

“Writing” and Historical Research

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This paper offers some personal thoughts on the relationship between writing and historical research. “Writing” in historical studies can mean a number of things. It can simply stand for ways of looking at the human past or ways of choosing significant issues to explore. So, how to “write” may mean how to “construct” pictures of history that are meaningful. “Writing” in historical studies may also refer to ways of presenting or organizing historical knowledge. “Writing” in this sense could be applied to tasks such as the writing of general histories and history textbooks. Actually, in the past, the whole enterprise of historical study often came under the banner of “writing history” or “historical writing.” Thus we find article titles like “Some Problems Involved in Writing Confederate History” (by Frank E. Vandiver, *The Journal of Southern History*, 36:3 [August 1970]), “Recent Trends in the Writing of Economic History in the United Kingdom” (by T. S. Ashton, *The Journal of Economic History* 9:2 [November 1949]). In addition, since the great majority of historians use ordinary language, not technical language, as the primary means of communication in their research works, “writing” may mean the actual act of writing. And this is the focus of my paper.

I intend to make two points. The first is that for historians, the act of writing is closely related to their respective research methodologies or approaches. Second, in many cases, “writing” is not independent from historical research. Rather, it is part of research and pertains to the quality of research. I will elaborate on these two points in the rest of my paper.

For the purpose of discussing the relationship between writing and historical research, it is necessary first to say a few words about research itself. I think most modern-day historical research can be sensibly classified into three main types. The first is narrative, or works in which narrative plays a prominent role. The second type is analytical research, which takes historical explanation as its central task. The third type may be called technical research. Most of the research of this type is devoted to finding new facts or revising past findings. Philologically based historical studies form a special genre in this third category of research. Japanese scholarship on traditional Chinese history and culture, for instance, is dominated by this genre. The three types of scholarship suggested here are inevitably ideal-types; most works of historical research perhaps do not belong to any pure type. Thus one may conceive these three types also as three key elements in modern historiography.

It is apparent that writing holds a central importance in the work of the historians who choose narrative as the principal medium to present their research. The essential meaning of narrative in historical research is to write history like a story. A story is a linguistic production having a clear beginning and end, is more or less coherent, and has a

great deal of description. A “good” story affects its readers greatly. As such, good historical writing is often associated with historians known for their works of narrative. To be sure, historical narratives scarcely come out in pure story form, as explanatory statements are sometimes unavoidable. Nevertheless, historical narratives are characterized by their lack of clear arguments; one may say that arguments lie in descriptions.

Narrative, even narrativism, has become a main focus in the philosophical examination of historical knowledge in at least the last two decades. Statistically, it is probably the most popular subject in historiography.^① One important issue in this discussion is how narrative relates to truth and what criteria should be used to evaluate narrative as a form of historical knowledge. Certainly, there are also those, often referred to as post-modernists, who charge that historical narratives are no more than literary, fictive constructions. Yet it seems that many historians and theorists hold the belief that narrative is a proper form for historical explanation. One intriguing question is why the issue of narrative attracts so much attention in the circle of Western historians, philosophers, and literary theorists. One obvious answer is that many responsible for the raising of this issue are literary critics sensitive to forms of representation.

Nevertheless, I think there may be a more fundamental reason. Narrative is a major form of historical representation in modern Western historiography. This form of historiography has encountered many challenges, such as the critical historical scholarship initiated by Ranke or at least promoted and celebrated in his name. In addition, a segment of the Annales school endeavored to use synchronic, quantitative accounts to reveal the deep structures of a given society. Narrative historiography faced a wider challenge from social science oriented historiography, which emphasized the working of general laws in the human world and sought to explicate the experience of the human past in relation to these laws. Yet in practice, narrative has always been an important form of historical writing in the West. After the 1970s, this form of historiography received renewed interest and respect. It is still flourishing today in the English-speaking world. In short, one reason narrative became a central question in Western historiographical discussions is that narrative is a mainstream form of historical scholarship in the West. The same, however, cannot be said about some other parts of the world, including the Chinese communities.

