**Introduction**

China’s actual transformation occurred under, if it was not exactly set in motion by, the Western impact (a hackneyed but still accurate description). It made a world of difference, both to the actual process of change and to the perception of its nature, that what might (or might not) have happened voluntarily happened under coercion, that what might (or might not) have occurred through the dynamic of domestic factors occurred under the overwhelming influence of foreign powers.

Jiwei Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*

They [who] are accustomed to sailing on the “Pacific” Ocean can only live through “pacific” days (taiping rizi).

Harold Shadick (translator), *The Travels of Lao Tzan*

As Mary Wright pointed out in a landmark essay written almost forty years ago, many Western observers on the scene in the final years of the Qing dynasty were surprised and delighted by the new dynamism they sensed in the Chinese populace and zeitgeist in those years. As the by-then-venerable missionary-educator W. A. P. Martin wrote in the latter part of 1906, in the preface to a short book brightly entitled *The Awakening of China*, “Had the [Chinese] people continued to be as inert and immoveable as they appeared to be half a century ago, I might have been tempted to despair of their future. But when I see them, as they are to-day, united in a firm resolve to break with the past, and to seek new life by adopting the essentials of Western civilization, I feel that my hopes as to their future are more than half realized.” Wright generally agrees with this assessment in her long essay’s comprehensive description of the period, and the scholarly view that this was a period marked by a pervasive “air of optimism” has persisted as a strong minority opinion to this day.

There can be no doubt as to the scope and scale of the changes that
ranged over Chinese society and its polity in the final years of the Qing, but the matter of the Chinese participants’ attitudes toward them is a question of much greater complexity. To cite but one instance, the initial chapter of Liu E’s brilliant 1903 novel, *Lao Can youji* (The travels of Lao Can), introduces a telling parable of the Chinese empire as a foundering ship that has recently become unable to navigate outside “taiping rizi,” or the “pacific days,” as the author characterized the period before the West arrived at China’s doorstep. Liu’s perception that Chinese institutions were unable to meet the challenge posed by the coming of the West in the nineteenth century was widely shared by thinkers of Liu’s generation and provided the motivation for efforts to deal with this newly perilous situation. With the closing words of his lachrymose preface to *The Travels of Lao Can*—“We of this age have our feelings stirred about ourselves and the world, about family and nation, about society, about the various races and religions. The deeper the emotions, the more bitter the weeping. That is why [I] have made this book, *The Travels of Lao Can*. The game of chess is finished. We are growing old. How can we not weep?”—Liu suggests that an optimistic perspective on the late Qing transformation was far from universal, at least among the Chinese thinkers who contemplated the great sum of the problems with which they were now confronted.

In fact, many, if not most, of the ideas that were brought forward in response to the national crisis were accompanied by a pervasive sense of impasse. This sense reflected, among other things, the fear that adapting too easily to alien ways would result in irreparable damage to the very set of institutions that reform was designed to save—that is, a Chinese culture whose continuity as a unified whole could be traced back thousands of years. Given that China at all times held on to state sovereignty and maintained the use of the Chinese language in its institutions, the period in which it became suddenly insufficient to think only in terms of China is thus fraught with an anxiety growing out of a central paradox—a paradox that can usefully be thought of as the “seamcolonial,” as Mao Zedong put it. The paradox is virtually unique to East Asia in the modern world and describes a situation wherein a nation was obliged, under an indigenous government, to so extensively modify its culture to save it that questions inevitably arose as to whether the resulting entity was that which was intended to be saved in the first place.

In an elegant study of the historiographical ramifications of the 1900 Boxer Rebellion entitled *History in Three Keys*, Paul Cohen wrote that, “in China in the twentieth century, . . . the West has been by turns hated as an imperialist aggressor and admired for its mastery of the secrets of wealth and power . . .” (emphasis added). Perhaps the fundamental problem with our understanding of the dynamics of modern China has been our failure to realize the difficult truth that “by turns” does not quite grasp the
peculiar moment of Sino-Western relations: the West has, rather, been at all times and at the very same time in modern China “hated as an imperialist aggressor and admired for its mastery.” The point of this book is to show a few of the ways in which this dialectic has worked, particularly in the crucial period between 1895 and 1919. This area had been a kind of scholarly marchland, which both students of tradition and students of the modern have sought either to claim as their own or, equally frequently, to abandon, deeming it as the exclusive jurisdiction of students of the other period, but it stands in urgent need of its own paradigm and research protocols.

In our own new century, in which the discourse of the transnational in academic cultural studies has become pervasive, it is too easy to think of problems like cultural translation, the questioning of universals, “postmodern” deconstructions of the tradition/modernity binary, and different positionalities vis-à-vis theory as being the unique products of late capitalism and neoliberalism. In fact, as I shall attempt to show in this study, contests of this sort have a long history. The many coincidences among the definitions of the semicolonial and what was later to be labeled as “neocolonial”—namely, the persistence of forms of colonial domination, primarily economic, even after the achievement of formal independence—are but a few indications of the extent of this history. Recent sinological research has, however, most often been given to treating the late Qing gingerly, generally avoiding grasping the nettle of the trauma that China underwent in these years.

