Bringing the World Home
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CHAPTER 4

New Theories of the Novel

People these days are reluctant to read the canonical texts, but they love fiction. Not all fiction, mind you, for they are sick of exemplary themes and far prefer the obscene and the fantastic. How low contemporary morals have sunk!

Li Yu, in Patrick Hanan (translator), The Carnal Prayer Mat (Rou putuan) (1657)

We speak of a cultural revolution, and we must certainly see the aspiration to extend the active process of learning, with the skills of literacy and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited groups, as comparable in importance to the growth of democracy and the rise of scientific industry.

Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution

Even after discounting the heavy irony in Li Yu’s assessment of literary taste in seventeenth-century China, his words still serve to underline the suspect position of the novel in premodern Chinese letters. That even Lin Shu, however, representing the most conservative literary force in the China of his time, was enticed by the possibilities he saw in fictional narrative illustrates both the appeal that some sort of renewed xiaoshuo held for post-1895 intellectuals and the transformation in ideas concerning literature that began to ferment during this era. The novel was eventually to become so important in this period that it is virtually the only form about which theorists from each of the literary schools outlined in chapter 3 had something to say. Undergirding this critical attention was an explosion in the number of novels written and published in the last fifteen years of the Qing, including the unprecedented phenomenon of large numbers of translations into Chinese of European, American, and Japanese fiction. This activity centered on Shanghai, where remarkable economic and population growth was creating a new type of urban society.
that in many ways resembled modern cities in Europe and America more than anything ever seen previously in China.\(^1\)

In fact, the general effort to raise the social and intellectual status of the novel is probably the best-remembered literary event in the final decade of Manchu rule. The plasticity and popular appeal of the genre itself accounted for most of this enthusiasm, offering the prospect of vastly increasing the audience for the messages that writers hoped to get across. This sense of potential—combined with a lack of any firm or, at least, positive notion of what the *xiaoshuo* actually had been in prior Chinese literary thought—brought forth a wide variety of hopes for and definitions of the novel, most of them centering on the educational function of the genre. But this combination of a sparse critical tradition, plus the sense that there were few specific indigenous models to provide guidance, raised basic questions regarding the relationship of the events it narrated to events that had actually taken place. It also brought considerable anxiety and confusion, in regard not only to what the *xiaoshuo* could and could not do, but also to what it should and should not do.\(^2\)

The efflorescence of the late Qing novel, then, was built on a highly unstable substratum. Probably the clearest justification for the new focus on the novel was the idea that the form could accommodate two urgent requirements: a larger audience for writing, and a form that could effectively represent to this larger audience the full dimensions of the crisis that China was facing. The social demands on writing extended well beyond the advocacy of a new importance to be conferred upon the novel. The summing up of recent changes in methods of poetic composition as a “revolution in the realm of poetry” (*shijie geming*), for instance, was announced in 1901 by Liang Qichao even before his call for the New Novel.\(^3\)

Huang Zunxian (1848–1904), the best-known advocate and practitioner of a new sort of poetry, had clearly been intent upon both meeting the twin demands of increasing readership for his chosen vehicle of expression and investing it with new social content.\(^4\) In his determination to broach issues related to politics and technology, Huang quite self-consciously sought to broaden both the scope and the reach of the lyric genre that had previously been regarded as the avenue for the self-expression of only a narrow group of the highly educated.

The novel, however, was soon to be regarded as the obvious candidate for appropriation as a tool to reach a broader audience. As Yuan Jin characterizes the situation, “poetry seems to have been the first to use the term ‘revolution’ to boast of changes to literary genres, but fiction eventually dominated in this.”\(^5\) The dominance of fiction came about not only because of the historical view that it was the genre that spoke to the elite about popular concerns but also because it had, in fact, enjoyed widespread popularity throughout the nineteenth century.\(^6\) For all its evident
suitability for the task of popularization, the *xiaoshuo* took some time to catch on as a medium of political reform, perhaps because of lingering prejudice about the vulgarity of the form. For instance, Huang Zunxian in his discussion of literature in *Ribenguo zhi* (*Treatises on Japan*), a popular series of observations composed in the late 1880s and published in China in 1890, launches one of the first comprehensive appeals for the use of the vernacular in Chinese writing, based on the notion that a closer link between the spoken and written languages will render the latter easier to learn. Even though he mentions the novel as being close to the spoken language, he makes no attempt to advocate either its widespread use or its reform.\(^7\) The early reform activist Qiu Tingliang (1857–1943) was even more militant on the matter of the utility of the vernacular, as is evident in the title of his most famous surviving piece of writing, the 1898 “Lun baihua wei weixin zhi ben” (On the vernacular being the basis for reform). In a long text that goes into any number of reasons for and historical references to the vernacular, he mentions fiction but once, and then only in passing, as something that Japanese schoolchildren can read because of the closer links between writing and speech that had become the norm in that country.\(^8\)

One practical consequence of the eventual adoption of the novel as a device to further reform was a new pressure for relevance, with the direct result that fiction written after 1895 took a much more direct interest in current issues than had fiction written before that time. The semi-journalistic tone of much of the new writing perhaps inevitably represented a coarsening of the refined argumentation that had characterized earlier “literati novels” such as *The Story of the Stone* and *The Scholars*. As part of a general sense that the scope of civic discourse needed to be widened, the presumed simplicity of *xiaoshuo* (a term roughly synonymous with “fictional narrative”) vernacular was reevaluated in these years. This simplicity was seen no longer as a mark of cultural inadequacy but as the genre’s great advantage—its ostensible legibility was transformed suddenly into its great virtue.

