

The Model for Prosumer and Historian Coproduction: Case Studies from Chinese History and Tales

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John Cabot University

Department of History and Humanities

Bachelor of Arts in History

The Model for Prosumer and Historian Coproduction:
Case Studies from Chinese History and Tales

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Abstract

Many different models, approaches, styles, and concepts have been created throughout the human study of history and each has caused an evolution of understanding within the discipline. Each of these tools are built with a purpose in mind so that they can advance our understanding of the past, while those that failed to stand the test of time have at least had their remnants act as fertilizer for new ideas. With the modern ideas of the prosumer rising in the discipline of higher education as someone who is at the same time the consumer and producer of an intellectual product such as historical romances in the vein of *Ivanhoe* or in more extreme cases shows like *Fate/Apocrypha* so should the concepts that are used in academia evolve. Based heavily on Bentley's *Companion to Historiography* evaluation of four styles of understanding the history of China and the voyages of Zheng He during the Ming Dynasty, a new approach to historians' products will be built. Using the dynastic cycle variant of periodization and cultural studies will test and examine to find the minimum requirements of a new prosumer assistive approach to producing historical works.

Dedication

To those who are willing to go on this strange journey known as the future alongside me as fellow historians and the many people whose ideas have clashed, mixed, and changed the way I see the world.

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But more than anyone else thank you mom for working so hard to raise me, giving me so many perspectives, ways of seeing the world, such a love of learning, and beginning all your stories with, as all good stories begin, “once upon a time”.

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Introduction

Academia is about research and education but the basis for having such a group within a society when there is recourse for taking discourse within the academia takes the form of something completely new for the interested public. Inside of the discipline of higher education is the rising use of the concept of the “prosumer” who takes a unique role concerning that which is produced in academia. To provide help in finding a better way of interacting with this new position within academia, a new set of guidelines that falls into a position like a historical approach will need to be formed. The audience of this approach that serves as the goal of this investigation is the so-called prosumers based on the ideas of a group that produces the very things that they consume, this idea has recently been applied to education and academic matters beyond its previous material base.¹ Therefore the prosumers as they are called can be understood as those who despite not being historians by profession still consume and produce historical works that other prosumers can consume and produce based on such as books and novels, video games, movies or shows. However, in academia or at least the discipline of history there is no such thing as historical work in true isolation but rather they work alongside each other while within a greater discourse so these prosumers would also bring in new ideas and clash with the existing discourse of history causing it to further evolve and improve based on what shows, games, literature and the like they produce. To find a better method than the ones currently available for interacting with this new group, an examination of existing concepts within the

¹ Joe Cullen, “Prosumerism in Higher Education—Does It Meet the Disability Test?,” in *Radical Solutions and Open Science: An Open Approach to Boost Higher Education*, ed. Daniel Burgos (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 105–21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4276-3_7.

discourse in conjunction with the narrative of Zheng He will seek to establish the base requirements and elements of this new approach. In other words, finding the basics of a new approach to showing history through narrative-based media so that the public prosumer can create an infinite loop of discourse with novels, show, games, and the like made by the public to contribute to both the academic discourse and the public understanding of the past.

Chapter One: The Problem and Method

Literature Review

The purpose of history and historical works is the most important question for the historian as their nature and interpretation are what sets all possible objectives, although that can lead to philosophical tangents that sometimes fall outside the study of a specific historical object. The interpretations of the nature of historical works act as the core to the various communities and lines of thought among historians both past and present, and with the discourse between historians constantly reevaluated and rebuilt. All historians know that the subject of history is the reconstruction and understanding of human affairs in the past and that such an investigative process is seldom absolute or complete. That is why the historical discourse is constantly evolving and searching for new angles to analyze a specific historical problem. From the point of view of the methodology of history, it is intriguing to explore how academic historians have approached the problem of the epistemological nature of history itself and the role of the historian, how history is communicated, the enjoyment, and practicality which within contains the minutia that builds to form the wildly different notions, limits, and objectives historians place on the study of history and historical works. Differences in understanding serve to form the basis of discourse for any discipline but in history which is analyzed with both the systematic analysis of the sciences and the theoretical analysis of the arts, the importance of these differences becomes even more pronounced.

The discourse on the purpose of historical work is so core to the historian and the processes they use because it determines how history is used both as the key for narrowing down the historical object and for empowering the objectives of the historian as a goal is always embedded into the produced work. In particular, the discourse of the historical narrative is one of the most important due to its simultaneously ancient and modern model alongside its status as the introduction to history “our” story². In the *Companion to Historiography*, Peter Munz; a strong advocate for the model of “narrative history”, goes in-depth into the idea of the historical narrative and its unique role within the many models and systems used within the discipline. He argues that the simplest reason for the use of the narrative model is that it is the only model that adequately indicates the most important feature for history to be history, a time. He argues that a narrative by nature automatically adds the notion of time and its passing and in turn provides not only the best but the only model that does history justice³. I believe that his argument is correct in its assertions of the value of the historical narrative but what stands out connects it to the greater discourse is the role of the narrative in dealing with the problem of presentism. In *Doing History* the problem of presentism in terms of reading the past based on the present is excellently raised, this issue of presentism is core to the aspects of the historical narrative.⁴ It continues to explain that the greatest cases of ahistorical perspectives come from a lack of historical context, applying modern concepts to the people of the past, and therefore using a biased point of view.

Each of the causes for ahistorical context based on this argument would then be a core reason for the historical narrative as a strong narrative form would provide the context and create

² E. H. Gombrich, , *A Little History of the World* (New Haven and London,: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 4. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/johncabot/detail.action?docID=3420132>.

³ Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography* (Routledge, 1997).

⁴ Michael J. Galgano, J. Chris Arndt, and Raymond M. Hyser, *Doing History Research and Writing in the Digital Age* (Clark Baxter, n.d.), accessed November 14, 2020.

an understanding of how the actors and characters of the narrative create change that cause or react to everything that happens and creates what historians can then work with as a history.⁵ *Doing History* also directly discusses the topic of the historical narrative and while it is far more critical of the movements, developments, and problems of the model, it does still acknowledge the core point that historical study requires interpretation⁶. The last step of this interpretation and the one that comes to mind first when speaking of a narrative is that of stories, novels, and other literary forms that are considered unfit for proper historical discourse or use in academia if not based on historical evidence and if not having a historical objective, although such issues are currently being debated as seen from the article "Viewpoints: Should Novels Count as Dissertations in Education?" which refers to a collection of meetings at the American educational research association that asks if a novel counts as research. While much of this article is dedicated to academic policy such as the requirement of dissertations and Ph.D.'s it does show several viewpoints as many historians and social scientists argued on the validity of the novel given its status as the natural evolution of a narrative, yet it is one line by Eisner that states that what is required for the novel to be accepted as academic is the further development of the novel form⁷. This issue of there being a reasonable use and development of the historical novel into something more than a story is important as it opens the three key questions of the nature of history, the historian, and the historian's work.

There already has been much discourse on the use of novels both historical and otherwise for the study and learning as excellently put by Lukacs's *A Student's Guide to the Study of History*: "Novels such as ... do not tell us only a story; they do not only remind us of many

⁵ M.C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History: A Guide for Students*, 1st Edition (Routledge, 2003).

⁶ Michael J. Galgano, J. Chris Arndt, and Raymond M. Hyser, *Doing History Research and Writing in the Digital Age*.

⁷ A. L. Saks, "Viewpoints: Should Novels Count as Dissertations in Education?," *Research in the Teaching of English* 30, no. 4 (1996): 403–27.

everlasting truths about human beings and about their inclinations; they tell us, plausibly, how certain men and women, in a certain place, and at a certain time (!) lived and talked and thought and desired and believed”⁸. Having a novel emulate history can in this way be a way of teaching the knowledge of the historian as while the historian teaches what at least is believed to have happened, the historian’s knowledge that is required for the discourse is in understanding how humans had acted, thought, or argued in a certain place and time. The idea of placing history into the narrative form is by no means new in itself the very notion of a story or as Grombrich puts it “Once upon a time”, for with space and time is in general terms history or what happened in the past.⁹ Of course, history as the discipline now does not place its focus on the past as a whole, it looks away from any story, the story of rocks or animals but humans, it looks towards “our” story. Observation of this connection is especially when the disciplines of education and history meet, another work produced with students in mind is Lemon’s *Philosophy of History: A Guide for Students*. Lemon takes the argument of separating the idea of the novel or fictional story from the real historical narrative to emphasize the practical goal of every event in a novel against the potentially message-less events in a narrative that could be selected to include by the historian. The argument of Lemon takes this stance, of course, thanks to his view of the historian as the individual producing a narrative for its own sake to reach an objective account¹⁰. Any objective answer to the discourse of the purpose and legitimacy of the novel as a model of understanding the past would have to be found between the interpretations but both are based on the original question of what the purpose of history and the historian is.