The late Qing–early Republican period falls into what Chinese scholarly periodization has marked off as jindai Zhongguo. This period is, at least from the perspective of the traditional/modern binary that has tended to shape our thinking, located uneasily between “traditional” (gudai, literally “ancient”), or China before circa 1840, and “modern” (xiandai), a term ubiquitous in East Asian languages to signify the modern in most of its senses (i.e., “xiandaihua” = “modernization,” “xiandaizhuyi” = “modernism”). In the domain of American sinology, at least, this tumultuous age between the First Opium War of 1840 and the May Fourth movement of 1919, has inspired more resistance to its very right to exist as a category of analysis than it has attempts at compelling narration of its characteristic features. Could this uncharacteristic Western linguistic failure to find an adequate figure for translating jindai be related to an unacknowledged perception of the period’s resistance to the traditional/modern binary, something related, in turn, to what Naoki Sakai has described as the West’s preference for being “a supplier of recognition [rather] than a receiver thereof”? It must be confessed at the outset that the jindai demarcation makes no evident sense on its face, defined as it is on the one end by the clear po-
itical marker of China’s first war with a European power and at the other
by an act of cultural symbolism for which the precision of the specific date
belies a much longer and more diffuse process. More than that, it seems
methodologically squeezed into an awkward zone between the end of the
High Qing and the birth of what seems at first glance a fully conscious
modernity; it is thus a period that few have ventured to define as a mean-
ingful unit of time. Nor, I hasten to make clear, will I try anything so
grand here. Nonetheless, the crucial final third of this eighty-year period,
from the mid-1890s until the New Culture movement, has attracted in-
creased attention in recent years as constituting a pivotal epoch. There is
general agreement that at the heart of this period lies the convulsive intel-
lectual movement in which the means of understanding the world that
had dominated Chinese thought since at least the late seventeenth cen-
tury was subjected to an unprecedented test, a test that also far exceeded
anything that emerged in the last trial of the ruling ideology in the late
sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The upshot of this process—
at least in the minds of those thinkers who have been best able to attract
the attention of their successors—was that the old understandings were
found, for really the first time, to be fundamentally inadequate.

Prior to Mary Wright’s happy rediscovery in the early 1960s of the
dynamism of the late Qing, the period had been generally regarded by
sinologists as a locus of chaotic failure, even by those who studied it closely
—the reason, perhaps, that many of Joseph Levenson’s key ideas regarding
the paralyzing conceptual impasses that beset modern China are
based on insights gleaned during his examination of late Qing intel-
lectual trends (i.e., the failure of the ti/yong idea, nationalism vs. culturalism,
history vs. value). Even after Wright ushered in an alternative view of the
period, the positive assessments that followed were generally made in the
name of the late Qing as a prelude to “modernity”—as a place, in other
words, where much of the May Fourth agenda had actually been carried
out, but which has been unjustly denied its rightful place in the sun. The
phrase “repressed modernities” in the title of David Der-wei Wang’s Fin-
de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911,
for instance, captures the essence of this sense of the late Qing as moder-
ity manqué. This perspective more than likely results from an inflex-
ible notion of modernity itself, as being something essentially universal
and invariable in its qualities, but even more fundamentally defined as the
Other to that which preceded it. As Benjamin Schwartz noted some time
ago: “[W]hile modernity is not contrasted to change—the acceptance of
change as a value is one of the earmarks of modernity—the change always
tends to be regarded as incremental change within the framework of an
established modernity.”

Even the recent attention that has been lavished on the period has
been conferred in the name of its being the key to the transition between
traditional and modern China, or, in Douglas Reynolds’s words, as “the
first big step in China’s sustained turn-of-the-century transformation
‘from tradition to modernity.’” Such a focus—notwithstanding its ex-
planatory power over the rich array of events that mark the period—can-
not help but contribute to a view of the period as “merely” transitional,
as a zone conducive of either residual traces of the old or hopeful signs
pointing toward the “modern.” Even Wright, in summing up her essay
recording the singular variety of the final dozen years of the Qing, re-
marks that “the roots not only of the post-1919 phases but of the post-1949
phases of the Chinese revolution lie in the first decade of the twentieth
century.” And Schwartz, even as he seems to open up a new perspective
on assessing the past in the passage quoted above, goes on the say that
“some traditions, far from impeding certain aspects of modernization,
may have actually facilitated them in some societies,” thereby in effect
reinscribing a Hegelian teleological perspective of a unilinear historical
progression. In other words, the pull of historical teleology has proved
relentless, particularly in light of the traditional/modern binary that just
does not seem to go away as a characteristic of Chinese studies, whether
inside or outside of China.

This is not to say that the late Qing does not tell us much about what
was to come (and what had just passed or was in the process of passing)
and that the period between 1895 and 1919 cannot be regarded as the site
of one of modern world history’s most important transitions. It is to ask,
rather, that we merely take a momentary step back from placing the age
in the strict perspective of an ineluctably emerging and uniform moder-
nity, a modernity “with fixed characteristics,” to paraphrase the contem-
porary Chinese slogan. Ironically, it is only by thus looking closely at ideas
that could not be implemented or at things that did not necessarily work
out that modernity will reveal itself in its potential infinite variety and
allow us to entertain alternative possibilities as to what might have come
to into being.

