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## The Study of Western Postmodern Philosophy of History in China in the Four Decades of Reform and Opening Up

**Abstract** In the 1960s and 1970s—as structuralism, post-structuralism, and literary criticism seeped into history—the “linguistic turn” or “narrative turn,” leading to what is known as postmodern philosophy of history, took place in Western philosophy of history. In the past forty years of reform and opening up to the outside world, and especially in the most recent two or three decades, Chinese research on Western postmodern philosophy of history has proceeded from overall review to in-depth research, and then on to reflection, criticism, and even transcendence. Neither the rethinking of historical objectivity and rationality nor the reconstruction of convictions about historical reason can work without the profound insights or theoretical tensions of postmodern philosophy of history.

**Keywords** Western postmodern philosophy of history in China, historical narrative, historical tropology, historical experience, reflection and transcendence

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In the 1960s and 1970s, as structuralism, post-structuralism, and literary criticism began to seep into history, Western philosophers of history—with Hayden White’s publication in 1973 of *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* as a starting point—set about successively employing narrative and tropology as theoretical tools to analyze historical texts and discourse. This brought about the “linguistic turn” or “narrative turn” in philosophy of history, leading to what is known as postmodern philosophy of history. Differing from modern philosophers, who regard language as a carrier conveying meaningful knowledge, structuralists and post-structuralists question language and its referential function. They hold that language is the ultimate horizon of reality, which is to say that there is no metalinguistic reality independent of human language or discourse. Language itself constitutes a relatively independent system of symbols, which are in endless mutual reference

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and hence can never reach a certain fixed meaning. The essence of postmodern philosophy of history is doubt about and deconstruction of objectivity in history. In the early 1990s or so, postmodern philosophy of history was formally imported into China and received much attention from the disciplines of history, philosophy, and literary criticism. Due to limitations of scope and length, this essay will mainly focus on general information about the research carried out by historians and philosophers in China concerning the postmodern philosophy of history represented by Hayden White.

With a comprehensive survey of research on postmodern philosophy of history by Chinese academia since reform and opening up in 1978, especially in the most recent two or three decades, we can see that it progressed from overall review to in-depth research, and then on to reflection, criticism, and even transcendence.

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## 1 The Overall Review Period (1980s to 2004)

Hayden White, an incontrovertibly leading theorist or theoretical standard-bearer for postmodern philosophy of history, was directly influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism, whose representatives include Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Before postmodern philosophy of history was introduced into China, Chinese scholars had learned something about Barthes and Foucault. In 1984, the “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” by Barthes was rendered into Chinese (translated by Zhang Yuhe), and through that essay Chinese scholars learned about thought concerning the consistency of function between historical and literary narratives. Meanwhile, the Chinese versions of Foucault’s works arrived in succession from the 1990s onward.<sup>1</sup>

From the point of view of presently available materials, the earliest essay published in China introducing postmodern philosophy of history was “Fictionality in Historical Narrative—Different Interpretations” (1988) by Yang Zhouhan 楊周涵, which mentions Hayden White from the perspective of comparative literature. The year 1993 witnessed the earliest translation of White’s works for mainland Chinese academia when *The New Historicism and Literary Criticism*, with Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛 as its chief compiler, included

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<sup>1</sup> From 1998 to 1999, the SDX Joint Publishing Company published in sequence three representative works of Foucault: *L’Archéologie du Savoir* (translated by Xie Qiang and Ma Yue), *Surveiller et punir* (translated by Liu Beicheng and Yang Yuanying), and *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (Liu Beicheng and Yang Yuanying). Another book authored by Foucault closely related to postmodern philosophy of history is *Les mots et les choses* (translated by Mo Weimin), published by Shanghai Joint Publishing Company in 2001.

four essays authored by White.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the 1990s, most general descriptions of philosophy of history published in China included postmodern philosophy of history in an independent chapter or section. For example, the *Western Philosophy of History—From Speculative to Analytic and Critical* (1997) written by Yan Jianqiang 严建强 and Wang Yuanming 王渊明 deals with postmodern philosophy of history as a contemporary new trend in its “Conclusion.” Meanwhile, Chinese scholars also published some introductory articles and reviews on postmodern philosophy of history on different journals.<sup>3</sup> This indicates that during this period Chinese scholars had realized and were paying more and more attention to the influence of postmodern philosophy of history as an independent theoretical genre.