⁸ John Lukacs, *A Student’s Guide to the Study of History* (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2000).

⁹E. H. Gombrich, Clifford Harper, and Caroline Mustill, “Once Upon A Time,” in *A Little History of the World* (London, UNITED STATES: Yale University Press, 2005), 1–4, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/johncabot/detail.action?docID=3420132>.

¹⁰ M.C. Lemon, “SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY,” in *Philosophy of History: A Guide for Students*, n.d., 110.

The Purpose of Doing History

The discourse on the purpose of the historian and of doing history is as old as the field itself as it is natural to seek a reason for action, but I believe that while the discourse on the purpose is ancient, the modern understanding of this purpose fails to match up with what the modern historian produces. As the discourse has shown there are many opinions on why it is important to do history and why people study history but the idea of there being a need to remember or an innate value in understanding the past or always the most prominent. It is in this light that the question changes from what the purpose of the historian is to what purpose is, to what extent, and how historians extend the memory of the past for the answer to what the final objective of the historian's works heavily determines the answer for all the other questions. The main products of historians tend to take the form of textbooks for schools, scholarly books, and articles to further the discourse within the field or attract public awareness to a topic in addition to the economic purposes. All platforms for spreading knowledge have their value and in this case, each form targets a different audience, textbooks for those willing to spend the time to learn, scholarly articles, essays, and books for those with experience, and multimedia for those with interest but unwilling to invest the time or experience. However, this targeted audience while useful does leave problems, textbooks do offer a brief if an incomplete view of the past but for a vast majority who use them and do not continue to major or focus in history, the content is quickly forgotten.¹¹ Academic research and scholarly works are valued within the historical community but are only used by those who can do much of the same research given time and in turn, while they improve the discourse across the discipline, they are not of use to anyone not

¹¹ Martin A. Conway, Gillian Cohen, and Nicola Stanhope, "On the Very Long-Term Retention of Knowledge Acquired through Formal Education: Twelve Years of Cognitive Psychology.," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 120, no. 4 (1991): 395–409, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.120.4.395>.

already in or planning to enter the field of history. Documentaries are required to be highly accessible due to their need for ratings and viewership, the changes made to improve their entertainment value often make them viewed as improper sources with little academic value. While each of these problems does not undermine the intent of the work, they do fail to meet my demand for academic works, for it to be used innately to contribute to society.

Any work produced after sufficient research and thought can add to the academic community and the included discourse and literature but that in of itself fails to serve society. This service to society is like the extra-disciplinary goal of public history but has one additional condition for success, opening a learning opportunity for prosumers. The idea of a prosumer by Alvin Toffler referred to those who produce goods and services they then used themselves while in the modern prosumer education movement has taken the term as a form of teaching with the emphasis on learner engagement and the co-production of knowledge.¹² The idea of a prosumer is part of the movement in education to reduce the idea of having a teacher and student as the authority of the “teacher” limits what the “learners” could think of. In turn, it is hoped that the learner will become prosumers who can introduce ideas into a discipline thanks to having an educated yet self-developed set of ideas from an outsider’s perspective. It is not expected of them to know the details of research in a field but bring new ways of looking at problems to assist in the production of historical works and bring the field outside of its circle. The prosumer is not expected to be a researcher, antiquarian, archaeologist, or writer but a disturbance and audience for the professional like the historian. Much of this is not for the historian however as it does come from an educator and as such its goal while hoping to work with the professional is more so to improve the conditions for the learner to learn by being a prosumer. However, the greatest problem with offering support for the prosumer is that by nature, they are not professionals of the

¹² Cullen, “Prosumerism in Higher Education—Does It Meet the Disability Test?”

discipline they wish to learn and as such often lack the core skills and experience required to enter the discipline's discourse. The most important skills for a historian and the requirements of academic sources are all about perspective, research needs to pay attention to the potential perspectives and bias from their sources, the discourse, and themselves. Gaddis in his work *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, describes the historian as someone both detached and engaged, who has to get into the mindset of people of the past and find their way back out.¹³ He uses the imagery of a man observing an uncharted land to represent this dynamic, but I would have to argue that he is only half right with the other half of the historian appearing instead as the artist who both placed the man and hid the landscape. The historian acts as Gaddis describes only when they only retreat to the edge of the uncharted land, if they are to return to civilization with their discoveries then they must use their skills and experience to recreate what they have found and then proceed to find people who care enough to see it. Bloch's *The Historian's Craft* also addresses the issue of perspective and offers the observation of the "tracks" of the past and even addresses the nature of history serving to build a two-directional understanding but this too revolves around the historian connecting with the "living".¹⁴ Public history offers a stage for the historian to share their recreation of what they find but it still is done in coordination with pre-set audiences and disciplines, it does not form a relationship with the public prosumer.

Historians do serve as teachers and educators in many cases but in terms of public history or contributing to the public, historians must serve as a lamppost and not exclude the thoughts or potential discourse from those not working in any historical field. Lampposts are not guide's that

¹³ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Cary, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2004), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/johncabot/detail.action?docID=273008>.

¹⁴ Marc Bloch, "Historical Observation," in *The Historian's Craft*, 1st American ed (Knopf, 1953), 48–78, https://openlibrary.org/books/OL6114394M/The_historian%27s_craft.

drag you from one destination to the next but light up the way so that you can see the path for yourself. Similarly, it is paramount for there to be an optimal tool for historians to use to light up the “landscape” so that the prosumer can enter it even if only for a trip, and for both sides’ narrative serves as the best tool. Certainly, it is also important to consider that the overuse of the historical narrative or any other narrative as a historical model has already been discussed and found wanting in academia. Bloch even goes to the extent of suggesting looking at history in reverse to observe history from what we have more evidence for to where more speculations are needed by using what has been established as the final result of any speculated event.¹⁵ Narrative models have the highest potential of inclusion of bias due to the additional opportunity for the historian to consciously or otherwise, alter their recreation of the past but equally place the highest awareness of this issue in the mind of the prosumer. Behind this desire to supplement the prosumer education system is that the ability to understand and reach one’s own opinions on any subject are the core of the liberal education system¹⁶. Logically this is not meant to mean however that all people have the same level of training, experience, or the ability to argue or disentangle an argument which is why experts are experts and professionals are professionals. Aside from the issue of learning and education is a personally worrying level of acceptance towards the keeping of specialized knowledge today. Bailyn, mentions that one reason for learning history is out of a desire to preserve it which I find to be a problem in itself as a possibility for it to be the historian’s responsibility to do so for one reason.¹⁷ The first is lemon’s argument of there being practical motivations for history and history done for its own sake, which for me are the same in that the work the historian produces under either motivation is still

¹⁵ Bloch.

¹⁶ William Cronon, “‘Only Connect’: The Goals of a Liberal Education.,” *Liberal Education* 85, no. 1 (1999): 6–12.

¹⁷ Bernard. Bailyn and Edward Connery. Lathem, *On the Teaching and Writing of History : Responses to a Series of Questions*, 1 online resource (97 pages) : portrait vols. (Hanover, N.H.: Montgomery Endowment, Dartmouth College, 1994), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01613>.

