

Borrowing from the Past to Describe (or to Satirize)
the Present in Alluding to the Upcoming Event: A
Genre Analysis in Ontology of the Present

借古喻今：當下存有論的一個體裁分析

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- Three ontologies of uncertain present —
- Michel Foucault's ontology of the present,
- Gilles Deleuze's ontology of difference,
- Jean-François Lyotard's ontology of events

- An analysis of a genre of Chinese historical understanding that is salient and persistent during uncertain epoch: learning from the past to perceive the present (借古鑑今), borrowing from the past to describe the present (借古喻今) or to satirize the present (借古諷今).
- For our examples, Xi Jinping, as a character referring to our epoch, has been analogized to Wang Mang (王莽, Reign 9-23 AD), Emperor Yang of Sui (隋煬帝, Reign 604-618), Chongzhe Emperor of Ming (明崇禎帝, Reign 1627-1644), Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧, Tenure 1861-1908),
- Lastly, for his aspiration to rule for life, he was characterized wickedly as Yuan(Shikai) Junior (袁二)

Foucault envisages

- “modernity as an attitude, a mode of relating to contemporary reality, a way of thinking and feeling; a way of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task.” Such an attitude has to be conceived “as an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”
- Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon, 1984

Foucault Analogizes

- *We “other Victorians”*
- Alludes to: modern anarchism and the artistic *avant-gardes* as remote heirs of the ancient Cynics.

- Michel Foucault (2011) *The Courage of Truth, Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*.

- Deleuze argues that Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence calls into question the conventional understanding of the passage of time as well as the relationship between past, present and future.
- Deleuze rejects the view of the eternal recurrence of the "same", which entails perpetually re-experiencing particular events as exactly people had already lived them.
- "It is not some one thing that returns but rather returning itself is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity or multiplicity." Thus,
- "Identity in the eternal return does not describe the nature of that which returns, but on the contrary, the fact of returning for that which differs.
- This is why the eternal return must be thought of as a synthesis, a synthesis of diversity and its reproduction, a synthesis of becoming and the being that is affirmed in becoming."

- We have to distinguish our subject matter from another genre, the coarse political slogans referring to a predestined cycle, spreading to mobilize peasant rebellions, such as “the azure heaven is already dead; the yellow heaven will soon rise” slogan during the Yellow Turban Rebellion (184-205 AD) at the late Han Dynasty (漢末黃巾起義的口號：「蒼天已死，黃天當立」) ; This genre of political slogan does not belong to this paper.
- The tropes of learning from the past and anecdote-analogues open to historical understanding do not refer to a mechanistic cyclical hypothesis of history.

Lyotard's Ontology of Events

- By *A phrase*, I understand the phrase which is the case, *der Fall*, the phrase *token*, the phrase event. A phrase-type is the referent of a phrase-event. For a phrase to survive the test of universal doubt stems neither from its being real nor from its being true, but from its being merely what happens, what is occurring, *ce qui arrive, das Fallende*.

- The aesthetic feeling lies in the subject's reflective judgment, and not intrinsic to the positively verifiable objects. Likewise, the historical-political event as cognitive object does not have a "reality in and of itself."
- Historical-political events are chaotic when relying on immediately intuitive empirical data. Yet the affect that accompanies the event is itself a sign of history. For events that is occurring (*Gegebenes*), we not only have no intuitive empirical data about what is about to happen, but the object of projected speculation is also empty. The occurrence of events (*begebenheit*), which does not prove (*beweisen*) anything, but merely alludes to (*hinweisen*) something, is not in itself a reason or basis for progress, but merely gives a sense or sign of history.

- I feel that enthusiasm, despite turbulent, still tends toward feeling of exaltation. And I believe we need a likewise philosophical analysis of historical events that gives forth feeling of awfulness or despair, which is also a mode of sublime feeling, though in a negative or condemned sense. Analogues across history may bring about perspectives from which we learn how to find out the contemporary situations that caught us, the power that disappoints, or even traps us. Such historical comprehending also presupposes some kind of "*sensus communis*", community of senses, that is, some cultural heritage allows people to feel certain transcendental ideas.

