New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction

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Published by Purdue University Press


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The first generation of May Fourth women writers such as Feng Yuanjun (1900–74) and Lu Yin (1898–1934) had to grapple with the complications of occupying a position defined as both the subject and object of the project of Chinese modernization. On the one hand, the emergence of women writers in the early decades of the twentieth century marked a significant stage in the emancipation of Chinese women. As Wendy Larson points out, the classical Chinese literary tradition had always sought to contain women’s literary creation through the claim of an antagonistic relationship between women and writing, and hence the dichotomization of female virtue versus male literary talent (Women and Writing 44–63). By contrast, the opportunity of becoming a writer in the May Fourth era seemed to have provided Chinese women a hitherto denied location from which to speak and be heard. Utilizing their own “liberated” state to let loose their creative voice, the women writers not only challenged social norms by bringing attention to hitherto underrepresented female experiences, such as romantic relationships between women; they also established women as I-narrators in fiction for the first time in Chinese literary history, thus taking important steps in their creation of their own version of an independent modern identity through ingenious and versatile use of first-person narration.

However, even as women writers used their writings to claim for themselves the position as the subject of Chinese modernization, they also encountered formidable forces of devoicing and objectification. Not surprisingly, the conservative social forces presented many obstacles in their writing career. Not only did writing fail to provide them with sufficient financial security because of the limited audience for May Fourth “new literature,” but women writers’ serious literary endeavors were also more easily dismissed by the general public at the time, due to both the male-centered tradition of premodern literary production and the fact that popular writers and commercial booksellers promoted salacious tales of women’s “secret” lives by alleging female authorship for them (see chapter one). In ad-
dition to the deeply entrenched social conventions that demanded women's silent submission, women writers also had to contend with barriers ironically set by modern male intellectuals who had promoted the liberation of Chinese women. As I mentioned in chapter one, the emancipation of Chinese women had long been subsumed under the May Fourth nation-building project. In a self-proclaimed effort to advance the May Fourth agenda of national salvation, male intellectuals used literary criticism and other pedagogical tools to censure fictional works that they claimed to have wandered off onto subjects and emotions detrimental to the project of nation building. Their vigilant police of modern literature was by no means gender-blind. The epithets forced on the women writers alone indicate that the conventional gender codes predetermined the reception of women's fiction. For instance, in the early 1930s, a critic categorically grouped his contemporary Chinese women writers into “Lady Writers” (guixiu pai), “New Lady Writers” (xin guixiu pai), and “New Woman Writers” (xin nuxing pai) (Yi, “Jiwei dangdai zhongguo nü xiaoshuo jia” 1). Furthermore, women writers were more often subject to criticism for the weaknesses of their gender than their male counterparts.

Male intellectuals asserted their authority over women writers particularly by criticizing the “emotional” and “autobiographical” nature of their fiction. Like many of their male peers, most of the May Fourth women writers had come from socially privileged families, where the classical education of the daughters of the family enjoyed more tolerance and attention, and they went on to receive a “modern” education away from home. However, more than their male peers, their family backgrounds and personal lives provided fodder for criticisms of their works. Central to the male criticism of “autobiographical” female fiction was the charge of feminine emotionalism. That is, women writers were especially criticized for being “obsessed” with the emotional experiences of the self, as male critics interpreted this as evidence for both their complete divorce from social reality and their ambivalence towards tradition. In fact, women writers were often accused of resurrecting the image of cainü, the talented women of the traditional society, who allegedly embodied such emotional and ideological deficiencies.

The depiction of emotions in fiction had not always been deemed incompatible with the May Fourth discourses of modernity. Along with Chinese intellectuals’ violent attack on Confucianism in the early decades of the twentieth century, (male) expression of emotions in literature was celebrated as the liberation of intrinsic humanity and the embracing of the doctrine of individualism. Women writers, particularly those who had kept emotions within the “proper” boundaries, were also initially praised for their delineation of female emotions. A case in point is Bing Xin (1900–1999). She self-consciously claimed: “I am not romantic at all. Some people say I am too rational” (qtd. in Zi 106), as if to hold off any criticism of excessive emotionalism. In her early fiction, she not only promoted positive female
role models in the characters of modern wife and mother (e.g., her first story, “Two Families” [“Liangge jiating”]), but also, according to male critics, produced a “feminine” (“nüxing”) depiction of moderate emotions: “gentle (wenrou), exquisite (xini), warm (nuanhuo), plain (pingdan), and loving” (Zhang T. 194). Whereas the favorable initial reception of Bing Xin’s fiction already hints at an undercurrent of male uneasiness about excessive emotions, the practice of identifying emotionalism as an exclusively feminine weakness derived more momentum from the increasing radicalization of modern intellectuals starting in the mid- to the late 1920s.

With the rise of Marxism, modern intellectuals felt compelled to promote writing about others instead of the self, for the accentuation of personal emotions seemed to not only unduly privilege the individual over the collective but also threat the masculine image of self-control. Therefore, male intellectuals isolated “emotionalism” as an attribute of their female Other in order to forestall charges of either “emasculating” or “ultra-individualism” against themselves. Despite the fact that women writers’ sensitive representations of the plight of Chinese women revealed social problems otherwise overlooked by many men, male critics alleged that the narrowness of the scope of women’s fiction was a result of their fixation on the self and their feminine emotions. Women writers became convenient targets of radical criticism, for the general perception had always been that they tended to be preoccupied with their personal emotions rather than the suffering of the proletariat or the peasantry. As such, the criticism of feminine emotionalism not only indicated the further radicalization of modern Chinese intellectuals, it also revealed a persistent conventional genre profile underlying the revolutionary rhetoric of the time.

A telling example is Mao Dun’s inconsistent position on emotionality in fiction. In 1922, Mao Dun highly praised Yu Dafu’s sentimental work “Sinking” for its “realistic” depiction of the hero’s psychological development (“Tongxin” 304). But in 1934 he criticized the woman writer Lu Yin’s similar “sentimentality” (“Lu Yin lun” 139–40). In the essay “Lu Yin lun” (On Lu Yin), Mao Dun declared Lu Yin’s seven earliest short stories to be the only redeeming part of her anthology Seaside Friends (Haibing guren, 1934), simply because they delineated the tragic lives of peasants and the proletariat instead of the bourgeois class (136). During the intervening twelve years between Mao Dun’s critiques of Yu Dafu and Lu Yin, modern China’s political landscape had undergone significant changes. In the 1930s writers were expected to renounce individualism; they were required to demonstrate their nationalist and class-consciousness in response to both the impending war between China and Japan and the increasing influence of Marxist ideology. As one anonymous critic pointed out in 1932, “The kind of romanticism that is only concerned with personal emotions has come to an end at this age. For romantic qualities to exist in literature, the best way is for authors to expand individual, particular emotions to the collective state of mankind” (“Yijiu saner nian” 6). However, Mao Dun’s criti-
cism of female authors did not merely indicate the changing ideological orientation among May Fourth intellectuals in the 1930s, it also revealed a stereotypical imagining of the weakness of the female gender. After all, in the same period the male writer Ba Jin was praised for writing about emotions: “It was Ba Jin who made the first successful experiment of this kind [of expanding individual emotions to the collective psyche]. We can say that Romanticism survived in literature after 1932 entirely thanks to Ba Jin” (“Yijiu saner nian” 6). In contrast to the accolade bestowed on Ba Jin, women writers such as Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin were accused of “emotionalism” by male critics such as Mao Dun, and, as a result, had to retreat into scholarly research (i.e., Feng Yuanjun) or change their writing styles (i.e., Lu Yin).

