

Historical Scepticism in the New Culture Era: Gu Jiegang and the “Debate on Ancient History”

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I. Introduction

In the early twentieth century, Chinese literati went through a crisis that left them depressed and pessimistic. Although they had always known frustration, be it on social or individual grounds, their *raison d'être* had never before been challenged quite as severely as towards the decline of the Qing. The monarchy once overthrown, most younger intellectuals hailed the 1911 revolution, only to be plunged into deeper despair as they were robbed of its victory by yet another “despot”. From the ashes of lost hope rose the “New Culture movement”, channelling a variety of social

and intellectual currents into a powerful stream which swept along every educated Chinese, at home or abroad.

Unlike the antiimperialist manifestations of May Fourth, 1919, New Culture had no datable beginning or end. Most participants were unaware they were joining a “movement”. Its major characteristic was a new sense of optimism among the literati who would redefine their (traditional) social role as educators, hoping to imbue the rising generation with a sense of responsibility for their own society, scepticism about stale traditions as well as the powers that be, and open-mindedness towards foreign ideas.⁽¹⁾

However, much as tradition was condemned, and the terms “new” or “youth” were polemically overstressed, the fondest hopes of most educated Chinese at the time were pinned on regeneration and rejuvenation of such elements of their own cultural inheritance as they held essential, in fact irrevocable, if their Chinese identity were to be maintained, even – or rather, particularly – in view of China’s “reduced” status as a mere *pars inter pares* within the universal family of nations (as opposed to its former self-regard as the centre of the world *tianxia* 天下).⁽²⁾ Many of their argumentative and methodological approaches were inherited from time-honoured “conventions of protest”,⁽³⁾ and most notably from Qing scholarship and reformist concepts. Certainly, they were also stimulated by late Qing and early Republican exiles’ and overseas students’ anarchist and Marxist experiments and other Western ideas gleaned from Christian missionary publications, foreign teachers in China, overseas studies, etc.; but while such influences served as incentives, they did not deprive New Culture intellectuals of their “Chineseness”, nor did they turn most of them into “Westernized” scholars, except on a very thin surface.

Which of those inalienable elements of Chinese culture were worth preserving in, and adaptable to, a modernized China was the issue of heated debates. The

(1) For these very traits, attempts by some historians to construct a discursive analogy of New Culture with the Cultural Revolution of 1966 ff must be repudiated.

(2) See for instance the remarks on China’s “cosmological myth” by H. Chang, 1971, p.186; see also J.R. Levenson, 1967.

(3) Cf. D.S. Nivison, 1960.

New Culture epoch resounded with vigorous discussions *lunzhan* 論戰, carried out in periodicals that sprang up like mushrooms. (*Lunzhan*—style scholarly dispute, too, had its indigenous tradition of roughly 2500 years, ever since “hundred schools” of *zhuzi* 諸子 were contending in Pre-Qin times.) Known as marks of the New Culture movement are controversies over a “literary revolution”; science and democracy; Confucianism and its social reverberations; “Western materialism” as compared with “Eastern metaphysics”; social history and the applicability of Marxist historical materialism to China’s conditions.

Not quite as well known is a debate on Chinese antiquity begun in 1923 by two young *Beida* 北大 historians, Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 (1887–1939) and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980). At the time, it struck China’s scholarly community like a thunderbolt, as it questioned some of the very foundations of Chinese cultural self-assessment. The protagonists and their supporters were branded, or praised as the case might be, as the “new faction of antiquity doubters” *xin yigu pai* 新疑古派. Their antitraditionalism doubtlessly owed momentum to the spirit of the era, braced by contacts with Western “modernity”. Often overlooked, however, are Chinese “traditions of antitraditionalism”,⁽⁴⁾ although scholars of Gu Jiegang’s generation and upbringing would cite them as their inherited authorities long before nationalists such as Hu Shi 胡適, in their search for roots, tried to make use of such scholarship.

The following remarks are meant to exemplify, by Gu Jiegang’s individual case, continuities of such traditions still viable in the New Culture era, holding potential for a changed perspective on China’s ancient history. For the purpose of what is now called “motivation research”, I have not only considered Gu’s published opus, but also some biographical material, published or not. Undeniably, Gu, like any other human individual, was the subject as well as the object of his own epoch and individual experience, which shaped his views as much as did his “objective” learning.

II. Gu Jiegang’s education⁽⁵⁾

(4) Cf. U. Richter, 1986.

(5) The broad outlines of Gu’s development are well-known by his *zixu* 自序 of 1926 (cf. Gu Jiegang, 1926c) and its annotated English translation, A.W. Hummel, 1931, which is usually quoted, flaws

Gu was of Suzhou gentry stock. From a tender age subjected to the most rigid traditional education, the only intellectual freedom left to the precocious boy was a sense of scepticism about much he was taught. At an age when today's children enter school, he began to discover contradictions in his classical texts.

From 1903, Gu's family subscribed to the *Xinming congbao* 新民叢報. Young Jiegang devoured Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 essays, deriving a first inkling of China's political troubles and the wide world beyond.⁽⁶⁾ Books his father brought from Peking (where he studied) opened the boy's eyes to future social alternatives as well as to social criticism of the past (e.g. Yan Fu's essay *Pi Han* 嚴復·辟韓 which scolded Tang scholar-poet Han Yu's *Yuandao* 韓愈·原道 for excessive glorification of sovereign and officialdom).⁽⁷⁾

After the 1905 abolition of imperial state examinations, Gu attended "modern" schools. Out of class, he studied ancient Chinese ideas while his grandfather tutored him on the Classics, among which the "Book of Documents" *Shangshu* 尚書 fascinated him most for the glimpses it allowed of Chinese social life 3000 years ago. Of course, a conservative scholar would present *Shangshu* as one consistent work, concealing from his grandson the perennial debates over this Classic and others. Jiegang himself, however, stumbled across stylistic inconsistencies, finding his doubts corroborated by Qing textual critics. But such exciting news were gleaned secondhand from terse biographical passages in late Qing anthologies while Gu searched his relatives' studies and Suzhou's bookstalls in vain for original works. Still, his own investigations led him to suspect, for instance, that certain parts of the *Shangshu* were of later origin than claimed by the New Text school, whence he became engrossed in Han commentaries

and all, by American authors. I here repeat those outlines to a degree, but add additional details learnt from more recent sources (e.g. Gu Jiegang, 1980; 1982; 1990; Gu Hong, ed., 1990; Gu Chao, ed., 1993; Hiraoka T., 1981), as well as personally from Prof. Gu (Feb. 1980), his family, and assistants.

(6) Gu Jiegang, 1926c, p.12; A.W. Hummel, 1931, translates "However vast *the world's knowledge* might be, I... was getting a smattering of it", but Gu writes clearly, "*tiandi zhi da* 天地之大".

(7) Yan's essay in *Wenbian* 文變 1902 (?), ed. Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 At ten, Gu had already studied Han Yu's *Yuandao*.

of the Classics (cf. *infra*).

"Modern" education bored Jiegang who detected contradictions in his newfangled textbooks, too. In 1909, he sat for entrance exams to a traditional Suzhou "hall of learning" where some famous scholars were teaching. He failed, however, because of his refutation, in his essay, of Han scholar Zheng Xuan's 鄭玄 interpretations of the Classics. Shortly after, his grandfather died, leaving the youth to browse through unconventional reading matter such as Tan Sitong's 譚嗣同 *Renxue* 仁學 in which Tan lamented Chinese gentry arrogance and xenophobia, suggesting "total Westernization" (long before May Fourth).⁽⁸⁾ At 17, Gu found in Tan's polemics an echo of his own budding ideas of disinterested learning that transcended doctrinaire or national boundaries.

