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*Brief Note*

The Origin of the Yellow  
Emperor Era Chronology

During the period leading up to the Chinese lunar New Year, we often hear statements that the coming year will be a number on the magnitude of 4700, e.g., in 2010 CE the Chinese lunar New Year was variously said to be 4647, 4706, 4707, or 4708. These high numbers are said to be the year according to the Yellow Emperor Era Calendar (*Huangdi jiyuan* 黃帝紀元).<sup>1</sup> Although these dates give the impression of great antiquity, my study shows that this calendar was actually created by Liu Shiwei 劉師培 (1884–1919), one of the leading conservative anti-Manchu revolutionaries. Having conceived the calendar as a way of emphasizing the unbroken unity of the Han race and Han culture, Liu introduced it publicly in a newspaper article published in the year 1903. Although Liu’s role in the creation of the Yellow Emperor Era Chronology has been noted by various scholars, both Chinese and non-Chinese, this essay demonstrates that it is unambiguously a product of the early twentieth century, and its dating has no antecedent in either legend or history. Consequently, outside of discussions of modern Chinese nationalism, the Yellow Emperor Era has no relevance for any serious discussion of Chinese history.

The Yellow Emperor Calendar is similar to other long-term calendrical systems with their beginnings in remote or mythological antiquity that often masked nationalistic implications. For example, the Jewish calendar, starting at the creation of the world in 3760 BCE,<sup>2</sup> was devised by adding up the “begots” in *Genesis* and other books of the *Old Testament* – a calendar that is currently used on the coinage issued by the state of Israel. There is also the Tan’ki 檀紀 calendar, starting at the time of

<sup>1</sup> Alvin P. Cohen, *Introduction to Research in Chinese Source Materials* (New Haven: Far Eastern Publications, Yale University, 2000), pp. 398 and 436.

<sup>2</sup> Also followed by many Christians, although some Christians use the year 3761 BCE.

the mythical ruler Tan'gun 檀君 in 2333 BCE, that was the only legally mandated calendar in South Korea from 1959 to 1965, and the Nihon kigen 日本紀元 calendar that begins in 660 BCE with the mythological ruler Jimmu Tennō 神武天皇 that is used by some Japanese nationalists. Then there is the Buddhist calendar, with its beginning variously calculated within the span 543–477 BCE, that has been used at various times in Vietnam and Tibet, and on the coinage of Thailand,<sup>3</sup> as well as presently in some Buddhist writings. All of these long-term calendars create pedigrees of great antiquity for their respective old cultures and belief systems. What about China?

China has a long line of historical and semi-historical accounts which contain records of reign periods for mythical, legendary, and historical rulers. But the records are all dated in the form of spans of reign periods, or are chronologies divided into sequences of uniform time spans – yet none of these calendrical systems sums up the numbers starting from some specific beginning year. The first such system in China was the Yellow Emperor Era Chronology, which begins with the putative birth of the mythical Yellow Emperor (Huangdi), created by Liu Shippei, as mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

Chinese annalists have written many chronologies, some of which start with the earliest mythical culture heroes and rulers, such as Fuxi 伏羲, Huangdi (Yellow Emperor), Yao 堯, and Yu 禹, the founder of the Xia 夏 Dynasty. I have examined the sixteen long-term chronologies that contain entries and/or discussions concerning the Yellow Emperor and/or the mythical ruler Yao, and indications of the durations of their reigns (all other long-term chronologies begin at much later dates). The texts examined range from the *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年 (*Bamboo Annals*; late fourth to early third centuries BCE), through the *Huang ji jing shi* 皇極經世 (by Shao Yong 邵雍, 1011–1077), to the *Jiyuan bian* 紀元編 (compiled by Li Zhaoluo 李兆洛, 1769–1841, et al.).<sup>5</sup> Occasion-

<sup>3</sup> Albert Galloway, *Illustrated Coin Dating Guide for the Eastern World* (Iola, WI: Krause, 1984), pp. 5–7; Cohen, *Source Materials*, pp. 451–53.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Dikötter (*The Discourse of Race in Modern China* [Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1992], p. 116) briefly notes Liu Shippei's advocacy of the Yellow Emperor calendar in 1903, but does not provide contextual detail.