Needless to say, the male disapprobation of the “autobiographical” and “emotional” female fiction was not merely a disapproval of its style or even its ideology. Just like their deployment of emotions in their own fiction and essays, this kind of criticism reveals male intellectuals’ need to mask their own ambiguous relationships to tradition. In a move reminiscent of the heroes in male authors’ fiction, who often project their own weakness onto their female Other, male intellectuals identified the flaws of women writers’ fiction as a feminine obsession with the authors’ limited individual and emotional experiences. Ultimately, the male criticism of both the “autobiographical” and “emotional” excessiveness of women’s fiction can be seen as a gender-inflected practice aimed to masquerade the inadequacy of the Self as the failings of the Other.

In spite of the stern criticism of their male counterparts, women writers of the May Fourth era contributed to the definitions and meanings of Chinese modernity through both their life and their work. The women writers’ delimited position as a female Other to male intellectuals did not lead to a complete deprivation of female agency. Although apparently accepting the austere canons of literary composition dictated by their male colleagues, these women writers also formed a complex relationship to the male-dominated May Fourth discourses of Chinese modernity. To some extent, that relationship can be construed in the light of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony—namely, the predominance of certain cultural forms over others not through domination but through “consent”—but in practice its complexity even exceeded Gramsci’s conceptualization. First of all, women writers’ enthusiasm about the May Fourth discourses of modernity was not devoid of personal motives; for, even as the dominant discourse sought its own articulation in the subjugation of women’s voice, it also earned support from radical female intellectuals by promising an appealing future of women’s liberation and national prosperity. As such, women writers participated in Chinese modernization not only for collective attainment but also for the sake of self-enhancement through such a collective enterprise. As mentioned above, under the auspices of the May Fourth Movement, they not only enjoyed increasing freedom and mobility as professional women, but were also able to invoke their experiential authority to speak out about their individualist emo-
tions from the location of “I.” Furthermore, as I will demonstrate through the analysis of Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin’s fiction in this chapter, their fictional narratives often subverted the dominant discourses of modernity even though apparently promoting them, particularly by proposing alternative models of representing basic human experiences such as time and place.

Women writers’ relationship to the May Fourth discourses of modernity had never been one of unconditional cooperation, but neither can it be described as one-dimensional, uncomplicated resistance. This is because women writers not only needed to appropriate male-dominated radical discourses in order to gain entry into the project of Chinese modernization, but also had to confront the traditional norms of female conduct that had been first instilled in them through a classical curriculum in their childhood, and which were later replicated to some extent in a modern school system dominated by male modern intellectuals.

This link between the “traditional” and “modern” curricula for women’s education can be particularly seen in the similarity between their discourses on female emotions. Although the tendency to reprimand women writers for feminine emotionalism became more prominent in the 1920s and 30s, excessive emotions had been traditionally associated with the female gender in premodern Chinese society. Confucian aesthetics and poetics promoted moderation. Although ideally poetry should express one’s intent (shī yàn zhī), a defining characteristic of high art in the traditional Chinese aesthetic is a constrained and decorous expression of feelings (e.g., Confucius 7, 11). Since women had often been excluded from the production of high art, the aesthetics of moderation had also come to be closely associated with masculinity in the classical tradition. Furthermore, the Confucian idea of “emulation” demands that women curtail their own excessive emotions by imitating their lord and master, the self-controlled man; the Three Cardinal Guides (sāngāng) dictate not only that husband teach and control his wife but also that he do so through his own example (Mencius 11). As a result, numerous traditional handbooks and treatises on women’s education from the Han (206 B.C.E.–C.E. 220) dynasty to the Republic period (1912–49), as well as biographical accounts of exemplary women in official historiography, proliferated images of impassive women who modeled on the ideal man to control and moderate their emotions. Naturally, an ideal woman as defined by this group of texts should also adhere to the Confucian gender hierarchy; she not only must obey the kind of social decorum that demands emotional constraint from both men and women but also has to silently submit herself to the man. For instance, the first book for the education of women in China, *Precepts for Women* (Nüjie, approx. 100), written by the woman historian Ban Zhao (41–ca. 115) purportedly for the edification of her unmarried daughters and nieces, espoused proper feminine conduct such as living “in purity and quietness (of spirit)” and loving “not gossip and silly laughter” (Swann 83–84). Ban Zhao also admonished her daughters and nieces that a virtuous woman should “avoid vulgar language; speak at ap-
propriate times; and not weary others (with too much conversation)” (Swann 86). Subsequent manuals on women’s education propagated similar behavioral ideals of emotional constraint and submissive silence for women (see also Martin-Liao 168–89). Although the promotion of these traditional concepts defining women’s gender roles was interrupted by the revolution of 1911 and the May Fourth Movement, they had undeniably left an indelible impression on May Fourth women writers from elite families, who had been brought up within this tradition of women’s education.

This aspect of women writers’ traditional heritage can again be illustrated with the example of Bing Xin. In an essay entitled “Girl Students at a Time of Destruction and Reformation” (“Pohuai yu biange shidai de nu xuesheng,” 1919), Bing Xin encouraged girl students to devote themselves to the betterment of society, but asked them to do so only through the fulfillment of their duties within the family. According to her, Chinese society had changed in its reception of girl students: from the “idolization of girl students” to “disgust with girl students.” This was because, she further explained, contemporary girl students presented to the public “various outrageous and absurd words and deeds,” such as vowing to “overthrow Chinese women’s old virtues and destroy the fences of Chinese rituals,” zealously campaigning for free associations of the sexes, and participating in political activities. To change such an unfavorable public view, Bing Xin issued detailed instructions for the self-improvement of girl students, including telling them how to dress (“Dress in plain and elegant clothes”) and behave themselves in public (“Avoid uttering empty words of ‘reforming society’”). Moreover, she highlighted the importance of familiarizing themselves with various aspects of family management: “household chores,” “children’s psychology,” and “personal hygiene,” though also urging them to pay attention to national and world politics and women’s needs in China. Bing Xin’s essay forcefully recalls Ban Zhao’s *Precepts for Women* not so much because it offers practical suggestions for women’s self-cultivation as because such suggestions seem to arise from the same motive to prepare women for their destined domesticate roles.

The return of traditional ideals of female conduct to modern women’s writings was by no means limited to Bing Xin’s works, though she is generally held to be a woman writer less radical than Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin. We will see that the more radical women writers had also internalized traditional values to varying degrees. However, women writers can expect little help from their male colleagues in their attempted break from the “tyranny of tradition.” As I have mentioned earlier, male criticism of feminine emotionalism surreptitiously reaffirmed the Confucian definition of female decorum and virtue even though male critics ostensibly reprimanded women writers for their “traditionality.” As such, women writers had to devise new ways to combat the united forces of traditional and modern discourses on female emotions, both patriarchal in nature though apparently espousing different ideologies. In privileging an emotive first-person narration, their
representation of new women reflects their attempts at establishing the female subject through the simultaneous and paradoxical invocation of both “traditional” and “modern” discourses.

