

Historical consciousness and national identity

Most Chinese are extremely proud of their long and continuous historical civilization, which some claim extends for five thousand years. But for much of the twentieth century, Chinese revolutionaries had a very ambivalent and mostly negative view of these millennia, believing that they produced a slavish and feudal mentality. The vicissitudes of modern historical consciousness in China closely reflect the kind of nation and society that regimes and intellectuals battled over in their search for a new China and an identity for the Chinese people. In other words, if we want to understand how Chinese leaders and people see their society and their role in the world, we need to consider their changing views of history.

For much of the last hundred years, one of the central historical questions that has preoccupied scholars and statesmen seeking to make sense of China's present relates to the transition from a Confucian, imperial society to a modern nation-state. In contrast to many other non-Western societies, imperial China possessed several characteristics that would facilitate this transition – as well as several that would hinder it. The former included the existence of a unified bureaucratic state, a politicized gentry elite with a sense of societal responsibility, a relatively open society largely free of ascriptive roles, and a highly developed pre-industrial economy and entrepreneurial expertise.

On the other hand, the obstacles included China's exploitative encounters with imperialist powers from the second half of the nineteenth century, which left the government severely incapacitated. Moreover, the bureaucracy and gentry elites represented a thin layer at the top of society that was incapable of – and often resistant to – the efficient mobilization of resources and population required for a competitive capitalist

world. Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern Chinese nationalism, frequently complained that the people were like a 'loose sheet of sand' with limited capacity to hold together for the common purpose of the nation. The statesmen of the early twentieth century, such as Liang Qichao, also noted that without a forward-looking, progressive sense of history, China could not begin to think of itself as a nation with a future.

Indeed, modern historical writing was born, along with the nation-state, some time in the late eighteenth century in Europe, and emerged in the non-Western world in around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such writing frequently served to plant a concept of the nation, instil a love for it – and hatred for its enemies – and create citizens who would serve the nation in this new world. In this new conception of history, the nation – its people and culture, not the dynasties and aristocracies – was the collective agent or subject of history. The linear, evolutionary movement of the nation itself had a propulsive effect since the goal of much historical writing at the time was to recover the very idea of a common, or potentially unified, people who could realize their modern destiny. This effect was catalyzed by the contemporary social Darwinist vision of the world in which a country was doomed to eternal colonization and extinction if it did not become a strong nation-state (with colonies of its own).

To be sure, Chinese civilization had a sophisticated and rich tradition of historical writing. For instance, the history written by the great Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) historian, Sima Qian, was characterized by a quite modern conception of time in which he urged the creation of new institutions for a new generation. But this linear temporality remained a distinctly minor key in the historiography. Much historiography during the late imperial period (from around AD 1000 until 1911) sought to return to the ancient ideals of the sage-kings (the legendary Yao and Shun whom Confucius emulated) and to 'slight the present in order to favour the past'. Moreover, dynastic chroniclers also tended to record events as the expression of cyclical cosmological patterns in which human and supernatural agencies were intertwined. Thus natural catastrophes such as floods and popular rebellions that brought down dynasties were understood as expressions of Heaven's displeasure with the monarch and bureaucrats whose moral laxity had caused the dynasty to lose Heaven's mandate to rule.¹

Imperial Chinese historiography therefore did not think of time in an evolutionary or progressive sense in which the future could always be

made anew by humans; or, in other words, in which future developments were an integral part of the entity known as history. Reinhart Koselleck has summed up the modern conception of historical time as one in which there was a break between 'experience' and 'expectation', whereby instead of expecting to live the lives their ancestors experienced, people began to expect a different future for themselves.² The past was linearly linked to the future, but the latter would not be the same as the past. Although in the everyday view of history this is not an issue, how one could remain the same or deeply continuous with the past and yet free to progress into something different presents quite a vexed problem for historians and nationalist thinkers all over the world.

At the very end of the nineteenth century in China, when the Confucian literati and other publicly minded people became convinced that Japanese and Western imperialists were about to divide up the Qing empire (founded by the Manchus in 1644) and that China as a cultural and political entity would cease to exist, they began to look around the world not only for new military technologies but also for political, economic and cultural institutions that would enable China to survive in the modern world. As they debated each other for solutions, they began to absorb the new conception of time and history as the most basic assumption about the new world. The linear, progressive and human conception of history became the precondition for understanding their society, their past and the future.

Liang Qichao and new history

By the early twentieth century, Chinese history came to be written in the Enlightenment mode of liberation from medieval, autocratic domination. The historian Liang Qichao, who was perhaps the first to write the history of China under the sign of progress, made it clear that a people could not become a nation without a linear history. The world history that he wrote in 1902, *New Historiography* [*Xinshixue*], was not only written as an account of the European conquest of the world, but was also written from the European perspective of bringing enlightenment to the world. Whereas his one-time mentor Kang Youwei had adapted the idea of progress into the categories of Confucian historiography, Liang's narrative represents a total repudiation of traditional Chinese historiography as unable to give meaning to the Chinese national experience.³

During these early years, this European model came to China via Japan where Meiji (1869–1912) historians had been developing the new history of the Japanese people and culture as a whole. They utilized such techniques as periodization and archaeology to establish the origins and continuous history of Japan. In response to the European historical narrative of conquest as a ‘civilizing mission’, the Japanese historians sought, in addition to their national history, to develop the history of civilization in East Asia that tracked its uncertain spiritual progress (its *zeitgeist*) in the region. In later decades, this East Asian civilizational history (*toyoshi*) would be used by some of these historians to justify Japan’s domination over China and the rest of Asia as the progressive leader of an ancient civilization.