After the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research on postmodern philosophy of history in China created a new situation. The *Postmodern Historical Narratology*, a collection of Chinese versions of Hayden White’s essays selected by himself (translated by Chen Yongguo and Zhang Wanjuan), met its Chinese readers in 2003; the *Contemporary Western Philosophy of History Reader (1967–2002)*, with Chen Xin 陈新 as its chief compiler, was published in 2004, featuring essays on historical narratives and historical rhetoric by Richard T. Vann, Sande Cohen, and Chris Lorenz; it also provided an introduction to postmodern philosophy of history. Accompanying these translations, a group of monographs and articles reviewing postmodern philosophy of history also appeared around the same time. For example, journals in Chinese—including *Historiography Quarterly*, *Academic Research*, and the *Dong Yue Tribune*—concurrently and without coordination arranged special columns on postmodernism and history in 2004, and scholars expressed their various attitudes towards the views of postmodern philosophy of history, holding intense discussions about such topics as the impact of postmodern philosophy of history on historical truth.<sup>4</sup> Chinese academia was gradually paying more attention to research on postmodern philosophy of history, which led to greater depth.

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## 2 The In-Depth Research Period (2004 to around 2010)

In 2004, Hayden White’s *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in*

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<sup>2</sup> They are respectively “New Historicism: A Comment,” “Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground,” “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” and “Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination,” the latter three of which come from 1978’s *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*.

<sup>3</sup> The representative articles included: Chen (1999), Zhou (1999), Li (1999).

<sup>4</sup> As for works on the study of Western philosophy of history in these three years, see Han (2009).

*Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), which marked the “linguistic turn” of philosophy of history, arrived in its Chinese version (translated by Chen Xin and proofread by Peng Gang). Afterwards, two essay collections, namely *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), were published in their Chinese versions in 2011 and 2005 respectively (translated by Dong Lihe). The same period also witnessed the publication of *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, the first Chinese version (translated by Han Zhen) of works authored by F. R. Ankersmit, another important representative of postmodern philosophy of history. Important works by other thinkers in postmodern philosophy of history—including *On “What Is History?”*, *From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* by Keith Jenkins (translated by Jiang Zhengkuan, 2007) and *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* by Hans Kellner (translated by Han Zhen, Wu Yujun, et al, 2010)—were also translated and published around this time. In 2006, Liu Beicheng and Chen Xin co-compiled *Readings in History: Historical Theory*, which included four essays on postmodern philosophy of history authored by Hayden White, Jörn Rüsen, and others. In 2007, the Chinese version of *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*, edited by Ewa Domanska and translated by Peng Gang, was published; this book, through interviews with 11 contemporary Western philosophers of history including Hayden White, displays to Chinese academics in popular and easy-to-understand language a panorama of Western postmodern philosophy of history.

With the successive translation and publication of these works, following a period of overall review and intense debates over postmodern philosophy of history, Chinese academics carried out profound theoretical research on such topics as historical narratives, historical tropology, and objectivity in history.

With respect to the question of historical narratives in the postmodern context, scholars have engaged in many discussions and arguments. Zhou Jianzhang 周建漳 (2005) looks on narratives as a mode of language that historians use to deal with historical phenomena and sort out them into orderly, meaningful forms, holding that it is the unity of cognition and expression. In Zhou’s eyes, narratives are a more primitive, and the most basic, mode of the construction of meanings for mankind; although metanarratives have their fictionality, this does not mean that man must abandon his efforts towards the macro-level understanding of his own history as a whole. Man obtains dominant strength by mathematizing natural and social phenomena, and gains meaning by narrativizing the world of life. Without such strength, our survival and prosperity will be threatened; without such meaning, our civilizations will fall into crisis. Zhou therefore expresses in his writings his resolution to defend the legitimacy of narratives.

Peng Gang 彭刚 (2006) also defines narratives as a certain mode of discourse

which puts the order of particular events, in light of their time sequence, into a linguistic structure that can be understood and grasped by man, and thus gives meaning. Differing from the traditional view about historical narratives, postmodern philosophy of history stresses the inherence and fictionality of historical narratives in terms of the study of history, and highlights the continuity between it and literary narratives. This will necessarily involve the question of the authenticity or objectivity of historical narratives.

Chen Xin (2005) meanwhile holds that the theory of postmodern historical narrative is actually shifting the discussion about historical truth from the level of historical facts to that of historical representation, and that it hence transcends realism's view of truth. The argument that historical narrative is a kind of fiction cannot however find a reliable foundation for the authenticity of history. Chen thus advocates dissolving the question of whether reality and authenticity exist in historical facts into intersubjectivity (i.e., authenticity originates from identification between different cognitive subjects), and turns the authenticity of historical facts into the authenticity of historiography.

