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BRIDGING THE GAP: ATTEMPTS AT CONSTRUCTING A "NEW" HISTORICAL-CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Axel Schneider

In 1922 Lu Xun attacked the intellectuals publishing the journal *Critical Review* (Xueheng zazhi 学衡杂志) as "faked antiquities," as insincere and outdated. However, at that time the *Critical Review* was not a unique publication. It was part of a considerable revival of interest in China's traditional history and culture that had developed during the 1920s and 1930s partly in reaction to the pro-Western iconoclasm of the May Fourth movement. Starting with the journal *National Past* (Guogu yuekan 国故月刊), the revival manifested itself in the cultural debates of the 1920s, the flourishing of "national studies" (guoxue 国学), and the publication of many journals and monographs on Chinese culture and history as differentiated from Western culture and history. However, after 1949 these intellectual currents were thoroughly marginalized.

1 Nanjing, Jan.-July 1933, published by Wu Mi 吴宓.
3 Beijing, Mar. 1919-Oct. 1919, published by Liu Shipei 黎世培, Huang Kan 黄侃, and Ma Xulun 马敏倫. During 1919 the *Guogu yuekan* was the main anti-May Fourth journal. Although it carried mainly academic articles in the field of classical studies, some of its authors were involved in a debate with Mao Zishu 毛泽余, Fu Sinian 胡适 and others which centered around the question of historical continuity and the relation between Chinese and Western culture. For a short summary of this debate, see Axel Schneider, "Wahrheit und Geschichte: zwei chinesische Historiker in der Suche nach einer modernen Identität für China" [Truth and history: two Chinese historians in search of a modern identity for China] (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), pp.151-3.
7 Until very recently this marginality was also reflected in Western historiography on China. For the only monograph on one of these intellectuals, see Guy Alitto, *The last Confucian, Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese dilemma of modernity* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1979). See also Charlotte Furth, ed., *The limits of change: essays on conservative alternatives in Republican China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976). Conservative intellectuals like Du Yaquan 杜亞泉, post-May Fourth Zhang Shizhao 章士钊, Chen Huanzhang 陈焕章, the *Xueheng* group including Wu Mi, Mei Guangdi 梅光迪, Liu Yizheng, Miao Fenglin 缪凤林 and others are still not very well known in the West.
When, after several decades of isolation, Deng Xiaoping initiated the reform process in the late 1970s, Chinese intellectuals were eager to catch up with the West. A plethora of Western academic theories and intellectual currents found their way into China. Heated discussions on the defects of the Chinese national character that might be responsible for the inability of the Chinese to catch up with the West culminated in 1988 in the TV series “River Elegy” ([Heshang, 河殇]). The makers of this series depicted the Chinese as being as “backward” as the Australian aborigines or African tribes and prescribed as the only possible remedy for China a course of only slightly disguised Westernization and market orientation. However, during the late 1980s and finally after 4 June 1989, intellectual discourse in China again underwent a far-reaching shift from the predominantly Western-oriented, anti-traditional “culture fever” of the 1980s to a more tradition-oriented and sometimes even aggressively nationalistic approach.

In Western research a rather gloomy picture has been painted of these changes, one that depicts the mainstream of this “neo-conservatism,” made up of the sub-currents of neo-humanism, New Guoxue, neo-Confucianism and postcolonial nativist theory, characterized by a neo-conservatism, which can partly be traced back to the neo-authoritarianism of the late 1980s, that stressed the indigenous sources of modernization. It advocates a gradualist approach to development and castigates the radicalism of the May Fourth tradition for its political romanticism and cultural sell-out to the West. Neo-conservatism is said to be in favor of a strong central government as the major agent of gradual modernization and thereby legitimizes the authoritarian status quo.

This rather elitist approach is combined with a strong nationalistic and anti-Western mood that sometimes assumes an even xenophobic stance, at least in its popularized versions.

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12 *New Guoxue* is sometimes also called “Guoxue-fever” in contrast to the “culture fever” of the 1980s.


These conservative and nationalistic trends are described as going hand-in-hand with a renewed stress on China's traditional culture and the rejection of what is perceived as Western cultural imperialism and universalism (e.g. the rejection of Western notions of human rights). A new East–West dichotomy seems to confront an essentialized East with a negative, colonialist West. In addition, it is sometimes claimed that these intellectual positions serve the government in its overall suppression not only of dissidents in favor of Western democracy, but of all opposition and dissent. The future of such an approach to China's modernization is assessed as not very promising—in the first place, because neo-conservatism is described as lacking a clearly expressed theoretical basis which would enable it to address pressing economic and social problems, secondly, because in the long run it will be undermined by the political consequences of economic liberalization.

All in all, these trends are depicted as an attempt to underpin the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), whose socialist ideological foundation, already weakened by decades of ideological struggles, has been further undermined by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Tiananmen incident of 1989. At the same time, they give expression to a new pride in being Chinese in the wake of the considerable economic successes of the 1980s and 1990s.