The year of 1911 saw Gu hail the revolution and join a "Socialist Party" just founded in Shanghai. But the cynicism of its mundane members disillusioned him, and soon he quit. In the spring of 1913, he went to Peking, having passed the entrance exams to *Beida*. Once more he found himself among a snobbish *jeunesse dorée* who took the university for a mere stepping-stone into civil service, while most of the staff were ingrained neo-Confucians offering little to stimulate Gu. At the same time, he witnessed with dismay Yuan Shikai's 袁世凱 machinations.

Like others, Gu felt depressed and hopeless. For a while, he gave himself up to the then typical *Beida* students' life of leisure,⁽⁹⁾ becoming a *habitué* of Peking opera. His intellectual curiosity was roused by *common topoi* in opera plots which he began to collect and compare. Another turning point was his friendship with Mao Zishui 毛子水, a serious fellow-student who was singularly unperturbed by the political hubbub and led Gu back on the path of academic virtue. He introduced Gu to Zhang Taiyan's 章太炎 lectures in late 1913. Gu was awed by Zhang's erudition and broad historical perspective, even if his invectives against Kang Youwei 康有為 stunned him.

(8) We must consider how young Tan was when he wrote his *Renxue* in 1886/7 (publ. 1898); since he was executed at the age of 33, it must remain a matter of speculation whether he, like other 1898 reformers, might have modified his views with time.

(9) Cf. Gu Jiegang, 1980.

Revived by such new stimuli, Gu resumed classes, e.g. with New Text scholar Cui Shi 崔適 who introduced works such as *Shitong* by Liu Zhiji 劉知幾, 史通 and *Wenshi tongyi* by Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠, 文史通義. At last he was able to study primary sources. Then, Yao Jiheng's *Gujin weishu kao* 姚際恆, 古今僞書考 struck him "like lightning". Also, he'd not have been his obstinate self if Zhang Taiyan's philippics against Kang Youwei had not incited him to see for himself what those books were all about. Although he resented Kang's idolatry of Confucius, Kang's indications at suprious Old Text Classics and underlying political motives corroborated Gu's own doubts and advanced him on his "road of criticism".

Naturally, such materials fell into Gu's hands in a haphazard manner. The field was vast and poorly tilled, and no systematic account of previous critical historiography existed. In fact, many treatises were lost. Only gradually would his picture fill in. I therefore forsake biographical consistency in the following paragraphs, drawing instead a cursory sketch of Chinese historical scepticism throughout the ages.

III. Historical scepticism of the past

Its origins (in astrology?) dating to the early 8th century BCE, Chinese historiography was a scholarly discipline by the late Zhou. Although the Confucian school was only one of many who contended in the Warring States period, the Sage's author-, or at least editorship of the "six Classics"⁽¹⁰⁾ was received by most of the *zhuzi* who also shared, with the exception of the Legalists, the paradigm of an idealized past qua model for the present (viz. the Golden Age of "Three Sage Kings and Five Holy Emperors" who inherited from Heaven and passed to Confucius and further the *dao* 道 principle and *li* 禮 ethics). Hence the *fugu* 復古 ("emulate antiquity") norm.

Sectioning history into rules, or periods within rules, was practised since about 165 BCE. Dynastic annals had their prototype in Ban Gu's *Hanshu* 班固, 漢書 and developed into the official histories compiled by state-employed committees in the succeeding dynasty. Supradynastic accounts go back to Sima Qian's *Shiji* 司馬遷, 史記 which upheld the Golden Age ideal. It served as a model for later general histories.

(10) A "Book of Music" was allegedly lost before the Han.

This tradition took the historical time/space continuum for the manifestation of the universal moral principle *dao*, while historians were to act as guarantors of the uninterrupted flow of that principle *daotong* 道統. From the Tang, the term connoted (Confucian) "orthodoxy".

Confucianism was suppressed under Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝. The early Han rulers shared his Legalist leanings. Only under Wudi 武帝 and his successor was the Confucian school fully rehabilitated. Imperial academicians were entrusted with collating and reconstructing the Classics in script devised by Qin reforms ("new texts"). To the canon were added *Lunyu* 論語, *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳 (a commentary on the Spring- and Autumn Annals *Chunqiu* 春秋), and the less significant *Guliang zhuan* 穀梁傳. These "new texts" obtained official status as textbooks for schools and civil service examinations. So began the "millennial connection between the Confucian Classics and Chinese political discourse [that] suggests the power these texts had over political behaviour in traditional China".⁽¹¹⁾ Thus, the struggle for dominance among schools was not purely academically motivated, since Confucian scholar-officials began to exert considerable political influence as teachers and examiners of future state officials.

Instrumental in the renaissance of Confucianism and the formation of the New Text school was Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 179–104 BCE), one of the literati in Wudi's service. He amalgamated Confucian ethics with archaic notions such as *Yin-Yang* 陰陽 and "Five-Elements". According to Dong, normative patterns guided rise and fall of dynasties. By complex manipulation of his metaphysical arithmetics, he reasoned away the Qin to prove that Han were legitimate successors to Zhou. Confucius was represented as mystical heir to the impeccable Golden Age rulers. Like Zhougong 周公 (alleged spiritual founder of Zhou and author of the "Rites"), Confucius was seen as a sage who himself wrote the Classics to preach his doctrine; an "uncrowned king" who sought to improve the defunct (Zhou) dynasty's institutions but, lacking real power, had to conceal his reform ideas under the dry style of *Chunqiu* (which explains the startling prominence of that book in Han Confucianism).

(11) B.A. Elman, 1984, p.27.

By the end of the former Han, a number of Classics written in archaic script (“old texts”) appeared, among them another *Chunqiu* commentary, *Zuozhuan* 左傳, which for the Old Text school was to play the same focal role as the *Gongyang zhuan* did for the New Text scholars. *Zuozhuan*, however, presents the *Chunqiu* as a mere chronicle of the Zhou state of Lu; Confucius as a scholarly compiler and editor, not the charismatic author, of the Classics. Although the authenticity of the Old Texts was challenged, they obtained official status under the “Xin” interregnum (9–23 CE). In the later Han, they lost it again. Old Text scholars like Wang Chong 王充(27–97) reproached the New Text school with superstition and inefficient speculation on “ways of Heaven” in bygone ages. In his *Lunheng* 論衡 he already questioned the historicity of certain predynastic sage rulers. His school saw the historian’s task in handing over the unadulterated *dao* of antiquity revealed in the original Classics. This accounts for both conservatism and textual criticism. The Old Text school upheld the sober maxim of “searching evidence from actual facts” *shishi qiushi* 實事求是. It eventually got the better over its New Text rival, who was nearly forgotten for many centuries.

After a decline, the Old Text school reemerged in the Tang. Court historian Liu Zhiji (661–721) in his *Shitong* deplored political dependence of historians and questioned historical stereotypes such as the casting of first dynastic rulers as “good”, last as “bad”. Incidentally, he already applied the term *yigu* (“doubting antiquity”): His magnum opus holds the chapters “*Yigu pian* 疑古篇” and “*Huojing pian* 惑經篇”. Such scepticism called for protests by ultra-conservatives like Han Yu (768–824) who established Confucian orthodoxy and introduced a chauvinist accent into Old Text learning that it was to retain down into the 20th century.

From the Song, an increasing number of scholars rebelled against historiographical clichés. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1017–1072), official revisor of the Tang history, like Han Yu one of the *Tang Song bajia* 唐宋八家, denied any connection between Confucius and the *Yijing* 易經 while finding it suspicious that the *Shi yi* 十翼 (“Ten Wings”)(12) were never mentioned before the Han. Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), another high-ranking official, in his *Yi Meng* 疑孟 questioned historical data in the

(12) Elucidations of *Yijing*, trad. by Confucius himself.

