The differences between the two writers, Ba Jin and Mao Dun, are obvious. Ba Jin, a relatively obscure young author in 1931, bombarded his audience with a series of emotionally explosive novels and novellas that indicted the traditional system. By contrast, Mao Dun belonged to an earlier generation of May Fourth intellectuals that also included Lu Xun and Yu Dafu, and had established his literary reputation as editor, literary theorist, and translator of foreign literature even before he started writing fiction in the late 1920s. Furthermore, in contrast to Ba Jin’s claim that his personal experiences within the Confucian family triggered off his vehement denunciation of tradition, Mao Dun characterized his promotion of modernity and revolution as the result of rational self-reflection. Even as Mao Dun assigned the woman revolutionary, a figure known for her passion and radicalism in his work, to the role of representative of modern Chinese women, he did so through a deliberate invocation of “objectivity” and “realism.” However, a close scrutiny of both his fiction and essays reveals that just like Ba Jin, Mao Dun created and managed his own modern identity through the deployment of emotions. Only in his case, Mao Dun performed the withholding and controlling of his private emotions under the rubric of promoting the doctrines of the Western theory of “Realism.”

Because of his already prominent status in literary circles by the late 1920s, Mao Dun certainly had more at stake than Ba Jin when faced with harsh criticism from radical intellectuals. His most important strategy to deflect criticism of “pessimism” and “sensuality” was to represent himself as a true “Realist.” This motive prompted him to vigorously advertise more his political experiences than his literary expertise. By all accounts, Mao Dun was one of the chief disseminators of Western literary theories and arbiters of modern Chinese literature who enjoyed widespread influence at the time. Mao Dun began his literary career in 1916 as an editor and translator for
the then largest commercial publisher in China, the Commercial Press (Shangwu yinshu guan) in Shanghai. During his tenure as editor at the Commercial Press, the May Fourth Movement broke out in 1919. Subsequently, he translated into Chinese a large amount of Western literature from English translations, such as works by Anton Tchekhov, Guy de Maupassant, Arthur Schnitzler, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gorky, Nietzsche, and many more. He was also a well-known editor of modern magazines. In addition to having spearheaded the publication of Xuesheng zazhi (Student magazine), he reformed one of the most prestigious literary magazines of the May Fourth period, Short Story Monthly (Xiaoshuo Yuebao), transforming it from the hub of “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Fiction” to that of May Fourth fiction. In addition, he cofounded one of the two most influential literary societies, the Literary Research Association, and promoted “Realist” fiction with both his extensive critiques of almost all the major authors of modern Chinese literature and his numerous theoretical essays.

Although Mao Dun was also one of the earliest May Fourth intellectuals to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), his literary accomplishments far outshone his political feat. However, Mao Dun emphasized the fact that he was first a political activist and secondly a fiction writer in order to establish his credibility as a writer. He claimed that his skirmishes with politics had made him a better fiction writer, since they had afforded him the opportunity to live in the real world first. According to his account, the breakup of the alliance between the CCP and the Nationalist Party in 1927, and the Nationalist government’s subsequent massacre of CCP members and leftist radicals forced him to flee China and take refuge in Japan for over a year. During the perilous time of September 1927, he began to write his first novella, “Disillusionment” (“Huanmie”):

I had lived truly first. I experienced one of the most complex scenes in China’s chaotic modern history; as a result I came to feel disillusioned with the contradictions of human life. Feeling profoundly depressed and alone—to say nothing of the external circumstances that constrained me—I determined to light a spark in this confused, gray life from the remnant of the life force in me. Therefore I began to write. (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 2, translation partly adapted from M. Anderson, The Limits of Realism 121)

The above personal narrative epitomizes Mao Dun’s attempts at establishing his status as a modern writer by representing himself as a “Realist.” For Mao Dun, being “modern” essentially meant being “realistic.” He accentuated his political experiences because the image of an author who already had the raw material of real life for fiction writing fit well with his idea of “Realism.” However, Mao Dun also surprisingly cited his own emotional responses to traumatic political events as a powerful motive for writing. As such, we can see that even though his version of “Realism” purportedly entailed the objective observation and unflinching representation of
reality (M. Anderson, *The Limits of Realism* 119–51), it differed from the representation of “objective reality” exemplified by Western fiction written by Zola or Flaubert. As we can see from his personal narrative, Mao Dun actually attempted to mesh the Western model of Realism with his premodern literary heritage by demanding that Realist literature be rooted in the author’s subjective experience of the world and that it be utilized as a tool to improve the overall morale of the revolutionary intellectuals. As Marston Anderson has convincingly argued, Mao Dun, like many of his fellow Chinese promoters of Realism, actually shied away from the hard objectivism implicit in the doctrine of Western Realism but chose to reassert the experiencing self into the creative process (*The Limits of Realism* 43–44).

However, neither Mao Dun’s emphasis of his political experience nor his unique definition of Realist literature managed to fend off accusations of “false realism” leveled against him by radical intellectuals in the late 1920s. The leftist critics, conceptualizing the “Real” very differently, repeatedly challenged Mao Dun’s defense of his works as “realistic.” They declared that his first three novellas, “Disillusionment,” “Vacillation,” “Pursuit” (Dongyao, 1928), and “Pursuit” (Zhuiqiu, 1929), later collectively called the *Eclipse Trilogy* (*Shi sansanbuqu*), had failed to capture the essence of an historical period of profound changes in China. For instance, in 1928 Qian Xingcun labeled *Eclipse* as “detailed expressions of bourgeois pathological psychology” in the historical context of the ebb of revolutionary causes (“Mao Dun yu xianshi” 106). Qian based his judgment of Mao Dun’s fiction on his observation that “Mao Dun only exposed the darkness; he stopped at depicting decadence and reminiscing about the past. He forgot to look to the future” (129), a comment uncannily echoed by critics on mainland China twenty years later (Fan J. 151–52). The radical critics of Mao Dun’s works, although apparently expressing dissatisfaction with his failure to capture the truth of reality, actually more concerned themselves with the lack of “revolutionary optimism” in his fiction. “Pessimism” in this case was a charge more serious than it had first appeared, for it connoted the author’s unrevolutionary and unmodern position by describing him as clinging to the old mode of “realistic” representation while refusing to embrace the new revolutionary ideology. As a result, although a long-time enthusiastic promoter of Realist fiction, Mao Dun faced the unusual task of having to convince his readers and critics of the legitimacy of his version of Realism in the late 1920s. He proceeded, somewhat paradoxically, by attempting to objectify his personal emotions.

As mentioned above, in his reminiscence about his early fiction writing, Mao Dun accentuated the personal, emotional experience that had compelled him to write. Mao Dun called *Eclipse* his “honest confessions,” for, he explained, it had captured his disillusionment, pessimism, and depression at the time (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 5). However, even if such invocations of his psychological and emotional experiences had succeeded in convincing his readers of the realistic basis of his fiction, he still needed to defend its objectivity, as he was allegedly describing highly personal emo-
tions in his works. Consequently, Mao Dun at times tried to distance his fiction from his source materials, i.e., his personal experiences. He declared, “There are no thoughts from me in ‘Disillusionment’ and ‘Vacillation.’ There are only objective descriptions. ‘Pursuit’ does reflect my most recent thoughts and emotions, but the young characters’ discontent, depression, and search for new routes are all objectively observed realities” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 5-6; emphases mine). He also declared himself to be on moral high ground in representing these objective and truthful realities. In response to criticism of his backwardness, he thus defended the pessimistic portrayals in his works: “I could not point out a new path for people in my fiction, because I did not want to utter anything against my conscience [. . .] If this is called ‘vacillation,’ then I do not want to defend myself” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 6).

