CHAPTER 6

A New Aristocracy of the Chinese Republic*

For more than half a century, from the 1920s to 1980s, the journal Xueheng 學衡 (Critical Review 1922–1933) was considered “backward-looking,” exemplifying the “limits of change” in a rapidly modernizing China.¹ A stronghold of opposition to the May Fourth Movement, the journal represents the other side—and the losing side—in the early twentieth-century debate on Chinese modernity. For some scholars, the journal seemed clearly outdated because it published articles in classical Chinese and promoted Confucianism to counter the industrialized West.²

Since the 1990s, the Xueheng has received more positive assessment. As part of de-centering the May Fourth Movement in the study of modern Chinese history, many scholars have re-examined the journal to look for an alternative vision of Chinese modernity.³ These studies reveal important dimensions of the journal that have long been ignored or suppressed. From Yue Daiyun’s 樂黛云 redefinition of conservatism to Lydia Liu’s studies of “translingual practice,” and from Shen Weiwei’s 沈衛威 biographical accounts of Xueheng writers to Zheng Shiqu’s 鄭師渠 critical analysis of the journal’s articles,

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² The critique of the Xueheng began with Lu Xun 魯迅 (1905–1936). See his 1922 article, “Gu Xueheng” 估學衡 (An assessment of Xueheng) in Lu Xun 1982, pp. 377–9. See also Mao Dun’s 茅盾 criticism of Wu Mi’s 吳宓 literary theory in his 1921 article “Xieshi xiaoshou zhi liubi” 寫實小說之流弊 (Explaining the pitfalls of realistic novels), reprinted in Li Jikai and Liu Ruichun 2001, pp. 642–5. This critique of the Xueheng continued on until the 1980s when Chinese scholars turned their attention on the contribution of the “conservative thinkers” in the debate on Chinese modernity.

³ For prime examples of this negative view of Xueheng, see Tse-tsung Chow 1960, pp. 282–3, 323; Li Zehou 1987, pp. 50–121.

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recent research makes it clear that the Xueheng writers were as cosmopolitan, progressive, and present-minded as the New Youth iconoclasts. Yet they approached the question of Chinese modernity differently and reached opposite conclusions. Instead of viewing modernity as a complete break with the past, they considered it as a dynamic process that did not require a violent attack on Chinese tradition. Rather than seeing modernity as the uncritical acceptance of the supremacy of the industrialized West, they understood it as a dialogue between the local and the global, one in which both sides played an equal role. This discovery regarding Xueheng not only calls into question the singular form of Chinese modernity promoted by the May Fourth Movement, it has also prompted some contemporary Chinese scholars to call for a wholesale re-thinking of the social and cultural history of modern China.

Thus far, inspiring as it is, the rediscovery of Xueheng has not touched upon one critical aspect of the journal, namely, its promotion of a social-political agenda by selectively presenting its own distinctive image of the West. While it is clear that the journal's major writers were Western-trained and well informed regarding the contemporary scholarship of Europe and the United States, little attention has been paid to their appropriation of Western knowledge as a form of “cultural capital”—an asset that would make them legitimate players in intellectual debate. As with the New Youth iconoclasts, the Xueheng writers went abroad to acquire foreign academic credentials, and came home to use those credentials to lend authority to their views on Chinese modernity. In a move similar to the New Youth iconoclasts' creative use of John Dewey's pragmatism in advancing their social-political agenda, they re-invented Western knowledge (e.g., comparative cultural studies) to bolster their position in the debate on Chinese modernity. Given their cosmopolitanism and their experience abroad, the question for us is not their knowledge of the West but their vision of Chinese modernity in appropriating the West.

In this chapter, I focus on Wu Mi 吳宓 (1894–1978), the chief editor of Xueheng. A student of Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) at Harvard University, Wu

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