"Scholarly Caution": Challenges and Traps in New Cultural History Studies

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Abstract: *In new cultural history studies, the materials, methods and approaches are all different from conventional ones, which asks scholars to be more cautious when conducting their researches. By analyzing various cases, this paper gives an explanation of what "scholarly caution" is and what scholars should do to avoid potential mistakes.*

Keywords: New Cultural History, Research Approach, Methodology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "scholarly caution" is to explain the attitude of scholars when they are conducting academic research projects. As an important quality of good scholars, this attitude is also necessary for all the scholars to follow.

There are two famous addresses made by two scholars that clearly show the essence of "scholarly caution". The first one is Lionel Trilling's speech at Cornell University in 1962, entitled "The Scholar's Caution and the Scholar's Courage"[1]. Trilling called for a combination of caution and courage to make achievements in the academic world. The second one is Hu Shih's speech at National Taiwan University in 1952, entitled "Zhixue de fangfa yu cailiao 治学的方法与材料"[2]. In this speech, Hu raised his famous quotation "大胆的假设，小心的求证" (To make assumptions boldly, but to testify cautiously) once again, emphasizing on this attitude to a high level.

Both speeches raised the central issue of "scholarly caution", which is essential for historians. In the book *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Peter Burke also mentions an attitude of cautious, which is essential for all the historians, no matter what field or study school that he/she is in. This case is especially important for historians in the field of new cultural history studies. Because in this relatively "new" field, without much mature methodology. As a result, the topics, approaches, methods, writing styles all experience great changes. Without the help of scholarly caution, it would be easy for scholars in this field to conduct mistakes, falling into the traps. In the following part, this paper would examine the issue of "scholarly caution" in three different aspects.

The structure is designed according to the normal process of a certain type of an academic research project. From the first part, the materials/sources, scholars conduct interpretation/analysis, to make conclusions/ judgments. Thus, the first two parts are two essential aspects in the process of research. Besides, scholars always need the help from outside, like the application of cross-discipline knowledge, approaches and methods. This is the third important part in the investigation of the "scholarly caution" issue in this paper.

2. THE TRAP OF SOURCES

New cultural history scholars deal with all kinds of different sources. One challenge that they encounter with is the problem of lack of sources. Here emerges two important questions: the first is how to determine whether the sources are "enough" or not? The second is how to make use of new sources like written stories in history studies?

2.1 The Problem of "Enough or Not"

Carlo Ginzburg's work *The Cheese and the Worms* presents a way to analyze the past, especially the mental world of people who live in the past. The reason why this project is possible is that there is a whole set of documents left

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[1] Lionel Trilling, "The Scholar's Caution and the Scholar's Courage." In *The Cornell Library Conference: Papers Read ad the Dedication of the Central Libraries, 1962* (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1964), 51–65.

[2] Hu Shih 胡适, "Zhixue de fangfa yu cailiao 治学的方法与材料." In *Zhixue de fangfa yu cailiao 《治学的方法与材料》* (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd, 1986), 143–56.

to present day, depicting the life and thinking of the hero, making it accessible for us today to know about the very details of the history. However, things are a little bit different in other cases. For example, when Professor Joshua Ehrlich shared his new research project on the print culture in 18th century India, to investigate into the mental world of people at the time is not that easy, because there are not enough materials left. Here brings an interesting question: how can we define if the sources are enough or not?

Generally speaking, from an extreme viewpoint, sources for history studies are never really enough. History focuses on human activities and thinking, which are both complex and complicated, involving with all kinds of materials. To understand a living person in daily life is already difficult, not to mention to do this familiar job on people who lived hundreds or even thousands of years ago. In this case, we need sources as much as possible, the more the better.

However, one of history's features is the dramatic changes happening all the route. Information gets lost along side the change of time, making it difficult for human beings to leave much behind their lives. In the old days, ruling groups like the emperors, kings and wealthy class people tried hard to fight against this trend, engaging in art and book printing as well as building fancy tombs and memorials. But most of these tries just failed, leaving little to present day, some of which have even been erased to the utmost. This is for the case of the upper class of a society. When we talk about the lower classes, things get worse. History is filled with millions of 'nobodies', who left nothing behind their lives.

