

## CHAPTER THREE

# Chinese History in China: The State of the Field (1980s–2010s)

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### Introduction

Never before have historians in mainland China published as prolifically on Chinese history as since the 1980s. It has been more than a hundred years since Liang Qichao in 1902 proposed the notion of a “New Historiography” (*xin shixue*). Liang envisioned a modern Chinese historiography, in particular a quest for a societal perspective and an interdisciplinary approach for historical research (Liang 1936). If we set aside his nation-building agenda and his social evolutionist inferences, his proposal is still relevant to Chinese historians today. Liang himself never put his vision into practice; such a fundamental intellectual transformation could be accomplished only through the combined efforts of successive generations of historians. In the first half of the twentieth century, western social science and its application to historical studies in China were first introduced and institutionalized. During the second half of the century, however, an interlude of political and cultural trauma set back any pre-war efforts. This was followed by the reintroduction of western historiography into mainland China through a series of restoration and reconnection endeavors. These efforts were made by scholars who grew up before the 1940s and thus were armed with solid training in both Chinese and western learning, by industrious translators who translated into Chinese many studies on western history, western historiography, and western writings on Chinese history, and by a new generation of Chinese historians that emerged in the 1980s, many of whom have become stars of the field in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Literature on Chinese history published between the 1980s and 2010s in mainland China should, therefore, be evaluated against a century of ups and downs by asking to what extent the present outcomes have achieved the ends put forward by Liang Qichao, or, in other words, how “mature” has the new Chinese historiography become?

To say that Chinese historiography has been subject to the influence of western historiography may trigger some skepticism. At first glance, the titles of many monographs

and articles published in China since the 1980s do contain some western concepts, or more precisely, some keywords picked out of anglophone China studies, but these choices of words are often ephemeral and have little intellectual significance. The term “rebellions” has been substituted for what was formerly labeled “righteous peasant uprisings.” At one time the terms “elite” and “gentry” were used to offset the negative connotations of the term “landlord”; at another time the phrase “cultural nexus” replaced “exploitation” as the key to understanding changes that took place at the village level in the state-making process. Those who wish to avoid the term “revolution” choose instead “impact-response” and “modernization” and make these the key terms of post-1842 history. To some, the notion of a “Tang–Song transition” responds to previous concerns about the “periodization of feudal society.” To others, “involution” or “growth without development” seems a better explanation for the “enduring stagnation of Chinese feudal society.” It is perhaps even easier to change one’s professional identity by claiming a new territory, be it quantitative history, new cultural history, legal history, ecological or environmental history. As happened in many other areas, in the field of historical studies the post-1980s era witnessed a process of importation, transplantation, application, and quite often appropriation of western ideas, or, more precisely, an assortment of terms used in the anglophone and sometimes Japanese world of Chinese historical studies.

While it is unrealistic and unnecessary to evaluate all works produced in this general atmosphere, perhaps it is still worth asking why for many Chinese historians some western ideas proved more acceptable than others. A simple answer to this question is that, one way or another, many Chinese historians find these ideas helpful substitutes for concepts they have previously applied in tackling five longstanding issues in Chinese Marxist historiography: the periodization of Chinese history, the feudal land system, “righteous peasant uprisings” (*nongmin qiyi*), the formation of the Han nationality, and the sprouts of capitalism. If we contemplate the state of the field of Chinese history in mainland China along these lines, we may see that the rhetoric has changed but the problematique has not. These five longstanding issues and the quest for alternative narratives have already been the subject of some critical analysis (Dirlik 1982; Li 2010b). Rather than joining this already well-established discussion or pretending to be an all-encompassing summary, this chapter attempts to capture what the author thinks is regarded by mainland Chinese historians as important in the development of Chinese historiography over the past three decades. It intends to draw the reader’s attention to areas which may have appeared obscure at first but have gradually become the focus of debates. These debates, full of self-reflection and experimentation, have involved scholars making pioneering attempts to distance themselves from conventional Chinese historiography and to develop alternative paradigms for achieving a new and holistic understanding of Chinese history on their own terms. The new paradigms may still be Marxist, but only in a sense that they continue to seek structural explanation for human actions; they are no longer the officially endorsed “Marxist” historiography of old. Within the new paradigms the “five problems” are still addressed in one way or another, but the questions are reframed, approaches renewed, and outcomes are expected to break new ground.

Structured both chronologically and thematically, this chapter attempts to underline the ebb and flow of various approaches that emerged in mainland China between the 1980s and the 2010s. It begins in the 1980s, when social history was the main trend, and points out that by the end of that decade this approach was already criticized for



being prone to fragmentation. Around the same time, a regional type of approach became increasingly prevalent, yet it soon received similar criticisms for its tendency to parochialism and failure to develop any overarching views of China as a whole. Since the late 1990s, historical anthropology has emerged as a new paradigm associated with scholars previously categorized as regional historians. Their discourses focus on the central question of what makes China a meaningful entity. Any approach to this persistent query has to start with problematizing the very notion of "China." These thought-provoking debates have evoked significant responses from historians who have previously focused on dynastic histories and are now looking for ways to revisit political and institutional histories. Since the advent of cyberspace, it has become necessary to understand to what extent accessibility and usages of source materials have changed, and how competitive the rising generation of the twenty-first century can be. As well, we must not lose sight of the possible political implications of a potential Chinese historiographical revolution as envisaged by forerunners like Liang Qichao.

