

**GU HONGMING (1857-1928)**

**AND CHINA'S DEFENCE AGAINST  
THE OCCIDENT**

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We commonly call the times we now are living in “globalised”, and if, on this planet, there is any future geographic key region, it is said to be the Pacific region.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, outside China, people like to speak of a looming rise of China to world power – an idea that evokes either terror, or envy, or admiration, depending on the audience. Such estimation is of course primarily based on official economic data and not so much on knowledge of or deeper going interest in the inner life of China. What however – if we change our perspective for a moment – does the obviously increasing contact between China and the rest of the world mean for China herself in the “global” era? Which consequences does this have for the construction of a modern Chinese identity? What shall be modern about it, what Chinese? And most of all: who shall define this?

In the discourse on such a modern identity construction between Chinese traditions and Western-dominated global standards, one notes the increasingly important role that Chinese living abroad have come to play, or more precisely: Chinese, who do not live in mainland China.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising that especially Chinese living abroad often see themselves as personal sites of projection or “rubbing surfaces” – as a living pilot project, so to speak. This vantage point, which is partly from the outside, opens up other perspectives; however, it is not always acknowledged by those people who represent the exclusive perspective from inside since the “Chineseness” of Chinese living abroad is at times questioned and further – if they reside long-term in the West – they easily fall into the disrepute of being somehow “contaminated” by the West. On the other hand, their partial outsider perspective provides interesting additional refractions to the exclusive view from inside. The Western observer (including the sinologist), who takes a total outsider perspective, is quite naturally interested in this. The problematic of the half-outsider perspective and the dispute about it are no recent

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<sup>2</sup> In the mid-1990s in particular, the 21st century was proclaimed the “Pacific” one.

<sup>3</sup> This needs to be particularly mentioned in regard to Chinese living in Taiwan. They, of course, do not see themselves as “living abroad” though some Western opinion makers like to suggest that this is not the “real” China – a point of view, which, turned around positively, can be associated also with Taiwanese identity constructions beyond any hegemonic “Chineseness”.

phenomena, however, as a look into history easily shows.<sup>4</sup> They can be at least traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> if not longer. One of the figures that in this context provokingly put themselves in front of the lens of historical inspection is Gu Hongming (namely in Germany where he was at times quite intensively received).

Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘, who was born in 1857 and died in 1928, became known as a cultural critic. Already during his lifetime, he provoked many different reactions and is considered until today as a personage that parts opinions.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the opinions on him in East and West vary from fulsome praise to scathing criticism. Taking, e.g., a Western academic standard reference into account such as the *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, which was compiled in the United States in the 1960s/70s, we find the following brief characterisation: “Ku Hung-ming [Gu Hongming] (1857–30 April 1928), European-educated scholar and long-term subordinate of Chang Chih-tung [Zhang Zhidong, a high official of the last dynasty in China] who was known as a trenchant critic of the Westernization of China and a staunch defender of traditional Confucian values”.<sup>7</sup>

In Chinese biographical dictionaries this turns into something like: “Politically, Gu Hongming [...] was extremely conservative; he venerated the doctrines of Confucius and rejected the New Culture [Movement].”<sup>8</sup> And already in 1903, the

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<sup>4</sup> Well-known historical examples are the first Chinese ambassadors and students studying in the West, who at times encountered outright discrimination at home until this phenomenon became more “normal”.

<sup>5</sup> In the 19th century, Chinese for the first time started to migrate to the West on a greater scale whereas migration to South-East Asia had already taken place for a much longer time. However, it is questionable to which extent the latter can be connected to the construction of a “modern” Chinese identity.

<sup>6</sup> Two more extensive academic biographical studies on Gu have been released in the West: ARKUSH 1965 and RIEDIGER 1987. Furthermore, Lo Hui-min especially dealt with Gu’s period of education: LO 1988. Lo had announced to publish a detailed biography, which to my knowledge, has not been released yet. Apart from that, Wu Xiaoqiao released a short article online, which contains some errors concerning the biography but which contributes information on Gu’s influence on Germany in particular and further documents the “Gu renaissance” in the PRC since the 1980s: WU 1999. The Chinese state of research on Gu has been drawn upon in a new, semi-academic biography: LI 2002.

<sup>7</sup> BOORMAN/HOWARD 1967-1979, vol. 2, p. 250.

<sup>8</sup> *Zhongguo Jin-Xiandai Renming Da Cidian* 1989, p. 673.

