Widely considered to be the most important event in modern Chinese intellectual history, the May Fourth Movement was actually an amalgamation of three different historical episodes: a language reform pushing to replace classical Chinese with the vernacular (1916–1917), a series of student protests after the Allied Powers unilaterally gave the former German colonies in Shandong to Japan (1919), and a totalistic critique of the Confucian tradition, launched by the writers of New Youth magazine (1915–1923). Despite its diverse origins, the May Fourth Movement expressed Chinese intellectuals’ strong determination to rebuild their country based on the European model. With the language reform, the Chinese intellectuals expanded the cultural field such that the production of knowledge was no longer dominated by educated elites, who were steeped in classical learning. With the anti-imperialist protests, the Chinese intellectuals instilled in their fellow citizens (especially the youth) a strong identification with the new Chinese nation founded after the 1911 Revolution. With the critique of the Confucian tradition, the Chinese intellectuals promoted a new society based on individuals rather than family, kinship, and local networks.

This determination to adopt the European model was the result of decades of soul-searching. To the May Fourth intellectuals, the repeated foreign defeats since 1840, the failure of the late Qing reforms (1860–1911), and the political chaos after the 1911 Revolution all indicated that the Chinese could no longer rely on their splendid tradition to provide answers to the challenge of the Eurocentric global order. In particular, the sophistication of European weaponry and machinery, the idealism of bringing the multitude into political unity, and the global vision of lifting the whole world to a new level of development proved far more advanced than the Chinese could have imagined. Strongly believing in “the survival of the fittest,” the May Fourth intellectuals concluded that China had no choice but to follow the European path. To drive home their...
point, they argued that China must learn science and democracy, with science meaning rationality in the Western tradition and democracy the pluralistic polity of modern Europe.²

Despite the predominance of the May Fourth view, there was resistance during the Republican period (1911–1949). On several occasions, critics even publicly questioned the two underlying assumptions of the May Fourth Movement: the efficacy of rationality in building a modern society and economy, and the imperative of developing a modern individuality by having a pluralistic and populist government. For a long time, these challenges to the May Fourth view were brushed aside as ill-advised attempts to stop China from westernizing.³ But from today’s perspective, these critics can be described as cultural conservatives who emphasized the particularity of China because of its unique culture, and affirmed the value of China’s past achievements based on a careful study of its history. More importantly, these critics were not traditionalists who upheld the past to resist change in the present. Rather, they supported what we call “alternative modernity” by charting a unique path for China’s modernization based on its historical and cultural background.⁴ As advocates of modernization, they strongly believed that China must modernize in order to compete successfully in the twentieth century. But unlike the May Fourth intellectuals, they separated modernization from westernization. While they believed that the developments in Europe during the last two centuries offered valuable inspiration for modernizing China, they did not see the need to follow every step that the Europeans had undertaken. Given China’s unique culture and its long history, they argued, it must modernize on its own terms while seriously taking into consideration European experiences.

To a certain extent, the “alternative modernity” in Republican China can be considered a form of “East Asian modernity.” As discussed in Chapter 2, “East Asian modernity” also emphasized the uniqueness of East Asian countries and stressed the importance of developing a different path of modernization. Nevertheless, there was a major difference between the two. Whereas “East Asian modernity” highlighted East Asia as a homogeneous region and emphasized the leadership of Japan in the region’s modernization, “alternative

² Despite its deceptively simple slogan of promoting “science and democracy,” Zhang Hao (2000) points out that there are many paradoxes inherent in the May Fourth view, such as the tension between rationalism and romanticism, scientific skepticism and religion, individualism and populism, and nationalism and globalism.

³ For a thoughtful critique of the hegemony of the May Fourth historiography, see Axel Schneider 2003.

⁴ For some studies of these cultural conservatives, see Furth 1976.