Based on this situation of historical sources, it is rather valuable when we discover something relating to a certain group of people or a certain person. For the case of Menocchio, it is really an unusual one. Commonly speaking, it is rare that a man belonging to the ordinary class of society could leave with so much information for historians to read, analyze and explain. It's the construction on this solid basis that makes Carlo Ginzburg's project so successful.

In this way, when we discuss how to determine if the sources are enough or not, we can turn to the sources for Ginzburg's study. What did he have when he did his investigations? Were the sources always enough for him when dealing with a certain individual problem in the whole process? These kinds of analysis may help us gain a view on the criteria better.

First of all, Ginzburg did have a whole set of materials all about his subject, including the documents about every parts of Menocchio's trial. The documents are rather detailed, recording the words, gestures or even the feelings of the circumstances. In other words, the basic information is enough for Ginzburg to sketch the framework and outline for his research plan.

However, this does not mean Ginzburg met with no challenges in the process, and this brings us to the second important feature of the documents about Menocchio, that is, the documents are all from one origin, the church (Holy Office). The Holy Office had recorded the trials and preserved them well in their archives, making it possible for Ginzburg to dig information within them. But the problem is that there lacks another angle. For example, what did Menocchio himself depicted the trials, what about his family and neighbors? These voices were not recorded, making it hard for Ginzburg to add details into his framework and outline.

To cope with this absence of different source origins, Ginzburg applied his techniques as a historian, to refer to sources beyond this specific case. For example, he examined the protocols and rules of trials at the same time as Menocchio was, to have a better understanding of how the Holy Office did the trial processes. He also conducted research and discussions on the details mentioned by Menocchio in his speeches, like the books he bought, read, and heard about. A deeper investigation into these 'irrelevant' materials also helps to contribute to the study of the main topic.

In conclusion, from the case of Ginzburg's study on Menocchio, we can argue that there is no certain standard for whether a set of sources is enough or not, for all historical traces are fragmented, providing only a glimpse into history. The main task for us is to see whether the sources are enough to draw the framework and outline first, if this job can be done well with the help of accessible sources, then the problem turns out to be not that serious, for we can supplement sources from other fields and perspectives, making the framework and outline better and more persuasive.

2.2 The Problem of New Types of Sources

The second challenge is that the sources are "strange" and could be misleading, especially when scholars are dealing with written stories as sources. Then the question becomes: how to make use of written stories in history studies?

History study is not equivalent to story telling, but it still consists of various stories. The historian's task is to investigate into the stories written by people in the past, to find clues for what was real and what was not. Written stories as historical materials play a unique role in the study process of certain topics. In the book The Return of Martin Guerre by Natalie Zemon Davis, the author has shown readers an example of how to deal with the stories.

In chapters 10 and 11, much discussions are provided by the author to talk about the storytellers who wrote the various versions of the Martin Guerre story. The case that the book focuses on is different from the Menocchio one. The story is not found by the historian, but already has long been recorded and told in hundreds of years. Writers from different backgrounds and standpoints wrote the story differently, leaving the historian a need to check between them and find the reasons why they did so.

For example, one of the main writers of the Martin Guerre story, Coras, had his own interpretation of the story. The information he got was "tailored" by him, showing emphasis on certain points, meanwhile neglecting or even twisting "facts" in some rather important places. As Davis notes on page 108, "Coras exaggerates certain things and omits others......in shaping his account." This can even be called "telling lies" to some extent. Firstly, Coras made Arnaud du Tilh's memory more marvelous than it was. Secondly, he presents himself and the courts as less convinced of Arnaud's innocence than in fact they were. Besides, Coras never mentioned that Ber-trande and Pirerre were imprisoned.

The findings here show the weakness of written stories as historical materials well. Unlike archives and personal diaries, stories written by writers for publication purpose have a strong style of "reconstructing the truth". As is seen in various cases, even the once-trustworthy materials like official archives also have some elements of faking the facts. There is no need to doubt about the same situation in written stories. So much parts of stories are actually fictions, thus making it unsuitable for serving as historical proofs for studies.

