Chapter 3

Split Time: Enlightenment and Its Discontent

To my mind, then, if we can find no way out, what we need are dreams; but not dreams of the future, just dreams of the present.

Lu Xun, “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?”

Perhaps, no period in modern Chinese history is like the May Fourth era when there was an unprecedented discrepancy between transcendent time and lived time, as intellectuals were eager to break away from tradition. They commonly used metaphors like Lu Xun’s ‘iron house,’ Guo Moruo’s ‘crystal cage,’ or prison, or shackles to describe the Confucian tradition. Through such terms we see lived time portrayed as unbearable, a time from which rebellious young men and women were deeply wounded while trying to escape. Yet they fell back on a vision of the trend of time as shi-force.

The May Fourth period is normally associated with youth, characterized by terms such as rebellious, iconoclastic, individualistic, and revolutionary. However, as David Der-wei Wang argues, no late Qing, no May Fourth: the May Fourth generation in fact inherited and continued the same ‘modern’ projects as the late Qing generation.1 To be sure, the rhetoric of the ‘old’ and ‘young’ had been prevalent during the late Qing period. Whereas Liang Qichao’s ‘young China’ attempted to accentuate youthful energy within the old empire, less than two decades later Chen Duxiu’s declaration of the ‘youth’ in the first issue of New Youth directly targeted the ‘old’ and justified the spirit of rebellion.2 What they shared is not only what C. T. Hsia calls the “obsession with China,”3 but also the disappointment and concern with the present. When history reached an intersection leading to multiple possibilities, both generations

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2 In the first issue of New Youth in 1915, Chen Duxiu challenged the long-standing Confucian deference toward elders by celebrating youth: “Youth is like early spring, like the rising sun, like the trees and grass in bud, like a newly sharpened blade.” The original title of the periodical is The Youth, later changed into New Youth in 1916.

sought to delineate the right path to follow the right historical trend and initiate change.

Nevertheless, whereas the late Qing scholars were obsessed with the ‘failure’ of the present and interested in imagining a future based on a moral and glorious heritage, the May Fourth generation were mostly motivated to smash that heritage. They were not certain, or in agreement with each other, on what they wanted for the future, but they were all clear what they did not want. In this sense, the May Fourth enlightenment movement is but another attempt at *grounding* the present, awaiting the more deterministic *shi*-force to reveal its historical pattern.

In this chapter, the discussion of the temporal character of this period starts with the intellectual debates of the time, then the historical plays by Guo Moruo and Ouyang Yuqian, concluding with Lu Xun’s short stories in *Old Tales Retold* (*Gushi xinbian*), which best attest to the discontent with the enlightenment. Without denying the intellectually creative agency in defining China and finding the national cure, I am more interested in the gap, discrepancy, doubt, and retreat in their novel experiments. My interest also lies in the ambivalent moral agency, a moral agency that intellectuals adopted yet at once paralyzed them by subjecting them to a larger historical trend.

### The Rebellious Present: Iconoclasm and its Pitfalls

During the May Fourth period, intellectuals were obsessed with the ‘new.’ Numerous theorists and multiple media, magazines and newspapers alike, devoted themselves to producing ‘new literature,’ ‘new fiction,’ ‘new drama,’ ‘new culture,’ etc., to announce the break from the past and define the present. ‘Era’ or ‘times’ (*shidai*) became fashionable words to formulate arguments in literary debates. For instance, Zhou Zuoren suggested that ‘era’ be the only key term and standard in judging literary works when he advocated ‘humane literature’ in 1918.4 Cheng Fangwu argued that literature should shoulder the mission of the ‘era.’5 And Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun) emphasized that ‘Mr. Era’ would not allow the restoration of or reversion to the past (*fu gu*) in the literary

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