



Exploring Archaeology

Archaeology as Humanities

Shengqian Chen



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Shengqian Chen
School of History
Renmin University of China
Beijing, China

Translated by
Guo Peng Chen 
School of Archaeology
University of Oxford
Oxford, UK

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PREFACE: QUESTIONING ARCHAEOLOGY

I once wrote a book, *Thinking Archaeology*, that found an unexpected and gratifying audience in China. As I ponder on its reception, I'm reminded of the ancient Chinese axiom, urging for "leal-heartedness and sincerity"¹ in our writings. When I scribed this work, my ink flowed not for public acclaim but as a catalyst for introspection. As it occurs, writing becomes an avenue for me to express my insights, an extension of my thought process. "In ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement. Nowadays, men learn with a view to the approbation of others".² Our forebears wisely counselled, "In ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement. Nowadays, men learn with a view to the approbation of others". This wisdom underscores a fundamental principle: to rekindle the ancient approach of learning for self-edification, particularly in our scholarly pursuits. These sages embarked on the journey of thought as personal quests, fuelled by genuine intrigue, nudging them to ponder,

¹ 脩辭立其誠, this idea originated in *Qian Wenyan* (乾卦·文言) from *The Book of Changes* (周易, *Zhouyi*), one of the oldest texts of Chinese philosophy. This particular phrase highlights a central principle of Confucian thought: the importance of sincerity in personal conduct and in relationships with others, extending this principle to the realm of speech.

² 古之學者爲己, 今之學者爲人。 From *Xianwen* (憲問) in *The Analects* (論語, *Lunyu*). The English translation is by James Legge. This phrase criticised the scholars of its time for studying not for the sake of self-improvement and self-realisation but to gain official positions and reputation. It reminded scholars to study for one's sake means to learn in order to improve one's moral character and wisdom.

probe, and seek enlightenment. Such a quest can resemble navigating a labyrinth of uncertainties, fraught with moments of confusion, repetition, and even occasional losses, yet ultimately leading to some clarity. Perhaps this resonated with readers, as they empathised with my courage to question, to expose the frustrations of my thought process. This book, then, can be seen as a sequel to *Thinking Archaeology*. The journey of academic exploration, of course, never truly ends. There's always another question around the bend, another fascinating rabbit hole to tumble down. Yet, I find myself exhilarated by this relentless intellectual odyssey.

What is there to question and explore in archaeology? For many, archaeology appears as an unusual discipline, often shrouded in romantic intrigue and mystery. For archaeologists, it is the study of the material culture of the past, including artefacts and monuments. Contemporary archaeology isn't limited to remnants of distant epochs; it encompasses all surviving evidence, even those from our present society. For instance, insights gleaned from analysing modern-day refuse or rubbish can reveal knowledge that evades even sociological research. The narratives hidden in these material remains do not lie, and thus the insights garnered from refuse analysis hold more reliability than questionnaire surveys. The range of material remains is very diverse: from the remarkably preserved ruins of Pompeii with tables left in disarray by fleeing inhabitants and the bodies frozen in their final moments to the more commonplace abandoned settlements, burials, or fragments of ceramics and lithic debitage piled up in bags and baskets in archaeological storage.

These fragments, survivors of the ravages of time and human interference, found by chance—almost serendipitously—are the subject of archaeological study. They tell stories from an era now silent, their attached emotions long since faded, leaving behind only the dust-coated remains. Some have been reduced to dust themselves, such as the frames of horse carriages in burials. Archaeology, as the discipline of things, asks us to understand the stories behind these objects. This investigation of things (*gewu*) brings to mind the reflections of Wang Yangming,³

³ Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), also known as Wang Shouren 王守仁, was a prominent philosopher during the Ming Dynasty in China, renowned for his significant contributions to Neo-Confucianism. He proposed the philosophy of the “Unity of Knowledge and Action” (知行合一, *zhixingheyi*), advocating that knowledge and action should not be separate entities, but rather, intrinsically connected—what one knows should be applied in practice. A central idea of Wang's philosophy is “*gewu*” (格物), a term

a profound Ming dynasty philosopher, who devoted days and nights to investigating bamboo with the hope of “investigating things and exhausting the knowledge of them”(gewuqiongli)until he fell in. If he were alive today, he would find a method known as “science” in the modern world. Scientists study bamboo and all kinds of life worldwide to discover principles of evolution, ecology, etc. The primary method contemporary archaeologists use to “investigate things”, or “gewu”, is science. Science seeks the truth, unravelling the principles or mechanisms underlying natural and social phenomena. Archaeology, as a scientific discipline, carries a theoretical dimension. The nature of archaeological inquiry is very theory laden. Though it is the study of material things, it is theoretical in nature.

In conjunction with scientific methods, contemporary archaeology is increasingly adopting a humanistic perspective. While science takes an external, objective approach, the humanistic perspective is internal and subjective. Contemporary humanistic archaeology rejects dichotomies and emphasises that all things, either human or the rest of the world, are entangled. Entanglement is best shown in praxis. Praxis is the dialectic union of humans and the world, history and reality, sense and sensibility, and society and individuals. As the products of this praxis, archaeological materials must be understood in their manifold connections. Thus, the scope of archaeological enquiry has evolved from mere functional relations to deeper, culturally significant connections.

