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Ethnic and Cultural Pluralism

Gu Jiegang's Vision of a New China in His Studies of Ancient History

TZE-KI HON

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Although the Chinese historian Gu Jiegang (1893-1980) has been known to the West for more than half a century (Hummel, 1931; Schneider, 1971; Richter, 1992), he remains for many scholars an ambiguous figure. Gu has been perceived variously as traditional or modern in his historiography and as pursuing a path independent of both the Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party in his political affiliation. He has been understood as at home in both high culture (e.g., classical studies) and popular culture (e.g., folklore) and as accomplished in both philology and ethnography. Gu's ambiguity exemplifies a type of dynamic personality that is still common in China. More important, his ambiguity reveals the limits of our scholarly categories for conceptualizing modern Chinese history.

In his groundbreaking monograph on Gu, Laurence Schneider emphasizes Gu's antitraditionalism and scientific method by calling him "a post-Confucian iconoclast and historical revisionist" (Schneider, 1971: 2). However, Schneider also sees the limits of this interpretation. He admits that a characteristic of Gu's scholarship was "his will to retain a Chinese identity for a twentieth-century China" (Schneider, 1971: 4). The "antitraditional" Gu seems to be proud of the culture of his nation, and the "scientific" Gu seems to think that China will remain China even after undergoing a "scientific revolution." The German scholar Ursula Richter, who has recently written at length about Gu in both German and English, also speaks of the paradox of Gu. She calls Gu "the traditional and yet modern scholar who was true to tradition also in that he 'obeyed yet resisted' "

(Richter, 1982: 288). She places him in an obscure area where tradition and modernity are separated and linked at the same time.

Likewise, in politics Gu was an anomaly. His refusal to give the Han people a privileged position in historical accounts and his rejection of the idea of Chinese territorial integration in antiquity earned the enmity of the GMD in the late 1920s. Amid the GMD campaign of nation-building, the ideologue Dai Jitao (1891-1949) censured Gu's writings (Hon, 1992). But the GMD's hostility did not mean that Gu was a Marxist. On the contrary, when the Marxist historical approach was in vogue among Chinese historians in early 1930s, Gu defended the value of "reorganizing China's national heritage" (*zhengli guogu*). Gu's resistance to the Marxist historical approach, according to Arif Dirlik, sprang from his inability "to substitute for the Confucian view a comprehensive theory of history that could account for the interrelationship of historical phenomena or the dynamics of historical change" (Dirlik, 1978: 10). Later, after the establishment of the People's Republic, Gu paid a high price for refusing to change. As the one time protégé of Hu Shi (1891-1962), Gu was accused of "bourgeoisie scholarship" during the anti-Hu Shi campaign of the early 1950s, and for political reasons, his research was almost brought to a halt throughout the 1960s and early 1970s (Richter, 1982: 287-294).

In recent rethinking among scholars regarding how one should study China (Cohen, 1984; Farquhar and Hevia, 1993), the ambiguity of Gu represents an intriguing case deserving new attention. The problems in interpreting Gu, it seems to me, arise less from the man himself than from the perspectives of Asianist scholars. Gu did not write his historical pieces to declare his "traditional" or his "modern" inclinations. Neither did he refuse to subscribe to the Marxist historical approach because he failed to see "the interrelationship of historical phenomena or the dynamics of historical change." As a sensitive soul responding to his time, Gu expressed what seemed to him the best path for his country and his profession. To understand why Gu made the choices he did, we must examine how he addressed the needs of the time and how he located himself in the discourse of history.

This article seeks to relate Gu's studies of ancient history to a vision of a new China that was implied in those studies. Like some of his colleagues in the 1930s, such as Chen Yinke (1890-1969), Qian Mu (1895-1990), and Fu Sinian (1896-1950) (Wang Yongzu 1984: 93-

176; Hon, 1991), Gu's narration of the past amounted to a critique of the present and a prescription for the future. Gu may not have been as systematic or goal directed as Marxist historians; nevertheless, he was fervently engaged in rethinking the nature of China and how China should be developed. Gu's refusal to give a systematic and teleological account of China's past, rather than being a shortcoming, was a strength and a matter of deliberate choice. It was a decision based on the belief that the dynamic of change in China lay in that nation's cultural and ethnic diversity.

HISTORY AND NATIONALISM

Laurence Schneider locates Gu's historical studies in the context of nationalism (Schneider, 1971: 53-84). In reviewing Gu's biography, it is clear that his early life was preoccupied with a quest for China's rebirth. Born two years before China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), Gu spent his formative years hearing and reading about foreign invasions and the late Qing reform (Gu, 1926: 11-17; Hummel, 1931: 16-27). As a high school student, Gu was so carried away with the 1911 revolution that he briefly joined the revolutionary group in Suzhou (Gu, 1926: 17-18; Hummel, 1931: 28-30). Distressed by the social and political instability in post-revolution China, Gu developed an interest in history while he was a student at Beijing University (1916-1920) (Gu, 1926: 23-27; Hummel, 1931: 38-47). Inspired by the May Fourth New Culture Movement in general, and Hu Shi in particular, Gu committed himself to transforming China by examining her past (Gu, 1926: 35-56; Hummel, 1931: 63-105). In his autobiography, Gu discussed how his nationalism animated his study of history:

This whole question of [Chinese] racial survival is a very important one in [the study of] history, but one on which it is impossible to reach definite conclusions without years of investigation. Living as I do in this period of turmoil, I share with others a patriotic desire to save the country, but having no personal aptitude for politics, and no ability in promoting great social movements, I find it impossible to make a contribution, except by helping toward a possible solution of this question [Hummel, 1931: 169, with modifications; Gu, 1926: 90].

For Gu, the pressing question was whether China could survive in the twentieth century. The China in which he lived was plagued by foreign invasions and civil wars. Especially in the early 1920s, when Gu began his career as an historian, China was racked by turmoil and seemingly locked in poverty. Beijing, the city Gu had known since he was an undergraduate, was the battleground for various warlord factions (Gu, 1926: 101-102; Hummel, 1931: 182-184; Strand, 1989: 189-221). To understand what had brought China to this pass and to find out how China might be saved from what promised to be her imminent dissolution, Gu turned to history.

