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How Modern Was Early Modern Chinese Literature?
On the Origins of *Jindai wenxue*

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*Jindai wenxue* is a term referring to Chinese literature from the Opium War to the fall of the Qing (1841-1911). The term was first invoked in the twenties but it did not become popular till after the fifties, in conjunction with two other periodization terms, *xiandai wenxue* and *dangdai wenxue*, which refer to Chinese literature from 1911 to 1949 and from 1949 to date respectively. Conventional wisdom sees *jindai* as a moment when the old literary order was falling apart and the new one was yet to be established—a transitional period that anticipated modern Chinese literature proper in the May-Fourth era. This approach has come under re-examination in recent years. Scholarship has suggested that the conception, production, and dissemination of literature during the last decades of the Qing demonstrated a vigor and variety that could hardly be confined to the parameters prescribed by May-Fourth discourse. To

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1 Studies of late Qing literature started as early as the turn of the twentieth century. In 1921, Shen Yanbing wrote “*Jindai wenxue tixi de yanjiu*” (A study of early modern Chinese literary system) which for the first time used the term “*jindai*” to refer to late Qing literature. The next ten years saw a series of publications on “*jindai*” literature but the time span of “*jindai*” remained vague. For Chen Zizhan, it covers the period from the Hundred Day Reform to the May Fourth (*Zhongguo jindai wenxue zhi bianqian*; Changes in early modern Chinese literature, 1929); for Chen Duxiu, it can be dated as far back as Yuan and Ming (“*Wenxue geming lun*”; On literary revolution, 1917). Zheng Zhenduo in *Chatuben Zhongguo wenxue shi* (An illustrated history of Chinese literature) describe “*jindai*” as a period from the Jiajing reign of Ming (1522) to the even of the May Fourth (1918), but he later revised this periodization and made 1840-1918 the time when *jindai* literature took place. For more discussion, see Guo Yanli, “Ershi shiji Zhongguo jindai wenxue yanjiu xueshu licheng huigu” (A review of early modern Chinese literary studies in the twentieth century), *Wenxue yichan*, 3 (2000): 3-12. Also see Dai Yan, *Wenxueshi de quanli* (The power of literary history; Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2002).

2 See, for example, Chen Pingyuan, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushi moshi de zhuangbian* (The transformation of the narrative structure of Chinese fiction) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1988); Milena Dolezelová-Velingerová, *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century*...
be sure, May-Fourth writers set in motion a series of paradigm changes, and thus realized what late Qing literati had not imagined, or had not been able to imagine. But May-Fourth claims to modernity may have equally obscured, or even eliminated, a great number of possibilities that had once thrived in the late Qing era; had they been given another chance, these possibilities could well have given rise to many other rich configurations of Chinese literary modernity.

"How modern was jindai wenxue?", therefore, is a question that solicits a paradoxical answer. For those who associate the modern with such notions as "ideology," "consciousness," or even "historical necessity," jindai literature may seem to fall short of the kind of discursive rigor that dominated May-Fourth literature. For those who associate the modern with formal innovations in both linguistic and extra-linguistic terms, jindai literature may reflect a material condition as yet not fully formed or re-formed. Nevertheless, historical hindsight has taught us that the newness of "historical consciousness" as represented by May Fourth literature may not always seem new, not at least in comparison with select European counterparts it set out to emulate, and that mere attempts at formalist or formalized rejuvenation does not guarantee a breakthrough onto global center stage where truly new modernities compete for attention.

This is where the modernity of jindai literature becomes polemical. jindai literature surfaced in the midst of clashing historical forces—from the Opium War to the Boxer Rebellion, and from technological advancement to epistemological renovation. Unlike orthodox May Fourth literature, which was couched in a discourse more readily subject to transnational circulation, jindai literature represented an undertaking of self-renewal at an inchoate and incoherent stage; it figured as an anomaly in which indigenous inputs and foreign stimuli, radical provocations and conciliatory responses were still engaged in drastic contestations. While this literature reflected the capricious circumstances when China was pushed onto the stage of early modernity, it demonstrated a raw, creative force that was not recapitulated once Chinese writers achieved mastery of readymade foreign models. To appreciate the chameleon nature of jindai literature, therefore, requires that one truly believe in Chinese literature's capacity to refashion itself, even at a disadvantageous moment, knowing that manifestations of modernity, in theory and in practice, need not have been limited to certain prefigured European formulae.

To extrapolate my point, I would like to discuss the following three cases drawn from the early stage of jindai literature: the poetic works of Gong Zizhen 龔自珍, the chivalric romance Dangkouzhi 蕃寇志 (Quell the Bandits) by Yu Wanchun 俞萬春, and the revived Tongcheng School 桐城派 under the aegis of Zeng Guofan 曾國藩. These three cases are separately drawn from the dominating genres of the late Qing—poetry, fiction, prose—and refer to three constituents of literary historical studies—the master, the genre, and the school. Where Gong Zizhen's poetry and poetics carve out a

(Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1980), David Der-wei Wang, Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
historical subjectivity immersed in an apocalyptic vision, *Quell the Bandits* sets a model for the politics of the novel and novelty. Equally noticeable is the role the Tongcheng School plays in the aesthetics and ethics of literary modernization, despite an antiquarian agenda.

Compared to the literature of the last decade of the late Qing, the cases in discussion may appear even less qualified as the antecedents of modern literature. My purpose is nevertheless not to jump-start the timing of Chinese literary modernity by setting the clock to an earlier moment, so much as to launch a genealogical inquiry. I look into a time when the sense of historical urgency and global relevancy was first being brought to bear on a renewed literary practice; I ask how jindai literati’s responses to the faltering paradigm initiated the long and tortuous search for reform in the decades to come, and how students would historicize their notion of the (post)modern by coming to terms with the “haunting” of premodernity.³

*A Poet: Gong Zizhen and His Apocalyptic Poetics*

Gong Zizhen (1792-1841) is arguably the most important poet in nineteenth-century China and the “first great poet in the modern era.”⁴ Gong was born in 1792, when Lord George Macartney (1737-1806) launched his historical voyage to pay tribute to Emperor Qianlong, and Gong died in 1841, when the Opium War forced China to open her doors to the world. Gong had discerned the signs of the Qing empire in decline as early as his younger days, and he was among the few who had both the courage and vision to address the necessity of reform.

