

Comparative Cultural Studies

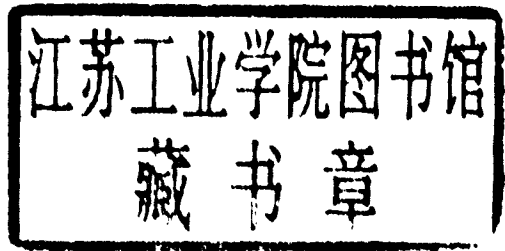
Jin Feng

**The New Woman
in Early Twentieth-Century
Chinese Fiction**

PURDUE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Early Twentieth-Century
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Introduction

The New Woman

How has the relationship between Chinese intellectuals and radical politics changed over the past century? How can we conceptualize the relationship between the projects for the modernization of Chinese culture and the liberation of Chinese women? What means and methods are open to us to evaluate the agency of Chinese women, especially female intellectuals, in the Chinese revolutions? These questions have not only proven to be of vital importance to recent Chinese intellectual history and of immense academic interest internationally, but are also questions and concerns that challenge national and disciplinary boundaries in the current age. In order to give these questions the full treatment they deserve, this book performs a kind of “narrative archeology” on a number of works of early twentieth-century Chinese fiction. It excavates and examines the recurring narrative patterns that had contributed significantly to the formation of the “new” style of modern Chinese literature but were often stridently denied or conveniently ignored by the authors and the critics. In uncovering these differently inflected layers of narrative practice, my project seeks to trace the nodes and vectors in the web of forces—self-representation, gender negotiation, and literary and national modernization—that constituted the politics of the multi-layered narrative forms. Specifically, this project is drawn together by three intertwining strands: the central figure of the “new woman” (*xin nǚxing*); the primary theme of the “politics of emotionality”; and a persistent attachment to an approach emphasizing the “reversed” and “oblique,” as opposed to the forward and the direct impetus of these texts and their allegedly modern outlook.

The literature under discussion is the narrative and critical literary output of a group of radical Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s–1930s. These authors, including both men: Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Ba Jin, and Mao Dun, and

women: Feng Yuanjun, Lu Yin, and Ding Ling, emerged as leading figures in the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1919-37) – generally held as the first collective Chinese native movement towards modernization that led to pervasive cultural and sociopolitical transformations (Goldman 1-3). Regardless of their specific political allegiances, these authors either actively participated in or manifested strong sympathy towards leftist radical politics. Their fiction and criticism have been canonized in the *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (*General Compendium of New Chinese Literature*, first series published 1935-36), and have commanded an enthusiastic following and scholarly interest to the present day.

In this body of texts, the new woman appears as a highly privileged *urban* figure that can take a number of different forms. These include women who shed the stereotypical domestic roles as the “good wife,” “loving mother,” or “filial daughter” to become “girl students” (*nü xuesheng*) attending Western-style schools for a modern education; urban drifters with no apparent familial or occupational affiliations; career women (including writers) making a living with their professional skills; and revolutionaries calling for social change through participation in demonstrations, rallies, and other political activities. Furthermore, the new woman possesses a unique and deep emotional interior that sets her immediately apart from the less self-reflective and uneducated female urban proletarians as well as from peasant women.

In view of the general “retreat” from the canon in the field of modern Chinese literature since the 1980s, my choice of such a group of works may seem odd, if not passé. As Rey Chow has pointed out, more and more scholars of twentieth-century Chinese literature are turning not only to non-canonical works (e.g., “popular” fiction of the early twentieth century) but also to nonliterary genres (e.g., film, radio programs, art exhibits, and popular music) (Chow, Introduction 16). These scholars seek to liberate previously undervalued discourses in order to launch attacks on what has been traditionally recognized as the canon of modern Chinese literature, and, as a result, to bring into view a more complete picture of Chinese modernity. However, I argue that the seminal aspect of canonization consists not only in the exclusion it effects but also in its unique mechanisms of inducing cooperation for its own creation and maintenance. The formation of the canon of modern Chinese literature depended not only on the obvious restriction of discourses of modernity but also on furious and multifaceted negotiations between the dominant but unstable ideologies and individual agency, negotiations that both partly enfranchised individual agency for the formation of the canon and exposed the gender and class origin of the canon. Since these complex negotiations particularly occurred within and surrounding canonized work but tended to be obscured in works that received less cultural and critical attention, a close scrutiny of the hierarchical relationships established in the process of canonization—especially those between the interrelated but clearly demarcated center and periphery of the

canon as a result of such negotiations—is a valuable means by which we can achieve a more thorough understanding of the process of Chinese modernization.

