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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Cyclical Views of Human History in Thucydides' *Archaeology* and Sima Qian's *Historical Records*

Abstract Many previous thinkers have imagined that there was a glorious or harmonious period in the past better than the world of their own time, but Thucydides and Sima Qian do not describe the early stages of human society as a Golden Age. I suggest that Sima Qian marks a separation between the mythical stories and the historical spirit in China, just as Thucydides did in Greece. Further, they both presented a modified cyclical view of human history. For a better understanding of the basic characteristics of Greek and Chinese historiographies, this paper discusses the cyclical views of human history underlying ancient Greek and early Chinese historiographies through a comparative study of Thucydides' and Sima Qian's texts. I analyze some similarities and differences between the two great historians' conceptions of historical process, and I conclude that Thucydides believes human intelligence develops through a historical spiral, while Sima Qian focuses on dynastic cycles with a strong moral concern.

Keywords comparative historiography, cyclical view of history, Thucydides, Sima Qian, *Archaeology*, *Historical Records*

Introduction

In ancient societies, there were many methods by which people preserved their memories: oral poetry, religious stories, funerary texts, instruction literature,

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king lists, chronicles of kingdoms, oracle-bone inscriptions, and so on.[1] As Kurt A. Raaflaub illustrates, the king lists and ancient texts were repeatedly copied in Mesopotamia, but no one would have thought to write a "history of Assyria" ("Geschichte Assyriens") or the "creation and destruction of the Babylonian Empire" ("Entstehung und Zerstörung des babylonischen Reiches").[2] According to Arnaldo Momigliano, although the Jews developed a kind of political history, history never became part of Jewish education and the Law of the Jews was definitely beyond history; moreover, Jewish people abandoned the practice of historiography almost entirely from the second to the sixteenth century.[3] Apparently, not every culture always needs historicity in the strict sense. However, it appears to me that both Greek and Chinese historical thinking originally investigated the past and reconstructed cultural memories through the application of rationality. Furthermore, I am inspired by the statement of Benjamin Schwartz: Some of the dominant conceptions in Chinese historiography "resonate with certain Western modalities of historical thought," and "fundamentally the basic dynamic principle is the immanent process of the *dao* 道 in history."[4] Thus, to determine the origin of historiography, I think that it is most necessary to analyze Greek and Chinese historical thinking and to compare "Sima Qian and his Western colleagues," as Fritz-Heiner Mutschler has already done.[5] In this study, I will attempt to show through a comparative analysis how cyclical views of human history underlie and influence Greek and Chinese historiographies. For this purpose I propose to study two great historians, Thucydides (ca. 460–400 BC) and Sima Qian 司

[1] These preservations of memories can be thought as historical consciousness, but they are still full of mythical legends and different from historical texts. So I think Catherine Darbo-Peschanski is right when she emphasizes that "one must be careful not to confuse historicity, historical consciousness, and historiography." See Catherine Darbo-Peschanski, "The Origin of Greek Historiography," 27–31.

[2] Kurt A. Raaflaub, *"Patres historiae*? Die Anfänge kritischer Geschichtsschreibung in vergleichender Perspektive," 5.

[3] Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, 16–28.

[4] Benjamin Schwartz, "History in Chinese Culture: Some Comparative Reflections," 28, 32.

[5] Fritz-Heiner Mutschler, "Sima Qian and His Western Colleagues: On Possible Categories of Description," 194–200. See also Fritz-Heiner Mutschler, "Ancient Historiographies Compared," 103–12.

馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BC), focusing on the *Archaeology* in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* and the *Historical Records* (*Shiji* 史記), especially the "Basic Annals of the Five Emperors" (*Wudi benji* 五帝本紀), the "Basic Annals of the First Emperor of the Qin" (*Qinshihuang benji* 秦始皇本紀), the "Biography of Boyi" (*Boyi liezhuan* 伯夷列傳), the "Biographies of the Money-Makers" (*Huozhi liezhuan* 貨殖列傳), and the "Postface to Historical Records" (*Taishigong zixu* 太史公自序), through which I hope to gain a better understanding of the basic characteristics of Greek and Chinese historiographies. In addition, Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant have also compared Thucydides and Sima Qian in their *Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China*,[6] and I hope to further their research and make a more specific text analysis in response to their previous discussion.

From Mythological Thinking to Historical Narration: The Similarity of the Origins of Ancient Greek and Early Chinese Historiographies

Although Thucydides and Sima Qian do not describe the early stages of human society as a Golden Age, many previous thinkers imagined that there was a glorious or harmonious period in the past, which was always better than their own time. In Greece, Homer and Hesiod both hold this view.

