

BOOK REVIEWS

Gu Hongming's Eccentric Chinese Odyssey

Chunmei Du

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This book guides us through Gu Hongming's eccentric odyssey with extensive readings of rich historical, archival, and literary materials, as well as newly discovered documents. A substantial contribution to late Qing intellectual history and globalization in the early twentieth century, Du Chunmei's 杜春媚 book is the first comprehensive study of Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘 (Ku Hung-ming, 1857–1928). Most studies on the late Qing period focus on Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), and Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921). Gu Hongming is comparatively much less studied. Yet Gu Hongming's controversial personal journey and philosophical pursuits are worth studying. Du's study turns a common narrative of Eastern adaptation of Western knowledge at the turn of the century on its head. Rather than focusing on the East's reception of Western democracy, modernity, and science, Du's study highlights the West's adaptation of Oriental mysticism after World War I. Du's reading of Gu Hongming adds nuance to the often oversimplified East/West binary, offering new insight into the complex process of cultural exchange at this early stage of globalization.

Throughout her study Du explores several interrelated topics: Orientalism, nationalism versus diaspora/transnationalism, the making of Gu's life/figure/work, and Chineseness/identity.

Orientalism: Using this postcolonial lens, Du Chunmei's rendering of Gu Hongming challenges existing models of both Orientalism and Occidentalism. Du illustrates Gu Hongming's atypical brand of "double Othering," in which he "projected an ideal image of Chinese civilization based on an antithesis of what he perceived as modern Western civilization" (44). Gu, both familiar and foreign to the East and West, was neither purely self-Orientalizing nor Occidentalizing. Unlike Western Orientalists who treat the East as racially or culturally other, or Chinese interpreters of the West who frame everything in Chinese terms, Gu promoted Chinese Confucianism in Western terms. Through Gu's example, Du

shows us that, far from being a binary, the East and West are defined and imagined together. Like many Chinese diasporic intellectuals, Gu did not simply project a Western-imagined East or create an Oriental version of the West. Instead, he participated in and contributed to a complex process of global interaction and coimagination.

Nationalism versus diaspora/transnationalism: Furthering its resistance of stark binaries, this book portrays an intricate, fluid relationship between the ideas of nationalism and diaspora. Gu is both a well-educated, Western-trained scholar and a nationalist who advocates for Confucianism and the feudalist Chinese tradition. Born in Penang, British Malaya, and raised in Scotland, Gu had plenty of diasporic experience and yet embodied the old Chinese tradition. Du's work breaks down the binary of nationalism and diaspora/transnationalism, which I explain further below.

The making of Gu's life/figure/work: In Du's words, Gu was one of those non-Western intellectuals who "had to reconcile their national identity and cosmopolitan worldviews, and they operated in truly global settings beyond local or national environments" (65). As a translator of Confucian classics, he interpreted Confucianism and rendered its philosophical ideas in a way that he believed to appeal to the West. Well versed in both Western literatures and Confucianism, Gu was able to make a cultural shift away from Sinophobia by bringing in new perspectives to the images that were commonly interpreted as backward, like the Chinese coolie, the monarch, and Confucianism.

Chineseness/identity: Gu's story not only sheds light on the fluidity of identity formation but also challenges the boundaries of Chineseness. The Chineseness that Gu put on public display was not one that was "true." It was imagined, and based on himself as a creative counterpart to his own perception of the West. Meanwhile, many features of his background call his Chineseness itself into question. He had a background in Europe, and he was a colonial subject born in Penang, a distant relative of a middle-class Scottish family. Traversing between East and West and past and present, Gu Hongming "could not be contained within the geographic and conceptual boundaries reserved for the non-white," argues Du (119).

To discuss these questions by tracing Gu's life and philosophy, Du divides the book into two parts. In part 1 she adopts an intellectual-history approach to Gu's writings and conservatism. She calls Gu Hongming a major spokesman for Chinese traditions in the world, who not only defends and popularizes Confucianism but also introduces the traditional way of Chinese life to Western audience. Part 1 consists of the first four chapters and the rest make up part 2. Part 2 combines historical, literary, and psychological interpretation to Gu's eccentric behaviors, psychological journey, identity transformation, and symbolic performances.