I would like to use personal experiences to illustrate the relative unimportance of narrative in modern Chinese historiography. Before going to the U.S. as a graduate student, I had been a student of history in Taiwan for five years, four years as an undergrad-

① This trend is palpably displayed in *History and Theory*, the principal journal in English devoted to the theory and philosophy of history.

uate and one year as a graduate student. As far as I can recall, during those years, the question of writing in historical scholarship never entered my consciousness as a significant topic, either in theoretical or in practical terms. I think my impression is reflective of the general situation in Taiwan's community of historical studies in the 70s, because I was personally interested in writing and probably would not have discarded such a question had it ever come to my attention. Yet when I entered the history department of an American university, I acquired a new sense of writing as a big part of historical scholarship. This is because the department I attended had a number of acclaimed faculty members known for their writing ability. I am talking about people such as Edmund Morgan, Peter Gay and Jonathan Spence. Narrative occupies an important place in the works of all three professors. Not accidentally, Peter Gay wrote a book titled *Style in History*. The situation in question might not be typical among American history departments, but there is no question that narrative and writing played a much more important role in historical scholarship in the U.S. than in Taiwan or in China. In Taiwan, writing is assumed by a majority of historians to be no more than a tool of expression, and narrative has only a marginal place in historical scholarship. Here, with very few practitioners such as early and elder scholars in the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica, monographs are rarely used as a form of scholarly presentation; books are often collections of articles. Historians in Mainland China seem more interested in publishing books. But there, narrative is also weak and usually mechanical. The tendency in mainland China to publish works of master narrative in various fields of history may be more a legacy of the official Marxist-Leninist-nationalist historiography than a natural product of intellectual inclination. In short, if Hayden White had lived in Taiwan or China, he probably would not have taken the literary forms of historical writing so seriously.

Now, why does narrative play such an inconsequential role in modern Chinese historiography? I think the answer lies mainly at the origins of this scholarship. Modern historiography in China emerged in the early twentieth century very much under Western influence. However, the greatest resource for its development was still a traditional one, namely, the mainstream scholarship of the Qing era (1644-1910), the so-called “evidential investigation” or *kaozheng* 考證 scholarship. As is well known, the *kaozheng* scholarship focused on the empirical exploration of textual and technical questions in ancient classics and other ancient works. It also had great achievements in disciplines relating to those questions, such as paleography, phonology and astronomy. The Qing study of history was very much a branch of the *kaozheng* scholarship. It was primarily concerned with concrete facts and texts. The history theorist Zhang Xuecheng (1738-1801) once made a famous comment in which he implied that historiography current in his time was merely

“historical compilation” (*shizuan* 史纂) and “historical investigation” (*shikao* 史考), not real “historical scholarship” (*shixue* 史學). “Historical compilation” and “historical investigation” in Zhang’s sense have little to do with narrative and the art of writing. And as I understand it, what he meant by “historical scholarship” was not necessarily characterized by coherent narrative either.

The point I would like to make here is that, despite the fact that early in its historiographical tradition China saw splendid narratives in works like Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*), narrative is not among the chief characteristics of its historical scholarship in the last few centuries. The best-known Qing historians are Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727-1814), Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛 (1722-1797) and Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1728-1804). All of them are reputed for their technical investigations and research notes. Historical narratives and biographies did appear in the corpora of Zhao and Qian’s writings, yet they paled beside their evidential scholarship. This condition continued in the twentieth century. There are Chinese historians aware of this difference between Chinese and Western historical studies. A modern Chinese historian Qian Mu 錢穆 rightly pointed out that among the main genres of Chinese historical writings, Western historical works resembled closest the style of *jishi benmo* 紀事本末.² Incidentally, *Jishi benmo*, a purely narrative style, is the least developed of all major genres of Chinese historical writings.

I have emphasized, so far, that narrative is an important form of historical scholarship in the modern West. Since the production of narrative involves sophisticated writing, it is understandable that the literary elements of historical scholarship have come under scrutiny in recent decades. Even earlier, in 1912, the President of the American Historical Association Theodore Roosevelt, who happened to be a former President of the country, made it the theme of his presidential address to eulogize the literary mode of history. Roosevelt claimed that “the great historian of the future” must have the power “to embody ghosts, to put flesh and blood on dry bones, to make dead men living before our eyes.” Through him, “we shall see the life that was and not the death that is.”³ In contrast, narrative plays only a marginal role in modern Chinese historiography. In most cases, when narratives were made for practical purposes, such as the writing of textbooks, they were mechanical and crude. Now let me turn to the question regarding the relationship between writing and what I referred to as analytical research.

² Qian Mu 錢穆, *Zhongguo shixue mingzhu* 中國史學名著, *Qian Binsi quanji* 錢賓四全集 (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshiye gongsi, 1995), vol. 33, pp. 304-5. Qian is a rare modern Chinese historian who emphasized the importance of writing in historical scholarship. Cf. his “Shixue daoyan” 史學導言, Lecture One, in Qian Mu, *Zhongguo shixue fawei* 中國史學發微 (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1989).

