As a founding father of the school of Evidential Inquiry, Gu Yanwu abandoned the approaches of the Song and Ming neo-Confucianists and replaced them with a strong emphasis on scholarly textual criticism favored by Han dynasty scholars. Gu opened the path to a renaissance of studying the ancient Chinese classics, as well as advancing practical studies to deal with specific problems that China faced.

Gu Yanwu was a great scholar during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties who exerted a profound influence over Qing scholarship. He is widely recognized as the founding master of the school of Evidential Inquiry (Kaoju xue 考據學) or Han Learning (Hanxue 漢學).

A native of Kunshan, Jiangsu Province, Gu was born into a wealthy family that had held government posts for many generations. At the age of fifteen, Gu joined Fushe, a literary association that was deeply involved in politics. While Ming China was falling into the hands of the Manchu armies, Gu joined an anti-Manchu resistance movement. The outcome of the Manchu invasion was especially tragic for Gu and his family: his hometown was sacked, his two brothers were killed, Manchu soldiers cut off the right arm of his biological mother, and his foster mother committed suicide by fasting. Gu thereafter became an ardent nationalist and Ming loyalist who, throughout his life, refused to serve the Manchus; he scorned those who served the new dynasty for material benefits. Many twentieth-century Chinese nationalists, when facing the crises of Western and Japanese invasions, were continually inspired by Gu’s most patriotic expression that “every ordinary Chinese has a responsibility” to defend the Chinese civilization.

Gu detested the once-flourishing neo-Confucian studies advanced by scholars like Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529) of the Song (960–1279) and Ming dynasties. Gu characterized the Song neo-Confucian scholars as being only interested in volubly and subjectively expressing their unrestrained opinions on abstract Confucian ethical principles. He further criticized the Ming neo-Confucian scholars for being obsessed with their own inwardly orientated meditative self-reflections on the vague and illusive goodness of human mind and human nature while taking no specific actions to do what the ancient sages said. Regarding these studies as having dealt with no practical problems faced by society and government, Gu satirized them as chan 禪 (a translation of the Sanskrit term dhyāna, meaning “sitting quietly to do meditation”) studies or empty studies.

Promoting a new type of learning, Gu insisted on returning to the study of the Confucian classics themselves and not the willful interpretations of the Song and Ming neo-Confucianists; he argued for an accurate restoration of the original texts of the classics and the correction of textual errors that occurred during the transcribing and printing processes in the past. Also, since these classics were written in ancient times, Gu claimed that philological researches and textual criticism were necessary to understand them. Gu believed that if anyone’s annotations
and interpretations of these ancient classics were more accurate, that should be those of the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) scholars, who lived closer to the time when the ancient classics were written. Gu thus urged scholars to thoroughly study the works of these Han scholars. Gu himself studied Han textual criticisms and methods and was later credited as the founder of the so-called school of Evidential Inquiry (考據學) or Han Learning (Hanxue 漢學), which flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and had a powerful impact on Chinese linguistic (e.g., phonology) and culture studies.

Gu’s task was to clean up the lofty but distorted interpretations of the Song and Ming scholars and return to the simple teachings of the Confucian classics. Gu maintained that the value of the Confucian classics did not lie in their fancy words and sophisticated philosophical points, but in their usefulness in guiding people to behave properly and become filial, loyal, humane, and polite, as well as in guiding officials to govern justly, to make proper laws and regulations, to educate people, and to rectify people’s customs. Gu wrote many short essays, most of which were collected in his Rizhi lu (Records of Daily Knowledge), to clarify and correct past misinterpretations of the classical Confucian texts.

To show how a practical and useful knowledge, rather than the “useless and impractical” one produced by the Song and Ming scholars, could be pursued, Gu was the first in Chinese history to study systematically the phonology of the ancient Chinese language. With the re-establishment of the correct ancient pronunciations of Chinese characters and the understanding of how some pronunciations had changed over time, Gu believed that modern scholars could better understand how original texts of the Chinese classics should be read and interpreted, and thus restore the distortions done to these texts by scholars of the past.

After he failed civil service examinations in 1639, Gu abandoned for good all the lifeless studies-for-the-sake-of-examinations, which focused mainly on memorizing Song neo-Confucianists’ annotations of the Confucian classics and on writing essays that followed fixed styles and format and had no intention of solving any actual political, economic, and social problems. Gu thereafter devoted his full energy to practical learning. Starting in 1657, Gu spent twenty some years traveling throughout northern China until he settled in Shaaxi for the remainder of his life. While traveling, he kept reading books, making new friends, collecting materials from places he visited, and writing constantly. In the early 1660s, Gu completed his practical learning masterpiece, the 100-chapter Tianxia junguo libing shu (The Book on Advantages and Problems Faced by Different Regions in the [Chinese] Empire). The book was an extensive collection of historical materials concerning regional customs, histories, geographies, military defense and supplies, agriculture, farmland conditions, river and irrigation systems, wasteland reclamation, grain transpiration, policies regarding taxations or salt production and trade, social unrests, and so forth. Meanwhile, Gu kept adding short essays and commentaries to his most important aforementioned scholarship collection, Rizhi lu, which remained unfinished at the end of his life. People can find in Rizhi lu’s 1,000-plus essays and commentaries Gu’s rich thoughts on statecraft—government operation and control, methods of selecting officials, taxation policies and management, rectification of ill social customs, and so on.

With all his efforts, Gu brought Confucian studies to a historical turning point where a more rational attitude was developed for handling the Confucian classics and where more practical issues concerning governance, national and regional agriculture, commerce, military defense, and society were to be tackled. Inspired by Gu, more Evidential Inquiry or Han Learning scholars hence emerged who not only reexamined and “objectively” annotated the main texts of the Chinese philosophical, historical, and literary classics, but also fostered a practical, rational, and even scientific approach to statecraft. Their efforts contributed to a renaissance of Chinese scholarly and cultural studies after centuries of dominance of Buddhist teachings and practices and helped to restore a confidence in the Chinese civilization at a sensitive historical moment when the alien Manchus still ruled China. Gu Yanwu’s important position in the Chinese intellectual history lies in the fact that, with his own brilliant groundbreaking scholarly accomplishments, he had laid down the most important foundation for all the new practical studies to blossom in the centuries that followed.

Yamin XU

Further Reading
The Pursuit of Learning

While writing a letter to a friend, Gu Yanwu discusses and criticizes certain men’s pursuit of sagehood.

What then do I consider to be the way of the sage? I would say “extensively studying all learning” and “in your conduct having a sense of shame.” Everything from your own person up to the whole nation should be a matter of study. In everything from your personal position as a son, a subject, a brother, and a friend to all your comings and goings, your giving and taking, you should have things of which you would be ashamed. This sense of shame before others is a vital matter. It does not mean being ashamed of your clothing or the food you eat, but ashamed that there should be a single humble man or woman who does not enjoy the blessing that are his due. This is why Mencius said “all things are complete in me” if I “examine myself and find sincerity.” Alas, if a scholar does not first define this sense of shame, he will have no basis as a person, and if he does not love antiquity and acquire broad knowledge, his learning will be vain and hollow. These baseless men with their hollow learning day after day pursue sagehood, and yet I perceive that with each day they only depart further from in.