

Academics as the Profession: A Historical Study of the First Half of Ku Chieh-kang's Life

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Abstract: *Ku Chieh-kang is one of the most important historians in modern history of China. He put forward the idea of 'Ku-shih-pien' and made a great contribution to the transformation of traditional Chinese scholarship. By investigating the text of The Preface to the First Book of a Symposium on Ku-shih-pien, this research finds that Ku Chieh-kang's thinking on Chinese ancient history was shaped by his own personality and experiences: he showed a keen interest in history and a strong spirit of critical questioning in his childhood, and was able to explore his various interests consciously, firmly establishing his belief in academics as his vocation. The years of study in Peking University helped him to complete his scholarly accumulation. Along with his long-term efforts, the idea of Ku-shih-pien was finally developed. Ku Chieh-kang's experience is a reflection of most Chinese scholars of his time, and the examination of the first half of his life helps us to deepen our understanding of the mentality of intellectuals in the Republican of China period.*

Keywords: *Ku Chieh-kang; The Preface to a Symposium on Ku-shih-pien; The intellectual mindset*

1. Introduction

Ku Chieh-kang is one of the most important historians in modern history of China, and he had a strong influence on Chinese historiography by initiating the 'Ku-shih-pien', which is a powerful demystification of the chaotic narratives of Chinese ancient history. *Ku Chieh-kang* is also regarded as one of the representative scholars of the Chinese school of scientific empirical history and has an extremely significant position in modern Chinese historiography.

So far, the scholarly community has produced a large number of studies on *Ku Chieh-kang*. As Peng Guoliang pointed out in *An Epistemological Analysis of Ku Chieh-kang's Historiographical Thought*, The studies concerning about *Ku Chieh-kang* focuses on three main aspects: his life, his historiographical status, and his approach to historical research. ^[1] However, it is pitiful that these existing research findings do not provide a good integration of Ku's life and scholarly thought. In view of this, this study will focus on the first half of Ku's life, and through the discussion of his life experiences to better grasp the generation of his academic thought.

It goes without saying that the formation of *Ku Chieh-kang's* thinking on ancient history was inextricably linked to his life experiences, his personality, and the context of his time. This study would utilize *The Preface to the First Book of a Symposium on Ku-shih-pien*, ^[2] which is one of his most important autobiographies containing his true emotions and experiences, to gain a better understanding of his academic ideas and the first half of *Ku Chieh-kang's* "academic career".

2. Rebellious Bookworm: Ku's Childhood and Adolescence

Ku showed potential as a scholar at an early age, which was inextricably linked to his good family upbringing. As *Ku Chieh-kang* himself said, his family was a scholarly family and his grandparents wanted him to study hard, so they started teaching Ku to read and write at a very young age. As a result of his perseverance and dedication to learning, *Ku Chieh-kang* developed a remarkable ability to read simple ancient books at a very young age, around six or seven years old. This early foundation served as a solid basis for him to independently delve into a vast range of books in the future. ^[3]

Ku had become attached to history during his childhood. His grandparents used to take him out on tours of his city, explaining the historical legends of each site. In this process, he acquired a initial understanding of historiography from the stories told by his grandparents, which gradually led to a keen

of history.^[4] After developing an interest in history, Ku began to experiment with 'historical research': For example, he tried to recognise who were the hundred sons of King Wen of Zhou (Zhouwenwang) and who were the seven of Confucius' seven teachers.^[5] Besides, he also attempted to trace his ancestry through genealogy.

In addition, Ku seemed to have been a natural rebel to *traditional Chinese scholarship*: his teacher asked him to read *the Book of Rites*, but he insisted on *Zuo Zhuan*, because the text of *Zuo Zhuan* is more vivid than *the Book of Rites*. He also read the classical works of Confucianism with a questioning attitude and made conscious reflections on them, and he wrote down many criticisms on his own.^[6] Although most of these questions now seem to be untenable, and many of the criticisms were naive. But it is still valuable for him to have such an awareness of issues and questioning. As the saying goes, 'The child is father of the man'. *Ku Chieh-kang's* behaviour at an early age seemed to have predestined him to become a historian and a rebel against traditional Chinese scholarship.

