Chapter 6. Melding East and West: Wu Jianren’s New Story of the Stone

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“Those Chinamen knew what they were about,” somebody added, “when they refused to let in our western civilization. They knew what it would lead to better than we did. They saw it as nothing but dynamite in disguise.”

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*

The foreign settlements at Shanghai may have been grafted on China, but they have grown into the commercial, financial, and industrial organism of that country, and to remove them entirely would be like cutting a pound of flesh from a man's body.

Thomas F. Millard, *China: Where It Is Today and Why*

If the world encompassed by *Strange Events* had ultimately proved itself too big and complicated to comprehend, Wu tried again to come to grips with a global understanding of China, its situation in the world, and its multiplicity of internal problems in a different sort of novel begun about two years later, in 1905. In his *Xin shitou ji* (The new story of the Stone), Wu created a fictional realm less tied to his own experiences, where solutions could thereby, presumably, be more readily—or at least more dispassionately—imagined. This tractability of intention is enhanced by the fact that half the novel is set in a science fictional realm almost certainly inspired by Edward Bellamy’s 1888 American novel of a socialist utopia. In both texts, fantasies are effortlessly realized, at least for much of the time. In borrowing two of the major characters (and one minor one) from China’s most famous novel—the eighteenth-century *Story of the Stone*, by Cao Xueqin—Wu is also, somewhat paradoxically,
able to bring a genuinely external perspective to bear on the issues of his time. Jia Baoyu, the protagonist of both Cao’s original and Wu’s version, represented an outsider’s point of view in the original text, as a conscientious dropout from the orthodox, examination-based path to social success that had long been the norm for educated elites in imperial China. In this sense, Baoyu gains a double objectivity in being suddenly transported to the Shanghai of 1900.

In Wu’s novel Baoyu proves early on to be a vastly quicker and more adept study than the Jiusi of *Strange Events*, capable of learning largely on his own and having only to see or hear things once to gain full comprehension. Baoyu, in contrast to the various scoundrels and frauds he encounters on his travels, also rapidly establishes himself in the reader’s eye as a reliable practical and moral guide to the complicated turn-of-the-century scene. The source of Baoyu’s intellectual authority poses an interesting question. Whereas Wu had relied on access to modern means of communication to enable Jiusi’s Bildung in *Strange Events*, Baoyu is, by comparison, a figure profoundly imbricated in the culture of tradition, who even, for instance, has to puzzle out what it is he is reading the first time he comes across a modern newspaper. Is it, then, Baoyu’s deep traditional learning that makes him so much more perceptive than the less-educated Jiusi? As we observed in the last chapter, in *Strange Events* the women of Jiusi’s household had often been the repository of a clear moral sense thoroughly based in Confucian learning, but their inability to function fully in society, precisely because of gender restrictions, had rendered that moral capacity merely theoretical. Baoyu, on the other hand, is very much out and about and trying his best, moreover, to intervene for the good where he is able.

As we shall see, however, Baoyu’s world collapses in the end just as surely as did Jiusi’s, although for quite different reasons. *New Stone* goes so far as to create a utopian realm in a science fiction mode, where all China’s problems look to be solved. This utopian scheme suddenly collapses of its own weight. Events at the end are just as overwhelming as in *Strange Events*, all the more so because of the suddenness of the revelation of failure. This brings up, in turn, another interesting question. All the novels we examine closely in this book are records of failures to construct a narrative world their characters can comfortably inhabit, and, in fact, all the work of the late Qing that has received critical approbation appears to belong in this category. As Denise Gimpel has shown, however, a wide variety of fiction was published in the late Qing that was situated in a significantly more benign social context. It would seem, therefore, that situating narratives in an crisis-saturated a context as leading intellectuals perceived China to be facing at the time has been the sine qua

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1 Late Qing Novels

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non of canonization for late Qing novels and stories, however misprized that canon has been in the post–May Fourth critical environment.

**Jia Baoyu in Shanghai: From Wenren to Wenhua ren**

Whereas *Strange Events* had been set almost entirely in the 1880s and 1890s, *New Stone* bravely moves up to 1900, the momentous year of the Boxer Rebellion. *New Stone* also spends much of its time in Shanghai, taking questions posed by that city as one of the text's major thematic concerns. In the great port city, the years after 1895 witnessed not only an increase in civic consciousness but also vastly increased economic growth, particularly in the new industrial sector, secured by new treaties allowing foreign investment in industrial enterprises. The resulting rapid expansion of a white-collar readership—consisting of the men staffing the new professions created by this economic expansion—was accompanied by a burgeoning publishing industry. In the period immediately following Liang Qichao's 1902 call for the creation of a new fiction, much of the attention of this industry turned to the production of hundreds of new novels, both indigenous and translated from foreign languages. Whereas the foreign novels were devoted to a wide variety of subject matters, many of the homegrown texts, and particularly those that achieved both critical and popular esteem, were acutely concerned with the cultural and economic conditions that had been the occasion for their appearance.

A significant number of these latter novels also took the city of Shanghai itself—the zone of contact within which both the new readership and the new economic activity were concentrated—as the ideal thematic focus through which at once to observe and to comment critically upon the rapidly changing circumstances of the time, as well as the multiple contradictions the city had come to embody.

Shanghai had also been one of the thematic foci of *Strange Events*, to which I shall regress briefly to show how that burgeoning city figures there. At the beginning of the introductory chapter, or "wedge" (*xiezi*), of the novel, Wu Jianren had voiced a sense of how the new urban space of Shanghai had come to represent the modern transformations that were taking place rapidly in China by the late Qing. More than that, the city also served as the locus for the many anxieties engendered by reflection upon those changes:

Shanghai is the gathering place of merchants and traders, a place where foreigners and Chinese mix and where human habitation is thick; ships come and go and the goods of the world are transported there. Add to this the very flower of Suzhou and Yangzhou [i.e., the prostitutes], who
have also migrated with their sights set on this large gathering of rich merchants and prosperous traders. They sail in and gather in the vicinity of Fourth Avenue, bedecked in a riot of color, contending with one another to be as extraordinary as possible. Those of the first rank are of course inquired after by noble young gentlemen, while even the lowly do have those who pursue them, greedy for a taste. So, what was sixty years ago a chunk of reed bank has been transformed into the most lively place in China.

