

## The Ambiguity of Cultural Identity: Gu Jiegang and the Rethinking of the Chinese Tradition

Zhang Longxi\*



In 1929, the prestigious Commercial Press in Shanghai printed a high school textbook of Chinese history it had commissioned the famous historian Gu Jiegang (1893-1980) to write, but the book was banned by the Nationalist government before it was shipped for distribution. Dai Jitao, a high-rank government official in charge of education policies, threatened to fine the publisher a substantial amount of money. The suppression of books was not uncommon in China, but the banning of a schoolbook on history caused some angry responses from the intellectual circle. Hu Shih protested against this outrageous censorship and "absolutely despotic situation."<sup>1</sup> Gu Jiegang himself recalled the incident with bitterness several years later and commented sarcastically on the reason for banning the textbook. The book was suppressed because Gu Jiegang rejected the traditional idea

that Chinese history began with the legendary "three emperors" and "five sovereigns," the supposedly common ancestors of all the different racial and ethnic groups in China. For Gu Jiegang, these legendary ancestors or originators of the Chinese cultural tradition are all fictional characters created in antiquity for the very purpose of integrating different racial and ethnic groups. They may have served that purpose, but they have no historical validity. From the government official's point of view, however, to begin a history book without affirming the common ancestry of all the people in China is detrimental to the unification of the different ethnic groups, it would indeed "shake the nation's self-confidence and do harm to the country."<sup>2</sup> This surely sounds incredibly heavy-handed. "When I first heard of it," says Gu Jiegang with mocking humility, "I did admire the

---

\* Chair Professor of Comparative Literature and Translation at the City University of Hong Kong and a foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities.

1 Hu Shih, "Xin wenhua yundong yu Guomindang," *Xin yue*, 2 (Sept. 10, 1929), p. 4. See Laurence A. Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's New History: Nationalism and the Quest for Alternative Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 107.

lofty opinion of this very honorable official and tremble to think that I might have committed a crime against the nation. But then I ask: Is our nation's self-confidence really built on the 'three emperors' and 'five sovereigns'?"<sup>3</sup> The skirmish between the government and the press is just one instance among many of the political control of scholarly work in China, but it also has broad implications for understanding the changing concept of history and its complicated relationship with the politics of nation and nationalism.

The writing of Chinese history underwent a fundamental change at the turn of the century in the wake of a series of events that forced the Chinese, and Chinese historians in particular, to realize that China was not the equivalent of "All-under-Heaven" (天下), and that the old assumptions of traditional dynastic historiography were no longer adequate to cope with a world of violent clash of nations and cultures. The Sinocentric view of the order of things, in which China as the center of civilization extended its kingly influence to all barbarians from the four corners of the earth (四夷), was shattered by the Opium Wars and the unjust Treaty of Nanjing in the 1840s, while the concept of China as one among the world's many nations began to take hold in Chinese historiography.<sup>4</sup> The sense of historical transformation also evolved from the study of classics during the Qing dynasty, which, as Liang Qichao (1873-1929) put it, had an iconoclastic tendency of "seeking liberation through the restoration of antiquity."<sup>5</sup> That is to say, in their effort to go back to the authentic teachings of the ancients through rigorous philological studies,

the classical scholars in the Qing were able to free themselves from the constraints of centuries of old exegeses and commentaries, and see the edifice of authoritative interpretation as historically built up over the generations. Kang Youwei's (1858-1927) controversial *Kongzi gaizhi kao* (孔子改制考) was exemplary of the kind of New Text scholarship that clearly related classical studies to their implications and consequences in political reality. In that work, he depicted Confucius as a political reformer who packaged his radical new ideas in supposedly ancient forms of institutions and basically invented the classics. The impact of Kang Youwei's work on the intellectual scene, as Liang Qichao described it, was like "the explosion of a volcano or a great earthquake";<sup>6</sup> and its advocacy of political reform, combined with the newly introduced Western idea of evolution, had a tremendous influence on the writing of history. The rise of new historical scholarship, says Zhou Yutong in a useful survey, was "indirectly caused by the social consequences of the Opium War and directly by the cultural force of the New Text scholarship."<sup>7</sup> This may give us some insight into the social and intellectual background of the new concept of national history in the early decades of the twentieth century, and also the close relationship between the study of history and the study of classics. The new history that arose against such a background, however, was able to transcend the rivalries between the New Text and the Old Text schools in classical studies. Another important figure that exerted a great influence was Zhang Pinglin (1869-1935), "the last Master of the Qing

2 Gu Jiegang, with Yang Xiangkuei, "Zixu" to *San Huang kao* (Beiping: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1936), p. 25.

3 Ibid.

4 See Ying-shih Yü, "Changing Conceptions of National History in Twentieth-Century China," in Erik Lönnroth, Karl Molin, and Ragnar Björk (eds.), *Conceptions of National History: Proceedings of Nobel Symposium*, 78 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 155-174.