The concomitant augmentation of *xiaoshuo*’s responsibilities was made possible by a more fluid environment in which previously stable hierarchies of literary genres were suddenly seen as being contingent upon particular historical circumstances and thus open to wide-ranging change. One of the principal justifications of the need for a wider readership, for instance, arose out of a particular Chinese reading of Japanese and Western modernization as having been the result of increased civic participation, facilitated in large part by popular consumption of socially progressive novels.\(^9\) Of course, such a drastic recasting of interpretive mode also implied a more or less desperate search for a new intellectual order to replace the old one. But this new enthusiasm for the novel con-
tained an important caveat, in the pattern first introduced by Yan Fu: the discussion of the genre often made explicitly invidious distinctions between the desirable novel in its foreign (i.e., Western and Japanese) setting and the traditional Chinese narrative, a form considered rife with corruption. This same distinction was to be mirrored almost precisely in the May Fourth discourse on the realistic novel some twenty years later. Critics thus discriminated within the genre of the novel itself. The traditional (i.e., Chinese) *xiaoshuo* was retrograde, and a new ideal form based on Western and Japanese models was explicitly called for and established as a new object of emulation. As with Yan Fu’s new ideas on the advantages of Western statecraft, it was the external origins of the new novel that provided it with the leverage it required for its new mission of effecting social communication and reform.

**A Critical Discourse Begins**

The principal justification offered by critics for their enthusiasm for fiction was the link between the popular appeal of the novel and the prospects for mass education that the novel thus represented. A focus on the possibilities for mass education dominated fiction criticism in the period of the “New Novel” (*xin xiaoshuo*) after Liang Qichao popularized that term in 1902. The resulting ferment has been often been subsumed under the general category of “revolution in the realm of fiction” (*xiaoshuo geming*), Liang Qichao’s 1902 term that was a back-formation on his characterization of the new poetry. The first straightforward summons to unite fiction and education, however, can be traced back to none other than John Fryer (1839–1928; Chinese name, Fu Lanya), the would-be Anglican missionary who had come to be almost by default the major translator of primarily secular Western ideas into Chinese in the 1870s and 1880s. Fryer, an impecunious 1860 graduate of a government normal school in London, had come to China in 1861 to teach at an Anglican school in Hong Kong, moving on to Beijing in September 1863. After studying Beijing Mandarin for barely two months, he was obliged by the illness of his predecessor to take over as the English professor at the Tongwen Guan in November of that year. After its creation in 1862, this was a post appointed by the Chinese government, but evidently via the recommendation of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). An Anglican body existing to promote the church’s missionary effort in China, the CMS duly “accepted [Fryer] as one of their agents” shortly thereafter. Although Fryer often expressed strong reservations about both his enthusiasm for and the good of teaching English, this appointment must at least have caused him to think that he had been brought closer than ever to his “desire to be engaged in more direct missionary work,” which had motivated his
journey to China in the first place. Moreover, having now secured a stable position in Beijing, Fryer proceeded in 1864 to send for his fiancée from England, and she duly arrived in Beijing in the fall of that year.

A terrible—and fateful—scandal ensued. Fryer’s intended had apparently had an extended affair with the captain of the ship on which she was traveling, and she seems to have arrived in China pregnant. Fryer married her soon thereafter in a hasty wedding ceremony in November in Beijing, after which he arranged immediately for her to return to England from Shanghai early the following year, along with “her child.”

Word was out within the small foreign community in the Chinese capital, however, and the resulting brouhaha caused the CMS to make a quick decision: “The only course open, in respect of the Society, is that you [i.e., Fryer] should close your connexion with us. It is quite impossible that we should retain as an accredited Agent of the Society one whose wife is under such a cloud.” Fryer’s protestations that his wife “was during the great part of the voyage kept, by the captain, under the influence of some drug of strong aphrodisiacal properties, and thus became an easy prey to him, when he had insinuated himself into her confidence” were of no avail. Upon severing its ties with him, the CMS caused Fryer to lose his position at the Tongwen guan, where he was replaced by the redoubtable American W. A. P. Martin. Because of his lack of funds, he had no choice but to stay on in Shanghai after his wife’s departure from the port.

Even as the CMS ended its relationship with Fryer, it made possible an appointment at a new institution, the Anglo-Chinese school for Chinese boys at Shanghai, similar to his old post at St. Paul’s College in Hong Kong. Although he predictably expressed little enthusiasm for this project, Fryer was obliged by bare necessity to accept the position, which he took up in the autumn of 1865. The school was a financial success and Fryer reported being pleasantly surprised by the quality of the students he had to work with. He worked out his frustrations with this meager employment not only by continuing his study of Chinese but also by taking on the editorship in November 1866 of the *Shanghai xin bao*, a Chinese newspaper founded in 1864 by the British-owned English-language weekly *North China Herald*. While serving as editor of this sheet, Fryer inaugurated the first of what would become a series of contests for essays written in Chinese. This first contest, probably held in 1867 and for which three prizes were offered, required a disquisition on the “advantages and disadvantages of Chinese intercourse with Western nations,—how to increase the one and diminish the other.” Fryer noted that the entries were to be “in no way flattering to Foreign Governments in their relations to China,” adding, “This is especially the case in reference to the remarks on our own country.”
After applying to the “American Mission” for membership and being rejected “for the same reason I had to leave the C.M. Society,” Fryer in 1868 finally managed to secure employment with the Chinese government at the impressive salary of eight hundred British pounds a year. Owing to his reputation for skill at Chinese, he was hired at the new Jiangnan Arsenal (Jiangnan zhizaoj), the impressive shipbuilding and armaments factory set up at the behest of first Zeng Guofan and then Li Hongzhang in the southern suburbs of Shanghai in 1865. In line with the broad mandate characteristic of the so-called Tongzhi restoration of the 1860s, the enterprise extended into numerous fields, including a translation bureau that was eventually headed by Fryer. Although Fryer was delighted to leave teaching, he was also required by his employer to give up his editing job at the Shanghai Chinese paper, for the government did not wish to be affected by anything negative that might happen to be reported on its pages.

