

Inventing China Through History

The May Fourth Approach to
Historiography



Q. Edward Wang

*Inventing China
Through History*

SUNY series in
Chinese Philosophy and Culture

David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, editors

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Q. Edward Wang

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C_{ontents}

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1. Introduction	1
History and Modernity, 6	
The Chinese Context, 15	
Tradition and Identity, 20	
2. New Horizon, New Attitude	27
Past versus Present, 28	
Perceiving the West, 36	
<i>New Historiography</i> , 42	
3. Scientific Inquiry	51
Innovation or Renovation? 53	
The American Model, 67	
History and Philology, 73	
Rankean Historiography, 89	
4. Equivalences and Differences	101
Methodological Attempt (A), 103	
Methodological Attempt (B), 111	
In Discovery of Ancient China, 121	
In Search of Modern History, 130	

5. Seeking China's National Identity	149
China-Based Modern Culture, 152	
History and Public Sphere, 160	
History and Politics, 171	
<i>Ti</i> and <i>Yong</i> : A Reconsideration, 189	
 6. Epilogue	 199
 <i>Glossary</i>	 211
<i>Notes</i>	217
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	275
<i>Index</i>	287

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Chapter One

Introduction

The past is always altered for motives that reflect present needs. We reshape our heritage to make it attractive in modern terms; we seek to make it part of ourselves, and ourselves part of it; we confirm it to our self-images and aspirations. Rendered grand or homely, magnified or tarnished, history is continually altered in our private interests or on behalf of our community or country.

—David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*

History connects past with present. This connection is established by and, generally, also for the present. Yet, the ways in which historians write history vary tremendously: History is and has been written differently for different purposes.¹ In order to cast light on present events, for example, one can simply collect and preserve any available information about the past. What prompted Herodotus (484–424? B.C.E.) to write his *Histories*, as he professed at its outset, was to prevent the memory of the Greeks about their glorious victory over the Persians from falling into oblivion. In China where historical writing has long been an integral part of its civilization, there is a well-known adage, “to know the future in the mirror of the past” (*jian wang zhi lai*), that expresses a similar desire to remember past events for better understanding the present and

successfully speculating upon the future. While interest in the past of this sort is shown in many historical cultures, contributing to the development of historical study, it by no means addresses fully the complex relationship between past and present. In fact, focusing on the past as a predictor shows a grain of naïveté in its implication that knowledge of the past can be directly applied to solving problems of the present, because such a focus presupposes the sameness of past and present and ignores the change of historical time.

Gordon Graham posits that a more ambitious way of linking past with present is, “to look beneath the surface of events and find their inner or ultimate significance.”² In so doing, one examines the past from a teleological perspective and tries to search for meanings in the course of history as a whole, rather than in some individual historical events. Although this kind of historical understanding, or the construction of a historical metanarrative, had appeared before, it was seen more often in recent times, especially in the rise of modern nations. As shown in the histories of many countries, historical writing was an integral part of the nation-building project. This goal of making a modern nation compelled historians to look back at the country’s past from a new, different perspective. Instead of regarding the past as a holistic entirety, for instance, they looked for multiplicity in the past and searched in tradition for elements useful to create a national history. In so doing, historians historicized the past against the change of historical time and differentiated the past—the subject of their study—from the present—their own time. Rather than a reservoir of knowledge, history now became a subject of study, or a mirror, that reflects not only the past for the present but also the present *in* the past. As a result, in the practice of nationalist historiography, there appeared an almost reversed relationship between past and present; the past was no longer viewed as a guidance but as a genesis of one’s imaginary of a nation.

In China’s long historiographical tradition, there existed many works written most definitely for the purpose of guiding the present. The most salient example was the writing of dynastic history, especially from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) onward, in which many historical events and figures, mostly in the arena of politics, were described in detail. By presenting these examples, which were considered precedents, dynastic historians hoped that the reigning dynasty could learn from past lessons and, by avoiding previous mistakes, would effect a long-lasting rule. However, in addition to these dynastic histories, which were considered by conventional

wisdom the mainstay of Chinese historiography, there were instances suggesting that historians also attempted more ambitious approaches to historical explanation. In his magnum opus, *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*), for instance, Sima Qian (145–86 B.C.E.) launched an investigation into the Heaven-Man correlation as manifested in history and sought out a comprehensive yet personal explanation. Over a thousand years later in the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), Sima Guang (1019–1086) in his *A Comprehensive Mirror of Aid for Government* (*Zizhi tongjian*) also tried to search for reasons beneath the rise and fall of dynasties and offered his perspective on the direction of Chinese political history for more than a thousand years, from 403 B.C.E. to 959 C.E.

