Bringing the World Home

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PART III

The New Republic
CHAPTER 8

The Contest over Universal Values

We see most past work through our own experience, without even making the effort to see it in something like its original terms. What analysis can do is not so much to reverse this, returning a work to its period, as to make the interpretation conscious, by showing historical alternatives.

Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*

For enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

The texts and subtexts of the major thinkers and the major novels in the last decade of the Qing may have disclosed a great deal of uncertainty about the changes unfolding in China, but there was still real enthusiasm abroad among Chinese elites that the various openings toward the “new” would effect substantive change for the better in their beleaguered country. As was pointed out in the introduction to this book, even foreign observers who were longtime residents in China shed their usual pessimism regarding developments in China to share in this general enthusiasm. Among the many reforms of the period, the numerous initiatives toward parliamentary government and local rule seemed to embody these hopes. A large mix of people participated in these efforts, including merchants, journalists, those who held high degrees in the examination system that had finally been abolished in 1905, and, perhaps most revolutionary, those who had received a modern education either at home or in Japan. As Min Tu-ki has observed in summing up his detailed study of the formation of late Qing provincial assemblies, “Although one may not agree that this was a ‘bloodless revolution,’ the traditional gentry did take over new functions, and new leadership within the gentry class shifted..."
from the conservative gentry with high degrees and high rank to the en-
lightened intellectuals. Clearly, a new era had arrived.”

When the revolution that overthrew the dynasty eventually came in October 1911, it was natural that the “enlightened” sector of Chinese public opinion was virtually unanimous in its enthusiasm for future prospects. For one thing, as this chapter will make clear, there had come onto the cultural stage a whole new group of intellectuals with an impressive command of both Chinese and Western intellectual traditions. The pessimism about the acquisition of Western knowledge expressed by Yan Fu in the years around 1900, mentioned in the last chapter, seemed no longer to be operative. This new optimism is clearly expressed by Ye Shaojun (1894–1988) in his 1929 novel, *Ni Huanzhi*, when he described the reaction in the cities as the news of the revolt became known: “Hidden beneath the surface were countless hearts which had been aroused by these events and were now uneasy, apprehensive, hopeful, elated, yet unanimous in the belief that a great upheaval was fast approaching.” For all the hopes with which the revolution was greeted, it soon became apparent that it added up to little more than a coup, and the rapid consolidation of the social status quo ante almost instantly deflated the hopes that serious change was in the offing. In addition, the resultant political confusion brought about a number of serious losses of sovereignty to the foreigners, something diametrically opposed to the hopes for increased Chinese sovereignty implicit in all post-1895 thinking, whether revolutionary or not. As Ernest Young has summed up the post-1911 situation: “A year after the revolution, a sense of failure was already infecting the country. The removal of the Manchus had not been the regenerating act that many had hoped it would be. The republic had not brought greater foreign respect for Chinese sovereignty. Reforms, though energetically pursued, had with few exceptions stalled.”

A striking, if only momentary, lull in the fervent cultural activity of the previous fifteen years attended upon this political disappointment. With the deaths of Li Boyuan, Liu E, and Wu Jianren and the failure of Zeng Pu to follow up on the success of *Niehai hua*, the activist trend represented by the advocates of the New Novel seemed exhausted. Thereafter, fiction took a lower profile, one that would have been regarded as retrograde by the earlier advocates of a fiction of social consequence. While patriotic themes continued to be popular, novels about romance (often with patriotic subtexts) came to dominate the literary arena, and many of these were written in the classical rather than the vernacular language. For instance, the success of *Yuli hua* (Jade pear spirit), by Xu Zhenya (1889–1937)—first when serialized in the Shanghai newspaper *Minquan bao* in 1912–1913, and when it was published as a single volume the next
year—marked the advent of parallel prose to the *xiaoshuo* form. This almost certainly represented the spread to the novel of the parallel prose promoted by the Wenxuan school, discussed in chapter 3. It was, however, also something the advocates of the New Fiction from the decade before would have found antipathetic to the popularization raison d’être for the movement. In these years the Nanshe (Southern Society)—a literary group that had been founded in 1909 by men who identified themselves with the Tongmeng hui but that became active in Shanghai by 1911—is another indicator of the changed cultural environment. Although it burgeoned just as the revolution was in the offing, it neither specialized in fiction nor had as prominent a political profile as the nature of its membership would suggest.⁷

The rapid consolidation of power by military dictator Yuan Shikai (1859–1916) almost immediately followed the founding of the republic on January 1, 1912, resulting in a confused and profoundly depressing political scene that did nothing to clarify the cultural situation. The high hopes that had accompanied the overthrow of the Manchus had been dashed. Disappointment was particularly strong among the politically active class that had come to dominate cultural production after 1895, a class that included the writers and readers described in the previous chapters of this book. Even the characters in the novels discussed in chapters 5 through 7 display the characteristics of this group. The “second revolution,” an effort that began in the spring of 1913 and was led by southerners representing (among others) the forces of reform against Yuan, was effectively crushed in less than six months, adding to the gloom.⁸ Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, the twin beacons of reformist thought in the period after 1895, had, as shown in chapter 2, long since begun to have reservations about some of their initial extreme views. Even had they strictly adhered to the positions they had pioneered in the late 1890s, however, new voices gathering around the revolutionary party of Sun Yat-sen would have made them appear quite restrained in comparison.

Yan and Liang had become conspicuously more moderate in their political views in the intervening years,⁹ even as the fire-breathing anarchist Liu Shipei had thrown his lot in with the Manchus in 1908. Yan and Liang thus had few new ideas to offer in these depressing times. In addition, because they had become voluntarily ensnared in what later commentators would unanimously regard as futile, even quixotic political activity, it was even less clear which voices of wisdom could be depended upon to offer guidelines to the troubling new situation. To make matters worse, as Yuan Shikai grasped for power in these years, he launched an active governmental effort to suppress the journalistic expression of opinion, an avenue of communication that had expanded greatly after
the 1911 revolution. His efforts at limiting the circulation of public opinion achieved conspicuous and indeed unprecedented success, even in the semiprotected zone of the Shanghai Foreign Settlement. By 1915, however, intellectual life began to heat up again—whether because of or in spite of Yuan’s continuing oppressive policies is difficult to say. At the heart of this renewed activity was, once again, a sense of cultural crisis, centering around the question of China’s disadvantageous position in the world. As we have seen, this question had been on the intellectual agenda from at least the early 1860s, but it had now become even more urgent with the realization that the post-Qing Chinese state was weaker than ever. One of the most important debates that developed concerned the nature of the differences between China and the West, a question that had bedeviled both the Yangwu thinkers and Yan Fu alike. In the postrevolutionary period, however, a new constellation of intellectual opinion sprang up, with positions polarizing toward two distinct trends.