“motivated” history.¹⁸ All historians are aware of the historian as the one telling the story but the general public, the society that all occupations are meant to eventually enhance may not. Lukacs puts it very well, “there is no essential difference between the “professional” and the “amateur” historian” and for this “amateur” historian or prosumer, an improved model of the historical narrative is key.¹⁹

Developing a New Model

Much as any single source is not enough to be a scholarly work, neither is any single perspective enough to perfect or even fully develop a new, valid model but it might be enough to be the start of one. To develop a new model that satisfies all the needs of a modern professional historian and the modern prosumer audience there first must be an examination of current models and the proposition of a new model. By examining the approaches of periodization and postmodern culture studies of Imperial Chinese history by historians such as Bentley and testing them on the introduced prosumer assistive approach that will be developed and built through this examination with the goal stimulating prosumer participation in the historical discourse, some failures, and new directions towards an improved model of history for the benefit of the public should be found.²⁰ Imperial Chinese History serves as the basis for this study for two reasons, the first being that it simply lends itself both source wise and culturally to romanticization of its history as has been done many times before.²¹ Secondly, it serves as a strong objective to write on given its less publicized presence in the west which is directly in line with where historians

¹⁸ M.C. Lemon, “WHAT IS HISTORY FOR?,” in *Philosophy of History: A Guide for Students*, n.d., 323–56.

¹⁹ Lukacs, *A Student’s Guide to the Study of History*.

²⁰ Michael Bentley, *Companion to Historiography*.

²¹ Lu Hsun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, trans. Gladys Yang and Yang Hsien-Yi (Foreign Languages Press, 1964).

can assist the prosumer in building a level of interest and understanding. While it is not necessary to use these models for this examination, they do offer useful case studies thanks to the concept of the integrated narrative being innately connected to the sources. The main focus for the case study will be the voyages of Zheng He but with context and understanding as a goal, other cases that expand on important cultural elements will also be used such translated Ming Shi-lu.²² Since much of the knowledge and time that is required of a historian is spent on gaining an understanding of the context to be able to interpret the context, the main goal of this new model for the active prosumer must serve to bridge this experience gap.

The prosumer assistive approach is based on the goal of building a historical narrative that naturally induces the same questions and worries that a historian faces in the mind of the prosumer. The prosumer's purpose is to coordinate inside of the discourse itself but where they shine is in working together to create and enjoy literature, videos, and games as these are the fields in which professional and academic work can reduce its unneeded details while meeting the goals of both the historian and prosumer audience. This is to hopefully lead the prosumer to actively engage with the content based on the developed context to allow them to join the discourse on the topic without needing intense research of their own is it at a less detailed level. To do so, each of the examined models will be used to deconstruct a collection of historical and ahistorical texts and reconstruct them into events, groups, individuals, or other actors and scenarios within a work of historical fiction. This work of historical fiction will be using the genre of xianxia fiction to ease the transfer of ideas from the sources to the work and will focus on the transfer of perspective between characters to leave open the option of what the "true" narrative is to the prosumer. The historical model of the dynastic cycle based on the period

²² Geoff Wade, trans., "Yong-Le," Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu, accessed April 20, 2021, <http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/mssl/reign/yong-le>.

building based approach to understanding the past that forms the dynastic cycle history will be examined first due to the dynastic cycle model of Chinese history while the cultural studies approach will be examined after to find what the necessary elements for the new approach are. By testing these models and examining their flaws when building a prosumer-focused work, the requirements and design of a new model for providing a historical narrative should become clear.

Conclusions on the Discourse

Historians should never be accepted as the keepers of the past as in the modern understanding of history its potential for propaganda, its influence on culture, and political implications are beyond what anyone group should be the keepers of. In turn, the modern movement in education for a more active audience and model of learning opens a fresh opportunity to build new tools for the discipline. While the roles of a historian are debatable, the need for the historians to offer something and engage with society and not merely to its community should not be. Bloch reminds us that the knowledge of the past which we call history is constantly transforming and our understanding of it is always improving thanks to the ingenuity of historians considering sources in a new light and by creating and using new techniques for investigating history.²³ By performing the fundamental acts of the historian by deconstructing, contextualizing, and reconstructing the past using two of the most commonly applied models of history and a new model for the historical narrative the path to a modern and actively engaging historical community will begin to show itself.

²³ Bloch, "Historical Observation."

Chapter Two: Examining the Period Narrative

Introducing the Narratives

The idea of periods is one of the more interesting creations of the historical discipline that has long since been given a life of its own to become part of the collective understanding of time despite its ambiguous, imperfect, and innately biased nature.²⁴ Periods so long as they are not attached to war, rarely have a clear start or end date nor even a common understanding of exactly why it must be distinguished from all other events that came before or after it. Yet, it has become one of the most common and easily understood ways of understanding the past, especially regarding the transition of time as a present or past into future or at least less distant past. In addition to its vague nature is the fact that it is nearly impossible to determine when it would be justified to consider it a new period thanks to the constantly evolving understanding of the past, many developments within the past with disputed importance, and even the historians own bias.²⁵ While there are cases of active claims to have entered a new period or age such as with the Space age and the Italian Renaissance, these claims are typically associated in the west with culture or science thanks in part to how they revolutionize the lives of everyone. But in a rather ancient model of periodization from the east, these periods are based on political structures instead, taking the form of the philosophical and political framework for the idea of the Dynastic Cycle. Based on the Chou belief of omens alongside the Han concept of the Mandate of Heaven, the Dynastic Cycle views time in a pseudo-cyclic manner, not dissimilar to the Greeks but

²⁴ Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History Into Periods?*, European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1044274&site=ehost-live>.

²⁵ Jacques Le Goff.

instead of the races of man, the cycle looks at the dynastic kingdoms and empires that form what today is seen as the Imperial Chinese Dynasties.²⁶

Although today, we refer to it as Chinese history, Chinese Dynasties, or Chinese Culture, it is a particularly interesting question within Sinology what exactly would count as part of what we call “China”. Through the plethora of different philosophies, cultures, dynasties, ethnicities, and political standings there are only so many things that would be considered common among the ruling or common culture from the early kingdoms to the late empires and well beyond. This is the case for nearly if not all enduring states but as the state with the potential; depending on your interpretation of what counts as “Chinese”, longest-running period of history, the situation is only more exaggerated within the history of China. It was in response to this that the idea of the Dynastic Cycle combines not only the cultural heritage of the local ethnicities but also the political history that went beyond them to form a unique understanding of permanence, state, and narrative. The basics of this cycle can be seen as a four-step process; rise, prosperity, corruption, and fall before the cycle continued with the rise of a new dynasty that holds the mandate of heaven. A dynasty grows from the fallen remains of the previous either through a coup, civil war, inheritance, or even an outsider’s conquest but does so under the mandate of heaven so the state that then grows would be bound to prosper. This prosperity would then uphold the new dynasty and allow it to grow in strength while also providing an abundance of resources for the common people but once it reaches a certain excess, would inspire corrupt desires. In turn, it is the corruption of the court that allows for the disasters to bring famine, famine brings dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction into civil unrest which eventually devolves into the end of the current dynasty and the birth of the next. Of course, this understanding is simplified not only in

²⁶ Michael S. Yamashita and Gianni. Guadalupi, *Zheng He: Tracing the Epic Voyages of China’s Greatest Explorer / Zheng He : Tracing the Eipi Voyages of China’s Greatest Explorer = 鄭和* (Vercelli, Italy: White Star Publishers, 2006), <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0828/2007310628-b.html>.

the steps but also in the cultural significance of each step as the concept of the mandate of heaven is key to the concept of what unites these often-separate states into a single heritage. Alongside heritage comes culture, ideas, concepts, and stories which are used to build the language, faith, and narratives that are then to be used to keep information, morals, and their story alive. Romanticization, fiction, and tales are particularly of relevance for Chinese history as up until the 16th century, tales of marvels and divine retribution were still being included as historical works while it was during the reign of Emperor Chien Lung, that tales of marvels were separated from histories.²⁷ While there was without a doubt a period in which the history and stories born from the dynasties were ignored, today they have not only come back with a new discussion of Confucius but also through new literature based on this heritage.

