

Ethic Dilemmas of Characters in *Zuo Zhuan* and Herodotus' *Histories*

WANG Xianpei, Central China Normal University

Translated by WANG Yingzi, Shanghai University

Abstract: As historical and literary classics, both *Zuo Zhuan* and Herodotus' *Histories* attach great importance to the roles of ethics in social history. In these two works, the ethical predicament encountered by certain characters are keenly observed and carefully portrayed. Some predicaments are imposed by external factors, and others are brought about by the conflicts of the characters' internal ethical values. The characters' choices when facing these predicament and their consequences reveal the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western ethical values, which have exerted a far-reaching effect on later generations, not only providing enlightenment and lessons for modern people, but also offering useful reference for contemporary literature and literary criticism.

Key Words: Herodotus' *Histories*; *Zuo Zhuan*; ethic dilemma; choice

1. The Difference of Ethics between *Zuo Zhuan* and *Histories*

Zuo Zhuan and Herodotus' *Histories* are the earliest classics of Chinese history and western history respectively as well as the literary classics of the world of early phase. Despite the segregation between China and Greece and Persia when the two books were created as well as their different objects and cognitive frameworks, they share one pronounced character of recording national ups and downs, regime change, alteration of territories, important wars, different customs, reflecting different ethics of different nations and races. Such contents indicate a historical notion that ethics have an important influence on racial and national fate as well as a literary concept that literature can reflect, spread and change ethics custom to some extent. Herodotus cited former poet that "custom is the dominator of every-

About the Author: Wang Xianpei is a professor and doctoral supervisor at the school of literature, Central China Normal University, served as president of Hubei Writers Association. He is mainly engaged in literary criticism and research on the direction of ancient Chinese literary theories. His representative works include *The Tutorial of Literary Criticism* and *History of Theoretical Criticism in Ming and Qing Dynasties*, etc.

thing.” The meaning of “ethics” and “custom” is closely related to each other in ancient Greece. What Herodotus wanted to express was his attention to ethics, considering the context. (Herodotus 212)¹ Reading the two books can set us thinking about how different natural and social environments have nurtured different ethic customs, how people should treat the differences and contradiction between the ethic customs of different nations, how we can evaluate the function of ethics in the development of social history and how the rulers of the mainstream society of a nation recognize and deal with the relations among different ethic customs as well as their influence on the cohesion of social members and national stability and development. Literature is an important channel for people to understand each other’s ethic custom which can either facilitate the approaching and integration of various customs and ethic ideas or deepen their segregation and opposition, which is up to the ideology and standpoint of the author as well as the ideology and standpoint of readers in the first place. In addition to the objective depiction of various customs and ethic ideas in *Histories* and *Zuo Zhuan*, authors’ ethic ideology are also expressed. There are many interpretations with regard to the two classics in both China and western world for the last 2000 years. Therefore, it is worth our attention and discussion to further understand the ethic ideas expressed in the two classics, realize their distinction and the far-reaching influence on the ethic culture of both China and western world and know about the function of historical writing and literary writing on the formation and evolution of national ethic traditions.

Varying with different ages and ethnicities, ethic custom of a nation or an age should not be judged by another nation or an age. However, they can compare with each other and learn from each other. Many tragedies, even wars triggered by the conflicts of ethic customs have been recorded time and again. Herodotus is critical of monarchs who mock the customs of other nations. He claimed that Cambyses II, the Persian King, was “a very crazy figure” because he made fun of religions and customs of other nations. (Herodotus 211-212). Words and deeds of rulers in this regard tend to arouse huge disasters, as Herodotus remarked, everyone thought that customs of his own nation were the best, which were, however, ridiculous and unbelievable from the perspective of another nation. Herodotus gave an example that Darius, the successor of Cambyses II, asked Greeks if they would eat their fathers’ bodies, and then asked if Indians who ate their fathers’ bodies would cremate them, both of which were replied with “that’s unimaginable”. As a matter of fact, it is considered proper that ancient Greeks cremate their parents and some of ancient Indians eat their fathers’ bodies according to their ethic ideas. “People are reluctant to accept any customs of foreigners” (Herodotus 294) in many historical periods. Customs and ethics of different historical periods and territories have developed on

the basis of different productivity levels and economic and political institutions, which all deserve our reasonable explanations from the perspective of modern science.

