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Article

## The conception of time in Classical Confucianism: the correspondence and interaction between the time of history and the time of ethics

A concepção de tempo no Confucionismo Clássico: a correspondência e interação entre o tempo da história e o tempo da ética

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the two types of conception of time, namely, the time of history and the time of ethics. The former is a conception of time that one views or situates one's lifetime in or with history, whereas the latter a time of our personal lifetime interrupted by the intervention of the other and the accompanied ethical significance. This article argues that Classical Confucianism has interesting specifications of these two conceptions of time. In particular, it shows a correspondence and interaction between the two. Then, it is not difficult to catch up with what our tradition has been aiming at through ethical practices, and the tradition in turn prompts us to be ethical.

**Keywords:** philosophy of time, time of history, time of ethics, Classical Confucianism.



## RESUMO

Este artigo aborda os dois tipos de concepção do tempo, a saber, o tempo da história e o tempo da ética. A primeira é uma concepção de tempo que se vê ou situa a própria vida na ou com a história, enquanto a segunda é um tempo da nossa vida pessoal interrompida pela intervenção do outro e pelo significado ético que o acompanha. Este artigo argumenta que o confucionismo clássico tem especificações interessantes dessas duas concepções de tempo. Em particular, mostra uma correspondência e interação entre os dois. Então, não é difícil alcançar o que nossa tradição tem buscado por meio de práticas éticas, e a tradição, por sua vez, nos incita a sermos éticos.

**Palavras-chave:** filosofia do tempo, tempo da história, tempo da ética, Confucionismo Clássico.

## 1 Introduction

What is time? We have yet to fully discover this issue despite living in time. Some characterizations are available, such as objective time and subjective time; the time of my life and the time of the other; the time of history and the time of ethics. This article focuses on the last pair and brings out a philosophically interesting understanding of the relation between the two. "Time of history" is a conception of time that one views or situates one's lifetime in or with the history, whereas "time of ethics" is a time of our personal lifetime interrupted by the intervention of the other and the accompanied ethical significance.

While some may think that the time of history may not be relevant (and thereby fails to contribute) to our everyday ethical dealings, this article argues that traditions which take the ethical (such as various ethical goals and cultivation) as their essence may manifest a correspondence and interaction between its time of history and time of ethics. Classical Confucianism serves as a good example: on the one hand, its time of history always has ethical content that ineluctably turns people into the mode of the time of ethics, *although somehow in an imagined or latent sense*. On the other hand, it is nothing but the time of ethics that fills in the content of the time of history. In other words, whenever one views or situates one's lifetime with or within the historical tradition, the major goal and direction of thinking are always related to the ethical; and whenever one is in the time of ethics, one is always fulfilling the content of the time of history.<sup>1</sup>

After this Introduction, section 2 sketches some general conceptions of time. Section 3 illustrates some basic understanding of the "time of history" and the "time of ethics". Section 4 explicates how these two notions of time are construed by Classical Confucianism and explains their correspondence and interaction and the philosophical significance.

## 2 Preliminary

Knowing the common conceptions of time helps us understand the core issue of this article. Of our interest are the distinctions between the objective time and subjective time, and between the time of my life and the time of the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, this article focuses on how we conceptualize time and how we are aware of our time. It introduces the account of Rudolf Bernet, which is then examined and contested with. One's conceptualization and substantiation of history and ethics are relevant to the issue, but they are to be situated in the conceptualization of time. As we proceed, it will get clearer that the discussion is different from a direct inquiry into the relation between history and ethics. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for his/her urge for a clarification.

First, objective time is “measured change, and it is experienced in terms of the categories of past, present, and future that are imposed by our cognitive capacities and measured by objective means—for example, astronomical events or clocks” (Morgan, 2007, pp. 212-213). It is named as “natural time”, “physical time”, time understood in science, or time understood in everyday life (see Morgan, 2007, pp. 212-213). This time “is applicable to everyone and everything and is divided into an infinite series of points that can [...] only be distinguished from one another by the number that is attached to them” (Bernet, 1998, p. 138). Such a “scientific-objective indifference”, as Rudolf Bernet describes, is not the usual way that we experience time in our lives, though we do need the measurements of clocks to cooperate with things in the world (see Bernet, 1998, p. 138).