In China, Liang’s *History* tried to create an emancipatory yet continuous history by utilizing the division of periods into ancient, medieval and modern. He criticized traditional Chinese historiography for dividing history into monarchical reigns and ignoring the history of the people-nation (*guomin*). In Liang’s periodization, ancient Chinese history extended from the sage emperors to the Qin unification (221 BC): ‘This was a China of China. This was the period when the Chinese people(s) developed themselves, competed among themselves, and organized among themselves. They were victorious over the barbarian races.’ The medieval period was the history of a China of Asia that would extend to the Qianlong era (1796). This was a time when China had interactions with other Asian peoples and developed its centralized autocracy. While the Han people were often physically overwhelmed by central Asian races, spiritually, the Han managed to overcome them, and by the end of the period the races of Asia (I believe he means the Han and China’s Central Asian neighbours) came together to form a great race that could face the outsiders. The modern period was one of China in the world in which the Chinese would, together with other Asian peoples, rid themselves of autocracy and compete with Western nations. Indeed, so closely was his conception of history linked to the nation-state that Liang explained the division of periods in linear history using the metaphor of a treaty between nation-states marking their respective jurisdictions.⁴

In this model, we see an antiquity that saw the birth of the true China – a China of China. The ancient age is the age of the creation of a people and culture, pure and original. The medieval age is one of decay – inner ills, outer barbarians and autocracy vitiate the purity of the people, and efforts to renew the spirit work only temporarily. The modern period is

one of renewal – often through struggle – and change, change towards progress. The modern period may or may not come with a renaissance; certainly the idea of a renaissance dramatizes the general disposition of the modern era to recover a lost past – the problem of reconnecting with the past even as one sheds the accretions of a middle age, whether this be Confucianism, barbarian rule or superstition – as one forges ahead in a new world. The entire apparatus then works to recover the continuity of culture and people even while it allows the historian to reject that against which one will fashion the future.

Subsequent periodizations of Chinese history often elaborated upon Liang's basic scheme. But within this scheme there was considerable debate in which dissenting positions were frequently shaped by the political perspectives of the advocates. A major debate, and a problem that endures to this day, concerned exactly who constituted the Chinese people. Was China the nation of the Han, the dominant ethnic group or nationality that comprised over 90 per cent of the population? Should China include what we now call the 'minority nationalities' such as the Manchus, the Mongols, the Muslims and the many smaller groups in the peripheral regions of empire? Although the numbers of the latter were small, the area they occupied historically covered around two thirds of the Manchu, Qing empire. Should these peoples and their territories be excluded from the new Republic? Could the Han be seen as the dominant and superior group within this empire made over into a nation, or should the new nation be a republic of different nationalities? In other words, who was to constitute the nation and what kind of relationship would prevail between its constituents – the question of identity – was a major problem.

History and the Republic (1912–1949)

In this way, claims to nationality and concomitant claims to rights and duties came to be justified on historical grounds. The birth of the nation from the empire was accompanied from the start by fierce battles over the identity of the nation. From around 1900 until 1911 when the Manchus fell, the reformists who wanted to transform China into a constitutional monarchy debated and fought the Republican revolutionaries. Liang Qichao represented the reformist faction during the early years, and his careful delineation of the middle period in which 'the races of Asia came together to form a great race facing the outsiders' was a coded

way of saying that the Manchu emperors of China and their empire peopled – perhaps sparsely, but over large parts – by non-Han peoples should be seen as part of the new Chinese nation. The revolutionaries, on the other hand, wanted to expel the Manchus because they were considered despotic and foreign, and to occupy a lower order of civilization (like the other non-Han peoples in the empire).

The most passionate statement from the revolutionary point of view was made, not by Sun Yat-sen, who was a moderate in this regard, but by Zou Rong and his mentor, Zhang Binglin. In *Revolutionary Army*, Zou wrote,

When men love their race, solidarity will arise internally, and what is outside will be repelled. Hence, to begin with, clans were united and other clans repelled; next tribes were united and other tribes repelled, finally the people of a country became united and people of other countries were repelled. This is the general principle of the races of the world, and also a major reason why races engender history ... China is the China of the Chinese. Countrymen, you must all recognize the China of the Chinese of the Han race.

Zhang, who was also greatly influenced by social Darwinism, used the Han lineage or clan system to construct a Han nation from a putative ancestral link to the mythical Yellow Emperor, and called on the Han to struggle against the inferior Manchu race with their alien surnames.⁵

After the Republic was established in 1912 and Han dominance asserted, the revolutionaries agreed to a Republic of Five Nationalities and settled on the appellation *zhonghua minzu* (the Chinese nationality) for the nation. Although the loyalty of the different peoples to the Republic was never fully settled – with the Mongols establishing their republic in Outer Mongolia and Tibetans and Muslims seeking independence – the Chinese nation-state has more or less retained the borders of the Manchu empire. Nonetheless, the relationship between the Han and the other nationalities continued to be a changing and troubled one and this is reflected in the historical writing.