The forms of xianxia and wuxia fiction literature have come to popularity both locally in China and abroad through many online translators to the extent of even having professional works of the genre being produced by entirely foreign writers.²⁸ The two genres are based on the combined aspects of dynastic Chinese heritage or at least how it is often thought of by many, particularly based on a combination of Daoism and Buddhism alongside the dynasty and either immortals or martial practitioners, respectively. Wuxia translated as martial heroes place the focus on a historical world that is based on these ideas but limits itself to a “limit” of the potential ability of a human trained extensively in Chinese martial arts. Xianxia similarly translates as immortal heroes and in turn takes its reader away from reality in any measure to instead examine ideas through the lens of Daoist and Buddhist “immortals” or individuals who practice either Daoist internal alchemy or Buddhist longevity techniques to dramatically extend their lifespans and utilize mystic techniques. Between the two, it is easiest for those who are

²⁷ Lu Hsun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*.

²⁸ “Pulp Fiction Frenzy,” *News China*, July 1, http://www.newschinamag.com/newschina/print.do?article_id=2205§ion_id=4&magazine_id=19.

unaware of the genres to equate wuxia to low fantasy based on martial arts and xianxia as high fantasy based on the use of Daoist, Buddhist, and Chinese folk legends literature. Both forms of literature are by no means ancient with its modern form being created during the 20th century while becoming far more prominent during the 21st century and as such cannot be treated in the same potentially scholarly value other literary genres like the Greek epics nor do they offer the same degree of direct insight about the past as more traditional historical fiction thanks to the additional degree of fantastical elements. However as stated well in *Doing History*, a historian's use of narrative has many purposes and many methods but what the narrative offers that is unique is its ability to assist its reader in understanding.²⁹ This understanding works well with these naturally ahistorical literary forms thanks to how they focus on the understanding the Dao which serves as the basis for the process of journey and answer in Daoist thought, in addition to its mystic equivalent in these genres. As such while they are without doubt improper as a basis for documentary work, they hold value as a basis for assisting a prosumer in understanding the worldview, culture, and thought processes that are needed to analyze and judge beyond what they are told in any other historical work.

Forming the Basis of the Narrative

To test this concept of the prosumer assistive approach three steps are required; the finding of existing problematic elements when using an older model for the established purpose, building of a new model, and of course putting this concept into practical terms. While the possibility of finding an unknown flaw of the existing models in such a manner is next to zero without extensive focus on them, there are existing flaws that are accepted as part of their nature

²⁹ Michael J. Galgano, J. Chris Arndt, and Raymond M. Hyser, *Doing History Research and Writing in the Digital Age*.

that serve as reasoning for the choice of other methods based on what the goal of any work is. In the case of building a new narrative model the best method of testing the narrative is by creating a narrative work and as such, the basis for the narrative should first be established for two reasons. Primarily, this is because building the entire world, process, and narrative itself three times would not be possible in any suitable length and as such instead, the focus will have to be on sections of the world and narrative. As a secondary benefit, a narrative is meant to draw in its reader while offering a new understanding of the narrative, regardless of if it is first found in a book or a paper. Therefore, first, the basic narrative and objectives of the story are required to be established, before introducing the focus that the selected sections will address the transformation from historical knowledge to narrative understanding. This story will start as so many stories begin, once upon a time there was a boy who sought to leave his village and be like the immortals he was told about while growing up, so when he heard about a sect opening its doors to new disciples, he rushed out during the night to try and join only to die to the mystic beasts that roamed the countryside. However, the story does not follow the boy's life but his eternal life after death for he gained a position among the court of the underworld to oversee, arrange and supervise the acts, karma, and destiny of certain individuals. The true story starts here with the boy serving as the writer of the tales of these individuals while also being given the requirements by the heavenly will and Jade Emperor. Each of the characters who are supervised by the lead character will serve the narrative to expand on the world, further the story itself and for this examination offer one of the cores of the prosumer assistive approach. The objectives of this approach or at least this initial version of it are as such: to improve its reader understanding of the world and beliefs that it is set in or based on, to create a narrative that cross-examines itself to lead its reader to perform the act of the historian, to create curiosity towards the

historical discipline or at least to the topic of the investigated narrative, and remove the knowledge details that serve as one of the hardest barriers in entering a historical discourse while maintaining the understanding that they provide. The methods that historians use to analyze sources and the narratives they find, while logical is not something that those who have not studied in the discipline would know and as such the use of perspective-based narrative must be at the center of the developed approach which also addresses each of the main objectives. As mentioned, however, an examination of the entire narrative for each of the observed characters would require a further focus so the examination here shall be on a selected group of events based on the same original case study as seen across the many perspectives of the narrative.

Among the possible narratives to use as a base for this examination of the potential historical models, the story of Zheng He, also known as Cheng Ho, Ma Sanbo, and Ma He, stands out as great basis for the examined sections.³⁰ This is in part thanks to a normally problematic aspect of many cases of historical research in which there is brevity of any historical records, minimal consistency among the records, or a scarcity of sources. Zheng He was a naval officer of the Ming dynasty but there was either little focus on his efforts during his lifetime and during the creation of official records and compilations or at least was made to appear that way. Despite records of his later life being problematic, much of Zheng He's life are known, born in the late 14th century and joining the retinue of Prince Yan as a Muslim eunuch, Zheng He played a particularly interesting role in the court of the Yongle Emperor, later known as the Emperor Ming Chengzu.³¹ While the early period of Zheng He's service in the court did place him into a noteworthy position in its own right, it was only with the voyages that started in 1405 that Zheng

³⁰ Jung-pang Lo, "Zheng He," in *Britannica*, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zheng-He>.

³¹ "ARTICLES SHIPPING NEWS: ZHENG HE'S SEXCENTENARY," China Heritage Project Newsletter, June 23, 2005, https://web.archive.org/web/20050623222048/http://chinaheritagenewsletter.org/articles.php?searchterm=002_zhenghe.inc&issue=002.

He placed his name into the records of history that have drawn the level of attention he is given today. The seven voyages of Zheng He is what he is best known for while also being the most controversial aspect of his legend, there been arguments from Menzies' in his work *1421: The Year China Discovered America* that Zheng He sailed to America in 1421.³² There are also those such as Hui Chun Hing who introduce the potential intrigue and discourse of the manipulation of records based on the political situation and that the idea of Zheng He's voyages not being seen as important as based on the surviving records is incorrect.³³ Although the voyage had little effect on the imperial court thanks to its lack of support from Emperor Renzong, the successor of the Yongle Emperor, the voyages have left countless local stories, plenty of opportunities for historical works, and one of the most interesting narrative legacies of the Ming dynasty. However, what is even more important for this investigation is when it happened, as to build a narrative, the characters in question must believe in their world and while it was rare for Ming historians to include romances such as the romance of the three kingdoms, it would only be 300 years after the death of Zheng He that a firm separation would be made between records and legends.³⁴

Transforming the Narrative

When transforming a historical narrative into a historically aligned literature or any other historical work, it is paramount to first establish what aspects and elements of the narrative are needed to develop the events that occurred, which are needed to be understood by its reader so

³² Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*, First Harper Perennial edition. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0645/2004295381-d.html>.

³³ Hui Chun Hing, "Huangming Zuxun and Zheng He's Voyages to the Western Oceans," *Journal of Chinese Studies* 51, no. 3 (July 2010): 67–85.

³⁴ Lu Hsun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*.

that they can follow the logic and emotions being used within the narrative, and what are only extraneous details that are only valuable to the historian who is doing the research. Similarly, as the first examination of the narrative of Zheng He is based on the Dynastic Cycle, the core ideas of the model must also be used to establish what is needed for the scenario to fulfill its purpose of illuminating its reader. Inside of the narrative of Zheng He as a person, the core elements of his identity are as a Muslim, navigator, court eunuch, and diplomat, while the elements of the narrative are that of the voyage, court politics, trade, and negotiation. There are also the elements of Chinese culture, religious and political norms, and beliefs, alongside the narrative tools of xianxia, historical literature, and historical romance. There are also the more detailed elements that have been the center of much discourse such as shipbuilding and nautical crafts but as one might guess, such elements would be difficult to include in a narrative without damaging the basis for it being a narrative in the first place. To coordinate, each of these elements into the dynastic model of periodization means to build a world view with the eternity of the concept of a Chinese dynasty at the center of the world.