The concept of *Tu Yi* is mentioned in *Zuo Zhuan*, as Pan Guangdan noted, “*Tu Yi* is mentioned for several times in *Zuo Zhuan*.”² *Tu Yi* refers to the idea that ethic customs of all nations, ethnicities and cultural bodies should be in line with their environment and traditions respectively without uniformity. It is thus clear that the respect for the particularity of ethic customs of all nations and territories can date back to the Spring and Autumn period.

In one word, authors of *Zuo Zhuan* and *Histories* advocate that people, especially rulers of strong power, should make effort to understand ethics different from theirs and respect the choice of other groups, which is still enlightening for the co-existence of various culture all over the world.

2. The Difficult Choice Forced by External Power

What makes people interested is the display of the ethic predicament of some characters and those unexpected choices they make during the critical moments in *Zuo Zhuan* and *Histories*, and exposure or implication of the influence of their choices on their own, groups they belong to, national fate and later generations, which can be very enlightening and alarming for modern human troubled by diversified ethics. MacIntyre, an accomplished and influential philosopher in modern philosophical ethics, pointed out in *Ethic Dilemma* that despite of the fact that modern scholars pay more attention to ethic dilemmas than ever before, they fail to get rid of and transcend ethic dilemmas and draw up effective theoretical construction, which means that proper guidance has never been given to those who struggle in dilemmas. Therefore, his conclusion is that we should come back to ancient times and return to the virtue traditions of Aristotle. MacIntyre classified ethic dilemmas into three categories: first, as one always has to be assigned at least one social character, sometimes the duty of one character can block him from fulfilling that of another one; second, due to the heterogeneity of ethical norms, obeying one doctrine can go against another one; third, the ideal ethics of one behavior can conflict with that of another one.³ By referring to MacIntyre’s idea and considering the common phenomenon of modern society, ethic dilemmas are divided into two types in this paper, namely the difficult choice forced by power and the entanglement and regret caused by inner conflicts.

Now let's focus on the first type. One story in *Zuo Zhuan* goes that the emperor of the state of Zheng ordered Yong Jiu, the son-in-law of Zhai Zhong, a minister in power of the state of Zheng, to kill Zhai Zhong. Yong Jiu told his wife Yong Ji about it, who went her parental home to discuss it with her mother. Yong Ji asked her mother, "Who is closer to me, my father or my husband?" Her mother answered, "You can have a lot of choices when it comes to your husband, but you have only one father. Isn't it clear to you now?" Yong Ji and her mother then told Zhai Zhong about it. As a result, Zhai Zhong took the initiative and killed his son-in-law at first. (*Zuo Zhuan* 56) As we can see, a difficult ethic issue was placed in the face of Yong Ji when she heard about the plot from her husband, which put her into an ethic dilemma where she was allowed to choose only one side in the struggle among her father, her husband and the emperor. Xu Qian, scholar of the Ming Dynasty, pointed out that "The monarch and his subjects, father and son, husband and wife, belong to the most important human relationships." Yong Ji and her mother only considered her husband and father, but left the monarch alone. Therefore, they have been violently criticized by Xu Qian and those later generations when it comes to the interpretation of the book. Is it true that these critics hold better solutions than Yong Ji and her mother? Not necessarily. Xu Qian suggested that Yong Ji should encourage her husband to advise to the emperor or take poison to kill herself to avoid watching such struggle. Xu Qian implied that all of Yong Ji, her husband and her father should go die to show their utmost respect for royal authority in this cruel power struggle, indicating that the ethic idea of principle of feudal moral conduct and highest monarch power exerted a more thorough and rigor control over scholars and common people from the Qing and Han Dynasties to the Qing Dynasty than that of the Spring and Autumn period, which is strongly objected by the ideological trend of democratic revolution in the 20th century.

There is a woman in *Histories* who suffered a similar ethic dilemma as Yong Ji did. Darius arrested the whole family of a man who launched coup d'état to seize the throne. His wife cried every day in front of the palace gate. Seeing this, Darius said that one of the family could be remitted, which was up to her choice. The woman chose her younger brother at last. Darius asked why she abandon her husband and son. She answered that "Your Majesty, I can have a new husband and some other children if God feels sorry for me. But my parents are all dead, which means I can never have a brother of mine." Clearly, she happened to share the same view of Yong Ji's mother.