This image is not completely mistaken, yet it clearly is one-sided and has to be supplemented and corrected by a more differentiated interpretation. My analysis of one type of neo-conservatism, i.e. the so-called New Guoxue, will show that it does not fit neatly into the above characterization and that elements of neo-conservative discourse are more pluralistic and less supportive of the CCP than hitherto assumed.

More importantly, I will show that the neo-conservative discourse of recent years inherits a discussion dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that centers on the question of historical-cultural identity and the socio-political role of the gentry and its successors. To be sure, it would be wrong to claim that neo-conservatism is nothing but the revival of an old discussion. Due to the very different social, political, and economic context of the 1980s and 1990s, arguments brought forward much earlier can assume a wholly different meaning. Yet, the discussion, as will be shown in the following, consciously inherits and refers to earlier debates. The issues that are at stake in neo-conservatism are thus not only rooted in history, but are also, due to the use of historical reference and allusion, disguised behind seemingly pure academic research on history.

These issues—the political role of the intellectuals and the question of national and/or cultural identity—have to a considerable extent long been discussed through the medium of historiography and the philosophy of history. Views on how China should situate itself in the world and what role intellectuals and scholars should play in formulating a correct worldview are presented through competing interpretations of history and conceptions of historiographical methodology. Intellectuals try thereby to gain influence vis-

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18 Xu Ben, “From modernity to Chineseness,” p.208; and Schubert, “Was ist Neokonservatismus?,” pp.67, 73.
For the concept of “cultural memory,” see Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* [Cultural memory. Scripture, recollection and political identity in early high cultures] (München: Beck Verlag, 1997).

Chevrier analyses this close interrelation between historiography and politics at length. See his “La servante-maîtresse.”

It hardly needs to be pointed out that the last-mentioned attitude is of course—especially in a previously totalitarian, now authoritarian political environment—highly political.

“Modernity” is characterized by the decline of all-encompassing, unitary philosophical systems (a finite world) and the rise of worlds of possibilities (a probable world) and with them competing worldviews. The term “worldviews” aptly refers to this reflexivity of modern consciousness and hints at the cultural plurality and historical relativity, which is so characteristic for modernity. On the modernity of “worldview,” see Martin Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes” [The era of worldview], in Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* [Wooden paths] (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1980), pp.73–110. For a definition of the typical modern view of culture, see Karl Mannheim, *Über die Eigenart kultursoziologischer Erkenntnis* [On the peculiarities of cognition in cultural sociology], in Karl Mannheim, *Strukturen des Denkens* [Structures of thought] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp.44–50.

For a recent example of such an interpretation with regard to China, see Arif Dirlik, “Chinese history and the question of Orientalism,” *Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective, History and Theory*, Theme Issue 35 (Oct. 1996): 96–118.


This allegedly conservative juxtaposition of China and the West or of the East and the West did of course occur in manifold ways. However, to proclaim that this dichotomist approach was the only conservative reaction to the Western challenge, as Gyu Alitto does, is simply not true. See Gyu Alitto, *Wenhua shboucheng zhu yi lun* [On cultural conservatism] (Taipei: Shibao Chuban Gongsi, 1985). Examples of alternative conservative reactions are, just to mention a few, scholars from the *Xueheng* group such as Chen Yinke

With the latter case, we can often observe views of history that amount to implicit attacks on the CCP’s monopoly on the correct worldview. Yet again, not all interpretations critical of the CCP are in favor of parliamentary democracy, i.e. of political Westernization. Although most take the Western experience into consideration, none of these intellectuals opts for modernity exclusively modeled along Western lines. They rather try to develop a modern view of history and culture that is based on China’s particularity without abandoning the quest for the Universal. However, to conclude that the definition of a particular China in juxtaposition to a universal modernity of Western origin amounts to the hidden approval of the very (Western) values underlying modernity is a lopsided argument. There is sufficient reason to take the possibility into consideration that the attempt to cope with the Western challenge may lead to a definition of identity conceiving of China not primarily as the Other of the West, but rather trying to re-conceptualize and pluralize the Universal by either including elements from Chinese tradition or by elevating the Universal to a more abstract level of common structures of human existence.

To argue, as I do, that the present *New Guoxue* discourse should be interpreted within the context of at least a century of discussion on the challenge of modernization, of course implies that this discourse cannot be properly understood without historical contextualization. Not only had certain options already been formulated and discussed before 1949, but recent contributions to the ongoing discourse are more often than not brought forward in an indirect way by the writing of articles and books on *à-ùis* China’s cultural memory and—willingly or not—they legitimize or delegitimize that political force, which justifies itself by reference to the predominant cultural memory. No wonder, then, that these interpretations are always highly contested and—more often than not—rehearsed in order to play an important role in politics. Yet, to conclude that these interpretations can therefore be labeled “apologetic” would be an oversimplification. Not only are there at least as many interpretations running counter to the prevalent cultural memory as there are interpretations trying to legitimize the ruling political élite, we also find some advocates of neo-conservatism trying to seek independence from any kind of political control and to define a new social and political role for the intellectual.
these historical precedents. Yet, this caveat against an unhistorical approach does not amount to historical determinism, i.e. the assumption that the present discussion is predetermined by and restricted to what has been written before. In a second step of contextualization, the neo-conservative discourse has to be interpreted by taking into account its location in the present situation in China. It is not only an attempt at reconstructing a historical and cultural memory as part of an effort to heal the wounds a century of turmoil and revolution has inflicted on Chinese identity. It is also an attempt to solve problems inherent in the contemporary situation—a situation that is characterized by the decline of socialism as one important source of the legitimacy of the CCP, the unprecedented scope of China’s incorporation into the world market, and the ensuing commercialization of the intellectual field. 29 In order to show how these issues are discussed by so-called neo-conservatives, the New Guoxue discourse is most suitable, because it includes two different approaches to making use of historical predecessors in order to define China’s position in the world and the role of intellectuals in contemporary politics.