Like Bing Xin, Feng Yuanjun and Lu Yin were also new women who were erstwhile disciples of male intellectuals. Both of them graduated from the well-known Beijing Women’s Advanced Normal School (later called Beijing Women’s Normal College), and had studied with famous male authors such as Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren at college before becoming writers themselves. But compared to Bing Xin’s work, their fiction features more forceful expressions of emotion, and, as a result, was more subjected to the criticism of “emotionalism.” In what follows I will study their representations of the new woman by especially examining how they figured “emotions” into their much criticized “sentimental autobiographies.” This exercise is useful not only for illustrating how women writers portrayed new women in ways different from male writers through the occupation of a distinctive subject position, but also for investigating to what extent their fiction was shaped by their perception of how their male others saw them.

Feng Yuanjun and her “Autobiography of Emotions”

Feng Yuanjun was not a prolific fiction writer. She wrote only a dozen or so short stories in her entire literary career, and devoted herself almost exclusively to the research of premodern Chinese literature after the late 1920s. Yet her work, although limited in number, illustrates the way women writers of her generation negotiated an independent modern identity for themselves when faced with the marginalization and exclusion of the process of canon formation. This can be particularly seen in the canonization of her short story “Lüxing” (“The Journey,” 1923), generally regarded as her representative work and one of the only two stories by her that have been included in the General Compendium of New Chinese Literature. Lu Xun praised this story as “a realistic depiction of the young people’s psychology at the time of the May Fourth Movement,” claiming that it encapsulated that generation’s complicated feelings of defiance, uncertainty, and nostalgia even as they rebelled against traditions (“Xuyan” 1481). Furthermore, Lu Xun declared, this story was a significant improvement on Feng Yuanjun’s two previous short stories treating the same theme (“Xuyan” 1481): “Gejue” (“Separation,” 1923) and its sequel “Gejue zhi hou” (“After Separation,” 1923).

In light of Lu Xun’s own privileging of an “inner truth” in his fiction and essays (see chapter two), it should come as no surprise that he especially praised Feng’s revelation of psychological truth allegedly for the representation of a particular historical period. However, that he favored “The Journey” above the other two stories that were excluded from the General Compendium raises an intriguing question. That is, since the three stories collectively narrate the tragic love affair of two college students who are respectively married and engaged to other people, and that all three pieces highlight individual psyche, what exactly made “The Journey” more ac-
ceptable to the canon than the other two stories? Sally Lieberman has rightly suggested that “The Journey” was selected because it delineates a heterosexual love affair, and thus exorcises the dominant figure of the mother from the modern woman’s life (116–241). I will further illustrate that in addition to this thematic change, it was by managing and modifying the “excessive” emotions prevalent in the other two stories—both of which created a more powerful subversion of the May Fourth discourses of modernity—that Feng Yuanjun succeeded in making “The Journey” into a canonical story through narrative manipulation. Below I will focus on a comparison of “The Journey” and “Separation” while bringing narrative analysis into conjunction with Feng Yuanjun’s own justification of her privileging of emotions. I will show that she deployed emotions in her fiction in order to appropriate the dominant May Fourth discourses for the establishment of her own modernity. I have chosen these two stories because they both feature a first-person narrator that is also the female protagonist, while “After Separation” is told from the perspective of the heroine’s female cousin who is a witness to her struggle and eventual suicide. Since “The Journey” and “Separation” adopt the same narrative perspective, a comparison of them can not only tease out the nuances of their apparently similar narrative practice but also more effectively reveal the criteria of the canon.

A “typical” May Fourth girl student when she first started writing (Yuan S. 337), Feng Yuanjun’s fiction also apparently features the “typical May Fourth love story” by pitting the younger generation’s romantic love against the old generation’s more conservative attitude (Liu S. 28). However, her unique realization of the theme of romantic love not only enabled her to “legitimately add [her] voice” to the iconoclastic May Fourth discourse of social protest (Lieberman 121), it also distinguished her fiction from the regular fares of the May Fourth fiction that promoted free-choice marriages as a means to women’s liberation. Unlike male authors such as Ba Jin and Mao Dun, Feng Yuanjun did not accentuate the revolutionary significance of the Chinese Nora’s departure from the patriarchal family. Rather, she made central to the plot the acute agony her heroine experiences at the point of break away from the family. Moreover, it is not the despotic father—a figure that was significantly absent in her work though prevalent in other May Fourth fiction—but the “loving mother” who, far from being “absent” from the life of the new woman as suggested by Lieberman (104), causes the heroine’s emotional pain. Feng Yuanjun suggested through her fiction that this is because the heroine insists on the equal sanctity of romantic love and filial love, and cannot make a choice between the lover-lover and the mother-daughter relationships that compete for her commitment. In the extreme case featured in “After Separation,” the heroine commits suicide in order to escape the conflict of her love for her mother and her male lover. The centralization of the conflicted loyalties in the new woman’s psyche not only challenged the modernization scheme conceived of by radical male intellectuals that often invoked heterosexual love as a weapon to com-
but patriarchal rule, but also produced a distinctive individual voice and “excessive emotions” that male intellectuals had criticized all along. It is these effects of Feng Yuanjun’s stories that they sought to control through both literary criticism and, ultimately, the mechanisms of canon formation.

“The Journey” and “Separation” differ from each other both in plot and in narrative device, though both use an I-narrator to relate the experience of the same heroine. On the plot level, the two stories respectively provide the account of the secret journey made by the heroine and her lover and of its aftermath. The events in “The Journey” take place in some unspecified locale away from the watchful eyes of the lovers’ families, but in “Separation,” the heroine is grounded at home by her mother because of her rejection of an arranged marriage. In “The Journey” the romance between the two lovers claims center stage, whereas in “Separation” the relationship between mother and daughter plays a more prominent role. But the more important differences of the two stories manifest themselves on the narrative rather than the plot level. “Separation” features an emotive monologue of the heroine, who writes letters to her lover describing her thoughts and emotions while being confined to home. In contrast, “The Journey” more focuses on the story of the trip narrated in the first person. As such, the two short pieces adopt different narrative devices that generate distinctive emotional tones.

“The Journey” is more a story of the others and for the others, whereas “Separation” is a tale that the heroine can claim for herself. A piece of epistolary fiction, the form of “Separation” creates the illusion of a forbidden dialogue, an insular communication only existing between the narrator and the narratee. In other words, since the heroine is writing a secret letter intended only for the eye of her lover, she is apparently pouring out her innermost feelings and thoughts to the only person who is both her fellow sufferer and ally in their fight against the stifling traditional marriage system. But far from merely consolidating the heterosexual relationship, as is more the case with “The Journey,” the narrator forcefully claims for herself the position of the subject by establishing herself as the only speaker in “Separation” while designating her lover as a peripheral, albeit sympathetic, audience. Towards the end of her letter, she declares to her lover, “My life has been destroyed in the name of love. Because of my mother’s love, I could not simply break off the marriage contract she arranged for me in good conscience. And because of her love, I had to come back to see her. Because of my lover’s love, I sacrificed my reputation in society and the joy of being with my family. The author of my tragedy is love. The heroine is myself” (“Separation” 111–12).

