

Transforming History: The Making of a Modern Academic Discipline in Twentieth-Century China

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History as a modern academic discipline and school subject has everywhere been intimately associated with the emergence of a political consciousness of nationhood. Nowhere are reminders of this link more frequently or starkly served than in East Asia – where, within the past month, a number of Chinese cities have witnessed demonstrations by youths incensed at Japanese challenges to the integrity of a ‘China’ seen as unitary, inviolable and unutterably ancient. However, the extent to which their national consciousness is the product of a rather recent historiographical revolution, and the key role played in this by Japanese models, are historical ironies of which few of these demonstrators can be aware. For their part, historians of modern China have always known of the Japanese influence on Chinese political and social thought in the early 20th century. But this outstanding new volume contributes significantly to our understanding of the ways in which Chinese historians – of varied research interests and ideological persuasions – found, largely through their study of modern Japanese scholarship and institutions, answers to ‘the challenges of an era in which the quest for national strength became the primary intellectual aim’ (pp. 60–1). This episode of intense intellectual borrowing has had profound and lasting implications for conceptions of national identity, and for the way in which modern Chinese intellectuals and governing elites have responded to issues of diversity within China’s borders, and to contact and exchange across them.

The drive to learn from Japan represented both a striking reversal in the flow of historiographical influence – until the mid 19th century, Japan had always borrowed from China – and produced a major shift in the philosophy and methodology of historical scholarship. In contrast to most societies faced with the task of generating narratives of national history to underpin state formation projects, China already possessed an ancient and highly sophisticated tradition of state-centred historiography. Scholars within this classical tradition had long engaged in fierce debates over methodological considerations. During the Qing dynasty, argument largely revolved around the practice of ‘evidential scholarship’ (*kaoju*), involving the philological interrogation of classical texts with the aim of divining their original meaning. The construction of narratives of the past through a critical analysis of sources was thus an aspect of the modern discipline of history that was far from alien to classically-trained Chinese scholars.

The real divide between traditional historiography and the modern discipline lay in conceptions of the political and ethical purpose of history, and its primary subject matter. History was inseparable from the broader practice of classical learning, whose central concern was to interpret the ethical teachings of the ancients for the guidance of their callow descendants among the governing classes. Assumptions of moral as well as material progress typical of 19th- and early 20th-century Western attitudes to the past were reversed in traditional Chinese thought, with superior wisdom assumed to reside in the words and deeds of long-dead sages and rulers. History was tasked with recording the performance of their successors in cleaving to or straying from the ethical legacy of a civilizational Golden Age. Moreover, this stock of ethical norms was assumed to be universally applicable. By no means were the lessons of Chinese history seen as relevant only to those who saw themselves as 'Chinese'; the study of this history was essential to the moral formation of the civilized man, and to training him for the exercise of political authority – whichever ruler (of Qing China, Japan, Korea or Vietnam) he happened to serve.

This historiographical vision was effectively torpedoed by the Qing empire's crushing defeat at the hands of Japan in 1895. In reaction to this event – more shocking even than the various humiliations the Qing had experienced at the hands of the Western powers – Chinese scholars travelled to Japan to discover what it was that had enabled these upstart pupils to humble their venerable master. Among the most famous and influential of these visitors was Liang Qichao. In 1902 he published an essay, *On the New History* (*Xin Shixue*), that aimed to rally historians to the task of saving the nation – or, indeed, constructing a nation capable of being saved, for Liang argued that China's critical weakness by comparison with Japan and other 'modern' states was the lack of a unifying sense of national citizenship. He called, therefore, for history to shift its focus from chronicling the deeds of rulers to articulating a sense of the national past, with 'the people' as its subject. The Chinese people, he lamented, were invisible in traditional historiography – now they must move centre stage, and history must propel them there.

For Liang and other early nationalist thinkers, developing history as a school subject was thus among the most urgent tasks of educational reform as China sought to establish a modern system of schooling in the final years of the Qing. Before they were finally abolished in 1905, the imperial examinations were also reformed with the inclusion of a paper (the *celun*) requiring candidates to answer questions on politics and current affairs (i.e. modern and contemporary world history). According to Liu Long-hsin, this reform played an important role in promoting notions of history as a linear and progressive narrative, and of evolution as a principle governing the rise and fall of civilisations and relations between nations. Face-saving theories of the 'Chinese origins of Western learning' proved popular in responses to questions set in the *celun* papers, with one scholar, for example, arguing that China had invented parliamentary systems during the Han dynasty (p. 92). More generally, arguments of the 'Chinese learning for [ethical] fundamentals, Western learning for [practical] use' type were common. However, such positions often served simply as fig leaves for proposals of what amounted to outright Westernisation.