However, sometimes it's hard to determine which part of a story is fiction. The author of the book shows one important way to do this job, that is to compare between different sources. She does comparisons between different versions of the same story book, as well as comparisons between different stories told by different storytellers. Besides, there is a need to check other sources if possible, like official trial documents. For instance, the fact that Bertrande and Pirerre were imprisoned, as mentioned above, is a finding she makes through checking the story with the same theme told by Le Sueur and the registers of the Parlement. The two sources both show a different version of the story plot that is seen in the Coras book.

In this sense, the process of checking the "facts" in written stories is like judges making decisions on court. Once we encounter with a myth, we have to find relating information and clues. When we're doing this, there is a need to ask for more than one source, or the reliability of the source provided would be shaken heavily. This brings us another tough task, for often scholars are not able to acquire enough sources. In some situations, all the written information that we can access today is nothing but a single line of words, with no other sources to check with. How should we deal with this problem? The author of *The Return of Martin Guerre* also gives us an example that we can follow and learn.

In the book, Davis uses words like "perhaps" and "maybe" a lot, which becomes one of the prominent features of the work. Though this method is still under criticism by some people, it's still a good way to solve the problem. For at least she does not simply interpret her "guessing" as "facts". Whenever she faces the problem of sources and proofs, she uses the guessing words to remind the readers, leaving places for further studies in the future. Similarly, as we see in the case of the Menocchio study, younger generations of scholars followed Carlo Ginzburg, successfully finding new archives about the subject.

This is also a responsible attitude when we make use of stories as historical materials., unlike the method of Coras who wrote down things based on his own choice, without implying anything to readers. It would be a disaster for scholars if the Coras version is left as the only source, for the irresponsible "choice of facts" would do harm to the search for facts. Though we can possibly never be able to reveal all the facts, the facts of what exactly happened as well as what people said and did are still there. All we need to do is to gather the pieces of the facts and try to make it full and accessible.

3.   THE PROBLEMS IN INTERPRETING

When new cultural history scholars write their papers and books, the job is to interpret the materials and sources into analysis. During this process, new problems emerged. As one scholar suggested, the work is to "search for opacity". How can this be possible? What strategies should be done to reach this aim of tracing the "facts" in details? Last but not the least, how should historians put themselves in the right position in viewing history and handling the problem of personal preferences? The following part will cope with these problems in four sections.

3.1 Search for Opacity

In response to the discussions on methodology in previous chapters, when it came to the conclusion part of *The Great Cat Massacre*, Robert Darnton once again talked about the methods and principles he used as a cultural historian. In this part, one key suggestion the author offered to readers is to 'search for opacity in texts'[3]. How can this be possible, and what should historians today do to in order to achieve this aim? To answer these two questions, an examination on Darnton's own approach is necessary. As in *The Great Cat Massacre*, he uses lots of materials from the past, written by some 'nobody' at the time, who had never imagined his writings would be seen as a part of history.

In one case relating to the book's main title, the cat massacre of the rue Saint-Severin, Darnton shows the readers how to 'search for opacity'. That is to try to make sense of anything that looks like 'nonsense'. As in the case, the workers who conducted the massacre on cats made fun of the event, expressing their endless happiness even long after the actions. This is so awkward to readers today, it's hard to understand why they did so.

However, if a reader or a historian just stops here, defining the written materials as 'nonsense' and meaningless, then it's a great failure for him/her. Sometimes, the secrets of history events just hided beneath this kind of so-called 'nonsense'. It is our job to erase the impact of first impression and prejudice, trying to view the materials as rather valuable rather than meaningless. This process of investigation is what Darnton called 'search for opacity'.

Meanwhile, as many critics may suggest, there does exist a potential of misinterpretation and over-translation when historians try to follow this route. To search for opacity is not an easy job, and it requires the 100% caution in doing so.

To analyse the awkward part of a certain kind of written material is not to explain it in anyway we like. All analysis should base on the text itself, emerging from the original information provided by the material. This asks us to dig into the text and focus on details. In this aspect, The Great Cat Massacre witnesses numbers of details in the discourse. For instance, when dealing with the police inspector d'Hemery's recording of the time, the author noticed some evidence about the way the police inspector wrote the materials. In the texts, there can be seen remarks such as "See the attached sheets" or "See his dossier," indicating that d'Hemery kept a file on each writer.[4] Such an attention on details is a tool to guarantee the reliability of the analysis given by historians when they approach to see the opacity in texts.