### Social history: Grand narratives versus trivialization

If "social history" (*shehuishi*) was envisioned as a promising breakthrough in Chinese historical studies by the late 1980s (*Benkan pinglun* 1987), many of its outcomes have been criticized since the 1990s for trivializing history and lacking theoretical concern. Studies of social history are a continuation of efforts made by Republican pioneers (Zhao and Deng 2001) in the 1920s and 1930s, but those studies to a large extent concerned debates on the "nature of Chinese society." They tended to be conjectural and politicized, yet they did result in a considerable quantity of empirical research substantiated by newly explored source materials. After the 1950s such debates subsided somewhat and did not resurface until the 1980s, when the idea of social history was brought up once more. Differing from the pre-war "social history" debate, the "social history" advocated in the 1980s aimed at a "history of daily life" (*shehui shenghuo shi*).

The men chiefly credited with leading the revival of social history in China are Nankai University professor Feng Erkang and his successors (Feng 1987). Feng believes that discourses concerning class struggle in past times provide only a mere "skeletal" basis for understanding Chinese society. Studies on social life and lifestyles are now necessary to fill this skeleton with "flesh and blood." In other words, studies on social life and lifestyles not only involve researching a variety of topics such as rituals and customs, popular forms of culture and entertainment, religions, and festivals, but should also entail exploration of social organizations, social communities, and social structures operating behind the everyday routine. This is the agenda behind the studies on social organizations such as lineages carried out by scholars like Chang Jianhua, Feng's former student at Nankai. Now an established professor, Chang has contributed to offering a wider picture of social history studies by reviewing those attempts made prior to the 1950s, updating the post-1980s state of the field, and introducing Chinese historians to the work of western social historians, notably E.J. Hobsbawm, Peter Burke, and the French *Annales* School (Chang 1997; Feng 2004). In 1988, faculty members of the Institute of Social History at Nanjing University published a collection of Chinese translations of works by Hobsbawm, Fernand Braudel, Jacques Le Goff, E.P. Thompson, and Charles Tilly (Cai Shaoqing 1988), which was considered a primer for the emerging field. Other universities also joined the venture. Whereas the Nankai cohort focused more on the Ming-Qing period, Qiao Zhiqiang of Shanxi University extended the



approach to modern Chinese history (*jindai shehui shi*), which was at the time still dominated by officially endorsed revolutionary discourses (Qiao and Xing 1998).

Since then, thousands of articles and books of social history have been published in China, and therein lies a problem. That everything has a history is undeniable, yet that *every thing* triggers a horde of researchers—resulting in a plethora of outcomes—can be disastrous. From the 1990s on, many social history studies were ridiculed for being “fragmentary” (*suipian hua*) or for studying mere “leftovers” (*cangeng shengfan*). The social mechanisms behind social life (communities, organizations, and structures), as stressed by Feng Erkang and Chang Jianhua, were often overlooked. Zhao Shiyu, a Ming historian then working in Beijing Normal University, pointed out in 1993 that with few exceptions, topical studies of social history in China lacked wider historical philosophical concerns and were incapable of offering any theoretical frameworks for further analysis. Zhao has gone on to state explicitly that Chinese social historians should aim to derive new methodologies and perspectives for interpreting history. In this sense the social history proposed by Zhao and like-minded historians is not merely one branch of historical studies; it should be the ultimate goal of the post-1980s historiographical reform (Zhao 1993). Not unlike Liang Qichao, Zhao proposes to apply theories of sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, and linguistics to social history studies, and he believes this will produce outcomes that are helpful for testing the validity of theories, even revising or improving them.

In fact, the pursuit of “theory” (*lilun*) has always been an undertaking of twentieth-century Chinese historians. Zhao Shiyu’s sentiments are shared by many others, and some seek a resolution by suggesting that historical studies are useful for generating middle-range theories. Yang Nianqun (2001b), a Qing historian from the Institute of Qing History at Renmin University of China, proposes the application of the middle-range theory developed by Robert K. Merton to historical studies as a means of integrating theory and empirical research. Once dedicated to the study of the transformation of Confucianism in Qing China, Yang draws parallels between, on the one hand, the tension between the earlier highly politicized debates on the nature of Chinese society and the post-1980s revival of interests in empirical research and, on the other, that between traditional grand narratives and Qing evidential research (*puxue*). Yang’s quest for the application of the middle-range theory is exemplified by his compilation (Yang 2001a) under the name “new social history,” which contains select articles by ten Chinese scholars (including himself) from different backgrounds. Yang believes that the 1990s’ social history studies differ from those of the 1980s in both problematique and methodology. He foresees the emergence of a new intellectual community in China that will appreciate interdisciplinary approaches and is able to develop a variety of analytical frameworks compatible with the middle-range theory. Yang’s aspiration is echoed and yet also questioned by Zhao Shiyu, whose article was included in Yang’s compilation. Zhao (Zhao and Deng 2001) laments that given the divergence in assumptions, concerns, methodologies, and opinions among researchers under the same umbrella of “social history” such as that illustrated by Yang’s volume, the label “new” is almost pointless for presenting a coherent picture of post-1990s social history studies, because such a coherency does not exist.

### Regional approach: More than the sum

The deadlock created by the tension between the pursuit of grand theory and trivialization of evidential research was to some extent released by the regional approach that was advocated around the same time. In China there has been a long literary tradition of