The second is the subjective time, which is also named as “psychical time” or “mental time”. It is a time from each of our personal or first-person perspective. According to this view,

*time is the flow of our experiences that are experienced by me from my I's point of view as here and now, with a sense of flowing from what has been in view and what will be, as anticipated, expected, and projected. In this sense, the past is before what I now experience, and the future is after or what is yet-to-be. (Morgan, 2007, p. 213).*

Such a time is continuous; and it is the manner in which our happiness and sorrow have their duration, which is not to be measured by any clock (see Bernet, 1998, p. 138). It is not the objective time but the *subjective time*, or some of its variation, that is the focus of the present article.<sup>2</sup>

Another is the distinction between the time of my life and the time of the other. According to the former, one can have the concept of time even when one is alone. As Rudolf Bernet explains, the time of my life has two properties, namely, its continuity or uninterrupted character, and its exclusively subjective or personal nature (see Bernet, 1998, p. 138). It is a continuity between my past, my present, and my future.<sup>3</sup> It is “a time that in its uninterrupted continuity confirms my personal identity” (Bernet, 1998, p. 141). In some sense,

*what threatens the continuity of my life comes from myself and not from another, i.e., comes from my forgetting of the past and from my uncertainty about the future, it is evident that I have no need of another in order to overcome this threat. I alone can master the time of my life. (Bernet, 1998, p. 142; italics original)*

Namely, my past is remembered, and it is purely done in the interiority of my consciousness or private life; and although my future is somehow co-determined by other people, I do not need anyone else in order to *experience my lifetime*. It is also true for my present time. When such a mastery is affected by the other, we are turned to a different time.<sup>4</sup> It is what Bernet delineates as a “transition” in his explanation of the various conceptions of time: it is only when one takes distance from one’s own mastery of one’s lifetime can the time become richer; namely, it is the inclusion or concern with the other people—

<sup>2</sup> The variation is possible as cases like the time of history (see below), is not objective time and is more appropriate to be regarded as inter-subjective time, for it is the time subjective to the whole group of people (say, nation, civilization, or so), while “inter-subjective” to each particular person within so because they share such a time.

Indeed, in his characterization of time into “the time of my life”, “the time of history”, and “the time of ethics”, except the first one labelled as subjective, Bernet (1998) does not state clearly whether the other two are objective, subjective, inter-subjective, or etc. But it is quite certain that all these are not to be conceived as objective time.

<sup>3</sup> For convenience, I generally follow Bernet (1998) to use the first-person singular (“my”) instead of third-person singular (“one’s”).

<sup>4</sup> But note that it is just to evince the theoretical possibility of totally subjective time. As I understand, the content of the things being remembered and experienced can of course include other people and things; and how one performs such remembering and experiencing, say, being alone or in a crowd makes a difference; but Bernet’s point here is that this very remembering or experiencing does not depend on the other, essentially *in the sense that it is the subject who is the master or the agent*.

history and ethics—that alters one’s lifetime. We will explain how time of ethics is a “time of other” (see Benert, 1998, p. 142). These are what we now turn to.

### 3 The time of history and the time of ethics

This section first illustrates the conceptions of time of history and time of ethics by mainly referring to Rudolf Benert (1998) and with some other supplements (sections 3.1 and 3.2). An evaluation of Benert’s account (section 3.3) then serves as a bridge to my arguments in the next section.

#### 3.1 The time of history

The time of history is a conception of time that one views or situates one’s lifetime in or with the history. “The time of history implies an enlargement of the significance of my lifetime over the borders of my life” (Benert, 1998, p. 142). In history, one is occupied with the life of previous and the life of future generations. Historical time is then a trans-generational time (see Benert, 1998, p. 142). Two points are highlighted: “History has to do with the life of human communities”; and “history concerns itself with the continuity between communities that live and have lived in different times” (Benert, 1998, p. 143).

What is more important is the nature of a historical community that allows it to be carried over from one generation to the next, i.e., *tradition*. While there are traditions of modes of conduct and rituals, of convictions and values, and so on, “[w]hat is handed down in tradition is ultimately less important than the fact that *there is tradition*” (Benert, 1998, p. 143; italics mine). What happened to my ancestors contributes to my conception of time as long as I am a part of such tradition. Besides,

*These contents of tradition receive a specifically historical meaning, not only through their being handed down across generations, but also through their relation to a historical time. Which historical time? Mostly the time of an original event or of a goal to be attained “at the end of all time”. The tradition of Christianity rests on the origin of Christ’s becoming man two thousand years ago and the tradition of Marxism rests on the aim of a classless society that is still to be realized in the progress of history. (Benert, 1998, p. 144)*

While the Christian tradition “orients itself to an origin (*arche*) and supposes a[n] archeological determination of historical time”, the Marxist tradition “is directed to a still to be attained aim (*telos*) and implies a teleological conception of historical time” (Benert, 1998, p. 144).<sup>5</sup>

Then, it is very likely that such a time is conservative in nature. While “history as collective remembering is not merely a matter of conscious representation but rather of the interpretation of documents and ritual communal activities”, Benert notes that “[r]emembering and historical tradition aim at preserving the past for the future” (Benert, 1998, p. 144). Besides, he thinks that the fidelity to the tradition can show respect and moral concern, but in historical contemplation “there is no place for a positive evaluation of a breach in time and for a responsibility in regard to future generations that are totally different from us” (Benert, 1998, p. 145). He takes the commemoration of the “Shoah”, the annihilation of millions of Jews by the Nazi in the Second World War as an example of a remembering of a foreign past out of ethical responsibility. To be something really ethically significant, the commemoration must exceed or transcend “the historical consciousness of a communal past of the German people” (Benert,

<sup>5</sup> But Benert also notes that these two conceptions of history are not incompatible, just as Christianity “proclaims a ‘history of salvation’ that connects the significance of the origin with an eschatological aim” (Benert, 1998, p.144).