As a self-analytical summary of her love affair, the significance of the above statement lies not so much in the fact that the heroine blames her tragedy on love as in the way she positions herself between her mother and her lover by using the concept of love as leverage. It is very telling that she does not address her male lover with either his personal name or the pro-
noun “you,” or even the endearment “my love” (wo de airen), as she does elsewhere in the story. Rather, she mentions “my lover” in the third person (“qingren”) in this passage, thus marking him off as another force external to her, one on par with “my mother” who both nurtures and controls her (112). The heroine thus subtly declares her independence by withdrawing from the intense one-on-one romantic relationship and placing herself at equal distant from the two forces of attraction and restraint in her life. Her weapon is her claim of uttermost commitment to love, which she alleges to have enabled her to act according to her conscience. She tells her lover that she has chosen to come back to her mother out of filial love, just as she has defied social norms to enter into a romantic relationship with him because of her love for him. Therefore, even though she asserts that love is the “author” of her tragedy and herself the “heroine,” she actually characterizes herself more as the agent rather than the victim of her tragedy.

The narrator also invokes “humanism” to further elevate the status of filial love and deflect the power of romantic love. It is striking that even where she addresses her lover in a tone more intimate than what is adopted in the self-analysis quoted above, the heroine justifies her voluntary return to home in the name of humanism: “Try putting yourself in the place of a mother already in her sixties who has not seen her child for six or seven year. Would I still be human if I did not desire to return home and be close to her while I still can?” (106, my emphasis). By characterizing her action as “humane,” the heroine is able to not only make filial love as important as romantic love, but, furthermore, also represent herself as an independent individual possessed of the rational faculty to make critical life decisions. Her demonstration of independence can also be seen in her assertion of her firm belief in the significance of her life and death. She pleads with her lover to “write out the history of our love, from the beginning to the end” and to “organize and publish our six hundred lover letters” in order to “forge a way for other young people and wish them better success [in romance]” (113). Ultimately, it is this call of “destiny”—her self-image as a harbinger of love and freedom—rather than her love for either her mother or her lover that proves to be the anchor of her subjectivity.

In addition to the somewhat detached tone, the narrative modes adopted in “Separation” also accentuate the beauty of the narrator’s ideal of love in order to free her from real life entrapments. Feng Yuanjun switched back and forth between the modes of description and summary in this story. As I have mentioned above, the narrator seeks to analyze her dilemma in more philosophical terms in the summary statement towards the end of the letter, but in the first half of her letter she allocates more space to the poetic description of her romance. Gazing at the moon out of her window, she writes a poem reminiscing about her affair, and then provides detailed footnotes to the incidents alluded to in the poem. Interestingly, all the past events are set in scenes of great natural beauty: a park, a garden, a reservoir where “the grandeur and austerity of the autumn landscape seemed
to make everything we did beautiful” (109). Natural imagery not only supplies an attractive background for human interactions, but also illustrates the intrinsic bond between the “purity of human souls” (111) and the beauty of nature, the two indispensable and interactive components of her philosophy of love. That is, although the narrator believes that “the purity of our souls is what makes us all human” (111), she regards nature, rather than human behavior, as the more reliable, unsullied mirror and embodiment of “pure soul,” free as it is from real life interpersonal entanglements.

In privileging the descriptive mode, Feng Yuanjun decreased narrative speed to accentuate the emotions, rather than the events, in this story. The lyrical prose she thus produced transforms an anxiety-ridden love affair into a series of idyllic vignettes. Moreover, it is the female “I’’-narrator’s emotions and beliefs that she focused on. Although Feng invoked Western writers such as Ibsen and Tolstoy as well as the names of Werther and Lotte (then one of the most popular and famous pair of fictional lovers ever since Guo Moruo’s translation of The Sorrows of Young Werther in 1922), she used these examples to enhance the universal appeal of their romance, and thus elevated the narrator’s personal experience to a representation of cross-cultural human experiences. Both the description of natural scenery and the use of allusion, as well as the choices of the prevalent narrative tone and mode of “Separation,” reveal that the author painstakingly organized the narration in order to create and consolidate the narrator’s image as a messenger of ideal love. This is an identity transcendent of the heroine’s roles in both her familial and romantic relationships, even though she marshals both to secure her claim to that individualist identity. As such, Feng Yuanjun had rendered this story “unsuitable” for the canon of modern Chinese literature by creating a strong feminine voice in “Separation” through the privileging of individual emotions. This was the case not so much because “Separation” featured a lyrical narrative less consumable for its lack of action. Rather, this story, in centralizing the emotions of the female subject, became more inassimilable to the gender-inflected May Fourth discourses of modernity, which centralized heterosexual love and appropriated female body for the project of nation-building.

In contrast to the self-confident “I’’-narrator of “Separation,” “The Journey” portrays her as a mixture of courage and trepidation. In a scene describing the lovers’ journey on the train, which was later singled out by Lu Xun as an example of Feng Yuanjun’s literary achievements, the narrator admits, “I longed to hold his hand but did not dare, except when the train gave an occasional lurch, causing the lights to dim. I was worried that the other passengers would pay undue attention to us” (“The Journey” 169). Because of a similar dread for contemptuous and suspicious looks from other lodgers in the hotel they stay, she and her lover resort to dissimulation, putting up the appearance of renting two separate rooms and claiming to be only classmates to each other. Furthermore, the “I’’-narrator betrays her traditional outlook when she expresses jealousy of her lover’s wife. She
claims to have always been “totally opposed to men who fall in love with other women and abandon their wives without a thought. I had argued that such men are the most inhumane on earth” (172), yet faced with her own dilemma, she changes her tone: “[N]o matter how obvious it is to me that their relationship was established on old ethical codes and practices, I cannot help feeling that the woman, his wife, is my adversary” (172). She secretly hopes that her lover will voluntarily divorce his wife, considering it “the only way to lessen the legal charge against him and the unhealthy criticism society will level against us” (172–73). But she also feels guilty for her wish because the realization of it will lead to the destruction of another, in a sense even more vulnerable, woman’s life. Consequently, she deliberately leaves out words such as “marriage,” “divorce,” or “husband and wife” in her narration, choosing to take refuge in ellipsis marks instead. By omitting these words, the narrator avoids facing not only the negative views of their relationship by society but also her own implicit identification with such views. Her obsession with the legal status of their relationship reveals that she has internalized rather than discarded traditional morality. But more importantly, her animosity towards her lover’s wife also questions the kind of romantic love promoted by May Fourth intellectuals that would both cause the conflict between “romantic love” and “universal humanity” and pit a woman against other members of her sex. As such, “The Journey” reveals not only the irreconcilable conflict between the promotions of “individualism” and “humanism” by May Fourth intellectuals, but also brings into sharp relief the male-centered nature of their discourses of Chinese modernity.

Male critics sought to contain the subversive power of “The Journey” by emphasizing its revelation of the heroine’s traditionality while eliding its exposure of one source of her “traditional” worldview: the May Fourth version of modernity. They declared Feng Yuanjun’s depiction of the narrator’s contradictory thoughts and behavior to be a mark of the story’s social realism. Lu Xun, for example, praised the heroine in “The Journey” as “realistic” and “completely different” from the protagonists who “boast about their decadent tastes or their literary talents” in works produced by the school of “Art for Art’s Sake” (“Xuyan” 1481). Although “The Journey” does provide a picture of a woman wavering between “traditional” and “modern” values, it is also true that male critics emphasized this aspect of the story in order to assimilate it into the male-centered May Fourth discourses of modernity. Ironically, their appropriation of the story was made possible, in no small part, by the narrative features of “The Journey.”

