

On the Evaluation of Historical Figures

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Abstract: The appraisal of historical figures has always been one of the issues that historians have focused on and discussed. When appraising historical figures, we should first define historical figures, and then have a comprehensive analysis based on the definitions as well as the evaluating principles, standards, methods, and significance. Only in this way can we get a more accurate appraisal of historical figures.

Keywords: Historical Figures; Principles; Standards; Methods; Significance

1. Definition of “Historical Figures”

What comes before evaluating is to get the connotation of historical figures, which requires a clear and scientific definition of them. There is a broad and narrow sense of historical figures. Broadly speaking, historical figures refer to people who objectively exist in history. However, it is difficult for a definition in such a broad sense to reflect their historical values, so this paper only discusses historical figures in a narrow sense.

For historical figures in a narrow sense, they should have characteristics different from other “figures”. This is mainly reflected in the following three aspects. First, in the narrow sense, historical figures are objective beings who have positive or negative influences on the process of historical development. Second, historical figures in the narrow sense are historical, that is, people in the past, not present or future, who must have left a mark in the world. Third, historical figures in a narrow sense can be divided into “great men” and “little minds”, which have academic and practical significance for later generations. For example, the princes and generals recorded in the *Historical Records* can be considered as the embodiment of the “great men”, while the valiant women and knights are the embodiment of the “little minds”. However, no matter the princes and generals, strong women or chivalry, they all had a certain impression on the later generations and had academic and practical significance.

2. Evaluation Principles of Historical Figures

There are many evaluation principles of historicism. As different historians evaluate principles from different angles, the evaluation principles are very different. In this paper, three relatively important evaluation principles are selected for a brief analysis.

2.1. The Principle of Historicism

At the beginning of the 20th century, when historicism was introduced into China, Hu Shi made a clear statement on the historicism method. He put forward the “historical method” in the pragmatic method, which actually focuses on the development and the change of things from a historical perspective. This is undoubtedly very reasonable, because the development of things is not isolated, but with its past, present and future. If we do not use historicism to study people and objects in history, we cannot understand the truth and nature. For the evaluation of historical figures, we must go back to the past and the historical background of the historical figures to judge, rather than demanding the ancients with today’s standards. Chairman Mao once said, “we are Marxist historicists, and we should not separate history. From Confucius to Sun Yat Sen, we should sum up and inherit this precious heritage.”

[1] Therefore, the principle of historicism is of great significance to the evaluation of historical figures.

2.2. Principle of Seeking Truth from Facts

A historical evaluation must be realistic. Edward Hallett Carr said, “we cannot infer that mountains have no shape or many shapes objectively because they will show different shapes from different angles. We cannot infer that this explanation is as good as another explanation because it plays a necessary role in constructing historical facts, nor because the existing explanation is not completely objective.”^[2] This is a very penetrating view. Historical evaluation activities should be based on facts. After fully grasping historical data related to historical figures, we should neither erase the contributions of historical figures nor exaggerate their defects, let alone emasculate history or take words out of context for various reasons. For example, when evaluating Yang Guang, Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty, Confucian historians of later generations often described him as a frightening “tyrant without Tao” for various reasons, highlighting his cruelty, while his contributions, such as “digging the Grand Canal” and “creating the Jinshi branch” were not mentioned at all, which was obviously suspected of castrating history. Take another example of killing. In historical books, there are different descriptions of killing, such as decapitate or behead, flog to death, execute, slaughter, kill, exterminate, and murder. Just as the saying goes, “A word of praise, glory to Hua Gun; a word of derogatory, strict in the axe.” That is to say, words can give you great honor or severe suffering^[3].

2.3. Use Comprehensive and Dialectical Principles

In the evaluation of historical figures, we should use a comprehensive, connected and developing point of view to evaluate, and never use a one-sided, static and isolated point of view. Historical figures are often multifaceted, with both advantages and disadvantages, which is true of everyone. As the old saying goes, gold can't be pure enough and man can't be perfect. Gentlemen may not be all advantages, and villains may not be without merit. For example, when talking about the Feng Dao (Changlelao), who served many monarchs of different dynasties, historians in the Song Dynasty made a very bad evaluation of him out of the concept of “loyalty to the monarch”. Ouyang Xiu once scolded him as a “shameless” person, and Sima Guang characterized him as a “particularly treacherous minister”. This is obviously not a comprehensive and dialectical evaluation of Feng Dao, nor a specific analysis under the historical conditions at that time, which is a typical generalization. In fact, Feng Dao is quite good in his ability and conduct, supporting the virtuous and helping the people. In the Five Dynasties, people, wise or foolish, all considered him a patriarch, which is a great reputation^[4].

