New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction

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Books and Mirrors:
Lu Xun and “the Girl Student”

In his 1925 essay, “Lun zheng le yan kan” (“On Looking Facts in the Face”), Lu Xun forcefully stated his view on the nature and function of modern Chinese literature: “Literature is a fiery flame radiant with the national spirit, and simultaneously it is a light illuminating the way along which the spirit of a nation ought to go” (240). However, he remarked, the Chinese had so far produced only “a literature of concealment and deceit under the influence of which the Chinese sank deeper and deeper into a bottomless quagmire” (240–41) because they “never looked life straight in the face [zhengshi rensheng]. They had to deceive themselves and dissimulate” (240). In criticizing the existing Chinese literature, Lu Xun actually advocated a particular way of writing and, indeed, of reading literature that would reveal the “fact” and “truth” of life. For Lu Xun, this was an internal truth. For it not only revealed what Kant called the “hidden motive powers of human existence or human life” (qtd. in Galik, The Genesis of Modern Chinese Literary Criticism 238), but it also both originated from and influenced human psyche: Lu Xun endorsed a modern Chinese literature born out of the author’s fearless self-reflection and incisive study of reality, which would in turn facilitate the spiritual awakening of the reader.

In stating the mission of modern Chinese literature as fostering critical self-reflection among the Chinese people, Lu Xun reaffirmed the May Fourth agenda of reforming the Chinese “national character” (guomin xing) through the creation of a modern literature. Yet he also in effect defined the role of the modern author as the initiator and organizer of the enlightenment of the masses, and thus established the hierarchical self-other dichotomy prevalent in the literary and critical output of May Fourth writers.

As is revealed in his essay on the nature of modern literature, Lu Xun actually made a claim to both a panoramic view of history and the cultural authority necessary for him to act as the spiritual guardian for the people when declaring that Chinese literature up to that point was one of “deceit and concealment” and advocating the creation of a new literature that would nur-
ture a healthy national spirit. Like many radical May Fourth intellectuals, he held an “aerial” view of the masses; he designated himself as an observer who looked from above to dissect the people’s spiritual disease. As such, his self-representation was predicated on the “othering” of an inferior Other, namely, the marking off of an Other as beneath and under the power of the Self. However, even as Lu Xun sought to stake his modern identity on the creation of a distinctive Other, this way of self-representation also necessitated self-alienation; he must separate himself from the “unenlightened” masses for the maintenance of this carefully defined and power-generative differentiation of Self and Other, and of the subject and the object of the May Fourth enlightenment project.

When it came to the representation of the new woman, an Other disturbingly similar to the Self, Lu Xun was forced to devise more effective strategies to sustain this self-other dichotomy. He deployed emotions as a mark of not only gender but also modernity in both essays and fiction. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will first outline Lu Xun’s position on the role of emotionality in literature, and then focus on his “Shangshi” (“Regret for the Past,” 1925), a short story that represents a new woman in the heroine Zijun. Since Lu Xun privileged the revelation of an internal, psychological truth in literature, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, his essentialization of emotionalism as an exclusively feminine trait created irresolvable tensions in his conceptualization of the nature and role of new literature. Furthermore, when juxtaposed with his narrative practice in “Regret for the Past,” his discussion of emotionality in his essays illustrates the way gender-inflected deployment of emotions generated contradictions even within the same author’s experiments with different genres.

I have chosen to focus on “Regret for the Past” to examine Lu Xun’s deployment of emotions because it occupies a unique position in May Fourth fiction by representing the archetypal girl student. In this story, Zijun, the heroine, leaves home to “live in sin” with the male intellectual Juansheng, dazzled by modern ideas such as free-choice marriages and women’s liberation espoused by him. However, she returns to her family and dies alone as a “ruined” woman after an unemployed Juansheng, under the pressure of financial hardship, declares he no longer loves her. As a fictional counterpart to Lu Xun’s famous lecture, “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home” (“Nora zouhou zenmo yang,” 1923), “Regret for the Past” creates a Chinese Nora whose tragedy exposes the inadequacy of the May Fourth discourses for resolving the plight of Chinese women. It shows that Chinese women’s efforts to achieve independence were not only suppressed by hostile conservative forces, but also hindered by the very modern male intellectuals who had initiated and encouraged women’s rebellion against traditions. As is illustrated by Juansheng’s example, male intellectuals were unable to live up to their own ideal of demonstrating individualistic courage under adverse circumstances, and in effect became accomplices to a society that
destroyed those women who were struggling to break away from the Confucian family.

More importantly, Lu Xun also implicitly criticized May Fourth male writers who similarly “othered” woman for the sake of reifying male subjectivity by revealing the way the male narrator Juansheng manipulates the narration of Zijun’s story in order to justify his failings. Although her occupation as student is more implied than stated in the story (e.g., her dress, her place of residency, and her interest in Western literature), the character of Zijun encapsulates the typical role of female intellectuals in the male-dominated May Fourth tradition: that of a girl student. This is because in “Regret for the Past,” not only does Juansheng regard Zijun as his devoted pupil, liberated from the patriarchal family by him through his introduction of Western ideas, he also uses her as an indispensable mirror image to contemplate and articulate his own subjectivity. Similarly, male May Fourth writers created the new woman in fiction in order to allegorize their own scheme of national modernization not only for the edification of the people, including their female comrades in the May Fourth Movement, but also for the reinforcement of their own modern identity, often at the expense of objectifying, distorting, and belittling the female subject position.

Lydia Liu rightly credits Lu Xun with the exposure of the deep flaws of the “male-centered discourse of modern love” (Translingual Practice 167) through the representation of Juansheng’s narrative practice. However, I argue that even as Lu Xun criticized the I-narrator Juansheng’s “self-narration [. . .] as an attempted deictic anchoring of the self in the here and now as the narrator guiltily rejects the then and there of his past memories” (L. Liu, Translingual Practice 165), his own deployment of this story reveals that he was equally caught in the web of male-centered cultural forces. Like those he had criticized for turning the individual Chinese woman’s plight into a national allegory, Lu Xun too ultimately sought to reform the Chinese people’s spiritual life, and hence the fulfillment of his public mission of enlightening the masses, through a sacrificial use of the female body in “Regret for the Past.” More importantly, the multifaceted narrative form of “Regret for the Past” also undermines Lu Xun’s self-proclaimed authorial intention of educating the masses, continuously defying any singular, homogeneous interpretation of the story. Using an I-narrator and a retrospective timeframe to accent “regret” and sorrow in Juansheng’s psyche, Lu Xun created powerfully engaging emotions that would potentially thwart his attempts at facilitating spiritual awakening even as the same narrative devices also inspired affective identifications. At certain points in the narrative, Lu Xun seemed to be wavering between identifying with and criticizing the male narrator. The particular narrative form of “Regret for the Past” thus both aided and subverted the realization of his avowed authorial intention.