As I have mentioned above, “Separation” privileges individual voice to reinforce female subjectivity. In comparison, “The Journey” features an intense dialogue between the narrator and her male lover, while also describing opposite views from their external world in order to accentuate their isolation from and united struggle against a hostile social environment. As a result, in contrast to the self-sufficient “I”-narrator of “Separation,” “The Journey” features a female narrator absorbed in a heterosexual relationship
in which the woman often has to concede to and depend on her male lover for support. The narrator often invokes and speaks from the location of “we,” instead of “I,” when seeking to legitimize their love. Yet in her anxiety to demonstrate to her audience the unity in deed and even in thinking of her and her lover, her gaze comes to completely concentrate on her lover to the point of surrendering her own independence. The story exposes the decrease of her agency from the very beginning. Although describing the journey as “a huge wave” and “a resplendent star” in both their lives, she reveals her more passive role by ending the statement with “for him, for both of us” (168). The order of the pronouns, first “him” and then “us,” but never “me,” indicates that he is the initiator and she the follower. Nevertheless, she emphasizes their connection rather than discreteness, stating that although the journey was first proposed by her lover, it also needs her consent for it to come to fruition. But far from strengthening that claim to (partial) independence in subsequent events, she ironically relives the traditional role of the abandoned wife or lover in the gesture of waiting alone in her hotel room for his return. She complains: “I never liked it when he went out, whether it be to shop or to see friends,” and even works herself into a rage when her lover returns to their hotel room after nine o’clock (174).

The narrator’s increasing passivity can be best illustrated by comparing the different ways “The Journey” and “Separation” narrate the lovers’ first night together in the hotel. The plot remains essentially the same; the reader is told that the narrator’s lover starts to undress her, but leaves her side and stands at a distance without taking off her underwear. In “Separation,” the narrator cites this incident as one of the many proofs of the “sanctity” of their love and of the purity of humanity: “Is this not rare both in ancient and modern times, within China and abroad? [...] It was at that point that I started to believe that the human is fundamentally pure” (111). In contrast to the lyrical, if slightly philosophical, musing tone in “Separation,” “The Journey” accentuates the drama of their first night, representing it as a significant and individual “event” and a climax in their relationship. The narrator tells us that the bedding her lover has taken on their trip “amounted to one thin quit and a rug” (171). Well aware of the implication of his apparently innocuous absent-mindedness, she initially resents his presumption and plans to rent more bedding from their hotel once they arrive. But eventually her “calculation was defeated by his” (“Lüxing” 21, not translated in the English version “The Journey”). Somehow they end up in the same hotel room, and a drama of psychological struggles ensues in which she loses more and more grounds.

First, it is striking that in this scene the “I”-narrator surrenders both physical mobility—“sitting on the edge of the bed for well over a quarter of an hour with [her] head bowed” (170)—and emotional independence. She feels so grateful for her lover’s self-restraint that she is moved to extol this gesture as “the highest expression of our souls” and as “an expression of purest love” (170). She even elevates this experience to religious heights, for
her lover is seen as behaving as if under “sacred solemn supervision, and like a believer praying to God to bless him with good fortune, he reverently left my side and stood at a distance from me” (170). Although Feng Yuanjun also hails love as the expression of purest humanity in “Separation,” the ultimate “point” of this account in “The Journey” is not to promote universal love, as is the case with “Separation,” but to both emphasize the intimacy of their relationship and to proclaim the moral legitimacy of their affair. Consequently, the narrator emerges more as the apologist for their relationship than as a confident claimer to her own independence.

The “I”-narrator’s decreased agency can also be seen in the way she emphasizes the male control of emotions in order to prove the “purity” of their love unsullied by carnal desire. As in “Separation,” the narrator also accentuates expression of her emotions, especially anguish, in the scene of their first night together: “I cried, I wept bitterly. But at the same time I felt as though I were alone in a vast network of pitch black caves. With no-one but him to care for me I had no courage to resist his embrace” (171). However, in “The Journey” her male lover alone can purportedly hold off the vast darkness outside of their love nest, not the least because his masculine rationality triumphs over her feminine emotional weakness. Because of his restraint from consummating their sexual relationship, she compares him to Liu Xiahui, a male scholar in Confucius’s time who, as legend goes, resisted the temptation of a seductive woman sitting in his lap. It is both ironical and revealing that the “I”-narrator should invoke a canonized Confucian model of self-control and moral rectitude to facilitate their rebellion against Confucian morality, which they have always held responsible for their current dilemma. By crediting her lover alone with the will to refrain from forcing more physical intimacy on her, the narrator not only tacitly yields herself to his power, but also leaves unacknowledged the sexual inhibitions foisted on the individual by social norms, which are actually one original source of her anxiety. In her attempt at proving the “propriety” of their relationship, she in effect becomes a willing helpmate both to her lover and to social conventions.

From the above analysis of the narrative features of “The Journey,” it should perhaps come as no surprise that Lu Xun characterized this story as more “conceptual” (“shuoli”) (“Xuyan” 1481), compared to Feng Yuanjun’s other works that have always been considered as “full of powerful subjective feelings and heavy with lyricism [. . .] There is not enough cold, objective description, but much attention to the expression of inner experience” (Luo 73). Indeed, compared to her other works such as “Separation,” “The Journey” gestures more towards a rational control of individual emotions.

“The Journey” can be seen as Feng Yuanjun’s self-conscious adaptation to male criticism of feminine emotionalism, but her apparent subscription to male definition of good literature arose more from her own sense of mission and identity than from unconditional submission. Like her male comrades, Feng Yuanjun also upheld the mission of literature as one revealing the internal truth. In an essay entitled “Groaning Without Ailment”
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("Wubing shenyin"), she contested the derogatory label of “groaning without ailment,” or, exaggerating one’s misery without legitimate reasons, by questioning the common practice of using an author’s biography to judge the authenticity of his or her representation of emotions. Rather than trust biographical accounts that have always been colored by the biographer’s own emotions, she argued, critics should instead respect the individual expression of emotions by the author: “The hidden sufferings of one person’s life, although seemingly insignificant on the surface, can be severe for the person who experiences them and only he or she can truly understand the impact. The value of art and literature lies in their ability to convey the ineffable pleasures and agonies of life” (163). Feng Yuanjun’s defense of what was dismissed as “sentimental” literature utilized the prevalent May Fourth critical discourse that privileged the representation of internal psychological truth. Furthermore, she sought to defend the “emotional” style of her own fiction by claiming for herself the mission of speaking on behalf of the “pitiful people who are filled with sorrow and indignation yet unable to express themselves effectively” ("Wubing shenyin" 163). As such, she represented herself as an author conscientious in fulfilling her social responsibility through the depiction of individual yet representative emotions. As this was also a strategy of self-legitimization utilized by Mao Dun, the criticism of Feng Yuanjun’s fiction exposes the double standard employed by male critics. More importantly, it can be seen that both the narrative changes in “The Journey” and her defense of emotional literature in her essay reflect Feng Yuanjun’s attempts at carving out a territory for herself through the appropriation of the dominant discursive practices at a time of increasingly rigid control of women’s writings.

