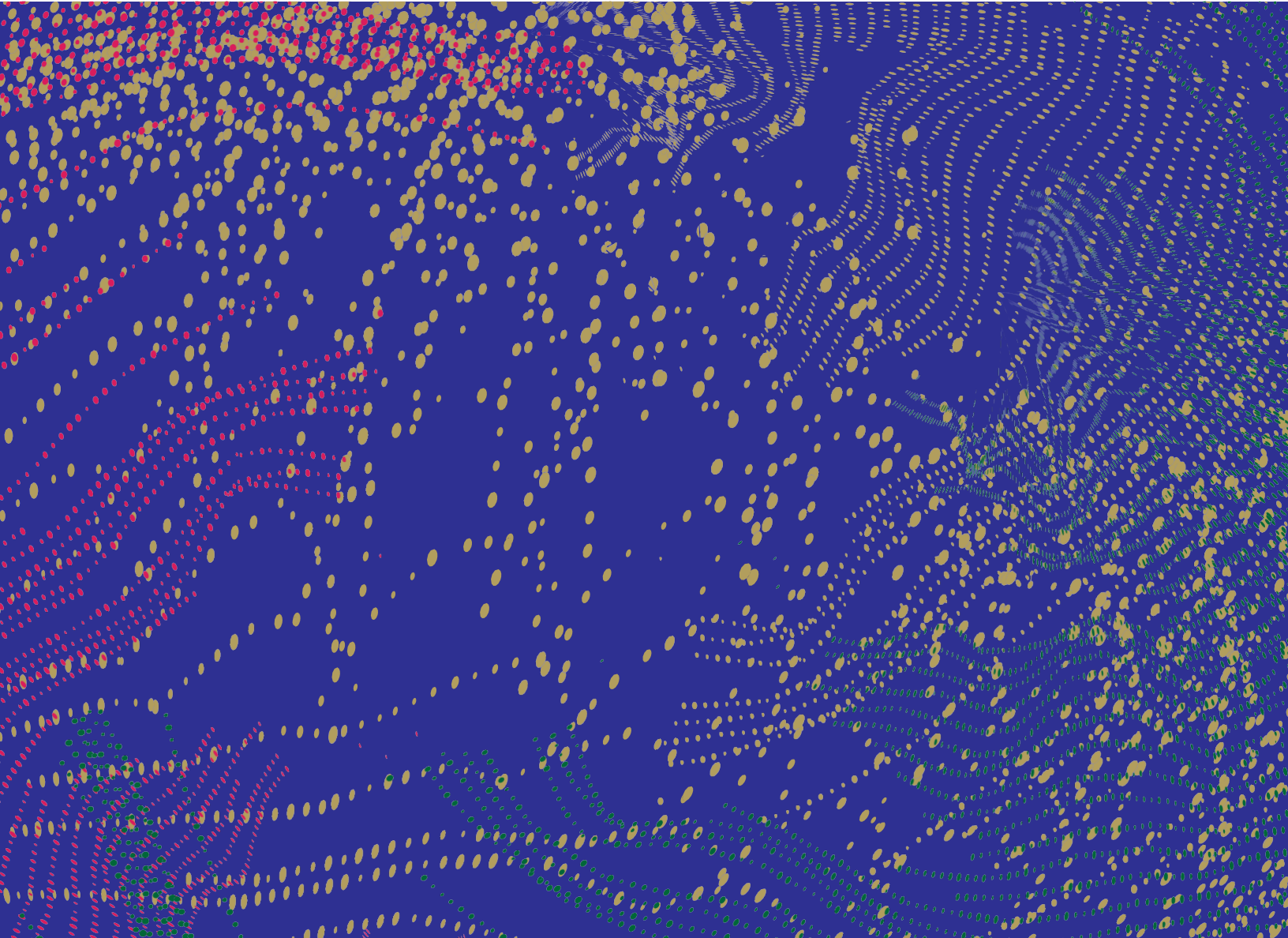


The World Humanities Report

Modern Chinese History

Wang Dongjie



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Modern Chinese History

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In May 1950 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) announced the establishment of the Institute of Modern History. This was the first historical research institute established by CASS, predating the Institute of History, which focuses on premodern Chinese history. Its establishment highlighted the important place that modern history occupied in the political and academic life of the new China. The study of modern Chinese history after founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 can be roughly divided into two periods: before reform and opening up (1949–65) and after it (1978–), with a fallow period during the Cultural Revolution (1965–76). In the period from 1949 until the Cultural Revolution, one of the most important developments in modern history research was the establishment of a narrative framework with 1840 as the starting point of modern China and 1919 as the ending and as the climax of three revolutionary movements (the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the Boxer Rebellion, and the 1911 Revolution). In addition, several substantial sets of source materials were published, which remain invaluable even today.¹ During the Cultural Revolution, the study of modern history nearly ceased, but it was not without its achievements. During this time, study of the history of Republican China took its first steps when, in 1972, the Institute of Modern History established a research group on Republican history under the supervision of Li Xin and Sun Sibai. This field initially limited itself to the study of the history of the ruling class, as it tried to distinguish itself from but also to cooperate with the Chinese Communist Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party. The group depicted the history of the Chinese Revolution as “how the Chinese Communist Party led the Chinese people in their revolutionary struggle,” and the history of Republican China as “how the ruling class fell and met its demise.”² But, on the whole, Chinese history in the period

¹ Zhao Qingyun, *Chaungzhen pimang: Jindaishi yanjiusuo yu shixue fazhan* [Cutting through thistles and thorns: The Institute of Modern History and the development of historiography] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2019); Xu Xiuli, “Zhongguo jinxiandai shi yanjiu 70 nian (1949–2019)” [70 years of modern Chinese historical research (1949–2019)], *Jingji shehui shi pinglun*, no. 2 (2019): 5–15.