<sup>5</sup> These long-term chronologies, as well as many sources with stories and anecdotes about the Yellow Emperor, have provided material for the compilation of various collections and discussions of Yellow Emperor lore. For example, Mori Yasutaro 林安太郎, *Kōtei densetsu* 黃帝傳說 (1959; rpt. Kyoto: Hōyo shoten 朋友書店, 1970); trans. Wang Xiaolian 王孝廉, 1974, under the title *Zhongguo gudai shenhua yanjiu* 中國古代神話研究 (Taipei: Dipingxian chubanshe 地平線出版社, 1974); Wang Zhongfu 王仲浮, “Shilun Huangdi chuanshuo zhong de jigewenti” 試論黃帝傳說中的幾個問題, in *Zhongguo shenhua yu chuanshuo xueshu yantaohui lunwen ji* 中國神話與傳說學術研討會論文集 (Taipei: Han-hsüeh 漢學, 1996), 1:229–41

ally the durations of reigns over some period of time will be summed up to show how long a dynasty or other historical period survived, or the length of time covered by the chronological record itself, but none of them sum up the accrued times elapsed from a specified beginning. More particularly, none of these sixteen long-term chronologies, dating prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, has accrued dates for a Yellow Emperor Era. In examining these chronologies one must be very careful to ascertain the dates of completion or original publication, because some twentieth-century reprints, whether facsimile or typeset, sum up the reign spans and insert the accrued numbers into the reprint, typically in the margin of a facsimile. Consequently, heedless use of such altered reprints can be misleading.

The second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was a period of vigorous anti-Manchu/pro-Han debate, as well as arguments in favor of the institution of some sort of republican form of government to replace the traditional dynastic structure of rule. The preservation of Han culture, or at least what was viewed as the best aspects of it, was assumed by some to constitute the proper foundation for the new order. But what was best, and in what manner to manifest the best of Han culture, were matters subject to much debate. Among the more conservative proponents for the development of a new form of Han-ruled government that preserved and celebrated Han culture, one of the stronger voices was that of Liu Shipai.

Liu was born and raised in a prominent educated family and received a traditional classical education. Even though he was very culturally conservative, he became a vigorous anti-Manchu/pro-Han, polemicist. His writings expounded what he referred to as China's (implying the Han people's) "national essence" (*guocui* 國粹),<sup>6</sup> and in 1905 he was one of the founders of the ardently nationalistic *National Essence Journal* (*Guocui xuebao* 國粹學報). He studied in Japan during 1907–1909, imbibed heavily the socialist and anarchistic theories and ideologies then current among some of the young Japanese intellectuals, and in 1907 was one of the founders of the Society for the Study of Socialism. But in a puzzling turnabout he returned to China in 1909 to become a regional official in the Manchu/Qing government. After

<sup>6</sup> *Guocui* is the Chinese reading of the Japanese word *kokusui*, a neologism of the late nineteenth century for expressing the new concept of the essentialism of a racially/ethnically homogeneous nation (Charlotte Furth, "National Essence and the Future of Confucianism: The Emergence of Neo-traditional Alternatives," in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. John K. Fairbank [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], XII: 354).

the demise of the Qing dynasty, Liu eventually affiliated with the Republic of China leadership, and in 1915 was appointed to the National Assembly by the president Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916). Liu then became one of the leaders in the abortive movement to restore traditional dynastic rule and make Yuan Shikai the emperor of China. The final two years of his life were spent as a professor of history at the National Peking University.<sup>7</sup>

Liu's collected works, published posthumously in 1936,<sup>8</sup> contain anti-Manchu/pro-Han tracts, writings concerning the glorious history of a unified Han race, as well as historical chronicles emphasizing the beginnings and growth of a unified Han culture.<sup>9</sup> However, not included in his collected works, possibly because it was published in a 1903 newspaper under the name Wuwei 無畏, one of Liu's thirteen pen names,<sup>10</sup> is an essay titled "Huangdi jinian lun" 黃帝紀年論 ("On the Yellow Emperor Era Chronology").<sup>11</sup> In it Liu argues for a new calendrical era that explicitly shows the beginning and development of the Han race and Han culture. He asserts that the previously proposed new calendrical eras – some of which began with Confucius or the founding of the mythical Xia dynasty or with the ascension of the mythical ruler Yao – had not adequately incorporated the foundation personalities and events crucial to the creation of the unbroken history of the Han race and culture.<sup>12</sup> He argues that the most appropriate beginning is with the establishment of the reign of the Yellow Emperor, which he dates in a way that would be equivalent to 2711 BCE. To demonstrate the historically unifying picture created by his new calendar he provides a list of crucial events in the history of China, with