In this epoch of scientific advancement, the cultural bedrock on which we stand can be easily overlooked, yet it is an intrinsic necessity of our existence. We could theoretically concoct a scientifically “perfect” diet where the quantity of carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, and minerals in each meal is meticulously calculated. However, no matter how perfect it might be by scientific standards, it will invariably become monotonous. The art of cooking, imbued with rich diversity, stems from our basic

which can be traced back to the “Great Learning” (大學) from the Confucian classics. Traditionally, “gewu” has been interpreted as the investigation of things, wherein one seeks to comprehend the principles of all things in the world. However, Wang’s interpretation of “gewu” diverged from this classical understanding. In his view, “gewu” does not mean investigating the external world, but rather, introspecting and understanding one’s heart-mind (心, xin). Wang believed that the principles of all things are rooted in the heart-mind, and by achieving self-understanding, one could understand the universe. Thus, for Wang Yangming, “gewu” is an inward journey of self-exploration and self-understanding that leads to moral self-improvement and, ultimately, societal harmony.

human needs. The Chinese well understand this principle. Even after we migrate, our palates stubbornly resist acclimatisation. Culture represents a spectrum of solutions developed by humans to fulfil their needs. Therefore, while scientific methods are indispensable for studying our past, it is equally crucial to imbibe a cultural and humanistic perspective, acknowledging the diverse cultures developed by people in different times and places.

Over the millennia, our knowledge and culture have accumulated, harking even back to the Late Palaeolithic period. This rich tapestry of culture is all around us. Even our landscapes hum with poetic resonance and beautiful associations. A mere glimpse of a lotus flower prompts our thoughts of it “growing from silt yet remains unsullied”.⁴ The sight of a chrysanthemum stirs up the serenity encapsulated in Tao Yuanming’s classic verse, “Plucking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge, / At a distance, I catch sight of the southern mountain”.⁵ The moon’s luminescence awakens our feelings of homesickness and shared kinship: “Looking up, I find the moon bright, / Bowing, in homesickness I’m drowned”,⁶ or “How I wish man could live forever, / And share her [the moon] fair

⁴ 出淤泥而不染。This metaphor is well-known in Chinese literature and philosophy, most famously written in Zhou Dunyi’s essay. It describes a lotus flower, which grows out of muddy ponds, yet remains pure and unsoiled by its murky surroundings. This expression, originating from the Buddhist tradition, is used widely in Chinese culture to symbolise purity, resilience, and nobility amidst adverse conditions. It suggests the ability to maintain one’s moral integrity while being in, but not tainted by, a potentially corrupting environment.

⁵ 採菊東籬下，悠然見南山。This is a line from “Drinking Wine” (飲酒, yinjiu), a famous poem by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, a revered poet of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420 CE) known for his reclusive lifestyle and love for nature. The line captures the spirit of Tao’s philosophy, depicting him plucking chrysanthemums—a common symbol of autumn and tranquillity in Chinese culture—by the eastern hedge of his garden, while leisurely looking at the southern mountain. This imagery is often seen as a representation of the ideal life in Tao’s view, embodying simplicity, naturalness, leisure, and contentment.

⁶ 舉頭望明月，低頭思故鄉。This line is from the poem “Quiet Night Thoughts” (靜夜思, jingyesi) by Li Bai 李白, one of the greatest poets of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), known for his imaginative and romantic style. This line illustrates a quiet moment of the poet gazing at the bright moon, which stirs in him a deep sense of homesickness. The moon, a common symbol in Chinese literature, often represents home or the loved ones who are far away, connecting people no matter the physical distance.

light everywhere”.⁷ Absent such cultural accumulations, these things are void of spiritual resonance and bereft of any emotional evocations, even if their physical properties remain the same. Strip away the cultural connotations of things, and we stumble upon a grim reality—a spirit bereft of its home, a society lacking spiritual cohesion, and humanity adrift in a materialistic world.

Archaeology embarks on a quest through historical epochs, unearthing material remains from our past and delving not only into the events that unfurled around them but also the accumulated cultural meanings that resonate within our society. In this modern era, archaeology serves as the keel, stabilising the ship amid the capricious waves of our times. “No water’s wide enough when you have crossed the sea;/ No cloud is beautiful but that which crowns the peak”.⁸ Immersed in the vast expanse of history, we stand stoic and serene in the face of fluctuating fortunes and tribulations. Particularly for modern China, a nation whose history has been subverted, critiqued, and even decimated, yet now experiencing an unprecedented material boom, the quest to discover the significance of past material remains and establish connections with the present has never been more critical.

Archaeology does not delve into the past solely for its sake but to enrich the present and the enlightenment of the future. Cultural significance bridges the chasm between the present and history, breathing life into the past. However, reconstructing cultural significance necessitates a basis in historical fact, which explains why archaeology necessitates both scientific methods and humanistic interpretation. For archaeology to be relevant to contemporary society, it needs a platform of expression, a

⁷ 但願人長久，千里共嬋娟。This line is from the poem “Water Song” (水調歌頭, shuidiaogetou) by Su Shi蘇軾, one of the most renowned poets of the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE). In his poem, Su Shi uses the moon as a symbol of both the passage of time and the shared human experience. Despite the geographical distance that separates individuals, everyone looks upon the same moon. In this line, the poet expresses a deep, existential longing: a wish for the longevity of life and the preservation of moments of beauty, shared across distances.

