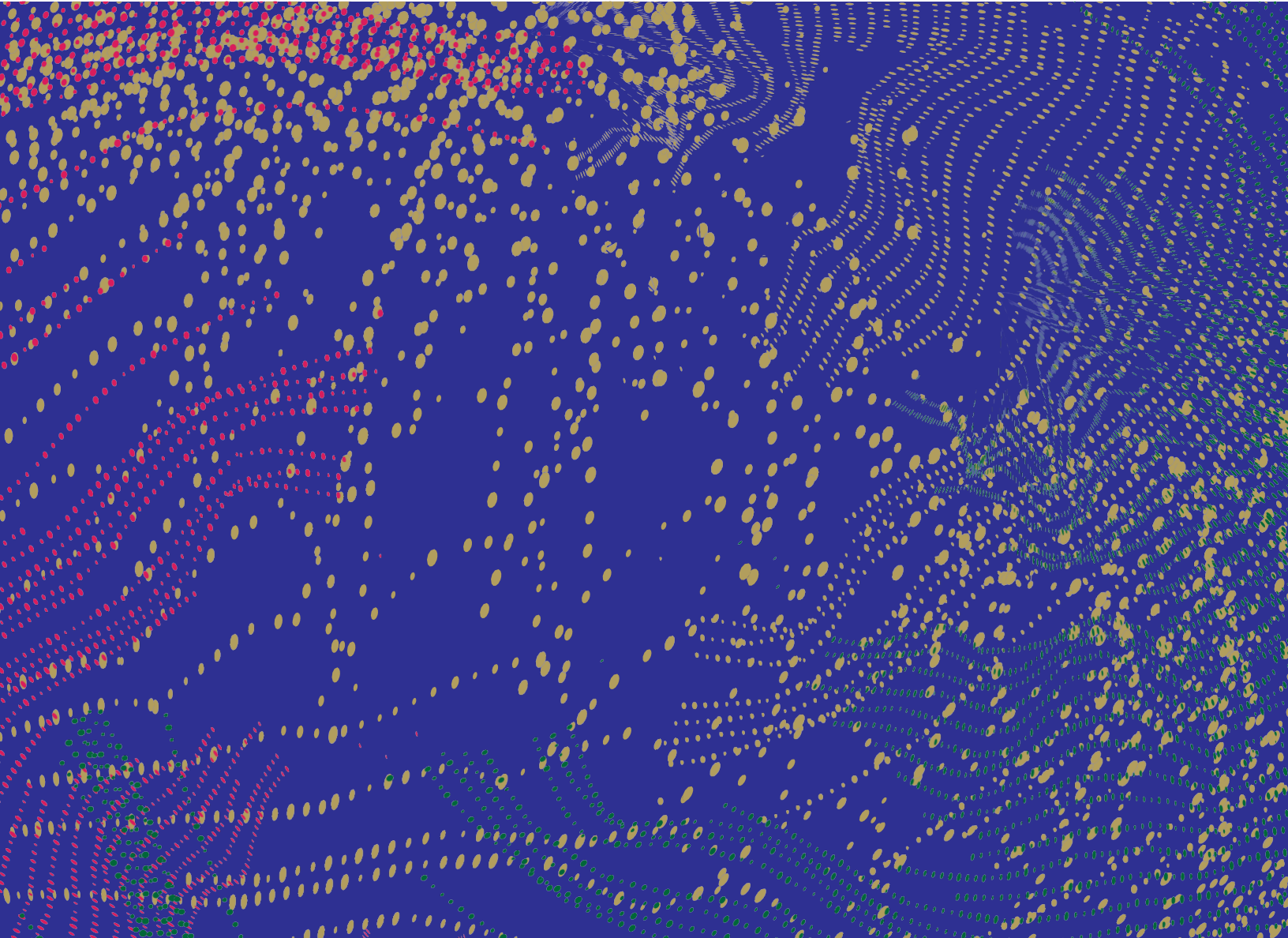


The World Humanities Report

# The National Learning Revival in China

Shen Weirong



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# The National Learning Revival in China