A systematic attempt at constructing a historical metanarrative also appeared in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century China. Influenced by the idea of nationalism, Chinese intellectuals came to reconfigure the past in order to build a nation-state, which was regarded by many as imperative for strengthening and reaffirming China's position in the modern world. In so doing, these intellectuals introduced changes to the tradition of Chinese historiography. These changes were manifested both in the idea and form of historical writing. In the following pages, I will describe and analyze the emergence of national history as a new historical consciousness in modern China.

In the first part of the twentieth century, there were three main schools of thought in Chinese historiography: the traditionalists; the liberals; and somewhat later, the Marxists. The traditionalists were not totally traditional in that they were not clones of ancient dynastic annalists. The liberals were not modernists intent on totally abandoning tradition. The Marxists were probably the purest of the three schools of thought, in that they sought to explain possible event in terms of class struggle. The protagonists in my book were one distinct group in the Chinese historical community, not only in terms of their educational background and career path but also in terms of their political inclination and ideologies. Having grown up in the late period of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), they all received a classical education when young. Yet at a later time, they all had the opportunity to study abroad, either in Europe or the United States. Their unique educational experience differentiated them from many of their cohorts who had little or no Western education. In the meantime, they also showed their disdain of the radical ideas of the Marxists who, while equally receptive to Western political ideology and nationalism, advocated the necessity of mounting a socialist revolution and establishing a proletarian dictatorship. By

contrast, these historians preferred and practiced (whenever they could) the ideas of liberalism and constitutionalism. Working mostly in an academic setting, they produced works that represent a new direction in the history of Chinese historical writing. The above three-way division however does not do full justice to the complex development of modern Chinese intellectual history in general, and modern Chinese historiography in particular; for although they were attracted to Western political and cultural theories like the Marxists, these Western-educated intellectuals also showed a strong interest in reviving Chinese tradition, an agenda conventionally associated with the traditionalists.

This new direction was followed in the field of historiography, where two seemingly contrary interests came in to play at the same time. On the one hand, these liberal historians attempted to construct a historical narrative for the nation-state, which lent their historiography strong political overtones. On the other hand, they were intrigued by the idea of scientific history, exemplified in nineteenth-century Western historiography, which, in its ideal form, advocated “the attempt simply to arrive at an accurate account of past events based upon sufficient evidence, without regard to learning lessons, predicting the future course of events, or grasping the ‘meaning’ of human history as a whole.”³ To them, the practice of scientific history marked an important achievement by Western historians in modern times and was an essential component of the powerful, hence advanced, modern West, whose experience and success China should emulate and extend. Assisted and inspired by their knowledge of Western theories in historiography, these historians—such as Hu Shi (1891–1962), He Bingsong (1890–1946), Fu Sinian (1896–1950), Luo Jialun (1897–1969), Yao Congwu (1894–1970), as well as Chen Yinke (Chen Yinque, 1890–1969)⁴—most of whom were either the “teachers” or the “students” of the May Fourth/New Culture Movement of 1919, embarked on a series of projects, aiming to reform the writing of Chinese history based on the Western model. They introduced Western principles and methods in source criticism, established historical research institutes, translated Western history texts, and taught Western histories and historiography in colleges. Their interpretations of China’s national history, therefore, were pursued at both ideological and methodological levels: the former refers to their sensitivity to nationalist concerns, the latter, to their adoption of the scientific approach to historical research. In other words, these historians were not only interested in forming a new connection between past and present from the perspective of nationalism, they were also

concerned about the way in which this national history was to be written.

Pursuing a historiography that was both national and scientific led these historians to attempt a new form of historical writing that found its place not only “in the oppositions between tradition and modernity,” as Prasenjit Duara suggests,⁵ but also in the reconciliations between these two exaggerated cultural poles. To some postmodernists, the distinction between tradition and modernity is a reification. In their pursuit of a scientifically based national historiography, despite Western influences, these historians also constantly harkened back to Chinese cultural heritage. To be sure, they were very interested in Western and Japanese examples in scientific history and were eager to emulate them. But their main endeavor was focused on discovering similar scientific elements in the Chinese tradition. To that end, they critically examined Chinese literary culture, which made them appear to be iconoclasts. Their chief interest, however, was to search for traces of science in the Chinese tradition, to avoid the impulse to discredit and disregard the tradition in its entirety. Their endeavor contributed to the change of one’s perception of the past in modern China. Out of their concern for the authenticity of source material, one of the primary requirements in studying scientific history, these historians revealed historicity, or anachronism, in China’s literary tradition, which helped cast suspicion on the authority of the Past and demanded a new historical interpretation. This eventually led to the discovery of multiple Pasts, including a scientific past, and the construction, “invention,” of a new tradition in China.⁶