Once at the arsenal, Fryer settled in for almost thirty years, bringing his wife out from England once again and starting a family. He was ultimately to be responsible for more than half of the translations actually published at the bureau (92 out of 162), translations he first worked orally into Chinese, with a collaborator then rendering them into acceptable literary form. He continued to take part in the general diffusion of scientific knowledge, primarily by acting as one of the principals behind the founding of the Chinese Polytechnic Institution and Reading Room (Gezhi shuyuan), and its attendant publication, the Gezhi huibian (eventually called The Chinese Scientific and Industrial Magazine in English) in 1875. In the mid-1880s, as part of an effort to revivify the institution, Fryer inaugurated another essay contest, in this case a series of works on public affairs. The topics were set by high government officials (i.e., daotai [circuit intendant] and above), and each contest in the series was advertised in both the Shen bao and the Hu bao, the most important Chinese newspapers of the time (the old Xin bao had folded in 1872, apparently unable to compete successfully with Shen bao). According to a long report issued by Fryer in 1887, these contests were highly elaborate, with a new topic chosen each quarter and with three prizes awarded each time. At the end of the year, the twelve winning essays were published together as a book, and Fryer announced that he was pleased with the quality of the winning efforts.

Thus, when Fryer announced his call for a “new trend in the novel” (qiuzhe shixin xiaoshuo qi) in the June 1895 issue of the Wanguo gongbao, it came as the culmination of almost thirty years of efforts to elicit written work from his Chinese reading audience, part of his long-standing general interest in popular education. The notice he posted was quite long
and went into some detail as to the advantages of writing in the theretofore suspect form, now suddenly valued for its capacity to reach a large readership:

In my opinion, nothing is more capable of moving people and changing social custom than novels, which circulate quickly and widely. After they have been in circulation for only a short time, everyone knows about them and they can thus easily transform popular habits. The three greatest evils afflicting China today are opium, the examination essay, and foot binding. Failure to make efforts to reform them would surely be a sign of a lack of wealth and power. I hereby would like to request Chinese who want their nation to flourish to write novels with a new appeal (xin qu) that would illuminate the harm caused by these three things and present ingenious ways to extirpate them. [Writers] should present their case, structure it as a whole, explicate it, and render it into a penetrating work, such that people who read it are powerfully moved to engage in the reform effort. It is vital that the language and syntax be clear and that the implications be graceful and compelling, such that even women and children will be able to understand it. In choosing which events to depict, take those that are contemporary and most likely to occur; above all avoid using stale formulae and do not indulge in creating strange and grotesque events that will startle the readership.25

As Yuan Jin has noted, “this was modern China’s first explicit advocacy of the novel as a device to eliminate old abuses and to usher in the new, to enlighten the popular mentality and to transform the populace.”26 Given that Liang Qichao in these years “recommends . . . [Wanguo gongbao] as required reading for those who were interested in foreign affairs”27 and that he also closely tracked Fryer’s scientific translations,28 it is almost certain that he was prominent among those who read Fryer’s call for a new sort of fiction.

Although Fryer had publicly noted how pleased he had been by the writings submitted in his earlier contests, he was conspicuously disappointed by the fiction entries. His harsh assessment was published—in English—in the missionary organ Chinese Recorder in March 1896:

On the whole these stories are quite up to the standard one might expect. There is a great paucity of new ideas among the Chinese, and hence many of these attempts are merely old literary rubbish and poetry worked up in a new form under a new name with but little attempt at disguise. It is a common remark that the inventive powers of the Chinese are of a low order, and this fact is abundantly manifested in these stories. There is but very little originality in them.29
Even if one sets aside the casual slights on the Chinese national character that were standard practice in the missionary writing of the time, this is a particularly negative evaluation of the practice of Chinese fiction. This criticism was to be echoed in quite similar admonitions regarding fiction writing that were issued by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao not long thereafter.

The idea of the novel as a serious avenue for reform was also given a major boost in the 1890s by Timothy Richard ("Li Timotai" in Chinese). He produced an abbreviated rendering in classical Chinese of *Looking Backward 2000–1887*, a 1888 novel about a future socialist utopia written by an American, Edward Bellamy. First serialized in the *Wanguo gongbao* between late 1891 and April 1892 as *Huitou kan jilue* (A short account of looking backward), it was published as a single volume in 1894 by the Guangxue hui under the title *Bainian yijiao* (A hundred-year sleep) and in a vernacular edition in 1898. The work was popular and influential, receiving notice from such important figures as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Tan Sitong; clearly influencing Liang in his unfinished 1902 venture into writing fiction, *Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* (The future of new China); and being one of the sources of inspiration for a much more important novel, Wu Jianren’s 1905–1906 *Xin shitou ji* (The new story of the Stone), which is the focus of chapter 6.

The mixing of advocacy of the novel into the discourse of the indigenous reform movement followed shortly. In early 1897, Liang Qichao, as part of a much longer work advocating total educational reform, included a series of recommendations on the sort of texts that should be used to educate children in a new, more vibrant fashion. He proceeded from his observation that there are far more readers of fiction than of the classics to his final recommendation of the five he issued regarding the use of fiction (*shuobu*). Liang advocated the novel as an educational device for its ease of comprehension, noting that a general disdain for the form in the past had caused it to fall into the hands of the “modestly talented” (*xiao yucai zhiren*), who had merely indulged themselves in work that “incites robbery and lust (*hui yin huida*).” His ultimate justification for creating novels, however, contains a number of clear echoes of Fryer’s formulation of two years before:

> It would now be appropriate to use solely the vernacular (*liyu*) in creating a wide range of [novels]. At their best we can use them to propagate the teachings of the sages, and at the least they dispense miscellaneous historical knowledge. In the short term they can arouse awareness of our national humiliation, and in the long term they can even tell us about the foreign mentality. As for the buffoonery of the officials, the various evils of the examination system, the stubbornness of opium addiction, and the
cruelties of foot binding, [the novel] can depict them all in great detail and can shake up the hoi polloi. Is there thus any limit to the good they can do?  

