CHAPTER TEN

TEMPORALITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND HISTORY WRITING IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA.
LIU YIZHENG AND A HISTORY OF CHINESE CULTURE

Ya-pei Kuo

History imposes its law upon the faraway places that it conquers when it fosters the illusion that it is bringing them back to life.
—Michel de Certeau, “Making History”

Introduction: The Writing and Rewriting of History

Liang Qichao’s “New Historiography” (Xin shixue) (1902) ushered in a new era in China’s historical thinking. In this manifesto of modern historiography, Liang harshly criticized the traditional approach and proposed a set of new working precepts for future historians.

Liang lamented that although about sixty to seventy percent of books printed in China were historical works, including dynastic histories, chronologies, bibliographies, biographies, and local gazetteers, almost none of these books could be called real history. Each of them suffered from at least one of four problems: (1) they paid attention only to the events that took place in or around the royal court, mistakenly identifying the royal family with the entire country; (2) they dwelt on a few individuals and failed to see the people as a group, much less as a nation; (3) the accounts all prioritized ancient times; and (4) writers showed no interest in theoretical subjects such as the nature and movement of history. In addition, Liang complained, previous attempts at history lacked creativity and remained inaccessible to ordinary people. There was too much moral judgment and not enough causality. Meaning was established not by examining the course of history, but by focusing exclusively on individual events.1 China, claimed Liang, needed a new history that would restore the nation to the center of its collective memories. The new history was to be a national history.

1 Liang 1902a: 1628–31.
Liang’s “New Historiography” was representative of its time. The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed a surge of interest in history writing. Prompted by the new national consciousness, intellectuals of different political stripes agreed on the need for a new narrative of the past. Zhang Taiyan, for example, confided to Liang Qichao in 1902 his private plan of writing a new general history of China.\(^2\) Liu Shipei and Xia Zengyou contributed to the making of history in more practical ways. As they tried to fill the market niche for new-style textbooks, the two scholars of classical studies experimented with new styles of historical narrative in their composition of teaching materials.\(^3\) Together with Liang’s work, these writing projects shared the same aspiration of placing the nation at the center of history, and using history to naturalize the Chinese nation.\(^4\) Zhang Taiyan, whose ambition went beyond producing a textbook, unabashedly asserted the utility of history for nation-building. The coherent narration of a national history was thought to inspire patriotism and solidify the China’s new identity as a nation.

The significance of Liang’s “New Historiography,” however, went beyond promoting the writing of national history. Equally important was the notion of *jinhua* (進化 literally, “progression and change”), a subject that Liang devoted most of his essay to. Although the term has often been viewed as the Chinese translation of the word “evolution,” Liang construed it almost as a synonym for “development,” without the association with the modern idea of Progress. One example of such a use may be found in the title of his essay “On the *Jinhua* History of China’s Political Despotism” (*Zhongguo zhuanzhi jinhua shi lun*) (1902).\(^5\) Here *jinhua* lacks any positive connotations: it simply refers to the continuous development of an institution that was detrimental to the overall progress of the nation.

*jinhua* was an irreversible and never-ending process; it was also the only appropriate topic for historical studies. According to Liang, history should not concern itself with the reversible and cyclical, because they were not phenomena of *jinhua*.\(^6\) This irreversibility was due to the linear coordinate system on which *jinhua* had to register itself. In this early attempt to give the modern concept of time, *shijian* (時間), a definition, Liang highlighted that time is the universal and all-inclusive framework of

\(^2\) Zhang 1902.

\(^3\) Hon and Culp 2007.

\(^4\) Tang 1996: 46–79.

\(^5\) Liang 1902b: 1648.

\(^6\) Ibid., 1632.