Bringing the World Home
Huters, Theodore

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The imagination developed in Europe and expressions found there are rich and extraordinary. Once in possession of them, one will be able to triumph over all ages and encompass everything.

Liang Qichao, “Travels to Hawaii,” quoted in Xiaobing Tang’s “Poetic Revolution”

We cannot say that we know a particular form or period of society, and that we will see how its art and theory relate to it, for until we know these, we cannot really claim to know the society.

Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution

The question of the role that the West and its vigorous ideas was to play in modern intellectual life, which so preoccupied Yan Fu, also manifested itself powerfully in the realm of letters. The issue played itself out across the whole spectrum of literary genres, sometimes posed explicitly and at other times visible only by reading carefully between the lines. At virtually all points in the various critical discourses on renewing or reforming literature, however, the catalytic power of Western theories of writing is plainly evident. There was a particular complication in this field: because literature’s long tradition was unalterably rooted in indigenous modes of writing, any transformations would ultimately have to make their peace with the intricacies of literary history. Given that writing was so clearly marked as indigenous, the contradictions between preservation of the national tradition and the need for thoroughgoing reform were to prove particularly vexing in this area. This chapter will pursue the development of this story by examining the work of a number of different writers and thinkers who discussed how to create that most basic of literary media, written prose. It will begin, however, with a short reminder of
New Ways of Writing

just how significant the coming of Western books was to one particularly important late Qing thinker.

New Sources of Inspiration

In late June of 1906, Zhang Binglin was released from prison in the international settlement in Shanghai. He had served a three-year term for anti-Manchu activities while he wrote for the *Subao*, a radical Shanghai newspaper shut down by the Qing government in 1903. Zhang was immediately escorted to Tokyo, where on July 15 he gave a speech to a welcoming meeting of Chinese students studying in Japan. Characteristically for the time and place, the speech concerns itself almost exclusively with the question of how to increase China’s wealth and power in the world. Considering that the speaker was a man whose dense and highly erudite scholarship was built on his conviction of the enduring unity of Chinese culture, the beginning of the address comes as a bit of a surprise:

When I was young, I read the *Donghua lu* (Records from within the Eastern flowery gate) of Mr. Jiang [Liangqi, 1722–1789], which contained accounts of the cases of Dai Mingshi [1653–1713], Zeng Jing [1679–1736], and Zha Siting [1664–1727]. I was moved to anger, thinking that an alien people had brought disorder upon China, something that became our greatest source of resentment. I later read books by Zheng Suonan and Wang Chuanshan [Fuzhi, 1619–1692], which are full of nothing but words [advocating] the protection of the Han race, and my nationalistic thought (minzu sixiang) gradually developed. None of the words of the two gentlemen, however, was animated by any theory (xueli). After 1895, however, I got hold of some books from countries both East and West, and it was only then that I picked up any theory. When I told my friends at the time of my notions of expelling the Manchus, they always shook their heads: some said that I was mad, some said that I was a rebel, and some said that I was setting myself up for the executioner.

A powerful anti-Manchu xenophobia suffuses the entirety of this brief autobiographical snippet. Given that Westerners and the Japanese had lately posed the most serious threat to China’s status in the world, there is something just a trifle odd in his directing the entirety of his animus at the Manchus and his sense of their past crimes against Han scholars. As Marie-Claire Bergère has said in regard to this issue: “Although foreign imperialists were identified as the most dangerous enemies, the Manchus were the ones who were attacked because they represented an easier target. Anti-Manchu struggle could thus be seen as an es-
cape, a non-rational solution to the fundamental contradiction between the violent anti-imperialist feelings and an impossible anti-imperialist struggle.” I would argue that it is not just the “impossibility” of the anti-imperialist struggle that caused Zhang to displace his rage onto the Manchus, but also his awareness that the only model that China could pursue to escape its precarious situation was the one provided by the very Western powers that were hammering at the gates. Zhang was aware, in other words, that intellectual anti-Westernism would at this point in history run a real risk of occluding the possibility of needed reform.

For all the conflicting feelings under the surface in this speech, the openness with which Zhang admits to his audience that the theoretical insights necessary to galvanize his theretofore only latent nationalistic thought were gained only by reading Western books is still striking. It is true that Zhang makes a halfhearted attempt to diminish the force of this utterance by saying that he had read books “from countries both East and West.” This claim follows, however, a quite unambiguous statement that prior to 1895 he seems to have read every available indigenous work concerned with Chinese nationalism and that they had all lacked the power to synthesize experience the way that the new books had. Moreover, the term he uses to signify “theory,” “xueli” (now obsolete), is one of the many neologisms invented in Meiji Japan to express ideas that were regarded as being within the province of the new and the Western and thus not capable of being voiced in the lexicon as it had previously existed. Zhang’s conceptualization of the issue of nationalism, then, has become possible only through new ideas and terms imported either directly from the West or, more frequently, from the West via Japan. Zhang’s statement of inspiration from imported ideas is hardly unique in this period. Yan Fu, for instance, in the preface to his 1903 translation of Spencer’s *Study of Sociology*, muses: “I read this book in 1881 or 1882, and was immediately sorry that I had not seen it earlier, for up until that time I had favored extreme and one-sided statements. It was only at this point that I realized my error.”

Wenxue and Its Complexities

As the examples given above suggest, the initial intellectual encounters between Chinese thinkers and the West in this period were heavily bookish. As a result, in taking the measure of the interplay between Chinese and Western theories of culture after 1895, it is clear that the questions of what to write and how to express one’s insights quickly came to occupy key positions in the intellectual life of the time. Even the word used to signify the general field of literature registers the complexity of the transformation that China was beginning to undergo. In China the term “wen-
xue," which can now be appropriately translated only as “literature,” originally had a range of meaning that is, paradoxically, at once both broader and more limited than that denoted by the latter word’s modern English usage. The traditional meaning of "wenxue" was humane letters in general, one of the four categories of learning, according to Confucius. Beginning in the 1890s, however, the term was borrowed back from a new usage popularized in Japan, where it had come to be used as a translation for the English term “literature.” Of all the terms imported from Japan in these years to stand in for Western concepts, it is perhaps “wenxue” that continued to be most fraught with the legacy of its earlier meaning, giving rise to a term that could never quite comfortably be taken for granted. Its broader connotation lingered on, and the ambiguities of the term inevitably added to its rhetorical charge, with the older and more extended meaning hanging over the more restricted, purely literary sense and increasing its resonance. One of the possible consequences is that “wenxue” was throughout the twentieth century called into service in a remarkably wide variety of social and political situations—its position as the locus of the intellectual purges that constituted the proximate cause of the Cultural Revolution in 1965–1966 is only the most spectacular example.