The conflict between the narrative form and authorial intention in “Regret for the Past” can, of course, be traced to the tension between Lu Xun’s personal life at the time and his status as an influential May Fourth
writer bound by the spirit of public service. Lu Xun chose the format of first-person narration to relate a story that uncomfortably recalled aspects of his personal life in “Regret for the Past,” all while trying to disperse public curiosity about his personal affairs and guide his readers to critical self-reflection. It should come as no surprise that he did not always succeed in that mission of enlightenment through the writing of this story. But more importantly, despite his proclamation of his sole objective to be in providing a mirror for his readers with his fiction, this story was also a mirror that revealed Lu Xun’s attempt at self-representation. On the one hand, by revealing the problematic in Juansheng’s narrative practice, Lu Xun sought to present himself as a modern Chinese writer with an unassailable social conscience and personal courage, who dared to challenge the dominant May Fourth discourse on women’s emancipation. On the other, even though Lu Xun wrote under the rubric of exposing social problems, the narrative form adopted in this story betrays the inconsistency inherent in his self-representation.

In view of both the complexity of “Regret for the Past” and his influence in the May Fourth era, it is evident that Lu Xun simultaneously knit together and unraveled the typical May Fourth narrative of the modernization of Chinese women through this story. Therefore, the analysis in this chapter will foreshadow the examination of fictional works by other male writers in the following chapters. Fiction by these male authors either fleshed out precisely the scheme of othering the Other (the new woman), a practice on which Lu Xun had incisively and often acerbically remarked, or shared with Lu Xun similar ambivalence towards this kind of narrative practice. But before analyzing “Regret for the Past,” I will first examine the complex treatment of “emotions” in Lu Xun’s nonfiction works in order to provide a footnote to both his fiction and the general male literary criticism of women writers of the May Fourth era.

**The Performativity of Male Emotions**

Although characterizing himself as a writer who “dissected [him]self more mercilessly than [he] did others” (Zuo 142), Lu Xun also manifested an intense aversion to the revelation of his private emotions. He explained his dislike for self-exposure as a resistance to the public viewing and savoring of the personal, and associated it with his goal of enforcing self-reflection among the Chinese people—the same way his revered satanic poets used their poetry to “disrupt people’s heart” (“Moluo shili shuo” 71). However, seen in the light of both the May Fourth male intellectuals’ dichotomization of tradition and modernity and their criticism of “feminine emotionalism,” Lu Xun’s distaste for excessive emotions signified a general anxiety about their own modernity shared by radical male intellectuals. This anxiety gave rise to repeated male performances of their modern identity through the marginalization and expulsion of the traditional and the feminine. Furthermore, Lu Xun was a lyrical writer as well as an uncompromising critic. How
to draw the line between appropriate and excessive expression of emotions thus became a particularly crucial and challenging task for him.

One strategy Lu Xun adopted was to accentuate the “objective” nature of his writings. He had long been a staunch advocate of “Art for Life” (wei rensheng de yishu). Although having never joined the Literary Research Association, the majority of whose members advocated “Art for Life,” he is believed to have edited and approved its inaugural declaration drafted by none other than his younger brother Zhou Zuoren. Mao Dun, one of the founders of the Literary Research Association, described the practice of “Art for Life” as “objective observation and unflinching examination of all aspects of society” (qtd. in M. Anderson 33). Similarly, Lu Xun claimed that the goal of all his works was to “reveal the disease [in the people of a pathological society] and draw attention to its treatment” (“Wo zemou zuqi xiaoshuo lai” 512). Yet his promotion of an “objective” attitude and of “looking facts straight in the face” played a central role in his self-signification as well as his works to modernize Chinese literature and the Chinese nation. For, by advocating an objective representation of social reality, he also sought to mask the discrepancy between his self-proclaimed modern stance and deep-rooted traditional heritage through an exile of “excessive emotions” to the land of femininity.

Lu Xun fully realized his own precarious position as a link between the old and new culture. He described the dilemma of being “an intermediate object” (zhongjian wu) caught between two worlds in a plain verse entitled “Farewell of a Shadow” (“Ying de gaobie”). In this poem, he spoke in the voice of a lamenting shadow: “Yet darkness will swallow me, and light will destroy me” (165). Ironically, it was also in his poetry that the “darkness” of Chinese traditions loomed large, for he demonstrated more proficiency with traditional regulated verse than with modern vernacular poetry (T. A. Hsia 149). In favoring traditional poetic forms, Lu Xun revealed his affinity with the rigid formal requirements of classical Chinese literature that radical May Fourth intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi had long called for elimination. In using classical verse to “regulate his emotions through rhyme, rhythm, and form” (T. A. Hsia 150), he also confirmed the classical Chinese aesthetics that advocated a constrained expression of emotions. This was the kind of aesthetics that he had denounced in his earlier “On the Satanic Power of Poetry,” in which he promoted a new “satanic” poetry—represented by the “stirring” poems written by Romantic poets such as Byron and Shelley—for the revitalization of the spirit of the Chinese people. In order to mask this inconsistency underlying his modern position and legitimize his surreptitious attachment to traditional aesthetics, Lu Xun self-consciously characterized “emotionalism” as a form of traditionality that only belonged to the alien realm of the feminine.

His poem entitled “Wo de shilian” (“My Disappointed Love,” 1924) illustrated the way Lu Xun associated the traditional with the feminine through the use of excessive emotions as a barometer. Although written in the vernacular (baihua) language and containing a number of modern images, this
The poem was described by him in its subtitle as written “in imitation of the ancient [style]” (nigu) (169) for its apparent adoption of the form of “Sichou shi” (“The Poem of Four Sorrows”), written by Zhang Heng (78–139) of the Eastern Han (23–220) dynasty. Lu Xun later explained that he wrote this poem as a burlesque of the then popular love poems that he dismissed as full of artificial sentiments and effusive expressions such as “aiya, aiyou” (“Wo he Yusi” 166). That Lu Xun should resort to a mixture of traditional and modern forms for the censure of excessive emotions was in itself highly suggestive. But more telling still, excessive emotions were considered by him not only as a sign of “insincerity,” and hence traditionality, but also an attribute of “feminine” writings.