² Luo Min, “Minguoshi yanjiu qishi nian: Chengjiu yu xin qushi” [Seventy years of Republican

before reform and opening up was dominated by the study of premodern history, as modern history was unable to compete in institutional or intellectual terms. The number of prominent figures in the field of premodern history was well beyond that in modern history. In fact, in the eyes of many, modern history was associated more with politics than with scholarship.³

Since reform and opening up, however, modern history has become one of the most fruitful and rapidly developing fields in the study of Chinese history. In the 1980s, after the ideological liberation movement, scholars began to break through the confines of ultra-leftist dogma and promote the shift toward a scholarly approach to history. Whether in the selection of topics, the choice of methods, or the updating of theoretical paradigms, modern history rapidly progressed. In addition to the Institute of Modern History at CASS, Beijing Normal University, Central China Normal University, Hunan Normal University, East China Normal University, Fudan University, and other institutions, under the leadership of Gong Shuduo, Zhang Kaiyuan, Lin Zengping, Chen Xuelu, Xia Dongyuan and others, laid a solid foundation for the discipline of modern history to take flight in the 1990s. Since then, the most important change in the study of modern history has been its continued break away from the pure “revolutionary history” and the constraints of ultra-leftist dogma and its return to true scholarship. By the mid-1990s, a new generation of outstanding scholars emerged and restored the academic status of the discipline.

The increasing specialization and systematization of modern history can be seen through the naming of the discipline. For a long time before the Cultural Revolution, “recent Chinese history” [*jindai shi*] and “modern Chinese history” [*xiandai shi*] were regarded as two closely related but still separate fields; in the history departments of many institutions of higher education, teachers of these two subjects were split up and sent to different research offices. The basis for distinguishing them was the division between the “old democratic revolution” and the “new democratic revolution” periods (1840–1919 and 1919–49, respectively). Although there have always been calls to bridge these two

history: Achievements and new trends], *Nanjing daxue xuebao (Zhhexue, renwen kexue, shehui kexue ban)*, no. 4 (2019): 17–18.

³ Xu Xiuli points out that in the “early years of nation building,” researchers in modern Chinese history consisted primarily of two groups: the “revolutionary” historians and the “professional” historians. The former “were revolutionaries first and then historians, with history as their tool for revolutionary struggle.” Xu Xiuli, “Zhongguo jinxiandai shi yanjiu 70 nian (1949–2019),” 5.

periods, it is only in the last thirty years that more and more people have come to consider *jindai* and *xiandai* as one historical period, as reflected in the term *jinxiandai*—modern Chinese history. Although the term was a compromise, it was the culmination of scholars' efforts to break out of the ideological control of revolutionary history in the service of class struggle and to convey respect for the development of history itself.

The study of modern Chinese history has undergone several paradigm shifts in a short period of time. From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, the debate between the modernization paradigm and the revolutionary history paradigm was the first major upheaval that changed the face of the discipline. The modernization paradigm described history from the mid-nineteenth century onward as a process of transformation of Chinese society from tradition to modernity in response to external crises. Taking the history of the late Qing period as an example, the modernization paradigm no longer focused on how external and internal reactionary forces drove China to become a “semicolonial and semifeudal society,” as the revolutionary history paradigm had done. It also gave considerable positive attention to major events beyond the “three revolutionary climaxes,” such as the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–95), the Hundred Days' Reform (1898), late Qing reforms (1901–11), and the Constitutional Movement (1917–22). The contributions of the Nationalist government during the Nanjing Decade (1927–37) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) were also evaluated more factually.

Despite the intensity of this debate, both sides agreed that the two paradigms were not necessarily two incompatible poles. They acknowledged some validity in each other's claims and generally concluded that each paradigm can guide, modify, or accommodate the other. As the debate unfolded, not only did both sides reflect on and adjust their original positions, but others also argued that the two paradigms each had their strengths and weaknesses and that they need not be substitutes or competitors but could each excel in their own ways and work in parallel.⁴

Then, in the 1990s, as Chinese society wholeheartedly embraced the tide of the commodity economy, the slogan of “farewell to revolution,” proposed by philosopher Li Zehou and literary theorist Liu Zifu, became a practical choice

⁴ Xu Xiuli, “Zhongguo jinxiandai shi yanjiu 70 nian (1949–2019),” 19; Zhao Qingyun, “Jin shinian lai Zhongguo jindaishi lilun wenti zongshu” [A summary review of the theoretical issues in modern Chinese history in the last decade], *Lanzhou xuekan*, no. 10 (2017): 31–33.

for many people.⁵ Although some people in the field of empirical research still claimed the fundamental value of the revolutionary history paradigm, its influence was in decline and the topics it had so persistently pursued were more or less forgotten.