Part of the reason for this enduring aura surrounding “wenxue” was the continuing use of the term in its old sense in the period of intense reflection that began in the 1890s. The following instance of the way the term was used in these years may be taken as emblematic. The American missionary educator-journalist Young J. Allen (1836–1907; Chinese name, Lin Lezhi) was the editor of the influential weekly Chinese paper Wanguo gongbao (A review of the times), published in those years by the new Society for the Diffusion of Christian and General Knowledge among the Chinese (“Guangxue hui” in Chinese; the English title was later simplified to “Christian Literature Society”). After Japan’s defeat of China in 1895, Allen collaborated with his aide, the jinshi (metropolitan degree holder) Ren Tingxu, to translate into Chinese a book entitled Education in Japan: A Series of Letters Addressed by Prominent Americans to Arinori Mori, originally published in New York in 1873. Mori Arinori (1847–1889) had been an important Japanese diplomat and reformer who eventually became Japan’s first minister of education (mombu daijin) in 1885. During the time of his posting to the United States between 1870 and 1873 he had taken it upon himself to send a number of letters to prominent American educators, inquiring about the links between education and national strength. According to Allen’s preface to the translation, Mori translated the collected responses into Japanese, entitled them Bungaku kokoku saku (Stratagems to revive the country through education), and dispatched them back to Japan, where they became blueprints for educational reform in that country. In his preface
Allen also expressed the wish that China could learn from recent Japanese success in renewing itself. The collected letters were attached to a compendium of Wangguo gongbao articles concerned with the recent war with Japan, entitled Zhong-dong zhanji benmo (The full story of the Sino-Japanese War). With its publication date of 1896, the prominence of the translators as sources of information, and the relevance of both the recent war and the newly invigorated demands for reform, this book became highly influential in its day.

What stands out from our contemporary perspective is that Allen and Ren use the term “wenxue” throughout to translate what had invariably been “education” in the English original. Given that education, in its sense of an organized and dynamic social enterprise, had no real equivalents in China at the time—the term “jiaoyu,” pioneered in Japan to translate “education,” had yet to arrive in China—it is not surprising that the translators had a difficult time finding the mot juste. “Wen,” or “writing,” had long been associated with moral endeavor in China, and with increased force after 1820 or so, so the translators’ adoption of this term had the advantage of suggesting the Confucian sense of education as personal cultivation, a personal cultivation that had always had profound social and statecraft implications. By the time the translation appeared, however, the term “bungaku” had for some time been used as the equivalent of “literature” in Japan, a usage that began to catch on in China during the 1890s but was not completely naturalized until the first decade of the twentieth century. As the new definition of “wenxue” became popularized in China as part of the general reform effort, it almost invariably brought along with it a didactic connotation, something that Allen and Ren’s use of the term to translate “education” could only have reinforced.

To fully understand the vicissitudes of the term in the last century, we must first look into some of the influential cultural theorizing that surrounded it in the years after 1895. The related notions of wen and wenxue came to be an indispensable part of the response to the attack on tradition so sharply set forward by Yan Fu, as a key portion of the process of cultural recuperation—recall that even Yan Fu had almost immediately engaged himself in such recuperation after his initial iconoclasm. A variety of notions was put forward to counter directly the shattering effect of the new currents of thought that followed upon Yan’s iconoclastic essays of 1895. Many of these notions attempted to reestablish a unified conceptual order. The most spectacular attempt at holding the center of a rapidly dispersing intellectual horizon was no doubt Kang Youwei’s effort to put state Confucianism on a religious footing. What Laurence Schneider has identified as “the discovery of culture,” however, was perhaps more significant in the long run. The new theory of “national essence” (guo-
that eventually crystallized in the first decade of the new century represented an effort both to guarantee continuity with the past and to separate culture from an earlier and demonstrably unsuccessful political realm.

Probably the most important vehicle for this envisioned essence came to be a more unified concept of belletristic writing than had ever existed before, encapsulated within the old term "wenxue." The tension inhering in the guocui ideal of trying to separate historical context from transhistorical significance is nowhere more apparent than in this "new" and highly ideological field of wenxue. Literature became, above all, an arena of tension between utopianism, along with the hopes for real departure from old concerns projected onto it, and the enduring influence of traditional patterns of thought that resided in the intellectual environment out of which the newly defined category had grown. In other words, wenxue offered everyone who cared to think about it a realm of potential in which traditional preoccupations could be resituated and—at least such was the hope—transfigured, more or less, depending upon the individual viewpoint. The almost bewildering variety of views set forth on the subject in the years after 1895 is at once emblematic of its importance to the overall cultural enterprise and of the tremendous frustrations involved in trying to construct that enterprise itself.

Prior to 1895 the category of embellished written expression was simply "wen," a term that represented a palimpsest of related meanings ranging from simple prose to decorated prose and decoration itself in combination with the traditional idea of personal and social cultivation in the broadest sense. "Wen" was thus a heavily fraught word even before it was weighted with an array of new tasks in the reform period, for use of the term in any of its senses tended to carry along with it overtones of the other meanings. The ubiquity of the moral overtones that had long attached itself to the term helps explain why advocacy of a particular type of wen, guwen (archaic prose), became one of the principal intellectual vehicles of the court faction that had sought to strengthen a weakening political order with a moral revival along orthodox neo-Confucian lines in the 1820s–1840s. Zeng Guofan (1811–1872) had seized upon this idea of prose in the 1850s–1860s and further developed it as part of his effort to galvanize the morale of the intellectual elite against the social erosion brought about by the Taiping rebellion. For the purposes at hand, it is sufficient to note that the melding of aesthetics with moral concern provided the occasion for a revival of guwen in particular and wen in general during the course of the nineteenth century. This was in the end to be the one constant among the various justifications for wen and wenxue that crowded the discursive field in the final decade of the dynasty.

After 1895 the process of elevating the role of writing continued
even as that role was transformed by the flood of doubts assailing the intellectual assumptions that had provided the context for the earlier emphasis on wen. The practical demands made on the new idea of literature were a response to the need to use wenxue to fill a variety of needs, including coming to terms with the challenges that Western ideas, now regarded as ineluctable, had presented to the old order. The newly conceptualized literary field had to provide a theory powerful enough both to unify and to continue the focus on theretofore disparate genres of writing, as well as to validate old ideas concerning the utility of writing that needed continued recognition and, above all, to underwrite the authority necessary for providing cultural significance to writing in difficult times. The literary discourse that followed in the years after 1895 took a number of distinct directions, some of which tried hard to stay within traditional patterns of significance and others that tried quite self-consciously to set out in new directions. Each trend, however, was eventually moved in directions its principal advocates could not foresee, by unpredictable combinations of new theories and residual influences from preexisting modes of thought that no one ever seemed quite able to take the measure of. In a sense, the legacy of the earlier nineteenth century, with its tendency to conflate utility and aesthetics (or, perhaps more accurately, a particular notion of “moral aesthetics”) provided a hidden gravitational pull that no one seemed able to escape. Beyond this central issue of utility and aesthetics, however, the situation was complicated by other theoretical axes, such as faithfulness to traditional forms versus willingness to experiment, and fidelity to the established literary languages versus a new determination to experiment with the vernacular. That none of the main theoretical groupings ran quite parallel to what at least some of them claimed as traditional antecedents again testifies to the monumental transformation of literary discourse in these times.