Most importantly, Mao Dun conceived of the notion of “the true spirit of the times” (shidaixing), a kind of collective psychology of the people in a particular historical context, in order to prove the representation of his personal feelings to be true reflections of the reality. In his essays, Mao Dun had always insisted that the grasp of “the true spirit of the times” was vital for achieving “Realism” in fiction. In order to objectify his fiction in works such as Eclipse, the writing of which was admittedly motivated by personal emotions, Mao Dun had to establish an accord between “the true spirit of the times” and his emotions. As Marston Anderson observes, “In defense of his work he [Mao Dun] seems to say that if his own frustrations were discovered in the psychology of his compatriots as well, they could be identified as objective facts and were therefore acceptable for fictional representation” (The Limits of Realism 126). Mao Dun’s idea of “the true spirit of the times” thus ironically boils down to a collective psychological realism, the genuineness of which can be easily confirmed by his own emotions. But more importantly, the notion of “the true spirit of the times” enabled Mao Dun to demonstrate through his fiction his courageous penetration into historical truth against the odds of his overpowering despair.

For the revelation of “the spirit of the times,” Mao Dun used his narrative practice in fiction to perform “penetrating observation, sober analysis, and meticulous composition” (“Du Ni Huanzhi” 207), all core requirements of fictional realism by his standard, and thus to establish himself as a Realist writer with moral courage and the strength of character. Particularly, in all his fiction written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he self-consciously represented strong-willed and over-sexualized women revolutionaries who often overwhelm their male counterpart, weaker modern male intellectuals, in their joint search for meanings in the chaotic Chinese revolution. Such a gender configuration in Mao Dun’s fiction served two purposes. For one thing, Mao Dun sought to objectify subjective emotions by erecting boundaries of gender and genre while studiously avoiding first-person narration. After all, he was apparently writing about female “others” with objective modes of narration. More importantly, it was precisely through the expo-
sure of male weakness by comparing him to the woman revolutionary that
the author displayed his own mastery of personal despair and his ability to
move beyond pessimism in search of painful yet liberating historical truth.

However, Mao Dun’s representation of the woman revolutionary si-
multaneously betrayed the nonrealistic and nonmodern aspects of his fic-
tion. By appropriating the figure of the woman for the construction of male
subjectivity, Mao Dun manifested a male-centered consciousness also ap-
parent in such works as Ba Jin’s *Family*. But unlike Ba Jin, Mao Dun did not
advocate the kind of gender equality that required women’s emulation of
men, and hence the eradication of gender differences, but instead accentu-
ated male delectation of both the female body and female emotions. Mao
Dun’s infusion of a heavy dose of eroticism in the representation of new
women not only linked him to Yu Dafu’s less-than-revolutionary objectifica-
tion of the female body but also exposed his ambiguous relationship to
popular fiction of his time, which had previously provoked his wrath for al-
legedly degrading women and poisoning Chinese people’s spirit. Further-
more, Mao Dun proved to be a connoisseur of female emotions as well as
the female body. Resurrecting the traditional discourse of female virtue and
bringing it into conjunction with the equally male-centered revolutionary
discourses, he contrasted the constrained expression of decorous, gentle,
maternal feelings by the more traditional type of women with the vivacity
and uninhibited display of sexuality of revolutionary women, and reveal-
ingly allocated more male affection to the traditional type. As such, Mao
Dun’s representation of the woman revolutionary reveals the complex rela-
tionships both between the canons of classical Chinese literature and May
Fourth literature, and between May Fourth literature and its contemporary
popular fiction.

Below I first examine Mao Dun’s earliest representation of the two
types of women he claimed to have produced repeatedly in his fiction, the
hesitant, bourgeois and the destructive, rebellious heroine. I will then ex-
amine the developments of these two types of women in his later fiction in
order to illustrate Mao Dun’s surreptitious bartering and trafficking of
modern and traditional discourses even as he promoted “true” Realism.

**Miss Jing and Miss Hui: The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in *Eclipse***

Mao Dun had made a name for himself with his adroit fictional representa-
tion of women ever since the publication of his *Eclipse Trilogy*. As Mao
Dun’s earliest fictional work, the three novellas included in this trilogy en-
capsulated his “othering” strategy in the representation of women that would
recur in his later works. As I have mentioned above, depicting women af-
forded Mao Dun a chance to objectify subjective emotions through the invo-
cation of the conventions of Realism (Martin 65–71), for he was ostensibly
merely portraying fictional women characters, the Other marked off by
boundaries of gender and genre. The figure of the woman revolutionary
particularly provided him with a convenient trope both to release personal anxiety and to convey revolutionary messages. In this respect, Mao Dun resurrected the allegorical tradition of classical Chinese poetry, in which literati created a literary persona through the figure of the abandoned woman to vent their own political frustrations.

Yet Mao Dun’s fiction also carries a particular narrative tension of its own as he sought to establish his status as a *bona fide* Realist. Mao Dun’s desire to appear realistic motivated his accentuation of the universality of the psychological state that he depicted while attempting at self-effacement: “It was not my intention to portray either the conflict between love and revolution or the vacillation of the bourgeois class in this novella [“Disillusionment”] […] My focus was the topic ‘disillusionment,’ as if I was writing an assigned composition in high school” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 5–6). Similarly, he declared: “‘Vacillation’ only describes vacillation, the vacillation of the revolutionaries when political struggle intensifies” (8). He even went so far as to claim that he had designated the characters in his fiction as manifestations of certain collective psychological traits rather than as “protagonists” (*zhuren gong*) in their own right (8). Whether that claim proved that some kind of conceptual framework had really preceded Mao Dun’s characterization is open to discussion. But it undoubtedly revealed Mao Dun’s anxiety to present himself as a self-possessed historian of a tumultuous age, one who carried out detached and keen observation of the collective psychology rather than being overcome by personal emotions when writing fiction. He asserted, “I have taken pains not to mix my ‘subjectivity’ [zhuguan] into ‘Disillusionment’ and ‘Vacillation.’ I have also made the characters’ reactions towards the [1920s] revolution correspond to the objective [keguan] circumstances of the time” (5).

The intent to appear objective and masterful also explains Mao Dun’s penchant for categorizing his women characters. He claimed that he had only portrayed two types of women in *Eclipse*: “Miss Jing [from “Disillusionment”] and Mrs. Fang [from “Vacillation”] belong together, and Miss Hui [from “Disillusionment”], Sun Wuyang [from “Vacillation”], and Zhang Qiuliu [from “Pursuit”] belong together” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 5). He further endeavored to differentiate the two types of women by means of his own projection of what his readers’ affective responses might be: “Miss Jing and Mrs. Fang will naturally draw sympathy from the public, or some might scold them as not being ‘thorough’ in revolution. But Miss Hui, Sun Wuyang, and Zhang Qiuliu, although not [completely] women revolutionaries, are not just superficial romantic women either. If readers do not find them lovable and pitiable, then it is the author’s failure” (6). Yet, just as Mao Dun’s abstract distinction between psychological states such as “disillusionment” and “vacillation” usually collapses at the levels of plot and characterization, his categorization of women characters also proves far from absolute. By examining the relationship between the author, the narrator, and the characters, we will find that Mao Dun assigned female charac-
ters to different roles only to accommodate the diverse needs of male subject formation more effectively.

Mao Dun originally planned to write a novel of over two hundred thousand words to depict the “three phases of modern young people’s involvement in revolution” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 4). These are: their excitement before the revolution occurs, their disappointment and vacillation when faced with the increasingly intense conflict between the revolutionary and antirevolutionary groups, and finally, their pursuit for a new meaningful goal to purge their disillusionment and vacillation. He eventually condensed this master plan into the three novellas as they stand now, though he claimed that he intended for “Disillusionment,” “Vacillation,” and “Pursuit” to constitute a cohesive unit. These three novellas share the same historical background and occasionally the same characters. Furthermore, Mao Dun wished for the combination of the three novellas not only to provide a complete picture of the psychological developments of the young people who took part in revolutionary activities but also to discover a way of regeneration for the dispirited revolutionaries of his time, and thus fending off criticism of “pessimism” and establishing his credit as a “Realist.” Nevertheless, the plot of the three novels seems to illustrate the escalation of the revolutionary young people’s pessimism without providing the characters or the readers with any feasible deliverance.