A representative work that broke through the paradigm of revolutionary history and adopted a modernization perspective on modern history was Mao Haijian's 1995 *Tianchao de bengkui* [The collapse of the heavenly kingdom].⁶ Through extensive archival research with both Chinese and foreign materials, the author tried to "understand the thoughts and actions of the subjects reasonably and rationally with the concepts of the time."⁷ He broke away from the "loyalty and treachery" narrative model, no longer evaluating historical figures from a moral standpoint as "traitors" and "patriots." Rather, he tried to understand the specific historical circumstances the people faced. At the same time, the author also adopted a distinctive modernization approach in that the book aimed to show that China's defeat in the Opium Wars was a historical necessity, highlighting "China's historical mission to modernize." The book provoked a strong social reaction, reflecting the fluctuating trends of social thinking in that period.

In this century, revolutionary history began returning to scholars' field of vision, but this time it has a qualifier—"new." In 2010 Li Jinzheng published an article titled "Transforming into a 'New Revolutionary History': Reflection and Breakthrough in the Research Methodology of the Revolutionary History of the Chinese Communist Party," which officially unveiled the banner of "new revolutionary history." According to Li, "new revolutionary history is a return to the tracks of historiography and an adherence to the simple spirit of seeking factual truths, attempting to improve the simplistic mode of thinking in the traditional view of revolutionary history, attaching importance to common sense, common situations, and common reasoning, and trying to use new concepts and methods to reexamine the history of the Chinese Communist Revolution, in order to reveal its operations, which are especially difficult, winding, and complex, and then propose a set of questions, concepts, and

⁵ Li Zehou and Liu Zifu, *Gaobie geming* [Farewell to revolution] (Hong Kong: Xianggang tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 1995).

⁶ Mao Haijian, *Tianchao de bengkui* [The collapse of the heavenly kingdom] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1995).

⁷ Mao Haijian, *Tianchao de bengkui* [The collapse of the heavenly kingdom] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1995), 2–3.

theories appropriate to the practical reality of revolutionary history.”⁸ In this sense, new revolutionary history inherits the position of returning modern Chinese history to an academic orientation after the era of reform and opening up. It also serves as a rebuttal to the deliberate efforts of the academic community, under the influence of the modernization paradigm, to correct deviations of the traditional revolutionary history research—a “rectification” against “rectifications,” so to speak.

Once the term “new revolutionary history” was proposed, many scholars immediately adopted the new approach. Studies by Wang Qisheng, Ying Xing, Huang Daoxuan, and others have further deepened and improved this path at different levels of theory and empirical evidence (though they may not all use the term “new revolutionary history”).⁹ Obviously, the popularity of new revolutionary history reflects not only the renewal of research orientation, but also the fact that revolution was originally the basic thread of the China’s historical development in the twentieth century and holds an eternal charm in the eyes of historians.¹⁰

⁸ Li Jinzheng, “Xiang ‘xin geming shi’ zhuanxing: Zhonggong gemingshi yanjiu fangfa de fansi yu tupo” [Transformation to “new revolutionary history”: Reflection and breakthrough in the research methodology of revolutionary history of the Chinese Communist Party], *Zhong gongchan shi yanjiu*, no. 1 (2010): 73–83; Li Jinzheng, “Zaiyi ‘xin geming shi’ de linian yu fangfa” [Revisiting the concept and methodology of “new revolutionary history”], *Zhong gongchan shi*, no. 11 (2016): 98–108; Li Jinzheng, “Xin geming shi: Youlai, linian yu shijian” [“New revolutionary history”: Origin, concept, and practice], *Jianhai xuekan*, no. 2 (2018): 156–67, 239.

⁹ For theoretical works, see Wang Qisheng, “Gaoshan gunshi: 20 shiji Zhongguo geming de lianxu yu dijing” [The rolling stone of high mountains: The continuity and progression of the twentieth-century Chinese revolution], *Huazhong shifan daxue xuebao*, no. 5 (2013): 96–106; Wang Qisheng, “Zhongguo geming de lianxuxing yu Zhongguo dangcaishi de ‘gemingshi’ yiyi” [The continuity of the Chinese revolution and the meaning of “revolutionary history” in contemporary Chinese history], *Shehui kexue*, no. 11 (2015): 151–53; Ying Xing, “Ba geming dai huilai: Shehuixue xin shiye de tuozhan” [“Bring back the revolution”: The expansion of a new vision of sociology], *Shehui*, no. 4 (2016): 1–39. Wang Qisheng, Ying Xing, Huang Daoxuan, Sun Jiang, and Li Lifeng have produced a large amount of empirical research. In his article “‘New Revolutionary History’: Origin, Concept and Practice,” Li Jinzheng lists five monographs and nineteen essays as representative works on “new revolutionary history” in recent years. In addition, several essays included in the special issue of *Xin shixue* [New historiography], vol. 7, “20 shiji Zhongguo geming de zai chanshi” [Reinterpretation of the twentieth-century Chinese revolution], ed. Wang Qisheng (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), are also important works along this path.