Prose Schools

I divide the literary discussion of the 1895–1908 period into four distinct areas, primarily on the basis of shared intellectual affinities within each division (a fifth category—xiaoshuo, or fiction—is so crucial that it merits its own chapter). There is some overlap, and the final category admittedly comprises everything that fails to fit into the first three. The primary defense of this categorization is that this is how writers grouped themselves at the time, a time when both preexisting and self-consciously new genres were engaged in complicated conversation with early practices of writing. The first two of these intellectual groupings represent explicit continuations of traditional schools of prose. The first of these, the Tongcheng
school of archaic prose, was by far the most influential voice concerning prose theory through most of the nineteenth century (at least after c. 1820), but its position eroded quickly after 1900. The second category, the so-called Wenxuan school, based itself on the theories concerning the aesthetic preeminence of parallel prose as promulgated by the eminent scholar and official Ruan Yuan in the 1820s. Because Ruan's ideas were conducive both to the aesthetic elevation of parallel prose and to the abstraction of that prose from quotidian concerns, it fit the newly exalted idea of wenxue better than did the more plainly didactic and less embellished Tongcheng guwen style. In addition, the Wenxuan school's sense that parallel prose partook directly of the essence of Confucian thought was even better suited to the needs of those searching for a national essence. Ruan Yuan's "heirs" thus became considerably more influential than did those of Tongcheng's Yao Nai (1732–1815) in the waning years of the Qing, a dramatic reversal in the relative positions of these two dominant prose genres.

The third group, which sought to open a less mediated path of expression, was led by Liang Qichao and his New Prose Style (xin wenti). Liang's effort to create an accessible style more in accord with the ostensible transparency of the vernacular was arguably not much different from the dominant classical language ubiquitous in official documents. It was, however, eventually to create reverberations that would shock Liang himself to the core, and his expressed willingness to write a prose that was meant to break decisively with precedent was perhaps its most important feature in the long run. Liang was also a pioneer among the large and varied company who advocated the novel as a vital medium of social and political reform (and who are the subject of the next chapter), something evidently related to his willingness to experiment with new styles of prose.

Finally, there were a number of prominent individual scholars who, on first glance, hardly seem to constitute a coherent group at all—they seem only to share a mood of dissent from or resistance to more dominant trends. They are represented at one extreme by Zhang Binglin, with his resolute denials that prose could have any special aesthetic properties, and on the other extreme by Wang Guowei (1877–1927), who by 1906–1907 had come to see aesthetics as the defining feature of human behavior. These two had in common, however, a conscious denial of any strictly utilitarian view of wenxue, perhaps the surest indication of the overt Western influence on their views of writing. The younger Zhou Shuren (1881–1936), later to become famous as Lu Xun, was influenced by both men and combined elements from each in such a way as to demonstrate the strengths, the weaknesses, and the limits of the traditional Chinese view of the capacities of literature. His writing is the subject of chapter 10.
A primary concern of the so-called Tongcheng theory of prose was to maintain a uniform, archaic style that was also evocative and relatively accessible to all educated men. The moral qualities held to be the immanent core of guwen were seen as the key to both the uniformity and the accessibility of proper composition. The moral authority of prose thus to some degree required that no form of writing become so specialized that it risked losing the general qualities that all guwen was supposed to share. Indeed, many of the late Qing calls for archaic prose rest specifically on a faith in the clarity of diction that ostensibly guaranteed accuracy of expression. As Yan Fu wrote concerning the style he had chosen for his translation of Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*:

Confucius said: “The purpose of words is only to communicate” and “language without embellishment will not carry far.” … [But my] wish is not simply to carry the words far; in fact the essentials and subtlety [of the text] are most readily conveyed by using pre-Han style and syntax. If one uses the vulgar language current today, it is difficult to get the point across: one always suppresses the idea in favor of the expression, and a tiny initial error leads to an infinite error in the end. (Emphasis added)

In light of the May Fourth–inspired and subsequently widely held view that guwen is perversely elitist and obscurantist, it is important to recall that one of the principal Tongcheng claims for itself was the precision of archaic prose in conveying complex ideas. On the other hand, Tongcheng theorists always acknowledged a stylistic density to guwen that was an equally important characteristic. The later Tongcheng master Wu Rulun’s musings on translation, written in the late 1890s, bring out the contradictions between these two views. In his 1898 preface to Yan Fu’s *Tianyan lun*, Wu dealt extensively, if finally indecisively, with the relationship between content and form. After briefly summarizing Huxley’s argument in the first third of his preface, Wu devoted the rest of his discussion to analysis of the stylistic elements of the Chinese translation. In the tripartite taxonomy of writing that he then set forth, Wu also demonstrated the extent to which orthodox neo-Confucian moral philosophy depended upon careful cultivation of written expression. His first category consists of prose in which both the dao and the style are superior; prose of this sort will certainly last through the ages. In the second, the dao is inferior but the prose is good enough to survive on its own, while the third type consists of inferior prose that will be soon forgotten regardless of the quality of the moral philosophy that the author is seeking to express. The weight Wu apportions to each segment of his argument—
two-thirds being on matters of style—tellingly indicates the real locus of his concern. As if to underline this, Wu noted that his understanding of Huxley was made possible primarily by Yan’s strengths as a guwen stylist.\(^{23}\)

Wu blamed the deficient literary climate in China for the difficulties that had been encountered in successfully bringing Western ideas to China, denouncing such forms as examination prose (shiwen), better known as the “eight-legged essay” (bagu wen); the plain style used in document composition (gongdu); and the mixed style used in anything from fiction to diary jottings (shuobu). Pragmatically, Wu was concerned that foreign works translated into inferior Chinese would earn only the contempt of “knowledgeable men.” He believed that writing as competent as that of Yan Fu is guaranteed to endure if—and this seems to Wu to be a large if—the current trend of debased prose can be overcome and people can recognize that Yan’s writing aspires to be on a par with that of Sima Qian in the Shiji and the great prose work of the eight masters of the Tang and Song. Along with Wu’s magnified concern with style, however, lies a certain ambivalence about a potential disharmony between form and content, something that the early advocates of the post-1800 guwen revival had been quite certain they would be able to oblitrate. Wu says that Yan Fu makes Huxley’s message all the clearer, but he admits to a certain wariness about the ultimate utility of the message itself. For, after implicitly ranking Yan’s prose with that of the traditional masters of archaic prose, Wu goes on to say:

I don’t know that the dao of Huxley compares with that of Buddhism, but I do know that to rank it with that of Sima Qian and Yang [Xiong, 53 B.C.E.–18 C.E.] would be difficult. I also know that it would be difficult to rank it with even the writers of the Tang and Song. But with the embellishment of Master Yan (Yanzi yiwen zhi), the book can run neck and neck with the thinkers of the late Zhou dynasty (wan Zhou zhuzi). Can writing style, then, be unimportant?\(^{24}\)

In the rather more private form of a letter written in response to Yan Fu, Wu is more open about his misgivings concerning the general currency of translation. Much more explicitly than in the preface, Wu wonders in the letter whether the vast differences between the Western languages and Chinese do not require that a wholly new form of Chinese be created to do justice to the ideas of the West, much as a new style was required to translate the Buddhist canon from Sanskrit. But Wu is also concerned lest the newly ascendant Western learning begin to supplant the Chinese learning upon which the indigenous culture is based. Because he views writing as the key to that culture, the use of vernacular Chinese as the medium of translation is unacceptable, for its widespread adoption

...
Late Qing Ideas

would only hasten the demise of a tradition based upon a carefully cultivated writing style. Wu, then, quite tentatively confers his approval upon Yan’s transformation of Western texts into elegant *guwen*, evidently, however, feeling a good deal of discomfort in so doing. His misgivings ultimately oblige him to come down firmly on the side of loyalty to style over consonance with the meaning of the original text, advising Yan that it is better to “sacrifice fidelity [in your translations] than to do harm to the purity [of their style].” Wu elaborates: “What harm is there in not noting minor matters of little consequence? To call something *wen*, yet to include therein the vulgar, base, and shallow, that which men of title refrain from speaking of, is something that men of knowledge have never failed to abstain from; it is what Mr. Zeng [Guofan] referred to as ‘avoiding the vulgar in one’s diction’ (*ciqi yuaban bi*).”

