

**Fang Weigui. *What is Conceptual History?* Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2020.
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In an interview with Christof Dipper in 1996, Reinhart Koselleck, the main founder of “Begriffsgeschichte,” or in English “Conceptual History,” said that after a long period of having not published any monographs, he planned to publish three collections of essays as to be “heard again” (187-205). Unfortunately, the plan didn’t come to fruition due to Koselleck’s sudden death in 2006. We can read only *Zeitschichten*, which came out in 2000, and *Begriffsgeschichte (The Conceptual Histories: Semantic and Methodical Studies of Political/Social Terms)*, which was published only after his death in 2006. Nevertheless, Koselleck’s life-long project of conceptual history has continued to be developed around the world, attracting more and more attention, and has become one of the most important historical approaches of this century.

Scholars in the Chinese academic circles have begun to study and to introduce conceptual history since the end of the last century. Among those historical and literary researchers, Professor Fang Weigui is no doubt the most influential and passionate, having written and published many brilliant essays on conceptual history that have enjoyed sizable academic influence around East Asia and even on a global scale. Interestingly, despite the fact that conceptual history is an approach that attaches great importance to theoretical tenets and methodological basis, no monograph dealing with the theory and method as a whole, or translated versions of Koselleck’s writings, have been published prior to the completion of this wonderful work by Professor Fang. We sure do have many essays and books that use “conceptual history” in their title, but if we take a closer look and be self-critical about the clarity of the concept itself, we are able conclude that most of those works have made the colossal mistake of confusing conceptual history with the history of ideas and intellectual history, which raises considerable issues regarding the quality of these

studies. Sadly, if not frustratedly, this situation also affects the ability of academic circles and interested readers to understand, master and apply the quite specialized historical research methods of conceptual history, as well as hindering the inquiries and development in China of conceptual history research itself.

Given this background, Professor Fang Weigui's publication of *What is Conceptual History?* is undoubtedly of great significance. This monograph not only makes up to a great extent the deficiency of theoretical sources in the study of conceptual history, but it can also be seen as a good starter for the future study of conceptual history in China, now with more methodological rigor and theoretical framework. In the book, Professor Fang has set out a very precise aim of writing a "small book" that offers an accurate introduction of the basic theory of conceptual history and the history of the approach itself, while taking into account the comparison and clarification of various terms and research methods (Fang Weigui 1-5). The whole book is divided into three parts and, if I may borrow Professor Fang's expression, it can perhaps be generalized under three questions, namely, what may be considered as conceptual history? Which approaches cannot be understood as conceptual history? And, how does the future of conceptual history look like?

1. What may be considered as conceptual history?

"Since it is so common to argue against hypothesis, one should sometime try to approach history without the aid of hypothesis. It is not possible to state that something is, without saying what it is. By just thinking of them one relates facts to concepts, and it is by no means a matter of indifference which concepts these might be" (Koselleck 255). Koselleck cites F. Schlegel's remarks to show the importance of always being critical about the concept itself. Like Koselleck, Professor Fang attaches great value to reflecting the concept of conceptual history itself, and in order to do that he uses two chapters of the book to demonstrate its theoretical background, both in the fields of philosophy and sociology, and then offers us a standard narrative of Koselleck's theory itself.

Of course, any historical research approach has its own understanding of history from which we can draw different perspectives and paths to understand and interpret history, and the same can be said for conceptual history. The first two chapters basically follow this presupposition, starting from the general background of the modern concept of history and the trajectory of research on human history, explaining the two origins of conceptual history which can be called philosophical conceptual history and social history. As far as I can see, this way of expounding

the theoretical foundations of conceptual history demonstrates the author's large-scale academic perspective, while pushing the methodological study of conceptual history to a higher level.

Usually, when writers discuss the academic history of conceptual history, they tend to regard relevant theories and studies of philosophers and historians, ranging from those by G. Frege to those by Gadamer, as the origin and methodological basis of conceptual history, using a somewhat chronical way of narrating that may give the mistaken impression that these scholars are living in quite different ages. Instead, professor Fang puts those writers into two categories and generalizes the first one as "philosophically conceptual history," which is more accurate and appropriate, as well as referring directly to the basic and essential characteristics of linguistic phenomena in modernity. Of course, this also shows the unique philosophical basis of the German method of conceptual history in the study of history.