Although Liang plainly shares a number of assumptions with John Fryer, including the conviction that the educational novel must be something new, any debt he may owe the British translator goes unacknowledged here. This failure to recognize a text he must have read probably reflects a reluctance to admit the foreign origins of ideas needed for China’s form, something consonant with the Yangwu ideology described in chapter 1. It was around this time, after all, when Liang was still making the characteristic Yangwu claim, in Hao Chang’s words, “that the Chinese cultural tradition had anticipated many of the modern Western values and institutions and had also developed some of them to a higher degree than had yet been attained in the West.”

Toward the end of the same year that Liang was writing his views on reform, the Tianjin Guowen bao published over three days a long, anonymous leading article entitled “Guowen baoguan fuyin shuobu yuanqi” (The reasons behind our decision to publish a fiction supplement). Because the article was not signed, it was assumed to have been written by the editors, Yan Fu and Xia Zengyou, and most scholars concluded that because of the many references to Western history and literature in the piece, it was mainly the work of Yan Fu. The editor of Collected Works of Yan Fu, however, considers Xia to have been the essay’s primary author, so I will assume it to have been a collaboration, at least in general conception. Be that as it may, the leaders’ argument centers, as had Liang’s, on the popularity of the novel, perceived to be a result of the form’s vividness of description, which ensures the endurance of the events it narrates. But even as the essay goes on to presuppose the extravagant proposition that “[w]e have heard that . . . Europe, America, and Japan invariably relied on the assistance of the novel at the time of their enlightenment (kaihua),” it contains an undercurrent of disapproval of the moral improprieties and untruths the genre allows.

The authors attempt to reconcile themselves to these moral problems by making the following assertions: “[W]hen the ancients composed novels, they may well have included subtle implications that they lodged between the lines of their texts. These were, however, well hidden and difficult to uncover. People of shallow learning, lost as they were [in the surface meanings], were thus unable to overcome the damaging features of fiction [by unearthing these implications], and it is difficult to identify the advantages to be gained [from reading it].” By maintaining that the novel can ultimately be justified only by investing it with subtleties that
have, almost by definition, eluded the very readers who created its popularity (the only real reason Yan and Xia take it seriously in the first place), the authors have gravely complicated their case. If they have at one stroke cleared the way for a more positive critical evaluation of the form, they have also rendered the argument for popular education through fiction problematic. And they have raised the stakes for novels of the future: if they cannot be found to contain the subtleties so carefully imbedded by the ancients in their fictional works, novels will be found wanting. The grounds for which they will be found wanting, however, must remain ultimately ambiguous: will it be a matter of imperfectly placed political messages or imperfect composition?

Kang Youwei entered into this discussion at about the same time, also noting the popularity of novels and their consequent suitability as texts to teach children. His advocacy, however, sacrifices the complex reservations registered by Liang, Xia, and Yan, resulting in a utilitarian exhortation that seems little more than a pastiche of pedagogical slogans:

> Among those who are barely literate, there are those who do not read the classics, but none who do not read novels. So if you cannot teach them the Six Classics, you should use novels to teach them. If the standard histories make no impact, novels should be used. If law cannot control people, then novels should be used for control. People of complete knowledge are scarce in this world, while the ignorant are many. People with a thorough grounding in the humanities (wenxue) are few, while those with a crude knowledge are many. . . . There are few literate people in China today, and even fewer who thoroughly comprehend the humanities (wenxue), so fiction is the perfect vehicle to communicate the intentions of the classics and a knowledge of history. How the study of the novel is valued in the West! 57

While the educational benefit of the (right kind of) novel is trumpeted here, Kang also is at pains to draw attention to the immense gap in learning between the highly educated (i.e., those few who can actually purchase and read the classics) and the broader mass of the barely literate. In this passage it is impossible to determine whether by “wenxue” he intends the broader meaning of the humanities in general or its new, restricted sense as a translation for the English word “literature.” In any event, the suitability of the novel as a component of high culture seems thoroughly compromised here, although the utilitarian tagline of its contributions to Western success in the world does paper this over.

When Liang Qichao returned to commenting on fiction—one of the first things he did after narrowly escaping with his life to Japan after the
failure of the “Hundred Days Reform” in September 1898—the reservations he had expressed the year before were amplified. In “Yi yin zhengzhi xiaoshu xu” (Preface to publishing translations of political novels), a work that was to become extremely influential, Liang announced the need for the importation of a new category of fiction from the West, the political novel. Even as he made extravagant claims for its social role, however, he contrasted it invidiously with the Chinese novel as it existed at the time. In fact, according to this essay, about the only thing the traditional Chinese novel was good for was to reveal that only the vulgar avenue of fiction could reach out beyond the small band of men who defined themselves as dedicated to high cultural seriousness:

_Xiaoshuo_ in China, although listed in the traditional bibliographic categories [of the _Hanshu_], has produced few good works since the _Yu chu_ [the work conventionally regarded as having initiated the category]. When [a writer] wished to write of heroism, he took _Shuihu zhuan_ [The water margin] as his model; when he spoke of relationships between men and women, he followed _The Dream of the Red Chamber_. In general there was nothing that did not fit into the two categories of inciting robbery and inciting debauchery (hui yin hui dao). All these [works] followed one another and stuck with one another [in their perpetuation of the harmful]. Therefore, presentable writers disdained [the genre]. Although this is so, the fact is that human nature hates the serious and likes frivolity . . . So there is nothing to be done about it when scholars take time from their learning and take up _Dream of the Red Chamber_ and _The Water Margin_. Therefore, to try to forbid [fiction] is not as good as trying to make it better. What Mr. Nanhai [Kang Youwei] said [in the passage quoted above] is correct.