Since Lu Xun had defined modern Chinese literature as the author’s sincere and courageous dissection of self and others, effusive love poems, labeled “insincere” by him, were clearly denied entry into his version of modernity. But more problematic still, Lu Xun also associated emotionalism with female writings. He explained in a letter to Xu Guangping—that a student of his at Beijing Women’s Normal College—that when he said “female/feminine writing” (nüxing de wenzhang), he meant more than “the excessive use of [emotive particles such as] ‘ai, ya, you’” (Letter no. 10, Liangdi shu 40). Rather, he claimed, it referred to a particular style of lyrical essay (shuqing wen) in which “women writers use more beautiful words, talk more about scenery, pine more for their families, feel melancholy at the sight of autumn flowers, and burst into tears upon seeing the bright moon, and so forth” (40). Lu Xun’s definition of “feminine writing” echoed Liang Qichao’s similarly unflattering view of the writings by the “talented women” (cainü) of traditional China (see Introduction). Lu Xun also criticized the “feminine” style of May Fourth women writers for the same reason Liang did: that such writings described personal emotions to the exclusion of social reality. Yet by reprimanding women authors for their effusive expression and, hence, insincerity from his privileged position of cultural authority, he actually excluded their writings from the canon of modern literature. In so doing, he also masqueraded his own traditional heritage—his adherence to traditional aesthetics—as a universal standard that would expose the defects of his female Other in order to ensure his own claim to modernity.

Compared to his poetry, Lu Xun contrived this gender-biased designation of emotions in a more complex way in his essays. While he utilized a lyrical style of writing in personal narratives for a direct representation of his modern identity, he adopted an “objective” attitude in essays in which he discussed the issues of women’s emancipation. Furthermore, in both cases he performed a “masculine” control of his emotions by either instilling heroic forbearance into the image of Self or by advocating unflinching examination of the dire situation of Other.

Lu Xun remained detached almost to the point of cynicism in his “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home,” one of the best-known lectures of the May Fourth era, which he delivered on December 26, 1923, at Beijing
Women’s Normal College (then called the Beijing Women’s Advanced Normal School). Deviating from the usual optimistic view of many May Fourth intellectuals, in this lecture he did not promote Nora, the heroine who leaves home in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, as a role model for contemporary Chinese women. Instead, Lu Xun painted a rather bleak picture for Chinese women who might have the courage to defy social norms and leave home. He stated that in contemporary China, there could only be two outcomes awaiting a Chinese Nora: “She would either become bad [duoluo], or return home” (159). Turning the popular metaphor of a caged bird freed from the cage on its head, he asserted that for a long-imprisoned bird, being released did not guarantee freedom. On the contrary, “there are predators such as eagles and cats waiting outside the cage. If the bird has forgotten how to fly, with its wings paralyzed [by the long imprisonment], it really has no hope to survive [in the outside world]” (159).

In the same lecture, following his diagnosis of the Chinese women’s situation, Lu Xun proposed a two-pronged remedy in the same matter-of-fact tone. He apparently believed “economic independence is the most important. At home, there should be equal distributions [of financial resources] between men and women; and in society, there should also be equality between men and women” (161). Yet, curiously, he did not underestimate the usefulness of dreams either. They appear in his lecture as an option other than financial independence: “Dreams are good; otherwise money is important” (160), for “the greatest suffering is to wake up from dreams with nowhere to turn” (159). Many scholars have ascribed such a clear-sighted view on Chinese women’s plight and its cure to Lu Xun’s incisive analysis of contemporary Chinese society, where gender equality through women’s participation in social labor had yet to be realized in any meaningful way. However, his deliberately detached tone also served to validate his modern and masculine identity; for, unlike emotional Chinese women mired down by their own sufferings, he alone seemed to possess the courage and the critical faculty to “look facts straight in the face.”

Lu Xun’s attempts at consolidating his modern status through the demonstration of a masculine control of personal emotions can be even more clearly illustrated through a juxtaposition of his deployment of emotions in his essays on Chinese women and in his personal narratives. The objective, analytical tone of the lecture “What Happens After Nora Leaves Home” contrasts dramatically with the uncharacteristically lavish description of his own sufferings in his equally well-known “Preface” to Nahan (Call to Arms), his first anthology of short stories. We can, of course, partly attribute this contrast in tonality to the difference of genres. After all, a public lecture hardly provides a suitable forum for self-revelation, as we normally expect the speaker to self-consciously conceal intimate thoughts and emotions from his or her audience. However, in Lu Xun’s case, the “Preface” was no less performative than the lecture. That the personal narratives in both the “Preface” and Lu Xun’s later essays were submitted by the au-
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author for publication and therefore for public consumption indicates the author’s awareness of both his audience and of the ramifications of such descriptions of his emotions. The “Preface” has also always been considered one of the most prominent works in Lu Xun’s oeuvre, suggesting that the accentuation of his anguish in this personal narrative well served Lu Xun’s purpose of self-signification.

In the “Preface,” Lu Xun reminisced about his aborted efforts of facilitating Chinese people’s spiritual awakening through the publication of a journal entitled New Life (Xinsheng) in Japan. He described his keenly felt anguish after the failure of the journal: “this feeling of loneliness grew day by day, coiling about my soul like a huge poisonous snake” (Selected Stories 3). He then supposedly plunged into a period of self-enforced silence, using “various means to dull [his] senses” because his loneliness “was causing [him] agony” (4). Since Lu Xun presented this period as a precursor to the explosion of his creativity during the May Fourth period, the years of silence helped to cast him as a bona fide modern intellectual. For his past silence, poignantly recalled and integrated into the description of the present, not only distinguished him as an emotive individual whose “loneliness” signified superiority as well as isolation, but also painted him as a heroic figure that both demonstrated stoical forbearance in the face of adversities and eventually overcame formidable social and psychological obstacles to join in the project of literary modernization.

Nevertheless, Lu Xun himself denied any intention of self-signification through his writings. He declared in the same essay that his motives for writing were not for the sake of self-expression, for “[he] no longer feel[s] any great urge to express [him]self” (8). Rather, he claimed, “I sometimes call out, to encourage those fighters who are galloping on in loneliness, so that they do not lose heart” (8). Apparently, his concern for the social effects of his writing determined his style: “This is why I often resort to innuendoes [. . .] I, for my part, did not want to infect with the loneliness I had found so bitter those young who were still dreaming pleasant dreams, just as I had done when young” (8). Lu Xun claimed that he had controlled personal feelings out of pedagogical considerations: that he wished to spare the younger generation the loneliness he had suffered from in the past and to encourage their participation in the new culture movement. He thus characterized his writings as geared towards the needs of others rather than self-indulging outpouring of personal sufferings. In this way, Lu Xun pro claimed not only the moral consciousness underlying his deliberate choice of a more constrained and “objective” style, but also his valuable contribution to the enlightenment of the Chinese people by writing in such a style. The performance of masculinity thus fortified his modern identity.

