New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction

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En/gendering the Bildungsroman of the Radical Male: Ba Jin’s Girl Students and Women Revolutionaries

If for Lu Xun, in order to be modern one had to be masculine while for Yu Dafu, in order to seem masculine one had to appear modern, then what happened when women writers also wanted to claim a share of modernity? Did they have to become more “like men” in order to be considered modern? Or did there exist an alternative modernity that would not only authorize women’s participation in the project of Chinese modernization but also enable them to produce their own discourses of modernity? After examining the configuration of gender and modernity in the representation of new women by Lu Xun and Yu Dafu—two of the first generation of radical May Fourth fiction writers—by whose labor Chinese women were often excluded implicitly or explicitly from modernity, the remainder of this book will explore in what way, if any, Chinese women were able to contribute to the discourses of Chinese modernity and create a modern identity for themselves. This will be fulfilled in the next five chapters through a juxtaposition of both male writers’ representations of increased female agency and the May Fourth women writers’ own literary and political efforts of (re)defining the relationship between gender and Chinese modernity.

As many intellectuals turned from the promotion of individualism to Marxist collectivism starting in the mid-1920s, new women seemed to gain more mobility and access to modernity in May Fourth literature. In fiction, not only did the girl student become more involved in radical politics, the woman revolutionary—a more forceful and active female figure who appears as political activist, union organizer, or even enlisted soldier in this literature—also gradually replaced the girl student as the most prominent type of new women. At first sight, women revolutionaries seem to embody the most radical departure from tradition up to their time. Unlike the female cross-dresser in vernacular stories, the woman revolutionary “flaunts” her femininity in public and does not rejoin her family after serving the people,
since a break from the family is always defined as the point of embarkation on her revolutionary path. She also appears to be more radical than the girl student, for she more often rebels against rather than unquestioningly follows the more socially acceptable path for women of her time and class: seeking independence through modern education.

Ironically, despite the increasingly radical stance of new women, their narrative construction by male authors embodied a more forceful return of the (repressed) male-centered tradition. That is, radical male intellectuals more explicitly betrayed their suppressed ties with the patriarchal tradition in their attempts at subjugating radical women under their twin projects of self-representation and Chinese modernization. This can be seen in the case of Ba Jin, whose mode of representation in fiction not only earned him loyal readers but also brought the author precariously close to the writers of “Butterfly Fiction,” whom May Fourth intellectuals had sternly criticized for their purported traditional outlook.

Ba Jin’s surreptitious resurrection of what had been denounced as “traditional” exposes the inner contradictions of his iconoclasm. These contradictions can be seen not so much in the commercial success of his most popular fictional work, the novel Jia (Family, 1931–32)—the sales figure of which arguably blurred the boundary between serious and popular literature at the time (L. Liu, Translingual Practice 216)—as in the precise nature of the power of his fiction. I argue that the capacity of his fiction to inspire affective identification among his readers resulted from a combination of revolutionary passion and an easily recognizable and consumable narrative form that drew on premodern vernacular narratives. Because of the uneasiness of this alliance of tradition and modernity, Ba Jin also struggled to demarcate tradition and modernity through his artful differentiation and repeated performance of masculinity and femininity in his fiction. In representing the new woman, he often portrayed a temporary solidarity between male and female intellectuals only to expedite the displacement of male emotional weakness onto his female Other. As such, the male intellectual is shown to be superior to his female counterpart because he is able to sever his emotional ties to the traditional family while she remains a slave to her emotions. Thus, the modernity of male intellectuals was accomplished through his masculine control while her “feminine emotions” apparently domesticate her and obstruct her break from tradition. Furthermore, although Lu Xun’s works also embody similar alignment of the feminine and the traditional, it was Ba Jin who depicted new women who wish to emulate modern men in order to become independent modern individuals themselves. In that aspect, his works set up a useful comparison with apparently similar conceptualization of female agency by the woman writer Ding Ling, to be discussed later.

Ba Jin’s way of integrating tradition into his depiction of modernity, and femininity into the construction of masculinity, reflected the general sociopolitical milieu of the time, though his narrative practice warrants a
closer scrutiny at a later point in this chapter. It is my contention that in addition to his own upbringing as son of a gentry family and his knowledge of classical literature, Ba Jin’s paradoxical resurrection of the traditional for the conveyance of radical messages suggested an increasing anxiety that May Fourth intellectuals felt about their identity amidst the further radicalization of the 1930s. This can be seen in that, like Ba Jin, they invoked traditional discursive patterns in more explicit ways than before in order to formulate a coherent identity for themselves, even as they fervently promoted Marxism, anarchism, or various other brands of radicalism. The representation of radical women in their fiction encapsulated such tensions between a radical surface text and a more traditional subtext.

Some may argue that the girl student’s decreased prominence in May Fourth fiction only reflected real life situations. After all, by the late 1920s many female intellectuals who came of age during the May Fourth Movement would have grown from girl students into professional women, and would presumably be applying what they had learned at school to their careers. In fact, women writers of the May Fourth group provided real life proof to this projection. However, it is also significant that radical male writers privileged revolutionary women rather than the more common and more “realistic” types such as female teachers or writers. To be sure, their penchant for privileging radical women in fiction signaled the general turn towards leftist radicalism among Chinese intellectuals that was caused by various sociopolitical factors (see Yü, Apter and Saich, and Lin, The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness). For example, the full-scale Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s sensitized intellectuals to nationalist struggle, while the persecution of leftist activists by the Nationalist government drove more intellectuals to join forces with the Communist Party. As a result, the promotion of Revolutionary Literature endorsing Marxist ideology and class consciousness gained so much momentum that it even overruled some of the most representative doctrines of the May Fourth Movement. For instance, individualism was deemed to conflict with the fundamental Marxist principle of solidarity among the oppressed classes and summarily denounced by radical intellectuals of the time. As has been mentioned in chapter three, Lu Xun was dismissed by the revolutionary critic Qian Xingcun as a relic of a dead age and an unfit role model for modern writers because of his perspicacious portrayal of the spiritual ailment of the Chinese people. Yu Dafu, the renowned “individualist,” also had to modify the theme and style of his depiction of the new woman in order to adapt to the rise of Revolutionary Literature.