Shen Weirong Tsinghua University

Since the 1990s, Chinese society has witnessed a national learning revival, which intensified further after the turn of this century and remains powerful to this day. As many as forty to fifty higher educational institutions in China have set up *gouxue* institutes and other forms of national learning centers for research, training, and dissemination. National learning classes have emerged under a variety of names throughout the country, even in primary and secondary schools. Many private teaching and training academies have emerged as well, offering courses that range from Confucian classics for primary school students to national learning training programs customized for successful entrepreneurs. Accordingly, “masters” of national learning of all stripes, emerging less from the academy than from the media sphere, have garnered great influence.

Despite its successes, national learning faces many challenges. The first problem is that no one has been able to offer a clear and authoritative definition of *guoxue* that can be widely accepted. As a result, people are still unable to say exactly what national learning is and what kind of knowledge it encompasses. Secondly, although artificially and rigidly installed in many higher education institutions, national learning as a discipline lacks a clear and self-contained object of research, theory, and methodology. Thus, it remains homeless within the modern humanities system and structure of higher education and survives only by being attached to or subordinated to mainstream humanities disciplines such as literature, history, and philosophy. Finally, because the rise of national learning was encouraged, supported, and promoted by social, cultural, and ideological trends outside of academia, and thus was not a product of rational, humanistic development and progress, it faces a difficult path forward as a scholarly pursuit. Without meeting these challenges, as time passes and broad social enthusiasm begins to cool down and fade, the strong momentum behind national learning will fade within the higher education system, and it will decline into oblivion.

## The Roots of National Learning

As national learning was becoming fashionable in the early twenty-first century, Li Ling of Peking University spoke against it, remarking: “Although national learning is deliberately distinguished from Western learning, it is essentially ‘a study of the nation in peril’ [*guojiang buguo zhi xue*]. It tries to overcome Western learning, but the more it tries to compete, the less convincing it becomes. . . . People are looking for its essence, but there hardly is any. In fact, it is knowledge that is neither Chinese nor Western, neither new nor old. The so-called masters are also very simple; they are all people who gut everything, start over from nothing, and create a variety of new scholarship.”<sup>1</sup> Li’s criticism has in mind the “national learning fever” that emerged in modern China a hundred years ago, during the time of scholars like Hu Shi (1891–1962), Wang Guowei (1877–1927), Chen Yinkoh (1890–1969), and others. He uses that past to ridicule contemporary *gouxue*.

Around the time of the May Fourth movement, people with radical anti-traditionalist sentiments fiercely criticized Chinese traditions. They wanted to overthrow Confucianism and enthusiastically embraced “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science” in order to save what they saw as a decaying and declining China. However, a group of intellectuals soon began to reassess this critique, made amid “a nation in peril,” and many of them immediately turned back to China’s traditions, triggering the first *gouxue* fever in the 1920s. At that time, Peking University and Tsinghua University were the first to establish national learning departments and institutes, and universities across the country such as Southeast University, Xiamen University, and Wuxi National College followed suit.

In the summer of 1925, Cao Yunxiang (1881–1937), then president of Tsinghua University, spoke at the opening ceremony of the Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning. He said: “The so-called new education in China nowadays is mostly copied from Europe and America. If we want to be self-

<sup>1</sup> Li Ling made these remarks in a lecture at the Institute of Qing History at Renmin University of China on April 18, 2007, which was published in the journal *Hong Kong Fax*, no. 50 (2007), and later included in Li Ling’s essay collection, *Fanghu guishan* [Releasing the tiger back to the mountains], rev. ed. (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2008), 219–38, under the title “Chuantong weishenme zheyang hong—ershinian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang” [Why tradition is so hot—strange phenomena witnessed in the past twenty years]. See also Li Ling, “Tong yige Zhongguo butong de mengxiang—wo dui Faguo hanxue, Meiguo Zhongguoxue he suowei guoxue de diandi yinxiang” [Same China different dreams—some of my impressions of French Sinology, American Chinese studies, and the so-called national learning], *Shiyue*, no. 3 (2015): 144–48.

