

❖ LEIGH JENCO ❖



CHANGING REFERENCES

LEARNING
ACROSS SPACE
AND TIME
IN CHINA
AND THE WEST



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*Learning Across Space and Time in China
and the West*

Leigh Jenco

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Changing Referents

CHAPTER 1

Toward the Creative Engagement of Chinese Thought

How and why might we want to learn from “foreign” others? This question becomes increasingly salient as globalization brings together otherwise disparate communities and individuals, with distinctive and often conflicting ways of viewing the world. Yet even as these very phenomena have exposed the culturally specific character of the social and political theories used to understand them, academic responses—such as postcolonial and comparative political theory—have tended to reproduce, rather than displace, the very ethnocentric terms they critique. The goal for many scholars at this moment of arguably unprecedented interaction and transcultural communication is not to *learn* from foreign others, in the sense that our very modes of pursuing knowledge are challenged or disciplined by the categories, methods, and standards of scholarship these others now maintain, or historically have practiced. Rather, many contemporary scholars urge a less radical approach, often emblemized by cross-cultural dialogue: our existing forms of knowledge are not transformed by this encounter with otherness so much as their limitations and possibilities are considered in a more self-reflexive light.¹

This book hopes to demonstrate an alternative possibility, which resists the idea that we cannot use non-Western thought for creative theorizing. I do this by working through a series of theoretically rich Chinese debates from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which awareness

1. Taylor, “Understanding and Ethnocentricity”; Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*; Dallmayr, “Beyond Monologue”; Godrej, “Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought.”

of Chinese ethnocentrism as well as methods of learning from difference were subject to heightened (some would say unprecedented) scrutiny. These Chinese thinkers personally confronted the historical processes that supposedly culminated in the displacement of “pre-colonial,” “indigenous,” or “traditional” modes of thought by the terms of Enlightenment modernity. Their self-conscious theorizations of that process offer not only important evidence of their agency in resisting and mediating such global phenomena but also one of the most sustained, literate, and self-aware discourses about how and why we should learn from differently situated others. For these Chinese reformers, this “Western Learning” (*Xixue*) entailed a radical restructuring of their entire society, to produce knowledge along what were often identified as “new” (*xin*) or “Western” (*Xifang de*) lines, rather than “old” (*jiu*) or “Chinese” (*Zhongguo de*) ones. On the basis of their own example, I engage these Chinese conversations as offering an important alternative methodology for cross-cultural engagement, which promises new insights into the now-global problem of how we can live with and learn from cultural others. In doing so, my attempt also hopes to *demonstrate* the relevance and theoretical capacity of the very “non-Western” discourses that processes of modernity are believed to have silenced. The Chinese reformers I examine here point us toward institutional and disciplinary spaces in which we can build whole communities of scholarship centered on erstwhile foreign knowledge—suggesting how our own efforts to de-parochialize can go beyond the insertion of differently embedded “voices” into existing conversations, and instead aim toward a more comprehensive engagement with alternative foundations of scholarship.

These bold methods of engagement contrast sharply with the rather underwhelming expectations for cross-cultural encounter maintained in much political and social theory today. These expectations have been chastened by earlier colonial attempts to transform knowledge, in which the political and epistemic dominance of subject peoples in the non-European world was secured through appeal to supposedly universal principles of human development. In response to this imperialism, philosophers and theorists have advocated more conversational, self-reflexive methods, which focus on how particular and vernacular experiences not only resist and creatively interpret such “universal” principles underlying modernity, political development, and subjectivity, but also themselves constitute the very resources through which any community comes to form its social theories.² In fields such as postcolonial theory, this approach has also drawn attention to the extent to which the pervasion of such categories

2. E.g., Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, “Social Theory as Practice.”

was secured historically not by transparent appeal to some universal human reason, but by the imperial reorganization of whole societies—including the total destruction or remaking of their political, educational, and cultural institutions—to reflect colonizers’ beliefs about how civilized humans should live together. By revealing the parochial origins of what are often assumed to be universal categories of analysis and urging their renewal on the basis of experience those categories have historically marginalized, these approaches do hugely important work in “provincializing” the dominant categories of Euro-American academic theory.³

However, in elevating the value of particular, vernacular, or embedded aspects of human cultural experience, these approaches occlude the possibility that other, differently situated ideas or practices might come to have more general relevance for us, here and now: how might claims articulated from within Chinese, Sanskrit, Islamic, or other internally diverse, culturally mediated bodies of thought present viable theories for us as we try to make sense of our world, including our relationships to the otherness we construct across both space and time? Without broaching such questions, we risk denying theoretical capacity to the very thought we seek to acknowledge as worthy of engagement. Just as problematically, we would have no way of dealing constructively with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s prescient observation that modernity has made unbroken lines of Indian and other “non-Western” forms of philosophy and social inquiry matters of historical research only: they are simply unable to be resources for critical thought in the present, in the same way that Western thinkers might be.⁴ In other words, however much historically situated thinkers such as Plato or Karl Marx may exhibit differences with what we take to be our current situation, their ascribed status as “Western” overcomes their otherness in ways that are never extended to include thought, of whatever era, circulating outside this geographic inscription.⁵

The inability of specifically Chinese thought to inform general theory was diagnosed most famously by the American postwar Sinologist Joseph Levenson, who associated the “death” of this thought with China’s

3. The classic source of this formulation is, of course, Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

4. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 6.

