

An Inquiry Into The Meaning of Studying History and Historiography

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What is the meaning of studying history? History education is often compulsory all around the globe and history curricula always are at the epicentre of education debates in politics. These current debates on history education are, however, mostly around “what to teach?” and “how to teach?” and not much about “why we teach?” I want to reflect, instead, on the meaning of learning history in schools and historiography in higher education. These reasons and doubts usually are from the daily life common sense or social sciences ground. In this essay, I reflect on the meaning of doing and learning history from a philosophical perspective, particularly hard determinism, to see whether studying history can withstand this challenge.

In this reflective essay, I will first introduce the idea of hard determinism. Then, I will try to address three major meanings of teaching history in common education from a hard determinist point of view. After that, I will try to address the theory of historiography. Finally, I will try to affirm the meaning of studying history and historiography, even if some of the options might be challenged.

To reflect on the meaning of learning and studying history and historiography from a determinist perspective, I need to summarise the core idea of hard determinism. Hard determinism is a product of a greater idea, determinism and determinism is a perspective in which all things and events are pre-determined by causes.

Two major justifying arguments are explaining this perspective. The first ideology is from the physicalists point of view. From physics, the particles are moved by other forces from other particles. This chain of impacts of forces and particles expand over time. Also, the particles form materials and the human body. Therefore, everything, including our bodies, is controlled by this particle movement chain from far before the material is shaped or we are born. If we are taking neuroscience of those contact between brain cells into account, even our minds do not escape from the particle movement chain.

Another wider, more common sense thinking is from the belief which everything has reasons, which may be either obvious or hidden. When those reasons happened, the resulted event must occur. As the causes of the results also have their causes, a causal chain of unavoidable events is formed. In this sense, things are determined far before our birth because the long-ago events decided what we are doing and thinking in the present and future. Regardless of which arguments philosophers are using, the determinists believe that all events must be happening because of certain causes in the chain of causal relationships.

While determinism makes sense in general views, it raises an issue that challenges the free will of people. When things are pre-determined, we do not have any choice but only one pre-determined result. For example, when we visit an ice-cream shop, we are pre-determined to buy the chocolate taste one, even there are many other tastes available. When there is only one result, even we seem to be able to make many choices, in fact, there is no other option. Therefore, under the belief of

determinism, our free will is challenged. There are many types of response from philosophers on this dilemma. Hard determinism is one of them.

Hard determinism is a simple way to solve this dilemma. It just simply admits determinism and reject free will. It also suggests that there is no room to make free will and determinism compatible. This entails that people are not choosing to do what they did. Their physical movements, as well as their minds, are just following the chain of a causal relationship, which is pre-determined, far back before their own existence began, which in fact raises the question of a first cause (an old philosophical dilemma). In some sense, our movement and minds are out of our, or any others', control. All of our behaviour, including thinking is decided by the huge causal chain.

This is not a metaphysics paper on determinism. Therefore, I will not discuss the validity of this school of thought. There are many other thoughts about the conflict between determinism and free will. The philosophical debates are still ongoing. But in this reflective essay, I will assume that hard determinism is sound; assume that we do not have free will, and then apply this assumption during the discussion of the meaning of history.

In the following sections, I will discuss three major meaning of studying history in common education separately. The first meaning to be discussed is the predictions and preparations of the future.

A common reason for people to study history is to comprehend the present and predict the future. "History repeats itself," is a common phrase among the general public. Nietzsche suggested the eternal recurrence of the same and many religions had the concept of cycles¹. As people tend to recur things, learning the past events and understanding the patterns of events helps us know things from now on. From the introduction of T.T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art, the used phrase "Knowledge of the past serves as a mirror for the present²," demonstrate this common belief in popular and simplest words.

For the philosophers on history, they think that studying history can understand the humans' nature or the historical materialistic world trend³. Both are the essence of the general law of human societies⁴.

Thereafter, people can design solutions for future problems, or even just copy the way their ancestors handled those issues. Under the rational decision-making model, when the decision-makers had their set of value in minds, which assumed is easy, all

¹ R. Lanier Anderson, "Friedrich Nietzsche", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/nietzsche/>.

² HKSAR, LCSD, "T.T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art," *Hong Kong Heritage Museum Leisure and Cultural Services Department*. Retrieved from https://www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk/en_US/web/hm/exhibitions/permanent_exhibitions/permanent_chineseart.html

³ Daniel Little, "Philosophy of History", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/history/>.

⁴ Little, "Philosophy of History", *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

they need is the information to make optimal choices. Knowledge in history, especially on events that sharing similar nature with the confronting problems, is an important source of information. In layman words, people would not make the same mistake. To provide information for solution forming, historians, thus, tend to generalise their finding into comprehensible and applicable patterns for the students and common inquirers.

In Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, he feared that people without studying the inaccurate history will suffer when they inquire about the past for the answer in the future⁵. He had the underlying logic which the people need to inquire about the past to answer the future. Therefore, another major task for history teachers is to instil historical facts as accurate as possible. Thucydides' book accorded these tasks. He spent the whole first chapter explaining not only the reason for writing the book, but also the methodology he used to assure the accuracy of his records⁶. In Medieval Europe and pre-modern China, the historians spent lots of time recording the events by plain, rather than rhetorical narratives, in order to ease the bias, which is bad for historical accuracy.