reliant, we must study the spirit of Chinese culture with great care. Therefore, our university has organized a research academy to study the lofty classics and philosophy. This study can make use of the scientific method, with reference to Chinese evidentiary scholarship, in the hope that the soul of China can be found in the Academy.”<sup>2</sup> From Cao’s words, we can see that the purpose of advocating for national learning at that time was to “find the soul of China,” that is, to rebuild the cultural spirit and the soul of the nation through the revival of traditional Chinese culture and scholarship. Obviously, this was not a scholarly aspiration, but a national, social, and cultural aspiration. However, the 1920s was the period of the formation of modern Chinese humanities. The traditional Chinese humanities, which had revolved around the classics, histories, philosophy, and literary texts, went through a thorough transformation modeled on the Western humanities, so as to set them on the path of rational and scientific modernism. Therefore, the instructional and research institutions of national learning that appeared in universities at that time had no choice but to reform the old ways and apply methods of modern Western humanities to the study of traditional Chinese culture, thus running counter to the very idea of national learning. Throughout the Republican era, national learning failed to become mainstream to humanities scholarship.

In 1923 Hu Shi explained in great detail his own perception of *guoxue* in the inaugural issue of the *Guoxue jikan* [National learning quarterly]:

In our mind’s eye, *guoxue* is just an abbreviation of *guogu xue* [study of the national past]. All of China’s past cultural history is our *guogu*, and the study of all this past cultural history is *guogu xue*, or *guoxue* for short. . . . The mission of national learning is to make everyone understand the past cultural history of China; the method of national learning is to organize all past cultures with a historical perspective. The purpose of national learning is to make a history of Chinese culture, of which systematic national learning must take as guiding principle. All research on national learning, regardless of ancient or modern, and regardless of the size of the problem, must go in this general direction. Only this objective can unify all materials; only this task can accommodate all efforts; only this vision can break down all gateways and boundaries. Our ideal national learning would have at least one such system: Chinese cultural history: (1) ethnic history, (2) linguistic and textual history, (3) economic history, (4) political history, (5) international transportation history, (6) intellectual

<sup>2</sup> Cai Degui, *Tsinghua zhi fu Cao Yunxiang wenxian pian* [Cao Yunxiang, father of Tsinghua, literature volume] (Xi’an: Shaanxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 67.

history, (7) religious history, (8) literary and artistic history, (9) folk history, and (10) institutional history.<sup>3</sup>

The national learning Hu Shi here advocates is closer to modern Chinese humanities scholarship focused on historical studies and far from traditional Chinese scholarship with the classics, history, philosophy, and literature as the mainstays. The Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning and the Peking University National Learning Department were both engaged in what Li Ling called “neither Chinese nor Western, neither new nor old [neither premodern nor modern].” At the Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning, Wang Guowei, Chen Yinkoh, Liang Qichao (1873–1929), and Zhao Yuanren (1892–1982) were the pioneers of the Chinese new learning.

The humanities of the Republican era may be best represented by the Institute of History and Philology of the Academia Sinica, founded by Fu Sinian (1896–1950), which was the best national learning institute in China at that time. When Fu Sinian proclaimed, “We want the orthodoxy of scientific orientalism in China,”<sup>4</sup> he meant to transform the traditional Chinese study of the classics and *xiaoxue* with Western philology. This would establish the Chinese people’s own “national learning” by absorbing the research methods and achievements of Western “Sinology” and *luxue* [studies of northern barbarians] and thus moving the center of Sinological studies from Paris back to China. Fu’s design for China’s “national learning” (Sinology + *luxue*) is essentially a set of scholarly projects of national philology, using the Western methods of Sinology and *luxue* to transform Chinese scholarly traditions and to modernize Chinese humanities scholarship.