In situating Gu's historical studies in the context of nationalism, Schneider reminds us that Gu shared a similar concern with other modern Chinese thinkers. Liang Qichao (1893-1929), for instance, had advocated in 1902 a "new history" (*xin shixue*), to be written for the Chinese nation rather than for the ruling dynasties. This "new history," according to Liang, would focus on the evolution of China as a nation from its very beginnings. The "new history" would promote Chinese nationalism by highlighting the fundamental characteristics of the Chinese nation and the communal identity shared by the people of China (Liang Qichao, 1980: 3-40; Xu Guansan, 1986: 1-11). Writing the "history of the nation" (*guoshi*) spread like wildfire in China at the turn of the twentieth century. Prominent historians like Liu Yizheng (1880-1956), Liu Shipei (1884-1919), and Xia Zengyou (1863-1924) all wrote various accounts of the evolution of the Chinese nation.¹ As the social and political situation in China deteriorated after the 1911 revolution, there was an increasing demand for accounts of the history of the nation.

While Schneider is right in stressing the common nationalistic concern of Gu and his colleagues, he has not paid sufficient attention to Gu's uniqueness as a historian.² Sharing with other historians the burning desire to save the nation and the notion of historical evolution, Gu distinguished himself by his vision of China—a vision (discussed below) that shaped his concept of the nation's evolution and informed his understanding of the sources of China's plight. In this regard, one may argue that the debates surrounding the publication of Gu's multi-volume *Gushi bian* (*Symposium on Ancient History*) involved more than a disputation over texts and historical facts.³ Rather, what was at issue was the very definition of the Chinese nation.⁴ To understand the

nature of the debates in the 1920s and 1930s, we need to investigate Gu's vision of China.

CULTURAL AND ETHNIC PLURALISM

To a great extent, Gu's vision of China was shaped by Hu Shi. In his autobiography, Gu admitted that his interest in classical texts and ancient history grew out of reading Kang Youwei (1858-1927), Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), and Wang Guowei (1877-1927) (Gu, 1926: 23-26, 50-51; Hummel, 1931: 38-47, 92-85). While these three masters provided Gu with specialized knowledge of classical scholarship, it was Hu Shi who gave him a perspective for understanding Chinese history.⁵ In a nutshell, that perspective was this: China was much more than what had been presented in high culture (Gu, 1926: 36-48; Hummel, 1931: 65-83).

Hu Shi, of course, first achieved fame by launching a literary revolution to replace the "dead" classical language (*wenyan*) of China with the "living" vernacular (*baihua*). What may have seemed to be purely a literary revolution was actually, in essence, a social revolution that entailed redefining the educated class. Instead of restricting the quintessential qualification for status as an educated person to knowledge of *wenyan*, as had been the case in the past, Hu Shi argued that the Chinese language should be "something universal, lying within the competence of the great majority of our countrymen" (Grieder, 1970: 75-88). By making the vernacular *baihua* the written language of the country, Hu Shi wanted to broaden the base of the educated class by including those who previously had been excluded because of their comparatively weak classical training. This expansion of the educated class implied an expansion of the meaning of Chinese high culture. What had been previously considered popular culture, such as the so-called four masterworks of the Ming novel (*sida qishu*), was now considered high culture worthy of meticulous scholarly study (Hu Shi, 1975: 1: 500-547; 2: 354-89). Undergirding Hu Shi's literary revolution was a populist vision that a rejuvenation of China had to involve more than a small elite.

Although Hu Shi had tried to present his populist vision in historical studies,⁶ it was actually Gu who made the populist vision known to

historians. In Gu's representation of the past, China was an ethnically and geographically diverse land constantly undergoing change. Gu did not think the "Chinese" consisted of only the Han people; rather, the word "Chinese," for Gu, designated all the people who lived in the land called China—*Zhongguo* (the Middle Kingdom). As the boundaries of China changed in time, the composition of "the Chinese" changed as well. But whatever changes may have taken place, China endured as a country, and her various ethnic groups and peoples played their part in making the country vibrant.

In his writings, Gu exhibited a high regard for China's minority ethnic groups, whom he thought were essential for the survival of the country. Gu found many instances in history when it was minority ethnic groups, not the Han people, that had resuscitated a declining China. Gu writes in his autobiography,

In the period of the Warring States (403-255 B.C.), when there was an influx of many new racial elements, China was unusually vigorous and powerful, but in the Han dynasty the arbitrary power of the monarchy, and the exclusiveness of Confucian teaching, brought Chinese culture to the verge of extinction. The reduced physical stamina of the people, their intellectual mediocrity, their lack of enthusiasm and will-power, all signified that the end was near. Had it not been for the infusion of new blood from the *wuhu*, or Five Barbarian Tribes of the Jin dynasty (265-419 A.D.), from the Khitan (eleventh century), from the Jurchen (twelfth century), and the Mongols (thirteenth century), I fear that the Han race could not have survived [Hummel, 1931: 166-167, with modifications; Gu, 1926: 89].

Gu's vision of China as a multiethnic and many-cultured country was the key to his optimistic reading of modern China's plight. Although by any standard the condition of twentieth-century China was dismal, Gu saw reasons for being hopeful:

But there are ways of viewing the question [of China in decline] more optimistically so that rays of hope begin to appear. Instead of saying that such elements of our population as the Manchus, the Mongols, the Mohammedans, and the Tibetans have reached a stage of decline, it is truer to say that they are still primitive peoples scarcely removed from the nomadic, hunting, and fishing epochs. And even within the confines of southwestern China there are aboriginal tribes such as the Miao, Yao, Dong, and Po which, despite the policy of the Ming and Qing emperors to "bring them within the range of Chinese," have not yet been truly

assimilated. . . . And while it is true that the culture of the purely Chinese, or Han clans, is certainly old, it must be remembered that under centuries of autocratic domination "The rules of ceremony did not apply to the common people," so that education was never widespread, and higher culture had only a limited influence on the masses. . . . There is hope for the future of China if we see to it that racial elements are given educational advantages, by the aid of which they can work out their own salvation [Hummel, 1931: 167-169; Gu, 1926: 89-90].