In the *Iliad*, Homer praises the great deeds of Diomedes, since the hero throws with ease a massive stone that no two men can lift in the poet's time. He also described Ajax, Hector, and Aeneas as having such power.[7] Meanwhile, Nestor preached that the warriors of the past were stronger than those of his own time.[8] In Homer, as Maria Pavlou points out, "the past is absolute and superior to the present," while "the past of the past had been even greater and superior."[9]

According to the *Works and Days*, a Golden Race of men lived in the time

[6] Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage: Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China*, 101–47.

[7] Homer, *Iliad*, 5.302–4, 12.381–83, 12.445–49, 20.285–87. See also Jonas Grethlein, "Homer and Heroic History," 17.

[8] Homer, *Iliad*, 1.260–268.

[9] Maria Pavlou, "Pindar and the Reconstruction of the Past," 102.

of Cronos; they were without sorrow and free from toil and grief. Then after the Silver, Bronze and Heroic Races, the fifth and most degraded race of iron "never rest from labor and sorrow by day and from perishing by night." Hesiod himself hates being among this generation.[10] W. Robert Connor reasonably argues that Hesiod's idea of a Golden Age is representative of the earlier Greek thinkers before the fifth century BC. Such legendary myths reflect a traditional way of viewing the past.[11]

Moreover, even in the fifth century BC, Pindar is keen to eulogize the old times in his epinician poetry. When he praises the contemporary victors in the Panhellenic Games, his stories often "concern the remote mythical past" and he "endows mythical data and historical events with equal validity."[12] He likes to use the "old examples of excellence" to compare the current winners.[13] So, he still does not distinguish between mythological thinking and historical narration.

However, during the fifth century some thinkers began to repudiate such a mythical understanding. W. K. C. Guthrie regards Thucydides' work as a model of the realists and the best guide to the Sophistic Movement in the latter half of the fifth century BC.[14] As an accumulation of these new thoughts on early human history, Thucydides' *Archaeology* deserves greater attention. It was impressive that his *Archaeology* "has no place for Golden Ages or great heroes."[15] As the past is not better, but similar to (though certainly not the same as) the contemporary and future eras, Thucydides is confident that his historical writing will play an educational function to men and become "a possession for all of time."[16] In fact, it is a monumental shift that the idea of history is no longer retrogressive, although the old view persisted through the following centuries.

In China, not only have "the emperors always sought to legitimize their

[10] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 109–200, especially lines 174–78. See also Bruno Currie, "Hesiod on Human History," 47–51.

[11] W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides*, 22.

[12] Pavlou, "Pindar and the Reconstruction of the Past," 95.

[13] Pindar, *Nemean Odes*, 3.32.

[14] W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 84–88.

[15] Connor, *Thucydides*, 23.

[16] Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Die große Herausforderung: Herodot, Thukydides und die Erfindung einer neuen Form von Geschichtsschreibung," 599–600.

dynasties by reference to history,"[17] but the Confucian school was usually inclined to persuade contemporary rulers via a comparison between the ancient sages and the previous tyrants as well. The legendary sage kings Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, who ruled before the Xia dynasty, were most admired. The "Yao and Shun complex" (*Yao Shun qingjie* 堯舜情結) gradually developed into one part of Confucian ideology, and the highest ideal of the Confucian scholars and officials was to assist their emperors to follow the rule of Yao and Shun.

Therefore, the period of Yao and Shun was glorified as a great and harmonious world by later scholars through the words of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子):

> When the great Dao prevailed, the world was shared by all. Virtuous and wise men were chosen as leaders. Honesty was promoted, and harmony was a pursuit. All the people not only respected and loved their own parents and children, but also the parents and children of others. The elders were cared for until death, adults were employed in jobs that made full use of their abilities, and children were educated well. Widows and widowers, orphans and the old without children, the disabled and the diseased were all supported. Every man and every woman had an appropriate role in society and the family. For property, people hated to throw them on the ground, but did not have their own possessions. People were willing to do their best for the public and did not seek private profit for themselves. Therefore, treacherous conspiracies did not arise, and theft, rebellion, and robbery did not occur. So, the doors of the houses were not closed. This was the "Great Harmony" [*datong* 大同].[18]

However, Confucius himself knew that this great harmonious age was far in his past. Notably, neither the Mohist School (a school founded by Mozi 墨子, ca. 468–ca. 376 BC) nor the famous Legalist Han Feizi 韓非子 (ca. 280–233 BC) agrees with this description of the period. They directly related that the living conditions of the age of Yao and Shun were very low: While Mozi criticizes the wealth of the rulers in history and praises the simple condition of Yao and Shun,

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[17] See Chun-chieh Huang, "The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking," 180.

[18] Dai Sheng et al., "Liyun," 582.

