse" names this limitation of loyalty; it is not so much the thesis to be proven as the accusation of a mistaken bias. By forcing the person who has a preference for white horses, or for men of Chu, into the absurd admission that such horses are not horses or such men are not men, Gongsun Long would oblige his hearers to take the position described by Confucius in his anecdote as "fulfilling benevolence and righteousness," that of the ruler of the notional Empire.

This example may seem to have taken us into a long detour, but it leads where it should have, demonstrating what happens when, in place of understanding a discussion as being about its reference and logical structure (i.e., the traditional portrait of Gongsun Long as being a "sophist" and maker of "paradoxes"), we attend to its pragmatics and metapragmatics (i.e., the effect of those "paradoxes" on their hearers in a context dominated by the desire for a form of political and philosophical legitimation that only universal empire could provide). And we end up with the major fact of Chinese history, the formation of the Chinese empire. We now can construe that fact, however, not just as something that occurred, not just as a precedent or as the outcome of some kind of historical law,¹² but as an effect of thinking about moral community, indeed the very horizon of ethical aspiration for early Chinese. This of course takes nothing away from the ambivalence of the result, that it was achieved through the bloodiest kind of *Realpolitik* and eliminated most of the schools of thought that had invented it in theory.

The idea of moral communities transcends the difference between fact and fiction. (Indeed the story about Gongsun Long and Kong Chuan may be invented, as likewise the story about Confucius's verdict on the king of Chu.) I see no difference between an invented story, a legend, and an episode from the best-attested factual history insofar as any of these is the creation of groups of people who see their moral aims as converging. Fiction has been, in fact, a powerful way of creating such groups. Print culture created many such non-face-to-face communities, as people found that their common response to works of literature brought them together despite their separation by barriers of place,

¹⁰ Gongsun Longxi *chang jian*, p. 14.

¹¹ See Ernst Joachim Vierheller, "Object Language and Metalanguage in the *Gongsun Longzi*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 20 (1993), 181-209.

¹² E.g.: "The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been." Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, tr. Moss Roberts (5 vols., Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000), 1:1.

class, gender or time.¹³ The metapragmatics, in other words, operate even when the referential function is knocked out by fictionality.

A parallel to the kind of discussion I've been conducting is found in Ernest Renan's famous essay of 1882, "What Is a Nation?" ("Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?"). Like Gongsun Long, Renan is speaking in a situation to hearers with particular desires, worries and inclinations. It would be short-sighted to take Renan to be speaking in a philosophical vacuum when he pronounces that

A nation is a spiritual principle... We have seen what is inadequate to create such a spiritual principle: race, language, shared interests, religious affinity, geography, military necessity. What more is needed? ... A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle... [to wit,] the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, [and] present consent, the wish to live together, the will to continue and to fructify the undivided heritage that has been bequeathed. ...

The existence of a nation is (pardon me this metaphor) a daily referendum, as the existence of the individual is a constant affirmation of life.¹⁴

Indeed, he is answering a problem specific to his place and time (however broadly applicable beyond them). The existence of the French nation was not quite in doubt at that moment, but its most appropriate political form—monarchy, republic, dictatorship or empire—was hotly debated, with at least nine changes of constitution since 1789. And each form of government carried implications about the set of people who could be considered "French" under it: the first Republic had given Protestants and Jews the rights of full citizenship, the second Republic had ended slavery, the Empire had restored aristocratic privileges abandoned in 1792, and so on. Under the Old Regime, France comprised a patchwork of differing laws and dialects; the Jacobins and Napoleon advanced a uniform code of laws and a single official language. The map gave France a different outline according to the rhythm of conquests (Algeria) and defeats (Alsace-Lorraine). What thread connected all these forms and differing definitions of nationality? Renan reviewed, only to dismiss them, some of the commonly-accepted definitions of nationality: geography, a common racial stock, a common language, and so on. The rejection of these criteria had its purposes: if geography was destiny, the Frenchness of a good part of France would be in doubt; if race was destiny, Renan would be handing over the definition of Frenchness to ethnic speculators like the inequality theorist Gobineau; if language was destiny, France, as the nation of full-time French-speakers, would have to be adjourned to some future date. As if in compensation for the lack of such material,

¹³ On such reading communities, see for example Judith T. Zeitlin, "Shared Dreams: The Story of the *Three Wives*' Commentary on *The Peony Pavilion*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54 (1994): 127-179; Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity," *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 215-256; Hannah Arendt-Stern, "Rahel Varnhagen and Goethe," tr. Haun Saussy, *Critical Inquiry* 40 (2013): 15-19.

¹⁴ Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite à la Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1882), pp. 25-26, 27.

positive, externally observable conditions of national identity, Renan situates the nation in the “soul,” which is nothing other than the regularly-renewed commitment, or at least passive acceptance, to continue as a single moral community.