. . . But these are small things: beyond this, there are frauds and swindles and gambling. In fact, there are all sorts of strange and rare things—things that one cannot even dream of—that all take place in Shanghai. So, what was sixty years ago a place of simple custom has become a refuge both for the frivolous and for the crafty.

Wu’s narrator duly notes the miraculous transformation that has taken place, as well as the powerful commercial engine that has driven it. Above all, however, he seems determined to demonstrate both the novelty and the singularity of Shanghai and, in particular, to persuade us that it has suddenly grown up out of nothing—an idea that much contemporary scholarship has been at pains to correct. He also links in the same breath the extraordinary commercial growth and a seemingly inseparable observation of the dissolution of appropriate values in a miasma of shady dealings. Prostitution—in effect the commercialization of a realm of human activity that had been extensively regulated within the traditional value system—serves here as the figure of displacement that more than anything else ties together the new economy and the decline in social values. It is the most conspicuous marker of the ultimate power of money to shape society and the people in it. The opening page of Strange Events confines itself to describing “merchants and traders” and the prostitutes they support. As was illustrated in the chapter 5, however, the narrative goes on to provide numerous examples of official malfeasance and the generally sordid parallel lives of those with considerable education who are the hangers-on of those with government positions. If such men are conventionally regarded as leaders and social models, the extremely low behavior that Wu attributes to them is an ominous sign of the moral chaos lying just ahead.

Although most of Strange Events is given to intricate description of abuses in the official realm (guan chang), there are a number of memorable passages of vicious satire directed against the self-consciously literary men, mingshi (or wenren), who along with the merchants and traders patronize the houses of prostitution on Shanghai’s infamous Fourth Avenue (si malu), the universal Chinese sobriquet for what the foreign authorities had labeled “Foochow Road.” In one of the most cutting por-
traits of these men, Jiushi, the novel's narrator, joins a group of poetasters and responds with utter amazement to the fatuously egotistical literary names they have adopted for themselves. He remarks:

These [style-names that I have just listed] were only the strangest among them, and after hearing them once, I will never forget them for the remainder of my life. As for all the rest, they were named after poets and lyricists and Buddhist adepts in such profusion that I cannot possibly recall them all. They asked me my style-name (biehao), and I replied that I did not have one. The one named Mei said to me:

"How can a poet not have a style-name? If one doesn't fashion a literary name for oneself, one's name will sink into obscurity. That was the reason ancient poets did this, which is why Li Bai [701–762] called himself the 'Green lotus hermit' (qinglian jushi) and Du Fu [712–770] styled himself YuXi sheng [actually the style-name of Li Shangyin (813?–858), a poet who lived some hundred years after Du Fu]."

I could not help exploding into laughter, and I suddenly heard someone say in a loud voice: "If you can't remember clearly, don't say just anything that comes to mind, or people will laugh at you." I all at once remembered that it is not a good thing to laugh at people to their face, so I rapidly resumed a serious demeanor. But I also heard the second person say: "YuXi sheng is the style-name of Du Mu [803–852]; you misremembered because both of them are named Du." The one named Mei asked: "Then what is Du Fu's style-name?" The other one replied: "Isn't he the 'Hermit of Fan River' (fanchuan jushi) [actually, minus the "hermit" suffix, Du Mu's style-name]?"9

After beginning by correctly identifying Li Bai’s literary name, the quality of the commentary supplied by these latter-day literati goes rapidly downhill, with the would-be wenren preposterously failing to recognize the actual referents of the names they had so enthusiastically adopted for themselves. Although the satire in this passage is a good deal cruder than that contained in most of the rest of the novel, its point could not be clearer: Wu Jianren is intent upon indicating that these paragons of letters, as they would like to think of themselves, know virtually nothing of the men and work they fancy themselves to be emulating.

The Qing-dynasty fictional discourse on the relative validity of the man of letters has a long history,10 but in the earlier period, the issue had not focused on the question of the literacy of the wenren. Rather, the issue had been more about the role of these men of taste in society at large. For instance, in chapter 7 of The Scholars, the elegant and witty mingshi Qu Jingyu is introduced into the text when he tells a joke on a contemporary examination official in Sichuan (an episode set in the first decade of the
1500s). He reports that the official had been drinking with He Jingming (1483–1521, an archaist poet and member of the “Former Seven Masters” [qian qizi] of Ming literature), when He suddenly blurted out that “[the examinees] in Sichuan are like Su Shi’s essays: they should all be graded as sixth-rate.” To which the examiner responded: “I have been in Sichuan for three years and have been all around the province carefully testing candidates. I don’t remember any Su Shi coming to take the exam.”

In The Scholars, then, those scholars who devoted all their energies to passing the official exams are the ones marked as culturally illiterate; however unsuccessful Qu and those more or less like him turn out to be at ordering the world, there is no question about their knowledge of literary lore. The contrast with Wu Jianren’s wenren from the passage quoted above could not be more stark. The frivolous men from Wu’s novel are no longer even capable of performing their self-appointed task of maintaining the literary heritage, much less contributing anything to the maintenance of the governmental and social realm. If nothing else, Wu’s caricatures demonstrate the extent to which the category of wenren had become devalued by the late Qing.

In The New Story of the Stone, which began newspaper serialization in Shanghai in late September 1905, Wu makes use of an extraordinarily familiar text to convey his rendition of the experience of the transformation China was undergoing in the period around 1900. Because Wu always had so many different works in serial publication at the same time, the actual time of writing and precise circumstances of composition are almost impossible to pin down. In 1905, for instance, in addition to editing the newspaper in Hankou for the first half of the year and participating actively in the protest movement against the American Chinese exclusion acts over the summer, he had throughout the year chapters from four different novels being simultaneously published in Liang Qichao’s Xin xiaoshuo and another one in Xiuxiang xiaoshuo (Embroidered fiction). As I discuss below, however, 1905 was a particularly crucial year both in the history of Shanghai and in the course of Wu’s own busy career, and it is thus likely that the patriotic political climate of the months preceding the publication of the first installments of the novel had a significant effect on its composition.