Therefore, the scenario for the narrative of Zheng He has two possible bases, first is taking its element of a voyage or journey which forms one of the two main styles of historical romance which happened to grow in popularity during the Ming dynasty. The second option of not focusing on Zheng He as an individual but instead looking towards his effect in and on the Emperor, court, and dynasty which while not as relevant to the elements of his narrative, is far more involved in his historical bearing than the romantic nature of the journey. This does go against both the easiest plot for a narrative as a journey or voyage are without a doubt, from ancient times to modern the easiest and smoothest method of narrative but that does not mean a scenario-based in the court cannot offer just as much, especially when the objective of the

narrative is to provide understanding. As such the focus of the historian is not to describe the acts or romanticize the journey but instead looks to describe the reasons and power at the court of the Yongle Emperor that manipulated the journey of Zheng He. In building the focus the scenario with such a focus, the main conflict is pre-established to be over the purpose, support, and logistics of the voyage so Zheng He's elements as a court eunuch who joined early on into the retinue and the overarching narrative elements of politics and negotiations will stand out the most. As such it is easiest to help the prosumer through understandings of the imperial court, the imperial worldview, and the nature of service to the emperor. Following the initial notion of needing multiple perspectives to simulate the historians struggle, it is important to establish what actors are meant to serve each understanding such as Zheng He's perspective for service, Yongle for the imperial court, and the diplomats and leaders visited by Zheng He for the imperial world view.

The narrative could serve its purpose using each of the three main foci of the dynastic cycle and the imperial court. A scenario for addressing the service in the imperial court would be quite beneficial as any inclusion of an Emperor from any stages of the dynastic cycle heavily controls both the political temperament of the court but also set the emotional state of dynastic China, on top of it opens many opportunities for manipulation of perspective. The actors of the imperial court in the narrative of Zheng He can be divided into roughly three groups; the eunuchs and ministers, the emperors, and the pre-existing traditions as it does require a living human to be one of the major forces that controlled the outcome of the scenarios. When it comes to service to the emperor, it is the words of the Yongle Emperor that put it best "I manifest the love of the "One on High" (上帝) for all living things", as this concept of righteousness is not too different in concept from the divine authority in the west, but it includes two important traits that it is key

that a prosumer would understand.³⁵ Having an incompetent or too divine ruler that is separated from the state and a scheming minister who serve as puppet masters are both images that unfortunately are easy to develop from history without the context of the relationship that serves as the basis for the imperial court. The many perspectives that are possible remind the prosumer that these choices and phrasing are not simply political manipulation of the people or each other but an internal game in which a vast majority work together that had a set of rules that cannot be violated without undermining thousands of years of support and rhetoric for the authority of the Emperor across both rulers and dynasties.³⁶ Placing either Zheng He or our temporary lead into the imperial court alongside the many potential perspectives does offer many opportunities to develop understanding but in terms of the Dynastic Cycle itself, it is difficult to tie the two. Although the Ming Dynasty had many Emperors with short reigns, the ministers and eunuchs did alter the purpose of the voyages, and the Yongle Emperor rose to power through a coup, the Ming dynasty still followed the pattern of the dynastic cycle and did so without much effect on Zheng He's behalf.

Of course, there is more to the imperial court than just service to the emperor himself as each of the ministers, diplomats, and eunuchs had goals, desires, and relationships with each other. As mentioned, the voyages of Zheng He offers an opening into this topic through the relationship of eunuchs during the voyages as there is no doubt that interpersonal relationship built the reasons for the later treasure fleets:

The eunuchs were entrusted with unqualified authority in the allocation of resources and recruitment of technical personnel. As Yung-lo's power became secure and with the eunuchs' personal interests and influence entrenched in court, the original purpose was

³⁵ Geoff Wade, "The Ming Shi-Lu as a Source for Southeast Asian History," 2005, http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/sites/msl/files/basic_page/MSL.pdf.

³⁶ Geoff Wade.

soon transformed into the collection of luxury items and strange objects as characterized by the later voyages.³⁷

This complexity was not simply about how each eunuch gained wealth and influence but also in their usage of the past as no matter how much they were to act as the bad cop of the imperial court, there had to be a basis for reason that they used just as much as the approach seeks for the prosumer. One of the narrative points that serve both informative and plot significance would be that of ancestor decrees as while there is a downturn of support for the elderly in the west in practice, the idea of founding fathers or family rules has not. The Huangming zuxun or Ancestral Injunctions of the August Ming served a major role in the discourse and choices in the records and political situation of Zheng He's fleets as these rules limited the effort towards the foreign influence that should be supported.³⁸ While one potential reason for the voyage was to find the then deposed Emperor, it's influence over the rest of the tributaries and visited states cannot be ignored not only for the effects of the visits themselves but the political and economic cost that both sides spent to continue the act that was required. In having rules that dictate how people are meant to act simply due to age is at least a concept that comes naturally as it is still how many laws and legal cases are decided and while there are plenty of people who question such decision, glory, justice, and righteousness still serves as a strong case for these rules. There is a contradiction here though as if the goal of a narrative or romanticization approach in which the fantastical is used to disconnect the assumptions, then a materialistic or relatable approach possess its own problems as the foundation of the narrative is still to allow the prosumer to develop ideas on their own so they can create their own narratives that can clash, improve, or cooperate with the discourse created by historians.

³⁷ Kuei-Sheng Chang, "The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of Great European Discoveries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 3 (1974): 353, <https://doi.org/10.2307/600069>.

³⁸ Hui Chun Hing, "Huangming Zuxun and Zheng He's Voyages to the Western Oceans."

At the core of the dynastic cycle and in turn a narrative it is based on would be the imperial court yet to most prosumer what is needed to grasp the dynastic cycle is not simply understanding the imperial court or why its actors make choices but setting themselves outside of their modern lives and into the worldview of countless lives from the ancient past. The viewpoints of the court of the emperor may offer some level of understanding but regardless of how fantastical or how much is built up through the narrative to separate the real and imaginary, an innate opposition to imperial or royal rule has been built up nearly worldwide. In turn, it is easiest to build narratives regardless of how fantastical they are with the view of the underdog, in xianxia fiction it is often so focused on by writers that one of the most common methods is through using the advancement into a new region, world, group, or otherwise previously only vaguely known existence where everything is better or at least stronger. One such way to easily integrate this into the dynastic cycle is through the constant evolution of the state, instead of having them reach a new world, have the narrative take place in the same world with a new dynasty that is stronger than the last. The dynastic cycle symbolizes eternity and inevitability, having the next version of the state follow the same path but grow even stronger than the last thanks to the mandate of heaven and the immortals involved would be infuriating for at least the reader but it would still serve its purpose. Many would find it infuriating since one of the most common ideas today is to learn from past mistakes, but the very nature of the dynastic cycle is that those mistakes are natural and going to happen. Using the perspectives of this relationship from those that supported the old dynasty, the new dynasty and the tributary states should at least annoy the prosumer enough to come to their conclusions if written well enough. In doing so the narrative is always able to provide the underdog's perspective, something that would then also be a necessity for our narrative yet to do so would require having an "underdog" in the first place.

While it is wrong to say that there is no power involved in the relationships of the imperial court or the tributary states visited by Zheng He, the idea that within the court and among the states were fundamentally weaker or subservient must be removed. Rhetoric aside, the choices of a vast majority of actors here are all pragmatic, the seven orders given to Siam in 1419, the 1537 debate, Emperor Hongwu's instructions to the ministry of rites, and so forth are all based on pragmatism and not a simple power relation.³⁹ Understanding the system of power without action alongside the action without power that occurred even just with the seven voyages of Zheng He, is a complicated matter but by using and having the audience able to see both the actions and the rhetoric which represents what our actors "thought it should be", across at least this scenario or perhaps even the whole arc it offers an opportunity for the prosumer to build their understanding of these relationships so they too may use it and add new ideas and life to the discourse.⁴⁰

Examining the Period Process

There are many problems beyond what has already been discussed both in the narrative essence of the dynastic cycle and in any historical understanding built by it, however. The dynastic cycle is based on eternity and repetition, as one falls another rise and while any decent narrative has a plot and therefore a beginning, middle, and end which while still possible to have the concept of the dynastic cycle inside of it and have its reader think of it is not the best format for such an idea. On top of that, the courtside set of perspectives, be it visiting tributary merchants, court eunuchs, or even the emperor himself, has an extraordinary difficulty in keeping it interesting with just a combination of court intrigue and Daoist immortals. While the

³⁹ Kuei-Sheng Chang, "The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of Great European Discoveries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 3 (1974): 347–59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/600069>.