⁸ 曾經滄海難為水，除卻巫山不是雲。This line is from the poem “Separation” (離思, lisi) by Yuan Zhen 元稹, a renowned poet of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). It expresses the poet’s feelings of nostalgia and longing, referring to experiences that have left such a deep impression that everything else seems insufficient in comparison. Yuan Zhen uses the imagery of the vast ocean and the unique clouds over Mount Wu as metaphors for profound, unforgettable experiences.

discourse. Material remains, bereft of a voice, can only be understood if presented through such discourse. Contemporary museums play a crucial role in this context, selecting specific remains and shaping them into tangible scenarios, crafting an implicit discourse that draws parallels with *jinsixue* (or epigraphy). “By beholding their [the Sages’] objects, reciting the words [in their inscriptions], and describing their general shape, we access the residual moralizing influence of the Three Dynasties. It is as though we are beholding their people [the Sages]”.⁹ Archaeology, despite its rapid evolution over the last century, has not matched strides in its form of expression.

Archaeologists need to ponder not only how material culture was conceived but also its intended significance and the means ancient people employed to express that idealistically. Even the humblest museum, housing a scant collection of artefacts, can stir deep sentimental connections to their home. Museum exhibitions need to take such emotional evocations into account. Contemporary archaeology needs to grapple with issues of cultural significance and its relevance in today’s society. By reflecting on these issues, we may usher in an era of archaeology that is more intriguing, humane, and insightful. As we wander through cultural heritage parks, experiencing the temporal shifts of history, and the rise and fall of past events, we constantly reposition ourselves in a dialogue between reality and history. Archaeology presents a stage that needs meticulous curation to weave the rich tapestry of the past into a coherent narrative, ultimately serving to inspire and better equip us for the future.

In questioning Chinese archaeology, whether for the sake of research or expression, we invariably find ourselves in the crosshairs of a conundrum that has beset Chinese scholarship for over a century—the reconciliation of the tradition with the modern, the East with the West. This seeming dichotomy of tradition and modernity also encapsulates a dialogue between the East and the West. There is a multitude of

⁹ *Jinsixue* 金石學 is a Chinese scholarly tradition of transcribing, translating, cataloguing, depicting, and interpreting historical inscriptions on bronze vessels and stone stelae, especially growing from the Song Dynasty. This quote (in Chinese, 觀其器, 頌其言, 形容彷彿, 已追三代之遺風, 如見其人矣) is from *Lü Dalin’s* 呂大臨 *Kaogutu* 考古圖, a significant Song Dynasty scholarly work of *jinsixue*. Translation from Jeffery Moser. “The Ethics of Immutable Things: Interpreting Lü Dalin’s ‘Illustrated Investigations of Antiquity.’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 72, no. 2 (2012): 278.

approaches to this dialogue: we could strive to assimilate into the global ethos, effectively merge China into the West, or staunchly uphold our unique path, unconcerned with external flux. An alternative is the “salad bowl” strategy, where we incorporate diverse cultures while maintaining impartiality regarding the dominant cultural narrative. A final stance might be the incorporation of Western elements into Chinese culture. Interestingly, the idea of integrating the West into the East is not the inverse of integrating the East into the West, though it may initially seem so. The former denotes a sacrifice of one’s own traditions to assimilate into an external narrative, while the latter implies a judicious absorption of Western elements to enhance our own cultural fabric. This discourse around the East and the West also encapsulates our understanding of the world. For the past century, our worldview has been West-centric, highlighting modernity. However, the postmodern world is increasingly decentralised, and the future world is envisioned as a flat, networked expanse rather than a hierarchical pyramid. Dismantling the edifice of modernity is a crucial precursor to the inception of a new world structure.

Prospecting the future is an endeavour I cherish, particularly because we inhabit an era of drastic change, especially in China. Despite the challenges that riddle China’s development, the country’s profound transformation over the past few decades is undeniable. So, what is the zeitgeist or the mission of our time for Chinese archaeology in this context? What is the future trajectory of Chinese archaeology? I’ve pondered this extensively, but my core belief remains unshaken—learning is about evolving into a better version of oneself rather than attempting to emulate someone else, which is a futile endeavour. My research, despite my doctorate from the United States, is centred on China. I draw inspiration from the seventh-century Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, who undertook a perilous journey to India to learn authentic Buddhist scriptures. On returning to China, he integrated these teachings to compensate for his shortcomings and stimulate exciting possibilities within a Chinese context. I envision a similar path for the development of Chinese archaeology.

While archaeology can be regarded as a science, it ultimately falls within the purview of culture, which forms the focal point of archaeological inquiry. Chinese archaeology must return to its roots, aiming to construct culture on a scientific foundation. Culture is an accumulation of historical narratives and archaeological practice as culture forms the bedrock of my research. Culture, to me, encapsulates the diverse forms of life,

including function. Form and function are intrinsically intertwined rather than mutually exclusive. Culture, a necessity for life in the past, present, and future, is infinitely enriched by diversity. A monotonous, homogeneous culture is a stark indicator of cultural violence. The world, as seen through the lens of modernity, exhibits this form of violence, calling for critique. Chinese archaeology seeks to enrich our cultural heritage based on scientific evidence. We don't require fabricated cultural narratives, but authentic material remains that, through interpretation and explanation, transforms into cultural heritage. These remnants of the past are waiting for us to dust off the layers of history to uncover their cultural significance and revive them within our contemporary context.

