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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
Department of East Asian Studies

**AN IMAGE NEVER REACHING THE PERFECT:  
SEEKING “NEW WOMEN” GEENEALOGY IN MODERN CHINESE  
LITERATURE AND FILM, 1910s-1930s**

by  
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There are many “new women” images in modern Chinese literature in the early twentieth century. What is the difference of these women images from those in traditional Chinese literature? How and why do these images show up? What kind of “newness” do they bear with the specific time? What do the writers and filmmakers intend to express by creating those new women images? How and where does this phenomenon of “new women” end up? My thesis seeks to take several concrete texts to examine this “new women” genealogy, analyze the differences and development of such an image, and argue that because all the new women images in modern Chinese literature are created with the writers’ certain purpose, they can never be ideal or perfect. They all have some drawbacks, and we could not even find one till today.

## The Emergence of “New Women”

“New Women” is not a term brought up by someone suddenly, but has a long way coming into the modern history of China. The whole nation and society of China had been facing the pressure of the more developed West since the Qing dynasty. This pressure not only forced the nation to take seriously the gap between China and the West in economic and political powers, but also in thoughts and culture. Prior to the political reformation in 1894, Chinese women were considered to be suppressed in the patriarchal society. They are supposed to be submissive to their father, husband and sons. Even if there are some wealthy and relatively liberal families which would provide their daughters education, those talented women are considered as only capable of “toying with ditties on the wind and the moon,”<sup>1</sup> quoted by Hu Ying about the late Qing scholar

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<sup>1</sup> Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation*, 163.

Liang Qichao's opinion. Scholars like Liang Qichao at that time claims "woman's place" functions as the site for the construction of difference, therefore if the traditional Chinese women represent the Chinese tradition, then a new woman can be the symbol for a modern China. Therefore, even if western missionaries came with their colonial purpose, late Qing scholars and intellectuals were happy to welcome them and ready to link women's education with the construction of nationalism. After groups of western missionaries arrived in China in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, foreign cultures began to influence the status of Chinese women. And the need of the appearance of "new women" was soon lighted. Little by little, Chinese people with westerners' help began to seek ways to help Chinese women to improve their status. They used newspaper as a media to comment on women's situation and to stimulate women's movement in China. With these westerners and some Chinese intellectuals' efforts, there were several remarkable events for women in the turn of the twentieth century: the heavenly feet movement, equal education for women, revolutionary women after the Republican (Xinhai) Revolution in 1911.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Qiu Jin, the heroine recognized as the first woman who woke up to fight for women's rights in China, came back to China from Japan and established the first newspaper for women in China in 1907: *Chinese Women's Newspaper*. She wrote in the Editor's Note that "How dark is the situation of our nation's women? How dangerous is the future of our nation's women? When I think about this, I feel sorrow and I cannot help standing up, to summon my sisters of the whole nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Yao, Esther S. Lee. *Chinese Women: Past and Present*, 105-124.

This is why I established *Chinese Women's Newspaper*.”<sup>3</sup> However, as a pioneer, Qiu Jin did not achieve her goal in the end. *Chinese Women's Newspaper* died soon in the same year, and she was executed by the Qing government for being a member of *Guanggu hui* (Restoration Society) and leading revolutionary activities against the Qing government. Qiu Jin is considered a forerunner of the Xinhai Revolution, and also a forerunner of China's modern women literature. Four years after she sacrificed herself, Xinhai Revolution overthrew the feudal dynasty. And then eight years later, May Fourth Movement broke out, giving the feudal patriarchal ideology a heavy strike. At the same time, there were more and more girls' schools, and colleges and universities also began to open their gates for girl students. More and more women had access to higher and higher level of education.

After all these preparation, it seems ready for the society to welcome a “new women” image. In the West, the images of modern women<sup>4</sup> occurred with the modern social production, urbanization and the corresponding cultural changes. However, the occurrence of the images of Chinese new women started with the May Fourth New Culture Movement, when there were not sufficient basic changes of the urban economy and social structure. Although such occurrence of new women image was influenced by the West, it had different meanings and developed into a totally different direction from that of the West due to the different social, political and economic situation of China in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>3</sup> *Qiu Jin ji*: Beijing: *Zhonghua shuju*, 1961, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Here “modern women” is a common use for the women images in the modern time of the west. But as to the women in modern Chinese literature, there is a distinction between “modern women” and “new women,” which will be discussed later in my thesis.