The New Guoxue of the 1990s—the Example of the Xueheng revival

The so-called New Guoxue is neither a clearly-defined intellectual position, nor a clear-cut academic current. The term is used to refer to a widespread renewal of interest in non-Marxist, non-liberal academics and journalists from the Republican period, who opted for a non-revolutionary approach to change based on a respect for tradition. The roots of this New Guoxue reach back to the 1980s, but it was not until the early 1990s that this current moved to the center of intellectual and academic interest.

This extraordinarily broad field of New Guoxue covers interest in and research on:
• National Essence scholars like Liu Shipei and Zhang Taiyan31;
• the opposition to the May Fourth movement as expressed in debates on cultures of the East and West and polemics on science and metaphysics;
• the conservative political and cultural stance of previous reformers like Yan Fu 嚴復 and Liang Qichao 梁啟超;
• the opposition against the May Fourth Movement known as the Xueheng group; and
• the neo-Confucianism that developed from the 1920s to the 1940s. 32

One focus of this New Guoxue fever—the Xueheng group—needs to be singled out, not only because this group was the most influential conservative opposition against the May Fourth Movement, but also because of its prominence within the New Guoxue.

30 For an early example of this trend, see Wang Yongxing, “Lie yan Chen Yinke xiansheng de zhishi fangfa” [Brief discussion of Mr. Chen Yinke’s historical method], Qinghua daxue xuehao [Qinghua University Journal] 1.1 (1986): 26–32.
31 The National Essence school (Guocuipai, 國粹派) most active in the decade before the revolution of 1911, argued for a racially motivated revolution against the Manchus, who were accused of having suppressed the Chinese National Essence. Culturally conservative as this might look, in their own approach to Chinese history and the classics the National Essence scholars were themselves rather revolutionary in their introduction of social-Darwinism and their re-evaluation of the importance of the various schools of thought during the later Chou period (Zhu zi baijia 諸子百家). See Zheng Shiqiu, Wangqing guocuipai—wenhua sixiangyanjiu [The National Essence school of the late Qing period—studies in cultural thought] (Beijing: Shifan Daxue, 1993), and Lawrence Schneider, “National Essence and the new intelligentsia,” in The limits of change: essays on conservative alternatives in Republican China, ed. Charlotte Furth, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.57–89.
32 The number of publications covered is far too numerous to be listed here. Suffice it to refer to the plethora of publications of selected and collected writings, of biographies, and volumes of collected articles from the above-mentioned debates: one example of the biographies of these intellectuals is the multi-volume series Guoxue dashi congshu [Collected writings of great scholars of national studies] (Nanchang: Baihuazhou Wenyi Chubanshe, 1992–). An example of the re-publication of selected and collected writings is Zhongguo xiandai xueshu jingdian [Academic classics of modern China], published under the general editorship of Liu Mengxi (Shijia-zhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, [OVER]
The interpretations of the Xueheng group presented in these publications are of course neither uniform nor do they focus on the Xueheng group as a whole. At the center of re-evaluation is on the one hand Wu Mi, the editor of Xueheng, and on the other hand, scholars who are rather loosely linked to the Xueheng group like Chen Yinke, Tang Yongtong, and Wang Guowei period, when many journals did not survive for more than a few months, this was quite an achievement. The Xueheng zazhi was replaced and partially continued by the Guofeng banyanke which was edited by Liu Yizheng and appeared from September 1932 until December 1936. The best summary of the intellectual positions of the Xueheng group can be found in Shen Songqiao, Xuehengpai. See also Richard B. Rosen, “The national heritage opposition to the New Literature and New Culture movements of China in the 1920s,” PhD diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 1969), and Hou Jian, “Irving Babbitt in China,” PhD diss. (State University of New York, 1980). The following summary is based on Shen Songqiao and my own ongoing research project, “Genesis and Structures of Chinese Conservatism, 1900–1957.”

33 Yue Daiyun, professor at the Institute for Comparative Literature and Culture, Beijing University, is the wife of Tang Yijie, the son of Tang Yongtong, who was an early sympathizer of the Xueheng group.