But the radical sociopolitical environment of the late 1920s and early 1930s alone cannot fully explicate the representation of the woman revolutionary in May Fourth fiction. For an examination of the narrative permutations in the portrayal of radical women reveals that the politics embedded in narrative forms often contradict the authors’ explicitly stated ideologies. As I have mentioned earlier, although Lu Xun and Yu Dafu promoted the
modernization of Chinese literature and the demolition of traditions, they also resurrected premodern allegorical strategy in deploying the representation of new women to make social commentaries and construct male subjectivity. Similarly, in the increasingly radical late 1920s and 1930s, male intellectuals often betrayed their traditional assumptions about and attitudes towards women in their narrative practice despite their fervent invocation of revolutionary agendas. This is because in writing fiction, May Fourth writers often had to grapple with the complication of their own emotions that can be more conveniently elided when espousing abstract ideologies in their essays, and their surreptitious attachment to their cultural past resurfaced in their representation of new women. However, at that time radical male intellectuals severely reprimanded “emotional” bourgeois women writers through the invocation of gender stereotypes while privileging the revolutionary woman in their fiction. In view of both radical male intellectuals’ own contradictory narrative practice and their didactic habit, their criticism of “feminine emotionalism” marked a self-conscious pedagogical effort. This move signaled their attempt at not only educating and guiding their female “disciples” but also demonstrating their own commitment to Chinese modernization precisely through their discipline of the “unruly” literary endeavors by female and male authors alike. Yet, when they deployed representation of emotions to signify their modern identity in fiction, the tensions caused by their conflicted loyalties to tradition and modernity became all the more volatile and striking. This can be particularly seen in an author like Ba Jin, whose writing style at this point of his career was generally acknowledged as “evocative” and “emotive.”

The New Woman to Facilitate Male Growth

Ba Jin started to write fiction in the late 1920s. His works reflected the ideological trend of his time in privileging the more radical types of new women, including revolutionary-minded girl students as well as women revolutionaries proper. Furthermore, demonstrative of his penchant for both the genre of novel and for coming-of-age narratives, Ba Jin brought these women to bear on male psychological growth in order to produce the Bildungsroman of radical male intellectuals. In light of his long-standing devotion to narratives of youth, it should perhaps come as no surprise that Ba Jin’s depiction of modern Chinese women began with, and centered on, the image of the girl student. One of his first and most popular novels, *Family*, provided an unforgettable role model for young women of his time in the girl student Qin. By contrast, woman revolutionary in his other fiction never managed to make the same lasting impact as did Qin, not the least because Ba Jin did not assign the same degree of psychological complexity, and particularly not the same amount of passion, to his professional revolutionary women as to revolutionary girl students.

As such, emotionality apparently played a more positive role both in Ba Jin’s depiction of new women and in his self-representation (for the two
were always interrelated in May Fourth fiction) compared to either Lu Xun or Yu Dafu. Unlike Lu Xun’s Zijun, a victim of circumstances, girl students in Ba Jin’s fiction are depicted as able to change their fates, for the May Fourth Movement not only equipped them with a modern consciousness but also liberated their youthful passion and thus enabled them to rebel against traditions in a more effective way. Ba Jin’s girl students are empowered rather than cheated and crushed by modern ideologies. They purposefully seek a modern education away from home, join forces with male intellectuals to disseminate revolutionary ideologies, and bravely stand up for the freedom of choice in marriage partners. Although Ba Jin also depicted obstacles to the emancipation of Chinese women, he more often emphasized modern women’s valiant battles against patriarchal restrictions. Largely devoid of the ambivalence towards modernity palpable in Lu Xun’s representation of the girl student, Ba Jin’s fiction features girl students who forthrightly represent the May Fourth ideals of the modern Chinese woman; they are intelligent, courageous, and perhaps most importantly, successful according to standards set by the May Fourth discourses.

Resonant with Ba Jin’s more positive portrayal of the girl student, his equally passionate hero usually enthusiastically praises girl students for their courage to challenge social norms, as opposed to the perpetually lamenting hero in Yu Dafu’s fiction who feels threatened by the girl student. Ba Jin portrayed heroes who appreciate and admire the girl student’s modern and revolutionary qualities, thus linking male and female intellectuals together through their shared ideals of modernization and revolution. Ba Jin’s unique pairing of the female and male intellectual not only testified to the increasing tendency toward radical collectivism in May Fourth fiction, it also presented a new form of utilizing and integrating girl students for the representation of male growth in fiction. In an arrangement reminiscent of the relationship between Juansheng and Zijun, Ba Jin’s hero often seeks from the girl student the encouragement necessary for his own breakaway from the family as he struggles to overcome both external and internal impediments. But in contrast to Juansheng’s increasing dissatisfaction with Zijun’s “weakness,” in Ba Jin’s fiction the girl student usually stands side by side with the hero and faithfully mirrors each stage of his growth. However, she is also shown to feel passionately about her own inadequacy and eventually fall short of the hero’s accomplishments. In many cases in Bai Jin’s fiction, the girl student is made to acknowledge that her inner emotional weakness, more than the external constraint imposed by society on her gender, prevents her from achieving a complete liberation such as that enjoyed by the hero. As such, Ba Jin’s representation of the girl student reveals the woman to be an inferior copy of the man: an almost-but-not-quite modern man. Furthermore, in highlighting the character flaws of the new woman, he in effect declared the “essential” weakness of the female gender even as he expressed sympathy toward the plight of his women characters. He thus also affirmed the inherent merit of the hero’s gender and his role as peerless individual by
placing him side by side with his imperfect simulacrum, the girl student. Therefore, as Ba Jin appropriated the woman’s agency to represent male subjectivity, his scheme of othering the new woman resulted in at best a qualified endorsement of this figure for the purpose of accentuating the male hero’s revolutionary credentials.