¹⁰ In addition to the trend of “new revolutionary history,” there are many scholars who have turned their attention back to “revolution” in recent years. For example, Chen Jianhua, “Gemingshi de xiandai xing—Zhongguo geming huayu kaolun [The modernity of “revolution”—an examination of the Chinese revolutionary discourse] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe,

New revolutionary history is representative of scholarly efforts to further break through the shackles of traditional concepts in political history and return to their academic roots. Corresponding to this trend, and partly intersecting with it, is the deepening of research on the histories of the Chinese Communist Party, the Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalist Party), the PRC, and the Cold War. Here, the works of Yang Kuisong, Wang Qisheng, Shen Zhihua, and others have significantly updated traditional perceptions.¹¹ In the first decade or so of this century, the study of the PRC history has made rapid progress. In addition to corrections and clarifications of historical facts, PRC history has also departed from the previous practice of historians of the modern period to regard 1949 as the earliest year for research. This expansion of modern history has facilitated the adoption of a more holistic and continuous vision of some basic threads of modern history—threads that are still in progress today. Taking new revolutionary history as an example, the rise of PRC history has led to a growing awareness that “revolution” had dominated the direction of Chinese society for a long time after 1949 and that its appeal remains undiminished even today. These perceptions also help us to reassess the meaning of “revolution”

2000); Luo Zhitian, “Geming de xingcheng: Qingji shinian de zhuanzhe” [The formation of revolution: Transition of the last decade of the Qing], *Jindai lishi yanjiu*, no. 3 (2012): 4–27, 160; no. 6 (2012): 11–26; no. 6 (2013): 42–61. In the fields of modern Chinese literary history and art history, research on “revolutionary literature” and related topics have also been growing rapidly in recent years, which is a noteworthy phenomenon.

¹¹ Yang Kuisong, *Mao Zedong yu Mosike de en'en Yuanyuan* [Mao Zedong and Moscow's grudges] (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2008); Yang Kuisong, *Xi'an shibian xintan—Zhang Xueliang yu Zhonggong guanxi zhi yanjiu* [A new inquiry into the Xi'an incident—a study of Zhang Xueliang's relationship with the Chinese Communist Party] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2006); Yang Kuisong, “Zhongjian didai”de geming—guoji dabeijing xia kan Zhonggong Chenggong zhidao [Revolution in “intermediate zones”—CCP's path to success in the international context] (Taiyuan: Shanxi remin chubanshe, 2010); Wang Qisheng, *Dangyuan, dangquan yu dangzheng: 1924–1949 nian Zhongguo Guomindang de zuzhi xingtai* [Party members, party power, and party contention: The organizational form of the Chinese Kuomintang: 1924–1949] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2003); Wang Qisheng, *Geming yu fangeming: Shehui wenhua shiye xia de Minguo zhengzhi* [Revolution and counterrevolution: Politics of Republican China from a sociocultural perspective] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2010); Shen Zhihua, *Mao Zedong, Sidalin yu Chaoxian zhanzheng* [Mao Zedong, Stalin, and the Korean War] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2003); Shen Zhihua, *Chuzai shizi lukou de xuanze: 1956–1957 nian de Zhongguo* [Choice at the crossroads: China in 1956–1957] (Guangzhou: Guangdong remin chubanshe, 2013). In addition, Han Gang, Wang Haiguang, and others have made many contributions to the study of the history of the People's Republic of China.

from a more flexible point of view so as to appreciate “the continuity and multiple interpretations of the twentieth-century Chinese revolution.”¹²

Neither new revolutionary history nor new achievements in the study of Communist Party and PRC history can be seen as a return to the traditional revolutionary history paradigm. Rather, they are a manifestation of breaking out of the two competing paradigms of revolutionary history and modernization in modern historiography. In fact, some scholars have pointed out that both paradigms may distort what history looks like. While revolutionary history reduces modern Chinese history to a history of class struggle against imperialism and feudalism, the modernization paradigm reduces it to a history of opposition between tradition and modernity. Hu Cheng emphasizes that neither of them actually escapes the “simplistic dichotomies of civilized/ignorant, dirty/clean, advanced/backward, open/conservative,” which were deliberately set by the colonial rulers among the colonized, and thus inevitably “distort and obscure” the actual course of history.¹³

Breaking out of the paradigm debate means that scholars gained a new understanding of the nature of historical research. Its influence was not limited to modern history but has impacted the entire study of history. In this regard, Luo Zhitian is to be credited.¹⁴ His work broke through the dichotomous narrative pattern of the “new” vs. “old” and has been half-jokingly summarized as “the new is not new, the old is not old; there is new in the old, and there is old in the new.” Although not particularly rigorous, the characterization is not

¹² Zhang Jishun, “Xin gemingshi yu 1950 niandai Shanghai yanjiu de xin xushi” [New revolutionary history and the new narrative of Shanghai in the 1950s], *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao (Zhaxue shehui kexue ban)*, no. 2 (2015): 14–20, 167.