1998, p. 145) and must take into account some ethical reflections (i.e., the other) that are not directly involved in the time of history.<sup>6</sup> We may now transit to the time of ethics.

### 3.2 The time of ethics

The time of ethics can be understood as a time that our personal lifetime is interrupted by the intervention of the other and the accompanied ethical significance. According to Bernet, it is “neither my time nor our time, but another time; *the time of the other as other*” (Bernet, 1998, p. 146; italics mine). He explains that “this is not just to say that in my relations with the other I may not force my time-consciousness upon the other, but also that the other penetrates my time-consciousness and thus changes it, makes it into another consciousness” and “the time of ethics is thus not a continuity but an interrupted time” (Bernet, 1998, p. 146).<sup>7</sup> The originally continuous lifetime of one’s own is interrupted when it comes across the needy other in the form of appeal. This interrupted time is “a time in which the mutual interwovenness of the future, present, and past is dissolved, a time in which also the future, present, and past of my life no longer belong simply and solely to me” (Bernet, 1998, p. 146).

Here Bernet brings in Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy to explicate the impact of the other on our conception of time.<sup>8</sup> For Levinas, the encounter with another person is crucial in that the other impacts me unlike any worldly object or force (see Bergo, 2015, §1). The other person addresses me, calls to me, and we have to ability to respond to the call. As Bettina Bergo explains, “Levinas’s descriptions show that ‘in the beginning was the human relation’”, and it is the primacy of relation that explains “why it is that human beings are interested in the questions of ethics at all” (Bergo, 2015, §1.1). The command and supplication of the other occur because “human faces impact us as affective moments or, what Levinas calls ‘interruptions’. The face of the other is firstly expressive-ness. It could be compared to a force” (Bergo, 2015, §1.1). It is the structure of our living.<sup>9</sup> The time of ethics, as Bernet understands Levinas, “is irreconcilable with a conservative or a paternalistic attitude towards the other; ethics assumes a radical break with all forms of egoistic self-reference and thus with a personal memory and an historical tradition that confirms one’s own identity” (Bernet, 1998, p. 146).

Bernet thus takes *death (of the other)*, *forgiveness* and *hope* to demonstrate how the other and the accompanied ethical concern alter my originally lonely and insipid lifetime (see Bernet, 1998, p. 146-147). Death “touches the deepest foundation of my life without belonging to me”, because I cannot really experience death (Bernet, 1998, p. 146). Thus, whenever we talk of death, it is the *death of the other* and it is also what affects our lifetime. Again, we can refer to Levinas and see how the death of the other may alter my conception of time. In *God, Death and Time*, Levinas says,

*It is not my nonbeing that causes anxiety, but that of the loved one or of the other, more beloved than my being. What we call, by a somewhat corrupted term, love, is par excellence the fact that the death of the other affects me more than my own. [...] We encounter death in the face of the other.* (Levinas, 2000, p. 105)

<sup>6</sup> This point will be evaluated in section 3.3 below.

<sup>7</sup> “Time-consciousness” is a concept put forward by Edmund Husserl. That I cannot “force my time-consciousness upon the other” approximately means that one cannot make others to have the conception of time or experience time in the way I do. For an introduction to the notion of time-consciousness, see Kelly (2008).

<sup>8</sup> The following references to other scholars are my supplements beyond Bernet.

<sup>9</sup> That is why Bergo says, “The phenomenological descriptions of intersubjective responsibility are built upon an analysis of living in the world” (Bergo, 2015, §1.1).

Yael Lin explains, "It is the death of the other and our ethical response to it that introduces an otherness that in Levinas's view is adequate for the constitution of time" (Lin 2013, p. 72).<sup>10</sup> We may not drill into the Levinasian constitution of time, but at least we can understand that it is the death of the other that interrupts my lifetime. For *forgiveness*, Bernet explains that it "gives a new meaning to my past, it releases me from the lonely and sometimes unbearable burden of a mistake or sin that I have committed" (Bernet, 1998, p. 147); and *hope* "frees me from my all too understandable anxiety for my future life" (Bernet, 1998, p. 147); and both forgiveness and hope can only come from other, so they can be regarded as "gratuitous gift" from the other (Bernet, 1998, p. 147). Bernet remarks that the encounter with the other also "changes me into an other or, more precisely, into a subject for the other", as, for instance, "the other that forgives me for a mistake from my past, at the same time summons me thereby to more responsibility in the future" (Bernet, 1998, p. 148; italics original). That is, the other, who "liberates" me from the loneliness, changes my lifetime by forgiving me, and relieves my guilt, is also the one who asks me for help. In short, the intervention of the other "makes of my present time a new time with an ethical significance" (Bernet, 1998, p. 147).