37 Founded in 1922, the Xueheng zazhi was the most influential conservative journal of the 1920s and 1930s, continuing for eleven years until it ceased publication in 1933. For this
before. Any radical opposition against tradition must lead to a total forms (classical Chinese and traditional narrative and poetic forms).42

Wu Mi, Hu Xiansu addressed questions of China’s future political organization, it is obvious that which were of universal value.43 The task of the scholar-poet was to represent this humanistic to embody the principles of neo-humanism. Only those foreign elements that did not equate these “isms” with the West, but rather emphasized the basic similarity of Chinese and Western classical civilization. Nowhere can we find a hint in their writings that they conceived of Confucianism as a Chinese remedy to the Western illness of modernity, but rather as one part of a classicist answer to the problems of modernity.

They opposed the May Fourth movement not because it advocated a new culture, but because of what they perceived as its romanticism and utilitarianism and, last but not least, its iconoclasm; in other words, the May Fourth movement stood from their point of view for the wrong “new culture.” They argued instead that the clear-cut juxtaposition of old and new, East and West, was misleading,44 because the new cannot be conceived of as independent of the old, but rather develops on the basis of what has been before. Any radical opposition against tradition must lead to a total deracination and, hence, cultural and social anomic. They consequently pleaded for a literature that would express new content within traditional forms (classical Chinese and traditional narrative and poetic forms).42

The ideal culture was to be based on Confucianism and, simultaneously, to embody the principles of neo-humanism. Only those foreign elements which were of universal value and were adequate to Chinese culture were to be adopted.43 The task of the scholar-poet was to represent this humanistic culture and to lead society. Although Wu Mi and his colleagues seldom addressed questions of China’s future political organization, it is obvious that they opposed modern mass democracy as well as a return to traditional...
The most comprehensive study of this academic field of historical geography during the Republican period is Peng Minghui, *Lishi dilixue yu xiandai Zhongguo shixue* [Historical geography and modern Chinese historiography] (Taipei: Dongda, 1995).

They published not only in the *Xuebeng* zazhi, but also in journals like the *Shidixuebao* [Historical geography] (Nanjing, Nov. 1921–Oct. 1926), *Shixue yu dixue* [Historiography and geography] (Shanghai, Dec. 1926 onwards), and *Shixue yu dixue* [Historiography] (Nanjing, Mar. 1929–Apr. 1931). They had their institutional base at the South-Eastern University in Nanjing, the later Central University, which developed into an antipode against the May Fourth camp at Peking University.

That is, the theories of the "doubters of antiquity" (Yigupai 風俗派) led by Gu Jiegang 魯迅, and Hu Shi's 胡適 movement "to order the national past" (zhengli guogu 整理國故). On the doubters of antiquity, see Lawrence A. Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's New History: nationalism and the quest for alternative traditions* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1971); Peng Minghui, *Yigu sixiang yu xiandai Zhongguo shixue de fazhan* [The thought of the doubters of antiquity and the development of modern Chinese historiography] (Taipei: Shangwu, 1991); Peng Minghui, "Gu Jiegang yu Zhongguo shixue xiandaihua de mengya—yi shiliao xuewei zhongxin de tantao" [Gu Jiegang and the social value of history] (Guji Chubanshe, 1991), pp. 80–4.

During the 1920s Liu Yizheng and Lu Moude 魯懋德 published in the *Xuebeng* in serialized form two of the first monographs on cultural history. Liu's aim in writing his *History of Chinese Culture* was to analyze the exchange between China and foreign people throughout history in order to discover the "causality" of cultural change. He reached the conclusion that although China had several times been heavily exposed to foreign cultures it had always succeeded in assimilating these influences. According to Liu this was due to the particularity of its culture and national spirit, which he saw as embodied in the Confucian rites. But, as becomes abundantly clear in his *History of Chinese Culture* as well as in other articles, Liu assumed that China with its superior Confucian ethics will again take the lead over Western civilization or at least make significant contributions to the badly shaken materialistic culture of post-war Europe.

They tried to achieve this by translating and introducing Western books on historiography, as for example Seignobos' introduction to the study of history (Langlois Ch. V, Seignobos Ch. trans. by Li Shichun, *Shixue yuanlun*, French: *Introduction aux etudes historiques* (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1926); and Lamprecht's concept of a history of world culture (Chen Xunci, "Lishi zhi shehui de jiazhi" [The social value of history], *Shidixuebao* 1.2 (1921): 1–2). For a list of their translations, see Zhang Wenjian, "Xuehengpai de shixue yanjiu" [The historical studies of the *Xuebeng* group], *Jindaishi yanjiu* 2.6 (1994): 37–8.

Liu Yizheng, *Zhongguo wenhua shi*.

Liu uses this term rather vaguely. It sometimes connotes a strict causality as implied in evolutionary science, but most of the time Liu uses "causality" to refer to mutual influence. His basic theoretical position was that history mostly is too pluralistic to be subject to strict causality. See Liu Yizheng, "Lishi zhi zhishi" [Historical knowledge], *Shidixuebao* 3.7 (May 1925): 19–21, reprinted in *Liu Yizheng shixue lumenyi* [Collection of Liu Yizheng's historiography] (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 1991), pp. 80–4.


