CHAPTER ONE
RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT FOR CONTEMPORARY CHINESE THOUGHT

1. Impact and Response

Contemporary historians are used to using the model of ‘Western impact—Chinese response’ to describe the contemporary development of China since the Opium Wars. But in the last few decades a few scholars have suggested a different model. This is not only because Toynbee’s theory of impact and response has come in for criticism and re-consideration, but because the whole of the last hundred years of Chinese history cannot be solely explained as an external reaction to contemporary civilisation represented by the West. The mutual clash of China and the West must also be treated via China’s own modernisation. Moreover, considering matters from a broad view of culture, how pre-modern Chinese culture was able to give a creative response to modernised western culture remains an important topic for contemporary Chinese culture. Basically, a cultural identity with deep spiritual roots—a stubborn cultural tradition of cultural conservatism—and an anti-traditional consciousness born of the urgent needs of modernisation are the two aspects whose overlapping interaction has formed the chessboard of contemporary Chinese culture.

Already over 350 years ago, the Confucian tradition encountered western Christianity, but it was only in the mid nineteenth century that it encountered a forceful challenge and pressure from western culture. From this moment on, the development of Chinese Confucian culture was unable to resolve the matter of its links with a western culture that exerted strong pressure. After the Opium Wars, Wei Yuan proposed “following the superior technology of the barbarians”; Feng Guifen advocated learning from the West. Cf. Ssu-yu Teng & John King Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*. Cf. Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 3.

Translator’s note: For more detail on the persons mentioned here and their background, see Yen-p’ing Hao & Erh-min Wang, “Changing Views of Western Relations, 1840–1895.”
to lay hold of western military and industrial technology while the China of traditional Confucian Learning would retain its status at the centre of a great country. Later Xu Shou and Li Shanlan proposed that to study western naval and artillery technology one would first have to study geometry, mathematics and physics. Later with the support of the Western Learning Movement they went on to recommend establishing schools, setting up hospitals and running industry and commerce so as to strengthen the state. This shows that Chinese people in the latter part of the nineteenth century, thanks to technology, businesses, democracy and other such means, were able to gradually gain a deeper understanding of contemporary western civilisation. Later there was no longer any reference to Wei Yuan’s “overcoming the barbarians”. Feng Guifen and Wang Tao both advocated “change of means but no change of the Way.” Zheng Guanying spoke of “Chinese studies for essentials; Western studies as secondary.” Zhang Zhidong’s famous “Chinese studies as the substance; Western studies as the means” was accepted by almost all advocates of ‘Western Affairs’ and became very representative of a widespread understanding. In a different area, the utopian socialism of the three revolutionaries, Hong Xiuquan, Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen, was related to the Confucian socialism of traditional Chinese culture.4 This is especially evident in Kang Youwei’s thoughts on Great Harmony.

All of these ways of thinking bear witness to a Chinese cultural nationalism. In a time of imperialism and national liberation, cultural nationalism and political nationalism are intertwined. A famous scholar of the time, Wang Guowei, once described it very aptly with the phrase “love what you do not trust, trust what you do not love.” Levenson held that this phrase is highly indicative of the contradictory psychology of early contemporary Chinese intellectuals who, on intellectual grounds, acknowledged the good points of western culture but who, on emotional grounds, rejected it, and who, on emotional grounds, were attached to traditional culture but on intellectual grounds rejected it.5 Yet this psychology can only be fully understood with respect to

4 Translator’s note: Hong Xiuquan led the Taiping Revolt in the mid-nineteenth century; Kang Youwei was associated with reform under the Guangxu Emperor at the end of the century; Sun Yat-sen established the Republic on 1 January 1912.

5 Cf. Joseph R. Levenson, Confucian China and its Modern Fate, 95: “[T]he cautious eclectics, protesting their perfect loyalty to the basic Chinese values, believed that immobility would be a self-defeating tactic and an impossible ideal. The only alternative to outright destruction of Chinese civilization by foreign conquerors was selective