PROLOGUE

The Beginning of the Journey

Youth is like early spring, like morning sun, like the budding flowers, and like the newly sharpened blade; it is the most precious period of a life. Youth, for a society, is like the fresh, vital cell in a body. . . . I, merely, with tears, place my plea before the fresh and vital youth, in the hope that they will achieve self-awareness, and begin to struggle.

青年如初春，如朝日，如百卉之萌動，如利刃之新發于硎，人生最可寶貴之時期也。青年之於社會，猶新鮮活潑細胞之在人身……予所欲涕泣陳詞者，惟屬望于新鮮活潑之青年，有以自覺而奮鬥耳！

—Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, “Call to Youth” 敬告青年 (1915) 1

In Ye Shengtao’s 葉聖陶 (1893–1988) novel Ni Huanzhi 倪煥之, the story begins when the young protagonist rises before dawn and leaves his home to travel along the Wusong River toward a town near Shanghai. The journey opens up a new chapter in his life. Although his boat is surrounded by darkness, he feels as if he is being showered with beams of bright light. He is imagining all the changes that will happen when he declares, “And now the curtain goes up on a new life!” 2 This moment, of course, is highly allegorical. Journey and dream, passion and promise, hope and future—these elements constitute the foundation of a master plot of China’s modern story about youth.

Ni Huanzhi was the first major Chinese novel to showcase the

1. All translations in this book are my own unless otherwise noted. The translation of this epigraph is based on Chow Tse-tsung’s with some modifications. Chow, The May Fourth Movement, 45–46.
2. Yeh Sheng-tao, Schoolmaster Ni Huan-chib, 9.
formative experiences of a modern youth. Through retelling the beginning of Ni Huanzhi’s life journey, I am trying to evoke the rich meanings that are invested in “youth,” a dominant trope that has been profoundly related to the ideas of nationhood and modernity in twentieth-century China. In this book, I aim to investigate the discursive construction of youth’s symbolic meanings and to explore how these meanings underline the novelistic narrative of modern Chinese youth’s personal development. A synthesis of cultural history and narrative analysis, this book delineates the multivalent connotations in the ideals of new youth and Young China through inquiring into their fictional representations against the backdrop of China’s constantly changing political and intellectual culture.

Ni Huanzhi’s plot is largely based on Ye Shengtao’s personal experience working as a teacher in new-style schools near Shanghai during the early Republican years. The protagonist is introduced as a youthful schoolmaster striving to experiment with various new pedagogical approaches, with an aim to fashion his students as well as himself into “new youths.” Ultimately, he wishes to set in motion comprehensive reforms of society by introducing new ideas, enlightening the people, instituting reforms, and even inciting revolution. At the beginning of his journey, Ni Huanzhi, enthusiastic and visionary, is full of great expectations. Sitting on the boat, surrounded by the impenetrable darkness, he feels exhilarated by his own inner dynamism. Such a beginning is, in the words of Edward Said, “the most important of activities,” for it formalizes “a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness.” Here, Ni Huanzhi’s very self-awareness of a new beginning is the most revolutionary part of his psychological growth: disillusioned with tradition and yearning for change, he looks toward a future that will be markedly different from the past.

3. For information on Ye Shengtao’s early life as a schoolmaster, see the biography written by his son Ye Zhishan. Ye Zhishan, *Fuqin changchang de yisheng*, in *Ye Shengtao ji*, vol. 26, 38–43.

The significance of Ni Huanzhi’s youthfulness is further highlighted through a contrast of his ardor with the shrewd attitude of a friend Jin Shubo 金樹伯, his companion on the journey. The two have not seen each other in years, and they engage in a delightful conversation. At a certain point, however, the young protagonist suddenly finds his friend Shubo already becoming “middle-aged”: “experience, acumen, worldliness were all deeply etched around his eyes.”

We learned earlier in the novel that Ni Huanzhi is “younger” than Shubo, but the discovery of the latter’s having aged so noticeably is more meaningful because it reflects how one’s mindset narrows as one ages much more than what a person’s biological age reveals. The two friends take opposite attitudes toward the significance of “ideal”: when uttering this word, “Huanzhi’s eyes were alight with enthusiasm,” whereas Shubo would simply reduce its meaning to “amusing himself.” The words “amusing himself” annoy Huanzhi—“and it struck him that Shubo’s four or five years of idleness at home had given him a jaundiced eye.”