A third type of intellectual belonging to the Xueben group consisted of historians like Wang Guowei, Chen Yinke, Tang Yongtong and Zhang Yinlin, who were linked to Xueben rather loosely. They did publish a few articles in Xueben and although it is obvious that they shared some basic humanistic convictions of the Xueben scholars, they never actively participated in the publication and editing process of the journal.

Whereas Wu Mi stressed a universal neo-humanistic civilization consisting of Western, Chinese and Indian elements, Liu Yizheng from the historical geography group emphasized the particularity of Chinese culture, sometimes even implying that it was superior to Western culture. Chen and Tang chose an intermediate position that can best be described as stressing cultural particularity and assuming that all cultures are—relative to world culture—of equal standing, thus implying a universalistic perspective.

Chen's research was based on the assumption that Chinese history is characterized by the gradual development of its particular national spirit. He identified the basic Confucian ethical principles of the Three Bonds and Five Relationships (sangang wuchang 三纲五常) as its core, but he did not go so far as to hypostatize it as an unchanging essence. He rather focused on the history of Chinese Buddhism and the exchange between China and foreign peoples, in order to show that the national spirit has always been subject to changes, has adapted to new circumstances and assimilated non-Han influences. His major claim was that only receptivity to external stimuli had guaranteed the persistence of Chinese cultural identity by preserving the core idea of the Three Bonds and Five Relationships, though in different historical guises. Any notion of an unchanging National Essence contradicts Chen's concept of continuity by change in the same way as the unqualified reception of foreign ideas alien to the Chinese national spirit contradicts it.

According to this concept Chen Yinke and Tang Yongtong strongly opposed the direct and unqualified transplantation of foreign ideas into China. What guarded them against cultural relativism was the notion of “the universality of abstract ideals” (chouxiang lixiang zhi tongxing 抽象理想之通性). Chen seems to recover the lost universal ground not by proclaiming a humanistic Chinese civilization superior to the West, but by assuming the universality of human attachment to “abstract ideals,” which do vary from culture to culture and have to be protected in order to safeguard the identity of this culture.

53 Chen and Tang were linked to Wu Mi and Mei Guangdi because they studied together at Qinghua University and at Harvard and were introduced to Irving Babbitt by Mei Guangdi.
54 Chen Yinke, “Feng Youlan Zongguo zhe xueshi xiaosha shencha baogao” [Report on the inquiry into the second volume of Feng Youlan’s History of Chinese philosophy (1933), in Chen Yinke xiansheng wenji [Collected works of Mr. Chen Yinke, hereafter CYKWJ] 2.3 (Taipei: Liren Shuju, 1981), pp.250–2. In the context of the New Guoxue discussion, it is interesting to note that in this report Chen refers to Soviet Marxism and American Liberalism as two examples of teachings that do not fit Chinese conditions.
56 The modern locus classicus of this topic of cultural identity based on a particular culture and its relation to universal ideals is Chen Yinke’s obituary poem commemorating Wang Guowei’s suicide and his foreword to the collected writings of Wang Guowei. Here Chen opposes the widespread explanations for Wang’s suicide as a reaction to the threat the Northern Expedition posed for Pu Yi 溥儀, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, or as the result of a quarrel with his long-time mentor Luo Chenyu 魯振玉. Instead, Chen argues, Wang Guowei killed himself because he could not endure seeing the decline of Chinese traditional culture. See Chen Yinke, “Wang Guantang xiansheng wanci bingxu” [Poem with foreword commemorating Wang Guantang] (Beijing, 1927), in CYKWJ 1.1, pp. 6–11; and Chen Yinke, “Wang Jing’an xiansheng yishu xu” [Foreword to the posthumous writings of Mr. Wang Guowei] (3 June 1934), in CYKWJ 2.3, pp.219–20. Passages from this poem and especially the foreword to the poem are quoted in probably one out of every two articles on the question of cultural identity published during the past several years. For a translation of the foreword into German, see my Wahrheit und Geschichte, pp.233–4.
57 Chen Yinke’s concept is in some ways reminiscent of Feng Youlan’s notion of “abstract inheritance” that is supported by the fact that both Chen and Feng referred to Plato’s concept of “ideas,” and that Chen held Feng Youlan’s History of Chinese philosophy in high esteem. However, Chen emphasizes the concrete contents of “abstract ideals” that have to be inherited. He refers to the concept of “abstract ideals” only in order to clarify that every culture does adhere to certain abstract ideals. In contrast, Feng develops the notion “abstract inheritance” in order to justify the inheritance of universally applicable principles as detached and abstracted from their concrete cultural particularity. It is interesting to note that Feng’s concept is not mentioned within the New Guoxue discourse. For Feng’s concept of “abstract inheritance,” see Feng Youlan, The Hall of Three Pines: an account of my life, trans. by Denis C. Mair (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), pp.287–300.
The historian’s task is to contribute to the recollection of the national spirit and its core values. He has to achieve this aim by adopting a historicist, hermeneutic methodology. His research should be based on the meticulous examination of historical sources and an accurate knowledge of the past, aiming at the empathetic understanding of the historical manifestations of the national spirit. Then, and only then, may the historian venture to evaluate Chinese history from a contemporary perspective.58

The correlate of this historicist methodology was a requirement that the historian should stay aloof from politics.59 Because history is no longer the manifestation of absolute principles the historian correspondingly loses his previous political position to actualize the universal Dao through historiography, thereby legitimizing the emperor’s claim to political power.60 Chen Yinke thus dissolves the traditional unity of knowledge and action and assigns to the historian the new role of being a mere guardian of historical memory and cultural identity.

