Introduction

In early China, the past was ubiquitous. It is no exaggeration to say that almost every text in the extant corpus refers to the past in one manner or another. Some of them merely gesture towards it, say, by invoking the commonplace but densely loaded term for "antiquity" (*gu* 古), while others would gaze upon the bygone world and interrogate it relentlessly for their own edification. Over the long first millennium BCE, in a profusion of bronze and stone inscriptions, silk manuscripts, and bamboo and wooden slips, a very expansive landscape of the past unfolded. In the oldest extant writings from early China, namely the oracle-bone inscriptions, we see a crowded "ancestral landscape" that was integral to the royal divinatory practices of the late Shang dynasty (*c.*1300–1045).[1] In some of the oldest transmitted texts, such as parts of the *Classic of Documents* (*Shu* 書) and *Classic of Poetry* (*Shi* 詩), as well as bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou dynasty (*c.*1045–771 BCE), we find regular and frequent references to the history of the Zhou state. In subsequent centuries, amongst the plethora of political and ethical essays that would come to be categorized as the "masters texts" (*zishu* 子書), one would be hard pressed to find a single text, from the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) to the *Han Feizi* 韓非子, that does not refer to the historical exploits of one sage-king or another in antiquity.[2] Even texts on technical arts were no exception; amongst the entombed texts at the Qin site Shuihudi 睡虎地 from the late third century BCE, for instance, legal statutes were buried alongside a state chronicle, an almanac, and a transcript of a speech about the barbaric

[1] I borrow this evocative term from the title of David Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China, ca. 1200–1045 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 2000),

[2] I follow the use of the term "masters texts" as the translation of the Han dynasty term *zishu* 子書 in Wiebke Denecke, *The Dynamics of Masters Literature: Early Chinese Thought from Confucius to Han Feizi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010).

past.[3] By the early imperial period, towards the end of the first millennium BCE, besides the ubiquitous citations of antiquity across almost all texts, a stock of historical anecdotes also served as a popular rhetorical currency in the writings of the political elite.[4] The past had a sustained, looming presence in the early Chinese corpus.

Readers working through these different texts from early China, however, will soon find that this vast landscape of the past is a convoluted one. Each text conjures up a particular vision of the past or seizes upon a certain historical moment that is meaningful to what it wishes to say in the present; if one were to put together all these different narrative pieces about the past, what emerges is a rather perplexing whole that is replete with alternative, competing, or even contradictory accounts of the same events, past figures, or historical eras. For instance, while the masters texts commonly refer to an idealized "antiquity" (*gu*) and the historical accomplishments of the "sages" (*shengren* 聖人), we soon discover that they have radically different understandings of what constituted "antiquity" and the proper qualifications of a "sage." Some texts, such as the *Laozi* 老子, found it necessary to evoke the primordial past, a time before the creation of all things, while others would narrow their attention to just the anthropological age, such as the *Shiji* 史記 by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (d. *c.*86 BCE), which begins its history of the world with stories of the Five Thearchs (*wu di* 五帝). Devolutionary views of the past predominate in a variety of texts, such as the *Han Feizi* from the late third century BCE, while others would put forward evolutionary narratives, such as, to name just one example, Lu Jia's 陸賈 essay the "Foundation of the Way" ("Daoji" 道基) from the early decades of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

Such markedly divergent delineations of the past abound. Their common attentiveness to the past belies their radically distinct understanding of the bygone world and their diverse investment in the idea of history. Canonical, popular figures and events that appear across multiple texts did not aggregate to a unified historical field, but rather they

[3] Here, "state chronicle" refers to the *Biannian ji* 編年記, "almanacs" refers to the *Ri shu* 日書, and historical speech refers to the *Yushu* 語書 discovered at the site. See *Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian* 睡虎地秦墓竹簡, ed. Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓竹簡整理小組 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990).

[4] Sarah A. Queen and Paul van Els, eds., *Between History and Philosophy: Anecdotes in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

embodied countless variations of the supposed shape of the past. Reading across the early Chinese corpus, therefore, one encounters the past, or more precisely their past, broken up into a thousand little pieces. The vast landscape of the past that emerges from this multitude of historical narratives is a contorted and contentious space.