Apart from the focus on details and evidences offered by the material, on the other side, as readers who're trying to see through the surface and dig out the hidden information, historians themselves should have an advanced sense of the history topics as well as the broader sphere of knowledge both at the historical period and present day. To know more about the world then and now will assist us in many ways, helping us understand the materials better and avoiding certain kinds of misunderstanding and foolishness.

Texts, any kind of which, are written for a certain reason, human beings do not randomly write down words and sentences, otherwise it would not be preserved and regarded as 'texts'. In this sense, to find the reason(s) for writing is also necessary. To achieve this goal, only carefulness and knowledge are sometimes not enough. People are so good at hiding their intentions and misleading the readers. So if one is about to guess why someone wrote in a certain way, he/she must have a thorough understanding on human mind, emotions and thinking habits. This kind of ability is often defined as 'EQ'. EQ helps us to identify the intentions behind from the intentions on the surface. Without a satisfactory performance on EQ, scholars are sometimes unavoidable of being referred as 'weirdos'.

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[3] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), 262.
[4] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), 159.

In conclusion, to respond to the questions of 'how possible' and 'what to do' when searching for opacity in texts, measures taken as required can answer them at the same time, both telling the reason for possibility and the steps needed. Focus on details and text-based evidences, a good knowledge of past and now, and a satisfactory performance on EQ are three key aspects in this process of digging out the secrets of history.

3.2 Trace the "Facts"

As we can see, the job of "searching for opacity" is closely related with the investigations into the "historical facts" in the texts and other historical materials. This brings us another aspect: how to trace the historical facts in details?

Even though the concept of 'historical facts' is not accepted by historians as a meaningful one, there is still a need to acknowledge that history is built upon the 'facts' in the past. Things like what people did and said are all existences that could not be easily denied. In the book *The Return of Martin Guerre* by Natalie Zemon Davis, one example of historical facts is presented vividly, that is the lack of mirror in the peasants' daily life.

As is stated in Chapter 4, "...sixteenth-century villagers do not build up an image of their faces by frequent glances in a mirror (an object not found in a peasant household)." This statement offers a glance into the real life of the peasants in history. Without the existence of tools like mirror, it is hard for one to identify self in the same way as modern people do as a convention. The finding seems not that important, but it tells us one important factor contributing to the possibility of the fake Martin Guerre's success when he conducted the trick, which also implying the deeper structure of the society that makes history as it is.

Based on the idea that historical facts are important, here comes the following question: how can historians trace these so-called facts? Natalie Zemon Davis shows us a nice model in her book. She traces the facts in details. When encountering with the problem of self-identity, most scholars would try to find if there exists any kind of written materials or folklore, dramas, and other sources, but few of them would turn to the real life of the subjects, which making them miss the details of history. What Davis does is to find the object that is closely linked with the concept of self-identity and try to figure out if there is any trace in the subject's daily life. The object she finds is mirror. Mirror as a common object in almost every household was not that frequently seen in the past. In the ancient times, mirror was hard to made and high in price, making it not accessible to ordinary people, especially the lower-class people like peasants in the rural areas. Besides, the peasants did not really "need" mirrors in their daily life, for they had no leisure time and money for making up and minding their looks. Life was hard for them, mirror was not helpful in improving life conditions. In short, mirror as an object as well as its "absence" is an important symbol of the ancient daily life.

To trace historical facts in details is not easy to do. Details are hard to identify in most cases, for they are quite "normal" in the sources. Either the writer or the reader of a certain piece of written material would not notice the details. The main reason is that the purpose of writing and reading is set well. The focus turns to the "important" parts in the material, leaving the details as only supplementary parts. This raises a task for us to be more cautious when we do readings and searching. What should be done is to focus more on the details that make the material as a whole. Apart from the main argument of an article, there are still other information that could be helpful in our research projects.

