

Reconciling history with the nation? Historicity, national particularity, and the question of universals*

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Recent years have witnessed a considerable resurgence of interest in nationalism and the structures and processes of collective identity and memory. This renewed focus is not only linked to the revival of nationalist movements after the end of the Cold War, but also hinges on the phenomenon of globalization and our understanding of modernity.¹

Based on an interpretation of the historiography of two outstanding Chinese historians – Chen Yinke (1890-1969) and Fu Sinian (1896-1950), who both have been labeled the Chinese Ranke² – I argue, first, that major problems with regard to modernity that early modern Chinese thinkers were facing can better be understood on the foil of German historicism, and that, second, some of the so-called conservative thinkers do show a much stronger awareness of the problematic of modernity than previously has been recognized. However, this awareness is not spelled out explicitly, but is hidden within the debates on language, culture, and history.

By ‘modernity’³ I refer to the ongoing process of historicization and, hence, relativization of norms and values once conceived as timeless and universal. In Europe, this process has been characterized by a decline of

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¹ For an analysis of this topic with regard to present discussions in the PR China, see: Axel Schneider, ‘Bridging the Gap: Attempts at Constructing a ‘New’ Historical-Cultural Identity in the PRC’, in: *East Asian History*, vol. 22 (December 2001) 129-144.

² For a detailed analysis of Chen Yinke’s and Fu Sinian’s historiography see: Axel Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte: Zwei chinesische Historiker auf der Suche nach einer modernen Identität für China* (Wiesbaden 1997) and Wang Fan-sen 王汎森, *Fu Sinian: A Life in Chinese History and Politics* (Princeton 2000).

³ On the development of views of history and the problem of historicity in 19th and 20th century Europe, see: Jeffery Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (Dordrecht 1988). For a reappraisal of the history and impact of historicism, see: Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus. Eine Einführung* (München 1992), and Jörn Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus. Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur* (Frankfurt am Main 1993).

metaphysical and theological assumptions concerning the structure of the world and a concomitant decline of traditional assertions of ontological and epistemological coherence. The world was less and less conceived as one finite world, but rather turned into a ‘meta-world’, that was dissolved into a diversity of possible *worldviews*⁴ – a term in itself symptomatic of the change that had taken place.

Kant’s philosophy was but a first step towards what Max Weber would later call ‘disenchantment’. In his epistemological turn, Kant transferred the structures of the world into *a priori* structures of consciousness, thus preparing the ground for the ongoing process of decentering the world. However, history understood as the historicity and relativity of human existence not yet played any role – Kant’s world was still *one* world, even if turned epistemological.

But not later than Hegel, history became the central issue and Western thought ever since has been characterized by various attempts at reconciling historical relativity with universal norms. However, Hegel’s view of history was not only based on the conviction that historical particulars had to be reconciled with a universal spirit, it also provided a teleological path of the articulation of the Spirit in world-history, thereby ultimately subordinating the individual to universal necessity.

In the course of the decline of German Idealism, Hegel’s grand vision and the underlying premises of Enlightenment and Idealism were increasingly challenged. From Herder’s philosophy of individual cultures, to Ranke’s historicism, and to Dilthey’s view of history based on a philosophy of life, we encounter various attempts to guard against relativism by holding particularity in esteem, without abandoning the quest for history as a meaningful whole. It was not until after the First World War that these approaches were superseded, culminating in the growing awareness of an irreconcilable chasm between contingent facts and normative tenets. Heidegger, for example, refuted any attempt at defining a metaphysical

⁴ The term ‘worldviews’ aptly refers to the reflexivity of modern consciousness and hints at the cultural plurality and historical relativity, which is so characteristic for modernity. On the modernity of ‘worldviews’, see: Martin Heidegger, ‘Die Zeit des Weltbildes’, in: Martin Heidegger *Holzwege* (6th edition; Frankfurt am Main 1980) 73-110. For a definition of the typical modern view of culture, see: Karl Mannheim, ‘Über die Eigenart kultursozioologischer Erkenntnis’, in: Idem, *Strukturen des Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main 1980) 44-50.

absolute, declaring the historicity of human existence to be the only universal left.⁵

None of these philosophers and historians reestablished a universal teleology of history. Universal reason, the backbone of Enlightenment, was explicitly denied a dominant role in history and became itself historicised. Most of the historicist and hermeneutic approaches in fact opposed and replaced the Enlightenment idea of progress by the notion of 'development' (German: *Entwicklung*). Based on an analogy with individual organic growth, the idea of development did not entail a hierarchy based on the progressive realization of knowable norms.