This new phase of Chinese historiography, therefore, addressed two key issues in the study of modern Chinese history. In light of the fact that this scientific discovery of China’s past is facilitated by the presence of modern science, this historiography acquires a transnational dimension, helping attest to the universal value (perceived at least at that time) of science. It suggests that in the formation of modern nation-states, especially in the experience of non-Western countries, there is always an intercultural, transnational dialogue that articulates and addresses the very idea of nationalism. In his study of nationalist movements in India and elsewhere, Partha Chatterjee acutely observes that in fighting Western imperialism, non-Western nationalists often adopted the nationalist discourse supplied by their Western precursors. Yet these Asian nationalists were also well aware of the cultural “difference” from the modular forms of Western experiences.⁷ In

the case of modern China, Chinese nationalist historians strove to understand science and scientific method against the backdrop of the Chinese cultural tradition and ground their nation-building project in foundations of the Chinese cultural heritage. Their interest in scientific history, while suggesting an intercultural development of modern historiography across the national boundary, was also pursued in juxtaposition with the intention to address distinct ethnic and/or national problems and even localized concerns. At the same time, we should note that although national history was a focus of attention of modern historians worldwide and was instrumental in defining national identity, it was presented and pursued in a transnational fashion readily identifiable in its methodological approach and its global attraction. In order to appreciate fully the process of the formation of the Chinese national identity, we must pay attention to both the transnational and national contexts in national history; we must examine not only why the modern Chinese were attracted to national history but also the way in which they constructed it, and how they modified the construction from time to time. Analyzing the development of modern Chinese historiography can help us perceive the complex history of modern China from yet another useful angle; it draws our attention to the interplay of foreign and native elements in shaping Chinese national culture, national and cultural identity, and Chinese modernity, hence inviting us to think more critically about what “Chineseness” means in the modern world.⁸

History and Modernity

Changes in the style and focus of Chinese historical writing in modern times have been examined by a few scholars from different angles. Joseph Levenson (1920–1969), for example, who began his career by producing an acclaimed monograph on Liang Qichao (1873–1929), examined extensively in his *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* the changing attitude of modern Chinese intellectuals toward the past, from the late Qing to the founding of the People’s Republic. Levenson stated that in response to Western cultural influence, radical intellectuals in China, especially those in the May Fourth movement in 1919, realized that tradition, or Confucianism in Levenson’s definition, was not “absolute” any longer. Taking a relativist outlook on the Confucian tradition, these intellectuals claimed that the tradition merely had “historical significance,” anachronistic to twentieth-century China. “Here was,” Levenson

explained, “an iconoclasm, then a bitter value-judgement, expressed as resentment of the absolute presentness of a past which should be relative—or, *historically* significant: let it be a subject of study but not a basis for present action.” But their opponents, or the latter-day Confucians, soon found a new way to defend the legacy. Identifying tradition with Chinese history, they forced the iconoclasts into a defensive position. After all, one can deny one’s tradition but not one’s history. The iconoclasts could reject the value of the past to the present, Levenson found, but they could not disown the past to which they were emotionally attached. Nevertheless, the traditionalists also experienced some losses: once history was discovered in Confucianism, Confucianism no longer could hold onto its “absolute value” to the present. It eventually lost its moral and political applicability.⁹

Analyzing the complex role “history” played in modern China, Levenson revealed the intricate connection of the modern Chinese with their cultural tradition. He pointed out that Chinese history was a haven for both the traditionalists and antitraditionalists, as well as the Marxists. But unlike the traditionalists who uncovered the romantic “essence” of the history and the Marxists who placed the history in the Marxian scheme of world history, the antitraditionalists, or the liberals, were caught in a dilemma in which they could not simultaneously deny the value of the past and remain emotionally attached to it. In contrast to the “success” of the traditionalists and the Marxists, the antitraditionalists ultimately failed to achieve a tangible outcome, as did Chinese liberalism.¹⁰

Levenson’s work has been useful for the study of historical consciousness in modern China. His powerful analysis of the antithesis of “history” and “value” helps illuminate the perplexing and multifaceted alliance between tradition and modernity shown in the cause of Chinese “liberalism.” From the perspective of intellectual history, it also explains why it was the Communists who achieved an ultimate victory in China. But although he ingeniously discussed the ideological limits of the antitraditionalists, his conclusion seems simplistic. He appears to blame the “failure” of the antitraditionalists on their inability to sever their emotional ties with tradition. But the key issue, in my opinion, is not whether one is capable or incapable of breaking away from the past, but whether there is indeed an absolute dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Although there are some instances that suggest such a dichotomy, other examples show that tradition and modernity can supplement each other, especially in the writing of national history, where appropriation of the past is viewed as a matter of course.¹¹

