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Texts and Contexts of the New Woman

The scope and depth of radical May Fourth intellectuals’ iconoclasm were arguably unique in modern history in general (Lin, The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness 6). Yet as is the case with any project redemptive in nature and transformational in objective, their modernization of China was predicated on a reconstruction of the past; they formulated a narrative of a diseased and hopeless Chinese tradition as the foundation to begin “the work of modernity” (Prasad 103). Furthermore, May Fourth intellectuals depended on the representation and deployment of women to both indict a “benighted” cultural tradition and create and consolidate their own emerging modern identity. Such a practice of othering women for the purpose of self-representation, of course, betrayed the radical intellectuals’ ties to a patriarchal tradition that they had allegedly rejected, but its capacity to anchor a metanarrative of Chinese modernity demands more than an examination of its ethical ramifications. We must examine both the historical circumstances and the textual productions that provided simultaneously the impetus and apparatus for its operation.

The Intellectual Self in Crisis

The May Fourth metanarrative of Chinese modernization gathered emotional force from a profound sense of dislocation, on both a national and individual level, that had been fermenting since the late nineteenth century. Ever since the “Opium War” of 1840–42, China’s every encounter with Western imperialism had brought national humiliation and concession of territory and sovereignty. The defeat of the Qing navy in the 1895 Sino-Japanese war by Japan, a country that had always been regarded as China’s tributary state, finally brought home to the educated members of Chinese society the irrevocable loss of China’s golden age, when the ancient empire had allegedly reigned as the center of culture and civilization. Within two weeks of the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki (April 17, 1895) between Japan and the Qing government, Kang Youwei led more than 1,200 of his fellow examination candidates (jiuren) in Beijing to present to the throne the famous “Ten Thousand Word Memorial” advocating comprehensive institu-
tional reforms (Yü 143). Ironically, these scholars’ efforts to strengthen China led to the demise of their own class. With their proposed educational reform spreading nationwide and leading to the establishment of modern schools and programs to send students to study abroad, a modern school system finally replaced the national civil service examination system (keju zhidu) in 1905. The abolition of the examination system was more than a change of format in the recruitment of civil servants. Its elimination ended the most widely accepted and time-honored channel to officialdom for scholars educated in the Confucian classics, and thus set the stage for the birth of the modern Chinese intellectual (zhishi fenzi).

Growing up amidst China’s traumatic transformation from a premodern to a modern society, May Fourth intellectuals witnessed the disintegration of the traditional framework of culture and morality. The dislodgement and erosion of Confucian ideas and values as well as the disappearance of the civil service examination system deprived them of any traditional means of actualizing the Confucian ideal of continuity and harmony between one’s inner self and the external world, and between the individual and the divine (tian ren heyi). As a result, not only were they compelled to abandon the traditional career path and change their own career choice, they were also embroiled in a profound crisis of the self that was caught between the old and the new.

The crisis of the intellectual self was manifested most noticeably in the radicalization of intellectuals in early twentieth-century China (Yü 147), for it encapsulated their struggle for a radical way to signify themselves as well as to modernize China. Ying-shi Yü observes that May Fourth intellectuals were more susceptible to political and cultural radicalization than their reformist predecessors (e.g., Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao) in that the May Fourth anti-traditionalism represented “a paradigmatic change [ . . . ] in the development of radicalism in modern China” (130). Indeed, May Fourth intellectuals not only advocated “whole-sale” and “immediate” transformations of the long-established Confucian tradition, the Way, into a variety of Western models (Yü 128), many of them also later converted to Marxism, and devoted themselves to political activities rather than literary productions.

However, a close look reveals that their project of radical modernization was deeply ingrained in their “fundamentally traditional desires to empower the self through an organic linkage with the outer world” (Denton, General Introduction 48). In other words, May Fourth intellectuals’ totalistic rejection of tradition constituted not only a crucial part of their plan to modernize China, but also a key step in their quest for a modern identity in a world rapidly changing beyond recognition, by paradoxically conceptualizing their new identity through the utility of the traditional paradigm of self-signification.

To be sure, the disassociation of modern intellectuals from state power contributed to their radicalism. Modern education, unlike classical edu-
cation, did not guarantee state employment, and modern intellectuals, no longer due for lucrative official posts, were not obliged to uphold state ideologies. But, paradoxically, it was precisely their marginalized position in state politics that spurred May Fourth intellectuals to launch a “cultural revolution” that would supposedly revitalize China. In so doing, they sought to gain political power by emphasizing the importance of culture and their status as leaders of a radical cultural movement. Radical intellectuals in fact utilized their iconoclastic stance against traditions to present themselves as leaders of Chinese modernization, thus securing for themselves a way back to the political center through the claim of moral as well as cultural authority. They had vocalized their rationale for thus completely severing ties with tradition: They declared that tradition was due for demolition because it hindered progress and national salvation. This rationale was then transformed into an indisputable proof of the worth of any “modern” project they undertook, and, by extension, established their position as the moral guardian and the architect of modernity for the Chinese nation.

Kirk Denton has argued that May Fourth intellectuals’ political commitment eventually led them to resurrect “the traditional role of the Confucian scholar-bureaucrat” (General Introduction 11). Indeed, by representing themselves essentially as both “‘servant of the state’ and . . . ‘moral critic of the ruler’” (Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text* 13), May Fourth intellectuals’ self-image ironically harked back to the Confucian model of the scholar-official.

As a central part of their project of Chinese modernization, May Fourth literary modernization also demonstrated radical intellectuals’ paradoxical practice of replicating the role of the Confucian scholar-official for the invention of a modern self. The rationale for their privileging of literary modernization had a distinct Confucian echo; for May Fourth intellectuals reaffirmed the Confucian emphasis on the cultivation of the mind as an integral part of the transformation of society (Metzger 134) by not only proposing to revitalize the nation through the enlightenment of the people but also particularly choosing literature as a vital tool in their project of nation building (see also J. Liu 106–16). However, May Fourth intellectuals also advocated the importation of Western, and hence “modern,” literary theories and devices both for the eradication of native traditions and for the establishment of their modern identity even as they surreptitiously utilized the Confucian model of self-realization to justify their radical views and practices. As a result, the literature that they produced revealed the conflict between the modern and traditional values—embodied most obviously in their discourses of iconoclasm and nationalism—that seemed to be pulling the self in opposite directions. This conflict lay at the heart of the crisis of the intellectual self at the time.