While at the same time, historians already well noticed the importance of making causal claims and hope the readers learnt from it and apply it to their present days. For example, Polybius's *Histories* illustrated the Punic Wars between Romans and Phoenicians⁷. Between the historical facts recorded, he also wrote on how the national culture between Sparta, Crete, Rome and Phoenicians affect their "fate"⁸. He also stated that the aim of his *Histories* is to tell his fellow Greek to learn from Romans⁹.

In the modern school context, in HKSAR History Curriculum Aims, discovering where students stand in the contemporary world through understanding the origins and development of modern events is the primary target¹⁰. The examination and course content also covers the causal relationships between events and historical figures, but not just reciting historical facts. This hints at the argument that history is meaningful because studying it can understand things nowadays. Through tracing the events and things backwards, we, then, can know how comes we are in this situation. It may help to make better decisions.

All the above are the illustrations or different arguing ways favouring the statement, knowing the past helps to know the present and predicting the future. And knowing the present and predicting the future improve societies by making better decisions. I construct the following argument in standard format for summarising the

⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I, 22.

⁶ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I, 22.

⁷ Polybius, *The Histories*, VI, 43-47.

⁸ Polybius, *The Histories*, VI, 43-52.

⁹ Polybius, *The Histories*, I, 1-3.

¹⁰ Curriculum Development Council & Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, "History: Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 -6)" *Personal, Social and Humanities Education Key Learning Area*. Hong Kong: Education Bureau HKSARG, 2014, 2.

idea above and argument analysis later. This standard format tries to organise the argument into lines of statements, one by one, and premises (P) and their implied conclusions (C).

- P1 The events now and future share the same features as the events in the past
- P2 The future events are caused by the current events and trend
- P3 Studying history is understanding the past
- P4 Understanding the past includes understanding the events in the past and the causal chain that connect events
- C5 Studying history understands the current and future events
- C6 Studying history understands the causal chain that caused future events
- C7 Studying history can predict the occurrence of future events
- P8 Knowing more helps to make better decisions and solutions
- P9 Knowing something in prior helps better preparations
- P10 Better decisions, solutions and preparations improve the society and oneself in the future
- C11 Studying history improves human societies and the student themselves in the future
- C12 Studying history is meaningful

This argument is valid. However, some premises are false even without the challenges from hard determinists. P1 is not true because every single event is unique, especially when the timeframe is different. For example, we are currently confronting the problem of privacy in software. Studying history in the 20th century does not help because the software and the concept of privacy did not exist back then. When technology, time and human society progress, something will be outdated and some new issues that we cannot imagine pop up. Therefore, P1, doubtlessly, is false. The only way to rescue this argument is to reduce the meaning of studying history by limiting its implication to the future. Adjusting P1 to “similar” but not “same” makes P1 true. Although the things, technology and concepts are totally different, events share some similarities when people progress incrementally. For example, people can use Thucydides’ analysis between Athens and Sparta to understand the Sino-US relationship.

Under the hard determinist idea, the room for improvement suggested by this argument is eliminated. I can reject P10 by constructing the following attacking argument:

- P1 Things are determined to happen [determinism]
- P2 We cannot freely decide things [hard determinism]
- C3 Things cannot be improved or worsened by doing alternatives

- C4 Regardless people studied history or not, they cannot make better decisions
- C5 Studying history cannot improve human society and themselves

Under the hard determinism argument, we cannot prevent events from occurring because they are determined to happen. Also, we cannot really make decision or changes because we do not have a choice but to do a certain action. When the future is fixed and studying history can do nothing to change the circumstances, either in a good or bad way, studying history is just meaningless.

Learning history even cannot be a tool or the middle of the causal chain. Our physical capacity does not increase by studying history. Other than that, studying history, different from studying professional disciplines, like engineering or law, can increase intellectual capacity in achieving certain areas that others cannot do.

Even in some sense that studying history can be the middle of the causal chain. It remains meaningless. While logically, as studying history is an event or a consequence of events, it should be caused and causing other things. However, in the determined world, the middle of the causal chain cannot bring any differences to the results. Therefore, we study history cannot change the future or bring any better preparation. Even if we can, it is not because of historical studies.

Other than that, studying history also brings despair if we consider this as a way for us to change the future and improve the present. In the real world, there are endless factors causing events after events. The determinism already suggested that everything have their causes, which can be more than one. Even the minor movement of the atoms thousands of light-years away from the earth can bring impacts to our future through the causal chain.