This total condemnation of the Chinese novel as it existed up to Liang’s time is striking, and his choice of the two most prominent works in the fictional canon as implicit negative influences would seem to allow for no exceptions. That he ends the piece with a ringing affirmation of the powers of a specifically political novel in the West—“It often happened that upon the appearance of a book a whole nation would change its views on current affairs. The political novel has been instrumental in making the governments of [the West and Japan] daily more progressive or enlightened”—does nothing to close the gap between his hopes for the form in general and the low regard he has for every novel ever written in Chinese. By thus cutting off any practical appeal to native precedent, Liang’s call puts up a huge barrier between what he advocated and the fictional languages available to writers at the time, even as he agrees with
his mentor Kang about the necessity of turning fiction into a medium for education. In addition, by focusing exclusively on the presumed flaws in the indigenous fictional texts, Liang is able to displace any traces of Fryer’s influence onto praise and blame for specific novels, rather than having to acknowledge the embarrassing presence of the Western intellectual initiative that suggested fiction as a device for national reform in the first place. Fiction’s potential as a formative influence on the new nation is thus kept that much closer to a discourse of national history, however fraught with ambiguity as to the extent of foreign inspiration and influence involved in the turn to the form.

This thoroughgoing rejection of the indigenous narrative tradition was to become an intellectual commonplace in the twentieth century, from the May Fourth period in the late 1910s to the critiques by Qu Qiubai (1899–1935) in the early 1930s and on to the Chinese critical arena as it sprang back to life in the 1980s, forty or so years after Mao Zedong’s proclamations on literature at Yan’an in 1942. But Liang’s steadfast vision of a novel that can, after it has been thoroughly reformed, serve as the most powerful instrument of change is probably the most remarkable thing about this essay. To cite only one of the problems with this formulation, however, the contrast between Liang’s positivism about the ability of the novel to deliver a straightforward political and social message and the tentative and ironic representations found in such novels as Cao Xueqin’s *Story of the Stone* could not be more striking. Clearly, only by positing radically other, external origins for the new novel is Liang able to indulge his extreme notions of the instrumentality of fiction.

Critics have long wondered exactly where within the European or Japanese discourse on the novel Liang Qichao, Xia Zengyou, and their contemporaries found the idea of the novel as the key to successful reform. Although, as is discussed below, a compelling case can be made for the importance of the political novel in Japan, it is hard to see it as a serious precedent for the extravagant claims made by the reform critics. It is more likely that Liang is basing his influential genealogy of the power of the novel on a simple strategic reversal of the traditional literati view of the harms lurking in fiction, with which, after all, he begins his essay. In other words, Liang’s censure of the traditional Chinese xiaoshuo is founded upon a highly traditional view of its capacity to produce certain undesirable sorts of human behavior. In the new era of possibility, however, narrative retains its old power over behavior, but it is now and only now suddenly reinscribed as capable of being transposed into a positive key. In other words, the core assumption of the old conception of the relationship between the novel and its influence on behavior has not changed, merely the direction and nature of that influence. But there was
a high cost to this reformulation—the rejection of any extant Chinese novel and a concomitant need to theorize fiction as a category transcending any prior practice.

The New Novel

During the early years of his exile in Japan, Liang took action on his conviction of the importance of the novel, founding the new journal Xin xiaoshuo in 1902. It almost instantly became the most important literary journal of its time and spawned a host of imitators, both in Japan and at home in China, principally Shanghai. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, the publication rate both of novels originally written in Chinese and of translations from other languages expanded exponentially after 1902. For instance, according to statistics adduced by Ouyang Jian, only 3 original novels were published in 1900, and 9 each in 1901 and 1902, whereas the figures are 39, 19, and 33 for 1903, 1904, and 1905, respectively, and reached a height of 104 in 1909. The figures for translations are even more dramatic: from a total of 16 published between 1900 and 1902 to 110 and 126 published in 1906 and 1907, respectively. Although debate about the absolute precision of these figures has been considerable, there has been no debate whatsoever about the relative numbers. This phenomenon can in good measure plausibly be credited to Liang’s efforts to popularize the genre.

In the inaugural issue of his new journal, Liang published a long theoretical essay explaining the power of the novel and its links to political activity, thereby setting the tone for the frenzied pace of the creation of both fiction and fiction criticism that followed. The piece, “Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi” (On the relationship between fiction and public governance), is where the term “revolution in the realm of fiction” first appeared. Capturing as it does the messianic spirit of its times, the essay has remained a key document of modern Chinese literary criticism ever since. In its use of parallel structures and Buddhist lexicon, it is also an exemplary piece of prose in Liang’s “new style.” The essay begins in an incantatory fashion reminiscent of Kang Youwei’s remarks on the efficacy of the novel published five years earlier:

If one wants to renew a nation’s people, one must first renew that nation’s novels. Therefore, should one want to renew morality, one must first renew the novel; should one want to renew religion, one must renew the novel; should one want to renew politics, one must renew the novel; if one wants to renew popular custom, one must renew the novel; if one wants to renew the arts, one must renew the novel; and even if one wants to re-
new the popular mentality (xin) and people’s characters, one must renew the novel. Why? Because the novel has an unimaginable power to govern (zhipei) the ways of human beings.47