compiling local or regional history, but here we are talking about something different. The regional approach that became prevalent in the 1990s grew out of the more established discipline of socioeconomic history, revitalized by government-initiated efforts. In the early 1980s the National Social Science Fund of the PRC inaugurated a nationwide project of Chinese socioeconomic history studies across two dimensions, namely temporal (periodization) and spatial (regional approach). The spatial approach was implemented by strategically assigning different regions to historians from related universities. Consequently, studies on Jiangnan (the lower Yangzi River region) were taken up by Nanjing University; Fujian, Xiamen University; and Guangdong, Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. Including Jiangnan as an analytical region in this venture was only natural, because for many years the study of Chinese socioeconomic history and the discussion on the sprouts of capitalism have focused on Jiangnan. As for Fujian and Guangdong, there exists an academic tradition of socioeconomic history founded half a century ago by several forerunners, who were originally trained not as historians but as social scientists. At Xiamen University, the key figure was Fu Yiling (1911–88), who studied sociology in Japan in the 1930s (Fu 1983). At Sun Yat-sen University, socioeconomic historical studies were initiated by Liang Fangzhong (1908–70), who in the 1930s received his bachelor's and master's degrees in economics at Tsing-hua University. Notwithstanding their social science degrees, both Fu and Liang began their professional career in China as historians. Fu and his successors at Xiamen, notably Yang Guozhen, Zheng Zhenman, and Chen Zhiping, have been renowned for their collection, reading, and interpretation of local history materials including stele inscriptions, land deeds, and genealogies, as well as their founding and running of *The Journal of Chinese Social and Economic History* (*Zhongguo shehui jingji shi yanjiu*) (Zheng and Liu 2004). Liang, with his renowned study on the single-whip taxation method in China, laid the foundation for studies of Ming taxation reform and its impact on the local society. His study was carried on by upcoming scholars at Sun Yat-sen University, notably Tang Mingsui, Ye Xian'en, Liu Zhiwei, and Chen Chunsheng. For this group of Ming-Qing historians, prefixing "economic" with "social" is significant as they believe classical economic models are inadequate for understanding the operation of the traditional Chinese economy, and more substantial studies on social organizations and institutions are needed.

This regional approach soon became prevalent. Since the late 1980s, researchers have taken up some kind of local history in every region (usually at the level of the province). Nonetheless, encompassed within the same umbrella of "regional history" are a variety of research questions and approaches. Many scholars simply enumerate regional characteristics. Critics say such research is nothing more than the "local edition of textbooks of general history of China" (*Zhongguo tongshi jiaokeshu de difangxing banben*), which offers very little to the reinterpretation of the history of China as a whole. Some historians have therefore tried to work out a more precise label for the type of regional approach that they find worth pursuing, emphasizing that regional research into Chinese social and economic history remains their ultimate concern (*Zhongguo shehui jingji shi de quyuxing yanjiu*). They apply a regional approach because by grounding themselves in a particular region they find it easier to measure the impact of the state at the local level (Deng and Chen 1988).

In this work the nested hexagonal models of central place theory applied by the American anthropologist G. William Skinner (1925–2008) to Sichuan to analyze its marketing systems has been a spring of inspiration for Chinese historians engaged in regional analysis. Skinner's research was first introduced into China in the early 1980s, yet the first complete Chinese translation of his "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural



China" (Skinner 1964a; 1965a, 1965b) did not come out in mainland China until 1998. Like many other Chinese translations of western works, the Chinese edition of Skinner's work triggered a whole series of discussions. Between 1998 and 2014, more than 150 articles on regional studies of Chinese history published in the mainland referred to Skinner's work in some ways,<sup>1</sup> not to mention the countless classes, workshops, seminars, and conferences during which Skinner's models were introduced or discussed. Nonetheless, among those works which were meant to critique the "Skinnerian models," many merely ended up disputing the number of markets Skinner had calculated, how the boundaries of macroregions should have been drawn, whether circles or hexagons should have been used to draw the models, and whether the abstract models he proposed were in accordance with reality. More articulated discussions, for instance, those by Wang Qingcheng (2004) and Shi Jianyun (2004), are few. In any case, the meaning of model-making in Chinese social science has not been properly considered in these discussions.

If any breakthroughs have been achieved by the application of regional approaches to social and economic history in recent years, they are in a sense a repercussion of Skinner's marketing system and macroregional models. Among the most outstanding outcomes are those conducted in Fujian and Guangdong. Studies of the Putian Plains in Fujian by Zheng Zhenman (1997) demonstrate how senses of local identities and the operation of local affairs were shaped by layers of communal systems that were formed in a long historical process from the Northern Song to the Qing during which local organizations and worshiping centers of different forms—irrigation associations, household registration (*lijia*), community shrines (*lishu*), village temples (*cunmiao*), lineage organizations, cross-village alliances—replaced, combined, and intertwined with one another. The case of the Han River Delta in Eastern Guangdong, as illustrated by Chen Chunsheng (2006a), shows how a distinct Hakka identity evolved gradually from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Over the course of these three hundred years of history, events in the Han River Delta—turmoil in the late Ming, the great coastal evacuation order of the early Qing, the practice of compiling genealogies narrating a make-believe history of ancestral origin, and the rise of Swatow as a treaty port in 1860—entangled with one another and triggered movements and encounters among different dialect groups, leading to the emergence of a self-conscious Hakka identity at the time of the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Employing a regional approach, these case studies modify Skinner's model. On top of marketing structure, they ask such questions as: What are other social structures that evolve over time and contribute to the formation of a larger physiographical and socioeconomic system which is also a culture-bearing unit within which villages are located? How should administrative hierarchical systems through which state policies are implemented be evaluated alongside marketing systems? It is remarkable that models developed on the basis of classical economics by an American anthropologist have become an important premise of this particular cohort of Chinese historians.