Humans understanding of the world still insufficient, and impossible to be enough in the plausible future, to know every necessary factor of future events. Not to mention that history only studying past events and heavily relies on very limited textual and archaeological findings. This becomes more limited in the common education. History teachers cannot teach all the things that the academics found because they need to follow the curricula. And there is definitely insufficient time for them to teach in detail. In high-school education, many historical events are neglected due to time restraints. Just like in HKSAR high school history, the whole process of World War II is neglected¹¹. For those students, they will find that studying history is useless for them because they cannot predict the future by their historical knowledge as they only know extremely little of the factors which cause events. They are far from omniscient to know the causation between events. As a result, what they learnt are rejected, or at least, meaningless, because the causation suggested in the textbooks may not even true and sufficient. If the student notices this, they may fall into the despair hole of

¹¹ Curriculum Development Council, "History: Curriculum," 8-16.

inability, meaninglessness, doubting the important textbooks and even nihilism.

Even for outsiders, encouraging teenagers to study history is also meaningless in common education. We expect the people who learnt history in their high school can have the ability to predict the future and notice the society for the better preparation or helping the society finding ways to improve the present status. However, only one prophet is enough to warn the world and to tell the world about the future. There is a total waste of resources for society to teach history in general education. Rather than spreading resources across thousands of pupils, it might be better for society to concentrate resources on a few. Loosening the time and resources constraint for the selected few allows them to learn much more than normal historical education. Thus, for the sake of omniscient in the past, rather than spreading resources across many students, focusing on a few to learn more may be more plausible, for the sake of knowing the future. Therefore, studying history is better as an elite education, but not a general education, in this sense.

From the arguments above, especially from the hard determinist perspective, studying history in high school has no use in helping the present and future. This rebuts common sense. From common sense and general experiences, the people who know well in history can estimate the future. Just like Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, suggesting the studies of Roman Republic history can help to understand the 16th-century Italian non-monarchical states and international politics¹². Or the Herodotus's *Histories*, perfectly match the triumph of the Persian Empire and the latter Empires with similar national characteristic¹³. From our perception, knowing the past can help the future.

But it is just a mere illusion. Even the prophet can get the answer correct, it does not mean that the prophet really can predict the future. An explanation is listed above. People cannot know all factors that cause certain events. Studying history can know some, but it is only a tiny portion of all necessary condition. Another one I will use the standard format to explain. Usually, the favouring argument of knowing the past knowing the future using accurate prediction to justify the effectiveness in learning history. Their argument basically likes that:

P1 Studying history can know the past

P2 People who knew the past justifies that the future will be developed in certain ways and certain events will occur

P3 People who knew the past believes that the future will be developed in certain ways and certain events will occur

P4 The future (comparing to the time of making the justification from the people who

¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, Julia Conaway. Bondanella, and Bondanella, Peter E. *Discourses on Livy*. World's Classics. Oxford; Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997, 5-7.

¹³ Herodotus, *The Persian War*, III, 80-82.

know the past) really is developed in the believed ways and the believed events really occurred

C5 People who know the past know the future.

C6 Studying history helps to predict future

This argument is familiar in the other sector of philosophy. Because it is similar to the famous epistemology problem. The argument above is for the old common belief in knowledge, justified true belief. However, it is proven to be problematic by Gettier. Gettier suggested cases that a person can well reason and get the answer correct when the way of the reason is wrong¹⁴. It just like a mathematics test in which the participant can get the answer right even if the steps are wrong.

This can be also applied to the prophet situation. There is a chance for a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the prophets or the audience know the prediction, they will try to fulfil this prediction. For example, the famous Lebensraum claims, which expect the future nations will struggles for lands and resources, from the German political geographers Friedrich Ratzel, were realised by their believers, especially in the two world wars¹⁵. The reason which the prediction came true not because of the knowledge of the past, but the claim, the prophecy and the idea itself changed people's minds.

Knowing the past, and then making a prediction, even predicted things happen, does not imply that the power of prediction. Therefore, the real-life cases and experiences which studying history help making the right prediction are insufficient to entail the meaning. Logically, studying history is useless, at least insufficient for now, to make predictions.

Of course, as I person who is studying history, this is undesirable to see a commonly believed meaning of my studies being rejected. So, is there any escape road, or last sort of hope which bring meaning to secondary school history education?

A meaning that general historical education can bring about future betterment is as a tool or enabler of further studies. if we considering general historical education as a screening tool or the foundation of the later studies, the problem of both spreading resources and insufficient time and resources are resolved. It is because even the high school education is a part selection process for the people who can explore new historical facts and causation which our ascendants did not find yet. Through the examinations and 3 or more years of teaching, students who finished the programme can gather enough experience and information for their next step of studies. With these factors, some of them will not continue to study history because they perceived that they are not interested in history or better in other subjects. This selection process continues in undergraduate and postgraduate studies. After the

¹⁴ Edmund L Gettier. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23, no. 6 (1963): 121-23.

¹⁵ Martin Jones, Rhys Jones, and Michael Woods. *An Introduction to Political Geography*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2004, 5.

process, those historians become cutting edge researchers in the humans' past and explore the new past and causations. And this is the meaning of general public historical education.

The reason for selecting historians is because society can concentrate resources on them. Those historians are the people who research and explore new things that human society did not find before. This means that the total understanding of history expanded with the hard works of history researchers. Although it is still far from omniscient, it at least is a step closer to the ultimate goal of knowing all the necessary factors, which enable the true prediction of the future. As a part of the selection process, is the only meaning about future society betterment and knowledge, after the challenges of hard determinism and some reflections.