French sinologist Paul Pelliot stated that Gu “[was] exactly that type of Europeanised Chinese that China and Europe should try to proscribe.”<sup>9</sup>

A completely different opinion on him was presented in 1916 by the German writer Oscar Schmitz. In his introduction to a German translation of one of Gu Hongming’s works, entitled *Der Geist des chinesischen Volkes* (The Spirit of the Chinese People), he says:

[Gu Hongming] belongs to the very rare characters that are free from nationalist narrow-mindedness as well as from characterless internationalism. In fact, he is a nationally-minded Chinese, who regards the Europeanization of his country with utter indignation; nonetheless, he is fully aware of the fact that knowledge of European culture can be fruitful for China as long as she remains faithful to her own heritage. Gu Hongming is the epitome of such a successful fertilisation while fully preserving native ways and manners.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the first axis around which the judgments on Gu Hongming turn is that he was either regarded as a bridge between East and West or even as an incarnate synthesis of both, or as an early apologist of a *clash of civilizations*. The other axis is his relationship to tradition and modernity, which cannot be easily put on the same level with the East-West dichotomy. Was Gu the last “true” Chinese as he preferred to present himself after 1912, the year of the proclamation of Republic of China, or – in the eyes of his opponents – the last queue that had to be cut, or was his displayed traditionalism rather a child of modernity? Or would it be better to not put him into these categories at all and regard him primarily as an individualist and maverick?<sup>11</sup>

A look into Gu’s biography reveals that he, who for some people advanced to represent the incarnation of old China and who enjoyed this role so much, de facto was a highly untypical Chinese. His paternal ancestors originated from the South-Eastern Chinese province of Fujian; however, they had been living in Malaya for generations since the British had been ruling there. They had served under them and also did business with them. Thus Gu belonged to the Nanyang 南洋-Chinese, i.e. overseas Chinese living in South-East Asia. His mother, however, was not of Chinese but at least

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<sup>9</sup> Cited after ARKUSH 1965, p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> GU 1924 [1916], p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> This is the conclusion of RIEDIGER 1987.

partly Portuguese – and in this sense “Western” – origin.<sup>12</sup> This means that, ethnically, he was not a “pure” Chinese himself – or in today’s jargon, he was in fact a *halfie* or a “hybrid”,<sup>13</sup> even though he can be unequivocally assigned to the paternal Chinese line according to the common Chinese patrilinear counting of descent.<sup>14</sup> His educational trajectory was equally untypical: a solid Chinese education was apparently not envisioned for him; instead he left for Scotland at the age of 10 because of his Scottish foster-father, the employer of his parents. After a decade in Scotland and some time in Berlin as a stopover, he finished his education with a *Master of Arts* at Edinburgh University.<sup>15</sup> Though he was a British citizen officially, he belonged, so to speak, to one of the earliest Chinese students studying abroad in general; however, he apparently grew up in a purely Scottish environment without any substantial contact with other Chinese.<sup>16</sup> After his university degree he travelled around the European mainland – possibly he also went to the University of Leipzig for some time and stayed in Paris for a while<sup>17</sup> before returning to Malaya in 1880. There he was converted to “Chineseness” by Ma Jianzhong 馬建忠, who had been also educated in Europe – i.e. in France – and who had become a Chinese official in the meantime.<sup>18</sup> Gu Hongming thus gave up his Western suit, grew his hair into a queue and started to devote himself to the Chinese

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<sup>12</sup> Zhou Zuoren reported this. Cf. LI 2002, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., e.g., Homi Bhabha and Lila Abu-Lughod.

<sup>14</sup> Even in LI 2002 it is striking that Gu is initially clearly labelled a “crossbred” (cf. Chapter 1) but that his portrayal in the following is one-sidedly focused on the fact that his father firmly taught him to be always and everywhere aware of being Chinese. His identity is thus presented in the book as one of a Chinese living in foreign countries (be it South-East Asia or Britain). In formal terms, Gu was a British citizen.

<sup>15</sup> In comparison to Arkush and Riediger, the more detailed information on Gu’s biography are due to newly accessible reminiscences of Chinese friends and acquaintances of Gu, who often quoted Gu himself as the source of information. Li primarily uses these reminiscences in his biography. Lo Hui-min points out that Gu’s MA degree at Edinburgh University (which is stressed even in later publications – e.g. in the editions by Gu’s grandson Gu Nengyi) was de facto merely the first available university degree that Gu could achieve, and he did so even without honours.

<sup>16</sup> At least one Chinese had studied at Edinburgh University already before him, however, several years earlier, namely in the 1850s. See ARKUSH 1965, p. 229, note 7.