5. For stylistic purposes, I hereafter drop the scare quotes around the terms “Western” and “non-Western,” but readers should be aware (as my discussion in this and the following paragraphs indicates) that I very much see those terms as inscriptions that result from the historic epistemic exclusion of certain kinds of thought from the domain of knowledge. “Western” and “non-Western” are not intended here or elsewhere in this book to indicate literal geographic locations or territorially bound cultural essences.

transition from what he called “culturalism” to “nationalism.”⁶ Before the late nineteenth century, the Chinese cultural domain appeared to its subjects not as “a country but the country, not a culture but culture itself.”⁷ Foreign states were registered as tributaries, or designated in other ways that reinforced Chinese centrality;⁸ and the Qing empire matched the British one in its “universalistic pretensions.”⁹ What Levenson calls China’s turn to nationalism, however, marks the realization of Chinese elites that there existed other societies which embraced competing values—competing in the sense that they were recognized not simply as inferior or less civilized variants of Chinese ones.¹⁰ Once Western Learning was taken seriously, Levenson argued, China’s intellectuals could remain committed to Chinese traditional thought only psychologically, not intellectually: they were loyal to it because it was “theirs,” not because it was “true” in any terms they could now affirm. For this reason, Levenson’s thesis about China’s transition from “culturalism” to “nationalism” is often read as a narrative of modernization.

Contrary to Levenson, however, I want to show that the success of the Chinese in transitioning their knowledge-production from Chinese to Western precedents, from one way of producing knowledge to another, is not a tragic story about the inevitable demise of “Confucian China” in the face of Western modernity. We might also read it as a constructive response to the painful process of de-parochialization: that is, the realization that one’s presumably universal values—including the terms through which one’s community conducts inquiry and advances knowledge; the norms that community enforces in conventional or legal ways; and the practices, relationships, languages and even styles of dress through which members communicate with and organize each other—are in fact particular. They are grounded in ways of life that not everyone in the world may or should share. Like many contemporary academics, these Chinese reform thinkers of a century ago became deeply concerned that their own received modes of knowing the world and theorizing their place within it derived not from universally accessible and transparent foundations but from specific discourses and historically situated traditions of thought that may embody only very local, not global, insights.

Chinese responses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to this unexpected challenge from Western powers thus offer striking and

6. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*.

7. Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen*, 7.

8. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order*.

9. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 25.

10. Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China*, 2.

instructive parallels to the situation we face in the twenty-first. Like them, we are confronting a seismic shift or what they called a foundational “change in situation” (*bianchu*), in which our typical ways of producing knowledge are not only disturbed but are increasingly recognized to be potentially inadequate. The proper way forward, then, may not be to simply continue our conversations as though the rest of the world does not exist, or to confront the problem of differently situated otherness in an abstract or speculative way. The solution may be to engage the world and its knowledge, not just in the sense that we should acquire more information about it but also that we should recalibrate our expectations about what and how we learn, what counts as knowledge, and with whom and for whom we might produce it.

For the Chinese, this turn was motivated, as it is for many academics today, by transnational developments that made a vision of world order dominated by a single culture or set of ideas very difficult to sustain. As subsequent chapters will show, in China this situation inspired both conservative entrenchment and radical self-critique, as well as every position in between. In any case, by the late 1920s, the era of the last of the conversations detailed in this study, little remained of the “traditional,” imperial institutions that had supported hierarchical political and family systems, an agricultural economy, a Sinocentric world order, and a system of elite knowledge based on classical texts.

In less than a century, reformers and revolutionaries established a range of new (albeit sometimes fleeting) political and social institutions to support modern scientific inquiry, egalitarian principles, cosmopolitan awareness, the use of vernacular rather than classical language, and some degree of participatory governance. Their success in transforming China from an empire to a republican state, and the relationship of that transformation to Western versus existing indigenous social trends, is even today subject to enormous debate. In any case, it is not the empirical but rather the *theoretical* outcomes and conceptual innovations of this transition that are my main interest here. To the Chinese reformers who helped to guide this transition, their culturally or historically specific starting point did not necessarily circumscribe subsequent attempts to pursue inquiry about political life on alternative or culturally unfamiliar grounds. Unlike many current theorists of cross-cultural exchange, that is, they sought not only to reproduce but also to innovate specific kinds of political, social, and technical knowledge on the basis of referents that circulated elsewhere.