If the nationalists' ultimate aim was to 'catch up' with the West, the textbooks that explained what this catching up would involve were, in the early 20th century, overwhelmingly derived from Japan. As Q. Edward Wang explains, Japanese textbooks current in the 1890s tended to synthesise the progressive, linear narrative of civilization (enshrined in what was termed the 'chapter-section' format) popularized by Fukuzawa and Taguchi, with a moralizing, state-centred focus on dynastic and regime legitimation. In other words, they invoked Western history as a 'measuring stick' (p. 143) (in Wang Fan-sen's phrase) for the progress, or lack of it, of non-Western nations, while attempting to retain some of the moralizing functions of traditional historiography. This combination was attractive to authoritarian modernisers in Japan and China (as in Bismarckian Germany – Japan's principal instructor in such matters), since it demonstrated the urgent necessity of industrial and technological modernization, while also justifying the established political structure by reference to a 'national essence' (*guocui*) distinct from, and superior to, those of degenerate nations to the West.

This synthesis of moral preoccupations and Social Darwinist assumptions was – and remains – extremely

powerful in shaping Chinese views of world history and their country's place in it. However, as Wang Fan-sen notes (and as Isaiah Berlin did before him), a belief in historical inevitability undermines any attempt to read moral messages into history. If the universal law of human history is 'the survival of the fittest', then what is morally 'bad' at one level may also be 'good' (or necessary) in furthering the cause of national 'progress'. Thus the first emperor, Qin Shihuang, traditionally decried as a tyrannical despot, was rehabilitated by Chinese nationalists (including Mao) for whom his achievement in unifying the nation trumped all his moral failings. (Viewers of Zhang Yimou's 2004 blockbuster, *Hero* (*Yingxiong*), may recall that this was the central message of that film.) As Zarrow observes, such revisionism reflected a significant 'militarization' of Chinese culture.

At the same time, that Chinese culture – and the discipline of history – increasingly reflected preoccupations with national strength and unity during the early 20th century should come as no surprise, given the dire predicament of the Chinese state vis-à-vis the West and Japan. In his discussion of 'the rise of historical geography', Tze-ki Hon stresses the 'out-directed' aspect of this sub-discipline in the Republican period – the intense concern with presenting a self-image of China to the world. In the 1910s, when historical geography (yet another borrowing from Japan) was just becoming established in the new Republic, most practitioners assumed that defining China's national boundaries and developing a coherent narrative of the nation's evolution were their most pressing tasks. To gain acceptance in the Western-dominated international order, what was needed – it was assumed – was to demonstrate that China was emerging (as Japan had done) as a modern major nation along Western lines. Moreover, in an era when hierarchies of race were widely taken for granted, many prominent Chinese eagerly embraced theories of 'Western origins' for the Han Chinese race. This fashion for 'Sino-Babylonianism', whose adherents included Sun Yatsen himself, was linked to a belief in the relationship between migration, imperialism and the survival of the fittest.

But by the 1920s, it was clear that such theorizing on its own would not suffice to gain Western – or Japanese – respect, as China was ignored at the Versailles Peace Conference, while Japan and the Western powers argued over their respective 'spheres of influence'. Although Hon does not discuss this, it is also likely that – in China as elsewhere in Asia – the spectacle of the European nations butchering each other during the Great War significantly dented the prestige of the supposedly 'civilised' West. In any event, in the aftermath of the war, betrayal and butchery presented themselves with new force to Chinese intellectuals as the governing principles of the international order, and led historical geographers to adopt a more activist political stance. They began to see it as their most urgent mission to inform the people of the spatial dimensions of 'China' so as to spur them to defend the national territory. The loss of Manchuria in the early 1930s was blamed by some scholars on Chinese ignorance of the nation's borders, and historical geography itself evolved into 'the strategic study of national defense'. This is a role that it has retained ever since, with China's Academy of Social Sciences boasting a 'Centre for the Study of China's Borderland History and Geography' – and through the education system and other media, both Kuomintang and Communist states have been assiduous in cultivating heightened awareness of the state's territorial limits, and foreign infringements thereof.