There is no termination point to inquiry, and all my responses are provisional. Before embarking on this journey of writing, I had no concrete answers. But, through grappling with these questions and engaging in a discourse of contrasting ideas, I believe we can find a path towards compromise, consensus, or a viable solution. These questions persist, and I have faith that readers will engage in their own reflections, probing deeper than I have and, hopefully, finding better answers. I would like to express my gratitude to my students, colleagues, and friends—both those I've met and those I am yet to meet—for their inspiring insights, which have ignited the spark for these inquiries.

Beijing, China

Shengqian Chen

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CHAPTER 1

Understanding Archaeology

The study of archaeology invites a moment of introspection. Situating within a cultural context usually deprives us of our ability to remain objective. In this sense, to understand archaeology, one should widen the lens and explore its greater connections, delving beneath the superficial to uncover the skeletal structure. The structure can be the *zeitgeist* or the spirit of the times, or it can be other conceptual frameworks that describe the cognitive patterns of an era. Even though I am a professional archaeologist, I have always been undetermined about what archaeology is and what it can be. I want to examine the nature of archaeology to grasp the various entangled factors that have shaped the discipline. There is so much I wish to explore but so little I can grasp. In contemplating archaeology, we may gain not only an understanding but also a serene appreciation with millions of years of history in mind. When we contemplate archaeology, we appreciate its beauty.

1.1 HUMANITY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE, WHAT TO RESEARCH?

The term “Doctor of Arts” within Chinese cyberspace has curiously earned itself a derogatory undertone. Why is that, one might ask? Well, a closer examination of the conceptual context reveals an underlying implication that the humanities and social sciences, more affectionately known as the “liberal arts”, are somewhat lacking in utility. Furthermore,

critics suggest a dearth of objectivity in research within these disciplines, which apparently renders them untestable. Some critics go as far as to cast doubt upon the logic underpinning liberal arts research and question the scientific literacy of the researchers. Hence, while the humanities and social sciences bear the moniker of “science”, critics contend they are, in essence, unscientific. In other words, they are neither useful nor scientific and, by default, unworthy. It should be noted that these criticisms are often made by people who are not ignorant but rather by those who are “scientifically literate”. After all, in our modern era so saturated with science, one would think twice before daring to present an argument against it. Confronted with such scepticism, many scholars within the humanities and social sciences adopt a somewhat submissive stance: “Indeed, indeed! The subjects we explore in our disciplines are inherently complex and perhaps less “scientific”, and we are, of course, striving to enhance our methodologies”. As if to say, “Yes, we understand. We’ll keep quiet and stay in our lane”. And yet, one can’t help but question: is such submissiveness necessary, or is there more to this tale than meets the eye?

Yet, we might ask, what indeed is science? As the renowned philosopher of science, Karl Popper, astutely observed, science does not equate to verification. A hypothesis can only be falsified, not proven. At times, we may even question whether falsification is within our grasp. In recent years, a team of European scientists boldly claimed to have discovered an entity that outpaced light, effectively debunking Einstein’s theory of relativity. Yet, other scientists cast doubt upon the reliability of this experiment, eventually unearthing a defective chip in the observation instrument. So, how do we falsify a hypothesis? With facts, you might suggest. Yet, are facts not the results of human observation and perception and, thus, susceptible to fallibility?

Shen Kuo,¹ the most scientifically minded man of the Song dynasty, observed that a lightning strike had knocked down an ancient tree and found a “thunder axe” (in fact, a Neolithic stone axe) in the pit of the

¹ Shen Kuo (沈括, 1031–1095) was a polymathic Chinese scholar-official during the Song dynasty. Renowned for his breadth of knowledge, Shen Kuo made significant contributions to various fields, including astronomy, geography, metallurgy, botany, zoology, mineralogy, art, music, and literature. Perhaps his most notable achievement is his written work, “Dream Pool Essays” (夢溪筆談, Mengxibitan). Within this book, Shen Kuo is credited with the first written description of the magnetic needle compass, which would later revolutionise navigation. He was also the first to recognise the concept of “true north” in geomagnetism.

tree, proving that there was a link between the stone axe and the lightning strike. As often said, seeing is believing, but what we see here is not true. The historical research we are doing is far from verifying the truth. If we cannot go back in time, what then is historical “truth”? If we can never achieve truth, then what exactly are we seeking? In this collection of essays, like the child in *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, I wish to expose the fundamentals of humanities and social science research and explore what it is about. This will influence the methods we should use in our research.

Before answering the question of what social science research is *about*, I shall first address the question of what social science research is *for*. Over the past hundred years, China has undergone radical changes. Some people describe it in terms of a thirty-year cycle, which I think is quite appropriate. From 1919 to 1949, China deftly rescued itself from colonisation, forging a new nation from the fires of tumult. Chinese historian Huang Renyu² offers us a keen observation, arguing that during this period, China effectively erected a modern state superstructure. The subsequent thirty years, spanning from 1949 to 1979, marked China’s assertion of independence and the creation of a comprehensive industrial system. According to Huang Renyu, these decades saw the completion of the construction of the modern state’s substructure. The land reform³ from 1950, followed by a series of social movements, fundamentally reshaped China’s basic social organisation. From 1979 to 2009, China embarked on a journey of self-reinvention. While Huang Renyu may not discuss the extent of this change, it’s fair to say that during these years, China managed to foster the growth of a modern state’s middle class, thereby giving rise to the largest middle class in the world. For the sake of clarity, I’d define the middle class as those individuals possessing a good education or trained skills, earning a stable professional income within the societal division of labour, and who can comfortably shoulder the costs of housing and travel. This burgeoning middle class forms the

² Huang Renyu (黃仁宇, 1818–2000), often known by his English name Ray Huang, was a prominent Chinese-American historian and philosopher, best known for his work in macro history. Huang’s approach to history was characterised by a large scale, global perspective that extended beyond traditional historical timelines.