With the onset of the Japanese invasion of China (1932–45), even the finest and most critical Chinese historians such as Gu Jiegang began to make deep historical claims upon the peoples of these vast borderlands, because these zones were contested by the Japanese and other imperialist powers. While the Japanese dominated the northeast (or erstwhile Manchuria) and colonized Taiwan from 1895, the Russians often supported

groups in the northwest, the British in Tibet, and the French in the southwest. In a 1938 text entitled *A History of the Changes in China's Frontier Regions*, Gu, who had done more than any other historian to explode nationalist myths and give the minorities an important role in the making of the nation, began to deploy the stereotypes of traditional Chinese history. He revealed that his purpose in compiling such a work was not only to demonstrate without a doubt to the Japanese imperialists ('our covetous, powerful neighbors'), but also to enlighten the Chinese people, that the Han peoples had spread to Manchuria, Mongolia and even into Korea during the Tang and earlier dynasties and thus had historical claims there.⁶

Soon after the fully fledged outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Chiang Kai-shek, the president of the Republic in China from 1927–49 and leader of the GMD party, reversed the Republic's formal commitment to the autonomy of the 'five nationalities'. In 1939, a GMD ordinance asserted that 'in our country, the racial, cultural and blood fusion (*hunhe*) among different groups has long been completed and should not be arbitrarily analysed'.⁷ In 1943, Chiang Kai-shek declared in *China's Destiny* that 'the Chunghua nation... has grown by gradual amalgamation of various stocks into a harmonious and organic whole'.⁸ By the 1947 edition, the idea that these various stocks were 'originally of one race and lineage' and that 'the distinction between the five stocks is territorial as well as religious, but not ethnological' had been added.⁹

Chiang himself was acutely aware of the teaching of 'Chinese history' and 'Chinese geography' as a means of producing 'a citizen who loves his country more than his own life'.¹⁰ Towards this end, not only were historians and other scholars urged to demonstrate the bases of Chinese historical claims to the peripheries in their research, but history and geography textbooks at every level of the school system were required to contain material about the problems of the border regions in order to cultivate a proprietary feeling for these regions that had not existed in the old empire. The popular media, including films and slide shows about the regions and customs of the peripheral people, were also mobilized to further this identification among the common people.

Thus, even though the Republic was a politically unsettled period, not only was history utilized to make nationality claims, but historical pedagogy was an important institutional means of disseminating this historical knowledge and cultivating national identity. The identity-building function of historical education was not limited simply to

the problem of territorial claims. Historical knowledge and education became deeply involved in creating an understanding of the past that could shape the people's self-image in the best interests of the nation, whether in its struggle for survival against imperialist powers or to succeed in a globally competitive environment.

The May Fourth Movement, which spanned the years 1917 to 1921, is justly regarded as China's Enlightenment because students and professors at Beijing University and in other provincial cities not only protested imperialist machinations, but also revolted against centuries of Confucian orthodoxy and patriarchy. Their slogan was 'Down with Confucius and Sons, Long Live Messrs Science and Democracy.' The movement ushered in a new era of modern egalitarian and nationalist values founded upon a radical vision of history that in some ways went beyond anything Liang or Sun had proposed. Whereas Liang repudiated the nature of imperial historiography, he found much in Chinese history that could be utilized to foster a new identity and loyalty to the nation. Others of the earlier generation, such as Zhang Binglin who had denounced the Manchus, were critical of Confucianism (in particular because it promoted universal values unsuited to nationalism) but sought to fashion a modern China from the vast reservoir of alternative historical traditions (*zhuzixue*) that had been suppressed by Confucianism, including Legalism, Moism and Daoism as well as Buddhism.

Dr Hu Shi, an educationist and philosopher who studied with John Dewey at Columbia University, represented an interesting bridge between the two approaches. Although he wrote for the radical, flagship May Fourth journal *New Youth*, Hu by no means sought to negate the past. Rather he promoted the vernacular Chinese literature (*baihua* or plain speech) that had flourished in popular society since late imperial times as the alternative to classical Chinese language, the language of the literati that few others could comprehend and which continued to dominate serious writing in his time. This vernacular tradition had produced great and much-loved novels such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Journey to the West* and *All Men are Brothers* (also known as *Water Margin*) and, much in the way that vernacular European cultures overcame the domination of Latin, Hu Shi sought to produce a new historical consciousness that the roots of the Chinese nation lay with the people and their language. Indeed, the *baihua* movement emerged as one of the most powerful and enduring consequences of the May Fourth era; it remains the foundation of the Chinese national language.¹¹

Hu Shi not only produced a history of China that was parallel to the history of vernacularization and popular sovereignty in Europe. He was surely aware of Liang Qichao's earlier essay 'On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People' in which Liang had observed the power of fiction to produce transformations in the individual's sense of self and ability to produce the 'new citizen' loyal to the nation and the government. It is worth mentioning in passing that Liang anticipated Benedict Anderson's famous concept of the 'imagined community' in which he argued that popular, printed fiction played the principal role in the creation of the nation in people's imagination. Although he distanced himself from political activism until the anti-Japanese war, Hu Shi like Liang recognized the importance of the older fiction in generating a renovated identity. In his words, it was time for Chinese 'to reorganize the national past and recreate [its] civilization'.

But the writers of the May Fourth generation, particularly its most celebrated hero, Lu Xun, placed little value on the role of traditional fiction, vernacular or literati. For them, without a total, in fact an iconoclastic, attack on Chinese tradition and history, the Chinese people could never be transformed and the new nation would be still-born. Lu Xun was, of course, an enormously complex and self-doubting revolutionary writer. But the Chinese Communist Party, which was born out of the effervescence of the May Fourth Movement in 1921 and developed a powerful revolutionary agenda of transformation, could not afford the luxury of self-doubt. Communist historians, who subscribed to a unilinear teleological history of the world, found themselves following European theory in characterizing the history of China as representing the transition from slavery to feudalism, and found little value in the depths and achievements of Chinese history. The identity they sought to create was that of people who struggled against their own feudal elites and the foreign imperialists who stood in the way of their true destiny. In large part, historical research became the search for the seeds of revolutionary forces among the peasant uprisings that crowded the Chinese historical record. The Taiping Rebellion of the mid-nineteenth century, with its combination of Christian and radical levelling tendencies, was a major source of historical inspiration for the Communists.