Traces of previous remarks of various critics on the need for fiction are in plain evidence here, even though Liang has moved far beyond them in his claims for the utility of the novel. More than that, however, he moves from this assertion of utility on to an unprecedented declaration of superior quality, calling the novel the “Great Conveyance for literature” (wenxue zhi zui shangcheng)—“Great Conveyance” is a Buddhist term signifying the most powerful means of conveying ultimate truths. Such rich praise is quite absent from the condescension accorded the novel in the earlier essays that were based almost exclusively on the social efficacy of the form. Even as Liang tenders his extravagant claims for the high quality of fiction and for the enormous power of fiction to move people, however, a troubling element haunts his new equation. Toward the end of the essay, Liang affirms that all the customs of the Chinese people of which he disapproves—such as the tendency for people to wish to “place first place in the exams and become prime minister,” the concept of “the talented man meeting the beautiful woman (caizi jiaren),” and fantasies about “bandits and the brotherhood of rivers and lakes”—are all the result of the pernicious effects of reading earlier novels that had glorified these things.48

In other words, the problem inhering in the earlier comments of a theoretical high quality and function running up against a dismal, if not actively harmful, set of practical results remains, but now, ironically, with redoubled force.

The question of the intellectual basis for this dramatic promotion in the theoretical status of fiction has posed a problem for scholars ever since. Xia Xiaohong, for instance, claims that it could have come only from Liang’s new familiarity with the Meiji tradition of political novels in Japan, where a number of these were written by reform politicians. This possibility calls into question Liang’s claims for “pure” literary quality as the basis for his reassessment.49 Xia’s identification of an ultimately utilitarian motive behind Liang’s claims is undeniable, as is the influence of the Japanese political novel. Another factor, however, would seem to be at work here, for in the same year that Liang published his landmark work on the novel, he published another essay with virtually the same title, namely, “On the Relationship between Buddhism and Public Governance” (“Lun fojiao yu qunzhi zhi guanxi”). In this latter essay as well, the social utility of the religion is stressed. As Hao Chang has written: “It seems obvious that what Liang prized in religion was not any specific religious faith or doctrine but the motivational function of religious faith...
Liang now found such a religious faith in Buddhism. . . . [and] he went so far as to claim that the new sociopolitical order that he envisioned in his *New Citizen* could find a cultural function in Buddhism."

The links between the two essays extend beyond the titles. “Fiction and Public Governance” is suffused with Buddhist terminology—“Great Conveyance” is but the most conspicuous example—which provides vivid imagery as to how fictional writing works its way into the individual mind. The move to center the intellectual justification for the New Novel in Buddhist thought does displace the locus of the conversation away from the appeal to Western and Japanese texts, which had been at the heart of Liang’s essay in 1898, back to what might seem at first glance to be home ground. Although Buddhism was enjoying a conspicuous revival among late Qing intellectuals in general, it was still exotic in respect to mainstream intellectual discourse as it had been conducted before the 1890s. Moreover, there is a question as to whether Buddhist philosophy and terminology can legitimately serve as appropriate conveyances for a message of social mobilization. Hao Chang concludes, for instance, with a certain amount of understatement, that Liang’s “unqualified depiction of Buddhism as worldly activism is patently an exaggeration.” By moving Buddhism in to fill gaps now visible in an increasingly vulnerable Confucian-based ideology, Liang is working in an ostensibly national idiom, but it just as surely represents a newly uncertain arena from which to pursue the understanding, the representation, and the transformation of the outer world.

The problems intrinsic to Liang’s inflated and contradictory assumptions about and expectations for the novel ultimately became apparent nowhere more clearly than in his own writings. He recognized, for instance, that his single, uninspired attempt at writing original fiction—the five-chapter fragment of *Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* (The future of new China) that he began serializing in the first issue of *Xin xiaoshuo* in the fall of 1902—was not able to achieve formal consistency: “In this issue of the journal, I am publishing the first two or three chapters [of my novel]. In reading it over, it seems to be both fiction (*shuobu*) and not fiction, both anecdotal (*baishi*) and not anecdotal, both treatise (*lunzhu*) and not treatise; I don’t actually know what sort of form it ends up being, and I can’t help laughing at myself as a result.”

In 1915, at a much later point in his life, after his early hopes for reform had been dashed, Liang published his “Gao xiaoshuo jia” (An indictment of the novelists), in effect a valedictory essay on fiction. In it, he expresses attitudes that are mirror images of his remarks in “Fiction and Public Governance” and in fact resemble even more the remarks of Li Yu quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Liang continues to adhere to his idea that fiction has immense power to move people, but he now sees
only the negative side. After first declaring once again that the behavior of Chinese people in the past had been molded by novels, he goes on to affirm: “Over the last ten or so years, the social climate has declined precipitously. In what way can this not be said to be a calamity brought about by the so-called new novelists? If we continue along this course for a few more years, China faces limitless peril.”

If in earlier years his utopian hopes had become lodged in a hyperbolic faith in the novel, by now Liang blamed the same instrument for the disappointment of those hopes. In both cases, however, the novel becomes the site where displaced desires to gain control over an intractable social process are given voice.

Whatever Liang’s final perspective on the novel was to be, the immediate response to his essay of 1902 was extraordinary, in terms of additional critical essays and a significant outburst of creative work, both original and translated. Writing toward the end of 1906, for instance, the novelist Wu Jianren unhesitatingly credited the explosion in the production of novels to Liang’s seminal essay. Because Liang’s essay contained such a multiplicity of ideas, this new work was able to go in many, often contradictory, directions. For instance, Di Baoxian (b. 1873), an influential advocate of fiction who became one of the founders of the important Shanghai newspaper Shibao in 1904, further complicated the issue of how fiction was to be created. In his 1903 essay on the genre, which was published in Xin xiaoshuo, Di called for an end to the frivolity he saw as endemic to all writing in the classical language and for a general turn to the utilitarianism that he saw as endemic to the vernacular.