As the Chinese government sought to insert its nation into the neo-
liberal world order in the 1980s and 1990s, a slogan came to the fore that
recalled the attitudinal changes that began in the late nineteenth century
and, indeed, served as the rubric under which research on and scholarly
compilation of materials concerning that period of Chinese history were
conducted. This slogan, “China moves toward the world, the world moves
forward China” (Zhongguo zouxiang shijie, shijie zouxiang Zhongguo) seems,
at first glance, an adequate and appropriately upbeat summary of a salu-
tary process. On reconsideration, however, the formulation increasingly
takes on the qualities of Zeno’s Racecourse, where each runner can com-
plete only half the distance to the destination at any given time and thus
can never actually reach the goal. There is no mention in the couplet of any meeting up or taking hold, thus indicating the question begged in the neat formulation and necessarily involved in reaching an accommoda-
tion: should China eventually reach the world (or the world reach China),
what will be the range of possible results, or, more to the point, what will
be the process by which any result is eventually reached? In not taking
up these issues, the slogan seems simply to assume a predetermined end,
thereby once again closing off inquiry into alternative possibilities.

Both Chinese scholarship and Western sinology, whether working
from the paradigm of “modernization,” “enlightenment,” or even “so-
cialist revolution,” have over the years tended to take for granted the in-
evitable of the transformation of modern China into something that
resembles the modern West more than it resembles China before, say,
1850. Given this teleology, the various sorts of Chinese resistance or alter-
natives set forth to this process have rarely been given the serious con-
sideration they deserve, at best being regarded as noble rearguard efforts
to stave off ineluctable and fundamental change. In recent years, some
efforts have been made to derail this notion of preemptive inevitability—
notably, Prasenjit Duara’s landmark *Rescuing History from the Nation,*
with its penetrating insights into the ways in which nationalism polices a Hegel-
ian notion of necessary progress—but there remains a shortage of de-
tailed studies of the process by which the thorny accommodation between
China and the incoming rush of Western ideas and practices was actually
effected.

How, then, to begin to define the period between 1895 and 1919 as
something with its own unique character? It is an admittedly strange beast
that starts with the end of the “Yangwu” (foreign matters) consensus in the
period immediately following the catastrophic defeat by Japan in 1895.
The Yangwu movement—which is the focus of chapter 1—began with real
zeal in the 1860s and was marked by the borrowing of Western technology
even as most Chinese institutions were deliberately left intact. I contend
that the rejection of the comfortable notions of easy grafting of foreign
techniques onto indigenous ways after 1895 was largely built upon ideas
set out in a series of iconoclastic essays published by Yan Fu in that year,
something I take up in chapter 2. Yan Fu’s furious search for an unprece-
dented foundation on which to base reform sparked a new and uncertain
era of possibility, which was tempered by a kind of agoraphobic anxiety
engendered by the very magnitude of the uncertainty implicit in such
manifold potential. It was thus, by definition, a period marked by intellec-
tual and political instability and suffused with blind spots, contradictory
formulations, strange silences, frequent deferrals, and outright misjudg-
ments. In many ways, it was a period that can best be defined negatively—
as a long process of forestalling or deferring the resort to pat answers that
had marked the preceding era, from which Yan Fu and those who followed him sought to differentiate themselves as they worked in this uncertain arena.

The real motivation in sloughing off the predetermined responses that had characterized the Yangwu era, however, was a hard-won and widely held conviction of the failure of the Yangwu movement itself. In fact, in summing up the post-1840 Chinese intellectual world, the prominent Chinese historian Xie Junmei wrote: "In reading [recent] history we discover that in the process of seeking genuine national salvation, progressive intellectuals are often transfixed by new ideas, but equally often become deeply pained by their swift failure, only to become excited anew by their yearning for the next new idea." We can see the process Xie describes beginning to work itself out in 1895. In general terms, the process constitutes the framework on which this book is constructed—it represents an attempt to explain a repeating course of rejecting the old and then invoking the new, and the complicated and contradictory revisions and recantations that arose out of that process.

Much of the complexity that marks the period results from the paradox that these deferrals and rejections were quite the opposite of what anyone wanted; given the virtually universal perception of crisis, speed in coming up with solutions was of the essence for all players on the scene. The bewildering variety of response was also in part the result of an almost desperate new receptivity that brought in too many inputs at one time. The old classifying devices of grafting the new things onto indigenous roots, whether through creative readings of the historical record or assuming a stable Chinese essence underlying the use of any imported new things, had become suddenly discredited in the years after Yan Fu’s powerful iconoclastic texts. The resulting taxonomic anarchy ushered in a new attitude toward the treatment of history, or, perhaps better to say, a skeptical distance toward history’s possible meanings. In other words, the late Qing and early Republican period was like neither the Yangwu period before it nor the May Fourth period that followed, during both of which history was relentlessly leaned upon to produce both meaning and value. The pressures of the teleology of history could never, however, just go away. It was just that in the years between 1895 and 1919, for a variety of reasons, they were not to be quite as insistent (or, at least, not insistent in quite the same ways) as they were in either the period immediately before or the period immediately following.