In his most famous work, *Family*, Ba Jin configured the girl student, Qin, and the hero Juehui in just such a way for the sake of vivifying male subject formation. Nevertheless, the remarkable success of *Family* suggests that despite (or, precisely because of) such a treatment of women in this novel, the author was able to construct for his audience a widely acceptable and eagerly received narrative. I argue that the popularity of *Family* was secured, to no small part, through the author’s deft blending of “traditional” sentiment and revolutionary zeal for the depiction of what he alleged was the inner truth of the characters. The importance of this formula to the success of Ba Jin’s works can also be contrastively illustrated by the lesser popularity of his other works written around the same time, particularly his *Love Trilogy*, including “Wu” (Fog, 1931), “Yu” (Rain, 1932), and “Dian” (Lightning, 1933). *Love Trilogy* more explicitly demonstrates Ba Jin’s scheme of building up the hero by juxtaposing him with the similarly-yet-less revolutionary new woman, not the least because the author in this case eliminated the traditional family structure that has generated ambiguous emotions in *Family*. The sentimental and romantic atmosphere surrounding the representation of the family thus gives way to more confrontational and volatile interactions in the young people’s revolutionary activities in *Love Trilogy*. As such, Ba Jin’s more subtle narrative manipulation of women made possible through a deft mixture of “traditional” and “modern” sensibilities in *Family* becomes decidedly manifest and even simplistic in *Love Trilogy*. In what follows I first focus on Ba Jin’s representation of the girl student in *Family*, and then use the observations derived from this novel to comment on his later *Love Trilogy*.

**Ba Jin’s “Instrumental” Girl Student in *Family***

Ba Jin’s *Family* has enjoyed immense popularity since its first appearance in 1931. Originally entitled *Jiliu* (The Torrent), it was serialized in *Shanghai Times* (*Shanghai shibao*) between April 18, 1931, and May 22, 1932. In May 1933 it was first published as a single edition under its current title by Kaiming Bookstore in Shanghai. From then to 1937, it went through ten printings. This novel is striking for its ready acceptance by the readers of its time as an accurate representation of the traditional Confucian family. In fact, it has immortalized the May Fourth representation of the traditional family and has in time become a cultural index in its own right. In order to effectively delve into Ba Jin’s representation of the girl student in this novel, we must do so through an examination of his depiction of her relationships with other family members, especially her male counterpart, the boy student and her cousin, Juehui. This approach is useful not only for assessing the typical May Fourth representation of new women whose revolutionary character
must find affirmation in a complete break from the traditional family but also for gauging the particular conflict in this novel: the younger generation’s complex relationships with the older generation, who, to the younger generation, embodies traditional mores and moralities. Ultimately, Ba Jin portrayed the girl student not so much to praise her revolutionary qualities as to represent the growth of the male protagonist Juehui.

In *Family*, the girl student Qin is ensconced, somewhat ironically, in extensive and complex familial relationships to the extent that her life outside the family is rarely mentioned. Such a “domestication” of the girl student is necessary because she is assigned by the author to be the feminine and inferior counterpart to her cousin Juehui—who is also the center of consciousness in the novel—a girl student to his boy student. At first glance, in *Family* the girl student and the male protagonist seem to be more similar than different. Indeed, *Family* embodies an intersubjective duplication, or a “figural density,” to borrow Andrew Plaks’ term (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*), in that both young people are portrayed as modern intellectuals possessed of social conscience and sincere emotions. However, the symmetrical and parallel placement of the characters Juehui and Qin also serves to both segregate the domains of their activities by gender and to differentiate the degree of their radicalism. In the novel Juehui usually displays an antagonistic attitude towards the older males in his family, while Qin not only never comes into direct conflict with any men in either her immediate or extended family but also acts as a dutiful and loving daughter to her widowed mother. Moreover, Juehui alone makes the ultimate revolutionary gesture of leaving home, an ending that implies his conflicts with the traditional family system are more fundamental and irreconcilable than those in Qin’s case. Even Juehui’s ambivalence towards the family appears to be less debilitating than Qin’s dilemma, for Ba Jin has located the source of Qin’s weakness in her gender and thus reaffirmed Juehui’s superiority. We will see that it is precisely by emphasizing the differences in their respective relationships and emotional responses to the traditional family that Ba Jin deployed Qin to magnify Juehui’s revolutionary zeal.

Ba Jin attempted such a Self and Other positioning between Juehui and Qin particularly through a differential treatment of “sincere emotions” in the portrayal of their character. That is, although sincerity is used as the criterion to evaluate every character’s morality in the novel, Juehui’s realization and confession of his own contradictions are shown to facilitate his maturation and rejection of the traditional family while Qin’s only confirm her weakness and bind her more securely to her family. As such, Ba Jin suggested that the different outcomes of their rebellion can be attributed to their different ability to transform negative emotions into positive actions, a distinction that he also aligned with mutually exclusive gender categories.