However, the acute sense of crisis also compelled May Fourth intellectuals to seek its resolution in literature, if only by invoking traditional paradigms once again. This can be seen in their attempts at achieving a fusion of
Self and Other through both their fiction and literary criticism as a means to reconcile the discourses of iconoclasm and nationalism. With regard to theoretical construction, such attempts were most visible in the overlapping literary theories of “Romanticism” and “Realism.” In the early 1920s, May Fourth participants became divided in their ideas about the new literature with the employment of these two Western literary terms, and formed two apparently mutually exclusive literary groups. While the Literary Research Association (Wenxue yanjiu hui, 1920–32) (Denton, Glossary 503) espoused an objective delineation of reality, the Creation Society (Chuangzao she, 1921–29) (Denton, Glossary 496–97) promoted aesthetic self-expression. However, the theoretical boundary between the two literary groups had never been clear-drawn, for their difference seemed to be only a matter of subject matter. As Lu Xun facetiously observed, “To write a good deal about yourself is expressionism. To write largely about others is realism” (“Bian” 87). Denton has further pointed out “some fundamental assumptions about the origin and function of literature” shared by these two schools of writers (General Introduction 36). He argues that both schools insisted on “a fundamental unity of the subjective and the objective” (36) and therefore, “[a]n assertion of self, interconnected with humanity and the external world [. . .] is necessarily an expression of the other” (46). By thus connecting the self with the others, the May Fourth view on the relationship of Self and Other, which was shared by the Realists and Romanticists alike, revealed their common bond with the premodern Confucian notion of individual assertion as a way to transform the external world.

In narrative practice, radical intellectuals’ efforts of resolving the crisis of the self can be seen not only in their continuous practice of creating a female Other, the new woman, for the formation and consolidation of male subjectivity (Eagleton 71) both within the text and extratextually, but also in their voluntary switch from the subjective to the objective mode of representation in the construction of such a self-other relationship. The May Fourth trajectory of national modernization can be described as one that gradually subsumed individualist autonomy under nationalist political engagement. To be sure, at the start of the May Fourth Movement, a general fixation on the self seemed to have emerged in literature. Yu Dafu’s well-known definition of fiction was representative of the common sentiment: “All literary works are the author’s autobiography” (“Wuliu nian” 335). This “inward turn” (Kahler) was also evident in their portrayal of new women. Be they male or female, “Romanticists” or “Realists,” May Fourth writers privileged not only individual beliefs and emotions, but also subjective narrative modes such as first-person narration, diary fiction, and epistolary fiction in their depiction of new women. The centrality of the individual in the early May Fourth fiction testified to the cultural milieu of the early stage of the May Fourth Movement, when the principle of individualism was being strongly promoted. But even at this stage, intellectuals already betrayed their uneasiness about extreme individualism. Not only did they always anchor
their modern subjectivity on the representation of a female Other in fiction, but they also claimed that they were facilitating Chinese modernization through such a practice, and hence the disregard of the artistic independence and autonomy of literature. Starting in the mid-1920s, the fusion of Self and Other manifested itself in literature in more noticeable ways. Radical writers changed their narrative modes into more objective styles (e.g., third-person narration) as well as started to write more about the proletariat and the peasantry.

This objective turn in narrative style reflected changed historical circumstances. Both the increasingly fierce nationalist struggle against Japanese invasion and the rise of the Chinese Communist Party during the Communists’ political conflicts with the Nationalist Party (Guomin dang) fostered the May Fourth intellectuals’ gradual conversion to Marxist ideology and collectivism. Yet, given the self-other positioning in the fiction about new women, the objectification of narration starting from the mid-1920s was in a sense inevitable. As has been mentioned above, the representation of the male intellectual self, both within the text and extratextually, was predicated on the creation of a female Other, the new woman. However, not only did this practice fall short of its objective of enhancing male subject formation, it also revealed a disconcerting link between May Fourth literature and its stridently denounced others, the contemporary popular culture and premodern Chinese literature. Therefore, the narrative objectification starting in the mid-1920s can be seen as yet another effort to re-invent the intellectual self through literature, this time by fusing Self and Other in the name of Marxist collectivism rather than that of individualism. As such, the self-other dichotomy between the male intellectual and the new female in the early May Fourth fiction signaled both a response to and a symptom of the crisis of the intellectual self in early twentieth-century China.

The Emergence of the New Woman in Print Culture
The cultural milieu in early twentieth-century China, fraught with tensions and confusions, compelled May Fourth intellectuals to seek out feasible means for the reinforcement of their subjectivity. However, their particular choice of the new woman as a tool to fulfill this need must be further explored. What follows is a brief examination of first, the existing cultural market that provided the necessary mechanism and motivation for their narrative practice and, then, the literary precedents that specifically shaped their writings.

The May Fourth project of Chinese modernization was facilitated through the publication of voluminous journals and books. May Fourth intellectuals’ privileging of print materials as one of the primary means of propagation was due not only to their shared belief in the supreme power of cultural transformation, but also to the prominent role that print culture played in satisfying the general public curiosity about the mores and modes of modernity. As the material fixtures of modern life had little presence as
yet in the daily life of most families in early twentieth-century China, people first turned to textual representations—more readily available than radio, film, and other forms of mass media at the time—as a way of gaining access to modernity. Consequently, a number of large publishing houses became important conduit for the dissemination of modern knowledge, which in turn molded Chinese people’s understanding of modernity. The phenomenal success of the Shanghai Commercial Press (Shangwu yingshu guan) presented a good example. In addition to the publication of widely used textbooks for the distribution of modern knowledge, the Commercial Press also launched two well-known “repositories” (wenku) to introduce “Western learning”: *Dongfang wenku* (Eastern repository, 1923–34) and *Wanyou wenku* (all-comprehensive repository, 1929–34). The *Wanyou* repository alone consisted of two gigantic series containing more than one thousand volumes each. For the category of “Western learning,” as opposed to “Chinese learning,” the two repositories together included two hundred and fifty titles of translations of “world classics,” two hundred titles under the heading of “natural science,” and fifty titles listed under “modern problems.” The titles covered categories such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science, economics, law, education, natural sciences, and various national literatures (Lee, *Shanghai Modern* 55–57).