Such adroit display of both his experience and control of personal emotions from Lu Xun, a writer generally known for his relentless and objective social commentary, was hardly an isolated or insignificant incident in his writing career. For example, at the ebb of the May Fourth Movement in the
mid-1920s, he described once again his spiritual sufferings: “The *New Youth* group disbanded. Some obtained official promotions, others retreated, and still others moved forward. I witnessed once again changes among colleagues in the same group [... ] I was once again left to wander about in the desert” (“*Zixuan ji zixu*” 456). Furthermore, Lu Xun again used the control of his own misery to signify his modern status. He claimed that in the 1920s he was not allowed to take refuge in silence, for he had been “bestowed with the title ‘writer’” and “could not escape the fate of writing desultory words in journals” (“*Zixuan ji zixu*” 456). This statement not only highlights the enormous strain under which he continued his work as a modern writer while being subjected to increased public scrutiny, but, uttered with self-mockery, it also performed his conquest of personal sufferings through the application of irony. At that time Lu Xun occupied an exalted position in the arena of new literature. He was generally revered as one of the most influential leaders of the May Fourth Movement and a “guide to the youth” (*qingnian zhidaozhe*) (Han 3.210). Therefore, his conquest of his emotional agony that was exacerbated by his public visibility would, and did, appear all the more remarkable when this victory was related in an apparently self-deprecatory tone.

From the above analysis, we can see that the apparently distinctive tones of Lu Xun’s personal narratives and his more “objective” discursive essays actually both contributed to the same configuration of tradition, modernity, masculinity, and femininity as featured in his poetry. Lu Xun aligned excessive emotions with femininity and traditionality in order to conceal his own resurrection of traditional sensibilities and modes of writing. This male-centered deployment of emotions, when transported into his fiction, created the discrepancy between the narrative effects of his fiction and his proclaimed authorial intentions.

“Regret for the Past”

A sense of futility permeated Lu Xun’s second anthology of fiction, *Hesitation* (*Panghuang*), published in the mid-1920s. Compared to his first fiction anthology *Call to Arms*, *Hesitation* mostly portrays intellectuals instead of peasants. Interestingly, the stories in it also adopt a more melancholy tone. This darker mood was both foreshadowed in the quoted lines from Qu Yuan’s *Lisao* (Sorrow of Departure) on the frontispiece of the anthology, and echoed by a poem entitled “*Ti Panghuang*” (On *Hesitation*) written by him in 1933. In this poem, Lu Xun described himself as a solitary soldier carrying a spear and wandering aimlessly (*panghuang*) between the “lonely new literary arena [*xin wenyuan*]” and the “peaceful old battlefield [*jiu zhanchang*]” (150) to accentuate his sense of isolation and bleakness. Even though the disquieting sensation of being suspended between two worlds was nothing new to Lu Xun, the particular personal circumstances at the time increased the intensity of his anxiety, thus presenting him with new challenges in his maintenance of a modern and masculine image. With his personal feelings
of dejection belying his image of a modern intellectual in possession of rational faculty and stoical forbearance, Lu Xun had to dissimulate his own emotions more than ever. This he attempted through both the narrative forms of his fiction and his own essays that suggested for his readers the “appropriate” ways to read it.

Lu Xun’s discursive maneuvering with regard to “Regret for the Past,” included in the same anthology Hesitation, demonstrates the complex way he negotiated the private and public spheres of his life in the management of his modern identity. As the story delineates a modern romance that recalled aspects of Lu Xun’s own life at the time, it naturally caused widespread speculations among his contemporaries. Although Lu Xun denied it, external evidence indicates that the writing of this story had induced intense and not always pleasant emotions in Lu Xun. It was finished on October 21, 1925, and later collected into his anthology, Hesitation. Lu Xun was undergoing occupational and psychological crises at the time. Not only was he dismissed from his official position as qianshi (section head) of the Ministry of Education on August 14, 1925 due to his support of “riotous” female students of Beijing Women’s Normal College, he was also by then romantically involved with one of his female students, Xu Guangping, despite his long-standing arranged marriage (Wang D. H. 324). Highly suggestively, he was very prolific during this period, producing over two hundred short stories, prose essays, and translations between 1924 and 1926, including his collection of literary essays reminiscing about his childhood, Morning Flowers Plucked at Dusk (Zhaohua xishi); the anthology of prose-verse (sanwen shi) Wild Grass (Yecao); and a number of anthologies of essays such as Tomb (Fen), Hot Wind (Re feng), in addition to Hesitation. This allows for speculation that Lu Xun was pouring all his pent-up emotions about his personal life into his literary works.

More pertinent to “Regret for the Past” itself, a number of facts concerning the writing and publication of this story show that Lu Xun treated it with more than even his usual degree of circumspection. It was one of the only two stories that he never submitted for publication in a journal before collecting it into an anthology. The other is “The Misanthrope” (“Gudu zhe”), a short story generally regarded as highly autobiographical. “Regret for the Past” was also one of the stories that Lu Xun himself mentioned least. Even though the writing of the eleven stories in Hesitation were generally less well-documented by him than the fourteen stories in Call to Arms, Lu Xun did usually record in his own diary the date when he finished or sent out a story for publication. Only four of his stories were never mentioned in his diary: “A Happy Family,” “Regret for the Past,” “Brothers” (“Dixong”) and “The Misanthrope.” Like “The Misanthrope,” “Brothers” was noted for its autobiographical content (Han 3. 33). More interestingly, of all Lu Xun’s fiction, “A Happy Family” is the only other story besides “Regret for the Past” that deals with the central theme of romantic love and modern marriage. Lu Xun’s reticence concerning “Regret for the Past” thus raises the question
whether he deliberately suppressed personal connections to this story because it hit too close to home.

On the rare occasions that Lu Xun discussed “Regret for the Past,” he made valiant efforts at concealment and elimination of its personal significance through his essays. Lu Xun characterized “Regret for the Past” as “nonautobiographical” (Lu Xun shuxin ji 1.121). His denial of having written an autobiographical work harks back to his customary practice of representing himself as an objective writer who chose to expose social problems rather than indulge in self-pity. However, other than allegedly enabling him to fulfill his public mission of awakening the masses, his painstaking self-effacement was also a means of self-representation. It helped him to keep from public eyes his personal “life that even he could not look straight in the face” (Wang X. “Wufa zhimian” 456–94) for the maintenance of his public image as an incisive and intrepid social commentator.