However, as a selection process, high school history studies remain nearly useless and serious reduced meaning on future prediction. The middle of the causal chain is basically meaningless when the results are determined. When human society is determined to be omniscient on the past, the selection process is useful, as a middle step, but is basically meaningless. So, as the result, the fundamental meaning of studying history as future betterment and prediction is largely reduced by the hard deterministic view.

In short, without free agents, the meaning of studying history is lost in helping the present days and the future because humans cannot alter and improve the future by all means. The statement, studying history can bring a better future, is just false.

While logically, studying history cannot help any in the determined future, in perception, it is helpful. As previously mentioned, it is common sense that knowing the past well can predict the future. Many historians and scholars believed in it as well. This constructed a social fact on this belief. When we believe in this illusion, and not reflect on this, we can feel great about studying history in schools. Because it lets us think that we are useful, and our studies are meaningful. And this constructive fact is also recognised by the external environment, the societies. Thus, the meaning of studying history in high school is to gain recognition, which brings self-esteem and happiness, from the outside and self by believing that studying history is impactful to the future prediction and improvement. Through embracing or not debunking the illusion, it can directly cause something, which is meaningful.

After discussing the most important meaning of studying history, the following section will discuss the general history education as an insurgent for the government, state or authorities.

In the context of basic history education, a way to discover the aim or meaning of this education is by browsing the HKSAR government curriculum documents. In the Hong Kong local case, there are Curriculum and Assessment Guides on different subjects; different period of studies between primary 1 to secondary 6.

From the official documents, a major meaning of studying history, especially the

motherland, is to strengthen the national identity of students¹⁶. The curricula of Chinese History (Secondary 4-6) placed a heavy emphasis on the Chinese national culture and unity. In the document, curricula idea section, the Education Bureau stated that the home country history is an important material in national education¹⁷. The government expected that history education can allow the pupils more affiliate with their state and nation (in Hong Kong example, Chinese) by letting them know more and reflect more on the history, culture and issues of the country.

This aim is further elaborated by the curricula aim section in that document. That section suggested that the Chinese History subject should teach students on the history and cultural succession and changes, to allow students to have a deeper understanding of the current daily life¹⁸. This implies that the government believes that by connecting the past and present life, students can be more patriotic. Other than that, the document also listed an aim which students are expected to incubate a sense of moral ethics and national sense of belonging through studying the development history of the state and the personal traits of historical figures¹⁹.

The HKSAR government documents are not primary for constructing an argument in explaining the meaning of studying history detailly, but the curriculum aim, target and expected outcome illustrates the underlying logic and assumptions behind why studying history can reinforce students' national identity. From the pieces in the curricula, I construct the following argument for better illustration and argument analysis later.

1-P1: Studying history is about knowing the human activities, from bottom daily life to top politics, in the past.

1-C2: Studying motherland history let students know about the continuation and changes in their own nationhood in the past. (Implies from P1)

1-P3: Knowing more about a thing or a group makes people more like or affiliate with it. (Hidden assumption)

1-C4: Studying motherland history strengthens students' national identity affiliation.

There is another argument favouring the national identity.

2-P1: A major part of studying history is learning the stories about some historical figures.

¹⁶ Curriculum Development Council 課程發展議會 & Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 香港考試及評核局, "Chinese History Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 -6) 中國歷史課程及評估指引(中四至中六)" *Personal, Social and Humanities Education Key Learning Area 個人、社會及人文教育學習領域*. Hong Kong: Education Bureau HKSARG, 2015, 2.

¹⁷ Curriculum Development Council, "Chinese History: Curriculum," 2.

¹⁸ Curriculum Development Council, "Chinese History: Curriculum," 3-4.

¹⁹ Curriculum Development Council, "Chinese History: Curriculum," 4.

- 2-P2: People tends to follow good examples and their idols. (Hidden assumption)
- 2-C3: Students learning the national heroes and other national historical figures will tend to follow them.
- 2-P4: Basic motherland history education usually mentions or teaches the famous people who were national heroes or morally good people in the past.
- 2-P5: Morally goodness in a certain context is upholding the national moral and cultural values.
- 2-P6: National heroes are the people who placed national interest before any other identities' interests. This is a major form of patriotism.
- 2-C7: Studying motherland history usually strengthen students' patriotism and reinforce their belief in national cultural morals and values.
- 2-C8: Studying motherland history strengthens usually strengthen students' national identity affiliation.

Generally, the arguments above are valid, but, some premises may be false which makes the arguments unsound. In the first argument, 1-P3 is the important assumption which there must be a causal connection between knowing more and affiliating more. First, the assumption is doubtful in common sense as it is not necessary to know more and love more. Many people quit their job after acknowledging that the industries or companies may not be suitable for them. However, in the empirical world, whether it really has such a tendency or correlation, is a topic of the education or social sciences.