Analogies emerged around the Character Xi Characterized Epoch

- In March 2018, China's largely ceremonial National Peoples Congress overwhelmingly endorsed a controversial revision to the country's constitution, paving the way for President Xi Jinping to stay in power indefinitely.
- Xi almost instantly won a moniker, 袁二 Yuan Er, or Yuan Shikai Junior, from the anonymous critics among the Party and the people.
- 袁世凱 Yuan Shikai, President, Republic of China, 1912-1915; Emperor, Empire of China, December 2015-March 2016



习近平想袁世凯

袁世凯

习近平

慈禧 Empress Dowager Cixi, Tenure 1861-1908



歲在庚子

The Gengzi Years

- In April 2020, Zi Zhongyun (資中筠, 1930-) , a noted expert in the PRC on American diplomatic history, published an essay: *An Old Anxiety in a New Era, 1900 & 2020* (庚子年的憂思)
- A “gengzi year” 歲在庚子 occurs every sixty years in the sexagenarian cycle of the Chinese zodiac.
- It was imagined by Chinese as years of disaster and hardship, because of the notorious coincidence in modern Chinese history: t 1840 was the Opium War;
- 1900 was the year of the Boxer Rebellion;
- 1960 was the Great Famine aftermath of the Great Leap Forward.
- 2020 the Pandemic, the down turn National fortune.

*The Empress Dowager Still Reigns on High,
The Boxers Continue Wreaking Havoc Below*

上面還是慈禧，下面還是義和團

- Chinese leaders and the masses enjoy a symbiotic relationship. It is of crucial importance for the people to be truly aware of what is going on. [During anti-Japanese demonstrations] there were a number of particularly ugly episodes in which protesters went on a destructive rampage in the name of 'patriotic action'. These events left me feeling profoundly dejected... Over the last century we have made no real progress: Empress Dowager Cixi is still at the helm at the Court in Beijing; below her the roiling masses of Boxer patriotic-thugs thrive as ever. I'm not particularly happy about comparing our present leaders to Cixi, but the [anti-Japanese] protests were encouraged, condoned and perhaps even organized by them. They were hoping thereby to divert attention from the problems they are facing at home by encouraging everyone to focus on a foreign enemy instead. But this is their stock in trade.

The situation is still multi-national coalition besieging China

- The two *gengzi* years Zi Zhongyun associated in tropes were the 1900 xenophobic and fanatic Boxer Rebellion, and the 2020, beside the pandemic, a down turn of national diplomatic fortune under Xi's Wolf Worrier thrust.
- *The Empress Dowager Still Reigns on High,*
- *The Boxers Continue Wreaking Havoc Below*
- *The situation is still multi-national coalition besieging China*
- 上面還是慈禧，下面還是義和團
- 局面還是多國聯軍圍困中國



Wei Jingsheng's essay "The Fate of History"

魏京生，*歷史的宿命*， December 2019

- The Ming Dynasty was destroyed at the hands of an ambitious emperor, while current Xi is also an autocrat with great ambition but lack talent. Wei summed up three points :
- First, the top leadership only understands power struggles, intrigues, and does not know how to run the country and secure it.
- Second, the entire ruling class is intoxicated by self-bragging, depicting reality with a megalomaniac mentality, dealing with crises in a ruthless way.
- Third, being an official is only for the sake of material gains, and their own fame and fortune are more important than the well being of the country.

Inaction of the Literati-bureaucratic Class

Connivance of the Intellectuals

Adverse Selection

- Wei is not merely commenting Xi the person but the entire officialdom and ruling class.
- The inaction of the literati-bureaucratic class and the connivance of the intellectuals were the necessary conditions, or even prerequisites, for the demise of a country.
- Are there really no talent people? No. Rather, the system ensured an adverse selection that makes outstanding talents not only useless, but also life threatening.
- Xi Jinping's political prison, and Emperor Chongzhen's imperial prison, is almost like brothers. In such an environment, there is no harm in doing nothing. While those who devote themselves and loyal to the country will almost never end well.

The Left Out Comparisons: The Plagues and Government's Responses

- Wei Jingshen's essay left out other comparisons that diffused elsewhere on Internet space: the draughts, famines, and particularly the plagues that in late Ming took a heavy toll in northern China. There is not yet an in depth comparative studies of the two epochs on how these disasters, and the government's responses, may precipitate, at least in the case of Chongzhen, the peasant rebellions that finally leading to the fall of Beijing and the Emperor's hanging himself.