<sup>7</sup> "Liu Shih-p'ei," in *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, Howard L. Boorman, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), II:411–13; Martin Bernal, "Liu Shih-p'ei and National Essence," in *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China*, ed. Charlotte Furth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 99; Michael Gasster, *Chinese Intellectuals and the Revolution of 1911* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 104, 166–77; Furth, "National Essence," pp. 354–56; Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 1, 10–11.

<sup>8</sup> Liu Shipei, *Liu Shenshu xiansheng yishu* 劉申叔先生遺書 (1936; rpt. Taipei: Daxin 大新, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> See especially his *Rangshu* 攘書 (1903; rpt. in *Liu Shenshu*, pp. 749–68).

<sup>10</sup> Zhu Baoliang 朱寶樑, comp., *Ershi shiji Zhongguo zuojia biming lu* 二十世紀中國作家筆名錄 (rev. edn., Taipei: Hanxue yanjiu zhongxin, 1989), p. 495.

<sup>11</sup> A full translation of this article is appended below.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Le Blanc, "A Re-examination of the Myth of Huang-ti," *Journal of Chinese Religion* 13/14 (1985): 52–62; Gao Qiang 高強, "Qingmo de jinian zhi zheng" 清末的紀年之爭, *Huaxia wenhua* 華夏文化 3 (2000): 21–22; Sun Longji 孫隆基, "Qingji minzu zhuyi yu Huangdi chongbai zhi faming" 清季民族主義與黃帝崇拜之發明, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 3 (2000): 68–79.

dates in his new Yellow Emperor Era. His list begins with the eleventh year of the Yellow Emperor Era, i.e., the beginning of his reign, since the relevant lore states that the Yellow Emperor reigned for 100 years and died at the age of 111 years. It is important to note that many of Liu Shipai's example dates vary considerably, up to 423 years, from those that can be ascertained from historical texts. I cannot determine whether the variations are due to Liu's historical viewpoint or to defective arithmetic.

Liu's concepts of racial nationalism and cultural nationalism, expressed in his use of the term *guocui* (national essence) were apparently heavily influenced by the writings of the Ming dynasty loyalist and anti-Manchu polemicist Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), especially by Wang's *Huang shu* 黃書 (*Yellow Book*, the 'yellow' evidently referring to the Yellow Emperor) which strongly denounced the Manchus, and glorified the Han race as directly descended from the Yellow Emperor.<sup>13</sup> Liu's conception went beyond the cultural nationalism expounded by the prominent intellectuals Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), who regarded genuine Chinese culture as beginning with Confucius,<sup>14</sup> and Liu's polemic expounds both his own sense of racial and cultural nationalism as well as being a rejoinder to Kang and Liang's advocacy of Confucius as the progenitor of the Han cultural era. Therefore Liu's argument can readily be regarded as the predecessor of the racial and cultural nationalism that blossomed under the encouragement of the Republic of China government, which projected the origin of the Han race even further beyond the Yellow Emperor to the mythical ruler Fuxi 伏羲.<sup>15</sup> Some scholars, especially Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) and his associates, objected to this deliberate manufacturing of the past, but the cultivation of the self-image of racial and cultural unity as beginning in the far distant past increased in response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, and Gu's objections ceased with the call for national unity in response to the major Japanese attack on China in 1937.<sup>16</sup> Under the Peoples Republic of China the conception of racial origins, and its attendant

<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Furth. "The Sage as Rebel: The Inner World of Chang Ping-lin," in Furth, *Limits of Change*, pp. 113–50, 375–79.

<sup>14</sup> Ya-pei Kuo, "The Emperor and the People in One Body': The Worship of Confucius and Ritual Planning in the Xinzheng Reforms, 1902–1911," *Modern China* 35.2 (2009): 123–54.

