

On The Historical Consciousness of Hong Kong Students

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1. What is historical consciousness?

Historical consciousness refers to the psychological acts through which a present-day phenomenon is linked up with the past. In this respect, historical consciousness can constitute part of the consciousness, which guides one's behaviour and is in itself value-laden. When a person uses the time perspective and seeks to understand the past, and from that to understand present and predict the possible future (be it the political or economic system, foreign relations, religion, customs, communication etc.), he/she is exercising his/her historical consciousness. It should be noted that it is only when historical knowledge has become internalised that there is the possibility of the formation of historical consciousness. Without historical knowledge, there will not be any good grounds for exercising historical consciousness.

Theory of historical consciousness

Jorn Rüsen (1987) sees historical consciousness as 'a basic mental procedure that makes sense of the past in order to orient practical life within time'. Bodo von Borries (1994) states 'if historical consciousness is defined as the complex network of interpreted past, perceived present, and expected future, then empathy, role taking, and the change of perspective within a distant time frame is essential'. With respect to the functional aspect of historical consciousness, Rüsen (1982) has classified the following four categories of historical consciousness: traditional, exemplary, genetic, and critical.

1. Traditional

This category includes behaviour and/or expression which is 'loyal to the original spirit'. Time is perceived as a continuation of the original state. In other words, the main characteristic of the traditional historical consciousness is inheritance.

2. Exemplary

There are two main elements in this category: (a) there is a set of behavioural frameworks to be referred to, and (b) events that happened in the past and/or in the present are being scrutinised in accordance with this set of behavioural frameworks. Time is perceived as circumscribed by a set of behavioural frameworks which either repeats or not repeats in the human behaviour. A behavioural framework of a person is expressed through his/her narration and judgement of historical events; exemplary historical consciousness occurs when the behavioural framework constitutes an example.

3. Genetic

Those who are concerned with the origin of the present always ask questions regarding how today comes about ... the trend and the moving force as seen from history. Time is perceived as change, and development and is expressed through behaviour which actually changed the situation at different points of time. People

who have genetic historical consciousness would regard progressive change as a development from the old to the new.

4. Critical

In this category it is hard to indicate the flow of time because the relationship between the past and present is being cut off through criticising the past. Time is expressed in the interchange of the old and new. In historical criticism the behaviour in the past is often looked at negatively. Hence a kind of scepticism is expressed when historians gave a positive narration of those events.

2. *The study*

In investigating the historical consciousness of Hong Kong students, Rösen's typology of the function of historical consciousness was used as an instrument to analyse the response of students as revealed through substantive historical events. The study sought answers to the following three questions:

1. When students seek to understand the present or predict the future, do they make any reference to the past?
2. When students interpret the present or the future in the light of the past, are there any general 'frames of reference' that they use? If yes, what are they?
3. Is Rösen's typology applicable to the Hong Kong context? If yes, how? If no, what other typology might be distinctive to Hong Kong students?

Two case studies were undertaken using Grade 10 and Grade 12 students respectively. For the Grade 10 students, the Chinese History curriculum they were following was introduced in 1990 and the corresponding Certificate in Education Examination had its first trial in 1995. The Grade 12 students had gone through the Chinese History curriculum and they were the first batch of students sitting for the examination in 1995.

The study was held over two days, Grade 10 on the first day and Grade 12 the second day. On each day, two groups (group 1 and 2) with five students each were formed to discuss for thirty minutes two passages chosen from the textbook (Book 4 and 5, Chinese History, Manhattan Press H.K.Ltd.1994; please refer to the appendix). The passages were about the Emperor Tang Tai Chung (AD 627-649) and the May Fourth Movement (AD 1919). The discussions were held in separate classrooms where nobody else was present, and the whole process was video taped. Students were asked to refer to each passage and discuss (a) whether or not the historical event was important to them, and why?, and (b) whether or not the historical event could be important to others, and why?

The tapes were transcribed and analysed. From the discussions of the students the underlying 'frames of reference' are looked for, and these are compared with Rösen's typology. This is done over and over again. When a narration does not fall into any of Rösen's categories, it is categorised in accordance with its features. In other words, how did it make reference to the present and/or future in the light of the two events.