“Disillusionment” depicts the quest of Miss Jing, a girl student living alone in Shanghai, during the historical turmoil of the late 1920s. Like many young women of her time, Miss Jing leaves her home in the countryside, and goes to school in a big city. She is soon surrounded by unwelcome male suitors who enjoy nothing better than gossiping about women and passing around libelous sexual anecdotes. Her friend Miss Hui, who recently returned from Paris, lives with her for a short time, and meets one of her suitors, a male student named Baosu. Hui flirts with Baosu but then suddenly leaves Shanghai. Miss Jing feels great sympathy towards the lovelorn Baosu and spends the night with him, only to discover in the morning that she has been seduced by an immoral scoundrel who is not only a seasoned womanizer but also a paid informer for the government who has been spying on student activities. Jing falls ill and takes refuge in a hospital. Upon hearing the news of the Northern Expedition led by the Nationalist party and with her friends’ encouragement, she goes to Wuhan to devote herself to the revolutionary cause. But she is once again disillusioned by the corruption and ineffectuality of the so-called revolutionary organizations. She then goes to a hospital to work as a nurse, where she meets a wounded lieutenant from the Northern Expedition Army by the name of Qiang Weili. The two of them fall in love and get married. But Qiang Weili is soon summoned back into the army and has to return to combat. At the end of the story Jing decides to wait for him with one of her old friends whose husband has also gone to battle. “It is as if I only had a dream, a happy dream,” she sobs after Qiang Weili leaves her (“Huanmie” 99).
In contrast to the constant change of setting in “Disillusionment,” the story in “Vacillation” takes place in one geographical location, a small county in the throes of revolution. Instead of following the life of one particular character, it incorporates multiple perspectives into the narration. Mao Dun especially privileged the viewpoints of two male characters: an opportunistic local squire who had recently renamed himself Hu Guoguang (meaning “nation’s light”), and a weak political leader with unspecified party allegiance by the name of Fang Luolan (a transliteration of the name of the French Realist novelist Roman Roland). The power struggle between the two men climaxes in a bitter conflict between leftist activists on the one side and the antirevolutionary merchants and members of the local gentry on the other. Hu manages to take advantage of the union members’ violent antagonism towards their employers and stirs up trouble in order to gain power. In contrast, Fang finds himself torn between the radicalism of his more revolutionary comrades on the one hand, and his sympathy towards shop owners as human beings on the other. To further complicate matters, Fang similarly wavers in his personal affairs. Although a happily married man with a small child, he finds himself fascinated by the dazzling woman revolutionary Sun Wuyang. This ill-fated attraction sparks rumors among the revolutionary community and jeopardizes the marital harmony of his own household. The triangle between Fang Luolan, his wife Meili, and the woman revolutionary Sun Wunyang constitutes a second story line. The end of the novella sees the collapse of these two storylines and failure in both Fang Luolan’s public and private lives. Because of the mishandling of political affairs by political leaders such as Fang Luolan, the county government comes under a full-scale armed attack by the united forces of a warlord army and local antirevolutionary landlords and merchants led by Hu Guoguang. Fang Luolan, his wife, and Sun Wuyang coincidentally retreat to the refuge of the same old temple on the fringe of the town. Mrs. Fang breaks down after hearing about her good friend Miss Zhang’s brutal death at the hands of the antirevolutionary forces and seeing Fang Luolan and Sun Wuyang talk together. In a hallucination, she sees a spider web in the dilapidated temple that seems to devour the whole universe and pitch everything into complete darkness.

Compared to the other two novellas in the trilogy, “Pursuit” represents the nadir of the revolutionaries’ morale. The title is, to a large extent, a diametric contrast to the content of the story, for the characters in the novella all fail in their various pursuits, not to mention the fact that they are not very clear about what they wish to pursue in the first place. Mao Dun claimed that there are no protagonists in this novella. The story moves from one center of consciousness to another, representing the lives and psyches of a group of young people stumbling along in the aftermath of a failed revolution. Zhang Manqing wishes to reform education, but fails miserably even to reform his wife, a fellow teacher whom he previously regarded as a comrade with similar educational ideals. Wang Zhongzhao works as a jour-
nalist, and plans to make a name for himself in journalism in order to win the admiration of his attractive and ambitious fiancée. Yet at the end of the novella he receives a telegram informing him that she has been in an accident and been disfigured. Zhang Qiuliu, the only woman within this group, at first plunges herself into a ceaseless pursuit of amusement. She later decides to marry in order to take care of the very sick Shi Xun, only to see the death of her intended shortly after getting engaged. The same Shi Xun, the confirmed “skeptic” of the group and Zhang Qiuliu’s sometime fiancé, likewise cannot achieve what he pursues: voluntary self-termination. His suicide attempt fails, and he dies instead from an acute illness just when he is planning to change his lifestyle and live with Zhang Qiuliu.

Mao Dun’s objective of depicting the development of the collective psychology through the narrative progression of these three novellas falls short. For by repeatedly producing the same types of characters who react to their environment in predictable ways, the distinctive psychological stages (e.g., disillusionment, vacillation) that they purportedly embody also share recurrent traits that form a repetition rather than evolution between the novellas. Furthermore, through the description of the repeated setbacks faced by these characters, all three novellas exude an acute sense of despair rather than convey any optimistic messages. As I mentioned earlier, faced with criticism of “pessimism” and “false realism” from radical intellectuals, Mao Dun cited a truthful representation of the collective psychology as sufficient evidence of his revolutionary commitment, particularly emphasizing his depiction of women in order to establish his modern and revolutionary credentials. Therefore, it is all the more necessary for us to bring a close scrutiny to his narrative representation of the two “archetypal” female characters in these three novellas for the evaluation of his claim to a revolutionary and modern identity.

In “Disillusionment” Mao Dun established these two types of women in the characters Miss Jing and Miss Hui. He characterized Miss Jing as “ceaselessly pursuing something, and ceaselessly disillusioned” (“Cong Guling dao Dongjing” 6). In contrast, Miss Hui is bolder, more experienced, and hardened by her past sexual debacles. As the heroine of “Disillusionment,” Miss Jing presumably should occupy the focus of the narration, since her life was meant to represent the universal “disillusionment people felt between the summer and fall of 1927, a feeling shared not only by the petit bourgeois class, but also by the proletariat and peasantry” (“Cong Guling dao Dongjing” 7). However, the omniscient narrator’s gaze constantly strays to Miss Hui whenever she appears on the scene. For instance, in Chapter Three of the novella, Hui, Jing, and Baosu go to a movie together. The narrative shifts to the description of the appearance of Miss Hui and Miss Jing:

When half of the movie had been shown, there was a ten-minute intermission. The lights went on inside the theatre. We could see the three of them sitting on the same row of chairs, with Jing in the
middle. It was quite warm in May. Hui was wearing a purple silk qipao. The soft silk fit her body tightly, one hundred and ten percent snug, outlining every detail of its round protrusions in a most uninhibited fashion. She had a pair of limpid, lively eyes under curvy eyebrows, small flowery lips wrapping around even and small white teeth. Miss Hui was really enchanting! (“Huanmie” 20)

The women are sitting in a movie theatre. As they watch the movie, they themselves are simultaneously on display. It is the omniscient narrator who examines and savors their beauty. He also compares the two of them and makes suitable evaluations:

But you couldn’t say that Miss Jing wasn’t beautiful as well. Hui’s beauty could be described, while Jing’s could not; you could not point to any feature of Jing’s face or body and say how it conformed to the Grecian standard of beauty, and you also couldn’t point out what the special features of her body were, its sensual attractions. You could go so far as to say that Miss Jing’s eyes, nose, and mouth were an ordinary set of eyes, nose, and mouth, but when all these ordinary features were gathered together as “Miss Jing,” they immediately took on a magical quality, as though there were something that could be neither seen nor described integrating her limbs and bones, permeating her every cell; and the result was a complete beauty that couldn’t be analyzed. (20, trans. in Lieberman 129)

The most interesting aspect of the above portrayal of Miss Jing and Miss Hui lies not so much in the fact that the narrator offers “two very different erotic objects” (Lieberman 129) as in the different narrative devices he adopts to describe the two women. To be sure, the narrator invokes the storyteller manner of premodern vernacular fiction to depict both women. He especially simulates the interaction between the traditional storyteller and his audience. When depicting the two women, he adopts the comradely “we” and “you” to encourage his audience’s participation. He delivers his words of wisdom, asks for confirmation, and implicitly invites his audience to join in a collective fantasy: “If, such a time, there were a thousand beauties available for your choosing [. . .]” (20). The male-centered tone is unmistakable.