Given this context, Wu’s choice to write yet another sequel to Cao Xueqin’s enormously popular eighteenth-century novel is not easy to understand. Wu himself opens his text in a defensive mode, noting the many sequels to famous novels and voicing the fear that his effort will be another case of “adding feet to [the portrait] of a snake.” He nonetheless concludes his introduction by claiming that a writer must please himself and not care overmuch about the response of his readers: “If the readers say it is good, that is fine; if they think it is clownish (chou), that is fine too.
I won’t be able to hear [the comments] in any case” (p. 2). I should note parenthetically the evident courage of such a stance in someone who was dependent upon the market for his work to make a living. Moreover, given the negative attitude toward The Story of the Stone manifested in Wu’s next novel, Sea of Regret, it is curious that he chose to emulate Cao’s text at all. In chapter 8 of Sea, for instance, the moral paragon Chen Zhongai is taken by colleagues to the pleasure quarters but refuses to indulge in the proffered courtesans. When mocked by his friends for what they take to be his overdeveloped sense of propriety, Zhongai accuses them all of having been taken in by Stone, concluding, “People of later generations have more often than not taken Stone to task as a book that incites lust, but the sins of the work cannot be limited to the word ‘lust’ alone.” That the author inserts three marginal comments into Zhongai’s discourse, applauding him (and himself) on the perspicuity of his comments, is convincing evidence that Zhongai’s negative remarks reflect Wu’s own opinion of the damage done by too much favorable attention paid over the years to Cao’s novel.

For all his fears that New Stone will be merely another low-quality imitation of a superior original, Wu’s work in many ways represents a daring innovation in the sequel genre. It is certainly true that, by writing still one more version of this beloved novel, Wu participates in an extremely familiar—and from the perspective of true connoisseurs of the novel, rather tiresome—Qing-dynasty practice. Most of the earlier sequels, however, had centered themselves on retelling Cao’s love story by carefully maintaining the original setting and characters, merely trying to ingratiate themselves to the audience by making the ending happier. Wu’s departure from the ordinary sequel format may well be a reflection of his censorious attitude toward the original. In Sea of Regret, for instance, the first chapter is devoted to making a careful distinction between works that advertise themselves as novels of qing, “(appropriate) sentiment or feeling,” and novels characterized by mo, “lechery,” the latter of which he regards as being considerably more common. In making this discrimination, Wu adds a marginal note accusing The Story of the Stone of being a classic case in point. His New Stone, in other words, may be at least in part a sincere attempt on his part to recast Cao’s eighteenth-century epic in a more congenial moral register.

Whatever his motives, Wu’s rendition makes a daring move in resuscitating only three of the male characters from the original and completely omitting the females who had been the great focus of Cao’s text. And by making the three men—Jia Baoyu; his page, Beiming; and his ne’er-do-well brother-in-law, Xue Pan—serve as indicators of the vast changes between the eighteenth-century setting of the original and the contemporary period, he creates something quite original. The novel is
constructed of two roughly equal but antithetical parts. The first twenty-one chapters bring the familiar characters to a transformed Shanghai and Beijing and other points in China that Wu knew firsthand. In these chapters, Baoyu repeatedly bears witness to the chaos of the modern and of the varieties of foolishness that have prevented the implementation of sound policy. The second half of the work—originally published only in the late 1908 book version of the text, more than a year after the serialization of the first half was completed—presents a completely contrasting ideal realm where this chaos has been resolved into order by resort to the creation of an overtly science fictional realm.

By bringing both Jia Baoyu and Xue Pan to contemporary Shanghai after a hibernation of some 150 years, the real shock of the transformations that Shanghai embodied can be distinctly registered by representing the responses of these two men to what they encounter there. Jia Baoyu, who in his earlier incarnation had been a young man dead set against joining the government or even entering into the discourse that would lead to officialdom, is suddenly transformed into someone with a burning devotion not just to understanding political economy but also to publicizing what he has learned. He is particularly intent upon figuring out why Chinese seemed to have been relegated to an inferior position in their own country. Xue Pan, for his part, adapts smoothly to the changed circumstances, registering no real sign of any surprise at them. He has made a good deal of money in trade since he has come to Shanghai, and he spends it liberally in instinctive pursuit of the same sort of mindlessly dissolute life he had led in the earlier novel. The Shanghai in which every human relationship appears to have become commodified turns out to be entirely suitable for Xue the consumer and his licentious style of life.

Xue Pan either genuinely does not sense, or chooses not to express, any amazement at conditions in Shanghai. Baoyu, on the other hand, is obsessed by the strangeness of what he observes and can hardly think about anything else. One of the things that strikes Baoyu immediately and continues to bother him greatly is the omnipresence of foreign goods for sale on the streets of Shanghai. In relaying his concern to Xue Pan, the latter expresses surprise that Baoyu is engaging himself with matters of commerce, to which the younger man responds: “This didn’t come to me all of a sudden, but I have been thinking that if foreigners do nothing but sell things to Chinese, won’t all of China’s money eventually flow out to foreign countries?” It is, in other words, the very novelty of the situation he encounters in Shanghai that forces him to consider things that had never occurred to him before. That these new things include much that has to do with commerce and trade demonstrates a new intellectual adaptability on Baoyu’s part, as well as Shanghai’s centrality to the emerging society and economy of modern China.
If Xue Pan proves himself to be quite recognizable even as he is perfectly adaptable to becoming a “merchant or trader” and a patron of the demimonde, the new Baoyu is harder to classify. In Cao Xueqin’s novel, Baoyu had provided a virtual model of the wenren, or literatus: holding his nose at the official bureaucratic uses of the world, he had cultivated a private sensibility that even his father, strict and orthodox official that he was, had at times to admit—if only to himself—was elegantly representative of the type. Baoyu’s new interest in political economy thus hardly conforms to expectation, as even the oafish Xue Pan cannot help noticing and pointing out a number of times. This abrupt transformation of Baoyu’s character must be seen in the context of Wu’s previous bitter depiction of the life of the would-be mingshi in Shanghai. If, in Wu’s judgment, the aesthetic disposition of the wenren/mingshi has become devalued, and if Baoyu is to be a character with whom the reader can continue to sympathize, then the young man apparently must turn away from his old habits and points of view. Furthermore, the conversion of Baoyu probably suggests that for Wu Jianren at least, given the new situation facing China at the end of the nineteenth century, there seems to be no appropriate place for the old category of wenren in the urban culture emerging in Shanghai in those years. Whatever role that wenren had played in previous centuries, their attempt to reconstitute themselves in modern Shanghai can only be ludicrous, as Wu takes pains to demonstrate.

