

# Narratives of Disclosure and Narratives of Female *Bildung*

Yinghong Li

## Introduction

When assessing modern Chinese literature, one of the famous May Fourth writers once made this observation: “Among the greatest achievements of the May Fourth Movement, the foremost would be the discovery of ‘the individual.’ Previously, human beings existed for the sake of *jun* [the sovereign], or the sake of *dao* [ethical principles], now they finally understand how to exist for the sake of the self.” (Qiao, 27)<sup>1)</sup> For Chinese writers, this discovery of the individual self, or more precisely the recognition that the individual may assert a right to one’s own being, shows a reviving energy that allows a new scope of creative practice virtually unknown in Chinese literature prior to this time. This discovery also necessarily relates to self-redefinition and, perhaps more urgently given the Chinese historical background, how this new definition differentiates from the conventional role-binding of the self’s obligatory existence to fulfill various social and familial roles that were prescribed rather than found.

In literature, this process often takes the shape of dramatic conflicts, and is part and parcel of the essential theme of modern Chinese literature. That theme, as summarized by the prominent scholar of modern Chinese literature C.T. Hsia, is the “obsession with China”, a China inflicted with the malignant disease of feudalism and seen as the absolute obstacle according to a new ideological paradigm that holds modernity at the other end.<sup>2)</sup> For modern Chinese writers Chinese modernity is defined by an all encompassing ideology of “intellectual iconoclasm”: it regards traditional Chinese society in total as an oppressive mechanism that reduces human beings to a subhuman level of existence, and even to a non-individual. (Lin, 155)<sup>3)</sup> It propagates an unconditional embracement of Western scientific and democratic thoughts and spirits.

Human emancipation for Chinese intellectuals, thus, starts with reestablishing the meaning and value of the individual. The choice for many modern Chinese writers in and around the May Fourth period was to write in the form of diaries, letters, and fictions with heavy autobiographical features to reconfirm an expansive need for self-expression. For women writers of the same period, however, modernity relates more to a gendered struggle with tradition. Their search for the meaning of the individual necessarily roots in a gendered position. Yet, ironically, it is precisely because of their gendered representation that modern women writers have been nearly categorically dismissed as trivial, weak, overtly romantic, and self-indulgent in their writing approaches.<sup>4)</sup> Until recently, much of this corpus of female modern literature has been relegated to footnotes, rarely if ever deserving even a page’s notice. The effort to decanonize the male-centered corpus of modern Chinese literature reveals substantial evidence that a female consciousness is undoubtedly embedded in Chinese modernity.

This paper examines a few narratives written by women writers in modern China

during the May Fourth period, many of which are not well known.<sup>5)</sup> They are organized into two groups: narratives of disclosure and narratives of female *bildung*. These pieces are chosen in order to demonstrate a wide range of issues dealt with by women writers of this time, as well as the belief that an alternative reading is possible for these works outside the canon of modern Chinese literature. This reading is meant to illuminate grey areas that were previously ignored or judged to be *de trop* and to reveal the possibility of a female aesthetics that is part of the modern female tradition.

### **Narratives of Disclosure**

Narratives of disclosure are texts that abide by three major organizational principles that set them apart from other texts. They are organized by principles of the diary form, or by using the first-person narrator, or through an unmediated display of the interior space of the female protagonist. In other words, these are narratives that “seek to distill an unmediated subjectivity, an authentic expression of authorial self which circumvents as far as possible the constraints of narrative organization.” (Felski, 83)<sup>6)</sup> By foregrounding a female subjectivity that is often more divided, circular and still forming than linear, stable and fixed, these women writers display a feminine sensibility about modernity and its relationship to representation.

In order to “write ‘woman’... into the discourse of Chinese modernity” women writers struggle to find literary forms, structures and language that better fit their needs. (Dooling, 3) They are also eager to explore new themes, create new characters and attempt to subvert gender biased images and presentations. Among the key issues addressed in their writing is the exploration of female subjectivity. Shi Pingmei [1902-28], Ding Ling [1904-86], Ling Shuhua [1900-90], and Lu Yin [1898-1934], all locate their female protagonists in modern movements of conflict in the texts discussed here.<sup>7)</sup> These moments are modern decisively because they dramatize the obvious tension and struggle played out in all social spheres caught in the transactional state of changing from the old world into a new one. These conflicts might be “trivial” compared to the heroic acts of social reform aspired to by a male-centered ideology of the time, they are nonetheless honest experiences of engagement with modernity as women. What is more, this engagement is presented as a possibility for active self-assertion for women even though the final result might lead toward self-destruction. By granting their female protagonists the will to take an extra step that reshapes their fate, women writers begin to define a female modern for modern Chinese literature.