In the light of these historical developments of reflecting on 'historical development' I suggest to conceive of modernity as a phenomenon that cannot be adequately characterized by a totalizing notion of the progress of reason or any other absolute.⁶ Instead, I believe that it should be understood as marked by the intrinsic tension between attempts, on the one hand, at resurrecting some sort of philosophical, theological, historical, or scientific certainty, and, on the other hand, the consequences deriving from the verdict of Nietzsche, that God is dead and mankind is liberated from and condemned to live without firm metaphysical or theological foundation.⁷

Turning to China, however, it is striking first, how much our image of modern Chinese intellectual history has long been dominated either by May Fourth historiography⁸ or by state-official ideologies, and that, second,

⁵ Barash, *Martin Heidegger*, 21-23 and 54-73. On Herder, see: Brian J. Whitton, 'Herder's Critique of the Enlightenment: Cultural Community versus Cosmopolitan Rationalism', in: *History & Theory*, 27:2 (1988) 146-168. On Dilthey, see: Manfred Riedel, 'Einleitung', in: Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (5th edition; Frankfurt am Main 1997) 9-80.

⁶ In the field of China research a recent example of an understanding and hence critique of modernity as the progress of reason by referring to Hegel's philosophy of history can be found in: Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago 1995).

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Die fröhliche Wissenschaft' 343, in: Idem, *Werke in zwei Bänden* I (6th edition; München 1990) 489-490, and Idem, 'Götzen-Dämmerung, Die vier grossen Irrtümer' 8, in: *Ibidem*, II, 351-352.

⁸ The intellectuals of the 'May Fourth Movement' of 1919 argued in favor of far-reaching cultural and political change modeled along the lines of Western

Chinese intellectuals opposed to these interpretations have been stigmatized as conservative or even as reactionary.⁹ Yet, taking into consideration that in Europe it were the very conservatives who made important contributions to clarifying the notion of historicity and the problem of modernity,¹⁰ paying more attention to their Chinese counterparts will help us to arrive at a more balanced understanding of the interrelation between historicity, national particularity and the problem of universals.

Given the fact that historically the writing of history in China had always enjoyed a higher status than in the West,¹¹ it is no wonder that historiography found itself at the center of modern debates, not only leading to a considerable reorientation of Chinese identity, but also to a growing awareness of the challenge posed by modernity. Already from the late Qing period onwards, Western ideas began to influence the conceptions and eventually the very language by which Chinese intellectuals tried to cope with that challenge.¹² Though historiography initially had been heavily

modernity. They pleaded for the adoption of 'science' and 'democracy' and demanded to reject Chinese tradition in an iconoclastic and total manner.

⁹ This is reflected in the scarcity of Western historiography on these intellectuals. For the only monographs on these intellectuals, see: Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian, Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley 1979), and Idem, *Wenbua shoucheng zhuyi lun* (On Cultural Conservatism; Taipei 1986). See also: Charlotte Furth ed., *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976). Conservative intellectuals like Du Yaquan, post May Fourth Zhang Shizhao, Chen Huanzhang, the Xueheng group including Wu Mi, Mei Guangdi, Liu Yizheng, Miao Fenglin and others are still not very well known in the West and more often than not lumped together under the general term of conservatism.

¹⁰ Mannheim, *Konservatismus, Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des Wissens* (Frankfurt am Main 1984).

¹¹ Chinese historiography has been at the center of political and cosmological/philosophical interest in China ever since the first millennium BC. It has enjoyed a degree of importance and continuity that singles it out as the most continuous and voluminous historiographic tradition and has been formally institutionalized as a state institution since the Tang Dynasty (8-10 century AD). For analysis of fundamental characteristics of Chinese historiography see Yves Chevrier, 'La servante-maîtresse: condition de la référence à l'histoire dans l'espace intellectuel chinois', in: *Extrême-Orient, extrême-occident, Cahiers de recherches comparatives IX, La référence à l'histoire* (1987) 117-144.