³ Land reform was a social movement in the history of the People’s Republic of China. Initiated in the late 1940s and continued into the early 1950s, it aimed at redistributing land ownership from the wealthy landlord class to the poor peasantry. This period of drastic social and economic change was marked by the abolition of feudal land ownership and the promotion of agricultural collectivisation.

bedrock of China's future stability and development. As we stride into the forthcoming thirty-year cycle, perhaps we might name it the era of self-strengthening. Looking ahead to 2039, we have every reason to believe that China, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, will emerge as a major global force.

This example is one that we Chinese audience are all familiar with. The sweeping changes we've witnessed haven't come about by happenstance but have been the byproducts of intellectual movements. These movements have been championed by the likes of Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and a succession of political leaders. These ideological shifts, aligning with the *zeitgeist*, are true accomplishments within the realm of the humanities and social sciences. Without this intellectual advancement, we wouldn't have seen the transformative societal changes that have taken place, nor would we find ourselves where we stand today. Are the humanities and social sciences of any use? They influence the life and death of a community, the rise and fall of a country, the stability and turmoil of society, and the very ebb and flow of human joy and sorrow. It is indeed regrettable that those who despise the humanities and social sciences turn a blind eye to their significance and simply evaluate all with a purportedly "scientific" scale, thereby restricting their understanding of the world to a rather narrow spectrum.

In light of this, let's return to our original enquiry: what is the subject of study in humanities and social sciences? As the names imply, these disciplines are concerned with human beings and the societies they cultivate. Researchers are, in themselves, part of the very society they study, rendering complete detachment impossible. Despite fervent calls for objectivity, value-free, and absence of personal biases, it's crucial to remember that this so-called "objectivity" is a value in and of itself. This feigned impartiality often cloaks insensitivity to injustice, oozing an air of superiority. The confluence of value judgements and humanities and social sciences is inevitable. A veneer of objectivity that refuses to distinguish between right and wrong is simply a form of self-delusion. Research in the humanities and social sciences demands a breadth of perspectives and in-depth reflection. The values of each society are the fruits of their historical and current developments, intimately connected with cultural traditions and current contexts. Can we find universal values across human societies? Perhaps, but they are likely to be few. The heterogeneity across societies should be acknowledged and respected. Therefore, for a scholar in the humanities and social sciences, upholding certain values is of paramount

importance. As the old Chinese proverb reminds us, “Commanders can be captured in battle, but a person’s will cannot be seized”, meaning individuals should not lose their willpower and their unique standpoint. Historically, the academic achievements of those studying natural sciences can be separated from their individuality. Once a scholar in the humanities loses their ethics, the value of their work diminishes significantly.

Indeed, humans are enigmatic, and the societies they form are even more complex. Modern science still struggles to fully grasp concepts such as consciousness, will, and emotions. Social issues further compound this complexity, and to date, no universally applicable social law has been identified. Even if such a law were to exist, its testing within the society of the tester would be impossible. The market economy, for instance, is a social construct, but its application yields varied results across different societies—some thrive, others falter. Its effective implementation requires a unique blend of human wisdom. Due to the vast complexity of human societies, the variables for a researcher to comprehend are overwhelming. In such a labyrinthine system, precise calculation is unattainable. We can perhaps only resort to holistic, fuzzy judgement. Often, leading figures in the humanities and social sciences are those endowed with the foresight and vision to make long-term predictions. These individuals don’t pluck ideas from thin air, but rather they have a deep understanding of social development rules, and current social trends and conduct extensive research and fieldwork. But we must also remember that despite the wealth of information at our disposal, it’s never enough to capture the full complexity of people and society. Paradoxically, an overabundance of information can sometimes breed confusion. Their inferences aren’t solely rooted in logical deduction but also necessitate intuitive, holistic judgement. Take, for instance, Mao Zedong’s pamphlet, *On Protracted War*,⁴ during the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. Mao accurately grasped the wartime situation, whereas some esteemed historians proposed that China would crumble under the strain of the war with Japan, suggesting surrender as the more prudent option.

⁴ *On Protracted War* (論持久戰, Lun chijuzhan) is composed in 1938 and offers a comprehensive analysis of why Mao believed China could outlast Japan in a protracted war. It integrates military strategy with Marxist–Leninist theory, providing an intellectual basis for the strategic shift of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from quick decisive battles to drawn-out warfare. In the text, Mao propounds his three-stages theory of warfare and provides profound insights into the nature of the war, ultimately envisioning a victory for China.

Mao, however, argued that resistance, even to the point of death, should be our response when we are faced with an enemy who ruthlessly massacred our compatriots. This, he believed, should be the spirit of the Chinese people. Those with a deep appreciation of history should understand the ebb and flow of historical trends and recognise that Japanese imperialism was never meant to last.

