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# Maybe, Maybe Not: The Tao of History

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# Maybe, Maybe Not: The Tao of History

## **Abstract**

Many years ago, I read an old Chinese parable in one of my brother's books. I haven't been able to determine its precise origins, but it goes something like this:

*One day, a farmer's only horse broke loose and ran away from his stable. "What bad luck," the farmer's neighbors said to him. But the farmer merely replied, "Maybe, maybe not." ... [excerpt]*

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial

## **Disciplines**

History | Intellectual History | Military History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Maybe, Maybe Not: The Tao of History

*April 1, 2015*

*by Kevin Lavery '16*

Many years ago, I read an old Chinese parable in one of my brother's books. I haven't been able to determine its precise origins, but it goes something like this:

*One day, a farmer's only horse broke loose and ran away from his stable. "What bad luck," the farmer's neighbors said to him. But the farmer merely replied, "Maybe, maybe not."*

*On the next day, the farmer's horse returned with three wild horses and all were brought back to the farmer's stables. "What good luck," the farmer's neighbors remarked. But the farmer merely replied, "Maybe, maybe not."*

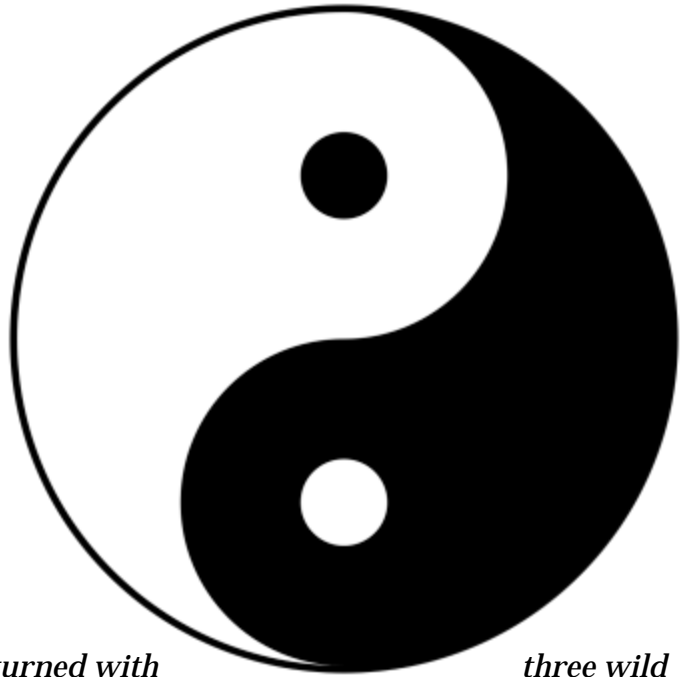
*On the third day, the farmer's son tried to ride one of the wild horses, but fell off and broke his arm. "What bad luck," the farmer's neighbors said to him. But the farmer merely replied, "Maybe, maybe not."*

*On the fourth day, a band of soldiers arrived to force local young men to join the army. They saw the broken arm of the farmer's son and continued on to the next house. "What good luck," the farmer's neighbors remarked. But the farmer merely replied, "Maybe, maybe not."*

The story ends here, but I could keep tracing the intertwining of fortunes good and bad. From my limited exposure to eastern philosophy in high school, I'm pretty sure it's a Taoist story given its message of 'going with the flow.'

Now, you're probably wondering why I think this Chinese parable has a place on a blog about the American Civil War. Let's see if I can explain.

The Civil War truly rent our nation asunder. Americans fought Americans to their bitter deaths. Never before nor since have we been so divided.



Yet somehow after the war both the North and the South were eventually able to rally around the idea of the war as a sort of trial by fire – an affirmation of American ideals made sacred by the blood sacrifice of men on both sides. This is the argument that holds that the soldiers on both sides of the conflict forged today's America – it's how self-proclaimed American patriots can justify flying Confederate flags, why the modern United States military is willing to honor Confederate generals, and why Gettysburg brings visitors from both the North and the South in spite of the fact that their forebears killed each other here. What was once a divisive event has since become a unifying cultural memory (to a certain extent, of course).

Someday, for all we know, the idea of the Civil War as a divisive event may reemerge in the mainstream historical consciousness. Maybe 'the South will rise again,' or maybe the North will decide to go its own way, citing the Civil War as precedent and thereby transforming the Civil War once again into an acrimonious memory. Of course, we don't know the future and I'm not in the business of speculating. But that's exactly my point: we don't know what will happen tomorrow, or how the past and present will be remembered in the future.

We're constantly imagining and reimagining our past – that's part of what makes history so fascinating. New books come out every week that weave a new narrative of the past, poking and patching holes in old interpretations. Sometimes historians swing and they miss. Sometimes their brilliance isn't recognized until after their death. More often, it seems, the best historians of one age are discredited in the next. Like the farmer's life, history is perennially in flux.

Even the most basic historic assumptions in one context can be invalidated in another. What looks like a 'good' turn of history in one moment might seem 'bad' in the next. For instance, how shall the Arab Spring be represented in twenty years from now? In one hundred years? History is littered with relativism and presentism and all other sorts of biases that historians must struggle to surmount.

Does that mean that historians waste their lives arguing over something that is ultimately relative and subjective? Absolutely not. It was important for the villagers of the parable to make sense of their world by labelling events good or bad, even if these events themselves were more relative than the villagers allowed themselves to imagine. Likewise, it is the job of the historian to try to make sense of the past in spite of history's fluidity, although they are responsible for doing so through considerably more nuanced schemas than the dichotomous worldview of the villagers.

Furthermore, historians can't look at these events in isolation as the villagers did because of the complex nature of the past, and neither can they simply judge all of the events in a certain progression by the most recent event. For instance, did the outcome of the Civil War make so much death worthwhile? It's a difficult balancing act to look at both the big picture and the little picture while doing justice to each. But such is the job of the historian.

The symbol Taijitu represents the Yīn and Yáng of Taoism, but could just as easily represent the intertwining of 'good' and 'bad' in history. Image created by George Maxwell. Wikimedia Commons.

The message I draw from this parable is a reminder of the complexity of the world and the difficulty of making judgments about our experiences, both past and present. Yet we *must* make judgments if we want to understand our world. Such a task is in our nature as human beings.

Of course, I wouldn't advocate that historians all convert to Taoism – historical methodology and Taoist philosophy would probably be rather difficult to reconcile beyond the points I've made above. Still, I think that the parable is an effective story to illustrate a few things to keep in mind when thinking about how historians consider the past.

Historians must be those villagers trying to make sense of the world even though tomorrow might change the way they see yesterday. That doesn't mean that they're wrong, but it does mean that they're fallible and that their judgments are always open to intelligent scrutiny. Such scrutiny is an essential component of the discipline of history, as well as of critical thinking in general.

Historians must also be cautious to heed the voice of the farmer whispering in their ear that they are fallible when dealing with semi-subjective interpretations of the past. They are, after all, as human as the subjects of their scholarship.

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