In contrast to this receptivity to variety, however, the period was also characterized by an agonism at the center of the whole process, resulting, I argue, in a countervailing tendency to shut off alternatives even as they were being advanced. This occurred because most of the new ideas that set in motion, suggested, or advanced revolutionary notions of po-
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In a recently published book, Yang Nianqun has dissected what has been universally regarded as the dominant paradigm in the Chinese academic historiography of the jindai period. According to this paradigm, the age can be divided into three distinct eras, each marked by a progressive realization of the true nature of the problems facing China. In this periodiza-
The historicity of the period has, in other words, been shaped by a discourse of political necessity to show an unrelenting progress forward and to repudiate the recent past as having provided the motive force. In *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Duara sets out what he labels as a theory of “disent” within which a new national discourse at once claims both descent and dissent from prior cultural practices. He argues for the centrality of this concept to the process of “heightening the self-consciousness of this community in relation to those around it.” The built-in paradox of at once identifying with and resisting the past thus challenges “the notion of a stable community that gradually develops a national self-awareness like the evolution of a species.” At the same time, however, he grants this process an at-least-provisional capacity to facilitate “a deliberate mobilization within a network of cultural representations toward a particular object of identification,” even if the “closure” that results will “unravel in time.” Although I think this formulation is a powerful analysis of the forces at work in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China, my focus here will be guided by the slightly different take that this collision between new and old in China was always already in the process of “unraveling” during any of the “deliberate [intellectual] mobilizations” that were undertaken in this period.

The issue I am seeking to examine here, then, is not primarily to establish whether there were alternative and at least potentially subversive discourses outside the dominant Enlightenment model. There certainly were these, and I hope that my account of a selection of some of the more memorable writings produced in this rich period shows some of the vibrant intensity of these alternatives. But in trying to somehow sum up the import of these various writings, it was impossible for me to escape the sense of a powerful force persistently pushing in another direction, which was a radical departure toward what was perceived as new. This direction was marked by a consolidation of a vision of how the new and the future
were to be understood, the most important constituent of which was the ineluctable elimination of alternatives to itself. This vision—which could never quite separate itself from the need to somehow reconcile the demands of continuity with those of the break with the past, as signified by the modern—kept asserting itself largely through its persistent capacity to push alternative possibilities ever farther toward the margins. But in this process, the perception of the legacy of the past invariably turned up as a negative, and anything that became associated with the old came to be regarded as that which had to be left behind. The need to assert continuity was, however, so thoroughly imbedded in the discourses of the modern—mainly nationalism—that a central paradox became lodged in the process of reform itself, in which reform needed to present itself as an internally generated imperative even as it insisted upon rejecting the legitimacy of any possible content to anything marked with the stigma of the past. Thus, the process described by Xie Junmei and Yang Nianqun developed its own inexorable impetus of progress. At the core of this force was a continuous process of outmaneuvering anything that was seen as blunting its momentum, by working up strategies that made its own operation seem inevitable, and everything standing in its way numbingly obsolete.

What I attempt here is to look at various key moments, thinkers, and texts in the pre-1919 period to see how they deal with the question of the exigent need to incorporate Western ideas. What unifies these cultural artifacts is a particular pattern of anxiety that I attempt to trace out, in which the imperative to break radically with the past was precisely that which rendered the paradoxical and insistent need to maintain continuity with the past in some form. The need to establish a new nation, in other words, made the need to cherish that nation’s history and traditions all the more insistent, even as they simultaneously needed to be denied. The end result, for all the variety of alternatives taken under consideration, was eventually pressure toward elimination of diversity of opinion, a tendency that ironically recalls the characteristic pattern of the periods both before and after.

Beginning with the work of Joseph Levenson in the 1950s, the agonism of Chinese accommodation has been recognized within American sinology, but it has been read as primarily a matter of deep psychological trauma, a species of acute homesickness over a vanished and irretrievable past. It has, moreover, been taken as an almost completely emotional response engendered by nationalism, something essentially lacking any intellectual content. As Levenson wrote: “[T]he fact that traditionalism had to be ‘worked at’ in Chinese nationalism, instead of exerting a natural charm, reminds us why nationalism swept into favor. The reason was that the tradition had lost its natural charm; Chinese thinkers, however reluc-
tantly, had lost their faith in its continuing value. And nationalism justi-
fied emotionally the departure from tradition, which was already justified,
only too well, by intellectual conviction.”

Levenson here clearly assumes that traditional ideas and practices had somehow thoroughly demon-
strated their intellectual inadequacy, and he thereby shows himself to be
faithful to the teleological reasoning that Duara questioned. Another of
the goals of my study, in fact, is to show that, pace Levenson, these old
ideas showed remarkable staying power, and that in many, if not most,
ways the intellectual activity of the jindai period was characterized by con-
flicts engendered precisely by the immense intellectual “charm” of tradi-
tional notions of social and personal morality.

This study therefore undertakes the examination—and sometimes
reexamination—of a number of important Chinese writers active in that
liminal period between the war with Japan of 1894–1895, when real ac-
commodation with the West first seemed incumbent upon a solid majority
of educated power-holders, and the culmination of the “New Culture
movement” on May 4, 1919, when a small group of the highly educated
was able to set a new intellectual agenda for China based on an essential
rejection of key elements of the national tradition. The rapidity of this dis-
cursive transformation is astonishing enough in itself, and it should thus
come as no surprise that it contained a deeply fraught set of intellectual
initiatives, hesitations, reconsiderations, disputes, and plain contradic-
tions. This study will look at some of these intellectual struggles, focusing
on the realm of literature. For a number of reasons, which I attempt to
explain below, the field of literature was regarded as a privileged locus of
intellectual activity throughout the period, and the various intellectual
moves that characterize the era are either implicitly or explicitly set forth
within it.