**Back to the 1990s—the Xueheng Revival**

In the years following the appearance of Yue Daiyun’s article a multitude of publications on the historiographical methodology and cultural theory of the Xueheng group appeared. Besides publications on the Xueheng group in general and its status in the context of modern Chinese conservatism, most of the articles focused on either the historians belonging to the third group within the Xueheng or on Wu Mi. The interpretations brought forward are of course manifold, but by and large two different approaches can be discerned: those publications that focus on Tang Yongtong’s, Wang Guowei’s, and Chen Yinke’s view of history, their historical methodology and the implications for the role of the intellectual; and those publications that laid greater stress on the position of the Xueheng group, especially that of Wu Mi, Mei Guangdi, and Liu Yizheng, within the topography of modern Chinese conservatism and their attitude towards the nation-state and nationalism.61

The first type of interpretation places the Xueheng group within the broader context of the New Culture movement and emphasizes its predominantly modern character.62 This interpretation stresses that scholars like Chen Yinke and Tang Yongtong did not negate the achievements of the New Culture movement in toto, but criticized its neglect or radical rejection of indigenous sources of change,63 in order to revitalize Chinese tradition and preserve its particularity by infusing fresh blood, i.e. Western ideas, into Chinese culture.64 Their research on the influx of Buddhism into China and the resulting Buddho-Confucian synthesis is seen as showing how even far-reaching cultural transformation can be achieved without leading to a rupture within cultural identity.65 Yue Daiyun argues that any attempt to hypostatize and essentialize tradition would eventually neutralize and thereby musealize that very tradition.66 To be sure, Chen’s frequent reference to the Three Bonds
and Five Relationships as the core of the national spirit, that has to be preserved, is seen as evidence of his ultimate ethical goal. But this concern with an ethical anchor in times of change is paired with Chen's concept of continuity through change and seems to be of only secondary importance for the advocates of this interpretation. Closely related to this concept of continuity and the relativity of values previously held as absolute is the emphasis on the shift of the intellectual's role. Repeated reference is made to Chen's conviction that the scholar should be free from political interference and detach himself from his own political inclinations.67

By way of comparing Wu Mi's rather political and Chen Yinke's more cultural explanation of Wang Guowei's suicide,68 Liu Mengxi 刘梦溪 makes clear that from his point of view it is precisely the attachment to Chinese culture in combination with the lack of freedom that drove Wang Guowei to commit suicide. According to Liu it was the unqualified adoption of Western ideas by the New Culture movement as well as the Chinese tradition of statecraft which bound the scholar to politics, against which Wang Guowei fought in vain.69 The message conveyed in most of these texts is abundantly clear: only scholars, who are independent from politics, are able to protect and develop the national spirit.

The political implications of this theme of one part of the New Guoxue writing were made known to a wider public by Lu Jiandong's biography of Chen Yinke's last twenty years, i.e. his life under Communist rule.70 The main theme of this book is the harsh and unjust treatment of intellectuals by the CCP and long passages read like a reckoning. Especially telling is a long quot-

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68 Liu Mengxi, “Shilun Chen Yinke xiansheng de wendu” and “Wang Guowei—Zhongguo wendu de zaiquanshi” [Mr. Chen Yinke’s “Theory of Chinese culture as the basis”], in Ji Xianlin et al., ed., Jinian Chen Yinke xiansheng hainian dachen xue-

/this problem in one of his less academic articles that addresses the problems of cultural continuity and the changing role of the intellectuals under circumstances of the process of globalization and rapid economic change in the PRC today. See Liu Mengxi, “Jieguo yu chongjian, wenhua yu jingji yu zhengzhi de sanhongbianzou” [Deconstruction and reconstruction, the triple variation of culture, economics and politics] (March 1993), in Liu Mengxi, Chuantong de wendu, pp.391–404.

69 In 1927 Wang Guowei, a brilliant scholar and professed traditionalist, who is regarded not only as the founder of modern Chinese literary studies, but also as one of the foremost transitional figures of modern Chinese historiography, killed himself. Immediately various explanations for the suicide were discussed. By and large three different interpretations were brought forward: a personal explanation tracing the suicide back to a conflict between Wang Guowei and his long-time mentor Luo Chenyu. Various political interpretations centered on the question of Wang Guowei's political convictions. Wu Mi, for example, argued that Wang Guowei—the Qing loyalist—was shocked by the imminent humiliation of the last Qing emperor Pu Yi by warlord armies threatening to occupy Beijing; a cultural explanation proffered by Chen Yinke proclaimed that Wang—the cultural loyalist—could not bear the decline of Chinese traditional culture. For a collection of articles commemorating Wang Guowei, see Chen Pingyuan and Wang Feng, Zhuiyi Wang Guowei [Commemorating Wang Guowei] (Beijing: Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi Chubanshe, 1997).