As an emblematic figure in the canon of modern Chinese literature, the new woman provides a vital tool for the study of Chinese modernity because of her important position in the body of works that played a crucial part in Chinese modernization. The May Fourth intellectuals, would-be architects of Chinese modernity, adopted what Yü-sheng Lin calls a “cultural-intellectualistic” approach (*The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness* 26–27) in emphasizing literature as a vehicle of social change in their project of Chinese modernization. As such, their privileging of the new woman in canonized literature encapsulates the problematic inherent in the May Fourth project of Chinese social and political modernization through literary modernization. In particular, the narrative representation of the new woman reveals an intriguing ambiguity that was both productive and troublesome for the project of Chinese modernization, namely, the fact that it could “neither reconcile the otherness of woman nor exist without it” (Schor). Even as male intellectuals deployed this figure to facilitate both their project of Chinese modernization and self-representation, this fictional “new woman” constantly exposed the ambiguity of their modern position while her real-life analogues, the woman writers within the May Fourth group, adapted to and contested the apparatus on which the male writers and their newly emerged modern subjectivities depended. As such, the figure of the new woman provides a useful analytical focus for the investigation of not only the roles of gender politics and individual agency in the process of canonization but also the meanings and definitions of Chinese modernity, an inquiry that still very much influences ideological and literary orientations in Mainland China today.

In addressing issues facing contemporary China, this examination of the new woman also enables me to contribute to the transnational scholarship on modern Chinese literature and intellectual history. As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, in this project I will be posing a set of questions to the relationship between cultural and political radicalism through the analysis of the new woman, a figure of subversive complexity despite, or precisely because of its apparent utility for the propagation of radical discourses of Chinese modernity. In the past these questions concerning the relationship between Chinese intellectuals and radical politics have produced both inspired scholarship and bitter political debate. Generations of scholars from diverse disciplines such as political science, history, and anthropology have raised and sought to answer them after each of the major political upheavals convulsed contemporary China: the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ascent to national power in 1949 (e.g., Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*), the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” between 1966 and 1976 (e.g., Apter and Saich), and, more recently, the “Tian’anmen Incident” in 1989. In the current age of cultural globalization,

these questions have, furthermore, called attention to the political ramifications of applying “international” theories such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism to the study of Chinese literature and culture. Some scholars, for example, have declared that Mainland Chinese intellectuals have become “complicitous” with a totalitarian regime in adopting postcolonial theories to rationalize their cultural nationalism. This verdict has caused bitter contention between scholars in Mainland China on the one hand, and émigré Chinese and non-Chinese scholars residing outside of China on the other, resulting in cross-examinations of not only individual scholars’ intellectual authority but also the very notion of “Chineseness” (Yeh 251–80). Therefore, I have created this backward-looking project not only to shed some light on the continually provocative issue of the relationship between Chinese intellectuals and radical politics, but also to address, through the act of integrating theory into a historically conscious inquiry, some newly emergent concerns in the field of Chinese studies. Towards those ends, I concentrate on the “politics of emotionality” in the narrative construction and utility of the new woman by radical May Fourth intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s.

Before more detailed discussion of this main theme of my project, a few brief notes are necessary to further elucidate the parameters and focus of my project. With regard to the period under study, in the decade or so between the early 1920s and early 1930s, May Fourth writers not only produced an unprecedented number of fictional representations of the new woman, but also manifested a particularly restless and troubled tone in those representations. This phenomenon bespoke a period of wandering and exploration for modern Chinese writers: between the May Fourth Movement, which violently dislodged traditional mores and moralities and the new political circumstances of the 1930s—such as the rise of the Chinese Communist Party and the war with Japan—which arguably “rechanneled their energies to goals of national survival and revolution” (Lee, “Romantic Individualism” 251). Focusing on this particular period will thus provide us with a sharpened view of both the many contradictions within the authors’ narrative representations and the historical exigencies shaping their literary endeavors. The shared political sympathies, ideological inclinations, and more importantly, narrative temperaments of these particular authors also make them an apposite focus group for my exploration of cultural radicalism through an examination of the interplay of tradition and modernity in the literary output of early twentieth-century China. Although far from being the “zealously ideological, heroic” type described by Thomas Metzger (qtd. in Lee, “Romantic Individualism” 240), they nevertheless did proclaim their commitment to cultural and national salvation by radical means. However, they also persisted in representing their modern discontent—their “feelings, moods, vision, and even dreams” (Prusek 1)—more through “realistic” (i.e., lively, authentic) rather than modernist literary techniques in their fiction. In featuring a co-existence of tradition and modernity in both

the content and form of their works, these authors presented complex cases of cultural radicalism.