<sup>17</sup> There is not much reliable information about this phase of his life. What can be said for sure is that the many diplomas from different European universities that are at times ascribed to him, are a myth.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. WEN 1937, p. 386. Ma had been educated by the Jesuits in France. Nowadays, he is mostly known for being the author of the first Chinese grammar in Western fashion: Ma-Shi Wentong 馬氏文通. (One of his brothers was Ma Xiangbo 馬相伯, who founded several important universities in China).

tradition with the purpose of not being any longer what he called an “imitation Western man”.

At the beginning of the 1880s when Gu was in his mid-twenties, he came to China for the first time and became a staff-member of Zhang Zhidong 張之洞, one of the most influential officials of that time. Despite his long education in the West and his outstanding language skills, which did not only include English, Malayan and Tamil (which he had learnt from early childhood on)<sup>19</sup> but also other languages he acquired in the West such as German, French, Latin, some Greek and Italian, Gu did not make a distinguished career in China. This is particularly interesting in consideration of other earlier Chinese studying abroad who also had difficulties at first after their return to gain a foothold in China since their Western education was considered to have potentially compromised their Chinese identity;<sup>20</sup> nonetheless, most of them eventually succeeded to get hold of a good position. Gu, on the other hand, was not able to capitalise on his abilities because of his additional role as a Nanyang-Chinese outsider and because of his self-acknowledged difficult personality. His late access to the Chinese educational canon was a further reason that prevented him from qualifying himself for the Chinese imperial examinations. Thus he ended up with only minor positions without much influence.

Instead, Gu became widely known because of his public disputes with Westerners living in China, which he held in English-language newspapers in the treaty ports, armed with his Western education. He primarily took on the missionaries and businessmen, who seemingly threatened the intellectual and material wellbeing of his adopted home-country China; the direction of his arguments was, however, always also political, decidedly revolting against the imperialistic behaviour of the Western powers. On the other hand, Gu was firmly against the Chinese reform movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent revolutionary, anti-dynastic forces at the beginning

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. ARKUSH 1965, p. 195, who suggests that Gu might have had an Indian wet nurse. In LI 2002 nothing likewise is mentioned.

<sup>20</sup> A well-known example is Yung Wing (Rong Hong 容闳), who belonged to the earliest Chinese studying abroad in the USA and who later wrote his memoirs. Cf. also note 4 above.

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose leader Sun Yatsen (Sun Yixian 孫逸仙) he significantly labelled as a “degenerated” or westernised Chinese who recklessly abandoned those traditional norms to which Gu had just converted. Gu vehemently supported the ruling Manchu dynasty and praised the empress dowager Cixi 慈禧, who was much disdained by the Western press especially after the suppression of the 1898-Reform Movement and the succeeding Boxer disaster, as the incarnation of Chinese statecraft and noblesse.

Gu, who was apparently dreaming of becoming Cixi’s adviser to deal with the Western powers, but who in reality had even difficulties to find favour with Zhang Zhidong regarding his views, retreated from public life after the death of both of these his role models in 1908/1909. Thereafter, he operated almost exclusively by pen.

After the proclamation of the Republic, Gu became more and more marginalised in China. He stayed loyal to the Qing, the last dynasty, and was also involved in the failed attempt to restore the dynasty in 1917. The fact that he regarded his granted audience with the former last emperor Puyi 溥儀 in the 1920s as the climax of his life,<sup>21</sup> once again emphasises his emotional attachment to the monarchy. However, he had not supported the efforts of Yuan Shikai 袁世凱, the president of the Republic, who had aimed at becoming emperor as a Chinese instead of the abdicated Manchus. Gu rather criticised Yuan, the “parvenu”, for his “betrayal” of the Manchus, who according to Gu were the righteous rulers since they tried to preserve the old cultural heritage and possessed the nobility necessary for governing. Only cultural achievements and the ability to rule, not ethnical origin, were for Gu the true legitimate criteria. It can be thus concluded that Gu was certainly not a simple Han-chauvinist – an accusation which was often addressed to him because of his ostensible anti-Western polemics – but rather a traditionalist or politically a monarchist. During the Republican era, he was only able to make a living from publications in English-language newspapers appearing in China and from teaching Latin at Beijing University. Because of his rejection of the New Culture Movement, which was significantly initiated at this very university during the

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. JOHNSON 1985 [1934], pp. 345-346.



first years of the Republic and which stood for a radically new cultural orientation, Gu's reputation in China was widely set as being an arch-reactionary.