70 Lu Jiandong, Chen Yinke de zai hou ershiniannian. Ten thousand copies of the first edition of this book were printed, and new print runs have been published.
In 1949 Chen Yinke refused Fu Sinian’s invitation to go to Taiwan and stayed in Canton for the rest of his life. He first taught at Lingnan University and later at Zhongshan University.

Chen Yinke, “Wang Guantang xiansheng wanci bingxu.”

Sudi 俗諺.

In order to validate this interpretation Ji explains the relationship between ruler and servant (jun 君 and chen 臣) as a traditional antecedent to patriotism. He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen appends two stipulations: he states that he will accept the post only if, firstly, research at the institute is not subject to Marxism-Leninism and free from “the shackles of common truth.” He goes on to explain that “common truth” in the 1930s referred to the KMT’s “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin zhuyi 三民主義) and, he hastens to add, that today it of course refers to Marxism-Leninism. As if this would not have been enough to antagonize the CCP, Chen...
All participants of the present New Guoxue discourse agree that the ultimate concern of the Xuebeng group was to realize a universal culture based on tradition. But they stress that China must never abandon its cultural particularity. In the case of the second interpretation, and especially scholars like Ji Xianlin 季羡林, the emphasis on China’s specific culture and history seems to be directed against the West and in some cases ultimately aimed at Chinese superiority, that is, they try to define Chinese culture as the Universal. In the case of Yue Daiyun, Liu Mengxi and others, the notion of a Chinese particularity seems to be one of China being situated on an equal footing and in constant exchange with the West. Yet the question of how to combine the preservation of one’s particularity with the aim of achieving a universal culture remains unanswered.81

Another similarity between the two interpretations is that they overlook the fact that wider social and political issues did not play a role in the writings of the Xuebeng group.82 That Tang Yongtong’s and Chen Yinke’s distance from power led to their silence on urgent problems of their time does not seem to trouble the New Guoxue scholars belonging to the first interpretation. Similarly, the conservative social and political implications of leadership by the elite of scholar-poets envisioned by Wu Mi, Mei Guangdi and Liu Yizheng, obviously do not raise concerns among those who adhere to the second interpretation.

Comparison with the Neo-Conservative Mainstream of the 1990s

From my analysis of the Xuebeng revival, it becomes evident that both interpretations share important characteristics with the neo-conservatism of the 1990s as described in Western research: they both underscore the need to establish a particular Chinese historical and cultural identity, and question, at least implicitly, the alleged universality of modern Western values. They want to achieve this by taking up again the thread of Chinese tradition and by developing it gradually, consciously avoiding what they perceive as the errors of May Fourth radicalism.83 They participate in a search for Chinese social values which could serve as a spiritual and ethical bulwark against the negative consequences of modernization, but as their subject of research, they too fail to combine this with a distinct and feasible social and political program.84

Despite these similarities, the differences between the general neo-conservative discourse and the first type of interpretation of the Xuebeng...
As can be seen from the success of Li Jiandong’s book on Chen Yinke, in Chen Yinke’s case, for nearly twenty years.


The phrase cited most often in this context is from the charter of the Xueheng zazhi, i.e. “to expound the National Essence, to adopt new knowledge” (changming guocui, ronghua xinzhi 昌明國粹，融會新知). See “Xueheng zazhi jianzhang” [General guidelines for the Critical Review], Xueheng 1 (Jan. 1922): 3.

Xu Ben, “From modernity to Chineseness,” pp. 218.

It goes without saying that in the context of the 1990s this is a highly political position.

The first type of interpretation is by no means anti-Western or excessively nationalistic; on the contrary, most of the Xueheng scholars referred to studied in the West for a long time. They were familiar with recent Western philosophical and cultural debates and advocated a balanced adoption of those ideas and institutions they deemed adequate to China and its cultural traditions. Their research is depicted by Yue Daiyun and others as an exemplification of Sino-foreign cultural exchange, and there is no doubt that this is not only a reaction to the pro-Western “culture fever” of the 1980s, but is also directed against the excessive, sometimes xenophobic nationalism of certain strands of neo-conservative discourse.

Correspondingly Chinese culture is portrayed as anything but static. Despite the repeated emphasis on the Three Bonds and Five Relationships as the core of China’s national spirit, the constant adaptation to new circumstances Chen Yinke and others had stressed contradicts any attempt at defining a national cultural essence. There are no signs, that the intellectuals standing behind the first type of interpretation conceptualize Chinese culture as something fixed and homogenous or legitimate a hegemonic sphere of Chinese culture.

Deviating even more from mainstream neo-conservatism is their attitude towards politics. In the predominantly academic texts analyzed here, there are of course no direct comments on contemporary politics, but the implications of the first type of interpretation are abundantly clear: not only does it implicitly resist any attempt by the CCP to control or direct the intellectuals and the academic elite, but more importantly, it opposes control by any kind of political force. The scholar as the guardian of Chinese culture is depicted as standing above politics. He influences the course of history by his research, but this does not amount to any kind of direct involvement in politics.