One side was generally the more moderate, basing itself on the notion that China’s problems were only slightly different species of a genus of general questions affecting humanity at large and the modern world in particular. Solutions to these common issues could thus be found by looking at a broad spectrum of ideas from both China and the West, resulting in the gradual development of a hybrid culture. The more radical position held that China’s problems were the result of a uniquely disadvantageous set of historical circumstances, which pushed in the direction of what Lin Yu-sheng has labeled “totalistic iconoclasm,” or the substitution of a wholly new set of ideals and values for the old. Practically speaking, this meant that the iconoclasts came to embrace wholeheartedly the ideas that had animated the recent history and success of the progressive West. Given the severity of the political crisis, which extended to the fundamental nature and even the existence of a central state, these two options represented the polar ends of a spectrum that was all but unavoidable in any profound reexamination of the political options available to the new Republic of China.

It should also be noted that the inevitable instrumentality of the choice here could not help but shape the way in which contemporary thinkers perceived the differences between China and the West upon which they based their analyses. In other words, the disposition of each thinker toward the nature of and the possibility for change colored his views of where these changes were to come from and how they were to be effected. The question around which the cultural crisis had long revolved—namely, whether ideas were universal property or were products unique to a particular culture—thus dramatically came to the surface again. This time around it was to prove even more vexing and immediate than it had to all prior would-be reformers, from the Yangwu theorists.
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after the 1860s to Yan Fu and Liang Qichao after 1895. The ensuing dispute came increasingly to dominate the sphere of public discussion that revolved initially around the Shanghai publishing industry and included Beijing after the reorganization of Beijing University in 1916. By 1920 this dispute would transform the public arena in ways that would have been unimaginable just a few years earlier and would, in fact, usher in a whole new intellectual regime in the period that followed.

As the debate over the proper mix between China and the West waxed in the years after 1915, there was a widespread feeling among all the contending parties that the stakes were now much higher than ever before. The continuing decline of the political situation even after the departure of the Manchus disabused anyone that any easy solutions were to be had. Beyond that, radical resolve was hardened by the unedifying spectacle of many of the former leaders of the anti-Qing revolution now having become part of the problem by virtue of their involvement with Yuan Shikai, and the sense that perhaps only by including new groups in the political process could there be any progress. At the same time, the beginning of the catastrophic European war in 1914, the rapid economic growth in urban China resulting from the need to produce the goods that Europe was no longer able to provide, and the accompanying expansion of a cosmopolitan elite with a vastly more sophisticated knowledge of the West and its ideas were giving rise to a new body of opinion makers. This group of men felt that it could much more confidently deal equably with Chinese and Western issues on the same intellectual horizon than had any prior generation of thinkers.

After 1915 this group split into two, which, although emerging from the same pre-1915 intellectual matrix, were each marked by very different modes of discourse. The eventual victory of the radical party that followed upon the events in Beijing on May 4, 1919, was to be decisive. For not only did it virtually eradicate the memory of the moderate position with which it had contended, but it also succeeded in powerfully insinuating the voice of radicalism firmly within the realm of literary criticism and practice. If the victory of the radical voice proved conclusive, in retrospect it hardly seemed inevitable in the years before 1919. At that time, the moderates seemed to have the more gifted writers, and their reasoning was almost invariably more carefully worked out. They also controlled the most prestigious and powerful organs of opinion. In the end, perhaps it was the characteristic signature of perilous times that the most extreme solutions proved to be, if not the most persuasive, then at least the most appealing to those stymied by China's myriad difficulties.12

It is not surprising that the first thinker to put the cross-cultural question back on the intellectual agenda was Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) in his radical new journal, Qingnian zazhi (Youth journal). The first issue
appeared in Shanghai in September 1915, shortly after Yuan Shikai launched his bid to restore the monarchy. It included an article by Wang Shuqian, entitled “The Question of the New and the Old” (“Xinjiu wenti”), in which Wang notes that the definitions of what is really new and what is really traditional have become hopelessly confused since the overt confrontation of reformist and traditionalist voices passed from the scene along with the former dynasty. Because everyone has now rallied to the cause of the “new,” regardless of the actual content of its ideas, any clear political direction has become impossible to identify:

Since the contention between New and Old arose in our country, no one has as yet been able to clearly define the two terms. During the former dynasty, China was clearly divided into reform (weixin) and conservative (shoujiu) factions that contended with one another and could never get along; it was an uproarious time for both concepts. Since the label of “conservative” disappeared along with the former Qing empire, people have come to regard the New as something almost sacred and inviolable and even those who actually advocate archaism (fugu) more often than not do so under the cover of “renewal,” in order to secure respect (yin yiwei zhong). When one examines the substance of their arguments, however, one finds that in all respects they are actually in conflict with the New. Because of this, all things seem to be both new and not new, old and not old, which is why we are in a period of confusion between New and Old. It therefore did not really matter if the arguments were right or wrong during the [former] period of contention between New and Old, since people could base themselves on their consciences in advocating their ideas. There was no dissembling, and the livelihood of the nation even depended upon this. Now that New and Old are muddled together, however, not only is the difference between right and wrong indistinct, but it is impossible even to distinguish the motives lying behind right and wrong. If things continue in this way, things will lead inevitably to a point where no one in our country will have a functioning consciousness (jing-shenshang zhi zuoyong) any longer. I don’t know how a country can stand under such circumstances.

In other words, since the “new” had assumed an almost totemic power after the end of the Qing, it was difficult to mark out a distinct speaking position from which one could clearly distinguish new from old. The problem of how to break out of this rhetorical impasse, where all discourse tended toward a superficial consensus, occupies Wang’s attention for most of the course of the article. How was a writer to gain the leverage to mark out distinct territory beyond this confusing middle ground? For Wang, this question is far from academic, because for him it consti-
tutes the indispensable prerequisite to gaining intellectual leverage over China’s creaking political situation in order to be able to implement any true social or political reforms.

Wang’s solution to this problem is to declare the distinction to be spatial rather than temporal, something that had long been at least implicit in late Qing thought: “Let us now set up the boundary in this fashion: Let what is new be none other than the Western culture that has come from abroad; let what is old be none other than the indigenous culture of China.” At first, Wang seems to justify his taxonomy on procedural grounds only, arguing that it will not be possible to distinguish the true characteristics of either culture or, more importantly, to decide whether or not they can actually accommodate one another, unless they are kept analytically distinct and thereby understood on their own terms. Even as he establishes this argument, however, he immediately shifts its ground to the moral arena by setting out the valorized categories of human rights and equality as the essential and unvarying hallmarks of Western culture, at least since the French revolution of 1789: “...Once the view of human life changed, a substantial value was placed upon freedom, and human reason could be developed without restraint. Once the attitude toward the nation changed, despotism was abolished, and the spirit of constitutionalism achieved complete expression. This is what we are calling Western culture, and it is something that China never had before, so we are labeling it ‘new.’ That which is the opposite of this we are calling ‘old.’”

