CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book looks at how Chinese intellectuals have written about China’s “modern history” through their incessant construction of various, often conflicting, explanatory schemes and narratives since the early twentieth century. More specifically, this study has three objectives. First, it aims to reveal how scholars as well as political elites in China derived meanings from their different readings of the nation’s recent past by conceiving it as a coherent, phased process leading to an ultimate goal. Central to my analysis is the proposition that historical writing on “modern China” has evolved primarily as a response to present challenges and concerns that have faced individuals; to write about modern China was primarily to trace the historical roots of the country’s current problems in order to legitimize their solutions rather than a truth-seeking process or the reconstruction of the past as it actually happened. Therefore, to grasp their representations of modern China, one has to examine history writers in the historical context in which their perceptions of the present and their direct or indirect involvement with ongoing political and social events motivated as well as constrained their rendering of the past. History writing, in other words, was inextricable from their participation in the social and political discourses of their own times and from their embrace or elaboration of ideologies that served to justify their political claims. A basic purpose of this study, therefore, is to scrutinize the changing interpretive frameworks for modern Chinese history in different periods from the early twentieth century down to the present by linking them with historians’ different positions in a given sociopolitical setting as well as
the ideologies they endorsed or articulated—ranging from the Chinese versions of liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism in the first half of the twentieth century to the orthodox, radical, or pragmatic Maoist creeds in the 1950s through the 1970s and the renewed liberal, nationalist, and Maoist traditions in the post-Mao era—which ultimately shaped the problematic, methodology, and philosophy of their historical writing.

But the intricacy of history recounting lies not only in its entanglement with historians’ present-day concerns, which make their depiction of the past inextricable from their subjective biases, but also in the fact that China’s “modern history” itself has been an ongoing process full of uncertainties and yet to be finished. Not only were Chinese historians constrained by the peculiar spatiality found in their writings—that is, their relation to the social and political forces that made history—which directly conditioned their perspectives and perceptions, but they were also bound by temporality, or the point in time at which the historians were situated in the longer, unfolding process of modern Chinese history. Therefore, what they wrote about was not only teleological, mirroring their subjective comprehension of the meaning and order in the past, but also essentially temporary in nature, reflecting only the limited section of the timeline up to the point where they lived and wrote; beyond that point was an unknown future, and the constant flux and twists of history have repeatedly defied historians’ teleological projections of the purported course of history. These spatial and temporal limitations shaped representations of modern China that varied throughout the twentieth century and beyond. The second purpose of this project, therefore, is to offer a systematic account of the successive master narratives as well as the changing and often contradictory interpretations of major historical events in the recent Chinese past; my primary concern here is to determine to what extent historians’ dedication to faithfully reconstructing China’s past was compromised by their commitment to an imagined trajectory of history that served a political agenda.

After laying bare the construction of major interpretive schemes and master narratives, and exploring debates on the most controversial issues in each of the major periods since the early twentieth century, an inescapable question that confronts us is what exactly is “modern history” in China? Is it possible, or necessary, to perceive—or conceive of—“modern Chinese history” as a purposeful, ordered
process with an ineluctable end or to impose on China’s recent past a master narrative that gives the particular section of Chinese history a unitary meaning? Should historians in China—and beyond—deny or ignore the meanings and order, if any, in the country’s past and write about it without a purpose at all? Should they totally abandon the upper-case “History” of the nation bolstered by a teleological narrative and instead remain satisfied with microstudies of lower-case “histories” of isolated, individual incidents and everyday phenomena at the local level, which would inevitably render the recent centuries in China as a cluster of disordered, meaningless fragments? My third and ultimate concern in this study, therefore, is with the question of whether it is possible to represent China’s past in a way that yields meaning without distorting historical realities.

**POLITICAL IDENTITY AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION**

A persistent question for Chinese historians in the twentieth century was how to reconcile their seemingly academic interest in objectively recasting the past with political inclinations that tended to twist their interpretations. Dedication to scholarly research, to be sure, does not necessarily enable one to depict the past neutrally and objectively; in fact, almost all history works that claim to be academic reflect more or less one’s ideological bias, aesthetic disposition, moral judgment, ethnic attitude, and methodological preference. In the historiography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western Europe, for example, “the use of the national past to legitimize (or delegitimize) particular governments and regimes remains as widespread as ever” among contemporary historians (Passmore 1999, 282). But here we can nevertheless distinguish between professional historians who eschew overt engagement in politics and those who prioritize an explicit political purpose in history writing. After all, thanks to the long process of professionalization that aimed to establish history as an “objective science,” historians in the West had to deliberately or at least rhetorically separate their political commitments from their scholarly work, no matter how unattainable their goal of objectivism was in actuality (Berger 1999, 4–5). In contrast, the politicization of historiography went much further in twentieth-century China. Engulfed by recurrent political and social turmoil that involved incessant struggles between different forces and factions, or actively participating in ideological
confrontations between sharply divided groups of intellectuals, few Chinese historians found it possible to remain politically detached and apathetic in their academic work. Thus, more often than not, historians recast the past differently to express their varying understandings of current politics or to demonstrate the purported causal relations between the past they represented and the political views they upheld. History writing, in other words, was about manifestation of one’s political identity rather than revealing the truth of the past. A certain version of historical interpretation claimed hegemony over all others not because it was any closer than the rest to the realities in the past, but because it resonated with the ideology of the dominant force or served to legitimate the political claims of those in power.

Despite their ideological schism and divergence over a wide array of issues regarding modern Chinese history, however, almost all historians in twentieth-century China have claimed the authenticity of their respective representations of the past without seeking to hide their political commitments. Few have been willing to admit or were aware of how their intellectual inclinations, their political and social biases, as well as their different modes of historical representation might lead to the possible distortion of history and hence varying degrees of discrepancy between their recounting of historical events and what actually happened in the past. Recent Chinese studies of historiography in modern China, too, have been generally contented with explaining what the different traditions and paradigms were in the writings of modern China in the past century, without much effort to explicate how competing ideologies and the ever-changing power relations between rival political forces interacted with the historians’ own intellectual and ideological predilections to shape their historical writing. Even fewer of the historians and researchers of Chinese historiography have shown a readiness to address the question of how the different modes of historical imagination that they have employed in producing the structure and content of narratives have affected their reinterpretation of the past.2

Outside China, historians have endorsed or questioned, over the past three decades since the “linguistic turn” in historiography, the propositions that history is a historian’s subjective construction of the past, that the historian “invented” history according to his or her ideological bias rather than “discovered” history as the past actually
was, and that historical writing is essentially no different from literature to the extent that fiction and imagination have been central to the construction of historical narratives (White 1987; Appleby et al. 1994; Iggers 1997; Evans 1997). Despite the growing skepticism of the possibility and necessity of truthful reconstruction of history, however, an emphasis on objectivity remained a time-honored tradition characterizing modern historiography in the West. Beginning with Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), historians in Europe and North America who espoused historicism had stressed a “scientific” attitude in research. The writing of history was supposed to be based on rigorous and impartial scrutiny of source documents; ideally it should do away with any contemporary concerns, self-interest, bias, or prejudice specific to a certain social class or group. The task of a professional historian, in the words of Ranke, was to study the past “as it actually was” (cited in Braw 2007) or “in its own right, for its own sake, and on its own terms,” as G. R. Elton put it (2002, 59). In fact, few were able to remain colorless, passionless, and evenhanded in interpreting the past; history writing, like all other knowledge-seeking activities, “involves a lively, contentious struggle among diverse groups of truth-seekers” (Appleby et al. 1994, 254). “All history,” Richard J. Evans writes, “has a present-day purpose and inspiration, which may be moral or political or ideological” (1997, 168). But it was equally clear that modern historians in the West rarely treated their work as explicit ideological exhortation or political propaganda; most of them, past and present, committed themselves to the quest for objectivity, which they deemed fundamental to their recognition as professionals. Not surprisingly, despite the challenge from postmodernists and the subsequent “epistemological crisis” since the 1970s, most historians, as Henry A. Turner Jr. rightly observes, still “strive to uphold the standards of Rankean methodological objectivity in their works” (Clark 2004, 1).