However, Ba Jin’s narration of difference-within-solidarity between self and Other proved to be an arduous and risky undertaking. For his essentialization of sincerity also threatened to reveal both the inner contradic-
tions of the character Juehui and the subversion of his revolutionary commitment by his emotional attachment to tradition. Although *Family* built its success among young readers on demonstrations of idealism and passion, it is perhaps inevitable that Juehui’s break from his family can never be absolute, for his discontent is described as largely rooted in his instinctive emotional outrage against, instead of rational critiques of, the family. Indeed, Juehui betrays the most pronounced contradictions through his interaction with his family. Although apparently the most fearless and rebellious of the three brothers, he is by no means the heroic role model that he has read about in new books and journals—the sources of all his new ideas. Within his family, he often finds himself helplessly entangled in ambivalent feelings. For instance, Juehui regards his oldest brother Juexin—a character used as a foil to impress upon the reader Juehui’s revolutionary courage as compared to people of his own generation and gender—as a coward who makes “unnecessary sacrifices” of himself and the women he loves. Yet he cannot help but sympathize with Juexin’s dilemma, and in fact often depends on him as a buffer against abuses by their grandfather and uncles.

Although it can be argued that a modern/ist consciousness manifests itself precisely in an individual’s contradictory feelings and heightened self-awareness, the author’s uneasiness with this notion of modernity is evident. In fact, since emotional ambivalence also led to moral ambivalence within the novel, Ba Jin employed various narrative strategies to justify Juehui’s conflicted loyalties. Particularly, Ba Jin introduced the figure of the girl student for the reinforcement of male subjectivity. He accentuated the difference-within-similarity between the boy and girl student in order to not only make the revolutionary commitment of the male protagonist appear all the more distinct but also convert his emotional “weakness” to motivation for revolution.

To be sure, Ba Jin also utilized other strategies to accentuate Juehui’s psychological growth as a modern individual, such as describing Juehui’s volatile relationship with his grandfather, the Venerable Master Gao (Gao Lao Taiye), the despotic patriarch of the family. Juehui at first regards his grandfather as a dictator who casts an ominous shadow over the lives of other family members. He holds his grandfather directly or indirectly responsible for the miserable lives of several people within the family. Mingfeng, a bondmaid promised to one of the grandfather’s elderly friends as a concubine, commits suicide in despair. Master Gao is also blamed by Juehui for causing his brother Juemin to flee home by arranging Juemin’s marriage. Personally, Juehui bears the brunt of the stern patriarch’s discipline because of his involvement in political rallies and the publication of radical journals. In response, Juehui demonstrates his heroic mettle by being the most vocal of all family members in venting anger at his grandfather’s autocracy. When being grounded by Master Gao for his participation in student demonstrations against soldiers of the warlord government, Juehui laments the tyranny that permeates his family in his diary, “I’m so lonely! Our home is like a de-
sert, a narrow cage. I want activity. I want life. In our family, I can’t even find anyone I can talk to” (85).

Ba Jin not only highlighted Juehui’s revolutionary spirit by pitting him against the corrupt older males in the household, but also added to Juehui’s psychological complexity by depicting his changing feelings towards his grandfather. It is shown in the novel that Juehui has no difficulty siding with the oppressed and raging against his grandfather’s behavior when laboring Master Gao as the symbol of patriarchal rule. The moment he starts to think of Master Gao as a human being, however, his emotions become less clear-cut. Significantly, Juehui’s change of heart happens when his grandfather is on his deathbed, no longer a tyrannical power to be reckoned with. In his final audience with his grandfather, Juehui sees that

He [Master Gao] lay with his bald head propped against high-piled pillows, his face bloodless and thinner than ever, his mouth slackly open. Above high cheekbones, his large eyes were sunken; from time to time he closes them wearily. To Juehui, his grandfather looked weak and pitiful; he no longer resembled the awesome and frightening Venerable Master Gao. (288)

The realization of his grandfather’s impending death disarms Juehui. He finds himself no longer “awed” or “frightened” by the old man, because his grandfather’s physical condition reminds him of human mortality in a very concrete way. Boundaries between abstract categories such as “tradition” and “modernity,” “dictatorship” and “rebellion” also become blurred for him, as he feels a new bond with his grandfather as a fellow human being. Moreover, this is also a moment of self-awareness for Juehui. On this occasion Master Gao expresses his wish to make amends before he dies; he praises Juehui as “a good boy” and promises to call off Juemin’s arranged marriage. Master Gao’s gesture of repentance not only convinces Juehui of his sincerity, and thus in Juehui’s eyes, partly redeems his moral character, it also reminds Juehui of his own contradictions.

He has just failed Mingfeng, the bondmaid he loved, who did not even dare to beseech him to rescue her from concubinage. Hearing from Juemin of her impending marriage and not knowing of Mingfeng’s planned suicide, Juehui privately convinces himself on the absurdity of the idea of a marriage between himself and Mingfeng, since they come from different classes. Mingfeng ends up committing suicide in despair but also as a sacrifice, in order not to burden Juehui with her difficult situation. Her death forcefully confirms both Juehui’s lack of power in his own family and the superficiality of his “humanitarian” sympathy towards the servants of the family. In the final meeting with Master Gao, Juehui finds it easier to forgive his grandfather, because he recognizes his own complicity in the destruction of the weak and the oppressed. After all, he just tacitly allowed Mingfeng to be devoured by the old family. Juehui admits to his second brother Juemin after Mingfeng’s death, “I used to blame you and Big Brother for being
spineless. Now I know I’m not any different. We’re all sons of the same parents, raised in the same family. None of us have any courage. I hate everyone. I hate myself” (229).

Juehui’s recognition of the similarity between himself and the other male family members is devastating for him, because up to that point he has launched all his attacks on the patriarchal family from the vintage point of his own moral superiority. By admitting to his own sin, Juehui can no longer draw a clear boundary between himself and the older male family members he previously despised. Although Ba Jin hinted that Juehui’s gesture of self-confession was essential for the birth of his modern identity, Juehui’s emotional ambivalence also created the kind of moral ambiguity that Ba Jin was anxious to clarify and dispel.