The main position for the New Culture Movement is the journal *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*). From No. 6, Volume 2, *New Youth* began to set up a column called *Nuzi Wenti* (Woman Question<sup>5</sup>) to specially discuss women's issues on it. Then in 1918 Hu Shi translated Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and published it on the *Ibsen Special Issue* of *New Youth*. This displayed a new and modern woman image in literature in China for the first time and immediately aroused big attention of the whole society on this "new woman." Sentences like "I am a human," "I have to try to be a human," became the slogan of the Chinese women at that time, and running away from home became their sign as "new women" in literature. Nora becomes the synonym and a symbol of "new woman."

After the big success of introducing Nora into China, Hu Shi then created China's own "Nora." He soon wrote a short play *Zhongshen Dashi* (The Greatest Event in Life), with the protagonist Tian Yamei marking the birth of the first Nora in China. Tian not only qualified as the symbol "Nora" under the May Fourth context, but also laid the path for the May Fourth literature to imagine the new women to a great extent. Soon there are many "Noras" running away from home in literature like in Lu Xun's *Shangshi* (Regret for the Past), Feng Yuanjun's *Gejue* (Isolation) and *Gejue zhi hou* (After the Isolation), Lu Yin's *Nanren he nuren* (Men and Women) and so on.

## The New Women in May Fourth Literature

Since the new women image was created by those pioneers of the New Culture Movement, it modeled after the new women like Nora in the West as the May Fourth Movement was affected by the West. It was engineered by the overseas Chinese students

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<sup>5</sup> The English translation of the titles and the stories in Chinese is all my own unless specified.

and intellectuals' imagination or observation of the "modern women" in those "modern countries." Therefore, the new women image represented in May Fourth literature are women who have received modern education of the modern knowledge, thoughts and culture.

May Fourth new women are the first group of new women entering modern Chinese literature. They are a group of young women who fight against the feudal oppression and the patriarchal family that represses their individuality. In the conflict between the "father" and the "son" during the May Fourth period, as it were, women are led and encouraged by the "son" to walk out of the door of the protective yet oppressive family, to run away from their traditional gender role, to become ally of the "son," and to fight together for their individuality and freedom.

According to the distance they keep from their family after running away, there arise different situations. The first situation is that the writer writes the story right to the point of running away, leaving the reader wondering the ending of the new woman, with Hu Shi's *Zhongshen Dashi* (The Greatest Event in Life) as one representative. The second situation is that the new woman gets rid of the bound from the family of the "father," just to enter the family of the "son," and begins her restricted life as a traditional wife in the family of the "son," like Zijun in Lu Xun's *Shangshi* (Regret for the Past). The third situation is that the new woman hesitates on the way between the family of the "father" and the family of the "son," like Lu Sha in Lu Yin's *Haibin Guren* (Old Friends by the Sea). They run away from the patriarchal family without ever looking back, yet they cannot find a new place to settle themselves because they know the family of the "son" would be another patriarchal one. Their awareness of individuality and freedom

has been wakened but the society has not yet prepared a good place for them, so they can only linger along the way. Their hesitation, confusion and anxiety are all marked with the time on the trail.

The first characteristic of the new women image during this time period is the pursuit for free love and freedom of marriage. Free love and marriage is their first goal, and they believe this is also the mark of the emancipation of personality and gender equality. Therefore, the most common theme in the new women literature at that time is how women fight for their freedom in love and marriage, and they take this as their main way to fight against the patriarchal family. Such claim and awareness indicates women's new notion of love and sex learnt from their new-fashioned knowledge, and the requirement for them to enter the modern urban life from the traditional family and to ensure their rights in this new life environment. The new woman Juanhua in Feng Yuanjun's *Gejue* (Isolation) speaks out that "Without freedom, I would rather die. If people don't strive to seek freedom to love, nothing else is worthy of mention." Such claim represents women's effort to use the new-fashioned free love to establish their female subjectivity and identity. This claim can be found in many works like Lu Yin's *Haibin Guren* (Old Friends by the Sea), which all depict how the new women fight with the family's arrangement of their marriage and seek free love with their classmates or friends.