¹² Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, China 1900-1937* (Stanford 1995) and Wolfgang Lippert, *Entstehung und*

influenced by the evolutionary worldview,¹³ already in the 1910s the situation had changed dramatically as various imported concepts of historiography together with indigenous traditions shaped a discourse that was very lively and pluralistic.

Although both Chinese historians I discuss here have followed dissimilar methodologies and agendas of research, both have been described as having been influenced by Ranke.¹⁴ Therefore a comparison of their historiography will not only shed light on the processes of the adoption and appropriation of Western thought and its intermingling with indigenous approaches, but can also serve as an example of how Chinese historians tried to cope with the modern problem of historicity, the crisis of identity and the task to redefine China's position in the world.

Funktion einiger chinesischer marxistischer Termini: Der lexikalisch-begriffliche Aspekt der Rezeption des Marxismus in Japan und China (Wiesbaden 1979).

¹³ As was the case with Liang Qichao's and Zhang Taiyan's early historiography. See: Liang Qichao 梁啟超, 'Xin shixue' 新史學 (New Historiography), in: *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 (New People's Miscellany) 1, 3, 11, 14, 16, 20, see: *Yinbingshi wenji* 飲冰室文集 (Collected Works of the Ice-Drinker's Studio) vol. IV/9 (3rd edition; Taipei 1983) 1-11. For Zhang Taiyan, see: Wang Fansen, *Zhang Taiyan de sixiang* (1868-1919) *ji qi dui ruxue chuantong de chongji* 章太炎的思想 (1868-1919) 及其對儒學傳統的衝擊 (The thought of Chang Taiyan and his attacks on the Confucian tradition; Taipei 1985) 189-199, and Furth, 'The Sage as a Rebel: The Inner World of Chang Ping-lin', in: Idem ed., *The Limits of Change*, 113-150. A detailed comparison of their respective views of history can be found in Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*, 68-82.

¹⁴ On Fu Sinian as a Chinese Ranke, see: Zhang Zhiyuan 張致遠, 'Lanke de shengping yu zhuzuo' 蘭克的生平與著作 (Ranke's Life and his Writings) in: *Ziyou Zhongguo* 自由中國 (Free China) 7:12 (16 december 1952) 10-15; Sun Tongxun 孫同勳, 'Tan Fu Sinian xiansheng de shixue' 談傅斯年先生的史學 (On Fu Sinian's Historiography) in: *Lishi yuekan*, 20 (January 1989) 8-13, there 10b, and Xu Guansan 許冠三, *Xin shixue jushinian, 1900- 新史學九十年* (90 years of New Historiography) I (2nd edition; Hong Kong 1989) 206-207. On Chen Yinke as a Chinese Ranke, see: Wang Rongzu, *Shijia Chen Yinke zhuan* 史家陳寅恪傳 (Biography of the Historian Chen Yinke; Taipei 1988) 53-57.

Before turning to Chen Yinke's and Fu Sinian's historiography, it is necessary to clarify Ranke's concept of historiography. He usually comes to mind as the founder of empiricist research emphasizing the critical evaluation of archival material, and aiming at objective knowledge of the past. His often-quoted slogan that the aim of research is to find out 'wie es eigentlich gewesen', represents this image.¹⁵

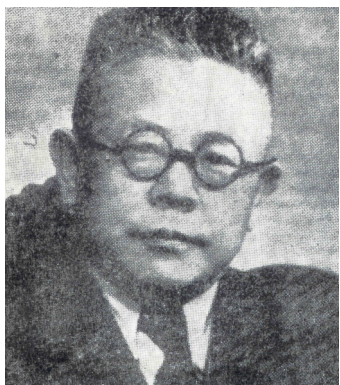


Leopold von Ranke (*1795-
†1886). Source: [www.badw.de/
/deuweb/akad2.htm](http://www.badw.de/deuweb/akad2.htm)