However, it is even more striking to note the way different narrative models are invoked in the depiction of the two types of women. The narrator’s lingering, almost tactile gaze seeks out a variety of details of Hui’s facial features, her bodily contours, and her dress. Jing, on the other hand, is described with minimal detail, as the narrator ingeniously resorts to nondescription as description, appealing to the reader’s imagination through the use of words such as “magic.” Apparently modeling himself on the realistic style of authors like Zola, the narrator goes into meticulous detail in the depiction of Hui’s physical appearance, but when describing Jing’s external beauty, which defies “the Grecian standard of beauty” (20), he immediately
applies the classical Chinese literary aesthetic that emphasizes conciseness, brevity, and the use of allusions and implications.

The intentional inventory or omission of details in the description of the two women’s appearances suggests that the narrator identifies with the womanizer Baosu’s gaze, who is at that point more enamored of the obvious and aggressive sensuality of Miss Hui than of the subtle beauty of Miss Jing. Yet, despite the erotic fascination suggested by the space given to the depiction of Miss Hui’s appearance, the narrator claims to favor the quieter and more decorous beauty of Jing, as if wishing to distance himself from the womanizing Baosu. Miss Hui’s beauty is evaluated as more eye-catching. But the narrator is quick to point out its flaws, “Hui gets you excited; she has a mysterious power of attraction that irresistibly draws one close to her; but excitement soon gives way to weariness and numbness, and you then yearn to escape from Hui’s feminine provocation” (20). Conversely, he rhapsodizes over the ineffable beauty of Jing: “Her serene beauty can stabilize your nerves; she intoxicates you, as though her body exudes some delicate fragrance or shoots forth some electrical current that flows stronger over time, until you are finally besieged and must ‘surrender your weapons and quietly await your punishment’” (20). Whether the narrator approves of Jing because she is more “motherly” than Hui (Lieberman 129) is open to debate, but she undeniably appears to be a more traditional, decorous type of Chinese beauty who soothes and nurtures with her subtler charms. As such, it is all the more significant that the narrator endows her with “a magical quality,” describing her as possessing “something that could be neither seen nor described integrating her limbs and bones, permeating her every cell; and the result was a complete beauty that couldn’t be analyzed” (20). Furthermore, Mao Dun seemed to suggest that this “something” that made the more traditional woman superior to the modern type was the psychological depth possessed by the former.

As a significant contrast to the allocation of space for the description of the two women’s external appearances, the more traditional Jing is portrayed as psychologically more complex than the bolder Hui in the story. Therefore, we can see that while Mao Dun utilized a replica of the traditional male storyteller to express his nostalgia for the imagined serenity of tradition embodied in the more traditional woman, his deep involvement in the production of modern discourses also ironically equipped him with modern devices for the resurrection of tradition. In other words, Mao Dun’s conceptualization of Realism prompted him to claim that he developed Jing’s psyche in depth only for the illustration of collective disillusionment, but at the same time, his detailed description of her psyche also enabled him to surreptitiously cast tradition in a more positive and appealing light.

Mao Dun’s relationships to both tradition and modernity were both complex and ambiguous. At first glance, his differential treatment of the two women’s physical and psychological traits in “Disillusionment,” and of male sexual and emotive responses towards them, would seem to bear out the division of male libidinal energies into “the two strains of tenderness
and sensuality” suggested by Freud: “the man almost always feels his sexual activity hampered by his respect for the woman and only develops full sexual potency when he finds himself in the presence of a lower type of sexual object” (64). But as I will demonstrate in the following analysis of “Vacillation”—which features the same divide of women’s sexual versus spiritual attraction, and men’s sexual versus emotional bonding with them—the revolutionary male intellectual experiences impotency and harbors feelings of confusion and trepidation when faced with the sexually uninhibited woman revolutionary, whereas the more “respectable” traditional woman helps to restore his self-confidence in his masculine prowess as well as secures his affection.

Like “Disillusionment,” “Vacillation” also betrays the contradictions within Mao Dun’s “modernity,” particularly in his delineation of the relationships between Fang Luolan, his wife Meili, and the woman revolutionary Sun Wuyang, a triangular arrangement that would resurface in various forms in Mao Dun’s other stories. As was the case in “Disillusionment,” in “Vacillation” Mao Dun not only invoked the allegorical tradition of classical Chinese poetry but also eroticized the female body (see also Lieberman 124–33 and D. Wang, Fictional Realism 77–89), thus using the female body as a “mediating place” (D. Wang, Fictional Realism 77–79) to represent the abstract categories of tradition and modernity and resurrecting the traditional patriarchal gaze that objectifies women. But “Vacillation” also more explicitly reveals Mao Dun’s ambivalence towards popular fiction of his time in his construction of the romantic triangle.

According to Perry Link, the triangle in “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Fiction”—popular love stories that flourished in large cities in China in the early twentieth century—typically involves one man as the pinnacle of a pyramid arrangement and two women respectively representing traditional and modern values who are subject to his often voyeuristic gaze (196–235). Comprised of a man and two women—Fang Luolan, his wife Meili, and the woman revolutionary Sun Wuyang—the romantic triangle in “Vacillation” seems dangerously akin to those prevalent in the “Butterfly Fiction.” Since Mao Dun had persistently attacked “Butterfly Fiction,” which he accused of “poisoning Chinese people” with “a worldview of playing with life and indulging in one’s desires” (qtd. in Mao D., “Zhenyou daibiao” 311), he was naturally eager to emphasize that his triangular arrangement was different from that of “Butterfly Fiction.” He declared that he had intended the romantic triangle in the novella to reveal the character Fang Luolan’s political vacillation and impotency in the public arena, stating, “Currently we can still write about characters’ political allegiance directly, unlike Turgenev, who had to resort to romance to depict politics. But Fang Luolan’s romance with Sun Wuyang is not just an idle episode (xianbi) either, because it proves that he vacillates on all fronts, including in romance” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 9).
In addition to his claim to have deployed romance as an allegory for politics, in narrative execution Mao Dun apparently reversed the power structure of the old romantic triangle of “Butterfly Fiction,” intent as he seemed on exposing the hero’s weakness rather than upholding his control of the triangle. In the novella Fang Luolan is portrayed as lacking initiative both in romance and in politics. He is very attracted to Sun Wuyang, who confuses even as she dazzles him; yet he refuses to divorce his wife Meili, even though Meili insists on it. Whenever rebuffed by one woman, he always gravitates towards the other. Thus trapped in “a romantic double bind” (M. Anderson, The Limits of Realism 138), Fang Luolan’s personal life appears to be completely dominated by two opposite forces of attraction. In a similar vein, in his public life Fang does not demonstrate any political conviction in his dealings with party leaders, fellow political workers, or the town residents. He sympathizes with shop owners who claim that they are going bankrupt because of the sales clerks’ strike, but he also feels alarmed when the antirevolutionary forces assemble to attack union members. Consequently, his efforts to mitigate the more radical demands of his colleagues or to placate the disgruntled gentry class both fail miserably.

Furthermore, Mao Dun unwittingly invoked what René Girard has described as the triangle of circular desires to reveal Fang’s weakness. Girard suggests that in certain romantic triangles it is not the courted object that sparks competition. Rather, the two suitors compete with each other precisely because each believes that the other desires the object (Girard 7). Therefore, it is the desire to be the other suitor rather than the desire for the allegedly coveted object that sustains the triangle. In “Vacillation,” Fang Luolan is described as voluntarily turning himself into the object of desire. On the one hand, he entertains fantasies that the two women compete for his affection. It gratifies him and provides him with a sense of security to imagine two women vying for his attention and affection, particularly when he is experiencing agonizing uncertainty caused by political chaos. On the other hand, his desire for both women also only reflects what he perceives as their desire for him. For instance, he is drawn to Sun Wuyang because he believes she “understands” him. Conversely, he resents his wife Meili when she treats him coldly. In turning himself into the object of desire, Fang Luolan not only surrenders his personal agency, but also consigns himself to the position of the superfluous factor in the triangle. This is because, as the Girardian triangle suggests, the two suitors actually compete with each other out of a desire for the other’s position in the triangle rather than for the purported object of desire. Utterly passive in his pursuit of romance, Fang Luolan appears as a diametric contrast to the suitor in “Butterfly Fiction” who energetically pursues two women. By thus conjuring up an ostensibly different triangle to expose Fang Luolan’s flaws, Mao Dun fulfilled his mission of representing intellectuals’ “vacillation.”