However, such free love is little more than the revision of the "free love" scene in the traditional Chinese literature like Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng in the early 14th century Chinese play *The Romance of West Chamber*. These new women take the first step to fight against the feudal and Confucian rules and to embrace their liberation, but

such portrayal of new women is a heritage from the traditional literary stories of “gifted scholars and beautiful ladies,” lacking the complexity of the new women’s experience in the modern society. Unlike Nora who is self-aware of her personal identity and speaks out that “I think that before all else I am a human being... or, at least, I will try to become one,” and finally steps out of her family, the new women created at this time seem to care more about their free love life without claiming directly how their pursuit of free love should actually be linked with the pursuit of their subjectivity. Therefore, in my opinion, these images have not escaped the influence of the beautiful and well-educated daughters created in traditional “gifted scholars and beautiful ladies” mode.

Mao Dun criticized this new women image in his *Lu Yin lun* (Criticism of Lu Yin) in 1934, and claimed that such an image lacked the sense of time, and would cease by the end of the May Fourth Movement. Indeed, the social change did not take place correspondingly as the awakening of women’s consciousness. And men’s rescue cannot help the new women, especially when such a rescue is not really aimed to emancipate women but serves as a noble excuse for them to manipulate women. It is more of a rescue imposed upon the women for the male intellectuals to build their dream of a modern nation state through the rescued women image. All this makes women’s liberation even more difficult. The new women awakened during the May Fourth movement were longing for their life meanings and freedom, but they could not find the right path.

Another characteristic of their pursuit for love is that the free love they want is more of a spiritual and Platonic love relationship, and thus the issue of sex remains untouched. Ironically, in *The Romance of West Chamber*, Yingying even seems braver than the new women in May Fourth literature in this respect. Yingying admitted her love

toward Zhang Sheng and had a physical relationship with him before marriage, which seems more realistic because the character follows her desire. Although in some male writers' writing in the early May Fourth literature, they have already boldly touched upon the male desire, and consider the catharsis of desire as their way of releasing life's pain, when the May Fourth writers try to create the ideal new women in their writings, no matter the male writers or women writers, they seldom write about new women's desire and sexual love. They intentionally avoid it or purify it: for example, Feng Yuanjun has tried the limitation at that time to write about a new woman Junhua sleeps with her lover in the same room, yet she keeps the lovers' communication on the spirit level for the whole night. Lu Sha in Lu Yin's *Haibin Guren* (Old Friends by the Sea) also says, "I always advocate for a spiritual life. Although we are not together physically, but the truth that we know each other's mind is already conciliative enough."<sup>6</sup>

A love relationship that separate personal desire from spiritual affinity is partly resulted from the May Fourth intellectuals' compromise to the huge pressure from the traditional and patriarchal society. On the other hand, it shows their unreadiness for creating and accepting such a new woman. The feudal and Confucian thought of women's chastity is so rooted in people's mind that they cannot jump out of the convention that a woman can only be considered as ideal when she is chaste at the same time. Actually in classic Chinese literature, there have already been quite a few women characters who pursue their love and follow their desire bravely, and those women do not have to be courtesans or prostitutes. We have well educated and cultivated women like Cui Yingying in *The Romance of West Chamber* and Du Liniang in *Peony Pavilion*. With the development of the economy and people's more and more open thoughts about young

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<sup>6</sup> Lu Yin, *Haibin guren*. *Shangwu yinshuguan*, 1928, 185.

people's longing for love, we have more and more plays and fictions praising young lovers' courage to pursue their love. However, in May Fourth literature, new women emphasize only their longing and faith for pure love, leaving their natural desire totally neglected. These "new" women even seem to be backsliding in women's emancipation process and their pursuit for free love.

Although the first group of modern Chinese women writers worked with the male writers for the first time to begin the literary fashion of depicting new women images, the new women under their writings display subtle yet meaningful differences.

The first difference is that new women like Zijun under male writers' writing are more determined to run away from home for their pursuit of free love, without ever looking back, while the new women under women writers' writing seem more hesitant.

Women writers, who mostly go for free love in real life, tend to depict women characters who feel guiltier toward their parents especially their mother, which indicates their uncertainty about running away from the family. For example, Junhua in Feng Yuanjun's *Gejue* (Isolation) is baffled between her love toward her lover and her mother and finally chooses to commit suicide. Even Lu Sha who seems to be more determined in Lu Yin's writing always feels guilty when she chooses love over her family, and tends to question the meaning and value of a couple's love.