Peng Gang (2008) also points out the problems in traditional realism, arguing that the metaphorical meaning expressed by overall historical texts greatly exceeds the literal meanings of the sum of their individual statements. However, he also emphasizes that historians are not totally free when they make historical narratives, and are necessarily constrained by historical materials. As to the question of which historical facts are unavoidable or have more significance than others, the academic community of historians is often able to reach a consensus. Additionally, aesthetic choice has an objective basis. The historical authenticity that actually exists, even though historians cannot directly touch upon it, has been always the final source of objectivity in history.

Han Zhen 韩震 and Dong Lihe 董立河 (2008) express their standpoint similarly. On one hand, they disagree with the naive realist view concerning the question of historical narratives, and hence affirm postmodernists' disclosure of the fictionality and subjectivity in historical narratives; on the other hand, they also oppose postmodernists' extremist tendency of equating historical narratives with literary fiction and thus deny objectivity in history. In their opinion, historical narratives, no matter what form they take, must aim at reflecting historical truth, and their difference from literary fiction cannot be totally neglected.

Compared with historical narratives, Chinese scholars have done slightly less work on the question of historical tropology in the postmodern context. Related discussions are mainly centered around such questions as the connotation and authenticity of historical tropology. Chen Xin (2010) has discussed White's thinking about historical tropology, which he holds can be called the "tropical theory of truth" and which he thinks has offered a new perception of historical

truth, mainly targeting historical texts and their structures as a whole. The reality expressed in tropical language is actually a kind of imagination, and reality can be accessed only through such imagination. Han Zhen and Dong Lihe (2008) show their interests in the concept of historical tropology and its relation to historical truth. They start with metaphors to argue how metaphors are able to guide readers in discovering the real meaning behind said metaphors; they then argue that historical tropology does not mean conflict with deductive or inductive logical inference, and that it actually can become an effective tool for knowing the past.

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### 3 The Reflection and Transcendence Period (2010 to the Present)

By 2010, discussions about historical narratives, historical tropology, and historical objectivity were still going on, but gradually becoming less intensive. Since then, Chinese academia seems to have entered a period of criticizing, reflecting on, and transcending postmodern philosophy of history. This change in Chinese academia is closely related to the theoretical turn taking place in the circles of Western philosophy of history, with Ankersmit's theory of "historical experience" a major motivator.

After 2011, the translation of Ankersmit's works in China made great progress. Apart from *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, at present his major works in English—including *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (translated by Tian Ping and Yuan Li), *Historical Representation* (translated by Zhou Jianzhang), *Sublime Historical Experience* (translated by Yang Jun), and *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (translated by Zhou Jianzhang)—have all been translated and published. Besides these, the *Postmodern Historical Theories Reader*,<sup>5</sup> mainly compiled by Peng Gang, has included the complete debates between Ankersmit and Perez Zagorin. The publication of these translations has facilitated and enhanced research on Ankersmit's theory in China.

With respect to Ankersmit's theory, Chinese scholars have paid more attention and made active responses to his theoretical tendencies while identifying and analyzing his particular concepts in certain periods. Peng Gang (2009) notices the shift of Ankersmit's theoretical emphasis from "narrative substance" to

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<sup>5</sup> The *Postmodern Historical Theories Reader* is a collection of translated essays on postmodern philosophy of history published in China in recent years, and includes 15 essays by Hayden White, F. R. Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, and other important scholars. It is a rudimentary reader for beginners looking to learn about postmodern philosophy of history.

