Bringing the World Home
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T
he preceding chapters have in common the attempt to work through a few of the components of what most scholars refer to as the coming of “modernity” to China. This general historical process has been the site of a vast amount of research over the past fifty years, both inside and outside of China, and if there has been any scholarly consensus at all, it is that the process was never easy, something with which my study is in full accord. Beyond this sense of the pain and suffering of the period, however, academic opinion varies. I have chosen to focus on a particular set among the discursive possibilities offered by the period between 1895 and 1919 and have found that each one I have examined (plus who knows how many more) has carried its own charge of anxiety and inconclusiveness. Moreover, most of the ideas and texts that I looked at had in common a pervasive sense that what thinkers took as the Western way had demonstrated its superiority and that China, therefore, necessarily took a subordinate position. But once this conclusion was reached came the concomitant and nagging demands as to how each idea could be accommodated with its Chinese counterpart in any prospective universal spectrum of concepts, a universality demanded as integral to the conceptual process that enabled the invidious comparisons in the first place. The painful difficulty of this accommodation is the story of this book. It is the story of a process of hybridization be sure, but a conflicted and unstable mix with no ready resolution at hand.

The whole process did start, in the wake of the shocking events of 1894–1895, with a burst of a sense of possibility enabled by the decisiveness of the defeat by Japan, and the resulting feeling that all openings needed to be explored. The impression of potential was in effect enabled by the multiplicity of options that appeared suddenly on the horizon to those who thought they now had for the first time license to entertain seriously a full range of ideas from the West. Following the initial—if inevitably—tortured conviction of new opportunity in the period immediately after 1895, however, the continuing political weakening in China
led to a progressive and apparently paradoxical narrowing of the perception of possibility in the years that followed. Options were tried and invariably found wanting—the differences in wealth and power between China and the Western powers virtually guaranteed failure, at least in the new geopolitical context. But these successive failures made irresistible the pressure to scapegoat that which had already been tried, and because indigenous institutions and patterns of thinking were most evidently extant in China, they became the target of blame. Given the tremendous influence of nationalism, however, something of the past needed to be affirmed, even as concrete examples of preexisting practices and ideas were denounced as a drag on the necessary hope for change.

This gradual constriction of the range of hope can perhaps best be represented by a comparison between Yan Fu from the beginning of the period under discussion and Lu Xun, writing toward the end of it. Yan Fu, at the start of his career as polemicist after 1894, perceived new opportunity as a particularly open field—everything was possible if only new ideas received the proper response within China. This openness, however, was occasioned by a new awareness of a wide range of ideas he thought of as having an exclusively Western origin, such as the notion of freedom and a sense of public spirit (gong). But much of what he was declaring to be absolutely new turned out upon second thought actually to be robustly present in Chinese historical practice—something particularly obvious in the case of gong. As his blindness to that fact receded, his sense of possibility could only narrow. This was true irrespective of whether he compromised his sense of novelty by accepting the Chinese precedents for his ideas or, conversely, merely ruled out anything from the reform agenda that could be traced back to native roots. In the end, Yan moved toward the former course, while the latter remained the rebellious province of each new generation of radicals.

For his part, Lu Xun as early as his 1907–1908 writings—barely a dozen years after Yan Fu’s opening shots—gives evidence of what at first seems to be a mysterious vacillation but turns out, upon closer inspection, to be a strict self-limitation. This hesitation becomes even more marked in his post-1918 work. The stark choice of accepting either that it was unlikely for any reform idea not to have some indigenous trace attached to it or that all new ideas had to be vetted such that all elements of the old be purged—the formula that Yan Fu put on the table and that all those who followed had to make their peace with—eventually emerges as the source of Lu Xun’s limitations on himself and his hesitancy to indulge in overt advocacy. His sense of disappointment, evident as it is, is muted by the enormity of the choice he faced, and the upshot was that he ruled out any too grandiose speculation about future prospects. So while the madman’s plaintive cry of “you should change, change from the bottom
of your hearts” essentially echoes the optimism of the early Yan Fu, the more constricted context that had been created by the ongoing failure of any reforms to take hold, and in which Lu Xun was stuck, led toward portending the impossibility of any such redemptive change of heart. And once this impasse is realized, then the narrator in “My Old Home” provides the perfect symbol of Lu Xun’s own reticence—if the chance that hope will be thwarted is so great, one had best be wary of embracing it too ardently in the first place. The result is a series of painful silences and withdrawals lying just beneath the surface of his narratives. He is acutely aware of these silences and of their cost to hopeful aspiration, and he duly punishes himself for them. In the end, however, he cannot allow himself to be more positive.