Wu’s determination to grant primacy to style over content was by no means the only position advanced on this important question in the late Qing and was, in fact, in sharp contrast to a number of other scholars’ views on the proper way to translate. For instance, Hua Hengfang (1833–1902), writing perhaps two decades before Wu, mused about the problems involved in translating abstruse mathematical treatises into proper Chinese. Hua, a scientist and co-translator of Western technical books at the Jiangnan Arsenal (*Jiangnan Zhizaoju*), participated in a two-man team in which one member orally translated the foreign work while the other concentrated on rendering it into good Chinese. Hua was the latter member of the team, and he wrote a number of essays on the difficulties he faced in such projects. In his discussion of the issues involved, he came to the following conclusion:

> In producing the written text, one must by all means write out every single word of the oral translation. There can be no omissions at all, and neither may one augment or reduce or offer any changes at all. When it comes to making the fair copy, then one must consider making corrections for grammar and style (*wenli ziju*), but any changes must be as close to the intention of the oral translation as possible. It is impermissible to create departures from the original in pursuit of the elegance of the archaic (*guya*) . . . and also impermissible to insert your personal opinions. If there are errors in the original and you have an opinion on them, you can insert a note to clear them up; you may not change the original.

(Emphasis added)

It is hardly surprising that a man as dedicated to science and its diffusion in China as Hua was would have such strict views on fidelity in translation, but Hua’s views do show how problematic Wu’s opinions were even in the period of cultural turmoil in which they were set forth.

The injunction to hew to the path of utmost cultivation in written
expression still does not satisfy Wu that the gap between the Chinese tradition and the newly imported ideas of the West has been closed, so he adds the somewhat anticlimactic suggestion that a curriculum of sanctioned Chinese prose texts be added to the Western-style education to be offered at the new schools. Following the practice of the post-1820 Tongcheng school, Wu places the writings of Yao Nai at the core of this body of work, basing himself now on a wish for clarity. He notes that any older—and, by implication, more profound—books would simply be over the heads of novice learners. The extraordinary vacillation with which Wu approaches the whole question of the flexibility of wen demonstrates, I think, how much more is at stake here than can be accommodated by any notions we might consider to be “mere” style. When Wu thinks of wen here, he evidently has in mind at all times the overtones of the word having to do with the essence of the cultural tradition itself and the means by which one gains access to it. His insistence on a punctilious observation of formal detail is thus only natural. The adamant refusal to recognize the possibility of any stylistic variations among different registers of writing, however, isolates Wu and his cohort on one horn of a dilemma. While he does evince an awareness of the need to reconcile the new ideas being introduced in response to the great social changes in the burgeoning cities of maritime China, at the same time he determines himself to hold steadfast to the purity and integrity of the old forms of expression.

In a new environment in which practical links between past and present became ever more difficult to maintain, the problems inhering in the Tongcheng literal adhesion to guwen norms, with its concomitant emphasis on a direct line of succession from the Tang and Song, became increasingly evident. That the most significant prose produced after 1900 within the school is archaic prose translations of Western works—including, ironically enough, guwen translations of novels—demonstrates just how untenable were Tongcheng theories of maintaining intellectual unity in their own time by upholding a direct link with the sages. The Tongcheng writers did take great pains to put their own notions of style ahead of generic distinctions whenever they ventured into an unfamiliar mode of writing. Their audiences, however, inevitably seemed to focus on the surface message rather than on the intricate cultural code so sedulously inscribed within the careful texture of the writing itself.

The greatest translator of foreign works into guwen other than Yan Fu was Lin Shu (1852–1924), whose choice of genres presents something of a taxonomic problem. Lin was a remarkable scholar who knew no English but wrote classical Chinese adaptations of Western novels as he listened to an assistant proficient in a European language orally translate into colloquial Chinese. Even more remarkable, perhaps, are Lin’s endeavors to colonize the previously tabooed territory of the novel for ar-
chaic prose. The irony of his rendering the most vernacular of genres into the most formal linguistic mode is best illustrated by the fact that the net result of his efforts to translate foreign novels into guwen was to augment the prestige of the novel rather than to produce any long-term gain in the audience for archaic prose. Thus the question arises of whether to discuss his work under the rubric of classical prose—which almost certainly would have been his choice—or in the next chapter, which is devoted to the novel and its late Qing critics. There is no real answer here—the choice itself mirrors the difficulty of the question, but in the end I have decided to follow Lin's own visions of himself as a promoter of archaic prose.

If Lin's prefatory remarks to his translations are to be believed, however, he was anything but condescending in his approach to the Western novel. On the contrary, he appears deeply impressed with what he finds there, particularly the elements of formal composition, which he compares favorably with the guwen style of the Shiji. But what Lin seems to find most remarkable about the Western novel is the sustained interest in the commonplace that Dickens is able to maintain throughout the recounting of a long chain of events. In his introduction to his translation of David Copperfield, for instance, Lin admits to being unable to find any Chinese equivalent to Dickens' skill at narrative. After first dismissing the Ming novel Shuihu zhuan (The water margin) for sensationalism, not to mention its inability to sustain character individuality over the full course of the story, Lin says of David Copperfield: “This book narrates only the most scattered events of everyday life; if someone with skillful pen were not writing it, then of course it would be so placid as to put one right to sleep. But Dickens is able to transform the worn-out into the wonderful, to take the dispersed and organize it, to take the five animals and myriad oddities and fuse them through his spirit—his is truly a unique style.”

