

Bringing the World Home

←————→
Appropriating the West in Late Qing
and Early Republican China

Theodore Hutters



University of Hawai'i Press
Honolulu

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Preface

This study had its genesis in a sudden realization in the early 1990s that modern Chinese literary critics, in castigating what they took as the manifold flaws of the Chinese literary tradition, were invariably more likely to place unique blame on that tradition for what turn out to be, after all is said and done, the universal problems of all literature. That this hypercritical disposition dovetailed with the general post-1919 intellectual denunciation of the Chinese past did not so much supply an answer to the question it raised as to deepen the mystery: what made the Chinese intellectuals of the twentieth century so determined to heap obloquy—far in excess of what any objective measure would demand—on their own social and intellectual traditions?

As I traced this problem, it quickly became evident that this negative perspective did not spring full-grown from the demonstrators in Beijing on May 4, 1919, but rather had begun more than twenty years earlier, in the period of introspection and crisis that followed China's devastating defeat by an upstart Japan in 1894–1895. Looking into the years between that fateful war and the late 1910s, I discovered a true world of difference, where the new and the old intertwined and jostled each other in ways that the later narratives of an exclusive modernity or the earlier discourse of a self-consistent tradition did not seem to allow for. In the interests of uncovering a vision of the intellectual life of a fascinating but indeterminate age, I explored this peculiar crossing of literature and history. The path I pursued was quirky and idiosyncratic to be sure, but no more so than were the times themselves.

The study also entailed looking back at the foundational Western work in modern Chinese intellectual history, once such a dominant presence in the sinological world but now generally seen as remote to the American scholarly community, both in time and historical significance. Partly because of this distance, it is not hard these days to find fault with

the pioneering formulations of Joseph Levenson and Benjamin Schwartz for their generally pessimistic assessment of the possibility of a Chinese tradition that may still have signified even after China's realization of the need for fundamental reform. But their engagement with what I think are still essential questions of cross-cultural inquiry continues to compel attention, if only to attempt to come to grips with the faults that a later generation finds in their arguments, many of which have become basic postulates in our field. My inquiry here was also inspired by a large number of works of intellectual history produced after 1990 in China, where the academic world continues to be vitally interested in questions of how the accommodation between China and the West has worked itself out.

It remains to talk a bit about the role of literature in this study. When I use the word "literature," I am referring to a smaller subset of that august body consisting largely of *xiaoshuo*, or fictional narrative, and the prose essay. As Bonnie McDougall has recently argued, a well-justified debate continues about the quality and even the nature of modern Chinese literature. If even the evaluation of the post-1918 "New Literature" is still to be determined, then how is one to deal with the literature of this period in between, traditionally spurned by both students of the modern and students of the premodern? In other words, the novels I examined have never been secure in their relationship with the canon. This uncertainty has posed an interesting problem, but I have begun from the premise of discussing only work that I enjoyed reading. Coming up with standards of evaluation to justify my tastes, however, has been by far the more difficult task. Rather than trying to force these narratives into standard critical categories, I have taken this study as a challenge to the categories themselves, in the hope that works from radically different contexts and times can add to, rather than merely reify, our ordinary touchstones of judgment.

During the course of research and writing, I have incurred substantial intellectual debts, and I wish here to offer thanks to some of the many people who engaged in critical discussion of my ideas and/or gave me the chance to present earlier versions of the ideas set out here. A look at the list will go some way, I would hope, toward convincing readers that an international community of scholars has been forged over the last decade, a development that has rendered intellectual inquiry all the more worthwhile. I thank all of these people sincerely for their help and critiques but absolve them of all blame for whatever flaws the reader may detect in what I have written. I hereby express my gratitude to Cynthia Brokaw, Chen Jianhua, Chen Pingyuan, Chen Sihe, Kai-wing Chow, Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Prasenjit Duara, Ben Elman, Josh Fogel, Fu Posheng, Ge Zhaoguang, Denise Gimpel, Bryna Goodman, Jonathan Hay,

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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 T's'an*

As Mary Wright pointed out in a landmark essay written almost forty years ago,¹ 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 immobile 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."² 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.³

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.⁴ 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 [C]an*. The game of chess is finished. We are growing old. How can we not weep?"⁵—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 "semicolonial," as Mao Zedong put it.⁶ 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.⁷