Working within these parameters of time and author, I use the term “new woman”—an integral part of radical May Fourth intellectuals’ discourses of modernity—to reveal the unique alchemy of gender and modernity in early twentieth-century China. I attempt this with the consciousness that although widely utilized and circulated by May Fourth intellectuals and their predecessors in the promotion of Chinese women’s liberation, the term “new woman” was established on several problematic assumptions. First, it was constructed against the May Fourth intellectuals’ own stereotypes of the “traditional” Chinese woman. It perpetuated the picture of unrelieved, monolithic oppression of traditional women while failing to acknowledge that premodern Chinese society was comprised of disparate strata within which women played diverse roles. Furthermore, the term “new woman” privileged male-centered May Fourth discourses of modernity by establishing this female figure as the symbol of “newness” and “modernity.” It thus prescribed rather than described what it meant to be a modern Chinese woman by excluding both alternative discourses of Chinese modernity and especially the voice of women as experiencing subjects.

In contrast, my use of the term “new woman” will excavate, rather than gloss over, these problematic premises. I will investigate the cultural context and the discursive mechanisms supporting the politicized uses of the representation of this figure (and her less glorified forebears) for the creation of the May Fourth version of Chinese modernity. The emphasis I place on the constructedness of this figure highlights not only the formal aspects of May Fourth writers’ narrative endeavors but also the sociopolitical circumstances that necessitated the creation of new narrative forms. More importantly, I use the “new woman” to bring a close scrutiny to the narrative duplicity underlying the May Fourth intellectuals’ representations of women. The dominant May Fourth discourses attributed the emergence of new women to inevitable historical causality, as they alleged that new women should and would replace traditional women in the process of Chinese modernization. However, I will show that the May Fourth writers, especially the male authors, artificially disconnected new women from their premodern predecessors in order to seize power over modern knowledge, a move that, moreover, contributed significantly to their own construction of a viable modern identity. In other words, in promoting the new woman, radical male intellectuals used the gesture of radical antitraditionalism both to mask their own inheritance of the mores and sensibilities of their premodern literati forebears and to marginalize alternative representations of the women of twentieth-century China, often causing the erasure of the particular plight of Chinese women in their experience of modernization. Simply put, we will see that the figure of the new woman played a key role in the May Fourth drama of self-invention and Chinese modernization.

The Politics of Emotionality

The multiple tensions in the representation and use of the new woman by radical intellectuals of early twentieth-century China came to a head in what I shall be calling "the politics of emotionality." I use this term to denote not only the various modes with which May Fourth intellectuals deployed emotions in both their critical essays and narratives for the generation and control of symbolic capital, but also the consequences of such discursive practices: namely, the complex relationships formed both within and between the May Fourth discursive community and its Other (i.e., the allegedly "conservative" and "antirevolutionary" groups).

The politics of emotionality was both a symptom of and remedy to male anxiety about their own precarious grasp of modernity and masculinity. Radical May Fourth intellectuals always integrated the representation of and debate on emotions into their interrelated tasks of national modernization and self-signification. In the early phase of the May Fourth Movement, male intellectuals privileged "sincere" emotions in order to attack the Confucian tradition that they had accused of stifling individual, especially women's, voices. However, in contrast to their proclaimed goals of the liberation of women and the demolition of traditions, male writers also invoked gender stereotypes previously established in the classical canon for the upkeep of their modern and masculine identity, using emotion as an instrument of differentiation to relieve the anxiety about their modernity and masculinity. For instance, in their critical essays they leveled charges of "feminine emotionalism" against women writers (Larson, *Women and Writing* 179–88) for the purpose of marking themselves as masculine modern subjects. Male intellectuals felt compelled to employ the politics of emotionality largely because their narrative representation and deployment of the new woman, an essential part of their projects of national modernization and self-representation, betrayed many irreconcilable contradictions between "tradition" and "modernity."

