

Introduction

Jana S. ROŠKER

History is the awareness and knowledge of the past. It is the narrative of past eras that influence our present. It is based on a form of collective memory, it is the story of who we are, where we come from and may reveal parts of our future.

It is of utmost importance for our self-image and also for understanding the world we live in. There is a history of every region, every topic, every discipline and every area—from music to technology, from literature to governmental systems or economics. History gives us a clear picture of how different facets of society functioned in the past, so that we can understand how it came to the way it functions today.

Although the results of historical investigations are not always directly visible and obvious, it is essential for us as human beings to understand them if we want to preserve, but also change and develop, the societies in which we live and the humanity within us.

This issue of the journal *Asian Studies* will examine the cultural, social and intellectual legacies of the various Asian regions. Its geographical scope extends from China to Iran and from Afghanistan to Fujian. It examines different aspects of history, from classical and modern intellectual history to art, political and gender history. It clearly shows that the history of this vast and diverse region is complex.

This volume is divided into four different content categories that deal with different aspects of the social and cultural realities of Asia. The first explores gender stories. It opens with Jana S. Rošker's critical introduction to Chinese gender history, which focuses on the famous female Confucian scholar from the Han dynasty, Ban Zhao. In addition to questioning certain prejudices against classical Confucian views on the role and position of women, the author also points out some previously unknown aspects of Ban Zaho's work that reveal the importance of her work for gender equality. The following article is entitled "The Paradigm of Hakka Women in History", and was written by Sabrina Ardizzoni. It presents the narrative of women in the history of the Hakka, and shows by means of a detailed analysis how and under what circumstances it has developed until today. Through her analysis of important social phenomena such as education, migration and women's narratives, the article focuses on the historical construction of female Hakka identity and the individual and group consciousness of Hakka women.

The final article in this thematic scope was jointly written by two authors, namely Mundayat Meera and Khatera Yekta. It examines from different cultural and historical perspectives the complex situation of Afghan women, the importance of their participation in politics and also the problems associated with this topic. The authors examine various interrelated problems they encounter in their work, ranging from educational barriers and economic dependence, to patriarchal social and cultural values.

The second thematic scope deals with cultural heritage and cultural exchange. It consists of two contributions. In the first article the Iranian authors Habib Sharafi Safa and Alireza Ali Soufi analyse artistic artefacts that belong to the oldest preserved images in Iranian history, namely the miniature paintings of Nasuh Mattrakçi in the historical city of Dargazin. The authors show how and why the three surviving images at two different locations can give us a new understanding of the social, political and cultural significance of this city in the Safavid period. The second article in this section introduces the beginning and development of Asian studies in Chile. The author Gonzalo Maire presents this development through the lens of three descriptive, synchronous, aspects that are characterized by objectivity, comprehensibility and the centrality of certain discourses. The article starts from the methodology of transcultural studies, surpassing thereby the traditional and orthodox orientalist perspectives.

The third scope is characterized by philological studies. It contains three contributions, that—each in its own way—examine certain classical Chinese concepts. The first is Téa Sernelj's work on the classical Chinese aesthetic concept of *qiyun shengdong*, which highlights its complexity and offers a critical presentation of the Modern Confucian scholar Xu Fuguan's widely accepted interpretation. This first essay is followed by Hu Xiangnong's article entitled "The Relativity of *Ren* (Humaneness): Re-examining 2A6 and 6A6 of Mengzi from the perspective of Self-Introspection in Experience". The essay offers a fresh and innovative reinterpretation of the above text by re-evaluating two different but so far most common interpretations of its ethical content. In the third and final essay in this section, which is entitled "An Exceptional Portrait of Yang Zhu and Mozi: Beyond the Mencian Track", Yao-Cheng Chang proposes a new and challenging explanation of Yang Zhu and Mo Di, offering an interesting and well-founded critique of common interpretations of the value of their work. The paper argues that such simplified readings can lead to severe misunderstandings of classical texts and their axiological evaluation.

The last section deals with modern and contemporary Chinese intellectual history and consists of two articles. The first is Jan Vrhovski's essay entitled "Shadowlands

of Objectivism and Comprehensiveness: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Zhang Shenfu's Philosophical Thought (1919–1948)". In this informative text Vrhovski gives an overview of the basic concepts and ideas of the philosophical thought of Zhang Shenfu, who was one of the leading intellectuals from Republican China. Since Zhang is still relatively unknown (especially in the Western academic world) despite his brilliance, the author also wishes to provide a provisional foundation for further research and a possible reassessment of Zhang Shenfu's significance for the development of intellectual history in modern China. The special edition concludes with Gregor Paul's essay "From Marx and Engels to Sino-Marxism Focusing on Communist and Confucian (*rujia*) Notions of Loyalty and Self-Criticism". Paul's article depicts and compares central elements of Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism and Maoism, focusing on the relationship between the latter and Ruism (Confucianism) and its impact on the ideologies of the Chinese Communist Party.

This diverse and rich range of historical images clearly demonstrates that historical narratives from different spaces, places and areas can provide us—despite their mutual distance—with a wealth of information about how people from different parts of the Asian world behave, how they feel and what they value. Although at first glance they are not directly linked to one another and therefore cannot provide a coherent insight into Asian history as such, the contributions in this special issue are like colourful stones in a vibrant mosaic. They clearly show why we cannot distance ourselves from history: it provides the most reliable grounds for our reflection on how cultures and societies work. Such reflection is indispensable if we are to live truly consciously and preserve our human autonomy.