One entirely sensible way to characterize the period between 1860
and 1919 would be to focus on the sense of transformation that permeates
almost every significant utterance on the state of China emanating from
that era, and particularly to focus on the sense that this transformation
was unprecedented in Chinese history. In chapter 1, I rehearse the pro-
cess by which leading reform thinkers in China attempted to claim ulti-
mately indigenous origins for the ideas they were trying to implement.
The peculiar shape their arguments took was necessitated by the fierce
resistance from the majority conservative faction at court, who objected
to reform precisely on the grounds that it was based on harmful, “alien”
ideas. Beyond this dispute, however, the various ideas bruited about dur-
ing this time share the traits of modernity as set out by Marshall Berman
in All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity. These traits in-
clude
the contradictory forces and needs that inspire and torment us: our desire to be rooted in a stable and coherent personal and social past, and our insatiable desire for growth... growth that destroys both the physical and social landscapes of our past, and our emotional links with those lost worlds; our desperate allegiances to ethnic, national, class and sexual groups which we hope will give us a firm “identity,” and the internationalization of everyday life—of our clothes and household goods, our books and music, our ideas and fantasies—that spreads all our identities all over the map.28

In China, however, the perception that it would be impossible to exercise indigenous agency over these changes was also a concomitant and constant undercurrent. All these upsets were understood as being the result of momentous movements inspired—or, even worse, enforced—by others, the movers and shakers in the metropolitan centers who, together with their local lieutenants, were seen as exercising a vast and amorphous power over this whole range of bewildering developments within China. As overwhelming as “modernity” appears in the West in Berman’s characterization, it was that much more so in the Chinese case when it manifested itself with the added complication of being what Lydia Liu has felicitously called “translated modernity.”29

I do not mean by any of this to assert a strict genealogy of ideas in which some are essentially Western and others essentially Chinese. I take for granted Liu’s powerful notion of “translingual practice,” which holds that the complex historical process of the last 150 years has brought about a sea change to all ideas that have been deployed in the Chinese discursive sphere, denaturalizing all of them and making them thus “new” in the new contexts in which they now appeared. The result was a process in which “intellectual resources from the West and from China’s past [were] cited, translated, appropriated, or claimed in moments of perceived historical contingency so that something called change [might] be produced,” as Liu describes it, adding, “In my view, this change [was] always already different from China’s own past and from the West, but [had] profound linkages with both.”30

Although it may have become impossible for us retrospectively to positively identify the national origin or ideas that circulated in China by the late nineteenth century, those who engaged these ideas at the time constantly assumed diverging national origins to be self-evident, and they attempted to build structures of intellectual significance on such assumptions. As is clear in the case of Yan Fu, as set out in chapter 2, these notional attributions are often, at best, highly problematic. This did not, however, prevent them from being extremely effective in galvanizing public opinion and becoming the basis for wide-ranging policy recommenda-
tions. In the case of the Chinese intellectuals under discussion here, the
impetus to identify which of the ideas they were forced to work with were
“Chinese” and which were “foreign” developed into a kind of obsession,
which added greatly to the complexity of building an intellectual found-
dation for proceeding in the new era in which they had come to reside.
Ironically, because ideas of Western and Chinese origin so often could
not in any sensible way be sharply distinguished, traditional Chinese con-
cepts kept demonstrating their “charm.” For if “new” ideas were looked
at hard enough, linkages or points in common with the “old” were bound
to surface.

Given my assumption of a basic fungibility for most of the ideas that
were circulating in this period, it follows that this study is frankly more
oriented toward process—or, to be more fashionable, discourse—than
toward substance. In other words, I am less interested, for instance, in the
question of whether Yan Fu is authentically liberal or not than in why that
question itself is problematic and might not be the best one to ask about
him and his intellectual trajectory. In this, I assume that whether there is
any ultimate convertibility among ideas Western and Chinese is a ques-
tion that needs to remain in play while we examine the various historical
factors, political contexts, and assumptions that provided the dynamism
for underlying ideas that may seem on the surface virtually identical. This
is not to deny that fundamental commonalities may eventually prove to
be the norm, but rather to stress the power that assessments of national
dissimilarity had over the writers of the period. It was these perceptions of
difference of national origin and their highly complicated configurations
within the context of the times that caused the various terms and ideas at
issue to be invested with the extraordinary power they often possessed.

In answer to the objection that China had its own “China-centered”
modernity that early on was fully capable of charting a consistent course
through the difficult waters of constructing the modern, I can offer only
overwhelmingly empirical evidence that the most historically significant
thinkers in the period between 1895 and 1919 were driven by a constant
anxiety that such a modernity was, in fact, not possible. This book is
largely the story of the various reflections of that anxiety and its move-
ment over time. There were, unquestionably, “surpluses of meaning,”
which opened up new possibilities, but, again, this is the story of the
alarming extent to which these surpluses were turned into agonized rejec-
tions that blocked rather than facilitated the imagination of new possibili-
ties. This is not to deny the possibility of “Occidentalism,” or the process
by which the ideas of the West were amenable to free appropriation for in-
digenous Chinese purposes, but just to show how much more difficult it
was to manipulate Western ideas in places that had to cope with the reality
of Western imperialism. Occidentalism was, then, a significantly more
problematic notion than the vastly more pervasive Orientalism, an idea expressing the way in which the overwhelming might of the West enabled it to imagine and formulate the non-West for its own imperial purposes.  