The challenge from hard determinism is that the affiliation is pre-determined without free will. Under the assumption from hard determinism, every person, regardless of knowing more about their national history or not, will or will not have a strong sense of belonging to the state. This can formulate an argument challenging the premise 1-P3. The attacking argument is like the following:

- 3-P1: Knowing more makes people affiliate more to the national identity. (1-P3)
- 3-C2: Knowing more and knowing less about national history makes differences in people's affiliation to the national identity
- 3-P3: Hard determinism is true. People do not have free will. People's minds are predetermined. (Assumption in the essay)
- 3-P4: People need to have free will to change or select that they will have strong or weak national identity affiliation. (Free will definition in hard determinism)
- 3-C5: People will have strong or weak national identity affiliation regardless of what happened in between, including knowledge about national history.
- 3-C6: Differences in knowledge about national history makes differences and makes no differences in the national identity affiliation at the same time. (From 3-C2 and 3-C5)

3-C7: 3-C6 is self-contradicting. 3-P3 and 3-P4 are true.

3-C8: 3-P1 is false.

If 1-P3 is false, the whole argument would be collapsed. The fundamental underlying idea of 1-P3 is that learning somethings makes differences in mind other than the knowledge itself.

It is the same as the second argument. In the second argument, 2-P2 shares a similar property with the 1-P3. The 2-P2 underlying idea is the belief that knowing somethings can change their behaviour and attitudes. Therefore, it also crashes with the determinism assumption which the determined behaviours and attitudes will not be altered by free will. Studying history seems that cannot have meaningful impacts on national identities.

However, even the meaning of studying history in national identity is weak, some meanings remain. Under the great casual chain, studying history cannot change the predetermined result of a person patriotic or not. But also, under this chain, studying history can be one of the unavoidable or essential steps to reach the outcome, which is the national identity affiliation. In this perspective, the meaning of studying history in popular education is for the national enthusiasts in the societies, especially the education departments, to promote patriotism and nationalism. Under the determinist chain, even people have no choice but to study history, to have a stronger national affiliation, they need to study history to achieve this result. Even the significance is reduced by hard determinism, studying history still have its meaning and role in fostering or worsening the patriotisms of individuals.

But this meaning is very minor as the hard determinism largely reduce the meaning of the middle of the chain. It is because the result is pre-determined far before the existence of the tool. Therefore, before the nationalistic historical education started, the patriotic elements of a figure are decided and are impossible to alter. Thus, as the middle of the chain, considering studying history as instilling a national idea tool is very minor in meaning.

In this sense, strengthening national identity is sound to be considered as a meaning of studying history. Some elements of the meaning withstand the challenge from hard determinism.

But it brings the over-determination problem which further reduces the meaning of studying history. From the paragraph above, we consider studying history as a mere tool and step in the great chain of causal effects in bringing a sense of belongings. Many other ways commonly considered as ways to arouse national identity over others. It can be politicians' speeches or cultural entertainment programme. And these methods are sufficient to bring the desired result, strong pride in national identity. Polices need not enforce the coded rules when people already informally following rules voluntarily. On this occasion, the factors are mutually devaluating because we

cannot omit the situation in which another factor is working. Just as the simple description below:

$Z \rightarrow X$ no Y, Z can bring X

$Y \rightarrow X$ no Z, Y can bring X

So, Z is useless when Y exist, and vice versa.

We do not need historical education for the youth when the TV advertisement already significantly instil nationalistic sentiments. The over-determination problem reduces the historical education as national education further. The only meaning left, therefore, is that the historical education in high school is a middle step of arousing nationalism and patriotic feelings when other tools are insufficient for the government or the nationalists.

While the previous two common meaning of studying suffered a lot from the hard determinists or other logical challenges, the third common meaning of studying history in all sort of general educations may be an escape road from hard determinism. Studying history can be just for pleasure. Outside the formal school settings, there are many websites, popular books, video channels and internet forums discussing and sharing their finding of the past. And many people selecting their subjects in schools are based on their interests, rather than their ability or any great meaningful reasons like saving the society. Many jokes about history are spreading on the internet. People can think of studying history as an enjoyable thing.

The intrinsic nature of history contains elements from stories. Indeed, learning historical events, past political systems and the causations between them are significant elements in historical studies. however, we cannot neglect that we can also illustrate history as a series of stories. History can be understood as stories that actually happened before, with a more realistic background setting, more details and more characters. Back when the first European History book was published, the *Iliad* and *Odysseus*, we cannot distinguish between history, poems and stories. In general education, before high school (or the latter half of secondary school), historical education focus on the behaviour of certain historical figures. For example, How Han Gaozu defeated his enemies and unified China. The popular historical finding sharing is more focused on that. People learnt the "stories" of Lenin's revolutions or the "stories" of a sunk Japanese Warship rather than studying the Imperial Russian political system or the command structure of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Understanding history as a story is not only for the commoners but also the academics. In recent year, academia embraced this concept. They started to find individual stories, not only the great figures they studied before but also the commoners in the general public. They call it Oral History, which recorded through interviews with eyewitnesses. In this sense, history does not have much difference

from storytelling. They are both about the story, one is seeking the truth and another one is attracting the audiences.