Han Feizi has a concept of historical evolution and thinks in particular that the monarchs in his contemporary time should enjoy their luxurious lifestyles.[19] Sima Tan[20] extracts this opinion and Sima Qian appears to accept it.[21]

Regardless, Sima Qian is not superstitious about ancient times; he wishes to interpret how dynastic cycles have occurred in history. He adopts the thought of the realists in the Warring States Period (*Zhanguo shiqi* 戰國時期, 475–221 BC), and he does not beautify the past in order to criticize the privileges of the present (as some Confucian scholars do), or utopianize the distant age to relieve the suffering of the people (as some Daoists do). This actually makes him "probe the boundaries of heaven and man and comprehend the changes of past and present."[22] He inherited the humanistic tradition of the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書) and *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), and took a more secular view. Thus, the *Historical Records* eliminated mythological thinking completely in favor of truly historical writing.[23]

I thus suggest that Sima Qian marks the separation between mythical stories and the historical spirit in China, just as Thucydides did in Greece. Further, both of them hold modified cyclical views of human history. In the following, I will analyze the two great historians' cyclical views of human history, focusing on the similarities and differences between their respective conceptions of historical process.

The Cyclical View of Human History: A Starting Point for Making a Comparative Study

From prehistoric times onward, many ancient cultures had some sort of idea

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[19] See Mozi, "San bian," 40; Han Feizi, "Wu du," 443.

[20] Sima Tan 司馬談 (?–110 BC), father of Sima Qian, was a famous scholar and Tai Shi Ling 太史令 (imperial astronomer and historian) in the early period of Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 (157–87 BC). Three years after Sima Tan's death, Sima Qian succeeded his father's position of Tai Shi Ling. About Sima Tan and his influence on Sima Qian, see William H. Nienhauser Jr., "Sima Qian and the Shiji," 464–67.

[21] Sima Qian, "Taishigong zixu," 3290. See also Kidder Smith, "Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, 'Legalism,' 'et cetera,'" 133–34, 140–141.

[22] Sima Qian, "Bao Ren An shu," 29.

[23] See Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 82–84.

that the natural and human worlds moved in cycles of origin, growth, prosperity, decline, and fall in various repetitive patterns. However, historical writings with the cyclical view appeared for the first time in Greece and China. In Greece, Thucydides most typically embodies this insight into human history. As mentioned above, to him the collection of past speeches and actions will have a profitable use in the future. He writes:

> If my work is judged useful by any who shall wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will someday, according to the human condition, happen again in such and such-like ways, it will suffice for me.[24]

Thucydides stresses the political and the economic reasons for the war, not the moral. In his view, men hope to attain wonderful achievements, which lead to recurrent disasters and destruction since they desire power, wealth, and fame. The most tragic realization is that the processes are inevitable and probably permanent also:

> During the civil wars the cities suffered many cruelties that occur and will always occur as long as men have the same nature, sometimes more terrible and sometimes less, varying in their forms as each change of fortune dictates.[25]

Thucydides believes that the narrative of most past events lacks evidence and is filled with myth. In addition, no past events can be regarded as highly as the present war. According to his own judgment, the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians was the greatest historical movement, more noteworthy than any previous wars.[26] Therefore, he chooses to record the activities in contemporary times as the best way to inform his readers of the reality of the world. Simultaneously, he describes earlier events at only minimal

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[24] *Thucydides*, 1.22.4. About the usefulness of Thucydides' work for the future generations, see G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, 32–33; Stewart Flory, "The Meaning of 'to mē mythōdes' (1.22.4) and the Usefulness of Thucydides' *History*," 193–208; Raaflaub, "Die große Herausforderung," 601. For Thucydides' text, I use my own translation.

[25] *Thucydides*, 3.82.2.

[26] *Thucydides*, 1.1.1–3, 21.1.

length.

In antiquity, Thucydides' *Archaeology* was despised by Dionysius of Halicarnassus; nevertheless, it has received great attention from modern scholars.[27] Through it, he not merely aims to give a brief outline of Greek civilization from the very beginning to the era of the Peloponnesian War, but seeks to prove his claim that the Peloponnesian war is the greatest and most destructive in history.[28] The style of narrative certainly includes some kind of exaggeration.[29] However, as J. R. Ellis persuasively argues, it manifests Thucydides' conception of history most clearly as he uses both linear structure and ring structure ("the linear structure displays the process logically and sequentially, the ring structure marks and highlights the principles") in the *Archaeology* to frame three historical processes: 1) the distant past, from the beginning of Greek history to the Trojan expedition (1.2–11); 2) the period "preceding this war," from the post-Trojan War era to the Persian War (1.12–18.2); and 3) the latest period, from the end of the Persian War to the Peloponnesian War (1.18.2–23.3). Each process has three phases (a. regressive phase; b. kinetic phase; c. climactic phase), and every phase appears to correspond to its counterparts in the other two processes. For Thucydides, as "technological development affects a progressive increase in the levels of power attainable," the Trojan War was the great expedition carried out by Hellas in common in "the earlier period" (1.10.3), the Persian War was the greatest action of "the past" (1.23.1), and the Peloponnesian War was the greatest movement in "the history of the mankind" (1.1.2).[30] However, every great war was inevitably followed by turmoil and chaos. Thus, Greek history is shaped like a modified circle (or a spiral).[31] This innovative idea is obviously

[27] In the opinion of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the *Archaeology* should be completely deleted from the text of Thucydides. See Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Thucydides*, 514. However, A. W. Gomme and Simon Hornblower both insist that these first chapters (1.1–23) as a whole make up an introductory part of Thucydides' work. See A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1, 89; Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1, 3.