### 3.3 A doubt on Bernet's account

While much can be said about Bernet's account, I focus on his view on the incapability of the time of history to deal with the ethical, as he says, "In historical contemplation there is no place for a positive evaluation of a breach in time and for a responsibility in regard to future generations that are totally different from us" (Bernet, 1998, p. 145). My question is: can the conception of time in terms of time of history be filled in with ethically-relevant elements, making such a conception of time both historical and ethical? My answer is affirmative, and it can be well demonstrated by Classical Confucianism in section 4.<sup>11</sup> But let me first explicate my doubt.

First, I admit that not all remembering of past events, even out of ethical responsibility, can really be responses to the ethical and are unconnected with the time of ethics. Why does Bernet think that the commemoration of Shoah itself as a time of history may not be enough to respond to ethical requirements or expectations? As he mentioned, the remembering may not take the other into account, which is necessary in an ethical response. In terms of the time of history, if there is something like an ethical responsibility, there is still one "for oneself and one's own community" (Bernet, 1998, p. 145). In other words, there should be a transcending of the mere "historical consciousness of a communal past of the German people" for the commemoration to have an ethical significance (Bernet, 1998, p. 145). This sounds correct.<sup>12</sup>

However, there is still another aspect in his explication of the time of history. While highlighting the formal characteristics of the time of history, Bernet does not neglect the substantial content of the time of history that each tradition has to fill in, as he writes, "These contents of tradition receive a specifically historical meaning" that can be gained through its "relation to a historical time" (Bernet, 1998, p. 144) before he takes Christianity and Marxism as examples. Then, to understand a person's or a group's time of history, we should identify the core of the historical meaning of a certain tradition and see if that

<sup>10</sup> Again, obviously, the time here is subjective time. To avoid complication, I can only sketch in this note Levinas's view of time and the other for the interested readers. For time to be constituted, there must be an otherness for us to realize that there are two genuinely separated moments. Philosophers have different views on what accounts for such an otherness that constitutes a conception of time. For Levinas, such an otherness lies not in one's own death but rather the death of the other that we have concern for. See Lin (2013) for discussion.

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, taking this argumentative strategy, there should be other traditions that suit the task. Classical Confucianism, to my knowledge, is at least one good example.

<sup>12</sup> What I add is that the mere act of remembering of *any event* may itself be ethically neutral. We can remember something out of its huge impact on us. This does not necessarily carry any ethical significance. So, when we go into detail about the thing being remembered, in the case of Shoah, it is very likely that if there is anything trying to address the "ethical" (or more abstractly, something "ideological") in the Nazi-driven campaign, that cannot pass our general ethical examinations.

contains any ethical elements that can link it to the time of ethics. Focusing merely on a (remembering of) certain event, whether ethically-relevant or not, may be insufficient or even irrelevant to the core historical meaning of such tradition.

## 4 The conceptions of the time of history and the time of ethics in Classical Confucianism

This article focuses on Classical Confucianism, which includes the three prominent Confucian philosophers, namely, Confucius (or Kongzi 孔子) (c. 551-479 B.C.E.), Mencius (or Mengzi 孟子) (c. 371-289 B.C.E.) and Xunzi 荀子 (c. 298-238 B.C.E.). They lay down the foundation of Confucianism and can illuminate the conception of time in Confucianism.<sup>13</sup> This section explicates how the conceptions of the time of history and the time of ethics would be conceived by Classical Confucianism (sections 4.1 and 4.2). I argue that their conception involves rich content, and, more importantly, an intriguing interaction or dynamics between its time of history and time of ethics (section 4.3). Let us start with its time of ethics.

### 4.1 The time of ethics in Classical Confucianism

Confucianism is usually characterized as a philosophy on self-transformation, persuading and guiding people to be gentlemen (*junzi* 君子) or even sages (*shengren* 聖人).<sup>14</sup> Focusing on of how one should live as a human, Confucianism extensively talks about how one should treat the others (including people, animals, and even plants) and can thus be regarded as mainly on ethics. The most explicit example to demonstrate the general conception of time of ethics should be the imagined scenario in *Mencius 2A6*:

*Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion [ceyin 惻隱], not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. (Lau, 2003, p. 73)*