The involvement of May Fourth intellectuals in such enormous undertakings of cultural modernization seemed obvious. In the preface to the first series (1923) of the two repositories, the chief editor of the Commercial Press, Wang Yunwu, acknowledged help from “friends” such as Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, Li Shizeng, Wu Zhihui, and Yang Xingfo, all renowned leaders and activists of the new culture movement (Lee, *Shanghai Modern* 55–57). The circulation figures of May Fourth literature also apparently testified to its wide influence. According to Chen Pingyuan, the twenty-five years from 1902 to 1927 saw the inauguration of some two hundred journals, more than forty times the number of journals published between 1872 and 1897. The most influential May Fourth journals, such as *Xin qingnian* (New Youth), *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (Short Story Monthly) and *Chuangzao zhoubao* (Creation Weekly), each realized large increases in their circulations from 1920–21: *New Youth*’s rose from one thousand to 16,000; *Short Story Monthly*’s from two thousand to ten thousand; and *Creation*’s from three to six thousand (“Xiaoshuo de shumianhua” 224–26).

As for May Fourth fiction, Lu Xun’s anthology *Nahan* (Call to Arms) was printed thirteen times between August 1923 and 1930, totaling 43,500 copies; his *Panghuang* (Hesitation) was printed eight times between August 1926 and January 1930, amounting to 30,000 copies (Chen P., “Xiaoshuo de shumianhua” 226–29). Ba Jin’s best-selling novel, *Jia* (Family, 1930), first serialized in 246 installments from April 1931 and May 1932, was published as a single-volume edition in 1933, and had gone through as many as ten editions by early 1937 (L. Liu, *Translingual Practice* 219). We do not have definite sales figures for other May Fourth literary works of the time, but according to au-
Thors’ recollections and contemporary witnesses, Yu Dafu’s *Chenlun* (Sinking) sold more than 20,000 copies (Yu, “Jilei ji tici,” 326), while *Young Werther’s Sorrow*, translated by Guo Moruo, sold more than 40,000 copies between 1922–30 with fourteen reprints (qtd. in L. Liu, *Translingual Practice* 292). At a time when the more widely distributed books sold a little over two thousand copies and most fewer than one thousand (Zhang J. L. 127–28), the popularity of “new” books and journals seems a well-established fact. The wide circulation of May Fourth books and journals indicates that at least a certain group of readers (presumably college and high school students) were eager to receive such writings. Moreover, May Fourth authors became culture authorities through their efforts of disseminating modern knowledge. Lu Xun was regarded as mentor for the youth, and was frequently sought by magazines and newspapers for advice on cultural matters, such as appropriate reading materials for the masses (Lu, “Qinnian bidu shu” 12). Tales of enthusiastic following also abounded. For instance, admiring the neurotic intellectual hero in one of Yu Dafu’s stories, young men rushed out to have their suits made of exactly the same material and cut in the same style as that of the hero’s (Kuang 28).

Despite the impressive success of May Fourth literature among urban readership, it by no means dominated the book market. Popular literature in fact enjoyed more success among the general audience for at least the first thirty years of the twentieth century (Link 14). *Libai liu* (Saturday) (ed. Wang Dungen, 1914–16, Shanghai), a representative journal of the school of “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Fiction” (*yuanyang hudie pai xiaoshuo*) had 20,000 subscriptions at its peak (Chen P., “Xiaoshuo de shumianhua” 226). One of the most popular love stories of this genre, *Yuli hun* (Jade pear spirit) by Xu Zhenya (c. 1876–?), was reprinted seven times and sold more than 200,000 copies within a two-year span (Chen P., “Xiaoshuo de shumianhua” 229). Some observers of the time even lamented that of all the fictional works published in Shanghai in the early twentieth century, “eight or nine out of ten are popular love stories” (Yuan J. 250). Just like May Fourth literature, popular culture also circulated the image of the new woman. Through the representation of this figure, both sides offered their vision of and commentary on Chinese modernization. Since May Fourth intellectuals often took the moral high ground by condemning the vulgarity and obsession with entertainment and consumption of popular literature, a sketch of the representation of new woman in popular literature can be very useful. It will serve to illustrate not only what May Fourth intellectuals allegedly fought against, but also to what extent their discursive practice converged with that of the popular literature in their attempt at producing a radical discourse of Chinese modernity.

Popular culture of early twentieth-century China took advantage of the contemporary cult of the “new,” and profited from producing and circulating images of “new women.” In most works by popular fiction writers, the new woman represents the two faces of modernity: its power both to
seduce and to destroy. Leo Lee has called our attention to the way domestic space was made more accessible to the public through the publication of popular journals in Shanghai in the 1930s and 40s. After an in-depth analysis of Liangyou huabao (Good friend pictorial journal), he concludes that “the ‘narrative’ that can be derived from reading through Liangyou huabao is one which revolves around women’s new roles in a modern conjugal family, into which are woven other aspects of an evolving style of urban bourgeois life” (Shanghai Modern 229). Yet, precisely because “[t]he domestic space of the household [was] now fully, open, ‘publicized,’ and as such [became] a public issue” (Lee, Shanghai Modern 229) in popular culture, male voyeurism and patriarchal oppression were also more effectively masqueraded as the goodwill of finding a proper space for women in order to ensure domestic felicity and cultural advancement. It should come as no surprise that women outside the home, a dangerous force inassimilable either to existing social hierarchy or to the discourse of Chinese modernization promoted by popular culture, which was centered on women’s proper domestication, were offered up for more blatant forms of voyeuristic consumption and moralistic condemnation.