Findings and interpretations

1. Three grade 10 (3 out of 10, Group 1, S1; Group 2, S1 & S2) and nine grade 12 (9 out of 10, Group 1, S1, S2, S3 & S4 Group 2, S1, S2, S3, S4 & S5) students do have historical consciousness with regard to the given historical events (i.e. these

historical events do provide them with references to interpret the present and predict the possible future).

2. When students interpret the present or the future with reference to past historical events, they tend to make use of different 'frames of reference'. While some of the frames of reference corresponded to Rösen's typology, there are others which do not belong to any of the typologies devised by Rösen, namely 'Cause-and-effect relationship' and 'Empathy with historical figures'.

3. The typologies do not always exclude each other. In other words a narration may fall under more than one typology. For instance, when a student sees a bad example (exemplar category) in a historical event, he/she is, at the same time, criticising (critical category) that event. In the same vein, the interpretation of the conscientiousness of a ruler might fall under the typologies of 'traditional' and 'cause-and-effect relationship'. In the 'traditional' category, the student carries the same expectation of the ruler today, and in the 'cause-and-effect relationship' the student derives the prosperity of the Tang dynasty and the present day Hong Kong in terms of causality.

The frames of reference identified which fall within Rösen's typology are specified below:

(a) Exemplar/Critical

A student may see patterns in the past, that serve as examples to be followed (or avoided) in the present and future.

"Tai Chong knew the reasons of the sort reign of the Sui dynasty, therefore he visited the people frequently to show his care and concern of their living. The policy in present China is learnt from the past. There are 1.2 billion people in China; one man one vote is not important. Their day-to-day living is more important." (Grade 12 student, groups 1 S1)

To this student, the present way of ruling in China is learned from Tang Tai Chong. This example will guide the practice of China in the future. With such a behavioural framework drawn from the past, the student feels confident to identify himself with the practice of China both in the present and in the future.

Students unanimously link up the May Fourth Movement with the June Fourth Incident; and they recognise the possible outcome of standing against the government after 1997. They see the May Fourth Movement as an example. Yet this negative example also gives rise to criticisms. Hence the historical consciousness falls under the 'exemplar' and 'critical' categories.

"People were killed in the May Fourth, there were tanks in the June Fourth ... Students were asking for freedom and rights, the government should not use brutal methods against them. If we stand against the government after 97, what will the government do to us? If there are parades and demonstrations after 97, I will see how many people participate first before deciding whether to join them or not, I am afraid of being impeached." (Grade 12 student, groups 1, S2)

Such a student would identify himself/herself as subordinate to the government, though he feels that the government should not 'kill'. His autonomous self (his I-

identity) is being submerged. Hence he might not feel the legitimacy to stand against the government after 1997.

(b) Genetic

Students might see the May Fourth Movement as setting a trend - as actually being the moving force for further change and development.

“The May Fourth Movement gave rise to the New Cultural Movement. It affects us today. Otherwise we would still use classical Chinese. After 97, there will be major changes in our language.” (Grade 12 student, group 2, S1)

It should be noted that although the May Fourth Movement and the New Cultural Movement are related incidents (the May Fourth Movement gave rise to the New Cultural Movement in which the use of colloquial style Chinese was advocated to replace classical style Chinese), the passage has made no reference to the New Cultural Movement. When the student makes these remarks, it shows she has a definite knowledge of this latter historical event. She is conscious about the genesis of the Chinese language used at present and about its change and development after 1997. The use of language helps her to identify with China. The mastery of the Chinese language, particularly Putonghua (or Mandarin, the official language in China) after 1997, would be a legitimate act.

Another student expresses her genetic historical consciousness in another way.