<sup>15</sup> James Liebold, "Competing Narratives of Racial Unity in Republican China: From the Yellow Emperor to Peking Man," *Modern China* 32.2 (2006): 181–220.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193–95.

essentialism, has been further projected back to Peking Man in the Paleolithic Era in order to include all the peoples of China under a single umbrella of origination.<sup>17</sup>

A peculiar finding in my study is that prior to Liu Shippei's publication of his Yellow Emperor Era chronology in 1903, John Chalmers (1825–1899) had, by at least 1865, already calculated this mythical ruler's initial reign-year as 2636 BCE.<sup>18</sup> Chalmers apparently made his calculation by summing up the reign spans of various chronologies. James Legge (1815–1897) lists initial reign-year dates of the early rulers in his "Table of Ancient Chinese Chronology," in the Prolegomena to his translation of the *Shu jing*,<sup>19</sup> in two columns: dates based upon the chronology of the *Zhushu jinian* (*Bamboo Annals*) as well as a "Common Scheme" based upon the chronologies of what he refers to as "other histories", although he judges the chronology of the *Bamboo Annals* to be the more reliable.<sup>20</sup> His earliest entry is for the initial reign-year of the mythical ruler Yao: Common Scheme 2356 BCE versus *Bamboo Annals* 2145 BCE. In addition, W. F. Meyers has the date for the beginning of the Yellow Emperor's reign as 2697 BCE in the "Chronological Tables" of his *Chinese Reader's Manual* (1874),<sup>21</sup> and Herbert A. Giles has the date for the beginning of the reign as 2698 BCE in both his *Chinese-English Dictionary* (1892) and *Chinese Biographical Dictionary* (1898).<sup>22</sup> It is most likely that these dates were calculated by summing up the reign spans recorded in the early chronologies noted above. I cannot find any indication that Liu Shippei or any other Chinese writer was aware of the Yellow Emperor dates reported by Chalmers, Meyers, or Giles. Either they disregarded the writings of non-Chinese scholars or were not able to read English, and therefore performed their own chronological calculations.

<sup>17</sup> Sigrid Schmalzer, "The People's Peking Man: Popular Paleoanthropology in Twentieth-Century China," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> "Astronomy in Ancient China," by John Chalmers (1825–1899), in the Prolegomena, p. 96, to James Legge (1815–1897), trans., *The Shoo King* (London: Trubner, 1865). On Text p. 167, Legge acknowledges his use of the year "o" between the years 1 BCE and 1 CE, in contrast to the usage by Antoine Gaubil (1689–1759), who follows the year 1 BCE by 1 CE.

<sup>19</sup> *Shoo King*, Prolegomena, pp. 184–88.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup> William Frederick Meyers (1831–1878), *The Chinese Reader's Manual* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1874), p. 386.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert A. Giles (1845–1935), *Chinese-English Dictionary* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1892), p. 5, and *idem*, *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1898), p. 338.

As far as I can ascertain, the Yellow Emperor Era was not officially adopted at any time by the Republic of China,<sup>23</sup> which officially used a modified Common Era (Gregorian) calendar, with the year denoted as the number of years since its inception on January 1, 1912. However, various writers and important reference books published after the founding of the Republic included dates in the Yellow Emperor Era in their chronological tables. It appears that conceptually the Yellow Emperor Era was securely lodged within popular Chinese culture with its inclusion in the “Calendrical Table of Major World Events” (“Shijie dashi nianbiao” 世界大事年表) in the encyclopedic dictionary *Ciyuan* 辭源 of 1915. This widely consulted reference work cites as sources for its chronology the *Huangji jingshi* 皇極經世 (by Shao Yong) and *Tongjian jilan* 通鑑輯覽 (by Fuheng 傅恆, d. 1770, et al.) – neither of which have accrued dates.<sup>24</sup> Other chronological tables published during the Republic of China, the Republic of China on Taiwan, and the Peoples Republic of China followed suit in listing dates according to the Yellow Emperor Era, including the *Jiyuan tongpu* 紀元通譜 (1930; with prefaces by noted scholars Liang Qichao, dated 1928, and Gu Jiegang, dated 1929).<sup>25</sup>

The following table shows the Yellow Emperor’s dates, with some specifying either birth or first reign year, in the major twentieth century chronologies that list dates for him.<sup>26</sup> Note that the chronologies using the Yellow Emperor Era do not all agree on dates, because the various early chronologies on which they are based report different data and it is therefore not clear as to how the reign spans for the mythical period should be summed up. Thus different conclusions were drawn from the various assumptions used to rationalize the gaps and inconsistencies in the records.