It is also of considerable interest that *New Stone* appeared in 1905, a year declared to have been a “memorable” one by F. L. Hawks Pott, an Episcopalian missionary and longtime head of Shanghai’s St. John’s University, in the title of chapter 18 of his 1928 *Short History of Shanghai*. This was the year both of the defeat a European power by an Asian one in the Russo-Japanese War and of the powerful boycott of American trade in protest of the Chinese exclusion laws put into effect in the United States. The boycott was most effective in cities like Canton and Shanghai. As Hawks Pott sums up the result: “The year 1905 is a memorable one in the annals of Shanghai, as at that time a change in the attitude of the educated Chinese became evident, indicating that they were no longer willing to submit passively to what they regarded as an infringement of their rights.”

As will be remembered, Wu Jianren played an active part in the dramatic events of that year, resigning as editor at the American-owned Chubao in Hankou in protest against U.S. policy. Upon his return to Shanghai in early July 1905, he attended as featured speaker and even chaired numerous public rallies, speaking and writing in support of the boycott throughout the rest of the summer. Given that the first installment of *New Stone* was published in the Shanghai Nanfang bao on September 19,
context renders Wu’s decision to transform Baoyu into an urgent nationalist understandable. That the vicious satires of Shanghai wenren found in chapters 33, 35, and 38 of Strange Events were also first published in the October and November 1905 issues of Xin xiaoshuo lends further substance to taking 1905 as a formative period in Wu’s view of appropriate social behavior for educated Chinese gentlemen facing new social and political circumstances. There is an interesting irony involved in Wu’s negative representations of Shanghai society, for 1905 was also the year in which active Chinese civic organizations were set up in both the Foreign Settlement and the Chinese city. Perhaps—as we shall see in chapter 9—Chinese observers were generally skeptical about the motivations behind the creation of such bodies.

As Wu sets about representing the new era, however, the character of Xue Pan remains the same gross figure, fully recognizable as the same man who appeared in Cao’s novel despite (or, perhaps, because of) his unwittingly becoming the perfect stereotype of the comprador. It may be that the unreflective adaptability of Xue Pan’s character signals the indispensability of a new sort of figure in the transformed order, one we might call (somewhat anachronistically) the wenhua ren (lit., “cultural person”), or critical intellectual. Shanghai culture, for all its fearsome novelty, seems paradoxically to offer any number of easy new subject positions to those like Xue Pan who happily and uncritically accept whatever comfortable social role is offered to them. It is thus all the more important for those who are intellectually capable of seriously evaluating their own circumstances to develop their abilities for judging the changed surroundings in as critical a fashion as possible. Jia Baoyu, the perpetual outsider never content with the social role for which he was trained in his earlier incarnation, is thus perhaps ideally cast for a new role as critical intellectual.

For all Wu’s contempt for the Shanghai-style wenren, however, there remains the difficult (if unasked) question as to what sort of education this new critical intellectual should be provided. Could one not make the case that the earlier Baoyu’s determination to experience a wide variety of texts, and not just utilitarian publications concerned with assisting young men to pass the examinations, provided crucial preparation for the role of independent evaluator he eventually plays after coming to Shanghai? The significance of Baoyu’s ability to discriminate is underlined by its contrast with Xue Pan’s enthusiastic conversion to the Boxer cause when he visits North China in early 1900. Earlier, and almost as soon as he had settled into Shanghai, Baoyu had become acutely critical of Xue Pan’s thoughtless and obsessive purchases of foreign-made “toys,” such as watches and a phonograph. When they meet later in Beijing, however, and Baoyu scolds Xue Pan for the latter’s foolish adhesion to the Boxer cause, Xue Pan becomes confused by what he regards as Baoyu’s inconsistent response:
[Xue Pan said:] "I really don’t understand your attitude. When we were in Shanghai, whenever you talked of foreign goods you became angry; but now that we have declared our opposition to the ‘Hairies’ [foreigners] you disapprove. But if we succeed in wiping the Hairies out, then there will be no more foreign goods, and won’t this be just what you wanted?"

Baoyu said: "How can you be so confused? My anger at foreign imports was simply anger at trading our useful money for their useless goods! I was also angry at us Chinese for not putting our minds to the task of learning how to manufacture these things ourselves. As for the foreigners, why should I hate them? As far as I can see, those folks [who joined the Boxers] all had their motives [for doing so], but what possessed you to join them?"

For all his enthusiasm for the fruits of foreign technology and for the good life in Shanghai, in other words, Xue Pan has remained oblivious to any larger issue involved. And for all his evident disgust at the excesses evident along the Yangjingbang (the creek dividing the International Settlement from the French Concession that had by then become synonymous with the city’s excessive aping of foreign ways), Baoyu has apparently absorbed a crucial message from his attention to the variety of new sources of information that now surround him: familiarity with the foreigners and their ways, learned in Shanghai, has enabled him to discriminate between mindless prejudice and a sensitive appreciation of the intricate demands of the new era. For all his stubborn refusal to succumb to the temptations offered up by Shanghai, Baoyu understands what he observes there much better than those like Xue Pan who go along with the creature comforts so easily available in the new metropolis. Baoyu’s sedulity in familiarizing himself with writings about his new surroundings has paid off in allowing him to realize the ultimate futility of the Boxer movement and thereby keep an appropriate distance from it. Xue Pan, however, can do nothing more than simply respond to the immediate sensory stimuli of the madding crowd and plunge in headfirst, again amazed at Baoyu’s response.