However, his methodology was nothing but a means to a higher end. The historicist Ranke argued against the enlightenment-approach to history, castigating it as superimposing abstract theories on history, thereby violating its very individuality. Not philosophy, but theology was the basis of his view of history. He assumed that every epoch is characterized by its 'particular tendency' and its 'own ideal'. Thus, the aim of writing history was to elucidate the differences between the individual epochs, and to show how every epoch, although individual and incomparable, was the manifestation of God's will. The methodological conclusion was to envision historical research as a hermeneutic project. The prerequisite attitude towards the object of research was to be one of *Mitgefühl*, that is 'compassion' or 'empathetic understanding'. The historian was to become aware of the individuality and the ideals of an epoch through intuition and spiritual contemplation.¹⁶

¹⁵ On this very influential empiricist image of Ranke and the extent to which it partially misrepresents Ranke's historiography, see: George G. Iggers, 'The Image of Ranke in American and German Historical Thought', in: *History and Theory*, 2 (1962), 17-40. On the similarly one-sided reception of Ranke in Japan, see: Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley 1993) and Margaret Mehl, *History and the State in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (New York 1998).

¹⁶ Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus*, 18-134.



Fu Sinian (*1896-†1950) was born in Liaocheng, Shandong-province. He performed research at the university of Berlin, Germany, and served as the president of Taiwan State University. Source: Fu Sinian, *Collected works of Fu Sinian (Fu Sinian Xuanji)* (Tabei: Zhuanji wenxhe chubanghe 1971)

But how to make sense of these apparently self-contradictory demands to carry on disinterested, objective research and, at the same time, to contemplate the very individuality of history as the expression of divine providence? For Ranke, to be sure, this was not a contradiction. Understanding history as the ever individual manifestation of God's will, almost inevitably led him to the demand not to subdue a past to present, subjective needs of *making* sense of the past. On the contrary, meaning was to be found *in* the past and the only way to relate this meaning to one's own present was through God. This understanding of the relation between historical particularity and the religious universal was his way of defending the particular, that is Germany, against what he perceived as the arrogance of universal enlightenment, that is the French revolution, without being forced into relativism.

Yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, many German historians, already far removed from Ranke's worldview, had lost faith in divine providence. They either did – in a positivist manner – put more stress on the methodological aspects related to the treatment of primary sources, or they were looking for other ways of relating the historical to the universal as was the case with Dilthey's philosophy of life.¹⁷

When returning to the reasons why Chen Yinke and Fu Sinian have been labeled the 'Chinese Ranke', it is most interesting to note that both argue for a very different philosophical and methodological approach to history.

Fu,¹⁸ a leader of the May Fourth Movement, was mainly oriented towards the positivist sciences. He advocated a view of history as

¹⁷ Barash, *Martin Heidegger*, 54-74.

¹⁸ On Fu Sinian, see: Wang Fansen, *Fu Ssu-nien*, and Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*.

determined by geographic-climatic factors comparable to laws in the sciences, a view he applies to explain how the Chinese nation came into being.¹⁹ Besides, Fu envisions history as characterized by the universal progress of mankind towards a rational, scientific mode of thought. He depicts *Xunzi* and *Kaozheng* (考證) empiricism as precursors of scientific, rational thought, which thus loses its Western coloring and is being raised to universal status.²⁰ Referring to Ranke²¹ and *Kaozheng* methodology he strongly argues against any kind of interpretation, and formulates the task of the historian as exclusively consisting of the verification and organization of the source material, allowing the bare facts contained in the material to speak for themselves. Accordingly, he opposes the use of any kind of theory or view of history and fiercely condemns any involvement of the historian in politics.²²

¹⁹ Fu Sinian 傅斯年, 'Yi Xia dongxi shuo' 夷夏東西說 (Theory of the I in the East and the Hsia in the West) in: *Zhongyanyuan qingzhu Cai Yuanpei xiansheng 65 sui lunwenji*, *Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan waibian*, 1:1 (January 1933) 1093-1134, see: *Fu Sinian quanji* 傅斯年全集 (Complete writings of Fu Sinian, henceforth: FSNCC) III (Taipei 1980) 822-894.