Exhaustive and rigorous examination of documentary evidence was also an age-old tradition in Chinese philology. Beginning in the early Qing period in the seventeenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century, it accounted for the stunning success in the recovery of ancient classics and reconstruction of China’s early history. The few Chinese historians who received professional training in the historicist or empiricist tradition in Europe or the United States and developed their career in Chinese universities in the early twentieth century also declared their commitment to
empirical research and detachment from ideologies. But such indigenous or imported traditions rarely found their manifestation in the emergence of modern Chinese historiography, especially in the writing of modern Chinese history in the twentieth century. The historians who wrote about modern China, ranging from the first generation that enthused about the making of “New History” under the influence of social Darwinism in the 1920s to the latest generation that embraced modernization theory in the 1980s and 1990s, all linked their studies of China’s recent past with the stated purpose of national salvation and strengthening or the explicit political agendas of specific groups. The Marxist historiography that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, especially the Maoist radical rewriting of history in the 1960s and 1970s, brazenly prioritized utilitarian purposes over other commitments. Unbiased investigation dedicated to the discovery of the objective truth about the past, which appealed to many historians in the West as a “noble dream” (Novick 1998), simply did not exist among the vast majority of Chinese historians writing about China’s recent history.

A probable reason for the politicization of modern historiography in China has to do with the preoccupation of Chinese intellectuals with the survival of the nation that overwhelmed their original enthusiasm for a Chinese Enlightenment in the early twentieth century. Whereas the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Europe led to the victory of science over religious superstition, the trust in scientific reason, and hence the development over centuries among historians of a shared faith in “scientific” history, or the possibility of discovering the truth about the past with reason and scientific methods (Appleby et al. 1994, 15–51, 246; Novick 1998, 1), few Chinese historians found it appealing or practicable to engage in purely empirical studies of the past in an ivory tower when confronted with crises of foreign encroachment and domestic turmoil. A subsequent and more important reason for the politicized historiography, therefore, is that those most active in writing about modern Chinese history were rarely professional historians; instead, they were first and foremost adherents to the ideologies of political forces they supported. As active participants in a revolutionary or reform movement, they used their interpretations of the past to give the movement a teleological meaning, to shape its guideline and direction, and to inspire future actions of its participants. History writing, in other words, turned out to be the most effective and powerful means
in the production and reification of a political ideology. The primary
goal of their historiography was not to faithfully reconstruct the
past, but to use the past to legitimate present-day action. Histori-
ans siding with different forces thus had different representations
of China’s recent past. Which version of history prevailed and estab-
lished its hegemony as the only legitimate representation of China’s
foregone experiences hinged on the result of struggles between com-
peting forces rather than whether it was closer to the realities of the
past. Seen in this light, truth and knowledge indeed appeared as
products of power rather than cognition, as cultural critics such as
Foucault (1990) and his followers have argued.3

As a study of Chinese historians’ writings in a historical context
in which their academic training and intellectual inclinations inter-
wove with ideological and organizational commitments to shape their
interpretation of the past, this study shows how historians used their
work to rationalize the agenda of certain political forces and how
such forces in turn used their respective interpretations of history to
forge a discursive hegemony, to build group identity, and to enhance
organizational solidarity in the competition for dominance—that is
to say, their views of history were used to legitimize and redefine
schemas of action and therefore became part of history itself.

But this study is more than a study of historiography or ideas
about history and politics in twentieth-century China. It also exam-
ines methods and strategies used by historians to produce histori-
cal narratives that often distort the historical realities they claim to
represent. I shall demonstrate throughout this study that, despite
historians’ assumption that what they wrote was consistent with
what actually happened, they invariably have turned history into
constructed memory through the making of narratives that retain
only the parts of events that fit into their explanatory schemes
and that exclude those that do not. The search for a more viable
approach to the rewriting of modern Chinese history is possible only
after deconstructing the narratives that have shaped Chinese histo-
riography in the past century and led to the discrepancy between its
representation and the reality of the past.

TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Political identity was not the only factor influencing historians’ per-
spective on the past. It was not sufficient to detach oneself from such
commitment and to engage in “professional” writing of history to make one’s representation closer to historical realities. The way a historian constructs the narrative of an event or puts together separate facts to produce a meaningful whole (that is, to tell a story) also affects the degree to which his or her writing mirrors the reality of the past. In other words, the historian’s literary style in writing about history and imagination or subjective structuring of the theme and plots of a historical event or a long-term historical trend are as important as ideological, moral, or aesthetic preference in shaping his or her representation.

It has been widely accepted among historians and critical theorists that the writing of history can rarely proceed without the construction of narratives, including the narrative of a specific event that has its own beginning, middle, and end, and the “master narrative” (alternatively termed “grand narrative” in this book) that links the smaller historical accounts together and stretches over a long period of time with an overarching theme.\(^4\) Historians, however, have disagreed over the relationship between the narrative and the past it relates. For some, narrative is imposed by the writer of history or those in power on a non-narrative world, for the past itself was formless. As an imaginary construction, narrative cannot be neutral; it necessarily reflects the historian’s subjective perspective, his or her aesthetic or moral values, and social or political prejudice. By arranging the individual, fragmented incidents or facts into a tidy and coherent narrative, the historian has to conceal the contradictions and discords of society that do not fit into the unifying story or the meaningful whole projected by the narrator (Clark 2004, 103–104). Narratives, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, are effects of poetic ordering rather than “features of some real action” (1984, 39), and their function is to transform the past into something new rather than to discover its truth. For Hayden White, the history thus produced serves only as a “refuge” for those who want “to find the simple in the complex and the familiar in the strange” (1985, 50).

For other historians, however, narrative does not depart too far from the past it covers. “Storytelling,” David Carr writes, “obeys rules that are imbedded in action itself, and narrative is at the root of human reality long before it gets explicitly told about. It is because of this closeness of structure between human action and narrative that we can genuinely be said to explain an action by telling a story about it” (2008, 29). Refuting the claim by many postmodernists that
narratives do not exist in the past itself but are all put there by the historian, Evans argues that in some cases “the narrative is there in the sources, lived and thought by the people we are writing about”; “people in the past,” he goes on, “were consciously living a story they believed in and sought to shape,” although he quickly admits that “many historical narratives have been devoted to providing historical justification or inspiration for political and social movements in the present” (1997, 126–128). The authors of *Telling the Truth About History*, too, state that “we see no reason to conclude that because there is a gap between reality and its narration (its representation), the narration in some fundamental sense is inherently invalid”; “narrative,” they contend, “is essential both to individual and social identity. It is consequently a defining element in history-writing” (Appleby et al. 1994, 235).

