

The Contemporary Value of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology: Centered on *An Outline of Historiography*

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Abstract

First published in 1924, *An Outline of Historiography* embodies Li Dazhao's views on historical epistemology, which absorb the essence of traditional Chinese philosophy and the achievements of Western historical philosophy. This paper focuses on the main contents of Li Dazhao's historical epistemology, highlighting three major characteristics: taking historical materialism as the essential core, the macro - historical perspective as the process feature, and dynamic cognition as the dialectical thinking method. The study finds that Li Dazhao's historical epistemology not only provides a useful reference for the development of today's historiography and the construction of history discipline with Chinese characteristics, but also offers philosophical guidance for the shaping of individual outlook on life and the construction of beliefs in human development. By connecting early Marxist historiography with contemporary concerns, this study demonstrates the lasting academic vitality and social significance of Li Dazhao's theoretical heritage.

Keywords

Li Dazhao; Historical epistemology; *An Outline of Historiography*.

1. The Domestic and Foreign Ideological Factors in the Formation of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology

1.1. Sublation of Traditional Chinese Historical Philosophy

1.1.1. Rejection of the outdated historical view of cyclical destiny

Ancient Chinese rulers claimed to govern by divine mandate, with dynastic changes seen as cyclical according to the theory of the five elements' succession. In *Shangshu*: Pan Geng I, it is stated, "The former kings had their duties, conscientiously observing the mandate of heaven," which was later developed by Dong Zhongshu into a theory of destiny centered on the divine right of kings and the interaction between heaven and mankind [1]. In his essay *Historical Perspectives*, Li Dazhao analyzed the strong flavor of divine destiny in historical views throughout history, noting that ancient philosophers mostly attributed the rise and fall of nations and the fortunes of individuals to divine laws, disregarding historical laws[2]. This mainstream historical view, deeply rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy, persisted until the late Qing Dynasty. Li Dazhao referred to historical views imbued with divine right, spirituality, individualism, and cyclicity as the "old historical view," emphasizing that establishing a new historical view with progressive, human-centered, materialistic, and social characteristics was crucial for countering outdated perspectives[2].

1.1.2. The Materialist-Progressive View of History as a Creative Transformation

Traditional Chinese historiography was, in its social function, a "statecraft historiography": it recorded and interrogated the concrete "affairs of humanity" and was meant to serve their resolution. Ever since Confucius edited the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, there has been a

"people-centred" tradition; Sima Qian inherited the spirit of the Annals, investigating the principles behind rise and fall so as to perceive decline within prosperity. Even Zhang Xuecheng in the Qing, confronted by an era rushing toward evidential scholarship, still upheld a statecraft attitude of "remedying the age's excesses." Li Dazhao entered a private school at six and immersed himself in the *Four Books*, the *Five Classics*, and other canonical histories. Precisely because these Chinese classics became second nature to him, he was able to flexibly re-appropriate their essence. He creatively transformed the best of traditional Chinese historiography, fused its statecraft purpose with a new materialist-progressive conception of history, and redirected this synthesis toward the twin realities of national salvation and social revolution.

1.2. Standing on the Shoulders of Foreign Philosophers of History

1.2.1. Drawing on the Values of Western Enlightenment and Progressive Historiography

As early as the sixteenth century, the French thinker Bodin criticized the medieval cyclical-retrogressive history dominated by theology and contributed to a theory of historical progress. By the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Condorcet argued that the study of the history of civilization could establish the fact of progress, thereby clarifying the direction forward and accelerating its pace[3]. Li Dazhao absorbed these Western doctrines of human progress. He held that although human history displays momentary spirals of "rise and decline, decline and rise," the overall movement is cyclical-forward and ascending, rather than cyclical-stagnant or cyclical-regressive[2]. Li further developed Western progressive historiography, insisting that history is social transformation—an ever-changing human life and the culture it produces[2].

1.2.2. Incorporating the Theoretical Core of Western Materialist and Dialectical Views of History

During his studies in Japan, Li Dazhao encountered Japanese Marxist theory through the works of Kawakami Hajime and Sakai Toshihiko; in *New Youth* he published *My View of Marxism*, arguing that historical materialism is the theoretical foundation of Marxist doctrine. He also studied Kant and Hegel. From Kant he borrowed the method of "critique of reason," emphasizing the rational analysis of the historical subject to uncover the essential laws of human history. From Hegel he adopted the insight that "history is a dialectical process of development," while simultaneously rejecting its idealist notion of "Absolute Spirit."