“National feeling and patriotic feeling are stronger at that time than at present. At that time, in response to the improper behaviour of the government, people stood against the government. The current Chinese government has made reforms and is now more open. Comparatively, the present situation is better than that of the May Fourth. There are things we should and could contribute to democratising our country. May Fourth inspired democratic thinking and paved the way for China to open herself up.” (Grade 12 student, group 1, S3)

This student has not elaborated on her conception of ‘democratic thinking’, but according to her the May Fourth Movement has paved the way for the future development of China. She interprets the present-day reforms and the more open policy of the Chinese government as having their historical origin dating back to the May Fourth Movement. And when she says ‘the May Fourth has paved the way for China to open herself up’, and ‘the government has made reforms and is now more open’, she herself apparently identifies with the May Fourth. This identification helps her to legitimise her behaviour in taking part in something she considers to be making progressive change and development of the country. At this point we can say this kind of historical consciousness can prompt a person to play an active role in society.

(c) Critical

A focus of students’ historical consciousness might be on criticism. The student below seeks to understand the present and the possible future by means of criticising the National government in 1919 and the government system in the Tang dynasty.

“The National government was so weak that foreign power could take advantage of her, it’s a shame. Even today China is economically inferior to

Japan that she allows Japan to occupy the Diaoyue Island. Shame on the government.” (Grade 10 student, group 1, S1)

The student criticises the weaknesses of the government in the face of foreign threat. She neither identifies with the National government in 1919 nor the present communist government in China.

“Although Tai Chong was an enlightened monarchy and was willing to accept others’ opinion, how could he manage the whole country all by himself. At present China was less developed than the western countries was mainly because of this system of government for over two thousand years. The system of inheritance monarchy was bound to be a failure. Yet the practice of communism at present was neither beneficial to China. In the future, China must adopt the western type of democracy.” (Grade 12 student, group 2, S3).

This student does not identify himself with the monarchy. The non-identification affects his value judgements of the present and the future system of government in China. Although he does not explain what exactly western type of democracy is, his historical consciousness is exhibited through criticising the monarchy.

4. The following categories do not fall within Rösen’s typology. These categories were arrived at from the analysis and synthesis of students’ narration.

(d) Cause-and-effect relationship

Although the ‘cause-and-effect relationship’ can be interpreted as a certain kind of exemplary type, the sense generation of students is more geared towards causality. With reference to the May Fourth Movement, a student sees the motive of the May Fourth students as a cause, whose outcome depends on whether there is support given by the people.

‘May Fourth was successful because people were being suppressed and had been suppressed for a long time. Many people joined the students. June Fourth failed because students’ demands were not echoed by people throughout the country. The June Fourth students were not against the foreigners, as students were in the May Fourth, but instead they were against the corrupted act of the government’ (Grade 12 student, group 1, S4)

This student does not specifically link the ‘cause-and-effect relationship’ to the future. Yet for her it is clear that successful social action depends on whether (a) it is against the government (cause) and (b) it has the support of the people (effect). If, say, there were such a social action - one that is against the government and has the support of the people -, it would be very interesting to see how she would see herself. Because to make judgements about the situation she has to bring in, to some extent, her own identity.

“Tai Chong’s conscientiousness in ruling the country contributed to the prosperity of the Tang dynasty. This is not sheer luck. Chris Patten’s (the last colonial governor of Hong Kong) big eye bags and deteriorating health reflect that he is also a diligent leader. That’s why Hong Kong is so prosperous.” (Grade 10 student, group 2, S1).

This student exhibits her historical consciousness in terms of the cause-and-effect relationship. She sees the causal relationship of the things done by the Tang emperor and the resulting prosperity. She hence identifies the present phenomena - economic

prosperity and political stability - as the outcome contributed by the colonial governor. This identification would certainly make her support the colonial government.

(e) Empathy with historical figures/Traditional

Rüsen's traditional type can be further elaborated in this study. When making evaluations about historical figures, and particularly those that the students are familiar with, students tend to project the behaviour of the historical figures onto themselves. In exercising the empathetic feeling and thinking, students could relate that role with themselves. Hence these historical figures tend to become references for the students' own behaviours.