<sup>23</sup> Feng Jiguang 冯继光, “Huangdi jiyuan” 皇帝纪元, *Zhongxue lishi jiaoxue cankao* 中学历史教学参考 7 (2000): 20.

<sup>24</sup> Liu Shipai is not listed among the editors of the *Ciyuan*.

<sup>25</sup> In his 1926 autobiographical preface to *Gushi bian* 古史辨 (trans. Arthur W. Hummel, *The Autobiography of a Chinese Historian* [Leiden: Brill, 1931], p. 81), Gu Jiegang comments: “Did not the official bulletins that were posted on every street and lane in the days of the Revolution [of 1911] state clearly that we were living ‘In the year of Huang-ti 4609’? On what basis was this chronology compiled?” Note that “Huang-ti 4609” puts the beginning at 2698 BCE.

<sup>26</sup> All dates are normalized to the Common Era calendar to facilitate comparison.

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Dates for the Yellow Emperor in Twentieth-century Chronological Tables

All dates normalized to BCE.

20TH-C. CHRONOLOGICAL TABLES	HUANGDI YEAR	HUANGDI BIRTH YEAR	HUANGDI INITIAL REIGN-YR. (= I I <sup>TH</sup> YR.)
Liu Shipei, "Huangdi jinian lun," 1903; and <i>Huangdi hun</i> , 1904		[2711]	[2701]
<i>Ciyuan</i> 辭源, Shanghai 1915	2697		
<i>Lishi tongxi ge</i> 歷史統系歌, Chongqing 1920	[2698]		
<i>Jiyuan tongpu</i> 紀元通譜, Shanghai 1930	2704		
<i>Zhongguo dashi nianbiao</i> 中國大事年表, Shanghai 1934			5141 alt. 4641
<i>Cihai</i> 辭海, Shanghai 1937	2698 alt. 2697		
<i>Guoyu cidian</i> 國語辭典, Shanghai, 1937	2d year 2697		
<i>Zhongguo nianli zongpu</i> 中國年曆總譜, Hong Kong 1960			2674
<i>Zhongwai lishi nianbiao</i> 中外历史年表, Beijing 1961	2550		
<i>Zhongguo lishi nianbiao</i> 中國歷史年表, Taibei 1977			2698
<i>Cihai</i> 辭海, Shanghai 1979, p. 4816	[2711]		
Notes that Sun Yat-sen announced in <i>Minbao</i> <sup>A</sup> 民報 that the year is .....	[2698]		

<sup>A</sup> *Minbao* was published in 26 issues from November 26, 1905 to February 1, 1910.

Given the diversity of the dates for the inception of the mythical Yellow Emperor's rule in the table above, it is evident that the Yellow Emperor Era has no relevance to any useful historical chronology. It was created in 1903 to demonstrate the unbroken unity of the Han race and culture as part of a new nationalistic ideology. As such, it serves only to promote Chinese nationalism and, perhaps, to impress the credulous with the antiquity of Chinese culture.

## APPENDIX: TRANSLATION OF LIU SHIPEI'S ARTICLE

(Liu Shipei's article, in which he initially enunciated the Yellow Emperor Era, was first published under the pseudonym Wuwei in the newspaper *Guomin riri bao* 國民日日報, with a date corresponding to July 11, 1903,<sup>27</sup> and some six months later was reprinted, with some revisions and under a different pseudonym, in Liu's book *Huangdi hun* 黃帝魂, which appeared in January 1904.<sup>28</sup>)

*On<sup>29</sup> the Yellow Emperor Chronology*

(With an Appended Table of Major Events)

黃帝紀年論 (附大事表)

by Wuwei 無畏 [pen name of Liu Shipei 劉師培]