Style and plot structure were not, however, the only things that attracted Lin Shu to Dickens. The translator was equally interested in what he perceived to be the Western novel’s profound capacity to inspire social reform. In his preface to his adaptation of Oliver Twist, for instance, Lin goes so far as to imply that England owed much of its position in the world to its novels, which had engendered prodigious governmental and social reform:

Without Dickens describing the situation, how would people know about this nest of thieves persisting in their midst? England’s ability to be strong, therefore, lies in its capacity to reform and follow the good. If we in China attend to this [example] and transform ourselves, we will also easily be able to change. I regret only that we have no Dickens capable of revealing accumulated social wrongs by writing [such] a novel and thus reporting these wrongs to the authorities, perhaps with similar results.
Although Lin’s ability to move so easily from considerations of the aesthetic to the utilitarian may strike the Western reader as odd, fluidity between the two in fact reflects the common moral basis expressed in Tongcheng ideology in particular, and in late Qing theorizing about wen in general. But in a time when specialization at all levels of society was proceeding apace (including in the system of imperial examinations, where tests on specialized topics were the norm after 1901), Lin’s attempts to embrace all facets of social organization and expression within the confines of an archaic prose style seem foredoomed to failure. That he settled on the novel as the perfect genre for his instinct for synthesis is perhaps only natural, for despite the novel’s traditionally low status, there was a widespread belief at the time (as is illustrated in the next chapter) that xiaoshuo was seemingly the only form loose and capacious enough to hold all the elements he sees as required. But embracing the novel meant admitting the heterogeneity of the form into orthodox literary discourse and thereby running the risk of allowing the notoriously imprecise criteria for xiaoshuo to dramatically reshape established boundaries. The eventual supremacy of the novel in modern Chinese literature and the almost complete disappearance of guwen illustrate the nature of the risk that Lin was running. The compromises involved in trying to maintain an ancient prose style that could be all things to all people contributed to the growth of prose genres that increasingly marginalized the archaistic style that the late Tongcheng writers had labored so hard to infuse within such forms as the novel and the policy essay. It is a mark of the eclipse of style by content that the late Qing writer Li Xiang (1858–1931), in his 1908 account of the Tongcheng persuasion, could completely overlook Yan Fu’s and Lin Shu’s achievements by holding that the school had been unable to generate any writers of ability following the death of Wu Rulun in 1903.

Wenxuan

The Wenxuan school was named after the Six Dynasties anthology that contained a significant portion of writing composed in the parallel style. Its organizing theory followed Ruan Yuan’s definition of wen as only that mode of writing composed of parallel couplets. Wen could thus easily be distinguished from purely utilitarian writing, which was classified as bi. In a sense this distinction offered a ready solution to the Tongcheng difficulty in absorbing new forms of writing. By setting apart a body of writing said at once to contain the direct spirit of the ancients and to be quite separate from utilitarian concern, the Wenxuan theory allowed for different writing styles, not to mention accommodating more readily to ideas about literary autonomy that became increasingly implicit in the new definition of wenxue. As long as one style could be set aside as the abode of the
essence of the Chinese tradition, various other modes could be freely employed to account for the most recent historical contingency. This ability to be abstracted from the daily grind, indeed from all recent history, no doubt accounts for the popularity and vitality of parallel prose in the final years of the Qing. In addition, Ruan Yuan had claimed that Confucius himself had initiated the parallel style, but that this fact had been obscured for hundreds of years until Ruan rediscovered it. These intimations of mystical significance, with Confucius at the center, accorded perfectly with the post-1895 temper. Wen as Ruan Yuan had defined it many years earlier thus became a likely resting place for a new concept of “national essence,” abstract and defiantly transhistorical as the idea was.

At the center of the national essence movement was Liu Shipei (1884–1919), a scholarly prodigy who, along with Zhang Binglin, was one of the twin pillars of anti-Manchu revolutionary anarchism in the period between 1903 and 1908. Born to an illustrious family of scholars that had resided in Yangzhou for several generations, Liu gained the juren (provincial level) degree at the tender age of nineteen sui but was unsuccessful in the metropolitan examinations the next year, 1903. After failing the exams, he went to Shanghai, where he met anti-Manchu activists like Zhang and Cai Yuanpei and quickly became involved in radical politics himself. Returning home, he soon came back to Shanghai, bringing his fiancée, He Ban, back with him; they married in that city soon thereafter. She entered the Patriotic Girls’ School (Aiguo nüxue), changing her given name to Zhen (“shock, shake”) in the process, a sign of her entry into radical politics. Liu was involved in a number of publishing ventures in Shanghai, notably the Jingzhong ribao (Alarm bell daily news). When the newspaper was closed by the authorities in 1905, Liu fled, first to Zhejiang and eventually to Anhui, a center of radical activism, before ending up in Japan in February 1907.

Zhang Binglin had been appointed editor of the Minbao (People’s journal)—the organ of Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary political organization, the Tongmeng hui—after his release from prison in Shanghai and removal to Tokyo in the summer of 1906. Zhang invited Liu Shipei to participate in the magazine, which was apparently extremely popular and influential at the time, and Liu became a principal contributor to it, joining the Tongmeng hui soon after his arrival in Tokyo. For the remainder of 1907 and much of 1908 Zhang and Liu managed to transform the tenor of the journal from one devoted to practical politics to one that focused on abstruse matters of political and cultural theory. During their time in Tokyo, Liu and He Zhen also published the Tianyi bao (Natural justice journal), which was devoted to the promotion of radical anarchism. Both journals were shut down by the Japanese government in 1908, not long after Liu and He had a falling out with Zhang.
to China. In general the Tongmeng hui was having a hard time of it in this period, with a good deal of dissension, internal strife, and questioning of Sun’s leadership, but Liu’s suddenly turning up in the personal secretariat of Duanfang (1861–1911), the Manchu governor-general at Nanjing, right after Liu’s departure from Japan must still be counted as a remarkable turn of events. Even though Duanfang was an enlightened modernizer and a generous patron of talent, for someone of Liu Shipei’s extreme views to move suddenly toward accommodation with the regime he had bitterly opposed for so many years came as a real shock to his erstwhile compatriots. Liu remained in Duanfang’s entourage until the distinguished official was killed in Sichuan in the revolutionary violence of 1911. Liu himself eventually ended up in Beijing in 1914, became a professor of Chinese at Beijing University in 1917, and died prematurely of consumption in 1919, at the age of thirty-six sui.

For all the mutability and even caprice apparent in Liu’s strange political career, his thinking about culture remained consistent. In fact, his most important legacy from these years, certainly in terms of scholarly influence, was his co-founding of the Society for the Protection of National Studies (Guocui baocun hui) in January 1905 and his continuing participation in the society, along with Deng Shi and Huang Jie. Within a month of its founding, the society began publishing the Guocui xuebao (National essence journal). The term “guocui” had been borrowed from Japan, where, as “kokusui,” it had been a concept developed in the late 1880s to assert a sense of national singularity in the face of pressing demands for Westernization. As cosmopolitan as he may have been in his role of revolutionary at the time, Liu clearly felt the need to anchor himself with a firm sense of Chinese cultural identity. As part of his cultural explorations, he wrote a treatise on the idea of wen, wherein one of his central concerns was to verify Ruan Yuan’s understanding of the term and its history. He gathered elaborate amounts of historical evidence to support what he regarded as the vital distinction between belletristic wen and the utilitarian bi. Much of this treatise is devoted to strictly textual questions, where he does not go into the reasons he considers wen to be so important.