"Students should study hard, they should not get involved in so many things. I would not do things like that even if I am not happy with the government."
 (Note: there were five girls in the group, shortly after the girl (Grade 12 student, group 2, S1) made her comments, the other four students unanimously disagreed.) "It is because students are educated, that they know how to change an adverse situation -- otherwise why do we have to study. I would certainly express my discontent in the public. As students we are the vanguard of social improvement." (The other four Grade 12 students, group 2, S2, S3, S4, S5).

Apparently the first student considers that the role of a student is to study, and that therefore involvement in social actions is improper. Her identity with that role tends to guide her behaviour. This student exhibits the traditional category of historical consciousness. The other four students, by actually identifying with the role played by the May Fourth students, thus establish a ground of legitimacy for similar acts both at present and in the future.

It is worth nothing that students e.g. discuss and make judgements about Tang Tai Chong, the Tang emperor, yet they do not project that reference to the present or in the future. Probably it is not easy for students to identify themselves with an emperor. Students simply use the present-day criteria to comment on his work. For example,

"Tai Chong could lead a luxury life." (Grade 10 student, group 2, S1)
 "Emperor could have many wives." (Grade 10 student, group 1, S2)
 "How nice if I were an emperor in ancient China." (Grade 12 student, group 2, S3)

3. Conclusion and recommendation

This study focused on evaluating students' historical consciousness as defined by Rüsen. Two historical events were used. Students were asked the importance of these historical events to himself/herself and/or to others. The aim was to investigate whether the typology of historical consciousness devised by Rüsen could be applied to Hong Kong, and/or whether there were other possible typologies other than the four types specified by Rüsen.

An investigation of students' historical consciousness has never been done in Hong Kong. This study may be viewed as a contribution to knowledge which, so far, is still incomplete. The typology could be seen as useful knowledge to understand students' historical consciousness; Woods (1979 pp. 20) says

'Typologies are useful in that because all our thinking is a form of categorising or typifying, they can improve our vision and sharpen our forms by drawing together a mass of details into an organised structure wherein the major types are indicated.'

In the two case studies, both Grade 10 (3 out of 10) and Grade 12 students (9 out of 10) exhibited their historical consciousness by employing substantive historical events. Also, it was found that Rösen's 'traditional' category does not distinctively appear; and that the categories of 'cause-and-effect relationship', and 'empathy with historical figures' do appear, which are complementary to Rösen's 'exemplary' and 'traditional' typology. It is hoped that with a larger sample and more sophisticated instruments, an analytical framework peculiar to the Hong Kong context can be developed. It should be noted that the findings offered in this study are by no means conclusive evidence. They are only selective exemplification.

There are changes made to the Chinese history curriculum in 1995 (certificate level) and 1997 (junior level). The stipulated aims never address the issue of learning on the part of our students. Students are regarded as recipients of knowledge. We know very little about how historical China is pictured by our students, nor are we aware of the part played by Chinese history in the orientation of our practical life. Rösen (1987) says 'Historical consciousness offers a new insight into the role of historical knowledge and its augmentation in practical life'. Therefore one of the aims of history education should be on the enhancement of the historical consciousness of our pupils. In achieving this aim, the following points are recommended:

1. In this study, students could relate the 'May Fourth Movement' to the present and/or the future more easily than 'Emperor Tang Tai Chong'. Hence it implies contemporary history could arouse students' historical consciousness more easily than ancient history. Therefore the history that students study should be reorganised to put more emphasis on the contemporary period. The present certificate level syllabus puts too much emphasis on the ancient period of political history which is beyond the imaginative experience of students. It is hard for students to identify with historical figures such as emperor, eunuch, court official, etc.

2. The current official aims of the Chinese history syllabus and examination jeopardise the historical consciousness of students in the following ways:

- (a) The first three (out of five) stipulated aims of the certificate level syllabus stress: "to enable students to 'know' and 'understand' different aspects of Chinese history". The implication appears to be that students are regarded as recipients of 'facts'. But what is the point of knowing and understanding all these facts? Rather than cramming all these facts into their heads, students should be learning how to handle data. The process of enquiry in evaluating and truth-seeking could enable students to better understand the part played by Chinese history in the orientation of their own practical life.