If Wang’s distinctions still seem to have an ad hoc quality in this formulation, however, he concludes peremptorily that “the two [i.e., new and old] are completely at odds with one another, and there is no space between them for mediation (tiaohe) or compromise (zhezhong).” China has no option, then, but to choose between one or the other of these two totalities. In his effort to find leverage for comprehensive reform, in other words, Wang makes the same absolute distinction between Western and Chinese cultural qualities that Yan Fu had made two decades earlier. Yan, as will be recalled, made this distinction a major vehicle in opening his comprehensive attack on late Qing intellectual and political life. Wang seems to echo that distinction here in his own attack on contemporary practices, even to the emphasis on freedom and equality as the essential qualities of the West.

Chen Duxiu, in another article in the inaugural issue of his journal, makes precisely the same distinction as Wang does between the essential natures of the new and the old. The essay, entitled “The French and Modern Civilization” (“Falanxi ren yu jinshi wenming”), is shorter and considerably more melodramatic than Wang’s, although much less rigorously argued, riddled as it is with factual errors and fanciful interpretations of European intellectual history. In reasserting the uniquely Western na-
ture of the new, Chen similarly attempts to follow Wang in moving the essential definitions of the terms of difference from new/old to Western/Chinese. He begins by flatly claiming that “that which can be labeled modern civilization (jinshi wenming) is the sole possession of the Europeans and is thus Western civilization, or it can also be called European civilization.” Chen isolates three entities as key to what he regards as an earth-shattering force—human rights, biological evolution, and socialism—and gives credit to the French for having given these ideas the force they possess in the modern world. If Chen’s argument in the end turns out to be the same as Wang’s, its failure to include any of the nuance that confers a good deal more depth on Wang’s essay has perhaps given Chen’s work more lasting force as a piece of propaganda. The very fuzziness of definition that Wang’s argument attempts to address with some care seems to be answered by Chen with definitions as abrupt and dramatic as they are simplistic.

Chen’s decisive turn from heuristic distinctions for analytical purposes to essentializing cultural characteristics, a move that Wang in his essay is chary of indulging in, becomes a basic building block in Chen’s cultural writings that follow. In his “Fundamental Difference in the Thought of Eastern and Western Nations” (“Dong-xi minzu genben si-xiang zhi chayi”), published in December 1915 in the fourth issue of Qingnian zazhi, Chen elaborates on his basic decision to perceive fundamental differences between China and the West by bringing out in full the always-implicit invidious side of his arguments. For instance, when discussing the contrasts between the Eastern family-centered society and Western individualism, he almost casually makes such comments as “Loyalty and filiality represent the morality of a patriarchal (zongfa) society in the feudal period and comprise the persisting spirit of the semicivilized (ban kaihua) Eastern peoples” (emphasis added).

For reasons that will be made clear below, it is quite likely that the bold cultural theorizing that characterized Qingnian zazhi may well have influenced Dongfang zazhi (The Eastern miscellany), which by then was quite established. The Commercial Press had begun publishing the latter authoritative journal in Shanghai in 1904, and by 1915 it had become the principal organ for educated public opinion in the country. Given the later importance of Chen Duxiu’s new journal, to say that it exerted an influence on other publications may seem a commonplace assertion, for later historians have retrospectively conferred upon Xin qingnian (New youth—the name of Chen Duxiu’s journal after late 1916) a weight and power it almost certainly lacked in its early years. In 1915–1916, however, Dongfang so far surpassed the new journal in influence and readership that one might well imagine the senior periodical simply ignoring the new upstart. But the fact remains that soon after Qingnian zazhi com-
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menced publication, leading articles on the East-West cultural question suddenly start to appear in *Dongfang zazhi*, in its first issues of 1916. It is noteworthy that in the years and months immediately prior to late 1915, the main articles in *Dongfang zazhi* had been a mixture of policy discussion, general questions, and accounts of current events, but with few systematic comparisons between Chinese and Western culture and values. If anything, the theses and tone of these pre-1916 articles suggest that the pieces are based on a thoroughgoing assumption by their authors of the ultimate universality of ideas and values and the transparency of cultural communication, with China taken as just another player on the international stage.

The first articles directly engaging the difficult questions of cultural comparison between the West and China come almost exclusively from Huang Yuanyong (1885–1915), writing under the name “Yuansheng.” Huang, who received the *jinshi* at the extraordinarily precocious age of nineteen, passed the last examination ever given for that degree, in 1904. He later became probably the leading journalist of the early republican period, serving as (among other positions) the Beijing correspondent of the Shanghai *Shen bao*. Because of his skill and fame as a writer, Huang became implicated in Yuan Shikai’s effort to declare himself emperor, and he departed Beijing for Shanghai when Yuan’s attempts to enlist became too pressing. Huang soon thereafter felt he had to flee even Shanghai, and he was eventually assassinated in San Francisco on December 27, 1915. The Shanghai scholar Tang Zhenchang has recently offered persuasive evidence that Huang was killed by supporters of the republican cause; they objected to his earlier mockery of the revolutionary effort as much as to any endorsement he may have given Yuan Shikai in the early years of the latter’s ascension to power. In a set of posthumously published essays written after he had fled China in the fall of 1915, Huang focuses on China’s dire straits in a way that sounds many of the same pessimistic notes expressed by Wang Shuqian and Chen Duxiu. The key difference between them is that Huang’s discussion is more carefully constructed upon a clear underlying theme of human similarity and a sense of the transparency of cultural communication. For all his stress on common humanity, however, Huang grants “thought,” or ideology (*sixiang*), the vital role in ordering human activity and in creating cultural difference, ascertaining that the contrasts among cultures arose from different historical circumstances that in turn bring about distinct patterns of thought.

The most important of this set of articles is an elaborately embellished essay published in January 1916, entitled “Our General Malignancy” ("Guoren zhi gongdu"). Huang begins the piece with an intricate parallel construction that fully recognizes the extremity of China’s cur-
rent position: “Of all the people in our country, there is almost no one who does not think China is about to perish. But when they say ‘is about to perish,’ it is to avoid the taboo of saying that everyone believes China will indeed perish. But when they say ‘will indeed perish,’ they are also being polite; in fact, they believe that China has already perished.”

Huang says he will set aside the question of whether these beliefs are true or not in favor of exploring the roots of the malady. In passing, he also mentions the uniqueness as well as the paradoxical implications of the discourse of autocritique in which he is even then participating himself: “Nowadays the politicians and scholars of other countries daily seek to extol the particular spirit of their nationals, while we [in China] consider it our most urgent task to research and seek out the particular malignancy that is universal among us (wu guomin tebie zhi gongdu).”

Huang develops his inquiry with logical precision and balance, carefully keeping in mind at all times the historical factors behind the malaise, as well as noting the universal factors underlying it. For instance, in setting the stage for his eventual diagnosis, he engages in a mock catechism on why Chinese society has come to be in its current sorry state:

In China now there are many “doctors.” The first of them said: “China’s maladies result from a bad political situation.” If one then asks why the political situation is bad, the response is “Because the authorities are bad.” But one cannot say (at least in general) that a malevolent god has specially dispatched demons to torment China; these authorities of ours are simply other Chinese. So why are they as bad as this? To speak plainly, such moral lapses as self-indulgence, debauchery, peculation, and cruelty are but the common excesses of unlicensed human interests (yisi); all humans seek to further their own interests at the expense of others. Willfulness and self-indulgence that lead to malevolent behavior are thus simply human nature. Human nature is naturally predisposed toward wickedness and turns toward the benevolent only with difficulty.

