Growing interest in late Qing fiction in recent years has only begun to revise our conceptions of modern Chinese literature. Although historians and literary scholars in China and Japan have been studying this period for some time, its bewildering spectrum of genres and innovations seems to defy existing frameworks of literary historiography. While Liu E 劉鶚 (1857–1909) and Wu Jianren 吳趼人 (1866–1910) have long been heralded as masters of the genre of “fiction of social critique” (qianze xiaoshuo 譴責小說), many late Qing popular fiction writers did not prefer to maintain an intellectually critical distance from the political scandals that palpably shaped the urban landscape. On the contrary, commercially minded writers, keenly aware of the marketability of sensationalism, were eager to tap into the salacious details of the quickly modernizing urban scene, transformed by new forms of knowledge through popularized Western science, technology, and perceptions of individualism.

The writing of late Qing literature was itself one of the many gestures and postulations of change during this pivotal moment of modern history and culture. A world in its own right, late nineteenth-century China was a nexus for old and new ideas, trafficking between fiction and second-rate writers and translators, and fostering a growing enthusiasm for Western science as a new source of not only pragmatic but also fantastical knowledge. It would be an exaggeration to say that this

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1 Tarumoto Teruo 樺本照雄, Shinmatsu shōsetsu kandan 清末小說閒談 (Informal discussions about late Qing fiction) (Kyoto: Hōritsu Bunkasha, 1983); Fan Boqun 范伯群, Zhongguo jinxiandai tongsu wenxue shi 中國近現代通俗文學史 (A literary history of early modern and modern Chinese vernacular fiction) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000); Yuan Jin 袁進, Zhongguo xiaoshuo de jindai biange 中國小說的近代變革 (Transformations of the Chinese fiction in the early modern period) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1992); David Wang, Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848–1911 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
worldview was empirical, scientific, and thus “modern” in nature, as the boundary between the scientific and the fantastic was often indistinct. It would be equally misleading to assess the fiction from this period according to the standards of great literature, if by “great” we mean canonical works still recognized today. It is, in fact, the oblivion of these once flourishing literary labors and cultural engagements in the modern canon that makes them all the more significant. More than fiction, they bring into relief a world that is unique in its emphasis on innovation rather than staying power, epistemic fissure instead of cohesion.

Examining this new constellation, this chapter analyzes the transposed knowledge of Western science, technology, and political nihilism, and their cultural relays through discussions of radicalism, female assassins, and heroism in early twentieth-century Chinese fiction. By looking at the different cultural and cross-cultural preoccupations that converged on sensationalizing the image of the female assassin, I am interested in how the different conceptions of radical political heroism, women as agents of violence and diplomacy, the possibilities of science, and the technologization of civilization gave new intelligibility to late Qing modernity. Admittedly, one of the difficulties of this task is that the late Qing cultural topography does not provide us with clear maps of genres. Operations of science, technology, gender, civilization, politics, and literature were interstitial, productive in their clashes rather than distinct voices. The complex production of late Qing culture, furthermore, mobilized a variety of sources. The abundance of biographies, journal articles, translated and untranslated Western fiction, Japanese science fiction, and political treatises on reform testified to the efforts of a diverse community of cultural agents working for profit, novelty, and ideology. This new proximity between the native and the foreign, science and literature, generated new epistemic grounds, forging surprising analogies between unobvious realms of cultural life and rearticulating scientism as a practical power and realizable fantasy.

Taking shape in this context, literary treatments of female heroism and assassination were much more than gimmicks for print sensationalism. The tolerance for and even fascination with violence committed by women in two novels published in 1904, Nüwa shi 女媧石 (The Stone of Goddess Nüwa) and Nüyu hua 女獄花 (Female jail flower), boldly places these new women at the forefront of visionary scientific and political innovations. In their own ways, these two novels rationalize the moral ambiguity in the much flaunted but little explained notion of “civility” (wenming 文明), widely circulated as a topic of intellectual