Although the ethnolinguistics project, representative of the academic practices of the Institute of History and Philology of the Academia Sinica, arose in relation to the rescue and reconstruction of national learning, it ended up nearly undoing it. Chen Yinkoh, whom Fu Sinian held in high esteem, wanted to rectify the “neither Chinese nor Western, neither premodern nor modern” conundrum, but his disdain for the scholarship of the most popular “master” of national learning in the Republican era, Zhang Taiyan, reflects the entirely

<sup>3</sup> Hu Shi, “*Guoxue jikan fakan xuanyan*” [Declaration on the launch of the *National Learning Quarterly*], *Guoxue jikan* 1, no. 1 (1923): 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> The Preparatory Office of the Institute of History and Language of Academia Sinica, “The Interest of the Work of the Institute of History and Language” [in Chinese], *The Collected Works of the Institute of History and Language of the National Academia Sinica* 1, no. 1 (1928): 10.

opposite fates of ethnolinguistics and traditional national learning during that period. In fact, even the national learning advocated and passed on by Zhang Taiyan was no longer the traditional study of the textual canon. As early as 1906, when he was in Japan editing the *Minbao* [People's news], the official organ of the anti-Qing revolutionary alliance Tongmenghui, he published an advertisement for the National Learning Revival Society, stating that the contents of the lectures and teaching materials of national learning would be: "(1) scholarship of the philosophers, (2) literature and history, (3) institutional studies, (4) internal canon (i.e., Buddhist canon) studies, (5) Song and Ming theory, (6) Chinese history."<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that Zhang Taiyan's work on national learning had also been deeply influenced by the modern Western approach to humanistic scholarship.

### The Needs of the Times

The sudden and unusual enthusiasm of the Chinese people for national learning at the turn of the twenty-first century has a few explanations. First, it was a reaction both to the reckless disdain for and destruction of national cultural traditions in Chinese society over the past hundred years and to the excessive esteem for Western thought and culture. In the 1980s, premodern Chinese traditional culture was almost synonymous with backwardness and ignorance. It was held responsible both for the presumed "backwardness" of China and for the unprecedented disasters and agony suffered by the Chinese people over the course of the twentieth century. This radical anti-traditionalist trend gave rise to a new fever for national learning as a return to traditional culture. In the 1990s, as China's economy took off, and its national strength increased and international status surged, people quickly switched from criticism of traditional Chinese culture to an enthusiastic embrace and celebration of it, eagerly hoping to recover lost cultural confidence, national self-esteem, and spiritual comfort. As a result, traditional Chinese culture, which had long been abandoned, became overnight the "root" and "soul" of the Chinese nation, the very foundation of the Chinese nation and people.

The reconstruction and revival of Chinese traditional culture are a double salvation for the Chinese people in the twenty-first century. In the wake of the criticism of tradition in the twentieth century and the destruction of traditional

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Taiyan, "Guoxue zhenqishe guanggao" [Advertisement for the National Learning Revival Society], *Minbao*, (October 18, 1906).

culture by modernization and globalization in recent decades, China's traditional culture is at a critical juncture. If we do not protect our tradition with great effort, it may disappear. Our cultural self-confidence, spiritual consciousness, and national identity could become just a shadow in the water. At the same time, with the rapid development of the market economy in the past thirty years and greatly improved living standards, Chinese society has quickly leaped from a premodern agrarian society to a highly industrialized and market-oriented postmodern society. As people's lifestyles, values, and spiritual pursuits undergo drastic change, many people are losing their spiritual support. They feel a sense of unfamiliarity and alienation from traditional culture, and "cultural poverty" and "spiritual emptiness" have become common problems. In order to save the spirit and soul of the nation, people have looked to national learning to revive traditional culture and, on that basis, to help the Chinese people cultivate a traditional humanistic spirit, to nurture one's own virtue, and to seek spiritual peace and freedom in this noisy era.

In short, the national learning movement today is a response to the needs of the times: a very natural social demand arising from the rapid social, cultural, and spiritual changes of contemporary China. Therefore, national learning in the new century is first and foremost a social movement, not a scholarly or educational advancement. As stated in *Guangming ribao—guoxue ban* [Guangming daily—national learning edition]: "National learning is essentially the bearer of the spirit of the Chinese nation, the spiritual phenomenology of the Chinese nation, our spiritual home, our spiritual homeland, our place of belonging."<sup>6</sup> Such lofty aspirations extend far beyond the reach of scholarly research, but this expectation and need from the people must be supported. It must find expression through scholarship, which can then deepen and shape it into institutionalized research and pedagogy. Otherwise, it will remain only a superficial trend.