If literature (wen) is to be taken as having a function, it must be taken not as a plaything but as a staple (shusu). Once, an epigrapher (jinshi jia) gave a banquet and brought out his Shang(-dynasty) yi, Xia ding, Zhou dui, and Han jue to use as containers for food and wine. The result was that both host and guests ended up with diarrhea for the week. Beauty is beauty, but what if it is not appropriate? Therefore, the accession of the vernacular style is really an unavoidable consequence of the selection of the superior.

Liang’s implicit call to transcend prior practice is left intact here, much as the equally insistent instrumentality of the earlier text is also reinforced. Di adds to this mix an explicit social Darwinism, demonstrating just how fast the influence of Yan Fu’s translation of Huxley had spread. This call for stripping language of its refinement in the writing of xiaoshuo must have left the would-be novel writer in a quandary. One the one hand, there was a persisting note expressed in fairly withering terms that fiction as it had been written in China was of a markedly lower order than other writing and that it would have to improve. On the other hand, there was
an equally forceful stress on the idea that this very lack of aesthetic polish was the essence of the genre, not to mention that which made the genre mandatory as a stimulus to change in these perilous times. How was an author to respond to these conflicting demands?

One of the ways these two guidelines were mediated was by establishing a genealogy of fiction that stressed hidden meaning as the core of the traditional form, an avenue opened by Xia Zengyou and Yan Fu in their long editorial of 1897. Thus, the perception of the low quality of premodern fiction and its irrelevance to contemporary times could be ascribed to the need for earlier authors to protect themselves against persecution by the state, with political dissidence assumed to be an inherent part of the novel form. Although this idea allowed the novel theoretically to fit the new activist profile that reformist critics demanded after 1897, it had little to offer writers who no longer had to obscure the called-for political side to their work. By mystifying the origins of the form and creating a notion of a secret power inaccessible to those living in more open times, this conjuring of a hidden force within the traditional novel ultimately heightened anxiety among contemporary authors regarding the present potential of the novel.

On the other hand, the utopian side of this discourse lodged itself in a series of wildly optimistic pronouncements about the potential of fiction to bring about a brave new world. The general tenor of these utterances fall into two distinct categories: those, like Liu Shipei, who saw the novel as uniquely suited to communicate with the semi-educated, and those who accepted fiction as having a universal audience. An anonymous essay entitled “On the Educational Value of Fiction” (“Lun xiaoshuo zhi jiaoyu”), published in 1906, is a good example of the first group. After first reciting the standard litany of charges against the bad influences of novels, the text goes on to explain how these negative influences can be transformed: “Should we begin one day to tell beneficial things to the masses, we will not have to reform the popular habit of listening to storytellers. What has been told up until now has all been baseless chatter, but were we to change that to things that people really need to know about life, then not only will it penetrate the streets and teahouses, but it also will work, in effect, to establish innumerable schools in these places. Will there be any who do not come to listen and then go on to exhort one another to the good?”

The didactic portion of this declaration is, of course, anything but new. The sense that the pedagogical effort is ultimately directed at an entirely different group from the elite readers of the document itself, however, marks a radical difference from past apologies for the novel, which, hortatory though they often were, still acknowledged the appeal of fiction to the writer’s own peers. To realize the extent to which this represents an
amplification of the instrumental approach to the novel, one need only recall Lin Shu’s prefaces to his translations, with their complete lack of condescension to the form, and their determination to judge the novel by a presumptively universal guwen aesthetic. As Hu Shi pointed out long ago, this post-1895 shift from talking about us to talking about them was to become pervasive in discussions of vernacular literature in the years to come.\(^6\) If traditional discussions of writing had been inextricably linked to notions of self-cultivation, then moving the burden toward taking responsibility for others who were explicitly defined as being quite different from oneself had a major impact on the development of modern Chinese letters. Literature moved decisively into a more public arena, thereby inevitably taking an ever greater role in the molding of public opinion. This new publicity for literature augmented its position in cultural discourse even as it rendered it less personally compelling. The new stress on its social role served to put it at a greater distance from the personal feelings of reader and writer alike than anything that had ever been part of Chinese literary discourse in the past.

There were those, on the other hand, who posited a universal appeal for the novel. The confluence of national essence ideas and imported, more democratic conceptions of literature created a heady mixture that seemed irresistible to those with a less refined palate than the likes of Liu Shipei. If Liu had maintained a strict distinction between what he thought of as wen and the new vernacular forms he suffered to exist, many of his contemporaries were far less discriminate. In 1906–1907, for instance, the critic Tao Zengyou contributed a series of articles with titles like “On the Power and Significance of Literature” (“Lun wenxue zhi shili jiqi guanxi”) to the Shanghai entertainment press. Tao’s rich prose requires only a small sampling to show the powerful mélange of ideas that had coalesced into a notion of literature that held out to writer, reader, and nation alike the promise of a tool to control their fates:

I have heard that to establish a country on this globe requires a particular spirit. . . . And for it to be strong for eternity, it requires a natural endowment for strength. . . . Ah! What is this particular spirit? What is this natural endowment? It is literature! “When letters receive their proper treatment, the world will know a wave of reform.” Countrymen! Countrymen! Do you not know that this literature is superior to other branches of learning? That it truly possesses the greatest of power? That it should enjoy the most beautiful of names? That it contains limitless significance? And that it alone should occupy the highest position in the world?\(^6\)

While a finely educated wenren (man of letters) like Liu Shipei would no doubt have been horrified by the crudity of Tao’s expostulations, there
can be little doubt that Liu’s own statements about the power of wen contributed to the ambience that encouraged such effusion. If Liu could at least have recognized the sentiments behind Tao’s notion of the power of writing, he would have had to resolutely oppose in its entirety another essay of Tao’s, in which the latter placed fiction squarely at the top of the hierarchy of literature:

Oh! There is great monster at the heart of the twentieth century. It walks without legs, flies without wings, sounds without speaking; it stimulates the mind, surprises the eye, opens one’s mental horizons, and increases the intelligence; it can by turns be solemn, facetious, lyrical, lachrymose, angry, hortatory, satirical, or mocking. . . . It has immense strength and attraction as well as unimaginable force; in the realm of literature it casts a particular brilliance and indicates a special quality. What is this thing? It is the novel. . . . The novel! It truly is the most noble vehicle in world literature.