Mencius concerning the sage rulers. Even Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), patriarch of neo-Confucianism, had his reservations about the Old Text *Shangshu*, took the “Changes” for an ancient soothsaying manual, and the “Odes” for a collection of popular ballads. Earlier than Zhu, civil servant and erudite Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162) held the same opinion about *Yijing*. In his *Tongzhi* 通志 he criticized the specialization of Han scholars in single Classics, and the factionalism of their schools. True to the Old Text tradition, he proposed to study the Confucian canon as a whole, disregarding the commentaries, hoping to “integrate and unify [diverse] textual traditions”.⁽¹³⁾ He also observed that some Golden Age “saints” were never mentioned in documents from before the Han.⁽¹⁴⁾

Confucianism had never been monolithic,⁽¹⁵⁾ and neo-Confucianism ramified as well. From mid-Ming and early Qing, scholars engaged in purging classical documents from what they saw as Song distortions. Reviving Old Text philology, the *Hanxuepai* 漢學派 distinguished themselves from the “idealistic” verbosity of the Song school. Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), Yan Ruoju 閻若璩 (1636–1704) et al. applied evidential textual research even to the Old Text canon. The discovery to cause a storm in Gu Jiegang’s youthful mind was Yan’s statement that the Old Text *Shangshu* was in fact the fake of a fake in that not only the “original” former-Han version had been spurious, but the one received in Yan’s own day dated only from the 4th century CE. Yan had arrived at this verdict in forty years’ work at his *Shangshu guwen shuzheng* 尚書古文疏證 which was not printed before 1745, and even then never became widespread.

Such early Qing treatment of ancient texts anticipated empirical research of the 18th century. Limited space forbids me to elaborate on it, except for a glimpse of a “modern” historian who refuted academic “fashions”: Zhang Xuecheng (1738–

(13) J. Mittag, 1984, pp.52–53.

(14) Further *yigu* precursors, cf. A.W. Hummel, 1931, pp.xxiv–xxv; a more complete account in Liu Qiyu, 1986; also in Gu’s new preface (1983) to Gu Jiegang, ed., 1936.

(15) Cf. Nathan Sivin’s foreword to B.A. Elman, 1984, p.xiii, “It is hard to think of any idea responsible for more fuzziness in writing about China than the notion that Confucianism was one thing”.

1801).(16) His “rehabilitation” of near-forgotten Zheng Qiao enticed Gu Jiegang to take a closer look at Song scholarship.

To Zhang, the Classics belonged to a yet to be completed compilation of historical documents of the Chinese nation, “The six Classics [represent] decrees and axioms of ancient rulers..., not made-up empty talk. Even Confucius in his wisdom merely commented on them without adding [of his own]. Those who fail to grasp this but amend at their own discretion do not only arrogate to themselves wisdom [exceeding that of the Sage] but improperly distort state acts of the past”.(17)

Zhang also wondered how the “sage rulers” paradigm could have been transmitted all the way from high antiquity since written characters had then not yet existed (revealing the traditional Chinese literati’s disregard of oral traditions). Besides, he argued, *Shangshu* mentioned only two of the Emperors and none of the Kings while even *Zuozhuan* was still vague on the issue.(18) Little wonder that Zhang, too, met with neglect during his lifetime.

Qing textual criticism *kaoju*, *kaozheng* 考據，考證 (“examining evidence”), and *bianwei* 辨偽 (“disputing forgeries”) set out as a revolt against Song philosophizing but soon took on pedantic features, as “texts and authors who contributed to the formation of this empirical strategy became captives of the forms of discourse they employed for analysis. Their philological presuppositions predetermined the subjects chosen for analysis by sanctioning what acceptable knowledge was and how it was to be verified. What did not fit in with the new strategies was excluded”, and “the preeminent position of classical studies in... scholarship, along with its historical focus, remained intact”,(19) while mathematics, astronomy etc. served as mere auxiliary resorts. The mainstream of scholarship continued to present Chinese history and culture as a continuous holistic unity. Whoever deviated from that path was condemned to outsider status and oblivion. This was certainly true for the two scholars to round

(16) D.S. Nivison, 1966, pp.162, 48 & passim; for Zhang’s (un-Westernized) “modernity”, *ibid.*, pp.2-3.

(17) Zhang Xuecheng, 1992, “*Yijiao*” pt.1, pp.1, 3.

(18) Zhang Xuecheng, 1922, “*Shujiao*” pt.1, p.8.

(19) B.A. Elman, 1984, pp.26, 84.

off this brief account: Yao Jiheng (1647–1715?) and Cui Shu 崔述 (Donbgi 東壁, 1740–1816).

Yao, in his *Gujin weishu kao* 古今僞書考, examines countless corrupt texts up to the 18th century, while in his magnum opus *Jiujing tonglun* 九經通論, he classifies the Classics, their commentaries, and annotations then generally accepted, as *cunzhen* (“existant, genuine”) and *biewei* 存真與別僞 (“separate [later], spurious”), proving a large number of “classical” documents as concoctions of the Han, Wei, Six Dynasties, and even Song and Ming. The colossal work was never published, nor was it included in the imperial catalogue. All that remained of it in Gu Jiegang’s day were a few fragments scattered throughout China and Japan. The brief *Gujin weishu kao* was only printed in 1893.⁽²⁰⁾

As for Cui Shu, he suspected even Qin and Han sources of deviations from authentic classical texts (hence his reservations against *Hanxue* scholars such as Gu Yanwu who had relied on Han documents). From 1783 to 1814, he worked at his *Kaixinlu* 考信錄 (“Inventory of [texts and theses] investigated for their authenticity”), finding that orthodox lore of high antiquity must have formed over time by reversed chronology, i.e. the later a figure first appeared in the texts, the earlier his ostensible lifetime. Thus, Yao and Shun find no mention in the oldest Classic *Shijing* 詩經; the Shennong 神農 (“Divine Farmer”) enters in the Mencius; the earliest sage ruler of all, Pangu 盤古, appears only in Han texts. Those personages and their legends, claims Cui, turned into stereotypes and, hallowed by tradition, assumed historicity. However, he observes, those who had tampered with the texts often would give themselves away unwittingly, since each period had its distinct “climate” reflected in its contemporaries’ objectives and modes of expression. An historian versed in the *Zeitgeist* of an era might well see through the alleged unity of history.⁽²¹⁾

The 19th century confronted China with unprecedented problems. *Hanxue* textual studies declined. The New Text school was revived less for its esoterics than for its statecraft ideas. This movement climaxed in the 1898 reforms headed

(20) See Gu Jiegang, ed., 1930.

(21) Cui Dongbi, “*Kaixinlu tiyao* 考信錄提要”, in Gu Jiegang, ed. 1936, vol.II.

by Kang Youwei. Gu Jiegang had perused Kang's *Xinxue weijing kao* 新學偽經考 ("Investigating pseudo-Classics of Xin scholarship", 1891) on spurious Classics presumably fabricated for political reasons during the "Xin" interregnum by court librarian Liu Xin 劉歆; and *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 ("Investigating institutional reforms of Confucius", 1897), which presents the Sage, in the New Text tradition, as an uncrowned bearer of the celestial mandate who was bound to reform outdated institutions, but forced to encode his message in "his" *Chunqiu*. Still, Kang applies some scepticism (reminiscent of Cui Shu), e.g. declaring Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 mere personifications of Confucian ethics.

IV. The "Ancient History" Debate

In the winter term of 1917/18, Gu Jiegang was among the *Beida* audience of US–returned philosophy professor Hu Shi (1891–1962) whose unconventional representation of ancient Chinese history met with the ideas he, Gu, had long fostered. He "lured" his then quite conservative roommate Fu Sinian 傅斯年 "onto Hu Shi's path".⁽²²⁾ Two years later, Fu would be among the student demonstration leaders on May Fourth (while Gu Jiegang stayed home). Later, Gu helped Fu with the *Xin chao* 新潮 "New Tide" magazine. Although he never shared Fu's radical Westernization ideas, he had his own private idol to smash (*ouxiang pohuai* 偶像破壞) at the time. Under penname Gu Chengwu 顧誠吾 ("honest self"), he launched a violent attack on the traditional Confucian family system,⁽²³⁾ based on personal resentment: In 1919, too soon after the death of his wife by whom he had "only" two daughters, his relatives urged him to remarry, to which he had to obey despite severe misgivings. Incidentally, his budding interest in folklore sprang from the same root: "Stylish" prose and poetry ignored, or at best paraphrased, human emotions; but in popular ditties and tales, traditionally snubbed by scholars, he found a comforting echo of his passionate love and grief for his young wife, so unseemly in a gentleman. Like earlier with Peking opera, his academic appetite was whetted soon enough as he

(22) Gu Jiegang, 1982, p.3; cf. Gu Jiegang, 1926, p.36.