Occasionally, however, Liu offers impassioned explanations of the source of his commitment, as in this passage analyzing the various meanings of wen:

In China during the Three Ancient Dynasties [Xia, Shang, and Zhou], cultural works were taken as wen, elegance was taken as wen, rites, music, law, etiquette, and letters were all taken as belles lettres (wenzhang). From this the classics came to be called wen, as did writing (wenzi), as well as the spoken language (yanzi). The use of “wen” in the belletristic sense began
with the “Wenyan” [commentary on the *Book of Changes*] of Confucius. So “wen” is to be glossed as “ornament,” that is to say, as a beautiful and ordered display. Therefore, *wen* is the external manifestation of the *dao* as well as the sequential ordering of events.\(^{44}\)

While Liu rigorously sets out the various meanings of *wen* through most of this passage, he ends in a display of historical faith by gathering all the overtones of *wen* into a definition that is much greater than the sum of its parts. As with the theorists of *guwen*, for Liu *wen* turns out to be not only the “external manifestation of the *dao* as well as the sequential ordering of events” but at the same time a specific literary style. In other words, the conflation of a particular writing style with the cultural legacy as a whole urges Liu to the judgment that cultural continuity depends upon certain clear rules of rhetoric as difficult to deploy successfully as they were easy to describe. It is hard not to see this move as marking off the territory where the national essence will reside. Liu’s definition also clearly seems to be a justification for the incipient promotion in status of a newly defined conception of what was even then coming to be thought of as *wenxue*. Liu’s choice to focus upon restoring Ruan Yuan’s notion of *wen* implied a consequential reduction in value of other forms of writing to a position of mere utility, necessary for a host of general purposes but without the links to the *dao*, or cultural essence, that Liu saw as the sum and substance of *wen*. This division among the functions of various literary styles, however, was not available to the heirs of the Tongcheng school. For Liu, as for many of the English romantics analyzed by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, the “reach for control” over society, which Williams takes as the core function of culture in an unstable period, required that literature retreat to more rarefied precincts, even as those engaged in its creation asserted the mystical preeminence and theoretical omnipotence of literary writing.\(^{45}\)

The ability of parallel prose to split practice and essence and to sanction a realm of purely literary expression perhaps accounts for its resurgence during the last years of the Qing. This impression is fortified by the fact that many of the new adherents to the *pianti* style were converts away from archaic prose. The young political activist and victim of the September 1898 reaction, Tan Sitong (1865–1898), for instance, wrote in his “Sanshi ziji” (Personal account at thirty)—in tones that perhaps influenced Liang Qichao when he came to write his own memoirs at thirty a few years later—that he had recently made just such a conversion:

> When I was young, I was very much in awe of the Tongcheng school, and for a number of years I made a point of basing my writing on theirs. Eventually I thought my writing had come to resemble theirs, and other
people thought so too. By the time, however, that I had happened to read a good number of books and had come to know many of the learned men of our age, I began to feel a bit ashamed of having no real way to express myself. Someone showed me the [parallel prose] of the Wei and Jin dynasties, which made me happy; I frequently read it and became ever more fond of it.16

Tan’s sense that guwen is neither fine enough to allow nuanced expression nor broad enough to accommodate a wide range of learning evinces itself here.

Comparison between the two schools of prose that had dominated intellectual discourse in the nineteenth century in their final, late Qing manifestations reveals how the intellectual crisis that precipitated the “discovery of culture” undermined the hopes for a unified field of learned discourse that at least the Tongcheng definition of wenxue had taken as its goal. Those devoted to archaic prose— with their ideal of learning, moral cultivation, and expression all conducted within the same stylistic frame of reference—concentrated their intellectual efforts into holding to the carefully developed and deliberately austere guwen style, even when they ventured out into experiments with new genres. In an age of increasing specialization on the one hand, and increasingly strident demands to expand the potential audience for written texts on the other, however, advocates of the ancient style were probably doomed to fighting a rearguard action to hold on to a steadily diminishing middle ground of discourse.

For their part, the Wenxuan school writers were freer to develop writing for practical application in other directions, as long they left a place atop their literary hierarchy for a prose based on the parallel prose that had flourished during the Six Dynasties. In the highly allusive, elaborately complex prose employed by leading Chinese thinkers like Liu and Huang Ren after 1895, we can see the influence of these efforts to place prose style on the highest possible cultural plane. Because the Wenxuan notion of bi in effect mandated legitimate distinctions among different levels of discourse, however, more vulgar forms became permissible, providing they recognized their lower position. Those who could not comprehend the most refined level of writing could thus always tune in some lower register. As a result, the Wenxuan theory shows much less of the intolerance toward what had often been seen in the past as unorthodox and hence somewhat dangerous “lower” forms of prose. If the Wenxuan writers were able to accept such unembellished forms, however, the Tongcheng school and its followers continued to express a quite rigid intolerance toward any writing that did not demonstrate a fine attention to style, manifested in Wu Rulun’s difficulties with finding appropriate ways to fit Chinese and Western together in his ideal school curriculum.
The following argument from Liu Shipei demonstrates just how much easier it was to find justification for working with unorthodox styles within Wenxuan theory than from within Tongcheng notions of the sanctity of a unified, archaic style. Given his exalted notion of what wen should be, it would seem counterintuitive that Liu could accept what he would inevitably regard as the debased form of the vernacular, no matter how much attention was devoted to its composition. He in fact prefigures what would eventually become the mainstream position on the vernacular by claiming its advent to be part of the general process of evolution. With this justification, he not only found his way to accepting it, however, but also actually embraced certain uses of the vernacular as a matter of some urgency, the refinement of language in this case being furthest from his mind. The following discussion of baihua from his work Luen wen zuji (Miscellaneous notes on literature) has often been cited as evidence that Liu supported the general use of the colloquial language,47 but his argument is more complex than it may seem at first glance.

After first establishing that the Chinese language has been in a long process of decline, Liu allows that use of the vernacular is but the next logical step in the process:

Speaking of writing in terms of the general theory of evolution, China upon entering into the modern age must reach the stage of allowing the common language to penetrate literature (wen). . . . Uniting speech and writing will lead to an increase in literacy, while using the vernacular to promote books and periodicals will allow those who are even slightly literate to place [these publications] in their homes, thereby aiding in the awakening of the people. This is indeed a pressing task in today’s China.48

But after allowing the colloquial a generous space with one hand, he sets it firmly in its place with the other:

How can we, however, then rush to discard the ancient language? Contemporary writing should thus be divided into two schools: one devoted to the common language and used to enlighten the mass of people, and another using the ancient language and used to preserve the national learning in order to carry on the norms of the venerable sages. If, however, one boastfully ranges too widely in pursuit of the strange and takes Japanese as a model, I have never been able to see how this can become wen.49

Liu thus always believed there to be a higher mission for superior prose that allowed for the simultaneous existence of a utilitarian and stylistically crude vernacular, a division of literary labor evidently quite com-
mon in societies with both expanding rates of readership and uneven distribution of educational opportunity and attainment. Nevertheless, as the final sentence of the passage indicates (one can safely assume that it is an attack on Liang Qichao’s “new style”), Liu is determined to resist any broadening or hybridization of the discrete prose styles he has taken such care in identifying.

The Wenxuan tolerance of unorthodox styles played an important part in bringing to late Qing letters in general a sense of freedom of manipulation that often had utopian overtones—particularly in regard to those who advocated the novel, as chapter 4 will demonstrate. The consequent loss of a unified field of intellectual discourse, such a vital focus of scholarly attention throughout the Qing dynasty, was, however, to have a number of unforeseen results. One of the most important is hinted at by Yan Fu’s lament quoted above: “If one uses the vulgar language current today, it is difficult to get the point across: one always suppresses the idea in favor of the expression.” In other words, Yan feared that the move away from a uniform writing style would be a Tower of Babel and the source of pollution for Chinese written expression. If guwen (for all its ostensible lack of flourish) demanded years of practice before a satisfactory result was in reach of the individual writer, it also promised to deliver standard meanings within standard contexts. Any trifling with this order of expression, then, threatened the onset of a terrible opacity within the realm of letters.