Although the argument proceeds chronologically, noting the cumulative ways in which these debates at various stages build from and

reference earlier ones, my primary goal in this book is, to reiterate, not historical but theoretical. This does not mean historical context is unimportant or that my analysis somehow provides “the” explanation for what is really going on. I mean simply that I make my argument by exercising the approach these Chinese thinkers advocate: rather than see them and their ideas as objects upon which I fix my scholarly gaze—that is, as “others” whose culturally distinctive utterances provide historical nuance or enhance awareness of my own epistemological situatedness—I engage them as constitutive sources of knowledge. This means that their ideas discipline my own approach to the subject matter we both share, and, indeed, discipline even my identification of that subject matter itself. As such, my argument over the next eight chapters hopes to belie the rather gloomy predictions of Levenson, as well as of many subsequent historians and theorists, who insist that all knowledge-production is given over, more or less, to the Europeanized categories that currently dominate thought and action in the modern world.

I focus in particular on how the field of political theory might deploy these alternative Chinese perspectives to effect more radical displacement of its own disciplinary ethnocentrism. But this call is not wholly intelligible or persuasive until I work through the very theoretical materials which have helped me formulate it. The chapters of this book elaborate the challenges and parameters of those nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese conversations about what and how to learn from the West, including the kinds of changes demanded by Chinese thinkers in order to make possible the production—and innovation—of new forms of knowledge. In the section that follows, I narrate a brief history of these conversations in order both to showcase the particular features of their methods and to explain why those features became salient or functional at this specific point in time. What emerges is not a singular “Chinese” approach to questions of cross-cultural engagement or a narrative in which earlier theories are superseded by later, more inclusive, or “better” theories. Rather, the book presents a series of perspectives that emerged through time, each focused on different aspects of a broadly shared problem, which becomes rearticulated in ongoing attempts by reformers to respond to it.

LEARNING FROM OTHERNESS: CHINA, 1860s–1920s

This book examines the cultural reform thought associated with the project of “Western Learning” or *Xixue*, a term coined in the mid-nineteenth century to describe efforts by reformers to acquire and develop forms of

knowledge—particularly of mathematics, technology, and the natural sciences, as well as of politics and society—associated with the powerful nations of Europe. I use this term also to refer more generally to thought of later eras that continues (often in self-conscious ways) these earlier efforts to theorize possibilities for learning from differently situated others, although radicals of later eras do not always consistently self-identify with the label of Western Learning.¹¹ Engagement with Western knowledge informed a vast swath of Chinese thinking beginning from at least the mid-seventeenth century, when Jesuit missionaries began translating Western works on religion, mathematics, and astronomy into Chinese in an effort to convince elites to convert to Christianity. This influence intensified dramatically, however, in the 1840s with the increasing commercial, missionary, and military presence of Europeans on China's coasts. China had been repeatedly invaded and ruled by foreigners before—most obviously, by the Manchu Qing dynasty that had governed China since 1644—and had throughout its history been in ongoing, mutually enriching contact with ethnically diverse peoples both inside and outside its dynamic borders. Yet in the judgment of many literati elites, the expansion of contact between China and the West was nevertheless unprecedented. For them it constituted a major “turning point” (*bianduan*), “change of situation” (*bianchu*), or “turn in fate” (*yunhui*) not only for the Qing empire but also for the broader “Chinese” civilization and its values.¹²

It would be impossible in one study to do justice to the complexity of this engagement. I therefore focus primarily on the work of radical thinkers who, in arguing for dramatic and sometimes totalizing reforms of Chinese life, necessarily broached some of the most difficult theoretical questions about the desirability, and the feasibility, of such transformations. For many, these transformations entailed imitation of what they saw as “Western” ways of life in order to secure wealth, prosperity, and international status to China. In a series of debates that emerged first in imperial court documents and then gradually took shape in the burgeoning, transnational public press of treaty ports and large coastal cities, intellectuals elaborated sophisticated methods for how Chinese elites and masses might come to reproduce the knowledge circulating in Europe, America, and even Japan. These methods, and their theoretical premises, are the focus of this study. In what follows, I offer a very broad overview

11. Today the term “Western Learning” inscribes a broad range of debates centered on the meaning and desirability of Westernization in Chinese academic and social life, articulated largely by reference to this earlier discussion; see, e.g., Fang Chaohui, “*Zhong xue*” yu “*Xi xue*.”

12. Pong, “The Vocabulary of Change,” 29–30.

of the historical context which gave rise to these debates, leaving more detailed examination of their key players and ideas to the relevant chapters.

In Chapter 2, I consider how these Western Learning conversations reflect or engage earlier Chinese approaches to cultural difference, including the role played by such difference in enabling social and individual transformation. Reform intellectuals committed to Western Learning projects sought not a more circumscribed or self-reflective mode of producing knowledge but an often totalistic replacement of the very attitudes, institutions, and social practices that produce knowledge along one line rather than another. This goal was shaped by methods of registering difference built on a set of quite different expectations about the malleability of both individual and collective forms of knowledge, including the relationship of the past to present capacities to learn and know. Although the thinkers examined in this book organize difference for diverse purposes, they build from the shared premise that processes broadly associated with “culture” (*wen, wenhua*) enable the re-orientation of individual and social knowledge-production, typically through the deliberate cultivation of connections to particular kinds of historical lineages. Although historically the power of such cultural transformation was associated almost exclusively with Chinese civilization (*Zhonghua*), the Western Learning project reconfigures these assumptions into a more general model of how individuals and communities might come to work within (as opposed to merely translate) the terms of foreign knowledge.