The preference shown by modern Chinese women writers for diaries, letters, and first-person narratives indicates, more than anything, a strong desire and need to get closer to the central consciousness of the narrative, as well as to the readership, which largely consisted of women. In many of the narratives, this forthright disclosing of the intimate becomes definitively feminist: it brings focus onto one of the main issues that challenge writings by women writers, namely, the relationship between the personal and the political.

Shi Pingmei’s “Lin Nan’s Diary” depicts the emotional struggle of the female protagonist Lin Nan, a youngish woman married into a fairly typical Chinese premodern family.<sup>8)</sup> There are several aspects about this work that make it worth a closer read. The common consensus among the majority of critics of modern Chinese

literature is that it is a literature socio-politically conditioned to “voice social discontent.” (Lee, 143)<sup>9</sup> Unlike their male counterparts who tend to position their male protagonists in the public sphere, women writers often choose to construct their narratives against a domestic or enclosed and private setting. The conflicts depicted in women’s works are often seen as lesser in magnitude and importance because of their narrow focus. This kind of value judgment of course is made under the rubrics of male-centered criteria derived from the male dominant canon.

For female writers, a different set of criteria needs to be established.<sup>10</sup> For one thing, women writers were fully aware of the limitations of the scope of their narrative focus. Instead of giving in to this social confinement, some women writers sought different ways to reach beyond *guixiu* [the boudoir] literature. By using the diary form, women that previously had remained only in the object position are now subjects of their own stories.

The central conflict in “Lin Nan’s Diary” is a plot common to literature of many genres and times. It deals with a husband’s betrayal by divulging his emotions to a woman other than his wife. The wife, Lin Nan, starts the diary after she finds out that her husband abandons her emotionally upon coming home after two years’ separation. By using the diary form, Shi Pingmei gives Lin Nan, a voice that is explicitly modern and female, and is endowed with a high degree of self-awareness as well as emotional complexity that challenges, in many ways, the presumed image of the female protagonist of the modern period. This is made possible by the honest manner in which Lin Nan confronts and discloses her feelings, especially repressed feelings such as pain and anger, without ever resorting to hysteria or melodrama. In other words, her realistic and non-romantic self-analysis of her own situation allows her to maintain her female subjectivity, though fragile and broken at times, even in moments of despair.

Lin Nan’s crisis occurs when a modern-style, educated woman, who is also a mutual friend, intrudes as the third person into her old-fashioned, arranged marriage. This crisis for Lin Nan is first and foremost an affective experience. It is a crisis because it comes without warning and arrives as a sudden rupture in the relationship as well as in the consciousness. No visible conflicts between her and her husband appear, making the rupture seem to happen because of her being where she is and what she is supposed to be. This crisis is an encounter with an experience of a different kind: an entanglement of experiences that is yet to be defined because of its modern nature. The imposed domain of experiences breaks up old boundaries and resists categorization. From being a wife, daughter-in-law and mother, all of a sudden she becomes something else: “an alterity”, an alienating being, an incomprehension. (Freeman, 2) Indignation, humiliation, pain and despair all erupt from the emotional splitting of the consciousness.

In pre-modern Chinese literature, female protagonists exert their emotions only according to type. Their emotional responses are always rigidly regulated. Shi Pingmei intends to break through the conventional approach of assuming that the female subject should always respond to her affective experience as a relational person, as the disenchanting wife or disgraced daughter-in-law, not as an independent individual worthy of self-autonomy in assessing her own emotions. Lin Nan’s refusal to let herself fall onto the trap of the typical responses of the discarded, old-style wife, and her discontent with romantic drama shows Shi Pingmei’s maturity as a modern writer with

an astute sense of female self-awareness.

Furthermore, Lin Nan's narrative discourse is mapped out in a circular motion, defined by an ambiguity and uncertainty toward her own feeling, and indeed her self-representation through language. On the one hand, she envies her sister-in-law, the symbol of the modern reformer in the story, on the other hand, she regards Nora's leaving home as throwing a tantrum.<sup>11)</sup> She understands the tragic nature of her pre-arranged marriage, and yet she learns that if it is not love it is a deep kind of *renqing* (human emotional attachment) that binds her to her own children and parents-in-law. In the last few entries of the diary Lin Nan negotiates her own situation against the choices of indulging her feelings or taking realistic actions within her ability.

Unlike many of the female protagonists created in the same period who tend to resort to extreme or "typical" feminine patterns of behavior, Lin Nan chooses to embrace an emotional separation from her husband. This is far from a simple and linear choice. It indicates her realization of a sense of self-autonomy. The separation does not necessarily mean living as an independent woman out in the society, but as a mature individual who no longer attaches her entire happiness onto the concept of marriage and love. She also ceases to regard herself as the helpless victim, even though she complies to endure the pain that her decision entails.