³ “History as Literature,” *American Historical Review*, 18:3 (April 1913), pp. 479, 484.

“Analytical research” is hard to define. It is the kind of research that centers on a consciously presented problematic or a set of them. A typical work in this category attempts to construct factual knowledge about its subjects and to explain the cause of historical conditions. There are a great variety of types of analytical historical research, and “analytical research” may not even be a suitable name. For the purpose of my discussion here, suffice it to say that analytical research is the kind of scholarship marked by a sense of problematic and explicit historical explanations. Most articles and technical monographs produced by historians in the English-speaking world belong to this category. Writing as an independent task is an important part of analytical research. For “independent”, I mean that words more or less flow on their own and do not constantly refer to texts, technical knowledge and terms, and specialized writings of academic peers. The “independent” type of writing has two main functions in analytical research: producing narratives and producing arguments.

Narratives are quite common in analytical historical works. They may serve as background for the central subjects so that the significance of these subjects could be demonstrated. They may be historical descriptions constituting parts of an argument. They may also be presentations of historical reconstructions by the author. Another function of independent writing in analytical research is to lay out arguments used in historical explanation. In general, arguments in historical research are notably different from arguments in philosophical discussions and works of social theories. Historians’ arguments are often closely linked to the original sources that they present as evidence. Otherwise, they are heavily empirical in content, backed up by established knowledge and findings of other specialists. Therefore, historical publications are distinguished by the large number of their notes from works in most other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Yet narrative works in history tend to have fewer notes.

As for technical and philological research, in comparison to historical narratives and analytical research described above, writing is chiefly a practical vehicle for showing the author’s findings and their bases. A conspicuous feature of technical historical works is their reliance on texts, specific factual knowledge, and specialized terminology to develop their statements. Often, there are no clear distinctions between technical and analytical historical scholarships. Many technical historians are interested in large questions, and their detailed studies aim to develop explanations for these questions. Nonetheless, at least from the viewpoint of style, the differentiation of the two historical scholarships seems warranted.

I hope I have illustrated the point that writing in historical studies is closely related to the approaches one takes. Historical narratives and some types of analytical research

require a great deal of writing as a somewhat independent task. In most technical research and some analytical research, writing is essentially a tool of expression. Here I would like to make a further point that in historical research in general, writing is part of research. It cannot be considered separated from research--merely a medium serving to demonstrate the results of research works. Writing is thus intrinsically related to the success or failure of a piece of historical scholarship, particularly in the cases of narratives and arguments. This may be a self-evident point for many scholars, but I believe it is still worth speaking about, particularly in a community where the factor of writing in historical studies has not been properly addressed.

I have heard stories about historians staying away from their research materials when they were composing drafts for their works. They read their materials before writing relevant drafts, and used the materials to check the accuracy or appropriateness of their statements after the completion of the drafts. Quite clearly, their purpose is to “think through” their subjects without being obstructed by the presence of fragmented information and strong opinions of others. I have actually heard about two such stories. One person involved is a literary-oriented historian, and the other is known for sweeping and incisive historical interpretations. These two stories highlight the critical importance of the creative mind in historical research. One historian needed a space free from materials to unfold his historical imagination, to work with all the information in his memory rather than some information at hand. He writes mainly narratives. The other author needed such a space to build up general historical pictures in his mind and develop arguments about them. Clearly, these examples are too extreme to be representative. Yet they do reveal an important fact that in many moments of their research, historians work between, and not just with materials.

In relation to the present topic, the key element in the thinking and imagination of historians is that they to a large degree function in the process of writing. When writing is not over, thinking and imagination are not either. In this sense, historians sometimes do write like creative writers, but their imagination is limited by evidence, existing knowledge in the field, and other rules historians ought to follow. Sometimes historians write like philosophers, but in their thinking and reasoning they have to work with infinitely more information, often minute, than most philosophers care to know. One may argue that most social scientists also work in a similar way. Writing is an intrinsic part of their research. This may even be applied to those writing in mathematical equations or obscure professional jargon. Yet my point here is that there is something special about the writing in some varieties of historical research. It is highly humanistic; it may be creative or philosophical. In most cases perhaps, historians need to be able to write like essayists-at

least like the author of formal essays, if not personal essays. It is in this sense that I would like to put forth writing as an important part of historian’s craft. Careful attention should be paid to it, particularly in places like Taiwan where this issue hardly exists and where there is no strong tradition of historical narrative.

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