Although Huang is here engaged in the same project as the writers of Qingnian zazhi—that of trying to understand the roots of China’s problems—he goes about it in a way that stresses a nature common to the whole human species. This clearly contrasts with the position of Chen Duxiu, who is engaged in a constant project of seeing China’s difficulties as the result of some unique national perversity. Huang’s discourse may also be indebted to the many discussions of Xunzi’s philosophy that were popular at the time, again a contrast with that of Chen Duxiu, who (at least consciously) is even at this early date attempting to establish the obsolescence of the Chinese intellectual tradition in its entirety. The root cause that Huang adduces as underlying all China’s problems is “noth-
As for the nature of this vagueness, Huang admits, "I cannot really define it, but I can describe it well enough: it is everything without system, without substance, without character, and without distinctions. The phenomena it gives rise to are arbitrariness, despotism, stagnation, corruption, and following weakly along." In a word, it is empty formalism.

In the latter half of the essay, in other words, Huang sounds themes that resonated long and loud in the New Culture movement that ensued shortly thereafter. What the radical voices of the movement omitted from their discourse, however, was the delicate nuance of Huang Yuanyong’s careful presentation of the full richness of the context of a universal human history.

At the same time as Huang was engaging himself in a series of anatomies of China’s particular problems, he also writes about the general malaise of the modern. In an essay entitled "Reflections" ("Xiangying lu"), published posthumously in Dongfang zazhi, he situates China’s difficulties as part of a common modern problematic:

Now the people of the civilized countries are also suffering from the vexations and disunity of [contemporary] intellectual life. Because of the omnipotence of science, religion and philosophy have become mere appendages to it, and so the [latter two] are not able to reach their fulfillment. As for the functions of science, it would seem to be more than sufficient for manufacturing (zhqi), but it is not up to promoting morality and nurturing one's character. It is just for these reasons that the more advanced that production becomes, and the greater the power of machines, the more difficult life becomes. The stimulation of the nervous system is even greater for them [i.e., those in the “civilized” countries] than it is for us. At this point, we have become neither new nor old, neither Chinese nor Western. Our old grain is exhausted and the new not yet ready for harvest, just as is the case with them. And what causes particular pain for us is the predicament of the nation, which is more extreme for us than it is for them. From the standpoint of a wise man, however, the sense of the experience of life and the anxieties produced are the same [for us as for them].

Huang does not simplistically equate China and the West here, nor does he demarcate them as two completely different realms, the one of nature and spirit and the other of science, as Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming were to do with much fanfare a few years later. Instead, while not ignoring the clear differences, Huang subsumes the consequences of modernity under a sense of general human crisis, which he describes as achieving the same effect on the individual subject whether in China or
in the West. Huang’s use of the term “people of the civilized countries” (wénmíng guó rén) to refer to the West here seems simply to be following and thus naturalizing a convention that had been common since the late Qing. If any irony is implied, it is understated almost to the vanishing point. In this respect, his usage contrasts sharply with that of Wu Jianren a decade earlier in *The New Story of the Stone*. As outlined in chapter 6, Wu Jianren deployed the narrating voice in a manner that becomes extremely defensive about just which country should be accounted as truly “civilized,” thereby registering his anxiety over the implications of the term itself. What allows Huang his uninflected use of the phrase is the underlying assumption in his discourse that the hurly-burly of modernity has rendered the “civilized” nations no better (or no worse) off than poor China, at least in respect of the affective life of their citizens.

Huang’s most profound inquiry into the problems of China, and into the nature of its contrasts with the West, is contained in a long essay published as the lead article in the *Dongfang zazhi* issue of February 1916. In this piece, entitled “The Clash between New and Old Thought” (“Xinjiu sìxiāng zhí chōngtù”), Huang begins by arguing a point precisely the opposite of what Wang Shuqian had dismissed as axiomatic in his contribution to the first issue of *Qingnian zazhi* in September of the year before: “Since the time that the importation of Western culture began, the clash between New and Old has never been as severe as it is today.” Huang notes that, after the 1898 effort at reform and the trauma of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, almost everyone had assented to a reform program based to a large extent on the emulation of Western political ideas, and that “there was no one so devoted to the old ways as to raise the banner of restoring tradition (fugu), as there is today.” But, Huang says, this new group of traditionalists is equally steadfastly opposed by believers in evolution, and each side is of equal strength. According to Huang, what accounts for this new standoff is the shift of the locus of the reform effort from institutional matters like armaments and political systems to the realm of thought, which he defines as “the source from which every aspect [of society] emanates.”

Even as he establishes thought as a fundamental marker of difference, however, Huang is careful to add a long section on how all such differences are relative rather than absolute. He concludes this demonstration with a long citation from *Zhuangzi*’s “Qiwu lun” (The sorting that evens things out) as his source of authority: “Humans eat the flesh of hay-fed and grain-fed beasts, deer eat the grass, centipedes relish snakes, owls and crows crave mice; which [of the four] has a proper sense of taste?” Huang comments, “One cannot know which has the proper sense of taste. The point is that if habits differ, then what each eats will differ. This serves to explain why, if thought differs, then behavior will differ as well.” In other words, even while preparing himself to make his strongest state-
ment on the historical roots of difference between China and the West, he prefaces the discourse with a strong assertion of ultimate cultural relativism. He thus makes clear that although Western thought may have a clear claim to instrumental superiority in dealing with the complexities of the modern age, this does not allow one to affirm its ontological supremacy. This distinction is easy enough to make, perhaps, but it is one that the radical reformers of the years to follow always strenuously denied.

As part of an evident delight in the rhetorical possibilities of his language, Huang was never one to introduce his principal thesis without a long prologue that set out a complicated context for what was to come. In “The Clash between New and Old Thought,” after establishing the importance of thought in culture and then expatiating at some length upon the relativity of cultural difference, he finally gets down to the business of defining Western thought and its fundamental differences with that of China. He first establishes the Renaissance and Christianity as the most important variables in the Western tradition and goes on to posit three stages of human thought: the unconscious period, the period of critical thought, and the period of theoretical synthesis (xueshuo goucheng). At this point he once again sounds a note a similarity with the nascent radical reformers in declaring that “China at present is just moving from the period of unconsciousness into the period of critical [thought].” He attributes Europe’s ability to fuse the drastically opposing strands of Christian intuitional piety and Greek skeptical empiricism to a tradition that has been the upshot of a long period of interaction among different civilizations. Interestingly enough, Huang grants substantial credit for this multiculturalism to the colonial policies of both the ancient Greeks and the modern Europeans, which resulted in increased contact with the ideas of other peoples and a disposition not to take the inherited ideas of one’s own culture as absolute truth.