The new information available to Baoyu upon his return, as well as his attention to the nuances of his new situation, enables him to have an appropriate vantage point on the various (and contradictory) aspects of the presence of the foreign. For instance, even before he arrives in Shanghai, he discovers some books lying on a table in a room in which he is staying. He pays little attention to the books—a mixture of novels and writings on the classics—and instead devotes himself to the paper they are wrapped in, which turns out to be a recent edition of the Shanghai newspaper Xinwen bao. He picks it up, first just trying to figure out what it is: "Baoyu picked up the paper and stared at it, thinking to himself, ‘Exactly how long has it been since I left home? Looking at this paper, it
seems clearly to be something like the *Capital Gazette* (*Jingbao*), except it not only carries official documents but also contains news from the outside. It seems to be issued daily." \(^{32}\)
The newspaper as an organ containing information that had been unavailable in earlier times has long been noted as an important feature in the development of modern Shanghai.\(^{33}\) Baoyu discovers the press soon after his return and relies on it extensively to orient himself in the new and more complicated world he discovers himself to be a part of. In fact, upon returning from his adventures in Beijing, he remarks to his confidant in Shanghai, Wu Bohui, "I’ve been away from Shanghai for some time. Living in Beijing, because of the chaos and the lack of newspapers, I feel as if I’ve gone deaf." \(^{34}\) One of the complications to which the newspaper introduces him is the presence of two calendars, with the Western year printed alongside the Guangxu-reign year at the top of each page. In Shanghai, it would appear, even the manner of keeping track of time has been transformed into something requiring careful consideration.

The unprecedented nature of the position of the West vis-à-vis China, in other words, demands an unprecedented sort of critical reflection, a dialectical attitude that can facilitate the difficult feat of simultaneously holding in mind a sense of the threat of the West and the capacity to appropriate things from it that can be of use to China. In a sense, this intellectual position is embodied in late Qing China only by the complicated diversity of the city of Shanghai itself; the place represents a new sort of society, which demands a new type of critical mentality to be able to make sense of what it means. For instance, the new concept of national identity is brought to Baoyu’s consciousness only by the awareness of national differences forced upon him by seeing the array of people and jurisdictions in Shanghai. For all the seeming remoteness of the new concept of the nation, however, for Baoyu the awareness of it is never strictly an abstraction but is inextricably entwined with his immediate perceptions. One of the key factors contributing to Baoyu’s newfound seriousness is, in fact, his having to come to grips with the differences he cannot fail to perceive between China and the foreign, as well as the omnipresent sense of Chinese inability to measure up, something he endeavors almost obsessively to get to the root of.

In an illuminating episode in chapter 7, Baoyu is invited out by friends of Xue Pan’s to a restaurant liberally staffed with courtesans. Baoyu insists upon trying to get an answer to why Yangzi River steamers belonging to the Chinese-owned China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company employ only foreign captains. After trying to explain the intricacies of insurance underwriting, the host, Bai Yaolian (a clear pun on “buyao lian,” or “shameless”), interjects a comment that leads to the following exchange:
"Not only is [the only Chinese insurance company at the time] unable to underwrite a whole cargo [and apparently no foreign company would have underwritten a cargo with a Chinese captain in charge], but no Chinese undertakings [of any kind] can be depended upon."

Baoyu said: "What do you mean that no Chinese undertakings can be depended upon?"

Yaolian said: "Well, to begin with, there is not a single Chinese person who can be depended upon."

Without waiting for him to finish speaking, Baoyu interrupted coldly: "Everyone at this table today is Chinese, so we are doubtless all undependable. It is one thing to say that I am unreliable, but are you including yourself among those you are taking to task?"

Yaolian said: "Although I am Chinese, I have a little bit of the temperament of a foreigner."

Baoyu responded furiously: "Foreign piss is also pretty tasty, but since I’ve never been a foreign dog, I’ve never actually had the good fortune to taste it."

Although Baoyu’s response may seem at first to be merely his instinctive retort to what is, in the end, merely a personal insult, he soon reveals a more fundamental notion underlying his reaction:

"Fortunately, according to him, all Chinese are unreliable. Otherwise, if they were able somehow to become dependable, wouldn’t that just turn China into a foreign country? To sum up, then, since he understands the foreigners’ language and their system of writing, anything that is foreign becomes better, and evidently he would like nothing better than to have foreigners for parents. But last night I sat up reading the whole night through and learned that what foreigners value most is patriotism. So I’m afraid that patriotic foreigners would have no use for this unfilial offspring [of China]."

In other words, in the course of the intense reading Baoyu undertook in his effort to figure out Shanghai and his own position there, he has discovered the Western discourse on nationalism, a complex of ideas that confounds any simple intention to adopt foreign ways in a wholesale fashion. A clear paradox is outlined here concerning possible responses to the West: if one expresses too much enthusiasm for it and its ideas, one thereby violates one of the central tenets of Western strength that one is seeking to emulate, the power gained from the notion of community solidarity within the nation-state and of ultimate loyalty to it. Show too little interest, however, and the great tasks of reform will rest undone.

If, for someone as concerned with his nation as Baoyu, the prob-
lem that nationalism poses is easy enough to perceive, his response to Bai shows how the advent of European power brings up yet another set of issues. As Partha Chatterjee sets out this problem: “[W]hy is that non-European colonial countries have no historical alternative but to try to approximate the given attributes of modernity when that very process of approximation means their continued subjection under a world order which only sets their tasks for them and over which they have no control?” Given the overwhelming dominance of the West at the beginning of the last century, Chatterjee’s question would seem to be just as applicable to semicolonial China as to colonial India, and this is particularly true for Shanghai, where the presence of the foreign was that much more evident. Given that the idea that foreign technology ultimately sprang from Chinese sources had become generally discredited after about 1900, the source of the general popularity of science fiction in late Qing China and the relevance of the science fiction episodes of New Stone become clear if one thinks of that genre as one of the few modes of writing available for thinking beyond the problem so eloquently posed by Chatterjee. It is perhaps only by inventing a utopian realm that knotty issues of domination and unilateral influence can be finessed, even if only momentarily and only in the imagination.