1.3. Forging and Sublimation in the Crucible of Revolutionary Practice

1.3.1. The October Revolution Verified Scientific Historiography in Practice

The victory of the October Revolution in Russia empirically confirmed Marxist theory on class struggle and the succession of social formations. Li Dazhao analyzed the causes and repercussions of the revolution and, drawing on this foreign success, keenly perceived that a socialist path could likewise rescue China[3]. Having already embraced Marxism, Li regarded the revolution's triumph as decisive proof of the validity of historical materialism.

1.3.2. The New-Democratic Revolution Sparked Genuine Insights

The blood of the May Thirtieth Massacre and the cries of the May Fourth Movement tested the vitality of theory; the New-Democratic Revolution provided a Sinicized arena for Marxism. Amid the socialist debates over China's future, Li shifted from theoretical propaganda to leading concrete struggles—organizing the Marxist Theory Research Society and founding Beijing's first Communist cells. His understanding of history moved from a scholar's pursuit to a practical guide, enriched and refined through action. The distillation of Li's historical thought, *An Outline of Historiography*, crystallizes his epistemological achievements.

2. The Content of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology

2.1. Subject and Object of Historical Cognition The Subject

2.1.1. Subject of Historical Cognition

Broadly, every member of society is a subject of historical cognition; narrowly, it is the historian. Li focused on the latter. He argued that historians must cultivate an open, rational, and objective disposition, explicitly stating that they should possess a "natural historical perspective," refusing to force history to conform to personal bias. Only thus can one handle sources with impartial rigor [2]. Adequate methods and knowledge are equally indispensable.

2.1.2. The Object of Historical Cognition

The object is the content under study. Li maintained that human history is the longitudinal observation of the manifold interrelated aspects of social life. It must encompass all social phenomena, not merely political or economic history [2]. For Li, history is "a living entity, observed horizontally in the present and extended vertically into the past," not a dead archive [2].

2.2. Formation and Deepening of Historical Cognition

2.2.1. The Active Human Grasp of History

Cognition is an active process in which the subject, through practice, reflects the objective world. Because the same historical fact elicits different interpretations across eras, within the same era, and even within the same individual, Li emphasized that "history fears not rewriting—it must be rewritten." Only by continually applying the latest historical perspectives and evidence to correct previous inaccuracies can one asymptotically approach historical truth [2].

2.2.2. Flexible "Interpretation" of History

While historical facts are fixed, their interpretations are fluid. Li coined the term *jieyu* ("interpretation") for the mutable "knowledge of historical facts." This knowledge evolves as overall understanding expands. Thus, unlike "dead" facts, *jieyu* keeps history alive and contemporaneous [2].

2.3. The Truth of Historical Cognition

2.3.1. Authenticity in History and Historical Cognition

Li Dazhao's Views on the Dual Meanings of Historical Truth Li Dazhao believed that historical truth had a dual significance. On one hand, it meant the accurate recording of past events; on the other hand, it referred to the correct interpretation of those events [2]. Whether the history recorded and interpreted by human beings as the cognitive subjects can truly reflect, or to what extent it can reflect, the absolutely true history is related to how close historical cognition ultimately gets to the absolute historical truth. To this end, in Li Dazhao's view, mere and sufficient historical records could not serve as the basis for historical truth. Only through continuous and adequate interpretation could they be considered a temporary historical truth within a constantly changing historical reality [2].

2.3.2. The Absoluteness and Relativity of Truth in Historical Cognition

Li Dazhao once stated that he believed there was "a unique and singular truth in the universe," and this truth "must be based on science, follow its logical boundaries, and be manifested in the intellectual perceptions of humanity," setting a clear boundary from superstition and fallacy that "cannot be obscured by legendary superstitions." [3] He believed that while there was no ultimate absolute truth, truth could "change with the course of history" and be continuously improved in practice, with people's understanding of it also deepening over time [3]. He also argued that due to changes in historical interpretation, what was considered true last year might not be true this year, and what was true yesterday might not be true today [2]. Moreover,

"it is extremely difficult for one person's intellectual perception to fully comprehend all existing entities." Therefore, the truth that each individual or era could achieve was limited and relative [3].