The above two views, contradictory as they are, can both be applied, with necessary modifications, to historiography in twentieth-century China, which centered on the construction of narratives. For Chinese historians, to write about China’s past meant primarily to conceive a narrative framework in which the facts could be purposefully arranged by addition or deletion to produce a coherent story that yielded the expected meanings. Each story was thus represented as a distinct narrative to reflect the writer’s own interpretation consistent with his or her explicitly or implicitly stated ideology. Above the separate narratives of events, there was always a master narrative that wove together the individual stories to produce a consistent theme or to give the stories a collective meaning, which could be directly incorporated into an ideology or add strength to an existing ideology. Unlike their predecessors in imperial times, who were largely free of conflicting ideologies, leaving their audience with no contradictory narratives, the historians in the twentieth century were burdened with rivaling ideologies, nationalist, liberalist, Marxist, Maoist, New Left, or neoliberal. Their interpretations of history thus yielded a myriad of varying (and often contradictory) narratives and competing grand narratives, which frequently functioned to distort and obscure rather than illuminate the realities in the past.

This does not mean, however, that the narratives thus produced were necessarily fictitious and extraneous to the past itself. In fact, as will be shown shortly, for politically motivated historians before 1949, what they wrote about modern China mirrored more
or less the history they experienced and imagined. The grand narratives that guided their writing, as mutually contradictory as they appeared, reflected the simultaneously coexisting and conflicting historical processes that shaped the political landscape in China. However, this should not lead to the relativist position that each such contending narrative was equally valid and no one should be privileged over another, as some postmodernists seem to suggest (Clark 2004, 210). My discussions on Chinese historiography in the second half of the twentieth century will show that a narrative or grand narrative could divorce itself from the event or period of history it claimed to represent when the historians’ writing was no longer relevant to their experience and social existence, when they failed to show respect for the sources that recorded the events, when history writing was no longer about the discovery of historical patterns but about legitimating the present agenda, and when only one hegemonic narrative was allowed and accepted as the orthodox representation of the past.

Several factors worked together to shape the narratives of modern Chinese history. The first and most important is a historian’s motivation, as discussed earlier, which in turn had to do with the time in which he or she lived, the challenges that confronted the nation, and the historian’s own political inclination toward national priorities. By and large, two grand narratives competed and alternated to shape the representation of modern Chinese history: revolution and modernization. Both originated in the late 1920s and 1930s as results of Chinese intellectuals’ inquiry into the reasons behind China’s backwardness and crisis of survival, and of their search for solutions to China’s plight. While the liberal and nationalist historians sympathizing or siding with the Nationalist government (1927–1949) created the modernization narrative to highlight the incremental reforms imposed by the state and to support the political aims of the existing regime, the leftist and Marxist historians who supported the communist revolution invented the revolutionary narrative to accentuate the bottom-up rebellions and revolutions in Chinese history and thereby to justify the current revolutionary movement. After 1949, the revolutionary narrative predominated in historical writing in the People’s Republic of China to legitimate the socialist state and to serve the ever-changing needs of party leaders; in contrast, the modernization narrative, which had lost ground in the Mao era, resurfaced and came to dominate the representation of
modern China after the death of Mao because it resonated perfectly with the party-state’s new policies of reform and opening up in the 1980s and thereafter. “Using the past to serve the present” (*gu wei jin yong*) turned out to be a tenacious tradition in Chinese historical writing (Unger 1993, 1–8).

Equally important in understanding the making of narratives is the ideology and concomitant methodology (theories, concepts, and approaches) historians employed to frame and bolster a narrative. Almost all ideologies that informed historical writing in China had a foreign origin; once introduced to China, however, they quickly yielded to the needs of different political forces in formulating and rationalizing their respective schemes for changing realities and recasting the past. Thus, on the one hand, intellectuals who had embraced the Enlightenment values and premised a Eurocentric modernity in their agenda for China’s “modernization” soon retreated from their liberal ground and turned to statism as a viable, though undesirable, approach to state building in the late 1920s through the 1940s. On the other hand, those who had espoused “authentic” Marxist doctrines from Russia, first in the 1920s and 1930s and again in the early 1950s, also switched willingly or unwillingly to the pragmatic ideology advocated by Mao in the 1930s and 1940s, and later the radical ideology of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, to reformulate their account of modern China. In the post-Mao era, at first historians had to couch the revived modernization narrative in quasi-Marxist terms; later they overtly espoused the liberal ideology of modernization theory imported from the West to reinterpret modern China. As China entered the postreform era in the 2000s, when its economy was largely privatized and incorporated into the global capitalist system, Chinese historians were divided into those who continued to adhere to the modernization narrative and the liberal ideology behind it and those who questioned the validity of grand narratives and attempted to rid their scholarship of ideological commitments by shifting their attention from the purported grand process of history to the everyday history of ordinary people.

Finally, to understand how the narratives of specific historical events were constructed, we have to look at the different “modes of emplotment,” using Hayden White’s term (1973, 5–11), or methods by which a certain group of facts were put together through purposeful selection (i.e., to include certain facts while obliterating others) in order to produce a meaningful entity that had its own accounts of
the origins, process, and consequences of events. A historical event thus constructed might have different versions, each of which had its own beginning, middle, and end as well as its own moral. The different purposes or present-day agendas that drove historians to retell the past directly accounted for different modes of emplotment by which they constructed the narratives. As this study will show, to speak for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its struggle with the Nationalist Party (Guomindang), many of the historians who joined the Chinese Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s tended to depict China’s recent history as a series of struggles between revolutionary and reactionary forces that culminated in the eventual triumph the Chinese Communist Party over the Guomindang. They thus eulogized rebellions and revolutions in modern China, depicted peasant rebels and communists as morally impeccable heroes, and at the same time demonized their enemies. For convenience of discussion, I term the mode of narration that characterized the writings of the CCP historians before 1949 as romanticism. The same mode of representation continued into the post-1949 period and took its extreme form during the Cultural Revolution, when radical historians linked struggles between good and evil in history to current power struggles and used the distorted historiography to serve their political purposes.

Pessimism as an alternative mode of representation permeated the writings of non-Marxist, mainstream historians in Republican China. Preoccupied with China’s recurrent efforts to modernize since the nineteenth century, they tended to depict modern Chinese history as a series of frustrations and to attribute such failures to cultural and political barriers inherent in China’s historical traditions and insurmountable for both reformers in the late Qing period and the Nationalists thereafter. The grim realities of political disunity and foreign invasion in the 1930s and early 1940s also accounted for historians’ pragmatic approaches to state making and economic reconstruction; they tended to be realistic in thinking about China’s path to modernity and critical of Western economic and political models, which earlier generations of Chinese intellectuals had wholeheartedly embraced.