Gong Zizhen’s talents were neglected by his contemporaries, except for a few friends such as Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794-1857). But his literary and political provocations would exert enormous impact on the subsequent generations of literati, intellectuals, and politicians, ranging from Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 to Kang Youwei 康有為, Liang Qichao 梁啟超, the Nanshe 南社 poets, Su Manshu 蘇曼殊, Lu Xun 魯迅, Yu Dafu 郁達夫, and Mao Zedong 毛澤東. Although his poetry and prose were written in patent classical style, Gong came across as a nonconformist, ever ready to break away from the canon. He drew his inspirations freely from ancient and contemporary conventions, and he mixed them in such a way as to be criticized for violating generic and metric rules.


Critics often see Gong Zizhen as the most compelling writer expressing initial dynastic decline. He is said to have brought together two traits of classical Chinese literature inscribing the crisis of early nineteenth-century China: historical engagement as represented by Sima Qian’s Shi ji, and lyrical pathos traceable to Qu Yuan’s Songs of the South. This view, nevertheless, does not necessarily qualify Gong as an avant-garde of the modern age. If Gong is to be regarded as initiating anything new, it is because he put his historiographical and lyrical faculties into a form which, though familiar at first glance, projects a radical departure from the conventions out of which it arose.

A vociferous critic of contemporary bureaucratic culture, exegetic scholarship, and neo-Confucian dogmatism, Gong propagated qing/feeling and “child-heart,” thereby echoing the “cult of qing” of the late Ming. Gong’s concern about contemporary geopolitics led him to configure history in terms of a spatial re-disposition of the self and the empire; his study of Northwestern China anticipated the shakeup in late Qing dynastic cartography. Most important, Gong’s commitment to the Gongyang School 公羊派 learning guided him not only toward a utopian view of progress but to a mytho-poetic vision of change and changeability.

Gong’s calls for an affective subjectivity, a historical imaginary of dynamism, and a political agency empowered by an apocalyptic vision are vividly articulated in his poetry. Take a look at Gong’s most famous poem:

九州生気恃風雷
萬馬齊喑究可哀
我動天公重抖擻
不拘一格降人才

The poem projects the cosmic movement on a halt and calls on the natural and supernatural powers to revitalize a state of stagnation. It climaxes in a plea to the Supreme Deity to solicit talent regardless of hierarchical constraints. Gong wrote as if the poetic form could no longer contain his desire for metamorphosis at both divine


6 For the rise and impact of Gongyang school in the late Qing, see Benjamin Elman, Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: the Ch’ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Also see Wang Hui, chapter 5.

7 All life in China’s nine regions depends on the thundering storm, thousands of horses all struck dumb is deplorable indeed.

I urge the Lord of Heaven to shake us up again
and grant us human talent not bound to a single kind.

and human levels. One can hardly miss the poet’s wish to evoke an anthropomorphic encounter, highlighted by the interlocution of the persona “I” and the Supreme Deity. For all its radical tonality, however, there lingers skepticism about poetry as a viable form of persuasion and agency. As the first half of the poem implies, at a time when the voices of thousands of talents have already been silenced, can a single poet’s call for reform really change Heaven’s set course?

Gong Zizhen’s deploring of the silence of his time and his yearning for a new voice constitute what I will call the “sonic motif” that would become a salient feature of modern Chinese discourse. His call to “move heaven and earth with the clamor of drums and bells” would find echoes among twentieth-century writers like Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), who equates revolutionary force with “thunderbolt-like noise” (leiting zhi sheng 雷霆之聲), and Lu Xun (1881-1936), who hopes to awaken the Chinese people with a “call to arms” (nahân 呀喊). But before Zhang’s and Lu’s voices could be heard, it was Huang Zunxian (1848-1905) who first came to articulate Gong Zizhen’s agenda by promoting a poetry in a vernacular cadence: “My hands write what my mouth speaks, how can I be restrained by antiquity?”

Liang Qichao has described how he was once captured by the “electrifying effect” of Gong Zizhen’s poetry, but he was quick to indicate that on second reading, Gong’s works appeared nevertheless too “easy and literal” (淺白). Gong may have anticipated such critique, having argued that he meant his poems to be simple and accessible, while the feelings from his brush were unfathomable and uncontrollable (欲為平易近人詩, 下筆情深不自持). What really matters is the passion inherent in poetry, a force often beyond the poet’s control.

This leads us to the broader issue concerning the evocative power of Gong Zizhen’s poetry. Scholars have continuously praised Gong Zizhen’s leading role in reviving the discourse of qing/feeling. In contrast to contemporary evidential scholarship and discourse of ritualism, Gong considered qing the quintessential element of humanity: “As a human entity, qing can be neither eradicated nor confined.”

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8 Quoted from Guo Yanli, Zhongguo jindai wenxue fazhanshi (A history of early modern Chinese literary development) (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), vol. 1, p. 45.
9 For more discussion of Huang Zunxian’s poetry reform, see Xiaobing Tang, “‘Poetic Revolution,’ Colonization, and Form at the Beginning of Modern Chinese Literature,” in Rebecca K. Karl and Peter Zarrow, eds., Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center Publications, 2002), chapter 9.
10 Liang Qichao, Qingdai xueshu gailun (A general introduction to Qing scholarship); quoted from Guo Yanli, p. 109.
11 I wish to write poems which are easy and accessible to readers but I cannot control my deep feeling when I pick my brush Gong Zizhen, “Jimao zashi, 14” (Miscellaneous poetry of the Jimao year, 1819; 14), Gong Zizhen xuanji (An anthology of Gong Zizhen’s works) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2004), p. 17.
Instead, feeling demands one’s respect.”\textsuperscript{12} As such, he revealed his indebtedness to such late Ming thinkers as Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602) as well as such early and mid-Qing literati as Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1634-1711) and Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797):

少年哀樂過於人
歌泣無端字字真
既壯周旋雜癡黠
童心來復夢中身\textsuperscript{13}

Gong further believed voice—and its cultural codification, language—to be an immediate manifestation of qiing; hence his statements, “How can qiing be channeled? Through voice” and “Those who are devoid of qiing cannot best express themselves in language.”\textsuperscript{14}

But qiing constitutes only part of the dialectic of Gong Zizhen’s poetics. Whereas it remained the innate force that modulates human emotive and ethical bearings, qiing, as Gong would have it, has to be embodied in response to ongoing political and cultural dynamics. It is at this juncture that Gong proposes a re-vision of history. Instead of being a transcendental force prescribing human activities, history appears to Gong to be a flux of changes which make sense only in terms of individual engagement and institutional inscription. In Zunshi (Respect history), for example, he describes a historical consciousness which is able to both absorb external events and stimuli (shanru 善入) and hand out sensible judgments (shanchu 善出).\textsuperscript{15} This historical consciousness is in its own turn propelled by the outburst of genuine feeling. In numerous works Gong invoked the images of jianqi (劍氣) and xiaoxin (簫心)—spirit of a sharp sword and heart of a plaintive flute. The two images embody his historical imaginary: only someone of chivalric valor could intervene with the set course of history; only someone with a tender heart could appreciate the melancholy core of history.