In chapter 1 “An Inscrutable Eccentric,” Du introduces the biographical sketch of Gu Hongming, and highlights how Gu’s life and ideas challenge the scholarly consensus of his time, which was dominated by industrial power, utilitarian values, and imperialist expansion. Du underscores the major objectives of her study: to give readings of Gu’s identity transformation and raise new questions about the man, such as his racial background and psychological world. Most important, she introduces the lens of “trickster” to reinterpret Gu’s eccentricity. By reading Gu as a trickster-sage persona who performed eccentricity to critique Western civilization, Du brings new perspectives to Gu’s identity transformation and his eccentric behaviors.

In chapter 2, “In Search of the Spirit of the Chinese People,” Du points out that Gu’s ideology, “deeply rooted in the nineteenth-century Western Romantic and conservative movements” (30), was rare in China yet not uncommon in post-Napoleonic Europe. Therefore, Du suggests reading Gu as an epitome of European conservatives. Du departs from existing scholarship which places Gu as an ultraconservative who completely supported everything old and disregarded everything new. By doing so, Du interprets a dynamic relationship between Chinese conservatism and the West. To Du, “combining Romantic critiques of modernism and conservative reactions to radicalism” (30), Gu Hongming contributed to building a hybrid model of the East and West.

Chapter 3, “The Rise of a Spokesman from the East,” presents Gu as a successful cultural informant in the West whose philosophy was well received among European cultural elites as a possible solution to their cultural crisis after WWI. Able to reconcile his national identity and cosmopolitan worldviews, Gu forged authentic identities across national, ideological, and cultural borders. For Du, this talent exemplifies Gu as a “cultural amphibian” who alternates between two worlds and challenged Western hegemonic discourses on civilization during his time.

Chapter 4, “Clash of Religions,” provides a religious context for how Gu’s thesis on Confucianism became possible and significant. Du showcases Gu’s debates with missionaries and evangelical leaders in and outside China and his claim that the missionary goal of moral elevation in China failed completely. Meanwhile, in the United States, many Westerners turned toward Buddhism and Oriental mysticism following their spiritual turmoil after WWI. The declining trust in Christianity made possible Gu’s spiritual East and Confucianism as spiritual alternatives and cultural rejuvenation.

Turning to part 2, chapter 5, “How an Imitation Western Man Became a Chinaman Again,” takes readers through Gu’s early European experience and his identity conversion trajectory from a diasporic subject to Chinese. Gu’s growing up and training belong to a conventional path of “diasporic Chinese professionals,” yet unique due to his Scottishness, especially because Scotland has an

ambivalent and marginal relationship to the mainstream of what we perceive as “Western civilization.” Through close readings of newly discovered documents, Du provides possible reasons for Gu’s identity transformation, including his troubling early experience and overwhelming national humiliation. Du suggests Gu’s identity journey involved more than his performative regrowth of a queue; rather, his search for identity was an unceasing struggle all his life.

Chapter 6, “Projections on a Chinese Screen,” and chapter 7, “To Reverence the King,” offer beautiful readings of the personal and textual interactions between Gu and two British authors who traveled to the East: W. Somerset Maugham and Edmund Backhouse. Du demonstrates the heavily stereotypical “Chinamen” and “Yellow Peril” narratives in Maugham’s works and claims that Gu used Maugham as a venue to express “his repressed and displaced attachment to the West” (126). While showing Gu and Backhouse’s interactions, Du presents Gu’s defense of the empress dowager and Chinese women against Victorian discourses of the time. Since Gu defended women with bound feet, concubines, and singsong girls in China to the Western world, he could be readily seen as someone selling Oriental exoticism to a Western audience. But Du argues for a different reading: shifting Gu from an objectified victim to a performer playing an Oriental “lunatic” against the modern Western civilization, Du sees Gu as an example of reverse Orientalism and self-exoticism.

Chapter 8, “A Trickster’s Trip on a Möbius Strip,” concludes the book by revisiting Gu’s inscrutable eccentricity as perceived in previous scholarship and reinterprets his eccentric behaviors as “intentional and symbolic performances” (158). This reading better contributes to the understanding of “fluid, hybrid, and multifaceted natures of Chinese diasporic experiences like Gu’s” (161). Du’s study presents the complexities of Gu’s identity transformation, which in turn challenges the boundaries of Chineseness. His identity transformation, after all, is “inherently hybrid and Western-Eastern at all times” (169).

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