In sharp contrast, historians of the post-Mao era, inspired by the modernization program of the new leadership and optimistic about China’s future prosperity, showed an inclination to reinterpret modern Chinese history by accentuating the linkage between
historical trends in the late Qing and Republican periods and the ongoing reform programs that aimed to transform China into a market economy and open it up to the world (i.e., the Western capitalist world). Thus they emphasized in their narratives the positive developments leading to the growth of industrial capitalism, civil society, and political pluralism, which they hoped to see reemerge in the new era. Western influences, which had been equated with the evils of imperialism, were seen as indispensable sources for the emergence of China’s own modernity. Cultural traditions that had been seen as impediments to China’s progress were recast as heritages conducive to capitalist development. Free of the distresses and insecurities that beset their predecessors in the Republican period, the historians of the post-Mao era tended to be more cosmopolitan in redefining China’s new cultural, economic, and political orientations. Optimism, therefore, was the style that characterized their representations of modern China.

The optimistic mode of history writing continued to shape the historiography on modern China as the country entered the postreform era at the turn of the twenty-first century. Consistent with the widespread confidence in China’s prospects for modernization, most historians were content with the master narrative of modernization that has dominated their writing since the 1990s, while the remainder adhered to the outmoded narrative of revolution. However, under the growing influence of postmodern theories and historiography from the West and displaying their commitment to the internationalization of their scholarship, an increasing number of historians have become dissatisfied with traditional historiography constrained by grand narratives and critical of claims by historians of earlier generations on the authenticity of their historical representation. Skepticism is the mode featured in the new history writing that repudiates the grand narratives of Chinese historiography in the twentieth century and questions the necessity and possibility of reconstructing the realities of the past.

The different modes of narration, as outlined above, affected history writing differently. By dramatizing history into a series of struggles between good and evil, the romantic historiography often obscured the aspects of the past that had little or no relevance to the purported theme. After dichotomizing historical figures into the simple categories of demons and heroes, the revolutionary historians also found it difficult to acknowledge the opposing traits found
in thoughts and activities of the highly moralized figures. Pessimistic and optimistic narratives, for their part, reduced the moral color in their representations of history, but the historians’ preoccupation with the failures or prospects of China’s modernization also led them to concentrate on either negative or positive factors behind the frustrations or successes in the past. They thus tended to illuminate part of history at the cost of obliterating the rest of it. Finally, the emerging generation of skepticist historians in the late 1990s and 2000s, discontented with grand narratives and even disinterested in discovering the truth about the past, ran the risk of stripping the most meaningful part from historical writing and reducing their representations of the past to nihilism, despite their purported commitment to reconstructing aspects of history that have been obscured or marginalized by conventional historiography.

All of the factors examined above, the narrative form of historical representation as well as the motivations, ideologies, and modes of emplotment specific to individual historians, combine to explain the varying levels of disjunction between historians’ representations and the reality of the past. This study does not seek to determine whether or not a specific narrative about modern China reflected the reality it claimed to represent. Instead, I probe the historical context in which the various narratives emerged and prevailed as well as historians’ purposes and methodologies in producing the narratives. Therefore, my examination of the Chinese historiography of modern China will follow a chronological order, focusing on the construction and contestation of various narratives during the following periods: the Republican era (from the 1910s to the 1940s), the Maoist era (from the 1950s to the 1970s), the reform era (from the 1980s to the 1990s), and the postreform era (since the 2000s). As an introduction to the ensuing chapters, I delineate below the making of the major historical narratives in each of these periods.

**CONTRASTING NARRATIVES BEFORE 1949**

By and large, two master narratives shaped the representations of Chinese history in the late Qing and Republican period. One depicted that period as a process of evolution or modernization, or China’s departure from an isolated, stagnant society past and its embrace of “modern” ideas, technologies, and institutions borrowed from the West. The other emphasized the theme of revolution or a
series of struggles of Chinese people against imperialism and feudalism that culminated in the communist revolution. The two narratives shared some assumptions that were fundamental to their interpretations of modern China: they both believed in the good of “modernity” (especially the utility of modern science and technology) for humanity and in the necessity for China to become an industrialized society; and they both conceived the transition to modernity as a national phenomenon, assuming the nation-state as the necessary vehicle by which the goals of modernization or revolution would be achieved, and therefore focused on events at the national level or with nationwide consequences. To some degree, these shared cognitions reflected what Paul Cohen calls the “consensual Chinese agenda” (2003, 132–133). But striking contrasts existed between the two narratives, as seen in the different sets of ideological presumptions underlying the two narratives, the perspectives each of them employed in interpreting the past, their respective origins and development during the twentieth century, and the extent to which their representations deviated or reflected the realities in modern China.

Central to the modernization narrative were the following propositions: (1) China was “backward” before its modernization, and the backwardness was attributable primarily to reasons internal to the country itself, especially its cultural traditions and ethnocentric self-perception. (2) Key to China’s modernization, therefore, were influences from the West through the introduction of scientific knowledge and modern institutions. (3) What made this influence possible were the efforts of enlightened ruling elites, who initiated modernizing reforms in defense, economy, education, and finally political systems; modernization, therefore, was essentially an elitist and gradualist movement. (4) A unified and centralized state was one of the indispensable preconditions for successful industrialization and economic development; individual freedom and political divide had to be compromised under a strong state before China was modernized. (5) The ultimate goal of China’s modernization, however, was to create a liberal democracy that offered full protection of individual rights and an economy that combined the efficiency of capitalism in production with the fairness of socialism in distribution.

Based on the preceding premises, the modernization narrative highlighted the positive effects of Western influences on Chinese society, the reform programs of ruling elites, and social-political
movements that contributed to the spread of modern ideas, the development of capitalism, and the making of a modern state. The Self-Strengthening Movement (1860s–1890s), the Hundred Days’ Reform (1898), the New Policies in the 1900s, and finally the “golden decade” (1927–1937) of reconstruction under the Guomindang government thus stood out as the most significant events in this light. In contrast, peasant rebellions and revolutions appeared as deviations and anomalies from the right course of history, impeding China’s modernization and secondary in importance.

As shown in Chapter 2, the modernization narrative found its clearest articulation first in the work of Jiang Tingfu (T. F. Tsiang, 1895–1965), a prominent historian in the 1930s and later a professional diplomat for the Guomindang government. Jiang’s embrace of the idea of modernization reflected a new trend in the thinking of Chinese intellectuals in the 1930s, namely, a transition from their preoccupation with the introduction and popularization of pure ideologies imported from the West (such as social Darwinism, liberalism, Marxism, and anarchism, to name a few) to an increasing concern with the more urgent, practical task of “national salvation” in the late 1920s and early 1930s. What drove Jiang to write about modern China, I shall argue, was primarily his concern with the crises that confronted China in the early 1930s and their solutions. His recognition of the importance of creating a centralized, strong state explained his support for the Guomindang government and disapproval of other forces that threatened political unity; his understanding of China’s disadvantaged position in dealing with foreign powers and of the history of China’s foreign relations also led to his support for the Guomindang’s conciliatory policy in handling Japanese aggression. His writing on modern China, therefore, was more of a rationalization of his opinions about China’s domestic politics and foreign relations than an academic attempt to reconstruct the past.