What modern literary ethic criticism should do is not judging whether Yong Ji and the wife were doing the right thing in their respective ethic dilemmas as many scholars did in the last 2000 years, but instead, exposing the reason why they did

what they did and the deep significance of the description made by ancient authors and historians so as to offer reference for modern people to get rid of ethic dilemmas.

There are three aspects to be weighed when it comes to making decision in ethic dilemmas, namely emotion, reason and gains and losses, among which reason is referred to as the rational analysis made by the subject under the guidance of the basic principle of ethic ideas. As for Yong Ji and her mother, they didn't talk about which side was doing the right thing and which one was not, thus failing to deduce who was right and who was wrong from ethic principle; the prisoner's wife was not even allowed to gain the opportunity to consider good and evil. Therefore, it is the monarch who did the wrong thing first in the above mentioned two cases. The ethic dilemmas imposed upon characters by their monarchs in the two books set reader thinking about the condemnation of the evilness of external force, Darius and the emperor of the state of Zheng who fabricated the ethic dilemmas of those women. It is quite similar to "Sophie's choice" in modern literature exposing the evilness of German Fascism, which is the value of excellent literary work.⁴ However, regulated by the idea of supreme imperial power, some scholars think that the ridiculous orders of monarchs should also be obeyed without questioning. Fang Xiaoru, scholar of the Ming Dynasty, criticized the ethics in *Zuo Zhuan* and believed that monarch himself was even more important than the whole nation, which seemed to jump out of ethic dilemmas and thus exposing the anti-rational and anti-humanity of ethics in totalitarian.

In addition to the source of external force, it still deserves our attention why individuals make one choice instead of another in the situation. What Yong Ji and her mother thought about was which one, father or husband, was closer. However, Yong Ji's mother asked her daughter to sacrifice her husband in order to keep the father safe, which was contradictory to the fact that she was also trying to protect her husband, thus showing the logical inconsistency. And as for the second case, the wife said she could find another husband and bear some children, but they actually no longer were her original husband and children, therefore, her reason was also imperfect. As a matter of fact, the basis of their choices are not emotion nor reason, but gains and losses. What the two women faced, in terms of modern scholars, are differential patterns. They were forced to make choices among their fathers, husbands, sons and brother, who were all their relatives. However, considering the special situation, only one of them could survive. Forced to decide their life or death, the women had to make choice by order. Their choices put their parental advantage as priority, which was based on their social system. "You can have a lot of choices when it comes to your husband" didn't mean that every man could be her

husband. Instead, as a woman from noble family, she had the freedom to choose her husband once or even more times. Many cases of remarriage of women from noble families were recorded in *Zuo Zhuan*, which were quite common and not a shame for them. Introduction of sexual customs totally different from later monogamy in *Zuo Zhuan* should be regarded as the relic of communal marriage. Ancient Chinese, Greeks and Persians wouldn't be as frightened as scholars after the Song Dynasty with regard to the saying that "You can have a lot of choices when it comes to your husband".

The most important basis of marriage is established on family interests, and marriage is the alliance of political interests among families. Aristocratic family system prevailed among these kingdoms in ancient China, which constitutes ruling class. Power and position were passed down from generation to generation among this aristocratic families which were bonded by marriage. Therefore, the fate of family members were closed related to each other, and many women still put their parental interest before that of their husbands' after they got married, which is similar to the situation of Persia. It is out of the concern of safeguarding family's power and influence and preserving the hope of family rejuvenation in unfavorable situation that women tend to protect the safety of their fathers and brothers in patriarchal society. The saying that "You can have a lot of choices when it comes to your husband" means that marriage can be oriented for the interest of parental family and political alliance. The saying that "There is only one father" means that the intrinsic family cannot be chosen or changed, and that a family tends to decay if the father is killed. People can fight with monarchs for the family interest. For instance, Zhai Zhong who experienced the regime of four monarchs actually had greater power than them. However, scholars of the Ming and Qing Dynasties got accustomed to the idea that the country should be governed by emperors with same surname for thousands of years and that monarchical power, paternity and authority of the husband should be unified without confrontation. In case of conflicts, monarch should come first, then father, and husband the last. Besides, the interest or even life of the parties involved can be left out.