Thus, for Gu, hope and comfort came neither from the center of the Chinese political order nor from high culture, both of which were dominated by the Han. Rather, hope and comfort came from those who were not contaminated by the Han elite: the uneducated masses, the minority ethnic groups, and those who lived on the borderlands. Although these three groups had long been denied a voice in the state and in genteel culture, they were historically vital forces for rejuvenating the country. The hope for the future of China lay in mobilizing these underprivileged groups, bringing them from the periphery to the center. Gu's argument was that because the former center of China, dominated by the Han and ruled by the Confucian state, had proven to be decayed and ineffectual, to save the country a new center open to all ethnic groups and all forms of Chinese cultures had to be established. To highlight his point, Gu announced that the mission of his historical studies was to counter four common misperceptions: (1) that the "Chinese" originated from one race, (2) that the territorial boundaries of China were eternal and unchanging, (3) that the ancient myths had to be rationalized as the human quest for a better life, and (4) that China possessed an untarnished golden antiquity (*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 1.96-102). By correcting these four conventional misperceptions, Gu underscored the diversity and fluidity of China.

DISPUTE WITH DAI JITAO

Because of his belief in multiethnicity, Gu regarded Pan-Hanism, advocated by the GMD in the late 1920s under the motto "The Five Races in Harmony" (*wuzu gonghe*), as both historically untrue and morally irresponsible (Schneider, 1971: 260-261). A case in point was

Gu's dispute with the GMD ideologue Dai Jitao in 1929. At issue was whether or not there was an unbroken genealogy of mythological figures that could be considered the founding fathers of China. If there was such a genealogy (e.g., "the three emperors and the five kings"), as Dai Jitao argued, then the Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans, and Muslims were, like the Han, descendants of the same mythological figures. Mongolia, Manchuria, Tibet, and the northwestern borders would have been part of a unified China from time immemorial (Schneider, 1971: 260-261, 272-279; Lee, 1993: 169-272). In this reading, China for thousands of years had been ethnically monistic and culturally homogeneous. Thus the GMD campaign of nation-building based on Pan-Hanism was nothing but the fulfilling of a historic mission of unifying China.

In response to Pan-Hanism, Gu argued that China before the Qin (221-206 B.C.) was ruled by groups with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Supported by his textual studies, Gu proved that a unified China was not only a relatively late development but also a result of a long process of conquest and coercion—of stronger tribes overcoming the weaker. To legitimize unity, the conquerors had pushed the Warring States' concept of "nine regions" (*jiu zhou*) backward and claimed that China had been unified since early antiquity in the fashion of the "nine regions." Hence China's ethnic and cultural diversity was concealed and forgotten in a seemingly cohesive genealogy of mythological figures and sage kings (*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 2.1-9).

Gu's efforts to prove the ethnic diversity of Chinese antiquity were not an idle academic exercise. What Gu undertook was to unmask the political agenda behind the GMD's claim that it was fulfilling the historic mission of unifying the country. In 1936, Gu (in collaboration with Yang Xiankui) finally published a full-scale study of ancient Chinese mythological figures, *San huang kao* (*The Study of the Three Emperors*), in which he took the GMD to task for lying to the Chinese people:

In this world, a thousand empty claims cannot compete with one solid truth. In the past, scholars exhausted themselves in elaborating on the Three Emperors and the Five Kings—they embellished them with gold and associated them with paradise. These scholars seemed to be successful in attracting converts. But, despite their efforts, the Chinese

remained disunited. In unifying the country, the ancient mythological figures are in no way comparable to a host of nationalistic folk heroes. . . .

Since we are all Chinese, we have many common interests. If we develop a good method of unifying the nation, we shall have no difficulty in staying together. The government does not need to lie, telling us that we all have descended from the same ancestors. Even if the government is successful in unifying the country with lies, this unity will be flimsy. Once the people become intelligent, can this trick still deceive them? [Gu, 1936: 25-26]⁷

Dai Jitao, the ideologue who masterminded Pan-Hanism, retaliated with all the political means at his disposal. Already in 1929, the government, at Dai's urging, had banned the high school history textbook that Gu had prepared for the Commercial Press of Shanghai (Gu, 1936: 25-26; see also Gu, 1980-1981: 5.387-400). Later, Dai mobilized other GMD officials to ridicule Gu's iconoclastic approach to the study of ancient Chinese mythological figures (Gu, 1980-1981: 5.391-392). For Gu, the confrontation with Dai Jitao was a moment of truth. It was an occasion when two visions of China collided: the GMD's monolithic, Pan-Hanist China versus Gu's pluralistic, multi-ethnic China. Although the future of China was hardly determined by this single debate, Gu had put history to good use in articulating his image of a new China (Hon, 1992: 16-20).

STRATIFICATION THEORY

If indeed China is multiethnic, many cultured, organic, and ever changing, then what is its essence? In the four or five thousand years of Chinese history, what has sustained China as a cultural and political entity? In the 1920s and the 1930s, Gu's critics frequently posed these difficult questions.