Following upon this detailed historical evaluation, Huang concludes with a long list of the different qualities of the “new” and the “old,” sorted into four general groupings. The third grouping is the most definitive:

Number Three: The new is that which affirms this human freedom [to study and critique traditional morality]. Therefore, it fosters individual self-consciousness and individual liberation. The new thus affirms that the human race has its own human character (renge). This human character consists of self-knowledge and holds that humanity has an absolute value and an independent purpose. It is not like an implement to be used by others, nor like a slave in service to others. If this [human character can be said to] have no value or purpose in itself, then the old [thinkers] can regard the human race as being made up of so many machines, good only for its instrumental use, and see each individual person as subject to the
service of others. Therefore, [under such a system] slavery is inevitable, and should a country [organized under these principles] perish, there is no reason to mourn it. 49

Huang is careful here to phrase in strictly universal terms his argument on the inadmissibility of allowing humans to be regarded as vulnerable to subjugation to a larger principle outside of themselves. While the differences between new and old are easily seen as represented in the modern West and a depressingly hidebound China, respectively, his discourse allows for considerable voluntarism. For instance, that China now has a variety of cultures on its doorstep (or, perhaps more accurately, the cultures have already intruded themselves well into the house) would seem implicitly to indicate that the conditions for cultural critique are now fully present at home. Huang concludes with a warning based on this tacit understanding, one of the few places in the essay where explicit comparison is drawn between the West and China: “Alas! If our country in the present day should prove still able to close its doors and be self-subsistent and to keep these strange Greek and Christian [systems of] thought forever at bay, with no exchange back and forth, then our people will simply remain content in our old ways and in their enjoyment of life.” 41

After Huang’s untimely death, Du Yaquan (1873–1933), the editor of Dongfang zazhi between 1912 and 1920 (and, perhaps not so incidentally, a pioneer of scientific education both in Shanghai and in his native Shaoxing), 42 resumed the major burden of cultural theorizing for the journal. 43 In so doing, Du protested—with some justification—his inability to continue the high standards that Huang had brought to the work he had so brilliantly begun. In an article published in the April 1916 issue of Dongfang zazhi, Du makes clear his debt to Huang in the title he chooses for the piece: “More Remarks on the Clash between New and Old Thought” (“Zai lun xinjiu sixiang zhi chongtu”). Like Huang, Du is at pains to advance the notion that differences customarily assumed to exist between China and the West are only “questions of degree” (chengdu wenti). The reasoning that Du advances for this position, however, seems to be rooted in a somewhat more reified sense of the particular natures of the two traditions than had been the case with Huang: “To say that the intellectual clashes among our people are the result of the [overarching] clash between Eastern and Western thought is simply erroneous. . . . How can what we refer to as the new thought in China ever depart from the legacy of traditional Eastern thought? And how can what we refer to as the old thought ever remain completely stuck in the patterns of traditional Eastern thought and completely reject that of the West?” 44

While Du, like Huang, certainly assumes the inevitability of hybridity here, the core of his argument seems tilted a bit more than Huang’s
toward assumptions about the fixedness of particular human characteristics that have evolved through historical difference. Thus, although he finds the evils of selfish desire (liyu) and personal will (yiqi) to be universal causes of political disruption, he also finds these problems to have been uniquely deleterious to China:

People of our country have never paid much attention to social intercourse, so their opportunities to learn from one another have been few. Since education and the establishment of schools have not been widespread, the level of [socialization] has also been rather juvenile. Educators have only paid lip service to the training of character and the molding of personal qualities, so the result has been far from [what they have advocated]. Therefore, there are very few of our citizens who combine general knowledge with satisfactory personal qualities.45

Du gives an extensive account of how such bad human habits develop in all populations, but his nomination of “human desire” as one of the besetting social sins overtly recalls the theories on human nature originally advanced by Song-dynasty Confucian thinkers, as well as the extensive debate about the depredations of renyu (human desire) that had been carried on throughout the Qing dynasty.46 In this sense, his remarks earlier in the article about how all thinkers in modern China, reformist and conservative alike, were inevitably attached in important ways to traditional values ring true at least in his own essay. If one can tease out a slight emphasis on an essential nature of Chinese culture in Du’s article of March 1916, when compared at least with Huang Yuanyong’s work that had apparently inspired it, the overall positioning of both men’s work is on the common quality of the human experience. That difference, in Du’s own words, is “a question of degree” rather than of essential quality.

By October of the same year, however, Du published a landmark article in Dongfang zazhi that was a significant departure from what had come before in that journal. Entitled “The Quiet Civilization and the Active Civilization” (“Jingde wenming yu dongde wenming”), the essay declares a basic reversal for Du from his earlier position: in the first paragraph Du proclaims that “as far as my opinion concerning Western civilization and our traditional civilization is concerned, the difference is a matter of quality (xingzhi) and not one of degree” (emphasis added).47 In setting out the reasons for this abrupt switch of opinion, Du announces a number of themes that were to resonate greatly in the years to come:

In recent years, the emulation of Western civilization on the part of our people has known no limits. From the great questions of the military and the state to the minutiae of daily life, there has been no area in which we
do not imitate the West. And as for our own traditional civilization, we have paid no attention to it at all. Ever since the beginning of the European war, however, the efficient instruments that were invented because of Western science have been used by the assorted Western nations to slaughter their fellow beings. The dimensions of this tragedy are unprecedented not only in our own history but in world history in general. For my part, I thus cannot help but entertain doubts about the Western civilization that I had once held in such high regard. As for those in our country who imitate Western culture, I will no longer be able to credit their expressions of faith in [Western] morality and its other achievements (gongye).  

It is noteworthy that Du begins his essay by expressing his frustration with the automatic emulation of the West that had been the calling card of Chen Duxiu’s new journal almost from its inception. If, however, Du has now come to believe in an essential difference between the West and China, he still has not given up the notion of communication between the two. In fact, he maintains that now, instead of China’s learning from Western experience, “[o]ur traditional civilization is just what is needed to remedy the defects of Western civilization.”

The discourse that follows this stunning opening is built on many of the same assumptions that Huang Yuanyong and Du had earlier called upon to show how China had been marked by deficiency vis-à-vis the West. For instance, where Huang had seen the Western multiculturalism that had grown out of the facility of cultural intercourse and colonialism as the West’s great advantage in the modern world, Du now sees only how this easy contact has resulted merely in persistent conflict, “leading to the present, in which there are still nation-states in contention.” The upshot is the present great war. According to Du, China, because it never developed such notions of national difference, has been spared such enduring strife. What Huang had analyzed as a negative attribute of the Chinese situation is thus now countered by Du’s precisely opposite representation of the attribute as positive. In a similar fashion, Du now radically reinterprets Huang’s analysis of the need for the concept of renge, or human character. He sees the Western notion of humanity as linked indissolubly with the concept of nationality, and because China has had no notion of the nation-state, the country has not developed any notion of what would now be termed the “national subject”:

So, aside from the notion of the natural individual, we have no fixed notion of human character. Everything is predicated on the individual as center, and family, friends, locality, country, the human race, indeed all creation, are seen as proceeding from near to far, from close (qin) to
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distant (shu), all as matters of degree and thus without conflict [among them]. In Western society, on the other hand, there is individualism to be sure, but there is also nationalism, class solidarity, communalism (minzu zhuyi), all of which result in discord. The two ideologies of individual-as-center and nationalism-as-center have come to the point of strong contention in the present era.50

Much of the remainder of the essay is devoted to showing how the two qualities of quiescence and activity will balance each other out in the end, thus leaving open the possibility of eventual reconciliation between the two cultures. For all that, however, Du has taken a major step in the direction of re-creating the sort of polar opposition between China and the West that Dongfang zazhi had generally seemed steadfastly to avoid in the years after Du had become editor. If nothing else, the way in which Du suddenly reverses the verdicts on the meaning of Western history that he had earlier agreed upon with Huang Yuanyong should cause later readers to beware of any essentializing of cultural qualities, almost regardless of how much historical evidence is provided. The wide variety of opinion Huang and Du evince concerning even as basic an idea as individualism alone should cause anyone to think twice about the validity of such concepts, based as they are on such a wide range of social and historical factors.

The question remains, however, as to how to account for Du’s abrupt about-face. We can without doubt take Du’s word that the accumulating evidence of the horror of the war played a major part in his reconsideration. His reaction may even have resulted from an awareness of the singular horror of the slaughter brought by the various offensives on the western front in Europe in the summer of 1916, although there is no indication in any of the other extensive articles or comments—many of them also written by Du—in the Dongfang zazhi of this period that these catastrophic events were attracting particular attention in China.51 On the other hand, a further look at Chen Duxiu’s writings from the same period suggests another possible reason for Du’s change of heart. For instance, in an article portentously titled “1916” and published in the January 1916 issue of Qingnian zazhi, Chen draws an unmistakably invidious distinction between the West and China: “For our people, from the beginning of history up until 1915, in politics, in society, in morality, and in academics, the sins we have committed and the insults we have endured cannot be washed away even with all the rivers of China. At this moment of extirpating the old and broadcasting the new, by all rights we should thoroughly repent, mend our errors, and renew ourselves.” Given this entirely negative view of Chinese history, Chen goes on to advocate a most thoroughly radical means of renewal:
Let us create the most substantial of boundaries between 1915 and 1916: We shall regard everything from the founding of our nation until 1915 as ancient history; let all things from the past perish as of 1916, and everything thereafter begin with 1916. We should first exert new energy (xinxue) in order to present a new character, a new country, a new society, a new family, and a new nation (minzu). Once we have this new nation, then we will begin to live up to our vows as humans (chang yuan), we will begin to have enough value to interact with the white race (yu xizu zhouxuan zhi jiazhì), and we will begin to have the qualifications to inhabit this piece of land we live upon.52

Although there is no direct evidence to justify the assumption, the depth of Chen’s iconoclasm, expressed in a new Shanghai journal of opinion, may have been enough to rally Du Yaquan to a more steadfast defense of Chinese culture than he had ever given previously. Chen’s evident efforts to remove any qualification or possibility of mediation in his demarcation of a progressive West and a decadent China may have pushed people toward the polarized positioning he seems to be demanding. If Chen has affected Du’s opinions, however, he has done so in a manner precisely the opposite of his own radical intentions, by bringing Du an increased appreciation of the value of his own tradition.

For his part, Du continued to contribute occasional writings on comparative culture to his journal. In an April 1917 essay entitled “The Postwar Reconciliation of Eastern and Western Cultures” (“Zhanhou dongxi wenming zhi tiaohe”), Du once again begins his discourse complaining about the tendency of Chinese intellectuals to idolize the West. He immediately proceeds, however, toward a more evenhanded evaluation: “In all fairness, modern life in both East and West cannot be said to be satisfactory; neither can the culture of either East or West be considered a model.”53 He sees the need for a process of self-conscious selection in which the features most appropriate to modern life can be determined. The essay goes on to break down the various features of human life into their most important categories—economics and morality. Du credits the West with vast economic power, so vast, in fact, that it has led to an extraordinary hunger for resources and markets that has been quite harmful to the world. Given that the goal of Chinese economic thought has been merely to provide equal sustenance to the population of the country, China has not harmed anyone else, but neither has it been able to provide enough even for its own people. Du concludes that “as far as the economic situation is concerned, Eastern societies suffer from systemic anemia, while Western societies suffer from an extraordinary surplus of blood.”54

As for morality, Du gives the West full credit for its moral energy
in creating institutions like charitable societies and cooperative agencies, but he breaks down Western morality into two main streams: Greek rationality, human centered and logical; and Jewish religious piety, divinely oriented and mystical. He observes that the Middle Ages were dominated by the spirit of the latter, whereas the Renaissance saw the former regain the preeminence it had once commanded in antiquity. Du sees an excess of science and rationality as the problem that created the disastrous situation that led to the war, and he predicts that, after the war, Western instrumental rationality will have to be leavened with Jewish religiosity:

However, when human thought undergoes a change of this sort, it must also witness a renewal. And in this period of thriving science, how can the divine authority of the old religion forcibly hold things together? Moreover, the tendency of modern men of culture toward Greek thought is ever clearer, so its power must not be underestimated. So the new era of Hebrew thought must be reconciled with that of the Greeks and have modern qualities at the same time. To revere heaven and be in awe of fate, even as one seeks to probe to the root of things and fulfill one’s nature (qiongli jinxing); to make consistent the purposes of the divine and the human and to unify the spirit and the flesh—these are not impossible tasks. Although China’s moral thinking is close to that of Greece, the basis of our rationality (lixing) derives from heaven, and its function devolves unto people: apprehending the intention of heaven and applying it to human affairs; dealing with human affairs such that they accord with the intention of heaven; a mind on guard and fearful, with the intention of cultivating the self and serving the divine. These notions [of ours] are thus in accord with Hebrew thought. Therefore, after Western moral thought has reconciled Greek and Hebrew ideas, it will look much like the moral thought of our Eastern societies; I await this outcome anxiously.55

If one adds to this Du’s notions that Chinese economic thinking has always been predominantly socialistic and that socialism will be the necessary reform in the Western economic realm to remedy the excesses of instrumental reason, Du sees reconciliation between the social ideas of China and the West as inevitable on a number of levels. Moreover, his logic puts China in the uniquely favorable position of being able to mediate the crisis arising out of the West’s inability to balance the demands of the material and the spiritual. Du’s principal thesis is also virtually identical to the notion of Eastern spirituality/Western materialism discussed in chapter 7. Ironically, for all his conscious efforts to conserve the past, his ideas here are years ahead of their time, for they were taken up by Liang Qichao only in 1919 after his disillusioning sojourn in Europe and
by Liang Shuming in the early 1920s. That Du has never been given credit for this idea is yet another demonstration of the way in which moderate voices were drowned out by the cacophony unleashed by the New Culture movement.