In contrast, the revolutionary narrative was built on the following premises: (1) China, which was no exception to the universal pattern of social evolution (through the five stages of primitive, slavish, feudal, capitalist, and socialist/communist societies, as formulated by Stalin), had already entered the “late phase” of feudalism and witnessed the “sprouting” of capitalism in the late imperial period; thus, even without the influence of the West, China would eventually evolve into the stage of capitalism in its own way. (2) The
encroachment of Western imperialism interrupted the “natural” process of China’s evolution and impeded, in collaboration with the feudal (and then the bureaucratic bourgeois) ruling class who had been subjugated by imperialist powers, the growth of Chinese indigenous capitalism. (3) Therefore, a revolution against imperialism and feudalism was the precondition for the successful development of capitalism and industrialization in China. (4) But the Chinese bourgeoisie, economically weak and hence politically inclined to compromise, was incapable of completing the task; therefore, it was up to the Chinese proletariat, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, to conduct the revolution by mobilizing peasants as the main force of the revolution. (5) Because of the CCP’s leadership of the revolution and because of the worldwide transition to socialism after the Russian Revolution of 1917, China should move toward the establishment of socialism as well after the revolution.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the revolutionary narrative foregrounded precisely what the modernization narrative trivialized, namely, peasant rebellions and revolutions ranging from the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), the Boxer Uprising of 1900, and the Revolution of 1911 to the communist revolution that succeeded in 1949. For revolutionary historians, it is the successive struggles against imperialism and feudalism that cleared the way for China’s strengthening and prosperity. Gradualist reforms, in this light, appeared as temporary, nonfundamental approaches that could only result in limited progress at best and that impeded revolutionary movements at worst (and hence were reactionary in nature).

The revolutionary narrative found its most authoritative formulation in the works of Fan Wenlan, a trusted historian of Mao Zedong. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, it emerged in the early 1940s primarily as a representation of China’s recent history endorsed by the Chinese Communist Party for two reasons. The first was the power struggle within the Party, in which Mao challenged the “orthodox” interpretation of history based on orthodox Stalinist Marxism and built his own ideological supremacy within the Party. The second was the heightened friction between the Chinese Communist Party and the Guomindang that threatened their fragile alliance in dealing with Japanese aggression, which explained Mao’s need to use history as a weapon to counterattack the political assault from the Guomindang and to legitimate the CCP’s political stance. Therefore, Fan’s work was significant in the history of the CCP’s histo-
riography not so much because it established a foundation for the further development of Marxist studies of Chinese modern history as because it started a new tradition that emphasized the pragmatic purpose of historiography, the use of history for political reasons at the cost of objectivity in representing the past.

The contradictory motivations behind their historical writing drove Jiang Tingfu and Fan Wenlan to tell two different stories about modern China. Not only did the grand narratives in their respective works contrast sharply, but their different perspectives and modes of emplotment also enabled them to depict the same historical events with different and even contradictory accounts of their origins, developments, and implications. The writing of history, as seen in the works of Jiang and Fan, resembles the writing of fiction to the extent that they both involve the use of imagination and emplotment in the construction of narratives and that their historical narratives were “more invented than found,” having “more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (White 1985, 82; italics in original). Behind the different representations of historical events and figures in modern China was the two historians’ motives to rationalize their respective political agendas for changing realities rather than to reconstruct historical realities. Therefore, no matter how contradictory to each other and how far from reflecting the past these narratives were, their different renderings of the past and the present nevertheless contained a degree of authenticity to the extent that they reflected the history that the historians experienced and participated in making. The conflicts and contradictions between the modernization and revolution narratives mirrored conflicts and contradictions in historical realities. Indeed, one cannot imagine a history of modern China without the two contradicting narratives that were essential to the ideologies of the rivaling political forces that played a decisive role in the making of modern China.

FROM DISCIPLINIZATION TO RADICALIZATION: THE MAOIST ERA

The victory of the communist revolution in 1949 marked the end of the rivalry between the revolutionary and modernization narratives. For the next three decades, revolutionary historiography stood as the only legitimate account of modern Chinese history. But
post-1949 historiography was far from unchanging and monolithic during the Maoist era (from the 1950s to the late 1970s). It underwent significant reconstructions, echoing both the recurrent ideological and political antagonism within the Chinese Communist Party and tensions between historians of different generations and social backgrounds. Overall, we can identify two contradictory trends: disciplinization that functioned to curb the romanticized mode of narration in historiography and radicalization that pushed it to its extreme form.

By disciplinization, I mean the efforts to turn the revolutionary narrative developed by CCP historians into a standard representation of China’s past through the creation of a formal interpretive framework, the imposition of a standard approach of historical analysis and description, and the formulation of a set of concepts and premises about the major issues in the field. Before its disciplinization, the revolutionary narrative had been accepted by only a small group of historians and supporters of the Chinese Communist Party, and it was in a state of constant change and uncertainty. Fan Wenlan and his comrades within the Party were able to update and revise the narrative to enhance its vitality and viability in competition with the modernization narrative before it took its final shape through disciplinization. Without a rigid interpretive schema and standard terminology imposed on historians, their writing still showed a degree of openness that allowed them to inject into their interpretation personal views and bias that did not necessarily conform to the Party’s ideology. After disciplinization, however, historians had to write about history strictly within the imposed interpretive framework. Historical facts thus were tamed or “politically domesticated” to adapt to the officially sanctioned schemes that brought order, consistency, and coherence to historical accounts, a situation not too different from the consequences of the disciplinization of historiography in nineteenth-century Europe (White 1987, 72). Rather than a tool enabling people to discover the reality of the past, disciplinization obstructed their view of it.

As a hallmark of the disciplinization of modern Chinese history, a standard interpretive schema was established through a debate on the periodization of the history from the Opium War in 1840 to the May Fourth Movement in 1919. As Chapter 4 demonstrates, central to the debate were historians’ different understandings of the criterion to use to divide the history at issue into a number of periods.
Should modern Chinese history be periodized in terms of changes in the “principal contradiction” that determined the nature of Chinese society? Or should periodization be based on changes in “relations of production” in Chinese economy and society, which seemed to be more consistent with the principles of Marxist historical materialism? Or should the periods be determined according to “surges” in class struggle, which was supposed to be the decisive force in propelling social progress? Most historians in the debate dismissed the criterion of “principal contradiction” despite its central importance to Mao’s theoretical thinking (as formulated in his famous essay “On Contradiction”) because emphasizing the principal contradiction underscored the role of imperialism, which contradicted the anti-imperialist revolutionary narrative. To stress the importance of relations of production, for its part, was criticized as a form of “economic determinism” and therefore non-Marxist. Therefore, what prevailed in the debate was the opinion that favored class struggle as the criterion of periodization. Historians endorsed this opinion not only because class struggle had been used by their counterparts in the Soviet Union as the criterion to divide the history of prerevolutionary Russia, but more importantly because this criterion jibed perfectly with the revolutionary narrative about modern China. As a result of the debate, a new interpretive framework was widely accepted as the only standard one for all textbooks on modern Chinese history.

However, once disciplinized, the revolutionary narrative also became a set of rigid concepts and standardized (and often oversimplified) formulations; it no longer had the vitality to redefine and update itself, the flexibility to adapt to ever-changing circumstances, and the subjectivity that enabled historians to express their individual preferences. Historiography, in other words, was turned from a reflection of lived experience and the expression of one’s individuality to a lifeless, stereotyped representation of the past.