Besides the focus on the supplementary parts of historical materials, another method in tracing the details is to build a web of connections when dealing with historical problems. Davis does this in the book, linking the concept of self-identity with the real life object mirror. With more links like this, a whole web would be possible to set. In this web, concepts and problems are the central issues, with the other part as places for historical sources. The historian's task is to find the link between these two parts. The process of investigation is also an inspiration for deeper understanding and better analysis.

The two methods that may help trace the historical facts in details suggested above both require the historians to have a whole-round knowledge of the historical background and research review. To know more about the time and people would help to find the links between subjects and objects. Without such basis, the searching and setting would be a tough job to do. In this sense, it is necessary for scholars to read more about the time periods that they are interested in. No matter what the individual subject or topic is, all are valuable in constructing the understanding of the time. The habit of only searching for the information "needed" would do harm to the research project in the future, for the lack of deeper understandings of history is going to restrict the scholar's imagination and interpretations of history.

3.3 The Position in Viewing History

When doing interpretation and analysis, scholars should also be aware of the position that they hold and be sure about how to find the right position in viewing history.

In the introduction part of *The Great Cat Massacre,* Robert Darnton pointed out his methodology into the study of cultural history, that is to collect and analyse the historical materials in their own sense, trying to interpret them in the original way, instead of putting too much extra explanations into it. When he came to this part, another warning was raised, which is very important for any historian who is dealing with the historical materials. According to Darnton, 'We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past. To be administered doses of culture shock.'[5] So, how should historians view the past in a proper way? To what extent should historians see the people in the materials as 'familiar'? Are they acquaintances or strangers to us today? In order to figure out the proper extent, let's assume the two opposite situation.

The first assumption is that we know nothing at all about the people in the past, the so-called 'familiarity' is just something as an 'illusion' or 'false imagination'. According to what we know about history, this viewpoint seems to be meaningless. People today do have a connection with the people in the past, they are not aliens from another world, the land, the system, the culture that they endured, are also existence today, which changed a lot, but not changed 100%, there exists a possibility for us today to feel the same feeling as they did, to think in the same way as they did too. It's too arbitrary to say in this extreme. So what about the opposite assumption? That is to say, we are so close to the people in the past that we're able to understand them as well as we understand ourselves.

This is also not the case. As what has been talked about above, things really changed a lot in the process of history, the way of living, the thinking models and knowledge system all changed massively. Even facing with the same object, like a book, people in the Qing dynasty would have different opinions with us today. In this case, there should be an extent to which our understanding of the past could be placed properly. People in the past, are neither 100% acquaintances or 100% strangers to historians today, they are both, to a certain extent.

This kind of extent lies in different positions in different situations.When it comes to situations where people deal with more simple issues, like food and drinks, there is a closer connection between past and present, for the action of choosing food is a simple decision, not influenced too much by other factors, especially when it's on the level of an individual's decision-making.

On the contrary, when it's about a complicated issue, like the interpretation of information or knowledge, it's hard for us to totally 'understand' people in the past. The reason for this is that it relates to a whole system of understanding the world, which is constitute of all kinds of aspects and materials. Generally speaking, different generations of people are produces on different bases, with different 'aspects and materials'. But we do not need to be too disappointed with the latter kind of situation. 'Being hard to understand the past' does not necessarily mean 'unable to understand the past'. Still, we can learn to understand the people in the past through other ways, like the reviews from other people in the same period as our study hero, or the minimal details from the materials offered by the study hero himself/herself.

In the book of *The Great Cat Massacre*, even though the author warned us about the danger of familiarity, he still wrote all the articles to investigate into the past, to reveal the secrets of the people in history. He did so, and did in a smart way, for the author seldom try to give definitions or judgments to the materials he checked. He just tried to dig out the information in the historical materials and to see the face of the people in the past, and then let them talk in their own voices. This is a vivid example of the extent to which historians should deal with the past. And in this way, strangers are to be made acquaintances.

3.4 Handle the "Personal Preferences"

Besides, there is another thing that may trouble the scholars: the "personal preferences". How to handle this preference to a proper level? Let's take Carlo Ginzburg as an instance. While Ginzburg's work, *The Cheese and the Worms*, has long been regarded as a classic in the field of microhistory, there have been a lot of criticisms from different groups of scholars. One kind of criticism is from within the microhistory school, which claiming that Ginzburg's own implicit preferences prompted him to point to a certain kind of culture as the inspirer of the miller's

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[5] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), 4.

ideas, instead of understanding these from his life[6]. This brings an important question for all the historians today, that is, how should we handle the "personal preferences" when investigating into history problems?