The complex issue involving the writing of national history was discussed by Laurence Schneider in his well-researched monograph on Gu Jiegang (Ku Chieh-kang, 1893–1980). Analyzing Gu's career against the background of the rising tide of Chinese nationalism, Schneider describes the "Ancient History Discussion" (*Gushibian*) of the late 1920s and the early 1930s, which Gu initiated, and assessed the impact of the discussion on changing the people's view of their past and on the construction of "new history" in modern China. He points out that Gu advocated source criticism in historical study and attempted a critical overhaul of Chinese historical culture. Gu's work was one in a host of examples of modern historical scholarship. But Gu also yielded to the authority of the present, that is, Chinese nationalism, and overlooked historical continuity. As a result, some of Gu's findings became "unhistorical."¹² Schneider has noted the painstaking effort made by Chinese historians in constructing national history; they had to negotiate between tradition and modernity. He has also acknowledged that nationalism was a major driving force for the movement of the National Studies (*guoxue*) of the 1920s, which was aimed at reconstructing the past on a scientific ground. However, swayed by Levenson's thesis, Schneider argues that this attempt at reconstruction was hardly successful. In his book, he describes in detail how Gu became anxious when the National Studies encountered problems in facing tradition and modernity. Hence he endorses Levenson's argument that the liberal antitraditionalists' approach to history failed to achieve sensible gains but was instead caught in limbo and contradictions.

Eager to join in the criticism of Chinese liberals for their presumably failed cause, therefore, Schneider seems to fall short of conducting a comprehensive in-depth critical analysis of Chinese nationalist historiography. This reflects on his limitations as much as on those of his subject. While an active member of the Chinese academic circle in the 1920s and the early 1930s, Gu Jiegang later developed a new interest in studying Chinese folklore. Consequently, he no longer played the leading role among historians from the 1940s onward as he had done in the earlier period. During World War II, known as the Anti-Japanese War in China, when Chinese nationalism reached its high tide, there was a wide spectrum of reactions as evidenced in the behavior of the scholars and intellectuals of Gu's generation. Many efforts were made to renew the linkage with the past in order to demonstrate the insurmountable vitality of the Chinese nation. However, many scholars also adopted different approaches to make this new connection; some went

beyond the academic arena by joining the government. Gu, for example, was drawn more and more into his folklore study as well as into the study of historical geography, whereas his friends and schoolmates continued their pursuit of national history. In order to do full justice to the history of modern Chinese historiography, therefore, we must expand our research to include more figures from the Chinese historical community in Republican China.

As Schneider stresses the influence of nationalism in shaping the modern Chinese view of the past, Arif Dirlik analyzes the Marxist practice of history, using the "Social History Discussion" of the 1930s as an example. Echoing the opinions of his predecessors on the limits of the antitraditionalists in their approach to tradition, Dirlik states that "their contributions remained restricted to uncovering previously hidden or ignored facets of Chinese history or, as in the case of Ku, demolishing the claims of crucial Confucian traditions to empirical validity." But the Chinese Marxists, he writes, displaced the Confucian past and found a "new history." While acknowledging the fact that many Marxists ignored unsuitable data and manipulated historical sources in order to fit in with their new theory, Dirlik in general considers Chinese Marxist historiography a political success, because it effectively uses the past to illustrate a political agenda that fits, supposedly, with China's historical reality. For him, the success of Marxist historiography was twofold: One was its methodological breakthrough, seen in the Marxists' introduction of socioeconomic theory to the field of history; and the other was the Marxists' effort to establish an immediate connection between historical study and the social and political changes in modern China.¹³ Marxist historians, consequently, carried away the palm that the liberals had failed to take.

Dirlik's analysis of the success of the Marxists and Schneider's work on Gu Jiegang have corroborated Levenson's thesis that liberal historians in China were bogged down by their intrinsic weakness: they were eager to seek inspirations beyond their own civilization but at the same time were sentimentally tied down to their own past. Legitimately, all three of them have analyzed the cause and development of modern Chinese historiography by drawing attention to the overarching impact of nationalism, namely the external forces. However they have overlooked a development within the discipline of historical scholarship in modern China and underestimated its significance. Liberal historians in the Republican period were criticized mainly because they failed to promote liberalism more successfully in China. That kind of teleological observation blamed Chinese intellectuals for a "failure" that had more to do with

the extreme circumstances, that is, the Anti-Japanese War, than with any supposed “fallacy” in their political and academic pursuits. Consequently, it failed to give full credit to the role these intellectuals played in causing the transformation of historical study in China. As this study tries to show, it was largely due to the rise of national history that the status of history (*shi*) as a scholarly discipline was forever changed: It was transformed from a subject auxiliary to the study of Confucian classics (*jing*) to an autonomous discipline of modern scholarship.