## Great National Learning

On October 16, 2005, the Renmin University of China School of Chinese Classics was officially established. To date, it is the second most high-profile and influential institution for national learning, after the Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning. Its establishment pushed national learning to the center of

<sup>6</sup> Song Zhiming, "Andun jiazhi peiyu jingshen" [The value of settling and cultivating the spirit], *Guangming ribao*, July 4, 2006, 5.



public attention and drew much debate in the mass media. One of the key points of discussion was what national learning fundamentally is, and although Renmin University of China School of Chinese Classics (hereafter RUC School of Chinese Classics) recently celebrated its fifteenth anniversary, definitions and understandings of national learning still vary widely.

For a long time, national learning has been limited to traditional Han culture, mainly Confucianism. Its classical texts form the basis for the national learning that is advocated today, and almost all of the scholars recognized by the Global Chinese National Studies Awards have worked in the areas of pre-modern Han Chinese literature, history, philosophy, and culture, highlighting the fact that most of the country still equates Sinology with national learning. When Chen Lai, Dean of the Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning, was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 4th Global Chinese National Studies Awards in November 2020, he characterized national learning thus: “‘National learning’ refers to China’s inherent scholarly culture, which includes what people today call philosophy, history, literature. It is the main body of Chinese culture and has provided rich nourishment for the formation and development of the great spirit of the Chinese nation. Under the conditions of the New Era, strengthening national learning and promoting its dissemination will certainly make positive contributions to advancing the great rejuvenation of the nation and the prosperous development of Chinese culture.”<sup>7</sup>

Such a definition of national learning, however, is inconsistent with an understanding of China today as a multiethnic and multicultural country. It promotes Han-centric thinking and excludes other ethnic cultures with equally long and rich histories from national learning. This narrow understanding of national learning runs counter to the ideal of forging a firm sense of a Chinese national community that is actively sought by the public today. It also misrepresents the inclusiveness and richness of traditional Han culture, and it diminishes the value and appeal of national learning. For example, although Buddhism was once a foreign religion, it has undergone a long and thorough process of Sinicization and has become an inseparable part of Chinese religion and intellectual culture, and it should never be excluded from national learning and Chinese culture.

Fortunately, since its establishment, the RUC School of Chinese Classics has actively advocated for and adhered to the concept of “great national learning”

<sup>7</sup> <https://culture.ifeng.com/c/81ltNkHk1aM>.

pioneered by its founding dean, Feng Qiyong (1924–2017). This concept expands the scope of national learning in the New Era to include the languages, literature, histories, religions, and traditional cultures of China’s ethnic minorities, in addition to the traditional culture of the Han people. In addition, it also established the Institute of Historical and Philological Studies of China’s Western Regions. The Institute has recruited experts and scholars who specialize in Sanskrit, ancient Tibetan, Tocharian, Sogdian, Old Uyghur, Tangut script, Chagatai, Mongolian, Manchu, and other languages. The goal is to rebuild and promote these areas of study widely regarded as “cold and extinct” and to become a leading academic institution specializing in the study of the languages, history, and culture of China’s frontier peoples, especially the ethnic minorities in northwest China.<sup>8</sup> The Institute of Historical and Philological Studies of China’s Western Regions has quickly attracted the attention of the world academic community. As a specialized academic institution engaged in the study of Western (Eurasian) languages and literatures, the institute has long been among the brightest parts of the RUC School of Chinese Classics. With its unique vision and scholarly achievements, the institute has put into practice and embodied Feng Qiyong’s concept of great national learning.