To begin the discussion on this tough topic, it's necessary for us to go back to the criticism on Carlo Ginzburg. The argument made by the critics is that Ginzburg held a view which was deeply rooted in his own understanding of history, that is about the importance of a certain culture and its influence on individuals. Based on this view, Ginzburg gave his explanations on the life and words of Menocchio, implying the culture and traditions as well as the social changes as the motives. On the same time, Menocchio's own experience, thinking and imagination seem less important in the process, at least not as important as the factors from the outside world. Here lies Carlo Ginzburg's 'personal preferences'.

However, if all the historians and their works to be examined in this way, then one is almost sure to say that all of the people and works are about 'personal preferences', to a certain extant, this problem is universal, with nobody being able to escape. The reason is, whenever a scholar began his/her project on a certain history problem, there is certainly a certain kind of interest or motive for him/her. And when the interest is raised, the scholar is getting some of the assumptions that he/she came up with in mind, basing on the knowledge, experience and academic training in the previous years. This is actually the 'first step' in the journey of scientific study. No one is 100% neutral when meeting with a certain topic in academics, bias and assumptions are always companions to us along the road.

In this case, the crucial point is not about whether scholars 'should' have personal preferences or not, but about the dealing method in the later periods of a research project. This is also a common route in the scientific studies, especially in the fields of natural sciences. The scientists always hold some kinds of assumptions in the beginning, then they conduct different kinds of experiments to check the assumptions, to gain more information on the subjects, then redirect to new assumptions, then go back to the circle of 'assumption-experiemnt-redirection' again. The philosophy and methodology behind this route of research are easily to figure out, which have a long tradition since the scientific revolutions and the formation of the modern world.

Now that the dealing method of 'assumptions' and 'personal preferences' is mature and well-developed in other research fields, it is necessary for historians as well as other scholars in the field of humanities to adopt the route into their own research projects. It is absolutely acceptable to have certain kinds of 'preferences' at the beginning of a project, but later on, the assumptions should be checked once and once again. By comparing the theories and assumptions with the materials, texts and debates made by follow scholars, the scholar's task is to re-examine his/her previous ideas. Courage and open-mind attitude are two factors needed at this point. Writing history is not for fun, it's an act of science. To make the research outcomes have higher values in the development of sciences, one must treat himself/herself in a strict way.

Based on the analysis above, if we go back to the criticism on Carlo Ginzburg's research, it's fair to say the argument makes sense, pointing out one important weakness of the renowned book. Though *The Cheese and the Worms* is definitely a sophisticated and well-written academic work, there is still shortcomings and possibilities for it to be better.

Talking about the improvement of Carlo Ginzburg's research project, the good news is, after years of decent study, younger generations of Italian microhistoy school historians have already made some supplements to Ginzburg's book, making the image of Menocchio more and more clear, making it possible for us today to comprehend him and the era in a better way. And this is probably another positive feature of history study itself, placing it in the context of what we call 'science' in the modern time.

4. THE PROBLEM OF APPLYING KNOWLEDGE

New cultural history scholars always apply knowledge both inside the history discipline and outside the discipline. During this process, there would be problems of improper application of the theories, ideas, and concepts. There are two main things to consider when scholars undergo their research projects.

4.1 Avoid Misunderstanding and Misinterpretation

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[6] Sigurður G. Magnússon & István M. Szijártó, *What Is Microhistory?* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), 25–26.

How to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation? We can take Hobsbawm's synthesis understanding trouble as an example. In the 5th chapter of *What Is Cultural History*, Peter Burke mentions Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's renowned book *The Invention of Tradition*, setting it as an example of constructivist history. In the introduction part of *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm expressed the idea that many so-called 'traditions' we know about today, are actually newly 'invented', that is to say, they were not 100% historical, but were constructed later on. When talking about this introduction, Burke said that 'The value of Hobsbawm's hypothesis...has been emphasized by the authors of studies of many other parts of the world, from Japan to Brazil. In the course of this warm reception, however, the message of the book was reinterpreted.'[7] This raises a problem for us when digging into the history of historiography study, that is: how to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation?