I contrast this “culturalist” view to the relatively more circumscribed expectations about self-transformation articulated by a diverse range of current political and social theorists, such as Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, Alisdair MacIntyre, and many contemporary scholars of comparative political theory. These otherwise diverse accounts tend to affirm the inevitable embeddedness of our knowledge in cultural or historical background conditions over which we have little immediate control. Engaging with otherness thus cannot constitutively transform our knowledge in any fundamental or disciplinary way, so much as it enables us to come to a more self-reflexive understanding about the limits and possibilities of our own beliefs and values. The cross-cultural encounter is therefore understood primarily as an epistemological dilemma about how to register the claims of differently situated others.¹³ This approach is on view most prominently in recent attempts by political theorists to “de-parochialize”

13. Dallmayr, “Beyond Monologue”; Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*; Taylor, “Understanding and Ethnocentricity.”

theory-production in their discipline, which do not seek theoretical guidance from non-Western thought so much as use it to enhance awareness of theorists' own cultural positioning or limitations,¹⁴ or to mitigate what Fred Dallmayr calls the "bland universalism" of colonialism and first-world capital flows.¹⁵ Although intended to do justice to the particularity of diverse cultures, this (what I call) "particularist" account elides the extent to which many cultural practices, particularly those associated with knowledge-production, are not automatically historically or sociologically imparted, but rather are deliberately acquired by individuals and groups over time. As such, this account provides no method by which other ways of thinking or organizing knowledge might become *ours*, in the sense not simply of enhancing our self-reflexivity but also of displacing existing modes of inquiry across communities and over generations.

As a remedy, and to clear ground for the arguments to follow, I draw on Chinese culturalist views to articulate an alternative account, which sees knowledge as sustained within diverse sets of communities, each enforcing differentiable rather than monolithic criteria for membership and participation. Many of its terms and practices are often routinely acquired (or fostered in others) via deliberate efforts at learning or the establishment of durable institutions, enabling the conditional generalizability (if not universalizability) of its categories. This view of knowledge emphasizes its open-ended character as a collective and emergent product that changes across both space and time, as new members come to acquire knowledge and to innovate within its terms. At the same time, it eschews claims to essentialist and primordial identities in favor of attending to how acquired, evolving, yet necessarily shared standards of intelligibility make the production of new knowledge both possible and unpredictable. These standards are acquirable not only within communities but also across them—rendering the idea of cross-cultural engagement open to the disciplinary self-transformations that are the outcome of any ordinary instance of learning.

My study of late Qing reform theory begins with one of the first mainstream debates to consider the radically transformative effect of Western knowledge, associated with the so-called *Yangwu* or "foreign affairs" movement of the 1860s. This movement continued indigenous trends of reform to address administrative weaknesses in the Qing state while responding to growing threats of European imperialism in south and east

14. Godrej, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought"; Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*.

15. Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism*, 99.

China. These foreign threats were emblemized by the Opium Wars of the 1840s, during which British gunships forcibly opened Chinese ports to trade in opium and other goods. By 1860, when an Anglo-French force looted the Chinese capital of Beijing in continuing efforts to gain concessions, Chinese scholar-officials (or “literati”) began contemplating the extent to which Western forms of techno-science and social knowledge might enable more strenuous resistance to these predatory foreign incursions. While Chinese scholars since the eighteenth century had pursued strategies of “statecraft” (*jingshi*) and “practical studies” (*shixue*) to address corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional imbalances in the Qing state, they also hoped that new Western knowledge might provide more efficacious solutions to ongoing domestic crises—such as the ruinous Taiping Rebellion in south China, which by the time of its suppression in 1864 had claimed more than 20 million lives and lasted more than two decades.

The interest of these literati in securing wealth and power, as well as their curiosity about Western culture, decreasing faith in the once-prosperous Qing administration in the wake of recurrent rebellions, and ongoing contact with Western military and commercial interests on Chinese territory, encouraged bold strategies for what the treaty-port intellectual Wang Tao called “total change” (*yibian*) in Chinese ways of life.¹⁶ Such bold calls for reform drew increasing attention not only from intellectuals but also from provincial leaders such as Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan, whose political and military capacities had expanded during the Qing’s decade-long attempt to subdue the Taiping Rebellion south of the Yangtze River. Warning that China risked foreign domination if its people did not actively absorb the knowledge that made Western nations so apparently wealthy and strong, Li and Zeng used their considerable private means to fund arsenals, schools, and factories to advance the “self-strengthening” (*zhiqiang*) of the Chinese state. Although most reformers would not contemplate thoroughgoing political reform until the 1890s, around this time a group of young reformers at court associated with Yixin (Prince Gong, nephew of the Xianfeng emperor) also implemented plans for reform, which included the establishment of the Translator’s Bureau (*Tongwen guan*) in 1861 and the limited inclusion of mathematics and foreign languages into the curricula of a few state-run schools for students of Manchu descent.