- (b) At present the examination questions tend to test students' ability of factual recall. This type of assessment could in no way enhance students' historical consciousness. It would be more desirable to introduce data-based questions in the public examinations with a view to training students to handle data and to interpret source materials. It is only through making use of source materials to train students to

exercise their empathetic thinking and feeling that historical consciousness can be promoted.

3. Only those who have sound historical knowledge can exercise their historical consciousness. The way that students acquire their historical knowledge thus affects their historical consciousness. Textbooks as the major source material used in Chinese history lessons play an important role. Yet the four groups of both Grade 10 and Grade 12 students simply took the passages for granted. Not even one student queried the credibility of the source material. Textbooks are the main source material for learning in schools, and hence textbooks will have a direct impact on students' historical thinking and hence their historical consciousness. Yet since most textbooks only provide a single perspective in their narration, there is a danger of indoctrination and bias. There is the danger that they will thus limit the room for students' independent thinking, and orienting the historical events with practical life. Therefore it is recommended that textbooks writers should take note of providing different perspectives for students' enquiry, particularly when dealing with controversial issues in history.

Appendix: Translation of the two passages which were originally written in Chinese

1. The May Fourth Movement

On 4th May, 1919, more than 3000 students from the University of Beijing and other higher institutions organised a rally and demonstration at Tiananmun Square. They put up notices like 'abolish the 21 demands', 'return Qingdao to us', 'externally, to fight for national right; internally, to exterminate the national thieves'. Students destroyed the residence of Tsao Yue-lin, the transport superintendent. Chang Chong-cheung, the Chinese ambassador to Japan was badly beaten up. The Beijing government sent troops to suppress the demonstration and as many as 30 students were arrested. At that time the place was in an uproar.

The next day, students in Beijing decided to suspend classes to show their anger. They asked the government to release the arrested students, and penalise Tsao Yue-lin, Chang Chong-cheung and Luk Chong-yue. They also sent a telegram to the representatives of the Paris peace conference, asking them not to sign the treaty.

The May Fourth Movement was echoed from students in other parts of the country. Industrialists, merchants, workers enthusiastically joined the students. Nevertheless, the Beijing government arrested as many as 800 students who were making public speeches. What the government did escalated further the resentment of people in the country. Classes were suspended, strikes were held all over the country. Under such pressure, the Beijing government had no other way but to release the arrested students. Tsao Yue-lin and Chang Chong-cheung were impeached. In July, the students resumed classes and the May Fourth Movement ended.

2. Emperor Tang Tai Chong (AD 627-549)

In the Chin Kuan period, the society was stable and there was development in the economy. The minor races were willing to pay tribute to Tai Chong and respected him as 'the father of Chinese and foreigners'. This period was called the 'Chin Kuan reign'. Yet the general conditions at that time were not as good as what was described by the historians. For instance, in the year 632, many places near the capital were deserted areas. It was only in comparison with other dynasties that the administration under Tang Tai Chong was regarded more proper.

Tang Tai Chong was regarded as a brilliant ruler in Chinese history. From the start of his rule, he repeatedly gathered together his underlings to discuss the factors leading to the downfall of the Sui dynasty, and used the short reign of Sui dynasty as an exemplar. He always used a metaphor 'the ruler was like a boat, and his people were water; while water can contain the boat, it can also rock the boat'. Therefore to avoid rocking the boat, he worked hard to administer the country and implemented lots of good policies. He triggered a prosperous age at the beginning of the Tang dynasty.

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Summary

This study focused on evaluating students' historical consciousness as defined by Jorn Rüsen. Two historical events are used. Students were asked the importance of these historical events to himself/herself and/or to others. The aim is to investigate whether the typology of historical consciousness devised by Rüsen could be applied to Hong Kong, and/or whether there were other possible typologies other than the four types specified by Rüsen. Rüsen's 'traditional' category does not distinctively appear. The categories of 'cause-and-effect relationship', and 'empathy with historical figures' do appear, which are complementary to Rüsen's 'exemplary' and 'traditional' typology.

Key-words: categories of historical consciousness, history teaching in Hong Kong.