Lu Yin and Her Self-Corrections

Compared to Feng Yuanjun, Lu Yin not only changed her narrative style more radically but also self-consciously proclaimed those changes in response to the ideological shifts surrounding her. In a chapter entitled “Changes in Thoughts” ("Sixiang de zhanbian") in her autobiography first published in 1934, Lu Yin divided her writing career into three phases: “Sorrow” ("beiai shiqi"), “Transition” ("zhuanbian shiqi"), and “Innovation” ("kaituo shiqi") (595). She also sought to support this self-proclaimed literary genealogy with concrete examples by slotting her works into these different periods. For instance, Seaside Friends (Haibing guren) was assigned to the first period, The Returning Wild Goose (Guiyan) to the second, and A Woman’s Heart (Nüren de xin) to the third. Interestingly, in the same autobiography she characterized her change in style as essentially a change of her “gaze”: “Now when I am writing, I hardly ever think of myself. In other words, my gaze has changed directions. I am not just concerned with my own interests, but have also started to pay attention to people around me” ("Sixiang de zhuanbian" 594).
Yet male intellectuals, such as the then much-respected literary critic Mao Dun, remained skeptical of Lu Yin’s self-proclaimed transformation. “She has not given us anything new,” Mao Dun commented on The Returning Wild Goose and A Woman’s Heart, “They are continuations of her Seaside Friends. Although [the heroines in these three works] differ from one another in the degree [of their sentimentality], in essence they are the same. They indulge in fantasies and are very sentimental [English in the original]” (“Lu Yin lun” 140). Mao Dun especially blamed the production of sentimental characters in Lu Yin’s fiction on her auto/biographical tendency: “After reading all of Lu Yin’s works, we always feel the limitation of her subject matter. What she shows us is only herself, her lovers, and her friends. Her works are decidedly colored by her autobiography” (“Lu Yin lun” 139). In view of his criticism of other women writers of the time, Mao Dun not only deprecated Lu Yin’s literary skills, but also located her lacking within the limits of her gender; apparently, it was her obsession with her limited life—a common failing among women writers according to Mao Dun—that resulted in the flaws of her fiction. Needless to say, the lack of changes in Lu Yin’s fiction in the radical 1930s also implied, to her male critics, her adherence to tradition and resistance to the revolutionary discourses of the time. In order to evaluate Lu Yin’s modernity or the lack thereof in both her early and late fiction, we need to look at both the contextual and textual evidence.

Lu Yin’s proclamation of changes, or, rather, her claim of self-improvement, undoubtedly arose from an anxiety rooted in the sociopolitical environment of the time. Authors in the early 1930s gradually turned from the individual to the collective in their writings, in response to both the national crisis and the pressure from radical intellectuals who promoted “Revolutionary Literature” (geming wenxue) for the sake of national salvation. Lu Yin’s autobiography was published in this turbulent historical period, after the bombing of Shanghai by the Japanese Air Force in 1931 and the Battle of Wusong between the Nationalist and the Japanese armies in 1932. In fact, she experienced the political turmoil on a very personal level, as part of her manuscript for the novel A Woman’s Heart was burned during the Japanese invasion of Shanghai. However, other than the changing fashion of leftist radicalism, Lu Yin’s voluntary change of narrative style can also be traced to her continual pursuit for an identity as a creditable writer. From the beginning of her writing career, she had defined “true creativity” as the ability of an author to not only “produce intense associations and passions” but also to “develop [emotions] into some kind of literature able to arouse sympathy and excitement in the reader” (“My Opinions on Creativity” 235). As such, it can be seen that she had always intended the representation of emotions to not only express her individuality but also incite affective responses in her audience. The close association of Self and Other in her conceptualization of literature not only suggests the link between her early fiction and her apparently radically changed late fiction, but also echoes male writers’ simi-
lar notions about modern literature. As I have mentioned earlier, the conceptualization in modern literature of the essential unity between Self and Other harks back to the premodern definition of individual agency as one and the same with the universal spirit (see chapter one). Therefore, not only was Lu Yin by no means particularly egotistical, despite what some male critics had charged, her “traditionality” also pointed up the similar tendency in radical male intellectuals. In this light, the male criticism of Lu Yin’s fiction actually reflects their need to isolate and represent traditionality as a weakness characteristic of their female Other. Furthermore, a close scrutiny of her narrative practice will show that she provoked much male disapproval not exactly because of her use of traditional forms. Rather, she created in her fiction a self-contained, emotion-motivated community of women through such a resurrection of tradition, and thus defied the male-dominated May Fourth discourses of modernity. In what follows I will examine some representative short stories featuring the girl student that were written at different phases of Lu Yin’s career in order to further gauge the degree of “modernity” of her narrative style.

What distinguishes Lu Yin’s early fiction about the new woman from that of either Bing Xin or Feng Yuanjun is her apparent indifference to the new woman’s family background. While Feng Yuanjun dramatized the clash between the new woman’s love for her mother and for a male lover, Lu Yin focused more on the woman’s troubles in romantic love and her disillusionment with marriage, both of which only have a tenuous connection to the woman’s own upbringing. In many of her stories, the heroine’s mother is only mentioned in passing, while her emotional as well as physical life away from home is highlighted. Whether this implies Lu Yin’s fictional repression of her painful childhood memories of her own mother’s neglect and cruelty, as in contrast to her cathartic narrative of childhood trauma in her autobiography (J. Wang 120–56), is open to discussion, but her fiction does appear to do a more thorough job of accentuating women’s liberation from the family. Furthermore, of all the May Fourth writers, Lu Yin probably privileged the modern form of first-person narration most in her fiction. She wrote at least four short stories—“The Diary of Lishi” (1923), “Father” (“Fuqin,” 1925), “Manli” (“Manli,” 1927), and “The Diary of a Mistress” (“Yige qingfu de riji,” 1933)—and one novel, The Returning Wild Goose (1931), fully or partially in diary fiction form, as well as numerous short stories fully or partially in epistolary fiction form, including “A Letter” (“Yifeng xin,” 1921), “Somebody’s Sorrow” (“Huoren de bei’ai,” 1922), “After Victory” (“Shengli yihou,” 1925), and “A Victim of the Times” (“Shidai de xisheng zhe,” 1928). Despite these modern characteristics of her fiction, her works incurred severe male criticism. What male critics really resented, one suspects, was Lu Yin’s centralization of female subjectivity through the accentuation of affective identifications among women in her fiction. To that end, Lu Yin not only boldly introduced the topic of romantic love between women (e.g., “Lishi’s Diary”), but also utilized both first-person narration
and “traditional” lyricism to establish a metanarrative link between the female writer and her targeted female audience, and thus constructed a close-knit and self-sufficient community of women.

