PART TWO

GENERAL HISTORY AND WORLD HISTORY
In the midst of the transformative currents in early 20th century thought and political culture in China, a modern genre of Chinese history known as “general history” (tongshi 通史) appeared. The most familiar form of historical writing to general Chinese readers today, this genre was created by historians to fulfill the need for a sense of China’s identity, the need to understand China’s heritage from the past during this time of rapid change. The earliest phase in the development of these general histories began before the collapse of the Qing dynasty, about the time the idea of nation was emerging in the 1890s and 1900s. It was also when the first halting steps were being taken in reforms that led to what would become the post dynastic polity. My aim here is to examine the beginnings of this new genre to assess what made it different from past historical writing. Over the course of the next several decades, the historians creating the genre were consciously working at shaping a form of new historical writing for civil society, writing free of the authoritative gestalt of the dynastic polity with its organic necessity for a historical narrative submissive to its internal requirements for legitimation.

During and preceding the period in which this new historical form was beginning to reweave the tapestry of historical memory out of threads from the past and the present, the “present”\(^1\) was an agonizing time of internal rebellion and division, of humiliating military defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1895, aggressive moves by other foreign

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\(^1\) Wilson 1992 stresses the framework of the “present” in studying the political culture of the transformational Bakumatsu period in 19th century Japan. Cohen 1997 develops the same kind of contextual approach.