Disciplinization was detrimental to the revolutionary narrative also because it necessarily involved a process of professionalization of historiography, or the transformation of historical writing from a highly subjective exercise serving a political agenda into an academic endeavor to be governed by its own norms and rules. Trained in either traditional Chinese philology that emphasized the meticulous examination of evidence or in the Western historicist tradition, many of the senior historians who had established academic reputations before 1949 continued their methods and practice in historical
research after the communist revolution. For them, the disciplinization of historiography meant not just the application of highly stereotyped Marxist doctrines to the field, but also a reemphasis on rigorous academic training in the profession, which meant erudition in the subject, a solid mastering of source materials, research built on exhaustive investigation of evidence, and judgment that reflected the objective realities in history as closely as possible. In resistance to the excessive politicization of historiography, they emphasized “historicism” (lishizhuyi), or objectivity in historical research. They also maintained their dominance in their field and in institutional administration by implementing strict academic regulations and by creating an administrative hierarchy, introducing a striking inequality between senior and junior faculty members: the former enjoyed full privileges in research, teaching, and institutional administration, and the latter had none.

Thus, there were multiple tensions and contradictions inherent in the disciplinized Marxist historiography. Despite its intention to buttress the revolutionary narrative with an orthodox ideological foundation and despite its goal of making the revolutionary narrative the only legitimate account of the past, the dogmatic application of the highly simplistic doctrines turned revolutionary historiography into mere annotations of the Party’s ideology and hence deprived historians of their originality in addressing present issues and satisfying the ever-changing needs of contending political forces. At the same time, however, despite its effort to make historiography a loyal tool of the party-state for ideological indoctrination, disciplinization inevitably resulted in an emphasis on professional training in the field and objectivity in research, which functioned to resist and correct the ideological twisting of history. When the highly formalized account of history proved to be too inelastic to accommodate the new needs of political leaders and when historians’ professional interest overcame their ideological commitment, disciplinized history reached a point of crisis and became vulnerable to subversion during the radicalization of historiography in the years to come.

The radicalization of historiography, as discussed in Chapter 5, required two steps: the “historiographical revolution” (shixue geming) during the height of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and its resurgence in the mid-1960s that directly led to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The initial goals of the revolution were to curb the tendency in historiography that prioritized “purely aca-
“demic” research without relevance to the present and to promote a new kind of historiography that aimed to serve the immediate needs of the party-state. The net result of the revolution thus was the denigration of the scholarship—and hence the weakening of the academic authority—of senior historians, who had rebuilt their academic prestige through the process of disciplinization and whose standing rested primarily on their professional training and academic achievement, much of which had occurred before 1949.

But the historiographical revolution, I shall argue, was more than a challenge to senior scholars’ academic standing, a form of cultural capital; it also undermined their status as a privileged social group, a form of social capital. Many of the junior faculty members and students welcomed the revolution during the Great Leap Forward precisely because it promised to narrow the gap with the senior historians and because they found new opportunities to participate in history writing, especially in the compilation of local histories and textbooks. Later, when the radicals among the junior historians renewed the historiographical revolution in the mid-1960s, they not only challenged the scholarship of senior authorities in the field and the legitimacy of the academic and administrative hierarchies in universities, but further called into question the ideological inclination embodied in the writings of senior scholars. The historiographical revolution, in other words, was no longer about differences in academic interests and different methodologies in conducting research; the radicals defined it as a struggle between proletarian and bourgeois views in historiography, which allegedly mirrored the struggle between the two classes in the political realm. The goal of the new revolution thus was totally different from before: instead of reversing the academic inclination in historiography, it was to attack the historians who presumably represented the bourgeois line in historical research and to eliminate them from the field.

The revived historiographical revolution thus displays a complicity between the young radicals and party-state leaders: the former used their attack on senior scholars to advance their own status in the field while showing their ideological correctness and loyalty to Mao’s radicalism; Mao in turn used the political attacks on historians as a springboard leading to a full-scale attack on his political adversaries, who purportedly represented the bourgeois line in the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in economic and political areas. In fact, throughout the Cultural
Revolution, historiography served as the most powerful weapon for Mao and his supporters to use in the struggle with their political adversaries. Because of the central role of the reappraisal of historical events and historical figures in the construction of radical ideologies, history also became the most prominent discipline in the humanities and social sciences during those radical years. The writing of history once again showed its value in real political life as it had in the 1930s and 1940s.

However, while its utility for politics increased, the radical historiography departed even further from the realities it represented. Without the constraints that the earlier efforts of disciplinization had imposed on historical writing, the radicals reinterpreted the past as freely as they wanted to advance their political interests. What characterized the radical historiography was a simplistic dichotomy between good and evil, or the revolutionary and the counterrevolutionary, as manifested in the unreserved approval of rebellions and revolutions in modern China and the idealization of rebel leaders and revolutionaries, which contrasted sharply with its caricatured denigration of those who opposed the rebels and revolutionaries. As a tool of political struggle that had little relevance to historical objectivity, the radical historiography was short-lived; it completely lost its value once the political struggle itself was over. It was remembered in the post-Mao age not as part of the historiography that contributed to knowledge about the past, but as a record of confrontations between two generations of historians and between two factions within the Chinese Communist Party in competition for political and ideological dominance.

FROM NEW ENLIGHTENMENT TO MODERNIZATION:
THE REFORM ERA

Compared to the Marxist historiography (including the pragmatic, the orthodox, and the radical variants), the non-Marxist, liberal tradition in historical writing turned out to be more enduring and vibrant in surviving and finally prospering in the drastic political upheavals and transformations in twentieth-century China. Based on conviction in the progress of history, the power of reason, and other Enlightenment values, liberal thinking found its systematic articulation in the writing of history first in the works of Liang Qichao (1873–1929) in the 1910s and 1920s; it continued to shape
mainstream historians’ interpretation in the Nationalist era as seen in the works of Jiang Tingfu and his colleagues, who often reconciled their liberal values with nationalist commitments. After the communist revolution, liberalism as an intellectual heritage and political faith receded but never totally vanished. Integrated into Marxist discourse, the liberal tradition primarily took the form of historicism that tenaciously resisted the Marxist orthodoxy and Maoist radicalism in historiography in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the post-Mao era, as Chapter 6 shows, the liberal intellectuals who had been marginalized and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution reasserted their positions through the “New Enlightenment” movement. Couched in the language of Marxist humanism, this movement sought to reaffirm the values of science, democracy, and individual rights while repudiating autocracy, the cult of personality, and the violation of human dignity that had prevailed in the preceding radical years. The liberal historians played a conspicuous role in the movement and focused their writings on refuting radical historiography while avoiding a direct challenge to the revolutionary narrative.

The modernization paradigm of the late 1980s and 1990s, as demonstrated in Chapter 7, continued the liberal tradition in Chinese historiography. Unlike their predecessors before the Cultural Revolution or in the New Enlightenment, whose liberal inclinations (especially their insistence on independent thinking, respect for historical objectivity, and resistance to the ultrapoliticization of history) paradoxically coexisted with their ideological commitment to Marxism and the revolutionary narrative, the younger generation of liberal historians who contributed to the emergence of the modernization paradigm received their academic training mainly in the 1980s. With greater exposure to Western ideas and less or no obligation to Marxism, they finally jettisoned the revolutionary narrative and embraced the imported modernization theory in place of Marxism as the interpretive framework with which they rebuilt the grand narrative of modern Chinese history.