In comparison, male writers almost take totally opposite position in depicting new male and women characters in their writings. When a male writer writes about a male character who has conflict with his family when he is pursuing his love, he tends to give in to his parents and ends up enduring his loveless arranged marriage, like a new woman would do in women writers' literature. During the May Fourth period, male intellectuals

accept a more modern idea of free love and marriage equality, yet in real life, on the emotional level, they hesitate between the traditional and new moral values. The traditional moral values take filial piety as the most important part, and in 1920s, the society is still more supportive to those who sacrifice their own happiness to “repay” their parents rather than those who pursue their personal happiness by disobeying their parents. In real life, male writers like Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Hu Shi, Ye Shaojun and so on, those May Fourth pioneers who have taken efforts in advocating for modern thoughts and values, actually almost all have to endure the pain from their arranged marriage. Therefore, the male characters in their writings are kind of a reflection and an explanation for them to cover their cowardice and compromise to the society. For those who write about the sons conflicting with their parents, they like to depict the protagonists as victims of the time and society, display their anguish and raped souls, and shirk all the responsibility to the society, in order to get the forgiveness of the new value system as well as the praise from the old one.

However, when these male writers are depicting a new woman in their writing, they are free from any potential accusation. When they write about the conflict between a daughter with her parents, they give her more strength and resolution without illustrating her inner struggle and hesitation. Such a resolute character is their expectation of the new women, as well as a way to shift their own anxiety and find an outlet for it. By depicting new women’s braveness and persistence, they try to eliminate their own moral tension.

Actually, it is not new in Chinese literature at all for a male writer to adopt a female’s voice to express their feelings, anxiety or whatever they cannot speak out as a male. This situation can be even dated back to how Qu Yuan, male literati in the third

century, B.C. China, adopted the voice of an abandoned beauty to indicate his loyalty and nobility and express his lament of being exiled by his monarch. And from then on, it has become a tradition in Chinese literature to compare an abandoned beauty with a not-appointed talented male scholar. In Song dynasty, with the development of the *ci* lyric form in Chinese literature, male adopting female's voice reached the climax. They usually use poems to deliver their male ambition and write *ci* lyrics to express their personal feelings. But most of them still consider it weak for a male to express trivial feelings in their writings, and they only consider the *ci* lyrics as an entertainment form rather than real literature, therefore they are more willing to write *ci* lyrics in a female's voice. Although the May Fourth male writers seldom wrote in a female first-person narrative, they created stronger women images to fill in their position as resolute fighters against the powerful and oppressive old social system.

The second difference is that male writers tend to write the new women as the saved and enlightened one by their male lovers. The male intellectuals are the guiders and the new women are their followers. The new women may leave their patriarchal family, but they just enter another male-dominant family and listen to another man. The saving-and-saved relationship is originally the May Fourth intellectuals' imagination of their modernized relationship with the masses, but when it comes to the relationship among the intellectuals between two genders, the intellectual women are automatically assigned as the saved ones. New women become the Other in male intellectuals' imagination of their subjectivity. Tian Yamei in *Zhongshen Dashi* (The Greatest Event in Life) is the first new woman in modern Chinese literature. The motivation or supporter of her running away is the "new youth" Mr. Chen. Although he never shows up in the play, his voice has acted

as a leading character in it, pushing the plot ahead and deciding the female protagonist's fate. In the end, it is his note left for Tian Yamei that wakes Yamei up, and encourages her to step ahead to resist her parents, and pursue free love and marriage. She repeats Mr. Chen's words again and again, and leaves her parents a similar note: "this is a matter that will affect my whole life. I should decide it by myself."<sup>7</sup> Finally she follows the male intellectual and realizes her dream of deciding "by herself."

There is a similar relationship between Zijun and Juansheng in *Shangshi* (Regret for the Past). Juansheng is always the narrator who controls the power of speech, while Zijun is the passive listener and recipient. At their house, it is always "full of my [Juansheng's] voice, talking about breaking down the patriarch system and the old conventions, and realizing real gender equality."<sup>8</sup> With the enlightenment of Juansheng's grant speech, Zijun finally cries out that "I am of myself. No one has the right to interfere me."<sup>9</sup> This is a remarkable sentence that symbolizes the awakening of May Fourth new women. And later it is also Juansheng's words suggest Zijun that her situation after marriage will finally lead them to a dead end. In their gender-distinguishing world, Juansheng always puts himself in the position as a guide and torchbearer. He keeps using his speech to illustrate and define his social status as a pioneer and a soldier who fights at the front line of the time. Zijun never questions his position and authority as her mentor and a forthgoer even when she is dying. On the contrary, if we look at the texts written by women writers at the same time, it is quite different. The appearance and function of male intellectuals is weakened or even missing in those texts. For example, in Feng

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<sup>7</sup> *Zhongshen dashi*, in *Hu Shi daibiaozuo*, edited by *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue guan*. Beijing: *Huaxia chubanshe*, 1999. 426.