The first to put these questions to Gu was Liu Yizheng, a member of the *Xueheng* (Critical Review) group.⁸ He asked whether, in interpreting his historical evidence, Gu knew the *Shuowen* tradition.⁹ Liu's query was more subtle than it appeared, for Liu was not simply curious about whether Gu followed the *Shuowen* tradition but wished to challenge Gu with the notion that if indeed China could only be defined

culturally, then the *Shuowen* tradition (as transmitted by Qing scholars) had to be one of its key elements. Broadly speaking, Liu Yizheng's vision of China was literarily based: China was China because of her literary tradition, and the Chinese were Chinese because they shared a common literary heritage. Ethnic and cultural differences were relatively unimportant as compared to the common literary legacy.¹⁰

In reply to Liu Yizheng, Gu wrote:

I find it hard to accept Mr. Liu's limited and limiting view. We have our twentieth century academic community to lead our scholarship. We should feel ashamed if we cannot measure up to the scholarly standards of our time. The book [*Shuowen*] by Xu [Shen] and the writings of Qing scholars are materials for our research. They are not a measurement of our scholarship. . . . To avoid being fooled, we have to use today's view to look at ancient texts. If we take the ancient texts as the measurement of our scholarship—blindly obeying them rather than questioning them— . . . we will be spending our whole life tangling with forged history [*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 1.223-231].

In short, Gu argued that times had changed. The *Shuowen* tradition may have been vital in the Han period and it may have captured the imagination of Qing scholars, but it was no longer relevant to twentieth-century China when fundamental changes had taken place in answer to the challenge of the West. Nor should the *Shuowen* tradition be regarded as a yardstick for measuring contemporary scholarship, when it only addressed ancient needs. The sole relevance of the *Shuowen* tradition to contemporary China, Gu believed, lay in its value as a source for elucidating Han intellectual life.

Like other May Fourth intellectuals, Gu wanted to free the present from the past by emphasizing temporal change (Sun, 1986-1987: 44-74; Lee, 1991: 158-177). What made Gu different was that he emphasized temporal change creatively, as a way of understanding multiethnic and many-cultured China. In 1923, Gu published an open letter to Qian Xuantong in the weekly *Nuli* (*Endeavor*) in which he expounded a tripartite "stratification theory" for the study of Chinese history:

- (1) Myths of ancient history became much longer and more elaborate at later times in history. . . .
- (2) Mythical figures became much more heroic at later times in history. . . .

(3) Although we cannot tell the exact condition of these mythical events, we can discover their earliest forms. We may not know the real history of the Eastern Zhou, but at least we know the history of the Eastern Zhou as presented in the Warring States Period. We may not know the real history of the Xia and the Shang, but at least we know the history of the Xia and the Shang as presented in the Eastern Zhou [*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 1.59-65].

What is striking about this "stratification theory" is that Gu did not intend to recover the past in history. For Gu, the past is transmitted to us in the form of historical representation. The representation of the past allows us to generate new meanings in new contexts. In this regard, history is not a record of what actually happened but an explanation of how the past might have led to the present. Seeing history in this light, Gu found the answer to the paradoxes in conventional accounts of Chinese history. The mythological origins of China were repeatedly dated earlier and earlier in successively later renditions not because newly unearthed historical artifacts had indicated an earlier origin but because a more remote origin gave later generations additional room for imagining a link with the ancient past. Similarly, Chinese mythological figures had become more heroic in later depictions not because more documents had come to light showing their heroism but because larger-than-life mythological figures gave later generations greater reason to identify with them.

Instead of comparing different historical accounts to decide which is truer than the other, Gu urges us to consider how Chinese history is presented at different times. Embedded in Gu's "stratification theory" is the notion that a true account of Chinese history will never be fully known to us. What is knowable is the accumulated efforts throughout Chinese history to make the past meaningful to the present. Like an archaeological site, the received account of Chinese history consists of layer after layer of relics, distinct and yet connected. Each period produces its own characteristic way of viewing the past, but the historical reflection in each period draws upon the historical reflection of preceding eras.

Elaborating on this view, Gu compared the writing of history with story telling (*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 1.270-275). As a child, Gu grew up listening to stories and later, as an undergraduate, he found inspiration in his frequent visits to the theaters of Beijing (Gu, 1926: 19-23;

Hummel, 1931: 30-32). Gu considered the creative rendering of a story in each telling as a metaphor for how history was written. As if telling a story, the historian re-creates history by narrating it. Through various means (e.g., packaging, thematizing, selecting materials), the historian builds a narrative to project his image of the past. In Gu's words:

For me, even the contemporaries themselves might not have known the true reality in a story, not to mention we who live much later in time. But we have to see how the story changes [over time]. We have to organize the [altered] materials in a chronological manner. Step-by-step we reconstruct how the story looked when it first appeared, and how it looked in its second rendition. . . . With this method of "not establishing one absolute truth [of an event], but exhausting its transmutations," we may not discover the truth, but we have a glimpse of the broad pattern of how the event [has been perceived] [*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 1.270-275].

For Gu, the essence of China lay in her continuous transformation and periodic regeneration. To capture the ever-changing nature of China, Gu urged his colleagues not to identify "one absolute truth" for the country but to unravel her multiplicity and complexity.

HISTORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Gu was a leading historian of the 1930s and also a founding father of modern Chinese folklore studies.¹¹ His dual identity as a historian and an ethnographer has remained an enigma for some scholars. Enigma or not, he was at home both in history and in ethnography, crossing disciplinary lines with ease.

If we accept Gu's organic view of Chinese history, his interest in ethnography becomes easy to understand.¹² The intertwining of the two disciplines is marvelously illustrated in Gu's interpretation of the folk tale about Lady Meng Jiang. The story of Lady Meng Jiang varied from time to time and from place to place, but its plot essentially centered on Lady Meng Jiang's search for her husband, who had been drafted by the First Emperor of Qin (reigned 221-208 B.C.) to build the Great Wall. Unable to locate the remains of her husband, who died of exhaustion, Lady Meng Jiang cursed the emperor and thereby caused part of the Great Wall to break open, revealing the bones of her

husband (Eberhard, 1965: 24-26; Hung, 1985: 93-95; Waldron, 1990: 197-201). For Gu, the intriguing aspect of studying this and other folktales is not ascertaining whether the story is historically accurate but uncovering how the form and content of the story have evolved in different times and in different places, reflecting the concerns of different peoples (*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 1.68).