\textsuperscript{12} Gong Zizhen, “Changduan yan zixu” (Preface to long and brief writings), Gong Zizhen quanj\textsuperscript{i} (Complete works of Gong Zizhen) (Beijing: Zonghua shuju), vol. 1, p. 232.

\textsuperscript{13} The sorrows and joys of my youthful years
surpass those of others,
I wept and sang without cause
And every word was true
A grown man now, I get around,
Nativete mixed with guile
but the “child-heart” returns again
to this body in its dreams
“Jihai zashi”\textsuperscript{170} (Miscellaneous poetry the Jihai year, 1839; 170); Owen’s translation, p. 1148.

\textsuperscript{14} Gong Zizhen, “Changduan yan zixu.”

\textsuperscript{15} See Gong Zizhen, “Zunshi” (Respect history), Gong Zizhen xuanj\textsuperscript{i}, p. 278. See Guo Yanyi, pp. 64-75; Chen Ming, Gong Zizhen zongl\textsuperscript{un} (A general study of Gong Zizhen) (Guilin: Xinhua shudian, 1991), pp. 85-96.
Above all, Gong Zizhen’s juxtaposition of qing and history must be understood in light of late Qing historiographical discourse. The first half of the nineteenth century saw Zhang Xuecheng’s view of “the Six Classics as nothing but indices to history” (liujing jie shi, 六經皆史) gaining increasing currency. More noticeable was the emergence of the Gongyang school of thought, which confronted the mainstream by prioritizing historical contingency over historical immanence, institutional implementation over moral cultivation, and polity over orthodoxy. A sympathizer of Zhang’s iconoclastic historiography, Gong Zizhen found a kindred spirit in Gongyang Thought. His allegorical reading of the classics let him conclude that his was a time of decline (shuaishi 衰世) while the worse—the time of chaos (luanshi 亂世)—was yet to come. Although Gongyang Thought projected an eventual coming of peace and prosperity, history as Gong Zizhen saw it would have first to take a downward turn, with no hope of salvation anywhere in sight. Even before the breakout of the Opium War, he was already professing an eschatological view: “The heart of autumn ebbs and flows like sea; / The soul of autumn, once gone, could never be summoned back” (秋心如海復如潮，但有秋魂不可招).17

Still, what makes Gong stand out is not so much his historical rumination as his rhetorical power. No other writer of his time could have so movingly pictured China as a land of desolation: the sun is setting, the winds of sorrow are blowing; all vegetation has withered in a fiendish fog while ferocious beasts and grotesque creatures lurk nearby. Roaming this Chinese wasteland is a lonely poet who, despite his pessimism and despondence, was driven all the more to express his feelings—his anxiety and wrath, and his chivalric desire and utopian volition. With exuberant language, Gong Zizhen recites his escapade in a fairyland and his encounter with divine powers, his political engagement and his romantic rendezvous. His poetry is full of contrasting color imagery, dreamlike sensations, and emotive extremity, rendered in such a way as to intensify the most vulnerable dimension of his feeling, the sense of youhuan 憂患 or historical pathos. In “Fu youhuan” 賦憂患 (Ode to pathos), Gong likens his pathos to romantic passion. He addresses his historical melancholy as if he were possessed by a mysterious love yet he refused to be exorcised. This is an early symptom of the “obsession with China” which C. T. Hsia believes underlay the psychic drama of modern Chinese writers:

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故物人寰少
猶蒙憂患俱
春深恨作伴
霄夢亦先驅
不逐年華改
難同逝水徂
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16 See, for example, Yu Ying-shih’s discussion in Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng (Dai Zhen and Zhang Xuecheng) (Taipei: Liangjing chuban gongsi, 1981).
17 Gong Zizhen, “Qiuxin” (Autumn heart), Gong Zizhen xuanji, p. 79.
Gong Zizhen’s poetic vision is best exemplified by his *Jihai zashi* 己亥雜詩 (Miscellaneous poetry cycle of the Jihai year). This is a collection of 315 poems, all in seven-character quatrains, written by the poet in the cyclical year *Jihai* (1839) when he had just quit office for good and was on his way home to Hangzhou. The poems, written on various occasions, touch on a wide spectrum of subjects and moods, from Gong’s reflections on his career to his geopolitical proposals, from critiques of social malaise to remembrances of things past, from interactions with family members and friends to romantic encounters with courtesans, from an indulgence in self-abandon to a desire for Buddhist reconciliation. As its title already suggests, *Miscellaneous Poetry Cycle* presents not a coherent sequence but a fragmented constellation of occasions, themes, and sentiments. The poetry cycle may appear to be couched in a familiar formal closure, but its haphazard cross-references and manic-depressive moods are such that they threaten to collapse the rhetorical order as well as its contextual grounding at any moment.

We can now better understand why Gong Zizhen’s work anticipates the rise of a *gestalt* called the Chinese modern. There might be nothing drastically new in his expressions, but his re-vision of history as a cosmic force to be acted out by human agency, his celebration of *qing* as the key unleashing the momentum of vigor and change, and his reliance on voice and language as that which mediates personal sentiment and historical vocation, would occupy reform-minded literati in the subsequent decades. When Huang Zunxian advocated a new form of poetry, he was elaborating on Gong Zizhen’s idea. In 1899, Huang even wrote a poetry cycle under the same title in homage to Gong Zizhen’s work six decades before. Whereas Liang Qichao derives from Gong the image of *shaonian* 少年 or youth in promulgating his notion of Young China (*shaonian Zhongguo*), Lu Xun appears to have recapitulated the poet’s predilection for *kuangshi* 狂士 (mad genius), *kuangyan* 狂言 (crazy words) in making his first fictional character a *kuangren* 狂人 or Madman. Finally, speaking of the “sublime figure” of modern Chinese poetics and politics, one has to look back at Gong’s poetic provocations. In 1958, Mao Zedong set out to promote the People’s Commune and he invoked none other than the above-mentioned “Nine Regions”...

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18  Few are my old acquaintances still in the world  
 Except for the pathos that still remains  
 Accompanying me into the depth of spring  
 Preceding me at the time of sleep  
 Unchanged as years pass by  
 Never departing like flowing water  
 Can there be anyone as passionate as you  
 Who wouldn’t reject the help of exorcism?  