(23) The essay fragment, cf. Gu Jiegang, 1919, 1920.

collected rhymes from Suzhou. To my regret, however, vital aspects of Gu's oeuvre such as folklore studies,⁽²⁴⁾ historical geography, etc, must here be disregarded.

After graduation in 1920, Gu was appointed assistant librarian at *Beida* which left him leisure to delve into many of the abovementioned works, notably by Zheng Qiao, Yao Jiheng, and Cui Shu. He discussed his new insights with Qian Xuantong (on *Beida* staff since 1915) and Hu Shi, who supported his scepticism. Like many iconoclasts of the era, Gu owed Hu the courage to "be bold in setting up hypotheses" *dadande jiashe, xiaoxinde qiuzheng* 大膽的假設，小心的求證. Gu's senior by less than two years, Hu's classical scholarship could not stand comparison with many of his "students" who had stayed in China, and he profited much by them. But in return, he equipped Gu with fresh methodological approaches such as the "genetic" analysis derived from (Hu Shi's American teacher) Dewey, by which historical systems or mentalities are not seen as isolated factors, but in a discursive perspective. Hu sectioned Chinese history by a supra-dynastic chronology into high antiquity, antiquity, middle ages, and recent history, and Gu later adopted the pattern.⁽²⁵⁾ Western as it may seem, it was already employed by Tang scholar Liu Zhiji in his *Shitong*.

Qian Xuantong was more familiar than Gu with both the New and Old Text positions, having studied under Zhang Taiyan in Japan and Cui Shi in Peking. He consolidated Gu's suspicion that in their Classics research, neither school upheld the *shishi qiushi* ideal.

By 1921, now assistant lecturer at the new *Beida* postgraduate institute, Gu was able to devote more time to research. One of his many plans provided for a comprehensive anthology of previous textual studies, *Bianwei congkan* 辨偽叢刊, with emphasis on Qing scholarship.⁽²⁶⁾ He set out to smash, single-handedly, China's entire pseudo-antiquity, and restore the true gestalt of ancient history. Later, he saw that the bravado of youth and the spirit of the tide had caused his ambitions to soar too high: The task would certainly require cooperation of many specialists, and

(24) Cf. Chao W.-p., 1942, 1943; Hung C.-t., 1985.

(25) Gu Jiegang, 1947, p.125.

(26) A "first collection", 10 vols., Beijing 1928-35; rev. ed. Beijing 1955 (cf. infra, Bibliography II).

was not likely to be accomplished within their own lifetime.⁽²⁷⁾

In 1922, Gu took leave and stayed home for a year, mourning his grandmother. Since he had to make a living, he was grateful to Hu Shi for his introduction to the Shanghai Commercial Press, who employed Gu as an editor of secondary school textbooks. In his spare time, he resumed his studies, e.g. on the “Odes”, sharing Hu Shi’s conviction that it was a collection of ancient songs *yuege* 樂歌, not of hymns by Confucian disciples *tuge* 徒歌. But what occupied him most ever since he had read Cui Shu was the paradoxical gestation of many historical stereotypes.

Gu first discussed the point with Wang Boxiang 王伯祥.⁽²⁸⁾ In 1922 and early 1923, he expounded his views in a correspondence with Qian Xuanton whose responses, though infrequent, encouraged him to publish parts of a long letter to Qian in the monthly supplement to the Shanghai weekly *Nuli zhoubao* 努力周報,⁽²⁹⁾ describing his then favourite idea as the “view of layerwise accumulated, fabricated Chinese ancient history” *leiceng di zaocheng de Zhongguo gushi guan* 累層地造成的中國古史觀. This became famous as Gu’s “stratification thesis”, one of the most controversial issues of the Ancient History Debate – which Gu had hereby opened.

The stir it caused among China’s scholars is reminiscent of the agitation over Spinoza’s tracts in Renaissance Europe. As Cui Shu had already noted, orthodox stereotypes of antiquity had in time assumed the character of “realities”, while their critics were ignored, or even persecuted. Now, a young unknown dared to declare openly that neither Pangu nor any of the Golden Age rulers had ever existed, doubting (like Kang Youwei) the historicity of Yao and Shun while denying (unlike Kang) that those ancient myths held even a much as symbolic normative significance for the present. As for Yu the Great 大禹, “vanquisher of the floods”, “inventor” of irrigation, so vital for China, Gu cited the *Shuowen* 說文解字 as deriving the character /yu/ from “insect, reptile”, containing the pictogram of hoof – whence Gu assumed Yu the personage to have evolved from an archaic mythical river totem.

(27) E.g. Gu’s preface (1930), GSB III, p.2.

(28) Gu’s letter to Wang, 9 June, 1921, in GSB I, pp.34–37.

(29) *Dushu zazhi* 讀書雜誌 9 (6 May, 1923); GSB I pp.59–66. During an illness, Hu Shi entrusted Gu with editing the supplement (not to be mistaken for a leftist *Dushu zazhi* of the 1930s).

Gu's stratification thesis, surpassing Cui Shu's in vehemence, assumed political motives behind those fabrications of "ancient" model rulers in order to support the normative *fugu*, as well as dynastic claims to power and the orthodox monistic view of the origins of the Han ethnos and its institutions *yi yuan lun* 一元論 which actually had been multiform. (Gu's suspicion of political objectives became a structural element of his scepticism; ever since the Qin and Han, he insisted, Confucian scholar-officials *shidaifu* 士大夫, currying favour with the powers, manipulated texts in order to "verify" pseudo-antiquity.) He claimed that the myth of a congruent origin of the Han was formed in the Zhanguo period when large states conquered smaller ones, incorporating them into new units; with time, ethnic ambiguities dissolved; the idea of national unity called for common ancestors such as the Yellow Emperor. Likewise, territorial unity had not existed in high antiquity: Before the end of the Warring States, disparate peoples and tribes had lived in isolated areas.

Gu expounded his stratification theory as follows: 1. The later a figure is mentioned in the texts, the earlier he is placed: Early Zhou documents present Yu as the most ancient ruler; in the Chunqiu period, Yu's predecessors Yao and Shun appear; Warring States sources know the still earlier Yellow Emperor and Shennong; only in the Qin, the Three Sages are mentioned; while Pangu does not enter before the Han. 2. The later the time of record, the more detailed and awe-inspiring the lore: Around the 5th century BCE, Shun is seen as a wise ruler observing the passive *wuwei* 無爲; the "Yaodian 堯典" chapter in *Shangshu* (whose oldest parts probably date from the 4th century BCE) shows him as a paragon of virtue who, true to Confucian ethics, cultivated himself, his family, and the state after receiving the mandate from Yao; in Mencius' days (372–289 BCE) he is transformed into a model of "filial piety".