In the autumn of 2007, the RUC School of Chinese Classics put the great national learning concept further into practice when it founded the world’s first Center for Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Studies. The center is a teaching and research institution specializing in Tibetan studies, especially Tibetan Buddhism (Vajrayana), with a focus on training outstanding young scholars to use texts in Tibetan, Chinese, and Sanskrit to conduct research on Buddhism across disciplines. Over the past decade, the center has developed extensive academic cooperation with many international and domestic academic institutions and scholars and has jointly trained a number of outstanding young scholars in Sino-Tibetan Buddhist studies. The center was the first to advocate the organic integration of the study of Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism in the international academic community, thereby building a body of research comparable to the long-standing dominance of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist studies. It intends to introduce Buddhist philology, the basic methodology of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist studies, into the discipline of Chinese Buddhist studies, so as to

<sup>8</sup> See “*Xiyu lishi yuyan yanjiu jikan bianji yuanqi*” [The editorial origins of the *Historical and Philological Studies of China’s Western Regions* series], in *Xiyu lishi yuyan yanjiu jikan, Diyi ji* [Historical and philological studies of China’s western regions], ed. Shen Weirong (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2007), 1:i-ii.

raise its overall research standards. It hopes to establish Sino-Tibetan Buddhism as an important aspect of Chinese Buddhism; to treat Chinese Buddhist culture, which is a blend of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, as an important element of Chinese national learning; and to pass on and promote the language, history, religion, and traditional culture of both the Han Chinese and Tibetan peoples as inseparable components of Chinese culture.<sup>9</sup> Strengthening the study of Sino-Tibetan Buddhism and promoting the harmony and integration of Han Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist cultures are important steps toward developing a firm sense of Chinese national community.

Feng Qiyong's advocacy around great national learning led to the establishment of the Institute of Historical and Philological Studies of China's Western Regions and the Center for Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Studies within RUC's School of Chinese Classics. The development and success of these two specialized institutions have not only made the RUC School of Chinese Classics into the foremost national learning institution, but also greatly enriched the concept of great national learning by demonstrating that it is the best way to approach national learning in the New Era.

### **Integrating National Learning into Universities**

Seemingly endless debates continue about what national learning is and how to carry it out. These uncertainties are a serious problem for the discipline in Chinese higher education institutions in the New Era. It is not easy to incorporate and integrate the needs of society, the times, and the enthusiasm of the public and scholars into a system of scholarship. Due to existing constraints in higher education and its disciplinary classifications, a practical and effective solution to the problem of integrating national learning into China's higher education and research system remains elusive.

In today's China, universities are at the heart of higher education and academic research, and the survival and development of national learning cannot merely rest on superficial social enthusiasm and advocacy. That requires assimilation and integration into universities. In order to survive and develop in higher education institutions, a new discipline must find a suitable terrain, an appropriate scholarly position, and institutionalized recognition within the academic system. Regrettably, national learning has not been able to take root in

<sup>9</sup> Shen Weirong, "Hanzang fojiao bijiao yanjiu chuyi" [Ruminations on the comparative study of Sino-Tibetan Buddhism], *Lishi yanjiu*, no. 1 (2009): 51–63.

the present higher education system or to be institutionalized as a new discipline independent of literature, history, and philosophy. Therefore, although national learning is a hot topic in the public sphere, and the “masters” gain much attention for themselves, there is no such discipline as “national learning” within university classifications. This is perhaps the biggest challenge to the development of national learning in the new century, and, if we want to ensure the healthy and long-term development of national learning, it must become an independent discipline so that it can have a place in the academic system of modern universities. However, to gain such a foothold, any discipline must have its scholarly topics and themes and a research theory and methodology. Although national learning has entered universities with a lot of fanfare, its disciplinarity has never been recognized institutionally, and it has not been able to complete a strict disciplinary design and construction within the university academic system that would establish its independence from the traditional divisions among the humanities, such as literature, history, and philosophy.

At present, national learning takes two forms in universities across the country. The first and most important is the actual dedicated national learning institutions, such as the School of Chinese Classics at Renmin University and the School of Chinese Classics at Wuhan University. They are formal teaching and research units with full-time faculty that independently recruit undergraduate and graduate students. The other form national learning takes is loosely affiliated groups of instructors located in traditional departments of literature, history, and philosophy, who provide elective courses, lectures, seminars, and other types of instruction.