Moreover, as an essential part of the modernization project in scholarship, the change of historical study reflects, perhaps better than in other cases, both the strong desire for modernity and the ensuing problems associated with it. In a recent study of the historical narratives in twentieth-century China, Prasenjit Duara offers a critical examination of the role history, that is, national history, played in the Chinese pursuit of modernity. He points out that the writing of national history, or History of the Enlightenment model that presented the past from a linear and teleological perspective, turned nation into a “moral and political force,” overcoming “dynasties, aristocracies, and ruling priests and mandarins.” As these forces (dynasties, aristocracies, and mandarins) became parts of history and lost their relevance to the present, national history helped the nation to become a “newly realized” and “collective historical subject poised to realize its destiny in a modern future.” In other words, the writing of national history helped pave the way for China’s modernization. His observation, which appears theoretical and abstract here, does not lack its backing from history. A few years prior to the fall of the Qing Dynasty, for example, revolutionaries like Zhang Taiyan (1869–1935), Liu Shiwei (1884–1919), and others had launched the National Essence (*guocui*) movement. In their journal, *The National Essence Journal* (*Guocui xuebao*), they published historical essays and attempted the writing of national history. Their enthusiasm for republicanism, along with their emphasis on the racial difference of the Manchu ruler of the Qing Dynasty, contributed to the downfall of the dynasty.¹⁴ During the early twentieth century, as noticed by Duara, and demonstrated by Lydia Liu in her work, as the National Essence scholars pursued national history, a concept they imported from Japan, “a new vocabulary entered the Chinese language.” The vocabulary of national history originated in the West but came to China by way of Japan. The adoption and appropriation of new ideas and concepts in changing historical discourse intertwined with the process of modernizing Chinese culture as a whole through the twentieth century.

“Indeed,” observes Lydia Liu, “to draw a clear line between the indigenous Chinese and the exogenous Western” has become “almost an epistemological impossibility” by the late twentieth century.¹⁵

This kind of cultural and linguistic blend allows Duara to adopt a comparative approach to examining the historical narratives in modern China and India, as well as the modern West. However, as the title of his book suggests, what he intended in his book is not to celebrate this crosscultural prevalence of nationalism, but to expose and analyze its limit and propose an alternative that can transcend the nation-state imperative in historical writing. In place of a linear outlook on historical movement, which characterized the practice of national history, Duara presents a “bifurcated” conception of history, which shows that “the past is not only *transmitted* forward in a linear fashion, [but] its meanings are also *dispersed* in space and time.”¹⁶ That is, there have been a variety of ways for the historian to build, in his work, the bridge between past and present; the relationship between past and present is plural, not singular. It is temporal, contingent on the specificity of space and time. While an insightful and inspiring argument, it lacks substantive explications. In the second part of the book, Duara thoughtfully discusses four cases, ranging from religious campaigns and secret societies to feudalism and provincial politics, and considers these discourses as potential but ultimately unsuccessful to the nationalist discourse centering on the nation-state. It is however interesting to note that his discussion on the subject of historiography, which is the basis of his argument and is treated in the first part, remains relatively thin. In fact, the change of historical writing in modern China has a good deal to offer in substantiating his “bifurcated” thesis. The study of national history, which began as an attempt to adopt the evolutionary outlook on Chinese history, experienced many changes in its development and did not always, as Duara presumes, present history in a linear fashion. Rather, due to the change of the nationalist need in time and space, Chinese historians often presented a discursive relationship between past and present, in which the past—the inferior end according to the linear historical discourse—often assumed a worthwhile position comparable to that of the present.

In Xiaobing Tang’s monograph on Liang Qichao’s (1873–1929) historical thinking,¹⁷ for example, we find that as one of the pioneers of national history, Liang’s ideas of history as well as his perception of China’s place in the modern world underwent significant changes in a period of twenty years. In Liang’s *New Historiography* (Xin-

shixue), a seminal text in modern Chinese historiography that appeared first as a series of essays in the *New Citizen's Journal* (*Xinmin congbao*) in 1902, Liang presents himself as a committed national historian, drawn to the idea of evolutionism and determined to tie history together with nationalism. His three definitions of history, each contain the word "evolution" (*jinhua*). History, therefore, was then viewed by Liang as a linear course of development. But in the early 1920s when Liang got another chance to ponder the nature of history again, he decided to eschew the term *jinhua* altogether.¹⁸ Along with this change in his concept of history, Liang also adopted a new way of thinking about world history and world civilization and China's position in it and possible contribution to it. His new stance derived from a new conceptualization of history: History was now viewed, explains Tang, "as both 'movement' and 'dissimilarity,'" ¹⁹ in which difference was not only allowed but should also be taken for granted.

If what Liang Qichao arrived at in the end is the notion that one's search for modernity can be completed not necessarily at the expense of tradition, he was certainly not alone. In Lionel M. Jensen's *Manufacturing Confucianism*, we see an interesting case—Chinese modern scholars' reconstruction of the image of Confucius and his followers—in which the past has even been used as a convenient medium that supplies sources needed for legitimizing the changes in the present. By comparing Zhang Taiyan's and Hu Shi's interpretations of the term "confucians" *Ru*, as well as Jesuits' understanding of Confucianism, Jensen finds a great deal of fluidity and temporality in the Chinese view of their cultural heritage. As historical products, Jensen notes, *Ru* and Confucius were important to modern Chinese not because their meanings were fixed and stable, but because, as cultural metaphors of China's past, their significance "is generated from a delicate dialectic of ambiguity and invention."²⁰ In other words, ambiguity invites invention, which enables modern Chinese to imagine and construct "a suitable historic past."²¹ Thus viewed, there is indeed a multifaceted and multidimensional relationship between past and present, which allows the historian to construct the past with different modes of narratives under the broad umbrella of national history. This is true of the changing views of Confucianism in modern China, and of the development of national historiography as well.