As he grew older, *Ku Chieh-kang's* passion for scholarship was growing gradually. He had two periods of self-education when he was young so that *Ku could have time to* explore in various bookshops, picking up all kinds of books to read. As a result, he developed a rudimentary knowledge of various subjects, on the basis of which he consciously sought to learn something about cataloguing to understanding the lineage of academic development.^[7] At that time, Ku's had shown an ambitious passion for scholarship, as he wrote at the age of twelve that he had an overwhelming desire to read all the books in the world',^[8] and his enthusiasm for scholarship was exceedingly evident. His questioning spirit, moreover, did not diminish with age, but grew with his knowledge: he questioned the wisdom and competence of his private teachers and gradually began to distrust what they taught him;^[9] What is more, he was denied admission by the Jiangsu Cungu Academy for criticising Zheng Xuan's commentaries.^[10]

Apart from reading, he also had demonstrates a strong desire on landscapes, literature and political activities,^[11] and his love of political activities in particular once led *Ku Chieh-kang* to divert his attention from reading and he joined *Shehuidang*, which was a revolutionary group in the late Qing Dynasty. However, Ku found that most of the members in this organisation were just talking about their ideals and had no real determination to change society, he chose to leave the organisation after a year and a half.^[12] Through this case, Ku also discovered that he did not have the ability to organise political movements, and after this he drifted away from different kinds of political organisations. It goes without saying that the experience of adolescence was critical to Ku, as E. Erikson suggests, the developmental task for children between the ages of twelve and eighteen is to establish self-identity, avoid role confusion, and experience the fulfilment of loyalty.^[13] It was during this period that *Ku Chieh-kang* identified what he loved and realised what he was not suited to do, which was very important for him to make the right choices for his life later on.

By reviewing Ku's childhood and adolescence, it could be obviously witnessed that his family's enlightenment laid the foundation for Ku's basic academic skills. Moreover, Ku's had already shown his academic rebelliousness, as he thought independently and questioned academic authority, which is a quality essential to a good scholar. What is more, he was able to explore his own preferences freely in his adolescence, recognising what he was suited to and what he was not. It could be said that the experiences of Ku's childhood and adolescence had gradually pushed him towards the path of scholarship.

3. Academic build-up period: Ku's Study Days at Peking University

When *Ku Chieh-kang* was 21 years old, he arrived at Peking University for his matriculation. In a sense, this period in Beijing was the most important for *Ku Chieh-kang*, because Beijing was the cultural and academic centre of the Republic of China, there are many leading scholars and richest cultural resources of the time. It was in this special area of Beijing that *Ku Chieh-kang* received his rigorous academic training and completed his academic accumulation, which laid the foundation for his later research in ancient history of China.

To begin with, *Ku Chieh-kang* drew some useful inspiration from the rich cultural resources of Beijing. In the words of Ku himself, Beijing was then a ocean of theatre.^[14] During his matriculation period, *Ku Chieh-kang* travelled around Beijing's various theatres so that he did not do well in his studies. But even so, he still gained some academic insight: in the process of listening to the plays, he discovered that there were considerable differences between folk theatre legends and the narratives of classical books, which made Ku realise that historical narratives are subject to constant change as they

are transmitted. And this realisation is one of the most important aspects of the idea of *Ku-shih-pient*.^[15]

Besides, The students and teachers at Peking University were extremely helpful to Ku: the strict attitude of Mr Mao Zishui in his pursuit of high-level knowledge, the profound learning of Mr Zhang Binglin, and the practical guidance of Mr Ma Youyu and Mr Shen Jianshi. Of these teachers, Zhang Taiyan had the greatest influence on *Ku Chieh-kang's* academic thinking. Although Ku was later much criticized by Zhang as a Classics teacher disguised as a scholar, it is Zhang Taiyan that made Gu aware of the relationship between scholarship and politics, and made him realize that the knowledge in books was only material for researching instead of a standard. At the same time, Ku learned from him the spirit of not doing scholarship for merit during Ku's studies.^[16]

There is no doubt that it was these teachers and friends that broadened *Ku Chieh-kang's* academic horizons and developed his relatively solid academic skills. As mentioned previously, Beijing was the cultural centre of China at the time, where all kinds of cultural resources converged, and its rich collection of books, various kinds of scholarly trends, and even its rich and varied theatrical productions all provided *Ku Chieh-kang* with the material and inspiration to build his research in ancient history. In this particular field of Beijing, Ku's habits gradually changed: his old gobbled-up way of reading was improved, and he moved from a 'questioning everything' approach to a more academic one: His original academic goal of deconstructing everything gradually changed to trying to construct something valuable.