For Gu, ethnographic study added an indispensable dimension to the understanding of China. The transformation of the legend of Lady Meng Jiang revealed to him not only that China was transformed in time but also that it was transformed in space.¹³ While in historical accounts one only reads of temporal changes, in the different receptions and retellings of tales and legends, one witnesses regional variation. To express these temporal and spatial aspects of a changing China, Gu followed a two-pronged methodology (Gu & Zhong, 1984: 91-95; Hung, 1985: 103-106). This methodology consisted of what we may call a vertical element—namely, a *historical* approach that examined the transformation of China temporally (e.g., imperial reigns, dynasties, and historical periods)—and a horizontal element—namely, a *geographical* approach that examined the transformation of China regionally (e.g., provincial variations, dialectical adaptations, and ethnic modifications).

The legend of Lady Meng Jiang is a case in point. Not only was the story given different form and content in different periods, but it also received various treatments in different regions. On the regional variations of the legend of Lady Meng Jiang, Gu writes:

If we look at the added elements of the legend, we observe the following: because of the worship of Jiang Yuan in Shaanxi province, the wife of Qi Liang became Lady Meng Jiang in that region; because of the worship of Shun's consort in Hunan province, the legend in that region included elements of "the terrace for husband-waiting" (*wang fu tai*) and "the embellished bamboo" (*xiu zhu*); because there was a custom of washing away evil in Guangxi province, Lady Meng Jiang in that region bathed in a lily pond in June [Gu & Zhong, 1984: 91-92].

Thus Gu intertwined history and ethnography in demonstrating the multiple elements at work in the regeneration of China. His purpose was to underscore the breadth and depth of China's ongoing transformation. Such an ethnohistorical endeavor brought the multiethnic and

many-cultured elements of China to the foreground as the source of the country's eternal renewal.

PROCESS VERSUS TELOS

Gu's ethnohistorical approach put him in an uneasy relationship with Marxist historians. On the one hand, his study of folklore led Gu to realize that social and economic factors were important in transforming China. On this score, he acknowledged the contribution of Marxist historians in introducing socioeconomic analysis into historical inquiry. On the other hand, he refused to adopt Marxist historical materialism.¹⁴ Gu advocated pluralism in the study of Chinese history; he found Marxist historical materialism—with its insistence on economic determinism—simply too restrictive.

Gu's mixed feelings toward Marxist historical materialism came to the fore in the early 1930s. The rise of Marxist historical materialism in modern China is conventionally dated to the publication in 1930 of Guo Moruo's *Zhongguo gudai shehui yanjiu* (*Studies of Ancient Chinese Society*) (Li Shu, 1983: 3-16; Wu Ze, 1984: 32-45).¹⁵ There, Guo Moruo questioned the validity of Hu Shi's "reorganization of China's national heritage" and promoted Marxist historical materialism as a superior historical approach. In the preface to the book, Guo Moruo mocked Hu Shi and his followers:

Hu Shi's *Zhongguo zhaxue shi dagang* [*An Outline History of Chinese Philosophy*] has monopolized the attention of the new Chinese academia for a few years. But it has not even scratched the surface of the real conditions of ancient China. Neither does it clarify the origins of Chinese society, nor does it explain the emergence of Chinese thought. Hence, things that he has "reorganized," we ought to "critique" in toto [Guo Moruo, 1982: 1.7].

Replacing Hu Shi's "reorganization" (*zhengli*) with his "critique" (*pipan*), Guo Moruo wanted to single out Marxist historical materialism as the most advanced historical approach known to humankind. Guo Moruo pointed out that the difference between "reorganization" and "critique" was not quantitative but qualitative. "Reorganization" gave order to otherwise disparate historical artifacts; "critique" ex-

plained why historical changes had to follow a pattern. "Reorganization" probed the how; "critique" went deeper and asked the why. "Reorganization" explained the past in terms of a process of change; "critique" explained the past in terms of a prescribed path or a telos (Guo Moruo, 1982: 1.7-10).

Although Gu was not singled out as the target of Guo Moruo's "critique," he was implicated as one of Hu Shi's followers. In 1933 Gu defended the validity of the "reorganization of China's national heritage" approach:

In recent years, [Marxist] historical materialism has become popular. Quite a few people criticize us for not adopting this approach in studying history. I cannot speak for others, but I am sure that I do not object to [Marxist] historical materialism. . . . [But Marxist] historical materialism is not a food product which has to be added to all dishes. As in the division of labor, different disciplines make different contributions. Instead of making it imperative that "the East wind [Marxism] overcome the West wind [liberal democracy]," we should see different disciplines as complementary to one another. . . . Hence, our "basic learning" is to provide the foundation for [Marxist] historical materialists "to reach high." Although we refrain from talking about historical telos, we do not stand in the way of [Marxist] historical materialists. On the contrary, we pave their way by providing them with a firm foundation [*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 4.22-23].

Gu's defense of the "reorganization of China's national heritage" was not confrontational. Gu did not play tit for tat with Guo Moruo by contrasting the strengths of "reorganization" with the weaknesses of "critique." Instead, in keeping with his belief in pluralism, Gu sought compromise, emphasizing the complementarity of the two approaches and pleading for an acceptance of alternative voices. Gu did not specifically criticize Marxist historical materialism, but in all of his pleas for openness and acceptance, he was targeting its fundamental weakness: its exclusivity.

The exclusivity of Marxist historical materialism emerged from the belief in a telos of human progress. Holding that throughout all of history humankind was inexorably marching toward an ultimate, predetermined end, Marxist historians inevitably sought a uniform set of factors to explain all social/historical phenomena. Not only did they want to identify how human history had begun and how it would end,

but they also wanted to explain how predetermined change manifested itself in all facets of human life at a given point in time. Governed by their quest for a telos, Marxist historians reduced diversity to uniformity, complexity to singularity.