### Historical anthropology: Till now a happy marriage

Perhaps because of the dual character that both history and anthropology possess—both cross the boundary between social sciences and humanities easily—the coupling of the two has borne much fruit in mainland China since 2000. But the path towards their marriage is an intricate one. In the late 1980s, the term "historical anthropology" (*lishi renlei xue*) was brought into China together with many other new directions in European



historiography, notably those of the French *Annales* School. However, whereas other ideas and approaches such as *longue durée* became quite popular among Chinese historians in those years, “historical anthropology” remained almost unnoticed.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, beginning in the 1980s, substantial cooperation between anthropologists from Hong Kong and Taiwan and historians in Fujian and Guangdong paved the way for the future alliance of the two disciplines. In the mid-1980s Helen Siu of Yale University and David Faure of the Chinese University of Hong Kong went to Guangzhou to collaborate with several historians at Sun Yat-sen University and began ethnographic surveys in the Pearl River Delta. Around the same time, a project titled “Comparative Studies of Minnan and Taiwan Culture and Society” (*Min-Tai shehui wenhua bijiao yanjiu*), in which more than 30 historians and anthropologists from the United States (Arthur Wolf), Taiwan (Li Yi-yuan, Chuang Ying-chang), and Fujian participated, was jointly launched by Xiamen University and the Institute of Ethnology of Academia Sinica. In those years, Sun Yat-sen and Xiamen Universities were the only two universities in mainland China with an active anthropology department, although it turned out that anthropologists outside China often found themselves better in tune with historians than with anthropologists in China. Between 1991 and 1993 the Guangdong and Fujian groups came together under the scheme of “Studies on the Traditional Chinese Sociocultural Formation in South China” coordinated by Chen Chi-nan, a Taiwan anthropologist then working at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Before then, the label “historical anthropology” was rarely mentioned.

The institutionalization of historical anthropology in China came at the turn of the millennium. The year 1999 was significant for the development of humanities and social sciences in mainland China, as it witnessed the beginning of major financial support given by the PRC government to humanities and social sciences through sponsorships on a variety of “key research institutes” set up in different universities approved by the Ministry of Education (MoE). Since 1999, more than 150 “key research institutes” have been founded. The abovementioned social history studies group at Nankai was further institutionalized with the founding of the Centre for Social History of China, which was soon endorsed by the MoE as one of the key research institutes. “Historical anthropology” in China, on the other hand, was still a new frontier full of uncertainties in some people’s eyes. The venture was developed by Sun Yat-sen University with the founding of the Centre for Historical Anthropology, which was later approved as one of the key research institutes by the MoE. A chain reaction ensued. Whereas in the 1980s historical anthropology was still something foreign and novel, between 2000 and 2014 more than 170 journal articles bearing the words “historical anthropology” in the title were published in China. Among them were empirical studies with titles beginning with the phrase “historical anthropological studies of” or ending with “from a historical anthropological perspective.” Some of these publications were meant to be critical reviews. Anthropologists were more eager to debate the nature of the discipline, even though in China, as foreseen by Jacques Le Goff, it was historians who led the institutionalization process (Xu 2001; Zhang 2003; Wang 2007; Zhang 2013).

Despite its novelty in the eyes of many, historical anthropology in China can, like social history, also be considered a revival of previous paradigms in historical studies by its initiators. Chen Chunsheng, the first director of the Centre for Historical Anthropology, has made an exhaustive account of the academic legacies that he and his colleagues have inherited. In addition to the two socioeconomic historians Fu Yiling and Liang Fangzhong, other pre-1949 intellectual resources that Chen is associated with include



the Institute of Philology and History at Academia Sinica (later renamed Institute of History and Philology) founded by Fu Sinian in Guangzhou, folklore studies promoted by Gu Jiegang, Rong Zhaozu, Zhong Jingwen in Sun Yat-sen University, social surveys conducted by sociologist Chen Xujing (Lingnan University) among the boat people of the Pearl River Delta, and ethnographical studies by ethnologists Yang Chengzhi and Jiang Yingliang (both in Sun Yat-sen University) on minorities in the southwest. Chen emphasizes that the problematique and approaches that he and his cohort have been applying are in actuality a continuation of various interdisciplinary academic paradigms that emerged in the 1920s. In other words, current historical anthropological studies have not emerged *ex nihilo* but have roots in previous scholarship. By blending traditional methods of documentation with field observations and collecting textual and oral accounts on site, Chinese historians will be able to develop a set of analytical tools for comprehending local source materials and hence local knowledge, and with more publications of case studies that share similar concerns and approaches, new interpretations of Chinese history may be derived (Chen 2006b). In retrospect, it is perhaps no coincidence that Jacques Le Goff's 1993 remark encouraging historians with anthropological orientations to establish a new discipline called "historical anthropology" was made at Sun Yat-sen University. His comment has become an endorsement for that endeavor in China.<sup>3</sup>

The fruit of the marriage can be illustrated by the works of Liu Zhiwei, which synthesize the collaboration between historians and anthropologists in the Pearl River Delta and demonstrate how historical studies may benefit the synthesis. Being accustomed to collecting and reading written materials, Liu was amazed by the oral accounts he and Helen Siu collected in the field. With more and more ethnographical experiences, he realized that the many dichotomies that appear in documents—landlords versus tenants, major lineages versus inferior households, outsiders and insiders, and the very essentialized ethnic categories of Han and Dan—are in fact full of ambiguities and fluidities. As noted by Siu, the contrast between self-identified labels and those imposed by others has always been striking. Liu remarks that investigating the formation of such dichotomies shows a history of long-term physiographical changes, struggles for power and resources, responses and reactions to state policies, interpretation and appropriation of various religious traditions, and literati ideologies in the local arena. Anthropologists can help draw researchers' attention to the power relationship and sociocultural structure represented by these labels. A critical reading of source materials will take cognizance of the fact that how local agents narrate their history in both written and oral forms also has a history, and is structured by previous narratives and history in which it is embedded. In this manner, the structuralist tradition of anthropology has shifted its focus from "structure" to "structuring," that is, how structures are formed over a historical process. Historians will contribute better to revealing the ongoing process of structuring if they are more aware of the "structures" that carry meanings and constraints (Liu Zhiwei 2003; Siu and Liu 2006).