A case in point is a journal entitled Nü xuesheng (Girl student) (starting 1931, Shanghai), edited by the “Butterfly Fiction” writer Bao Tianxiao. Not coincidentally, its inaugural issue enclosed many photos and pictures of women both Chinese and foreign, real and imagined, literary and athletic, and of both noble and common lineage. A perusal of the table of contents yields titles such as “Various Poses from a Girl Student’s Daily Life,” “The Six Women Athletes of the Shanghai Track and Field Team,” “A Queen after the Revolution,” “Portrait of Miss Fu Xuewen” (wife to Shao Lizi, one of the founders of the Nationalist Party), “Famous Dames: Portraits of Miss Liu Manqing and Miss Wang Canzhi” (Liu was China’s first female explorer, and Wang China’s first female pilot and daughter to the Late Qing woman revolutionary Qiu Jin), and “The Goddess of Peace.” These images of women extend down to the early childhood and prepuberty, as we encounter pictures entitled “The Kindergarten,” “Cartoons on the Eighteen Changes of a Young Girl.” In his mission statement, the editor Bao Tianxiao vowed to remedy the situation that “nowadays society is still male-centered, and there are hardly any magazines devoted to women” (1). However, the sole self-proclaimed “Chinese journal for the perusal of young women” turned out to be undermining rather than supporting the endeavors of the various “woman politicians, woman clerks, woman attorneys and judges” (1) whom the editor had claimed to admire. By displaying titillating images of young women and female celebrities, this journal exhibited and trivialized women, belying the lip service Bao paid to the cause of women’s emancipation.

Similarly, writers of popular yangqing (love story) fiction also plunged into the production and exhibition of modern women, and produced popular romances that ran the gamut of the emotions that the authors harbored for the new woman. Some condemned the destructive influence of modern
education on women (e.g., Li Dingyi’s *Ziyou du* [The Poison of freedom, 1919?]). Others lamented the tragic fate that befell girl students who received modern education (e.g., Gong Shaoqing’s *Nü xuesheng mini ji* [The Secret tales of a girl student, 1931]). Still others both lauded those girl students who preserved traditional virtues despite their modern education and criticized those who lost their chastity (e.g., *Nü xuesheng zhi baimian guan* [The Many facets of girl students, 1918], edited by Shi Taizhao and others). These tales often proclaimed their intent of didacticism and moral caution, while ensuring entertainment value through the sensational titles and plots, not to mention the surfeit of women’s pictures accompanying each story.

Blessed with a robust cultural market but faced with a commercially highly successful rival, modern intellectuals also increased the publication of women’s magazines and newspapers. From the 1910s to the 1930s, numerous women’s newspapers and journals were published in major cities in China. These included *Funü zazhi* (Lady’s Journal) (starting in 1915, Shanghai), *Xin funü* (New women) (starting in 1920, Shanghai), *Nübao* (Women’s newspaper) (starting in 1909, Shanghai), *Funü shibao* (Women’s time) (starting in 1911, Shanghai), *Nüzi shijie* (Women’s world) (starting in 1914, Shanghai), *Funü pinglun* (Women’s discussion) (starting in 1920, Wuxi), *Funü sheng* (Women’s voice) (starting in 1922, Shanghai), *Funü zhounan* (Women’s weekly) (starting in 1924, Beijing), and *Xin nüxing* (New women), to name a few. Moreover, in 1924, only five years after the eruption of the May Fourth Movement, the interest in “the woman question” (*funü wenti*) culminated in a two-volume, ten-section anthology entitled *Zhongguo funü wenti taolun ji* (Anthology of discussions on the Chinese woman question), which was reprinted twice within a decade of its first appearance.

Almost all of the journals controlled by May Fourth intellectuals can be characterized as “culturally critical.” That is, contributors to these journals delved into social issues affecting early twentieth-century China, and did not just focus on literary works. A quick study of these journals reveals that the majority of the editorial staff and contributors to the May Fourth women’s journals were male, college educated, and supporters of the May Fourth New Culture Movement. This interesting fact, of course, hints at the male sponsorship and male authorization of the women’s movement in modern Chinese history. According to Wendy Larson, this was a cross-cultural phenomenon that happened in Greece and India as well: “The pattern of male intellectuals promoting women’s rights prevailed in virtually every culture moving toward the modern nation-state form” (*Women and Writing* 20). More importantly, male control of the magazines formed the journals’ editorial vision of Chinese women, which in turn influenced the readers’ understanding of Chinese women and modernization.

For instance, the inaugural issue of *Xin funü* (New women) contains a mission statement (“Xuanyan”) that vows to “reform contemporary society, to make women completely enlightened [juewu], so that they can shoulder all major responsibilities in a new society together [with men]” (1). Typi-
cally, in this proclamation the editorial staff set up “new women” against women in traditional society: “The reason for naming this journal *New Women* is to make people realize that women in the new society are not like the women of the old society. Women in the new society possess complete personalities, cheerful spirits, and worthy occupations. They are equal to each other, free, independent, and mutually supportive” (1). More tellingly, the editorial staff clearly regarded itself as indispensable to the production of new women. To fulfill its task of “enlightening” women, the staff proposed to accomplish four goals. These were: 1) the elimination of all the thoughts, systems, and customs in society that hinder the new woman’s progress; 2) the investigation of approaches and paths that the new woman should adopt; 3) the introduction of the new women’s movements and thought from Europe and America for Chinese new women’s reference; and 4) the undertaking of research on the current living situations of women in Chinese society to prepare for reforms (1–6).

