

Writing in Old Age About My Life and Experiences

Philip C. C. Huang

Age 86, or “late high old age” 高龄晚期 by my own categorization, is a time of declining memory, energy, and capacity for writing/thinking. Twilight years of a scholar, we might say. It is also a period of perhaps more self-reflection, to ask more questions about the meaning of life, the state of our scholarship, and such.

At this age, my brain no longer has the capacity for long periods of sustained work or three-segment days (morning, afternoon, and evening). I am now more inclined to just two- or three-hour stretches at a time, often just one or two such stretches in a day, rather than the two or even three long sessions of my younger days, not to speak of working deep into the night or early morning.

In part for those reasons, I myself no longer attempt to write big pieces—books and journal-length articles—but have instead taken on “short essays” 短文, often of just one to a few thousand words, as my principal and preferred mode of writing in this late stage of my life. In the last three years (since 2023), I have written 48 such essays and have found them well suited to my present energies and work habits. They allow me to focus on subjects of special concern to me, to complete

each item usually within a few weeks or even just days, and to quickly and easily post them online for those who might have an interest.

I have not followed the quite common past practice for Chinese scholars in their old age to compile or assist in compiling a “chronological biography” 年谱 of themselves. First, because in this day and age, those no longer have the value that they used to have, since such information is often quite widely accessible, and they are really no longer worthy endeavors for senior scholars to devote the final stage of their lives to. Second, because that established tradition placed great emphasis on apparent objectivity, it tended to limit the work to simple chronicling when the most valuable and important information an author can provide is often actually more the author’s personal views than the quite readily accessible chronological facts. The attempt at objectivity in fact often blocks or limits what an author can most usefully contribute for posterity. Substance can actually come to be sacrificed for supposed objectivity.

But I also do not want to indulge in anything like a long-winded narration of my personal views and preferences. Such writing can often degenerate into boring self-justification or aggrandizement, all the worse when long. I think a much more useful contribution is to offer truthfully one’s own understanding of relevant historical contexts and one’s own purpose, without exaggeration or hiding behind a

pretense of strict objectivity, but in an honest effort to contribute to a truthful and undecorated view or record of one's own history and context.

Given the above considerations, my own choice has been to write a series of self-reflective short essays 短文, mindful of not self-touting while being as objective and historical as possible in presenting honestly my own views and takes on the historical context or meaning. The intent has not been so much to give my own views as the only or correct ones, but rather to attempt to be one voice among others.

Of course, there is still only a thin line between such writing and self-touting. I have tried my best to maintain as much as possible a straightforward and truthful, undecorated view of the relevant background and context, but of course cannot be totally free of certain biases or colored lenses in my narration of the events or the context. But I have tried my best to guard against those.

I have opted for short essays in preference to long articles or full-length books because the latter, when devoted mainly to the author's personal experiences and views, can quickly become boring for readers. Short essays, by contrast, allow us to discuss a wider range of topics in pithier ways, adopt multiple perspectives, and are much less likely to bore the reader.

In the few short essays I have written about certain aspects of myself and my work, my purpose is not so much to try to create THE narrative of MY own life and thoughts, as some autobiographies or biographies are prone to do, but rather merely to attempt to participate in possible future discussions of the multiple issues raised in these essays—to be one voice among others, offering what I might be able to add.