But even while Republican China faced very real threats from external invasion and internal turmoil during the 1920s and 1930s, the discipline of history continued to mature, as scholars openly and fiercely debated methodological issues and new agendas for research. Xiao Yishen and Meng Sen, discussed here by Madeleine Yue Dong, argued over what constituted legitimate sources for the history of the recently deposed Qing, whose imperial borders now defined the limits of the new Chinese nation state. Xiao, for whom the Qing were an alien ‘conquest’ dynasty, saw the ‘Han’ people as the central subject of his historical narrative, and this led him to favour the use of non-official histories (*yeshi*) produced by Han scholars over the standard official sources left behind by a ‘foreign’ regime. Meng Sen, by contrast, focused on several controversial incidents in Qing history to show the frequently fanciful or misleading nature of *yeshi* by comparison with the official records. Meng’s stance was informed by his view of the Qing as a great *Chinese* dynasty, not an illegitimate alien occupier. However, both Xiao and Meng, Yue Dong argues, were conventional modern professional historians, who stressed the importance of objectivity and narrative.

A conviction of the ‘scientific’ status of historical scholarship characterised many professional historians during this period – and led some, such as Gu Jiegang, to radically question the traditional dynastic chronology because of what they saw as the unsatisfactory nature of sources relating to the earliest dynasties. Moloughney shows that Gu’s own arguments and methods were often weak and flawed, since the task of untangling legend and fact in early texts was much more complex and problematic than he generally assumed. Moreover, much of the early dynastic past that Gu sought to consign to the status of ‘myth’ was very soon restored to the realm of ‘history’ by archaeological excavations at the Shang capital of Anyang (from 1928), and elsewhere. Nonetheless, Gu’s practice of publishing his critics’ work alongside his own ‘provided a model of how an open and engaged scholarship could advance historical understanding’ (p. 262).

Even in debates over sources and method, however, history and politics remained inextricably intertwined. While classical scholarship had placed history ‘above politics’, requiring the historian to pass judgement on political actions by reference to universal moral laws, the aim of constructing a narrative of the Chinese nation implied, as Dong puts it, a ‘history *for* politics’. Thus Xiao and Meng’s disagreements over the validity of *yeshi* as historical sources were linked to their differences over the definition of ‘Chinese’ subjectivity itself. Were the Manchus – or, for that matter, the Mongols, Tibetans or Uyghurs – Chinese or not? In a world of discrete nation states, where did China begin (in time) or end (in space)? What were the criteria – ethnic, cultural, biological – that determined who was, or wasn’t ‘Chinese’, now or at any point in the past?

Summing up the challenges facing Chinese historians in the early 20th century, Axel Schneider observes that they were compelled to reconceptualise the national past ‘as part of a coherent vision of world history’, while asserting a distinctive national identity and asserting China’s capacity to ‘catch up’ with the West. And they had to do all this in the context of a tradition ‘placing the historian in an elevated political position’ – in which historians were expected to offer ‘solutions’ to present problems (p. 275). Schneider focuses on the attempt by Liu Yizheng – often dismissed as a hidebound ‘conservative’ – to reconcile the Confucian notion of a universal ethical core of history with a modern linear concept of time. Renowned for his *History of Chinese Culture*, Liu sought to identify a distinctive Chinese ‘national spirit’ shaped by culture and history though not, Schneider insists, by race. For Liu, this ‘spirit’ resided in the traditional ethics of the five relationships, the ‘Golden Mean’, loyalty and piety – which rendered Chinese culture superior to that of the degenerate and individualistic West. At the same time, these ethical norms were universal – since there was an all-encompassing heavenly order revealed variously in different national cultures, but exemplified in that of China. While rejecting the modern West, Liu thus demanded respect for the particularity of other cultures – combining ethical conservatism and belief in universal ethical order with a ‘modern’ vision of history as a discipline (focused on ‘people and nation’, causality and material – if not ethical – progress). ‘It is thus obvious,’ Schneider concludes, ‘that Liu’s concept of history does not have to be rescued from the nation’ (p. 288).