During his days of study in Beijing, under the influence of many outstanding teachers and friends, *Ku Chieh-kang's* academic ambitions were further accentuated: dissatisfied with the classification of classical Chinese catalogues, he sought to reclassify and reorganize the classical works of China using the classification of modern academic methodology;^[17] in addition to this, *Ku Chieh-kang* wanted to thoroughly expose the inadequacies of traditional Chinese philosophy through the study of philosophy. Although *Ku Chieh-kang* himself in hindsight admitted that he would never have been able to accomplish these tasks on his own, he still gained many valuable insights from his scholarly explorations, which could be considered a valuable asset for his future academic research.^[18]

In conclusion, *Ku Chieh-kang's* understanding of scholarship deepened and his approach to learning matured during his years in Beijing. This was not only related to the special cultural environment of Beijing, but also the result of *Ku Chieh-kang's* conscious efforts at scholarly exploration. The academic atmosphere of Beijing greatly contributed to Ku's academic growth and enabled him to gain an initial understanding of the purpose and meaning of scholarship. What is more, *Ku Chieh-kang* continued his youthful nature, his enthusiasm for scholarly research and his courage to question authority. It can be said that his time in Beijing was a time when *Ku Chieh-kang* changed from being a "learner" to a "scholar".

4. The final formulation of the idea of *Ku-shih-pien*

During the period when *Ku Chieh-kang* was studying at Peking University, the whole of society was in a state of political and cultural upheaval. Bitter in the face of reality, Ku chose to major in philosophy, hoping to figure out what he had seen in those chaotic years and bringing Traditional Chinese Scholarship with a new lease of life on his own.^[19] During his time in the philosophy department, he was most influenced by Hu Shih's course on the History of Chinese Philosophy, which dropped the mythology of Three Emperors and Five Emperors, which was thought to be authentic in the past, and began directly with King Xuan of the Zhou (Zhouxuanwang).^[20] This approach reinforced *Ku Chieh-kang's* notion that the narrative of ancient Chinese history is mostly absurd, and perhaps the origins of his idea of *Ku-shih-pien* can be traced back to this. At the same time that Ku was studying for his undergraduate degree, the New Culture Movement was in full swing, and traditional scholarship was being attacked from all sides of academic community. In the social environment of the New Culture Movement, *Ku Chieh-kang's* academic rebellious character was further stimulated, which made him gradually developed the courage to overturn the previous academic system gradually. It is no wonder that *Ku Chieh-kang's* statement, 'The reason why I have developed this scholarly opinion is the a combination of the influence of the circumstances, my real-life encounters and my own personality'.^[21]

It is obvious that even though the circumstances, personalities and real-life encounters had all come together, *Ku Chieh-kang's* ideas on ancient history had gone through a relatively long gestation period. Although *Ku Chieh-kang's* questioning of ancient history had been around for a long time, it was more

of a vague feeling and far from a systematic theory like the one he later developed. Ku first drew inspiration from poems with similar content but different main themes,^[22] and then he drew on Hu Shih's approach to history to identify the ancient on the basis of his predecessors' identification of apocryphal books. To achieve this goal, Ku did a great deal of historical crawling and examining ancient editions. At this time, the advantages of Beijing as a national academic centre were once again highlighted, and *Ku Chieh-kang's* academic work was greatly aided by his ability to consult with other outstanding scholars in Beijing, to learn about new research findings in ancient history, and to consult a large number of written materials, in the process of which *Ku Chieh-kang's* academic horizons were further broadened. Eventually, in his inquiry into the historical status of Yao, Shun and Yu, which were regarded as some of China's first monarchs in the past. He developed his most famous hypothesis - that historical narrative of ancient China is accumulated in layers, and that the order of occurrence and the ordering system is precisely the reverse.^[23] To be more precise, The system of ancient history described in the ancient books of the Warring States, Qin and Han dynasties is an accumulation of successive myths from different eras, and the order in which the different myths and legends of the ancient emperors occurred is the opposite of the order in which the ancient history system is described in the ancient books. On the basis of this hypothesis, *Ku Chieh-kang* then refined it, culminating in the famous article *In the Discussion of Ancient History with Qian Xuantong* in the *Journal of Reading*, which is a legend in the historiography of modern China. At this point, the system of *Ku Chieh-kang's* thought on ancient history was basically established.

Furthermore, what was truly touching was that despite facing numerous hardships and setbacks, *Ku Chieh-kang* persevered in his pursuit of scholarly ideas. He experienced the heartbreaking loss of his wife and grandmother, which deeply affected his spiritual well-being and made it difficult for him to focus on his studies for about two years. Additionally, his countless journeys between Beijing, Shanghai, and Suzhou for various tasks drained him physically and mentally. Moreover, his health deteriorated while in Shanghai. Despite all these challenges, *Ku Chieh-kang* never wavered in his commitment to research. Had he given up, our understanding of ancient history would have remained obscured for an indefinite period of time. *Ku Chieh-kang's* determination and resilience were admirable, as they enabled him to overcome personal tragedies and continue his important work for the benefit of future scholars.