On the other hand, Gu became more and more known in Europe during that time as his moral discrediting of the West and the "Chinese spirit" propagated by him in contrast fell on sympathetic ears in a Europe troubled by the First World War. Especially in post-war Germany, his writings grew in popularity, considering also the fact that during the war Gu had warned against a one-sided condemnation of Germany and was thus perceived as "objective" in Germany.<sup>22</sup> For the Chinese who were studying in Germany during that time it was quite surprising that Gu, who was vilified in China, was in great demand in Germany.

While in China Gu was perceived as an embodied anachronism since the abdication of the last emperor, or as a "fogey", to borrow the words of Zhou Zuoren 周作人, a noted writer who was also teaching at Beijing University during that time, some Europeans considered him to be the "light of the East" that should save the ramshackle Western civilisation from ruin and that should enlighten its path to a better future. This paradox reflects the completely different starting points of the reception of Gu's thoughts in China versus Europe. In a country where modernisation was seen as the first and foremost task, Gu's thoughts per se – which in fact questioned this value – were regarded as obsolete, but in Europe, at the time weary of modernisation, his ideas appeared future-oriented.

Taking a closer look at Gu's literary activities, it is noteworthy that – as mentioned earlier – Gu preferably wrote articles for English-language newspapers in China.<sup>23</sup> Correspondingly, his articles carried strong references to current issues and reflected a polemic tone. The medium as well as the way of writing thus indicated Gu's being deeply rooted in modern civilisation – in spite of the content posing as traditionalist. His references were mostly chosen from Western literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. the German edition of one of his article collections: *Vox Clamantis*, in the preface by the translator: Gu 1920, pp. 3-5.

<sup>23</sup> His Chinese-language work is, in fact, very modest. On the latest available Chinese editions see LI 2002, p. 15.

19<sup>th</sup> century, and he preferably cited Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Emerson, Tennyson and Goethe – all authors, to which he probably became acquainted during his education in Scotland during the 1860s and 1870s – as well as the bible. Doing this, Gu aimed at holding up a mirror to the Europeans and Americans to reflect their behaviour in and towards China by using selected luminaries of their own tradition. On the other hand, he also wanted to demonstrate that he was, by means of his Western education, perfectly qualified to give the Westerners a piece of his mind on an equal footing. (However, as became repeatedly evident, Gu was suffering from the feeling that he was not taken seriously by the “Whites” as a non-Westerner.) Gu’s central reproach was the existential threat to the venerable Chinese civilisation by Western ideas – and gunboats. To him, Christian mission and economic penetration were integral parts of imperialism. Accordingly, he took sides against the Westerner in the course of the growing conflicts between Western missionaries together with their converts and parts of the Chinese population by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Gu also took sides against the Westerners during the Boxer crisis as to him it was their presence in China that provoked the unrest – a viewpoint that was shared, by the way, also by several critical British commentators such as Goldsworthy Dickinson, who taught in Cambridge (cf. his work *Letters from John Chinaman*).<sup>24</sup> Beyond the polemic, Gu nonetheless offered arguments and own analyses of the respective political situations, which is why his readership could not just peg him as a chauvinist – and thus felt particularly provoked. Gu’s strategy was to constantly compare the actual happenings with Western moral standards or with supposedly parallel events in Western history in order to promote an understanding for the Chinese reactions. That way he tried to work against the trend in dominant public opinion in the English-language press. Nolens volens – however, not all unintentionally, as his pseudonym “a Chinese” (later “Sinesis”) suggests – he took up the role of the “voice” of China. A further component of his approach was to play off conflicts within the Western camp wherever possible. The fact that Gu’s often anonymously (or under the guise of “a Chinese”) published articles were vehemently discussed amongst Westerners living in China showed a definite success of his strategy.

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<sup>24</sup> Published in London in 1901.

Not without good reason, Gu observed that the fact that a Chinaman argued with such self-confidence was perceived as the greatest provocation. In addition to that, the efficiency of his approach became tangible in the fact that his first well-known essay collection *Papers from a Viceroy's Yamen* [1901], or *Papiere aus dem Amt eines Vizekönigs* (in which several of the above mentioned articles were collected, now explicitly under his name) was received even in far-away Europe. Tolstoy, for instance, said to have been deeply moved and subsequently wrote the famous “Letter to a Chinese”, in which he praised the ancient Chinese civilisation and insistently warned against the so-called “modernity” of the West. Even though Gu could not influence political decisions as he endeavoured, e.g. with his commentaries on the Russo-Japanese War 1904/05, he still presented a viewpoint that clearly distinguished itself from the common Western press opinion, and his perspective was deemed thought-provoking by some critical spirits abroad – and in any case guaranteed him publicity. Hence, Gu did not only advance to becoming the addressee of personal letters by well-known figures, besides Tolstoy even including the German Kaiser Wilhelm,<sup>25</sup> but was visited also by a number of prominent travellers to China. Significant figures from the German side include Lord Keyserling or the nowadays almost forgotten writer Alphons Paquet, with the famous China missionary and sinologist Richard Wilhelm probably being the actual central point of contact.<sup>26</sup> Gu had always been in touch with Westerners in China, who were often impressed by him but did not necessarily feel sympathy for him – a feeling which probably was mutual.<sup>27</sup> Apart from that, Gu, whose first wife had been a Japanese prostitute, also associated with Japanese. Gu obviously saw the Japanese as culturally related to the Chinese,<sup>28</sup> and was frequented by people such as the famous writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke 芥川龍之介 (author of, e.g., *Rashōmon* 羅生門).