To be sure, the privileging of the new woman in May Fourth fiction was undeniably a new literary phenomenon. Representations of women in pre-twentieth-century Chinese literature and historiography in the classical language (*wenyan*) generally assigned women to domestic roles. Literati not only produced copious *exempla* of female virtue in the figures of self-sacrificing wives, wise mothers, filial daughters (Mou 109–47) but also, in the case of the "talented woman" (*cainü*), restricted their voices by appropriating them for the reinforcement of patriarchal values such as female "chastity." Vernacular fiction, on the other hand, did produce a crop of "footloose women," including courtesans, matchmakers, and cross-dressers, who enjoyed a certain degree of mobility outside the family structure. However, the authors of vernacular fiction as a rule neither regarded the footloose condition of these women as a particularly commendable state nor did they ever allow the footloose woman to completely sever her domestic ties. Most

frequently, she was portrayed as being forced from the home due to the exigencies of poverty or war, or through the promptings of the (ambivalently portrayed) desire to obtain for herself the classical education generally accessible only to men. Nor was her footloose state allowed to continue indefinitely, generally meeting with one kind of authorial rectification or another. Some of these footloose women were castigated as the antithesis of female virtue for their promiscuity, avarice, or shrewishness, while others, lauded for their chastity and loyalty, were re-assimilated into the family and clan system through marriage.

By contrast, May Fourth intellectuals not only created new types of women outside the family, such as girl students and women revolutionaries, but also privileged these new types over the older prostitutes and matchmakers. They also used new literary devices borrowed from Western literature to portray these modern women's complex psychology in their break from the patriarchal family for the sake of self-fulfillment in a modern society, thereby accentuating these women's individuality and agency as well as displaying a markedly different attitude towards the relationship between woman and family. Yet, even as May Fourth intellectuals ostensibly celebrated women's displacement from the patriarchal family as a crucial step both in the realization of the new woman's individuality and in the forward progress of Chinese modernization, their narrative practice betrayed their ambivalent relationship to traditions.

Although generally functioning as an icon of modernity in May Fourth fiction, the new woman under the pens of male writers often appears to possess less moral strength or political conviction when compared to the resurrected versions of idealized feminine sacrifice, especially the "loving and suffering mother." Furthermore, modes of representation prevalent in premodern literature resurface in May Fourth fiction to confirm the genealogical linkage between the apparently dissimilar figures of the traditional and the modern woman; the authorial gaze in May Fourth male fiction commandeered the interior, if not always the body, of the new woman for the illustration of ideologies and the fortification of male subjectivity. Indeed, the patriarchal unconscious underlying the nationalist project of Chinese modernization ultimately guaranteed that the focus on the new woman represented but a transitional phase in modern fiction. Subsequently, valiant revolutionary woman replaced the high-strung girl student as the most visible type of new women in May Fourth fiction starting in the early 1930s. Eventually, selfless women workers and soldiers who were also Marxists replaced women intellectuals as desirable female role models in fiction produced by writers affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, thus ironically signaling the containment of "liberated" women by the (patriarchal) rule of the Party. Male representation of new woman was not only riddled with irreconcilable contradictions between the alleged progressive message on the one hand and the authors' traditional sensibility and discursive habits on the other, but also, when used as a device of public instruc-

tion and social mobilization, called into existence a cadre of real-life new women who proved even more challenging than their fictional prototypes. In view of the unruly females in both fiction and life, it should come as no surprise that a further elaboration of the discourse on emotionality was necessary for the production and regulation of the (predominantly male) discourse on Chinese modernity and female participation within it. Arising from such needs, the politics of emotionality became a discursive interaction performed in two overlapping arenas—fictional narrative and literary criticism—for the purpose of demarcating the gender and class boundaries of membership within the articulating group of intellectuals.

