

Book Review

Zhao, Tingyang. *The Whirlpool That Produced China: Stag Hunting on the Central Plain.*

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Tingyang Zhao’s masterpiece provides a philosophical perspective on China’s historical development and the characteristics of its civilization. The book presents a series of innovative theories through an in-depth analysis of Chinese history.

In the book, which is a translation of Tingyang Zhao’s Chinese publication (Zhao 2016), Zhao offers a new perspective on the formation and continuity of China through the unique theoretical framework of the “Whirlpool model.” The theory compares the historical changes of ancient China to a gradually forming whirlpool, explaining the evolution of the country from the ancient period to around the 19th century. Tingyang Zhao not only seeks to answer the fundamental question of “how China became China,” but also offers a broader reflection on how China has continuously reinvented and regenerated itself within its unique “Whirlpool model.” The book also elaborates on the concept and meaning of historicity, arguing that historical events and processes not only record and depict the past, but also have far-reaching effects on the present and future.

The “Whirlpool model” explains why the Central Plains became the political and cultural center of ancient China, attracting continuous participation from neighboring regions and ethnic groups, ultimately forming an open and unified civilization. The model is not only due to the self-reinforcing mechanism created by the competition for material and spiritual resources, but also through the imagined world order – a system that integrates multiple cultures and ethnic groups into one.

The author also explores the link between methodology and the destiny of Chinese history, arguing that the trajectory of China’s historical development and the vitality it has demonstrated throughout history stem from a mode of thinking and methodology known as the “ontology of becoming.” This methodology has contributed to the Chinese spiritual world, where history and economics are intertwined and mutually validating. The five key concepts of the book are as follows:

1 Whirlpool Model

Tingyang Zhao views China's history through the lens of the "Whirlpool model," showing a tendency to continuously attract surrounding groups and shape unique forms of civilization. He divides the civilization of ancient China into multiple stages, emphasizing that the political and cultural forces of each period converged in a dynamic "whirlpool." Early China was shaped by this "Whirlpool Model," with the Central Plains as its core, drawing in people and resources from neighboring regions. Through this inward-oriented process of attraction and self-reinforcement, China's territory and civilization gradually consolidated. By employing the Whirlpool Model, China not only assimilated surrounding peoples and cultures but also actively redefined itself as a unified entity that transcended geographical boundaries and encompassed multiple ethnicities and cultural traditions.

Zhao argues that the whirlpool was not only a geographic and political center but also a center of gravity that attracted and stabilized diverse cultural and social forces. Through this model, Zhao shows how Chinese history has created new ways of being and methodologies amid internal and external contradictions and tensions. The "whirlpool" created by the Central Plains, in the process of competing for material interests and spiritual resources, possessed a strong centripetal force that actively involved peripheral cultures and forces, contributing to the progressive integration and enlargement of its cultural and territorial boundaries. This model explains how China achieved multicultural integration through attraction.

The vortex model demonstrates how ancient China achieved multicultural integration and continuously enlarged its cultural influence through attraction. This dynamic promoted the dual qualities of "universality" – understood here as the broad appeal and integrative power of Chinese culture – and "nationality," enabling China to develop a multicultural and multi-institutional composite political order. While the belief in grand unity is important, it is the centripetal force of this interaction – where Central Plains through its influence over neighboring states, maintained a cohesive internal structure – that truly underpins China's continuity. This dynamic, rooted in the relationship between China and its periphery, explains the unique historicity of China's existence.

2 Historicity

Tingyang Zhao's interpretation of the concept of "historicity" is a key part of this book. Historicity is defined as a civilization's independent capacity for self-understanding and self-selection, and it serves as the core "Dao" and

“potential” of civilization. Through the far-reaching influence of Chinese characters and Confucianism, Zhao suggests that Chinese characters are not only a tool for communication but also a “spiritual carrier” of the whole civilization. In the book, the author traces the formation of the spiritual world of the Central Plains, arguing that this spiritual connotation, through continuous transmission, ultimately formed the internal dynamics and unique structure of China as a civilization. Zhao’s view not only unpacks how history shapes culture but also reveals the modern connotations of historicity – the trajectory of a civilization, its cohesion, and its impact on the future.