習近平的政治危機

與宗禎的教訓

／梁京



"Objective Evaluation of Emperor Yang of Sui", a Hot Search Event

- In February 2022, a long article "Objective Evaluation of Xi Jinping" appeared, with a net account pseudonym. It is considered to be a signal of the mass gathering of anti-Xi forces within the CCP. This article attracted widespread attention overseas, and was once circulated among domestic networks. However, as of February 12, the article had been blocked on *Baidu*, China's largest search engine. Instantly "Objective Evaluation of Emperor Yang of Sui" was listed on the "hot search" topic list.
- To be sure, this article has not once mentioned Emperor Yang. And because it was banned, most people didn't get a chance to actual reading it. Then, the curious question:

Why was such a unfair substitute of Xi Jinping by the remote Emperor Yang?



A despot who loves to launch grandiose project
and craves for greatness

- Even the historical education of the PRC fosters a minimal but imposing impression of Emperor Yang: 好大喜功的暴君
- Completion of the grand canal, reconstruction of the Great Wall, the conquest of Champa (占婆) resulted in the death of thousands of Sui soldiers from malaria, the disastrous campaigns against Goguryeo (高句麗).
- The conscriptions levied and increased taxation left the empire bankrupt and the populace in revolt.

中國夢、中華民族偉大復興、一帶一路、大國外交、人類命運共同體、雄安新區千年大計、南海造島、大撒幣

- The Xi Jinping era began with the resounding phrase “Chinese Dream”, the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” which has become widespread in official announcements as the embodiment of the Xi’s political ideology. As a centerpiece of his foreign policy, Xi launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, formerly known as One Belt One Road, a global infrastructure development strategy adopted to invest in nearly 70 countries. It is considered a central component of Xi’s “Major Country Diplomacy” strategy, calls for China to assume a greater leadership role for global affairs in accordance with its rising power and status. Matching the ambition, the phrase “Community of common destiny for mankind” promoted and included in the preamble of the Constitution of the PRC in 2018. The CCP to express its aim of creating a “new framework” of international relations which would advance global governance. Some analysts outside of China have reasoned that Xi's vision of “community of common destiny for mankind” would attempt to replace the established international order with a unity of nations whose economic dependence on China leads them to submit to Chinese political demands.

Grandiose Projects carrying personal signature of Xi's ambition

- The grandiose is not only phrases but also in applying China's infrastructure prowess to construct Xiong'an as new capital for next millennium, and creating artificial islands in South China Sea, an incredible almost 3200 acres of new land, claiming the islands as China's territory.
- These grandiose projects, in particular, the Belt & Road Initiative appeared to many Chinese as a remote but conspicuously wasteful spending spree, profitable only to an insider circle, in contrast to the background of a not yet rich China, where hundreds of million people still living under insufficient conditions of education, housing, and health care.
- Such unpopular and often resentful domestic reception is exacerbated by the massive real estate bubble burst, the sharply risen debt problems for families, businesses, local and central governments, and the much worsen economic, financial, and fiscal conditions of the country. The Emperor Yang of Sui thus becomes an instant substitute for the banned evaluation of Xi Jingpin.



- 周公恐懼流言日，王莽謙恭未篡時。
- 向使當初身便死，一生真偽復誰知？白居易
- *When the Duke of Zhou was afraid of the rumor,*
- *when Wang Mang behaved humble before he usurped the throne;*
- *If they died early in life,*
- *who knows whether his life is true or sham — —*
- **Bai Juyi**
- 出自白居易《放言五首·其三》，From Bai Juyi's poem, my translation.
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2000 Years Apart in History Yet Dozen similar features

- They both bore to a family of military noble.
- When they were young, they behaved modest and were liked by elder relatives.
- Wang Mang studied classical literatures diligently, while Xi didn't have much opportunity to study. Yet they both cherished a bygone ideology; Wang Mang was reverent to the classical rites of Zhou (周禮), while Xi is respectful to the legacy of Marx-Lenin-Stalin-Mao.
- They both went through intricate power struggles and reached the seat of highest reign.
- They would callously either kill or imprison dissidents.
- They would eradicate corruptions, as a way of striking down potential opponents and a way of centralizing power.
- On their road of ascending to power, they enjoyed flattery and personality cult that adorned them with artificial aura of charisma.
- After they seized power, they no longer accept negative criticism and maintain the feature of forever great, graceful, and infallible (偉大光榮正確) (on this feature I insist that Xi is in line with Stalin, Mao and Kim Il-Sung; let's not downplay the contemporary cultural axis of Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang).
- They loved to show their tender care for the wretched people; Wang Mang staged disaster relief and Xi presented the policy of targeted poverty alleviation (精準扶貧).