These “stories” elements in studying history make it interesting for the general public. People love stories, either fictional or not. They listened to their grandfather about their life or adventures when they were young. They like some historical fiction films like *Titanic* or *Gandhi*. These stories need not be true or need not be just imagination. As long as they are attractive, people like to read or study them. Therefore, many people enjoy studying history because they understand these as a series of interesting stories.

Even not as stories, studying history can be interesting for someone. Some people like to know more about the systems or causation in the past. They think that just knowing it itself is already interesting enough for them to study history. Happily studying history itself can be the meaning of studying history, rather than bring impacts to the society. As long as it is enjoyable, studying history is meaningful as it brings happiness and satisfaction to people.

Hard determinism cannot challenge this common meaning of studying history. It is because this meaning is intrinsic in the action of studying history itself. This is not about studying history as meaningful because it causes something, but about the meaning of just learning and actions. It is not an illusion. It is the perception that people’s feelings when they are reading history books, films or formally learning history in high schools. Therefore, even under hard determinism, results being predetermined and people losing the free will, studying history is meaningful just because it is interesting for someone.

There is a possible challenge from the overdetermination perspective. When other actions can also bring happiness, for example, eating good food, why there is value in studying history as the source of happiness? This is a similar issue to studying history as a tool for arousing national identity. However, different from the national identity one, as the source of happiness is inexhaustible value under competition. The government desires a certain level of patriotic sentiments. They do not want the citizens to be too patriotic because of the incontrollable characteristic of this sentiment. Even if it is not true, these sentiments have their maximum. Sacrificing all he or she can for the nation or state is the maximum. Therefore, when the other ways can achieve the ends, studying history is somewhat meaningless for the ends.

But for happiness, there are no external control factors and there is no maximum for people to seek happiness. From the utilitarian perspective, the people, and even the whole society perusing more material, happiness and goodness are ethnically right. There is no such thing called too much happiness in this idea. Therefore, even if eating good food or studying other subjects makes persons happier, studying history remains very meaningful in bringing extra happiness to people by interesting stories or enjoyable learning process. Overdetermination cannot reduce the meaning of

studying history for happiness.

Although happiness does not have limits and margin, the time and attention that people can spare have. Therefore, the issue of overdetermination may still exist. The target has no limit, but the resources have a limit. People cannot achieve both studying history and eating good food if they have insufficient time, attention and resources to achieve both. Even if they can, the happiness can be weakened. Just imagine a person who is eating food and reading history books at the same time. That person is likely that cannot enjoy either learning new history stories or the tastes of those foods.

However, time and attention limitation cannot bring the overdetermination issues. Even the time and attention are exhaustible, as long as someone like history, studying history remains a meaningful learning process. This issue is largely related to the personal aesthetic which is pre-determined. Therefore, for the people who like history, they are determined to gain happiness through learning them. The people who feel history is boring or less interesting than other subjects cannot affect the meaning of studying history because history lovers still exist. When there is a demand for learning history as an interest, history has the meaning to be studied.

In short, studying history is interesting. It is a merely unchallengeable meaning of learning history.

After a brief reflection on three meanings of studying history in common education, I will discuss a bit on the meaning of historiography in the somewhat specialised historical education, to be exact, historiography.

Historiography, different from history, is a complicated concept that developed from the studies of history. Although history is no less complicated than it, historiography is out of the perception of the general public, including high school history students. Depends on the curriculum of different higher education institutions, the history students learn these in their either first or last year undergraduates. But taking HKU as an example, a history major student can evade a major part of historiography in their undergraduate studies.

Because of the complexity of historiography and the focus of this reflective essay is on history, the reflective discussion will cover little only and be short.

It is so complicated that it has two totally different meanings. One is as the ways to study history, in short, methodology. Another one is as the ways to understand history, in another phrase, schools of thought. In the following section, I will discuss the methodology part.

As a methodology, historiography is a way to assure the accuracy of historical facts. For historians, when they gathered many pieces of information about events in the past, they need to judge the truth value and the influences of those pieces of evidence. Primary sources usually come with a lot of bias and the incomprehensiveness due to the narrow scope of the people who experienced the events as an individual or an organisation. Their personal interests also had a strong

impact on their contemporary life, causing bias. Therefore, historians, before assessing the content of the evidence, need to know the type, author, created time, purpose of the sources. From Herodotus's *Histories*, the first formal history book in ancient Greece, Herodotus already cited the sources of his records²⁰. And there is even different narration from different people in the books for comparison and his judgement on sources reliability²¹. And in modern days, Historians need complex citation systems to show their sources in their publications. Assurances on the sources as facts is a must in doing history because history is the fact in the past.

After assessing those contexts of sources, acknowledging those biases, they can dig into the content and value significances of sources in describing essences of the past. This is a selection process because there is always insufficient time and manpower to comprehend merely unlimited sources.