Claiming “Chinese origins for Western knowledge” (*Xi xue Zhong yuan*), these reformers contemplated the replacement of historically central

16. Wang, *Taoyuan wen lu wai bian*, 22–23.

Confucian tenets with new precedents for innovation: namely, those of mathematics and natural science. Chapter 3 argues that although their claim seems to serve culturally chauvinistic ends, it actually reveals the contingency of how otherness is identified and organized. As articulated by Yixin as well as reformers outside the court such as Wang Tao, the claim does not shore up conservative attachment to tradition, but the opposite: it registers the “cultural” differences presented by foreign knowledge as identical to those “historical” differences already authorizing innovation within existing activities of Confucian knowledge-production. As such, the thesis ironically ended up inspiring innovations in knowledge along lines traceable to Western rather than Chinese pasts. Noting that current academic theory-production (including political theory) positions the otherness of past authors just as these imperial reformers did, I argue that we must broach something like a China-origins claim if we are to render *culturally*-other as well as *historically*-other thought capable of disciplining the present and future production of knowledge rather than simply serving as a target of inclusion or assimilation. Doing so, we blur self/foreign and history/culture binaries, to enable future innovation of thought on radically new terms.

Debate over the thesis from the 1860s onward reveals that what is at stake in de-parochializing knowledge-production is not necessarily the specific content of knowledge but what I call its terms of innovation: the conditions under which new knowledge is recognized as a contribution to knowledge per se rather than as something deviant, irrelevant, or uninteresting. These stakes were articulated explicitly in 1895, when intellectuals responded to China’s unexpected loss of territory to Japan, a former tribute state of the Qing whose culture was long considered by Chinese as derivative and inferior. Japan’s victory was widely attributed to the success of the Meiji government in rapidly adopting Western forms of knowledge—not only of engineering and technology but also of military tactics, social organization, and political theory. The defeat sparked a profound self-examination on the part of Chinese elites in regard to their own lack of modernization, which led to a marked deepening of earlier reform efforts. These conversations articulated their difference from earlier and in their view inadequately tepid attempts at transformation by reference to the ancient metaphysical binary between “structuring” or “essence” (*ti*), on the one hand, and mere “efficacy” or “usefulness” (*yong*), on the other. Where earlier reformers merely wanted to adopt the “useful” aspects of Western technology, late nineteenth-century thinkers urged the mutually interdependent relationship between such technical knowledge and the Western “structures” or essentials that made

such technology function in society. Reformers such as Yan Fu (1854–1921)—one of the earliest and most well-known students to have studied abroad, in England at the Royal Naval Academy—called to his fellow Chinese to embrace freedom, participation in government and constitutional monarchy. To do otherwise, warned Yan, would be to risk the continued failure of their importation of Western knowledge.

Chapter 4 draws on the ideas that motivated the Reform Movement of 1898 (*wu xu bianfa*), particularly the concept of *bianfa*—a “change of institutions” that was also at the same time a transformation of those patterns or “referents” that enable and legitimate knowledge of particular kinds. In urging a constitutional monarchy, the revision of educational curricula, and the limited devolution of political power to local participatory bodies, reformers such as Liang Qichao (1873–1929) explicitly acknowledge that social and political reform amounts to more than changing individual minds. He and his co-reformers, including Yan Fu and Tan Sitong (1865–1898), recognize knowledge as a socially mediated practice. In this sense, they accept the claim of many current postcolonial and comparative political theorists that knowledge is always already a social product. Yet by attending to reform of the institutions by which we come to know and learn, these reformers target the very background conditions that structure the character of our knowledge. Facing the ongoing failure of Chinese society to successfully reproduce the “wealth and power” of Western nations, the 1898 reformers were keenly aware that merely “including” foreign thought in existing debates would be to assume that it shares the same logic and structure—what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “evidentiary rules”—that characterize defensible argument in our own communities. Effacing its difference in this respect would leave us unable to produce knowledge on new or different terms, with the effect that we would in some ways continue to reproduce, as opposed to displace, our existing ethnocentrism.

Their goal thus goes beyond merely epistemological efforts to acknowledge the particularity of foreign others or negotiate the exclusions inherent in all claims to knowledge. I argue that they effectively show how learning from others can be a political as well as an epistemological task: that is, the distinctive features of knowledge are not irreducibly embedded in particular, individual minds, but are publicly accessible and collectively tractable, subject to ongoing amendment and participation by many different people over time. These reformers thus continue the method first embodied in the “Chinese origins” thesis examined in the previous chapter, by rethinking how we engage both historical and cultural others as sources of transformative learning. Their debate shows that *without*

such attempts to “change referents,” engaging thought typically excluded from our own conversations would collapse into merely a project of inclusion, rather than of de-parochialization.