Disastrous Foreign Policy

- The foreign policy of Wang Mang's new dynasty messed up with most of its neighboring countries with incredibly rude and humiliating measures.
- It downgraded the title of rulers of the vassal states, such as the Xiongnu, Goguryeo, countries in the Western Regions and the Southwest, who were originally subject to the Han Dynasty. It changed the title of Xiongnu king to "surrendered slave," (降奴于服) and Goguryeo changed to Xiaguryeo (下句麗, with a connotation of down-under) ; therefore, countries refused to comply to the new dynasty, resulting in endless border wars.
- Likewise, the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy that marked the Xi era is constantly displaying rude measures, such as refusing the access to China's domestic market as a way of political blackmail, the long-arm intervention that kidnaps wanted dissidents from other countries, or detains foreign citizens as hostage for certain political stakes. It is not surprising that Xi's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy has painted China, with its own wolf hair brush, to an isolated corner in less than one decade.

Economic Statism 2000 Years Ago

- Hu Shih (胡適) rehabilitates Wang Mang as “a socialist 1,900 years ago,” based on the three policies of Wang Mang's reform, nationalizing the land, leveling properties, and abolition of slavery.
- To be precise, however, the new policy implemented by Wang Mang's was a “command economy” two thousand years ago.” The “Five Leveling” Order (五均) was the price controls for five necessities of living, including silk, cotton, textile, silk fabric, and grains. The “Six Control” Order (六筦) was the State monopoly of six categories of people's livelihood resources and economic activities, including wine, salt, iron, cast money, products from famous mountains and lakes, and credit loans.
- Though never mentioned by Xi, there is no doubt that such an “Economic Statism,” has much affinity with Xi's ideal of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.”

Out of Touch with Reality

- The new policies implemented after Wang Mang ascended the throne were mostly imaginary imitation and invented restoration of the system of Zhou Dynasty. However, hundred years apart, customs are different, environments are different; policies and laws imitating ancient systems may not be appropriate, may even be disastrous; so the failure of implementation is historically inevitable.
- From the perspectives of Qian Mu (錢穆) and other historians, Wang Mang was a politician who believed in Chinese classics, and who was out of touch with reality.
- Likewise, one of Xi's frequently repeated muttering phrase is 不忘初心 “staying true to the original intention (of carrying out communism, the red flag, over the world)”. No one gets the chance to inquire him openly: which ancient system he believes in, and how invented is his imaginary on it.

- Going Back to Bai Juyi's poem, only a fully unfolded life could make us see how truthful is Duke of Zhou, or to the contrary, how deceitful is the character of Wang Mang. Wang Mang before his usurpation, and Xi Jingpin during the first years of his reign, enjoyed popularity and high expectations from the populace. Whereas when life unfolds, they turn into figures that disappoint and are eventually resented by the populace.

The horizon is moving along with us; and along the moving horizon, we move.

- History can be a powerful political force in all countries—especially China. Figure like Mao Zedong, whose politics or poems I have nothing to recommend about, yet I would praise his talent of learning from history to perceive the present, outstanding among his peers and foes. But visions from analogies across historical times can become vibrant resonance; it is because the Chinese public knows their history.
- This is a genre of ontology of the present. It does not involve any mechanistic cyclical hypothesis of history. It does not prove; nor does it soothsay. But the collective affects it aroused have consequence. And the sign of history, *Geschichtszeichen*, gives more than one color; it could be exaltation of enthusiasm, as Lyotard suggested; yet it could also be other colors, such as disappointment, disillusion, anxiety, or desperation.
- As Georg Hans Gadamer once described, it is like fusion of horizons, from which we comprehend our present and another historical time at once. The horizon is moving along with us; and along the moving horizon, we move.