On the thematic level, Lu Yin’s early fictional works collectively feature a “biography” of the girl student; her stories represent the different stages of the new woman’s life. Furthermore, these stories establish an emotional cohesiveness through shared narrative gestures, tropes, and tempo. Above all, her early pieces all emphasize the empathy between the narrator and narratee through innovative uses of first-person narration. Diaries are presumably private writings, intended only for the eye of the diarist. Yet “Lishi’s Diary” encloses both a prologue and a postscript by a fictional editor, indicating an afterlife of the diary that survives the death of its own author. Similarly, both “Somebody’s Sorrow” and “After Victory” are equally “extroverted,” though both simulate the form of private letters. “Somebody’s Sorrow” ends with a note written by the cousin of the original letter writer Ya Xia, who, after Ya Xia’s suicide, collects her letters and diary and sends them to Ya Xia’s friend KY, the intended recipient of her letters. “After Victory” also has a frame for the featured long letter, connecting the life of the recipient with its sender. Furthermore, Lu Yin’s fictional diaries or private letters extend the communication beyond the two people directly engaged in correspondence. She typically wove many women’s names and lives into her diary or epistolary fiction. Not only do her works highlight women’s group activities, but they also develop multiple story lines following each of these women’s lives. Moreover, since the epistler frequently cites the love affairs and worldviews of mutual acquaintances to her addressee, other women’s lives and opinions are also incorporated into the letter. As such, the letter in Lu Yin’s stories invariably breaks the insularity of private correspondence between two parties, conjuring up instead an intricate web of empathy and sympathy among women.

In addition to interweaving multiple paralleled story lines, Lu Yin’s early fictional works also employ similar tropes in order to facilitate the exchange and sharing of emotions among women. A perfect case in point is her deployment of the trope of love. To be sure, for Lu Yin as well as for her fictional characters, “to love is an act of supreme honesty and sincerity: stripping oneself of civilized hypocrisy in order to reveal one’s true self to the beloved. To love is also a heroic act of defiance, renouncing all the external restraints of artificial society and merging ecstatically with nature” (Lee, The Romantic Generation 77). However, even as she celebrated romantic love as a gesture of supreme individualism, she repeatedly represented women’s shared experience of suffering psychological ordeals caused by love in their search for both their own identity and the meaning of their life. For instance, in “Somebody’s Sorrow,” the heroine Ya Xia not only describes in her letters to her friend KY a series of her own unlucky romantic encounters with men, but also frequently refers to similar misfortune of her other female friends involved in heterosexual relationships. She eventually
commits suicide because her philosophy of *Carpe Diem* is no match for the powerful social conventions that expect a woman to committee herself to a heterosexual relationship. As the indefinite pronoun “somebody” in the title implies, Lu Yin considered the complication of romantic love a common denominator of women’s identity crisis. Her female characters test their philosophy of life by applying it to their romantic relationships, only to see it collapse in the face of reality. Therefore, their subsequent embracing of death, whether by suicide or by illness, is not just a testimony to their failure in love affairs, but more importantly, also a sign of the irresolvable conflicts between their ideal and reality. In this light, Lu Yin represented romantic love in her fiction not so much to privilege love as the commanding force of life as to delve into the dilemma central to the shared life experiences of new women.

Although Lu Yin’s alteration of the conventions of diary and epistolary fiction already reveals her divergence from the standard “individualist” fiction, it is the temporal arrangement of her fiction that more explicitly reveals her daring practice of integrating tradition into modern narrative forms. Most of her fiction depends on what Seymour Chatman calls “contingency” rather than “causality” in order to accommodate the representation and signification of female emotions (47). In other words, in her fiction different letters or different entries of the diary in a story usually follow an emotional rather than a causal logic, as they are linked with one another through what Robbe-Grillet calls “accumulative descriptive repetition” (qtd. in Chatman 47). Rather than developing through a series of fast-paced dramatic events, Lu Yin’s early stories more often gradually build up a certain mood or atmosphere through the reiteration of similar scenes. As such, her temporal arrangement proves intrinsically circular rather than linear.

Lu Yin usually recorded distinct dates, as required by the conventions of epistolary or diary fiction, to mark a formal division between different parts of the same story. However, the inner sense of the progress of time is often more determined by descriptions of seasonal changes in her works. Since seasonal changes often inspire the letter or diary writer to describe and contemplate the mystery of nature and the meaning of life, this gesture of philosophical meditation virtually transforms the linear story time, namely, the time when events take place one after another, into a synchronic poetic-descriptive time. Furthermore, the writer of the letter or diary frequently cites examples of her friends for the generation of her own philosophical discourse, and also asks for confirmation of this discourse from her addressees. As such, Lu Yin’s fiction often establishes an emotional and philosophical community of women by privileging a unique kind of internal time over external time.

To Lu Yin’s radical male colleagues, the resurgence of a circular temporal structure in her fiction was undoubtedly a sign of her “traditionality,” for they conceived of a modern literature as embodying a new historical consciousness, and only authorized in this literature a “unilinear time” that
would confirm the newness and progress of their times according to an overarching evolutionary logic (Lee, “Modernity and Its Discontents” 159). Therefore, Lu Yin challenged the male definitions of both modern literature and modern consciousness as well as established female subjectivity through the paradoxical generation of such a “traditional” lyrical sense of time. The effects of Lu Yin’s unique temporal arrangement can be seen most clearly in her short story “After Victory.” As it consists of only one long letter that also incorporates other letters, this story best illustrates the way Lu Yin established a circular discourse time to highlight the stagnation of the women characters’ lives after their apparent triumph over tradition. As such, it also questions the May Fourth definition of modernity as progress as well as reinforces female subjectivity through the establishment of a community of women with common emotional experiences.

The letter in “After Victory” brings together a group of women by quoting their life stories and comments. The specifics of their life experiences might differ from one another, as one becomes a bored housewife, another a harassed spinster absorbed by her work, and yet another a second wife struggling within an “unnatural” marital configuration. But related by the same letter writer, their lives become testimonials to the same pattern of deterioration; their present invariably compares unfavorably to their past. Not surprisingly, they all express identical negative emotions: “nostalgic about the past, troubled by the present, and fearful of the future” (“After Victory” 147). In addition to the circular structure of the story, Lu Yin also slowed down the narrative speed in “After Victory” by adopting the descriptive mode to produce narrative pauses. Specifically, she transformed the linear narration of events into a series of mutually resonating representations of places. The letter ostensibly begins with its writer Qingzhi’s wistful remark about the fleeting of time. However, her letter in fact eliminates the progress of time, since the past and the present congeal into symbolic locations in it. For instance, Qingzhi describes the site of her honeymoon as bountiful in natural beauty, free from the intrusion of society, and comforting for troubled human spirits. By capturing such picture-perfect moments of the past, Lu Yin froze the passage of time into a series of descriptive vignettes.

In contrast to the static representation of time, the story is suffused with volatile human emotions, which constitute the main driving force of the narrative and belie the “traditional” temporal arrangement of the story. Qingzhi’s memory of an idealized past is shaped by the emotions she harbors for the present. Precisely because she feels keenly the disappointment of unrealized aspirations, she yearns for the golden past, a lost Utopia that represents all her lost youthful ideals. As such, “After Victory” proves to be a story of two parts; its theme of stagnation and its static narrative tempo contrast sharply with the “modern” discontent it conveys, making it more a protest in despair rather than a sigh of resignation. Furthermore, the unique modernity of “After Victory” consists in its establishment of a communal
rather than individual modern identity, for the story again establishes a community of women through the accentuation of their emotions. First of all, it emphasizes the communication between the correspondents by featuring a frame for its centerpiece—the long letter from Qingzhi. Just as “Lishi’s Diary” begins and ends with editorial notes and “Somebody’s Sorrow” ends with Ya Xia’s cousin’s short letter to the intended recipient of Ya Xia’s letters, “After Victory” also depicts the way Qingzhi’s friend Qiongfang receives, reads, and responds to the letter. “After Victory” also accentuates sympathetic reception of the letter by its reader. Just as both Ya Xia’s cousin and the editor of Lishi’s diary burst into tears after their perusal of the texts, Qiongfang, the recipient of Qingzhi’s letter, feels “as if something were lodged in her chest” after reading the letter (147). Lu Yin even had Qiongfang’s husband, who has not even read the letter, agree to her expression of disillusionment, thus implying a rapport between the reader and writer of the letter based on a shared emotional reality that transcends even the text.