5 Liang Qichao, *Qing dai xueshu gailun*, in Zhu Weizheng (ed.), *Liang Qichao lun Qing xueshi er zhong* (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1985), p. 6

6 Ibid., p. 64.

7 Zhou Yutong, "Wushi nian lai Zhongguo zhi xin shixue," in Zhu Weizheng (ed.), *Zhou Yutong jingxueshi lunzhu xuanji*, (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1983), p. 520.

Old Text school" and also "a great scholar equally conversant with the classics and the histories."<sup>8</sup> Yü Ying-shih argues that it was Zhang Pinglin and Liang Qichao, who was Kang Youwei's student, that jointly "started the modern transformation of Chinese historiography whereby 'national history' has replaced 'dynastic history' as the focus of historical research and writing."<sup>9</sup> In the radical critique of the Confucian classics and traditional historiography during the May Fourth period, Chinese historians were no longer bound to any of the schools but tried to write a new national history, in which the concept of evolution or political and economic change played an important role. The Revolution of 1911 put an end to the last dynasty of imperial China, and some years before that, the abolition of traditional examination system and the establishment of new schools with Western style curricula deprived the Confucian classics of their sacred status. Great changes in both social and intellectual environment made it possible to reconceptualize the history of China in a critical examination of the ancient classics, and understanding ancient Chinese history was thus invariably connected with a critique of China's long textual tradition.

That is exactly what Gu Jiegang tried to achieve in a vigorous questioning of the validity of ancient texts and a critical examination of historical records, in an intellectual movement that produced seven volumes of critical essays, letters, and notes known as *Gu shi bian* [Critique of Ancient History]. When he was still a student at Peking University, Gu Jiegang already believed that "all learning must start with history," and start with a new kind of history no less, because the government-commissioned official histories were

not to be trusted.<sup>10</sup> His concept of history was firmly grounded in the idea of evolution and evidential scholarship, but his assimilation of evolution theory was combined with his confidence in drawing on the past history of China as the resource for a national revival; it was thus opposed to the kind of simplistic social Darwinism quite popular at the time that rejected Chinese history as nothing but a total failure and mistake. Gu Jiegang's ambitious plan was to write Chinese history in the context of world civilization. "I want to do my best in integrating the Chinese and the Western, the ancient and the modern," he wrote in a letter to Wang Boxiang, his high school classmate, "and to sort out things, as far as we are able, in order that later generations will have a profound understanding of the process of historical evolution, that they will not retrograde but will recognize the differences and similarities between the situations in China and elsewhere so that they will neither follow other nations blindly, nor do things differently merely for the sake of difference."<sup>11</sup> For Gu Jiegang as a historian, the rejection of the past and a total Westernization never seemed an acceptable alternative, and the idea of evolution was in itself an idea of the historical process of change and progress. To study history, he admits, entails working with things past and old, but it has great significance for the making of a new culture that must come out of the old and rest on a solid historical foundation. Those who would have all things new but nothing old, says Gu, are like the creationists who "seem to believe that humanity could be created by God *ex nihilo* without having to go through the process of evolution from microorganism to insects, to fish, to birds and beasts. What is created out of nothing is indeed very fresh,

8 Ibid., p. 517.

9 Ying-shih Yü, "Changing Conceptions of National History in Twentieth-Century China," p. 159.

10 Gu Jiegang, letter to Fu Sinian, August 11, 1919, in "Gu Jiegang yi zha," *Xueshu jilin*, 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai Yuandong chubanshe, 1994), p. 254.

11 Gu Jiegang, letter to Wang Boxiang, August 14, 1919, *ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

without a tinge of anything old, but unfortunately it is nothing more than phantom towers and terraces that will disappear sooner than you can snap your fingers."<sup>12</sup> To help find solutions to China's problems at the present and to strive for a more hopeful future, he argues, we must have a clear understanding and rigorous critique of the past.

In the long preface to the first volume of *Gu shi bian*, Gu Jiegang clearly states that the study of history is a direct response to the endangered survival of the Chinese nation under the pressure of imperialist powers and domestic strife, an attempt at looking for resources of survival and regeneration in the nation's past history and cultural tradition. The question underlying his study of history was: "Has the Chinese nation become really old and weak, or is it still young and strong?"<sup>13</sup> In trying to answer that question, he came to explore the origin and transformation of Chinese culture in history, the very cultural identity of the Chinese, the difference between the elite and the folk culture, the relationship between people of the Han and the ethnic minorities, and a number of other related and important issues. His approach in historical studies is to investigate the process and ways in which a particular historical image or representation is constructed, to understand what he calls the ancient history built up stratigraphically." It is difficult to recover the truth of a particular event in the remote past from the various legends and historical records, but if historians collect all the relevant materials and arrange them chronologically in sequence, and then examine them in their various stages and interrelations, it is then possible, Gu Jiegang argues, to know how the historical narrative is constructed by those very legends and records, and how it is