Conclusion

Since the abolition of the examination system in 1905, intellectual history can in part be understood as the struggle of intellectuals for a new self-image and a new role in society following the demise of that system and the ensuing decline of the traditional scholar-official. Both types of New Guoxue try to establish the intellectuals as a social stratum of highly specialized keepers of the historical and cultural memory of Chinese society. But one crucial difference between these two interpretations is to be seen in the way they conceptualize this role.

Those scholars who refer to Wu Mi’s and Mei Guangdi’s New Humanism adhere to the idea of the intellectual as spiritual leader in close connection
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to politics. Although they leave space for historical change through the selective adoption of new ideas, the bulk of their writings conveys a rather static vision of Chinese culture. Their approach—which can be called “foundational”\(^\text{91}\)—aims at freezing change, at least change exceeding the limits of national culture as defined by them, or, as Guo Lanfang 郭蘭芳 expresses it, socialist spiritual civilization.\(^\text{92}\) It is precisely the classicism of the Xueheng 校鶴 core group that attracts them. Classicism defines models for imitation\(^\text{93}\) that leave space for legitimate change and adaptation to new circumstances, but simultaneously limit its scope by setting up principles that cannot be transgressed.\(^\text{94}\) The “classical” is assumed to define the content of recollection without pretending to supply norms of absolute fixity.

In contrast to that, the other type of interpretation can be called a “counter-presentive”\(^\text{95}\) form of memory. It promotes intellectuals as guardians of culture, detached from politics, albeit not politically irrelevant. Although they too adhere to the Three Bonds and Five Relationships as the core of the Chinese national spirit, they put much more emphasis on change over time. They can be called classicist and post-canonical at the same time: classicist insofar as they establish models for emulation, however, predominantly on the abstract level of the structures of historical change and cultural influence; post-canonical and critical because they no longer endorse unchanging principles or political ideologies. This evidence points out that the above-mentioned notion of an overall suppression of dissenting voices\(^\text{96}\) cannot be maintained. Undoubtedly, the CCP’s claim to political power is not directly challenged by the New Guoxue discourse. But some intellectual groups do contest the CCP’s claim to ideological supremacy in a threefold way: by presenting an alternative view of history; by devising a methodology of historical research that contradicts the hitherto dominant historical materialism; and by claiming a new space for the intellectuals that relieves them of political constraints. It is this new role of the intellectual, which—together with the question of Chinese identity—is at the center of this version of New Guoxue discourse. In this case and in the context of present-day China, memory becomes an act of resistance and a very subtle attack on the ideological leadership of the CCP. That these intellectuals are nevertheless able to express their views in an only slightly disguised way clearly indicates that currently the CCP is either not willing or no longer able to suppress and antagonize these forces. It seems that as long as intellectuals defend China’s particularity against Western claims of universality, the CCP or certain forces within the CCP are at present willing to tolerate if not to support them, at least for the time being.

In the case of both interpretations, however, it is the phobia of unrestrained cultural arbitrariness—the loss of identity and meaning, and the threat of social degradation—that motivates their rationalizations. That these attempts to overcome the cultural phobia try to build a bridge into the future by way of reinterpreting the past surely is nothing particular to China. But that

\(^{91}\) Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis, pp.78–83.

\(^{92}\) Guo Lanfang, “Wu Mi xiansheng de wenhua guanlian” [Mr. Wu Mi’s view of culture], in Li Funing et al., Di yijie, pp.189–205.

\(^{93}\) “Imitation [of the ancients]” mofang guren 莫仿古人 is an important part of Wu Mi’s and Mei Guangdi’s theory of literature.

\(^{94}\) The differentiation of “canonical,” “classical,” and “post-canonical” or “critical” draws on Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis, pp.103–29.

\(^{95}\) This term refers to a way of recollection that does not legitimize the existing order (i.e. the foundational mode of recollection), but goes back to history in order to construct a counter-image directed against the present order. See Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis, pp.78–83.

they focus to a large degree on the ideas of earlier historians reminds us of the very special role historiography and the strategy of historical reference played and still attempt to play in China. If there is a specific Chinese culture of memory it can be found in the exceptional role historiography played and plays in defining what and how it has to be recollected. However, does this mean that nothing changed? Certainly not. Not only are the proponents of New Guoxue aware of and take into account new developments, but even more important is the change of environment. As Joseph Levenson once stated the problem: “An audience which appreciates that Mozart is not Wagner will never hear the eighteenth-century Don Giovanni.” Meaning is not independent from context, and the 1990s are dramatically different from the 1920s. When Chen Yinke demanded the independence of the intellectual, he was admonishing his colleagues to renounce their claim to power. When Yue Daiyun and others demanded the same in the 1990s, they were fighting a war on two fronts: against the CCP’s ideological domination, and against the leveling and marginalizing effects of the market that not only threatened the intellectual’s cultural influence, but also the privileged position of history as a discourse where central questions of political and philosophical importance are being discussed.

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