²⁰ Fu Sinian, *Xingming guxun bianzheng* 性命古訓辨證 (Disputation and Vindication of the Ancient Glosses on 'Nature' and 'Destiny') 2 vols. (Shanghai 1940) see FSNCC II, 491-736.

²¹ Fu Sinian, "Shiliao yu shixue" fakanci' 史料與史學' 發刊辭 (Editorial to 'Historical material and historiography') in: *Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan waibian* 2, *Shiliao yu shixue* (Historical Material and Historiography) 1 (November 1945) see: FSNCC IV, 1402-1404.

²² Fu's most important article on methodology is: Fu Sinian, 'Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo gongzuo zhi zhiqu' 歷史語言研究所工作之旨趣 (Working Intentions of the Institute for History and Philology) in: *Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* (Bulletin of the Institute for History and Philology) 1:1 (October 1928) see FSNCC IV, 1301-1314. Other texts are: Fu Sinian, 'Liu Fu 'si sheng shiyanlu' xu' 劉復'四聲實驗錄'序 (Foreword to Liu Fu's Record of Experiments concerning the Four Tones; January 1923) see: FSNCC III, 935-941; Idem, 'Zhongshan daxue yuyan lishixue yanjiusuo zhoukan fakanci' 中山大學語言歷史學研究所周刊發刊詞 (Editorial of the Weekly Bulletin of the Institute for Philology and History of the Sun Yat-sen University) in: *Zhongshan daxue yuyan lishixue zhoukan* 1:1 (January 1, 1927) 1; Idem,

This short summary reveals that in his case *China's* history as a *particular* history was muted by subordinating it to universal laws. Thus, he tries to establish a Chinese identity by fitting China into world history as determined by characteristics that are universal, but in fact are of Western origin. While he ventures to find precedents of the correct, scientific world view in Chinese history, he forsakes the very possibility to devise an answer to the question of what is 'typically Chinese'.

Although Fu referred to Ranke only once, it is not unlikely that he equated his approach with that of Ranke, namely the empiricist Ranke. The problem of how to define and protect one's particularity without being trapped in relativism and historicity could hardly be resolved within the limits of this approach. In fact, Fu's approach subjugating China to universal laws that to a certain extent allow the prediction of its future can be interpreted as implying the de-historicization of China's past. At the same time, however, Fu satisfied his nationalist agenda portraying China as an equal member in the world of nation-states, and was, contradicting his own methodological stipulations, again and again driven into political-nationalistic action,²³ a fact that was not only reflected in his many

'Zhanguo zijia xulun' 戰國子家敘論 (Systematic Discussion of the Philosophers of the Warring States) (1927-1928) see: FSNCC II, 417-422; Idem, 'Yu Gu Jiegang lun gushi shu' 與顧頡剛論古史書 (Letter to Gu Jiegang discussing Ancient History) in: *Zhongshan daxue yuyan lishixue zhoukan* (Weekly Bulletin of the Institute for Philology and History of the Sun Yatsen University) 2:13-14 (January 23 and 31, 1928) see: FSNCC IV, 1521-1522; Idem, *Shixue fangfa daolun* 史學方法導論 (Introduction to the Methods of Historiography; n.p. 1928) see: FSNCC II, 335-392; Idem, 'Kaoguxue de xin fangfa' 考古學的新方法 (The new methods of archaeology) in: *Shixue* (Historiography) 1 (December 1930) 195-206, see: FSNCC IV, 1337-1347; Idem, *Zhongxi shixue guandian zhi bianqian* 中西史學觀點之變遷 (The Change of Historiographical Points of View in China and the West), written around 1928, published first in *Dangdai* (Contemporary) 116 (December 1995) 64-71.