At the same time, her decision to align herself with her children, incidentally all female, indicates the importance for women to assert relationships of female affiliation. She also desires to define female identity as a continuous fluidity that extends, permutates, immerses, and emerges.<sup>12)</sup> Lin Nan does not seek control but a capacity to relate, and to enter into a relationship that defines her.<sup>13)</sup> What becomes empowering for her is precisely her own ability to articulate herself as subject with will. What the narrative discloses is Lin Nan's negotiation of ways to respond to a change, not by obliging to familial and social expectations of her, but between her and her inner self. It is perhaps of interest to point out Lin Nan's unfaithful husband remains nearly entirely speechless throughout the story, presented as unable to articulate his position or desire. The text also criticizes the arbitrary victimization of less privileged women as the unconscious target for modernizing.

Although first-person narrative was introduced to China only in 1906, it became very popular around the May Fourth period. This was perhaps expected given the consensus of didactic and enlightening pursuit of literary meaning at that time. First-person narratives are surely more convincing in tone if not content. For female writers of this time, however, first-person narratives were used less for their directness but more for their potential of intimacy, trust and inclusion. It is very interesting that in several cases the first-person narrator tells the story not of herself but of an acquaintance. Ling Shuhua's "Little Liu" is such a story.<sup>14)</sup>

Although much less known than some of her other works, "Little Liu" stands out in several ways. It is essentially both a condensed story of female *bildung* and a narrative of disclosure. These two kinds of narratives are often overlapping. The plot itself is simple and straightforward, telling the changes resulting from marriage, multiple births and miscarriages brought to Little Liu, once a sharp-tongued and quick witted leader of a group in a new style all-girl's school. The power of the story, however, comes from the narrator's direct confrontation with the ugliness of the wasted female body and

female home environment. The intensity and purity of the ugliness that shocks the first-person narrator speechless is also plainly laid out in the text, complete with many details of vulgarity and humility.

While it is possible to argue that the ideological concern in this story is to critique Little Liu's total lack of self-consciousness of her own abused physical body and denigrated social position, it is important to point out that the crisis the female subject encounters is one closely related to the crisis of language and representation. It is particularly interesting to see the contrast between the adolescent Little Liu and the postnuptial Liu. The physical situation that surrounds Little Liu, filth, chaos, stench, young children's screaming, and general decay is appalling enough, but more devastating is Little Liu's verbal regress. She loses the ability to voice any emotional responses whatsoever, making this horror even more horrific for the female subject.

Recalled from the memory of the first-person narrator at the beginning of the story, Little Liu's popular initiation twelve years ago of a verbal protest to ostracize a newlywed and pregnant girl from the new style all-girl's school is now full of ironic intent. It is even more cruelly played out because of the total displacement of Little Liu's self-consciousness. The narrative thus problematizes the representation of female identity and the helplessness of language to make a whole of the existence of Little Liu from disjointed and dissimilar pieces of memory.

The moment when the female subject encounters an object or state of being that is beyond representation has been referred to as the moment of the female sublime.<sup>15)</sup> In her subtle and yet radical analysis of the female sublime, Barbara Freeman articulates it as the female subject's encounter with an alterity – social, political, aesthetic, erotic – that is excessive and unrepresentable. It is a site of women's affective experiences and their encounters with the gendered mechanisms of power. Unlike the masculinist sublime which is a strategy of the self's attempt to appropriate, colonize or master the object that would exceed or undermine it, the female sublime attests to a relation with it.<sup>16)</sup> Freeman's arguments are illuminating in regard to the discussion of the female subjectivity and its responses to the subliminal moment in Chinese history: the rapture and rupture of modernity.

The moment of the female sublime in "Little Liu" seeks to re-metaphorize the abused female body by bring attention to its unassimilableness to representation. It is also doubly convincing for this sublime moment to establish given the closely resembling characteristics between the spectator, that is the first-person narrator, and the subject, i.e. Little Liu, of the event: their sex, age, education and partial experience. However, witnessing the devastation that comes from the banality of the body's use and waste, the female subject responds in a typical female manner: a pause in order to attest to a relation with it, as pointed out by Freeman.

Ling Shuhua is purposeful when she chooses to use a female acquaintance's voice to tell Little Liu's story. This direct yet subtly removed articulation manages to refrain from further victimizing Little Liu. The readers are not encouraged to either condemn or empathize with Little Liu more than she needs. By allowing the female subject to intrude upon the personal and private space of Little Liu, Ling Shuhua juxtaposes two entirely exclusive and yet mutually compatible female beings in a decisive moment. It is the historical moment when modernity arrives as a sudden and powerful rupture that

exerts affects on all social dimensions. As shown in this text, the female experience of modernity is clearly defined by gender. For the two women modernity becomes the invisible and simultaneously movable border that redraws boundaries around them, in between them and somehow connects and includes the reader at the same time. Which is the truer self - the adolescent Liu, the brutally violated woman, or the first-person narrator as spectator, as comrade, or as authorial voice? Perhaps by re-evoking that particular progressive moment of the memory for the reader, for herself, for Little Liu, the female subject establishes a relation, opens up a space in which female identity is able to reconfigure itself. Any ultimate meaning would remain “infinitely open and ungovernable.” (Freeman, 11) It is made possible precisely because the narrative voice is authorial but not authoritative.