If the utopian nature of Du’s aspirations for the future renders his discourse somewhat strained, Qian Zhixiu, in an essay entitled “Utilitarianism and Scholarship” (“Gongli zhuyi yu xueshu”), published in June 1918, sets out the bleaker side of the interaction between China and the West. According to Mao Dun, Qian was of the three subeditors of Dongfang zazhi under Du Yaquan and was a regular writer for the journal. He also replaced Du as the major force in editing the magazine for a time after Du was relieved of his duties and Dongfang was reorganized in late 1919, with the changes taking effect for the first issue of 1920. Qian explains in his essay his views on the modalities of the introduction of Western ideas into China at some length. He believes the Chinese adoption of these ideas to be tainted by a lack of real conviction that results in an inevitable and deleterious instrumentality in their application. Qian sums up this tendency as utilitarianism and describes it as the great flaw in the relationship of China to the West, seeing it as lying behind all the reform ideas that had swept China in the forty years prior to 1918:

“Forty years ago, the theory of “enriching the country and strengthening the military” (fuguo qiangbing) favored riches and strength on the basis of their being effective in resisting foreign insult, winning battles, and bringing about economic self-sufficiency. It was the most elemental form of utilitarianism. Thirty years ago, there was the theory of sound scholarship and science (gezhi shixue), which were advocated because they would lead to better armaments, further technology, and bring about the satisfactions of material civilization. This also did not depart from the pattern of utilitarianism. Twenty years ago, the theories of human rights and liberalism were espoused, along with constitutionalism and republicanism.”

Although Qian’s argument may at first glance resemble the sort of wholesale condemnation of Western ideas that had been the staple of late Qing conservative thinkers, Qian is quick to add an important qualification concerning the merits of the ideas in their own right:

“When human rights and liberalism, constitutionalism, and republicanism were implemented by Europeans and Americans, they may have been used to break free of the old system of feudalism and divine authority or to bring into being the ideals of humane justice. These are not things that can be simply encompassed by the notion of utilitarianism. But with us
it is different: we adopt these things because the flourishing peoples of Europe and America have passed through this stage, and since we wish to be on the same level of strength and wealth, we feel we cannot but follow in their footsteps.39

The problem, then, is not with the quality of the Western imports per se but with the strictly instrumental considerations that motivate the Chinese advocates of Western imports. In fact, Qian holds that any idea not strictly related to the maximization of utility, whether from traditional China or even from the West, gets discarded because of this orientation. Qian concludes his general remarks on the subject with the mordant observation that the blatant practicality of China’s adoption of utilitarianism is probably something that even Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill would not have been able to imagine when they originally advocated utilitarianism. When Qian eventually gets down to his discussion of the conflicts between utilitarianism and scholarship, he takes the frankly elitist position that scholarship will be irreparably harmed if it takes only utility as its goal and that true scholarship can thus never be anything other than a pursuit of a highly educated and disinterested minority. Perhaps most controversially, however, he takes what he regards as a corollary stand—by opposing the elimination of elite education, with its classical language, and the introduction of a debased popular education and its use of the vernacular language as its vehicle of instruction.

There may be no definitive proof that the “neoconservatism” of Dongfang zazhi after the middle of 1916 was at least in part a reaction to Chen Duxiu and his new journal. On the other hand, there is incontrovertible evidence that Chen was very much aware that the older journal had begun to run articles pointedly at odds with what he was advocating in Xin qingnian.60 In September 1918 Chen published “Questions Addressed to the Correspondents of the Eastern Miscellany” (“Zhiwen Dongfang zazhi jizhe”), which was a direct refutation of a number of articles recently published in Du Y acquan’s journal. Chen paid particular attention to Qian Zhixiu’s essay attacking utilitarianism. Possibly because Chen so flatly disagreed with Qian’s assumptions about the basic nature of utilitarianism and the damage it had brought about, his polemic spends more time on what can only be called facile debating tricks rather than directly addressing Qian’s substantive points. For instance, in trying to undermine the basis of Qian’s opposition to utilitarianism, Chen breaks the Chinese word “gongli” into its component parts and asks rhetorically if Qian favors their opposites: “The opposite of ‘gong’ (gain) is ‘zui’ (hardship), and the opposite of ‘li’ (benefit) is ‘hai’ (harm). May I ask, since the correspondent of the Dongfang zazhi is opposed to utilitarianism (i.e., gong-li-ism), does that mean he favors “harmism” (i.e., zui-hai-ism)?”61 In keeping with the
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overall tone of the attack, Chen closes his essay with a snide provocation: "I beg the correspondent of the Eastern Miscellany to respond clearly to each of the questions I raise above. Please favor me with comments that take some pains to avoid vague imprecision and illogic. Vague comments are, after all, just what the former correspondent for the Eastern Miscellany, Huang Yuanyong, so scathingly denounced." 62

In the December issue of Dongfang zazhi, Du Yaquan responds to Chen’s critique in a considerably more intellectually rigorous manner than Chen’s original attack:

[In Qian’s original essay] he said something on the order of “The theories of human rights, liberalism, constitutionalism, and republicanism advanced in Europe and America cannot be encompassed by the notion of utilitarianism, but when we advocate these, it is out of utilitarian motives.” The correspondent of New Youth asked in response whether our correspondent was “opposed to human rights and liberalism” and whether he was “opposed to constitutionalism and republicanism.” But to criticize a [merely] utilitarian advocacy of human rights and liberalism is not to be opposed to human rights and liberalism in themselves. . . . This is rather like criticizing studying only for the sake of passing the exams in order to become an official, which is not the same as opposition to study in itself; or like criticizing elections based on bribery, which is not the same as opposition to elections in themselves. The correspondent of New Youth should also take care to logically examine these assumptions [of his]. 63

The more moderate tone of Du’s response is clear enough. His moderation in itself betokens an intention to argue the issues, rather than simply an effort to shut down his opponents through rhetorical flourish.

Chen duly wrote a rejoinder to Du’s response, which was published in the February 1919 issue of New Youth. In this piece, Chen seems to have been affected by the gravity of Du’s effort, for he tones down his sarcasm considerably, addressing the issues with a good deal more specificity and seriousness. There is still, however, no meeting of the minds, and the continuing differences between the two on the matter of utilitarianism illustrate the larger gap between them. As Chen inquires: “Where is [Qian’s] error? It is at the point where the Eastern Miscellany correspondent fails to understand the value of utilitarianism and its achievements in the history of European and American civilization. He mistakes it for coveting the illicit and an unprincipled adherence to power and influence (gouqie shili).” 64 As Wang Xiaoming has said of Chen and his journal:

The most fundamental characteristic of New Youth is the effective dominance of utilitarianism. In the foreword to the first edition of the journal
(jakanci), “A Warning to Youth” (“Jinggao qingnian”), Chen Duxiu earnestly sets out six hopes that he has, the fifth of which is for “utility and not empty formalities.” He even goes so far as to affirm that in every aspect of the social reforms in Europe since the eighteenth century, “there was nothing that was not hell-bent on contributing to the single path of practical enhancement of the popular livelihood (housheng liyong zhi yitu).” In the next issue [Oct. 15, 1915], in “The Guiding Principles of Education Today” (“Jinri zhi jiaoyu fangzhen”), he even more strongly advocates a notion of what he calls “Realism” (xianshi zhuyi), and [he] says that “applied to ethics and morality, this is called utilitarianism (leli zhuyi); in politics it is called the greatest good for the greatest number; in philosophy, empiricism or materialism; in religion, atheism; in literature and the arts, realism or naturalism.” One should not underestimate this short utterance, for it in fact draws a tight cordon around the content of New Youth. From volume 1 to volume 6 [i.e., from 1915 through 1918], there was not one important article of advocacy or discussion that was not in the service of this notion of “realism,” from “On the Literary Revolution” [by Chen] to the critique of “spirituality” (lingxue). This was even more the case in the extensive discussions of “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science.”