To understand the formation of historical narratives in modern China as an inventive and dialectic dialogue between past and present is not to deny and underrate the valiant endeavor of modern Chinese historians in "scientizing" historical study. One of the main

motives for modern historians to reexamine and reconfigure the past came from their exposure to and interest in scientific history. To Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, and others, the attempt at national history required a scientific approach, exemplified in modern Western and Japanese historiography. This scientific approach involved efforts to search for lawlike generalizations in history and to conduct careful source analysis and criticism. If nation-building was modern historians' ultimate goal, scientific method was the indispensable means to that end; as the former defined their historiography, the latter characterized the way in which their historiography was presented. This interlocking between national and scientific history further suggests the complex interplay of both national and transnational forces driving the changes in modern Chinese historiography as well as in modern Chinese history.²²

If we look at the worldwide development of modern science, we find that this interconnection between national and transnational is not unique to the Chinese experience. In fact, it has been identified in both the genesis and the growth of science in the modern world. On the one hand, scientific activities were based on a set of metaphysical assumptions that were shared by peoples across the world. On the other hand, however, as observed by Toby Huff, "The final breakthrough to modern science and its spread in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, paradoxically, occurred virtually simultaneously with the breakdown of linguistic unity, along with the rise of nationalism based on indigenous languages and local literary symbols."²³

An example of the national/transnational experience is found in the course of development of modern European historiography. When European scholars began to examine their cultural heritage, especially the ancient classic Greek and Roman culture, they pursued it initially in Italy but soon searched in other parts of Europe. The Scientific Revolution, too, involved scientists all over Europe. The Scientific Revolution helped contribute to the decline of religious authority that had unified Europe by revealing the myth of the cosmos and changing people's faith in church doctrines about the correlation between heaven and earth. Consequently, it promoted religious agnosticism and historical Pyrrhonism. Ancient historical narratives were not considered trustworthy accounts of the past once they were scrutinized against scientific standards. European historians began to search for new ways in writing history.

During the Enlightenment the attempt to write scientific history acquired a new, philosophical aspect. Buoyed by the success

of the Scientific Revolution, historians searched for laws in human history by analogy to the scientists' approach to uncovering the mysteries of nature. Historians believed in the idea of progress and regarded history as a meaningful and directional process that pointed to progress in the future of mankind. In the meantime, however, national histories, such as Voltaire's *The Age of Louis XIV*, thrived and juxtaposed the interest in universal history.²⁴

By the nineteenth century, this Enlightenment historiography reached its peak. After centuries of search for a scientific method, historians became convinced that the success of scientific history depended on source collection and criticism, which helped them to describe laws in human history. Applying the scientific method, European historians began to write systematically national histories. In order to compose a factual history and overcome the naïveté of ancient historians in treating source material, nineteenth-century-European historians not only emphasized the use of original documentary sources but also sought archaeological and material evidence for writing history. Historical Pyrrhonism and the awareness of the distinction between primary and secondary sources contributed, according to Arnaldo Momigliano, to the rise of modern historical consciousness in the West.²⁵ Historians' critical use of source materials in writing history was then regarded as a new genre, known as "scientific history," exemplified in the work of German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). On the one hand, Ranke used philological methods to ensure the credibility of historical sources, which had a paradigmatic and international influence on the practice of historical writing in modern times. On the other hand, Ranke showed a great interest in writing national histories, especially the rise of modern nation-states in Europe. He penned histories for almost all major European nations, be they England, France, Italy, and (of course) Germany. It was not until the end of his life that he began to write a world history, which was left unfinished.²⁶

The Rankean historiographical model faced challenges in the 1930s, especially in countries outside Germany. His critics, such as the New Historians at Columbia University in the United States in the "Progressive era" (whose practices inspired Chinese historians in the twentieth century), attempted a methodological revolution in historiography by seeking methodological inspirations in social sciences. As a manifesto of the New Historians, James H. Robinson's *The New History* called for broadening the use of historical sources and embracing the new scientific methods of the social sciences so that history could improve its didactic role in modern society. But

Ranke's interest in national histories was kept alive until much more recently when the French *Annales* school began tapping into regional history and "total" history from the 1960s onward. This new interest, which is now shared by historians across the world, in looking at the past beyond the national boundary will be, in my opinion, an interesting phenomenon as we enter the next century and the world becomes even more globalized.²⁷