It is exactly at this moment that a strange feeling wells up in Huanzhi’s heart: Shubo has become “older.” In the mind of Ni Huanzhi, youthfulness is associated with passion and idealism, and a young person should always be ready to break with tradition and embrace a new beginning both in his own life and for his struggle to reform the nation. Thus, for Ni Huanzhi as well as for Ye Shengtao, who uses his character to voice the spirit of the new youth generation, youth is not essentially a category of age, but rather a symbol that embodies an array of lofty ideals: newness, progress, and above all, the vision of national rejuvenation.

A comparison of Ni Huanzhi’s life story with Ye Shengtao’s life experience indicates that Ni Huanzhi’s journey begins approximately in the middle of the 1910s. It was roughly around

5. Yeh Sheng-tao, Schoolteacher Ni Huan-chih, 12.
6. Ibid., 9–12.
7. Ye Shengtao’s original name was Ye Shaojun 葉紹鈞. In spring 1917, Ye Shaojun was invited by the educator Wu Binruo 吳賓若 to teach in a new-style school in the small town of Luzhi甪直. In Ye’s biography, written by his son Ye
this time that Chen Duxiu’s 陳獨秀 (1879–1942) journal Xin qingnian 新青年 (New youth) began to exert impact over educated readers. 8 New Youth was the most important periodical emerging from China’s New Culture Movement (1915–19), which waged a totalistic cultural war on Chinese tradition and aimed at a radical reform of Chinese society (see figure 1). 9 The magazine, which Chen founded in 1915, popularized a new image of youth as the leading force of China’s social reform and created a cult of youth among enlightenment intellectuals, who placed their hope for China’s progress on young people. It was the magazine and the New Culture Movement that can be credited with creating a new identity for Chinese youths: xin qingnian (new youth). As illustrated by Chen Duxiu’s eloquent statement (quoted at the beginning of this prologue) that opens the first volume of New Youth, not only is youth considered the most precious period of a life, but it is also young people, through Chen’s “call to youth,” who have been designated as agents of change for society, “like a fresh, vital cell in a body.” 10 Interestingly, Chen Duxiu’s discourse on new youth centers on the cellular metaphor that implies a scientific view of rejuvenation, which emphasizes the necessity of a cultural reform for the nation as if it were a natural part of the metabolism for the body. 11

From the perspective of intellectual history, this symbolic signification of youth in both scientific and political terms signals an anti-traditionalism, for as Vera Schwarcz says: “In the Chinese

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8. When it was first published in 1915, Xin qingnian was called Qingnian zazhi 青年雜誌, with the French title “La Jeunesse.” But Chen Duxiu had to change the journal title to Xin qingnian because the editors of another journal also named Qingnian zazhi sued him for stealing their title.


11. For the microbiological underpinnings of the May Fourth intellectuals’ fascination with youth, see Rojas, “Of Canons and Cannibalism.”
1 Cover of *New Youth* magazine. Photography by the author.
context, where age had been assumed to be the source of all wisdom, to single out youth as the most precious repository of social creativity was, in effect, to turn tradition on its head.”\textsuperscript{12} Through this lofty image of “new youth,” Chen Duxiu and his comrades declared total war on Chinese tradition and initiated a cultural revolution that thrrove on the dynamic vision of national rejuvination—a vision that first appeared in the political thinking of late Qing reformers, but remained central in modern Chinese intellectuals’ cultural imagination and evolved in different phases of China’s modern transformation.

\textit{Ni Huanzhi} was published in 1928, nearly a decade after the glorious days of the New Culture Movement that crystallized in the image of the “new youth”: young men and young women who followed the mandate of enlightenment, embraced Westernized ideas of science and democracy, and sought direct action to put their ideals into practice. The character Ni Huanzhi is such a model new youth; he tries to “bring a new vitality to each of three arenas of his life, the pedagogical, the romantic, and the political, each time with unsatisfactory results.”\textsuperscript{13} He dreams, struggles, triumphs, and, as the later part of the novel shows, also doubts, compromises, eventually fails, and dies tragically. The novel is structured in a cycle of hope and disillusion, ideal and action, yearning and despair. The plot unfolds as a gradual process of the protagonist’s realization of his ideals, interrupted by frustrations, failures, and fatal crises; such a plot design would persist in modern Chinese novels about the youth’s psychological development. \textit{Ni Huanzhi} traces the entire life journey of its protagonist, but nevertheless the most beautiful moment is found at the beginning, when Ni Huanzhi is mesmerized by the magic of youth and lured by hope to seek his way in the world. In the rest of the novel, Ni Huanzhi repeatedly tries to find yet another new beginning in different arenas of his life, or simply to prolong the momentum of the “great beginning.”

A novel like this, deeply invested in the significance of the

\textsuperscript{12} Schwarcz, \textit{The Chinese Enlightenment}, 59.