What the narrative discloses is not intimate details of a private life, nor depictions of sexual or emotional relationships as in typical confessional narratives. Instead it points toward a broader area of concern that encompasses not just the individual, but the cultural identity of woman, and questions the validity of formation of this identity, and the power to represent it truthfully. As such it is less self-indulgent, more generous and sympathetic in bridging the gap between the more fortunate and the less, and in a way serves as an answer to one of the negative appraisals of female writing with its narcissistic concern of the petty bourgeoisie. The women that could afford to be educated and write were after all the privileged few. It is due to their self-consciousness of their privileged position, however, that quite a few chose to tell their stories in the same way as Ling Shuhua tells it here. Engagement with modernity in this text comes through problematizing the need and right to speech, and the means of representation for the oppressed and exploited female body and consciousness.

The third kind of narrative of disclosure concentrates on the psychological struggle experienced by the female subject. The narrative focalizer clearly locates itself in the consciousness of the female protagonist, and the narrative intends to get as close and unmediated as possible to female subjectivity. For the general Chinese readership in modern China this was surely a novelty because conventional Chinese literature was never written from within individual consciousness. Psychological delineation was never part of character development. In fact, characters in traditional Chinese fiction almost never experience processes of psychological development.

Ling Shuhua’s “Li Xiansheng” [Teacher Li] is a narrative that builds entirely around the psychological state of the main character.<sup>17</sup> The story focuses on one of the more privileged type of women, one with a decent job, and thus independent. The location of the story is one commonly seen in narratives by women writers of this time: the newly established institutes for young women to be educated and modernized. The conflict between the old and the new China is approached entirely from within the character of Li Zhiqing, even though the surface narrative structure locates her, a celibate middle-aged woman with no looks, in direct contrast with the sexually awakened and sumptuous modern girls anxious to display their own physical property. The internal conflict that torments Li is again a common, although very new, experience for women of this time: the possibility to remain single or to enter into matrimony as expected.

The newly opened girl’s schools provide many career opportunities for women like

Li Zhiqing, who are educated themselves and willing to pursue an independent lifestyle. This is a new type of female character loved by many women writers of the time. This career choice itself indicates a strong dissonance with conventional life paths laid out of women to fulfill different social and familial roles prescribed for them. The dissonance, as Ling Shuhua masterfully displays, is devastating less because of it being a political issue, and more because of its psychological impact.

Ling Shuhua approaches the conflicting moment by locating Li Zhiqing in a succession of moments of emotional dilemma. On a particular Sunday, Li realizes that she is required to return to her family to participate in certain familial rituals. The intensely complicated rules, requirements, and obligatory actions necessarily accompany these family gathering of various rituals all of a sudden enter into Li Zhiqing's consciousness and quickly evolve into a massive force of psychological oppression. From hesitation, confusion, chaos, and anger and to eventual break down, Ling Shuhua calmly, objectively and realistically discloses a complex range of emotions going on inside Li Zhiqing without ever mixing in a hint of didactic preaching or moralistic appraisal or condemnation.

The narrative ends abruptly in a surprise. Half on the way to her family where she grew up, Li Zhiqing can no longer control her emotional outburst, and tells the driver to take her back to her school. The journey is aborted, her obligatory duty is ignored, Li Zhiqing is in despair, giving in to her own emotional outbreak. Yet in that final decisive moment when she tells the driver to change her path she is an independent individual, a woman able to exert her will. The will enables her not to participate in the meaningless, irrational and calculating games of rituals in the name of family, even though she is fully aware that this refusal to enter into that patriarchal system of relationship may very well become a self-imposed separation and disconnection with the family.

The price for that, as shown by many examples in reality and fiction, could be fatal. But for Li Zhiqing the difference lies in that she chooses to do so. It is far from a heroic act, but full of emotional ambiguity and agony. Interestingly, toward the end of the narrative Ling Shuhua relates Li Zhiqing's emotional torment to her memory of the deceased mother, and thereby reveals a different layer of meaning for the narrative. The female subject's rejection of the family connection, ironically, brings her closer to the female emotional continuity and fluidity that stands in the center of relations between mother and daughter. What the narrative reveals is an uncertainty about the meaning of the family: what is family when not based on the meaningless repetitions of rituals? And is a woman still a woman when she does not enter into that frame of existence? Is she entitled to the right to be? These questions remain unanswered in the text.