With a similarly advisory spirit, all the other May Fourth women’s journals of the time engaged in discussions of the plight of Chinese women. The more “proactive” male intellectuals promoted women’s freedom in choosing their marriage partners, women’s right to participate in politics, and women’s financial independence; others, reacting more to what they perceived as injustices, condemned the oppression of women in society. During the May Fourth discussion of the woman question in China, the Confucian family came under full attack. When discussing the situation of women and offering solutions, modern intellectuals invariably denounced the “traditional” family and called for its complete destruction. Fu Sinian (1896–1950), the chief editor of one of the most renowned precursor modern journals, *Xin chao* (New tide), labeled the traditional family “the origin of myriad evils” (*wan e zhi yuan*): “Family burden! Family burden! Family burden! Countless heroes have been crushed by this lament” (127). The radical intellectual Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), one of the leaders of the May Fourth Movement and founding members of the Chinese Communist Party, attributed the differences between Western and Eastern civilizations to their different social structures that were determined by the different roles family played in society. He concluded, “The Western society is based on the individual while the Eastern society is based on the family. The various symptoms that speak of the ignominy, lawlessness, cruelty, and weakness of the Eastern countries can all be traced back to this [evil of the traditional family]” (4). It can be seen that Chen’s promotion of rebellion against the traditional family was meant, as was the case with so many other May Fourth intellectuals, to eliminate traditions in order to build a more just and prosperous modern China.

May Fourth intellectuals’ assaults on the Confucian family were not entirely modernist in nature, since intellectuals promoted individual liberation more as a means to realize national modernization than as an end unto itself. This reveals a Confucian heritage that emphasized an individual’s re-
spontaneous towards the collective. Moreover, the May Fourth scheme of Chinese modernization often ironically entails the domestication of women in the name of national welfare. The advocacy of “modern motherhood” at one period of the May Fourth Movement is a revealing example (Lieberman 27–34). Even as mothers were extolled for their “happiness and authority” in the education of their children (Feng Z. 1379), the fact that the role of mother was privileged over others demonstrates a move to limit women’s mobility.

Furthermore, although May Fourth intellectuals dismissed women who would marry for the sake of financial security as confirmed slaves (Zhang X. 1269–73), some of the most enthusiastically discussed topics in their journals were surprisingly domestic. For example, one topic that ignited heated discussions in 1926 in Xin nüxing (New women) turned out to be whether the journal should include recipes to teach women how to make cakes. A distinctly domestic action, making cakes was nonetheless used as a trope to discuss women’s education. Sun Fuyuan, for one, derived from this discussion the idea that “education [for women] should be practical,” arguing that while teaching how to make cakes should not be an end unto itself, it was certainly better than “aiming too high and offering only impractical suggestions [for women’s modern education]” (417). Zhou Zuoren more explicitly voiced his dissatisfaction with the current state of women’s education: “Modern women really lack knowledge, let alone practical knowledge [such as making cakes]” (560). Male intellectuals who participated in the discussion certainly manifested a disavowed arrogance and condescension towards women, as was evident in their demand that topics about which they knew very little themselves, such as baking cakes, be included in the curriculum for the education of new women. More revealingly, by in effect requiring Chinese women to learn household chores such as cooking, they betrayed their tacit agreement on the notion that women’s proper place should be at home. In arguing that learning how to make cakes would make Chinese women better educated, and hence more qualified members of the modernizing force, they also revealed a rather limited understanding of what modernity entailed for Chinese women. For these intellectuals, cakes, as objects imported from the West, functioned as a form of synecdoche to denote Western modernity. But the fact that male May Fourth intellectuals assigned a domestic image to signify the new women’s education not only exposed their inherently traditional view of women’s roles, but also broke down the carefully maintained boundary between May Fourth intellectuals and popular authors. Although radical May Fourth intellectuals decried the exploitation of women by writers of popular literature and editors of popular pictorial journals for material gains, they themselves also overlooked women’s individual needs and invoked traditional female roles in their discussion of women’s liberation, if only for the alleged purpose of promoting their own version of Chinese modernization.

By juxtaposing print materials produced by both the May Fourth group and popular authors, we can see that both male May Fourth intellec-
tuals and male writers of popular literature presumed the right to speak for and dictate to Chinese women. While the former discussed the contribution of women’s liberation to Chinese modernization, the latter more often lamented the ruination of traditional values with the emergence of new women. But both groups formulated their conceptualization of Chinese modernity through the deployment of the figure of the Chinese woman. Their allegorical practice of commenting on social changes by representing new women actually elided the particular quandary and interests of the women.

Despite, or, precisely because of this overlap in discursive pattern, May Fourth intellectuals attempted to mask the similarity between their works and popular literature by violently criticizing the latter especially on the grounds of their supposed demeaning treatment of women. This action can be attributed to their deep anxiety about the need to establish their modern identities. When May Fourth writers such as Mao Dun accused popular fiction of “poisoning the people” (qtd. in Mao D., “Zhenyou daibiao” 311), they had two goals. On the one hand, they were trying to exclude an alternative representation of Chinese modernity and therefore establish themselves as the only source of cultural truth. On the other hand, they were hoping to show their complete break from premodern traditions by distancing their works from popular literature, whose “playfulness,” according to them, smacked of traditional tastes and hindered the scheme of Chinese modernization through literary modernization. However, May Fourth intellectuals’ distinction between tradition and modernity was repeatedly undercut by their own practice.

May Fourth intellectuals often defined modernity as a contrast to and negation of tradition. Thus, not only did they predicate modernity on an unstable différence, they also exaggerated the alienness of tradition. All this while they actually often surreptitiously embraced tradition in their discursive practice. For instance, true to the Confucian heritage they had otherwise denied, May Fourth intellectuals often defined themselves as part of a collective cultural force to bring about and maintain profound societal changes through Chinese modernization. As mentioned above, this self-image resurrects the role of Confucian scholar-officials, who had taken it upon themselves to represent the “people” (min) and determine the political legitimacy of current regimes (Feuerwerker, Ideology, Power, Text 11–14). Furthermore, although May Fourth intellectuals were eager to establish clear-cut dichotomies such as old versus new, and conservative versus revolutionary, such attempts often tended to be undermined by the classical training they had received. Not only did they constantly fall back on a traditional male-centered position on women’s nature and roles, their literary productions that represented Chinese women also invoked themes, images, and literary devices that had thrived in and grown out of premodern Chinese literature.