*Gong Zizhen xuanji*, pp. 78-79.
poem of Gong Zizhen. More than a century after the Qing poet fell into silence, Mao brought out both the romantic solipsism and apocalyptic vision already embedded in the burgeoning moment of China's literary modernization.

A Genre: Quell the Bandits as a Science Fantasy

In the tradition of late Qing narrative fiction, the appearance of Yu Wanchun's Dangkouzhi (Quell the bandits, also known as Jie Shuihu zhuan 結水滸傳 [Conclusion to The Water Margin]) in 1853 marks an intriguing moment. Written as a sequel to Jin Shengtan's 金聖嘆 (1610-1661) seventy-chapter edition of The Water Margin, Quell the Bandits rewrites the plot of reconciliation between the Liangshan band and the Song government. Instead of chivalric heroes, Yu describes the Liangshan rebels as outright criminals threatening the dynasty's well-being. As the novel's title suggests, all the bandits are to be put down; their defeat and deaths represent not a tragic downfall, as the conventional reading of the classic would have it, but a deserved retribution.

As I have argued elsewhere, although written with the avowed purpose of honoring imperial sovereignty, the novel finds its inspiration in a narrative cycle known for spreading treacherous thought and bandit ideology. It sets out to condemn the bandits' acts against the law and the state, yet in the process becomes tantalized by their nonconformist valor and wisdom as a means for revitalizing a nation's strength. At its most polemical, the novel renders duplicitous descriptions of loyalism and righteousness, two of the most treasured values in the Confucian canon, thereby undermining its apparent call for restoring dynastic orthodoxy.

Few novels from mid-nineteenth century China can match Quell the Bandits in immediate impact on contemporary politics. Because of its loyalist agenda, Quell the Bandits was widely published as propaganda by the Qing government in the Taiping Rebellion period; to that effect, it is little surprise that the novel was banned by the censors of the Taiping regime. Its tendentious conservatism and flagrant
anachronism notwithstanding, the novel addresses a range of issues from sovereignty to revolution, to the polemics of reading and writing literature, issues that would become the central concerns for literati in the next century. Thus, although motivated by a political agenda that was anything but modern, the novel should be regarded as one of the progenitors of later literati’s campaign for “narrating” a nation and the polemics of modern Chinese political novel.

The author of Quell the Bandits is Yu Wanchun (1794-1849), a literatus from Zhejiang. Yu Wanchun and Gong Zizhen were contemporaries. But unlike Gong who doggedly searched within the confines of tradition for something that would replace it, Yu stumbled upon a fragment of the modern without ever realizing the radical implications of what he was imagining. Yu never took any official position throughout his life, but in his youth he assisted his father, a local official in Guangdong, in several crackdowns on tribal rebellions. He also volunteered to serve as a strategist during the Opium War. Thanks to his living experience in Guangdong, Yu had many contacts with foreigners and appeared quite open to western innovations, though politically he remained a conservative. His predilection for martial arts and military technology eventually led him to produce two books: Huoqi kao (A study of fire armaments) and Qishe lun (A treatise on equestrianism and archery). On the other hand, Yu was a pious believer of Daoism, and he claimed that he wrote the novel as a result of being inspired by a female deity.

In my previous study I called attention to Yu Wanchun’s mixture of fantastic elements drawn both from the Chinese narrative and religious traditions and from his recent encounter with Western technologies. I described how the novel introduces “modern” gadgets and warfare foreign to traditional military romance; it creates new devices and battle strategies but puts them in a cosmological (as well as narrative) order that is anything but new. Yu Wanchun appears both as an advocate of new military technology and a promoter of Daoist mythology. This duplicity indicates Yu’s struggle to grasp the episteme of a new age, and the mixture of the scientific and the fantastic modes may well point to the renewed discursive format of Yu’s time.

At the center of Yu Wanchun’s narrative is the introduction of a foreign character Baiwaerhan. A native of the country of Atlantic Europa, Baiwaerhan is said to have green eyes, blond hair, pinkish complexion, and deep-set features, “looking just like the foreign devils in Western paintings.” This “foreign devil” specializes in designing and manufacturing weapons; his recent inventions include “galloping thunder wagons” and “underwater clam boats”. Baierwahan is first enlisted by the Liangshan rebels, his new weapons proving devastating. To capture this foreigner

23 Yu Wanchun, preface to Dangkouzhi, p. 3.
24 Fin-de-siecle Splendor, pp. 252-270.
becomes the Song troops' primary task. When he falls prey to the Song a few chapters later, Baierwahan turns out to be someone ever ready to pledge his loyalty to the imperial court, to which he divulges the secret text on military technology, *Lunji jing* (Classic of wheeled machines).  

Yu Wanchun's fascination with both Chinese and Western military technology should not be seen as an exception to the intellectual discourse of the 1830s-1840s. Although few literary works during Yu's time reckoned with the theme of military modernization, the notion that China had to strengthen its armed forces by appropriating Western know-how was a view widely shared among enlightened literati, especially after the bitter loss of the Opium War.  

Insofar as it echoes contemporary calls for military modernization, *Quell the Bandits* can be aligned with such historical works as Xu Jiyu's 習氏啓 (1795-1873) *Yinghuan zhilue* (General study of the world, 1848), and Wei Yuan's 魏源 (1794-1857) *Shengwu ji* (A military history of the Qing dynasty, 1842) and *Haiguo tuzhi* (Illustrated treatise on maritime nations, 1844).

Among Wei Yuan's books, *A Military History of the Qing Dynasty* and *Illustrated Treatise on Maritime Nations*, one commemorating the military glories of the early Qing period, and the other introducing world geography and advanced modern technology, were popular among reform-minded intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century. They opened up new geographical and econo-technological horizons for contemporary intelligentsia, thereby facilitating the first stage of the late Qing modernization campaign. In the sixty juan edition of *Illustrated Treatise on Maritime Nations*, for instance, Wei Yuan dedicates eight chapters to information drawn from contemporary studies of military technology, such as Zheng Fuguang's 營復光 *Huolunchuan tushuo* (Illustrated study of steamboat), Huang Mian's 黃冕 *Dilei tushuo* (Illustrated study of landmine), Pan Shicheng's 潘世誠 *Gongchuan shuilei tushuo* (Illustrated study of torpedo) and *Xiyang yongpao celiang shuo* (A treatise on Western artillery computation). These chapters testify to Wei Yuan's

Ibid., p. 678.