But just as liberal historians such as Gu Jiegang became more nationalist in their historical investigations, the Japanese invasion also led to the search for national roots among the Communists. Much of this was conducted at the level of popular culture – or what the Maoists would

call National Culture – looking for folk traditions that could serve as the basis of identity but also transformed so that they could be made revolutionary and support the goals of mass mobilization and self-renovation. Thus the old-style drama and popular operas loved by the masses (and once considered the pillars of feudal literature) had to be preserved, but revised with a scientific interpretation. Similarly, traditional Chinese medicine came to be institutionalized as the ‘people’s science’. The Confucian classic *The Book of Songs* was now seen as the repository of ‘people’s literature’: where Confucians saw noble selflessness and ritual piety, Communists found protests against feudal rites and oppression of women. The historian Joseph Levenson commented, ‘[T]he Communists found that a complete disavowal of the old China was psychologically impossible even for them... The need for compensation implies an attachment to the old tradition, an attachment on the part of Communists which is not belied but evinced in their repudiation of that tradition.’¹²

The Mao era, 1949–1976

We might see what Levenson viewed as a psychological dependence on nationalism as a rift, an aporia that is common to all progressive national histories whether in China, France, Kenya or the United States. The predicament of national history lies in its task to bridge an unbridgeable gap: this history must create the conditions of a progressive future in which our expectations diverge from our experiences in the past, while at the same time it must establish the continuity of a people so that national claims to the land and culture can be firmly established. Ernest Renan summed it up in what to us may seem the impossible ‘hymn of every *patrie*’: ‘We are what you were; we will be what you are’. Notwithstanding Levenson’s claim, this aporia has been particularly difficult for the Communists in China to address.

Because of both their ideological predisposition to see the past as feudal and imperialist and their self-perception as inheritors of the May Fourth legacy, the Communists often displayed a ferocious hostility towards the past. They attacked the ‘living past’, not only among the elites but among the people. In particular, they conducted campaigns in which they dispossessed and eliminated popular religious communities, associations, properties, ceremonies and festivities that were often associated with temples and markets, especially during the 1950s. Although today there is a return to religious devotion and community activities among

the populace, it is a circumspect revival and the authorities are alert to alternative ideas of community and moral authority such as those among the Falungong that became visible in the late 1990s. In the 1960s, the Cultural Revolution, which erupted as a farcical and tragic incarnation of May Fourth iconoclasm, brought new meaning to the assault on the 'living past'. The drive to vaporize every sign of the past entailed the dangerous eugenic idea of the 'bloodline theory' in which children and grandchildren of 'class enemies' were targeted for attack because of the stigma of their ancestors.

While there was a need for the Chinese regime, like all other nation-states in modern society, to link the past with the future, during the first thirty years of the PRC the attack on the past overwhelmed the attachment to it. Notably, it was during periods when the nation-state felt threatened by external competitors or invaders that aspects of the past were restored as fit for study and dissemination. During the anti-Japanese war, when the CCP forged a united front with the GMD and viewed society more inclusively in order to rally the largest possible numbers for the national cause, a number of radical intellectuals of the May Fourth persuasion such as He Bingsong and Feng Youlan turned to a more China-centred history, and Marxists became increasingly influential in historical circles. This was also the period during which the CCP sought to find the roots of the people in folklore and popular culture. The next period marked by a nationalist turn towards history occurred during the rift with the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Soviet model became for the Chinese Communists both the most progressive and the best means for the Chinese people to stand tall in the world. Soviet advisors played a major role in establishing new institutions, and professional historians were also expected to follow their vision of materialist history. In the Soviet view, however, China represented a rather backward state in the evolution towards socialism. Thus it did not take long for differences to appear between PRC and Soviet historians over the right to interpret Chinese history. For instance, historians such as Fan Wenlan objected to the Soviet idea that the imperial Chinese state had merely effected a political unification and Chinese nationalism had developed only with the emergence of bourgeois capitalism in the twentieth century. Fan protested that *national* unification had begun with the Qin–Han unification in the third century BC, far earlier than it had elsewhere in the world.¹³

Chinese historians also objected to Soviet historians consigning China to the Asiatic mode of production. Derived from Marx's writings about Asian societies, this model posits a stagnant agricultural society without private property and ruled over, not by a class, but by a despotic state that extracted all its surplus and limited commerce. Within the progressive conception of historical materialism, this characterization rendered China even less advanced than ancient Greece and Rome, which had slave modes of production.¹⁴ One can readily sympathize with the Chinese objections to such disparaging and hopelessly inaccurate historical characterizations, but also note how Marxist theory reproduced here the civilizational hierarchy of Enlightenment imperialism. This framework of linear, progressive history shared by two socialist states was accompanied by a competition over which was better equipped historically to attain the goals of socialism. Indeed, competitiveness tended to become a crucial, if not central, feature of the worldview, and shaped the relations between the two states for the next thirty years.