\textsuperscript{13} Anderson, \textit{The Limits of Realism}, 110.
beginning of a journey, resembles Goethe’s account of Wilhelm Meister’s departure from home, Balzac’s depiction of a provincial youth’s pursuit of his dreams by going to Paris, and Charles Dickens’s great expectations for his young character’s personal development into a good gentleman.14 Or, to borrow the words of Lionel Trilling, it comes from a great line of novels that depict the development of a youth, who always “start[s] with a great demand upon life and a great wonder about its complexity and promise.”15 Such a line of novels is the Bildungsroman, a specific type of novelistic narrative that focuses on a youth’s psychological growth—the cultivating of a self, the fashioning of a personality, and the attempt to seek self-realization against the backdrop of historical movements. To many philosophers and literary scholars, the Bildungsroman is essentially a modern literary form: M. M. Bakhtin considers it the latest, and highest, development of the novel as a genre of realism;16 Georg Lukács sees in it the layout of the Hegelian realization of subjectivity and uses its examples to illustrate the inner form of the modern narrative;17 and Franco Moretti, from the perspective of cultural history, defines it as the “symbolic form” of modernity.18

As a Chinese Bildungsroman, Ni Huanzhi presents a modern vision of personal development and social reform mirrored through the journey of a new youth who tries to change the course of his own life as well as the fate of his country. Ni Huanzhi is only one of the first young heroes featured in modern Chinese novels that began to emerge after the May Fourth Movement (1919), which brought the new youth generation to the center stage of the political struggle for the nation’s future.19 Behind Ni

14. These plots are found, respectively, in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, Balzac’s Illusions Perdues, and Dickens’s Great Expectations.
15. Trilling, “The Princess Casamassima.”
19. On May 4, 1919, students from several colleges and universities in Beijing took to the streets to stage a massive political protest against the government’s signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which was considered to be unfair and humiliating to China. See Chow, The May Fourth Movement; Lanza, Behind the Gates.
Huanzhi stand an array of youthful characters created by modern Chinese writers—including Mei Xingsu 梅行素, Gao Juehui 高覺慧, Jiang Chunzu 蔣純祖, and Lin Daojing 林道靜, to name just a few of the most famous examples. And behind Ni Huanzhi’s youthful figure shines the radiance of the glorious and sublime image of Young China, a central symbolic sign in modern Chinese nationalist discourse, which expresses the persistent yearning for national rejuvenation. Such was the goal of many Chinese reforms and revolutions throughout the twentieth century—from the late Qing reform to the Republican Revolution, from the May Fourth Movement to left-wing political activities, and from the Nationalist campaign to the socialist transformation.

Beginning with the pre-dawn boat journey of an impressionable young man, this book ventures into the world of qingchun 青春 (green spring), a Chinese vision of youth that, as a symbolic ideal, remains central to the intellectual discourses and literary representations that characterize modern Chinese culture. This book traces the origin and development of the youth discourse prevailing among modern Chinese intellectuals, and explores the various fictional representations of young people in modern Chinese novels that integrate the individual’s Bildung to the different visions of national rejuvenation. This is a journey to a brave new world that registers both hope and uncertainty, and this is a story of Young China that shows both its brightness and its shadows.

There are many journeys, actual or fictional, that this book will usher readers into, and nearly all the chapters herein begin with descriptions of particular journeys undertaken by historical figures or fictional characters, like Ye Shengtao’s travels to Luzhi or his fictional representation of Ni Huanzhi’s great expectations for a new life path. The journey to the world of China’s “green

20. They are, respectively, the protagonists of four famous modern Chinese novels about youth: Mao Dun’s 茅盾 Hong 虹 (Rainbow, 1930), Ba Jin’s 巴金 Jia 家 (Family, 1931), Lu Ling’s 路翎 Caizhu de ernumen 財主底兒女們 (Children of the rich, 1945–48), and Yang Mo’s 楊沫 Qingchun zhi ge 青春之歌 (The song of youth, 1958).
spring” continues in the following pages, with explorations of the
discursive, cultural, and fictional configurations of youth in the
context of China’s enormous transformation from an old empire
into a modern state. This book consists of seven chapters, each of
which takes on a different aspect of modern Chinese youth dis-
course and its representation in novels from the late Qing to the
early years of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC).
Now I turn to the structure of the book.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the youth discourse of
modern China, and it also lays out the theoretical framework for
a cultural analysis of the Chinese Bildungsroman. In this chapter,
I first present an overview of the discourse of youth in modern
China, looking into the philological connotations of some of the
key terms that are central to the Chinese youth discourse and
examining their changing significance in China’s transition from
the ancient to the modern age, while also considering the global
context of the young nation movements around the world that
inspired the ideal for a Young China. My analysis emphasizes that
the Chinese youth discourse originated in the unique idea of “re-
juvenation”: the old regaining youth, a vision that first fascinated
late Qing writers and has since complicated the reevaluation of
tradition and, consequently, youth’s symbolization of modernity.
I bring these historical and cultural approaches to the study of the
Chinese Bildungsroman, a narrative genre that often embodies,
but can also undo, the cultural and political symbolism imposed
on the youth figure. As exemplified in Ni Huanzhi, this genre seeks
a meaning for youth through realizing certain ideals in historical
contexts. Its plot is designed to make promises come true, but it
is often accompanied by conflicts between self and society, ideal
and action, the taming of youth and its untamable dynamism.