The emphasis on language is not the sole feature of historical studies of the 20th century. The second chapter examines the field of political and social history and analyzes its relevance to conceptual history. Under this category, the rise of conceptual history research, on the one hand, can be seen as inspired by the criticism and rejection of the traditional history of ideas, which involves the development of German conceptual history from Meineke, to Weber and then Mannheim, and other historical and social researchers. On the other hand, it is through the comparison with social history that conceptual history found its reference. The Annales School and its study of "mentalité" shares many basic concerns with historical semantics, which from 1680 to 1820 resulted in the compilation of reference books of basic political and social concepts of France. This chapter includes a discussion on Koebner's approach of modern historical semantics and examines the theoretical connection between Koebner and Koselleck.

The third chapter returns to the main theory of conceptual history, that is, the theory and practice of Koselleck's conceptual history, focusing on the second stage of Koselleck's academic career. This chapter gives us a full list of "keywords" of Koselleck's approach, including the most familiar theory about "Sattelzeit" (saddle period), "Kollektivsingular" (collective singular), "Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen" (asynchronous synchronicity), four standards of conceptualization including "Demokratisierung" (democratization), "Verzeitlichung" (temporalization), "Ideologisierung" (ideologization) and "Politisierung" (politicization), "Erfahrungsraum" (space of experience), "Erwartungshorizont" (vision of expectation), "Indikator" (indicator) and "Faktor" (factor), and offers us an

insightful analysis about Koselleck's understanding of the relation among concept, time, history and society.

Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschicht ("Social History and Conceptual History"), written by Koselleck in 1972, can be understood as the fulcrum of the methodical thinking of his conceptual history, which dealt with the relationship between social history and conceptual history. Koselleck believes that concepts and facts have their own distinct history, and in the huge gap and discrepancy between those two, comes the space of the study of conceptual history (Fang Weigui 156). The relationship between time and concept also partly explains why conceptual history, a kind of social and political history, can exist, and why through conceptual history we can study history itself. The last section of this chapter focuses on the relationship between words and concepts, "concepts are words that cannot be defined clearly", and the primary feature of the basic concept is "its indispensability for observing and interpreting social and political conditions." In addition, due to this indispensability, the basic concept is also characterized by its controversy (Fang Weigui 183). This section places special emphasis on Koselleck's concern for context and pragmatics, and traces it back to Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy, which also prepares the ground for the further comparison between conceptual history and discourse analysis.

2. What is not conceptual history?

Taking a macro-level and overall perspective, conceptual history is not the only theory that sets language as its object of study following the emergence of the philosophical linguistic turn and the new social and historical methodology of the 20th century. In terms of these new approaches, Lovejoy's history of ideas, Foucault's discourse analysis and archaeology of knowledge, the study of the history of political thought history by the so-called Cambridge School, and Raymond Williams's study of "keywords," all seem to share some common characteristics with conceptual history. Any reader who is interested in the study of the history of thought must have encountered some of the above theories in the process of reading. Unfortunately, the differences between these theories are often overlooked by writers and readers.

The theoretical confusion mentioned above has already caused serious confusion of understanding, which is not only detrimental to the promotion and development of those theories themselves, but also to people who try to learn those approach and apply them to historical research projects. In this book professor Fang has expressed his concern about this grave situation and is determined to do

some work of clarification. The second part of this book aims to solve a problem of methodological and practical significance, i.e., what kind of approach cannot be directly equated with conceptual history and what is the nature of its similarity and relevance to them and to conceptual history. In general, those theories can be classified under two types, the first type shares the same theoretical concerns with conceptual history, but has different methodological assumptions and research paths, namely the discourse analysis of Foucault, and the so-called Cambridge school represented by J.G.A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and others.