3. Criteria for Valuating Historical Figures

Since 1949, Chinese historians have recognized that Marxist Historical Materialism is the general standard and principle for evaluating historical figures^[5]. However, there are a lot of disputes on the specific criteria for Evaluation, which mainly focus on the unified criteria theory and the multi-criteria theory.

Unified standard theory: this kind of view mainly believes that the evaluation of historical figures needs a constant and unified standard. However, historians still have different views on the specific connotation of this standard. The first was represented by Guo Moruo. In his book *Historical Figures* in 1947, Guo Moruo proposed that the evaluation of historical figures should follow the standard of “people standard”^[6]. This is actually standing in the position of the public, to see whether historical figures have a positive or negative impact on the development of history. The second was represented by Rui Yun and Ji Wenfu. Rui Yun proposed on the basis of Guo Moruo that historical figures should be evaluated not only by whether they promote or hinder the development of history, but also by whether they conform to the interests of the people or violate the interests of the people^[7]. Ji Wenfu believed that the key criterion of historical evaluation was whether it was progressive and popular or not^[8]. Compared with the first category, the second category actually highlights the “interests of the people”. The third group was represented by Xie Benshu and Jian Tong. Xie Benshu believed that there were three important criteria for the correct evaluation of historical figures. First, to see who was beneficial to them; Second, whether they promoted or hindered the development of history; Third, who stood to benefit from what the society provided at that time and what role it played in social development^[9]. In 1987, Jian Tong proposed that the evaluation of historical figures should not only focus on the role of promoting or hindering the development of material civilization, but also the role of spiritual civilization and the important role of critical moments in history^[10]. Jian Tong proposed that historical figures should be evaluated in three aspects, including material civilization, spiritual civilization and critical moments of history. That was quite reasonable. The fourth category was represented by Su

Shuangbi and Xiao Li. They believed that integrity was an important criterion for evaluating historical figures, and one of the indispensable criteria for evaluating historical figures ^[11]. Later, some scholars put forward a series of standards such as the theory of moral standards, the theory of productivity, and the theory of success or failure. The above four criteria discuss how to evaluate historical figures from various aspects and deserve our attention.

Multiple criteria: such views are represented by Shang Yue, Sun Wenfan, Li Zhiting and others. Shang Yue clearly opposed the unified standard theory, he thought that no matter which era of social life was very complex, it was impossible to use a fixed, unified formula to summarize. He suggested that we should use multiple standards. He advocated that under the guidance of Marxism, we should start to do some research on the historical basis of reality from material practice, and explain things about ideas ^[12]. Meanwhile, Yue advocated that the impact was great from practice to evaluating historical figures. Sun Wenfan and Li Zhiting believed that there should not be any unified and fixed standard for historical evaluation, but should be different according to people, time and style, or according to the class (stratum), political status, social role and influence of historical figures, and develop relevant standards respectively ^[13]. Lin Bishu believed that historical evaluation was a kind of historical cognition activity in which evaluators measured the significance of evaluation objects according to certain standards ^[14]. Due to the different subjective starting points of evaluators and the complexity of historical development and evaluation objects of historical figures, he believed that evaluation standards could not be simple and uniform, but very complex. These views have reasonable elements and are worth our reference.

4. Evaluation Methods of Historical Figures

There are many evaluation methods of historical figures, and historians at all times and in all countries have made contributions to that. Especially in the past hundred years since the 20th century, there have been many discussions and analyses on the evaluation methods of historical figures, mainly including the method of class analysis, the method of the specific analysis of specific problems, and the method of comparison of ancient and modern figures, etc.

4.1. Method of Class Analysis

Since the founding of new China, Chinese historians generally have believed that class analysis is undoubtedly one of the most important methods in the process of historical research. Historical figures always belong to a certain class, and no one can be an exception. Among historical figures, it is impossible for any individual to be above class. Historical figures in a certain class always reflect the basic interests and demands of the class, but at the same time, they inevitably have their own limitations. When we use class analysis, we should pay attention to the following points. First, as an analytical method, we must not give up the class analysis method. When using this method, we need to pay attention to the fact that it cannot become the only component theory and the only origin theory. For example, some scholars believed that Confucius was born in a declining aristocracy and could be regarded as a commoner rather than an aristocrat. They believed that Confucius' revolution stemmed from his class composition, which was undoubtedly inappropriate and inappropriate ^[15]. For another example, some scholars believed that Liu Bang once had served as the head of the pavilion in the Qin Dynasty, saying that the regime he had established was an aristocratic regime, which was obviously questionable. Generally speaking, when using class analysis, it is definitely wrong to only rely on the component theory and birth theory. We must consider its class composition, so as to correctly estimate its influence and role, and avoid falling into the wrong path. For example, after the revolution of 1911, if the Nanjing National Government established by Sun Yat Sen did not consider its class composition, it would be impossible to conclude that it was a bourgeois government. Second, when using the method of class analysis, we should pay attention to the differences between classes and strata, and their status is not the same. For example, there were small, medium and large landlords in the landlord class in ancient China, and all the small, medium and large landlords were afraid of revolution to a certain extent. But before the revolution, if the small and medium-sized landlords put forward a reform program, this program is often one step closer to the interests of farmers, while the reform program put forward by the big landlords is often far from the interests of farmers. In addition, in the turbulent times of ancient times, classes and strata may change greatly, so it is not allowed to simply stick the class label at will. Another example is that after the victory of the peasant uprising at the end of the Yuan Dynasty, a group people at the bottom of the society represented by Zhu Yuanzhang became the top of the society, realizing the leap of class and stratum.