Chapter 2 takes “old youth” as the key figure that epitomizes
the complex and multivalent connotations of the youth discourse
in the late Qing. In this chapter, I discuss the late Qing intellectual
trend that attempted to rewrite the archaic tradition into modern-
ity, and analyze Liang Qichao’s 梁鴻超 (1873–1929) discourse on
Young China in connection with his complicated approaches to
“rejuvenating” Chinese tradition. The image of “old youth” created
in Wu Jianren’s 吳趼人 (1866–1910) Xin shitou ji 新石頭記 (The new story of the stone, 1908) is the focus of the textual analysis. A product of discursive and cultural reconstruction, “old youth” is a prominent symbolic figure that reflects the cultural symptoms of the late Qing negotiations between tradition and modernity. “Old youth” is first of all an embodiment of the tradition’s revitalization, as represented by Wu Jianren’s utopian vision of a future China that is built upon China’s traditional merits. But a more subtle and ambiguous meaning of “old youth” is found in the revived Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉, the iconic youth figure transplanted from the classical Chinese literary world to a futuristic context. He is eager to engage in intellectual development, and this gives Wu Jianren’s narrative a motive of the Bildungsroman. Ironically, Baoyu’s development is interrupted by his encounters with the old youths who have already built a new China in the novel’s future world. The Bildungsroman becomes problematic in the sense that Baoyu may well be identified as an “old youth” of a different kind. His youth is timeless, but it is also meaningless because it is not a part of historical progress. Throughout the novel he is a character displaced and stuck between tradition and modernity. This second meaning of “old youth” points to the cultural ambiguity in the emerging youth discourse in the late Qing.

After the May Fourth Movement, an anti-traditional cultural position was clearly written into youth discourse, and the image of “new youth” signaled a radical turn in China’s youth movement. Chapter 3 looks into how the formative experience of the new youth generation was configured into the novelistic narrative of the Chinese Bildungsroman as exemplified by Ye Shengtao’s Ni Huanzhi. In this chapter, I analyze the cultural representation of the ideal of enlightenment through a historical investigation of the youth discourse constructed by New Youth, which came to be the leading youth magazine of the May Fourth period. My discussion elaborates on the “new youth” image as a mediator in a culture of enlightenment that began to enable the self-fashioning of educated Chinese youths. Written as a retrospective configuration of the new youth’s personal development, Ni Huanzhi builds
the master plot for a modern Chinese youth’s developmental story, which unfolds as the protagonist gradually realizes his lofty ideals. But this plot is nevertheless interrupted by a series of historical frustrations that darken the protagonist’s youthful idealism in a constant cycle of hope and disillusionment.

The changing political climate of the 1920s was marked by a leftward turn in modern Chinese literature. The enlightened “new youth” was replaced by the more radical “revolutionary youth” as a central figure in the literary imagination of this period. Chapter 4 mainly focuses on Mao Dun’s 茅盾 (1896–1981) early novels, the Shi 蝕 (Eclipse) trilogy (1927–28) and Hong 虹 (Rainbow, 1930). Written partly as a response to the problematics presented by Ni Huanzhi, these novels strove to create an ideological corrective of the Bildungsroman of the new youth generation and to impose a teleological rhetoric upon the narrative of youth’s development toward a predetermined goal. This chapter traces Mao Dun’s early literary career after the failure of the first Communist revolution, first analyzing the narrative patterns and aesthetic modes in the Eclipse trilogy, then looking at the myth of the Goddesses of Northern Europe that Mao Dun employs to historicize time in his literary vision, which eventually led him to construct a linear transformation story in Rainbow that aims to evoke historical progress. My analysis of this novel, a gendered revolutionary Bildungsroman, also draws attention to the complications and ambiguities in its representations of self-determination, sexuality, and the problem of the teleology in narrative layout.