In sum, narratives of disclosure, as exemplified by Shi Pingmei and Ling Shuhua, show efforts of women writers to reach beyond the self-indulgent practice of writing to present a much more mature and objective kind of female experience with different facets of modernity. They provide insight into crucial aspects of modern Chinese literature in seeking to represent Chinese modernity truthfully. Especially interesting is their astute awareness of the many dark elements that accompany the arrival of modernity. Problems such as the splitting of the unitary subject, seen from a female

point of view, is more devastating. These narratives also disclose a desire to reach an emotional and psychological resonance among the women readership. They attempt to create a new narrative space in which empathy and tolerance become available. They do not seek to achieve political awakening through didactic propagandizing, but feel consoled by the ability to articulate. They propose neither a total command nor complete submission, but a pause, a moment of contemplation to look inward, to feel, to hear and to see. They seek a common ground where women participate in a discourse that does not dismiss, or patronize, but encourages and relates to the female consciousness.

### **Narratives of Female *Bildung***

In another kind of writing, narratives of female *bildung*, women writers in early modern China fully examine the meaning and indication of becoming a completely independent individual for women, economically as well as emotionally.<sup>18)</sup> Ding Ling's "Meng Ke" and Lu Yin's *Ivory Ring* and *Woman's Heart* are all longer works that follow the psychological development of the female protagonist. In each of these three *bildung* narratives, there is a textual gap that clearly points toward the incompatibility between role fulfillment and self-definition for women in modern China. Once women decide to step beyond social roles that convention and tradition have prescribed for them, they find that in reality there are no socially acceptable or established parameters against which they can measure their self-value. Because these social limitations are powerful and stable they are forced to resort to extreme, irrational or incomprehensible choices as means to destabilize a conventional ideology.

Ding Ling's "Meng Ke" is perhaps the first modern Chinese story that focuses on the sex and the city motif and problematizes the male gaze that was becoming ever more visible and present in the burgeoning of mass and consumer culture.<sup>19)</sup> The trajectory of Meng Ke's self-development is marked by three crucial moments in her life. In each case, the focus of the conflict is upon the physical body of the female as she is interrogated under the male gaze. In the first incident, Meng Ke is the witness when a male instructor insults a nude female model posing in an art class. Anger and humiliation enrages the high-spirited Meng Ke. As a protest, she aborts her schooling and seeks shelter with a distant Aunt. Her dream to become a well-educated woman with creative skills to support not only herself but also her family is finished before it is allowed to even begin. Meng Ke already senses women's inferior position in a social economy that clearly favors men.

Having just left her provincial home to seek education in the city, she is now forced to reenter the familial environment. Just as she finally feels able to enjoy herself with all the material comfort her Aunt provides and the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai makes available, she receives her second shock. One day she overhears a conversation between two young gentlemen, one a distant cousin, the other a friend of the cousin's and a frequent guest at the Aunt's residence. She is shocked to find out that she is the subject of the conversation in which she becomes a bargain hunt: a transaction is reached between the two men with one happily ceding Meng Ke to the other. The shock infuriates her to leave behind the high walls of her Aunt's house with nowhere to go and nobody to turn to. Meng Ke finally realizes that all the polite conversations,

courteous gestures, including encouragements the two men give her to pursue her artistic career, are pure lies. Without her knowing it, she is implicated in a false game of courtship, an expensive kind that only the wealthy privileged few can afford. The sole interest is her physical body, displaced and full of licentious promises. There are many moments in their contacts when Meng Ke is taken in by their generous compliments on her talent and femininity and unable to see that she is in fact subjected to an intensely possessive assessment and control by the male gaze.

The final decision Meng Ke makes is an interesting one that is ironic in intent, and bitterly illuminates limitations of social conditions at a historical moment for women. After weighing carefully all the possible choices that she can make realistically, Meng Ke decides to try her luck at one of the most modern professions for women at the time, especially young ones with the looks: to be a movie actress. The following passage provides insight into Ding Ling's decision for her female protagonist to make this seemingly self-negating step in life, in regard to both the character and the narrative.

"She left that house because she didn't want to see those hypocrites again. But then can she walk upon a sunny road? She's more likely heading toward the pit of hell ... but is she to blame? Oh, ask her to go serve the people to open up schools, to set up factories, how can she have great strength? To go back to school again? Isn't she fed up with all that meandering among teachers and students? ...Can she possibly sacrifice all of herself to go to hospitals to be a nurse...or must she become a maid just because she likes children? But then dare she taste the treatment the servants receive, to be stuck with oily-faced cooks, slyly smiling errand boys or thieving servant women..." (Fu, 35)

Ding Ling's Meng Ke sees her inferior position in the modern economic distribution of wealth and labor. To use the only property she has, i.e. her looks, to her own benefit, even if it is only measured in monetary terms, seems preferable because it is at least realistic and within her ability. Earlier in one of her sojourns to the city, Meng Ke has a chance to meet with several radical revolutionaries who give her the impression of being brute, primitive and even self-denigrating. This is all very interesting considering that some years later Ding Ling would take a sharp turn, both in her creative career and real life, to become a devoted revolutionary for the rest of her life.