⁴⁰ Geoff Wade, "The Ming Shi-Lu as a Source for Southeast Asian History."

basis for the narrative being tested does allow for the revising of an older scenario with a different lead and the previously mentioned eternal reconstructed state has enough potential to be included in the final product, it is likely not enough. The goal of the new narrative approach is not just to be interesting enough or inspire thoughts on the world but bring the reader into the discourse of history and the dynastic model while interesting and deeply rooted in Chinese history have trouble in doing so. The period approach and the dynastic cycle are both models currently seen as going on the way out with many historians today discussing what if any is the boundary of the period while the modern Chinese state has pushed hard against the model's modern usage. Neither models are preferred to still be used and much of their discourse has dried up, not completely as it is still discussed in historiography and the latter case, sinology.⁴¹ However, while the basis for the dynastic cycle is counter-intuitive to promote a narrative that could ever be read by a prosumer it does still offers opportunities for the narrative such as with the eternal dynasties, coup, corruption, and natural disasters all serve as wonderful starting points for any narrative that fits well with any lead including that of Zheng He.

⁴¹ Michael Bentley, *Companion to Historiography*.

Chapter 3: The Cultural Approach

The existing framework

While the dynastic cycle is rooted in the understanding in ancient China about the nature of the state and turn its relationship with people and other states, it is only one of the many potential perspectives that one could use to try and gain an understanding of the past. In particular, the critical scholarship, and modernist approaches to Chinese history are all important directions that have been taken to understand the past, but they are not what matters to the necessary use of narrative in the prosumer assistive model. Each of these models looks towards the connections between present and past as a method of understanding the past but by placing the present as a presupposition of the past, both limits and alters the perception of the past. In the same vein, a second wave-postmodernists have influenced the cultural studies model to develop scholars who “tend to see cultural manifestations as textual, and to see culture as subject to the process of ‘reading’—that is, the imposition of order on perception, or ideology on practice.” as put by Bentley.⁴² The confrontation of what is known or even knowable combined with having its scholars take on the viewpoint of the reader is directly related to the very basis of the reasoning to build a new model. This variant of the cultural studies models as discussed by Bentley, not only gives an existing model in the direction of the developed objective but it in turn also allows finding where it is not compatible with the differing needs of the two models. While the two do take a similar outlook towards the sources being used and what position its reader should take, it targets a different and incompatible demographic that have greatly differing needs

⁴² Michael Bentley.

and desires. The scholars of this existing method of cultural studies are professional historians in one form or another and turn are expected to have some existing understanding of the details and minutia that have been deemed detrimental to developing an understanding or comprehension of the sources and subsequent historical works. On the other hand, the prosumer cannot be expected to have this level of understanding nor for them to check each footnote or source used since they are not professional historians. What is useful to them is the understanding of a fundamentally different experience to that which they have experienced or at least from a perspective that they would have otherwise been unable to consider. Beyond these issues is that one of the focuses of this approach is about ritual as a performance which while not incompatible with the view of placing oneself into as many shoes as possible, does place a distance between the two approaches.⁴³

If reading the story of Zheng He would be the objective of this postmodern view of cultural studies, then the objective of the prosumer assistive approach is to adapt Zheng He to become readable as a narrative. However, the similar focus on the reading of the story is a pivotal question that does need testing which can be directly inspired by this approach to cultural studies. The narrative naturally gives both the dimensions and delimitations that are required and as such allow for the same reading of rituals and understanding the flaws within.⁴⁴ It is not a stretch to being the narrative of Zheng He into the discourse on rituals and their readings as it has to be remembered that the very nature of the tributary system was a rite both in practice and in its nomenclature with the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty placing his instructions regarding a tribute to the ministry of rites.⁴⁵ Of course, cultural studies also place their focus on the more material aspects of culture as well such as food, treasures, animals, and prominent items, all of

⁴³ Michael Bentley.

⁴⁴ Michael Bentley.

⁴⁵ Chang, "The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of Great European Discoveries," 1974.

which were part of the voyages of Zheng He both for their participation as rite and as a more materialistic tribute to the treasure fleet that was headed by Zheng He.⁴⁶

Testing the Cultural Model

Let the voyages be the focus of this reading as it is the center of the rite of tribute and the passage of material goods that defined the narrative of Zheng He. The journey within the narrative of Zheng He is that of a treasure fleet voyage which as previously examined has an innate ritual service both as part of the rite of tribute and the emperor's "virtue". Therefore, three "rites" can be found at the center of Zheng He's voyages, that of the founding emperor, the tribute system, and of the (originally) newly enthroned Yongle Emperor. Of the rites that were established by the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Hungwu directly addressed the issue of tribute but in a quite unexpected way going so far as to say about the tributary system that, "Messages should be forwarded to them to reduce their tribute to avoid high and unnecessary expenses on both sides".⁴⁷ From this there are two points of note, both of which could be read and interpreted for the narrative form, the first is that the rite was absolute and had little importance to the founding emperor from a wealthy perspective, with the second being its isolationist nature. Of course, this was the same instruction of the rite of tribute that was ignored by the Yongle Emperor who sent Zheng He on his voyages and in turn caused the same voyages to not be overly recorded or publicized but that only provides an opportunity to rebuild this particular cross-generational interaction.⁴⁸ This particular set of decisions offers two direct readings, one from the founding emperor and the other from the Yongle Emperor, what we can

⁴⁶ Michael Bentley, *Companion to Historiography*.

⁴⁷ Chang, "The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of Great European Discoveries," 1974.

⁴⁸ Hui Chun Hing, "Huangming Zuxun and Zheng He's Voyages to the Western Oceans."

“know” about them are nearly identical given their extremely similar position, degree of surviving records, and rise to power. If Emperor Hongwu decided to alter the repetition of the ritual of tribute by placing its delimitations tightly, then Emperor Yongle characterized the rite of tribute for its influence by spreading its dimensions towards the greater part of Asia, part of Africa, and according to some even America.

When translating this understanding of the preface and beginning of the voyages of Zheng He, there would be two easy directions for variety in perspective: inter-generational and courtly. An inter-generational narrative would place the focus of the reading on the transitional periods between emperors and between dynasties as not only was Emperor Hongwu the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty but in turn, was the individual who replaced the last emperor of the Yuan dynasty. In addition to Emperor Hongwu’s offerings towards an inter-generational narrative that can be provided through any number of lenses from an “immortal” character, there are the many emperors who Zheng He sailed (or did not sail) under with each changing the narrative, perspective, and decision from the previous. This too could be read as an unofficial rite of imperial authority where each emperor must show their court that they are different from the previous one and in turn will be making different and at least argued improved decisions. If rites are indeed texts to be read by their “allusiveness, self-characterization, layers of repetition and improvisation” according to this cultural studies framework then there is a narrative within this rite of righting that would be necessary to be understood.⁴⁹ The other reading of this set of decisions that can be interpreted without too many edits is from the perspectives of the courtiers, ministers, or eunuchs that have also had an opportunity to show their perspective with the model of the dynastic cycle. These members of the imperial court would have to make decisions, alliances, and suggestions based entirely on the relationships of the rising members of the court

⁴⁹ Michael Bentley, *Companion to Historiography*.

and the rites that were already established by previous emperors. Therefore, a reading and in turn narrative from the many members of the court could also help enlighten the relationship between keeping the repetition of rites and innovation of rites to show changing power within the court. As the perspectives that this would suggest also fall in line with one of the better potential perspectives from the narrative based on the dynastic cycle, it would be entirely possible to address both at one which would make the world of the narrative more “alive” and more useful for assisting its prosumer readers.