<sup>8</sup> *Shangshi* in *Lu Xun xiaoshuoxuan*. Chengdu: *Sichuan renmin chubanshe*, 1979, 258

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

Yuanjun's writing, the male intellectuals to whom the new women devote themselves are merely imaginary figures without concrete flesh or soul. Their existence is only to provide a channel for the new women to break up with her family and get rid of the conventional roles, but they themselves have no power to save or change the women's fate. What is more, new women in Lu Yin's writings need no guide from the male intellectuals, and they even question those males' love. They observantly detect males' selfishness and hypocrisy in their advocated new marriage, and realize the possible new way of deceive and explore women sexually under the cover of free love. In *Lantian de chanhui* (Lantian's Confession), Lu Yin depicts the male intellectual He Renshu as a shameless and unscrupulous man who plays with women under the cover of free love and liberation of personality. This kind of "new youth" is the reason for new women's life tragedy. Therefore, the new women's illusion of sex is not only the result of the writer's compromise with the traditional power, but also from the writer's suspicion of the feudal and Confucian residue left in male intellectuals' mind. With such suspicion, the new women who fight for their own rights and happiness not only oppose their family, but also watch out for potentially dangerous males. They have no one to fight together with, and this makes their way of becoming really emancipated and independent new women even harder.

The third difference is their attitude toward the ending of the new women's effort to break away from tradition. For those new women who have to go back to normal daily life after their fight, male writers show more disavowal or simple sympathy. In most male writers like Yu Dafu and Guo Moruo's writing, there is a trace of self-sympathizing and self-aggrandizement as well as the tendency of symbolizing their female characters. Lu

Xun's *Shangshi* (Regret for the Past) is an exception, in which he shows deep concern and understanding. This short novel rightly responds to Lu Xun's 1923 speech of "What about Nora after She Runs Away." It takes the form of Juansheng's memoir and tells a story how Zijun falls from a resolute new woman into a house wife who is trapped in daily household duties and other trivial things and stops to be an updated new woman after entering her own family life. Gradually she becomes the burdon of Juansheng and is finally abandoned, losing her family as well as her subjectivity and even her life. To address the lack of ready opportunity for women to step out of their family and have the society to accept them, Lu Xun uses this story to question the popular discourse of calling for the "runaway home" new women of that time, and shows his deep concern of the new women's ending after running away from their family. The narrator Juansheng expresses his guilty and repentance of abandoning his ally and lover Zijun on the half way and indirectly causing her death. Lu Xun criticizes and reflects the selfishness and cowardice of the torchbearer in the New Culture movement through the character Juansheng, which is rare among the May Fourth male writers' writings. The only problem is that Lu Xun's deep understanding and keen awareness of the new women's harsh situation is shade by the narrative format he takes to tell the story. *Shangshi* takes Juansheng as the first person narrator, and all about Zijun is told by Juansheng. Zijun becomes a subject stripped of the right to speak, therefore, her image is flat, not like Juansheng whose characteristics have been displayed to the reader through his own narration. What is more, through the technique of flashback, the novel mixes what happened in the past with the narrator's confession and retrospect in the present. Therefore, the criticism toward Juansheng's cowardice and selfishness is weakened in his

own narration of confession. Juansheng uses this way to give his guilty an outlet, and through his confession, he is able to change reader's impression of his selfishness. This kind of self-explosion actually helps him to gain his great moral image back, and he seems to have found a "convenient" way to blame Zijun's bad ending to her own inertia of moving forward after marriage.

The May Fourth new women seem to all have a sad ending, such as represented by Zijung. Those new women who fight for their independence and freedom all end up in sickness or death. This sad ending for the May Fourth new women is actually just the reflection of the May Fourth intellectuals' mental anguish. They try so hard to find a way to change themselves and reshape the society and the nation, yet they still get lost on their way. Like those new women they create, they are enlightened by western thoughts and cultures, yet the society does not provide them the opportunity to fulfill their dream and ambition. Therefore, they feel disappointed of the society and write such anguish into their new women characters who are as confused as they are.