During these years, historians needed to tread a careful line between pursuing the revolutionary historical vision of a future radically different from the past, and undertaking a rearguard action, albeit in a minor key, against efforts to belittle China's historical honour. The goals of the socialist regime were to achieve egalitarianism and collectivism, and historical research that characterized modern Chinese history as 'semi-feudal and semi-colonial' focused on class struggle, popular uprisings, and the striving of different peoples or national minorities (*minzu*) for the same class and anti-imperialist national goals. The renowned historian Hu Sheng declared in 1954 that the Taiping Rebellion, the violent anti-foreign Boxer Uprising of 1900 and the anti-Manchu Revolution of 1911 were the 'three revolutionary climaxes' that would constitute the basic paradigm or narrative of modern Chinese history.¹⁵

Indeed, a new revolutionary identity was being created. As David Apter and Tony Saich have demonstrated, revolutionary history became intertwined with the manner in which Mao Zedong and the CCP narrated their claims to leadership over the GMD and Mao's rivals. During the Japanese invasion, the Communists had made their base in the remote and inaccessible Yan'an Soviet in northwest China. From this bleak environment they launched guerilla attacks on the Japanese occupiers and developed the disciplined and highly motivated body of cadres that would dominate the leadership of the People's Republic after 1949. These cadres honed their commitment and loyalty to Mao and revolution by

internalizing the 'semi-feudal and semi-colonial' version of Chinese history through emotionally charged collective readings – a process Apter and Saich call 'exegetical bonding'.¹⁶ These texts and techniques were subsequently disseminated to the wider population through schools and myriad other institutions. During the Cultural Revolution, an exaggerated form of exegetical bonding would occur through the personal and collective readings of the *Quotations of Chairman Mao* Red Book which embedded the revolutionary history.

The rearguard defence of the past took the form of showing that China historically had a highly developed material culture that included great scientific inventions such as the compass, the seismograph, gunpowder, paper money, printing techniques and much else. The revolutionary paradigm depicted the Chinese past as feudal rather than Asiatic. Compared to the latter, the former would show China as part of mainstream world history and not consigned to an exceptional and stagnant mode of production. The advancements in technology and organization in Chinese history made it much more comparable to other feudal societies in the world. Indeed, Chinese historians were able to find the 'sprouts of capitalism' in late imperial China, as well as forms of managerial capitalism that indicated a society pregnant with modernity. The question of national identity and pride would not go away.

The reform era and globalization

Since the opening of China in 1979, there has been considerable relaxation of state ideological and political controls in many areas of life and culture. But the writing of history has been slower to change than other academic disciplines. In part, this is testimony to the importance of history to the legitimacy of the nation-state that still calls itself a socialist, if not revolutionary, state.

But if professional historians were bound by state controls on academia, non-academic interpretations of history, especially in the new media, rose to the task of producing a new history for a new age. None was more daring and influential than *Heshang* [*River Elegy*], a six-part documentary series that was first broadcast on television in June 1988. It had a powerful impact on the intelligentsia and the urban viewing public, and may be seen as a crucial event in the chain that triggered the spring 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square. This serial presented itself as a historical narrative, indeed a counter-narrative to the official

revolutionary nationalist history. Its basic message was that Chinese culture and history are tyrannical and brutalizing; the Yellow River (the river of the title), along with the Great Wall, represented the stagnant Asiatic mode of production, and constituted the central metaphor of this misery. By contrast, Western civilization is seen as dynamic, and is symbolized by the openness of the blue ocean that transports science and democracy across the seas. A crucial event in this history was the closing of China to the outside world from the Ming dynasty: 'For humankind as a whole, the fifteenth century was an extremely critical century. The human race began to move its gaze from the continent to the seas. History gave a fair chance, both to Orient and to Occident, to make a choice.'¹⁷ With China's turn inwards, it lost this opportunity.

Although the *Heshang* narrative adopted the iconoclastic spirit of the May Fourth Movement, by asserting that China was characterized by the Asiatic mode of production and by admiring Western imperialism, it violated the two core values of revolutionary nationalism. As its critics untiringly pointed out, it was highly selective in its presentation of the historical materials and passionate in its rhetoric. But it was also unprecedented in being perhaps the first mass media production in China that successfully reached out and moved vast numbers of people to question the official historical narrative. *Heshang* circulated in video form and hand-copied scripts even before the competition broke out in the publishing industry to acquire the script. It was enthusiastically received, particularly by high school students in both urban and rural areas. One of the co-authors of the script, Su Xiaokang, wrote that a million youths came to debate *Heshang* in Guangzhou.¹⁸ *Heshang* represented a counter-history that radically altered and questioned historical perceptions of the self in order to move the future in a different direction. This direction, of course, was that of globalization, modernization and democratization. And just as surely, when the discussion turned political and the enthusiasts fell silent, its denunciation was national and civilizational: 'you have flogged our ancestors with impunity,' its detractors claimed. The rearguard took charge.

Since the crushing of the uprising in Tiananmen in 1989, the Communist regime has been much more favourably disposed to Nationalist history and alternatives to the revolutionary narrative. A 'reformist' narrative of history had been debated in academia in the 1980s, but emerged full blown in the 1990s. It substitutes three other events from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the 'three revolutionary

climaxes': namely, the Self-Strengthening movement from the 1860s when reformist Confucian statesmen such as Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang sought to adapt a few Western institutions such as the military into the fabric of Confucian society; the 100 days reform Movement of 1898 led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, and the Bourgeois Revolution of 1911. Popular uprisings are noticeably missing from this narrative, and many of the villains of the revolutionary narrative such as Zeng Guofan and Confucian reformer Kang Youwei began to appear in an increasingly favourable light. Interestingly, in the 2003 TV series *Towards the Republic*, watched by hundreds of millions of viewers, this reformist narrative had become even more conservative and frankly statist. Thus the Empress Dowager Cixi and President Yuan Shikai, *de facto* heads of state between 1900 and 1916 and long regarded as bitter opponents of reform, are treated with great sympathy and shown to have been devoted to the greater interests of the nation-state. The revolutionary narrative has been overturned, but the power of the nation-state has been fortified in history.