Therefore, a few inferences about the gender politics engaged in by these intellectuals can also be drawn in light of their problematic configura-
tion of tradition and modernity discussed above. As mentioned earlier, May Fourth male intellectuals often positioned traditional womanhood as a category opposed to that of modern womanhood in order to promote women’s liberation and Chinese modernization. Their essentialist distinction of traditional and modern Chinese women not only created the myth of traditional women’s unrelieved, passive victimization, which has been challenged by recent studies by historians (e.g., Mann and Ko), but also functioned to acquire for them the role of moral and intellectual guardian of new women. With their superior knowledge of Chinese modernity thus established, May Fourth male intellectuals subsumed Chinese women’s liberation under the project of national modernization while eliding the individuality of Chinese women they purportedly worked to emancipate. As such, their endorsement of women’s appropriate role (e.g., enlightened motherhood) or criticism of women’s shortcomings (e.g., feminine emotionalism) must be construed as vehicle not only to promote their scheme of national salvation but also to make possible their performance of a modern masculinity that was ironically based on the traditional model of the Confucian literati-scholars. Such a complex entwining of tradition and modernity, and gender and nationalism, in the construction of masculinity and femininity defies any singular, convenient definitions of “manhood” or “womanhood” in early twentieth-century China. However, it also simultaneously offers up rich opportunities for us to examine the lively performance of and tentative reach for so-called “stable” gender identities.

The narrative representation of the new woman provides just such a valuable venue to explore gender negotiations and definitions supported by a mixture of “traditional” and “modern” praxes. Oftentimes in May Fourth fiction, modern ideologies are juxtaposed with premodern Chinese literary paradigms, while iconoclastic zeal is pitted against nostalgic attachment to fond memories of traditions. Before I examine specific May Fourth literary works, a brief survey of representations of women in premodern Chinese narratives is necessary to reveal the conventions that, though vocally rejected by the authors, had nonetheless shaped the production May Fourth fiction. The representation of Chinese women in narratives written in the classical language, especially in the genre of lieniü zhuan (Biographies of noted women), the primary means for the representation of women in official history, has been discussed very productively by various scholars (e.g., Raphals), some of whom have also provided insights into the influence it had on May Fourth fiction. Therefore, I will focus my attention on the representation of the “footloose women” in vernacular fiction, the immediate native predecessor to the new woman in May Fourth fiction in terms of both language and characterization.

Footloose Woman as topoi in Vernacular Fiction
The figure of the new woman is not entirely a modern innovation, since premodern Chinese vernacular fiction had already produced images of
women who wandered outside the Confucian family structure: the “footloose women.” They range from high-class courtesans and unlicensed prostitutes to female go-betweens in both the arrangements for illicit affairs and proper marriages—such as matchmakers, Buddhist nuns and Taoist priestesses—to legendary cross-dressers such as Hua Mulan and Zhu Yingtai. These women enjoy partial economic independence, comparatively freer association with the opposite sex, and, on occasion, considerable clout when dabbling in official business. For example, in the *Jin Ping Mei* (*Plum in the Golden Vase*) (c. 1580), matchmakers such as Xue Sao (Auntie Xue) are able to wheel and deal with high officials by taking advantage of the networks they have established with the officials’ wives and favorite concubines. Yet, despite occasional examples of subversive texts that challenged the traditional patriarchal norms (Yang 99–152), vernacular works, produced by men and intended for male consumption only, generally attempt a unanimous containment of the footloose women through both themes and narrative devices.

At the thematic level, footloose women are usually portrayed as occupying marginal social positions, and when appropriate, are reabsorbed into the family structure. In premodern literature the majority of drifters are male. The wandering man’s Other, the abandoned and waiting woman back home had constituted a time-honored literary *topos* in Chinese literature by the Song dynasty (Samei). By contrast, the wandering woman does not have a male Other who signifies her presence even in her absence. Rather, she often represents an aberration and even a menace in need of containment. With the economic development and the consequent urbanization of the Song (961–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, the emergent vernacular fiction featured a group of male wanderers who are adventurous, enterprising, diligent, and frugal, and who enjoy financial success in a big city away from home (e.g., Qin Zhong [Feng M. 4.31–70]). In contrast, in vernacular fiction wandering women (with the possible exception of chaste cross-dressers) are almost always associated with dubious sexual dealings. “Negative” types such as conniving matchmakers and licentious nuns are depicted as avaricious for wealth and sexual gratification obtained through the illicit exchange of material wealth and sexual favors (Feng M. 4.271–97). Even “positive” examples of footloose women—often extolled for their beauty, talent, resourcefulness, and fidelity—are mostly reformed famous courtesans (e.g., Du Shiniang [Feng M. 3.483–99] and Wang Meiniang [Feng M. 4.31–70]) who have worked as sex slaves in the past. There is no shortage of praise for the sexual purity of female cross-dressers who pose as men, of course. However, it is precisely because their sexuality is concealed, and hence contained, that these women are allowed to roam in masculine domains. Furthermore, the very obsession with the masquerading of female sexuality exposes the furtive voyeuristic gaze and desires that female cross-dressers were subject to.
Besides being stigmatized by a sexually risqué reputation, a device of marginalization and control in itself, footloose women are also contained by the structuring of the plot in premodern vernacular stories. In heroic tales, matchmakers who are accused of wrongdoing perish at the avenging hands of male heroes. In happy-ending domestic stories, courtesans give up their trade and cross-dressers their disguise, before marrying into respectable families. The tragic tales, such as that of the courtesan Du Shiniang, of course, depict the bankruptcy of such a self-reform program. Du Shiniang manages to “get out” (congliang, literally, following a good man [husband]), only to be resold by her lover and forced to commit suicide. But even her death confirms rather than undermines the notion that congliang is the only path to salvation for these sometime femmes fatales.

In addition to the plot structure, in premodern vernacular stories authors also employed certain narrative devices to establish a particular narrative contract with their implied audience in order to contain the footloose woman. The realization of this narrative contract first depends on the simulation within the story of a professional storyteller telling the story to his audience (Hanan 1–27). The footloose women in vernacular stories are invariably presented to the reader through an omniscient and impersonal narrator. By citing proverbs, poems, and familiar prefatory stories, this simulated oral storyteller establishes himself both as an authority armed with knowledge to enlighten the less educated masses, and as a fellow member of their society who shares their deeply entrenched likes and dislikes (D. Wang, “Story-telling Context” 133–50). As such, when commenting on the machinations of footloose women, the narrator can always quote numerous well-known proverbs and horror tales to caution the audience against the insidious nature of women’s social mobility. In so doing, the narrator not only invokes traditional wisdom to corroborate his narrative, but also consolidates certain cultural stereotypes in an effort to maintain the solidarity between the narrator and the audience.

