CHAPTER FOUR

ONE YEAR AT THE INSTITUTE OF HISTORY AND PHILOLOGY

Among the graduate students in the History Department at Yanjing University, there was one who came from Guanghua University in Shanghai by the name of Yu Dagang 俞大鋼 (1908–1978). He was the younger brother of Yu Dawei 俞大維 (1897–1993, a military and diplomatic official in the Republican era and later in Taiwan), Yu Dafu 俞大紱 (1901–1993, celebrated plant pathologist and microbiologist), and Yu Dayin 俞大絪 (1905–1966, professor of English at Peking University). He was a man of surpassing intelligence and multi-talented. He initially was studying the Taiping Rebellion but later turned to work on the history of the Tang period. Although not especially hard-working, his knowledge and experience were outstanding, thus earning him an extraordinary reputation among our group of friends. Before he had even completed his graduate studies, he began to work at the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica. He later abandoned historical research altogether and became a Chinese opera critic in Taiwan. He has now passed away, though his collected writings have been published in Taiwan [Yu Dagang quanji 俞大鋼全集 (Collected works of Yu Dagang) (Taipei: Heluo tushu chubanshe, 1977–1978, 2 volumes)].

Yu often praised the profound insights and originality of his older maternal cousin Chen Yinque’s study of the history of the Wei, Jin, Sui, and Tang periods. These comments elicited my interest. When the new semester began in the autumn of 1935, I made my way to the Number Three Building at Qinghua University to quietly audit Professor Chen’s lectures on the history of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties. After listening to just one lecture, I was completely in awe of him. On that one occasion, he devoted the two hours of his class to the Jie 羯 people, given in Chinese sources as one of the “five barbarians,” and he discussed their origins and how the Shi 石 clan arose from Shiguo 石國, one of the states in what the Chinese sources call “Zhaowu jiuxing” 昭武九姓 [meaning a confederation of oasis states in Central Asia with Shiguo near present-day Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan]. He lectured in a cautious and careful manner, proceeding one step at a time, and especially when he entered
into issues concerning the various ethnic groups of Central Asia, I realized I was hearing things I had never heard before. I remember as well that, in addition to myself, two others from the Institute of History and Philology—Yu Xun 俞遜 (courtesy name, Rangzhi 讓之) and Lao Gan 勞干 (1907–2003, courtesy name, Zhenyi 貞一)—joined me to hear these lectures. Our small group of young folks all loved Peking opera. After class we all by chance sighed in admiration and said: “That was immensely satisfying. Just like listening to an expert performance at the Yangxiaolou 杨小楼 Theater.”

While auditing the lectures in class, I also sought out Professor Chen’s published writings to read them. Although I read a few of them, I realized that I could not fully understand them. Nonetheless, my esteem for Professor Chen only grew further. I was coming to the realization in my heart of hearts at the time that, if I persevered, I would probably be able to reach the level of other professors’ scholarship. However, the acuity of Professor Chen’s views, the depth of his scholarly competence, and the breadth of his learning—to say nothing of the many languages he had mastered—was something I would never be able to attain. Later, with several more decades of experience, this proved to be an accurate assessment. After leaving Beiping in the autumn of 1936, I asked my wife-to-be Deng Yi who had by then entered the Institute of Chinese Literature at Qinghua University to attend Professor Chen’s lectures and take notes for me. Inasmuch as every year he lectured on new research and new knowledge he had thus acquired, there was not going to be a repeat performance.

Prior to summer vacation in 1936, Yu Dagang recommended me to Professor Chen for work in the History Section of the Institute of History and Philology (Professor Chen was the section head). Only then did Yu tell me that I would be examined for this position. I weighed the pros and cons, recognizing that studying and working with Professor Chen would be an extraordinary opportunity, and decided to abandon pursuit of a master’s degree at Yanjing University and take this research post at the Institute of History and Philology which had moved to Nanjing. Coincidentally, Professor Hong happened not to be in Beijing at the time; had he been at the university, it is highly likely that he would have come up with a way to keep me there. Before departing for Nanjing, I first went to Qinghua University to have a one-on-one meeting with Professor Chen. This was the first time I had seen him outside of class. Although I had been an unregistered student of his, my father was a close friend of his older brother, the celebrated painter Chen Hengque 陈衡恪 (1876–1923, courtesy name, Shizeng 師曾), and his seventh younger brother, the poet Chen Fangque 陈方恪 (1891–