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<sup>25</sup> See LI 2002, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Chapt. 11, “Die Alten von Tsingtao“, in WILHELM 1980 [1926] and WILHELM 1956, pp. 183-184. Some further direct and indirect contacts are enumerated in RIEDIGER 1987, p. 200.

<sup>27</sup> This, at least, was the way how Somerset Maugham described Gu after a meeting with him in the section of his work *On a Chinese screen* intending Gu: “The Philosopher”. Cf. MAUGHAM 1957 [1922]. Chapt. XXXVIII.

<sup>28</sup> RIEDIGER 1987 has given special consideration to Gu’s relationship with Japan.

With his critical articles, Gu himself aimed at more than only impacting upon urgent political decisions in favour of China or at strategically winning over voices critical of (Western) civilisation abroad. He rather tried to spread his personal understanding of history by comparing certain Chinese and European processes in order to make his worldview plausible to the Western reader. This attempt became evident in his work on the “Chinese Oxford Movement” – as he termed it – that was published after Zhang Zhidong’s death: in this work he compared the group around Zhang Zhidong, to which he belonged himself (in China this group was commonly called *Qingliudang* 清流黨 or the party of the “pure”) with cardinal Newman’s Oxford movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was directed against liberalism. He demonstrated his critique of shallow modernism at the expense of cultural substance primarily using the example of China. (This was mainly directed against the legacy of Li Hongzhang 李鴻章, who had represented the school of thought competing with Zhang Zhidong’s group. By this, Gu was deliberately positioning himself as an “insider” of the Chinese establishment – though a subaltern one – and tried to revise characterisations of outstanding personalities widespread in the media). However, the more general point which went beyond China of questioning modern fashionable trends through a confidence in the positive sides of one’s own tradition, was clearly recognised in the West. Accordingly, the German translation of Gu’s second famous essay collection published under the title *Chinas Verteidigung gegen europäische Ideen* [*China’s defence against European ideas*] and translated by the already named Richard Wilhelm, which appeared in 1911 for the first time and included the article on the “Chinese Oxford Movement” as a central text, was hailed. The German newspaper “Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung”, e.g., stated:

If we have read Gu Hongming, we must come to the realisation that there are deeper problems than just the conflict between the East and the so-called “liberal” ideas of the West; we must realise that this conflict is not limited to the struggle between the white and the yellow race.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, Gu had at least achieved that the cultural issue between East and West was not only discussed on the level of a *clash-of-civilization* but that divergent tendencies within

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<sup>29</sup> See the second-last page in GU 1924 (publisher’s advertisement).

each tradition as well as the question for a possible deeper consensus between both cultural complexes were taken into consideration.

These ideas were carried on in Gu's third essay compilation *The Spirit of the Chinese People* or *Der Geist des chinesischen Volkes*, which became again well-known in the West: conceptualised already before the outbreak of the war and updated in view of the war, this work in a sense became Gu's positive credo. He, who had bidden farewell to active politics in the meantime, slipped more and more into the role of a missionary for the cause of China and of an admonisher of mankind.

Gu believed that Confucianism was the royal road to true civilisation of the whole human race, which had been threatened to break into smithereens between the Scylla of a false liberalism and the Charybdis of materialism. Gu's interpretation of Confucianism was, next to obvious traces of neo-Confucian orthodoxy,<sup>30</sup> strongly influenced by his Western education. This can be already seen in his few translations from Chinese, such as of the *Analects* of Confucius (*Lunyu* 論語), where he freely paralleled Confucius, Goethe and other Western authors appreciated by him. Also in his translation of the Chinese classic *Zhongyong* 中庸 (often translated as *Doctrine of the Mean*), Gu tried to find Western religious and philosophical termini for Chinese concepts to make the latter more accessible to the Western reader, clearly trying to distinguish himself from sinological-philological translations à la James Legge,<sup>31</sup> which sinologists held against him in return. He believed this to be legitimate in accordance with the credo he adopted from Wordsworth: the way of representation (*the manner*) is crucial for communicating the content (*the matter*). Thus, the translator needed to put himself into the state of mind of the ancient sages in order to transfer the original meaning. In other words, Gu claimed to be united with the sages of ancient times