### Problematizing "China"

Critics who find social history trivial and regional approaches fragmented may also find historical anthropology overly preoccupied with field work at a micro level. They are worried about the "loss of China" in research, despite the fact that scholars engaged in historical anthropology ventures do clarify from time to time that their ultimate goal is a holistic understanding of China and Chinese history. Eventually it will be the joint effort of countless spatial-cum-temporal researches that will help explain the evolution of



“China” as an entity in whatever terms. More and more historians believe that the notion of “China” has to be deconstructed before its history can be reconstructed. “China” needs to be problematized, or China studies will be problematic.

At this juncture, scholars of Chinese intellectual history are more ready to offer a broader lens for looking at “China as a whole.” Ge Zhaoguang, the author of *An Intellectual History of China*, proposes the notion of “viewing China from the periphery” (*cong zhoubian kan zhongguo*) as one of the five themes of research which he launched at the National Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies founded at Fudan University in 2007. Following his undertaking of positioning China in the historical context of Asia, in particular East Asia, Ge’s notion of “viewing China from the periphery” calls for intensive research on materials about China collected or written abroad, mainly in but not limited to Japan, Korea, Mongolia, and Vietnam. These materials would present the viewpoints of East Asian intellectuals other than their Ming-Qing counterparts between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such a perspective, Ge expects, would be helpful for releasing China studies not only from the China-centered view of *tianxia* (under heaven), but also from the previous over-reliance on western sources (western-centric [Eurocentric] point of view). Ge’s search for an Asian perspective as an alternative to the Eurocentric point of view is meant to be a major backbone for his venture of problematizing China. He proposes to think beyond the Eurocentric nation-state paradigm for studying “China” in motion, asking how “China” as a socio-political and cultural entity has evolved over time. Specializing in medieval cultural and religious history, he argues that the emergence of certain senses of the “Chinese consciousness” (*Zhongguo yishi*) can be traced back to the Song dynasty. Such senses of Chinese consciousness became the foundation for historical memories, discourse on space, and national identities held by many Chinese people in the centuries that followed. Along these lines Ge is engaging in debates with postcolonial western historiography, challenging a tendency to understate the continuity in senses of Chineseness over the long course of history (Ge 2011; 2012).

Perhaps the best place to experiment with the notion of “problematizing China” is the southwestern part of China (present-day Guizhou, Yunnan, and the southern part of Sichuan), which was not integrated into the Chinese empire until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Despite the growing number of publications in Chinese, English, and Japanese on this region, Wen Chunlai (2008) from Sun Yat-sen University selected in particular the Yi people in the northwestern part of Guizhou as his research subject. According to Wen, the Yi people, unlike many other frontier populations, used to have their own writing system and political organizations, whose history can be traced back to the Song period when a number of autonomous states coexisted in the southwest. Wen argues that a certain sense of Yi identity already existed at that time and substantiated a relatively autonomous political, social, and cultural entity. This entity mostly worked against the Ming and Qing political and social institutions, but did at times adapt to their Han-Chinese culture. Wen rejects the postmodernist notion that ethnic identity is merely a modern invention while also refusing to side with the claim that the Yi is one single people that has existed from the days of old. What he is looking for is a middle way between the ontological and constructionist views of ethnic identity (see Mullaney’s chapter in this volume).

The notion of “problematizing China” has also been proposed to address the apparent dilemma of unity and diversity, yet the question remains how a balance can be struck between the two that would lead to useful methodological directions. Reexamining the



idea of Sinicization, the emerging “new Qing history” studies in the United States have evoked responses among historians specializing in Qing studies both on the mainland and Taiwan (see Liu and Liu 2010; Wang 2014). Acknowledging the significance of the questions raised by the new Qing history concerning the legitimacy of the Qing and of the importance of non-Chinese materials, Ding Yizhuang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences critically reviews the “grand unification” (*dayitong*) discourse that has been prevalent among many mainland Chinese historians (Ding 2009/2010). She looks at how Manchu intellectuals might have perceived their own identities and their identification with the idea of the Chinese nation that emerged in the late Qing (Ding 2014). Placing the historical-geographical orientation of the new Qing history alongside that of Chinese scholarship, which has evolved since the Song, Yang Nianqun suggests a search for a third road to strike a balance between the “northeast/inner Asia” orientation and the “south/north” orientation, and between the Sinicization narratives and the emphasis on the “Manchu way,” so as to achieve a genuine multidimensional view of the formation of the Qing empire (Yang 2011a; 2014b). In any case, to avoid politicizing the debate, these mainland historians try to synchronize the perspectives at two poles, at a time when a new Qing History Compilation Project is being launched with strong financial support from the PRC government.

A comparable debate was started by David Faure and Liu Zhiwei in response to a special 2007 issue of *Modern China* devoted to “Ritual, Cultural Standardization, and Orthopraxy.” The two authors suggest that the apparent dilemma of unity and diversity should be tackled by appreciating the long duration of the legitimizing process over large and varied geographic regions of China through a systematic documentation of the history of the adoption of legitimizing symbols, and by comparing these histories across local cultures instead of reiterating the existence of variations between local practices and perceived unities (Ke and Liu 2008, 2009; Sutton 2009). It is worth noting that although questioning unity and emphasizing local variations can be politically sensitive in mainland China, the debates concerned, involving scholars from different countries with different academic backgrounds, are sincere intellectual discussions and are not demarcated along political or national lines.