Generally speaking, 'misunderstanding and misinterpretation' are almost unavoidable. The moment a book or an article is written down and got published, it does not 'belong to' the author anymore, all the readers and critics would understand and absorb the information from the words, according to their own habits and thinking models. However, this does not mean we can do nothing at all. As a historian, one is both a writer and a reader, so there exists two aspects for him/her to do.

Firstly, as a writer who writes down words, especially when giving a special comment or definition, one should be very cautious. The No.1 rule is to avoid using extreme words, giving any kinds of comments which may be seen as too definitive. In the case of Hobsbawm's work, in fact, he did a nice job, frequently using words like 'often' and 'sometimes'[8]. That is to say, Hobsbawm did not want to exaggerate his synthesis to the level that all of the traditions seen in the world are 100% made up later. Besides, Hobsbawm did pointed out that "strength and adaptablility of genuine tradition' should not be confused with invention.'

When a good writer is cautious enough, like the case of Hobsbawm, then it is one's job to do well as a reader/critic. This is something often confuse us all at times. As a reader and critic, what one must do is to comprehend the whole book or article thoroughly and carefully. This is not only an expression of respect to the author, who has put hard work into the product, but also an essential support for avoiding misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Also in the case of Hobsbawm's synthesis, readers and critics all over the world gradually 'transferred' Hbosbawm's idea from 'sometimes or often, traditions are invented' to 'traditions all over the word are invented'. In lack of the restrain of extent, the meaning changed totally, making it an extreme and definitive conclusion, which is not Hobsbawm's original thought.

If we investigate deeper into this kind of problem, one reason may be found to explain why people often make such mistakes as misunderstanding and misinterpretation. That is, in doing so, an idea, a definition, a conclusion, would be more 'powerful'. With not much restrictions, the sentence would be more like a 'universal truth', making it much easier to spread among minds. Otherwise, it would be seen as too old-school and too much scholarly style, making it not easy to evoke interest and discussions. So in order to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation of certain academic conclusions and ideas, one may obligate himself/herself to resist the temptation of the 'easy mode'. Try not to simplify the argument, even though it may make it easier to understand or spread, for it would also bring big troubles along with the minimal benefits.

In conclusion, there are two aspects to focus if we aim to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation when we're writing, reading and discussing academic materials. For the role as a writer, one must bear in mind that do not use extreme words, do not simplify the conclusion, making the arguments as a whole, try best to avoid being misunderstood or misinterpreted, this is the writer's unescapable task. Meanwhile, for the role as a reader or a critic, one must absorb the information in detail, according to the ideas of the writer. Things should also not be simplified, if there exist some restrictions, quote them together with the conclusion sentence. Always say no to the allure of 'easy mode', for the exploration of knowledge is a rather serious matter.

4.2 Problems in Quoting Other Scholars

The application of knowledge also includes quoting other scholars. This process may being traps, too. In the first chapter of *What Is Cultural History*, Peter Burke raised an interesting assumption that the famous sociologist Max Weber who wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) would be surprised to learn of the rise of the 'tiger' economies[9], which is more often referred to as 'The Four Dragons of Asia' in recent discussions.

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[7] Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?.* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 86.
[8] Ibid, 87.
[9] Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?.* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 10.

Is this a valid guess? Will Weber really be surprised to see the new economies rising? To check this problem, what we need to do is not only examine Weber's theories and history facts behind him, but also a further investigation into the 'value of cultural history study'.

Above all, to answer the question in a simple but tricky way: Max Weber may be surprised, may be not. That depends on how in which way his theories and opinions are understood. According to Peter Burke's view, Weber in the book argued that 'the ethos of Confucianism, like that of Catholicism, was hostile to capitalism'[10]. Weber's book talked about here is *Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism (1904)*, in which book he examined the set of Chinese culture as a whole, and specially pointed out that culture in the east is different from the west, which led the two parts of the world to different historical paths in the long period, especially in the pre-modern and modern times.

