National Essence, National Learning, and Culture: 
Historical Writings in Guocui xuebao, Xueheng, and Guoxue jikan

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Abstract:  
This article examines historical writings of early twentieth-century China from the perspective of the nation. In part one, I compare the historical writings in *Guocui xuebao* (Journal of National Essence, 1905-1912) and *Xueheng* (Critical Review, 1922-1933). In current scholarship, historians who published in these two journals are often considered to be cultural conservatives who rejected modernity. To challenge this view, I compare the ways these two groups of historians envisioned post-imperial China. The *Guocui* historians wanted to win the support of Han Chinese to revolt against the Manchu Dynasty. To achieve this goal, they promoted racial nationalism and defined China as the nation-state of the Han race. In contrast, two decades later, historians associated with *Xueheng* envisioned China as based on a communal bond developed over centuries of acculturation and socialization. Instead of racial genealogy, they used “culture” (*wenhua*) to articulate a multi-ethnic identity for twentieth-century Chinese.
In part two, I compare the historical writings in Xueheng and Guoxue jikan (National Studies Quarterly, 1923-1952). Although much attention has been paid to Hu Shi’s (1891-1962) call for a “reorganization of the nation’s past” in Guoxue jikan, not all historical writings published in that journal were iconoclastic in nature. On the contrary, many of them were similar to those printed in Xueheng, particularly in respect to locating the cultural roots of twentieth-century China and combining Chinese learning with Western learning. The main difference between these two groups of historians, I propose, was in their social visions for a pluralistic China rather than their efforts to reorganize the national past.

This study calls into question the conventional practice of dividing early-twentieth century Chinese historians into “radicals,” “liberals” and “conservatives,” based on their iconoclasm or alleged support of Westernization. To be sure, dividing historians neatly into different groups helps to make the picture of twentieth-century Chinese historiography easier to grasp. However, as this study shows, sometimes the “conservatives” could be as revolutionary in their social and political visions as the “radicals,” and in many instances it is hard to tell who were more “liberal” in envisioning post-imperial China. To fully understand the complexity of the historians’ debates, we should avoid simple categories and focus on the social-political implications of historians’ narration of the past.