The next two chapters consider in detail the kinds of techniques for producing new knowledge explored by specific members of this reform generation. Chapter 5 examines Tan Sitong’s theory of “totalistic Westernization” (*quanpan Xi hua*), in which he creatively appropriates the pervasive essence/function (*ti/yong*) dichotomy to forge new insight into how socially embedded meaning might move from one place to another. In most contemporary discourse, the essence/function dichotomy served to distinguish the value of the Chinese “essence” from the merely “functional” value of Euro-American techno-science. In Tan’s work, however, essence/function—and the analogous binary of way/vessel (*dao/qi*)—serve a much more radical end: Tan draws from commentaries on the ancient Chinese classic the *Book of Changes* to argue not only that *dao* and *qi* are mutually constitutive, but that because of this interdependency, the reproduction of the physical forms and standardized practices Tan identifies with *qi* could literally act as vessels to carry the logics and forms of knowledge (*ti, dao*) that constituted Western cultural practices. Working from these metaphysical assumptions about the connections between concrete practices and objects, on the one hand, and the forms of life they support, on the other, he draws attention to the possibility of authentic imitation (*xiaofa*) of foreign cultures, culminating in totalistic Westernization. His ambitions to authenticity, however, do not affirm a cultural essence so much as they recognize the process of meaning-production as driven by a necessary tension between continuity or replication, on the one hand, and innovation and interpretation, on the other.

Chapter 6 considers another facet of Tan’s, Liang’s, and Yan’s political program: the construction of *qun*, “communities” that both turned on, even as they enabled, the transmission of knowledge from Western to Chinese locales. Unlike Tan’s *qi*, a metaphysical concept self-consciously indebted to earlier Chinese thought, *qun* was an appropriation from early Chinese texts to translate the new idea of “community” or “grouping”—identified within the emerging Euro-American discipline of sociology as central to the economic and political strength of Westerners. Liang, Tan, and Yan urge a specialized “study of communities” (*qunxue*) to create *qun* in the process of studying them as objects of learning. Actualized in community-building projects such as reformist study societies (*xuehui*) encouraged by Tan and Liang in Hunan province, *qunxue* inaugurates a “bootstrapping” process that tacks between the existing reality of a community, on the one hand, and the knowledge that eventually comes to be

produced about as well as within it, on the other. Their approach contrasts in sharp ways with the particularist accounts described in Chapter 2, which typically hold that communities mark the contextual limitations to the application of knowledge generated elsewhere. Yan and Liang rather ask a more political question: how might communities be created or transformed to broaden the circulation and application of knowledge—and vice versa?

These conversations continued, albeit with different emphases, after the Revolution of 1911 ended the dynastic system and established a republic. When the 1898 Reform Movement was brought to an end by a palace coup merely one hundred days after it began, radicals sought more dramatic solutions. Revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen and Huang Xing eventually succeeded in overthrowing the Manchu dynasty and established republican rule for the first time in China's history in January 1912. Unfortunately, the monopolization of the parliament—and attempted self-enthronement—by Yuan Shikai, a former Qing general and commander of a regional army, undermined the new republican institutions. Unable to sustain control over the multiple regional forces that had mutinied against the Qing, the republican government collapsed as various warlords claimed jurisdiction over wide swaths of territory.

During this time, intellectual life continued, albeit under uncertain and sometimes dangerous conditions. Thinkers after 1911 asked questions about why Chinese republican government had failed, and many prominent public intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu deemed the answer to be the inadequate modernization of China's culture. Hu, Chen, and other thinkers associated with the New Culture and May Fourth movements (circa 1915–1927) called for iconoclastic rejection of “traditional” Chinese thought and practices, which they associated with Confucianism. In their place they continued Tan Sitong's call for a profound, and in some cases totalistic, Westernization of China's social, political, and cultural institutions as well as cultivation of a strong national consciousness. They advocated the creation of a vernacular literature, and the deeper institutionalization of democracy and scientific methods of inquiry, to develop a “modern” China that could keep up with global measures of progress. Alongside these radical voices, moderates turned attention to the more constructive role China and its culture could play in a future world order.

In the next two chapters I consider how such political interventions, as Chinese reformers increasingly discovered, trouble the ease with which we link spatially situated communities to particular kinds of pasts. The relationship of the past to the present plays a major role in particularist

accounts of cultural engagement: scholars such as Roxanne Euben, Charles Taylor, and Fred Dallmayr argue that because the past structures the background conditions within which we are irreducibly embedded, it constrains the extent to which we can convert to other forms of thinking. Yet at a time when not only connections to the past, but also the very identity of the past itself, was profoundly uncertain, Chinese intellectuals could not easily draw lines around the history that is supposed to inform their theorizing or the communities that purportedly inscribe it. These questions gained salience for Chinese intellectuals as increasing numbers of students had opportunities to travel and study overseas. Their increasing familiarity with the diversity of the “West,” and a concomitant reflection on the apparent failure of the Chinese to establish modern democratic government, drew attention to the ways in which cultures were situated in time—not only in the sense that some cultures were more “advanced” than others with respect to evolutionary progress but also that cultural products were recognized as products of specific kinds of dynamic histories.