The Chinese Context

Changes in Chinese historical writing have provided us with a good opportunity to examine the transnational aspect in national history. Indeed, national history was introduced to China against a transnational background: China's military defeats shattered the Chinese confidence in believing that their country's status was the "Middle Kingdom" of the world thereby forcing the Chinese people to acknowledge not only the existence but also the strength of other civilizations. At that time, China's challengers included many European nations as well as its Asian neighbor Japan. To some extent, China's defeat by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895)—although occurring later—exerted a more traumatic impact on the minds of the people because Japan's victory alarmed them about their own slow pace in adjusting themselves to the changing world. In other words, China's national crisis in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries occurred in a transnational context, beyond the China-West dichotomy. In coping with this crisis, Chinese historians pursued the writing of national history in order to promote national pride. Yet this national history, as this study will demonstrate, was written with inspirations from the Euro-American experience, the Japanese example, and the Chinese tradition.

In chapter 2, I describe the national crisis China experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its sociopolitical impact. During this crisis, Chinese historians began to obtain knowledge about their Western and Asian adversaries. Wei Yuan (1794–1857), a historian at the time, defined their intent as "to use the way of the barbarians to fend off the barbarians" (*yi yi zhi yi*). Wei's friend Lin Zexu (1785–1850), who served commissioner during the Opium War (1838–1842), also ordered that a historical account of the world be made—*Sizhou zhi* (A History of the Four Continents). Wei Yuan, along with Wang Tao (1828–1897), Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), and others, wrote histories of the West and

China's Asian neighbors, broadening the vision of traditional historians.²⁸

Acknowledging the changes outside China, these historical accounts widened the worldview of the Chinese people. Some scholars, especially those in the PRC, have claimed that Wei's and others' works began a modern era in Chinese historiography. But a closer look at their historiography shows that while these authors wrote about China's close and distant neighbors, they did not change the conventional norm of historical writing. These historians did not attempt methodological innovations. Perhaps like most people at the time, these historians remained under the influence of the *ti-yong* dichotomy, a prevalent ideology in which Chinese tradition was "substance" (*ti*) and the knowledge of the West was "function" (*yong*). Historians seemed unable to understand that China's problems in associating with its neighbors, be they Western or Asian, were complicated by the expansion of the entire world, rather than caused by a simple China-West confrontation.²⁹ Viewing the Western merchants as pirates, for example, Wei Yuan produced a work on Qing military history, hoping to draw lessons from the successes of the early Qing rulers in shoring up the southern sea border. He hoped to offer historical wisdom to respond to the Western challenge at his time.

Significant changes in Chinese historiography did not occur until the turn of the twentieth century, known as the "transitional era,"³⁰ when Chinese historians consciously attempted methodological changes. They departed from the norm of traditional Chinese historiography—the writing of political/military history in an *annals-biographic* form—and pursued the writing of *scientific* history. Liang Qichao in his *New Historiography*, attacked the Chinese tradition of dynastic historiography, or the "standard histories" (*zhengshi*), and waged a "historiographical revolution" (*shijie geming*). Inspired by the interest of Japanese historians in writing "histories of civilization" (*bummeishiron*),³¹ Liang pointed out that the main problem in the traditional practice of historical writing was its failure to acknowledge the role of the people and to foster a national awareness. At the outset of his *New Historiography*, Liang stated that:

In contrast to the subjects studied in Western countries today, history is the only one which has existed in China for a long time. History is the foundation of scholarship. It is also a mirror of people's nature and the origin of patriotism. The rise of nationalism in Europe and the growth of modern European

countries are owing in part to the study of history. But how can one explain the fact that, despite this long tradition of historical study in China, the Chinese people are so disunited and China's social condition is so bad?³²

Liang thus called for the writing of national history. What caused Liang to make this call was, as Xiaobing Tang points out, Liang's discovery of the spatial change in the world. In Tang's words, the influence of "spatiality, or a given mode of determining spatial organization and relationship" persuaded Liang to take a new approach to historiography. Xiaoging Tang argues that Liang's idea of history evolved together with the idea of the global space of the world, which allowed him eventually to perceive modernity in "a new global imaginary of difference."³³ Liang's global view of the world set him apart from his nineteenth-century predecessors.

Liang's history was novel in China not only because of its spatial view of the world but also because of its new view of the past. In his *New Historiography*, Liang posited that history shows human progress and its causes, or the change of time in history. This change of historical time entailed a search for new ways to present the past, in which current needs would dictate the direction of their historical outlook. Liang's historical thinking thus was based on his realization of the changes of both space and time in world history: The former helps shape his imagination of the new world, the latter exposes anachronism in history, making him consider the old world irrelevant.