27 According to Wang Ermin's study, at least sixty-six names of intellectuals and bureaucrats can be identified in terms of their open support of strengthening Chinese military power after the Western model, and at least twenty-two works were written addressing the ways of inventing, improving, and manufacturing Western-style weapons and military vehicles. See, Wang's “Shijiu shiji zhongguo shidaifu dui zhongxi guanxi zhi lijie ji yansheng zhi xinguannian” (Nineteenth-century Chinese intellectuals' understanding of Chinese-Western relations and the consequent rise of new concepts), in idem, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun* (An intellectual history of late imperial China), pp. 6-7.


29 Jane Kate Leonard, *Wei Yuan and China's Rediscovery of the Maritime World* (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984); also see Wang Ermin, pp. 6-7;

30 See Yuan and Gui, pp. 127-131.
deep concern about China's weakness in the face of foreign military threats and his empirical approach to China's crisis. All of his studies of Western science and technology may be crystallized into the famous slogans: "yi yi zhi yi, yi yi guan yi" (use foreign things to subdue foreigners; use foreigners to rule foreigners) and "shi yi zhi changji yi zhi yi" (learn the strengths of the foreigners so as to subdue them).31

Quell the Bandits is an integral part of this burgeoning national discourse on wealth and power. But if the novel is worthy of our notice today, it is not because Yu Wanchun has fully dramatized Wei Yuan's and his peers' yearning for the rejuvenation of China. Rather it is because he has brought to the fore that which remained unspeakable in the enlightened pronouncements of the intellectuals. Yu is given latitude to do so, I argue, thanks to the fact that he wrote in a "less serious" mode, fiction. Unlike those theoretical treatises which sought to legitimate modernization in historical or philosophical terms, Quell the Bandits presents an imaginary discourse in which the dynasty's desire for power and unification is articulated. It shows us that Chinese modernity came about not as a mere encounter between foreign science and indigenous fantasy, the enlightened and the reactionary; rather, it points to a far more entangled negotiation among temporal-spatial schemes, epistemological trajectories, and narrative patterns alternately calling themselves old or new.

My case-in-point is the episode about Baiwaerhan, a European weapon inventor in support of the Water Margin bandits (Chapters 113-118). By introducing Baiwaerhan and his inventions to a simulated eleventh-century landscape, Yu Wanchun is able to talk about the technology of warfare in a way unprecedented in Chinese fiction. Yu has already indicated a strong interest in advanced weapons in the earlier part of the novel, but the idea of modernizing military technology is not fully brought out till the foreign inventor's appearance. Baiwaerhan becomes a necessary agency in the changes that are to be imposed on Chinese warfare. To diminish Baiwaerhan's threat, the Song troops must respond with weapons which are equally powerful; and to that effect they first have to figure out the secret of Baiwaerhan's power. The plot reawakens the historical memory that China was once a country known for its scientific ingenuity and intellectual cosmopolitanism.32

31 In Shengwuji (The military history of the Qing dynasty), We Yuan has proposed the idea of "using the foreigners' strength to overcome their strength". See "Wushi yuji: junzheng pian" (Military affairs: chapter of military politics), in Shengwuji (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1946), vol. 14, p. 545. The idea was fully extrapolated in Haiguo tuzhi; see Yuan Yingguang and Gui Zunyi, pp. 128-129.


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The whole scenario about the capture and co-optation of Baiwaerhan exposes a basic paradox in China's modernization movement in the post-Opium-War period. Whereas historians have described how Song China led the world in scientific invention, a novelist of the fantastic can turn back time and provide China with nineteenth-century gadgets that might have grown out of eleventh-century indigenous ingenuity. In other words, Baiwaerhan invokes nineteenth-century inventiveness that should have been an extension of Song dynasty creativity but was not. Baiwaerhan is an important *figure* of the novel, not in that he stands out as a foreign intruder to an eleventh-century Chinese domestic war, but in that he is the embodiment of contested historical memories and desires that subsume a fantasy.

The capture of Baiwaerhan brings to mind Wei Yuan's famous dictum, "to learn the strengths of foreigners so as to subdue them," which represents the compromise of post-Opium-War policy. In the case of *Quell the Bandits*, to outmaneuver the foreigner, the Song troops must acquire the same kind of intelligence and skill that make Baiwaerhan such a formidable power. Wei Yuan's concept, nevertheless, is based on an easy epistemological transaction, a mere matter of give and take. It implies a functionalism that attempts to make the unfamiliar (science) familiar by means of both literal and rhetorical appropriation. At a deeper level, it bespeaks an indigenous essentialism: Western technology is after all nothing new; rather, they say, it originated in Chinese antiquity and therefore can be assimilated back into its original form. Science and technology can ultimately be made familiar and accessible by being assimilated to one pole in each of several dyads of traditional Chinese philosophical discourse: *dao/qi* 道器(*The Way / concrete object*), *ti/yong* 體用(*substance / function*), *ben/mo* 本末(*foundation / extension*), *zhu/fu* 主副(*principal / ancillary*), and *yue/bo* 約博(*essential / breadth*).34

In the Baiwaerhan episode, one finds that Yu Wanchun echoes such thought by playing out all its hidden motivations. No sooner is Baiwaerhan brought in to "update" the world of the fantastic as a nineteenth-century Chinese writer/reader would understand it, than he is subordinated to the old political power. Baiwaerhan appears both as a quasi-Chinese and a non-Chinese. Not only is he described as an admirer of Chinese civilization, even his inscrutable skill is thought to be something originating in China. The secret text of Western science, *Classic of Technology*, is finally written down and bestowed on the Chinese. The episode offers an ideal model for Chinese acquisition of Western learning: it starts with an attempt at acquisition,

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33See, for example, Temple, pp. 214-249.
34See David Reynolds, "Rewriting China's Intellectual Map: Images of Sciences in Nineteenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 12, no 1 (1991): 27-61; also see Wang Ermin, "Qingji zhishi fenzi de zhongti xiyong lun" (*Late Qing intellectuals' discourse of 'Chinese learnings as substance; Western learnings as application'*, in *idem*, *Wanqing zhengzhi sixianglun* (*A history of late Qing political thoughts*), pp. 51-71; Xue Huayuan, *Wan Qing zhongti xiyong sixianglun* (*A study of the theory of Chinese learning as essence and Western learning as application in the late Qing* (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 1991), pp. 11-39.
followed by a desire of appropriation, and ends with a rationale of assimilation. After Baiwaerhan gives away the secret recipes for his inventions, it is only natural that he disappears from the novel.