[28] See Connor, *Thucydides*, 22, 26.

[29] See A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies*, 6–7.

[30] J. R. Ellis, "The Structure and Argument of Thucydides' Archaeology," 344–76, especially 365–66.

[31] Ellis, "The Structure and Argument of Thucydides' Archaeology," 372–75. About the similar pattern of history in Thucydides' *Archaeology*, see also Virginia Hunter, *Past and Process in Herodotus and Thucydides*, 42–49.

different from Herodotus', whose aim is mainly to preserve human memories from decay and not to make human events inglorious.[32] The historical philosophy of Thucydides, in fact, may be similar to Sima Qian's.

In his "Postface to Historical Records," Sima Qian recalls his father's unfulfilled wish to continue the cause of the ancient sages:

> There had been five hundred years after the death of the Duke of Zhou 周公 [eleventh century BC] when Confucius [551–479 BC] was born. So far it has been five hundred years since the death of Confucius; someone who is able to succeed the great career in this flourishing age should modify the *Commentary on the Book of Changes* [*Yizhuan* 易傳], continue to write the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Chunqiu* 春秋], and discover the nature of the *Classic of Poetry* [*Shi* 詩], the *Book of Documents* [*Shu* 書], the *Three Rites* [*Li* 禮] and the *Classic of Music* [*Yue* 樂].[33]

In this postface, then, Sima Qian, who feels a strong responsibility to obey his father's will and complete the grand historical writing, repeatedly shows his deep respect for Confucius's compiling of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.[34] This kind of responsibility and respect originates from a hidden belief that five hundred years should be a cycle of history.[35]

About two centuries earlier, Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, ca. 372–289 BC) already gave voice to this perception:

> It is a rule that a true royal sovereign should arise in the course of five hundred years, and that during that time there should be men illustrious in their generation.[36]

Mencius' assertion was on the basis of early Chinese history: The period from

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[32] Herodotus, I, proem. See Raaflaub, "Die große Herausforderung," 611–12.

[33] Sima, "Taishigong zixu," 3296. See also Burton Watson, *Ssu-Ma Ch'ien Grand Historian of China*, 87.

[34] I agree with Shankman and Durrant on the point: The spirit of Sima Qian's work was deeply influenced by Confucius, but he did not rely exclusively on the words of the Confucian classics. See Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 89–91.

[35] Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 88.

[36] Mengzi, *The Works of Mencius*, trans. James Legger, 232.

Yu the Great (Da Yu 大禹, ca. twenty-second century BC, the legendary founder of the Xia dynasty) to King Cheng Tang 成湯 (ca. seventeenth century BC, the first king of the Shang dynasty) was approximately four-and-a-half centuries; that from King Cheng Tang to King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (roughly the middle of the eleventh century BC, the first king of the Zhou dynasty), lasted about five-and-a-half centuries; and from King Wu of Zhou to Confucius was around five hundred years. Thus, while the cycle of "five hundred years" is just a general estimate, it reflects the cyclical view of ancient Chinese historiography.[37]

As is well known, the idea of Yin-Yang permeates traditional Chinese culture. *Yin* 陰 (dark side) and *Yang* 陽 (bright side) represent opposed forces active in the whole universe. Laozi 老子 (sixth century-fifth century BC), the founder of Daoism, generalizes to state that the movement of the Way (or *Dao*) is reversion (like the swing of a pendulum).[38] According to this theory, the movement of the world can be described as alternating motions of Yin and Yang in endless cycles. As a historical philosopher, Confucius shares this conception, and he lays particular emphasis on historical changes and the replacement of dynasties through this cyclical view:

> Zizhang 子張 [503 BC–?, a student of Confucius] asked whether ten generations hence could be known about. The Master [Confucius] said: "The Yin based itself on the Xia ritual and what they subtracted or added may be known. The Zhou based itself on the Yin ritual and what they subtracted or added may be known. The Zhou's possible successors even in a hundred generations may be known about."[39]

In the view of Confucius, *Sandai* (Three Dynasties 三代) have succeeded one another, but their constitutions, their rituals, and their cultures, in which there are often some elements added or subtracted according to the current situation,

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[37] About the cyclical view of Mencius, see Michael Puett, "Following the Commands of Heaven: The Notion of Ming in Early China," 59–60.