Although it is shown in the novel that only after his acknowledgment of his ties to the morally bankrupt older generation is he able to leave the traditional family to join in revolution, Juehui’s ultimate renunciation of the family can also be construed as an escape after all his attempts at rebelling against and reforming the traditional family from within have failed. Despite the grand gesture of giving up his family for the sake of revolution, he also leaves behind the very real suffering of the people confined within that family. Furthermore, the timing of his departure is very telling. Neither Mingfeng’s death nor the recognition of his guilt directly drives Juehui from home. Rather, Ba Jin arranged that Juehui leave home only after his grandfather’s death, when the patriarch’s emotional hold over him is irrevocably severed. Master Gao holds such tremendous emotional power over Juehui because Juehui always harbors an emotional rather than analytical view of the family. Although regarding himself as a defector (pantu) of the family, Juehui has never consciously questioned the premise of the Confucian family structure: the moral authority allocated to the position of patriarch. In impugning the immorality of the older males of the family, he is actually venting his disappointment with his male relatives, who turn out to be unsuitable moral leaders for the younger generation, rather than issuing a clear-sighted denunciation of the principle of moral hierarchy that organizes the patriarchal family. Given the profound and all too plausible ambiguity inherent in Juehui’s revolutionary commitment, Ba Jin had to take some steps to salvage his hero’s failed mission of demarcating a revolutionary self from antirevolutionary others within the family.

Ba Jin ingeniously planted Juehui’s cousin, the girl student Qin, into the story as his female counterpart in order to verify the hero’s devotion to the causes of Chinese modernization and revolution. In the novel, Qin appears as a new woman who challenges stifling traditional norms. She fights, though without success, for an opportunity to go to a co-educational school, supports and sustains her lover Juemin in his rebellion against an arranged marriage, and generally acts as a model modern woman for both her female and male cousins. Just as Juehui is the most radical of his brothers and male cousins, Qin’s modern education and revolutionary courage distinguish her
from her less outspoken and less fortunate female cousins. Nevertheless, it is her male cousin Juehui who eventually breaks away from the family, while she falls in love with Juehui’s brother Juemin and stays home at the end of the novel. Thus, despite all her impressive feat, in failing to deliver the ultimately revolutionary gesture of rejecting her family, Qin becomes both an exceptional woman and an almost-but-not-quite man, thus providing a contrast to set off the more thorough iconoclasm of the hero, Juehui. As Juehui’s kindred spirit, Qin echoes his concerns and social conscience. Apparently not resolute enough to leave the family, Qin also makes Juehui’s intrepidity look all the more outstanding. This respective central and peripheral positioning of Juehui and Qin is illustrated most obviously by the space given to representations of not only Juehui’s rebellious action but also his psychological development in the novel, such as the intense inner conflicts he experiences over the behavior of his family mentioned above.

To be sure, Qin is granted certain degree of psychological complexity as well, but the depiction of her inner thoughts was used to endorse the male-centered May Fourth discourses of modernity rather than to represent her individuality. Rey Chow has already remarked on the narrative voice that “levels class and gender differences” in *Family* (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* 99). She observes that Mingfeng’s status as an uneducated bondmaid within the family contrasts glaringly with the author’s bestowment on her psyche a “uniform meditative complexity” (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* 99). Compared to Mingfeng, Qin, as an educated modern woman, provides a more facile tool for the author to conceal his gendered narrative practice. This can be seen particularly in Ba Jin’s portrayal of the negative role that emotionality plays in Qin’s quest for a modern identity. In contrast to the representation of Juehui, whose fierce inner battle eventually frees him from his attachment to the family, her emotions are depicted as more crippling than liberating. For instance, Qin is shown to be enslaved by her devotion to her mother. Faced with the typical May Fourth conflict between filial love and revolutionary commitment, Qin declares, “I love my future, but I love my mother too. I love light, but for the sake of my mother, I would remain in darkness to keep her company” (197). She even refuses to cut her hair, a widely recognized sign of modernity at the time, lest it upset her mother. Moreover, Qin’s internal conflicts always seem to root in her awareness of the disadvantages of being a woman, of the inherent inferiority of the feminine position as compared to the masculine. Bombarded by her mother’s repeated attempts at matchmaking on her behalf, the only escape route Qin can think of is to become a man: “I will not take that road [arranged marriage]. I want to be a human being, a human being just like a man […] I don’t want to go that way, I want to take a new road, I will take a new road” (203, emphasis mine). As indicated in the above quote, Qin considers “being a man” the equivalent of not only being free and modern, but also being human. Whereas her expression of resistance to arranged marriage offers the reader a glimpse into her yearning for a masculine position, her in-
ternal turmoil when faced with the danger of rape by looting soldiers even more dramatically reveals Qin’s dissatisfaction with a feminine one. In this scene, she is depicted as associating masculinity with strength, and femininity with weakness.