The modernization historiography of the late twentieth century shared its basic assumptions about modern China with the modernization narrative that Jiang Tingfu had formulated about half a century earlier. They both saw Western influence as the critical factor in China’s modern development, they both formed their basic assumptions about modernization on the basis of Euro-American...
ican experiences, and they both perceived China’s modernization as essentially a process of Westernization. What was highlighted in the newly revived modernization historiography thus were the contrasts between Chinese tradition and Western modernity, as evidenced in the social differentiation between enlightened reformers and conservatives, and in the spatial differences between foreign concessions and Chinese residential areas in treaty port cities, between the industrializing cities and poverty-stricken countryside, or between the increasingly commercialized coast and stagnant interiors. Modernization thus was perceived as the dissemination of modernity (embodied in new ideas, technologies, and institutions) from the West to China, from the enlightened elites to the rest of society, from the concessions to the rest of Chinese cities, from urban to rural areas, and from coastal to inland regions. As a grand narrative, modernization further assumed a linear progression from a traditional, agrarian society to a modern, industrial society through a number of stages, again modeled after the historical experiences of the “modernized” (i.e., Western) nations, and was believed to be applicable to all modernizing non-Western countries.

Despite such resemblances, the modernization historiography of the reform era, I shall argue, was fundamentally different from its predecessor before 1949. Contrary to the tragic mode of narration that permeated the writings of the modernization historians in the 1930s and 1940s, optimism was the dominant narrating style in their historical representation in the late 1980s and 1990s. Unlike their predecessors obsessed with China’s repeated failures and pessimistic about China’s prospect of modernization, the historians (as well as other Chinese intellectuals) of the post-Mao era showed an unprecedented confidence in China’s future, and their optimism was well buttressed by China’s rapid economic growth and its steady integration with the world. Not surprisingly, they were interested primarily in positive signs of China’s progress in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rather than the reasons behind China’s frustrations since the Opium War. Furthermore, unlike their counterparts before 1949 who, after witnessing so many failures in China’s recent history and its present situation, tended to be critical of China’s own cultural traditions and skeptical of Western capitalism, the historians and liberal scholars of the 1980s and 1990s showed both greater interest in the positive aspects of China’s cultural heritage and a greater willingness to accept Euro-American models of modernity.
Equally stark is the contrast between the modernization historiography of the reform era and the revolutionary historiography in the preceding years. Committed to representing modern Chinese history as a process of China’s transition from tradition to modernity, rather than a battle between good and evil, the modernization historians would weave both the enlightened ruling elites and the subversive social forces into their narratives, irrespective of the purported political confrontations between the two groups of people. Furthermore, unlike the revolutionary narrative that highlighted only rebellions and revolutions, turning modern Chinese history into a history of peasants, rebels, and revolutionaries, the modernization narrative greatly broadened the scope of historical investigation to include a wide range of topics pertaining to urban history, business history, social history, cultural history, and so forth, bringing forth the flourishing of studies of modern history under the rubric of “China’s modernization” in the late 1980s and 1990s. But the modernization narrative was no different from the revolutionary narrative to the extent that it is a product of historical imagination shaped more or less by an imported ideology. It “invented” the history of modern China by foregrounding the parts of history that fit the theme of modernization and obscuring those that appeared to be irrelevant to modernity. Peasant rebellions and revolutions, which had been central to the revolutionary narrative, became marginal topics from the perspective of modernization. By looking primarily at areas that showed the signs of growing modernity; by judging growth by criteria unsuited to Chinese settings; and by trivializing economic, social, and political processes where no signs of modernity were found, the modernization narrative ran the risk of distorting history as much as did the revolutionary narrative that it challenged and replaced. Moreover, as the revolutionary historians were committed to legitimating the communist revolution and Maoist policies following the revolution, the fundamental concern of modernization historians was to prove the historical and logical “necessities” of the capitalist transformation of the Chinese economy in the reform era and its integration with the capitalist world under the grand narrative of a linear process of modernization. Both the revolutionary and modernization accounts of modern China, therefore, were products of historical imagination driven by an ideological commitment, rather than results of serious reconstructions of historical realities.

By the late 1990s and the early 2000s, as China had completed
much of its capitalist transformation and increasingly integrated itself with the Western capitalist world—not only economically, but also culturally and to some degree ideologically as well—the modernization narrative had also established its hegemony in the writing of modern Chinese history. The revolutionary narrative, by contrast, had basically vanished in scholarly works and lingered, with little appeal to readers, only in the official rhetoric of the communist revolution. As seen in many other fields of humanities and social sciences, Chinese historiography ended the twentieth century with the eventual triumph of the liberal tradition over its age-old rivals, the orthodox and radical Marxist traditions.

**REWRI Ting H SI F ACTION IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION**

Historiography in Europe and North America has experienced remarkable changes since the 1970s and earlier, such as transition from the investigation of macrolevel processes to microhistory that focus on local events and the everyday life of ordinary people; from a traditional concentration on political history to a new emphasis on social and cultural history; from an alleged commitment to the discovery of objective truth to a thriving interest in textual and discursive analysis and other symbolic dimensions of history; from an explanatory approach of socioeconomic determinism to the method of “thick description” or a more comprehensive analysis of motives, values, and other aspects of the social context of human behavior; and from a linear history based on master narratives of progress, nation-state, and modernization to multilinear narratives that advocate cultural pluralism (Appleby et al. 1994; Iggers 1997; Brei- 

Recent trends in Western historiography directly or indirectly influenced history writing in China in the 1990s and 2000s. We will find that similar shifts in academic interests are also discernable among Chinese historians. What made these changes possible, I shall argue, is the impact of globalization, which has fundamentally transformed China’s economic and cultural landscape. Along with the unprecedented involvement of the Chinese economy in the global capitalist system, the 1990s and 2000s saw a surge in academic exchanges between Chinese scholars and their counterparts in the West, and a large number of books that had an impact on theoretical conceptions or analytical approaches in the humani-
ties and social sciences in the West were translated into Chinese. What inspired the new generation of Chinese historians around the turn of the twenty-first century, therefore, were precisely the imported theories and approaches from the West, and their commitment to the internationalization of their scholarship, a redefinition of research subjects, problematics, analytical approaches, and even style of writing to ensure the compatibility of their work with “international” (i.e., Western) scholarship.

Growing dissatisfaction among the new generation of Chinese historians with the grand narratives of revolution and modernization was another driving force behind the new tendencies in Chinese historiography. To such historians, the contrasting grand narratives that had shaped Chinese historiography in the twentieth century accounted for the obvious fallacies of existing historical studies: by foregrounding relations of production and class struggles, the revolutionary narrative failed to present a rich and multifaceted picture of the realities of Chinese politics, economy, society, and culture in the modern era; similarly, by accentuating the impact of the West and the aspects of Chinese society that experienced subsequent changes, the modernization narrative failed to take into account the aspects of history that had not been affected by Western influences or had not seen the expected modernizing effects.

To overcome the problems inherent to the grand historical narratives, the most innovative historians of the late 1990s and 2000s proposed a transfer of scholarly attention from the major events that had nationwide impact to the everyday social, economic, or cultural life in local communities; from significant figures (political leaders or prominent elites) who supposedly made history to the insignificant, ordinary people who were made by history; from trends or institutions at the national level to customs, practices, economic relations, and social networks at the local, regional, or transregional levels; and from the officially published data or officially preserved archives that represented the bias of the state to written and oral sources scattered in local communities or preserved in the memories of the populace. They placed all these new orientations under the rubric of “new social history” (xin shehui shi).