This realization was indeed revolutionary in the Chinese tradition of historical writing. In imperial China, official history played the role of equating past with present. For instance, every dynasty, on its founding, embarked on the task of writing a history of its predecessor. This practice was based on the assumption that past experience was useful for the present. Information about the past thus was carefully preserved and became an important source of knowledge for historians. The writing of dynastic history, for example, was often based on the sources collected and bequeathed by the historians of the previous dynasty. Instead of searching for a new understanding of the past, historians simply annotated extant historical texts.³⁴ This historical interest derived from the notion that there was no essential difference between past and present.

Campaigning for the writing of national history, Liang attacked the historiographical tradition in his *New Historiography*. By the 1920s he saw that within the tradition, many masterpieces still shone with superb literary talent in historical presentation and high

sensitivity for source examination. In other words, while Chinese historians' efforts to develop new interpretations of the past were thwarted by political oppression, they seemed quite advanced in historical methodology. In the late imperial period, Chinese historians expressed serious doubts about the validity of ancient histories and engaged in a meticulous textual exegesis of them. For example, the well-known "evidential" (*kaozheng*) scholars of the Qing Dynasty worked diligently to ascertain the authenticity of ancient texts through philological examination, which was used to verify historical sources.³⁵ Their work bore obvious resemblance of that of the antiquarians in seventeenth-century Europe.

Thus, as Liang Qichao and like-minded historians in the early twentieth century attempted to write a national history modeled on the work of Japanese historians, they were able to gain wisdom not only from their counterparts in the West and Japan but also from their own ancestors. Although their historiography served the seemingly narrow nationalist goal of making China rich and powerful (*fuqiang*), their interest in writing history with empirical, scientific evidence was truly international. This international empiricism led them to communicate with historians of different nations as well as to engage in dialogues with their own predecessors.

Hu Shi, a leading advocate of such scientific historiography in China, believed that the success of modern science was based on its method, and therefore that methodological improvement was tantamount to the evolution of scholarship. At the outset of his dissertation on Chinese philosophy—completed at Columbia University—Hu declared: "That philosophy is conditioned by its method, and that the development of philosophy is dependent upon the development of the logical method, are facts which find abundant illustrations in the history of philosophy both of the West and of the East."³⁶

Acting on this belief, young Hu Shi returned to China in 1917, ready to teach his compatriots the scientific method he deemed universal and quintessential in modern culture. Hu was not alone. In the late 1910s and early 1920s when Hu preached scientism, He Bingsong, a Princeton graduate and Hu's Beijing University (*Beida*) colleague, took on the translation of James Robinson's *The New History*, aiming to offer a concrete example of scientific history for his students and colleagues. Even the elder Liang Qichao was not immune to this enthusiasm for methodological experiment; Liang wrote the *Methods for the Study of Chinese History* (*Zhongguo lishi yanjiufa*, hereafter: *Historical Methods*) during this period.

In fact, this apparent zest for scientific method came to characterize the New Culture Movement of the 1920s. Under its influence, Fu Sinian, Luo Jialun, Yao Congwu, and Gu Jiegang (all Beida students) followed suit; they looked for methodological inspirations either from within—inside tradition—or from without—in Western culture, and supported the endeavor of their teachers in historiographical reform. While Gu Jiegang remained in the country, Fu Sinian, Luo Jialun, Yao Congwu, went to either Europe and/or America during this period to seek scientific knowledge. There they met Chen Yinke, a veteran student of Western scholarship and later a prominent historian in Tang history. While the length of their Western sojourns and the degree of their academic successes varied, their knowledge of scientific scholarship enabled them to pursue distinguished careers after returning to China. It was through their pursuit of scientific knowledge that a new history of China was written in the first half of the twentieth century.

For these historians, scientific history meant acquiring skills in textual and historical criticism, exemplified by the work of Western and Japanese precursors of scientific history as well as by the forerunners—for example, Qing evidential scholars—in the Chinese tradition. They emphasized the importance of differentiating primary and derivative sources and using reliable materials in historical writing. Accordingly, they introduced a new perspective on the past that allowed them to make distinctions between past and present, historical texts and historical reality, and the ancient and the modern. With these distinctions, Chinese historians were able to break away from an age-old tradition that extolled ancient wisdom and ignored the need to rewrite history. They could also display changes in history and accommodate new ideas in writing history.

Through the work of these Western-educated Chinese historians, the cause of modern historiography, centering on examining and rewriting China's past, gained momentum in the Republican era (1912–1949), as shown in chapters 3 and 4. In his teaching of Chinese philosophy at Beida, Hu Shi questioned the validity of ancient sources on China's high antiquity. By launching the project to “reorganize the national heritage” (*zhengli guogu*), he conducted scientific investigation in almost every aspect of traditional Chinese scholarship, ranging from history and philosophy to religion and literature. In his research, Hu employed the scientific method which he himself summarized as no more than a “boldness in setting up hypotheses and a minuteness in seeking evidence” (*Dadan de jiashe, xiaoxin de qiuzheng*). Inspired by Hu's exemplary work, Gu Jiegang, a student of Hu's at Beida, began to question the