[38] Laozi, *The Book of Laozi*, trans. He Guanghu et al., 60. About the reversion as a key topic of Daoism, see Anthony C. Yu, "Reading the 'Daodejing': Ethics and Politics of the Rhetoric," 180–182.

[39] Kongzi et al., *The Analects*, trans. Raymond Dawson, 8.

do not change their essential aspects. The three ages have followed "a moral trajectory through time": "Good governance prevailed, and when it did not, that sovereignty was replaced by more worthy rulers who augured a new, more righteous age."[40] The changes of the dynasties seem to be a repetitive and endless cycle.[41] In this sense, "there is no new thing under the sun" and a hundred generations can be understood. However, the scholars who live in a splendid or disastrous time in particular should record these historical events. Hence, inheriting this ancient Chinese tradition, Sima Qian has an enormous sense of mission that was not only based on his position as an official historian, but also on the belief that the historical movement toward a flourishing age (the reign of Emperor Wu of Han) needs a new classical record.[42] This idea was to some extent similar to Thucydides' (human nature and condition merely change their forms in history) and thus should provide a starting point for a comparison of the two.

The Similarities and Differences between the Two Types of Cyclical Views: An Analysis Centered on Thucydides' *Archaeology* and Sima Qian's *Historical Records*

Thucydides' *Archaeology* (in ancient Greek, "a survey of ancient times"), his subject (1.1, 23.1–3), methods (1.20–22), and the events in the three periods (1.2–11, 12–18.2, 18.2–19) comprise the introduction to his book. Sima Qian's "Postface to Historical Records," which is the last chapter of his book, almost performs a function similar to the opening part of the *Peloponnesian War*.[43] Moreover, on the one hand, the first six "Basic Annals," from the five legendary emperors to the first emperor of the Qin, deal with a similar topic (the early history of a civilization) to Thucydides' *Archaeology*. On the other

[40] Deborah Sommer, "Sandai," 521.

[41] Raaflaub, "*Patres historiae?*," 10–11.

[42] Sima, "Taishigong zixu," 3299. See Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 90.

[43] As an introduction, it contains three parts: At first, Sima Qian narrates his family lineage and intellectual background, and he also reminisces about his early life; then, the historian depicts the ambitious goals of his magnificent work through a dialogue between himself and an official astronomer, Hu Sui 壺遂 (Sima Qian's colleague); finally, there are 130 abstracts of every chapter of the *Historical Records*. See Watson, *Ssu-Ma Ch'ien Grand Historian of China*, 130–131.

hand, the "Biography of Boyi" and the "Biographies of the Money-Makers" focus on the moral impact and technological progress brought about by social development and change. The two biographies reflect the same concern as the *Archaeology*. Thus, these chapters seem to be the most illustrative and representative texts for the analysis and a comparative study.

First, neither Thucydides nor Sima Qian idealized the initial stage of human society. On the contrary, both were inclined to think that the condition of early people was very simple and uncertain. Thucydides supposed that there was a long period of "proto-Hellas" in Greece:

> There were migrations in former times and each tribe of people, being forced by anyone more numerous, were always ready to abandon their territory easily. In the absence of commerce, they did not communicate with each other without fear either by land or sea; they utilized their own resources as much as necessary to live off and did not have the surplus goods or plant the land; it was unclear when someone else would come and take away the goods from the people who did not have walls, and supposing that they could obtain the necessity of daily food everywhere, they did not emigrate with difficulty; and accordingly neither the size of their cities nor the rest of their resources was strong.[44]

It can also be seen as a general account of a primitive nomadic society. No doubt there was considerable uncertainty and huge disorder at the dawn of human history in Thucydides' view. Unlike Thucydides, Sima Qian ignores this period of total chaos. He says that he knows nothing about the era of Shen Nong 神農 and before;[45] and his *Historical Records* begin explicitly from the Yellow Emperor.[46] By quoting Laozi, he describes the primitive agricultural

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[44] *Thucydides*, 1.2.1–2.

[45] Sima Qian, "Huozhi liezhuan," 3253. In Chinese mythology, Shen Nong, who was sometimes thought to be the same person as the Yan Emperor 炎帝, was one of the "Three Sovereigns" 三皇 and taught people agricultural knowledge and skills. Sima Qian mentions that the clan of Shen Nong were the rulers preceding the Yellow Emperor 黃帝. However, he considers the Yellow Emperor more of a historical figure than the "Three Sovereigns." See Sima Qian, "Wu di benji," 3, 46.