¹³ Hu Cheng, “Quanqiuhua yujing yu jindai Zhongguo ban zhimindi wenti de lishi xushu” [Historical narratives of the discourse of globalization and the semi-colonial problem in modern China], *Zhongguo xueshu*, no. 1 (2003): 161–62.

¹⁴ Luo Zhitian, *Quanshi zhuan: Jinda Zhongguo de sixiang, shehui yu xueshu* [Shift of power: Ideology, society, and scholarship in modern China] (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1999); Luo Zhitian, *Luanshi qianliu: Minzu zhuyi yu Minguo zhengzhi* [Undercurrents in turbulent times: Nationalism and Republican politics] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001); Luo Zhitian, “‘Tianchao’ zenyang kaishi ‘beingkui’—yapian zhanzheng de xiandai quanshi” [How the “heavenly dynasty” began to “crumble”—the modern interpretation of the Opium War], *Jindaishi yanjiu*, no. 3 (1999): 9–24; Luo Zhitian, *Zaizao wenming de changshi: Hu Shi zhuan (1891–1929)* [The attempt to recreate civilization: A biography of Hu Shi (1891–1929)] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006); Luo Zhitian, *Jindai Zhongguo shixue shulun* [Modern Chinese historiographical discourse] (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015).

without some accuracy. The breakthrough on the issue of old and new is only one part of his overarching view of history. In fact, we can detect his fundamental stance toward historical research through a set of key words that he often uses, including (but not limited to): *relative*, *pluralistic*, *nonlinear*, *ambiguous*, *multifarious*, among others. In this way, he advocates an approach that is fuller, more three-dimensional and dynamic, as well as in closer proximity to the complexity of history itself. He opposes the construction of a rigidly drawn, well-organized “system” of discourse and warns scholars to beware of hindsight in historical research (a tendency he calls “rewinding the film”). He advocates a method of scholarship that “returns to one’s former heart and mind, uses one’s experience to derive meaning, discusses the world in order to know people, and read texts from all sides and angles.”¹⁵ Even more, he urges others to arrive at research innovation by taking a path that revisits the past (i.e., Chinese cultural tradition). Through abundant empirical research and numerous articles, Luo’s views have had a significant impact on the entire discipline of Chinese historiography and have effectively improved the status of the field of modern Chinese history.

In this century, new cultural history had already become a thing of the past in Western historiography, but to the younger generation of Chinese historians, it still seems like something fresh and full of potential. Inspired by this trend, a number of new topics that had gone unnoticed by previous scholars have come into view: political and cultural history, history of medicine and disease, history of publishing and reading, history of popular culture, urban history, history of the mind, psychohistory, historical anthropology, history of representation, history of consumer culture, history of the body, history of women and gender, history of children, historical memory and collective memory, social history of language, conceptual history, oral history, image history, microhistory, regional history, global history, and more. There is no shortage of interest in terms such as *discourse*, *construction*, *imagination*, *invention*, *narrative*, and they have become widely used in scholarly works. These topical and terminological changes represent the popularity of new historiographical concepts and remind scholars to begin examining history with fresh eyes.¹⁶

¹⁵ Luo Zhitian, *Jindai Zhongguo shixue shulun* [Modern Chinese historiographical discourse] (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015), 269.

¹⁶ Zhang Zhongmin, “Xinshiji yilai Zhongguo dalu de xin wenhuashi yanjiu” [Studies of new cultural history in Mainland China since the new century], *Lishi jiaoyu wenti*, no. 1 (2013): 56–59; Fudan University Department of History and Center for Comparative Studies of Modernization, eds., *Xin wenhuashi yu Zhongguo jindaishi yanjiu* [New cultural history and

Other designations that have different names from “new cultural history” but share the same agenda are “new social history” and “new historiography.” New social history was proposed by Yang Nianqun in 2001. In 2004, 2005, and 2006, the journal *Xin shehuishi* [New social history] edited by Sun Jiang, Wang Di, and Yang Nianqun, published three special issues titled “Event–Memory–Narrative,” “Time–Space–Writing,” and “Body–Mind–Power,” respectively. According to Yang Nianqun, new social history is a “midlevel theoretical construct that fits the local discursive context” and seeks “the possibility of interpreting grassroots society and culture in more microscopic units, beyond the monolithic structure of traditional economic history.”¹⁷ The journal soon changed its name to the more wide-ranging *Xin shixue* [New historiography], publishing special issues such as “Sense–Image–Narrative,” “Concept–Text–Method,” “Cultural History Research Restarts,” “The Reproduction of Modern Knowledge,” “The New Frontier of Qing History Studies,” “The Ecological Interpretation of History,” “The Reinterpretation of the Twentieth-Century Chinese Revolution,” “History and Memory,” “New Explorations in Medical History,” “Debating Confucianism: Religious Identity in Modern China,” and “Travel Writing in Modern China.” The majority of articles in this series are in the field of modern history.