Authors also resorted to particular narrative techniques to contain footloose women. Most prominent of these are what Keith McMahon calls “interstice” and “recurrence.” McMahon observes that in seventeenth-century vernacular Chinese fiction, although the writers were “studiously devoted to illustrating exceptions to the norm and to noting details—minute, obscene, or erotic—that belie the consistency and decorum of the surface” (1), breaches of social norms are countered by formulaic “linkages” that hold the narrative together. He categorizes these devices as two kinds. First, “interstice, a transition between two poles, such as inside and outside, man and woman, nonaction and action, etc. It is the space between two joining things; but, as such a space or emptiness, it is also a bridge or a filler” (18). Under this category he lists certain topoi: festivals, windows, or a scene in which a character goes outside to relieve him or herself. Second, “recurrence, [which] refers to a correspondence over a broader range, such as a scene, motif, char-
acter type, or word that resonates with another elsewhere in the work, or, in some cases, where there is a semblance of cyclic return” (18).

The device of “recurrence” McMahon has mentioned is similar to Andrew Plaks’s notion of “figural density” (The Four Masterworks 87), which denotes the parallel of characters, imagery, and topos that helps to unify the narrative. The device of “figural density” is used in the narrative representation of footloose women in order to correct their transgression. For instance, the courtesan in “The Oil Peddler” is restored to the bosom of her long-lost natural parents soon after she is married to the oil peddler. The reinstatement of her as a “respectable woman” (liangjia funü) depends on a double restoration: Her attainment of a respectable married name parallels the recovery of her maiden name. As such, her marriage is endorsed by patriarchal blessings while simultaneously perpetuating the patrilineal line; she is said to have produced three sons by this marriage, all of whom enjoy enormous success in the civil service examination. Similarly, interstices can also encumber women’s movement in fiction by producing narrative arrest (i.e., nonlinear, usually descriptive segment between major actions). In vernacular stories, interstices often facilitate voyeurism. In the Jin Ping Mei, for instance, the opening of a window always solicits a roving eye that witnesses the unfolding of a sexual encounter inside the room. At that point, the narrative comes to a full stop for the audience to better savor every tantalizing detail. With this device, the woman is changed into an exhibition in order to produce vicarious pleasure and/or moralistic preaching.

Briefly stated, pre-twentieth-century vernacular fiction reincarcerates footloose women through the establishment of a male-centered contract between the narrator and the audience. The intention of containment is not only often clearly stated in moralistic commentary, but also manifested in the way the narrator relates the transgression of footloose women. By means of both the plot and narrative devices, the narrator manages to share with the audience the delights of both the women’s transgression and his containing of them at narratological as well as thematic levels. The narrative thus achieves balance by absorbing women’s temporary aberration of venturing outside home. Footloose women are also strategically presented in vernacular stories to create erotic titillation, righteous indignation, and superior condescension, all of which help to coax the audience into a narrative contract that acknowledges and enhances the narrator’s authority.

Images of footloose women also appeared in the immediate predecessors of May Fourth fiction, the late Qing qianze xiaoshuo (exposé fiction) and the early Republican popular yanqing xiaoshuo (love stories), some of which I have mentioned in a previous section of this chapter. Zeng Pu’s (1872–1935) Nie haihua (Flowers in a Sea of Sins), a representative work of the exposé fiction, will be particularly examined in this section for its portrayal of a footloose woman with modern flavor; I will use the edition included in Zhongguo jindai wenxue daxi (General Compendium of Early-Modern Chinese Literature). But
first, a brief introduction of the narrative significance of exposé fiction is necessary.

In terms of both themes and narrative forms, exposé fiction appears to be a bridge between May Fourth fiction and pre-twentieth-century vernacular narratives. For example, Wu Woyao (1866–1910), author of *Ershi nian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang* (Strange phenomena witnessed during twenty years), mostly depended on established narratological apparatus for the depiction of modern phenomena. This novel exposes the rampant corruption in the Qing officialdom (*guanchang*) from around 1884 to 1904. It demonstrates the burgeoning of capitalist economy and ideology by contrasting officialdom with the business arena (*shangchang*), and unabashedly endorsing the latter. Although this novel was considered by some as the first work of Chinese fiction to use first-person narration (Dolezelová-Velingerová, “Narrative Modes”), Wu freely borrowed narrative techniques from *Honglou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) to structure his novel, such as a prefatory frame, a “*xiezi*” (prologue), in which a disillusioned middle-aged man who calls himself “Sili taosheng” (Fleeing death) acquires a manuscript written by somebody named “Jiusi yisheng” (Nine deaths but just one life). Perhaps more importantly, Wu mostly used the first-person narrator, Nine Deaths but just One Life, as a variation of the traditional storyteller. Not only does the first-person narrator in this novel cite the formulaic phrases that are the trademark of the simulated storyteller in premodern vernacular novels, such as “*xiahui fenjie*” (“wait for the explanation in the next chapter”), the novel also emphasizes his function of recording the strange phenomena he witnesses rather than his individual thoughts and feelings.