This book studies this landscape of the past in early China. It asks not only *what* the shape of this landscape was, but also *why* there was such a landscape to begin with. Beyond just describing key sites of this landscape of the past, it will also study its formation and transformation as a function of the changing political condition over the course of the first millennium BCE. As the late Bronze Age aristocratic order collapsed and new bureaucratic empires gradually emerged in this period, what might have compelled the political elite to turn their gaze backwards and invest in the construction of elaborate historical terrains? If the past mattered to some of them a great deal, *why* and *how* did it matter to them? This study approaches these invocations and elaborations of the past in the early Chinese corpus not as artifacts of a cultural convention or intellectual habit, but as signs of a deliberate mobilization of the past as ideological capital for the construction or destruction of political arguments or ethical ideals. The past was implicated in a variety of ways as a powerful resource in the contentious imagination of relations of power. This book is a study of the history of this politics of the past in early China.

Beyond Didacticism: Methods and Perspectives

I am hardly the first reader to have noticed this pervasiveness of the past in early Chinese texts. It is almost a cliché at this point, after more than a century of modern scholarship on the subject, to say that writings from early China tend to be historically minded, or that veneration of the past is one of the civilizational traits of ancient China. There has been, accordingly, a massive amount of scholarship on this topic. The arguments in this book are built on this foundation that past generations of scholars have assiduously cultivated. At the same time, they are also crafted in relation to what I consider to be some of the paradigmatic problems and blind spots in these earlier studies. Let me elaborate.

This long tradition of scholarship on the history of the past in early China is very rich – with a staggering number of works published in the

last century – but also surprisingly narrow. This is due, to a large extent, in my estimation, to the overwhelming and undue emphasis placed on just a few historiographical works as their key sources. To study the "attitude to the past" held by the ancient Chinese, scholars had almost always opted to look first or only at their historiographical works as the most relevant sources.[5] Conversely, it is largely within the scholarship on early Chinese historiography that one finds extended discussion of how the early Chinese imagined the past and how that evolved over time. In other words, there has been a conflation, witting or unwitting, between the study of historiography and the study of the idea of the past in early China. There is an implicit identification between ideas about the past supposedly beheld by those who lived in early China and the content of the historiographical works that they compiled and consumed.

Now, there is nothing wrong about this assumption per se, of course, but in my view it is severely and unnecessarily limiting. Why confine oneself to just the historiographical works, if the question is why and how the past mattered to the early Chinese political elite? To write a historiographical work is one way of engaging with the past but it is hardly the only way; the idea of the past was mobilized in so many different manners in all kinds of texts for a great variety of argumentative ends in early China. To write a history of the past in early China, I would argue that one must attend to the wider spectrum of political and ethical writings beyond just those that are ostensibly, self-reflexively, historiographical.

To elaborate on this methodological point, let me first discuss this body of scholarship on the Chinese historiographical tradition and the sort of history of the past that they have typically proffered. In this

[5] I use the phrase "attitude to the past" from the title of Herbert Butterfield, *History and Man's Attitude to the Past: Their Role in the Story of Civilisation* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1960), a work that I will refer to later as a typical example of the type of comparative civilizational scholarship that argues for a predominant didacticism in traditional Chinese historiography. And these few "historiographical works" are the usual suspects: the *Shu* 書; *Guoyu* 國語; *Zhanguoce* 戰國策; *Chunqiu* 春秋 and its various commentaries, especially the *Zuozhuan* 左傳; and of course the *Shiji* by Sima Qian and *Hanshu* 漢書 by Ban Gu 班固, namely mostly works that one can find under the traditional "histories" (*shi* 史) bibliographical category. For a history of this bibliographical category, see Stephen Durrant, "Histories (*Shi* 史)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature (1000 BCE–900 CE)*, ed. by Wiebke Denecke, Wai-yee Li, and Xiaofei Tian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 184–200.