This realization, as I explain in Chapter 7, enabled a more productive way of reproducing Western cultures, by projecting their pasts into the Chinese future. The question for both moderate and radical voices of the May Fourth movement was not “how might we gain awareness of the limitations of our own past, including its influence on how and why we produce knowledge?” but rather “how might we act to collectively reproduce (in the future) the conditions under which knowledge has been produced (in the past) in various Western locales?” These questions were centered, for both radical participants such as Chen Duxiu and more moderate voices such as Du Yaquan, on how China’s past might be situated as “global” or at least understood as part of a larger world. Might this global character—as many May Fourth radicals believed—be a project undertaken in the present aiming toward the transformations of future generations, rather than a given heritage received from the past whose premises we reproduce? And how does our mode of interpreting the past authorize or create new communities in the present—including not only political communities at the national and international levels but also communities of shared argument and knowledge that span national, cultural, and other territorialized identities? By articulating their place in this global, shared history, both radical and moderate May Fourth thinkers forged diverse connections to Euro-American communities heretofore seen as culturally distant.

By troubling the link between past and present, these debates further undermine the assumption that historical background conditions necessarily

shape thinking in specific ways or remain permanently intractable to transformation in the present. In Chapter 8, I examine how this possibility was explicitly confronted by Zhang Shizhao as early as 1918, when he interrogated the ontological conditions of the “new” culture called for by radical intellectuals. Zhang asserted that novelty could never be understood absent the continuities that rendered newness intelligible as such. His insistence on the continuity between past and present was challenged by Zhang Dong-sun and Li Dazhao, who interrogated Zhang’s connections between historically situated practices, languages, and thought, on the one hand, and the capacity of members of existing communities to engage that material, on the other. At the core of this debate over the ontological possibility of a truly Westernized “new” culture in China was the question: do existing traditions create communities, whose members then go on to reinterpret tradition in light of unprecedented dilemmas? Or can members of existing communities, when confronted with the unprecedented, inaugurate new traditions that efface continuities to some given past? The old/new debate wrestled with the idea that the past, far from being a given quantity, must be positioned in particular ways so as to enable the production of new knowledge. The debate supplied a number of answers rather than pronouncing a single alternative, suggesting the degree to which connections to the past are not transparently given but rather are subject to interpretation, debate, and even deliberate reconstruction.

The concluding chapter draws together these various debates by showing how their attention to learning across space and time offer new insights into how we might think about engaging otherness. From the perspective of space, these thinkers reveal how ideas are always distributed across persons in ways that allow for idiosyncratic interpretation even as they remain meaningfully social. As such, the question for engaging difference is not always best understood as how to engage differently embedded individuals, but rather as how to gain familiarity with the broader terms of debate circulating in unfamiliar communities of knowledge. The spatial distribution of *all* ideas, in fact, suggests that their mobility *across* persons and communities is less akin to translation or assimilation and more akin to the ordinary learning that takes place within communities and which continually converts individuals to new ways of thinking. From the perspective of time, these debates—particularly those that erupted after the May Fourth movement—draw attention to the extent to which incommensurability may not necessarily figure in, or be paradigmatic for, all instances of cross-cultural engagement, because they reveal incommensurability to be a synchronic rather than a diachronic phenomenon. Over time, the conditions under which

two beliefs or ideas are seen to be incommensurable are themselves negotiable, largely through the ways in which the people who adhere to such beliefs change their minds, come together in new communities, or reinterpret the past.

On this basis, I call for collective, ongoing revision of our own communities of argument, particularly those that dominate the academic production of knowledge. Rather than continue to affirm our embeddedness in Europeanized categories, I suggest that scholars create or join *qun* to learn and produce research in other languages, transform their work to reflect the disciplinary standards of new audiences, and otherwise attempt to institutionally and politically transform the conditions under which they produce knowledge. This book is one, obviously partial, contribution to what must necessarily be an ongoing, collective effort that will unfold across time and space. But I hope that in offering an alternative view by which we might transform our relationship to the communities that sustain the production of our knowledge, I show how little we are justified in assuming that our parochial starting points necessarily circumscribe the breadth or depth of their eventual displacement.