Intertwined with his contemplation of high national policy, Baoyu at all times exhibits an awareness of the implications of how social change impinges upon his personal life. For instance, early on in the section of the book devoted to Shanghai, Baoyu hears that one of the four famous prostitutes of Shanghai (si da jing’gang) is named Lin Daiyu, Baoyu’s soul mate in the earlier novel. He is stunned to learn this and becomes preoccupied about it to such an extent that his interlocutor cannot help noticing and stops the conversation. Baoyu can’t figure out how this could have happened, and his reaction eventually leads to a frustrated state of suspense (“He thought about it first this way and then that, and his mind could not help becoming vexed”). This suspension is finally resolved three chapters later, when Xue Pan tells him that the “daguanyuan” (Grandview Garden) names (i.e., names of the women who lived in a garden compound of that name in Cao Xueqin’s text) have been promiscuously adopted by all the courtesans in Shanghai, and that he should not worry about the “real” Lin Daiyu, who is safely dead. Ironies abound in this resolution to Baoyu’s anxiety, beginning with Xue Pan’s easy assumption that Daiyu is better off dead than having returned as a prostitute. More profoundly ironic, however, is Xue Pan’s revelation of the ubiquity of the Grandview Garden names on and around Fourth Avenue in Shanghai. If the “real” Lin Daiyu of Cao’s novel has escaped the “fiery pit” of prostitution, the widespread commodification of her name does send a more general signal of the ex-
tent to which human relationships in general have been put at the mercy of mass commerce in a way unthinkable in the original *Story of the Stone.*

The eerie resemblance between this episode and the brutal final scene of *Sea of Regret* only amplifies this message. In this scene, Zhongai discovers that his once-cloistered fiancée Wang Juanjuan has become a courtesan as a result of the chaos attending upon the Boxer Rebellion. Particularly jarring is Juanjuan's sudden departure from the party room they are both in when she realizes that Chen has recognized her. Rather than showing any regret at her new identity and how she has disappointed her fiancé—or in other words, rather than recognize the vicissitudes that have driven her into her present circumstance—she chooses to deny her origins. Baoyu and Chen share a shocked sense that firm ground is being pulled out from under their feet. It is the sudden awareness of the contingency of what they had assumed to be firm identity in the face of the enormous changes taking places in China that gives each episode its particular force. Of special interest, however, is that both identity crises take place against the context of the inexplicable fall of a well-educated young woman into prostitution. Most disorienting of all, perhaps, the values surrounding the most urgent questions of personal integrity are shown to be acutely vulnerable to ready commodification. In both cases, also, the commercial capital of Shanghai serves as the most typical, if not the only, possible site of these deeply unsettling transformations of identity.

For all Baoyu's unease with the disposition of power and with various popular attitudes that he finds in Shanghai, the city proves to be the one place he visits in China where he can ponder and discuss the issues facing the country without the threat that discussion of the questions themselves will prove dangerous to those who engage them. For instance, the page Beiming is captured by the Boxers when he and Baoyu visit Beijing and is about to be executed on the suspicion that he is a Christian convert (*ermaozi,* "subaltern hairy"). Even worse, when Baoyu visits Hankou in chapters 18–20 and makes some critical remarks about the educational philosophy of the local examination official that are overheard and reported, he is arrested and nearly executed (by informal murder in his prison cell at the behest of the evil official concerned). The critical facility that he had developed with so much enthusiasm during his days in Shanghai—the location of the paradoxes and stimuli that engendered this faculty, in other words—proves to be not easily transported to the rest of the country. This was also, as we saw, very much the case in the concluding chapters of *Strange Events,* but it is something of which the characters themselves never seem to become fully conscious. The hybrid environment of Shanghai seems to demonstrate itself indispensable in allowing for clear thinking about China's predicament in a new age.
In suddenly finding his way in chapter 22 to what is portentously called "wenming jingjie," or "the civilized realm" (apparently hidden off in a corner of Shandong Province), Baoyu enters a world in which the seemingly insoluble anxieties and difficulties of the first half of the book become suddenly and painlessly resolved. In constructing a utopia on Chinese soil, Wu more than anything else finds a way of coping with the challenge presented by the West: not only has China caught up with the West in technology and social organization in this zone of the ideal, but this technological development has also allowed the ultimate superiority of traditional Chinese values, which had seemed so threatened in the first half of this novel and throughout Strange Events, to reveal itself in full glory. In chapter 25, for instance, when Baoyu first sees the elegant flying machines that provide public transportation in the new realm, he comments on how their invention seems to have borne out the imagination of such things that he had read about in Chinese novels. His guide responds:

"Actually, the creation of these machines was enabled in the first place because the ancients had the idea, which allowed us to think up the experimental method [to bring the idea to fruition]. The ridiculous Europeans and Americans, on the other hand, invented the [hot-air] balloon, which is both cumbersome and dangerous, but they persist in endlessly bragging about it. Do you see any way [these balloons] could even approach our [flying machines] in stability and general satisfaction?"

In chapter 28, Baoyu moves on to inquire as to the intellectual and cultural underpinnings of this ideal order. His curiosity piqued by learning that the region completely lacks temples or churches, he asks:

"But if there are no temples (miaoyu) or churches, are there any Confucian temples (wenmiao)?"

Lao Shaonian responded: "There is a portrait of Confucius in every school, but no Confucian temples."

Baoyu said: "If there are no Confucian temples, then what religion do you follow in your realm? Are there any countries in the world (tianxia) that do not have a religion?"