The latter remark is a swipe at Prasenjit Duara, author of *Rescuing History from the Nation* [\(1\)](#), whose view

of Chinese historiography, Schneider tells us in a footnote, is ‘rather one-sided’ (p. 302). Frustratingly, however, he does not elaborate on his critique of Duara, whose central argument is that dominant narratives of national history – especially in ‘postcolonial’ contexts (such as China and India) – tend to exclude or ignore alternative historical viewpoints (such as those of federalists in early 20th-century China) in their drive to assert a homogenizing, totalizing teleology of national evolution. Liu’s historical philosophy, as described by Schneider, while on the one hand asserting an ethical universalism seems, on the other hand, to offer substantial philosophical support for a deeply chauvinist vision of the superiority of the Chinese ‘national spirit’. Liu’s only overseas trip was to Japan, where, we are told, he was ‘deeply influenced by the new, Western-inspired way of writing history’ (p. 278) – but where he was presumably also exposed to the increasingly chauvinist, pseudo-Confucian late-Meiji discourse on Eastern ethical superiority and Western degeneracy. It is also clear, both from the other chapters in this volume and from other studies, that history as an academic discipline and school subject in contemporary China has been and remains in thrall to a narrowly nationalistic political agenda of precisely the kind identified by Duara.

This is nowhere better illustrated than in James Leibold’s chapter on prehistoric archaeology. Archaeology in modern China has been tasked with ‘validating traditions of shared ancestry’ and testing or demonstrating the truth of established historical chronology – in contrast to the situation in the West, where the emergence of archaeology (and geology) was associated with a dramatic secularization of time. In China, the archaeological project involved no radical overturning of the dynastic chronology – on the contrary, in Leibold’s phrase, the mission of archaeologists became one of ‘filling in the nation’, weaving into the old dynastic narrative a vision of China and the Chinese people as a ‘single, organic whole’ (p. 339). Until the 1930s, ‘diffusionist’ theses on China’s origins were dominant – assuming that the ancestors of the Chinese people had originally come from elsewhere (the West, or, ultimately, Africa). However, from the 1930s, as the Japanese invasion challenged the integrity of China’s territory and the Chinese nation itself, diffusionist ideas were increasingly discarded in favour of vigorous assertions of the ‘autochthonous origins and unity’ of the Chinese people.

Most of the contributors to this volume insist that the basis for the Chinese identity that modern historians sought to elaborate was ‘cultural’ or ‘secular Republican’ and not ‘racial’. However, Leibold’s chapter makes clear, as Frank Dikotter argued 20 years ago (2), that establishing a biological as well as cultural basis for Chinese unity has been extremely important for scholars and ideologues of various political persuasions, from the Republican period onwards. In particular, the discovery of the remains of Peking Man at Zhoukoudian was used to assert the Chinese origins not just of the Han but of a *Zhonghua minzu* encompassing all the peoples of China (it is significant that the museum at Zhoukoudian was one of very few actually built rather than closed during the Cultural Revolution). Archaeological findings have been used, wherever possible, to bolster a ‘myth of consanguinity’ which, even if it acknowledges the diverse origins of the Han themselves, or of the broader *Zhonghua minzu*, emphasizes the steady and inevitable progress of assimilation. In the words of Jian Bozan (a historian driven to suicide during the Cultural Revolution), the centripetal attraction of the Han draws in other *minzus* (‘nationalities’) ‘like bees to honey’. A fundamental tension between racial thinking and what Zarrow terms the ‘rhetoric of assimilation and harmony’ (p. 192) thus persists in the visions of Chinese nationhood underpinned by mainstream historical and archeological scholarship. Leibold illustrates this by citing the extreme political sensitivities surrounding the case of the Tarim mummies – the bodies of ancient Caucasian inhabitants of Xinjiang. A transnationalism (i.e. openness to investigating cross-border dimensions of the development of Chinese culture) evident amongst some younger, often Western-educated scholars is pitched against ‘a highly nationalistic, state-dominated academic establishment that continues to police the boundaries of culture and race’ (p. 362). This dogged insistence on ethno-biological unity allied to a conviction of Han cultural superiority has had significant negative implications for contemporary Han-‘minority’ relations, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Finally, what of Marxist historiography – often dismissed nowadays, within China and without, as stale and irrelevant? Arif Dirlik reminds us how crucial Marxism was, especially during the inter-war period, to opening up new areas of research into the Chinese past – even as it constrained researchers to operate within