The book emphasizes that historicity is not merely an accumulation of stories but a continuity of unrepeatable events. On the one hand, it is manifested in the uninterrupted civilizational quality centered on the Way of Zhouyi; on the other hand, it is reflected in the “convergence” effect, in which many participants in history pursue the greatest good while simultaneously pursuing their own interests. This effect is structurally like the extension of “family – country – world,” and gives China a sacred, natural theological meaning of the unity of man and nature. This “general law of the natural world and human society” in the Chinese concept imbues China with a sacred, natural theological meaning, making the “world” in Chinese thought an inclusive political model that transcends geographic boundaries. The existence of this structure and the Whirlpool Model made the competition for “Stag Hunting” the central dynamic of ancient China, explaining the internal logic behind this historical phenomenon that lasted for thousands of years.

3 Focal Point and the Concept of China

In his discussion of the “Focal Point,” Tingyang Zhao explores how the common perception and cultural consensus of Chinese civilization were formed. Drawing on Thomas C. Schelling’s concept of the “Focal Point,” he analyzes the process of China’s centrality since the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. The author points out that collective rational choice gradually built up the dominant position of the Central Plains. As forces swirled around the Central Plains, attractive centers were gradually formed. Zhao argues that rational choices and repetitive behaviors throughout history forged China’s core mode of existence, making the “Focal Point” an enduring symbol of Chinese culture.

4 Chinese Spiritual World

Drawing on Alfred Gell's anthropological criteria, Tingyang Zhao argues that apart from sorcery and divination, the "technology of enchantment" by which humans understand the world includes writing, religion, and political ideology. In the Whirlpool Model, Chinese characters and institutions serve as the technologies of enchantment that carry both history and the future.

The high stability of Chinese characters may stem from their pictorial qualities. On the one hand, Chinese characters, as a medium, construct an objectified world while expressing the external world; on the other hand, Chinese characters themselves, as images, constitute a self-contained world of imagery. This pictorial script not only constructs invisible conceptual meanings but also provides visible imagery, thus carrying not only abstract conceptual meanings but also visual (and even artistic) and emotional meanings, constituting a world of possibilities rich in the meaning of life. Therefore, Chinese characters are not just a tool for expressing ideas but also a space for spiritual habitation, both as a tool and as a world. The pictorial attributes of Chinese characters make them semiotically transcend the ordinary symbols as "Signifier" and form independent meanings. The signifying function of language is usually limited to signification, and once a sign loses its conventional relationship with its referent, its meaning tends to be empty; whereas Chinese characters have both signifying and self-contained pictorial meanings, which refer to things as well as being self-contained landscapes. The ancient philosopher Gongsun Long's saying that "nothing is not a reference, but a reference is not a reference" may reflect this uniqueness of the Chinese characters: On the one hand, things are all references of the characters, but on the other hand, the meanings of the characters go beyond the purely indicative function, and have a spiritual connotation that is independent of the world of objects.

In the eyes of the ancients, the highest level of "work" was the creation of the system, often attributed to the sages and kings; technical work was less important and regarded as "author" rather than "sage." The creations of the ancients not only benefited future generations materially but also shaped spiritual ways of thinking. Through transmission, the ancient "making" transcends time limits and becomes the spiritual basis for the continued existence and creation of future generations. Therefore, the making of the ancients becomes the "being" of future generations, and human "being" is defined by "what has been made." In terms of human activities, "being" is realized in creation, and creation is continued through inheritance. As Xuecheng Zhang puts it, "creating" is establishing a standard; "disseminating" is practicing education. Both "creation" and "dissemination" are sacred, reflecting the continuity of the spirit.