The term Nation<sup>30</sup> [denotes] the special characteristics of the people of a state. Every Nation cannot but [desire to] trace itself back to its origin. Who is the original ancestor of the 400,000,000 people of the Han 漢 race? This is the Yellow Emperor, surnamed Xuanyuan 軒轅. This being the case, then the Yellow Emperor is none other than the first person who created [our] civilization (*wenming* 文明) and the one who initiated [our] 4,000 years of [historical] development. Thus if we desire to continue the task of the Yellow Emperor, then *we should use the birth of the Yellow Emperor as the beginning of our chronology*.<sup>31</sup> We observe that of the various states of the Great West (*taixi* 泰西) there is none that does not use the descent into the world of Jesus for their chronology, and the various Islamic countries use the era of Muhammad. But the chronology of Our China (*wu Zhongguo* 吾中國) is entirely composed of the reign periods of rulers. In the recent generation, such people as Kang [Youwei] and Liang [Qichao] are gradually

<sup>27</sup> Liu Shipei 劉師培 (pseud. Wuwei 無畏), "Huangdi jinian lun (fu dashi biao)" 黃帝紀年論 (附大事表), in *Guomin riri bao huibian* 國民日日報彙編 (1905; rpt. Taipei: Dangshi shiliao bianzuan weiyuanhui 黨史史料編纂委員會, 1968), 1:275-79. This Shanghai newspaper began publication in June 1903.

<sup>28</sup> [Liu Shipei], "Huangdi jinian shui (fu dashi biao) 黃帝紀年說 (附大事表), in *Huangdi hun* 黃帝魂; preface dated 12th month, winter, 4614th year of the Yellow Emperor Era [Jan. 17 to Feb. 15, 1904]. The original colophon says: "Printed on the 11th day of the 11th month of the 4614th year of the Yellow Emperor Era [Dec. 19, 1903], published on the 6th day of the 12th month of that year [Jan. 22, 1904]" (rpt. Taipei: Dangshi shiliao bianzuan weiyuanhui 黨史史料編纂委員會, 1968), pp. 1-4. The authorship of the article is given as: "Accounts by numerous descendants of the Yellow Emperor; compiled by a single descendant of the Yellow Emperor."

<sup>29</sup> The *Huangdi hun* version, hereafter *HDH*, reads *shui* 說 "argumentation for," instead of *lun* 論.

<sup>30</sup> The author seems to be using the term *minzu* 民族 in the sense of "nation" as defined by race/ethnicity, rather than as referring to a political entity. *Minzu* is the Chinese reading of the Japanese neologism *minzoku*, which was apparently coined during the 1880s to express the new concepts of nationalism, especially in its implications of a unified racial/ethnic populace (Furth, "Sage as Rebel", p. 131; Liebold, "Competing Narratives," note 1).

<sup>31</sup> Italics here and elsewhere in my translation follow the author's original emphasis marks in the article.

understanding that this chronology is wrong, and they want to use the chronology of Confucius to replace it. I think this is not appropriate. Presumably the principle objective of Kang and Liang<sup>32</sup> is to preserve [our cultural] doctrine (*jiao* 教), and therefore they use the birth of Confucius as the [beginning of] their chronology. I have the *preservation of the race* (*bao zhong* 保種) as the principal objective, and therefore use the birth of the Yellow Emperor for our chronology.

Now, there are three advantages to using the Yellow Emperor chronology. First: Previous to the Yellow Emperor there were few historical<sup>33</sup> events, but previous to Confucius there were many historical events. *Therefore if we use the Yellow Emperor chronology, then the recording of events becomes simple and we avoid the difficulty of [dating] “previous to” or “posterior to” [an event].* Second: The [chronology for] the founding of Japan uses the chronology of Jimmu Tennō 神武天皇 in order to trace back to the beginning of the founding [of that nation]. Although there have been frequent changes in the [royal] surnames of the Chinese imperial state, which is different from the myriad generations of unchanged [surname] among Japanese rulers, still *from ancient to modern times there have always been [people of the] Han Nation ruling China. Are they not those who are the descendants of the Yellow Emperor? Therefore China having the Yellow Emperor is similar to Japan having Jimmu Tennō.* Following the example of Japan, [we should] select what is best for us and proceed accordingly. Third: The form of government in China has reached the extreme of autocracy in which All Under Heaven is the private possession of the ruler. Now if we use the Yellow Emperor chronology then the reign periods of the rulers just become empty terms and the *argument for the nobility of the rulers falls apart by itself without being attacked.*