Indeed, in revealing Fang Luolan’s weakness, Mao Dun changed the dynamics in the romantic triangle of “Butterfly Fiction” and established
himself as a Realist novelist who unflinchingly exposed the character flaws and flagging spirits of revolutionaries in spite of his own personal emotional chaos. However, as he exploited the images of the two women and accentuated their sexuality in order to construct an apparently new triangle, he ironically made a centripetal move to “Butterfly Fiction.” This is because, in contrast to the plot of “Vacillation,” where the male protagonist is denied the control of the triangle, on the narrative level Mao Dun installed a male-identified omniscient narrator who deftly deploys the two female characters and allegorizes the rivalry between them as the competition between more conservative and more radical attitudes towards revolutions, thus resurrecting the power relationship characteristic of the original triangle in “Butterfly Fiction.” Just like the popular authors whom he had denounced as antirevolutionary and poisoning Chinese people’s spirit, Mao Dun positioned two women against each other as symbols of mutually exclusive ideological tendencies.

Not only did Mao Dun base his own modern identity on the construction of this traditional male-centered triangle, he also partly redeemed Fang Luolan’s masculinity and modernity through the strategy of deploying women to accentuate the uniqueness and centrality of Fang’s psyche. In “Vacillation” the two women never directly confront each other. Meili accuses Fang Luolan of infidelity only behind closed doors at home. Sun Wuyang declares that she does not want Fang Luolan for a lover, and instead advises Fang to make amends to his wife and reconcile with her. But the author devised their battles in Fang Luolan’s psyche, and consigned the two women as ideological types to be fixed in antagonistic locations through his deployment of the omniscient narrator. As such, even though portraying Fang as a weak male, Mao Dun still credited him with a psychological complexity less noticeable in the women characters. Furthermore, Mao Dun seemed to suggest that the hesitancy and weakness Fang demonstrates in his sexual encounters with the woman revolutionary signifies an innate moral core, for only depraved antirevolutionary males such as Baosu (in “Disillusionment”) and Hu Guoguang were portrayed as having no qualms about trampling moral code for the gratification of their sexual appetites. This moralistic coloring of Mao Dun conception of modern masculinity is echoed by his male-centered moralistic treatment of female sexuality. Mao Dun displayed an objectifying attitude towards modern women in basing his judgment of a woman’s degree of commitment to modern or revolutionary principles on their sexual behaviors. He seemed to define modernity in women mostly as the kind of uninhibited female sexuality or even promiscuity demonstrated in the character Sun Wuyang, who claims to be “toying with men” rather than loving them. Moreover, Mao Dun contrived to have the hero, Fang Luolan, emotionally more attached to the more traditional woman of the pair. Sun Wuyang is a source of bafflement and intimidation for Fang Luolan. On one occasion, he even mistakes Sun’s contraceptive medicine for cosmetics. By contrast, his wife Meili provides him with a
more secure anchor not only because they have been married for more than five years, but also because Fang Luolan shares with her similar feelings of confusion and disorientation at a chaotic time. To be sure, he at first expresses discontent or even exasperation towards Meili’s “backwardness,” but that is precisely because he cannot stand seeing his own weakness revealed to him in the image of the Other. Even though easily captivated by character traits that complement his own shortcomings and repulsed by weakness similar to his own, Fang Luolan is more emotionally engaged with the traditional woman than with the modern woman. To put it simplistically, he cannot help experiencing more complex and more deeply felt reactions to the traditional woman, for it is she, rather than the modern woman, who provides a faithful mirror to himself. Not surprisingly, Mao Dun had Fang eventually return to his wife’s side like the proverbial strayed and repent husband. Fang Luolan is described as reviving both his affection and sexual desires for his wife faced with his wife’s devotion to the family, her gentle caring of their son, and her dignified demand for a divorce after finding out about Fang’s attraction by Sun Wuyang—she declares, “The education I received was not modern, of course, but it did teach me not to play the fool” (“Dongyao” 206).

Just like in the case with “Disillusionment,” in depicting Fang Luolan’s relationships with the two types of women, Mao Dun allocated more space to the description of the psyche of the traditional woman than that of the modern woman. In this way, he came up with a more nuanced picture of Meili, rather than Sun Wuyang, through the eyes of Fang Luolan. Since Meili’s psychology provides a more faithful copy of that of Fang Luolan, Mao Dun’s depiction of Fang’s impotency towards the revolutionary woman, rather than the more respectable traditional woman (as suggested by Freud), signifies not only the character’s moral inhibition but also a profound male narcissism. Fang’s love for himself apparently rechannels his erotic passions, diverting them from the revolutionary woman, a morally “lower” sexual object by Freudian standards, towards the more respectable traditional woman.

However, Mao Dun also showed that male self-love subsists on the man’s “loving” of both types of women, albeit in different ways. The traditional woman, with her psychological similarity to the man, confirms the core “spiritual” values cherished by the male intellectual. In contrast, the sexually uninhibited revolutionary woman, by flaunting her exotic attraction, induces in him not only the sense of his own moral righteousness but also erotic titillation. Mao Dun frequently betrayed in “Vacillation” a motivating force similar to that featured in popular fiction: male erotic fantasy. Contrary to Mao Dun’s claim that he had designed Fang Luolan’s romantic failures as a metaphor for his political foibles, eroticism actually overrules political concerns in “Vacillation.” The narrator constantly highlights sexual tensions in various political activities, such as by describing how Sun Wuyang flirts with the party leader, Shi Jun. He also implicitly measures the male
characters’ strength or weakness by their sexual conquests. Hu Guoguang, “the old fox of long standing,” for instance, cleverly manipulates the political movement of liberating the country women from arranged marriages to satisfy his own lust, and emerges as the real leader in the community. Fang’s romantic debacles, rather than playing second fiddle to politics, as Mao Dun would have us believe, at times disconcert him so much that he cannot concentrate on his political work. His negligence of work due to romantic distractions also plays a part in the complete collapse of the county government at the end of the novella.

From the above analysis of the complex triangular configuration in “Vacillation,” we can see that by privileging the male voice and male gaze, Mao Dun deployed women as convenient tools to demarcate either male emotional sensitivity and moral superiority or his sexual prowess and political wiliness. The woman in effect becomes a double signifier that serves as both a political allegory and as a barometer of masculine prowess, be it more “spiritual” or “corporeal.” As such, Mao Dun’s effort of distancing himself from popular fiction and tradition met with only a dubious success.

The problematic in Mao Dun’s deployment of women in his fiction takes on new forms in “Pursuit.” In this novella, the woman Zhang Qiuliu appears as another incarnation of the Miss Hui-type character. She is a former revolutionary disheartened by the 1927 Nationalist massacre of the Communist Party members. In addition to the uninhibited exhibition of sexuality also characteristic of Miss Hui and Sun Wuyang, Zhang Qiuliu embarks on a restless pursuit, moving from one project to another. When the novella begins, she participates in the launch of a society with the vaguely phrased purpose of “criticizing the current state of the nation” (“Zhuiqiu” 271). Yet she seems to devote most of her time to playing around: dancing, drinking, and going to movies. She finally decides to have a relationship with Shi Xun, the cynical and very ill “doubter” of the group. But he dies before very long and leaves her groping for a purpose in life again.