If Liang Qichao had begun the discourse on the potential of the novel with his 1902 essay, Tao amplified and popularized it even as he drastically simplified and vulgarized the message.

A few critics in this period were able to avoid the hyperbole and contradiction of the general discourse and to engage, instead, in a more disinterested appreciation of the novel. Preeminent among these was Huang Ren (1866–1913), an erudite man of letters who participated in a variety of literary and publishing venues. A member of the important literary society Nanshe (Southern Society), Huang in 1907 was also a founder of Xiaoshuo lin, one of the three important successor fiction journals to Xin xiaoshuo. His “Zhongguo wenxue shi” (History of Chinese literature), generally taken to be the first history of Chinese literature, is based on the notes for the lectures he gave at Soochow University (Dongwu daxue) in the years after 1900. These lectures, filled with astute commentary on the work of foreign critics, were apparently quite popular with the students, even though the odor resulting from Huang’s habitual failure to bathe (a predilection he shared with Zhang Taiyan, by the way) made it exceedingly unpleasant for any of them to sit in the first three rows of the classroom.

In his History, Huang makes an eloquent and well-documented case for the autonomy of literature, based as much on the work of foreign critics like Matthew Arnold as on Chinese example and he later argues in a similar vein for the literary status of fiction in his “Xiaoshuo xiao hua,” a series of articles he published in Xiaoshuo lin. This series is notable for, among other things, his taking the Chinese narrative tradition as a serious resource: all his examples are drawn from Chinese novels. As Huang care-
fully anatomizes his texts, however, he too becomes drawn into the discourse on the novel as a source of utopian possibilities, at least in the sense of opening new avenues for Chinese writing. For example, in comparing fiction with the *bagu* essay required for the imperial examinations, he says: “Thus, those who write examination prose (*shiwen*) and those who study it know almost nothing, whereas those who write novels and those who read them know almost everything—the difference between the two is that great.” Although it is easy to agree with Huang’s proposition that the novel is obliged to be wide-ranging in its selection of topics, it is another matter to see the novel as the symbol of a new, more scientific approach to perceiving the world and to agree that this quality was quite absent from all the literary forms that had enjoyed higher status in pre-1900 China.

In sum, the mixture of enthusiasm, disdain, and condescension that critics of the time directed toward the novel at the very least presents a vivid case study of the upheaval in the world of Chinese letters that took place after 1895. Even more important, placing fiction at the heart of a sweeping transvaluation of ideas about the form and function of writing provides a suitably complex representation of the tensions facing the Chinese intellectual world as a whole in this pivotal period. Fiction, for all the attention lavished on it by twentieth-century scholars, had, in general, before this time never been taken as a serious contender for pre-eminence among the many genres of Chinese writing. Thus, it could be welcomed as something new and, above all, as something saturated with the prestige and authority of the modern West, a matter almost invariably alluded to in the critical texts that marked the period. At the same time, fiction undeniably had a long indigenous history, which was at once a source of embarrassment and denial and the source of a firm footing for fiction as an indigenous product, something ultimately indispensable in the new age of nationalism. The volatile mix of indigenous and exogenous features provided the energy for fiction’s sudden rise to eminence in these years, as well as for its equally rapid collapse as a genre of high seriousness after 1908.

To the extent that Liang Qichao validates the novel, we can take it as an opaque figure for the superiority of the foreign, a matter about which he is quite explicit in 1898. On the other hand, many of the other major voices discussing the novel at this time make it clear that it is primarily an instrumental form of writing (Liu Shipei is explicit on this, and we can see traces of it almost everywhere else). So although we might seem to have, in the novel, a carefully coded endorsement of the foreign as the salvation for China’s problems, behind it lies the shadow of the other, more basic forms of writing that have a longer history of elite participation and critical acceptance. It was the same with Yan Fu’s call for complete appropriation of the foreign: behind it lay a solid discourse of morality and
fundamental value, which was solidly Chinese and emerged from time to time regardless of Yan's best efforts to suppress it. Things Western remain the site of utility, or yong, in spite of the recognition by the most astute critics of the time that a purely instrumental approach will not be enough to allow the magnitude of transformation they see is needed.

For all the celebration and utopian hopes invested in the writings of New Fiction advocates, the narrative work produced either in response to these calls or simultaneous with them presented a far bleaker sense of the actual possibilities, as Leo Lee and Andrew Nathan have pointed out. Given the contradictory elements that contributed to the various voices advocating a new fiction, it is not surprising that the gap between theory and practice worked itself out into this particular division of labor. Using their foreign sources of inspiration as a basis, the critics found it easier to position themselves outside the social maelstrom and to transcend the inescapable contradictions that a purely local genealogy would present. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the novels themselves could do little to avoid becoming caught up in those contradictory details. For our purposes, what is most significant about this discrepancy between theory and practice is the manifold pressures it exerted on authors. They ended up writing in a genre sponsored by a group of reformers who set contradictory demands that by definition could never be reconciled. Given that the only thing that all of these demands had in common was a predisposition to accord to the novel enormous influence in the abstract, the tensions surrounding the composition of actual texts became that much more acute.