added on and modified in time. "The main idea I have about ancient history is not its truth," he declares, "but its transformation."<sup>14</sup> As Zhou Yutong observes, Gu Jiegang was trying to "study the change of ancient history by using the method of studying narrative transformations."<sup>15</sup> To look at historical writing as a narrative, to read passages of the Confucian classics as elements of a story, was to realize the construction, and often the fictitiousness, of a particular image or event, and that was, for his time, a very new, very courageous, and revolutionary way of looking at ancient history.

When many people still believed in the legendary "three emperors" and "five sovereigns" as originators of Chinese history, Gu Jiegang shocked many of his colleagues and readers by treating all those revered cultural heroes as mythical and fictional characters and arguing, for example, that Yu the great flood-controller was probably a worm as the totem of an ancient tribe. Whatever the validity of that argument, the impact of such iconoclasm was crucial in clearing the ground for a new concept of Chinese history. The dismantling of ancient legends as cultural myth and pseudo-history completely destroyed a deeply entrenched idea of Chinese history as a monolithic, linear genealogy of ruling houses that were ethnically and culturally homogeneous. Gu Jiegang argues that we must tear down all the idols in ancient history, idols that were set up on the basis of a false homogeneity and the monistic view of Chinese culture. "We have a rather common misconception that the eighteen provinces of China the Han people now inhabit have always been unified since antiquity. This is in fact to define the boundaries of pre-Qin geography from a misplaced post-Qin perspective."<sup>16</sup> Before the Qin unification,

---

12 Ibid., p. 258.

13 Gu Jiegang, *Gu shi bian*, vol. 1 (7 vols.; Shanghai: Shanghai guji, rpt. 1982), p. 89.

14 Ibid., p. 273.

15 Zhou Yutong, "Gu zhu *Gu shi bian* de duhou gang," in *Zhou Yutong jingxueshi lunzhu xuanji*, p. 609.

16 Gu Jiegang, *Gu shi bian*, vol. 1.

Gu argues, China was a conglomeration of small states, not a monolithic culture. But "once such an unshakable monism was in place," he writes in the preface to volume 4 of *Gu shi bian*, "it threw everything in our history into chaos and dominated everything in our minds." We must, he argues, "take apart those fabricated systems and decorated shapes in order to restore their pluralistic true features so that people will know the truth about antiquity and understand that the nation's glory lies not in the past but in the future."<sup>17</sup> If China is not a monolith of racial and cultural homogeneity, if Chineseness is not an innate essence or fixed being but a becoming or an identity in the constant process of formation and articulation, then the ethnic and cultural diversity and pluralism will provide much strength for the revival of China. What has made China seem weak and old, he argues, is the official culture of the Han nationality, that is, the moral and political orthodoxy of Confucianism and its embodiment in the ruling elite; but that is not the entire culture of China: there is the popular culture of the Han people, and there are other cultural forms and elements of the ethnic minorities, which all contribute to the strength and vitality of the Chinese culture as a whole. In this pluralistic view of China and Chinese culture, Gu Jiegang finds hope and the answer to the question that underlies his historical studies, the question of the future of the Chinese nation.

In his book on Gu Jiegang, Laurence Schneider rightly argues that Gu "wanted to destroy at its root the idea that from time immemorial there was a transcendent, unchanging Chinese essence [...] The content of Chinese identity, in Ku's telling, was thus always in a state of change."<sup>18</sup> The iconoclasm

in Gu Jiegang's writings aims to destroy the monistic view of the Chinese nation, the false ethnic and cultural homogeneity, the anachronistic misconception of China's geographical unification, and the deeply conservative and retrogressive myth of a Golden Age in remote antiquity. Schneider also notes that Gu Jiegang put a great emphasis on the positive role the ethnic minorities played in forming the cultural heritage of China. "Ku resisted the notion of early racial or ethnic homogeneity because it obscured and often obliterated the diversity of ancient China and the special contributions which distinct social groups had made."<sup>19</sup> And yet, Schneider considers this "a peculiar motif" in Gu Jiegang's historical scholarship, a motif often elaborated for the purpose of "propaganda."<sup>20</sup> Gu Jiegang's pluralist notion of the origin and content of Chinese culture is indeed closely related to his concerns about the survival of the Chinese nation, but it is not an arbitrarily preconceived and fixed notion. Rather, it comes from his careful study, his critical examination of ancient texts and their interpretations, and from the paradigmatic change of the very concept of history. Moreover, it was precisely against the Nationalist government's propaganda of the so-called "Five Races in Unity" (*wu zu gonghe*), as Schneider also notes, that Gu insisted on the racial and cultural diversity in China. The Nationalists and their spokesmen propagated the cultural myth that all racial and ethnic groups in China were descendants of the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun and Yu, a myth that would legitimize national unity under the Nationalist central government. Gu Jiegang, as Schneider observes, had no quarrel with the government's desires to unify the country or to relax the tension between the Han and the non-