[46] Sima, "Taishigong zixu," 3300, 3311. See also Nienhauser, "Sima Qian and the Shiji," 471–72.

and sedentary life of ancient China in a classic scene:

> Though states exist side by side, so close that they can hear the crowing of each other's cocks and the barking of each other's dogs, the people of each state will savor their own food, admire their own clothing, be content with their own customs, and delight in their own occupations, and will grow old and die without ever wandering abroad.[47]

However, Sima Qian does not believe that this mode of social organization can still be applied to the period from Emperor Shun (the last one of the Five Emperors) and the Xia dynasty down to his own age. He even satirizes the utopianism of Laozi and comments that the subtle arguments of the Daoists could never succeed in changing the people from the prehistoric age onwards.[48] In short, his opinion on the beginning of history is nearly identical to Thucydides': Without sufficient wealth and necessary communications, it was not a "Golden Age," but just a poor phase of a historical process.

Second, as Adam M. Parry observes, history actually is "movements of power" from the perspective of Thucydides.[49] It is the first step that some people become more powerful than others by controlling the fertile land.[50] This causes a series of changes in human history. According to Thucydides, only after Hellen and his sons became strong in Phthiotis and were invited to help other cities did cities prefer to be called "Hellenes" in association.[51] In the same way, Pelops acquired power and had his name associated with a wide range of locales even though he was an immigrant, since he was able to bring abundant wealth from Asia to the needy people in the Peloponnesus.[52] Some men, who usually led the way in piracy or plunder for the sake of their own profit and for the necessity of the weak, became powerful as Hellen and Pelops did.[53]

Afterwards, Minos, the famous Cretan mythological king, was believed to

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[47] Sima, "Huozhi liezhuan," 3253. Here I use the translation of Burton Watson. See Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, 433. See also Laozi, *The Book of Laozi*, trans. He Guanghu et al., 101.

[48] Sima, "Huozhi liezhuan," 3253.

[49] Adam M. Parry, "Thucydides' Historical Perspective," 291.

[50] *Thucydides*, 1.2.4.

[51] Ibid., 1.3.2.

[52] Ibid., 1.9.2.

[53] Ibid., 1.5.1.

have been the earliest one to establish a navy, and he removed piracy from the sea as best as he could so as to protect the revenues for himself.[54] Sea power subsequently grew in importance to have decisive strength in the Mediterranean world. Agamemnon, who surpassed his contemporaries in naval strength, was able to launch the Trojan War less because of good will than because he was feared.[55] Later on, the Corinthians, the Ionians, the Phocaeans, Polycrates of Samos, the tyrants in Sicily, Darius, Xerxes, the Corcyraeans, and the Athenians in varying degrees all took turns controlling the sea in their area with their fleets.[56] Thus, Simon Hornblower correctly stresses that Thucydides demonstrates the importance of sea power in the whole *Archaeology*. [57]

Through the *Archaeology*, we can find that hopes for profits and fears of damage are two fundamental aspects of power; meanwhile, the development of human communities essentially arises from people's hopes and fears. Thus, in Thucydides the longing for profit causes the weaker to submit to the stronger, and the more powerful have the surplus wealth to make the smaller cities obey them.[58] In his mind, once human beings enter civilized life, their desire for wealth and power will always drive them to pursue this kind of rule. This has brought forth the rise of one great power after another (Crete, Mycenae, Persia, Sparta, Athens, etc.), as well as repeated conflicts. Therefore, devastating wars and disasters (the Trojan War, the Persian War, the Peloponnesian War) will inevitably break out at the peaks of civilizations, forming a group of historical cycles.

Sima Qian would probably partly agree with this idea. He clearly remarks on the increasing desires in civilized societies as well:

> Ears and eyes have always longed for the ultimate in beautiful sounds and forms, mouths have desired to taste the best in grass-fed and grain-fed animals, bodies have delighted in ease and comfort, and hearts have swelled with pride at the glories of power and ability.[59]

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[54] Ibid., 1.4.

[55] Ibid., 1.9.3.

[56] Ibid., 1.13–16. About Thucydides' *Archaeology* as a "succession of thalassocracies," see Hans Kopp, "The 'Rule of the Sea': *Thucydidean* Concept or Periclean Utopia?," 139–40.

[57] Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1, 3, 8, 41–48.

[58] *Thucydides*, 1.8.3. See Raaflaub, "Die große Herausforderung," 605.

[59] Sima, "Huozhi liezhuan," 3253. Here I use the translation of Burton Watson. See Sima, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, 433.

Nonetheless, Sima Qian does not think that the need for profit results in ruthless domination and absolute submission inevitably. He points out five levels of the relationship between rulers and their people:

> The highest type of ruler accepts the nature of the people, the next best leads the people to what is beneficial, the next gives them moral instruction, the next forces them to be orderly, and the very worst kind enters into competition with them.[60]

One may say that as Sima Qian idealizes peaceful and harmonious rule rather than oppressive control, he seems to have a wider and more comprehensive understanding of political situations than Thucydides does.