When fighting breaks out in the city, amidst the widespread panic among family members and her womenfolk’s avowals to kill themselves if cornered by soldiers, Qin is beset by self-doubt:

“You could never do it [commit suicide],” a voice inside her said. Although she could think of no other alternative, she felt there must be one. All her new ideas, her new books and periodicals, Ibsen’s social dramas, the writings of the Japanese author Akiko Yosano—had vanished from her mind. She could see only outrage and humiliation, leering at her, mocking her. The shame would be something she could not live with. She had her pride. It was hopeless; none of them [her extended family] could save her. Yet they all were infinitely precious to her; she couldn’t bear to leave them. Weary, despondent, for the first time Qin began to think she was no different from women like Mei and Ruijue. She was just as weak, after all. (177)

Qin’s thoughts when she is faced with the threat of violation expose the problematic in the construction of her modern identity. The novel tells us that she has had access to Western ideas mainly through texts: books, journals, and newspapers. She has in fact built her aspirations on what she has read about women’s liberation, freedom of the younger generation, and modernization of the nation. As such, she is actually depending on the gendered interpretation of what means to be a modern Chinese woman provided by male intellectuals for the construction of her own identity. Therefore, Qin’s gendered self-image also calls into question the validity and applicability of a male-centered modernization scheme to women’s true development.

In the above passage, Qin laments that she is no different from other women because she is just as weak as they are, mirroring Juehui’s acknowledgement of his similarity to corrupt male family members. But, unlike Juehui, Qin’s disappointment with herself is shown to only increase her sense of helplessness rather than spur her to leave the family. This is because, while Juehui’s awareness of his complicity in patriarchal corruption induces in him a strong desire to separate himself from the source of contamination, Qin’s refusal to identify with other, even more oppressed, women only further traps her in her gender. In other words, she aspires for the kind of modern identity that is actually a copy of (constructed) modern masculinity, and, as a result, finds herself frustrated in her pursuit precisely because the construction of such a masculinity necessarily depends on repeated protestation of unalterable and mutually exclusive gender positions. Furthermore, in her eagerness to embrace the May Fourth gender discourses, she also internalizes their underlying traditional male-centered consciousness that further impedes her liberation.
In the looting scene, Qin’s paralyzing misery is partially caused by her unquestioning acceptance of the absolute importance of female “chastity,” a distinct echo of the neo-Confucian cult of women’s virtue, which claimed that even the loss of chastity under duress was grounds enough for women to commit suicide. But more tellingly, she regards her female relatives such as Mei and Ruijue, two women whose lives are destroyed by the family, as symbols of weakness and failure. The two women Qin pities, and whom she perhaps subconsciously holds in contempt, actually show far more poise and determination than she in the face of death or “a fate worse than death.” Yet Qin dismisses as insignificant both their strength of character and their struggle, despite arranged marriages and un consummated loves, to build a life within the patriarchal restrictions. Qin’s ideal of female autonomy is the one and only version of women’s emancipation handed down by male intellectuals: A liberated woman should receive a modern education, choose her own husband, and join in revolutionary work. Having convinced herself that she can never transcend the weakness of her gender to attain such a personal autonomy, she in effect suspends herself between the reality of women’s struggle and her vision of (masculine) power. Supposedly a pioneer of modern Chinese women, Qin is actually caught in a position of isolation and powerlessness.

Nevertheless, rather than acknowledging that Qin’s subscription to the May Fourth modernization discourses is one reason for her captivity, Ba Jin blamed her quandary on her “soft-hearted” emotions. Although Qin’s “feminine” traits such as compassion and gentleness are described as highly desirable to the young men in the novel, she is also shown to allow herself to be overwhelmed by her own emotions in the looting scene just mentioned. As a result, Qin appears inferior to the more radical Juehui, whose righteous indignation prompts him to leave the family after the death of his grandfather. By contrast, Qin has to play the role of filial daughter, supportive lover, and generally speaking, the nurturing woman within the family. In this light, her betrothal to Juemin, although signaling a victory gained through her revolutionary protest against arranged marriages, indicates both her domestication and her symbolic contingency with masculinity, if only by becoming a man’s extension: a wife. Not coincidentally, Qin plays a relatively static role in the two other novels that, along with Family, make up Ba Jin’s Torrent Trilogy, Spring (Chun, 1938) and Autumn (Qiu, 1940). Although her cousin Shuying, another girl student, leaves home in Spring, Qin stays home until the end of Autumn, when the reader is told that she finally cuts her hair, and plans to get married to Juemin and accompany him to his teaching position. In these two sequels to Family, Qin in fact becomes the revolutionary man’s link with the old family by maintaining regular correspondence with those who have left home. She is portrayed as being blessed with the best of both worlds by staying home: She is the rebel within the family, and the nurturing female for (male) radicals outside the family.
Both the praise of Qin’s merits and the exposure of her emotional weak-
ness are thus brought to bear on the development of the male protagonist’s revo-
lutionary qualities. Significantly, the novel ends with Juehui’s departure for Shanghai:

A new emotion gradually possessed Juehui. He didn’t know whether it was joy or sorrow, but one thing was clear—he was leaving his family. Before him was an endless stretch of water sweeping steadily forward, bearing him to an unfamiliar city. There, all that was new was developing—new activities, new people, new friends. This river, this blessed river, was taking him away from the home he had lived in for eighteen years to a city and people he had never seen. The prospect dazzled him; he had no time to regret the life that he had cast behind. For the last time, he looked back. “Goodbye,” Jue-
hui said softly. He turned to watch the on-rushing river, the green water that never for an instant halted its rapidly advancing flow. (329)

The image of the flowing river, a conventional metaphor for development and progress, forms a sharp contrast with the imagery at the start of the novel. Whereas the novel begins with the two brothers Juehui and Juemin walking home one winter evening through a heavy snowfall, it ends on a spring morning when Juehui embarks on a new journey, closing on a self-consciously optimistic tone. But Juehui’s emotions are as turbulent as the rushing waters. On a more mundane yet practical level, he still has to rely on family subsidies, especially money contributed by his big brother, in order to survive in a strange city away from home. Just like the rushing river, he is moving towards an unknown future whose only discernible characteristic to him is its “newness.” Even though the future promises excitement, it also induces feelings of bedazzlement, of uncertainty, and maybe even of suppressed terror. As described in the passage above, Juehui’s determined gaze towards the future can only follow his last look backward.