Also, historiography is a way to assure the correctness of inferences. There are two major elements in doing history, facts and causation. While the analyses of the primary source focus on exploring and refining people's understanding of the flow of particular events, interpretations, typologies and linkages between events require causation studies. Traditionally, historians use qualitative in-depth case studies to make a causal inference with inductive logic. Polybius argued national virtues bring prosperity in his *Histories* by comparing differences²². In recent years, quantitative studies methods borrowed from social sciences are also used. Especially with the digitalised archaeology and overwhelming quantitative data in modern history archives, applying scientific and quantitative methods is feasible for modern historians.

The strict methods in judging sources and causation are not important in the deterministic world. In the deterministic world, the knowledge historians knew are extremely limited. Not to mention the physical sides of the factors, even in the traditional historical sense, historians are lacking evidence in reconstructing the past. For examples, the demographic data of the past is severely insufficient and incomplete. With this limited knowledge, regardless of the methods and the deductive logic are used, the conclusion will remain far from the reality, which the historians are seeking. I will explain my thoughts and argument in standard form and paragraphs below.

From common sense, historians require a few steps to make fruitful results

P1 Correct historical facts

P2 Correct deductive logic

C3 Correct causal claims

²⁰ Herodotus, *The Persian War*, I, 1, 75.

²¹ Herodotus, *The Persian War*, I, 75.

²² Polybius, *The Histories*, VI, 43.

This is basically a rational decision model. In a rational decision model, the public manager acquires the perfect information and the public value to make the optimal policy for the public²³. Then, the role of historiography comes in.

P1 Historiography assures the accuracy of historical sources

P2 Accurate historical sources bring correct historical facts

C3 Historiography assures correct historical facts

P4 Historiography assures the correctness of inferences

C5 Historiography assures correct causal claims

In this argument, P1 and P2 are not always bringing C3. Therefore, it is invalid. "Accuracy" is a degree while "accurate" is a definite term. They cannot use interchangeably. Also, P1 is problematic. Using correct methods to assess the sources only assure the sources without some errors or clear problem which human can observe. With many unknown factors, historians cannot deny that, the later findings or even things that cannot be found, will totally reject the sources they are assessing. In this deterministic world, humans know so little. This also applies to P4. There might be a logical gap that people cannot explore yet. Logics is still a developing and indefinite discipline in philosophy. Thus, historians cannot assure that their logic under these methodologies can survive the challenges in the future. This implies that historiography's limitation in assuring the truth under this deterministic world.

Therefore, similar to the reaction to the incapability of the rational model, bounded historiography can be suggested.

P1 Good enough historical facts

P2 Good enough deductive logic

C3 Good enough causal claims

This is similar to bounded rationality. The bounded rationality only requires sufficient information to make good enough decision, rather than the perfect information and optimal decisions²⁴. Thereafter, historiography can apply the same logic. It can be explained as the way to assure good enough accuracy and correctness of sources and inferences respectively. This remains problematic, howbeit.

P1 Historians know very little about the past in text or some archaeological evidence

P2 To qualify "good enough" in historical facts requires knowing the major sources about events

²³ D. F. Kettl. Decision making: Rationality and risk. In *Politics of the administrative process 7th edition* (pp. 266-287). CQ press, 2018, 269-271.

²⁴ Charles E. Lindblom. 'The Science of "Muddling Through,"' *Public Administration Review* 19(2): 1959, 84.

P3 Humans know very little in the universe, at any time and any moment

C4 Historians cannot reach the necessary condition of “good enough” with very limited sources

This argument rejected the possibility of for historians to turn bounded historiography argument’s P1 into true. Hence, the bounded historiography is unsound, at least for now.

Other than that, there is a fundamental difference between bounded rationality in decision making and the “bounded historiography.” In public management, the government wants to achieve practical betterments, or at least impacts, for the citizens. Their priority is on the real results. On the other hand, historians cannot satisfy with the “good enough,” albeit many historians satisfy with it. Historians’ duties are to find correct facts and make correct causal inferences. The term “facts” shows that historians have a high requirement to qualify the information because facts are unchallengeable. Historians also do not have the urge to make results, conclusions or decisions in the short time, which the public managers need. They had the time to polish and reassure their findings.

Using deductive logic in historical studies is too challenging as well. Deductive logic requires very strict logical tools and validity to achieve sound argument, in this case, inferences. Making an inference sound under deductive logic need both validity and true premises. The validity part is not perfect. As the logics are still developing in philosophy, new logic tools may exist in the future. But it is probably sufficient as it is sets of strictly developed tools from pure human intrinsic imagination and thinking rather than observation of the external world.

The major problem of deductive logic is requiring all true premises. In deductive logic, the argument collapses and becomes unsound once a premise is false. This is a very strict requirement for constructing arguments, especially when historians only know little of the past and the sources are not guaranteed 100% true even after assessing tools. On this occasion, deductive logic becomes a gap that too strict for historians to pass. Historians barely can make any causal claims with deductive logic.

Introductions of quantitative, digital and scientific methods do not help the historiography’s unavoidable problems. The sources and knowledge remain very limited and the logics still consist of development space. Not only the problems remain unchanged, but the causal inference can also be weaker under the quantitative scientific methods.