### More “new”: New institutional history and new political history

Since the decade of the 2000s, reflections in response to the impact of socioeconomic history with a regional approach on Chinese historiography have become more apparent among scholars who work on periods other than Ming-Qing. Historians working on ancient and medieval history have begun to pay more attention to society than to the court (Li 2012). By the same token, some scholars who work on modern and contemporary China, including those specializing in Chinese Communist Party history, have begun to conduct research at a micro and local level, and their efforts are being complemented by some fieldwork-oriented Ming-Qing historians who plow through post-1950s local archives and source materials and conduct on-site interviews and observation in rural communities. At the same time, historians working on Republican China are seeking to distance themselves from the revolutionary paradigm with its focus on peasant society and to look for new arenas in cities. This shift has resulted in a huge amount of such topical research as urban development, municipal constructions, public health and hygiene, media and entertainment, religions, and social campaigns, as well as studies of post-1911 symbols and monuments.



There are also attempts to counterbalance the slant to socioeconomic approaches and to work out a grand yet operative agenda to guide studies of modern China. Stressing that government codes, regulations, and institutions (*dianzhang zhidu*) have been a strong point of traditional Chinese historiography, and that such research orientations have been relatively ignored by historians who work on modern China, Sang Bing proposes a series of systematic and topical studies on “knowledge and institutional transformation” (*zhishi yu zhidu zhuanxing*) as a thematic breakthrough for reexamining late Qing and early Republican history. Sang maintains that studies of government regulations and institutions should involve not only examining their origins and developments in the literal sense, but also how they have been put into practice and what reactions and consequences have resulted. He argues that the knowledge and institutional transformation that took place during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was undeniably triggered to a large extent by Sino-foreign conflicts and exchanges. He calls the transformation’s impact consequential, almost marking a “great divide” in Chinese history. But precisely because this transformation process involved “Sino” (and thus “traditional”/“imperial” China, to which we as modern people are alien) and “foreign” (and thus “Japanese” and “western,” the meanings of which are always ambiguous) elements, and because modern Chinese scholars are products of this “great divide,” twentieth-century researchers are part of these institutions and cannot avoid using their terms and vocabularies. To be critical and reflective of themselves, the terms, vocabularies, knowledge, and institutions that twentieth-century scholars have been using need careful scrutiny. Sang believes that by historicizing terms and concepts, modern researchers will be better armed to prevent themselves from falling into the dichotomies of “east” and “west,” “traditional” and “modern,” “backward” and “advanced,” which have for a long time dominated the discourse of the studies on modern China (Sang 2004; 2012).

Sang and his collaborators do not use the term “new institutional history” (*xin zhidushi*) to describe what they do. But among some Song historians this term is paired with “new political history” (*xin zhengzhishi*) as pointing the way forward. Institutional and political histories in the traditional sense used to dominate studies of Song history. By promoting a “living institutional history” (*huo de zhidushi*), Deng Xiaonan (2004) implies that researchers should consider institutions or institutionalization as a social process as well as a web of connections, and examine how certain institutions have evolved and have been put into practice in reality. Studies of the Song bureaucracy, for example, involve not only the nature and organization of the government, but also the formation and operation of the institutions concerned. Moreover, cross-dynastic institutional continuity also requires Song historians to look at the state of affairs in mid- and late Tang as well as in the Five Dynasties. Historians today should be able to overcome the constraints of their Song counterparts who looked at the Tang and the Five Dynasties from the traditional point of view, which was mainly concerned with the rise and fall of the dynasty (*benchao shiguan*). This statement is significant for Chinese historians in China as their professional training and grouping have always been periodized according to imperial dynasties. Alongside new institutional history is “new political history.” Huang Kuanchong (2009b) from Taiwan echoes Deng Xiaonan’s discussion in his article entitled “From a Living Institutional History to a New Political History.” Whereas traditional political history pays much attention to studying a few emperors and officials as decision-makers and competitors for power, new political history requires researchers to examine the interaction between the central government



and local society and to consider political observers and practitioners as part of a literati group rather than as a few manipulative and influential individuals. Meanwhile, thanks to the efforts made by scholars on collecting and annotating source materials, the increasing availability of literary collections which reveal in detail the activities and personal opinions of Song men facilitates this new research orientation. Compared to the above-mentioned academic fashions such as social history, regional approaches, and historical anthropology, “new political history” is so “new” that the discussion has as yet been recapitulated only in the form of a “written conversation” (*bitan*) among scholars from mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan, which was published in the *Journal of Historical Science* (*Shixue Yuekan*) in 2014.

### Generation Y and e-research

The post-1990s development of historical studies in mainland China is like its economy: its growth is swift, its scale massive, its resources substantial, and, more importantly, it is to some extent planned and mobilized by the state, specifically the Ministry of Education, which attempts to interfere with academic development from time to time. The Chinese Communist strategic practice of building an echelon or cohort of successors (*tidui*) matches well with the traditional Chinese norms of continuing lines of scholarship (*jiafa*) from one generation to another. The result is that junior scholars in mainland China receive more attention and support from their institutions and governments than their foreign counterparts. Compared with their predecessors they have more resources at a young age to launch their own research projects, to attend and organize conferences or seminars solely for their age group (typically those born in the 1980s), to visit or study abroad, and to have their work published in China and overseas. Many universities have been for some years recruiting new faculty among overseas PhD graduates. Even for postgraduate and undergraduate students there are cross-university seminars and summer classes for scouting talents. Some of the best works of this new generation show that they are better equipped to blend together traditional Chinese scholarships with modern social science problematiques, and to have conversation and cooperation with foreign counterparts. In this age of information they are busy circulating ideas and sharing resources on blogs and Chinese apps such as WeChat. They are encouraged to be innovative, and are also doing their best to be. How far they can go, however, may take another ten years to evaluate.