Zhang Qiuliu is depicted as masculine in temperament: “Friends always say that she is a woman in flesh but a man in disposition. She has indeed proven herself a daring person without fear in a lot of things. She has a strong personality, sometimes akin to being egotistical and individualistic” (320). Significantly, this more masculine woman fares even worse than Miss Hui and Sun Wuyang, as if her more explicitly masculinized strength has to be punished and contained. After the death of her lover Shi Xun, she discovers that she has contracted syphilis from him. Not only is her health threatened, she could also become a pariah due to the stigma traditionally attached to sexually transmitted diseases in Chinese culture. Furthermore, Zhang Qiuliu is narratively assigned to play a limited role. She constitutes neither the center (e.g., Miss Jing) nor one of the two wings (e.g., Meili and Sun Wuyang) of the narrative. She is only one example of a group of young people who pursue different goals in life, contributing to the large picture of “the sorrow of disillusionment, the anxiety about self-improvement, and the
impulse towards decadence” (Mao D., Wo zouguo de daolu 265). The end of the novella sees her declare her carpe diem philosophy to friends in the hospital, while the downpour of rain outside the window sounds “like the bullets fired outside Jinan city on May the Third” (“Zhuiqiu” 420). The image of bullets echoes Zhang Qiuliu’s avowal to enjoy life to the fullest, even if she should meet with a violent death that would suddenly cut it short. Although some of Mao Dun’s contemporaries read in this ending Zhang Qiuliu’s eventual return to the revolutionary path because of her passionate pursuit for an “explosive, unusual death” (Xing 107), the image of bullets also causes the narrative to shift from her fate to a historical event, thus further assimilating Zhang’s life into the sociopolitical environment of the time.

Another narrative strategy to diminish Zhang Qiuliu consists in the alteration of the triangle existing in Mao Dun’s two previous novellas. In “Pursuit” Mao Dun not only re-assembled the dyadic arrangement of women characters as symbols of tradition and modernity, but also replaced the man in the original triangle with children as a new definitive point. Wang Shitao, a female character who first appears in “Disillusionment,” presents a sharp contrast to Zhang Qiuliu. Wang is pregnant with the child of a revolutionary who has died in battle and left her quite destitute. However, she decides to carry the child to its full term despite Zhang’s skepticism. Wang understands that “in an era full of intense conflicts, women suffer the most, especially those women with children” (372). But she wants to have the baby, because, she explains, “I always feel that children are necessary. They are the hope of future. Our lives are limited, but our struggle is long. Children can carry on our torches into the future” (372). Commenting on Zhang Qiuliu’s disapproval of her friend’s decision, the narrator adds, “A woman cannot understand a mother’s feelings until she is taught by the mystery of pregnancy” (372). This brings into sharp relief Mao Dun’s tendency to associate revolutionary women with infertility and lack of proper “feminine” feelings including maternal instincts, and more traditional women with the role of mother. For instance, Sun Wuyang uses contraceptives while Meili has a son. Compared to Zhang Qiuliu’s barrenness and sexual impairment caused by disease, Wang is portrayed as a courageous and high-minded mother who sees in her offspring the promise of victory of the revolutionary cause. In this way, Zhang Qiuliu is further reduced in stature and character. The narrator’s sympathy decidedly inclines toward the more tradition-bound Wang Shitao rather than towards Zhang Qiuliu. In the end, while Zhang’s life is damaged by venereal disease, Wang can still entertain hope for the future. Once again, Mao Dun produced a dazzling modern woman only to have her morally eclipsed by a more traditional rival. Thus, we can see that Mao Dun’s apparent enchantment with revolutionary women proved no match for his more profound attachment to the traditional discourses of female virtue. This deep-rooted traditionality in him would cause him to adopt new strategies to channel the new woman’s passions from sex to revolution in his novel Hong (Rainbow), and thus to simultaneously mold
her into a better mirror for the extratextual authorial psychological development.

Mao Dun ascribed the changes in his representation of new women to his own psychological needs. He reminisced that he wrote the three novels of *Eclipse* while he was a blacklisted political refugee in hiding from the Nationalist government. He claimed that “Pursuit” particularly registered his internal turmoil, and that it took him twice as much time to finish as did either “Disillusionment” or “Vacillation,” stating: “I was experiencing spiritual agony at the time [of writing “Pursuit”]” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 10). But he vowed to shake himself free of the shadow that his works such as *Eclipse* had cast upon his mood: “I do not want to feel depressed anymore. I believe I really can bestir myself. I can see the goddess Verdandi [of the three goddesses of fate from Nordic myths; Verdandi, the middle one, represents the present] beckoning to me, urging me to march forward” (“Cong Guli dao Dongjing” 10). These words of self-encouragement reappear in Mao Dun’s preface to his anthology of short stories entitled *Wild Roses* (*Ye qiangwei*, 1928), signaling an altered strategy in his deployment of emotions for the consolidation of his modern identity. That is, in addition to the realistic depiction of the collective emotional and psychological state, he was also to demonstrate his own masculine and heroic forbearance through his attempts at generating “revolutionary optimism” regardless of his personal feelings. Interestingly, he also toned down description of female sexuality and accentuated the psychological complexity of the woman revolutionary in his later *Rainbow*. This fact reveals the close connection of his representation of woman’s psychological depth, his proclamation of moral rectitude (often associated by him with revolutionary commitment), and the extratextual performance of his modern masculinity.

**From *Wild Roses* to *Rainbow***

When Mao Dun published the short stories later anthologized as *Wild Roses*, he encountered criticisms of “sensuality” (*rougan*) or even “pornography” for his depiction of women. Seen in hindsight, the criticism of “sensuality” of Mao Dun’s fiction in the 1920s and 1930s revealed the gender politics in play at the time. A significant difference between the criticisms of Mao Dun’s early fiction by his contemporaries and by more recent scholars consists in that it was mostly criticized as “unrevolutionary” by the former while characterized as “feminine” by the latter. For instance, C. T. Hsia claims that Mao Dun’s fiction was typical of “the more feminine South, romantic, sensuous, and melancholic” (*A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* 165). David Wang also observes that Mao Dun wrote “like a woman” (*Fictional Realism* 79). Most recently, Chinese scholar Yan Jiayan even ascribes Mao Dun’s supposed feminine style to the topography of his hometown in western Zhejiang province (261–67). Mao Dun had criticized the fiction by his contemporary women writers such as Bing Xin and Lu Yin for their alleged feminine emo-
tionalism, and arguably contributed to the marginalization of modern Chinese women writers (D. Wang, *Fictional Realism* 77–89; Lieberman 124–25). In this light, his contemporary male critics’ refraining from dealing him the epithet of “feminine writer” seems to indicate a kind of male solidarity performed in critical literature, which further excluded women from Chinese modernity. Despite this possible male support, however, Mao Dun’s fervent and repeated self-justification also suggests his awareness of his precarious position as a modern and masculine intellectual and of his urgent need to perform his modernity and masculinity.

Just as he had in his defense against the charge of “pessimism” against his *Eclipse*, Mao Dun invoked the concept of “Realism” as well as revolutionary rhetoric to defend his *Wild Roses*. He claimed to have “exposed the characters’ class ideologies through their romantic behavior” in this anthology (“Xie zai Ye qiangwei de qianmian” 13). He also argued that the sexual liberation of the female characters demonstrated their break from “traditional thought,” and thus signaled their revolutionary potential (“Xie zai Ye qiangwei de qianmian” 13). Moreover, Mao Dun again summoned “Realism” to his aid. In the preface to *Wild Roses*, he implied that he regarded it his mission to reveal defects in life for the betterment of society. Mao Dun described himself as one with the courage and selflessness to sacrifice personal reputation for the collective good. Alluding to the Norwegian novelist Johan Bojer’s fable about wild roses, he declared: “Life is just like wild roses [. . .] We ought to identify where the thorns are and pluck them. If my works can serve the purpose of plucking thorns, I will be happy even with hurting my own hands [in the process]” (“Xie zai Ye qiangwei de qianmian” 14). Yet his narrative practice in *Wild Roses* jeopardizes his claim to revolutionary Realism, and thus thwarts his performance of his modern identity.

*Wild Roses* consists of five stories, all featuring women, but only three of them concentrate on the images of modern women: “Creation” (“Chuangzao,” 1928), “Poetry and Prose” (“Shi yu sanwen,” 1928), and “Haze” (“Tan,” 1929). In these three stories Mao Dun poked fun at male characters who are self-styled mentors and creators of modern Chinese women. By representing these male intellectuals as invariably routed or frustrated by the women of their “creation,” Mao Dun established the superiority of a narrator/author who presents ironic or satirical pictures of the unenlightened male who cannot appreciate the modern qualities in women. Yet, at the same time, Mao Dun’s narrative practice also betrays his own ties to a patriarchal tradition. This can be illustrated particularly through an examination of his short story “Creation.”