In fact, as early as 2002, Yang Nianqun, Huang Xingtao, Mao Dan, and others convened a symposium of multidisciplinary scholars under the theme “What Kind of New Historiography Is Needed in China: Commemorating the Hundredth Anniversary of the Publication of Liang Qichao’s *New Historiography*.”¹⁸ The following year, a collection of the symposium papers edited by the three of them was published by Renmin University of China Press, titled *New Historiography: A Picture of Multidisciplinary Dialogue*. However, the symposium was less about Liang Qichao’s *New Historiography* and more about opening up new spaces for Chinese historiography. The

the study of modern Chinese history] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009).

¹⁷ Yang Nianqun, “Daolun: Dongxifang sixiang jiaohui xia de Zhongguo shehuishi yanjiu—yige ‘wentishi’ de zhuisu” [Introduction: Chinese social history at the crossroads of Eastern and Western thought—tracing a “problem history”], in *Kongjian, jiyi, shehui zhuanxing—“xin shehuishi” yanjiu lunwen jingxuanji* [Space, memory, social transformation—selected papers on “new social history”], ed. Yang Nianqun (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2001), 55–56.

¹⁸ Modern historiography is conventionally understood to have been born in China when Liang Qichao published his six-part manifesto “New Historiography” in 1902. See Liang Qichao, “Xin shixue,” in *Liang Qichao quanji* [Complete works of Liang Qichao], Vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2018), 2:497–523.

multidisciplinary dialogue approach adopted at the symposium was an important force in the development of Chinese historiography in the last thirty years. On the one hand, historians took the initiative to embrace theories, knowledge, and methods from sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, political science, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, and other disciplines. On the other hand, a group of scholars from literary studies, art history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, economics, and other disciplines have crossed over into the field of history. The merging of these two forces has greatly refreshed the face of Chinese historiography.

Yang Nianqun has also compiled a new historiography repository (published by Beijing Normal University Press), which advocates focusing on new research materials, adopting new perspectives, introducing new methods, and using new narrative strategies. As of May 2020, the repository had released ninety-two titles. In addition, a series edited by Chen Heng has also adopted the title *New Historiography* (published by Da Xiang Press). If we also take into account the journal *New Historiography* that started publishing in Taiwan in 1990, it is clear that the term “new historiography” holds powerful appeal for Chinese historians, including researchers of modern history. This is both an outcome of the internationalization of Chinese historiography and a symptom of the growing diversity of local Chinese thought. Although some people continue to argue that China’s modernization is not yet complete and it is far from postmodern, the practice of new historiography shows that the challenge of postmodernism remains a topic that many Chinese historians cannot avoid. Most of them still largely adhere to some basic beliefs in modern historiography, while actively invoking the achievements and conceptual orientations of postmodern historiography to enrich and deepen their knowledge of history. In this respect, their choices are no different from those of historians in other countries.

One of the unanticipated consequences of new cultural history has been a debate on the fragmentation of historical research in the field of modern history. In 2012, the editorial board of *Jindaishi yanjiu* [Modern history studies] invited several active scholars to express their opinions in the form of written discussions on the topic of “Fragmentation in the Study of Modern Chinese History.” Zheng Shiqu, Luo Zhitian, Wang Di, Li Jinzheng, and others argued that there is no danger of fragmentation in the study of modern history, or, if there is, it has not yet occurred. Zheng Shiqu suggested that what many people call the “crisis of fragmentation” is actually preparation for the pursuit of “new

synthesis” in modern historical research. Luo Zhitian even put forward the slogan of “no common understanding without fragmentation,” advocating the establishment of a “historiography built on fragments.” On the other hand, some participants claimed that the field of modern history had indeed become too obsessed with “small and micro issues” and lacked “big concerns,” “big connections,” and “big theories.” However, even those who were critical of fragmentation did not completely reject this century’s explorations of new historiography in China. Many of them rather hoped to build on the achievements of the new historiography to effectively synthesize and enhance them and to answer the “big questions” of modern history in greater depth. Therefore, Zhang Kaiyuan reminded scholars to reject fragmentation but also to pay attention to the “research of details.” Xing Long emphasized that “a distinctive awareness of the issues,” attaching importance to “long periods of time,” and the “interdisciplinary intersection of historiography” are all necessary components of the “return to ‘general history.’”¹⁹ Obviously, the distrust in “fragmentation” does not mean a return to the situation before the new historiography.

Similar to this debate, a recent issue in the field of modern history is the question of what place political history should occupy in historical research. The study of modern Chinese history began with political history, and politics has long dominated the attention of researchers. Even in the case of intellectual history and cultural history, research unfolds with politics as a point of departure and emphasis. However, since the 1990s, studies of intellectual, cultural, academic, and social histories have emerged, attracting the attention of large groups of young scholars. The popularity of the new cultural history has intensified this trend. In the first decade or so of this century, this new historical research had become more vivid, while major topics in the more traditional