Ba Jin 巴金 (1904–2005) was perhaps the most committed spokesman for youth among the post–May Fourth writers. Chapter 5 focuses on his early anarchist novels, and attempts to clarify the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic links between his anarchist beliefs and the creation of a cult of youth in his writings. I begin with a critical overview of the impact of anarchist thought on Ba Jin’s literary imagination, then inquire into the formal attributes of his early fictional writings that both illustrate and problematize his political faith, and finally analyze the gradual establishment
of a melodramatic approach in his novels that turns the sacrifice of youth into an aestheticized process of the “flowering of life.” This image registers Ba Jin’s ultimate vision of morality and conceives the foundational plot for almost all his early novels about youth, including *Miewang* 滅亡 (Destruction, 1928), *Xin-sheng* 新生 (New life, 1932), and *Aiqing de sanbuqu* 愛情的三部曲 (The love trilogy, 1931–33), as well as his most famous novel, *Family* 家 (Family, 1931). This is not a developmental plot, but one that instead points toward a moment of moral revelation that demands unconditioned self-devotion. Thus Ba Jin creates a different type of *Bildungsroman* that reaches its climax as the youthful vitality of the protagonist is consumed in self-sacrifice, which suspends the development of youth or, rather, fulfills the goal of its transformation upon its total consumption.

After the second Sino-Japanese War fully broke out in the summer of 1937, the journey of Chinese youths was set in an enormously different chronotope. Their wartime journey was one of exile, or forced displacement: instead of going to the metropolitan centers that had been celebrated as shrines of enlightenment and modern culture during the May Fourth period, they began to move, geographically and ideologically, in the opposite direction. Chapter 6 describes this journey to interiority. The two novels I analyze in this chapter, Lu Ling’s 路翎 (1923–94) *Caizhu de ernümen* 財主底兒女們 (Children of the rich, 1945–48) and Lu Qiao’s 鹿橋 (1919–2002) *Weiyang ge* 未央歌 (The everlasting song, 1959), both penetrate the complexities and ambiguities of individual subjectivity as they orient the youth’s journey toward the interior—not only geographically to China’s hinterland but also psychologically to the inner restlessness of a problematic self.

Chapter 7 attempts to reach an understanding of the cultural politics of youth in the early PRC through reading two novels of that period: Yang Mo’s 楊沫 (1915–85) *Qingchun zhi ge* 青春之歌 (The song of youth, 1958) and Wang Meng’s 王蒙 (b. 1934) *Qingchun wansui* 青春萬歲 (Long live youth, 1979). Both works were written in response to the Communist discourse on youth, but with subtly different approaches and styles. *The Song of Youth* can be considered a socialist *Bildungsroman*, which I define as a
literary genre that assembles a specific set of narrative conventions to show young readers the “correct” way of self-fashioning, and thus promotes the “correct” ideological thinking. While *The Song of Youth* was the most influential *Bildungsroman* in the early PRC, *Long Live Youth* made its mark by challenging the generic definition. It does not trace the full circle of a hero(ine)’s life but instead depicts the restless, ecstatic feelings of youths, breaking down the linear, step-by-step narrative of personal growth that is politically underwritten by Maoism. For this reason, Wang Meng’s novel complicates or even sabotages the political appropriation of youth in an unintentional and unexpected way. Through comparing and analyzing the two novels and their connection with the Maoist discourse on youth, I try to answer the following questions: how did the political appropriation enlarge, glorify, and also manipulate the agency of youth? How did the youth discourse help shape the national imagery? And more importantly, how did literary representations of youth endorse but also challenge the orthodox Maoist youth discourse, penetrating into the ambiguous areas of the cultural manifestation of youth, and rendering youth into a problematic subject that resists taming? The morning sun, as Mao extolls, darkens and explodes.

In the epilogue I present a brief discussion on the popular youth images in contemporary Chinese literature. From the fin-de-siècle of the twentieth century to the new age of the twenty-first century, the utopian urge for envisioning a Young China continues to prevail. But Liang Qichao’s dream has been re-appropriated and twisted in a complicated combination of political cynicism and cultural hedonism after 1989 to such an extent that a utopia of youth, as depicted in contemporary Chinese science fiction, may appear to be an uncanny reconfiguration of the vision of a stronger, wealthier nation, now populated by self-indulgent young citizens or netizens who have bidden farewell to history. The same vision of the radiant youth that Ni Huanzhi cherishes at the beginning of his journey may still be shining for the youths of a new millennium, only with the poignant turn of reorienting the journey to a virtual reality that removes the sorrows and pains from the unbearably heavy book of the *Bildungsroman*. 