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).⁸ 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, “post-modern” 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.⁹ Recent sinological research has, however, most often been given to treating the late Qing gingerly, generally avoiding grasping the nettle of the trauma of accommodation 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” (*xian-dai*), 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.¹⁰ 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”?¹¹

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-

litical 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.¹² 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 meaningful unit of time.¹³ 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 increased attention in recent years as constituting a pivotal epoch. There is general agreement that at the heart of this period lies the convulsive intellectual movement in which the means of understanding the world that had dominated Chinese thought since at least the late seventeenth century 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 intellectual trends (i.e., the failure of the *ti/yong* idea, nationalism vs. culturalism, history vs. value).¹⁴ 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 modernity *manqué*.¹⁵ This perspective more than likely results from an inflexible 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.”¹⁶

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.'" ¹⁷ Such a focus— notwithstanding its explanatory power over the rich array of events that mark the period— cannot 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, remarks 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." ¹⁸ And Schwartz, even as he seems to open up a new perspective on assessing the past in the passage quoted above, goes on to say that "some traditions, far from impeding certain aspects of modernization, may have actually facilitated them in some societies," ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰

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 modernity, a modernity "with fixed characteristics," to paraphrase the contemporary 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 toward China" (*Zhongguo zouxiang shijie, shijie zouxiang Zhongguo*) ²¹ seems, at first glance, an adequate and appropriately upbeat summary of a salutary process. On reconsideration, however, the formulation increasingly takes on the qualities of Zeno's Racecourse, where each runner can complete 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 accommodation: 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 “socialist revolution,” have over the years tended to take for granted the inevitability 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 alternatives set forth to this process have rarely been given the serious consideration 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 Hegelian notion of necessary progress—but there remains a shortage of detailed 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.²² 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 unprecedented 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 intellectual and political instability and suffused with blind spots, contradictory formulations, strange silences, frequent deferrals, and outright misjudgments. 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."²³ 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.²⁴ 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-

litical reform and cultural revitalization either did in fact come or were taken as having come to China from the modern West. If from no other source, this agonism was guaranteed by the central presence among these imported ideas of the concept of nationalism, that nineteenth-century European complex of notions that privileged the nation-state as the locus around which were arrayed all the various elements that made up the social order, not to mention cultural identity. Thus, the present study will focus on the ways in which the almost invariably foreign origin of these new ideas—or, equally significant, the perception of their origin as foreign—affected the nature of this intellectual process. This agonism also provided the motive power behind the pressures toward discursive closure that countervailed against the period's characteristic general curiosity and that, in the end, pulled to pieces the fragile intellectual regime that marked the period. In short, the Hegelian imperative to move ever onward was at least as powerful in post-1895 China as it has been in Western sinology.

I hope not to be misunderstood here. I am not saying that every intellectual initiative in late Qing and early Republican China was tinged by anxiety about how it would adapt itself to the new ideas coming from the West. Nor will I argue that Western ideas themselves, because of the vector of their entry into China, necessarily engendered anxiety. In fact, I argue, particularly in chapter 8, that there were many phenomena in Shanghai—to name only the place where the West made itself felt most palpably—in which things Chinese and things Western interacted in a model of productive hybridity. As I attempt to show, however, there was a particular discourse on the introduction of the West and its ideas that was so thoroughly suffused with this anxiety that to analyze it otherwise fails to do it justice. Furthermore, this discourse, I argue, became more rather than less dominant in the years leading up to the New Culture movement in the late 1910s, as new ideas rose ever higher on the horizon. The outpouring of iconoclasm that marked May Fourth, and the defensive moves to uphold Chinese culture that then issued forth in response from men like Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming (1893–1988), seem to offer incontrovertible evidence of this anxiety's substance and of its power to shape the intellectual arena in modern China.

The Era and Its Dynamic

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-

tion the first early period before 1895 is marked by relatively superficial technological borrowing that was thought to be a sufficient solution to China's problems with the West. The second period between 1895 and circa 1917 is said to have focused on institutional reform, in which it was believed that China could straighten itself out by transformation of its political and economic institutions. Finally, the period after the New Culture movement in the late 1910s saw the realization that only the most thoroughgoing modification of traditional mentalities would suffice to salvage China and bring it into the realm of modernity. Yang notes, "[I]n fact, the power to explain the reform discourse of the earlier period has been in the hands of the creators of the reform discourse that followed. This circular process has brought about a discursive chain of negative explications."²⁵ 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 "discent," 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."²⁶ 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