¹⁹ Zheng Shiqu, “Jindaishi yanjiu zhong suowei ‘suipianhua’ wenti zhi wojian” [My view on the so-called problem of “fragmentation” in modern historical research], Luo Zhitian, “Feisui wuyi litong: Jianlun yi suipian wei jichu de shixue” [No common understanding without fragmentation: A brief discussion of fragment-based historiography], Wang Di, “Bubi danyou ‘suipianhua’” [No need to worry about “fragmentation”], Zhang Kaiyuan, “Zhongshi xijie, jujue ‘suipianhua’” [Pay attention to details, reject “fragmentation”], Xing Long, “Kefu ‘suipianhua,’ huigui zongtishi” [Overcoming “fragmentation” and returning to general history], all in *Jindaishi yanjiu*, no. 4 (2012): 5–10, 10–18, 30–33, 4–5, 18–22; Li Jinzheng, “Zhengti shi: Lishi yuanjiu de ‘sanweiyiti’” [History as a whole: The “trinity” of historical research], Li Changli, “‘Suipianhua’: Xinxing shixue yu fangfalun kunjing” [“Fragmentation”: Emerging historiography and methodological dilemmas], both in *Jindaishi yanjiu*, no. 5 (2012): 14–28, 20–24.

fields of political history and diplomatic history had become less noticeable. But in the last decade, with the introduction of new revolutionary history, political history has recaptured the attention of the academic community. In 2013 Yang Tianhong wrote that politics is “a ‘platform’ for integrating other historical factors,” and therefore, in the extreme, it might be said that “the entire history of Republican China is political history.”²⁰ However, similar to the criticism of fragmentation, he also emphasized that what he advocates is a “new” political history that incorporates the findings of the new historiography.

In the last three decades, one characteristic of the field of modern Chinese history that cannot be ignored is the participation of international (mainly Western) perspectives. In the 1990s a large number of Western works, represented by *The Cambridge History of China: Late Qing 1800–1911*,²¹ attracted the attention of many readers with fresh ideas and perspectives. Many publishing entities actively joined the effort to introduce the best of Western Sinology, and many books were continuously reprinted (e.g., Overseas Chinese Studies Series, published by Jiangsu People’s Publishing House). Among the readers of these books are both professional researchers and nonacademic history enthusiasts. Among the authors of the imported works are both Western scholars (e.g., Paul Cohen, Joseph Esherick, Frederic Wakeman) and Chinese scholars working abroad (e.g., Yu Ying-shih, Yu-sheng Lin, Hao Chang), who provided many historical facts and perspectives, which was delightfully refreshing. In concert with the popularity of Sinological works, a number of scholars with overseas academic experience returned to China or, if still living overseas, remained actively involved in academic circles within China, serving as a bridge between Chinese and foreign academia. Through these channels, Chinese historians have been exposed to and actively drawn on important overseas research in an effort to push modern historical research into a new era—the aforementioned new cultural history and other trends are results of that effort.

The influence of East Asia (especially Japan) on modern Chinese history has grown steadily in the past thirty years as well. In fact, most Chinese (including scholars) are not very cognizant of “Asia” or “East Asia” compared to their

²⁰ Yang Tianhong, “Zhengzhishi zai Minguoshi yanjiu zhong de diwei” [The place of political history in the study Republican history], *Nanjing daxue xuebao (zhhexue, renwen kexue, shehuixue ban)*, no. 1 (2013): 113–19, 160.

²¹ John K. Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 11, *Late Qing 1800–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

Japanese or Korean counterparts. On the one hand, this is a reflection of the long-standing binary civilizational map of “China and the West” in the Chinese mind, and, on the other hand, it is also inextricably linked to the many historical feuds and entanglements among the three East Asian countries since the nineteenth century. However, in this century, many Chinese scholars began to actively think about the concept of East Asia, which gradually became an important category in Chinese historical studies. At the same time, the governments and citizenry of various East Asian countries have come to realize that to move into a new type of regional relationship, they must also objectively contemplate the history they share. Therefore, the adoption of an attitude that facilitates mutual understanding and dialogue among countries, without burying historical truths but allowing for a deeper reflection on the past, has become an important task for historians in each country. In this context, since 2002, more than forty scholars from China, Japan, and Korea have been working together on a history textbook for highschoolers, *Modern History of Three East Asian Countries* [*Dongya sanguo de jinxiandai shi*], which was finally published in all three countries in 2005.

Interestingly, it was the introduction of the Western perspective that prompted more Chinese to feel the need for cultural self-awareness. The 1989 publication of a Chinese translation of American historian Paul Cohen’s 1984 book *Discovering History in China* can be considered a landmark event. All of a sudden, “discovering history in China” became a catchphrase that everyone knew and has remained a strong current of thought to this day. This slogan inspired Chinese scholars to adopt an “insider’s” point of view, to observe the transformation of modern China from the perspective of historical continuity, and to see where the vitality of Chinese cultural traditions lies—an approach that coincides with a proposition that Qian Mu, one of the most important historians of modern China, put forward in his *General History of China* that the study and management of national history must be “temperate and respectful.”²² However, there is also a danger that this intellectual current will deliberately downplay the impact of Western influence on modern China, as well as isolate and essentialize China. However, what I would like to point out here is that the