In fact, as we have seen, Du had been arguing from quite another position. He had fully acknowledged the importance of the qualities of the greatest good for the greatest number that Chen sees as the essence of utilitarianism in Western history. Instead, Du had argued against utilitarianism largely on the basis of the Chinese context, in which it had figured for him as simply a symptom of the lack of any enduring principle, or what might more readily have been referred to as opportunism. In insisting upon using a strict textbook definition of utilitarianism, and one that contains no reference to historical practice or the different situations of China and the West, Chen almost willfully ignores the point that Du is attempting to make. In other words, it is not that one is wrong and the other is correct about the meaning of the term, but that the two have completely different understandings of the implications of the term and are thus talking past one another.

It is important to note that the two do have in common one unspoken point: both are implicitly skeptical of the capacity of China to deal with the new world that has come to its door. To Chen, China’s deficiency in this regard is reason enough to jettison the whole of the past and everything related to it. His despair for the present is masked by his enthusiasm for a future inspired by new light coming from the West. For their part, Qian and Du recognize that the situation is much more complex and that any self-imposed limitation to newly imported ideologies will merely re-
inforce the problems that the imported ideas are ostensibly intended to solve. If, for instance, China’s polity had come to be marked by a series of struggles of one against all in the name of personal survival, then the doctrine of utilitarianism imposed on this basic pattern will in all likelihood simply give license to more of the same self-serving behavior. The question remains, however, why Qian can so readily conceive of the features of utilitarianism as serving a positive function in the West but cannot adduce a comparable set of ideas to serve China in its time of crisis.

In summing up the import of the long course of this debate, we can draw a few conclusions. First, before the radical denunciations of Chen Duxiu and his colleagues in their new journal, both Huang Yuanyong and Du Yaquan had made extremely trenchant critiques of their own on Chinese politics and society. (It must be said, by the way, that the quality both of Du’s argumentation and of his writing is never able to match that of Huang’s.) Each of them, however, was careful to position his critiques in a context in which Chinese flaws were measured in terms of universal patterns of behavior. In fact, the critiques were found to be meaningful precisely to the extent that they could be perceived as particular species of general deficiencies in human society. Whether Chen believed this or not—and it is impossible to tell from his writings of this period—his early polemical writings were overwhelmingly focused on Chinese deficiency, with the international context beyond China invariably depicted as having an altogether more wholesome set of characteristics. Second, we can probably safely assume that Du’s change of orientation vis-à-vis the legacy of Chinese tradition is at least in part a defensive reaction to the spirit of iconoclasm being manifested in New Youth. If this is the case, then Chen’s apparent effort to polarize the difference between China and the West to the fullest extent possible was remarkably successful. We can fairly conclude that Chen was able to exercise a good deal of agency in shaping the discourse into a pattern of his dictation very early in his career as a radical polemicist. It must also be noted, however, that his effect on thinkers like Du Yaquan and Qian Zhixiu seems to have been precisely the opposite of what he had intended.

On the other hand, the critical importance of Huang Yuanyong’s invocation of the common alienation of the modern world should not be overlooked. Although Huang subsequently censured the particular failings of China, his capacity to tune into the spirit of a nascent Western modernism and to plausibly include China within its universal orbit represents a real departure from the reformist discourse up to that point. It is perhaps the first credible theoretical notion of cultural equivalence in the period after 1895, when the question presented itself for the first time with such ineluctable pertinence. For, however casually Huang adduces his argument—indeed, one could argue that its breezy informality is pre-
cisely what renders it so compelling—it contains the seeds of demystifying any theory of the cognitive superiority of the West. Thus, when Du Yaquan finally emerges with his defense of Chinese culture, it may well be that Huang's easy equation of the modern in China and the West gave Du the room to question at the least the invidiousness inhering in Chen Duxiu's reinvoicing of an essential difference between China and the West. That Du at the same time more obviously is reacting to and thereby reinscribing Chen's rigid theory of difference does not rule out the presence of Huang's ideas as a vital catalyst in the transformation of Du's thought.

Ironically perhaps, it was the paradox apparent just behind the controversy over utilitarianism that led toward this polarization in the first place. If Qian is correct in his assessment of the utilitarian motives for the adoption of Western ideas, then the ultimate subservience of these imported ideas to a domestically generated political and social agenda is the only logical conclusion. Moreover, it is a point on which he and Chen implicitly agree, although Chen would never admit it. For the radical reformers, however, the political apparatus's capacity for endurance is what forces them toward extreme positions: the only conceivable way for politics and society to escape being recaptured by tradition is to insist on the need for an absolute departure from it in a drastic delimitation of boundaries (or huaping jiexian, the revealing phrase that would be so popular in the Cultural Revolution, half a century later). Thus we encounter the almost chiliastic tone of Chen's enthusiastic "1916." The insistence upon the creation of a completely new literature, which was to be the hallmark of the New Culture movement, results directly from this iconoclasm: there could be no illicit importation of traditional imagery into it, nor could there be any recognition of the debts the new literature and its theories owed to the activity of the decades immediately preceding it.

More than anything else, though, it was perhaps the Ministry of Education decree of January 1920 that eventually succeeded in definitively banishing the past: "[F]rom this autumn onwards, all national schools are to use the national language as the language of writing in the first two grades, in order to achieve the uniformity of the spoken and written word."67 If Wang Yuanhua's surmise is correct, and Du Yaquan's dismissal as editor at Dongfang zazhi was due to his resistance to the wholesale adoption of the vernacular and the management's fear of possible consequences for the textbook market, then the extent to which cultural practice was affected by a short and simply worded government edict is remarkable. Within its scope was encompassed more than two decades of reform thinking about writing and its social functions. The edict was both a portent of things to come and a poignant ending to a period of extraordinary openness of contention about China's cultural future. It should be kept in mind, however, that precisely because of this determination to
sever itself from its past, the new literature that grew up after 1920 would
never be at peace with itself. As the critical writings of Qu Qiubai in the
early 1930s demonstrate, the price of a rigorous iconoclasm was an etern-
al vigilance engendered by the fear that old forms and genres would
always find a way to sneak in through an unguarded back door.