In this Chinese *Pygmalion*, a male intellectual named Junshi is dismayed by the fruits of his intellectual labor in shaping an example of the new woman. He has reeducated his wife, Xianxian, disabusing her of traditional ideals and instilling in her modern values. However, he succeeds beyond his wildest dreams. Previously shy, she becomes sexually aggressive. Previously indifferent to politics, now she actively participates in political
meetings and takes a radical stand on the issues of the day. In the past she was content with a simple life, but now she demands material gratification. Junshi laments that his creation is a destruction of Xianxian’s appealing qualities, for he thinks Xianxian became corrupted by the volatile social environment immediately after he had broken her of her old habits. Xianxian, on the other hand, proceeds to go out to one of her political meetings, leaving him a note stating: “I am going out. Please catch up with me, otherwise I will not be waiting for you” (“Chuangzao” 31).

This story reveals Junshi’s male narcissism as manifested in his attempt to create an image of the Self in the Other. It also questions the usual methods that May Fourth intellectuals had employed to modernize Chinese women by showing that the alleged “modernizers” themselves fell woefully short in the face of modernization. As is revealed in the story, after a traditional woman is convinced to adopt modern values, her mentor, the purportedly modern man, immediately turns into a conservative husband, for he discovers that his authority has slipped away from him as a result of his creation of a modern woman. Despite Mao Dun’s valid social criticism, however, “Creation” illustrates once again that the author’s male-centered consciousness has organized the entire narration. Even though ostensibly extolled for her liberation, the modern woman is still subjugated by the author’s male gaze. Not only is she classified as “modern” mostly due to her brash sexuality, but the author also adopted certain narrative devices to curtail her autonomy. A telling detail in this regard is the different modes of representation before and after Xianxian’s “transformation.” When she is a more reserved traditional woman, the narrator relays all her conversations with her husband Junshi, giving a painstaking inventory of the various topics of their dialogues and the husband’s contemplation of counter measures to reform Xianxian’s traditional worldview. Although marking each stage of the creation of Xianxian only from Junshi’s point of view, Mao Dun at least described Junshi’s mental and emotional engagement with his wife at this stage. However, once she becomes a new woman, Xianxian’s clothes, her physical beauty, and aggressive sexuality become the descriptive focus, implying that physical attributes alone make the modern woman. Of course, Xianxian’s modernity is purportedly also demonstrated by her political activism. However, Xianxian’s life outside the home is only vaguely touched upon, and to Junshi’s mind, presents only a minor annoyance compared to her aggressive sexuality. Xianxian is represented first and foremost as a truant wife, not as a revolutionary woman. Mao Dun’s narrative execution in “Creation” reveals that although mocking the hapless Junshi in the story in order to demonstrate his own modern consciousness, he secretly joined in the hero’s labors to contain the modern woman through narrative devices. By accentuating the modern woman’s alluring physical appearance but not her psychological individuality, Mao Dun not only allowed his voyeuristic fascination to contradict his self-proclaimed political intention, but also betrayed once again the way that the
traditional discourses of female virtue determined the scope of his literary modernization.

We can see that Mao Dun’s performance of his masculine modern identity was not entirely successful in *Wild Roses*. By privileging erotic images of modern women, he not only failed to create a heroine resembling the goddess Verdandi who would point him to a bright future, but also betrayed his own absorption with “sensual, indulgent” (Qian X., “Mao Dun yu xianshi” 124), and, allegedly, feminine pleasures. Small wonder Mao Dun next produced the novel *Rainbow* (*Hong*, 1929), in which he strove to delineate the making of a woman revolutionary with more masculine austerity.

*Rainbow* stands as the first climax in Mao Dun’s fiction writing career, since for the first time he featured a full-length *Bildungsroman* of a modern Chinese woman, by the name Mei Xingsu. In that Mei plays different roles at different stages of her life, the representation of this heroine provides an apt vehicle for the reader to revisit Mao Dun’s previous literary endeavors. She is a girl student when the May Fourth Movement breaks out. She then fights her way out of a confining arranged marriage and becomes a professional woman living in the city. Last, she joins in the revolutionary cause in Shanghai in the 1920s. Mei Xingsu also encounters different types of women in her struggle, who variously recall Miss Hui, Miss Jing, Sun Wuyang, Meili, and Zhang Qiuliu. Moreover, not only did Mao Dun integrate the previously dyadic paring of women characters (i.e., conservative vs. revolutionary) into Mei’s complex psyche, he also had her alternate between masculine and feminine positions in her consciousness. Therefore, the reader can find in Mei’s psychological development versions of the attacks of weakness suffered by Fang Luolan and Meili, the aggressive sexuality of Miss Hui, and the kind of revolutionary zeal demonstrated by Sun Wuyang. Additionally, Mao Dun portrayed Mei’s transformation from a bourgeois individualist into a woman revolutionary devoted to collective causes, thus promoting the radical ideology of his time by presenting Mei’s metamorphosis as the ideal model for modern intellectuals. He himself explicitly stated the “positive significance” of having Mei joining in the revolution in the novel, claiming that he produced through this novel a “bridge of rainbow and hope” (“Mao Dun huiyi lu” 418) not only for the reader but also for himself. This is because, he elaborated, although his “complicated thoughts and feelings” added to the ambivalence of the novel, the end product could steer him in a new direction (“Mao Dun huiyi lu” 418). It is therefore all the more important to examine to what extent his self-conscious construction and deployment of the new woman Mei succeeded in generating such revolutionary optimism.

Mao Dun’s attempts at creating a more positive role model in Mei Xingsu are apparent from the very beginning. The heroine’s name alone signals the adaptation of traditional values into a modern context. Her family name is Mei, homophone of plum blossom, which traditionally symbolizes aloofness and integrity in classical Chinese aesthetics. Her personal
name “Xingsu” is taken from the idiom *wo xing wo su*, denoting the characteristic of following one’s own chosen path and ignoring the constraint of social norms. Living up to her significant name, Mei Xingsu demonstrates in the earlier part of the novel a personality that illustrates not only a fusion of traditional elitist sensibility and modern individualistic ideals but also masculine courage and resolution. The narrator summarizes her temperament in the very first chapter, “She was no ordinary girl. She was like a rainbow [. . .] She simply charged forward with the spirit of a warrior, doing what circumstances dictated. Indeed, her special talent was ‘charging forward.’ Her only ambition was to overcome her environment, overcome her fate” (4).

In a similar effort to commend Mei’s character, Mao Dun described Mei’s transformation from being merely a courageous individualist to a revolutionary woman warrior, casting her in a more positive light than her predecessors, such as Sun Wuyang and Zhang Qiuliu, through the emphasis of not only her individualist courage but also her revolutionary moral fiber. Mei is portrayed as having a strong personality, but as being less egotistical than Miss Hui or Zhang Qiuliu. She is never as promiscuous as Sun Wuyang and, in the end, devotes herself to the collective revolutionary cause because of her love for one man. But Mao Dun’s teleological narrative of the making of a woman revolutionary was not always successful. At times he manifested some uncertainty in his account of her transformation, leaving the novel unfinished and disjointed.

Mao Dun originally planned to “trace the great drama in China that has happened over the past ten years” through the writing of *Rainbow* (“Hong ba” 15). Yet the novel turned out to cover only the first five years after the May Fourth Movement, abruptly ending with the May 30 rally in Shanghai in 1925. This is, of course, yet another example of Mao Dun’s tendency to truncate his original plans, as demonstrated in his scaling down of *Eclipse* and *Midnight* (*Ziye*, 1933). Marston Anderson attributed this to Mao Dun’s failure to discover “a structural framework that would both envelop the particulars of his social observations and place those particulars in just proportion to one another” (*The Limits of Realism* 129). In the particular case of *Rainbow*, however, Mao Dun’s uneasiness about the heroine’s fortuitous turn towards collectivism also contributed to the unfinished state of the novel.