Here lies the most intriguing paradox of Yu Wanchun's (and his contemporaries') occidentalism: the Westerner symbolizes an evil force that has to be eradicated from the civilized realm of China; on the other hand, he is treated like a harmless mediator that restores the long lost heritage of Chinese civilization.\(^{35}\) Judged by the plot of the capture of Baiwaerhan, the popular concept, “learn the foreigners' skills so as to subdue them” must take on a converse dimension, namely, “to subdue the foreigners so as to learn their skills.” To overcome the formidable power of Baiwaerhan, the best way is to capture and co-opt him and learn his skill firsthand. But if Baiwaerhan falls such an easy prey to the Song (or Qing) forces, what is so dangerous about foreigners? What is the point of learning from him?

As history developed, the West would come with its even more powerful weapons, and this conventional China of cosmic mirrors would be overpowered on a higher plane of defeat; by implication, the West could also bring better fictional and fantastic technology, so the reversion to conventional fantasy is a painful finale. The messages of the magic mirror of the cosmos must be deciphered in a paradoxical way; the novel's valorization of traditional epistemology and narratology presupposes its self-destruction.\(^{36}\) Baiwaerhan may have been subdued by the Song, as Yu Wanchun tells us, but as late Qing history since the Opium War reveals, the final victory belonged to Baiwaerhan's descendants.

\(^{35}\)This is similar to the myth that the Arabs did nothing for modern Western science except to preserve it while the Europeans were unfortunately lacking in appreciation of their own (Greek) heritage. In fact, the Arabs united Indian, Greek, and Chinese sources and added their own devotion to experimental method to make modern science what it is now.

\(^{36}\) An inspection of the Chinese fantastic modes, particularly that of shenmo fiction, reveals that Daoist magicians, supernatural bureaucracies, monsters that long to become human, to name a few, are the all-too-familiar actants and topoi of a narrative tradition of the unknown. Quell the Bandits must have fascinated many contemporary readers because, for all the familiar themes and figures, it features guns, cannons, “galloping thunder wagons,” “sinking clam boats,” and, most importantly, “foreign devils,” elements startlingly different from the extant fantastic. Moreover, by narrating the new military inventions in a mimetic, know-it-all manner, Yu Wanchun has added to his narrative a simulated cognitive tone, making his narrative sound more like that of science, as late Qing writers would have defined it. Yet at the same time, his novel generates a renewed “fantastic effect” by disorienting regular readers of fantasy. Yu Wanchun might know little of modern science and technology, but he has managed to talk about them in such a way as to usher his audience into a different mode of cultural awareness.
A School: The Tongcheng School and the Politics of Reactionary Reform

The revival of the Tongcheng School in the post-Opium War era marks a peculiar moment in late Qing literary modernization. Arguably the most influential literary clique during the Qing dynasty, the Tongcheng School originated with such literati as Dai Mingshi 戴名世 (1653-1713), Fang Bao 方苞 (1668-1749), and Liu Dakui 劉大櫆 (1698-1780), all natives of Tongcheng, Anhui province, but it did not become a leading trend till after Yao Nai's 姚鼐 (1731-1815) systematic promotion in the last decades of his career.37 Yao's anthology, *Guwen ci lei zhuan* 古文辭類纂 (Classified compendium of archaic prose) was a canon-making endeavor. When it was published posthumously in 1820, it soon became the major source book for literati and scholars. By the eve of the Opium War, the Tongcheng School had become the most popular literary force of the time.

The Tongcheng School derived its discursive vigor primarily from its treatise on prose writing. In contrast to *shiwen* 時文 (contemporary-style writing), whose most blatant sample was *baguwen* 八股文 or eight-legged prose, Tongcheng scholars upheld *guwen* 古文 (archaic prose) as an alternative to the cultural taste and scholarly bearing of the time. For Fang Bao as for his followers, archaic prose contains the "purport" (yi 義) and "method" (fa 法) crucial to any meaningful form of communication. Fang traced the genealogy of the Tongcheng School to the Tang scholar Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824), who advocated an even more archaic form of prose.

Involved here is the dialogical relationship between *dao* 道 and its formal manifestation in *wen* 文 or letters, an issue which has occupied Chinese scholars for centuries. For Tongcheng scholars, whereas *dao* stands at the core of intellectual pursuit, *wen* serves as formal evidence that substantiates *dao*. *Wen* is not a mere embellishment but an emanation of *dao*. To master archaic prose, accordingly, is a way leading to the truth.

This argument may sound like trivial hairsplitting within Confucian hermeneutics, but it points to a significant shift of the late Qing episteme. The rise of the Tongcheng School represented a response to at least three trends at the time: the philological scholarship of Han Learning; the moral reasoning of Song Learning; and the aforementioned eight-legged stylistics mandated by the imperial exam system. As if seeking a new balance point in the midst of these trends, Tongcheng scholars promulgated a tripartite methodology of "moral reasoning, evidential learning, and written expression" (*yili 義理, kaozheng 考證, cizhang 辭章*), and they considered archaic prose the key to illuminating all three directions. An eclectic tactic as it might first appear to be, this tripartite taxonomy maintained a subtle tilt in favor of *cizhang* or written expression. For it is through the exercise of archaic prose, the Tongcheng scholars argued, that one could find a way to remedy the semantic fragmentation.

37 See Chen Pingyuan, *Cong wenren zhiwen dao xuezhe zhiwen* (From the literature by literati to the literature by scholars) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004), pp. 199-228.
inherent in the philological exegesis of the Han Learning, to provide a formal grounding for the philosophical abstraction of the Song Learning, and to rectify the pomposity and formulaic nature of bagu stylistics. Wen or writing was thus given an unprecedented position in an otherwise familiar Confucian discourse; to elucidate dao, one has first to master language and form.