Such a double vision also characterizes Ba Jin’s own narrative practice in Family. That is, Ba Jin’s modern, progressive, and revolutionary messages are nonetheless juxtaposed with a lingering attachment to premodern literary traditions, manifested in both the traditional male-centered consciousness inherent in his deployment of the girl student for the representation of the male subject, and in his adoption of premodern narrative devices. Indeed, in addition to Ba Jin’s molding of Qin for the reinforcement of Juehui’s subjectivity, other aspects of the narrative modes of Family also reveal Ba Jin’s conflicted loyalties towards both tradition and modernity. In the novel two types of narratives evolve synchronically. Ba Jin delivered the ideological message of the novel by exposing the older males within the family through the agency of the center of consciousness, Juehui, thus making the family into an allegory of the morally bank-corrupt Confucian tradition. However, Ba Jin’s loving depiction of the domestic space betrayed his emotional ties to the old family as a “presence,” an aesthetic entity so deeply
rooted in his cultural and psychological makeup that it escaped the censorship of his ideological conviction. Such a subconscious perception of the family was more difficult to dismiss on moral and rational grounds because it had been formed prior to and outside of the author’s cognizance of modern knowledge and revolutionary ideologies. It follows that although Ba Jin considered himself to be one of the most relentlessly antitraditional modern Chinese authors and the one who had been most influenced by foreign models (“Da Faguo Shijie bao jizhe wen” 326), he adopted a significant number of plot structures and literary devices from Dream of the Red Chamber for his most popular modern novel (Gu), pointing up yet again the inconsistency in May Fourth intellectuals’ cultural iconoclasm.

Ba Jin’s poetic delineation of the family gardens in particular reveals his own paradoxical move of both affiliation with and dissociation from the family as a cultural icon. Similar to the Grand Prospect Garden (Daguan yuan) in Dream of the Red Chamber, the Gao family garden serves as the stage for various human dramas, especially those of a romantic nature. For example, after many years of separation Juexin encounters his old lover in this garden, where his wife then happens upon the grief-stricken couple. Here Juehui also expresses his love for Mingfeng, who later commits suicide in the lake inside the same garden. However, it is in the depiction of the garden as a site of seasonal changes and wistful dreams, with a descriptive rather than dramatic mode of presentation, that the author’s deepest ambivalence is revealed.

Significantly, the family garden is frequently a location of reunion and revelry in Family. Chapters twelve to nineteen are devoted to the Gao family’s celebration of Chinese New Year in the garden, a section that makes up almost a quarter of the entire novel. The narrative tempo slows down in these eight chapters, constituting a prolonged narrative arrest, i.e., a non-linear, descriptive interlude inserted between major action units. Before the description of the New Year’s celebration in chapter twelve, chapter eleven treats Juehui’s interview with his grand-father who then grounds him. After the long section on the New Year’s celebration, chapter twenty begins with the startling news of the riot and looting in the city. We can see that before this narrative arrest, various conflicts and Juehui’s rebelliousness have been gradually building up; and after the elaborate celebration and sacrificial ceremony of the New Year’s Festival, the fortunes of the Gao family then take a turn for the worse. Chapters twelve to nineteen thus embody a peak that both summarizes the previous developments and prepares for the deterioration of the family and the dispersal of its members. In so doing, the novel adopts a convention often featured in premodern vernacular novels such as Outlaws of the Water Marsh (Shuihu zhuan, c. 1573–1620), Plum in the Gold Vase (Jin Ping Mei, c. 1580) as well as Dream of the Red Chamber. Furthermore, Ba Jin betrayed his emotional attachment to the family through the extensive, almost caressing description featured in these chapters. Although the remainder of the novel witnesses the death of family members, the disin-
integration of the clan, and the departure of various characters, the deliberately lingering pace of these eight chapters facilitates a leisurely savoring of the merriment of the festive occasion even as it, as Rey Chow argues, exposes the hypocrisy of traditional rituals (Woman and Chinese Modernity 100).

Ba Jin’s revival of narrative conventions in premodern vernacular novels suggests his subconscious attachment to tradition. Yet, while admitting to using Family as a way to exorcise his nostalgia about his own family, he also emphasized that rather than debilitated him, this lingering attachment spurred him to launch even more vigorous attack on the traditional system. As he claimed, “it is this attachment [to the family] that incited in me greater anger, encouraging me to write a history of an old family, ‘a complete history of the vicissitudes of a feudal family coming undone.’ I wanted to call out ‘J’accuse’ against a dying system” (“Jia” 375). It can be seen that in a move echoing his depiction of Juehui, Ba Jin rationalized his emotional ties to the traditional family by describing them as the motivating force for his rebellion against tradition. However, Ba Jin also took pains to distance himself from Juehui, whose ambivalence towards the traditional family rendered him a potential hazard for Ba Jin’s construction of his own modernity. Ba Jin claimed that Family was not autobiographical even though he based it on the life stories of several people he knew. He emphatically declared that he was not Juehui (“Jia” 378). With those assertions, Ba Jin was not only attempting to make readers accept the truthfulness of his account and hence the legitimacy of his “indictment” of the traditional family, but also to prove that he was an objective “historian” and a fearless warrior who successfully purged nostalgic feelings towards the old family through his fiction writing. Indeed, just as in his narrative practice in Family, in his essays Ba Jin also depended on the performance of exorcising debilitating emotions for the solidification of a modern masculinity.