In many respects, though, professional historians today find themselves relatively free from the interpretive straitjacket of class struggle, popular uprisings and the standard of a single narrative. Several innovative historians have adopted the 'history from below' approach that established its importance in the West with the appearance of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* or Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebel*. This approach seeks to eschew strictly defined class or law-governed histories imposed from above in favour of a view of the people as agents of their own histories. Zhao Shiyu, for instance, has studied popular religion, temple life and carnivals in late imperial China. He shows that this religious life, while interlinked with official culture, could subvert and threaten it as well as provide a refuge for women typically confined to the domestic area. Sometimes the research reflects critically even on sacred events such as the May Fourth. In an essay on the movement in Shanghai, Feng Xiaocai noted that the intellectual perception of the May Fourth Movement as a popular nationalist movement was quite different from the scene on the ground. It was less the spirit of patriotism that motivated the popular movement than rumours that the Japanese were spreading poison in the food. As panic gripped the population, they began to riot and occasionally attacked Japanese residents in China and even other Chinese.¹⁹

Yet academic freedom continues to face limitations, sometimes from unexpected quarters. Most recently, in January 2006, there was a

case in which the journal *Bingdian* [*Freezing Point*] was shut down after controversy generated by an essay written by a senior professor, Yuan Weishi from Guangzhou. The journal, which was known for its serious and provocative essays, was reorganized and subsequently relaunched in March. The thrust of Yuan's essay was to criticize Chinese school history textbooks for distorting the record, especially in regard to the imperialist role in the Second Opium War (1858–60) and the Boxer Rebellion (1900). According to Yuan, this kind of pedagogy can only inflame nationalistic passions and produce youth such as the violently chauvinistic Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, he finds Chinese historical consciousness quite comparable with that of the Japanese: 'the two have something in common: the mainstream culture in society lacks deep reflection on its contemporary history'. Yuan concludes with a plea for a more calm and rational historiography so that China can properly engage in its modernization project.²⁰

There are two matters of interest in this episode. The first is that most of Yuan's criticism derived from a comparison with Hong Kong history textbooks, which according to Yuan present a 'more complete picture' of both events and do not demonize the foreigners alone. This alternative view, so close to home, is likely to continue to unsettle the field of knowledge within China. The second point is the vitriolic response to the essay in *Bingdian* from many sections of its readership. Some historians criticized the essay for 'seriously violating historical truth, delivering a mistaken judgment on history, and gravely misleading the youth'. Others claimed that Yuan had 'grievously hurt the feelings of the Chinese people'.²¹ Although the decision to close down the journal and change its editorship was made by the government, the groundswell of nationalist opposition among the readership cannot be ignored.

We can also see this pattern in the realm of public history: relative freedom from state strictures accompanied by a zone of constraint emanating from a popular nationalism. While museums have often been the site of displays and formation of a national historical identity, in Shandong, perhaps one of the most historically rich regions of China, dwindling government support has led museums to look elsewhere for support. It is only museums in remote places and still dependent on government support that continue to follow the revolutionary or reformist narrative. In the major cities, museums have branched out in different directions – such as the history of alcohol, folk-culture or mining – and are often driven by market considerations. James Flath suggests that

since 1992, with the guarantee of the security of historical sites from attacks such as the Cultural Revolution, it has become acceptable even in connection with historical subjects of national significance to display such politically incorrect items as the many rooms of Kang Youwei's concubines or the Catholic church as the first location of the provincial CCP headquarters.²²

This liberal approach may also be seen in the management of the historical monument Yuanmingyuan, the Qing emperors' summer palace and gardens filled with architectural replicas from China and Europe. Until recently, this site was remembered chiefly for its devastation and national humiliation at the hands of Western imperialists during the Second Opium War and the Boxer Rebellion. Haiyan Lee's analysis of the various recent efforts to utilize and represent this site reveals the state to be quite neutral about whether it should be kept as a site of ruins and thus of national humiliation and vengeance, or restored as a glorious history of imperial romance and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, she argues that the job of the state today is to balance the two, as it must also balance the relationship between history as commercial pleasure and history as a reminder of national humiliation. The nation-state's principal concern appears to be to ensure that globalization – the desire for global goods and values – is not overcome by the desire for national authenticity or vice-versa. Lee argues that Yuanmingyuan is 'an ideal schooling ground for the art of socialist neo-liberal citizenship: of being able to reconcile authoritarianism and freewheeling capitalism, patriotic loyalty and transnational imaginary, self-righteous rage and aesthetic and sensual enjoyment.'²³

But while public displays now seem to be much less state-driven, they do not necessarily exclude nationalism in their mode of presentation. For instance, on Liugong Island in Shandong, once the headquarters of the former Beiyang Navy, there is a new museum dedicated to the defeat by the Japanese Navy in 1895. It houses enormous dioramas of Chinese crushing the Japanese foes, but contains few reminders of the actual Chinese defeat.²⁴ From the mid-1990s, regional museums became much more interested in displaying and boosting regional rather than national history. But these regional narratives are not incompatible with the national story; they generate a voluntary rather than a coercive integration with the centre, spawning mass cultural patriotism from below. This kind of cultural patriotism has generated a tense situation and a 'relics warfare' across the China–Korea border over the problem of Koguryo, an ancient Korean kingdom in present-day Chinese territory claimed

by the Chinese as Chinese.²⁵ This kind of popular nationalism expressed through history is a natural result of years of government textbook pedagogy and other historical education; but it is also a creation that takes on a life of its own.

