Preface

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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-Velingrová, Prasenjit Duara, Ben Elman, Josh Fogel, Fu Poshek, Ge Zhaoguang, Denise Gimpel, Bryna Goodman, Jonathan Hay,

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