The pedagogical tradition of ancient China has always held a reverence for expansive knowledge and profound comprehension. In fact, certain scholars were able to recite by heart the annotations in *Thirteen Classics*,⁵ which is truly remarkable. Yet, the very cornerstone of humanistic thought needed to catalyse modern social change and scientific revolution did not originate on Chinese soil. Reading Rousseau's *Confessions*, we find that this Enlightenment philosopher had received scant formal education. Similarly, Spinoza's educational background was unremarkable. One might wonder why there is such a divergence between Chinese and Western education. The answer might lie in the humanities and social sciences' significant emphasis on *verstehen*, the German concept of understanding. To acquire this understanding, experience and practice are paramount. Without being in touch with social realities and having a keen eye for observing nature, how can one ever hope to gain genuine insight? This is particularly pertinent given the Qing government's isolationist policy.⁶

⁵ The *Thirteen Classics Commentaries and Explanations* (十三經注疏, shisanjingzhushu) is an essential collection of ancient Chinese texts that forms the cornerstone of Confucian thought. Compiled during the Qing Dynasty, it contains thirteen of the most significant works in Confucian philosophy, each accompanied by detailed commentaries and explanations. This compilation includes renowned texts such as the "Analects of Confucius", the "Book of Rites", and the "Book of Changes", among others. The commentaries and explanations accompanying each classic provide insights into their complex teachings, making the texts more accessible to scholars and students alike. This compilation served as the principal curriculum for Chinese scholars for centuries, shaping the intellectual and moral character of Chinese society.

⁶ The isolationist policy (閉關鎖國, biguansuoguo) was a key feature of China's Qing dynasty (1644–1911). It implied a restrictive and defensive stance against foreign influences and engagements. Initially, the Qing maintained a system of regulated trade, primarily through the Canton System, which limited foreign trade to the city of Canton. However, the policy became increasingly strict, especially after the destructive experiences with opium and the consequent wars with Western powers. The rationale behind this policy was to maintain social stability, protect traditional Chinese culture, and resist

In many respects, the humanities and social sciences seem more akin to a set of practices or abilities rather than concrete knowledge. That's why some believe that all one needs to study humanities and social sciences is a well-stocked library. This notion resonates with me. A former Harvard president once claimed that given sufficient funding to establish a university, he would initially build a grand library and only hire professors with the remaining funds. Having been a student myself for two or three decades, I wholeheartedly echo this sentiment. I have often pondered upon what I truly learned within the confines of a classroom. Teachers often appear more like guides, with the imparted knowledge quickly evaporating from memory. It is the palpable yet unrecordable classroom atmosphere that seems to exert a more profound influence. The education within humanities and social sciences appears to work subliminally, with the teachers' temperament, style, and wisdom subtly influencing the students and leaving a more lasting imprint than the taught knowledge. In this sense, humanities and social sciences offer a form of spiritual training, fostering a person's values and nurturing sound judgement. Prolific reading is undeniably an effective pedagogical approach, offering a breadth of perspectives and insights across various disciplines. Therefore, students in the humanities never seem to have enough books. Despite being unable to read all of them, they continue to amass more. In contrast, natural science students' bookshelves are often adorned with professional textbooks. For them, mastering the underlying principles is vital, reflecting the divergent aims of the two fields. Of course, students of natural sciences would also argue that science itself is a form of cultivation, a notion that harks back to ancient Greek science, which was a form of cultivation grounded in the humanities, albeit having since diverged.

Contemporary humanities and social sciences are beginning to resemble natural sciences. When publishing an article, the absence of at least a few statistical charts or models is often viewed as a shortcoming, undermining its scientific credibility. If no graphical representation is provided, it should at least show that the conclusion has been derived through logical reasoning. These mathematical and logical transformations are leading to the convergence of humanities and social sciences with the natural sciences. But pondering over it, do we understand life

what was perceived as harmful foreign influences. Despite these intentions, many historians argue that this approach ultimately hindered China's technological and economic development, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation during the era of Western imperialism.

any better than our predecessors? Do we have a better grasp of human nature? Is our society superior to ancient ones? Are there fewer tragedies in modern human societies? Confronted with these questions, we waver in confidence. Is scientific progress always steadfast and continuous? If humanities and social sciences cannot advance in the same vein as natural sciences, are we on the wrong path? I can't profess to have the answers. Like the innocent child in "The Emperor's New Clothes", I'm merely asking: is there really truth beneath that shiny veneer? If there is no truth, why pretend to seek it? If the goal is not truth, then what are we truly studying?

When we look back at human society's historical trajectory, the significant contributions of humanities and social sciences become evident. The philosopher Zhang Zai⁷ aptly encapsulates the objectives of intellectuals: "to ordain conscience for Heaven and Earth, to secure life and fortune for the people, to continue lost teachings for past sages, to establish peace for all future generations".