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<sup>30</sup> Gu explicitly referred to Zhu Xi 朱熹. His understanding of Confucianism was supposedly mostly derived from Zhang Zhidong and his entourage.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Gu's introduction to his translation of the *Zhongyong*, pp. 7-8 (GU 1956).

spiritually – an approach which he claimed was difficult to realise “living in this modern world of the ‘civilisation of progress’”.<sup>32</sup>

There is of course no “new learning” in all this [an allusion to the Western shaped curricula, which used to be propagated in China at that time], but what is better, there is *true* learning in it. The enunciation of it in some form or other is to be found in the best literature of every nation that has ever had a civilisation; and what is most remarkable [...], the enunciation in the same form and language as it is in this book [the *Zhongyong*], written two thousand years ago, is to be found in the latest writings of the best and greatest thinkers of modern Europe.<sup>33</sup>

The goal of mission-critic Gu was thus missionary: the instruction and – if possible – the conversion of Europeans to his true religion of humanity, namely Confucianism. Though Confucianism was a “Chinese religion”, according to him, it did not know any racial barriers – a fact, that was of particular personal importance to Gu who used to be a cultural – and partly ethnical – outsider originally. He then tried to spread this objective with his work *The Spirit of the Chinese People* which exposed his self-confidence that the value of the Chinese civilisation can be definitely “proven” by being able to give answers to the Western world which was in the process of self-destruction. Here, the central idea was the moral impetus of Confucianism, which did not need any religious superstructure and – one may add – thus in fact accommodated modern man as well. Furthermore, Confucianism to him did not focus on the human being as an individual alone but addressed him as an inner-worldly social being. Instead of ontological speculations, it led to a definition of the human being as part of the community; by this, isolation is overcome and the human being is discovered as essentially a citizen. Loyalty and filial piety which support the state and family were cardinal virtues in Gu’s eyes. With these virtues he defined “Chineseness” and by this he also justified his unshakable loyalty to the abdicated Manchu monarchy. However, one cannot evade the feeling that behind all these assertions of loyalty, there were also Western models of chivalry à la Artus. E.g., his public defence of Cixi’s honour called to mind strongly such chivalrous role models. Thus it seems questionable to which extent this definition of “Chineseness” was, as a matter of fact, “purely Chinese”.

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<sup>32</sup> GU 1956, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> GU 1956, p. 13.

According to Gu, Confucianism as a secular (and thus modern) moral power could replace Christianity since the latter had served its time as a moral authority in the West. In Gu's mind, the most outstanding positive feature of Chinese civilisation was the assumption that human nature is good (a thought referring back to Mencius) – and this is the reason why China, unlike the West, did not need force to suppress assumed wickedness. And this is also why there was generally no need for priests and soldiers (i.e. for spiritual and physical disciplining). – It is quite obvious that this view sugar-coated the historical reality of China but Gu's effort was meant to show to the Western "head person" which he liked to oppose to the Chinese "heart person", that the Chinese civilisation was indeed reasonable. This was an image of China which had already been spread during the age of enlightenment, taken over from the Jesuits. It remains speculative, though, to which extent Gu was aware of that heritage.

Gu attempted to present the Chinese or the "true" Chinese as an ethical person, by this also consciously trying to write against the frequently negative images abroad concerning the Chinese which apparently offended him personally; beyond that he also tried to relativise common observations of Westerners travelling in China such as the lack of hygiene as true but not that important. His efforts, in short, aimed at presenting China as different but equal. In this regard, he appealed to look beneath the "yellow skin" and discover the Confucian nobleman in there, or to cite him from elsewhere: "You must look at China from the essential, moral side, and not merely from the electric-light side".<sup>34</sup>

In the end, he was convinced that East and West, the "true" Chinese and the "true" European were not so far apart from each other. According to Gu, "only very little difference between the East of Confucius and the West of Shakespeare and Goethe"<sup>35</sup> existed but a great deal of differences did exist between these "true" representatives and the popular culture – or in Gu's words: "mob" culture.<sup>36</sup> Here again, a certain aristocratic attitude of Gu is revealed: Gu was hoping for a successful cultural

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<sup>34</sup> GU 1956, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> GU 1924, p. 156.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. pp. 25-26.

synthesis by such “true” representatives or leading figures. It can be assumed that by this he also intended to create an image of himself.