As a supplement to the stratification thesis Gu developed his idea of the four idols *ouxiang* of orthodox Confucian monistic derivation *yi yuan lun*. Although the following elaboration was written a few years later than the debates here under review, I shall insert it in this logical context. Those monisms, according to Gu, are, 1. The idol of racial (Han) congruence of the Chinese nation; 2. The idol of a coherent,

perennially binding concept of ethics; 3. The idol of monarchy as the only valid Chinese political principle; 4. The idol of the Classics canon as the sole source and foundation of Chinese learning. For the purpose of deriving all historical structures from one single principle, orthodox Confucianism claimed that (1.) the various racial and ethnic groups who had originally possessed distinct languages, customs, etc, had one and all originated, down a line of (legendary) rulers, from the Yellow Emperor; (2.) rites and institutions, once actually quite variegated, were monistically derived from “five virtues” *Wude* 五德 and “three principles” *santong* 三統; (3.) doctrines aiming at state institutional reforms which had originally been set up with reference to different concrete problems at their time were monistically derived from Yao and Shun. (4.) These monisms were combined to form orthodoxy, *daotong*, whereon the entire Classics tradition rested.⁽³⁰⁾ Therefore, one of the first steps to reconstruct the true gestalt of antiquity, or of Chinese ancient history, would have to be an analysis of such traditions, a dissection, as it were, into their original structural elements. In order to do that, the status of the Classics as canonic books on which the *daotong* was based would have to be unsettled.

In his reply, Qian Xuantong agreed with, and added to, most of Gu’s points.⁽³¹⁾ A torrent of responses came in from enthusiastic supporters, among them many of the May Fourth avantgarde, as well as stern critics, one of whom declared Gu possessed by a demon for profaning the temple of China’s antiquity. Among the conservatives, Liu Shanli 劉揆梨, well versed in classical scholarship, was an opponent after Gu’s own heart. Liu opens battle by complimenting Gu and Qian for their synthesis of *kaoju* and modern scientific scepticism. However, he continues, Gu’s view of Yu rested too onesidedly on etymological evidence. Liu disputes Gu’s claim of “*Yaodian*” being more recent than *Lunyu*: The mere fact that it was never mentioned there was, to Liu, inconclusive proof. In short: Liu finds Gu’s courage impressive, but his evidence a bit thin.⁽³²⁾ Gu answered Liu in June and again, with copious references,

(30) Gu Jiegang, 1933, *Guxu* 顧序, GSB IV, pp.12–13.

(31) Letter of 25 May, 1923 (*Dushu zazhi* 10, 10 June, 1923); in GSB I, pp.67–83.

(32) Letter of 23 May, 1923 (*Dushu zazhi* 11, 1 July, 1923); in GSB I, pp.82–92.

in the autumn of the same year; Qian joined in.⁽³³⁾ Later, Liu supported Gu’s attacks on the “idol” of *yiyuanlun* with respect to the Han nation, but challenged his doubts in a unitary territory in antiquity, reproaching Gu with lack of methodical skill in exploring ancient territorial distribution. Gu’s ideas concerning anthropomorphism of mythical figures, though interesting, had to be based on more evidence to be tenable. In any case, Liu warned, scholars ought to approach their material not emotionally, but disinterestedly. Gu accepted some of Liu’s reservations, e.g. modifying his theses on Yu, without relinquishing his doubt in Yu’s historicity.⁽³⁴⁾

Other critics censured Gu of having presented a mere welter of notes, raising all sorts of problems without offering valid conclusions. (Gu’s reply, cf. *infra*.)

During the following two years, Gu had stacks of responses, some even more sceptical than his own views. After its opening in *Dushu zazhi*, the Debate continued in *Xiandai pinglun* 現代評論 and spread to the *Beida* weekly and other academic periodicals all over China. A selection of these items was published by an unauthorized outsider in 1925, whereupon Gu’s friends urged him to compile a complete collection and issue it at their publishing cooperative, *Pushe* 樸社. This was done. Adding his own long preface, some earlier correspondence (since 1920) with Hu Shi, Qian Xuantong et al., as well as letters and essays received between 1923 and 1926, Gu thus edited the first volume of *Gushibian* 古史辨 (1926). Its main part was of course dedicated to the “stratification thesis”. Apart from selling well, it intensified the Debate, and even caught the attention of foreign scholars.⁽³⁵⁾

What distinguished this volume, as in fact all the following six volumes of *Gushibian*, is the openness with which Gu included not only supportive entries but even the most subjectively critical ones.

In 1930, despite difficult times, Gu brought out a second volume for which he compiled, among others, entries discussing political objectives of Qin/Han scholars,

(33) GSB I, pp.96–102; 105–150 (Gu); 102–105 (Qian).

(34) GSB I, pp.151–186 (Liu); 227 (Gu).

(35) Notably the American missionary and sinologist A.W.Hummel who published enthusiastic reviews and later translated and annotated Gu’s preface to GSB I as his doctoral dissertation (cf. Bibliography III).

historical clichés such as the “corruption” of the last Shang ruler, as well as terminology, e.g. by Wei Jiangong 魏建功⁽³⁶⁾ who holds the original meaning of *di* “supreme ruler”= “emperor” to have been *shangdi* 上帝 (“supreme deity”), a key to ancient mythmaking. Gu’s own contributions include, “The cause of Qin/Han unification and the weltanschauung of Zhanguo contemporaries” discussing Xia, Shang, and Zhou territories (claiming that the Zhou were of the Qiang 羌 nationality), and, “The [perception of] Confucius in the Chunqiu era and the Confucius of the Han” where he asks how, and under what interest, the image of Confucius changed from a lettered mortal to that of the near-divine “Sage”, showing, among other factors, that during those centuries the term *sheng* 聖 underwent semantic shift from “knowledgeable” to “wise”, even “saintly”, adding severe charges against the role of Confucian *shidaifu* in that process.⁽³⁷⁾

Conditions for the preparations of *Gushibian* III (1931) were more favourable. Central topics under discussion were *Yijing* and *Shijing*, under the aspect of their “secularization”. Thus the status of the “Changes” as sacred scriptures derived from Fuxi 伏羲 (patron of hunters and fishermen) was challenged in favour of its origin as a sooth-sayers’ manual; that of the “Odes” as Zhougong’s hymnal in favour of an ancient collection of lyrics.

Around 1929, Hu Shi’s attitude changed, much to the bewilderment of those who once had been incited by him. An amusing instance is contained in *Gushibian* III, pt.2, where various essays on *Shijing* by Gu and others appear, among them Gu’s short analysis of a poem in the “*Zhaonan* 召南” section of the “Odes” which to Gu was a love song a girl addressed to her sweetheart, expressing desire for sexual satisfaction; once the book had turned into a Classic, however, Confucians made such verse out to be “pious hymns”. Hu Shi replies that although Gu is basically right, he might not word it so coarsely, but rather put, “A girl is hoping for an encounter with the man she loves”. In a sequence, Hu proves even more prudish. Zhou Zuoren 周

(36) GSB II, pp.27–32.

(37) GSB II, pp.1–10 (cf. Gu Jiegang, 1926a); 130–139 (cf. Gu Jiegang, 1926b).

作人 retorts by a mock quotation, “Be bold, be bold – but by no means too bold”!(38)

Apart from Gu’s preface, *Gushibian* IV (1933) contains only one entry by Gu: an inquiry into the chronology of *Laozi* 老子.(39) In his 1917/18 lectures, Hu Shi had followed the traditional dating of *Laozi* prior to Confucius and *Lunyu*;(40) Liang Qichao debates this, taking *Laozi* for a product of the late Zhanguo period; Qian Mu 錢穆, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, and others second Liang,(41) as does Gu who claims style and mentality of the book to be characteristic of the Zhanguo–, not the Chunqiu era. Hu Shi counters by a cutting dismissal of the four authors’ points as devoid of evidence (failing, however, to prove his own position).(42)

Volume V of the Debate (1935), edited by Gu, covers two subjects, viz. 1. New/Old Text schools and Han classical studies; 2. The origin of the *Yin–Yang* and *Five–Elements* (Virtues) concepts and their bearing on China’s ancient political system. Contributions include Gu’s “Politics and history under the thesis of five consecutive virtues” discussing Han scholarship, spurious Classics, Liu Xin’s machinations, etc.; Qian Xuantong’s essay on the New/Old Text schools; Qian Mu’s data on the lives of Liu Xin and his father, repudiating assumptions of the Qing New Text school; and Liang Qichao’s study on the gestation of the *Yin–Yang* and *Five–Virtues* doctrines.(43) In a final sequence, Kang Youwei and the “New New Text school” are partly defended by Gu but relentlessly condemned by Qian Mu.(44)

Volume VI (1937) is a sequel to volume IV and comprises in its first section works on various pre–Qin *zhuzi*, in the second, *Laozi* studies.