Lu Xun was aware of the personal implications of his writings. For instance, he admitted that, being the oldest of three brothers in his family, he cast negative characters only as first-born, fourth, or fifth brother, so as to “forestall the poisonous tongues of rumormongers” (Huang R. P. 45; Han 3. 466). More than personal attacks, he was wary of the political ramifications of writing. He pointed out the dire consequences of using real persons as models for one’s fiction: “The author would be labeled an ‘individualist’ [geren zhuyi] and regarded as having committed the crime of destroying the ‘United Front’ [lianhe zhanxian], and henceforth would not be able to function in society [zuoren, literally, ‘being a person’]” (“Chuguan de ‘guan’” 519). It follows that “Regret for the Past,” with a plot resonant with Lu Xun’s personal dilemma, elicited more strenuous efforts of dissimulation from him even as such efforts created more violent conflicts between the effects and the proclaimed intention of his narration.

In “Regret for the Past,” Lu Xun sought to expose the I-narrator’s narrative duplicity, thus destabilizing the narrating self and distancing the authorial self from the fictional “I.” Despite his best intentions, however, Lu Xun generated two conflicting moods in this piece. His determination to embrace pessimism in order to eliminate uncertainty and achieve closure, called by Wang Hui as his “philosophy of resisting despair” (404–32), accounted for the bleak story he told in “Regret for the Past”: For him, to confront reality was to anticipate tragedy. Yet the way he told this story, especially his unique utilization of a first-person narrator, also privileged the pathos of the story over its avowed ethos. On the one hand, Lu Xun exposed the I-narrator, Juansheng’s duplicity through both the construction of the plot and the representation of Juansheng’s narrative maneuvers in order to deliver criticism of inadequate male modern intellectuals and flawed May Fourth discourses. On the other, with the centralization of the narrator’s sorrow, Lu Xun inevitably made him appear in a more sympathetic light. Although it can arguably add to the complexity of Juansheng’s character, such a narrative effect also both aided the de-voicing of the woman character, Zijun,
hindered the cultivation of social consciousness and self-reflection in a readership as yet unused to critical interpretation of emotive representations—a fact testified by the many readings of this story at Lu Xun’s time or close to it. Leo Lee rightly points out that Lu Xun, a modern Chinese author who employed I-narrators frequently and effectively, in fact often used first person narrative to “avoid revealing himself” (Voices from the Iron House 63). In this case, however, the narrative form of the story not only demonstrates Lu Xun’s ingenuity at using an individualized voice to express social concerns while concealing himself, it also reveals the inherent contradictions in his act of displaying self-control for the management of his modern identity.

“Regret for the Past” adopts a narrative mode (Frye 33–67) that digresses considerably from Lu Xun’s usual style; of all his fiction that represents new women, it alone both features a first person narration and privileges emotions. It adopts the topos of an individual looking back on his/her past, and hence the related narrative paraphernalia including an I-narrator, a retrospective timeframe, and an emphasis on psychological delineation.

In some of Lu Xun’s stories, he used the figure of the girl student to expose the conservative male characters’ hypocrisy (e.g., “Soap” [“Feizao,” 1924] and “Master Gao” [“Gao lao fuzi,” 1925]), thus turning the new woman into a device of satire rather than presenting a well-rounded picture of her subjectivity. Although “A Happy Family” (“Xingfu de jiating,” 1924), like “Regret for the Past,” also depicts the new woman and is also told from the perspective of a male modern intellectual, the modes of these two stories remain completely different. Whereas the death of romance is unequivocally and dramatically confirmed by the death of the heroine in “Regret for the Past,” in “A Happy Family” it is the everyday unhappiness that gradually erodes the ideal picture of romantic love. “A Happy Family” features a third-person, synchronic narration. The narrative tone of the story is ironic, as “complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgments” (Frye 40) is scrupulously preserved in order to distance the reader from the object of the author’s ridicule. The hero’s “power of action” (Frye 33) is tested against ordinary life event through a juxtaposition of quotidian details and his exaggerated vexation and futile efforts to cope, and is subsequently exposed as woefully inadequate. In such a narrative mode, the sense of the absurd rather than that of the tragic comes through more clearly. In contrast, “Regret for the Past” adopts an I-narrator and a retrospective temporal arrangement. The narrator is also represented as more psychologically complex and more lyrical in his expression of sorrow than the hero in “A Happy Family.” These narrative features help to reduce the distance between the character and the reader, and to establish a narrative contract of identification rather than alienation.

Therefore, even as Lu Xun partly revealed the narrator’s objectification of the new woman, the overall effects of “Regret for the Past” undermined his alleged intention of exposing the moral flaws of the characters in order to foster self-criticism among the Chinese people. Since he attempted at self-
representation through alleged participation in the education of the Chinese people, the generation of powerful emotions through a lyrical narration in “Regret for the Past,” and hence the hindrance to reader’s rational self-reflection, also posed questions to his effectiveness as a modern intellectual. Furthermore, since this story exposed the prevalent male practice of demarcating Self and Other by the degree of emotionality as both artificial and untenable, it also questioned the project of literary modernization anchored in such a practice, undertaken by radical male intellectuals like Lu Xun. Below I first explore the thematic dimension of the story, and then look at the two narrative devices Lu Xun adopted: a frame of reminiscence and an I-narrator who strives for a singular lyrical voice, in order to examine the particular ambiguity and tension represented by this story.

In the plot, Lu Xun exposed the duplicitous narrative practice of the I-narrator, Juansheng. It is shown that he creates an Other in the image of Zijun, his love, by turning her into both his audience and his mirror for the fortification of his subjectivity. Even though their romantic love can be seen as a joint “literal translingual experience” (L. Liu Translingual Practice 165) in light of their shared love of translated literature, Juansheng ensures his authority in the relationship, and hence the establishment of a gender hierarchy, by representing himself as the introducer and disseminator of Western literature and Zijun his devoted pupil and worshipper. Not only does he hold forth on the topics of break with tradition, gender equality, women’s liberation while Zijun is said to only “nod her head, smiling, her eyes filled with a childlike look of wonder” before their cohabitation (Lu, Selected Stories 198); Juansheng also eventually uses Western literature as a facile tool to break up with Zijun, invoking the notion of sincerity while urging her to leave him as courageously as Ibsen’s Nora. In an uncanny replay, Zijun is again seen as reduced to silence while “her face turned ashy pale, like a corpse; but in a moment her colour came back, and that childlike looks darted from her eyes” (210). Juansheng thus portrays himself as the determining force in their romantic relationship even as he expresses his remorse for its tragic ending, for he alone possesses the power to provide happiness and cause pain.