In this respect, it seemed to Gu there was no fundamental difference between Marxist historical materialism and GMD Pan-Hanism. Both were equally narrow-minded and hegemonic. Whatever the result of the Marxist historians' quest for a telos, it definitely led to one concrete result: historical studies became a part of politics. When the telos revealed in historical studies had to be the same as that guiding political revolution, history and revolution were no longer distinct but united. The result was that history was absorbed into revolution, and scholarship became nothing but an extension of politics.

As an expert on Han intellectual history, Gu had studied a classic case of how an academic endeavor was transformed into a political tool. The precedent involved the twisting of the theory of the Five Agents (*wuxing*) into a means of legitimizing Han rule. The Five Agents (metal, wood, water, fire, earth) were interdependent: they produced, combined with, and overcame one another. Welding this theory of change with the Han belief in the correspondence of human society and nature, emperors of the Western Han explained the victory of the Han over the Qin by associating the Han, and each of the dynasties that preceded it, with the Five Agents. Because the earth agent overcomes the water agent, proclaimed emperor Wudi of the Han, the Han dynasty (governed by the earth agent) replaced the Qin (governed by water) (*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 5.437-450). After that, all that remained was to explain why earth was the agent governing the Han. Han scholars were quick to fabricate historical materials to make sure that it was cosmologically inevitable for the Han to replace the Qin. However, under the demands of a changing political climate, scholarship in the final years of the Western Han took a drastic turn. To pave the way for Wang Mang to usurp the Han throne, scholars like the father-and-son team of Liu Xiang and Liu Xin took it upon themselves to reassign the Five Agents to dynasties. Because the fire agent gives rise to the earth agent, the two Lius argued, the Han dynasty (now identified as governed by the fire agent) would pave the way for Wang Meng's new regime (governed by the earth agent)

(*Gushi bian*, 1926-1944: 5.450-564). This politicization of scholarship ushered in another round of fabricated historical documents and a realignment of academic lineages.

Gu realized that what had happened in the Han dynasty was happening again in the 1930s. Although the Chinese Communist Party still had a long way to go before it could dominate academia, the Marxist historians' quest for a telos promised to reduce historical studies to a handmaiden of political revolution. Like the study of the Five Agents in the Western Han, in the 1930s the history profession was on its way to being appropriated by politics. To serve a political goal, the historical record was not read as it was but, rather, as a justification of the teleological necessity of communism.

Gu recognized that historical studies are bound to have political ramifications. However, it is one thing to express political views in one's historical narratives, and it is quite another to monopolize historical discourse to promote a particular political doctrine. To counter what he saw as an imminent catastrophe for the profession of history, Gu argued in 1935 for the importance of cultivating "historical consciousness" (*lishi guannian*).

In Gu's mind, "historical consciousness" was diametrically opposed to "pragmatic consciousness" (*zhiyong guannian*): whereas the former was idealistic, apolitical, and purely academic, the latter was practical, political, and calculative. While practitioners of the former aimed to critique contemporary politics by deliberately distancing themselves from it, practitioners of the latter aimed to serve contemporary politics by becoming a part of it (Gu, 1935: 209-211, 246-248, 1926-1944: 7.1-5, 62-64). Although many people believed "historical consciousness" to be practiced by only a few sensitive souls in ivory towers, Gu argued that, from a long-term perspective, the practical value of "historical consciousness" might even exceed that of "pragmatic consciousness." This, Gu claimed, was because "historical consciousness" critiqued contemporary presuppositions:

If we want to prevent the tragedy [of pragmatic consciousness overcoming historical consciousness], there are two things we must do. One is that all of us think clearheadedly, not blindly following others. Second is that all of us should be receptive to different opinions and different writings, not to form groups to bully others. From these two, our historical consciousness will rapidly develop, and the value of

impracticality will far outweigh the practical returns of pragmatic consciousness [Gu, 1935: 209-210].

By underscoring the importance of "historical consciousness" for historians, Gu reiterated in another guise his pluralistic view of history. To be historically conscious meant being aware of the multiplicity and complexity of human events, of refusing to reduce the complexity of human life to a few "scientistic" principles, of recognizing that change in human life is multidimensional and multicausal. Gu's ethnohistorical approach may look unsystematic and unstructured from the Marxist perspective, but it nevertheless represented Gu's attempt to take the complexity of human life seriously.

CONCLUSION

The historical discourse in China of the 1930s is an intriguing instance in which history and nationalism as an imagined community were united.¹⁶ The dynastic system came to an end in 1911, but it was unclear what the content of the new system should be, even after the Nanjing government was established in 1927. It was in this context that historical writings became the locus of competition among different visions of China. While the GMD military leaders and politicians were busy attempting to unify China militarily and politically, historians were busy imagining the new nation by defining the nature of China and by attempting to forge a communal identity among the Chinese. The historical writings in the 1930s were definitely new in one respect: they were all written for the nation, not for a dynasty or a government.

History in the 1930s was also where the future of the nation was expressed in narratives of the past. In imagining the nation, Chinese historians went beyond trying to legitimize the current regime; they expressed their hopes and fears about the future of the nation in the guise of historical reflection. In their debates, what they were contesting was more than historical fact; they were contesting what the new China should look like. On the surface of their writings, Chinese historians evoked tradition and described the old, but in evoking the past, their eyes were turned to the future.

It was in this context that Gu Jiegang emerged to prominence as a historian. His writings were influential because they were *modern* (e.g., Gu introduced Deweyism into Chinese consciousness) and simultaneously because they were *traditional* (e.g., Gu continued the tradition of Qing evidential scholarship). But much more important, Gu's studies of ancient China constituted an important event in modern Chinese historiography because they offered a vision of a multiethnic and many-cultured China. In his writings, Gu presented China as a land of diversity and change, as an organic entity constantly undergoing transformation.

Gu was certainly not alone in seeing China this way. Among his contemporaries, Meng Wentong (1894-1987), Chen Yinke, and Qian Mu also saw the development of ancient China as a process of transformation. Indeed, Gu was part of a historical discourse that argued that the main source of change in China, premodern or modern, was her own dynamism.