Last and most voluminous of the series, volume VII (1941) was organized in three parts. The first is taken up by Gu’s “Fakes fabricated and exposed by Zhanguo, Qin, and Han contemporaries” and Yang Kuan’s book–size “Introduction to China’s

(38) GSB III, pp.439–41 (Gu); 442–43, 576–87 (Hu); 587–89 (Zhou).

(39) GSB IV, pp.462–520.

(40) Hu Shi, 1919, p.79.

(41) GSB IV, pp.305–307 (Liang); 383–411 (Qian); 420–422 (Feng).

(42) Hu Shi, 1933; GSB VI, pp.387–410.

(43) GSB V, pp.404–617 (Gu, cf. Gu Jiegang, 1930); 22–101 (Qian Xuantong); 101–249 (Qian Mu); 343–362 (Liang).

(44) GSB V, pp.617–630 (Gu); 631–636 (Qian).

high antiquity”;⁽⁴⁵⁾ in the second, the “Three Kings and Five Emperors” are discussed; the final part deals again with Yao, Shun, and Yu, and various aspects of the Xia dynasty.

Yang in his essay shows that the formation of ancient legends was not always based on political interest. Together with Fu Sinian, he amends Gu’s stratification thesis by a “premise of evolution and diversification of myths” *shenhua yanbian fenhua shuo* 神話演變分化說. Gu’s pupil Tong Shuye 童書業 explains, “[Gu’s thesis] presumes that ancient history is an accumulation of fabricated fakes. Although a large proportion of tradition is indeed unconvincing, such [scholar-officials] who deliberately made up forgeries were certainly few. How, then, did ancient history pile up ‘by layers’? We may add [to Gu’s approach] the diversification thesis according to which topoi of antiquity diffused [all over China] by increasing numbers, in time growing ever more complex [...] Such vast material could not accumulate but ‘layerwise’. Thus one might say that the diversification premise elucidates of the stratification thesis, i.e. that [Gu] names causes [...] while [Yang] describes effects”.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Gu, although ready to accept “natural” mythmaking processes, would insist throughout his career on the fact that many, for political motives, had indeed invented “antiquity”.⁽⁴⁷⁾

By 1930, Gu had outgrown his youthful impatience and “megalomania” (as he would call it later). In 1931, he admits, “As easy as it is to overthrow an old theory, as extremely difficult it proves to set up a new one, as [the doctrine to be discarded] holds in itself solid evidence for its falsification, while in establishing a new approach, each tiny detail leads to a wealth of complex questions [...] The few Classics alone raise such a number of problems that the few of us shall hardly be able to reorganize a tenth thereof, even if we spent our entire lifetimes on them”.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Of course, he continues, the field of ancient history requires so much more

(45) GSB VII:1, pp.1–64 (Gu, cf. Gu Jiegang, 1935); 65–318 (Yang, cf. Yang Kuan, 1938).

(46) GSB VII:1, Tong Shuye, “Zixu 2” p.3.

(47) E.g. Gu Jiegang, 1982, p.25.

(48) GSB III, Gu Jiegang, “Zixu”, p.2.

than textual studies, e.g. paleography, ancient linguistics, religious, sociological, and ethnological aspects. In short: Concrete results leading to a more trustworthy representation of China's antiquity are dreams of a distant future. Thus he answers his critics by pointing out that the Debate was never meant as a finished product, but as a pool of raw materials. By publishing those incongruous items, his intention had been to change "the scholarly attitude of 'following one [school] blindly'; to create a new atmosphere for academic dialogue; to stimulate the readiness of scholars to accept controversial opinions; and, above all, to rouse that intellectual dissatisfaction out of which, after all, grows the burning desire for solutions... Even a forced argument only wants an opponent for its correction... Neither are forced counter-arguments in any way tragic, as they incite a proponent to expound his position more intrepidly. Therefore, clashes [of opinion] and a certain lack of direction [in *Gushibian*] ought not to disturb the reader, for they are meant to oblige him to use his own head, make choices, ...and decide [for himself] on true or false... Now that we [only begin to] reorganize ancient history, we prefer [to follow] a less rigid concept, raising questions, debating them, compiling material – in order to lay the groundwork for future circumspect research which may one day lead to a conclusive compendium".⁽⁴⁹⁾

Responding to criticism by Social History Debate participants, Gu conceded there were many approaches to antiquity other than textual research, and it was more important to reconstruct its true gestalt than to destroy fake images.

"How should I not have wished to study ethnology, sociology, and historical materialism, in order to join in that constructive effort? [Yet] not only must I confine myself to fundamental work in a narrow field, but hope others [may do the same] so that a broad base of specialized research will be laid".⁽⁵⁰⁾

In any case, "Historical materialism is no sodium glutamate one may add to each and every dish... In investigating ancient chronologies or biographies, in verifying or falsifying classical texts, it is of little significance, [and] its adherents might well avail

(49) GSB III, Gu Jiegang, "Zixu", pp.2-3.

(50) GSB III, Gu Jiegang, "Zixu", pp.7-8.

themselves of the sources provided by comparative and textual research. Admittedly, studies on ancient ideology and systems profit from a materialist approach... But only once ancient documents... will have been painstakingly sorted out, [Histomat] historians may refer to synoptically arranged source material without error".⁽⁵¹⁾

V. Criticism and aftermath

Needless to say, Gu was criticized for such remarks during the campaigns of the 1950s because they conditioned "redness" by "expertise", as it were, while the new Communist rulers would have it the other way round.

Although both the Nationalists and Communists claimed the New Culture and May Fourth movements, the spirit of the Ancient History Debate, being that of free and independent thought, was one of the features they both preferred to suppress. Thus, the Communists were not alone in resenting *Gushibian*-style historical scepticism. In the early Republic, a textbook published in 1923, compiled by Gu and others, nearly caused the ruin of the Commercial Press because of objections from Guomintang hardliners.⁽⁵²⁾ During the anti-Japanese war, Gu, like many others, retreated to the Yunnan and Sichuan hinterland, where he found himself hard pressed to avoid involvement in GMD intrigues and power struggles. Once, in 1940, vice education minister Gu Yuxiu 顧毓琇 called on him in Chengdu and, after some smalltalk, asked off-handedly if the Great Yu's birthday might still be ascertained. Gu Jiegang replied with a smile, "Yu is of course a legendary figure... Interestingly, though, the Qiang 羌 nationality who lived in [ancient] Sichuan used to celebrate his birthday on the 6th of the 6th moon... which is mentioned in [ancient gazetteers] as well as Su Dongpo's 蘇東坡 poems". A few days later, Chen Lifu 陳立夫 of the notorious "CC brothers", who used to adorn his speeches by cynical allusions to "Gu Jiegang's proof of Yu the Great being a reptile", wrote in a leading paper, "The regulation of the floods by the Great Yu was the first eminent achievement of our nation's engineering. Now that Prof Gu has established Yu's birthday on the

(51) GSB IV, Gu Jiegang, "Guxu", pp.22-23.