The rite of tribute that was used as the public reasoning for the voyages of Zheng He is of course another of the rites that can be read, and an attempt made to be “known”. Tribute and the tributary system were one of the core aspects of nearly all the imperial dynasties of China and are far too complicated to reach a conclusive understanding of from a single paper or even a single historical narrative thanks to its longevity, cultural reasonings, and many layers of political consideration. While there are many questions and places for discourse regarding the tributary system used by dynasties such as the Ming, that is not to say that there is nothing to “read” from it using the model of cultural studies. The power dynamics involved in the tributary system are clear from any reading of it, including those long after the death of Zheng He such as the statement in 1444 that “those who respect Heaven, serve the superior and protect all living things will certainly receive Heaven’s support” or in 1478 “The native officials are people outside culture. Since the time of the ancestors, they have only been required to offer tribute at regular intervals, as a way of restraining them”.⁵⁰ What could be read from the voyages of Zheng He in this regard have three main perspectives purely based on available sources, Zheng He, Ma Huan (one of the members of Zheng He’s voyages who wrote *The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s*

⁵⁰ Geoff Wade, “The Ming Shi-Lu as a Source for Southeast Asian History.”

Shores), and the “visited” leaders such as the chief of Malacca, King Alagakkonara of Ceylon, pirate chieftain Chen Zuyi, and the royal family of Semudera.⁵¹

However, much as a single investigation into the topic of tributaries could not conclude within the discourse of history results in many historians investigating based on each other’s research and continually evolving the discourse so too would the prosumer be stimulated to read and think more on the topic thanks to the narrative form. The variety of aspects, questions, and potential reasonings for the tributary system only open more potential narratives and characters to voice those aspects through their dialogue and actions. The narrative that is tied to the rite of the tribute within the voyages of Zheng He alone is enough for at least an entire protagonist’s journey within the built narrative with plenty of potential perspective changes. These perspective changes could be at different stops across the journey, over different character lifetimes (thanks to the nature of the overarching narrative), or even just through the usage of journals and reports as they return to the court. Beyond just being ripe for using perspective to examine the topic is how well its topic matter fits into a narrative as if mixed with the reasoning for the journey that was previously discussed, the reasonings that are understood by the reader can vary wildly. The relationships formed by the removal of forces, authorization of local decisions, hostile actions of locals, and local disputes of legitimacy when connected to the rite of tribute which holds the regions near china in a simultaneous closeness and distance only serve to improve this. Returning to the emphasis of allowing the reader to be a prosumer who gains an understanding of a period, its ideas, culture, and beliefs before creating something completely new to the discourse is the nature of the literary genre and it is in the literature that character relationships are king. No matter how interesting a premise or how elegant the writing, little to no pieces of literature

⁵¹ Ming-Yang Su, *Seven Epic Voyages of Zheng He in Ming China, 1405-1433: Facts, Fiction and Fabrication* (Torrance, California: The author, 2005).

can hold attention or active thought without characters of some form, not necessarily human characters but characters, nonetheless. Using the many different types of interactions and relationships such as the royal infighting attempts against Zheng He and his crew, or even just the simple affirmation of support all can serve as major plot points that with a strong narrative voice can easily force the reader to figure out how they understand the decisions and nature of the people and world they are reading.

What can easily assist in building that understanding, the narrative, and the historical accuracy without adding far too much minutia are the goods that served as a tribute and served as one of the major questions of the voyages.⁵² It can be seen from the decision of the dynasty founder and the subsequent statements by later emperors against the voyages that in the period of the Yongle Emperor, the voyages would not have been an economic benefit to the dynasty as a whole. It did, however, serve as a gathering of exotic items that improved the increasingly wealthy and luxurious appearance of the Emperor and eunuchs collections which places an important place of understanding for the reasonings of why.⁵³ It is easy for those who are not already knowledgeable in the topic of tributary systems to consider it all too similar to a system of taxation made to gather wealth within a centralized region which would directly conflict with any attempts to explain the system. This conflict could only be resolved by showing the nature of the tribute as the system of rites based on duties and tribute that was meant to maintain order in the regions of East Asia as previously examined.⁵⁴ However, there are still some useful lessons and concepts that cultural studies would point out that could be observed from the pieces of material culture that were seen as having enough value or purpose to fulfill this rite in the first

⁵² Chang, "The Maritime Scene in China at the Dawn of Great European Discoveries," 1974.

⁵³ Chang.

⁵⁴ Immanuel C. Y. (Immanuel Chung-Yueh) Hsü 1923-2005., *The Rise of Modern China*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0604/99010876-t.html>.

place. Local products are frequently referenced to among the goods received by Zheng He such as ebony, ivory, rhinoceros horns, aloe wood, and the bread tree fruit alongside animals especially from states further west such as lion, leopards, giraffes, and horses from the Arabian peninsula.⁵⁵ In addition to these more normal goods were the often return of people as prisoners which have their potential reading as a form of material culture but given that a seeming majority of notable prisoners that returned to be presented to the Emperor were to be executed or forgiven; it seems ill-fitting to read them as entirely part of the tribute part of the tributary system as much as the examples the Ming Dynasty chose to show the completion of its duties that are part of the tributary system.

The reading of material goods is arguably just as ripe with narrative possibility as the rites that have already been discussed for the narrative format. Every item has its story and the large-scale gathering of exotic goods to enter the court offers many stories to play with to build both for the narrative and the world it is contained in. However, although there is much to say in this regard and be read about what was valued and seen as proper cost for the tributary system which could certainly be enough to develop a scenario for the narrative; few narrative tales in any form or from any region that emphasized the economics of the situation have been able to retain the attention and thoughts of its audience. As such while it is possible to work more in-depth with this aspect of the reading of material culture, such a task will be left to anyone who builds further upon the prosumer assistive approach later. Given this acknowledgment, what can be far more realistically integrated into the narrative is the considerations regarding the difference between the luxurious showing of tribute to its actual economic benefits that are all too easy to combine into one. Beyond this, a more in-depth understanding of goods and what

⁵⁵ Yamashita and Guadalupi, *Zheng He: Tracing the Epic Voyages of China's Greatest Explorer / Zheng He : Tracing the Eipi Voyages of China's Greatest Explorer* = 鄭和.

makes each region unique within the world; at least those with a relationship to one of the factions based on the Ming Dynasty, should also be remembered during world-building, descriptions of what is shown leave an impression, and what material goods could cause a major incident.

Determining the Faults

The usage of cultural studies and the postmodern viewpoint to read the rites and material goods involved with the voyages of Zheng He is undoubted of benefit to the narrative being built and some parts of its are more than good enough to include into the prosumer assistive approach but that does not mean that it is without faults. Of its strengths that could be incorporated, the noting and usage of rites as repetition until innovation is a strong concept that works well in a narrative form thanks to how striking it would be within the world and the equally strong emotions that would be shown by the characters. While the specifics of the tributary system as a rite may not end up being particularly applicable due to differences in geographic changes made while transforming China into a fantasy variant of itself, the focus of reading rites has plenty of value remaining. Not only inside of just this Chinese-themed narrative, as while the west, Africa, and the rest of the non-Chinese world does not typically have a ministry of rites, it would be false to say that they lacked rites. Rites are a common factor of social consistency which serve as the living memory of the decisions and beliefs from the past which often contribute to offering an understanding of their ancestors to those who participate which supports its importance when explaining culture and society to a newly introduced prosumer. Another aspect that will be included in the narrative directly is that notion of exotic goods and their place in representing authority entity separate from simply showing what is theirs or how wealthy a state is. As such,

the movement of wealth and resources as two separate entities are something that more attention will be paid in the writing of the narrative.

Nothing is perfect and the flaws in using cultural studies to directly use as the basis in building a narrative are far too much to use wholesale. In the first place, while it is reasonable to focus on culture from the standpoint of the historian, a narrative is controlled by characters, and at least for traditional and easier literary forms, those characters are typically not an entire cultural framework. Beyond just the problem of scope needing other influence to transform the voyages of Zheng He into a narrative distinct from the romanticized style of historical works that already exist, is that when building a fantasy world is in part to build alienation between the reader and the world. One of the established goals that are required for the prosumer assistive approach is placing the prosumer in the position of a distant reader who can get into the minds of the many people and perspectives involved in the development of the narrative which means that the narrative cannot cause its reader to be too detached or too involved. Fundamentally, cultural studies ask the historian to serve as a detached reader who observes rites, material culture, and other major indications of culture which require a detached reader to see the whole picture, but the prosumer does not need to see the whole picture at one time. While the prosumer is asked to enter the discourse and add a new perspective to it, they are not asked to be as prominent, active, or even return to the discourse as while it is ideal for the prosumer to become truly interested in the topic there are no time constraints of when to continue talking, reading, and thinking about a discipline aside from the time constraints of death itself. The loose time constraints for the involvement of the prosumer are why there must be such a prominent consideration for readability, interest, and entertainment for narrative-based historical works such as historical fiction, documentaries, romanticized history, and in the prosumer assistive approach.