²³ Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*, 33-56.

journalistic publications²⁴ and some methodological texts,²⁵ but also in some of his historiographical writings of the 1930s.²⁶

Chen Yinke, in contrast to Fu, stressed cultural particularity assuming that all cultures are of equal status, thus implying a universalistic perspective. His research was based on the assumption that Chinese history is characterized by the gradual *development* of its particular ‘national spirit’ (*minzu jingshen* 民族精神). He identified the Confucian social ethics as its core (*Sangang wuchang* 三綱五常),²⁷ without hypostatizing it as an unchanging essence.²⁸ He focused on the ongoing cultural exchange between China and foreign peoples, in order to show that China’s national spirit has always been in the making by assimilating external influences.²⁹

²⁴ The texts are too numerous to be quoted here. Suffice is to refer to his participation in the debate on traditional Chinese medicine. See: Fu Sinian, *Guanyu ‘guoyi’ wenti de taolun* 關於‘國醫’問題的討論 (Discussion on the Problem of ‘National Medicine’; August 27, 1934) see: FSNCC VI, 2322-2329; Idem, ‘Suo wei ‘guoyi’ 所謂‘國醫’ (The so-called ‘National Medicine’) in: *Dagong bao* (The Impartial; August 5, 1934) see: FSNCC VI, 2299-2304.

²⁵ Fu Sinian, ‘Xiantan lishi jiaokeshu’ 閑談歷史教科書 (Idle Talk about Schoolbooks for History), in: *Jiao yu xue* (Teaching and Studying) 1:4 (October 1, 1935), see: FSNCC IV, 1357-1372.

²⁶ Fu Sinian, *Dongbei shigang* 東北史綱 (Outline of the History of the Northeast; Beijing 1932). For a detailed analysis of Fu Sinian in comparison with other historiographical trends of the 1920s and 1930s see: Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*, 146-176.

²⁷ The *Sangang wuchang* (Three Bonds and Five Relationships) refer to the relationship between ruler and official, father and son, and husband and wife, and are the concrete expression of Confucian social ethics.

²⁸ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, ‘Wang Guantang xiansheng wanci bing xu’ 王觀堂先生輓詞並序 (Poem with Foreword commemorating Wang Guantang [i.e. Wang Guowei] written in 1927, see: *Hanliutang ji*, *Yinke xiansheng shicun* (Extant Poems from Mr. Yinke, Collection from the Hall of the Winter Willow), *Chen Yinke xiansheng wenji* 陳寅恪先生文集 (Collected writings of Mr. Chen Yinke, henceforth: CYKWC)) vol. I:1, appendix II (Taipei 1981) 6-11.

²⁹ His most important historiographical works are his monographs on ‘medieval’ Chinese history; see: Chen Yinke, *Tangdai zhengzhibishi shulungao* 唐代政治史略稿

Chen claimed that only the receptivity to external stimulants had guaranteed the persistence of Chinese cultural identity by preserving its core, though in different historical manifestations. Any notion of an unchanging national essence contradicts this concept of continuity by change in the same way as the unqualified adoption of foreign ideas alien to the Chinese national spirit does.³⁰

What guarded him against cultural relativism was the notion of ‘the universality of abstract ideals’ (*chouxiang lixiang zhi tongxing* 抽象理想之通性). Referring to Plato he recovers the lost universal ground not by proclaiming a humanistic Chinese civilization superior to the West (as e.g. Zhang Junmai), or by referring to universal science (as e.g. Fu Sinian), but by assuming the *formal* universality of human attachment to ‘abstract ideals’, which do vary from culture to culture, and change in the

(Draft of a Description and Discussion of the Political History of the Tang Period; Chongqing 1943) see: CYKWC III:5, 1-159; Idem, *Sui-Tang zhidu yuanyuan luelun* 隋唐制度淵源略論稿 (Draft of a Brief Discussion of the Origins of the Institutional System of the Sui- and Tang; Chongqing 1944) see: CYKWC II:4, 1-158.