varied body of work, spanning more than a century, a few paradigmatic ideas have predominated from the beginning to today. Most prevalent and important of all is the argument that Chinese historiographical writings are fundamentally didactic in nature, or that the ancient Chinese, as a matter of cultural attitude and intellectual habit, assigned great importance to a proper knowledge of the past for the many lessons that it had to offer for those in the present. Histories are a "brilliant mirror" (*mingjing* 明鏡) for the people of a country, as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 put it more than a century ago, reusing a very old metaphor perhaps most famously used in the title of the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid Governance* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑) by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), in his withering critique of traditional historiographical practices.[6] Looking at this historiographical mirror, we learn who we are, and also what we ought or ought not to do in the present. Relatedly, history is also the retrospective arena in which correct moral judgment of past figures and events can and should be dispensed. This presumption of a fundamental didacticism in Chinese historiographical writings has been widely shared across different scholarly traditions, not only in China but also globally in the United States, Europe, and Japan. In one of the earliest works in the English language on the subject, namely Charles Gardner's *Chinese Traditional Historiography*, published in 1938, we are told that Confucius edited the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) in order to draw on "lessons of the past" to demonstrate that moral justice always prevails in the world.[7] The purpose in drawing on the past and in writing history is to instruct those in the present on the principles of our moralistic cosmos. By the postwar decades, a time when we saw an elevated output of scholarship on the subject, this supposed didacticism in the Chinese historiographical tradition had become a truly commonplace assumption. In the collection of essays on the subject, *Historians of China and Japan* published in 1961, for instance, the editors suggested that due to the influence of Confucius, Chinese historiography "came to be fraught with a solemn ethical function, the duty of expressing 'praise and blame,' that was to hang

[6] Liang Qichao 梁啟超, "Zhongguo zhi jiushi" 中國之舊史, in *Zhongguo lishi wenxuan* 中國歷史文選, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), Volume 2, 352–365.

[7] Charles Gardner, *Chinese Traditional Historiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 13.

over it, often to its detriment, throughout its subsequent development."[8] Around the same period, Burton Watson, in his important introduction to the works and thought of Sima Qian, Grand Archivist of the Former Han empire (206 BCE – 9 CE), *Ssu-Ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China*, argued for the first awakening of the "historical consciousness" sometime in the Zhou period, with the development of a rationalistic and humanistic view of history that culminated in the composition of various didactic works of history that were meant to instruct those in the present with meticulous, accurate records of the past.[9] Across the Atlantic, in the United Kingdom, the great Joseph Needham also declared that for the "Chinese mind," history "serves an essential moral purpose," not only as a guide to governance but also in "encouraging virtue and deterring vice."[10] These are all but a few typical articulations of this scholarly consensus that traditional Chinese historiography, starting with the major works from early China, was informed by a deep-seated didactic purpose; that it had always been a moralistic and moralizing endeavor.[11]

[8] William G. Beasley and Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Historians of China and Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 2. See also the contribution of one of the coeditors, Edwin G. Pulleyblank, titled "Chinese Historical Criticism: Liu Chih-chi and Ssu-ma Kuang," where he argues that in imperial China, historical records "served an essential moral purpose by holding up good and bad examples through which virtues could be encouraged and vice deterred" (143).

[9] Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 135–137. I follow Michael Nylan in using the word "archivist" to translate *shi* 史 as part of the Han official title *taishi ling* 太史令. See Michael Nylan, "Sima Qian: A True Historian?", *Early China*, 23–24 (1998), 203–246.

[10] Joseph Needham was speaking specifically about the *Zizhi tongjian*, but he extrapolated from it to the whole of the historiographical tradition of premodern China. Joseph Needham, *Time and the Eastern Man* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain & Ireland, 1965), 14.

[11] One may also note the examples, from around the globe in the various major Sinological traditions, of Homer H. Dubs, "The Reliability of Chinese Histories," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 6.1 (1946), 23–43; Yu-Shan Han, *Elements of Chinese Historiography* (Hollywood: W. M. Hawley, 1955); Charles O. Hucker, *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 23–28; Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, *Liang Han sixiang shi* 兩漢思想史 (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1975), Volume 3, esp. 157–159; Nemoto, Makoto 根本誠, *Chûgoku reikishi rinen no kongen* 中国歴史理念の根源 (Tokyo: Seikatsusha, 1943); Naitō Torajirō 内藤湖南, *Shina shigakushi* 支那史學史 (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1949); and Etienne Balazs, *Chinese Civilzation and Bureaucracy: Variations on a Theme* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 129–141.