Foucault and Skinner are mentioned quite often in this book. This is mostly due to Professor Fang's writing arrangement in regards to the use of comparative method. Unlike the intentional use found in the comparisons in this book, many researchers in their analysis of texts unconsciously use these concepts simultaneously and interchangeably, as if they were the same approach. In this regard, the study of Foucault and the Cambridge School is different from the history that the concept has been facing metaphorically and practically, thus to establish distinctions becomes an important aspect of this conceptual history book, as it sets on its task of drawing boundaries between these concepts from its very beginning.

As the most important philosopher of postmodern times, Foucault's theories and research are very complicated and all-encompassing. This book has no intention of becoming a research manual on Foucault, and focuses instead mainly on the part of his theories and thought which are directly related to conceptual history: the genealogy and the archaeology of knowledge. Like the study of conceptual history, Foucault does not believe that the established history is the real history, nor does he agree with the practice of the traditional study of the history of ideas. Foucault is "passionate about anthropological and sociological themes and methods, keen on various non-traditional, non-classical topics and relationships, and redefines the boundaries of history" (Fang Weigui 190-91). Through the archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of knowledge, Foucault has revealed the extremely special normative role of discourse itself, indicating that discourse itself as a material form can produce material effects, therefore connecting the binary gap between words and things. Foucault's genealogical analysis aims to show the relationship between truth and power through the retrospective scrutinizing of dialogue, breaking the myth of continuity of historical ideas, which is a very different goal compared to the focus of conceptual history. Foucault reminds people to pay attention to words, but also speaks bluntly that "the generation processes of concepts cannot be understood as successive forms of the same meaning." From this deconstructed perspective, the conceptual history is criticized as "another trick" of the history of ideas (Fang

Weigui 213-14).

Another research paradigm that interacts more frequently with conceptual history is the so-called Cambridge School of Intellectual History represented by Pocock and Skinner. In China, it is quite common for scholars that lack a high degree of methodological finesse to mix these two in their study of texts, so much so that many ridiculous monographs and papers have been produced. In his past writings, professor Fang has made clear his criticism of these kind of studies, fully tracing the possible causes of this confusion. This book continues this enterprise, showing the relationship between the conceptual history of Koselleck and Pocock's contextualism and Skinner's ideological research through detailed comparisons. In short, the Cambridge School does not believe that conceptual history can be said to exist. Inspired by Kuhn's paradigm theory, linguistic philosophy mainly developed by Wittgenstein and Austin, and Foucault's discourse analysis, the Cambridge School set its research on the basis of restoring context. In terms of understanding the author's intentions and clarifying the concept of history, they do not agree with Koselleck's devotion to the compilation of dictionaries of the history of individual basic concepts. They insist that the concept itself cannot have its own history, "the written conceptual history is only one dimension of the linguistic phenomenon, words and their use." Therefore, conceptual history may be too one-sided to really describe the role of the word in a particular society and its interrelations with other terms in their opinion.

Unlike the positive relationship between discourse analysis, the Cambridge School and conceptual history of critical learning and debating, the other two approaches are present as objects of questioning and criticism, regardless of the similarity of their names with conceptual history.

Despite its emphasis on language and text, Arthur Lovejoy's history of ideas adheres to the eternity of unit-ideas and the continuity of the ideas in history, which in fact is opposed by conceptual history, discourse analysis and the Cambridge School. The book also mentions Skinner's harsh criticism of Lovejoy's work (Fang Weigui 223, 232-37). Williams' study on keywords is written in the form of manuals similar to dictionaries, which may be one reason why many people confuse those two. However, conceptual history and the study of keywords need to be strictly separated, both because of their methodological precepts, theoretical positions, and because of the specific practice of research and writing. Not to mention that the keywords study approach has very obvious tendencies of politics and partisan positions, while historical semantics as a historical research method presupposes objectivity as its basic requirement.

3. What is the future of conceptual history?

The first two parts of the book aim to outline the gist of conceptual history from both internal and external perspectives, and to supply readers with the general background, academic context, key assumptions, research methods, and practices of the field, which can be regarded as the past and present of conceptual history. Still, if we take Koselleck's theory into consideration, the past, present and future are the three dimensions which constitute a complete time structure, and conceptual history thus needs to examine the continuity, change, and novelty of the concept (Fang Weigui 36). It follows then that what would naturally remain for this book to do if professor Fang wants to complete his review of conceptual history, would be an examination of the change from its present state and its potential and location in the future.