The institutions dedicated to national learning are the main force in the national learning establishment. Some of these institutes within universities emphasize teaching, and others research. The schools of Chinese classics at both Renmin University of China and Wuhan University enroll students into a six-year BA-MA degree, with assigned faculty advisors, emphasizing both teaching and research, thereby forming an independent interdisciplinary teaching and research establishment. In contrast, the Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning provides only part-time faculty advising, does not admit undergraduates and graduate students, and accepts only visiting scholars and postdoctoral researchers. With its various named lectureships and its publication of works such as the *Qinghua guoxue wencun* [Tsinghua national learning repository], the Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning emphasizes research achievements and the display of scholarly influence.

The establishment of the RUC School of Chinese Classics in 2005 was the most substantial achievement of this century's national learning fever. Scholarly practice since the establishment of the school has been a process of exploration that has been full of hardships, controversies, and issues that need to be considered and resolved. The school has made outstanding contributions through the concept of great national learning and through its dissemination of cutting-edge research. Its success shows that physical schools or institutes located within the higher education system provide fertile ground for the future development of national learning and that they play a central role in the survival and development of national learning that cannot be replaced by other institutional forms.

Of course, the establishment and development of schools for national learning in universities does not mean that we have a unified understanding of national learning, nor does it indicate that we have built it into an independent discipline and formalized its acceptance into the higher education system. Strictly speaking, today's national learning is still on the outside looking in, and we have yet to arrive at a unified and widely accepted definition of the nature of *guoxue* as an independent humanities discipline. Social expectations and aspirations for national learning still influence practitioners of national learning in universities. Although they have made many painstaking and fruitful attempts to do a good job in teaching and researching, national learning practitioners remain in a process of continuous exploration and have a long way to go.

The RUC School of Chinese Classics has five teaching and research departments: the Department for the Study of the Classics and Philosophy, the Department of National Literature, the Department of National History, the Department of Foundations for National Learning, and the Institute of Historical and Philological Studies of the Western Regions (highlighting its distinctive understanding of national learning). The Department for the Study of the Classics and Philosophy is mainly engaged in the teaching and research of Chinese philosophy and the history of thought, and falls under philosophy; the Department of National Literature is engaged in the study of premodern Chinese literature, and falls under the category of literature in the major of Chinese language and literature; the Department of National History is engaged in the teaching and research of premodern Chinese history, and falls under the category of history; the Department of Foundations for National Learning teaches and researches Chinese language, phonetics, and exegesis, which traditionally

belong to the category of *xiaoxue*, and falls under the discipline of linguistics in the humanities system. The Institute of Historical and Philological Studies of the Western Regions, on the other hand, provides students with linguistic training in the study of ancient languages, documents, and history of Central Asia, which may be classified as a branch of traditional Oriental studies in the world humanities classifications, such as Indian studies, Tibetan studies, Turkic studies (Uyghur studies), Tocharian studies, Sogdian studies, Tangut studies, Mongolian studies, and Manchu studies.

As designed and implemented at the RUC School of Chinese Classics, these teaching and research programs are admirable for their ingenuity. They not only integrate the study of the languages and histories of the people of the western regions (Central Asia) into the study of national learning, but also combine the traditional scholarship of premodern China (classified as *jing shi zi ji* or *xiaoxue*) with modern Sinology, which takes philology and history as the basic methods. The school offers a scholarly paradigm of China studies for the New Era that is worth promoting. It takes ancient Chinese civilization as its object of study, but instead of a “regional study” of China that places more emphasis on social scientific methods, it returns to the philological approach of traditional Sinological studies. Unfortunately, under the current system of higher education in China, such a productive implementation for national learning cannot be recognized by the scholarly establishment. Students at the school, whether they are in bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral programs, are unable to obtain a degree in national learning. They must obtain a degree in literature, history, or philosophy, depending on the discipline to which their faculty advisors belong. The inability of the academic system to recognize national learning as an independent discipline is undoubtedly a major impediment to its further development.