²² Qian Mu, *Guoshi dagang* [A general history of China] (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2013); Luo Zhitian, “Faxian zai Zhongguo de lishi—guanyu Zhongguo jindaishi yanjiu de yidian fansi” [History found in China—some reflections on the study of modern Chinese history], *Beijing daxue xuebao*, no. 1 (2004): 107–12; Wang Dongjie, “Cong neibu kan lishi he huidao Liewensen” [History from the inside and returning to Levinson], *Dushu*, no. 2 (2020): 24–32.

popularity of the slogan “discovering history in China” cannot simply be seen as the result of Chinese scholars’ dogged pursuit of Westernization. It also profoundly reflects the deep desire of twenty-first-century Chinese to try to observe and interpret their own history from their own cultural standpoint. In the last decade or so, this aspiration has become a clearer consciousness that has firmly guided practical directions in all areas of Chinese social science—although what exactly constitutes the so-called Chinese cultural consciousness is still a matter of opinion, and Chinese scholars’ insider perspective still has a long way to go.

The renewal of insight, theory, and methodology has been the main driving force behind the rapid development of modern Chinese history in the last thirty years. However, the gathering, sorting, and publication of large collections of historical materials have never stopped. In recent years, this type of work has been particularly favored in the bid for major projects by the National Social Science Fund of China. In fact, the expansion of the modern history field along with shift of research focus and the discovery and sorting of relevant historical materials are two interrelated aspects of the same process: the growth of historical materials is born out of the need for research and provides the basis and impetus for more in-depth research. Over the years, there has been an obvious correlation between the widespread use of archives (especially grassroots archives from the Qing, Republican, and PRC periods), local documents, and oral histories, and the rapid progress in the previously mentioned studies of new revolutionary history, the history of the PRC and the Cold War, local and regional histories, and social history.

The breakthroughs in specialization of modern historical studies have also laid the foundation for its active participation in the public life of Chinese society. The Chinese cultural tradition was already keen to use historical knowledge to solve real-world problems. Since 1949, historical research has played a key role in political and social life. After the era of reform and opening up, the nature of this role has shifted, and the ideological overtones have been significantly diluted. Yet, the public’s interest in history, especially modern Chinese history, has increased rather than decreased. The development of mass media such as newspapers, radio, television, documentaries, the internet, and so on has also provided a broad channel for the dissemination of various historical information. During this period, a group of writers engaged in writing historical nonfiction emerged to meet the needs of many readers. For example, the recent much-publicized exploits of the Chinese Expeditionary Force during

the Second Sino-Japanese War are the result of their efforts.²³ These writers and media personnel paid close attention to academic trends—the disclosure of new historical materials, the emergence of new perspectives, and the development of new research directions—and quickly took to the public media. In addition, as the economy took off, there was a huge boom in the collection of cultural artifacts, and folk museums sprang up like bamboo shoots. Among them, the Jianchuan Museum Group in the town of Anren in Dayi County, Sichuan Province, is particularly famous for its collection of modern historical materials and artifacts, which has roused a great deal of attention from all walks of life. Strong social interest in modern history is driven both by intellectual curiosity and by various practical interests. In the latter case, history has become an instrument to be used intentionally or not by various parties involved in public controversies. For example, in the last two decades, the subject of the history of Republican China has become a hot topic, with terms such as “Republican style” becoming popular, representing an extremely complex social mentality. However, the veracity of historical information behind this popular history is mixed at best, and there is the danger of piling errors on top of errors. This suggests that researchers of modern history need to take a more active stance, break through the narrow confines of the academy, and participate in public debates. As Eric Hobsbawm once suggested, one of the most urgent tasks facing scholars is to break down all kinds of myths constructed by different forces and to tell the truth about history.

Translated from the Chinese

²³ Phoenix T. V., *Zhongguo yuanzhengjun: Xuezhàn diàn miàn shìlù* [Chinese expeditionary force: A bloody battle in Yunnan-Burma] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubān gōngsī, 2005); Sun Kegāng et al., *Zhongguo yuanzhengjun zài miànbei* [Chinese expeditionary force in Northern Burma] (Kunming: Yunnan rénmin chubānshe, 2008); Fang Zhìjūn, *Zhongguo yuanzhengjun* [China’s expeditionary army] (Nanchang: Jiāngxī jiāoyù chubānshe, 2009); Zhāng Dōngpān, *Fùqīn de zhānchāng: Zhongguo yuanzhengjun diānxi kāngzhàn tiānyè diāocha bǐjì* [Father’s battlefield: Notes on the field investigation of the Chinese expeditionary force’s Anti-Japanese War in Western Yunnan] (Taiyuan: Shanxi rénmin chubānshe, 2009); Yunnan Weishi, *“Jīngdiān rēnwēn dìlì”: Zhongguo yuanzhengjun* [China’s expeditionary force] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubān gōngsī, 2012); Sun Xiāoqīng, *Tēngchōng! Tēngchōng! Zhongguo yuanzhengjun shēngsǐzhàn* [Tēngchōng! Tēngchōng! The life-or-death battle of the Chinese expeditionary force] (Guāngzhōu: Guāngdōng rénmin chubānshe, 2016); Sun Chūnlóng, *Měiyóu huìjiā de shìbīng* [The soldier who didn’t go home] (Chéngdū: Sìchuān rénmin chubānshe, 2017).

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