This scholarly consensus on the didactic nature of Chinese historiography has had a remarkably stable career. It has remained quite widely accepted to this day, and is still often reiterated as an uncontroversial claim about the Chinese historiographical tradition. From just a decade ago, for instance, one still finds a confident declaration that "the revelation of the *dao* [the Way] at work and the related correct moral judgment of historical events ... are the main aims of traditional Chinese historiography."[12] What may account for the success and longevity of this particular interpretation? To be certain, one reason is that it does contain an element of truth. There is indeed plenty of evidence to support this claim that the past was utilized for the ethical education that it affords its readers (and, by extension, the critical function that historical narratives can have in the remonstrance of those who were

The latter two are distinctive in their emphasis on the political rather than ethical lessons in the writing and reading of histories, a consequence of the bureaucratization of the writing of history in premodern China; the lessons may be different, but histories are didactic all the same.

[12] Joachim Gentz, "Historiography," in *Keywords Re-oriented* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2009), 59. For other recent examples in the last few decades, one could mention On-Cho Ng and Q. Edward Wang, *Mirroring the Past: The Writing and Use of History in Imperial China* (Honolulu: University Hawaii Press, 2005); Grant Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Anthony E. Clark, "Praise and Blame: Ruist Historiography in Ban Gu's *Hanshu*," *Chinese Historical Review* 18 (2011), 1–24; Wang Shumin 王樹民, *Zhongguo shixue shi gangyao* 中國史學史綱要 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997); Du Weiyun 杜維運, *Zhongguo shixue shi* 中國史學史 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1993). In the past decade or so, there have also been a number of new works focusing on "truth claims" in early Chinese historiography; there are a great number of new insights in these works on the nature and goals of early Chinese historiographical culture, but the presumption of primacy of a moralistic, didactic agenda largely prevails: see the essays in Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer and Achim Mittag, eds., *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism, and Ideology: Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005); Paul Goldin, "Appeals to History in Early Chinese Philosophy and Rhetoric," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35.1 (2008), 79–69, which in turn draws on the insightful discussion in Anthony S. Cua, "Ethical Uses of the Past in Early Confucianism: The Case of Hsün Tzu," *Philosophy East and West* 35.2 (1985), 133–156. In this context, I should also note the recent work by Garret P. S. Olberding, *Dubious Facts: The Evidence of Early Chinese Historiography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), which addresses the question of what constituted factual evidence in early Chinese political speeches, as preserved in various historiographical works, and has subtly shifted the focus from normative moral didacticism to strategic political persuasiveness.

politically powerful).[13] That can be found not only in the historical writings themselves, but also in the long tradition of historical criticisms in imperial China; these scholars would often refer to the authoritative pronouncements in early and medieval works of literary criticism, such as Liu Xie's 劉勰 *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 and Liu Zhiji's 劉知幾 *Shitong* 史通 (from the late fifth and the eighth centuries respectively) as additional support for the veracity of this view that, as a matter of cultural attitude, the past served a didactic purpose in traditional China. Another reason for the successful career of this idea, besides this semblance of truthfulness, is perhaps its resonance and consistency with the area-studies paradigm constitutive of the study of traditional China throughout much of the twentieth century. It is a framework that is designed to abstract from a reading of the historical materials structural patterns and essential attributes specific to the supposed culture of China for the purpose of comparative civilizational studies.[14] It is indeed quite striking that in so much of this earlier discussion of the Chinese historiographical tradition, there has been such a strong desire and willingness to seek unitary cultural explanations, most

[13] This understanding of the role of didacticism in early Chinese historiography often extends into the topic of remonstrance (*jian* 諫). Histories, properly written, contain the correct moral lessons, and can therefore be used to remonstrate against the moral failings of the rulers in the present. As Mark Edward Lewis noted, "Literary accounts of the past, as opposed to court chronicles, had been a tool of criticism and opposition," in his *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 316. David Schaberg, in his article "Remonstrance in Eastern Zhou Historiography," *Early China* 22 (1997), 133–179, dealt with this relationship between remonstrance and the writing of history in a very interesting way; he suggested that it was the need to remonstrate that may have implicated and necessitated a desire to preserve the words and deeds of the past.