Readers of May Fourth fiction cannot help noticing that psychological depth is regularly aligned with social class in its portrayal of female characters. On the one hand, as Yue Ming-bao has rightly pointed out, male May Fourth writers often emphasized the physicality of the lower-class woman, tending to render her as a silent and suffering body or as an ignorant beast of burden in a process that excluded “women’s experience from its own articulation” (54). By contrast, the same writers tended to endow their fictionalized female intellectuals with relatively more psychological complexity. Furthermore, in portraying different classes of women, these authors utilized different narrative techniques that aimed to generate different affective responses in the reader. While they often adopted a third-person narrator and a “case study” approach in their representation of peasant women (see also Duke, “Past, Present, and Future” 45), characterized by an “objective,” “realistic,” and impassive narrative tone, the situation was different with the depiction of the more intellectual new woman. Here, they took an inward turn and accentuated the emotional turmoil and inner struggle of the male self faced with the plight of his female other. Their practice of conferring differential psychological depth in proportion to the social position of the female character, of course, reflected the promptings of the male authors’ own bourgeois background; no doubt more familiar with the women of their own intellectual circles than with poverty-stricken peasants, they were better able to write about their internal experiences. But more importantly, the different degree of emotionality in the May Fourth male narratives dealing with Chinese women proved itself a mark of gender as well as of class.

Compared to the male May Fourth authors’ representation of peasant women, their fiction and criticism concerning the new woman betrayed the male authors’ inability to leave behind the “discursive habits of a patriarchal tradition” (Yue 54) in more volatile and complex ways. These male authors sought in the narrative evocation of the new woman both an affirmation of the individuality of the male intellectual self in the fictional narrative as unique, emotive human being and a foil for their extratextual performance of modern identity. Female writers in turn responded to and appropriated male strategies of allegorizing the woman as part of their own struggle to establish an independent identity for themselves as well as their characters.

When they produced female I-narrators that spoke primarily of their own emotional experiences, however, they not only exposed the gendered origin of the May Fourth project of modernization but also triggered male writers' anxiety about the bases of their own modern identity.

As Wendy Larson describes it, female "sentimentality" was deemed "bourgeois" or "traditional" by male intellectuals ostensibly because it signaled women writers' disassociation from the context of nation and society (*Women and Writing* 185). However, the much maligned "feminine emotionalism" in fact pointed up the streak of traditional sensibility still visible in the work of the male as well as the female writers; for these supposedly modern male writers inherited and often invoked in their literary works the kind of elegant sensibility characteristic of the premodern elitist literati tradition for the articulation of their subjectivity (Larson, "The Self Loving the Self" 175-93). Furthermore, "sentimental" female writing presented a challenge to the unspoken hierarchy within the May Fourth Movement, a gendered structure based on the premise of a male instructor-female disciple relationship. Last but not the least, it questioned the very nature and efficacy of the male-sponsored project of women's liberation by resurrecting the stifled and trivialized figure of the "talented woman" of old. Consequently, male intellectuals both expressed their anxiety about the issue of emotionality and took counter-measures in the critical literature they produced against the threat it posed.

The late-Qing (1644-1911) reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) described "talented women" as essentially the type of traditional woman "who toys with ditties on the wind and the moon, the flowers and the grass [...] who makes ditties on spring sorrow and sad departures" ("Lun nǚxue" 39), and summarily excluded them from the project of Chinese modernization on the basis of their sentimental tendency and their lack of contact and concern with pressing social realities. Echoing Liang's judgment, radical male intellectuals criticized the sentimental literature produced by "liberated" women writers in order to secure a superior male position through the essentialization of sentimentality as an exclusively feminine attribute, though ostensibly cautioning modern women to guard against the reemergence of this traditional trait in their literary creation. This strategic use of the new woman in the process of male self-signification becomes even clearer when seen in the light of the relationships the talented women of old forged with their male sponsors.

In the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties, talented women formed a very real and visible literary and social force through their publication of poetry, distribution of literary anthologies, and, in some cases, their ironical privileging of "female virtue" over literary creativity in the contemporary discussions of female talent and morality (Chang 236-58). Insofar as talented women formed a complex relationship with the dominant discourse of Confucianism, sometimes seeking power through the adoption of the male voice, they disproved the popular May Fourth myth of the unrelieved

victimization of the traditional Chinese women. However, radical male intellectuals chose to ignore this revelation while ironically resurrecting the premodern model of male patronization/patronage in their criticism of sentimental female fiction. In other words, just like the liberal-minded yet still "traditional" male teachers and relatives of talented women in the past, radical male intellectuals not only sponsored the production and distribution of sentimental literature by women but also explicitly claimed the position of arbiter and mentor to women writers under the rubric of the enlightenment and liberation of the "second sex" through the introduction of modern knowledge.