Third, it is noteworthy that both Thucydides and Sima Qian focus on wars, revolutions, coups, slaughters, natural disasters, and human torture. Suffering and destruction, a main topic in their historical writing, always drew their attention.[61] Moreover, their personal misfortune—one contracted the plague in Athens and then was sentenced to exile by his city-state, the other received the punishment of castration after he was unjustly imprisoned by his emperor—became an inspiration for their historical writings.[62] Sima Qian even invents a theory about the relation between the afflicted experience of writers and their grand works: Most of the three hundred pieces of the *Classic of Poetry* were written when the sages poured out their anger and

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[60] Sima, "Huozhi liezhuan," 3253. Here I use the translation of Burton Watson. See Sima, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, 434.

[61] On this point, I cannot agree with Fritz-Heiner Mutschler as he says that the Greco-Roman historians "are more appreciative of war as the object of their activity than Sima Qian and his Chinese colleagues." See Mutschler, "Ancient Historiographies Compared," 110–111. In ancient China, sacrificial rituals and warfare were deemed as the most important things of states. Sima Qian was highly concerned about the military affairs in history, and also good at the narrative of wars.

[62] Thucydides suffered the epidemic disease during the great plague at Athens, and later he was exiled from Athens for twenty years after his failure at Amphipolis in 424 BC. See *Thucydides*, 2.48.3; 4. 104–7; 5.26.5. Sima Qian underwent the penalty of castration after he, in front of Emperor Wu of Han, defended General Li Ling 李陵 (?–74 BC), who was defeated in an expedition to the Xiongnu Empire in 99 BC in spite of the desperate fighting. See Sima, "Bao Ren An shu," 22–29. See also Nienhauser, "Sima Qian and the Shiji," 468.

dissatisfaction.[63]

Shankman and Durrant are certainly right when they ascribe a deeply tragic meaning to both Thucydides' and Sima Qian's texts.[64] As far as cruelties are concerned, Thucydides aims to portray a spectacle of calamities in his work:

> This war [the Peloponnesian War] not only went on a great length, but also was accompanied with such sufferings in Hellas that no other similar period of time could parallel. For never had there been so many cities captured or deserted, some by barbarians, others by the Hellenes themselves when they fought against each other [and some cities even had a change of their inhabitants after they were conquered], nor had there been so many men exiled or slaughtered, some in the war itself, others because of the internal strife. And the descriptions formerly known only by hearsay, but less actually confirmed, now turned to be trustworthy, such as earthquakes, which happened in the most range of areas with strongest force, and eclipses of the sun, which occurred more frequently than at any past time according to our memories, also great droughts in some parts and consequent famines, and the most harmful and fatal disease: the plague. All of these fell together upon the Hellenes with this war.[65]

According to the *Archaeology*, the Trojan War was greater than any event before, and it marked the end of prehistoric Greece. After the Trojan War, Hellas again saw migrations and incursions similar to those at the beginning of history.[66] The Persian War was the greatest action of the Greeks in the past. But a short time later, the Spartans and the Athenians quarreled and made war upon each other with their allies. There was hardly real peace in the Hellenic world.[67] The Peloponnesian War was not only the highest summit but also the largest ruin in this "historical spiral." Thus, the greater the achievement

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[63] Sima, "Taishigong zixu," 3300. See also Sima Qian, "Bao Ren An shu," 28; Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien Grand Historian of China*, 155–57; Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 109–10.

[64] Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 110–116.

[65] *Thucydides*, 1.23.1–3.

[66] Ibid., 1.8.4, 12.1.

[67] Ibid., 1.23.1, 18.3.

humankind attains, the more miseries it will suffer. However, Thucydides' vision of history differs from the punishment of Sisyphus: Although every historical process unavoidably leads to destruction, our efforts are not in vain. Human history is not just a simple cycle since intelligence shows an overall increase; and the glory and the suffering should thus be recorded in a serious way.[68]

With regard to the falls of states and their rulers, Sima Qian expresses himself with an emotion resembling Thucydides':

> In the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, thirty-six sovereigns were murdered, fifty-two states perished, and the number of feudal princes who lost their states and went into exile was countless. When I observe the reasons why they were so fallible, I conclude that all of them lost their right way to govern. So the *Book of Changes* [*Yi* 易] says that a miss is as good as a mile. It also says that the regicides and the patricides do not happen suddenly in a short time but develop gradually into reality.[69]

> Yet, after the Qin Empire had become the master of the world and established its palaces within Mount Xiaoshan 崤山 and Hangu Pass 函穀關, a single commoner opposed it and its seven ancestral temples toppled, its ruler died by the hands of men, and it became the laughing stock of the world. Why? Because it failed to rule with humanity and righteousness, and did not realize that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has thereby won are not the same.[70]

However, Sima Qian has greater respect for the past sages than Thucydides.[71] As we can see, Sima Qian, following the rational spirit of

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[68] See Parry, "Thucydides' Historical Perspective," 293–95.