In between these two majestic figures, most of the study is devoted to a few of the major narrative works produced in the interim. Narrative form was the place where this struggle over the nature and definition of the “new” left its most tangible legacy. It is a powerful symbol of the age, posited initially by Liang Qichao and soon thereafter by those who followed in his steps as something new, but malleable and familiar at the same time. It was thus, at least theoretically, the ideal site in which to invest hope—by representing the novelty of reform possibilities but also being something deeply rooted in the Chinese mentality. Liang’s writings demonstrate the inherent contradiction in his advocacy, but the urgency of the situation confronting China prevents him from recognizing the paradoxes he constructs, much less suggesting any way to resolve them. In other words, the explosive plasticity of the form itself seemed to offer the chance to square the circle by representing both what was actually there and where the future was supposed to lead. That this was easier to set out theoretically than to portray in convincing narratives shows, again, the intractability of the problem.

Although even to mention what follows risks falling into the teleology I am so intent upon warning against, it would be foolish to deny the legacy of this period for later events in modern Chinese history. Is not the Cultural Revolution, for instance, in which neither foreign imports nor legacies of the Chinese past are admissible, in some way a logical extension of the intellectual impasse already on display as early as Yan Fu’s writing from the late 1890s? Does not literature throughout the rest of the century continue to hold out for itself the hope that it can represent the unsatisfactory present and the glorious future at the same time? Examples could be multiplied, but the point is that although the period between 1895 and the late 1910s in many ways prefigures the future, it still has a unique character that calls for its own standard of evaluation.

Joseph Levenson long ago outlined the theoretical advantages Marxism brought as solution to the intractable dilemma posed by the
need to import Western notions of the nation-state and all it entailed, and the opposing but equally pressing demand of the nationalist imperative for something Chinese. The power of Marxism in this respect lay in its capacity to trump these vexatious questions, all of which revolved around the irresolvable issue of ultimate origins of the concrete histories of discursive formations. But the solution, whereby Marxism could at once originate in and be critical of the West, was durable only to a point, and it was not long before characteristic seams began to show through the patchwork garment that was Chinese Marxism. In the Cultural Revolution these problems broke through, and the Marxist “solution” has not worked well ever since. It therefore comes as no surprise that a number of Chinese scholars have returned to the late Qing and early Republican (or jindai) period to explore the diversity of ideas to be found there.

It is thus not simply coincidence or fashion that the post-1989 period has seen a stunning outpouring of empirically rich and analytically sharp studies from China on this period and its intellectual manifestations. From one perspective, it is perhaps only the security provided by the now substantial distance from the “semicolonial” that has allowed scholars the freedom to trace out the problems involved in such a clear-eyed way. A deeper purpose, however, is also at work. With the jindai period as the last age before Western intellectual paradigms started to drive the world of Chinese thought, scholars now look there for substantial alternatives to the much-bruited-about “end of history.” As embodied by the work of such talented thinkers as Wang Hui, who has just completed a major project that attempts to critically evaluate scholarly traditions from before the great watershed of the late 1910s, this research proceeds not by ignoring the West and its ideas but by exploring the genuine differences between them and the indigenous notions that still flourished in the late empire and early republic.