Perhaps more importantly than serving as his audience, Zijun also functions as a mirror that both supplies Juansheng with much needed adulation, and hence the enhancement of his self-esteem, and enables him to project his own inadequacy onto her. From the beginning of his relationship with Zijun, Juansheng is paralyzed by his awareness of the hostile social environment against their relationship. He waits for Zijun to come to his hostel, because her uncle has once cursed him for “accosting” Zijun. When walking with Zijun in public, it is also he who recoils from the contemptuous or leering looks of bystanders and must turn to Zijun as a source of courage. She seems to him “quite fearless and completely impervious to all this [public gaze]. She proceeded slowly, as calmly as if there were nobody in sight” (200). When she declares: “I’m my own mistress. None of them has
any right to interfere with me” (198), Juansheng is so overcome with joy that he is moved to make a leap of faith from individual experience to nationwide forecast, asserting in ecstatic hyperbole: “Chinese women were not as hopeless as the pessimists made out, and we should see them in the not too distant future in all their glory” (199). What is more important for Juansheng, of course, is not exactly the future of Chinese women or even that of Zijun. Zijun’s courage matters to him only in so that it bolsters his own ego: “She was fearless then only because of her love (for me)” (212).

After they move in together, Juansheng continues to use Zijun’s expression and behavior as an index of his worth. However, the illusion of Zijun’s absolute adoration is harder to maintain when they are living in close quarters. The deterioration of their relationship allegedly originates from his clearer reading of her weakness. He is at first vexed by Zijun’s dreamy expression when she silently reminisces about their romantic past, supposedly because he does not wish to be reminded of his own shallow posturing at that time but actually more because he is anxious about living up to her romantic impression of him. Later Juansheng feels his wishful placement of Zijun as his worshipper shattered when she becomes completely absorbed in cooking, feeding chickens and her pet dog with no time to “chat, much less to read or go out for walks” (202). He resentfully comments, “I was very conscious, however, that my ‘place in the universe,’ as Huxley describes it, was only somewhere between the dog and the hens” (206). This marks a turning point in their relationship not only because Juansheng begins to detect the insecurity of his position at the pedestal, but also because in Zijun’s ordinariness, he discerns his own. Moreover, while expressing his resentment towards Zijun for stripping away his spontaneous, romantic, and modern façade with her mundane domestic mien, he again reverts to quoting Western literature. This hackneyed practice not only reveals that he clings desperately to his perceived superior knowledge of modernity, but also sheds new light on previous cases when he had cited Western literature to woo Zijun. Was he, after all, twisting the literature he ostensibly revered only for self-serving ends, all while misunderstanding and/or disregarding what those Western writings really signify?

It is perhaps inevitable that Juansheng would project his sense of inadequacy onto Zijun. Zijun’s fights with their neighbor over some trifle not only cause her “the look of unhappiness” (206) but also depress him when he ferrets out from her the reason for her grievances. As he has no financial ability to provide a suitable residence for both of them, he can only brood: “People ought to have a home of their own. This was no place to live” (206). When he is dismissed from work, he resents Zijun’s reaction more than his boss’s action: “What distressed me most was that even Zijun, fearless as she was, had turned pale. Recently she seemed to have grown weaker” (203). Just as Zijun had mirrored his desires of being recognized and idolized before their cohabitation, now she also reflects his fears for his manhood: He is reminded of his own failure to provide for Zijun and realizes his failed am-
bitions by her waning confidence in him. He counteracts by lashing out and driving her out of his life so that he can avoid facing his own failings looking back at him through her eyes.

When Zijun finally leaves their home, the first reaction Juansheng has is to feel the room “extraordinarily quiet and empty” (211) even before being informed of her departure. The lack of verbal proof of Zijun’s absence is very telling. One might argue that according to the logic of the plot, Zijun really has nothing and should have nothing to say here. However, the more salient aspect of her silence lies in the fact that Juansheng can read the material traces of Zijun’s existence—“salt, paprika, flour and half a cabbage, with a few dozen coppers”—as a voiceless yet reassuringly persistent declaration of love from her: “These were all our worldly goods, and now she had carefully left all this to me, bidding me without words to use this to eke out my existence a little longer” (211). Yet, even Zijun’s perceived last gesture of goodwill proves to be inadequate compensation for the loss of her as the mirror and buttress for his existence.

In discarding Zijun as his sounding board, Juansheng discovers the futility of reciting Western literature. The “quiet” in his room implies the loss of his own voice as well as hers, for Zijun’s absence deprives him not only of an audience but also of the object of his vocal interpretation. Furthermore, he feels completely paralyzed after her departure, “I went out now much less than before, sitting or lying in this great void, allowing this deathly quiet to eat away my soul” (211). He is unable to assert his individuality and venture towards all the wondrous locales he had read about in literature and dreamed about during their cohabitation: “high mountains and great oceans below, big buildings and skyscrapers, battlefields, motorcars, thoroughfares, rich men’s houses, bright, bustling markets, and the dark night” (210). Whereas the previous entrapment he had felt in cohabitation could be blamed on a hapless scapegoat, Zijun, now he has to turn his gaze upon himself. It is he himself who cannot step into the “new life” that he had envisioned while guiltily wishing for Zijun’s death in the past. Without Zijun’s presence to bolster his image, Juansheng is slipping into the passive feminine position he had previously willfully assigned to her.

Juansheng’s textual approach to Zijun is both his buttress and his downfall. His reading of Western literature only supplies him with a seductively glamorous veneer without offering any concrete means of self-sustenance: His translations are mostly rejected and unprofitable in monetary terms. More importantly, when applying his textual interpretative methodology to their romantic relationship, he invariably misreads Zijun, making her into a silent book and denying a real dialogue between their voices and worldviews. Although claiming to have read her “soberly like a book, body and soul” (201), he actually has not acquired knowledge of Zijun, but rather is unconsciously projecting his own failings throughout their relationship. His willful misreading of Zijun, which handily contributes to his takeover of her subjectivity, may well reflect his similar use of the Western literature that he
reads and translates: It helps to present himself in more flattering but no less false colors. But more importantly, she functions more as a mirror that reflects his desire and anxiety rather than as the “book” that presumably provides internal knowledge about her. Therefore, we can see that in his insistence on reading and signifying Zijun, Juansheng also proves that his sense of the Self is in fact predicated on his construction of the Other.