Lao Shaonian laughed and said: "You should add one word to what you just said, 'Are there any barbaric (yeman) countries in the world that do not have a religion?' To which I would respond, 'Are there any civilized countries in the world that do have a religion?' You should know that this thing called religion (jiao) is simply used to indoctrinate (jiao)"
ignorant people. If the people all understand the cardinal principles of what is right (dayi), on the other hand, what need is there for religion? But if you insist upon asking what religion we follow here, then we can only respond that we follow Confucianism. In our realm, however, we have home education from the time children are very small, and their mothers instruct them in practical ethics. Once they go to school, the first lesson is on self-cultivation (xiushen). So no matter whether people are young or old, noble or humble, there is no one who does not follow principle (xunli). The [cardinal virtues] of filiality (xiao), brotherly duty (ti), loyalty (zhong), trust (xin), ritual (li), righteousness (yi), modesty (lian), and shame (chi) are all infused in the people’s hearts. And this is why we adopted the word ‘civilized’ to be the name of our realm. . . . As for those on the outside who use the term ‘civilized,’ they are the exact opposite of what the term means. They insist on bragging to one another about how they are ‘civilized countries’; they think they are fooling the world, but they don’t know that we just laugh at them.”

With this discourse, Wu not only finds a way to posit a technical parity with the “civilized” countries of the West but affirms at the same time the moral superiority of the Confucian teaching in particular and of Chinese culture in general. Interestingly enough, this moral superiority is guaranteed by a set of local and informal practices thoroughly rooted in Chinese society, rather than any institutionalized religion of the sort that had been called for by a significant number of late Qing reformers. All in all, these episodes in the civilized realm represent the ultimate wish fulfillment of “Zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong” (Chinese learning as the essence, Western learning as the application), that slogan so thoroughly imbricated in late Qing intellectual life and discussed in chapter 2. By placing so much emphasis on the word “civilized” (wenming), as well as by constant reference to the falsity of Western claims to this status, Wu clearly announces his ideal of recuperating the fallen position of China in the world: in appropriating the particular term “wenming”—extremely common in contemporary China, Japan, and Korea—and almost invariably used to signify Western origin, Wu declares his radical intention not just to abolish the invidious distinction between a progressive West and a backward China but also to reestablish the superiority of Chinese culture, however complicated the new context.

In presenting the spectacle of a technologically advanced civilized realm, Wu does not fail to give an account, cursory though it may be, of how these inventions were made possible. While discussing the reasons for the perfection of the Chinese flying machines, Baoyu suddenly inquires of his host:
"I have heard people say that without factions (dangpai) there is no competition, and without competition there can be no progress. In your realm everyone is of one mind, however, so of course there are no factions. How, then, did you manage to progress so quickly?"

Dongfang Fa said: “That is unsympathetic talk from those who know nothing about us. They want to have people in competition with them at every point, and only then are they willing to get down to work. If they have nobody to compete with, they just won’t work, so they advance a theory of progress requiring competition. What they don’t realize is that even without competition, as long as you can manage at all times not to be complacent with yourself (buzuzi de xin), there will be no lack of progress. Moreover, we do have factions, except that our factions are not among ourselves.”

Baoyu responded in surprise: “If the factions are not among yourselves, then where are they?”

Dongfang Fa said: “Everyone in our own country composes one faction, while the other faction is, of course, made up of foreigners. If one is looking for competition, there is competition with foreigners; how can anyone say we have no competition?”

The official history of progress in the civilized realm turns out to be an eclectic mix of elements of Confucian theories of communal unity combined with an idiosyncratic borrowing from social Darwinism: there is the obligatory competition and natural selection, but the competition is only with those from outside the national body. Wu can thus have his social Darwinist cake and eat it too: the painful demand for internal “survival of the fittest” can be displaced onto competition between China and the West, which, conveniently, China has already won by the time Baoyu has reached the civilized realm. In setting up his utopian China, in other words, Wu incorporates the key points of a corporatist nationalism that had first dawned on Baoyu when initially confronted with the new society and economy of Shanghai. Wu also reveals the inextricable bonds between nationalism and culturalism in China.

In spite of (or, perhaps, because of) the importance of the lessons to be learned from the new realm, for the most part the realistic account of contemporary China and the fantastical journey to the wenming jingjie are kept rigorously distinct from one another. Once Baoyu reaches the other realm, there is no commerce back and forth. Only in the book’s final chapter does Baoyu return from the “civilized realm” to Shanghai and Beijing, although the episode is set off by conventional phrases clearly marking it as a dream (“Just as he was about to fall asleep, he saw . . . ”). For those readers who might have missed the invocation of the dream convention, events become more fantastical as the dream draws to a close,
as is the conventional practice with this motif. In this case, the fantasy builds toward a vision of a prosperous and industrially developed modern China, with the lower Yangzi River now built up to resemble a vastly expanded Shanghai bund—ironically resembling many parts of that stretch of river today:

In the time it took [Baoyu] to look up, he suddenly sensed himself to be aboard a steamer, one that was proceeding forward at great speed. Looking at both banks, he saw them covered with tall buildings, and the smokestacks arose like the trees in a vast forest. Unconsciously he said to himself, “Where is this? I’ve never been here before.” Suddenly, he heard Bohui’s voice coming from behind: “This is the Yangzi River!” Baoyu turned his head and asked: “Where on the Yangzi are there as many buildings as this?” Bohui said: “You don’t know? Nowadays there are Chinese-owned factories covering both banks of the river all the way from Wusong to Hankou.”