A final way in which history and national consciousness are being transformed in China today relates to the subtle transformation of the territorial conception of nationhood discussed above in the context of the Republic of Five Nationalities. The People's Republic of China (*zhonghua renmin gongheguo*) of 1949 was similarly founded upon goals of equal citizenship – indeed of affirmative action – for its fifty-six nationalities. Like other decolonizing nations, the PRC was committed to a civic, territorial model of nationality over one that stressed the dominant ethnic nationality of the Han. With the rapid advance of globalization over the last few decades, the territorial model has been coming increasingly under stress as overseas Chinese capital and connections have become more and more important for China's global competitiveness. The effort to integrate the overseas Han Chinese into the nation has led to a spatial reimagining of the nation from the territorial China to the ethnic one. This has been accompanied by an intensification of economic investment and activity in the coastal regions of China, away from the hinterland where we also find most of the minority populations. There has thus been a reorientation of national and historical identification.

Tu Wei-ming, a professor of Chinese philosophy at Harvard University and one of the most prominent overseas Chinese scholars, proposed a narrative through which one could identify Chineseness across the world. Tu identified concentric circles of 'cultural China', beginning with the first symbolic universe comprising Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, to a second comprising the Chinese diaspora, and finally, in a Confucian gesture, to a third symbolic universe comprising all who empathize with Chinese culture, including many non-Chinese scholars of China. The recent publication of the *Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas*, an excellent and authoritative history of the overseas Chinese edited by Lynn Pan, is in fact framed by these concentric circles of Chineseness. In its less academic form, this vision of nationality finds – or revives – an alternative ethnic or cultural integration (minus the empathetic foreigners) in the ideology of the children of the Yellow Emperor (*yanhuang zhizi*) and the new attention to Confucianism.²⁶

According to Professor Tu, this concentricity may also be understood as two types of Chineseness – one political and the other ethnic. Tu's two

types of Chineseness more or less match the two types of nations and nationalisms I have mentioned: the civic territorial conception of the People's Republic of China and the ethnic or ethno-cultural one. There have been historiographies associated with these two types of Chineseness, and James Liebold has recently written about the relationship between the racial and territorial notions among Republican historians as both contesting and intertwined. He finds such an ambivalent relationship resurgent even today among PRC historians.²⁷ The recent spread of the historical narrative of the ethnic nation linking Han Chinese to overseas Han Chinese in a kind of 'deterritorialized nationalism' has occurred at the expense of the territorial nation. Together with the imbalance in regional development in China, it has led, at the ethnic frontiers of the nation, to counter movements of irredentist or ethnic nationalism in Tibet, Mongolia and Xinjiang. The government's campaign to develop the west – *Xibu dakaifa* – is a response to this perceived imbalance. But the campaign itself is a double-edged sword that both increases investment in the interior and increases control over the region and floods it with Han people and culture.

Over the last century, historical consciousness in China has been chiefly used to enable the emergent nation to find its place in the world, to create a population that identifies with the nation-state, and to mobilize this population for the survival and success of the nation-state. At the same time, we have seen the contours of the nation – who was to be included and who excluded, to what extent and what aspects of the past were acceptable – change quite dramatically over the century. With every turn, we have seen demands on academic history and popular historical consciousness to adapt to these changes. History has also been central to understanding the dominant values of the changing present because it is a source of legitimacy for those engineering these changes.

But even as the configuration of the nation-state and nationalism has changed, the ideology of nationalism appears to have grown. Limiting ourselves just to China's relations with East Asian nations, despite the growth of economic ties with Japan, Korea and Taiwan and what is being referred to as the 'peaceful rise of China', political tensions have also been rising. Not surprisingly, they are being expressed in the realm of history; in the discourse of identity and the claims arising from it. History textbooks and claims to historical heritage and territories are at the centre of these tensions. They include the Japanese government's decision to publish textbooks without due acknowledgment of Japanese war atrocities in China and East Asia; the Korean protest over China's

declaration of Koguryo as Chinese; the hundreds if not thousands of small and large islands contested by China, Korea, Japan and others; and most of all, the bitter contest between the PRC and Taiwanese nationalism over Taiwan. These issues have been a fundamental part of the historical pedagogy of nationalism not only in China but in each of the East Asian societies. They have become crucial to the individual's sense of self-worth, and are thus fuel for a sometimes runaway nationalism that can come to threaten the state itself. If the 'peaceful rise of China' is to continue, it may be necessary to pluralize historical education and its goals in this region.

Indeed, we may be seeing some pluralization in historical education taking place even as we speak. In 2006, Shanghai produced a new set of history textbooks. The high-school history books were notable for eliminating references to Mao Zedong and toning down the references to Japanese aggression, imperialism, class struggle and even nationalism. To be sure, these texts met with fierce condemnation across the nation on the grounds that they diluted national solidarity and identity. Yet they seem to have survived the assault and the very debate itself points in a hopeful direction.