The New Style

Toward the end of his life, Liang Qichao wrote a brief account of Qing intellectual history, in which he included a fairly substantial third-person narrative of his own position. One paragraph describes his mature prose style and how he developed it:

Liang never liked the ancient-style writing of the Tongcheng school. His own early writing had been modeled after that of the late Han, Wei, and Jin [i.e., parallel prose], and it particularly attended to dignity and refinement. Once he had attained this, he liberated himself from it and made it a rule to be plain and fluently expressive. He would often interlard his writing with colloquialisms, rhyme, and foreign expressions, letting his pen flow freely and without restraint. Scholars vied to imitate it, labeling it the “new style of prose” (xin wenti). The older generation, however, resented it and slandered it as heretical. Nevertheless, his style had a clear structure, and his pen was often full of feeling, with a special charm over the reader.
At first blush, the reader might be inclined to take this as simple self-promotion. Hu Shi, however, writing in 1923, noted that “over the past twenty years, there have been almost no scholars who have not been influenced by [Liang’s] style.”\footnote{The literary scholar Qian Jibo (1887–1955), writing in 1930, also offered evidence that Liang was not idly boasting: “Even now, when scholars under sixty and over forty [i.e., those born between 1870 and 1890] write of politics or academic matters, they never fail to display the hidden influence of Liang.”\footnote{Liang Qichao left an even more detailed account of his own educational experiences and the literary influences he was subject to in a brief memoir he published in 1901. Entitled “Sanshi zishu” (Personal account at thirty), Liang’s narrative of his own Bildung, or experience of intellectual development, provides eloquent testimony to the anxieties occasioned by the unsettled intellectual environment in China during the final years of the nineteenth century. Liang begins this short saga by recounting his experiences when he entered a preparatory academy near his home at age twelve sui:}}

[There I] daily worked at examination prose (tiegu), and although I was not satisfied with it, I did not realize that there was anything on earth other than examination prose that could be called learning. So I immersed myself in it. But I still loved belles lettres (cizhang), and my grandfather and my parents gave me Tang poetry from time to time, which delighted me far more than did bagu [essays in the examination style]. Because our family was poor, we owned few books, and we had only a copy of the Shiji and the Gangjian yizhi lu (Primer of historical events). My father and grandfather taught me from these books, and to this day I can still recite eighty or ninety percent of the Shiji. Among my father’s close friends was one who cherished intelligence, and he presented us with a copy of the Hanshu and Yao Nai’s [anthology], the Guwenzi leizuan.\footnote{At thirteen sui, I first learned of the philology of Duan [Yucai, 1735–1815] and Wang [Niansun, 1744–1832]. I liked it very much and gradually developed the ambition to cast aside examination-style prose. . . . [At age fifteen sui], I took up my studies at the Xuehai tang in the provincial capital, an institution founded by former viceroy Ruan Yuan in the Jiaqing period [1796–1820] in order to train the Cantonese in philology and belles lettres. At this time, I decided to give up examination prose in favor of these pursuits, and I came to the realization that aside from philology and belles lettres there was nothing on earth that could be called learning.}\footnote{In other words, Liang had begun with a fairly standard education in examination prose and guwen. He had, however, quickly moved beyond}
these two genres once he discovered the appeal of the combination of scholarship and embellished prose that became the trend in the final years of the dynasty.

After an unsuccessful attempt at the jinshi degree in Beijing, Liang (by now a prodigious juren) returned to Canton in the autumn of 1890. There his classmate at the Xuehai tang, Chen Qianqiu, told him of the political activity and of the novel ideas of the activist scholar Kang Youwei. Upon first going to see Kang, the two younger men stayed the whole day. Liang described the experience:

\[\text{[It was like] cold water poured on my back or like a direct blow to the head: in one moment the entire structure of my old [learning] (gulei) was gone, and I was at a loss as to what I was doing. I was in shock, but happy; resentful, but composed (yi); full of doubt, yet fearful. [That night] I shared a room with [Chen Qianqiu], and neither of us could sleep the whole night through. We went again to visit the next day and asked for scholarly guidance, and the teacher [Kang] taught us of the xinxue (learning of the heart-mind) of Lu [Jiuyuan, 1139–1193] and Wang [Yangming, 1472–1529], as well as touching upon the basics of history and Western learning. From this time on, I determined to cast aside the old learning, so of course I withdrew from the Xuehai tang and every other day sought to continue my studies with Mr. Nanhai [Kang Youwei]. What I know of learning in my life began from that moment.}\]#57

As the example of Yan Fu makes clear, it was not particularly remarkable in the volatile period of the 1890s in China for such oscillations of scholarly orientation to be registered. On the other hand, it is of interest that in this account of intellectual peregrination, Liang presents the new learning from the West only as a small part of the knowledge that he eventually came to take as definitive and as much subsidiary to Lu-Wang xinxue. Although one suspects that the advent of Western learning actually represents a much larger part of this transformation than Liang allows here, his ability to portray an almost purely domestic intellectual world marked by substantial variety and scope is significant. On the other hand, the very Kang Youwei who figures so largely in Liang’s narrative “is said to have told a reporter in 1898 that he owed his conversion to reform chiefly to the writings of [the missionaries Timothy] Richard and [Young J.] Allen.”#58 Liang himself in his autobiography has a brief account of a visit to Shanghai in 1890, where he “bought a copy of Yinghuan zhilue (Treatise on the world), by Xu Jiyu [1795–1873],#59 in a bookstore.” Liang continued, “Upon reading it, [I] realized for the first time the existence of the five continents and the assorted countries on them. [I] also noticed that the Jiangnan Arsenal (Jiangnan zhizao ju) had translated a
number of Western books, and I was drawn to them; unfortunately, I was unable to buy any [because of a shortage of funds].” In other words, however casual he pretends to be about it, the above reference to his discovery of the world only through Western books discloses the extent that Liang’s encounters with Western books were a crucial part of the mix in his educational progress in his formative period.

As Liu Shipei pointed out, the literary sources Liang claims as instrumental to his liberation—colloquialisms, rhyme, and foreign (principally Japanese) expressions—are precisely those elements that both of the dominant schools of late Qing prose would have ruled out as unorthodox and thus detrimental to the purity of either form. In a sense, then, Liang stresses the types of literary expression proscribed by the major theories, but he is aware that the usage of them was so widespread that any comprehensive notion of writing or literature would somehow need to account for them. Moreover, Hu Shi suggests that every stage that Liang went through left its trace on the style he had developed by the late 1890s, specifically including the bagu form that was such a bête noir to modern Chinese men of letters. Both Hu and Qian Jibo stress the innovative qualities to Liang’s style—for instance, its liveliness and capacity to expound at length. Hu, however, is critical of what he seems to regard as a kind of rhythmic verbosity embedded in the style, something he sees as especially noticeable—and unfortunate—in attempts by others to imitate Liang’s style in later years. For his own part Liang gives no indication that any higher order of writing anchors his eclectic New Prose Style, although the mode in which “Personal Account at Thirty” is composed is notably denser than what we take as the norm for his prose.