WESTERN LEARNING AS THEORETICAL RESOURCE

These various positions on Western Learning signal just how contested was the process of what I am calling “de-parochialization” in China. Its goals and methods were resisted and reformed over decades by thinkers from all points of the political spectrum, and many complained that its goals were never fully realized. Whatever its drawbacks, however, such protraction explains why Chinese conversations about Western Learning offer such a rich and insightful source for theorizing engagements with foreign knowledge. Other reformers, in countries now known as Japan, Russia, and Thailand, pursued more aggressive projects of borrowing from foreign (usually but not always Euro-American) systems of thought, law, or society. But because the projects in these communities were so successful or rapid, dissenters had fewer opportunities to explain their objections to such projects, and defenders had less need to explain and explore their reasons for pursuing them. In China, in contrast, precisely because there was so much debate about what the project of Western Learning might entail and whether it was warranted, and across such a long stretch of time in which international and domestic conditions were changing so rapidly, there exists a broader exploration of various facets of the effort to learn from foreign others. As a result,

debates over Western Learning produced one of the most sustained, syncretic, wide-ranging, and theoretically rich conversations in human history, on a topic of both popular and intellectual consequence: how, should, and *can* we learn from the thought and practices of others who occupy different spaces and times?

This book takes those conversations seriously as theoretical resources for constructing a new approach to engagement across difference, particularly but not exclusively cultural difference. But before I proceed, I should consider possible objections to my use of these materials in this way. If true, these objections would threaten the practicality of my conclusions, the historical accuracy of my readings of these materials, or both. As I see it there are at least two categories of objections: the first argues that discussions about Western Learning are not theoretical interventions into a more general dilemma about what and how to learn from foreign others but are the discursive desiderata of something else that is “really going on,” such as pre-emptive self-colonization, modernization, or a response to an external threat. Relatedly, the instrumental goal of some early advocates of Western Learning to obtain “wealth and power” may disqualify the discourse from serious consideration as a theoretical resource. The second category of objections, and the one most difficult to answer, is that my own claim to be disciplined by this Western Learning conversation is self-contradictory: the intellectual resources whose inadequacies prompt one side to look to the other for guidance are the same resources from which the other expects salvation. That is, if I were really learning from them, I should pursue my own “Western Learning” more strenuously, not turn to the Chinese sources from which these thinkers were (in some cases desperately) trying to distance themselves! Moreover, in considering the possibility of forming and becoming disciplined by new communities of knowledge, I do not pursue a true means of “de-parochialization” but rather entrench a different kind of parochialism, this time based on Chinese rather than Western sources and ideas.

Regarding the first set of objections: might the Western Learning conversation be reducible to, or at least more meaningfully understood in terms of, some phenomenon other than a creative theorization of learning from difference? It is of course true that any event or phenomenon can be understood in many different ways, and this era of Chinese history is indelibly marked by incursions of imperialism as well as attempts by Chinese and foreigners to industrialize the economy, open Chinese domestic markets, and institutionalize modern diplomacy. These historical transitions, which comprise typical definitions of “modernization,” are emblemized by the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century, in which the

superior military of a European power forced China to open its markets to British trade. I am not denying these realities; nor am I denying that the thinkers I study in this book are in crucial ways implicated in these processes. I am only pointing out that even if the motivations of these thinkers really could be *totally* reducible to such instrumental motivations as the pursuit of wealth and power or the construction of a modern nation-state, it hardly evacuates their work of broader theoretical significance. As Brian Barry has noted, we might concede that William Shakespeare very likely wrote for money. “Still, there is something rather breathtaking in the idea that the chief gainer from the existence of Shakespeare’s plays is Shakespeare’s bank account.”¹⁷ The instrumentalism motivating a specific idea or set of debates is arguably even less relevant for the production of theory, for two reasons. First, it is nearly a truism that theoretical innovation and reflection are spurred by moments of crisis; their insights are rendered particularly lucid when people or thinkers face the threat of extinction. As Sheldon Wolin has explained, “The need to establish a field of intelligible meanings among political phenomena becomes acute when traditional social and political arrangements appear to be breaking down into a kind of primal condition.”¹⁸ As reformers argue about what to do and how to do it, their attempts at self-preservation in the face of stronger external threats necessarily invite critical reflection upon the value and identity of existing values, institutions, and methods, as well as the kinds of innovations that reform might seek to instill. These arguments retain theoretical valence even if they stem from what may be the most instrumental motivation of all, self-preservation.

Second, and perhaps more important, theory (as I have argued elsewhere) is itself constituted by the process of generalizing from one particular context to another.¹⁹ That is, the specific claims that constitute a “theory” implicitly or explicitly articulate similarities between two or more otherwise distinct contexts in order to meaningfully apply an idea from one to the other. Theorizing involves the application of localized insight to other places, persons, and times. Difference is inherent in its very execution because, as a form of generalization, theorization unites diverse existences by claiming them to be intelligible as forms of the same thing. Theory takes shape by advancing claims about comparative similarity that name (and by naming, unite) a series of heretofore specific and unconnected circumstances as iterations of some larger, more general

17. Barry, *Culture and Equality*, 31.

18. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 218.

19. Jenco, “On the Possibility of Chinese Thought as Global Theory.”