The gendered literary criticism coming from male intellectuals made it amply clear that their anxiety about their own modernity was at the same time anxiety about their masculinity. Radical male intellectuals often invoked gender stereotypes in their criticism of female writings and applied a double standard through the creation and careful maintenance of categories such as "rational" versus "emotional," and "social" versus "autobiographical." While male writers' evocative works were hailed either as frontal attacks against traditional morality or as masterful artistic achievements, comparable fiction by female writers was criticized for its lack of social consciousness and artistic control. Male writers who privileged male emotions were not accused of being "effeminate," yet female writers were often accused of being "miss-ish" if they wrote about women's emotions. Simply put, the alleged lack of social consciousness and sentimentality in female literary production were often associated with the inherent inferiority of their gender (Larson, *Women and Writing* 177-88). This kind of gender-inflected male criticism of female fiction led to the creation in the critical literature of May Fourth period of a new form of the new woman: the woman writer. The frequent appearance of the female writer as a target of radical criticism in effect created in the critical discourse of the time a nonfiction counterpart to the new woman of the fictional text, who, like the fictional figure, served as an Other whose expulsion defined the modernity of the radical male intellectual.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that male writers could not be victimized or marginalized. Rather, it was precisely their marginalized position in early twentieth-century Chinese society—and their keenly felt frustration about the lack of "meaningful" relationships between self and society, between artistic creation and social commitment—that prompted their gendered practice of the politics of emotionality. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that participation in the politics of emotionality enabled male intellectuals to perform their masculinity through the occupation of various and at times even contradictory ideological and gender loci. For instance, sometimes within the same literary piece the male author contrived to have the male center of consciousness vacillate between masculine and feminine positions. But, ultimately, male writers deployed emotions in both fiction and criticism for the sake of strengthening the authorial claim to a modern masculine identity.

Yet the politics of emotionality also proved to be a double-edged sword for the male writers who tried to wield it. Once launched, it gathered momentum and by its own internal logic and power exceeded the intentions of its original creators. As mentioned above, male intellectuals positioned themselves on one side of the politics of emotionality to alleviate anxiety about their own qualifications as modern and masculine subjects. However, the circulation of this discourse on emotionality also turned male writers into the object of its disciplinary force. The particular dilemma faced by radical males who leveled criticism of "emotionalism" against female writers lay precisely in their own practice of the "emotional" narration of new women. Although the evocative narration of new women served to affirm, through its creation of pathos, the writers' modern identity beyond the text as humanistic and modern individuals with a unique, profound, and critical vision of society, it also simultaneously exposed the authorial presence in the process of narration with the production of sentimental overtones. This threatened the male authors with a direct confrontation not only with their own melancholy and pessimism but also with the contradictions inherent in their criticism of feminine emotionalism, and hence the exposure of their patronizing and patriarchal attitude towards women writers. A close scrutiny of the affective residue in male narratives, therefore, would reveal not only the vacillation of their political conviction but also the limits of their self-proclaimed promotion of women's liberation for Chinese modernization. The male writers discussed in this book adopted different strategies to divert such unwelcome attention. Some attempted to displace male emotional weakness onto a female other in their narratives, while others either vigorously denied that their emotionally volatile male protagonists were autobiographical or accentuated their dedication to objective style and to "realism" rather than "self-expression." The most interesting case in this regard is that of Yu Dafu. Unabashed "exhibitionist" though he may have been, he almost never depicted psychologically complex female Chinese intellectuals. Instead, he either formulated a discourse on Chinese modernity in the invocation of Chinese nationalist sentiment through the portrayal of Japanese women or turned his attention to prostitutes and female factory workers, and thus falling back on a more traditional mode of representing male-female relationships.

On the other hand, the politics of emotionality never fully succeeded in annulling women's agency or imposing its entire agenda on women writers, even as it utilized their work and made prescriptions for it. Female writers of the May Fourth generation were, naturally, attracted to the May Fourth discourse of Chinese modernity for its avowed objective of the emancipation of women. As new women themselves, they were free, indeed compelled, to let loose their creative voices and explore women's experience and the possibilities of female autonomy in their own ways, even as their works were also shaped by the austere canons of literary composition dictated by their male colleagues. They not only challenged social norms by