In another revealing passage earlier in the narrative, Meng Ke befriends the Ersao (second sister-in-law), a woman married into her Aunt's family, who confides in Meng Ke about her abusive and drunkard husband. Ersao tells her that for women an old style marriage is the same as prostitution, the only difference being "it's cheaper and you get an intact person." (Fu, 30) It seems for Meng Ke becoming a movie star at least provides an economic independence. After all Nora does not need to return home, or fall into debauchery. That is, if she can stand herself being subjected to the constant male gaze, full of naked desire and wanting. And it seems Meng Ke is able to endure, not because she totally complies, but because she can see the irony of it all.

Ding Ling is able to not only critique the oppressive marriage and family system but also to point out that modernity comes with a price and that price ironically is women's objectification and alienation. Meng Ke's decision to alter her identity (she gives herself a different stage name) has complex implications. By hiding her previous identity she preserves her true self for her own sake, and allows only part of her to enter into an

economy defined by patriarchal rules of representation. She is neither a complete victim nor a total accomplice, but an autonomous subject capable of being responsible for her own choice.

Meng Ke's *bildung* from the confines of domestic into public is thus presented as an emancipatory if problematic process, that "proceeds from the recognition of women's estrangement within a male-defined environment but also articulates the possibility of at least a partial individual liberation from existing ideological and social constraints toward a degree of self-determination." (Felski, 124) Modernity is liberating but it also poses threats to women in particular. New configurations of old systems of oppression bear directly upon women, especially the physical body of women. The dislocation between the two Meng Ke creates irony that renders the text modern and ensures the female subject as neither entirely passive nor totally liberated.

Lu Yin's *Ivory Ring* is a narrative of female *bildung*, but also biographical because it is based on a real life episode of Shi Pingmei, the first writer discussed in this paper.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Meng Ke whose search for self-meaning and identity is defined more by patterns of formations for social identity, Qinzhu, the female protagonist of *Ivory Ring*, struggles to find her true self and autonomy as a woman more through formations of patterns of psychosexual identity. Qinzhu's *bildung* plot is mapped out by her encounter with several male suitors, two of them turn into lovers. The crucial moment of awakening for her comes when she finds out her first true love is a married man with a devoted wife who has given two children to him. The sudden realization that love is but an emotional game that follows male defined rules pushes Qinzhu to take extreme measures of self-protection.

From self-denial, to self-indulgence, to self-loathing, and finally self-destruction, Qinzhu guards her virginal pride and refuses to enter into intimate relationship with men, including one whose faith in her nearly destroys him. Shortly after Qinzhu finds out she wronged him deeply, she dies on her sick bed. Qinzhu's self-discovery is twice marked primarily by her own recognition of the mistakes she makes. Both times she fails to recognize the discrepancy between what is assumed to be the male lover and the man in reality who abide by a different set of social rules. The emotional sentiment displayed by the character of Qinzhu is quite typical of many women of the time, fictive and in real life.

The combination of traits from the dissimilar value systems of the new concepts derived from the West, and the old ethical principles of Confucianism are at the center of many characters in modern Chinese literature. Female characters like Qinzhu reflect the ambivalence and ambiguity in this constant battle between values in achieving modernity. The modern Qinzhu is passionate, verbal and direct, extroverted and unafraid of trespassing into many socially risqué areas. Yet in her heart she treasures the purity of her own virginity. For women like Qinzhu, engagement with modernity becomes a sexual negotiation and struggle. Like in "Meng Ke," the dissonance between the two Qinzhu becomes, ironically, the centrifugal force that drives the narrative forward and in different directions. Partially because these two forces fail to reconcile, Qinzhu ends her life in death from sudden illness.

The question that Lu Yin raises in this novel points toward one of the central but seldom addressed issues in women's emancipation in early modernity: the psychosexual

dimension of female subjectivity, whether it is representable and if so, how it should be represented. The problem of sexual liberation needs to be incorporated into the new writing. The first step seems to be to address the issue of sexual repression, an issue that has remained untouched in China. Without doing this, sexual emancipation for women would only be a romantic fantasy.