The “new social history,” therefore, was characterized not only by its embrace of Western historiographical theories, but also by its abandonment of the grand narratives that had defined the writing of modern Chinese history. Unlike the revolutionary or modernization
historiographies that served an explicit or implicit political purpose through the construction or acceptance of a grand narrative, the new generation of scholarship allegedly freed itself of any ideological commitment and therefore found the use of a grand narrative obsolete and redundant. Unlike traditional historiographies that invariably claimed ideological correctness as well as the truthfulness of their accounts, which was essential for making history a powerful tool for building the legitimacy of and hence the popular support for political programs that the historian spoke for, the new generation of historians showed no interest in asserting the authenticity of their recounting of the past. For some of them, to reconstruct the past exactly as it had been was neither possible nor necessary, for their writing about history was not to make people believe what they had written was true, but rather a way to articulate their own academic or aesthetic interests, which supposedly did away with any pragmatic purposes. History, in other words, did not have to be an ordered, meaningful whole, in which every piece of fact had to be fit into the grand narrative; instead, it was to be perceived as what it was in actuality, a chaotic world comprising fragmented pieces of facts. To the extent that an increasing number of historians have lost their interest in guiding their narration of China’s recent history with a master narrative and have shown little interest or confidence in rewriting history according to the actual realities in the past, we might characterize the mode of history writing among such historians as a kind of skepticism, to distinguish it from romanticism, pessimism, and optimism, the three major modes of narration that prevailed in the earlier generations of historiography in twentieth-century China.

The rise of “new social history” thus had contradictory implications for understanding the future directions of Chinese historiography after its desertion of grand narratives. On the one hand, by shifting their attention from ideological interpretation of macrohistorical trends in the entire nation to microlevel investigation of local events and everyday phenomena, proponents of “new social history” were able to move their reconstruction of history closer to the realities in the past than earlier generations of historians. On the other hand, the new orientations in Chinese historiography may turn out to be obstructive to its further development. Satisfied with empirical research of local or regional history, the new generation of historians has shown apathy, if not hostility, to reconstructing a macrohistorical framework (if not a new grand narrative) in which local
and regional histories might find meanings that could not be fully appreciated in local or regional settings. Moreover, contented with the often simplistic use of borrowed concepts and theories without much caution and creative adaptation, they have also lost the motivation to build a more viable and sophisticated set of interpretive constructs to replace those they have deserted. The result, therefore, has been a gradual loss of autonomy by Chinese historians and the establishment of the hegemony of imported theories and approaches in the emergent “new social history” in China.

But China’s ongoing integration into the world capitalist system also offers Chinese historians an unprecedented opportunity to advance their scholarship by redefining the spatiality and temporality of “modern Chinese history” in the larger context of globalization. Globalization, as a transnational phenomenon in world history, can be traced to the sixteenth century or earlier, when a capitalist world system emerged in northwestern Europe and expanded to other parts of the western hemisphere. However, as a discourse that has increasingly attracted the attention of intellectuals and the media, globalization has only a short history prevailing since the 1990s. What made possible the rise of this discourse are not only a revolution in information technologies that brought the different parts of the world closer to one another than before and created a growing global awareness, as well as new geopolitical and environmental challenges in the post–Cold War era that necessitated greater collaboration across national boundaries, but, more important, the rise of a number of large-size economies in the non-Western world (especially China and India), their unprecedented integration with the global capitalist system, and its profound impact on the existing world economic order. Since its origins in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the capitalist world system has been dominated by Western powers, which in turn gave rise to their hegemony in world politics. Until the 1980s, the “global” process of capitalist expansion had been basically a Western phenomenon, in which the “core” countries of Western Europe and North America plus Japan dictated the world economic order, while the “peripheral” countries in the non-Western world were subject to the political hegemony and economic dominance of the former. The rise of the “new economies” since the 1990s, especially the escalation of China to the second largest economy in the early 2010s, not only signified the shifting of the world economic center from the Atlantic world to the Asia-Pacific region
that made the capitalist system truly global for the first time, but also redefined the terms of trade, capital flow, and redistribution of wealth across borders. For the first time, Western hegemony in world economy and geopolitics as well as the Eurocentric conception of “modernity” that reflected the historical hegemony of Western powers faced a fundamental challenge; people in the non-Western world are exposed to new alternatives in their pursuit of economic and political developments. For China, globalization not only means its full integration into the global system leading inevitably to the restructuring of the preexisting world economic order, but also a redefinition of China’s relationship with the rest of the world and a reconfiguration of China’s geopolitical relations.

For Chinese historians, therefore, recounting China’s recent past in the context of globalization means first of all the extension of “time” in modern Chinese history. In most of the twentieth century, the “modern history” in China had been considered a history of revolutions; the triumph of the communist revolution in 1949 thus signified the ending of China’s “modern history”; the post-1949 period, as a living reality to historians in the People’s Republic, was completely separated from the revolutionary past and not considered part of history. In the 1990s, a significant number of historians equated modern Chinese history with the history of China’s modernization; the time of modern China thus was extended to the post-1949 period to cover the longer process of China’s modern transformation that has yet to be finished by the 2010s. Nevertheless, for modernization historians, the ending of “modern history” in China is also easily defined: as soon as China finishes the process of industrialization, urbanization, and democratization, no matter how ill-defined or how Eurocentric these concepts may be, its modern history would come to a conclusion. In sharp contrast, from the perspective of globalization, the “modern history” of China extends well beyond the point when China is “modernized”; finishing the immediate goals of modernization only allows the country to define “modernity” in its own terms; what challenges China after “modernization” is not only redefining its own version of modernity to accommodate new challenges within the country and promoting it as an alternative paradigm for development beyond its boundaries, but also redefining its role in the existing global capitalist system and reshaping the economic and political order within that system in order to effectively cope with the challenges that confront all of humanity.
Interpreting modern China from the perspective of globalization thus also entails the broadening of “space” in modern Chinese history. Despite the importance of external influences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, revolutions and modernization movements in China took place largely within its physical boundaries; the space of China’s “modern history,” in other words, was largely limited to the artificial “nation-state,” which itself was in the making in the past two centuries. But the nation-state will lose its validity as an explanatory tool as well as a historical space when we no longer define modern Chinese history as merely China’s revolution and/or modernization but instead look at it as a grand process of regeneration and revitalization of Chinese civilization in the larger context of its interaction with other civilizations and the reconfiguration of its relationship with other powers in the increasingly interconnected world. In a nutshell, a new interpretation of modern Chinese history in the age of globalization means not only the lengthening of its span to the centuries before the coming of Western influences that engendered Chinese revolutions and modernization movements and to the era beyond the process of China’s “modernization,” but also the widening of its space from within China’s national boundaries to the larger geopolitical setting in which the grand renewal of Chinese civilization has been taking place. All these changes in the content of modern Chinese history, needless to say, necessitate a corresponding change in the approach by which we comprehend the enlarged process and scope of modern China. Speculation regarding what such an approach might be will be offered at the end of this study after the existing approaches and their fallacies in interpreting modern China have been thoroughly examined.