Lu Xun revealed that Juansheng’s self is constructed against an image of Zijun that he conjures up. In that process, Juansheng assigns all his weakness to Zijun, an alien Other, so that he can more effectively disassociate himself from such weakness. Like Juansheng’s narrative construction of Zijun, his exposition of “regret” is yet another device to formulate and consolidate a coherent masculine subject. However, Lu Xun’s privileging of Juansheng’s emotions through the implementation of a retrospective temporal frame and an I-narrator produced an affective residue that detracted from the stated authorial intention of fostering critical thinking among his readers. First, with the gesture of looking back, the narrator Juansheng can both distance himself from his past guilt and lure readers into an emotional identification with rather than an analytical interpretation of his behavior. For this temporal arrangement grants the narrator effective means to embellish his feelings and thus generating engaging emotions of grief and repentance for the disguise of his moral character. As such, the privileging of his rather than her unique psyche provides him with yet another convenient way of establishing his individuality while eliding hers.

“Regret for the Past” features a poetic frame that consists of a preface and an epilogue to Juansheng’s account of his romantic tragedy. In the opening and ending, Lu Xun gave the narrator ample space to tell beautiful lies, even though he exposed this narrator in the main body of the story. The beginning of Juansheng’s reminiscence generates engaging emotions through an evocative and poetic description. It begins with the completion of a circle, as Juansheng moves back to the same hostel he lived in before the ill-fated cohabitation. The sense of lyrical unity is further enhanced as he re-touches this familiar locale with poetic nostalgia:

This shabby room, tucked away in a forgotten corner of the hostel, is so quiet and empty. Time really flies. A whole year has passed since I fell in love with Zijun and thanks to her, escaped from this dead quiet and emptiness. On my return, as ill luck would have it, this was the only room vacant. The broken window with the half dead locust tree and old wisteria outside and square table inside are the same as before. The same too are the mouldering wall and wooden bed beside it. (197)

He uses six “zheyang” (“just like this”) sequentially to depict his surroundings: the same worn-out small room, the same dilapidated windows, the same half-dead tree and vines outside the window, the same desk in front of the window, the same worn-out wall, and the same shabby bed
leaning against the wall. Thus, he not only establishes the rhythm of sameness but also transforms the ordinary scene into a landscape of meditation. Whereas such a beginning already invites the reader to share in the I-narrator’s desolation, the ending even more effectively establishes him as an individual struggling against the crushing force of fate.

Juansheng declares at the end of the story:

Since I am living, I must make a fresh start. The first step is just to describe my remorse and grief, for Zijun’s sake as well as for my own. All I can do is to cry. It sounds like a lilt as I mourn for Zijun, burying her in oblivion. I want to forget. For my own sake I don’t want to remember the oblivion I gave Zijun for her burial. I must make a fresh start in life. I must hide the truth deep in my wounded heart, and advance silently, taking oblivion and falsehood as my guide. (215)

This ending, as an epilogue to his account of the romantic tragedy, produces mixed effects. On the one hand, it exposes Juansheng’s attempt at reinventing himself. After retelling their past, Juansheng envisages hell as a fictional transformative space that would allow him to obtain Zijun’s forgiveness: “I wish we really had ghosts and there really were a hell. Then, no matter how the wind of hell roared, I would go to find Zijun, tell her of my remorse and grief, and beg her forgiveness. Otherwise, the poisonous flames of hell would surround me, and fiercely devour my remorse and grief” (215). However, he knows there is no hell, as is revealed by the word “suowei de,” “so-called,” he uses to qualify “hell.” This final call for redemption, just as his account of his “regret for the past,” signals another move to reconstruct his past in order to usher in a new future.

Nevertheless, even as the ending reveals Juansheng’s ulterior motive behind his act of remembering—his wish to describe the past, to contain its effects, and then to forget it, so as to move forward—it also creates a powerful gesture of poignant confession. As such, he emerges from the story not as a common malefactor who repents his past sins, but as a “wounded” romantic hero who rises from the ashes of past failures and moves resolutely towards the future. With the construction of such an image of the self, his use of “oblivion and falsehood” (215) can only be construed as the means that will be unambiguously justified by the end. The discourse time (i.e., the time when the story is told) of the story—which starts with Juansheng’s expression of remorse after Zijun’s death and ends with his avowal to move forward—in fact simultaneously masks Juansheng’s narrative manipulation and aids him to re-signify the events of the story time (i.e., time when the real events happen in the story). In view of both the powerful affect produced by Juansheng’s gesture of reminiscence and Lu Xun’s contemporary readers’ response to “Regret for the Past,” we may well argue that Juansheng’s mechanisms of othering Zijun could have been revealed more clearly and Lu Xun’s didactic intention more successfully realized without the lyrical frame of the story.
More than the accentuation of the narrator’s gesture of looking back, the focalization of his voice grants him even more power to silence Zijun through the lyricization and centralization of his own experience. The use of an I-narrator in fiction usually enhances readers’ identifications with the narrator, since s/he appears to be the orienting force of the narrative. Moreover, in this particular story, poetic descriptions by the I-narrator prevail over direct representations of characters’ speeches, and “sight” is privileged over “hearing,” thus more easily allowing him to use his expression of remorse to consolidate his subjectivity rather than exposing his moral defects. Juansheng has to re-organize the past, to “strip the word of others’ intentions” (Bakhtin 297), or, to rid his voice of the resonance of Zijun’s. He attempts this through the creation of a lyrical univocalism in the retelling of his relationship with Zijun, their cohabitation and separation, and Zijun’s eventual death.