Alas! At every opportunity our northern enemies trampled on and ruled China (*Zhonghua* 中華). Yet can we say that there has ever been a major transformation [in the Han Nation]? Thus the Han Nation<sup>34</sup> has continued like<sup>35</sup> a string that has never been cut. So if we desire to preserve the survival of the Han Nation, then it is imperative that we venerate the Yellow Emperor. *The Yellow Emperor is the Yellow Emperor of the Han Nation.* If we use a chronology based on him, then this will display a national awareness of the Han Nation. How great is the merit of the Yellow Emperor! How exquisite are the people of the Han Nation!

Written on the seventeenth day of the intercalary fifth month of the 4,614th year from the birth of the Yellow Emperor [July 11, 1903].<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> HDH reads *bideng jie* 彼等借 “those people make use of,” instead of *Kang Liang yi* 康梁以.

<sup>33</sup> HDH inserts *zhi* 之 to balance the parallelism of the following phrase.

<sup>34</sup> HDH reads *di* 敵, instead of *zu* 族.

<sup>35</sup> HDH reads *qiu* 秋, instead of *zhuang* 狀.

<sup>36</sup> From 1896 to 1913, the only year with an intercalary 5th month 閏五月 was 1903. Therefore this date coincides with July 11, 1903; see Dong Zuobin 董作賓, comp., *Zhongguo nian-li zongpu* 中國年曆總譜 (Hongkong: Hongkong University Press, 1960), II.237-40, and Xue Zhongsan 薛仲三 and Ouyang Yi 歐陽頤, comp., *Liangqian nian Zhongxi li duizhao biao* 兩千年中西曆對照表 (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1940), pp. 380-83. In addition, the newspaper in which this essay appeared began publication in June 1903.

ORIGIN OF YELLOW EMPEROR CHRONOLOGY

*Abbreviated Table of Major Events after the Birth of the Yellow Emperor*

The chronology of China (*Zhongguo*) does not follow a linear pattern. Starting from the *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年,<sup>37</sup> the historical chronology of events has endless complications. Now I use the birth of the Yellow Emperor to make a chronology, and align the major events after the birth of the Yellow Emperor as follows [italics in the original table are omitted]:<sup>38</sup>

YEARS SINCE YELLOW EMPEROR'S BIRTH	MAJOR EVENT IN CHINA (ZHONGHUA)	HISTORICAL DATE PER COMMON ERA	HISTORICAL DATE PER YELLOW EM- PEROR DATE	HISTORICAL DATE MINUS LIU'S DATE
11	Yellow Emperor assumes throne			
350	Tangyao assumes throne			
498	Yu of the Xia [dynasty] assumes throne			
940	[King] Tang of the Shang [dynasty] assumes throne			
1586	[King] Wu of the Zhou [dynasty] assumes throne			
1860	The people of the Zhou [dynasty] expel King Li			
1931	The Zhou [dynasty] moves [its capital] eastward to avoid Quanrong [tribe]			
2240	The great philosopher Confucius born	551 BCE	2161	-79
2488	The First August One of the Qin [dynasty] assumes imperial throne	221 BCE	2491	+3
2503	Chen She raises a Change the Mandate [of Heaven]/revolutionary ^ army	209 BCE	2503	0
2605	The Jin 晉 [court] moves [its capital] southward to avoid the Five Barbarian [tribes]	317 CE	3028	+423

<sup>37</sup> Often called the *Bamboo Annals*. This text was discovered in a tomb in ca. 280 CE. It is a chronologically arranged collection of brief statements that seems to have been assembled during the late fourth to early third centuries BCE. It begins with statements about the Yellow Emperor and ends with a date corresponding to 299 BCE.

<sup>38</sup> I have added the three columns on the right to facilitate comparison with Liu's Yellow Emperor Era dates: 1. dates from historical sources in the Common Era calendar; 2. conversion of the historical dates to Yellow Emperor Era dates using 1900 CE = Yellow Emperor Era 4611; and 3. historical Yellow Emperor Era dates minus Liu's Yellow Emperor Era dates.