3. Characteristics of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology

3.1. Historical Materialism as the Essential Core of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology

3.1.1. Historical Materialism Provides a New Method for Historical Research

Li Dazhao stated that the purpose of conducting historical research with historical materialism was to obtain the complete historical truth, which was fundamentally different from the historical records written under the old historical outlook as tools for the ruling class to deceive the people. It was a study of social evolution [2]. The method of interpreting history from a materialist perspective "does not seek its causes in the power of the mind" but attributes them to the power of matter. He pointed out that the most important thing was to find the means by which a nation's people made a living, which was the key to progress and change in other aspects [2]. This meant that when interpreting history, one must first analyze objective social existence to obtain true historical cognition.

3.1.2. Historical Materialism Offers a New Perspective for Observing Society

Li Dazhao believed that historical materialists regarded economic phenomena as the most crucial aspect of observing social phenomena because economic changes were the most developed and significant among the qualitative elements in history, and economic factors were also the only material elements in history [3]. The economic structure was the foundational structure of society, and the entire surface structure of society changed accordingly [3]. This indicated that when interpreting social phenomena in different historical periods, attention should be paid to the contradictory movements between productive forces and production relations and the interactive mechanisms between the economic base and the superstructure, making it easier to obtain true historical cognitive effects when examining complex and changing social phenomena [3].

3.2. The Macro-Historical Perspective as a Processual Feature of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology

3.2.1. The Close Connection between Literature, History and Philosophy

Li Dazhao believed that literature, history, and philosophy were of the same origin but different streams, all deriving from ancient myths and legends. But they ultimately converged in helping us shape our personal cultivation [2]. The records of ancient myths and biographies were both literary and historical, and historical compilers often had multiple identities such as historians and litterateurs. Historians should balance their written expressions with the calm mind of scientists and not embellish history with literary flourishes or fervent emotions [2]. He also analyzed the contact points between philosophy and history in three aspects: the history of philosophy, philosophical history, and the philosophy of history, using the influence of Hegel's dialectics on Marx's historical materialism as an example to illustrate that historical outlook originated from philosophical thought [2]. It can be seen that Li Dazhao did not think about the discipline of history in isolation but placed it within the macro-relational network of knowledge to consider its disciplinary position.

3.2.2. Cross-Level Interactions Reveal Historical Laws

Li Dazhao believed that to study and examine the experiences of human life that constitute history, one should analyze the life experiences of humans as individuals, as members of clans, communities, nations, ethnic groups, and even as members of all humanity, rather than

adopting the narrow view that "history is the biography of society." He divided the recorded history in broad historiography into six levels from micro to macro: personal history, clan history, community history, national history, ethnic history, and human history. By examining and interpreting history from this overall framework, he revealed the interactive relationship between individual practices and group destinies, demonstrating his grand historical concept [2].

3.3. Dynamic Cognition as a Dialectical Interpretation of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology

3.3.1. A Dialectical View of the "Present" and the "Past"

The comparison between the merits of the present and the past can easily lead to two extremes: the "nostalgic" school that reveres the past and the "present-worshipping" school that exalts the present. In Li Dazhao's view, one should adopt a dialectical attitude toward the debate between the present and the past and not completely deny either the present or the past. Li Dazhao's concept of the present and the past contained a dynamic and dialectical understanding of "change and continuity" because the destiny of the universe and human history were constantly changing, and history was continuously progressing and changing forward and upward with a certain continuity. Human life was a continuous and proliferating existence, forming a great life from ancient times to the present, so the present also contained the good values of the past [2].

3.3.2. The Dialectical Unity of "Living History" and "Historical Records"

Li Dazhao believed that history was the culture produced by and for human life, and since human life was constantly progressing and changing, history was also alive and dynamic [2]. Studying living history sometimes relied on recorded materials, but there was also living history beyond old documents. For example, studying Lenin required referring to books about Lenin, but books about Lenin were not equivalent to Lenin himself, showing the difference between history and historical materials and records [2]. In the past, historical writing was too narrow, focusing only on political aspects and records centered on the aristocracy. Economic, religious, and artistic lives were all part of human life, so they should all be included in the scope of historical records and research [2]. History was also social transformation, which existed at every moment in the past, present, and future. The scope of living history included not only the past but also the present and the future [2].