This anxiety created a double bind—in which recourse to the West was at the same time mandatory and highly distasteful—that has caused a number of characteristic distortions to the historical record, thereby complicating clean documentation and a straightforward narrative. In a number of cases, for instance, the nature of an argument precluded explicit recognition of the sources on which it was based. A conspicuous example of this is set out in chapter 4, in the discussion of Liang Qichao’s silence vis-à-vis the contest for novels on reform topics sponsored by the missionary John Fryer in 1895. Although Liang was almost certainly aware of Fryer’s contest, it can only be assumed that the exigencies of nationalism kept him from referring to it in his remarks on the novel that date from 1898 and that at several points virtually echo the missionary’s words. A similar lack of acknowledgment is seen in Du Yaquan’s failure to mention the possible influence of Chen Duxiu and his new radical journal, New Youth, in Du’s 1916 about-face on the question of differences between China and the West, as described in chapter 8. When the circumstantial evidence for influence in such cases is so overwhelming, however, the silence itself becomes an important part of the data.

The Centrality of Literature

We now return to the conviction of the centrality of literature expressed by those who worked in that field in the years under discussion. Although it is probably true that every newly reformed field of intellectual endeavor in the years after 1895 saw itself as the key to national renewal, it still remains to account fully for literature’s taking upon itself the powerful sense that it occupied a uniquely privileged position. Literature was both the medium that sold itself as being most opportune for spreading the message of cultural reform, and at the same time something that could not be denied its long history within the old dispensation. It thereby embodies the paradox of semicolonial nationalism in its most acute form. As many have argued, Hegelian notions of the progress of world history dominated the Western discourse on the concept of progress in the world for much of the modern period. Central to the Hegelian perspective was the idea that there were certain areas (and, as Hegel specifically mandates, all of Asia is included in this stipulation) whose time had come and gone and that were therefore “out of history.” Did it not thus become incumbent upon any zones implicitly or explicitly excluded from the ongoing march of history to somehow demonstrate the ways in which their own histories, if not alive at present, could be brought into being and fused with the uni-
versal history that Hegel theorized? The very plasticity of literature made it seem to be the ideal locus of such attempts at historical fusion.

The bulk of this study is devoted to tracing out how China’s crisis of accommodation worked itself out in the realm of literature—in particular, in narrative fiction and the critical work that accompanied the very self-conscious transformation of the genre of the novel after 1895. The role of literature in the ongoing project of modernization in Europe has been widely recognized, beginning as early as the late eighteenth century. As Raymond Williams showed in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, his seminal pair of early works analyzing the complicated history of the development of modern Great Britain, literature and the arts were a crucial nexus of the social necessity both of communication and of working toward visions of new social possibilities. This function of literature was equally evidently a key concern in China, where public writing occupied a central position in theorizing about the transformation of society and the organization of a new type of state. Beyond its role in communication and creating visions of new possibilities, however, literature served a key role in conceiving of the new nation as such. As Bill Readings has explained, “Of course, the role of the literary had been clearly acknowledged by Schlegel, who claims in his *Lectures on the History of Literature* that it is literature rather than philosophy that binds together a people into a nation.” Readings goes on to quote Schlegel: “There is nothing so necessary...to the whole intellectual existence of a nation, as the possession of a plentiful store of those national recollections and associations...which it forms the great object of poetical art to perpetuate and adorn.... [I]n a word, ... they have a national poetry of their own.”

The way in which literature in fact provides the most attractive packaging to that sense of history required by nationalism is fairly clear here, but literature also presents itself as the keenest example of the paradox of modern Chinese nationalism. If after 1895 those intellectuals in China who were very self-consciously trying to bring China into the modern world regarded their most important task to be finding some way for their old country to cast itself off from the burden of its own history, how, then, could literature, this core paladin of the nation-state, fulfill its role of affirming identity? How could it fashion itself from the “plentiful store of... national recollections and associations” if at the same time reformers had come to regard the denial of the critical weight of this heavy legacy as central to their modernizing project? The late Qing witnessed an outpouring of attempts to finesse this issue, from notions of how literature should be divided generically to the question of how to write the “new novel” that was so widely seen as the key to national mobilization. Chapters 3 and 4 take a detailed look at the world of literary theory, while chapters 5, 6, 7, and 9 examine individual novels to see the uphill struggle of balancing
the demands of affirming national identity with those of thoroughgoing
reform on the Western model.