As I have mentioned earlier, Mao Dun had intended to make a fresh start after writing *Eclipse* in the grip of deep despair, both to raise his own morale and to justify himself in the eyes of his more radical comrades. Yet the solution he outlined for modern intellectuals in *Rainbow* was neither new nor convincing. Chronologically speaking, the story in this novel takes place before the disillusionment caused by the 1927 political turmoil represented in *Eclipse*. Therefore, the validity of political work, promoted as it is in the latter half of *Rainbow* as the only meaningful way for modern intellectuals to realize themselves, was already called into question by Mao Dun’s
earlier *Eclipse*. Mao Dun was also a political activist himself who had actually experienced the carnage and despair of 1927. It seems that Mao Dun would have to both purposely deviate from the practice in his earlier fiction and ignore his real life experiences in order to inject a more optimistic tone into *Rainbow*. This also means that Mao Dun had to not only relinquish his cherished theoretical construct, “the true spirit of the times,” but also engineer a conversion to collectivism for his heroine despite his own penchant for and success in delineating recalcitrant individualistic heroines in his earlier works.

The tension between Mao Dun’s authorial intention and his narrative capability manifests itself first in the temporal arrangement of the novel. *Rainbow* demonstrates an imbalance between the narrative pace and Mao Dun’s avowed intention. It begins in the middle of the story, when Mei Xingsu leaves her home province Sichuan to travel to Shanghai by boat. Chapter one provides a stage for her entrance, symbolizing the beginning of her new life with the image of the boat sailing into open waters after passing the treacherous terrain of the Three Gorges. Chapters two to seven then switch back to her life from the May Fourth Movement to her departure from Sichuan. But only three chapters—eight, nine, and ten—are allocated to her life in Shanghai, the purported turning point in her life. Furthermore, Mei’s life as an individualist is presented in greater detail and with more dramatic flair than is her time as a revolutionary political worker in Shanghai. As an individualist heroine, she moves from place to place in Sichuan, dodging an unwelcome husband while seeking to make a living by teaching in several schools. In contrast, her life as a woman revolutionary in Shanghai proves more static. Although she apparently takes part in political work and is constantly involved in personal conflicts, the circle of her life has shrunk and the nature of her quarrels with her colleagues uniformly petty. Therefore, despite his avowed intention to demonstrate more optimism about the Chinese revolution, Mao Dun actually painted a rather unappealing picture of Mei’s life after her conversion from an individualist to a Marxist revolutionary.

In addition to the problematic temporal arrangement of the novel, Mao Dun’s utility of the romantic triangle in *Rainbow* also revealed his ambiguous position on tradition and modernity. In this novel, he deliberately staged a reversal of Mei’s role in the romantic triangle in the course of the narrative, presumably for the purpose of demonstrating her revolutionary consciousness but actually depriving her of personal agency. In the first half of the novel about her life in Sichuan, Mei occupies the center of male attention. Before leaving her hometown Chengdu, she is involved with her two cousins, Liu Yuchun and Wei Yu. She is repulsed by the former but attracted to the latter, not just because of the contrast between the upstart Liu’s vulgar mien and Wei’s more refined sensibilities, but also because Wei Yu is weaker and she can take control in their relationship. When teaching at schools in other parts of Sichuan, Mei becomes a high profile personage and feeds the fantasies of
her male colleagues. This time a triangle forms between her, her fellow Chinese literature teacher Li Wuji, and a warlord, the district commander Hui. The novel offers little detail concerning Mei’s life as a governess in Hui’s household. Yet her long talks with Li Wuji are not only represented in detail, but also used to illustrate her personality. In those scenes Mei’s internal struggles are also detailed to illustrate again her tendency to favor weaker men.

This kind of triangular dynamics changes abruptly after she arrives in Shanghai. For the first time in her life, Mei is slighted by a man, a revolutionary named Liang Gangfu, and, inexplicably, loves him all the more for it to the point that she joins in revolutionary activities for his sake. Liang’s personal name means “strong man” in Chinese, echoing the name of Miss Jing’s lover, Qiang Weili, or “strong, all power.” Mei is depicted as eager to be friends with Liang than with her more friendly yet weaker former colleague Li Wuji, who has also moved to Shanghai by this point. Not only is Mei more attracted to the stronger, more masculine Liang, she is also shown willing to give up her independence for his love. Mei concedes: “It was in trying to deal with his [Liang’s] stronger personality that she herself had become weak” (167). Apparently, this weaker Mei is more feminine: “This was a new, second self that had emerged since her arrival in Shanghai: a self stripped of self-confidence, an irresolute and hesitant self, a more feminine self” (163). Since this weaker Mei is also a more revolutionary Mei, her loss of power in the love triangle apparently represents a necessary step on the way to becoming a true revolutionary. The author juxtaposed her personal life with her revolutionary activities in Shanghai, implying that not only is the increase in her “feminine” weakness only proper in her transformation, but her move towards collectivism is enough to redeem any personal failure and salvage her Bildungsroman. What is proposed as an empowerment of the intellectual woman boils down to her submission to the revolutionary man who personifies the revolutionary cause.

True to form, Mao Dun also utilized female sexuality and psychology to promote the revolutionary cause. The novel abruptly ends at the May 30 rally in Shanghai. Mei takes part in the demonstration but is soon separated from her comrades by police fire hoses. She runs into an old acquaintance, a cousin of her best friend who had helped her to escape her husband in the past. The young man, now an officer in the Nationalist army, invites her to his hotel room to change clothes, with the ulterior motive of staging a seduction. But Mei resolutely rejects his advances and returns to the street, after putting on the new qipao that he gave her. The reader witnesses the exhibition of the female body also seen in Eclipse and Wild Roses. Only this time Mei is the moral woman revolutionary who firmly rejects the antirevolutionary lecher. Thus, her female sexuality is appropriated to serve the cause of revolution, even as its display would gratify the voyeuristic fantasies of the narrator and (presumed) reader alike. Furthermore, by moving from the portrayal of the male revolutionary Fang Luolan’s impotency towards the
over-sexed revolutionary woman to Mei’s firm refusal of sexual temptation presented by the enemy, Mao Dun suggested that the “right” political conviction can elevate the woman revolutionary’s moral character and, as a result, supply her with more strength of character. Since Mei’s commitment to revolutionary causes is both spurred and supported by her love for a revolutionary man, the woman’s psyche was again appropriated for the idealization and adulation of a form of politicized modern masculinity.

Despite, or, precisely because of Mao Dun’s best intentions and efforts of adopting a more optimistic tone, Rainbow leaves many questions unanswered concerning the growth of the woman revolutionary Mei Xingsu. In this novel Mao Dun depicted all the revolutionaries Mei encountered as deeply flawed characters, Liang Gangfu included. Yet, in contrast to his usual practice, in this novel Mao Dun also self-consciously provides only titillating hints of the sexual relationships between the revolutionaries instead of explicit descriptions, though demonstrating no such self-restraint when describing the rowdy nonrevolutionaries. The author obviously performed an act of self-censorship in order to correct his old “sensual” style. But this move, echoing the moral elevation of the woman revolutionary in the novel, also reaffirmed his acceptance of the traditional discourse on female virtue, which also contributed to the incoherent feel of the novel.

Through the above study of Mao Dun’s fictional representation of the woman revolutionary, I have illustrated that in response to the increasing radicalization starting in the late 1920s, he deliberately invoked the theory of “Realism” and performed a control of his private pessimism through fiction writing in order to establish his modernity. In representing and criticizing the weakness of modern intellectuals who participated in the revolution, Mao Dun sought to represent himself as a revolutionary Realist writer who unflinchingly exposed collective psychological reality. However, Mao Dun’s allegedly realistic representation of radical women was also organized by a male-centered consciousness. He echoed “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Fiction” in the construction of male-dominated triangles, where women are always deployed as ideological types to facilitate male subject formation. His surreptitious invocation of patriarchal moralistic discourses and his detour into eroticism also objectified women through the adoption of a voyeuristic narrative gaze. Ultimately, Mao Dun’s promotion of Realism proved to be a strategy of self-representation that nevertheless failed to eliminate all traditional traces from his fiction, for his narrative practice reaffirmed some of the traditional values and praxes shared by both premodern literature and contemporary popular fiction.