³⁰ The most prominent formulation of this methodology and his view of history can be found in: Chen Yinke, ‘Feng Youlan Zhongguo zhexueshi shang ce shencha baogao’ 馮友蘭中國哲學史上冊審查報告 (Two Reports on the Examination of Feng Youlan’s History of Chinese Philosophy) written in 1930, see: CYKWC II:3, 247-249; Idem, ‘Feng Youlan Zhongguo zhexueshi xia ce shencha baogao’ 馮友蘭中國哲學史下冊審查報告 (Two Reports on the Examination of Feng Youlan’s History of Chinese Philosophy) written in 1933, see: CYKWC II:3, 250-252; Idem, ‘Du Ai jiangnan fu’ 讀哀江南賦 (Reading the Fu Mourning for the South) in: *Qinghua xuebao*, *Qinghua 30 zhounian jiniankan* (Qinghua Journal, Issue in Memory of the 30th Anniversary of Qinghua University; July 1939) see: CYKWC II:3, 209-217; Idem, ‘Chen Yuan xiyuren huahua kao xu’ 陳垣西域人華化考序 (Foreword to Chen Yuan’s Investigation of the Sinification of the People of the Western Regions) written in 1935, see: CYKWC II:3, 238-239; Idem, ‘Chen Shu Liaoshi buzhu xu’ 陳述遼史補注序 (Foreword to Chen Shu’s Supplementary Annotation of the History of the Liao) written in 1942, see: CYKWC II:3, 234-235; Idem, ‘Zhi Mindu xueshuo kao’ 支愨度學說考 (Investigation of the Teachings of Zhi Mindu) in: *Lishih yuyan yanjiusuo jikan waibian*, 1:1 (January 1933) 1-18, see: CYKWC I:2, 141-168.

course of history, but have to be protected in order to safeguard the identity of the respective culture.³¹

Accordingly, the historian's task is seen to consist in contributing to the recollection of the national spirit, a goal he has to achieve by adopting a historicist, hermeneutic methodology. His research should be based on the meticulous examination of historical sources, aiming at the 'empathetic understanding' (*tongqing zhi liaojie*

同情之了解) of the historical manifestations of the national spirit. Then, and only then, may the historian venture to evaluate history from a present day perspective.³² The correlate of this was the demand, that the historian should stay aloof from politics. Because history is no longer regarded as the manifestation of absolute principles, the historian loses his former, eminently political position to actualize the universal *Tao* through historiography. Chen thus dissolves the previous unity of knowledge and action and assigns the historian the *new* role of a mere guardian of historical memory and cultural identity.³³

Chen's view of history is thus a form of idealism, albeit qualified by his emphasis on the particular manifestations of abstract ideals. The specific contents of these ideals vary from culture to culture, manifesting themselves in different ways in history. Hence, the ideals and their corresponding culture cannot be integrated into world history by general schemes of evolu-



Chen Yinke, Hongkong 1941.

Source: Zhang Die and Yang Yanli, *Remembering Chen Yinke (Zhuyi Chen Yinke)* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe 1999)

³¹ Chen Yinke, 'Wang Guantang xiansheng wanci bing xu'.

³² Chen Yinke, 'Feng Youlan Zhongguo zhexueshi shang ce shencha baogao' (1930); Idem, 'Feng Youlan Zhongguo zhexueshi xia ce shencha baogao' (1933).

³³ For a detailed analysis of Chen Yinke in comparison with other historiographical trends of the 1920s and 1930s see: Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*, 126-146.

tion, or by means of universal norms as implied by Fu's approach.³⁴ It is *Chinese* history that speaks to Chen who thereby wants to establish an identity that can only be integrated into the larger world through respect for each culture's commitment to its specific ideals.

In Chen's case it is much more difficult to assess Ranke's influence. Though he never referred to Ranke, later historians claimed to recognize such an influence.³⁵ However, if we take into consideration that Chen had studied in Germany for many years, it may well be justified to assume that he knew of Ranke and the tradition of German historicism.³⁶ Chen's position surely was closer to the hermeneutic Ranke, who struggled with the problem of the relationship between the individual and the universal and who opposed any notion of teleological progress. However, this should not mislead us to ignore some fundamental differences between Chen and Ranke.

While Ranke had lived in a Christian world still comparatively at peace with its theological assumption of divine providence and untroubled by the devastating experiences of the twentieth century, Chen could not fall back on a Christian God for solace. At the same time he was – far more than Ranke – confronted with far-reaching political, social, and cultural changes,³⁷ which brought about the rapid decline of his Confucian world, a

³⁴ This is not only manifest in Chen's writings on history, but is also made clear in his writings on language, especially on the relationship between Chinese and foreign grammar, see Chen Yinke, 'Yü Liu Shuya jiaoshou lun guowen shiti shu' 與劉叔雅教授論國文試題書 (Letter to Professor Liu Shuya Discussing the Questions for the Chinese Examinations) in: *Xueheng* (Critical Review) 79 (1931) see: CYKWC II:3, 221-228.