(52) Cf. Gu Jiegang, 1982, pp.18-19; U. Richter, 1992, pp.176-178.

double-6th, we declare this the 'Day of the Engineer'". Shortly, Gu had a letter from Miao Fenglin 繆鳳林, a Nanjing scholar in agreement with Gu's scepticism, contributor to the Debate. He reprimanded Gu: On the one hand denying Yu's existence, on the other fixing his birthday – that was truly too inconsistent! Only then Gu realized that Chen and his cronies, jealous of his (involuntary) services for their political opponents in the Nationalist government, were out to undermine his professional reputation.⁽⁵³⁾

If Gu had hoped for liberation from political tangles in 1949, he was soon to be terribly frustrated. During campaigns of the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution after 1966, Gu shared the fate of most intellectuals. Much as he suffered from personal harrassment, isolation from, or loss of friends and colleagues, and destruction of his priceless library, what pained him most was the fact that once again, falsified Chinese antiquity was upheld as ultra-leftist *shidaifu* restored ancient myths to serve their ideological ends. The *yigu* or *Gushibian* "clique" was campaigned against in 1952 and after, and from 1958 on began to vanish from the PRC's modern Chinese intellectual history. Silence was of course absolute after 1966. Only by 1977, Gu was able to publish again. After Gu's death in 1980, a reprint of the *Gushibian* was published in Shanghai, which he had partly been able to prepare while still alive,⁽⁵⁴⁾ and an increasing number of fairly objective appraisals of the *xin yigupai* and their role in the New Culture movement have since appeared in the PRC.

Since Gu stayed in the Mainland after 1949 and even made feeble (and utterly useless) attempts to come to terms with the new régime, Taiwan scholars were tongue-tied about his work and the Debate. Here, too, mentioning Gu or the *Gushibian* was practically "taboo". A striking example is a small volume by Mao Zishui,⁽⁵⁵⁾ reminiscing his *Beida* years without once mentioning Gu Jiegang, in spite of their deep friendship then (cf. *supra*). Still, it was the same Mao who was instrumental in

(53) Gu Jiegang, 1990, p.22; cf. Gu Jiegang, 1982, pp.19–20.

(54) Cf. Bibliography, pt.I.

(55) Mao Zishui, 1967.

publishing a Taiwan reprint of the *Gushibian* in 1970.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In his foreword, Mao rather cleverly justifies this venture by stating that in the *Gushibian*, “ancient scholarly texts are discussed..., uninfluenced by political ideas [of the 1930s], so that the reader is by no means led astray. Authors in this work holding anarchist views make up one or two percent at most... I personally think that the spirit of *shishi qiushi* prevalent in this work can serve scholars as a guideline, while with regard to education, the least it can do is stimulate students to think independently. [This] spirit is [after all] the only tool fit for fighting Communism”!⁽⁵⁷⁾

Then, in 1977, a cautious attempt was made in Taiwan to include Gu Jiegang and the *xin yigupai* at least nominally in Chinese historiography.⁽⁵⁸⁾ To my knowledge, the first lengthy survey of the *yigu* group in a Taiwan-published appraisal of modern Chinese historiography was bashfully hidden in an anthology.⁽⁵⁹⁾ In 1987, a monograph came out in Taipei,⁽⁶⁰⁾ discussing the “*Gushibian* movement” in detail, and offering a wealth of references, including up-to-date PRC publications. This book does not quite live up to the claim in its subtitle, as to an “analysis from [the point of] the history of ideas“, since it mainly presents quantitative data. A more thoroughly analytical approach is pursued by a Master thesis completed at Taipei’s Chengchi University in the same year.⁽⁶¹⁾ Meanwhile, Gu Jiegang’s daughters were able to publish some of their father’s own texts in Taiwan.⁽⁶²⁾ A recent monograph⁽⁶³⁾ has come to my notice only at stop-press, wherefore I was unfortunately not yet able to form an opinion.

Japanese and Western sinology had early taken notice: Apart from A.W. Hummel who reviewed *Gushibian* vol.I in the year of its appearance and translated Gu Jiegang’s “autobiographical foreword” (cf. *supra* fnn.4, 30), scholars such as H.G. Creel, W.

(56) Cf. Bibliography, pt.I.

(57) Mao Zishui, 1970, last paragraph.

(58) Jin Yufu, 1977.

(59) Du Weiyun, Chen Jinzhong, vol.III, 1980.

(60) Wang Fansen, 1987.

(61) Peng Minghui, 1987.

(62) Cf. Gu Jiegang, 1990; Gu Hong, ed., 1990.

(63) Chen Zhiming, 1993.

Eberhard, T. Hiraoka, S. Kaizuka, B. Karlgren, O. Lattimore, B.L. Riftin, R.V. Viatkin, A. Waley (to name only a few) had personal contact with Gu Jiegang and other *yigu* historians, or acknowledged their influence.⁽⁶⁴⁾ It is the more surprising that until now, the only English in-depth study remains the monograph by L.A. Schneider, 1971, which, for all its impressive analytical scholarship, suffers not only from a lack of data due to the obstacles of the time during which it was prepared, but also from a propensity of the Levensonians for all-too generous generalizations (cf. *infra*).

VI. Conclusion

I have tried to show how Gu Jiegang arrived at his scepticism "naturally", i.e. how there existed in scholarly minds like his a genuine capability for disagreement with tradition (or with normative conventions of representing tradition) which needed no "Western impact" to be aroused. Of course, no educated Chinese of Gu's generation and background was totally untouched by Western ideas. Still, Gu represents a majority who took in new impulses to enhance intellectual currents that had their precedents in China, no matter how suppressed by orthodox mainstream scholarship. Gu Jiegang, who was not even superficially Westernized, arrived at an almost "structuralist" analysis of Chinese antiquity in the early decades of this century.

Gu himself acknowledged the unique historical moment in which he found himself, being of a generation who had still received a sound classical education, at the same time benefitting by the influx of new ideas. In 1931, he summarized, "We know that our abilities do not match those of Qing, let alone Song, scholars. Still, the glorious times we live in give us courage for liberal criticism which permits us to carry our research one step further than scholars of the Song in that we break loose from the bonds of *daotong*; ...one step further than those of the Qing in that we escape from the fetters of [obdurate commitment to single] schools of learning. In

(64) As for Japanese responses, I refer the reader to Liu Qiyu, 1986, pp.292-300. Concerning the reverberations in Western sinology, even a merely descriptive review should require the space of another article.

addition, a wealth of new material is now at our disposal for... comparative studies; this will open unthought-of horizons”.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Gu and his combatants advanced beyond previous historical criticism not only quantitatively, like historians of the past had done over their predecessors (cf. supra pt.III). Earlier scholars had been critical out of reverence for the classical canon and their *daotong* obligation to hand it down undiluted.⁽⁶⁶⁾ The “antiquity doubters” of the New Culture era were sceptics rather than textual critics, questioning with a joyful vengeance nearly the entire range of Chinese ancient history, feeling bound to no other *dao* than that of positive scientific truth. They changed the “rules of the game”, as it were, of traditional (Confucian) scholarship, thus adding a qualitative dimension to their advance.⁽⁶⁷⁾ It is obvious that Gu’s *yigu* and *bianwei* “iconoclasm” blended in with the general antitraditionalism of the New Culture/May Fourth period. However, Gu repeatedly emphasized that his scepticism was motivated by a purely scientific interest, not by any political end. If his work was ideologically instrumentalized, this was due to the *Zeitgeist*,⁽⁶⁸⁾ and often (though not always!) resented by Gu. In an autobiographical draft of 1950 (only published in 1990 in Taiwan), Gu states, “In my *zixu* [of 1926] I said I’d never again become entangled in politics... but would spend the rest of my days in my study. In these 20 years, nothing has changed this wish. And yet, I did engage in some socially and even politically relevant work”, explaining that he had been motivated by the disturbingly dismal situation of his country’s rural population he observed during a trip in the spring of 1930,⁽⁶⁹⁾ i.e. by concern and compassion for his fellow countrypeople. If we must use Western terms, we might call this a “patriotic” motive; it was, however, much in keeping with the ancient Confucian notion of the *junzi* 君子 being responsible for the “order of the state”, which ideally included concern for the commoners’ welfare.

I have also tried to show how at least the beginnings of Gu’s folklore studies were

(65) GSB III, Gu Jiegang, “Zixu”, p.1.

(66) Cf. Du Weiyun, Chen Jinzhong, eds., vol.III, 1980, p.152.

(67) Cf. Peng Minghui, 1987, pp.8-9.

(68) Du Weiyun, Chen Jinzhong, eds., vol.III, 1980, p.513.