3. The Entanglement and Regret Caused by Inner Conflicts

Now let's focus on the second type of ethic dilemmas, namely that the subjects have the possibility of making choice but suffer entanglement and regret caused by inner conflicts for incompatible ethic ideas. For example, *Zuo Zhuan* recorded that

Duke Ling of Jin sent Chu Ni to assassinate Zhao Dun who often stopped his violent deed. Chu Ni went to fulfill his task in the wee hours, but found that Zhao Dun was already dressed and waited for the levee. Chu Ni couldn't help but sighing, "He is such a good master of folk. I'll be a disloyal person if I assassinate him; but I'll be unfaithful if I forget about the king's order. I have no choice but to kill oneself!" Later, Chu Ni hit himself at a tree and died. (*Zuo Zhuan* 165). There was no force to drive him to death, and he could finish his task or quit it and run away. It was out of his conscience that it was against ethics to kill a decent officer or disobey the order of his king that he committed suicide. As Macintyre pointed out, the subject deduced two conclusions based on two premises both of which he had no reason to doubt. He noted that the feature of such dilemma was that "parties involved held a consistent idea that there was certain right direction to be recognized contrary to the present situation and that it was their duty to discover and adopt this direction. Please pay attention that dilemma wouldn't torture them so much if there was no such idea." Such being the case, it is due to the fact that parties involved cannot get rid of the confrontation of the two ethic principles that causes the pain and death of them.

Another story in *Zuo Zhuan* recorded that the minister of the State of Chu, Yu Quan, tried to correct the mistake of King Wen of Chu, but he wouldn't listen. Yu Quan had no choice but to threaten him by using weapons, and the king had to accept his suggestion. Yu Quan said that "I committed a serious crime as I threatened the king by weapon, so I have to cut off my legs as a punishment". Later, the king was defeated in war and returned, but Yu Quan closed the city gate and forced him to go back to the battle field, which ended up with their victory. At last, Yu Quan killed himself as the king got ill and died. His deed was spoken highly of in the book, however, Fang Xiaoru opposed it and pointed out that "*Zuo Zhuan* set an example for later generations that ministers can threaten the king in the name of loyalty and love." There are at least two questions. First, do subjects have to obey the orders of king? According to some appalling violence of Duke Ling of Jin and Zhao Dun's criticism of him recorded in the book, readers can make their judgment that it is a new evildoing of assassinating Zhao Dun, which should not be executed. What Yu Quan did was for the national interest, and it was not a mistake, not to mention crime, to refuse the order which went against national and people's interest. The second question is that how we should evaluate the suicide of Chu Ni and Yu Quan, who paid more attention to the ethic rules they believed in instead of emotion nor profit. Their suicidal was caused by the violent confrontation between the two sets of ethic principles, among which one was bound to be wrong. They thought that they shouldn't disobey orders of king despite their awareness that they

were unjust. It is natural that we know it is far too insensible to kill oneself in order not to be disloyal to the king who issue the evil order. However, the two men gave up their rights of living just for their ethic idea, which has aroused great pity among later generations. Ethics boasts great power that can be passed on from generation to generation within a nation, which is a vital part of national culture. Even though later generations are not in favor of some original contents of previous times, some parts of the spirit need to be preserved. For instance, the ethic idea of the virtues of loyalty, filialness and benevolence established in the early phase of China has been bestowed with a narrow sense by confucianists in certain ear, which has been sublated since the May 4th Movement. However, the virtue of loyalty has always been adored by the majority as it is not referred to being loyal to one person, but a just cause. People's pity for the death of Yu Quan and Chu Ni indicates the complexity of the inheritance of ethic rules.

There is a similar case in *Histories*. The king of Medea had a dream and the oneiromancer told him that the descendent of his daughter would be his successor. As a result, the king ordered one of his ministers to kill the grandson, which threw him into an ethic dilemma. On one hand, the minister wouldn't go against the order of the king. On the other hand, he wouldn't have the heart to kill an innocent baby. But different from Chu Ni, he considered his own safety and interest at first instead of emotion or reason. He drained his brain to figure out a method by which he could fulfill the order and needn't to be a killer himself. Finally, he found a herd and told him that terrible death would come down to him if he didn't kill the baby. In this way, the minister shifted the dilemma to the herd. Then the herd discussed about it with his wife; they threw their own dead baby into a valley and took the king's grandson as their own baby. In this case, they wouldn't neither be punished by their master nor committing crime of killing a baby. They turned down the evil order and kept their own safety. The choices made by the herd and minister in the ethic dilemma shared some similarities of that age, but at the same time, showed the difference between kind folk and cunning minister. (Herodotus, 55-59) Chu Ni and Yu Quan, as well as the herd couple, have gained the respect as historical figures. However, the minister had no ethic principle nor prepared to sacrifice his life for his faith. The author seemed to despise him in his later record of the king's angry rebuke on the minister for losing a battle.