a framework of historical materialism and ‘stages’ of social development. The ideologically-inspired rigidity of this framework necessitated interpretative contortions, notably over the definition of ‘feudalism’ in the Chinese context, and over the questions this raised regarding the periodisation of the Chinese past. Dirlik cites the early dispute between Tao Xisheng and Guo Muoro over Guo’s the designation of the earliest dynastic period as an era of ‘slave society’ – a controversy won by the latter. But despite (or even because of) such arguments over periodisation, the attraction of Marxism for many scholars of the inter-war years lay in its focus on social history – ‘filling in the nation’ by focusing on socio-economic developments affecting ‘the people’, rather than on the political machinations of officials at the imperial court. From the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s, Dirlik maintains, historical scholarship conducted within the now-established Marxist paradigm – notably Fan Wenlan’s *Concise Comprehensive History of China* – advanced a subtle and coherent account of the development of Chinese society.

Following the Cultural Revolution, when historiography was once more subordinated to the immediate purpose of making revolution, Marxist history has been largely discredited, at least within the academic establishment. In its place, other approaches have gained popularity – such as modernization theory. There has been an increased focus on science and technology, their role in modernization, and the causes of the ‘rise and fall’ of states, while less attention has been devoted to the history of the ‘working masses’. Meanwhile, in contemporary Chinese society, some of those traditional attitudes and practices that Marxists used to attack or deride as ‘feudal’ have made a comeback. Dirlik points out that modernization theory is teleological in just the same way as Marxism, and that work conducted in this vein continues the dominant 20th-century trend of focusing on ‘meta-historical processes’ at the expense of the local or the peripheral. He suggests that Marxist history today, as ‘one current among many’ in Chinese historiography, may have a role to play in promoting the greater study of social history ‘from the bottom up’, and in ‘empowering historical work to transcend the ideological horizon set by the spatial and temporal teleology of the nation’ (p. 395).

But the prospects for vibrant historical debate within China today seem limited, even if they are greater than they were 30 or 40 years ago. It is telling that only one of the contributors to this volume (Luo Zhitian) is based at a university in mainland China – and he obtained his doctorate from Princeton University. The rest are based in Europe, Australia and (mostly) Taiwan or America. Zarrow and Moloughney write in their introduction that ‘the establishment of the modern historical discipline was largely complete by the 1930s’, and indeed that the scholarship of the Republican period has supplied resources for a revival of historical studies in the post-Cultural Revolution period (p. 32). But if the historical discipline really thrives in any Chinese societies today, then it does so principally in Taiwan and Hong Kong (where this book was published). If any criticism could be made of this excellent volume, it is that, with the significant exception of the observations on Japanese influences, relatively little account is taken here of the transnational, or cross-border, dimension of modern Chinese historiography. This dimension became especially salient in the post-1949 period, admittedly not the main focus of this volume, but it might still have been worth a chapter.

Historical scholarship within and about Hong Kong and Taiwan also exemplifies the sort of questioning of boundaries and explorations of local histories and identities that have tended to be neglected, if not specifically outlawed, on the mainland. The state of the discipline in Taiwan today is particularly vibrant, while in Hong Kong, teaching and research are nowadays conducted against a backdrop of increasingly crude attempts by the local authorities to impose the orthodox mainland narrative of the national past – most recently through a programme for ‘Moral and National Education’ for secondary schools. This review was written two days after students, teachers, academics, parents and the media combined to force the Government to effectively abandon this initiative. The early 20th century, when the modern discipline of history was established, has been termed China’s ‘Age of Openness’ – but openness, essential for the health of the discipline, remains highly circumscribed on the Chinese mainland. In the continuing struggle to ‘rescue history from the nation’, Hong Kong and Taiwan thus have a pivotal role to play.

Notes

1. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*

(Chicago, IL, 1997).[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Frank Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Palo Alto, CA, 1992); Frank Dikotter, *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao* (Berkeley, CA, 2008).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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