Chapter 6 looks in some detail at the problematics of the “semicoloni-
al” and at the ways in which both its practice and its theory are actually
more complicated than our ordinary conceptions of coloniality. It should
not come as much of a surprise that it was far easier to phrase the need
for accommodation than to actually write it out in well-wrought narra-
tives. This core problem is one that would seem to impinge acutely on all
colonized and “semicolonized” zones, where everything attached to the
old ways had been at least implicitly implicated in the failure of these re-
gions to resist the incursions of foreign powers. Partha Chatterjee’s im-
portant book on this issue, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World,* is
significantly subtitled *A Derivative Discourse?* One his central theses, how-
ever, is that a successful way around this impasse of finding a satisfactory
national identity was the positing of an indigenous spirituality in opposi-
tion to the overwhelming material power of the Western aggressor. This
solution, as set out in chapter 8, was voiced from time to time in China
but just as often was shouted down as an inadequate sham.

There is a further problem here: to what extent were literature itself
and its modern manifestations regarded as part of the very problem of
foreign origins that national forms were meant to overcome? In a recent
article, Franco Moretti has presented the issue quite bluntly, in delimit-
ing what he calls “[Frederic] Jameson’s law of literary evolution”: “in cul-
tures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means:
almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel first
arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between
a Western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materi-
als.” As chapter 4 explores in some detail, nationalism would have, in
other words, special and obvious problems in incorporating the new nar-
native forms that were so hopefully regarded as the future locus of na-
tional identity.

Behind the issue of origins is a larger and even more fundamental
question: is it actually possible to represent this process of crushing trans-
formation adequately, including a satisfactory sense of Chinese thought
and society in the years before circa 1920, after which Western ideas argu-
ably shaped Chinese discourse decisively? Is the project at hand, in other
words, really feasible? The matter of the very possibility of the represent-
ation of otherness has proved to be the focus of an inordinate amount
of Euro-American critical inquiry over the past several decades. One of
the most influential critics in assaying this question has been Luce Iriga-
ray, the title of whose most recognizable essay, “This Sex Which Is Not
One,” conveys the difficulty of asserting a genuine female otherness in the
face of the relentless domination of a male (or “phallocratic”) epistemic
order. Irigaray sees the need for differentiation to be able to express this otherness extending even to language—“Woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s; woman’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.”

The mechanics of finding different verbal registers, however, pose great difficulties in themselves. One cannot, for instance, simply seek to overturn the ruling discourse, because any such effort would inevitably replicate the monist, male-based discourse that constitutes the order being interrogated in the first place. As Irigaray puts it, “[I]f [woman’s] aim were simply to reverse the order of things, even supposing this to be possible, history would repeat itself in the long run, would revert to sameness, to phallocratism.” In taking up this problem, with the assumed impossibility of ignoring the ruling order, Judith Butler stresses the power of “subversive repetition” to enable the possibility of “effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of the constructed identity” (emphasis added).

According to Butler, the point of this repetition is to disclose the fundamental facticity of basic power relations, something that bears a clear relationship to postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha’s notion of subversive mimicry, in which the creation of crises “in the positionality and propositionality of colonialist authority destabilizes the sign of authority.”

It is important to point out, however, that all of these theories of undermining a dominant discourse point to the fundamental incontestability of the regime they are ostensibly contesting. In the case of the non-Western culture in its moments of becoming subject to the discursive power of the West, the question of the inevitability of the new order is much more contingent, but in ways that, as Irigaray and Butler suggest, have no ready-made mode of expression. I would hope to show here one case of how this process worked out, thereby adding to the inventory of examples of cultural interaction and opening up space for new ways of thinking about it. The example of Lu Xun discussed in chapter 10 is a particularly poignant case of awareness of the fundamentally linguistic nature of the crisis of cultural accommodation. In his chronic doubts about his own status as a speaking subject, Lu Xun embodies the depths of that crisis. This study can only hope, then, to point to alternative possibilities without foreclosing the questions and problems that they raise.

One example of how the contingency of new possibilities keeps getting buried in the trajectory of the modern is the notion of nationalism versus “culturalism,” with the latter defined as “the significant unit [that] was really the whole civilization rather than the narrower political unit of a nation within a larger cultural whole.” The problem with this thesis, long accepted as the norm in Chinese studies in the West, is that there was never the theoretical possibility of a “narrower political unit” within
the “larger cultural whole” of Chinese civilization, for the two had always
been, and continued to be, coterminous (to which the continuing obsession over the status of Taiwan offers eloquent demonstration). It is therefore natural that Chinese thinkers could not think of the life or death of one without the automatic inclusion of the other, since Chinese “nationalism’s” “larger cultural whole” after the coming of the West was still the one Chinese nation, something that had never before been the case with any single nation in the West. Given that the Chinese were faced with an overwhelming binary fact—that is, themselves versus the “West”—Chinese nationalism as it evolved after the 1890s by definition included important elements of “culturalism.” This should remind us that, at a fundamental level, even the vocabulary used to describe changes in China needs to be carefully examined so as not to import conclusions based on European usage and historical trajectories.

The impossibility of separating nationalism and culturalism can be best illustrated by considering the discourse having to do with Japan in this period. As Reynolds has pointed out, “[I] little of the Xinzheng [1898–1912] achievement could have been attained without Japan, the story’s missing key.” In fact, one of the major concerns of Reynolds’ book is to supply this missing story, the proper understanding of which he maintains has been “retarded severely by academic taboos that bar from consideration the element of Japan, which alone can explain what happened and how.”45 In elucidating why this story has been ignored, Reynolds is in agreement with other scholars in assuming that Japan’s long history of aggression and imperialism toward China after 1915 is accountable.46 What is striking, however, is that even in what Reynolds labels the “Golden Decade” of the late Qing, when Sino-Japanese amity and cooperation were at their height, there is little serious analysis in China—as opposed to exhortations to emulate the political institutions—of the root causes of Japanese success. This paucity of analysis certainly contrasts with the intense scrutiny of Western society and history that we shall see illustrated in Yan Fu’s writings, the focus of chapter 2.