Yet, Gu was unique in two respects. First, he recognized that his organic vision of China was in conflict with that of the Pan-Hanists, who had dominated the historical arena since the late Qing. Well aware of the sociopolitical implications of the two visions, Gu devoted the early part of his career to comparing them. Second, he went a step further than his contemporaries by grounding his organic vision of China in an ethnohistorical approach. As I have argued, Gu's ethnohistorical approach brings to the foreground the two-fold dynamism in China—diachronic dynamism in time (e.g., dynastic and epochal differences) and synchronic dynamism in space (e.g., local and regional differences). Gu was among the first to make the latter in particular a part of modern Chinese historical consciousness.

One may argue that Gu's organic view of China was a result of his being a transitional figure. As his autobiography attests, he was a late-Qing person in training (e.g., his education in philology and classical studies) and a May Fourth rebel in temperament (e.g., his affinity for cultural iconoclasm and populism). The dynamism of China he saw in documents may be a reflection of the dynamism he enjoyed as a person standing at the crossroads.

But almost everyone in Gu's generation was a transitional figure. Being a transitional figure did not necessarily make Gu more receptive to an organic vision of China. Particularly when we compare Gu with

those of his contemporaries (e.g., Fu Sinian, Qian Xuantong) who went in different ways in envisioning China, it is a bit far-fetched to link Gu's organic vision of China solely to his ambiguous identity. One thing is certain, however. Gu's ambiguity had served him well in undermining Pan-Hanism. Building their argument on philological studies of classical texts, the Pan-Hanists found themselves in deep trouble when Gu employed the language of a classicist—the result of his late-Qing training—to undermine the authority of the classics.

Both Gu's ambiguous identity and his organic vision of China reveal the limitations of the tradition-modernity dichotomy as a mode of analysis. Some modern Chinese historians, such as Gu, simply did not operate in the supposed dichotomy. They were traditional (or Eastern) in some aspects and modern (or Western) in others. They had synthesized the traditional and modern elements in their thinking in such a manner that it is hard to distinguish one from the other. Instead of laboriously sorting out the traditional and modern elements in modern Chinese historians, we may learn more about them by focusing on their visions of China. If indeed there is such a thing called Chinese history in modern times, its subject matter is what constitutes China as a nation. For the majority of modern Chinese historians, the goal of writing historical narratives is to narrate the nation.

NOTES

1. See Liu Yizheng (1902), Liu Shipei (1906), and Xia Zengyou (1906). For a brief discussion of these three works, see Wu Ze (1989: 132-165, 214-231). For an insightful analysis of how Liu Shipei articulated his anti-Manchu position by presenting a trajectory of a unique Chinese culture, see Zarrow (1990: 37-39).

2. Subscribing to the China's-response-to-the-West model that was influential at the time, Schneider tries hard to prove that undergirding Gu's historical vision was American pragmatism (Schneider, 1971: 53-120). Schneider argues that Gu was heavily influenced by Hu Shi, who had gone to Columbia University to study under John Dewey (Schneider, 1971: 29-32, 56-75). Although it is true that Hu Shi did attempt to introduce American pragmatism into China (e.g., by encouraging He Bingsong to translate James Harvey Robinson's *The New History* into Chinese), his acceptance of American pragmatism was based on his experience both in America and in his native country (Hu Shi, 1933). Furthermore, Gu indicated in his autobiography that he had become acquainted with the notion of historical evolution and the storytelling nature of history long before he worked closely with Hu Shi (Gu, 1926: 41-49; Hummel, 1931: 74-91). Having said this, I do not wish to imply that American pragmatism played no role in shaping Gu's historical vision. What I want to say is that the formation of Gu's historical vision is a complex issue involving many factors.

3. There were altogether seven volumes of *Gushi bian*. Gu edited volumes one (1926), two (1930), three (1931), and five (1935), all on classical studies; Luo Ganzhe edited volumes four (1933) and six (1938) on non-Confucian schools of thought; Lu Simian and Tong Shuye coedited volume seven (1941) on ancient history. The publication of *Gushi bian* (especially its first three volumes) caused somewhat of a sensation among contemporary Chinese intellectuals. The work triggered such a critical reflection on Chinese historical writing that Hu Shi called it "a revolution" in the field of Chinese historical scholarship (Hummel, 1931: v). For a discussion of the impact of *Gushi bian* on modern Chinese intellectual development, see Wang Fansen (1987).

4. Some sixty years after the first volume of *Gushi bian* appeared, Chinese scholars are still debating how to assess Gu and his seven volumes of essays. Some treat Gu harshly, accusing him of promoting iconoclasm and destroying the Chinese historical tradition. Others appreciate the constructive aspects of Gu's seemingly destructive iconoclasm. Among the latter, Wang Fansen (1987) and Peng Minghui (1991) trace Gu's iconoclasm back to the late Qing historical context, showing that Gu was not alone in his iconoclasm but part of a long tradition. To a great extent, Ursula Richter's book (1992) is an expansion of Wang's and Peng's argument; see Qingjia Edward Wang (1994). Xu Guansan (1986) has shifted the focus in assessing Gu by highlighting the positive aspects of Gu as a scholar—his dedication to scholarship, his personal ethics, his interest in annotating the *Shangshu* (*Book of Documents*) in his later life, and so on. Likewise, Liu Qiyu (1986) stresses Gu's anti-Japanese sentiment evident in his 1930s populist writings. And recently, some scholars have offered a more sophisticated way of assessing Gu. Chen Zhiming (1993) and Longxi Zhang (1995) have begun to analyze the debates surrounding Gu and *Gushi bian* as debates on defining China. Transcending the traditionalism/iconoclasm dichotomy, Chen Zhiming and Longxi Zhang assess Gu in terms of his narrative of China.