Precisely because of the uncertainty created by this crisis of representation, Lu Yin incorporates seemingly all narrative devices available to her to tell the story: the prominent third person narrator, first person narrator, diaries and letters are all juxtaposed and switched around freely and frequently. The narrative becomes less stable and at times incoherent, making it difficult to locate a central position in the text. It is Lu Yin's intent to destabilize any authorial voice in the narrative and enhance a multi-voiced discourse in order to generate a narrative space in which boundaries of female identity and subjectivity, personal desire and communal sympathy are able to dissolve and remerge.

*Woman's Heart* is another work by Lu Yin, the most prolific of all women writers of the time.<sup>21)</sup> The journey of self-discovery for its female protagonist, Su Pu, takes her a step further than nearly all her fictive counterparts. Not only does she allow herself to fall in love with a younger man outside her marriage, she also goes to America with him, and stays there for two years taking courses she is interested in while remaining the wife of the other man. Eventually, however, she cannot stand the guilt she feels toward her daughter from her loveless marriage and decides to join her and give up her love.

Several factors combine to propel her to make this retrograde move: her husband's reluctance to give up on their marriage and her desire to remain emotionally close to her daughter. More importantly, it is her vague disappointment in her young lover who seems unable to comprehend her psychological complexity. As she tells her lover: "Chunshi, you only know about the freedom of the body, but haven't considered the constraint of the soul!" (Lu, 282) What she understands to be a person with autonomous individuality is more than merely having the freedom and spirit to be with her true love. Ironically, physical freedom at the price of psychological burden becomes alienation. She realizes that being an autonomous individual has different implications for males and females. Education, intelligence, love, and mobility all make her a more complete independent and modern individual, and yet being a woman, she cannot escape the fear of discontinuity in the emotional attachment between her and her daughter. The male-defined social environment is simply not ready to tolerate, not to mention accommodate, a woman's desire and right to genuine happiness. That right will allow her to negotiate among different dimensions of identity, the social, the familial, the psychological, the sexual, without taking up that unnecessary burden of being the one to blame.

Su Pu's encounter with the modern, then, manifests as a psychological negotiation in which the split subjectivity is able to at least reach an understanding, if not agreement. As in "Meng Ke" and *Ivory Ring*, there is a textual gap created by the intensely dissimilar and conflicting layers of consciousness within the main character. Unlike her two counter parts, Su Pu seems more mature emotionally and intellectually, partially because of the fact that she has traveled further in her physical and emotional journey. She also sees herself as part of a larger consciousness that is a social field of human

relationships not based on obligations but connected through affection and sympathy. The search for self-meaning reveals to all three female protagonists their “sense of their cultural marginalization.” (Felski, 75)

Unlike narratives of disclosure, *bildung* narratives are broader in scope, setting, and range of characters. More importantly the female protagonists enjoy a physical mobility that many of their counterparts do not have. Their journeys necessarily involve moments of departure and separation. But these are choices they make. Even though self-sacrifice is inevitable, they would rather not be passive. These narratives often choose to use irony as the preferred modern technique to bring forth the disharmony between that which belongs to old China and that which belongs to the new.

For female protagonists this irony comes from the dislocation between the true self they aspire to and the convention-bound woman that consciously or unconsciously exists in them. Their *bildung* thus puts an emphasis on the process of their search in which they learn to form a new identity for themselves and simultaneously learn how to confront the more destructive self. Their self-discovery often becomes an uneven progression in which their identities permutate, and reformulate. It ultimately is a struggle to achieve a more integrated consciousness.

## Conclusion

The development of Chinese narratives in the early decades of the twentieth century expresses two important ideas: femininity and modernity. The decanonizing effort reveals the necessity to give voices to many unfairly neglected women writers who clearly form an important part of the modern Chinese tradition. Unlike their male counterparts who tend to present a clearly defined sentiment of black versus white in the process of modernization, women writers define modernity as a process, as a field for a different range of affective experiences, as a gap, an inconsistency, an ambiguity, a circular and eventually spiral motion, an encounter with the deeper dimensions of the self, an unstable state of being. Modernity promises but also confines; it aspires but also denigrates. It is spiritual but also carnal, and most of all it has gender written in and out of it. In other words, in their experience with modernity, women writers reveal a more complex and multi-layered sensitivity, a reluctance to over-determine modernity's political and social outlook.