Notes

1. See Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001; and Achim Mittag, 'Historical Consciousness in China: Some Notes on Six Theses on Chinese Historiography and Historical Thought', in Paul Van Der Velde and Alex McKay (eds.), *New Developments in Asian Studies: An Introduction*, London, Kegan Paul, 1998, pp. 47–76.
2. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (trans. Keith Tribe), Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985, pp. 276–81.
3. Liang Qichao, 'Xinshixue' [New history], *Yinbingshiwenji* (ed. Lin Zhijun), 1970 reprint of 1932 edition, Taipei, Taiwan Zhonghua shuju, 1903, v. 4, 1–30.
4. Liang Qichao, 'Zhongguoshi xulun' [A systematic discussion of Chinese history], *Yinbingshiwenji* 1, 1902, v. 3, 10–12.
5. Zou Rong, translation in John Lust, *The Revolutionary Army: A Chinese Nationalist Tract of 1903*, Paris, Mouton, 1968. See also Kai-wing Chow, 'Imagining Boundaries of Blood: Zhang Binglin and the Invention of the Han "Race" in Modern China', in Frank Dikotter (ed.), *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1997, pp. 34–52.
6. Gu Jiegang, 'Zhongguo Jiangyu Yangeshi' [A history of the evolution of China's border regions], Changsha, Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1938, p. 4.
7. Quoted in Liu Xiaoyuan, 'The Chinese Communist Party and the "Nationality Question" 1921–1945', Unpublished paper, 1999, p. 38 n. 2.

8. Chiang Kai-shek, *China's Destiny* (trans. Wang Chung-hui), New York, Macmillan, 1947, p. 4.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 4, p. 12, p. 239 fn. 1.
10. In Richard Wilson, *Learning to be Chinese: The Political Socialization of Children in Taiwan*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1970, p. 276.
11. See Jerome B Grieder, *Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance: Liberalism in the Chinese Revolution, 1917–1937*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1970, pp. 80–5.
12. Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1965, p. 176, p. 190.
13. Q. Edward Wang, 'Between Marxism and Nationalism: Chinese Historiography and the Soviet Influence, 1949–1963', *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 23 (2000), 95–111.
14. Timothy Brook (ed.), *The Asiatic Mode of Production in China*, London, M. E. Sharpe, 1999, pp. 14–15.
15. Hu Sheng, 'Zhongguo jindai lishide fenqi wenti' [The question of periodization in modern Chinese history], in *Lishi yanjiu*, 1959 n. 1, 5–15.
16. David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994.
17. Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang* (trans. Richard W. Bodman and Pin P. Wang), Ithaca, NY, Cornell East Asian Series, 1991, p. 131.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 290–1.
19. Zhao Shiyu, *Kuanghuan yu richang: Ming Qing yilai de miaohui yu minjian shehui* [Carnivals and everyday life: Temple fairs and popular society since the Ming and Qing], Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 2002; Feng Xiaocai, 'Shanghai xiaceg minzhong dui wusi yundongde fanying: yi "Riren zhidu" fengchao wei zhongxin' [The response of Shanghai's lower strata towards the May Fourth Movement: centring upon the Japanese poisoning agitation], *Shehui kexue yanjiu* 3, 2005, 136–45.
20. Yuan Weishi, 'Modernization and History Textbooks', *EastSouthWestNorth*: www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_1.htm
21. See Zhang Haipeng's critique of Yuan's article, published in the resumed *Bingdian*: <http://blog.chinesenewsnet.com/?p=8072&cp=1> Zhang Haipeng, 'Fandi fanfengjian shi jindai zhongguo lishide zhudi' [Anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism are the themes of modern Chinese history], Tuesday, 28 February 2006.
22. James A. Flath, 'Managing Historical Capital in Shandong: Museum, Monument and Memory in Provincial China', *The Public Historian* 24, no. 2, Spring 2002, 50–3.
23. Haiyan Lee, 'The Dialectics of Ruins in Yuanmingyuan', Paper prepared for MLA Convention, Washington, DC, 2005, 39–40.
24. James Flath, 'Managing Historical Capital', 55.
25. Yonsoon Ahn, 'Competing Nationalisms: The Mobilization of History and Archaeology in the Korea-China Wars over Koguryo/Gaogouli', *Japan Focus*, 9 February 2006.
26. Tu Wei-ming, 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center', in *Daedalus* 120, no. 2, Spring 1991, 22.
27. James Leibold, 'Competing Narratives of Racial Unity in Republican China', *Modern China* 32, no. 2, April 2006, 181–220.

Guide to further reading

- Duara, Prasenjit, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Gu Jiegang, *An Autobiography of a Chinese Historian* (trans. Arthur W. Hummel), Taipei, Ch'eng-wen Publishing Co., 1966 reprint.
- Harbsmeier, Cristoph, 'Some Notions of Time and of History in China and in the West, with a Digression on the Anthropology of Writing', in Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (eds.), *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1995.
- Levenson, Joseph R., *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1965.
- Mittag, Achim, 'Historical Consciousness in China: Some Notes on Six Theses on Chinese Historiography and Historical Thought', in Paul Van Der Velde and Alex McKay (eds.), *New Developments in Asian Studies: An Introduction*, London, Kegan Paul, 1998, pp. 47–76.
- Puett, Michael, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Wang, Q. Edward, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography*, Albany, State University of New York, 2001.
- 'Between Marxism and Nationalism: Chinese Historiography and the Soviet Influence, 1949–1963', *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 23, 2000, 95–111.