Writing toward the beginning of the period, for instance, the great late-Qing moderate reformer Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909) adduces a number of reasons in urging Chinese students to study in Japan: “[The Japanese language] is close to Chinese, making for ease of comprehension; there are vast numbers of Western books, and whatever is trivial in Western learning has already been sifted through [in Japan]. The situations and customs of China and Japan are similar, and [Japan] is thus easy to imitate.”47 The view of Japan here is little more than as the most convenient path to Western learning. Even more striking is that, as we shall see in chapter 10, Lu Xun, writing in Tokyo in 1907–1908 at the height of the “Golden Decade,” has virtually nothing to say about the Japanese
cultural matrix that is the source of his new, Western ideas. One would think that the example of Japan’s easy modernization, its rapid accommodation with the West, the ideas that arose as part of that process, and/or the underlying causes that enabled the Japanese renewal after 1868 would have inspired much comment and emulation in China. There was emulation enough, to be sure, but there is all along a curious silence on Japan as an intellectual model or even as a potential source of original ideas.

Given that Japan had suddenly emerged on China’s borders as the most tangible threat to national sovereignty, if nationalism were in fact divisible from culturalism, the newly powerful eastern neighbor would surely have attracted the kind of Chinese attention to and anxiety about the roots of its national success in the period after 1895 that the West did. Instead, Japan seems to figure as nothing more than a transparent window on the West, incapable of adding anything of its own to the complex of new ideas that needed to be dealt with. Japan’s presumptive identity in China as a subsidiary part of the Chinese sphere of civilization rendered it invisible to the sort of cultural/national inquiry that marked the final decade of Qing rule, even as the newly powerful neighbor was posing the most serious sort of challenge to China’s national existence.

Finally, with regard to conditions in which the Western discursive order had not yet come to dominate, the generational configuration of the thinkers discussed here is significant in itself. Virtually everyone who figures on these pages was born between 1850 and 1881. The accident of birth thus placed these men in a peculiar position; growing up in a world of Chinese learning, they generally became acquainted with Western ideas while quite young and intellectually receptive. The resulting struggle to reconcile the two worlds was thus characterized by an awareness not accessible to their forebears and by a lived-in sense of the tradition that was to become rare in the generation(s) to come—they were in a privileged position to look both ways in full seriousness. In this context, it would be worth comparing intellectuals like both Yan Fu (b. 1853) and Lu Xun (b. 1881) with the young radical politicians that the emissary from Bloomsbury, G. Lowes Dickinson (1862–1932), encountered on a journey he made to China in 1912–1913:

I met in Canton some of the chief officials of the revolutionary government, the chief justice, the foreign secretary, and others. I was astonished. They were exactly like American undergraduates. Their whole mentality, so far as I could see, was American. . . . This conversion may, of course, be superficial. There may be underlying it an unchanged basis of Chinese character. It is these young men that have made the revolution and established the Republic; they are doing all they can to sweep away the old China, root and branch, and build up there a reproduction
of America. There is nothing, I think, which they would not alter if they could, from the streets of Canton to the family system, and the costume of a policeman to the national religion.  

Even allowing for Dickinson’s wariness of things American, this is still a revealing observation and would apply equally well in many respects to Beijing university students in 1919. Although it is no doubt safe to say that in later life most of the men that Dickinson met would reveal a good deal more of “an unchanged basis of Chinese character” than the British visitor could discern at the time, it remains the case that their fathers’ generation could never have so serenely and at such tender ages expressed themselves in a way that would have struck any observer as being so Western in outlook and behavior.

All in all, such transformations of character and changes in intellectual disposition as Dickinson describes must be seen as the denouement of a long and complex series of developments rather than simply a sudden “awakening” as to the inadequacy of Chinese intellectual life in the years around 1919. In fact, the extraordinary currency of the notion of a sudden enlightenment originating among the *New Youth* group on the campus of the reorganized Peking University in the years after 1916 was, as Wang Xiaoming has argued, the result of a particularly successful propaganda campaign launched by the group itself, as well as yet another manifestation of the process by which the past needed to be suppressed in the interests of forward motion. One result is that, as Bonnie McDougall has acerbically pointed out, “modern Chinese literature is in most instances a product created by a small number of self-identified intellectuals for an audience only slightly broader than itself.” Because of the institutionalization that followed May Fourth, in other words, the culture that was produced and vetted after that time can seem monochromatic at times. The period of intense cultural contestation and diversity of the years immediately before stands in sharp contrast. As the world drew ever closer to China in the late 1910s, however, the struggles over identity and direction were eventually to offer themselves as symptoms of an incapacity to adapt rather than as the profusion of riches they now seem in retrospect. Perhaps the revival of interest in the late Qing over the past two decades both in China and in foreign sinology bespeaks a belated attempt to place in the foreground once again the extraordinary dynamism of a period whose hallmark may be its contradictory stance toward its own diversity.