Given its adherence to Confucian tenets, it is little surprise that the Tongcheng School, especially its fixation on archaic prose, should come under severe attack during the May Fourth era. The May Fourth modernists, however, overlooked the fact that Tongcheng scholars’ elevation of wen was motivated by their discontent with contemporary discourse, and that the archaic prose they recommended was meant to be a style less cumbersome than the sanctioned one. In a way, the Tongcheng scholars were the non-conformists of their own day. But the paradox lies in the fact that, to legitimize their desire for change, Tongcheng scholars sought to call on the ancients, and as such aligned their undertaking in the long line of “reactionary reforms” in the Chinese literary tradition. Reactionary, because they valued the past more than the present or future; reform, because the antiquity they vowed to restore could not be a revival of the past as it was at least a partial imaginary construct projected from the present.38

Such a reform via antiquarianism was destined to entail drastic reactions at a time when the temporal paradigms of evolution and revolution were introduced to China. However, one should not overlook the Tongcheng School’s role in the late Qing and early Republican politics of style. In his pioneering study Theodore Huters pointed out that Chinese scholars’ renewed interest in wen since the late eighteenth-century contributed a good deal to the cognitive grounding and disciplinary rigor of wenxue literature as we understand it today.39 This is where the Tongcheng School should be viewed as both an impetus of and an impediment to Chinese literary modernity. Compared with the calls for total literary reform at the turn of the twentieth century, the Tongcheng School’s revisionism appeared feeble and its valorization of classical orthodoxy amounted to little more than anachronism. But insofar as modern reformers considered literature not a mere rhetorical referent but


39 Theodore Huters’s two articles, “From Writing to Literature: The Development of Late Qing Theories of Prose” and “A New Way of Writing: The Possibilities for Literature in Late Qing China, 1895-1908,” Modern China, 14 (1988): 243-276, have contributed tremendously to our reappraisal of the development of prose in the late Qing. My discussion benefits much from the arguments in these articles.
an aesthetic entity *embodifying* moral and intellectual implications, they had not left the Tongcheng teachings too far behind them.

The Tongcheng School suffered a plummet from power after the Opium War. At a time when China was encountering a new system of knowledge *and* power represented by the West, the Tongcheng School’s adherence to *wen* and *dao* seemed impractical. The Taiping Rebellion and other riots in the 1850’s further shook scholars’ confidence in the efficacy of traditional learning and its manifestations in archaic prose. But the school underwent a dramatic reincarnation in the 1860’s thanks to Zeng Guofan (1811-1872). A monumental figure of late Qing military and political history, Zeng is best remembered for his double role as both a general quelling the Taiping rebels and a scholar advocating archaic prose. Though without direct lineage, Zeng remained committed to the Tongcheng School’s tripartite guidelines of philosophy, scholarship and writing. What made Zeng stand out, however, was that to this triad he added a fourth element, statecraft (*jingji* 經濟), thus upgrading the school’s agenda in a timely manner. A good composition, accordingly, is said to be able both to cultivate individual minds and remedy dynastic crises, to illuminate one’s scholarship and to represent social commitment.

By highlighting the linkage between writing and statecraft, Zeng Guofan hoped to win for the Tongcheng School a political agency, and he did succeed in renewing people’s attention to the “usefulness” of Tongcheng prose. As a result, the Tongcheng School enjoyed a revival parallel to the short-lived “restoration” of the Tongzhi reign (1862-1875). But the most surprising outcome of Zheng Guofan’s revival of the Tongcheng School was its excursion into the realm of literary modernism. Among Zeng Guofan’s disciples, Zhang Yuzhao 張裕釗 (1823-1894), Li Shuchang 黎庶昌 (1837-1897), Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838-1894), Wu Rulun 吳汝倫 (1840-1903) were considered the most prominent. While they followed their mentor’s inculcation of *wen* and *dao*, they were equally wary of the increasing import of the New Learning. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Li Shuchang, Xue Fucheng, and Guo Songtao 郭嵩燾 (1818-1891)—another follower of Zeng Guofan’s Tongcheng discourse—were among the first group of late Qing diplomats and that they all had extensive overseas careers. They were on the frontlines of China’s first encounter with the West and they were compelling trumpeters of the need for reform. However, when they came to write about their foreign experiences, they uniformly resorted to archaic prose. The appeal of their exotic subjects and the antiquarian claim of their native style inevitably brought to Tongcheng discourse a tension absent in past Tongcheng writings.

In 1875, Guo Songtao was appointed the first imperial envoy to Britain amid the opposition of the conservatives. Although he was discharged from the position only two months after his arrival in London, Guo had already left plenty of writings about his foreign encounters. His *Shixi jicheng* 使西紀程 (An account of my mission to the West) featured firsthand accounts of British landscapes, civil facilities, and social manners and morals. One finds a vivid example in an entry on watching the
Like the dazzling fireworks that brightened the British night sky, Guo’s overseas tour was full of excitement and discovery, which might easily have shed light on China’s capacity for radical reform. But Guo wrapped all these revelations in the patented Tongcheng style, as if his new awakening could be made intelligible only via archaic prose.

A similar case can be found in Li Shuchang’s writings. Li was an assistant on Guo Songtao’s pioneering mission to Britain and became a prominent diplomat in his own right. In his account of visiting the popular beach resort Brighton (“Bulaidun ji” 卜來敦記 An account of Brighton), for instance, Li noted that the most remarkable asset of Britain was not wealth and power but her people’s capacity to enjoy spare time. If there was any moral to be drawn from his visit, Li suggests, it would be his discovery of “leisure” as a way of life. Beyond his Confucian stance, Li found himself no less attracted to cosmopolitanism. However, this discovery did not keep Li from concluding in a way typical of Tongcheng rhetoric. He ended this essay with an allusion to the Zuozhuan, suggesting that Chinese sages had long realized that only a strong country was capable of taking care of popular pastimes: a tongue-in-cheek way to legitimate futuristic imaginary by alluding to ancient discourse.

In “Guan Bali youhua ji” (An account of viewing oil paintings in Paris), Xue Fucheng, Qing ambassador to Britain between 1890 and 1894, described how on his visit to a wax museum in Paris he was struck by a simulated scene of the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. The painted panoramic set, the lifelike wax figures, and the meticulous props created such a transfixing illusion that Xue almost had a sensation of watching a live battlefield scene. Although he meant to draw a moral from the French crisis, Xue appeared to consider Western artistic technology a much more powerful medium than its Chinese counterpart, something much in need so as to shock the Chinese to their own crises. Xue’s praise for the French craftsmanship uncannily sustained the Tongcheng School’s preoccupation with form, which serves as the vehicle for representing truth.

Insofar as language and form constitute the core of its stylistic politics, it may not be a coincidence that the last stage of the Tongcheng School’s transformation would take place in two translations. In 1898, Yan Fu (1854-1921) published his translation of T. H. Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics as Tianyan lun 天演論. The book’s Social Darwinian thesis stunned late Qing intellectual circles. Equally impressive was the fact that Yan Fu rendered Huxley in a prose style that was reminiscent of the philosophical

42 Ibid., “夫惟堅凝，斯能整暇,” Zuozhuan, Chenggong shiliu nian.
treatises of pre-Han dynasties. Yan Fu’s translation added a new aspect to the tension to the the Tongcheng School’s encounter with the West. Unlike Li Shuchang’s and Xue Fucheng’s cases discussed above, Yan Fu’s translation indicated more an intellectual acquisition than an empirical perception of the West. His use of archaic prose, therefore, touched on the epistemological dilemma besetting the Tongcheng School.