What is already clear at this stage is that the impact of massive publication and digitalization of source materials on historical studies is far-reaching. With the application of a variety of digitized databases of such fundamental Chinese history literature as the *Twenty-Five Histories* (*Ershiwu shi*), *Complete Library of the Four Branches* (*Siku quanshu*), Confucian classics, gazetteers, genealogies, Ming-Qing government archives, literary collections, steles and inscriptions, with the compilation and digitization of a huge number of modern newspapers and journals, and with the gradual release (and occasional closing) of Republican and PRC archives to the public, Chinese historians, especially those who work on the post-sixteenth-century period, find themselves immersed in an ocean of source materials and are crying for a way out. In this age of overwhelming information, historical study can no longer simply be the elementary documentation of the chronology of terms. Instead, it requires a contextualized understanding and interpretation of the operative meaning of those terms (and thus the material culture, institutions, and social phenomenon that they represent) on the



basis of preliminary search, which can now be done by machines. In this manner the traditional training of edition study (*banben*) and textual criticism (*jiaokan*) plays a vital role in judging the validity of texts selected for constructing and complementing these databases.

In light of the mass production of doctoral theses, journal articles, and monographs resulting from data-running, keyword-searching, and the routines of cut-and-paste, it is not uncommon for many Chinese historians to remind their students of the Tang historian Liu Zhiji's three yardsticks for assessing the competency of historians: intelligence (*shicai*), knowledge (*shixue*), and sense of judgment (*shishi*). In other words, a proper intellectual monitoring of the expansion of raw data is urgently needed in this age of cloud computing in order to distinguish good academic work from mass-produced outcomes. Likewise, students of Chinese history also need the sophistication to pick reliable references from the fairly inclusive China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (cnki.net), in which the China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database has collected published articles from more than 8,000 types of academic journals published in China. Equally noteworthy is the more traditional printed media. With a promising market backed up by a huge reading population, resourceful presses in mainland China are often willing to print 1,000 to 5,000 copies of academic works of various topics and subjects, in contrast to the decline of academic publishing in many other parts of the world.

### Not yet a conclusion: The "Second Revolution"<sup>4</sup>

There is no easy answer to Liang Qichao's question posed at the beginning of this chapter: Have Chinese historians become well versed in an interdisciplinary approach? Have they accomplished the writing of a holistic history? Has Chinese history been helpful in deriving general laws and models for understanding changes and transformation of human societies? One western social scientist's answer to these questions after 60 years was a hypothetical yes. In a short piece published in 1964, G. W. Skinner affirmed that the characteristics of China make it an extreme and exceptional case but one that could "not be omitted from comparative analysis directed toward the development of universal theory" (Skinner 1964b, 522). It is worth noting that as an anthropologist starting his research with field work on the contemporary society, Skinner gave deliberate emphasis to imperial China.

A Chinese historian's response to Liang Qichao's appeal after another 50 years is more complex, and, perhaps surprisingly, places more hope on the study of contemporary China. Wang Jiafan (b. 1938), a historian held in high regard on the mainland and elsewhere, gave a concise review of the development of twentieth-century Chinese historiography at the concluding session of a conference held in 2012, which discussed the opportunities and challenges posed by the expansion of new materials to Chinese history.<sup>5</sup> Himself a Ming-Qing historian, Wang gives deliberate emphasis to the study of modern and contemporary China. Seemingly casual, Wang's comments are in fact heart-touching statements addressing a whole new generation of Chinese historians. They are, therefore, worth quoting at length:

The changes undergone by our historical studies over the past thirty years ... can be summarized as an attempt "to escape from the writing of general history" (*zouchu tongshi*)—if I may put it in this way. We find the previous writing of general history unsatisfactory. I am one of those who muddled through in compiling general history. I know that business well.



Those kinds of general history are full of simple judgments of black and white, of abstraction, arbitrariness, ideological control, distortions, and even of faked or false facts. In the beginning we were young and did not know history well; we trusted everything. However, with more and more studies we began to question whether they are true or not, and to be dissatisfied with these kinds of general history. What I would like to assert now is that after thirty years of effort we should set for ourselves a goal. From now on we should come out [of our previous state]; we are like what Mr. Lu Xun says in his "What happens after Nora leaves home?"—We have left the old home of general history; we have wandered in society [i.e., engaging in social history]; and now we are still looking for a new home. After all we must have a home to go to. With all the efforts we have made we should go back to the goal of compiling a general history.

What I mean to say is that our goal of compiling a general history has undergone two revolutions. The first one was the "New historiography" movement initiated by Liang Qichao. It was aimed at reforming the classical tradition of general history established by Sima Qian. Apparently Liang's slogans look very similar to ours, but ultimately he did not achieve his goal, namely, writing a people's history that would replace the traditional history of emperors and kings, generals and ministers. We later changed his slogan into "history from below," attempting to shift our attention from the upper levels to the grass roots of society. This revolution was in effect started in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with social history as its marker. We have undergone a very long preparatory stage to put this revolution into practice. This is because while advocating a "history from below," the foremost concern [of scholars] is in fact the future of China. If there was any "social history" in those years [i.e., before the late 1970s], it was in fact in debates on the nature of Chinese society. Our socioeconomic history originated from these debates on the nature of Chinese society. It was not until some years later that a *bona fide* social history revolution commenced. Over the past thirty years [more and more Chinese historians] have gone to the field to be with the people and to experience their lives. From then on they have become more able to reflect upon the governance and control of the state from the people's point of view.