Gu, however, was not the only one in China at that time who thought about a possible cultural synthesis of the East and West. The First World War – reputed to be a declaration of bankruptcy of Western civilisation – triggered a new thinking in China about the value of different civilisations. Obviously, wealth and power, the catchwords of the previous reception of Western culture, were not sufficient anymore for the formation of a new China; on the contrary, they seemed to lead to rivalry and self-destruction. Liang Qichao 梁啟超 and Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 were outstanding exponents of the reconsideration of „Asian values“, as we would say today. Liang Qichao, the former reformer of 1898 who had been consequently attacked by Gu, drew his conclusions after a trip through devastated post-war Europe<sup>37</sup> and soon after invited Rabindranath Tagore to China who praised Eastern wisdom and who also met with Gu. Liang Shuming, who had never been to Europe, developed his well-known model of the three cultural types represented by the West, China and India, taking his version of Confucianism as the epitome of the Chinese cultural type and as the continuation of the path of simple materialistic need satisfaction as followed by the West.<sup>38</sup> Liang was, just as Gu, teaching at Beijing University, but he was much younger. While Gu’s praise of the Confucian tradition at this university where Hu Shi 胡適, in the meantime, voiced his often cited slogan "Down With the Confucius Shop" within the framework of the New Culture Movement, was dismissed as “crazy fantasising” of an old man – especially as Gu defended unpopular aspects of tradition such as the old system of marriage, the traditional role of women, foot binding, concubinage and the consumption of opium with often pointed comments<sup>39</sup> – Liang Shuming’s book *The cultures of the East and West and their Philosophies* (*Dong-Xi Wenhua Jiqi Zhexue* 東西文化及其哲學) unleashed a heated debate on the relevance of traditional values in China. More and

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<sup>37</sup> LIANG 1941. The text originates from 1919.

<sup>38</sup> LIANG 1982 [first edition 1921].

<sup>39</sup> A famous example is Gu’s comparison of concubinage with a tea set: you see one teapot with many cups everywhere but nowhere the contrary.



more students had studied abroad and thus knew the West from first-hand experience. Their curricula and personal environment there had been very different from Gu Hongming's, who seemingly had not visited the West again after his education in Europe in the 1860s and 1870s and who probably kept himself informed only via his contact to Westerners living in China or via the reading of publications. Thus Gu's field of competence in regard to not only Chinese but also to Western culture appeared to be completely obsolete now to the younger generation who was very keen on acquiring only the very latest knowledge to bring back home – a phenomenon that can be also observed nowadays. After all China was seen as backward in development and thus one wanted to catch up as fast as possible. In this regard, older foundations of Western culture did not appear to be directly relevant; but it was exactly these parts of Western culture Gu referred to.

Thus, only few people in Republican China were interested in Gu, who on his part obviously was not looking for a connection with any movement or trend but preferred to stay for himself and instead was sought after rather by foreigners. A famous exception was the Chinese writer Lin Yutang 林語堂 who later also preferred to write in English and was probably one of the most-read Chinese authors in the West in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Insofar as Gu did not continue to make an impact on the West with his own works (which reached the peak in the early 1920s), he was met with a positive response from Lin. The fascination that Gu triggered in Lin began with Gu's profound knowledge of British culture, but it continued with his positive presentation of the Confucian tradition as a conscious opposite trend to common Chinese and Western opinions of his time. It was not so much Confucianism as such which impressed Lin Yutang but rather Gu's nonconformism. Lin as well had gone through an atypical upbringing: he grew up in a Presbyterian minister's family which had been Christianised for generations; he later complained that his upbringing had alienated him from his own, i.e. Chinese tradition. Lin saw himself as an "imitation China man" – if one may modify Gu's self-description of being an "imitation Western man" – and regarded Gu as his model of how to apparently confidently compensate cultural