In the last two years since *Ku Chieh-kang* wrote down his autobiography, his academic research had been divided into three main areas: archaeological research, falsification of false historical narratives and folklore research.^[24] , of which, for reasons of financial resources, personal energy and ability, *Ku Chieh-kang* had not gone far enough into archaeological research, while in his falsification of false historical narratives and folklore research, *Ku Chieh-kang* had made considerable achievements on various topics such as *The Image of Yao, Shun and Yu*, *The Image of Meng Jiangnv* and *The Divine Way of the Folk*. By investigating these studies, it is easy to see that *Ku Chieh-kang* almost always used old materials to make new achievements, which also reveals that historians need to have a new awareness of the problem in order to make completely new results.

5. Summary and Discussion

In the last part of *The Preface to the First Book of a Symposium on Ku-shih-pien*, *Ku Chieh-kang* lamented after summing up the first half of his life:

"I can bear my circumstances, I dare to follow my personality, and I am willing not to overlook my encounters. by the coming together of these three, I will be able to build my academic claim."^[25]

This passage by *Ku* is in line with reality. He consciously took up the burden of being a Qing dynasty textual researchers and combined their methodological approach with a modern scientific approach to ancient history, making a mark and withstanding the test of scholarship put on him by the times. *Ku Chieh-kang's* spirit of questioning has been with him since childhood, which had given him a unique sense of questioning; the stage of the old and the new in the late Qing and early Republican periods allowed him to be educated in both the old and the new environment; and the general trend in the intellectual world since the New Cultural Movement has kept his questioning character from being suppressed. It was the combination of these three elements that enabled *Ku* to use the "Copernican spirit" to explore the possibilities of ancient history.

After lamenting the first half of his life, the author's writing turns abruptly, and the style of the Preface suddenly shifts from the bookishness of the preceding pages to a downbeat one. *Ku Chieh-kang* said that his heart was weighed down only with heavy pain and sorrow.^[26] In academic terms, he

suffered from the fact that he had not accumulated enough academic knowledge and could only do a little of this field and a little of that topic, resulting in academic results that were unstructured and disorganised; he also suffered from the fact that the modern disciplinary system had not yet been established in China, which caused him constant problems and pain. He also suffered from the fact that the modern discipline system had not yet been established in China, causing him constant problems and suffering. In his life, he lamented the waste of his time and the oppression of the social reality, which prevented him from conducting stable research and focusing on his study; he regretted the superficiality of his studies as a child, which prevented him from carrying out his research successfully; he worried the dilemma of his livelihood, which prevented him from plunging headlong into the academic ocean. He was also saddened by the dullness of his life, as academics took over the time he spent on hobbies, making his days more and more dull.

These worries of *Ku Chieh-kang* were also the pain of many scholars of his time. During the Republican period, the country was in turmoil, an environment that made it impossible for scholars to focus on their own research, which made academic progress all the more difficult. It was also a period of significant transition for traditional Chinese scholarship, and the task faced by Chinese scholars was itself daunting at that time. Besides, the establishment of a new academic system took a lot of effort, and it was difficult to make a living for scholars. Most of them, however, resolutely embarked on the path of scholarship, just like *Ku Chieh-kang*, who, even though he lived a relatively poor life, was still fully committed to what he loved to do, even going so far as to resign if his work got in the way of his scholarship.

It is obvious to see through this preface that *Ku Chieh-kang* could be described as a born scholar, with a talent for scholarship and a persistence in it. He developed an interest in scholarship from a young age, and his scholarly spirit of questioning and criticism ran through his entire life track. Even when he suffered enormous life changes and his own circumstances in life were as bad as they could be, he persisted in his scholarship and did not give up his academic pursuits. We as descendants know that decades after he wrote this Preface, he was branded unpopular scholars in official circles and was subjected to daily attacks. But he continued to work on the Twenty-four Histories and the Manuscript of Qing History, which he was responsible for proofreading. It is not that Ku was unaware of the difficulties of scholarship, nor that there were no other easier career paths to take, but even so, he resolutely chose the path of scholarship.

Scholarship created Ku's suffering to some extent, and as someone with a high degree of scholarly self-consciousness, he would certainly have explored them in the face of the boundless sea of learning. As Weber puts it in *Wissenschaft als Beruf*: "A civilized man, in the midst of a civilization constantly enriched by knowledge, ideas and questions, can only feel 'tired of living', but cannot feel like enjoying the whole of his life."^[27] A large part of his anguish stems from the reality that there is no end to his life, but there is no end to the knowledge of the world; however, scholarship had brought him the confidence and scholarly spirit that can be found everywhere in his Preface, and had made his name remembered by every subsequent scholar of history. His spirit of "we have destroyed because we seek to build"^[28] would inspire every aspiring academic to move forward.

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