The time of the man is interrupted by the sudden witness of a child in an imminent danger. Such an endangered other calls on us and our heart-mind will react accordingly, manifesting its aspect of compassion. This reaction is unconditional as shown by Mencius's attempt at denying all the possible egoistic motives or purposes. A person of benevolence (*ren* 仁) "cannot bear" (*buren* 不忍) to see other suffer and finds himself or herself responsible for offering as much help as possible. The Confucians would agree with Levinas's (and Bernet's) view that the other interrupts our originally continuous lifetime in the form of appeal. But more importantly, for the Confucians, this call or appeal manifests the Confucian worldview that everyone and everything is related and is in one body. Mencius says that, "All ten thousand things are there in me" (*wanwu jie beiyu wo* 萬物皆備於我) (*Mencius 7A4*, in Lau 2003, p. 287), which is explicated by the Song-Ming Neo-Confucians (such as Cheng Hao 程顥 and Wang Yangming 王陽明) as "ten thousand things in one body" (see Cheng & Cheng, 1981, p. 16-17; Wang, 2014, p. 29).<sup>15</sup>

Other forms of the interruption of our lifetime by the interventions of the other and the accompanied ethical significance also abound in Confucian texts. Death of the other, as Levinas also emphasizes,

<sup>13</sup> I think the later Confucians share a similar view.

<sup>14</sup> For elaborations on Confucian self-transformation, see e.g., Tu (1985).

<sup>15</sup> Suffice it here that for a Confucian, the moral capacity for helping things to live properly is inherited by human beings. There is the notion of "assisting in the transforming and nourishing process of heaven and earth" (*zan tiandi zhi huayu* 贊天地之化育) in *The Doctrine of the Mean* (see Chan, 1969, p. 108). A comparison on the Levinasian and Confucian worldview and metaethics will be an interesting topic. For recent related attempts, see Nelson (2009) and Lee (2013).

is a prominent one. Amy Olberding ingeniously points out that in the ancient Chinese tradition, “the problem of death is no that I shall die, but that *other people do*. Indeed, the problem is not death, but *deaths*, the serial losses that accumulate in any life lived in companionship with others” (Olberding, 2019, p. 206; italics original); and she explains that the effect of other’s death on my life is related to the Confucian conception of self:

*Selves are [...] shared achievements and thereby dependent on far more than any individually defined agency, activity, skill, or indeed self-understanding. The death of one here refracts as ending for more than he who dies. It likewise ends more than a present self-conception for the survivor. (Olberding, 2019, p. 214)*

The death of Yan Hui 顏回, Confucius’s favorite disciple, serves as a good example.<sup>16</sup> In the *Analects* 11.9 and 11.10 (in Lau, 2010, p. 99), Confucius is transformed by grief because of Yan Hui’s death. Olberding explains that such extreme reactions of Confucius:

*Confucius without his Yan Hui is altered by death. He is no longer able to teach with the economy of words, in the easy silence of full mutual understanding he shared with Yan Hui. Without the student who loves learning, the teacher is changed, lost. (Olberding, 2019, pp. 213-214)*

Given the social and relational nature of self, which makes death “a socially and relationally shared phenomenon”,

*[W]hen Confucius suffers the loss of Yan Hui, he is bereft of a self he reasonably would have aspired to become: the teacher of the renowned philosopher, Yan Hui [...] The self afflicted by loss is thus not one without an other, but a self bereft of its own identity, present and future. The one who survives death endures his own existential death, burdened to go forward not simply without his companion, but without himself as was and as would have been. (Olberding, 2019, p. 214; italics mine)*

As I understand it, on the superficial level, the death of the other that takes place now interrupts the originally continuous and independent time of my life just like when we bump into the needy other. More profoundly, as these philosophers point out, the potential death and the happened death also alter our conception of the past, present, and future, just as how Bernet explains the effects of other’s forgiveness and hope in our originally independent lifetime. Yan Hui’s death alters Confucius’s identity as well as his perceptions and conceptions of present and future. This effect is also noted by Xunzi, who says, “[A]mong the creatures that have blood and vital force (*qi* 氣), none has greater awareness than human beings, and so human beings’ feeling for their parents knows no limit until the day they die” (translation adapted from Hutton, 2014, p. 213), namely, our parent’s death will affect our whole lifetime as we love them. I suggest further that death not just affects our selves merely when the death takes place, but also when it is anticipated and remembered. A profound reflection on how other’s death always affects our lifetime can be seen at the *Analects* 4.21 (in Lau, 2010, p. 35): “A man should not be unaware of the age of his father and mother. It is a matter, on the one hand, for rejoicing and, on the other, for anxiety”. As the contemporary scholar Qian Mu 錢穆 explains, “what is to be rejoiced is the living of the parents. What is to be anxious about is that their remained years are not many. The joy and the anxiety appear simultaneously” (Qian, 2011, p. 110; translation mine).

<sup>16</sup> In answering someone’s question about which of his disciples was eager to learn, Confucius says, “There was one Yan Hui who was eager to learn. He never transferred the anger he felt towards one person to another. Nor did he make the same mistake twice. Unfortunately his allotted span was a short one and he died. Now there is no one. No one eager to learn has come to my notice” (the *Analects* 6.3, in Lau, 2010, p. 47).