5. Hu Shi indirectly taught Gu to be a skeptical reader and an iconoclastic historian by asking him in 1921 to edit and punctuate the writings of Cui Shu (1740-1816) (Gu, 1926: 45-46; Hummel, 1931: 80-82). For the importance of the rediscovery of Cui Shu in China and Japan, and Cui Shu's impact on Gu and Hu Shi, see Fogel (1995: 3-21).

6. Hu Shi first presented his populist vision of history in an essay refuting Zhang Taiyan's view that the various schools of thought (*zhuzi*) in the Spring and Autumn Period were derived from the court offices in the Zhou dynasty (Hu Shi, 1975: 1.254-261). Hu Shi planned on expounding his populist vision of history by writing a general history of Chinese philosophy. Due to his involvement in other affairs, he could only complete a portion of his planned project. After publishing *Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang, shang juan* (*An Outline of History of Chinese Philosophy, Volume One*) (1919), Hu Shi seldom wrote systematically populist accounts of history.

7. From this quotation on, all the translations are mine.

8. Historiographically, Liu Yizheng is most famous for his *Zhongguo wenhua shi* (*History of Chinese Culture*) published in Nanjing in 1935. For a discussion of Liu, see Zhang Shunhui (1984: 307-310) and Wu Ze (1987: 173-191). The *Xueheng* was a journal founded by the faculty of Southeastern University (*Dongnan daxue*) in Nanjing in 1922. The journal was in circulation until 1930. In the mid- and late 1920s, the *Xueheng* had become the mouthpiece of a group of intellectuals who, inspired by Irving Babbitt, saw common ground between high culture in Europe (e.g., Platonism) and in China (e.g., Confucianism). Members of the *Xueheng* were a diverse group, but the key figures included Liu Yizheng, Wu Mi, Mei Guangdi, and Miao Fanglin. Some scholars do not see the *Xueheng* group as conservative. The goal of those identified with the *Xueheng*, very similar to that of Gu Jiegang, was to identify a unique Chinese identity for twentieth-century China. For a discussion of this view, see Shen Songqiao (1984: 201-268) and Furth (1976: 73-84).

9. Liu Yizheng's article is reprinted in *Gushi bian* (1926-1944: 3.217-222). The *Shuowen* (in full, *Shuowen jiezi*) is a philological dictionary compiled by Xu Shen of the Han dynasty. The dictionary explains the six basic methods (*liu shu*) by which Chinese characters are constructed. It also classifies and analyzes Chinese characters written in the ancient *zhuan* style. Because of the interest of Qing scholars in philology, the *Shuowen* received a great amount of attention in the high Qing. To be considered a man of letters at that time, one had to be familiar with the *Shuowen*.

10. Liu Yizheng developed this idea in his *Zhongguo wenhua shi* (Liu Yizheng, 1935: esp. preface, 1-5).

11. Historians and ethnographers tend to see what they want to see in Gu. Historians emphasize Gu's contribution to historical studies and slight his role in ethnography. Likewise, ethnographers emphasize Gu's important role in establishing the study of folklore in China and make little of his contribution to history. Rare are attempts to connect the two faces of Gu. In his book on modern Chinese folk culture, Chang-tai Hung resorts to "accident" to explain Gu's dual identity (Hung, 1985: 46-49). Laurence Schneider, on the other hand, confronts Gu's identity head-on and convincingly. Schneider links the two disciplines of history and ethnography by seeing them as two means serving the same ends: Gu's historical studies served to undermine the authority of the old aristocratic culture, and his ethnographic scholarship aimed at building a new Chinese culture based upon folklore (Schneider, 1971: 13-14).

12. In general, Gu's interest in ethnography falls into the broad pattern of the rise of ethnographic studies in China early in the twentieth century. Although ethnography was first developed in Europe, few Chinese ethnographers paid attention to the works of their European counterparts (Eberhard, 1965: xxxiii-xxxiv; Hung, 1985: 161-178). Ethnographic studies in China arose out of nationalism and a growth of romantic attitudes toward rural life more than out of ethnographic theories imported from the West (Hung, 1985: 10-21). Like many other ethnographers, Gu had little exposure to foreign books and foreign ideas. In his autobiography, Gu traced his interest in ethnography to two sources: his upbringing in a storytelling family and the countless hours he spent in theaters during the two years he was enrolled in a college preparatory school in Beijing (Gu, 1926: 5-6, 19-20; Hummel, 1931: 5-7, 30-32). Both experiences taught him that there was untapped vitality and creativity in folktales and folk culture. Gu was convinced that unlocking folk vitality and creativity was essential to rejuvenating China.

13. Gu was by no means alone in recognizing the geographical diversity in China. Fu Sinian (1896-1950), for instance, argued in a 1933 article that the three ancient dynasties—Xia, Shang, and Zhou—were constantly locked in an east-west confrontation (Fu Sinian, 1980: 822-893). On the other hand, Meng Wentong (1894-1987) argued that the geographical rivalry in ancient China did not take place on an east-west axis but on a north-east-south triad (Meng Wentong, 1933). What distinguished Gu from Fu and Meng was that Gu did not study geographical diversity solely to identify the center of power and high culture. Rather, Gu combined geographical diversity with a populist vision, looking at how different regions, ethnic groups, language groups, and distinct communities transformed a commonly shared story or folk song into their own.

14. In the context of China in the 1930s, there is a subtle distinction between historical materialism as a general approach in socioeconomic analysis of history and Marxist historical materialism as a particular historical method. As Arif Dirlik (1978, 1989) has shown, scholars of different political persuasions—including anarchists, radicals, and leftists of various stripes—were interested in reexamining Chinese history from a socioeconomic perspective. Many of these scholars were not Marxists in the sense that they did not subscribe to economic determinism,

nor did they accept Marx's telos of human progression. I thank Mary Mazur for alerting me to this distinction.

15. On the rise of Marxist historical materialism in China in the 1930s, see Werner (1990).

16. On the concept of nationhood as "an imagined community," see Anderson (1991: 1-31) and Bhabha (1991: 297-299).

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