As I have mentioned above, Zijun is rarely allowed to speak for herself in Juansheng’s narrative. While the sounds made by her heels on the brick pavement are duly indexed by Juansheng to reassure himself of her comforting existence, her voice has to be suppressed, since it has a signifying function that could sabotage his narration. In other words, if told from Zijun’s point of view, their story would inevitably take on meanings that he refuses to acknowledge. Consequently, Juansheng feigns amnesia in order to monopolize the right to bestow meanings on the past. He characterizes the days of their courtship not only with the comforting presence of Zijun but also with her convenient silence. He even claims that he has forgotten her response to his proposal: “I can’t remember clearly now how I expressed my true, passionate love for her. I did not even see clearly how Zijun reacted at the time. All I know was that she accepted me, although I didn’t know what she said, or whether she said anything at all” (199–200). Juansheng’s efforts at paraphrasing and silencing Zijun are particularly revealed in the breakup scene that he stages. On that occasion, he finally tells her that he no longer loves her: “You asked me to tell the truth. Yes, we shouldn’t be hypocritical. Well, to tell the truth—it’s because I don’t love you any more!” (209). Upon receiving this blow, Zijun only greets his cruelty with silence: “I was expecting a scene, but all that followed was silence. Her face turned ashy pale, like a corpse; but in a moment her colour came back, and that childlike look darted from her eyes. She looked all around, like a hungry child searching for its kind mother, but only looked into space. Fearfully she avoided my eyes. The sight was more than I could stand” (209–10). In this scene, while Zijun’s voice is silenced, her image is invoked not only to convey the sense of tragedy in their confrontation, but more importantly, also to validate Juansheng’s subjectivity: he perceives the tragedy and is spurred to action, whether by fleeing home at that time or professing remorse later, while she is perceived as immobilized by his act of betrayal.

In addition to the revelation of Juansheng’s selfishness, a more important aspect of this scene lies in Juansheng’s invocation of Western discourses...
in order to silence Zijun’s voice and to suppress his own guilty conscience. Juansheng’s speech is often a parody of the May Fourth discourses of modernity. His courtship has been reinforced by an eloquence originating from his knowledge of the West. In his talk, the foreign, the new, the revolutionary, and the good interweave into a dazzling narrative that help him to seduce Zijun. Moreover, Zijun’s death, he reasons, is caused by his “honesty.” In the scene of their breakup, Juansheng “deliberately” brings up the past (209). He even quotes the same Western authors he had previously used to seduce Zijun, but this time to issue a break-up declaration: “I spoke of literature, then of foreign authors and their works, of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House and The Lady from the Sea. I praised Nora for being strong-minded” (209). When his painstaking “remembering” of their past years rings false, Juansheng invokes the bourgeois idea of individualist, sincere self-expression to deal Zijun the final blow: “Yes, we shouldn’t be hypocritical. Well, to tell the truth—it’s because I don’t love you any more” (209). Under the guise of upholding “sincerity” and “individualism,” Juansheng actually reduces his version of “modernity” to an unabashedly social Darwinist message: survival of the fittest at whatever expense to the others.

As I have shown above, in his account of his relationship with Zijun, Juansheng strives for a univocalism by privileging the poetic description of scenes over the representation of direct speeches by Zijun. Lu Xun exposed Juansheng’s narrative practice of eliminating other voices for the creation of a coherent narrative of the self by juxtaposing Juansheng’s loquacity with Zijun’s silence. However, by featuring such an eloquent I-narrator, Lu Xun also granted Juansheng the power to signify his narrative with poetic lyricism while suppressing the voice of Zijun. The use of such an I-narrator potentially allows the narrator’s emotional performance rather than the author’s alleged rational insights to sway the readers.

By examining the two striking narrative features of the story, its gesture of reminiscence and its lyrical I-narrator, we can see the ambiguity underlying Lu Xun’s act of self-representation through fiction writing. On the one hand, he duly exposed Juansheng’s elaborate linguistic contortions. By detailing his activity of (mis)reading Zijun throughout the narrative, Lu Xun revealed that the hero’s attempts at self-reinvention are both obvious and futile. Since Juansheng is the one who tells the story, it is only his voice that we hear and it is only his voice that shapes his own subjectivity and the chains of causality in his remembering and forgetting the Other. Juansheng’s subject-position proves to be only crafted by his false words. Moreover, by exposing Juansheng’s egocentrism, Lu Xun also implicitly criticized the May Fourth practice of using women’s situations as barometers of the state of the nation. May Fourth intellectuals steered clear of either the cult of women’s chastity as a crucial means to preserve “national essence,” or the condemnation of “licentious women” as the ruination of the state, two attitudes towards Chinese women often adopted by Confucian moralists. But May Fourth intellectuals’ idealistic conceptualization of Chinese women’s roles
in national modernization produced unexpected side effects. As is shown in this story, the practice of treating Zijun merely as a signifier of women’s emancipation and national salvation allows Juansheng to ignore her particular quandary and shirk his responsibility towards her. Therefore, as a fictional rendition of his answer to the question “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home,” “Regret for the Past” helped Lu Xun to fulfill his role as a truthful modern writer who relentlessly exposed social problems.

On the other hand, even as Lu Xun detected and disclosed the flaws of modern discourses and their ineffectuality in bringing about Chinese women’s emancipation, he also repeated their practice of othering women. Lu Xun allegorized Zijun’s tragedy to express his concerns about Chinese women’s situation. If he was indeed examining the spiritual pathology of the nation and seeking its treatment, he did so with a sacrificial use of the female body. This move not only enabled his surreptitious identification with other radical male intellectuals, but also fed on their illusion of rebuilding the nationalistic male subject through such a narrative deployment of Chinese women. Furthermore, there is no denying that Lu Xun accentuated male emotions in “Regret for the Past.” The first-person narrator, the genre of personal memoir, and the retrospective time frame all help to establish a lyrical mode that generated powerful affect, more so because of its univocalism. It can be argued that Lu Xun depended on the artistic representation of the artifice inherent in Juansheng’s narrative in order to expose his duplicity. But even as Lu Xun sabotaged the narrator’s performance, he simultaneously demonstrated the utility of an emotive, albeit artificial, narration for the formation of a coherent male subject.

Therefore, “Regret for the Past” is a mirror of many faces. Although Lu Xun both criticized a narrator who relies on the Other as a mirror image for his own subject formation and scrutinized the May Fourth discourses of women’s emancipation through the lens of the heroine Zijun’s tragedy, he also betrayed his own ambivalence towards the discursive practice of May Fourth intellectuals through his narrative execution. The effects of the narrative forms of “Regret for the Past” not only show Lu Xun’s own mixed feelings about the male consciousness in the story due to his personal situation, but also prove that, despite his criticism of “excessive” feminine emotions, he both privileged male emotionality and utilized this practice to marginalize the new woman in the narrative, all for the reinforcement of his own extratextual subjectivity. His narrative manipulation of emotionality in “Regret for the Past” thus embodied the same problematic dichotomization of self-other, masculine-feminine, modern-traditional that he had also featured in his poetry and essays. Ultimately, the contradiction and tension created by Lu Xun’s deployment of emotionality expose the suppressed link between the May Fourth project of modernization and the premodern cultural heritage of radical male intellectuals at one particular juncture: the male-centered gaze guiding their creation and utilization of women in literature for the articulation and fortification of male subjectivity.