The conception of time of ethics in Classical Confucianism is rich and obvious. Let us turn to its conception of the time of history.

## 4.2 The time of history in Classical Confucianism

The time of history in Classical Confucianism is tightly tied with the encounter with the other and thereby with ethics. Therefore, this article argues that in Classical Confucianism, we can almost say that the substantial content of the time of history is always about the ethical. This can first be seen at what is handed down by the tradition (section 4.2.1) and is interestingly supported by the particular style of ancient Chinese historiography (section 4.2.2) and the related use of history in ethical discourse (section 4.2.3).

### 4.2.1 The core of the Confucian Tradition being handed down

The core the Confucianism tradition can be regarded as the ways of the sages, which can be illustrated along three aspects about how one should treat the others and thereby about the ethical: (a) The benevolent governance (*renzheng* 仁政) of the ancient sages; (b) Social rituals; and (c) Reading and reflecting on the classics.<sup>17</sup> In this article, I can only highlight their characteristics in relation to the ethical. As Karyn Lai notes, the yearnings for the time of the sage abound in the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*. Confucius champions the way of life of the early Zhou Dynasty and appreciates Zhou Gong 周公 and also the commitments and achievements of the sage rulers Yao 堯, Shun 舜 and Yu 禹 (e.g., the *Analects* 8.19, 8.20, in Lau, 2010, pp. 73, 75). They have carried out policies and projects that helped the people, like Yu, who “lived in lowly dwelling while devoting all his energy to the building of irrigation canals” (the *Analects* 8.21, in Lau 2010, p. 75). There are also many references to sage kings in *Mencius* that are about the ruler’s commitment to people’s wellbeing. For instance, in 1B4 (in Lau, 2003, p. 37), Mencius quotes a saying of the Xia Dynasty (though said through the mouth of Yanzi 晏子): “The Former Kings never [i]ndulged in any of these excesses [in hunting and drinking]”. Xunzi also appeals to historical examples.<sup>18</sup>

The rituals, for the Confucians, have their origin in our need of emotional expressions as well as regulations. On the one hand, Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi all agree that the rituals such as the three-year mourning and the burying of parents’ dead bodies are for our expressions of love and grief for our beloved ones.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, they, especially Xunzi, emphasize the function of regulating both our emotions and behavior. For Xunzi, the three-year mourning period breaks off the mourning so “there may be a proper stopping point for sending off the dead and proper regulation for resuming one’s normal life” (Hutton, 2014, p. 213). The rituals help us express our emotions properly. Broadly speaking, therefore, being recognized by the people, the rituals guide our conduct and facilitate smooth social interactions.<sup>20</sup>

The classics are the sages’ words. *The Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), *The Classics of History* (*Shujing* 書經), *The Records of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), *The Record of Music* (*Yueji* 樂記), *The Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) and *The Spring and Autumn Annuals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) are the major classics. Take *The Odes* as an example. There are 305 poems that Confucius sums up in one phrase: “Have no depraved thoughts” (the

<sup>17</sup> “The ways of the ancient sages”, “social ritual and elegant expressions of self” and “reading and reflecting on the classics” are aspects highlighted by Karyn Lai during her discussion on the ways in which the past is invoked in Confucian moral thinking (see Lai 2008). I adapt some of these elements to elaborate my point here.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, see the “Achievements of the Ru” of Xunzi in Hutton (2014, pp. 52-67)

<sup>19</sup> See the *Analects* 17.21 (in Lau, 2010, p. 179), *Mencius* 3A2 (in Lau, 2003, pp. 101, 103) and *Xunzi* Chapter 19 (see Hutton 2014, p. 213) on mourning period, and *Mencius* 3A5 (in Lau, 2003, p. 120) on the burying of the parents.

<sup>20</sup> See the *Analects* 20.3 (in Lau, 2010, p. 205): “A man has no way of taking his stand unless he understands the rituals”. Learning the rituals is the prerequisite for one’s participation in society (see Lai, 2008, p. 101).

*Analects* 2.2, in Chan, 1969, p. 22). People can learn moral messages in the poems.<sup>21</sup>

From all these we can see an ethical character of the tradition inherited by the Confucianism, which is usually deemed as the representative of the Chinese tradition.

#### 4.2.2 The peculiar ancient Chinese historiography

In fact, a special feature in ancient Chinese historiography helps illustrate the ethical characteristics of the conception of historical tradition. Some scholars point out that the ancient Chinese historiography reveals a tendency of infusing moral evaluations with historical facts and thereby creates a kind of history different from the modern counterparts. The latter emphasizes on objectivity; but the former, though not necessarily violates it, may not take it as the first priority.