(69) Gu Jiegang, 1990, pt.I, p.19.

not, as some writers claim, prompted by nationalist/"populist" leanings but rather by personal motives, and then by a genuine scholarly pleasure at including hitherto neglected materials into his historical studies. I doubt whether political labels fit his research even at a later time, the fact that he took part in anti-Japanese propaganda work after 1925 notwithstanding.

Western (American) Chinese Studies were prone, during the 1950s and 60s, to a rather diagrammatic view of Chinese reforms (1898–1919). Paradigms such as "imperialism" or "Western impact" biased their perception of modern Chinese history.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Not infrequently, such perspectives were heeded by a certain sensationalism in observing the "stunning" modernity of Chinese reformers of the period who, it was assumed, had to "excavate", if not "invent" critical traditions ⁽⁷¹⁾ in order to prove their iconoclasm as genuinely Chinese. At the danger of repeating myself ad nauseam, I concede that doubtlessly, Western ideas *had* their influence. But statements such as, "with antiquity still a criterion of value, the West forced revision of Chinese judgements on the older contending Philosophies... discrimination[s] between Chinese schools were blurred when a new Western alternative existed for them all, a more genuine alternative than they afforded one another... when the West was a serious rival, Chinese rivals closed their ranks", or, "When Chinese history had not been threatened, the quest for value had been undertaken freely... But when Chinese philosophers, defensively ranged against the West, came to see truth in all these philosophies..., their eclecticism was an intellectually sterile thing",⁽⁷²⁾ fail to notice that Chinese eclecticism was often a mere tool for polemics, and that Chinese rivalling schools (later, ideologies) had done anything but "closing ranks". The same author (whose brilliant style I admire, while deploring his predilection for simple dichotomies), claims that Gu Jiegang, "like other post-Confucianists..., prescribed for the nation's ills not Chinese medicine, but cosmopolitan science. The Confucian classics had etched out a Chinese 'world' identity... in the past. But a

(70) Cf. P.A. Cohen, 1984.

(71) For a drastic example, cf. J.A. Fogel, 1979.

(72) J.R. Levenson, 1953, p.151, 154.

Chinese *national* identity (which rendered the classics a purely national historical possession) involved a new 'world' intellectual appeal – transcendence of nation to build a nation".⁽⁷³⁾

Some of this author's points may have applied to some Chinese intellectuals at certain moments of their twisting developments, but I cannot hold with them as generalizations. Neither does Levenson's pupil L.A. Schneider justice to Gu Jiegang when he casts him among "China's newly emerging Westernized intelligentsia"⁽⁷⁴⁾ who "felt themselves not merely deprived of their former status and political potential but, moreover, alienated from the total society".⁽⁷⁵⁾

Gu is claimed to have sensed "growing fear for the viability of Chinese civilization under the pressures of the West and Japan";⁽⁷⁶⁾ only out of this fear, Schneider holds, Gu was frustrated and "felt no compulsion to identify himself with some Western schools of scholarship, nor with a Chinese variant"; consequently, it must surprise Schneider that Gu nonetheless "felt a strong urge... to detail his filiation with past Chinese scholars".⁽⁷⁷⁾ The more Gu "tried to identify with his scholar heroes, the greater was his need to stress the distance between his thought and theirs. Ultimately, there was the danger of... trying to employ thought and values inappropriate for moderns, however advanced that thought might have been in its own time. To avoid this dilemma, the proto-scientific scholarly tradition was made safe for the New Thought by being transformed into a mere symbol of something intellectually Chinese that was not Confucian; something that was not Western which pointed the way toward intellectual modernity".⁽⁷⁸⁾

Therefore, Schneider cannot accept Gu's self-portrayal (in the *zixu* of 1926), but declares it to be "a highly personal narrative... More interesting than the facts it gives us about [Gu's] life is the image he wished to convey of himself: as the

(73) J.R. Levenson, 1967, p.272.

(74) L.A. Schneider, 1971, p.22.

(75) L.A. Schneider, 1971, p.8.

(76) L.A. Schneider, 1971, p.14.

(77) L.A. Schneider, 1971, p.21.

(78) L.A. Schneider, 1971, pp.12-13.

independent, the challenger, the doubter, the iconoclast".⁽⁷⁹⁾

Caught in his own premises, Schneider must see Gu's motivation for research into folklore or, in this instance, historical geography as a "make-up", as well: "...another stimulus for the establishment of the journal [*Yugong* 禹貢半月刊] was the current trend in scholarship, grown out of the Social History debates, toward... material aspects of China's history... We might add that [Gu] seems purposefully to have infused the journal with some of the nationalistic sentiment of the day in order to give more dramatic significance and audience appeal to its sometimes extremely dry and esoteric subject matter".⁽⁸⁰⁾

Casting Gu Jiegang as one who posed for the disinterested scholar he was, or presupposing that Gu put on certain political "sentiments of the day", is far-fetched indeed. As for the "nationalism" of early 20th century Chinese scholars like Gu Jiegang, it often bore "classical" Chinese features, as mentioned before. I doubt whether Gu, for one, was concerned with "building a nation". Like Zhou Zuoren (and unlike Lu Xun 魯迅), Gu assumed that it had existed for millenia.⁽⁸¹⁾ One might call his views on minority nationalities naive, even Han-chauvinist; his regard of the common people as patronizing; one may charge Gu with the typical Jiangnan scholar's aloofness; but the modern Western notion of "nationalism" seems inappropriate. In addition, Gu appears to have been troubled by any sort of problem but that of a "choice between" tradition and modernity.

Concerning Gu's historical scepticism, as my original point of departure, I debate whether his rediscovery of critical predecessors such as Zheng Qiao, Cui Shu, and others, was prompted by the need of "a manipulable heritage".⁽⁸²⁾ I second D.C. Price who states, "Through [his *zixu* and other evidence, Gu] emerges as an unambiguously modern Chinese who has fashioned a satisfying and distinctively Chinese identity, a 'positive inheritance'... The precocious intellectual rebelliousness

(79) L.A. Schneider, 1971, p.19.

(80) L.A. Schneider, 1971, p.273.

(81) Cf. Fuji Shozo, 1981.

(82) L.A. Schneider, 1971, p.96.

which he attests contributes, in Schneider's account, to the image he wanted to project in 1926. Dogged by nagging fear of China's 'cultural annihilation'... This is a sensible interpretation *if* one assumes that [Gu] was afraid of cultural annihilation. On the other hand, [Gu's *zixu*] may be taken more nearly at face value, in what case a somewhat different portrait emerges, one in which intellectual quests and discoveries are primary sources of gratification, not a means to the resolution of cultural anxieties. Gu's affinities with [Zheng] and [Cui] were a happy discovery, not the answer to a need for Chinese predecessors, for [Gu's] skepticism... did indeed have secure indigenous roots... The intellectual passion which underlay [Gu's] scholarly vocation [should not be diminished for the sake of a debatable thesis]"⁽⁸³⁾

A recent voice from the PRC puts Gu Jieang's *yigu* in the context of the New Culture era and its "aggressive" *Zeitgeist* with its desire for intellectual liberation; however, Gu is described, in contrast with many participants in the various movements of the time, as a very rational person who preferred scholarly arguments to "aggressive" slogans; while then, many thought him too aggressive, he later appeared to be too objective, scientific, reasonable, and was scolded for not being aggressive enough; much in Gu's own sense, the author explains the preliminary ("unfinished") character of Gu's approach as a value in itself, and concludes that Gu's antitraditionalism was rooted in Chinese tradition; that Gu is not easily classified; that even today, his *zixu* [of 1926] made fresh and profound reading: "it seems that there are more ways between 'aggressive' and 'conservative' to investigate into the structures of intellectual and cultural history"⁽⁸⁴⁾

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⁽⁸³⁾ D.C. Price, 1974, pp.692–695.

⁽⁸⁴⁾ Wu Fang, 1991, pp.51–52

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