From the above analysis, we can see that Lu Yin’s early stories represent women’s quest for independent modern identities in ways different from the discourses of Chinese modernity promoted by radical male intellectuals. Particularly, her stories illustrate the affective effects of both modern (e.g., first-person narration) and traditional (e.g., lyrical temporal arrangement) narrative forms, thus not only placing “unsuitable” emphasis on female subjectivity but also demonstrating a new way of integrating tradition into the definition of modernity. In light of Lu Yin’s revelation of the link between tradition and modernity in modern literature, male criticism of “feminine emotionalism” and “autobiographical colors” of her fiction can be interpreted as an attempt at containing the subversive power of her stories. Perhaps more importantly, her unique way of configuring time and space for the representation of new women also established a new model of representing basic human experiences in the modern era, thus further revealing the cultural-political ramifications of her conceptualization of female subjectivity.

Compared to the narrative innovation of Lu Yin’s early fiction that enabled her to deploy emotions for the negotiation of an independent female identity, her later efforts of self-correction often produced only mediocre specimens. Starting in the early 1930s, Lu Yin self-consciously changed the subject matter of her works in order to shed the title of “autobiographical” writer. Her works of her self-styled transitional period, the novels Ivory Rings (Xiangya jiezhi, 1934) and Flames (Huoyan, 1935), apparently more focus on the others than herself. Lu Yin claimed that Ivory Rings was “a faithful description” of her friend Shi Pingmei’s tragic life and death. Flames veers even further from her usual subject matter, offering a report of the Chinese army from the battlefield of the anti-Japanese war. Not coincidentally, she also considerably decreased the use of subjective mode of narration in her later works. However, an examination of the thematic and narrative aspects of her “Diary of A Mistress,” a short story that she wrote in the
form of diary fiction in the late 1930s, will more clearly demonstrate the impact on her narrative practice caused by her deliberate ideological changes.

The fictional diary in this piece runs from September 3 to November 5 of the same year, covering the sixty days that lead to a turning point in the female diarist’s life. She is a clerk by the name Meijuan who works in a government office and harbors a secret love for her married boss, “a leader of the party.” Defying the contempt and condemnation of her colleagues, she initiates a romantic relationship with him, only to see him leave her shortly after under the pretext of his mother’s illness. His subsequent letters in his absence make her realize that he does not want to risk his own reputation by continuing their affair. In the last two entries of the entire diary the diarist suddenly wakes up from her infatuation. On November 5, after a former colleague tells her about the Japanese atrocity in Manchuria, Meijuan declares: “I want to fulfill the supreme love. I will not only love Zhongqian [her married lover], I ought to love my motherland more” (“Qingfu de riji” 424). The diary ends with her farewell letter to her lover written in her own blood before she leaves to join in the anti-Japanese war.

Lu Yin made self-conscious efforts to create a new, more revolutionary, and more male-oriented narrative in “Diary of a Mistress,” to the point that its plot at times strains the reader’s credulity. The rationale behind the diarist Meijuan’s life-changing decision is inadequately explained in the narrative. Furthermore, as Lu Yin sought to anchor the narrative on a (male) Other, the heroine also appears to lose her agency. In a clear departure from her other diary and epistolary fiction written up to that point, “Diary of a Mistress” includes no editorial notes, preface, or postscript to convey the impression of self-sufficient textual and emotional exchange between its female writer and (female) reader. Rather, the diarist appears to be a woman who desperately wants to be included in the world of men. The title alone indicates the unusual self-image of the diarist; she takes pride in her role as a mistress and defines herself only through her relationship with a married man. Moreover, rather than citing other women’s similar opinions to reinforce her own point of view, Meijuan’s diary integrates multiple male perspectives and depicts how they dictate her thought and behavior.

Revealingly, the heroine’s emotions appear to be debilitating or even diminishing for the female subject. Not only is Meijuan’s self-confidence seriously eroded by the condemnation of the public, her sense of self-worth also completely relies on the love of a man. One brief look from her lover Zhongqian overwhelms her: “I was completely dazzled. Some hot, repressed emotions rose in me. I almost fainted and had to lean on the back of a chair to support myself” (407). Her lover’s acceptance of her love lifts her out of “the maelstrom of sufferings,” prompting her excited announcement: “I am ecstatic, I am smug, I have possessed the most valuable thing in the whole universe: Zhongqian” (415). In establishing her male lover as the center of her universe, Meijuan surrenders her own rights to seek out the meaning of her life. Although Lu Yin apparently granted the heroine certain
agency in her gesture of abandoning an old life at the end of the story, she also had Meijuan join in the army because of the rejection by her male lover. Tellingly, Meijuan is initiated into her new life by yet another man, who brings into her isolated world the news of other people’s suffering. Ultimately, Meijuan appears to be a woman forever seeking, whether through love or valor, to belong in a men’s world, apparently unaware of any kind of female identity other than what is granted and defined by men.

As a story belonging to Lu Yin’s third period of “Innovation,” “The Diary of a Mistress” conveys an apologetic gesture from the author but nevertheless falls short of her previous literary achievements. Lu Yin had criticized herself in her autobiography in 1934 for works from her first period that were submerged in sorrow: “I was selfish. I decided the world was so [full of sadness] and wanted to drag other people along the same path. I did not think of ways to solve the problem and did not point out a new path for other people” (“Sixiang de zhuanbian” 591-92). Yet in her haste to negate individual emotions for the betterment of the collective, Lu Yin created not only an implausible plot but also a less distinct and independent female protagonist in “Diary of a Mistress.” By voluntarily shifting the female subject’s emotional experience from the center to the periphery, she actually caused the subjugation of female agency to first a male-centered heterosexual relationship and then an equally male-centered nationalist discourse. But Lu Yin’s continual interest in female emotions demonstrated in this story, just as her subpar artistic achievements, also shows the tenacity of her previous view on the nature and effects of literature, which privileges the representation of emotions and creation of affective identifications among the audience. In this light, Lu Yin’s later fiction demonstrates not only the limited power of ideology to produce creditable literature but also the enduring link between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity in any individual author’s literary endeavors.

As was the case with Bing Xin and Feng Yuanjun, not only Lu Yin’s fiction but also her life provided ammunition for gender-inflected literary criticism. Faced with charges of “feminine emotionalism,” Bing Xin retreated into the genre of children’s literature while Feng Yuanjun dedicated her life to the study of classical Chinese poetry. Lu Yin’s life ended in childbirth. Some of her male contemporaries argued that the author’s passionate nature made her remarriage, and, by implication, her childbirth and death, unavoidable. It seems that the accusation of “emotionalism” not only haunted Lu Yin’s life but also dictated the definition of her death. The experiences of the first generation of May Fourth women writers foretold the inevitability and difficulty of their successors’ struggle against both traditional and modern forces of objectification in their own endeavors to establish their independent modern identity. This will been testified by Ding Ling’s example in the next two chapters.