First, Paul R. Goldin suggests that the ancient Chinese have a different conception or emphasis on accuracy or objectivity. That may be due to the deliberate purpose of the writers. The inscription on the Scribe Qiang's Basin (*Shi Qiang Pan* 史牆盤) serves an example. The inscription contains "a blatant historical error", namely, it depicts the humiliating defeat of the King Zhao as a victory, because the scribe who wrote it wanted to claim prestige by riding the coattails of the Zhou kings (see Goldin, 2008, pp. 82-83). Besides, many descriptions of the past are doubtful and unverifiable. Nevertheless, as Goldin notices,

*None of these writers, it should be evident, were concerned with the "facts" or "reality" of Yao and Shun; still less were they concerned that readers would take them to task for "distorting" history. Indeed, since it was hardly possible, even in olden times, to verify that Yao and Shun ever existed, let alone corroborate all the tales about their choice to abdicate instead of passing the throne to their sons, the whole story could never have had any value except as a didactic example. (Goldin, 2008, p. 89; italics original)*

That is, the descriptions of the sage kings are to demonstrate the ideal and the ethical but are not necessarily factual.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes, "didactic narratives were welcome even at the expense of misrepresenting facts" (Goldin, 2008, p. 90). Goldin suggests that Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?-86? BCE) "represents something of a watershed" in that while he "has been criticized by many later historians for inserting his emotions into his exposition and failing to maintain a judicious reserve" and the inclusion of what modern readers may take as myths, he

*introduced a new historical consciousness by observing that sources must be handled critically when they are contradicted by other sources. Sima Qian's protocols for judging sources, though not wholly amoral, are nevertheless substantially less moralistic than those of previous ages. (Goldin, 2008, pp. 90-91)*

Nevertheless, the standards of accuracy or objectivity can still hardly compare with the modern counterpart. Goldin suggests that

<sup>21</sup> For instance, when persuading the King Xuan of Qi to practice benevolent governance, Mencius quoted the sentences of the *Odes*: "He set an example for his consort. And also for his brothers, and so ruled over the family and the state" (*Mencius* 1A7, in Lau, 2003, p. 19).

<sup>22</sup> Chun-chieh Huang even thinks that for the ancient Chinese, history is written in the form that the ideal time, which he calls the *Supertime* or *Sagely Time*, patterns our normal humanly lived *Time* (i.e., not clock time) (see Huang, 2006, p. 20). Huang says, "Time viewed thus as humanly lived, shaped and achieved by paradigmatic individuals is History" (Huang, 2006, p. 20). The *Supertime* is exuded from the morally excellent periods of the normally human lived *Time*, which is set to be exemplary for the people to continue or re-live. In other words, to Huang, the time of history of the ancient Chinese is always something normative, which concerns about how one should treat others, or in fact everything in the world.

*it is evident that ancient Chinese thinkers, at least until Sima Qian (司馬遷) (145?–86? BCE)—and possibly even later—did not approve or disapprove of statements about history according to how well they fit what we would call facts. Rather, they valued statements about the past that embodied what should have been true, regardless of whether they embodied what was true. History was expected to be edifying, not necessarily factual. (Goldin, 2008, p. 81; italics original)*

Therefore, when approaching the Chinese historical records, we “must shed any presumption that Chinese historians (and their audiences) felt constrained by objectivist concerns” (Goldin, 2008, p. 83).

Apart from the infusion of didactical materials as the historical records, another special feature of Chinese historiography that reveals the infusion of the ethical is the commentary practice, which can be traced to the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, the *Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*. While describing the historical facts, the author of *Zuozhuan* inserts his comments by stating “the noble man said” (*junzi yue* 君子曰). For instance,

*In winter, the leaders of Jin chastised those responsible for the defeat at Bi and the military confrontation at Qing. They put blame on Xian Hu, had him put to death, and completely extinguish his lineage. The noble man said, “Evil came to him because he himself brought it on”. Would this not describe Xian Hu? (Lord Xuan 14, in Durrant, Lee, & Schaberg, 2016, p. 669)*

It is noted that “[t]he elucidative and interpretive concerns of framed comments in *Zuozhuan* continue as stated judgments in many forms of Chinese historical writings”, such as Sima Qian, who concludes the events and judgements with his comments that he puts as “the grand historian said” (*taishigong yue* 太史公曰); and that “It became conventional in official historiography to end with the judgment of the historian, who adopts the usual self-designation of an official as the emperor’s ‘subject’ or ‘servant’ (*chen* 臣)” (Durrant, Lee, & Schaberg 2016, p. LXXIII). Such comments reveal moral judgments, which are usually Confucian.<sup>23</sup> This commentary practice also demonstrates the ethical dimension in the Chinese time of history.

### 4.2.3 The use of history in ethical discourse

The use of history in the ethical discourse can also reveal the ethical characteristics of the conception of historical tradition. In his paper about the ethical uses of the past in *Xunzi*, Antonio S. Cua highlights four functions of such “use of the historical appeal”: the pedagogical, the rhetorical, the elucidative, and the evaluative functions (Cua 2005).<sup>24</sup> Particularly of our interest is the evaluative function, which Cua explicates along two aspects, namely, the “retrospective” and the “prospective” uses of the historical appeal.