When Weber talked about 'ethos of Confucianism', he did a comparison with 'that of Catholicism', these two are much alike in his eyes. And the same part is that these two kinds of ethos are both hostile to capitalism. This is a definitive conclusion, only accurate when put in the context of a certain period of history time. For this case, the history time is pre-modern and early modern times, which were the fields Weber devoted to. In the uprising period of capitalism in Europe, like in the 16th to 19th century, Catholicism in Europe did make itself an obstacle on the road, it refused the new kind of mindsets. On contrary, Protestant Ethic found an explanation and foundation for the capitalism to grow and prosper. This is what happened at the time when Weber made his conclusion, but what about later, for example, in the 20th century, the time when the Four Dragons of Asia witnessed an economy boom? Clearly, things were different by time.

In the 20th century, capitalism had already been a dominant model of society management, both in economic, political and social aspects. Those Catholic nations remained their Catholic ideology, but still transferred themselves to the system of capitalism. That is to say, Catholicism once was an obstacle, later was not anymore. The case is the same for the Confucianism.

Why did this change happen, and what lesson can we learn from it? To make the change possible, lot of other changes happened previously. For example, capitalism itself went through a process of development, from an immature new-borne factor in society to a well developed giant set of ideas, rules, and systems. It was not the 'capitalism' Weber talked about anymore, it updated itself, which made it more acceptable.

Another change is on the opposite side, relating to the Catholic and Confucian society system. These two also experienced great changes in the past centuries. The ideology of tradition once was the dominant power, but it gradually lost control of the whole society, which made the culture and society more open-minded. For the case of Confucianism and Capitalism, many academic works have been written to explain it in details, such as Sophie Pezzutto's *Confucianism and Capitalist Development: From Max Weber and Orientalism to Lee Kuan Yew and New Confucianism*[11]. So, if we're to answer the question raised about Max Weber's possible reaction to the growth of capitalist economy in Asia, we must bear one thing in mind, that is: history, especially cultural history, is not motionless, it always develops itself. The history background changes, along with the changes of people's ideas and ideologies. That is to say, the 19th century version of 'Max Weber' would definitely be surprised to hear about capitalism growth in a Confucianism society, but the 20th century version of 'Max Weber' would not be that surprised.

This gives us a crucial lesson about the value of history study, especially the value of culture history investigations by different generations of historians. Why do we need to reconsider, re-investigate, and re-examine the same subject once and once again? Because things are always changing, our interpretations and understanding also need changes, otherwise we would not get closer to the secret of history, but would get lost in the jungle, far away from what we call the historical 'truth'.

5. CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE ISSUE OF "APPROACH"

In the book *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Peter Burke represents his observations on the newly development of using images to help research in the 10th and 11th chapters. When doing so, he suggests

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[10] Ibid, 10.
[11] Sophie Pezzutto, "Confucianism and Capital Development: From Max Weber and Orientalism to Lee Kuan Yew and New Confucianism," *Asian Studies Review* 43 (2009), no. 1: 1–15.

using the concept "approach" rather than "method", saying "I call them 'approaches' rather than 'methods' on the grounds that they represent not so much new procedures of investigation as new interests and new perspectives. "[12]

If we think about the problem in a more historical way, the relationship between "approach" and "method" is just like the traditional evaluation of "道" and"术". "道" means the way or route, suggesting the importance of choosing the direction, planning the steps, and going for the right destination, which are all necessary for a successful project, no matter it is an academic project or not."术" refers to exactly "method", which is also important, but compared with "道" , it's the second focus instead of the most important one. In the traditional culture of the Chinese, the balance of these two terms is the key to final achievement, suggesting that the right choice of approach plus the hard practice of method would be the best solution to any kind of difficult questions and problems. In this sense, the self-awareness of "scholarly caution" is also a type of "approach" that may help scholars avoid possible mistakes and gain more in the research projects.

To conclude this discussion, one old Chinese saying from hundreds of years ago could be quotes. The saying suggests that "sharpening your axe will not delay your job of cutting wood". The thinking of approach is just like the "sharpening axe" procedure. Once a nice approach is chosen and applied, the work would be more likely to produce nice conclusions and knowledge for the readers as well as the academic world.

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[12] Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 169.