[69] Sima, "Taishigong zixu," 3297–98.

[70] Here, in the discussion of the collapse of Qin 秦, Sima Qian quotes the famous essay "The Fault of Qin" (*Guo Qin lun* 過秦論) of Jia Yi 賈誼 (201–168 BC), an outstanding Confucian scholar and official who lived in the early Western Han dynasty. See Sima Qian, "Qinshihuang benji," 282. Here I use the translation of Burton Watson with some revisions. See Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty*, 80.

[71] Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 90–91.

Confucius and Jia Yi, inquiries into the causes of collapse of the states, not from the providence of God, but from human deeds and words. This is another notable similarity between him and Thucydides.[72] Sima Qian is also clear that the progress of material and intelligence goes on throughout history.[73] However, Chinese historical thinking is a kind of moral thinking.[74] In Sima Qian's view, after the period of the five legendary emperors, the demise of the dynasties (the Xia, Shang, Zhou and Qin) was always due to the stupidity, cruelty, and indulgence of the rulers (Jie of Xia 夏桀, Zhou of Shang 商紂, King Li of Zhou 周厲王, King You of Zhou 周幽王, the first emperor of Qin 秦始皇, the second emperor of Qin 秦二世, Xiang Yu 項羽). Nor would the Han dynasty be an exception even if the emperors and their people created unprecedented prosperity and achieved huge territory. As time passes, morality is inevitably corrupted and the dynastic cycle continues. Sima Qian is quite familiar with the processes, but he still pursues moral principles in history, although he admits his confusion.[75] However, Thucydides' conviction is that civilization will lead to terrible havoc because of evolving technology and growing desires while moral bonds are so weak that a sad end is inescapable.[76]

Finally, there is another distinction between Thucydides' and Sima Qian's cyclical views of human history. Unlike Thucydides, Sima Qian may not necessarily think that the peak of a booming age must be closely followed by a great destruction. Thucydides lived in a transitional period when the Greek world was changing from prosperity to decline, and he witnessed the Athenians losing the Peloponnesian war and their hegemony. His tragic sense is thus easily understandable. However, this sense is more rooted in the conflicts of *poleis* during a relatively short period than in a longer historical view with a

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[72] About Thucydides' pursuit of the historical truth and his criticism on the mythical stories of poets and other prose writers, see Jonas Grethlein, "The Rise of Greek Historiography and the Invention of Prose," 156–60. About Sima Qian's prudence in differentiating between facts and fantasy, see Young-Tsu Wong, "Humanism in Traditional Chinese Historiography—With Special Reference to the Grand Historian Sima Qian," 52–53.

[73] See Sima, "Huozhi liezhuan," 3253–84.

[74] See Huang, "The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking," 180–188.

[75] See Sima Qian, "Boyi liezhuan," 2124–25. See also Huang, "The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking," 182; Shankman and Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage*, 129.

[76] See Colin Macleod, "Thucydides and Tragedy," 141–42.

variety of political systems. By contrast, Sima Qian's perspective covers the whole early period of Chinese history from tribal confederations to kingdoms and then to empires.[77] He examines the story of the abdication of Yao and Shun, the violent overthrow of the Xia and Shang dynasties, the gradual disintegration of the Zhou, the tyranny of the Qin and its rapid collapse, the enlightened rule of Emperors Wen 漢文帝 and Jing 漢景帝 of Han, and the flourishing days of Emperor Wu of Han. Although Sima Qian criticizes some wrong policies of the Han government and laments his own unjust punishment imposed by Emperor Wu, he truly thinks that the reign of Emperor Wu is a powerful and splendid time, and not an era of total destruction.[78] The specific viewpoints of the two historians were certainly shaped by the different historical stages of their respective civilization.

Conclusion

I agree with Raaflaub that ancient Greek historiography and early Chinese historiography originated and developed independently.[79] Moreover, in my opinion, they both led to the application of rationality to the human past, and they are both characterized by a cyclical view of human history. Thucydides and Sima Qian are the outstanding representatives of their respective historiographical traditions. Thucydides believes that human intelligence develops through a historical spiral, thinking highly of the progress and the disasters brought about by technological and economic changes, while Sima Qian focuses on dynastic cycles with a strong moral concern. The works of these two great historians reflect the heights and the characteristics of their respective civilizations. A comparsion of the two thus fruitfully reveals not only their own similarities and differences, but those of their respective cultures. I thus hope that this kind of comparative study of historical writing can continue.

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[77] I partly agree with Juri L. Kroll that there is indeed a linear inheritance within each clan and dynasty in ancient China. However, Sima Qian's overall view of history is a cyclical concept. See Juri L. Kroll, "Toward a Study of the Concept of Linear Time in the *Shiji*," 38–39.

[78] Sima, "Taishigong zixu," 3299.

[79] Raaflaub, "Patres historiae?," 7.

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