alienation. There was a further aspect that fascinated Lin with Gu: his courage to arrive independently at his own moral judgements. Gu had never been a simple nationalist who wanted to defame the West or even coquet with China's potential global power in the sense of a *China can say no* – as the title of a notorious Chinese book of 1996 goes with which significantly former Chinese students in the USA – in the context of the Taiwan crisis and even more significantly in unacknowledged imitation of a Japanese model! – wanted to demonstrate national confidence.<sup>40</sup> One might recall here that this was also the phase of prophecies about the “pacific century” in the West, which was alluded to in the beginning. Gu was also not in line with modern neo-Confucians, who commonly understood Liang Shuming's book as their historical starting point and who, by means of Western philosophy, wanted to newly interpret and update Confucianism, political implications intended. In comparison to that, Gu's intellectual stature was much smaller. He was no philosopher, though very often called one, but he rather was an early missionary of a possible cultural synthesis based on morals, and this was probably the main reason why Lin Yutang admired him. Gu as well as Lin were both primarily concerned with demonstrating the respectability of Chinese culture to a Western audience. Thus their objective was – to take up Gu's book title – to defend China against the occident. This however required that both of them were not only acquainted with Western culture but also made it, to a certain extent, into the starting point of their argumentation. In other words: China's defence *against* the occident had to be done *with* the occident. In this respect, one can speak here of a “self-orientalisation” – to pick up on a popular term. Being atypical Chinese, who were able to “straddle the culture of East and West” as Lin liked to term it, both Lin and Gu felt particularly compelled and competent to draw connecting lines between “East” and

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<sup>40</sup> SONG 1996. Several other books followed this book in a similar vein. The Japanese model, or to be more precise, the beginning of a whole series of similar publications (mostly by or with Ishihara Shintarō), was Morita Akio 盛田昭夫 and Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎: <No (nō)> to ieru Nihon – Shin Nichi-Bei kankei no hōsaku (kādo) <No (ノ-)> といえる日本。新日米関係の方策(カード) [Japan that can say “no” – the strategy (card) of a new relationship between the USA and Japan], Tokyo 1989. Ishihara expanded the polemic onto Asia as a whole in a co-publication (*Asia can say no*) with Mahathir, the Malaysian prime minister of the time. In Japan, this co-publication was released in 1994 and just as the first co-publication with Morita (the former head of Sony), it was quickly translated into English. It may be assumed that the Chinese imitators learnt about it via the English versions, which immediately created a stir in the West.

“West”. Gu did this mostly with bold historical or linguistic comparisons, and Lin, who was much better known and productive, did so with extended characterisations of mentalities, fictive renderings or compilations of translations in the form of “wisdom books”.

Today Gu has largely fallen into oblivion in the West like in China – but for a small renaissance of interest in him since the 1990s there<sup>41</sup> – and even Lin Yutang has become obsolete for many. But no matter how much fault can be justifiably found with Gu’s often simplistic way of thinking and his often demonstrated overcompensation of uncertainty about his cultural belonging, his figure can remind both teachers and students of Chinese of one fundamental aspect: whether or not in times when dialogue is often asked for as an antidote against a clash of civilisations, his conviction that the differences between “the East of a Confucius” (here many more names could be added) and “the West of a Shakespeare and Goethe” (here as well, many more names could be enlisted) were not that big, could not rather provide more solid foundation for a fruitful intercultural dialogue than today’s fairly common academic value-indifferent forms of postmodern, radically-relativistic anti-essentialism criticism. (This, however should not be – nota bene – understood as a plea for “essentialism”!) What is most important is that Gu’s position emphasises correlation and not opposition of cultural identity and dialogue. In this context, as Rémi Brague states in an interesting reflection on the example of Europe, a sustainable “cultural identity” does not exist in dissociation from “the other” but precisely is rooted in it and needs to appropriate it over and over again<sup>42</sup> with the “self-consciousness” (in the double sense of the word) of one’s own hybridity between latent extant barbarism and aimed-at received (and thus taken over) values.<sup>43</sup> (Insofar, the “cultural outsiders” or today’s exiles that have been hinted at in the beginning of this article do, in fact, have a certain “cognitive advantage” precisely because their “cultural identity” is not that self-evident but rather has to be consciously

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. above, note 6.

<sup>42</sup> On the issue of „cultural identity“ see BRAGUE 1992, especially Chapt. 7. (Interestingly, the Italian translation of this book carries the even more profiling title: *Il Futuro dell’Occidente. Nel Modello Romano la Salvezza dell’Europa*. The German translation carries one of the chapter titles: *Europa: eine exzentrische Identität [Europe: an eccentric identity]*).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, final paragraph of this work.

acquired). Gu's standpoint is, therefore, still relevant even though he himself did not always render it convincingly. Despite all his recourses to pre-industrial role models he turns out to be quite modern and "globally" thinking in this sense (which remained incomprehensible to many of his fellow countrymen at his time who were fixed upon modernisation and industrialisation). If we now come back to our initial question about a modern identity construction in China, we do indeed find an important potential for a modern identity here – but not only for a Chinese one. And thus, the perceived need to have to defend China against the occident or the occident against China turns out to be superfluous.

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