CHAPTER FIVE

PHILOLOGY, NATIONAL ESSENCE, AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NATIONALIST LANGUAGE POLICY

After the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire, the [ancient] books and statutes were burned or lost [...] and for a time the brilliance of the culture of Greece eclipsed. Only when the Crusaders entered Arabia and brought the books back [to Europe] did Europeans learn to pursue the study of antiquity. At this time the Italian cities were flourishing, the overseas trade was open. Scholars were invited from Greece to teach Greek and the theories of Ptolemy, Hippocrates, and Euclid. Moreover, people learned Latin and studied the writings of Cicero and Vergil. Dante (an Italian) used the Italian language to write the Divine Comedy, [but he also] studied ancient poetry and prose. Later Petrarca and Boccaccio (both Italians) studied ancient literature on a large scale. They not only studied the thoughts of the men of antiquity but they also searched for lost books from ancient Rome and Greece, even abroad and under great difficulties. They built libraries where thousands of books were stored. At this time, there was an atmosphere of admiration for antiquity among the educated. The scholars who studied antiquity were called “humanists” which was meant to be a laudatory title. [...] Alas, how great was the European Renaissance. Master Deng says: The 15th century was an age of renaissance in Europe. But the 20th century will be the age of renaissance in Asia.¹


The origins of a culturally conservative nationalist movement can be traced back to the Wuxu era (Chapter Two), but became only fully developed during the anti-Russian movement of 1903 when the anti-Manchu revolutionary faction split from the reformist opposition led by Liang Qichao. From the beginning, the revolutionary movement

of the Lower Yangzi region was marked by a large number of highly educated young men many of whom had been students at prestigious academies. This included a number of renowned philologists from the famous academies of evidential scholarship, in particular Zhang Binglin and Liu Shipei, who was the scion of a scholar family of the Yangzhou school of philology.

During and after the Russo-Japanese War, the radical circles also took up the idea of “national essence” (guocui 國粹). First used by the educational authorities to justify the study of Confucian classics in China’s classrooms (see Chapter Four), the Japanese-coined term soon became the synonym for a culturally conservative group that was part of the wider anti-Manchu revolutionary movement.2 With the emergence of the national essence idea, the intellectual elite within the revolutionary circles shifted their attention from popular propaganda in the vernacular (see Chapter Three) to academic study. The so-called “national essence school” (guocui pai 國粹派) was in the first instance a scholarly enterprise that aimed to create an academic climate of independent study and teaching in order to counterbalance the Neo-Confucian interpretation of “national essence” prescribed for the national school system in China. At the same time, it was a response to the strong influence of foreign (especially Japanese) definitions of Chinese culture and history. It was the attempt of philologists in the tradition of anti-Manchu southern Chinese schools of evidential scholarship to assert their place in defining the nation in China.

Large parts of the efforts of the national essence school were devoted to the creation of an alternative antiquity that freed them from the need to identify themselves with China’s subdued and poor present or to rely on the same models of the past (i.e. Neo-Confucianism in its form as canonized during the Tang and Song dynasties) adhered to by the Qing government and Japan. Deng Shi, the mastermind and founder of the school, declared the Chinese classical language to be at the heart of China’s national heritage. However, it was Zhang Binglin who pursued the study of language as an autonomous area of scholarship and developed an independent nationalist language policy.