“historical representation” and then on to “historical experience,” demonstrating that Western philosophy of history had displayed noteworthy new trends and changes. Zhou Jianzhang and Zhan Suping (2009) have analyzed Ankersmit’s concept of “sublime historical experience,” pointing out that such historical experience is in essence a kind of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) or experience of existence, as well as the integration of subject and object. They believe that the advancement of this concept indicates that Ankersmit has obviously transcended the previous approach of linguistic analysis. Dong Lihe (2010) likewise investigates Ankersmit’s shift from “narratives” to “experience,” and his response to Eelco Runia’s theory of presence.<sup>6</sup> Dong thus believes that a paradigm shift from postmodern to post-postmodern seems to be taking place in Western philosophy of history. In 2011, in light of the accumulation of research on Ankersmit’s theory in China, the third issue of *Historiography Quarterly* introduced a special column titled “Ankersmit and New Trends in Western Historical Theories,” discussing Ankersmit’s new theoretical contribution and its influence on the trend of development of Western historical theory. In 2017, Truth & Wisdom Press published a Chinese version (translated by Yu Wei and He Limin) of *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* chiefly edited by Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot. This book has seven essays in its first section introducing postmodern philosophy of history; in the third section, titled “Post-postmodernism: Directions and Interrogations,” there are articles about “post-postmodernism” authored by seven scholars, one of whom is Ankersmit, trying to reflect on and sort through postmodern philosophy of history. Dong Lihe noticed the English language edition of this book in 2014, and by means of it was able to recount in detail the various trends of “post-postmodernism,” pointing out that the prefix “post-” here does not mean the complete abandonment of postmodern philosophy of history but rather the dialectic sublation of it.

During this period, several journals also organized attempts to sort through postmodern philosophy of history. In 2010, the first issue of *Historiography Quarterly* inaugurated a special column titled “What Has Postmodern Thoughts Left to Us?” Scholars point out the objective fact that postmodernism has exerted influence on the study of history, but they meanwhile also seek, under the guide of historical materialism, to make scientific judgment upon and responses to postmodern philosophy of history.

In 2013, the fifth issue of *Historical Research* initiated a special column, “Postmodernism in the Study of History,” inviting five scholars either at home or abroad to write essays assessing and summarizing postmodern philosophy of history. In particular, Huang Jinxing 黄进兴 (2013) points out that postmodern

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Eelco Runia’s theory of “presence,” see Lü (2013).

philosophy of history shows a tendency towards linguistic obsession or textual fetishism, and that its totally self-contained theory of texts has non-referentiality like that of “brains in a vat,” and thus no experiential meaning. John H. Zammito 陈立新 (2013) also believes that the linguistic hyperbole in postmodern philosophy of history makes it difficult to apply in practice. Hence, he stresses the necessity of veridicality and coherence in historiographical practice, holding that historical representation is not only aesthetic, but also cognitive. The same year, the fourth issue of *Journal of Historiography* launched a special column titled “A Study of Issues at the Frontiers of Contemporary Western Historical Theory,” discussing how to demonstrate the legitimacy of historical research and historical writing in a postmodern context. Chen Lixin (2013) points out in the special column that the most valuable point of the contemporary theory of historical narratives is that it highlights to a certain extent the unique quality of historical knowledge which differs from “science” and “art” but is nonetheless related to them, which also explains how historical research can maintain its legitimacy.

In general, Chinese academia has been constantly deepening and steadily advancing its research on postmodern philosophy of history in recent years. On one hand, it has been digging into the conceptual resources of postmodern philosophy of history and harvesting its helpful achievements; on the other hand, scholars have been paying attention to various theoretical turns within postmodern philosophy of history and devoting themselves to the construction of historical rationality, or that of the objectivity of historical knowledge (see Peng 2014, Dong 2015, and Gu 2017). Hayden White’s death on March 5<sup>th</sup> this year was an immeasurable loss for the philosophy of history. Chinese scholars are writing various commemorative articles to pay homage to this leading figure of postmodern philosophy of history.<sup>7</sup> We are obliged to systematically sort out his theoretical legacy, and to carry it forward.

Reviewing Chinese research on Western postmodern philosophy of history in the forty years of reform and opening up, especially in the most recent two or three decades, we can see that Chinese academia has made great progress both in the translation of texts and the exploration of theories. On one hand, scholars are still actively promoting the translation and introduction of works on Western postmodern philosophy of history, especially Hayden White’s later works; on the other hand, scholars are also constantly deepening their theoretical understanding of Western postmodern philosophy of history, and step by step joining the process of criticizing, reflecting on, and even transcending it. Western philosophy of history has trended towards a paradigm shift, but this absolutely does not mean that we can simply give up research on postmodern philosophy of history.

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<sup>7</sup> Commemorative essays which have been published include Zhang (2018) and Chen (2018).



Chinese research on Western postmodern philosophy of history has not yet exhausted all pertinent topics; on the contrary, it still has vast space for theoretical expansion. Neither the rethinking of historical objectivity and rationality nor the reconstruction of convictions about historical reason can work without the profound insights and theoretical tensions of postmodern philosophy of history.

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