At this point, in good dreamlike fashion, Baoyu suddenly finds himself aboard a fast train, which passes through vast expanses of well-kept agricultural lands. After reaching the capital of China (quite pointedly not identified by name here), he finds himself in the midst of an international peace conference being held there, a clear echo of the first chapter of Liang Qichao’s famously incomplete and unsuccessful 1903 attempt at a political novel, Xin Zhongguo weilai ji (Record of the future of the new China). At the conference, it is announced that the emperor of China will say a few words, and when the emperor ascends the dais, Baoyu is amazed to see that he is none other than Dongfang Qiang (“oriental strength,” also known as Dongfang Wenming, “oriental civilization”), the rather mysterious figure who had served as Baoyu’s guide to the civilized realm from the point of his first arrival there and in whose guest room Baoyu had just fallen asleep. The dream ends abruptly as Baoyu applauds and stamps his feet in appreciation of Dongfang’s enthusiastic words announcing the coming era of world peace. In stamping his feet, Baoyu breaks through the floor and finds himself falling into an abyss, and the terror he experiences wakes him up. When he awakens, Baoyu finds himself still in the civilized realm, but the substantive contact between that realm and actual places in China that he had just visited turns out to have been only such stuff as dreams are made on.

In evaluating the frenzied conclusion to Baoyu’s dream, it is important to note that this chapter represents the only actual meeting between the “real” China of the late Qing and the fantastic civilized realm; it also provides the only structural link between the first half of the book and the second. And at least with regard to the imagination of future urbaniza-
tion—of all the things that Baoyu observes in his dream, by the way, this seems to impress him the most—we see an apparent projection of contemporary Shanghai, in which that modern city has, in effect, reached out to colonize the rest of China, albeit under Chinese ownership. But just at this point where we see the projected urban China of the future, the dream begins to expose itself most transparently as being only a dream, through a montage of random jumps wherein Baoyu suddenly finds himself first aboard a steamer, then aboard a train, then in the capital. Perhaps the best indicator of the instability of the union between the “real” China and the fantastical realm is the collapse of the illusion of communication between the two as soon as Baoyu begins to participate in it, even if only through the passive activity of applauding the emperor’s idealistic speech. As David Wang has suggested, to a large extent this sequence of events serves to remind us painfully of the remoteness and inaccessibility of the utopian vision of the perfect Chinese order that Wu had so lovingly set out in the second half of the novel.

Perhaps of even greater interest is that in Baoyu’s final dream Dongfang Qiang (Wenming) turns out to be the emperor of China, for he had been the man in charge of the “civilized realm.” Moreover, immediately after waking, Baoyu learns that Dongfang is none other than Zhen Baoyu, that spectral mirror image of Jia Baoyu in Cao Xueqin’s original who had always been more committed to the norms of the Confucian ruling class and from whom the latter had done his best to keep his distance (it is also significant that the more earnest Zhen had haunted Jia Baoyu’s conscience throughout the original novel). That Dongfang Qiang is identified as the enlightened and idealized ruler of the civilized realm, as the emperor of a new China, and as Jia Baoyu’s alter ego is emblematic of a stunning collapse of narrative perspective into the single focalizing standpoint of Jia Baoyu himself. At some level, then, the whole utopian vision presented in the civilized realm is revealed to be nothing other than self-obsession and personal fantasy, with a single consciousness acting both as reflector of events and as only real agent upon them. The result is, in short, a situation very much like that depicted in Cao Xueqin’s *Story of the Stone*, except that Wu Jianren has added a powerful dimension of an impinging statecraft to the sequel.

Moreover, as David Wang notes, since Zhen Baoyu has already overseen the successful reform of China and its subsequent progress, Baoyu “can only be a late spectator to what ‘will already have’ happened while he sojourned somewhere outside history.” The narratorial sleight of hand that allows Baoyu to witness both China’s early twentieth-century backwardness as well as its presumptive transcendence of this state also renders Baoyu the embodiment of “belated modernity,” where someone else has already done the work and he can only witness or copy what has
been accomplished. To have the actual process by which the “civilized realm” achieved its utopian status disappear into a time warp that is never accounted for in any serious sense simply shows the imponderability of the process itself and casts doubt upon the possibility that it can ever be made to happen.

We can conclude that in Wu’s New Stone the resurrected Jia Baoyu’s perspective on the new order of things facing Chinese thinkers has been decisively shaped by his experience of Shanghai. He develops a powerful critical outlook, but it is perhaps the enormity of the new data that this critical mentality has enabled him to gather that overloads the transmission line between self-cultivation and ordering the world that was central to the neo-Confucian worldview. The overload collapses the link between self and world in on itself, with all the points along the line of separation becoming blurred upon one another. In more mundane terms, this final admission that all the projections of future improvement in China’s situation are based on the inventions of a single imagination hints at the unraveling of the social consensus that had, for better or for worse, been the basis for political order in late imperial China. If Baoyu’s sojourn in Shanghai had alerted him to the existence of a stark new world that, for all the problems it presented, was still alive with possibilities, it also alienated him from the society he had come from in the first place. The disconnection represented in the novel between individual perception and the actual ways of the world might also serve as a forecast of the dangers inhering in investing too much reliance on the brave new world of “interiority” (or heightened subjectivity) that was beginning to come into vogue in the late Qing. As foretold by the impact of Lu Xun’s madman (kuang-ren), it was just this idea of the alienated perceiving mind that would sweep the whole of the literary stage by the early 1920s, partly out of emulation of Western forms of writing. If interiority did in fact open new avenues of insight, the final failure of the actual and the ideal to be able to find any common ground in New Stone illustrates the dangers of solipsism and of an ultimate narrowing of perspective to an exclusive concern with the position of the cognizant subject.

In his two remarkable novels, then, Wu Jianren makes a complete circuit of the intellectual possibilities of his era. Strange Events focuses almost exclusively on behavioral defects, heavily relying upon the infrastructure supplied by the modern West to achieve its understanding. The novel grinds to a halt when it travels to a completely traditional realm without modern communications. New Stone attempts to be more upbeat, consciously contriving to achieve an understanding, even a union, between the realms of the wished-for modern and the desuetude of the present. The sudden collapse of this effort in the final pages of the text is all the more bleak for its abrupt admission of the impossibility of a success-
ful fusion. If Yan Fu had found himself whipsawed between what seemed an airtight case for rejecting China’s past and equally urgent ideological and moral needs to build upon it, Wu found himself in much the same situation, which is all the more poignant for building its case through its vivid representations of the exigencies of everyday life.