While the preceding is a critical reflection by Wang Jiafan on previous scholarships as well as on his own life, what follows is his message to a new generation of Chinese historians of the twentieth-first century:

We are now witnessing and are also beginning a second revolution of historical studies. This "Second Revolution" is shifting its focus downward in a sense that its center of attention is moving from traditional and modern history to contemporary history. This revolution has just begun. ... Some innovative ideas are emerging, and they are still a hidden tendency; some studies are still underground. Slowly this undercurrent will become the mainstream, a hotspot, and an established discipline. We should trust that China is proceeding and developing. Why do I say something like this? I tell my post-graduate students that I do not want them to study the Ming and Qing periods, and some of them do work on the modern period. I think there should be more and more young people studying contemporary China. If they do not equip themselves for this field within the coming decade, they will not be able to catch up with the trend in twenty years from now.

Like many other Chinese historians, Wang's aspirations for Chinese historiography goes side by side with his aspirations for the future of his country. The possibility of rewriting the history of the People's Republic of China means a lot more than mere academic achievement, as it points to the possibility of opening up a new future for China. This future is, hopefully, foreseeable from the wisdom of the past.



## Notes

- 1 See the data downloaded from China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database at <http://cnki.net>. Accessed June 1, 2016.
- 2 The Chinese term *lishi renlei xue* for translating the French *anthropologie historique* appears probably for the first time in a short article Jin Chongyuan (1985), who later published a more elaborate piece in 1986. Jin highlighted the studies of *anthropologie historique* and *histoire des mentalités* among the French historians. In 1989, a more comprehensive picture of the state of French historiography was introduced in mainland China with the publication of *New Historiography* (*Xin shixue*) in 1989, a collection of Chinese articles selected from *Faire De L'Histoire* (co-edited by Jacques le Goff and Pierre Nora, 1st ed., 1974) and *Nouvelle Histoire* (co-edited by Jacques le Goff and Roger Chartier, 1st ed., 1978), in which a chapter titled "Historical Anthropology" by André Burguière is included. In the same year, another very influential translated work coming out in China was *New Directions in European Historiography* (*Ouzhou shixue xin fangxiang*) (by Georg G. Iggers, 1st ed., 1975, trans. Zhao Shiling and Zhao Shiyu).
- 3 In 1993 Le Goff came to China and joined a seminar-cum-tour conference jointly organized by L'Institut TRANSCULTURA and Sun Yat-sen University. On that occasion he had conversations with history faculties, sharing with them his prospect for the future of history. Pointing to the dilemma faced by western anthropology in the postcolonial era, Le Goff says, "ethnology is now turning into anthropology, i.e., the science about humans, and not the science about races. This research approach is very essential, as with this approach we will be more capable of understanding the history of people's daily lives—the history of all human beings, not merely the history of the upper class. However, anthropology evolves from the schools of functionalism and structuralism, both of which pay little attention to times and history. In view of that, for those historians who want to be anthropologists, they should establish a discipline, namely, historical anthropology." The conversation was recorded, transcribed, translated, and published in Chinese six years later. See Liu Wenli 1999.
- 4 In modern Chinese history, the "Second Revolution" refers to the military campaign launched by the southern provinces in July 1913 in an attempt to depose Yuan Shikai, who was blamed for selling the country to foreigners and thus being a traitor to the newly established Republic. Since this episode a "Second Revolution" has always meant a second attempt to fulfill a formerly unaccomplished mission.
- 5 Entitled "New Source Materials and New Historiography: Opportunities and Challenges" (*Xin shiliao yu xin shixue: jiyu yu tiaozhan*), the conference was held at Zhejiang University August 25–26, 2012.

## Suggestions for further reading

Note: This Further Reading list consists only items in English. But students of Chinese history should realize that among the many works produced by mainland Chinese scholars the best are written in Chinese. To fully appreciate the documentation and the argumentation of high-quality scholarly works students should equip themselves with adequate Chinese proficiency. Meanwhile, Chinese academia has taken some initiatives to translate selected Chinese journal articles into English. Early attempts are made through *Social Sciences in China* (since 1980), an English edition of *Zhongguo shehui kexue* published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In recent years, two English journals on Chinese history have jointly been launched by Chinese institutes and foreign presses. They are, namely, the *Frontiers of History in China* (China Higher Education Press and Brill, since 2006), and the *Journal of Modern Chinese History* (Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Routledge, since 2007).



- Dirlik, Arif. 1978. *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937*. Berkeley: University of California Press. A contextualized and historicized treatment of Marxist historiography in China, examining the intellectual currents in the 1920s and 1930s.
- Liu Wennan, Arif Dirlik, Luo Zhitian, Timothy Cheek, Peter Zarrow, Yang Kuisong, and Huang Daoxuan. 2013. (Articles resulting from the forum titled “Reflections on Chinese Revolutionary History and Its Contemporary Legacy.”) *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 7.2: 240–65. doi: 10.1080/17535654.2013.854947, 850860 850863, 850865, 850866, 850868, 850869. An up-to-date example of dialogues between mainland Chinese, Taiwan, and overseas scholars on the current state of Chinese revolutionary history.
- Rawski, Evelyn. 1991. “Research Themes in Ming-Qing Socioeconomic History—The State of the Field.” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 50.1: 84–111. A critical review of the state of Ming-Qing socioeconomic history studies in the Chinese-, English-, and Japanese-speaking worlds in the 1980s and 1990s.
- Sang Bing. 2009. “The Boundary of Source Materials for Recent Chinese History and the Integrity of Historiography: With Reference to the Compilation and Publication of Relevant Historical Materials.” *Frontiers of History in China*, 4.4: 510–36. doi:10.1007/s11462-009-0021-z. Expresses the concern and responses of experts on modern Chinese history in view of the boom of source materials.
- Xie Wei. 2010. “Thirty Years of Modern Chinese History Studies: Past Experiences and Prospective Trends.” *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 4.1: 91–104. DOI:10.1080/17535651003779475. A state-of-the-field account of post-1980s modern Chinese history studies.