The general late Qing conviction that literature was obliged to be hortatory concurred perfectly with the dictum of Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073) that “writing should convey the way” (wen yi zai dao), a phrase that had been enthusiastically adopted by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and had thus become the key neo-Confucian guide to prose composition in the Ming and Qing. The various theories of how to write prose generated under this general guideline, however, invariably also took great care to stress the authority of earlier writing thought to embody the right combination of moral rectitude and practical direction that constituted the dao. Although this guideline may have muted creativity, as many modern critics were to claim, it did guarantee a continuity and a gravity to language by limiting abuse of the accepted conventions of meaning and usage. This was something on which the Tongcheng tradition put the greatest of stress. The Wenxuan school and Liang Qichao were now calling, each in his own way, for an equally (if not more) didactic writing, but without the built-in limits mandated by the need to appeal to precedent. It was also true, though, that for Liang and Liu Shipei alike, unprecedented events called for new
means of expression, however much they were to be controlled by careful taxonomies of writing. These new means quickly found their own paths, much to the surprise and chagrin of those who had sanctioned the departures in the first place.

Two Nonconformists

Difficult as it was to swim against this strong pragmatic tide, there were a few nonconformists, each of whom was quite aware of how outside the mainstream he was. In fact, the rarity of attempts to deny the hold of didacticism or a special role in political discourse for various genres of writing ironically highlights just how difficult it was to separate any concept of wenxue from the global practical concerns of the post-1895 reform movement. Perhaps most influential of those who swam against the tide was the brilliant Zhang Binglin, a major figure in the national essence movement and a profound influence on the young intellectuals of the time. Zhang’s conception of wen could not have differed more dramatically from that of Liu Shipei, a young man otherwise very much an intellectual collaborator of Zhang’s. As we have seen, Liu had exalted wen, held it up as the key to the maintenance of the national essence, and even spoken of its incommensurability with learning (xue). Zhang, on the other hand, rejected any notion of special status for writing of any sort, seeing it instead as a historical storehouse that provided evidence of common national origins.

A self-conscious adherent of the philological rigor of the great days of the Han learning in the late eighteenth century, Zhang devoted himself to arguing against what he regarded as the pernicious effects of dehistoricizing the written tradition by indulging in overembellished letters based on misperception of the true meanings of the terms “wen” and “wenzhang.” That belles lettres should not be a primary vehicle for political issues was virtually the only idea about writing that Zhang held in common with Wang Guowei. But where Zhang attempted to push literary expression aside, Wang sought to place it on a completely different plane from ordinary written discourse. This separation of literature into a rarefied realm might seem to share something with Liu Shipei, but Wang moves the distinction into quite a different direction. Wang had become familiar with the ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer before he entered the realm of literary criticism with his well-known 1904 essay on Hong lou meng (The dream of the red chamber; hereafter referred to as The Story of the Stone). Soon after he completed his critique of the famous novel by Cao Xueqin (1715–1763), Wang moved away from the metaphysical Sturm und Drang of Schopenhauer toward a Kantian definition of art as that which was characterized by “purposiveness without purpose” and marked also by a pure “disinterestedness.” If the import of Liu Shipei’s various theo-
ries added up to a call for raising the status of aesthetic writing. Wang upon entering his Kantian phase sounded a new note in Chinese criticism: he raised the cognitive position of literature even as he promoted it to a separate ontological level. The result was a perspective that allowed more attention to the features needed to generate art and less anxiety about addressing the national agenda. The principal idea to emerge out of Wang’s writings during the next several years aimed at creating a separate realm for art, as he had described it in his article on *The Story of the Stone*. This idea led to a radical new theory of the autonomy of aesthetics from social and political concerns, which he outlined in 1906 in “Wenxue xiaoyan” (Remarks on literature). He holds here that literature and philosophy must be concerned with truth rather than utility and are therefore above the conflicts of interest that inhere in any social or political analysis of phenomena. He concludes his argument rather starkly, with “literature produced for the sake of filling one’s stomach simply cannot be literature.”

On the surface, Wang’s Kantian aesthetic offers Chinese artists a freedom from political involvement rare indeed within the tradition of post-Song-dynasty Chinese letters. Closer examination, however, reveals that, rather than having severed for good the relationship between literature and politics, Wang’s theory of writing seems based instead on a perception of an inevitable relationship of opposition. The idea that the pursuit of truth inherent in his concept of literature demands that literature take a critical stance toward the society it describes can easily be read into both Wang’s critique of *The Story of the Stone* and his later 1906 definition. Moreover, his classification of literature as being a member of the same category as philosophy would seem to be a direct threat to maintaining aesthetics as a value transcendent in itself.

Indeed, Wang almost in spite of himself often admits of the close relationship between literature and society. In discussing Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, for instance, he avers that the two “were alike in using their unparalleled literary talent to propagate their thought.” Much as the thought would probably have horrified Wang at the time, this statement of the link between the world of ideas, even political ideas, and that of literary style sounds more as if it belongs to Wu Rulun writing to Yan Fu than to someone who thought of himself as the apostle of literary autonomy. As if to demonstrate his affinity to Wu, Wang made perhaps one of the more utilitarian arguments for literature on record in 1906–1907 when he, in Joey Bonner’s words, declared: “There is no pastime in all of China . . . that is more sinister than opium smoking, and it is as an alternative to that repellent habit that he proposes the lower classes turn to religion and the upper classes to art.” Wang’s eventual abandonment of literary criticism to pursue a more specifically cultural-nationalist agenda should
thus not be regarded as a complete about-face. Certain clear but unspoken aspects of his ardent pursuit of a distinct literary realm between 1904 and 1906 reveal the unconscious hold on him of certain key patterns of traditional Chinese notions about writing, even as he ostensibly distances himself from them in pursuit of an admittedly Western-inspired agenda.

Looking at these theoretical writings as a whole, one cannot but be struck by the extent of their ambitions for literature, even as that new category is being articulated for the first time. Elements perceived as indigenous are in constant negotiation with those regarded as being new imports, with the results almost always being other than what the advocates of various ideas had in mind to start with. From one perspective it would be easy to dismiss these struggles over writing as merely desperate attempts to salvage cultural meaning that never succeeded in making substantial links to literary practice. Indeed, the one thread that seems to link all the theories—namely, that literature could serve as a vital center for cultural renewal—now looks more like a revelation of the depths of the cultural crisis of the time than a realistic expectation for its solution. Nonetheless, the uncertainties brought to the fore by these struggles marked the signal importance of the literary arena, and this critical ferment brought a new vitality to literature. The primary locus of this activity, however, was to be the novel, a genre rarely taken seriously before that time. And as we shall see in chapter 4, it was, paradoxically, precisely this low esteem and scant attention that allowed fiction to be at once the repository of hopes for the future and the site wherein could be heaped much of the intellectual discontent with the legacy of the Chinese past.