The book repeatedly points out that since the 20th century, many theoretical schools have in fact re-examined the overall process of human history and political and social development from linguistic and textual perspectives. The highlighted interest on the influence of non-traditional elements such as ideas, thoughts, mentality or discourse on history and practice, as well as the complex interrelations between them, is not the unique discovery of conceptual historians or of Koselleck. In this regard, the difference between conceptual history and other research methods, as well as the research space that could be developed under the precepts of conceptual history, have become the key for conceptual history to transcend itself and its present and future.

Chapter VII of this book sets as its priority answering this question at the outset. This part does not only discuss the metaphorical theory, the new direction of German conceptual history, religious conceptual history, interdisciplinary knowledge and the study of the history of science, but also mentions the new updated version of Koselleck's four standards of conceptualization, that is, "Verwissenschaftlichung," which means scientification, "Popularisierung," which means popularization, "Verräumlichung," which means integration and "Verflüssigung," which means hybridization, in order to show that conceptual history has not yet meet its end. On the other hand, since the end of the last century, the research method of conceptual history has shown a very obvious momentum for internationalization. In many countries, specialized research institutions and groups of conceptual history have emerged. They have organized various academic forums and discussions, and since the beginning of the 21st century, Koselleck's works have been widely translated into multi-language publications, which have elicited a wide range of academic interest.

It is worth mentioning that, in terms of the international spread and development of conceptual history, the study of it in East Asia, especially in China, has not only kept pace with the world in both time and rhythm (happening maybe even earlier than in other parts of the world), but Chinese scholars have also been committed to exploring the scope and boundaries of conceptual history. The end of Chapter VII includes an overview of works of conceptual history in China, with historians such as Jin Guantao, Liu Qingfeng, Sun Jiang, Huang Xingtao and Zheng Wenhui etc. being all on the list. Together with professor Fang Weigui, those insightful and energetic historians have promoted and contributed to the development of conceptual history studies regarding East Asia.

Just as this review has repeatedly pointed out, professor Fang Weigui is one of the earliest promoters of conceptual history in China, and the Chinese academic circle's discussions and discourses surrounding conceptual history studies have more or less used his methodological essays as reference. In addition, professor Fang has published monographs and papers on conceptual history in German, English, and Chinese, examining the historical situation of many basic concepts in modern China, including the concepts of civilization and culture, the spread of Western knowledge in China, the evolution of the word "intellectuals," etc., and made a wonderful demonstration of how to apply conceptual history as a method in historical research on China. Of course, the prosperity of a research paradigm requires not only the dedication and practice of individual scholars, but also the exchange and cooperation of aspiring colleagues, as is the case in this regard in the form of the academic forum collection *Thoughts and Methods* edited by professor Fang, or the *New Historiography* (volumes 2 and 3), compiled by professors Sun Jiang and Huang Xingtao respectively, or the *Study of the History of Asian Concepts*, which has been promoted by the Institute of Xueheng of Nanjing University.

At this point, I feel it's sufficient to conclude that the author of *What is Conceptual History* has delivered his promise of articulating the basics of conceptual history with a high-quality narrative. But after finishing the book and closing it up, it is true that, as professor Fang says, we may feel that we perhaps haven't see through many of the basic problems involved, which are "much more complex than we suppose" (Fang Weigui 36).