4. The Contemporary Value of Li Dazhao's Historical Epistemology

4.1. Inspiring the Development Direction of Contemporary Historiography

4.1.1. Rethinking the Value of An Outline of Historiography from the Academic Periphery to the Center

Since its publication in 1924, *An Outline of Historiography* has been continuously reprinted and has experienced a journey from the "periphery" to the "center" in the academic world [4]. Fan Wenlan praised Li Dazhao as "China's early Marxist historical scientist," and his work is regarded as a pioneering work of Marxist historiography in contemporary academia [5]. This reflects the current academic recognition of Li Dazhao's historical thought and theoretical achievements and also prompts the academic community to reflect on the future development direction of Marxist historiography.

4.1.2. Look at the potential of research in the field of grand historical perspective and historical theory

Xi Jinping said that Only throughout the long course of human development can the essence of historical movements and the direction of the time be discerned [6]. He also claimed that

historical research is the foundation of all social sciences, and it is pointed out that efforts should be made to promote the integrated development of related historical disciplines and integrate research forces in areas such as Chinese history, world history, and archaeology [7]. It can be seen that Xi's grand historical perspective of grasping the historical process from the overall and continuous perspective of a long period of time coincides with Li Dazhao's research concept of the macroscopic historical framework. In addition, to improve the construction of the historical discipline system, academic system and discourse system with Chinese characteristics, it is necessary to pay attention to some weak points existing in the research of historical theory fields such as historical epistemology and methodology.

4.2. Promoting the Progress of History as a Discipline with Chinese Characteristics in Line with the Times

4.2.1. Integrating the Development of Historiography into the Framework of Socialism and National Rejuvenation

Li Dazhao emphasized that history is created by the people, and the ordinary populace constitutes the fundamental force driving historical progress. This enlightens contemporary historiography to further highlight the people's subjectivity, construct a "people's historiography," and explore the contributions of the masses in national rejuvenation. Through research methods such as oral history and social history, the roles of ordinary individuals in significant historical events can be documented. Continuing to adhere to the guidance of historical materialism and emphasizing the integration of history with reality, experiences can be summarized from the historical logic of China's modernization to provide historical wisdom for national rejuvenation.

4.2.2. Balancing Social Benefits and Academic Rationality in the Development of Historiography

During a speech at Shanghai University, Li Dazhao mentioned that when we observe ancient documents from a new historical perspective, we can gain fresh insights and uncover accurate facts [2]. Chinese historiography continues to evolve and explore new perspectives. The vast majority of historical cognizers fully exert their subjective initiative in the process of exploring history, not only delving deeper at the academic level but also taking into account its social benefits. This ensures that new historical insights and experiences serve both the construction of a socialist market economy and public education, thereby promoting the progress of history as a discipline with Chinese characteristics in line with the times.

4.3. Strengthening Education in a Scientific Historical outlook

4.3.1. The Shaping of Worldview through Historical Outlook

Li Dazhao said that only knowledge or learning that is useful to life is true knowledge or learning, and historical research is both a kind of learning and knowledge, which has a huge impact on life. First, it can cultivate an attitude of respecting and valuing science, thereby helping to shape a down-to-earth outlook on life [2]. Second, we should have a clear and progressive view of history and the world, guiding us to discover our world, ourselves and our authority in history. Only in this way can we not wallow in the past, not be distracted by the future, not be empty talk, not be sad and lament about fate, not be numb and appeal to heaven and sages, and give us an optimistic and hardworking outlook on life [2].

4.3.2. The Golden Age is Always Ahead of Us

Li Dazhao's correct understanding of continuous world and historical progress tells us that there is no need for pessimism or reverence for the past, as the future is bright. The golden age will not be behind us but always ahead, created through our current and future efforts [2]. This

represents not only an optimistic and forward-moving attitude that individuals should possess but also the confidence that humanity as a whole should hold in a better future.

5. Concluding Remarks

Li Dazhao's historical epistemology still holds cautionary significance today. On one hand, it reminds contemporary historiography to be wary of the pitfalls of fragmented research. In the current era of the prevalence of microhistory and new cultural history, Li Dazhao's concept of revising and reconstructing history reminds us that detailed textual research should be combined with a macro-explanatory framework to prevent mere concatenation and accumulation of historical materials. A successful historical work must undergo the process of interpreting historical records. On the other hand, amidst the technological innovations in quantitative historiography and AI text analysis, Li Dazhao's emphasis on "historical subjectivity" cautions historical researchers against technological alienation and urges them to maintain humanistic adherence during digital transformation. Digital technology should serve as an "engine" propelling history and other humanities disciplines forward, while humanistic spirit should act as the "conductor" steering the direction.

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