“What is a Nation?” allows for the nation to be a kind of fiction, based on nothing other than itself. If this is idealism, it at least has a pressing set of enabling circumstances behind it. Renan’s account has been found providential by many other democratic analysts of the category of the nation. It offers an explanation of the contingent but undeniable existence of nations, shorn of the teleology, determinism and essentialism that inspire definitions of the nation in the fascist style (e.g. Barrès: “the earth, the dead”).¹⁵ And its “referendum” theory implicitly carries a rebuttal of the law of the stronger (with Alsace almost certainly in mind): “No nation has the right, any more than a king does, to tell a province, ‘You belong to me now, I’m taking you.’ A province is its inhabitants; and if anyone has a right to be consulted, it’s the inhabitant.”¹⁶ Renan’s construction of the nation addresses many of the problems created by the modern persistence of ancient borders and the continued appeal of the nation despite their submergence in supranational dynamics (economy, resources, climate). Or at least it offers a mythic resolution of the tensions.

Our present discussions are made especially lively by the fact that some of us are part of the ancient moral community known as China—fashioned, as I argue, at least in part by philosophical argument and historical narration, and lived in on a day-to-day basis since at least 221 BCE. *What is “China”?* asks a recent book by Ge Zhaoguang.¹⁷ I take the quotation marks to be essential: he is not asking, what kind of a thing is China, but what kind of a name is “China,” or what kind of act is it to say that something is “China”? Through those quotation marks, something of a Renanian plebiscite becomes visible, an intimation that there might be no actual object corresponding to a normative definition of “China,” only an intellectual outline that people who use the term “China” project onto the things they have at hand. And the answers to this question will often be determined by a sense of national emergency, that the answer one gives will decide the fate of this “China,” will in fact take the place of a notional plebiscite. The debates about the solidity and continuity of the earliest accounts of Chinese history, or about whether the Central Plains really were the stage of the dominant cultural development, were shelved at about the time Japan began overrunning parts of Chinese territory in the early 1930s.¹⁸ It takes a great deal of security to begin to ask serious questions about national belonging. Renan’s “daily referendum” is one in which most of us vote approval simply by not raising the question. But with the “Chinese” status of many areas recent, debated, or legally enigmatic, disinterested contemplation may be an exotic standard. In any case, a community of long standing is never entirely fungible or reversible.

¹⁵ Maurice Barrès, “La terre et les morts: Sur quelles réalités fonder la conscience française,” Paris: Bureau de la patrie française, 1899.

¹⁶ Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*, p. 28.

¹⁷ Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *He wei ‘Zhongguo’? Jiangyu, minzu, wenhua yu lishi* 何為「中國」？疆域，民族，文化與歷史 (What is ‘China’? Borders, ethnicity, culture and history, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Ge, *He wei ‘Zhongguo’?*, pp. 86-87.

Renan's formula for a nation might then seem to be only a feature of modern republics with their porous borders, their sense of themselves as constituted by laws and not by blood or history. But if you take the long view, even so deeply naturalized and accepted a form of belonging as "China" is an act of will. Who finds themselves invested in the national project? What forms do the imagination of "China" take, within different parts or sub-communities of China, in its disputed areas, among its neighbors, among people feeling various degrees of loyalty, disaffection, utopian longing or selectivity? No one, I think, will say any more that an "imagined community" is *merely* imaginary: there is no "merely" about this kind of imagining.¹⁹

To these questions, historical narrations provide a response that can be tracked over a long period of cumulative reflection. Such statecraft texts as Qiu Jun's 邱濬 *Daxue yanyi bu* 大學衍義補 (*A Profuse Commentary to the "Great Learning,"* 1487), give explicit instructions, referring all the way back to the *Shang shu* 尚書, on how to construct and maintain a Chinese polity. (A full translation of this work is underway, led by Timothy Brook and Pierre-Étienne Will.) The *Twenty-Five Dynastic Histories* and their predecessor narrations build up, through narration and sometimes through naked appeals to a "continuity of tradition" (*daotong* 道統),²⁰ a collective endeavor in which to participate is not only an option but an obligation for any literate male reader. The mechanisms of inclusion in such texts are easily recognized: code words, normative language, recognized story patterns. But how are the limits of inclusion sketched out, implicitly rather than overtly? How, for example, do the authors of the dynastic histories attribute (or neglect to attribute) purpose and agency to outsiders? An invasion, for example, can be endured as a catastrophe (in that regard little different from an earthquake or drought or plague of cicadas), or it can be recounted as the result of a strategic calculation by a foreign leader. When and where do outsiders become for the histories people with motives and assignable moral characters, people whose actions can be assessed as one would do for other members of one's own moral community? What kind of outsiders qualify, in which contexts and at what times: nomads, merchants, diplomats, pirates, aborigines? This kind of question has the merit of being framable in sheer formal terms, by scouring the texts for words connoting different types of agency, sentence structures implying a conscious subject versus structures that simply report an event, and for reported thoughts or dialogue. From such empirical data we may be able to build up a detailed picture of changes over time in the definition of moral community through Chinese historical narration. That would, I think, be an important chapter in the ethical history of the world, and a substantive answer to stale polemics on China's being either "closed" or "open."

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Growth and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁰ Thomas A. Wilson, *Genealogy of the Way: The Construction and Uses of the Confucian Tradition in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).