Like *Ershi nian*, Nie haihua also adopts a narrative mixture of the old and new for the portrayal of footloose women. In this novel, the author further added a certain exotic flavor to the depiction of footloose women. Zeng Pu created not just a foreign footloose woman, a female Russian anarchist and would-be assassin of the Russian Tsar Alexander III, but also a Chinese semi-footloose woman, a courtesan-turned-concubine named Caiyun, who uses her feminine wiles in foreign locales. Substituting for her husband’s primary wife as his companion on his diplomatic missions abroad, Caiyun learns how to speak English and socializes with high officials and royal families in foreign courts. She clearly outshines and overpowers the purported hero of the novel—her husband, the *zhuangyuan* (top examinee of the national civil service examination) Jin Wenqing, in every aspect. While he appears gullible, she is shrewd; when he falters on social occasions, she dazzles with her beauty and quick wit. Caiyun dominates her husband to such an extent that she eventually brings about his death through her adulterous affair with a German officer. Although echoing the stereotypical *femme fatale* in premodern fiction (McLaren), the image of Caiyun has two distinct new features. First, her husband the Confucian scholar is depicted as coming in a distant second to her competence and confidence in foreign countries. Their relationship reverses the Confucian husband-wife hierarchy
and symbolizes the collapse of Confucian order under foreign influence. Second, by demonstrating greater mobility on foreign soil, Caiyun obtains a “modern” veneer. Whereas the *femme fatale* of yesteryear usually used her physical allure and sexual prowess to ensnare and eventually destroy both infatuated men and herself, Caiyun indulges in excessive sex but has the mental capacity to utilize her sexual attractiveness for personal advancement.

However, Zeng Pu explicitly utilized premodern vernacular narrative strategy to contain the footloose woman even as he also invoked the most popular cultural icon of the time, the Western figure of “the Lady of the Camellias,” in his portrayal of Caiyun (Y. Hu 41). Not only did he use Caiyun’s transgression and the disintegration of the Confucian family order as an allegory of the system malaise of the country, thus echoing old tales of the rise to power of beautiful but evil women as sign of the ruination of the state, but he also reduced Caiyun’s individuality, and hence the restriction of her power, by invoking specific techniques prevalent in pre-twentieth-century vernacular stories. For example, Caiyun’s name is used in a drinking game at a banquet early in the novel (56–66), even before she appears on the scene, so as to plant clues for future development of the plot, a technique used both by the *Jin Ping Mei* and the *Honglou meng*. In this banquet scene, the guests drink wine and make merry while each reciting a poem that contains a homophone of “caiyun” (meaning “colorful clouds”). Her name appearing as a “play thing” implies her inferior position in a male-dominant environment. Moreover, with each poem the guests quote, the vicissitudes of each character’s future life are also foreshadowed (P. Li 154).

As Peter Li points out, some of the poems are from *Mudan ting* (*The Peony Pavilion*), a play that tells the story of the death of a lovesick maiden and her resurrection by the supreme power of love. Since in her past life Caiyun had been a courtesan mistreated by a younger Jin Wenqing and now she has been reborn to repay his faithlessness, these poems imply their separation in a previous life and their reunion in this life (P. Li 154). One of the poems cited is a line from the *Honglou meng*, “Colorful clouds are easy to disperse and glass easy to break” (Cao 69–92), foretelling the tragic ending of their relationship (P. Li 156). Caiyun’s destructive power over her husband is thus explained by the principle of retribution, and her agency reduced through the revelation that she is only playing out her proper role in an overarching and determinist cosmic order.

In view of the similarity in narrative forms between the exposé fiction and pre-twentieth-century Chinese vernacular fiction, it would appear that May Fourth fiction embodied a dramatic break from its predecessors in formal aspects. However, although vehemently denied by radical intellectuals, the development of May Fourth fiction owed much to its native traditions. Most directly, as Chen Pingyuan has pointed out, the flourishing of print culture since the late Qing privileged the genre of the short story, thus offering May Fourth writers ample opportunities to experiment with the new genre (“Literature High and Low” 220–249). Similarly, Milena Dolezelová-
Velingerová observes that the literary exploration since the late Qing, which led to the appearance of certain “modern” narrative devices in late Qing fiction, also contributed to the narrative innovations in May Fourth fiction (“Narrative Modes”).

Perhaps most importantly, May Fourth intellectuals betrayed the commonality of their works with both exposé fiction and premodern vernacular fiction precisely in their utility of narrative innovations to disseminate modern knowledge. Narrative forms and narrative politics are always intertwined with each other. For the expression of radical modern ideologies, May Fourth writers purposely rejected native literary traditions, and imported Western literary genres and narrative conventions, such as diary fiction, epistolary fiction, and first-person narration, to portray the new woman. However, not only did some May Fourth writers also make use of vernacular narrative devices to depict modern phenomena, but even the adoption of Western narrative devices, apparently completely different from conventions of premodern vernacular fiction, reaffirmed rather than disclaimed May Fourth intellectuals’ cultural heritage.

Simply put, May Fourth intellectuals borrowed literary devices from Western literature because of their belief that Western nations rose to power through the promotion of special types of literature. This utilitarian view of literature prompted these intellectuals to regard modern Chinese literature as a means to promote modern ideologies. Their project of national modernization through literary modernization demonstrated a Confucian heritage that assigned literature as the vessel of the Way, and accentuated the power of literature in transforming people spiritually. Furthermore, male May Fourth intellectuals often resurrected the narrative contract, if not the exact devices, of premodern vernacular fiction. Whereas writers of premodern vernacular stories reassimilated footloose women to establish the solidarity between the author and his audience in a male-dominant society, male May Fourth writers often allegorized and objectified new women to both propagate a variety of political and moral messages and construct viable male identities for themselves. In both literatures male writers designated the author as educator of his audience while depending on the narrative deployment of women as the essential signifier of his power of persuasion. Only in May Fourth fiction, it was a sense of personal and national crises rather than an optimistic view of the innate justice and order of the world that organized the representations of women. Even though the avowed intent that motivated and sustained either narrative contact differed—thus spurring displays of apparently distinctive authorial attitudes towards the same figure—the dynamic relationships between the author, the audience, and the character remained very much the same in both.

In view of the complex and ambiguous relationships of May Fourth literature to premodern Chinese fiction and to contemporary popular fiction, the following chapters in this book will not only “embrace a view of tradition and modernity as ‘continuous rather than separate, dialectically
related rather than diametrically opposed” (Denton, General Introduction 4), but also scrutinize the way that the tension between avowed modern attitude and deeply ingrained traditional discursive habits shaped the narrative representation and criticism of new women in May Fourth fiction. Furthermore, I will illustrate that contending ideologies and conflicted loyalties were most dramatically exhibited through the gender-inflected performance of the politics of emotionality in both narratives and discursive literature.