Cua infers the idea of the retrospective use of the appeal to history from “dealing with the present through the past” (*yigu chijin* 以古持今) in “The Achievements of the *Ru*” in *Xunzi*.<sup>25</sup> More specially, it means “to use one’s knowledge of or beliefs about the past in order to maintain a view about the present” (Cua, 2005, p. 91). An example is *Xunzi*’s appeal to benevolence and righteousness (*yi* 義) in his justification of the use of army in the sages’ attacking the wicked (see Cua, 2005, p. 92; Hutton, 2014, pp. 155-156). “Retrospective use of the historical appeal is thus conservative, in that it attempts to pre-

<sup>23</sup> For instance, it is noted that “some scholars now believe that exegetical comments belong to a later stratum of the text, but the idea that *Zuozhuan* conforms broadly to Confucian thought as it evolved through the Warring States era is still widely accepted” (Durrant, Lee, & Schaberg, 2016, p. LXIII).

<sup>24</sup> Cua refers to “the use of the historical appeal” “the ethical use of the distinction between the past (*gu* [古]) and the present (*jin* [今]), of historical characters, situations, and events” (Cua, 2005, p. 73).

<sup>25</sup> Eric L. Hutton’s translation reads: “using what is ancient to manage what is current” (Hutton, 2014, p. 64).

serve the continuity of an ethical practice” (Cua, 2005, pp. 93-94; italics original). However, as historical memory is not always reliable, retrospective use of the historical appeal cannot always justify ethical judgments. The prospective use of the historical appeal reverses “the standpoint of the retrospective one” in that “[h]uman history is seen as subject matter rather than as a basis for ethical judgment” (Cua, 2005, p. 94). Cua discovers that most of Xunzi’s prospective use of the historical appeal involves ethical explanations of historical events, rather than objective historical explanations (see Cua, 2005, pp. 95-96). Here, we come back to the historiography issue discussed above. Cua concludes,

*While the retrospective use of the historical appeal is conservative, the prospective use implies a creative form of ethical judgment, though essentially contestable, in response to exigent and changing circumstances. Its argumentative value lies in laying the ground for a possible reasonable acceptance rather than invoking the support of an established framework of ethical justification. (Cua, 2005, p. 97)*

In short, the Classical Confucians, like Xunzi, demonstrate the interaction of the ethical and the historical. While the historical appeal may sometimes help provide justification for ethical judgment, sometimes it is scrutinized and is in need of ethical interpretation.

### 4.3 The correspondence and interaction between the time of history and the time of ethics in Classical Confucianism and the significance

That being the case, we may say that, on the one hand, the time of history in Classical Confucians always has ethical content (for the tradition—like the Classics—handed down are about the ethical, and history are always viewed with an ethical eye, etc.) that ineluctably *turns people into the mode of the time of ethics, though somehow in an imagined or latent sense (for the encounters are not actual, say we are not witnessing a child falling into a well)*; on the other hand, *it is nothing but the time of ethics that fills in the content of the time of history*. That is, whenever one views or situates one’s lifetime in or with the historical tradition, the major direction of thinking and the goals being pursued are always something related to the ethical; and whenever one is in the time of ethics, one is always fulfilling the content of the time of history. In Classical Confucianism, the relation between the time of history and the time of ethics thus sees the interesting correspondence and interaction, which provides an alternative to Bernet, who claims that the time of history can have nothing to do with the ethical. Then, the scenario is not a one-way traffic: holding the time of history brings you to the ethical and being in the time of the ethical you manifest or fulfill your time of history. Hence, it is not difficult to catch up with what our tradition has been aiming at and doing through ethical practices and the tradition in turn prompts us to be ethical. It is because while perceiving the time that yourself is placed in history or the tradition, your time is enriched by the Classics like the *Analects* and *Zuozhuan* which have the ethical encounters recorded and by viewing events with an ethical eye; whereas when helping a needy person, your time interrupted by the needy is also a manifestation of gist of the time of history.

## 5 Conclusion

This article argues that by referring to Classical Confucianism, we obtain that traditions taking the ethical (such as various ethical goals and cultivation) as essence may manifest a correspondence and an interaction of its time of history and time of ethics. On the one hand, the time of history of the Classical Confucians (in terms of what Classics hand down, their viewing of history with an ethical eye, etc.) always has ethical content that ineluctably turns people into the mode of the time of ethics, although somehow *in an imagined or latent sense*; on the other hand, it is nothing but the time of ethics that fills in the

content of the time of history. Then, holding the time of history brings you to the ethical and being in the time of the ethical you manifest or fulfill your time of history. Then, it is thus not difficult to catch up with what our tradition has been aiming at through ethical practices and the tradition in turns prompt us to be ethical.

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