Chapter 4: Building the Initial Prosumer Assistive Approach

Reexamining the Purpose and Lessons

From the dynastic cycle that forms periods within Chinese history and its explanation of why people acted the way they did and how they saw the world to the cultural studies that read the rites and material goods to understand the culture of its focus, alongside many other views of history such as critical, modernist, and Fairbank styles in the case of Chinese history all serve to build an understanding of the past. Historians have learned to analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct history as part of their profession and the models used reflect this but both of those examined and many others have logical issues that only become issues for a prosumer audience. To properly build the prosumer assistive approach first the goals, focuses, and stylistic choices must be established. The pre-established rules of this approach were that the works developed by this approach were to have prosumers as a target audience, to focus on making said prosumer develop their understanding of the past based on what is knowable instead of thinking of the past as known and gain a historian's eye for the bias of perspective. This was to be done thanks to the interest that are developed much easier within narrative works and with a genre and concept that can set the appropriate theme and distance such as xianxia for Chinese romanticized events. To fulfill these goals, the main elements of this approach would be based on distance, interest, and the transmission of concepts, ideas, and worldviews that are understood or discussed as part of the topics of modern discourse. On top of these elements is the most important one, that it must be a self-sustaining approach that has enough of an impact on the prosumer to discuss, introduce,

and create based on their understanding that could grow thanks to the simultaneous interest and distance.

From the dynastic cycle and in turn, the period-based view of the past that is commonly understood by even the most novice of prosumers came new additions that needed to be added to the list of requirements for this new model. Much as a good narrative starts with once upon a time, so does history but to understand why the narrative of historical characters acted the way they did requires understanding not the world but the worldview that they lived in. Periods while not being the most rigorous of tools thanks to their often ambiguity and lack of consensus are still used to a certain degree by historians and in western cases such as the Renaissance where it was the people of the time who spoke of a new era, these periods become even more useful. As such for the Chinese case in which the dynastic cycle formed its periods both inside and between dynastic changes certain elements are perfect for the approach being built. The emphasis on worldview based on perspective aligns well with the objectives thanks to the changes between perspectives as the inconsistent narrator limits the degree to which the reader becomes invested and feeling connected to anyone's perspective. Beyond this is the element of a worldview that the periods do bring to the forefront of the discourse as while there are many ambiguous elements to the idea of periods, if the very worldview of the human actors within a narrative, changes then there is a different period. At the core of the dynastic cycle that makes it different other forms of periodization is that it holds a political factor above all else but behind that political factor is an entire world view based on the will of heaven, heavens mandate, and the love of the “One on High” that must be introduced to the historian or prosumer for the worldview to be a rational creation.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Geoff Wade, “The Ming Shi-Lu as a Source for Southeast Asian History.”

Cultural studies also provided imperative requirements for the new approach that is being built, especially regarding human interactions that serve as the main source of events in history and plot lines within a narrative. The position of a reader who reads the culture and in particular the rites and material culture are a strong position that is quite useful for the historian thanks to the near-unlimited directions that cultural elements of any society can be understood. The insights it offers into how to understand rites and how the cultural elements they are connected to as forces of human actions make it a useful tool not only for obtaining a historical basis for actions within a narrative while also forming a list of required cultural elements that a reader would need to understand. This degree of insight that culture studies offer is heightened by the material observations such as those discussed in the last chapter especially as one of the main drawbacks of having a prosumer audience as a focus is a lack of details that can be included. To combat this lack of details, the usage of important and material goods and the worldbuilding that allows for the transport of said goods from one location to where they are seen in the narrative is an amazing assistant in having a checklist in finding what is missing from the world. While these elements are amazing for having a checklist on the creation side and in turn need to be pronounced enough for a prosumer to pick up on them before they seek to produce their works, there is a problem with including cultural studies directly. At the core of a story is a time and a place, while culture studies are an amazing tool to analyze and reconstruct the past it is not meant to take the form of a narrative in which the very basis for the concepts it investigates are being changed. Culture studies are great at considering the cultural elements of a world, but it is not meant for a journey and at its core, all stories that can be told through a narrative is a journey, be it a journey of emotions, differences, reconciliation, politics, conflict, or even a hero's journey that forces its protagonist to cross the world.

Establishing the completed approach

From each of these investigations are the requirements for the prosumer assistive approach to become something with a purpose that is unique and in turn, serves society, the historian as a professional occupation must go beyond its circle and this approach is only of use if it facilitates this. With the above considered in full, an initial set of rules and guidelines for this approach are formed with twin goals of creating an opening for the prosumer to become invested not in an event but history as a whole and inspiring the prosumer to produce their works that advance the discourse of history. In terms of its sources and topics, this approach is only possible for narrative investigations and in turn, requires character actors to push its story along resulting in it being unfit to explore a piece of history they lack in human choices or reactions. Second, is that the narratives built must focus on building a world that addresses the worldview as something that its reader would not be aware of and make use of changes in perspective or distant but involved observer characters that force the reader to always remember that they can only “know” a semi-accurate truth. Third, it must introduce the elements in a representative model such as repetition for rites and as such must avoid shorter length narratives and shorter periods must be lengthened through perspectives, deaths of characters, or the like. Finally, when using the approach, usage of cultural studies or similar methods, styles, or approaches that build the world from the angle that the historian wants to discuss must be used as it is only with context that the narrative can change from simply entertaining to an opening into the historical discourse. Something that must be noted however is that there are still many problems with this list and the prosumer assistive approach beyond those already discussed. For one, it asks the historian to be both a historian and work with a form of media from literature, tv, movies, or games, which are an unfortunate limitation but perhaps one that could offer opportunities for

historians in the future. Another issue is that there are so many ways of constructing the past and each has its value that should ideally be introduced into the methods used for products and works that leave the discipline of history into the rest of society. While yet another is that the approach relies on having a prosumer audience which while interesting and rising in prominence within modern education, is by no means prevalent yet so only time will tell if this movement grows to the extent that this approach holds any practical purpose. However, there is a negative saying about educators that those who can do and those who cannot teach but that saying would imply that the opposite is also true, those who cannot do such as the untrained prosumer can teach something new to those who can do the studies and research such as the historian. If prosumer learners are to be the future of higher education or even education, then all academic fields must decide how to address this change and the prosumer assistive approach is one such potential decision, if not as it currently is then as it could eventually be.

Conclusion

Building a new tool for the use of historians is hard enough and building a new tool not only for historians but also suitable for the prosumer while even the identity of the prosumer is still in flux is even harder. The difficulty therein does still allow for someone to develop such a model, tool, or approach but such a person who could do so would be called a genius while most historians and all professionals within academia create works that stand on giants. Marc Bloch's *The historian's craft*, Bentley's *Companion To Historiography*, M.C. Lemon's *Philosophy of History*, and many other works by professional historians are used today as textbooks while sources of any topic have countless secondary sources that have built the discourse within history. In turn, the building of a new tool for analyzing, deconstructing, or reconstructing history such as the prosumer assistive approach is far more likely to become a successful creation that brings benefits to the field once it has new interactions built upon the last, no different from how the discourse itself evolves. This investigation into the building of the prosumer assistive approach addressed the nature of the approach itself, periodization, and culture studies to build a narrative based on Zheng He but that is only two historical styles. Only two methods have been focused on in building the prosumer assistive approach and while they are relevant, they are far from the only ones. There are many directions to improve the approach with new directions such as history from below, but it is hoped that what has been investigated will act as a foundation for greater things. Regardless of future work, however, so long as a single voice that would have otherwise never been made is inspired through this approach, it will have served its meaning.

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