Just as the social sciences in economics or politics, quantitative historical studies are using basic statistics with the null and alternative hypothesis to make correlations and comparisons. However, in historical studies, because the quantified data is fixed, historians cannot do experiments to estimate the counterfactuals. Without counterfactuals, the quantitative history is less viable than other mainstream social

sciences as a significant tool for researches is missed.

Besides the missing experiment tools, the nature of statistics also brings the problem to historical studies. There is no escape to statistics if historians prefer quantitative studies and in a scientific manner. However, statistics have a fundamental problem in making causal inferences. It is the p-value problem. P-value means the opportunity that the two sets of data are different just by an extreme outlier, accidents, random or chance²⁵. In practice, when the p-value is lower than 0.05, which means over 95% confidence that there is statistically differences, researchers consider there are differences and make causal claims based on the results²⁶. A problem is that the p-value also indicates the possibility of the vice versa happens by certain chances. This implies that the inference claims in quantitative methods remain uncertain.

Also, in historical studies, all the things have already happened and certain, there is no possibility for probability to exist in the past. The result is not only determined, but also occurred. The problem is more serious when we consider hard determinism. The world, past, current and the future is pre-determined. It means that all the things are certain and the probability, p-value, does not exist. Thus, it is nonsense to make causal claims bases on the numerical probability of statistically significant differences.

A problem exists when making inferences based on statistic as well. The statistics only can entail there is a correlation or statistically significant differences between two groups of data. however, correlations and differences cannot certainly entail causation. For example, the sea levels correlate to the world population. Thus, I claim that raising sea levels cause world population growth. This is nonsense. Therefore, using scientific quantitative methods in historical studies is problematic, overall.

Understandably, historians want to use "quantitative" and "scientific" to brand historiography and historical studies as professionals or trending things. But it may be better to continue the tradition of inductive logic and making general causal inferences and assessments on historical sources. From both philosophical (hard determinist) and statistical view, historiography does not significant and does not improve by introducing methods from other disciplines.

Another meaning of historiography is the ways to understand history. Comparing to pure methodology in studying history, this aspect of historiography is more complicated. Therefore, in this reflective essay, I will just pick one school and very briefly reflect and discuss it.

The major school to discuss is historical materialism, also called the materialist conception of history or Marxist historiography. It is an extreme and unique, but also influential school of historiography. This school influenced the understanding of history in the post-communist world and the scholars, especially the social scientists,

²⁵ Paul Kellstedt & Guy Whitten, *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 136

²⁶ Kellstedt & Whitten, *The Fundamentals*, 138.

in critical theory²⁷.

In extremely short, historical materialism illustrate history as determined. The shift of social classes and the mode of production caused the shift in the political structures²⁸. For example, the rise of the bourgeoisie capitalists caused the 1789 French Revolution and marked the early stage of capitalist society. While the rise of capitalists was caused by technological innovations and the first industrial revolution. Marx and Engel used this historiography to predict the future communist revolution which the lower working class raised by overthrowing capitalists and form a classless society²⁹. And they claimed that this future is determined and unchangeable³⁰.

The deterministic elements of this school perfectly compatible with the hard determinist view. Both reject the power of free agent as people cannot change the determined future. However, their predictions and inferences are doubtful because humans still do not know much about the factors which cause the future form of societies. Therefore, it remains uncertain that will the ultimate end of human society is classless or not.

At the same time, the idea of historical materialism itself rejects the meaning of studying history. In the hard determinist world, people have not freedom and future events are determined to happen. If historical materialism is true, the future is determined to be classless. Then, there is no more need for historians to study history under this school. It is because they already find the answer. They need not further justify it by finding more historical sources and evidence. Thus, further studies in history as the prediction of the future becomes meaningless.

Also, if historical materialism is true, it will bring despair to some people. Historical materialism points to a classless future. But certainly, not all people are happy about it, especially for those who enjoy benefits more than average. These people confronting the predetermined classless future are hopeless because they have no power to change this future.

Fortunately, historical materialism's prediction still needs justifications and rebuttals. Other historiography schools are arguing against this historical materialism. Also, the latest history of the cold war shows that societies can be reverted rather than moving on the one-way road. Therefore, Marxist historians still have meaningful tasks to turn the claim into the answer of history and the future.

In this reflective essay, I reflected on the meaning of studying history in common education. Under hard determinism and some other philosophical ideas, studying history as a future prediction or identity shaping is not that strong and valid. However, studying history still can be just for pleasure. On the historiography side, I argue that

²⁷ James Bohman, "Critical Theory", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/critical-theory/>.

²⁸ A. Giddens and P. W. Sutton. *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013, 74.

²⁹ Giddens & Sutton. *Sociology*, 74.

³⁰ Giddens & Sutton. *Sociology*, 74.

using the scientific method, deductive logic and quantitative data solely to study history is not a good idea as they bring extra problem while they cannot solve the fundamental issue in studying history on lacking sources. I slightly discussed historical materialism but the idea itself is doubtable even it matches the deterministic world view. All in all, from a determinist perspective, many existing meanings and assumptions about studying history are reduced. However, there are meaningful elements left. Thus, even with these limits, even studying history and determinism is not perfectly compatible, we still study history.

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