The Woman Revolutionary in Love Trilogy

In light of the success Ba Jin obtained through an ingenious blending of traditional and modern sensibilities and discursive practices in Family, it perhaps should come as no surprise that his Love Trilogy, made up by the novellas “Fog,” “Rain,” and “Lightning,” did not fare as well. The most obvious “failing” of these novellas is that Ba Jin hardly invoked any premodern vernacular novel, thus unable to draw on the readership’s previous experience with vernacular narratives to promote the trilogy. However, Ba Jin’s unsubtle use of women characters solely for the sake of facilitating male subject formation was more at fault. Although the more radical new women in this trilogy also aid the male intellectual’s rebellion against tradition, just as Qin does in Family, Ba Jin’s oversimplification of human emotions and relationships in the trilogy proved detrimental to its success among readers of the time.

The three novellas in this trilogy share some characters, though the first two of them unfold in the urban setting of Shanghai while the third takes
place in an unspecified small town. Ba Jin’s penchant for tripartite structure manifests itself again in the grouping of characters in Love Trilogy. In his Family, three brothers, Juexin, Juemin, and Juehui were made to represent values that range from the most conservative to the most radical. In “Fog,” three male characters contrast with each other in the degree of their dedication to the anarchist cause: Chen Zhen, the most committed and steadfast; Wu Renmin, passionate yet rash; and Zhou Rushui, the most indifferent to the revolution and the weakest in character. They also contrast with each other in their relationships with women. In “Fog,” Chen Zhen devotes himself completely to the revolutionary cause, and displays a misogynist attitude towards women. In the same story, Zhou Rushui pursues a modern girl student, only to back out at the last minute because he is already married. Another failed romance pushes him to commit suicide in “Rain.” Wu Renmin forms a contrast with these two in that he proves to be the most interested and persistent in romance. He is also the male character who links the three novellas together. While in “Fog” he appears as a happily married family man and hot-tempered revolutionary, he enters “Rain” a recent widower and gets involved with another woman, a former student of his. In “Lightning” he emerges as a mature revolutionary leader and winner of the heart of Li Peizhu, former girl student and now woman revolutionary extraordinaire.

In fact, Wu Renmin’s growth is facilitated and marked by his associations with three different women in his life: his wife (“Fog”), his first lover Xiong Zhijun (“Rain”), and his second lover Li Peizhu (“Lightning”). His degree of revolutionary commitment is shown to be proportionate to the amount of revolutionary zeal possessed by the woman involved with him. While his wife always stays home to take care of him and their household, Xiong Zhijun is a young widow and former student of his who comes to Shanghai to eke out a living on her own. However, like Wu’s wife, she also sacrifices herself for him. When an officer in the warlord army threatens to execute Wu, she consents to marry the officer in order to save Wu, and eventually dies of tuberculosis. In comparison, Li Peizhu is the most radical of the three women. She leaves her old father, and goes to the countryside to organize revolutionary activities. She is also the most independent of the three women, and seems to get involved with Wu not so much out of romantic love as because they are comrades fighting for the same cause. Yet, even though by far the most positive and aggressive new woman in Ba Jin’s fiction, Li Peizhu is still placed as a link in a sequence to best display Wu Renmin’s growth. For it can be seen that Wu Renmin’s development into a mature revolutionary leader and a strong man is illustrated in the trajectory of his love life: from being devoted to his sickly wife, to manifesting a savior complex in his relationship with Xiong Zhijun, and finally, to accepting a partnership in revolution with Li Peizhu.

Ba Jin readily admitted that he was not very familiar with revolutionary women when he wrote these three novellas, but explained that he por-
trayal their relationships with male intellectuals in order to “bring romantic relationships to bear on the character of the hero” (“Aiqing de sanbu qu zongxu” 317). Although he had adopted similar narrative strategies of bringing an idealized new woman to bear on the Bildungsroman of the hero in Family, in Love Trilogy he even more explicitly and simplistically appropriated the agency of new women to reinforce male subjectivity. For instance, the novellas feature a male center of consciousness that actively categorizes all the new women the man encounters. Chen Zhen groups his female acquaintances into three types: demure and innocent bourgeois girl students such as Zhang Ruolan, aggressive seductresses such as Qin Yunyu, and revolutionary women such as Li Peizhu. In so far as the new women facilitate and testify to the growth of the male characters, they play roles similar to that of Qin in Family. However, as these women are assigned the single task of providing a convincing testimony to male growth, their characters are also portrayed with less emotional depth and appear more one-dimensional than Qin. Revealingly, the characterization of the male characters that structurally correspond to these women also suffers a loss of psychological complexity as a result.

In conclusion, Ba Jin’s deployment of emotionality in his representation of new women both reaffirmed the typical discursive pattern privileged by radical male intellectuals and signaled changes. On the one hand, both his displacement of male weakness onto his female Other in Family and his continuous utility of new women to signify male growth in Love Trilogy echo similar efforts by Yu Dafu and Lu Xun, and thus demonstrating the traditional male-centered consciousness in fiction by these male writers. However, he differed from those two authors in his accentuation of difference-in-affinity rather than antagonism between modern men and women. By thus displaying more optimism about both the future of the emancipation of Chinese women and of male intellectuals’ growth, Ba Jin’s fiction illustrates the gradual replacement of individualism by collectivism as dominant discourse in the 1930s. Furthermore, his symmetrical placement of male and female radical intellectuals made possible by his essentialization of emotions also signals a new strategy of self-representation for radical male intellectuals. That is, in the age of revolution, passionate promotion of revolutionary causes in fiction not only obtained moral authority for the writer but also endorsed a masculinized modern femininity that ostensibly supported women’s emancipation but actually enabled the male writer to more effectively elide and appropriate female agency for the reinforcement of male subjectivity. The ambiguous position of the male writer between tradition and modernity will come into view once again in Mao Dun’s fiction, generating new ways yet of deploying new women for the construction of male identity, the topic of next chapter.