In an attempt to get rid of the shackles of the academic system and to dispel doubts about the non-scholarly nature of national learning, the RUC School of Chinese Classics recently added the new name of School of Chinese Classical Studies to its title. It has three branches: the Department of Chinese Classics; the Department of Western Classics; and the Department of Eurasian Classics. Now, the subfields fall within the scope of traditional Sinology and the study of the languages and cultures of other ethnic peoples in premodern China. The idea was for the renaming of the school to better reflect its disciplinarity and to allow it to successfully enter the current system of the humanities under of the category of “classics.” Unfortunately, in the current system in China, people are

accustomed to defining classics narrowly, as the study of Western classical civilization, mainly Greek and Latin, and so, although in recent years many major universities in China have been actively cultivating and developing “classical studies,” few people can agree that *guoxue* is actually a kind of classical studies (the study of the language and literature of ancient Chinese civilization).

In terms of academic method, the study of the classics is a most characteristic form of philological study and the source of modern humanities scholarship. Western classics is the philological study of Western civilization, while Chinese classics is the philological study of Chinese civilization, so the national learning of China should be the study of Chinese classics. Recently, many classical scholars at American universities have launched a movement to return Western classics to “ancient Greek studies” or “ancient Roman studies” and to abandon the general term “classics.” For example, the Classics Department at the University of California, Berkeley, has been renamed the Department of Ancient Greek & Roman Studies.<sup>10</sup> Defining the “classics” more specifically as “ancient Greek studies” or “ancient Roman studies” is meant to emphasize the philological core of the classics, that is, historical and cultural studies based on the interpretation of languages and documents. Although “postclassicism” believes that classical studies is based on a set of “German narratives,” its modern attributes still have a deep logic of power or racism.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, “classical studies” which integrates Western classics, Chinese classics, and Eurasian classics, focuses on the linguistic and literary study of different civilizations in the world and may offer Western classics as a modern humanities discipline, a way to dissolve its own racist overtones of rejecting ancient Eastern civilizations, and thus to take on a new life in the world of humanities scholarship. Under this context, Western scholars of classics have expressed a clear understanding and appreciation of the renaming of the School of Chinese Classics at Renmin University of China as the School of Chinese Classical Studies.

<sup>10</sup> “Announcing Our New Name,” University of California, Berkeley, Classics Department, accessed July 16, 2021, <https://classics.berkeley.edu/>. “In January of 2020 the faculty of Classics voted to change the name of our department. As of August 2021, we will be the Department of Ancient Greek & Roman Studies. . . . We believe our new name communicates more clearly and unambiguously what it is that we study and teach, and we hope it will make our department more visible and accessible to the UC Berkeley community and the world beyond.” See also, James Porter, interview by He Yanxiao, “Hougudian zhuyi yu gudianxue zai Zhongguo” [Post-classicism and classics in China], *Pengpai*, October 19, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Fang Kaicheng, “Zhengtong yu yiduan: Zhongxi zhijian de gudianxue jianzhi” [Orthodoxy and heterodoxy: The classical establishment between East and West], review of *Postclassicism*, by The Postclassicism Collective, *Pengpai*, January 4, 2012.

Finally, it is worth reemphasizing that the Chinese classics or Chinese classical studies advocated by the School of Chinese Classics at Renmin University of China is not intended to apply modern methodologies of Western “area studies” to the study of premodern Chinese civilizations. Rather, it should still insist on using the linguistic and interpretive methods of Western classics or traditional Sinology, Tibetan, and Mongolian studies to study the language, history, and culture of China’s various ethnic groups, which is both traditional, modern, and scholarly. In short, the developmental direction for *guoxue* in Chinese institutions of higher learning in the future should be to transform “national learning” into the study of Chinese classics.

*Translated from the Chinese*



**Shen Weirong** is a professor of Tibetan and Buddhist philology at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He is the author, most recently, of *Philological Studies of Tibetan History and Buddhism* (2010; in Chinese).