1.2 HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES, AND SCIENCES

The term "science" often conjures a sense of awe, representing an impartial and supreme standard. We're instilled, from a young age, with a love and respect for science, urged to further its progress. When I embarked on a university degree in archaeology, I too aspired to these scientific ideals, and I noticed the same in my cohort. Many of them, however, chose to depart from archaeology, partly because it lacked the semblance of "science". The nature of archaeology, even amidst the concrete remains of an excavation, seemed incredibly subjective. Determining whether a pit was round or square, big or small, or even the naming of artefacts, all hinged on the excavator's understanding. Even if these understandings were flawed, once they were inscribed in the report, they became "objective material". This is, of course, merely a matter of perception,

⁷ Zhang Zai (张载, 1020–1077) was a philosopher during the Song Dynasty in China. He is best known as one of the leading figures of the School of Principle or Rationalistic School, which was part of the larger Confucian philosophical tradition known as Neo-Confucianism. Zhang Zai's most influential work, the *Zhengmeng* (正蒙 or "Correcting Youthful Ignorance"), sought to integrate elements of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. His philosophy placed a strong emphasis on the moral cultivation of the individual and the recognition of the interconnectedness of all things, encapsulated in his concept of *Qi* (气)—the vital energy or material force that pervades the universe.

and it is correctable. But perhaps the deeper disappointment lies in the aims of archaeology. What tangible outcomes can archaeology yield? Despite identifying with science, at least broadly, we've not produced the hard-hitting results of pure sciences. Nor is archaeology as practical as economics or law, with their real-world problem-solving capabilities or their potential to create more prosperous lives for us and our loved ones. Thus, giving up archaeology seems a more sensible choice.

Despite these odds, I didn't give up and instead opted for a seemingly more "scientific" branch of archaeology—Palaeolithic archaeology, which delves into the origins and evolution of human culture. In China, Palaeolithic archaeology usually nestles under the umbrella of natural sciences. Later, as my fascination for archaeological theory blossomed, my research sphere gradually widened to encompass Chinese prehistory in general. However, the more I researched, the more doubts surfaced. Are the goals of archaeology genuinely scientific? Is archaeology a science, *per se*? These queries led me to reflect on the fields of humanities and social science research in general. I've come to acknowledge that the humanities and social sciences do not fit the mould of "sciences" in the narrow or strict sense. We needn't, nor should we, impose such a label on them. We should be like the child in "The Emperor's New Clothes", courageously voicing our thoughts. In an era brimming with scientific development, this could be seen as foolish, anti-scientific, or even heretical. I harbour no grudge against science, and I don't oppose the use of scientific methods in humanities and social research. What I take issue with is labelling humanities and social research, including archaeology, as "science".

Why do I assert that the humanities and social sciences aren't "sciences"? To address this, we first need to pin down a definition for "science". "science" has been the subject of endless debates, and probing this topic plunges us into the realm of philosophy. Here, I employ "science" in its colloquial sense, rooted in the general impression that science evokes. It's a nebulous yet specific term that significantly influences our judgement and actions. Our impressions of "science" at least comprise the following: science is objective, rational, and logical; its goal is to unearth truth, and hence, it holds universal significance, unfettered by time, place, or person. A case in point is a recent interview with the historian He Zhaowu (1921–2021), conducted when he was 99. The article was titled "If truth contradicts national conditions, it's not the truth that needs to change, but the national conditions". Truth is paramount. As ancient Western philosophers would argue: the pursuit

of truth is a human duty. The title of this article is provocative, but its validity hinges on the premise that such truths genuinely exist in social and cultural development.

Regrettably, we are yet to unearth such truths. Market economies might dominate today's world, and the belief that the invisible hand of the market can distribute resources most effectively is deeply ingrained. But the reality is that a market economy is simply one type of economic development, relatively efficient but not uniquely so, and it doesn't universally succeed at all times and places—failures are far from rare. The market economy assumes that people are rational and their goal is to amass wealth. However, this assumption isn't universally valid. People aren't always rational, and their goals don't necessarily align with market principles. Even when a market economy is highly successful, it's a product of modernisation, merely a fleeting moment in the grand scale of human history. For 99% of human history, markets didn't exist. There is neither consistency between the past and the present, nor is there a one-size-fits-all approach. Even the most widely accepted and popular social science theories struggle to achieve objectivity, rationality, and universality. This issue is even more pronounced in other theories in the humanities and social sciences.

In the humanities and social sciences, rules applicable to one society may not necessarily work for another. Each society has its unique historical and cultural backdrops, as evidenced by countless social practices. Of course, we can't deny that different societies can learn from each other's rules, as exemplified by the adaption of Marxism to the Chinese context. Humanities and social research focus on humans themselves, who exist within certain social, historical, and cultural contexts. Our understanding of ourselves cannot exist independently of or beyond these contexts. No one has a bird's-eye view of all beings, and all research originates from these contexts and is bounded by them. In contrast, in scientific research, the researcher can maintain a relatively objective stance, separate from the object of study.

Perhaps what's even more crucial is that humans have agency. They can comprehend and exploit rules, and they can also defy rules, upsetting the existing order. Therefore, humanities and social research need to consider human agency and, relatedly, human dignity. A society shouldn't forcefully impose what it deems to be the right rules on another society. This disregards the agency of the people in the other society and infringes upon

their dignity. Society, history, culture, and agency—these four elements constitute the uniqueness of humanities and social research.

Unfortunately, over the past century or so, since humanities and social sciences took shape in the West, scholars have been promulgating their values worldwide under the guise of science, invoking truth, rationality, objectivity, and reality. Social Darwinism and racism have run amok. In capital markets, the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, reigns. In the political arena, it is claimed that human history is nearing its end and that democracy will be the ultimate destination for all human societies. All of these are the “achievements” of humanities and social scientific research. But where is the truth in all this? As Foucault pointed out, knowledge is power. What we see more often is that might make right. From this perspective, humanities and social research that seek to discover “laws and truth” are, in fact, aiding and abetting tyranny. They have become tools for one society or group to invade, exploit, and rule another. All of this transpires in the name of science.