It is unrealistic to ask all ancient people to go against the wrong and evil orders of monarchs directly. It is also not a proper deed for men of letters and historians to speak highly of the obedience of wrong and evil orders. What triggers the anxiety of the parties involved in ethic dilemma is how to comply with their own ethic principles and protect the long-term interest at the same times when imposed on ethic

dilemma forced by outside factors, which is also discussed on the two books. They offer some examples for later generations. In *Zuo Zhuan*, Duke Xian of Jin listened to the slanderous talk of Li Ji and suppressed Shen Sheng and Chong Er. Shen Sheng, who didn't listen to the advice of others and neither defended nor fled to another place, hung himself in the ethic dilemma. In contrary, Chong Er fled to another place for 19 years, and became Duke Wen of Jin after he returned and developed the state of Jin. Later, Liu Qi, Liu Biao's son, suffered the same dilemma as Shen Sheng and Chong Er did, in the three kingdoms period. He asked advice from Zhuge Liang, who pointed out that "Shen Sheng was in danger as he stayed in the nation, while Chong Er kept safety as he went abroad." It is thus clear that the lessons learnt from the different strategies adopted in ethic dilemmas offered in *Zuo Zhuan* were thought highly of by later generations.

The close relation between the ethic dilemmas caused by inner ideas and the self-cognition of the subjects' identity provides huge space for interpretation of literary ethic criticism. Main characters in tragedy tend to be lack of proper understanding of their multiple ethic identities and the relationship between these identities. Characters in the two books have no idea that humans are the most important thing in the world. Autocratic monarch, such as Darius and the king of the state of Zheng treated human life as dirt. Many other characters also didn't pay enough attention to the life of their own and their relatives'. Human value has been recognized gradually by the development of society. As Kant pointed out the proposition that "Man is the end" in *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, he said that "Your deed should consider your own humanity and other people's humanity as the end at all times instead of just means.", and that "generally speaking, every rational being lives as the end. He is not simply a tool at random use by some willingness. No matter for him or other rational being, his deed should be considered as an end at all times."⁵

People need take emotion and interest into consideration in ethic dilemmas, but cannot give up careful thought based on ration, which transcends physical desire and determines will without being influenced by subjective concepts. The duty of ethics is to enrich and improve our own humanity.

Human can encounter ethic dilemmas at all times. For example, who should be saved at first among so many victims in a sudden disaster? Which is more important, loyalty or filial piety? The constant ethic dilemmas is an important theme of tragedy and philosophy, which has been elucidated and demonstrated in various ways. As for *Zuo Zhuan* and *Histories*, the former pay more attention to the consistency and inheritance of ethic ideas while the latter the variability and otherness of ethic ideas. Nowadays, it is the researchers' duty to desert violent and fatuous

awareness and unceasingly strengthen and enrich the new ethic principles of our times by making comparative study of literary and historical classics and absorbing rational spirit of justice.

Notes

- 1 “Therefore, I think that Pindarus is right by saying ‘ custom is the dominator of everything’ .” *Histories*.
- 2 Pan Guangdan. *Pursuit of the Adaptability of Chinese*, Int'l Culture Publishing House, 1997, p. 3.
- 3 Macintyre. “Ethic Dilemma.” Translated by Mo Weimin, *International Philosophy*, 1st Issue, 1992.
- 4 The 11th chapter of *Records of the States in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty* can be used as an example, which depicts no internal struggle, thus weakening the tragic quality as compared with *Zuo Zhuan*.
- 5 Kant. *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. Translated by Miao litian, Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2002, p. 47, p. 48.

Works Cited

- Herodotus. 《历史》“Li Shi” [*Histories*]. Translated by Wang Yidu. Commercial Press, 1997.
- Zuo Zhuan.《春秋左氏传正义》“chunqiu zuoshi zhuan zhengyi”.《十三经注疏》“Shi San Jing Zhu Shu”
Zhonghua Book Company, 1980