17 Ibid., vol. 4, p. 13.

18 Laurence A. Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's New History*, pp. 14-15.

19 Ibid., p. 260.

20 Ibid., pp. 258, 259.

21 Ibid., p. 261.

Han people, but "he could not see the necessity of sacrificing historical truth even to that worthy goal."<sup>21</sup> Because he rejected the historical validity of the legendary "three emperors," as we have seen, the high school history book he wrote for the Commercial Press in 1929 was banned by the government. Gu Jiegang refused to abandon his position to accommodate the government's propaganda, and he insisted that national unity should not build on "the empty words of a common ancestry," and that "deception" should not provide the ground for the nation's self-confidence.<sup>22</sup> He had no doubt that he should follow the truth he came to know in the conflict between politics and scholarship, nationalism and the reality of cultural identity.

The politics and ideology of nationalism on the one hand and the free and disinterested pursuit of knowledge on the other often come into direct conflict, but the *Gu shi bian* school is anything but disinterested in its vigorous critique of ancient classics and ancient history, its passionate pursuit of the truth about antiquity, and its openly acknowledged purpose of working toward the revival of the Chinese nation. That may explain the difficulty in the evaluation of Gu Jiegang and his works. The *Gu shi bian* school is often criticized for being more destructive than constructive in its skepticism and its iconoclastic study of history, but such criticism usually ignores Gu Jiegang's effort to recuperate a counter-tradition in history, a tradition not carefully preserved and certainly not celebrated in the official dynastic histories, but one that he tried to recover or reconstruct by studying the changing geography and the integration of different races and ethnic groups in ancient China, by collecting folk songs and folk tales of different nationalities, and so forth. The new concept of ancient history that emerges from the

debris of old ideas and hypotheses is a pluralistic image of China that constantly changes in a historical process of integration and disintegration, unity and diversity.

In any case, insofar as the cultural identity of the Chinese is concerned, Gu Jiegang's pluralistic notion is certainly more true to historical reality than the old myth of timeless racial and ethnic homogeneity. We have the pre-Qin testimony of Mencius himself, who understood the cultural heritage of *Zhongguo* as the intermingling of ethnically diverse groups, each making contribution to the culture as a whole:

Mencius said, "Shun was an Eastern barbarian; he was born in Zhu Feng, moved to Fu Xia, and died in Ming Tiao. King Wen was a Western barbarian; he was born in Qi Zhou and died in Bi Ying. Their native places were over a thousand *li* apart, and there were a thousand years between them. Yet when they had their way in the Central Kingdoms (*Zhongguo*), their actions matched like the two halves of a tally. The standards of the two sages, one earlier and one later, were identical."<sup>23</sup>

If Shun and King Wen, the great cultural heroes constantly referred to in ancient classics and historiography, were originally barbarians but became sages in the Central Kingdom, then, to the extent that the Central Kingdom becomes the name for the whole of China, the originators of the Chinese tradition were, at least in the case of Shun and King Wen, at odds with the idea of China as an ethnically homogeneous unity. The identity of the Chinese or, as Yü Ying-shih puts it, the idea of *tianxia* ('All-under-Heaven'), was thus

22 Gu Jiegang, with Yang Xiangkuei, "Zixu" to *San Huang kao*, p. 26.

23 *Mencius*, IV.b, 1, translated by D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 128.

---

"defined in cultural rather than in ethnic terms."<sup>24</sup>

For Gu Jiegang, of course, Shun was a mythical figure and King Wen was not as nearly so significant as he was made out to be in the Confucian idealization of an ancient Golden Age; nor was Mencius reliable as a source of historical information. However, Gu Jiegang would certainly appreciate the passage cited above that puts in question the opposition between *hua* and *yi*, the Han and the non-Han people, as the distinction between the civilized Chinese and the uncultured barbarian. Given the tremendous political pressure from both the Nationalist government and the Communist one to propagate the cultural myth of homogeneity and harmony, Gu Jiegang's argument for the ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism of China is especially valuable for our understanding of the complexity of cultural identity. To move away from ethnocentrism, which is so deeply imbedded in the nationalist ideology and responsible for so much senseless strife and suffering in the world, is a great challenge of our times. In this respect, Gu Jiegang's work still has its relevance and significance, it is not to be dismissed as something obsolete in an often hasty assessment of its iconoclastic tendency, but a critical legacy we must build on and carry forward in our study of ancient culture and ancient history.