At first glance, it may seem that I am painting humanities and social research with an overly critical brush. Admittedly, there are general patterns in such research, but their application and relevance are bounded by the social, historical, and cultural landscape. The primary goal of social research is not the establishment of patterns but rather the pursuit of social relevance. This could easily be misconstrued as pandering to power, but by “social relevance”, I refer to a kind that withstands historical scrutiny. Humanities and social research that fail this historical test can scarcely be considered successful. Scientific research is tested against the objective world, while the humanities and social research don’t have such an objective world for validation. People exist in their unique worlds, worlds that are inevitably subjective. Thus, humanities and social research can only be tested through social practice, which may not be convincing in a single period of time and needs to be examined in the context of a long-durée history. As the traditional Chinese saying advocates, “One should take a broad view of things over time”.

This is not to discount the scientific aspects of humanities and social research. Studying the mechanisms of human behaviour and society undeniably enhances our understanding of ourselves. Humanities and social research have incorporated scientific methodologies and yielded numerous insightful results. However, we must recognise that these fields are not “science” in the strict sense. There are fundamental differences among these research areas, and treating humanities and social research

as science is either misguided or intentionally deceptive. If humanities and social research aren't science, what are they then? Will their value diminish? They may not be science, but they are scholarship—profound and meaningful scholarship closely connected to people and society. The rise and fall of nations, the survival of ethnic groups, the essence of life, these questions are the dominion of humanities and social sciences, attesting to their intrinsic value.

If humanities and social research don't yield laws and truths, what do they provide? In my opinion, they offer wisdom. Consider life itself, it's hard to pinpoint any universal truths or laws. If such existed, life would be simplistic. This explains why we have debated life and death, happiness, for thousands of years, without arriving at a consensus. However, wisdom for life is undeniably real. The wisdom yielded by humanities and social research is universal, yet it must be understood and experienced. Knowing life's wisdom isn't difficult, but truly understanding and experiencing it often demands personal engagement with the world. From this perspective, humanities and social research cannot be divorced from practice or context. A critical issue with contemporary Chinese humanities and social research, I fear, is that it has become disjointed from China itself.

While science knows no borders and scientists worldwide collaborate to tackle shared challenges such as COVID-19, humanities and social research don't operate on the same principle. Many scholars are studying the impact of the coronavirus on economy, politics, culture, and so forth. Although these studies seem to share a common theme, their objectives differ. Some research aims to minimise a nation's economic losses and mitigate the crisis. Chinese researchers, for instance, must consider how to guard against this crisis offloading, and how to stimulate domestic economic growth against the backdrop of a global recession. Of course, some research considers cooperative and "win-win" scenarios among different countries, but this is not the sole approach. The priority of most research is solving domestic problems, with secondary consideration given to win-win cooperation and how much each party gains. The value of humanities and social research in this context is plain to see. While noble motives of cooperation exist, so too do considerations of conflict, as the dichotomy of "us" versus "them" always lurks in the background. Moreover, they consider universal issues, such as the need for increased investment, market expansion, and economic development. Humanities and social sciences are complex, which precludes their reduction to mere scientific laws.

Treating humanities and social research as science seems like an attempt to elevate its status, but the actual outcome tends to be the opposite. Because humanities and social research can't match the universal applicability or objectivity of science, they appear to rely on the mantle of "science" for legitimacy. When it falls short of providing laws or truths, trust in it is significantly undermined. Though we don't hear much opposition to humanities and social research in formal media, in private conversations, and on social media, many express views that such research is unreliable and meaningless, admitting at best that it sounds interesting. The occasional defences for the humanities often stem from a scientific perspective, arguing that the development of humanities and social research is still in its infancy and that, given time, it can indeed "become scientific" given the complexity of human social phenomena. In other words, the ultimate goal of humanities and social research is still perceived as science, an aspiration that is largely impossible to fulfil. Treating humanities and social research as science ultimately diminishes its value.

Treating humanities and social research as science also has a significant implication: it lends legitimacy to the uniqueness of Western values. The humanities and social sciences that we study today are fundamentally products of Western modernisation, with different research areas delineated into disciplines. As Western imperialism and colonialism spread, the rest of the world, under the weight of power, found itself learning from the West—from science and technology to political systems and from thought and culture to even basic living habits. As historian Jiang Tingfu⁸ argued in *Modern Chinese History*, it is impossible to be half-Chinese and half-Western. The implication was that China couldn't progress unless it was fully Westernised.

⁸ Jiang Tingfu (蔣廷黻, 1895–1965) was an important Chinese historian, diplomat, and politician during the twentieth century. He is best known for his work in modern Chinese history and his involvement in the Chinese government during a turbulent period of the country's history. Jiang was educated both in China and abroad. He studied history at Peking University before going on to Harvard University in the United States, where he obtained his master's degree. He later returned to China and served as a professor at Peking University. In addition to his academic work, Jiang was deeply involved in politics. He served as a diplomat for the Republic of China (ROC) during World War II and was the ROC's representative to the United Nations. Later in his career, he also served as the Minister of Education and the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the ROC.