## Notes and References

- 1) The quote was originally from Yu Dafu, and referred to in Qiao Yigang, *Duocai de Xuanlu - Zhongguo nuxin wenxue zhuti yanjiu* [Multifarious-colored Melodies], (Tianjin: Nankai Daxue Chubanshe, 2003).
- 2) For more discussions on this theme, see C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 3-27.
- 3) For extensive discussions on this topic, see Lin Yu-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).
- 4) In the “Introduction” to their volume dedicated to some of the “less familiar women writers” in the modern era, Amy Dooling and Kristina Torgeson write: “Until quite recently, the prevalent assumption (among Western sinologists and Chinese scholars alike) has been that besides Ding Ling, Ling Shuhua, and Xiao Hong there were few other ‘worthy’ or ‘significant’ women writers during the formative stages of modern Chinese culture.” See Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson, eds., *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women's Literature from the Early Twentieth Century*,

- (New York: Columbia University Press 1998), 1-38.
- 5) The May Fourth period roughly refers to the period began in 1915 with the initiation of the New Culture Movement, and ended around 1930, although the May Fourth incident occurred in 1919. All the texts discussed in this paper were completed and published in the 1920s and the beginning of 1930s.
  - 6) Inspirations for my discussion of the two kinds of narratives are mainly from Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989. Felski, however, uses the term “confessional texts” to refer to mainly autobiographical narratives by women writers in the West. I have revised the term in order to broaden its scope.
  - 7) Although the writing career runs on different courses for these women, in the late 1920s and early 1930s when all the texts discussed here were written and published, they shared many similarities in writing style, thinking, and, occasionally, life style. The corpus of criticism on modern Chinese literature in English has been expanding since Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker’s *Ding Ling’s Fiction* was published in 1982. However, critics tend to focus on the few well-known works produced in the May Fourth period, such as Ding Ling’s “Miss Sophie’s Diary” and Ling Shuhua’s “Embroidered Pillows”. In recent years many mainland Chinese critics have also written extensively on modern women writers in China. For biographical information and critical essays on the writers discussed here in Chinese, please refer to: Xu Dai, *Bianyuan xushi: Ershi shiji Zhongguo nuxing xiaoshuo ge an piping* [Marginal Narratives: Case Studies of Twentieth Century Chinese Female Fiction], (Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe, 2002), Yue Shuo, *Zhongguo xiandai nuxing chuanguo ji qi shehui xingbie* [Modern Chinese Women’s Writing and its Gender], (Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou Daxue Chubanshe, 2002), Zhang Yanyun, *Chunhua qiuye: Zhongguo Wusi nu zuojia* [Spring Flowers and Autumn Leaves: Female Chinese Writers of the May Fourth], (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2002).
  - 8) The story was finished shortly before the writer’s death in 1928. The edition of this work used here is from Fu Guangming, ed., *Shi Pingmei: Qifu* [Abandoned Woman], (Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Chubanshe, 1998), 106-117. For English translation see Dooling, 119-130.
  - 9) For a discussion of literary trends in relation to intellectual history in modern China, see Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literary Trends I: The Quest for Modernity, 1895-1927,” in Goldman, Merle and Leo Ou-Fan Lee, eds., *An Intellectual History of Modern China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 142-195.
  - 10) It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail the issue of canonization or de-canonization as the case may be. Among helpful analysis of feminist’s efforts to de-canonize the male dominant Western canon, see Lillian S. Robinson, “Treasure Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon,” in Elaine Showalter ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 105-121. Among critical writings that include the issue of canon making in discussions of modern Chinese literature, see Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China 1900-1937*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), especially 183-213.
  - 11) Nora is the heroine in Henry Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*. Hu Shi, one of the most progressive thinkers in early modern China, translated and introduced this play to China in 1918. Nora quickly became the symbol of women’s liberation during the May Fourth period. Lin Nan’s comment here seems to show an opinion that diverges from the popular idea that Nora’s leaving her confinements of married life is complete emancipation.
  - 12) Discussion of female identity here has been inspired by Western feminist critics, in particular Luce Irigaray.
  - 13) The idea to define feminine power as “ability”, rather than “control” comes from Judith Lowder Newton, in *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981).
  - 14) The story was first published in 1930. The edition used here is from Fu Guangming, ed., *Ling Shuhua*, (Xian: Tiabai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1997), 103-119.
  - 15) For details, see Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
  - 16) For details of the argument, see Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*.
  - 17) The story was first published in 1930. The edition here is from Fu, ed., *Ling Shuhua*, 120-129.

- 18) The female *bildungsroman* refers in its broadest meaning to fictions that delineate women's self-development. Among the variations of this term, critics have used self-development, self-discovery, awakening, and formation for specific purposes. For more information about this narrative tradition, see Laura Sue Fuderer, *The Female Bildungsroman in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism*, (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990).
- 19) The story was first published 1927. This edition is from Fu Guangming, ed., *Ding Ling*, (Xian: Taibai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1997), 1- 43. English translations are mine.
- 20) The novella was dedicated to the writer's friend Shi Pingmei. The edition used here is from Lu Yin, 57-229.
- 21) This novel was completed in 1932. The edition used here is from Lu Yin, *Xiangya Jiezhì* [Ivory Ring], (Beijing: Jingji Ribao Chubanshe, 2002), 230-322.