3300	Emperor Wen of Sui [dynasty] unifies north and south	589	3300	0
3638	Shatuo barbarian Li Keyong rules China ( <i>Zhongguo</i> )	885	3596	-42
3842	Jin 金 enemy conquers the Song [dynasty] capital city; Song [Court] moves southward	1126	3837	-5
3993	Mongol barbarians annihilate Song [dynasty] and rule China ( <i>Zhongguo</i> )	1279	3990	-3
4081	The Grand Emperor of Ming [dynasty] expels the Mongols	1368	4079	-2
4359	The Manchus enter the Pass	1644	4355	-4
4560	Hong Xiuquan raises troops at Jintian Village	1850	4561	+1
4609	Reform of Government under the Guangxu Emperor [Qing dynasty] <sup>B</sup>	1898	4609	0
4611	United [foreign] armies enter Beijing	1900	4611	0

<sup>A</sup> It is not clear whether the author uses the term *geming* 革命 in the pre-modern sense of ‘Change [the possessor of] the Mandate [of Heaven]’ or in the Japanese sense of *kakumei* ‘revolution’, which had recently been introduced to China by Chinese students who had studied in Japan.

<sup>B</sup> *HDH* omits this entire entry. See also note 40.

This table generally emphasizes three types of events: 1. Nation/race; 2. Form of government; 3. Culture (*wenhua* 文化). The entry for the Zhou [Dynasty] evading the Quanrong [tribe], *records the first time a different nation (zu 族) conquered the Han Nation*. The entry for the Jin evading the Five Barbarian [tribes], *records the first time a different nation entered and ruled China (Zhongguo)*. The entries for the Shatuo, Jin 金, and Yuan are *records of different nations usurping<sup>39</sup> the throne*. Entries about Emperor Wen of Sui, the Grand Emperor of the Ming, and Hong Xiuquan are *records of the restoration of the Han Nation*. The entry for the united [foreign] armies entering Beijing is a *record of the Han Nation about to suffer control by Westerners. These are transformational events for the Chinese Nation*.

Why is there an entry for Yu of the Xia [Dynasty] assuming the throne? *This records [the beginning of] hereditary rulership*. Why is there an entry for [King] Tang of the Shang [Dynasty] assuming the throne? *This records [the first time] the Various Lords engaged in Changing the Mandate [of Heaven]*. Why is there an entry for the Zhou [Dynasty] people expelling King Li? *This records [the first time] the common people engaged in Changing the Mandate [of Heaven]*. Why are

<sup>39</sup> *HDH* reads *tie* 僭, instead of *jian* 僭.

there entries for the First August One of the Qin [Dynasty] and Chen She? *These are records of the waning and waxing of princely authority and popular authority (junquan minquan 君權民權)*. Why is there an entry for the reform of government during the Guangxu reign period [of the Qing Dynasty]? *This is a record of [the beginning of] Europeanization imported into China (Zhonghua).*<sup>40</sup> *These are sufficient*<sup>41</sup> *[records] of activities in the Chinese political realm.* The era of the Yellow Emperor is the era of the embryo of [our] culture (*wenhua*). The era of Tangyao is the era of the gradual development<sup>42</sup> of [our] civilization (*wenming*). The era of [King] Wu of the Zhou [Dynasty] is the era of the apex of [our] cultural and political [development]. Thus their *accessions to the throne* are especially noted. However, the great accomplishment of Confucius was to further assemble Chinese learning, therefore there is also a *record of his birth*. *These are the transformational events in Chinese culture.* Besides these three [critical characteristics], other books can provide [more] details. For this reason, I have not recorded them.

### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HDH      Liu Shiwei, *Huangdi hun*

<sup>40</sup> HDH omits this entire reference to the abortive Guangxu government reforms of 1898. Since HDH was published during the Guangxu reign, 1875–1908, therefore reference to a failed reform movement may not have been prudent.

<sup>41</sup> HDH reads *shi* 是 “this,” instead of *zu* 足 “to be sufficient.”

<sup>42</sup> HDH reads *qi* 起, instead of *qi* 啓.