Disciplining the National Essence

Liu Shipei and the Reinvention of Ancient China’s Intellectual History

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Abstract

Around the year 1900, the taxonomies in which knowledge had been organized in China for centuries were unsettled and gradually superseded by a Western-inspired disciplinary matrix. The introduction of new curricula of higher education and the abolition of the civil examination system unmistakably marked the demise of the old regime of learning. In the natural sciences the transition led to a rapid denigration of Chinese knowledge. In the realms of the humanities and social sciences, the transformation proved to be more complex. To defend the validity of values enshrined in canonical and some noncanonical texts, late Qing scholars suggested various ways to preserve China’s moral heritage in the incipient world of global knowledge. One of the earliest and boldest attempts to secure a sustainable place for China’s embattled moral sciences was formulated by Liu Shipei in the context of the “National Essence” (Guocui) Movement. This essay aims to reconstruct the key elements of Liu’s reinvention of ancient China’s intellectual history in Euro-American terms and to analyze the violent conceptual transformations that this effort required and that foreshadowed many reformulations of the histories of Chinese science and thought published throughout the Republican period.

In the decades around the year 1900, the taxonomies in which knowledge had been organized in China for centuries were unsettled and gradually superseded by a Western-inspired disciplinary matrix. The introduction of new curricula of higher education from 1898 onward1 and the abolition of the civil examination system in 19052 unmistakably marked the demise of the old regime of learning. In the field of the natural sciences the transition quickly led to an almost complete denigration of the “old” Chinese knowledge.3 In the realms of the humanities and social sciences, however, the transformation proved to be more complex. To defend the universal validity of values enshrined in canonical and some noncanonical writings, late Qing scholars suggested various ways to preserve China’s moral heritage in a new world of knowledge defined in globalized terms of Euro-American origin. Their efforts contributed to the emergence of new genres of writing aimed at ensuring the survival of substantial portions of traditional thought through translations into a new lan-

1 Weston 2002.
guage of scholarship and a Europeanized disciplinary framework that con-
tinue to shape our understanding of “Chinese philosophy,” “Chinese logic,”
“Chinese religion,” and many other areas of learning.

One of the earliest and boldest attempts to secure a place for China's embat-
tled moral sciences in the incipient world of global knowledge was formulated
in 1905 by the intellectual prodigy and self-styled “radical no. 1”4 Liu Shipei 劉
師培 (1884–1919) in the context of the movement for the preservation of the
“National Essence” (Guocui 國粹). Arguing against efforts to save Chinese
learning through the creation of a protected reservoir of “National Studies”
(Guoxue 國學), Liu drafted a master plan for a new grand narrative of ancient
China's intellectual history that was structured by disciplinary boundaries and,
as such, raised questions that none of the now all-too-familiar histories of
“Chinese philosophy,” and so on, could afford to ignore. This essay aims to iden-
tify the key elements of Liu's radical effort at translating early Chinese knowl-
dge into disciplinary terms and to illustrate the violent conceptual
transformations necessary for its completion. I will focus on a close reading of
Liu's deliberations on what he considered to be the core disciplines of the
modern humanities—psychology, ethics, and sociology—and concentrate in
particular on the three most significant aspects of his reinvention of ancient
China's intellectual history: first, his transformation of argumentative strate-
gies derived from the popular theories of the “Chinese origins of Western
knowledge” (Xixue Zhongyuan shuo 西學中源說); second, his adaptation of
philological methods borrowed from the reinvigorated studies in noncanoni-
cal masters (zhuzixue 諸子學); and, third, his use of an untested scholarly
vocabulary imported from Japan in interpretations of ancient Chinese texts.

In recent years, the formation of modern academic disciplines in late Qing
and early Republican China, not only in the humanities and social sciences,
has attracted growing interest. Pioneering Chinese studies by Chen Pingyuan,5
Sang Bing,6 Luo Zhitian,7 Zuo Yuhe,8 inter alia, have greatly enhanced our
understanding of the “intellectual resources” (sixiang ziyuan 思想資源) and
“conceptual tools” (gainian gongju 概念工具)9 applied in the reordering of
late Qing China's discursive terrain. More recently, a series of edited volumes
emerging from a project initiated by John Makeham has traced the formation

4 Wang Xiaoling 1998, 163.
5 Chen 1998.
7 Luo 2003.