When studying at the Royal Naval Academy in Plymouth in 1876, Yan Fu made acquaintance with Guo Songtao, then Ambassador to Britain. Through this connection Yan came to know Guo’s friend Wu Rulun, famed educator and practitioner of Tongcheng prose, and later Yan was able to invite Wu to write a preface to his translation of the Evolution and Ethics. With Wu’s endorsement, Yan Fu found his way into the league of Tongcheng writers. For Yan as for Wu, the style employed for translation meant as much as the subject being translated. Yan argued that he had chosen archaic prose in light of Confucius’ teaching that “language without embellishment will not carry far”: “If one uses the vulgar language current today, it is difficult to get the point across; one always suppresses idea in favor of expression and a tiny initial error leads to a gigantic error in the end.” Thus he provided a motto for good translation: faithfulness, precision, elegance.44

Wu Rulun believed that only someone as immersed in the practice of wen as Yan Fu was qualified to translate because he was able to give the new learning a discursive form commensurate with that of ancient classics. In light of the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, Wu believed that Yan Fu’s undertaking would enrich rather than diminish the eminence of dao. At his most polemical, Wu advised Yan to sacrifice semantic fidelity so as to preserve the purity of language. He thus turned the Tongcheng School’s antiquarian hermeneutics into a formal pursuit.

With a belief similar to Wu Rulun’s, Lin Shu 林纾 (1852-1924) felt fully justified when he translated Western fiction and drama in an elegant archaic style, without even knowing any of the foreign languages of the originals. By conventional Tongcheng standard, one cannot emphasize enough the distance between fiction and prose, and between indigenous wen and foreign literary imports. Lin’s assimilation of Western literature to Chinese cultural legacy was an attempt as much to Orientalize—Sinicize—foreign sources as to exoticize the indigenous tradition. He found in Dickens’s fiction a compositional structure reminiscent of that of the Shiji, and he celebrated Alexandre Dumas’ La Dame aux Camélias because it demonstrated for him a supreme model of qing/feeling. Through his translation, fiction and prose, Chinese thought and Western sensibility, were yoked in such a way as to become something

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both new and not at all new. Perhaps because of this mixed appeal of exoticism and nostalgia, Lin’s translations became bestsellers in late Qing China. A seemingly obsolete style like Tongcheng prose thus provided Lin as well as his readers an interface where the cultural and intellectual conflicts embedded in Chinese and non-Chinese literatures were reconciled, a fact that could never have been foreseen by the Tongcheng predecessors. In that sense, Lin Shu’s radical antiquarian exercise constitutes an important part of the late-Qing project of literary modernization.

For all Tongcheng scholars’ efforts to adapt to the need of the time, vernacular Chinese writing had become the trend by the end of the nineteenth century. But the ghost of the Tongcheng School could not so easily be exorcised. The Tongcheng School was a major target of literary reformers throughout the twentieth century. In 1917, Hu Shi published “Wenxue gailiang chuyi 文學改良芻議 (A proposal for reforming literature). To echo Hu’s preamble, Qian Xuantong (1887-1939) set out in 1918 to condemn the Tongcheng School and its counterpart, the Parallel Prose School (wenxuanpai 文選派), as “condemnable species” (選學妖孽) and “fiendish monsters” (選學妖孽) respectively. Nevertheless, one might overlook the fact that as early as the 1920’s, selected May-Fourth literati had already recognized the merits of the Tongcheng School. Hu Shisheng (1891-1962) for one contended that, for all its conservative ideology, the Tongcheng School helped reorient nineteenth-century prose stylistics. With its claims of clarity, precision, and elegance, it promoted an “archaic style” which paradoxically served to update the convoluted tendency of “contemporary style,” thereby paving the way for the new writing. Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967) went even further, suggesting that the styles of Hu Shi’s, Chen Duxiu’s, and Liang Qichao’s writings were all derived from Tongcheng prose.

The end of the Tongcheng School marks the end of the classical language, but it does not mark the end of classicism. As discussed above, whereas Gong Zizhen struck a note of de-cadence on the eve of the Opium War, Yu Wanchun, whose writing spanned the War, registered an episteme far more confused by the changes of the time. But it was the late Tongcheng writers such as Li Shuchang, Xue Fucheng, Yan Fu, and Lin Shu who demonstrated most poignantly the nebulous terms of becoming modern. Alternately labeled conservative and reform-minded, they acted out a negative dialectic which propelled Chinese literature into the new age. Looking back, one comes to realize that where Tongcheng scholars sanctioned wen as that which substantiated a cultural and social edifice, late Qing and early Republican reformers proposed wenxue 文學 as a distinctive field, one informed as much by imaginary configurations of the human world as by moral commitment to it.

46 Zhou Zuoren, Zhongguo xinwenxue de yuanliu (The origins and trends of Chinese new literature), quoted from Qingdai wentan mengzhu tongcheng pai, pp. 410-414.
As modern literature developed into the 1930s, some of the reformers and revolutionaries were well on their way to turn formal commitment into formulaic dogmatism. To dethrone the hegemonic language—in this case, classical-style prose—is one thing; to give up hegemony over language is another. The modernists' "obsession with China" can be traced back to the moment when wenxue as a cultural institution was still in an embryonic stage. In Huters' words: "the legacy of the earlier nineteenth century, with its tendency to conflate utility and aesthetics... provided a hidden gravitational pull that no one seemed to be able to avoid."47

With three case studies this essay has examined the multiple beginnings of modern Chinese literature. As mentioned at the beginning, my point is not to expedite the timetable of China's encounter with modernity any more than to uncover the moments when Chinese writers were brought to re-define their legacy in local and global contexts. Their desires, experiments, and proposals did not always result in the outcomes that fit any conventional definition of the modern, nor were their reformist attempts conditioned by the temporal scheme of progression and revolution. But this may very well be their contributions to the Chinese imaginaries of the modern. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, incipient signs of Chinese modernities already provided rich possibilities. The poetics of the sublime and of melancholia in Gong Zizhen's works, the politics of the novel and novelty as demonstrated by Quell the Bandits, and the dialogics between wen and dao in the Tongcheng School are but three of the lessons about repressed modernities. Jindai wenxue may not be "modern" enough for many, but the three examples drawn from jindai wenxue lead one to ponder whether the literature under discussion is the least modern of Chinese modernities or the most conventional of all Chinese conventionalities.

47 Huters, "From Writing to Literature," p. 96.