The meaning of history points to the future. Without the future, history will become a sealed past, losing its connection to life and turning into a meaningless relic. The end of history is the denial of futurity, the loss of future possibilities, the loss of a world of meaning; all meaning is derived from possibilities, and necessity defines only truth. The consciousness of time takes the present as a fixed point, which gives rise to a symmetrical consciousness of past and future, and the dichotomy “ancient-present” is the temporal state of history, not a linear division of time.

A world of truth alone is a world of meaninglessness, whose causal changes constitute the future but have no future, only the endless passage of time. Only the possibilities associated with “the past and the present” give meaning to the future, that is to say, only the possibilities of destiny constitute futurity.

5 Ontology of Becoming

The existentialism in the Zhouyi differs from traditional existentialism based on “being.” Instead, it explores the dynamic existence of “change.” In this existential theory of “change,” “existence” is not a static term but a process full of vigor and possibilities. In other words, existence is not a static “being,” but a dynamic state of “becoming,” a process of constant movement toward the future and change, which is the true meaning and value of existence. The core issue of becoming is “endlessness” – how to maintain continuity in the midst of change, always in a state of endlessness. This reflection on the future, as composed of countless possibilities, mirrors the ancient concept of “Dao.” This “Way” is not just a theory but a methodology for realizing effective existence, adapting flexibly to change.

The “Dao” of effective existence is embodied in the method of “adaptability,” requiring flexible responses to change in order to realize a dynamic balance and achieve relative stability in the midst of change. Through adaptability, one can adjust to changes and maintain a state of self-constancy while not being detached from changes, thus achieving a state of “goodness in.” The ultimate significance of adaptation is to enhance the capacity of existence, so that it can cope with the ever-changing environment and thus remain essentially unchanged.

In this existential context, the author points out that the methodology of “becoming” has not only influenced Chinese thinking but also shaped its historical trajectory. Chinese history reflects a way of thinking aligned with adaptability, enabling it to endure for thousands of years and remain vibrant amidst constant change. This methodology has contributed to the Chinese spiritual world, where “scripture and history are one” – finding mutual validation in both scripture and history, reflecting the accumulation and transmission of wisdom and history in the Chinese tradition.

In this view of history, “becoming” does not emphasize mere progress or regression. As a description of phenomena, progress and regression are indeed obvious, such as advances in technology or changes in literary works. However, progress or regression as theories is a manifestation of predetermination, the belief that the future is fixed or has a fixed ultimate purpose. The modern theory of progress is derived from Enlightenment thought, and if it is abused in culture, institutions, art, etc., without the technological dimension, it denies the accumulation of history and the preservation of wisdom, because it implies that each era is merely a stepping stone to the next, and ultimately, the meaning of history dissipates through this accelerated denial, and history will wither away due to the loss of the accumulation of meaning.

The view of history based on the existential theory of “becoming” creates an infinite openness to history, and although its historical tense is the dualistic structure of “ancient and modern,” the focus is on the state of “today.” The “present” here is not static, but a dynamic “present.” On the one hand, it absorbs the wisdom of the past and imparts the meaning of antiquity to the present; on the other hand, it prepares for future changes and maintains the dynamism and creativity of the present. This concept of “now” brings together the flow of time from the past and the future to the point of “now,” making it a point of convergence in time. On the one hand, “today” carries the historical time flowing from the past to the present, and on the other hand, it also leads the future to the present, making “today” the center of a kind of history in a two-way flow. If the “center of the earth” is the core of Chinese space, then the two-way open “present” is the core of time, which supports the continuity and resilience of Chinese culture and makes “present” flourish in its deep roots. Through this sense of “flux,” the Chinese view of history realizes its self-awareness of its own existence, and achieves a kind of historical continuity that is constantly growing, open and accumulating, and thus the story of China continues to be told.

This book is not only a study of Chinese history but also a deep reflection on the evolution of civilization. With rigorous philosophical thinking and an innovative theoretical framework, Tingyang Zhao provides readers with a new way of looking at Chinese history on a macro level, making this book an indispensable reference for understanding Chinese history and culture.

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