[14] On this point, I am indebted to the insightful critique of the field by Michael Dutton, "The Trick of Words: Asian Studies, Translation, and the Problem of Knowledge," in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). I also appreciated the critique of the genealogy of comparative Sinological studies by Haun Saussy, "Outside the Parenthesis (Those People Were a Kind of Solution)," *MLN* 115.5 (2000), 849–891. I very much agree with his assessment that "Reflections on Asian culture too often present us with an antithesis [between East and West] . . . where what we need is a transition" (884). See also Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), esp. 1–18.

popularly this presumption of a fundamental didacticism as a motivating factor in their engagement with the past. The diversity of voices, the many competing uses of history, which were quite plain to see in the sources themselves, were systemically elided in favor of the phantasm of cultural attributes, a supposedly master inventory of essential traits that would faithfully describe and explain the culture of traditional China for those outside it. It is not surprising at all that this well-worn cliché about the moralizing, didactic tendency of the Chinese historiographical tradition is so widely accepted and so often reiterated in works on global comparative studies of historiographical writings. It is a culturalist framework designed to render the unfamiliar familiar by conjuring up a unitary other with essential traits.[15]

A number of recent works in the field have begun to point out, wittingly or unwittingly, the limitation of this approach in reading early Chinese writings about the past. They fall into two broad categories, asymmetrical in respect to the types of texts that they focus on. In one category, the scholars survey a wide array of texts, beyond the typical historiographical canon, to study a broad constellation of ideas about the past. With their consideration of a variety of texts, they quite readily move beyond the confines of this didactic reading; the old framework is simply not sufficient to account for the rich, diverse historical imagination that was at work behind this plethora of texts. The discussion of the "philosophy of history" in early China by Roger Ames in his *The Art of Rulership* is an early example of this effort. In this study of the *Huainanzi*

[15] For recent examples, see Jeremy Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Georg G. Iggers and Edward Q. Wang, *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-cultural Perspective* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001); Du Weiyun 杜維運, *Zhongguo shi xue yu shi jie shi xue* 中國史學與世界史學 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2008); Needham, *Time and the Eastern Man*; and Butterfield, *History and Man's Attitude to the Past*. This point is also current in broader comparative studies between early China and the ancient Mediterranean world, such as G. E. R. Lloyd, *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26: "Chinese thinkers of many different philosophical persuasions were repeatedly harking back to the teachings of the Sage-kings. Sometimes, to be sure, that is just for form's sake . . . Nevertheless the idea that there is past wisdom, that there were, once, Sage-kings, is a commonplace."

淮南子, he gave a brief but valuable account of the "philosophy of history" of the major intellectual traditions, namely Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism.[16] More recently, Mark Edward Lewis in his monumental *Writing and Authority in Early China* presented one of the richest and most detailed accounts of the different ideas of history in early China; similarly, Scott Cook in his article "The Use and Abuse of History in Early China from *Xun Zi* to *Lüshi Chunqiu*" looked beyond just the historiographical canon and discovered, in the process, the important role that history played in the political and ethical debates of the Warring States period, (453–221 BCE).[17] A few years later, we also saw the publication of Mu-Chou Poo's "The Formation of the Concept of Antiquity in Early China." While the start of the essay described "reverence toward the past (*zungu* 尊古)" as another "prominent phenomenon" in Chinese culture, Poo quickly proceeded to explain that his project was to *historicize* this phenomenon; it was not simply a cultural given but a historical, evolving phenomenon susceptible to explanations based on changing sociopolitical factors. Poo did not accept that the past was simply revered, as a matter of fact, but set out to investigate "*why* the past was revered" at all.[18] Then he proceeded to discuss a broad range of texts, from the Western Zhou corpus to writings from the end of the Han dynasty, to see how various individuals or texts tried to "uphold the authority that antiquity could bring."[19] In a similar vein, and around the same time, Heiner Roetz speculated that there was a growing opposition to "an unreflected traditionalistic appeal to the past" from earlier times, paving the way for a process of "de-historicization" in the late Warring States period; in this reading, the frequent appeal to the past was more a historical than a cultural phenomenon in early China.[20]

[16] Roger Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 1–27.
[17] Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 99–146; Scott Cook, "The Use and Abuse of History in Early China from *Xun Zi* to *Lüshi Chunqiu*," *Asia Major* 18.1 (2005), 45–78.
[18] Mu-Chou Poo, "The Formation of the Concept of Antiquity in Early China," in *Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization*, ed. Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl (Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 2008), 85–102, esp. 85, emphasis added.
[19] Ibid., 100.
[20] Heiner Roetz, "Normativity and History in Warring States Thought: The Shift Towards the Anthropological Paradigm," in Schmidt-Glintzer, Mittag, and Rüsen, *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism, and Ideology*, 85, 88. For further