4.2. Method of Specific Analysis of Specific Problems

The concrete problem analysis method is an important methodology of the materialist dialectical view of contradiction, which has a great influence on the evaluation of historical figures. Historical figures have their own characteristics due to their living background, growth experience, education level, and contribution, so when the unified standard is difficult to play or only partially plays a role, we must use a specific analysis method. For example, when we evaluate Liu Bang's establishment of the Han Dynasty and Zhao Kuangyin's establishment of the Song Dynasty, we must use the analysis method of specific problems. Although the two have common ground in the process of making achievements, the differences are obvious. No matter how many commons between the historical background and conditions, it is still greatly different among the degree of domestic and foreign troubles, the degree of difficulty and ease of making achievements and other aspects.

4.3. Method of Comparison of Ancient and Modern Figures

Through the comparison of ancient and modern characters, we can understand the advantages and disadvantages of ancient or modern characters, but we should pay attention to the following points when using it. First, we should not elevate the ancients with today's vision. For example, some people regarded the "Great Harmony Thought" in ancient China as "communism" and thought that "communism" appeared in ancient China, which had obviously elevated ancient thought. Second, we should not criticize the ancients from today's perspective. For example, Jian Bozan believed that we stood on the position of the working class, not that we must evaluate historical figures with the standard of the working class, but from the historical point of view of the working class^[16]. When we evaluate historical figures, we must not use backward and outdated standards to evaluate the ancients. Of course, we cannot use current conditions and moral standards to evaluate the ancients, otherwise, it will be unfair. Third, we can't simply compare the ancients with modern people. For example, during the cultural revolution, the gang of four practiced pragmatism and fabricated history at will under the slogan of "making the past serve the present". This is absolutely wrong and absolutely not allowed. We should realize that when using the comparison method of ancient and modern characters, we should always pay attention to whether we have gone astray.

5. The Significance of the Evaluation of Historical Figures

The evaluation of historical figures can help restore the true face of history and help people treat all kinds of figures in history more objectively and rationally. After all, history cannot be separated from human creation, especially outstanding figures. They have affected a certain stage or link of history, and promoted or delayed the development and progress of society. Although any historical figure is constrained by his or her time, there is no doubt about the great dynamic effect of their actions. The civilizing function of history can provide lessons for future generations to learn from. By evaluating historical figures, people can see the big from the small and grasp the development direction of historical events and historical figures, so as to reveal the essential characteristics of historical development to a certain extent. The ancient Greek thinker Thucydides wrote in his book *History* that history will repeat itself.

From the perspective of cognition, the evaluation of historical figures is generally an important ideological material for people to understand and grasp the law of history and establish historical materialism. The study of history is inseparable from the study of historical figures. Only by grasping typical historical figures can we have a better glimpse of the true nature of history. From the political point of view, the correct understanding and evaluation of historical figures can help people to have a deeper understanding of China's national history and party history. From the perspective of ideology, historical figures often have certain moral qualities and spiritual temperament, which can help people distinguish right from wrong and good from evil, so that they can improve their ideological level and moral cultivation^[17]. They can all be great inspirations for people. For example, Fan Zhongyan in the earlier Song Dynasty said, "To worry before the common people worries; to enjoy only after the people can enjoy." While Wen Tianxiang in the late Song dynasty and early Yuan dynasty wrote in his poem, "Since death is unavoidable to everyone throughout history, what one should strive for is a loyal heart, gloriously recorded in the historic books." As for Lin Zexu in the Qing Dynasty, "I will do whatever it takes to serve my country even at the cost of my own life, regardless of fortune or misfortune to myself." From the perspective of education, taking history as a mirror can pass through ancient and modern times, and the experience and lessons generated by the merits and wrongs of historical figures

can be used for reference by people at present. An important function of history is to educate others. History always has surprising similarities. By drawing lessons from historical figures, we may not repeat the mistakes of history.

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