³⁵ Wang Rongzu, *Shijia Chen Yinke zhuàn*, 53-57.

³⁶ Chen Yinke studied in Germany from 1909 to 1911, and from 1921 to 1926, a time when the dilemma of late historicism became apparent and was widely discussed e.g. by Ernst Troeltsch and, with quite different conclusions, by Friedrich Meinecke. See: Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (München 1936); Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen 1922); Idem, *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung* (Berlin 1924).

³⁷ Chen Yinke's opinion that Wang Guowei's objectives of protecting and continuing traditional Chinese culture were illusionary due to the overall social, economic and political change, and that this fact was the reason for his suicide, is evidence that Chen was quite aware of this dilemma of historicism. It is clear from Chen's repeated affirmation of the values Wang was fighting for that this applies to

decline at least accelerated by a civilization more different from the Chinese world than France had ever been different from Germany.

This may explain why Chen, comparable to European late historicism, tried to conceptualize a view of history capable of accommodating change without, however, necessarily leading to a breach of continuity and identity. He achieved this by means of a methodology that took historicity and culturality seriously. It is true that he – as did Ranke – conceived of meaning as to be immanent in history, but at the same time, he acknowledged that this meaning is mediated by the observer. Comparable to Dilthey's historical methodology, Chen seems to conceptualize historical meaning as the product of a dialogical process between manifestations of past human endeavors and present interested perspectives, integrated under the umbrella of overarching and coherent ethical and cultural orientations.³⁸ Deprived of any metaphysical foundation and opposed to a progressive universal *Telos*, Chen embraced a view of history that left much more room for intercultural diversity and intracultural plurality.

The case of Chen Yinke's historiography clearly evinces that some Chinese historians from the Republican period tried to come to grips with the same problematic of historicity and relativism typical for modernity, as their European counterparts. I hence propose an interpretation of Chinese concepts regarding the relation between historicity, national particularity and the question of universal standards that not only takes so-called conservative approaches into account, but one that also suggests that these approaches have not been as marginal as is sometimes assumed. It is true, that Chen Yinke was an exceptional case, but an analysis of the historiography of historians affiliated with the Xueheng group reveals that their view of history, culture, and the nation was less hegemonic and much more pluralistic than hitherto assumed.³⁹ However, it is also true, that these approaches have long been neglected. There are many reasons for this, but

Chen's own situation as well. See: Chen Yinke, 'Wang Guantang xiansheng wanci bing xu'.

³⁸ Barash, *Martin Heidegger*; Rösen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus*.

³⁹ See e.g. the historiography of Tang Yongtong, Zhang Yinlin, Miao Fenglin, Liu Yizheng, Zheng Hesheng and others. I am currently working on a monograph on so-called 'conservative' historians and intellectuals of the post May Fourth period including these historians as well as Du Yaquan, Liang Qichao, Zhang Taiyan, Zhang Shizhao and others.

three important factors come to my mind, which might explain this peculiar phenomenon:

First, due to their view of history, some of these intellectuals consciously avoided politics, thereby considerably reducing their influence on public discussions. This, however, does not mean that they exerted no influence at all. Quite a few of them wrote multi-volume histories of China and Chinese culture that were widely read and often referred to.⁴⁰

Second, due to their opposition against the view of history as propagated by so-called liberals and leftists, they were, at best, stigmatized as conservative, if not banned completely from *state-official* historiography – for a long time an influential source of information on China.

Third, and perhaps most important, their concepts of history do not easily fit into notions of progressive history and directly challenge the ideological supremacy of the West. It might have been their ‘obstinacy to surrender’ that concealed them from our investigations, an ‘obstinacy’ much more fundamental than the nationalist anti-imperialism of historians like Fu Sinian, Guo Muoruo, or even Gu Jiegang.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Liu Yizheng 柳詒徵, ‘Zhongguo wenhuashi’ 中國文化史 (History of Chinese Culture) first published serialized in Xueheng 49-54, 56, 58, 61, 63, 64, 67, 70, 72, 75 (January 1926 until March 1931). Published as monograph in Nanjing, 1932.