A book with an interrogative sentence for its title is clearly intended to inspire readers to think more about the broader issues associated with it. If we follow this path, there may be questions of three levels that need to be further answered in terms of the book itself and its possible impact on academia. First of all, it seems

that until now, conceptual history has mainly been a way to examine political and social history. Despite its dependence on text and language, it shares the same concerns of all other paradigms of history. If this is true, then to what extent, conceptual history and ideological history, discourse history or mental history can be distinguished from each other? Can conceptual history get out of its self-limitation? This book did manage to offer a succinct framework to distinguish conceptual history, the history of ideas, the Cambridge School of intellectual history, keywords study and other theories. However, as the book repeatedly mentions, in terms of the development of historical semantics, Germany, Britain and France have for a long time been lacking in communication with each other. Thus, the translation and acceptance of related works is quite limited, so there seems to be a lot of mutual misunderstanding and misreading due to this situation. Besides, in explaining the theoretical shortfalls of Lovejoy and Williams, the criticism is mainly borrowed from Cambridge School. I'm pointing this out because if this is indeed a book exclusively aiming to describe conceptual history, it productive to offer some academic scrutinization from within the discipline itself?

Second, given that this book can perhaps be seen as a result of a conscious reflection and clarification by the Chinese academics towards the methodology of conceptual history, which gains in importance every day, how should we assess its value and contribution to researchers of China? In answer to this question, the author repeatedly points out in the book, first of all, that Chinese academic circles still lacks a monograph that introduces the theory. Thus, the publication of *What is Conceptual History* serves to fill this gap in knowledge, provides researchers with more theoretical resources, and can facilitate the continuing development of conceptual history as a rigorous discipline in China.

The third question is a one linked to world literature. As a method of analyzing concepts, conceptual history is inevitably returning to the text in practice. However, is this text merely a socio-political and historical text in a narrow range, or can we expect more? The answer to this question, of course, seems to be in the positive at the moment. For one thing, the formulation of the history of conceptual history in this book is anchored in the more general process of the occurrence, development, and transformation of modern thought. Therefore, although the book takes conceptual history as the narrative spindle, in fact it can also be read as a manual of the evolution of modern Western thought. The author not only takes into account German idealism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and other philosophical theories, but also brings sociology, ideological research, genealogy, and history of political thought research into scope, thus offering us a general background to understand

the emergence of modern humanism and critical theory of certain areas.

Actually, professor Fang's field of interest is mainly literary criticism, and it is quite obvious that he has intentionally explored the applicability of conceptual history to literary criticism and literary theory. In addition to studies such as "On the Transformation of Concepts of Civilization and Culture in Modern China," "The Concept of Civilization and Culture in Modern China," and others that are mentioned in this book (Fang Weigui 302), "A Short Study on the Western Concept of Literature and Some Rectifications" can be regarded as a masterpiece and exemplary work in its use of conceptual history methods to examine the literary issues in China's modern history. Besides these, his studies on concepts including "world literature," W. Benjamin's *Aura* and "hybrid, hybridity, hybridization," and the examination on Thomas Mann, both deepen and advance related literary theory (Fang Weigui *Illness* 57-66). Meanwhile, they also reveal the author's ambition of exploring various cultural and literary concepts that have been gradually formed and stereotyped in communication and criticism, misunderstanding and misuse, inheritance and eventuality since modern times.

Finally, in a broad sense the book makes a solid contribution to the development of inquiries on thought history. Although conceptual history originated in Germany—which is where most of its theoretical sources and representative figures are from—as far as this book is concerned, goes we can confirm that it constitutes a global historical theory. Nowadays, contributors and researchers in this field are not entirely limited to the German language. Taking this book as an example, it represents a very high level of conceptual historical study not only within Chinese scholarship, but also on a global scope. In an essay tracing the history of the concept of "world literature," professor Fang once stated that although Goethe is regarded as the coiner of this concept, it is an invention neither original nor exclusive to him. In fact, the concept itself "rejects theorization of a fixed boundary" (Fang Weigui *What Is World Literature* 15). As this entails, if a theory wants to be dynamic and persistent and possesses explanatory power, the essential condition of achieving that status would first of all be giving up the fantasy of being a fixed and rigid operating manual. It needs to have an independent thought, and the courage to break boundaries and a critical consciousness in order to explore the potential space. To borrow Gadamer's remark on Koselleck from this monograph, which stated that Koselleck was a historian with a genuine thought, this book by professor Fang Weigui successfully demonstrates that conceptual history is a historical method of profound intelligence and intellectual resources, while the book itself conveys a way of thinking on modern life, historical developments, and academic research that is

far beyond that of an introduction manual.

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