By contrast, women writers care more about the new women's situation and their ending. First, they depict new women's perturbation after running away from home. In order to cooperate with the appeal of women liberation, the new women as depicted in literature need to run away from home and enter the society as Nora did. And the main path for this process is to find a job. It seems that with their knowledge, they can step out of the family into the society to find a job. But the problem has just begun after running away from home. In 1930s, with China's modernization, there was a new group of working modern women. These women are called Nora-like new women. Although these new women have escaped from traditional home, they cannot escape from their

traditional gender roles. The male society keeps watching them as objects consumable, like how Wei Ming is treated in the film *New Women*, which will be discussed later with details.

They also write about many new women who go back to family after running away from her father's house, but they show more sympathy toward the new women than male writers do at the same time. Ling Shuhua's *Xiao liu* also depicts a new woman who has gradually gone into a lagged and oppressed situation after marriage as Zijun in *Shangshi*. The "I" in the novel functions as a storyteller who sees and tells the change of Xiao Liu before and after her marriage in details. It shows clearly how a new woman changes her social status from a girl student into a wife and has her mental status adjusted in the process. Because the "I" is also a female, "I" can well understand Xiao Liu's situation and her choice from the same gender perspective. Therefore, although "I" was shocked and regretted to know that Xiao Liu finally fell back to traditional life, "I" did not show any criticism or satire, because "I" understood the helplessness Xiao Liu felt with their hard economic situation, her boring husband and her burden from their children.

No matter what attitude the writer shows in his or her writing of a new woman, new women created in May Fourth literature seldom have a happy ending because under the social reality at that time it is hard for the writers to imagine one. It is still hard for a woman to find a job and live independently in the society unless she is born in a wealthy and liberal family and has a supportive husband as Lin Huiyin does, who in my opinion best illustrates the new woman image in reality at that time. The May Fourth writers have noticed this and therefore they cannot find a way to adjust such an ending even in fiction. But some women writers just ignore the ending of the new women. They rather pay more

attention to their characters' inner struggle of being both new women and good wives. Their characters express more anxiety of their identity between personal space (family) and the public space (society). Being anxious of the confliction between their identity in the family and in the society is another characteristic of the new women image in May Fourth literature. Chen Hengzhe's novella *Luo Qisi de wenti* (Luo Qisi's Problem) shows such an experience and modern anxiety of the new women. Luo has everything in her life, but she begins to retrospect her loss. She finds out that prestige, success, and profession are all lovely and great, but none of them can nourish her anxious soul. Chen believed this was not Luo's own problem, but a problem of all the intellectual new women at that time. Bing Xin depicted some more new women in her fictions, like Yaqian in *Liang ge jiating* (Two Families), S in *Wo de xuesheng* (My Student), Shuying in *Xiangpian* (The Photo Picture), Miss F in *Wo de pengyou de muqin* (My Friend's Mother) and Mrs. M in *Wo de linju* (My Neighbor). All these new intellectual women are knowledgeable, good at housekeeping, facilitating their husbands and educating their children. With these tasks, these women not only decide the fate of their families, but also indirectly affect the whole society and the nation. Bing Xin seems to have solved the new women's anxiety of inner identity division; however, it is at most using the super image of women with their responsibility and sacrifice to the family to suppress their female subjectivity. All their knowledge and cultivation is to help their intellectual husbands and to bring up the next generation of "new people."

Ling Shuhua has her own way of depicting the inner struggle of a new woman. A large part of her writings like *Jiuhou*, *Hua zhi si* and *Chuntian* shows the paradoxical life of the new women, displaying their effort to keep their subjectivity and individuality, and

their anguish of giving up all of this when they have to. These new women's dilemma is not only resulted from the social system at that time, but also comes from the conflict between the social role they are put with and their desire to find the true self as new women. During the May Fourth period, men still have control even in the modern new family. Cai Tiao in *Jiuhou* tries to kiss a male friend with her husband's "permission," but she finally gives her impulsion up. Xiao Yin in *Chuntian* tries to console and save a friend in sickness, but her wish is not realized, either. Yan Qian in *Hua zhi si* pretends to be a admirer of her poet husband...There are no big conflicts in this kind of stories at all, but they are actually new women's confusion and struggle everywhere. These new women still try to recover their individuality and independence, but they have already become someone's "wife" and they have to obey the rule to be a wife under the moral confinement. In Ling Shuhua's writings, the new women have the right to speak. She does not just show the surface of new women's life after marriage, but also pay attention to their inner struggle, and this struggle is not cries of the new women to the society; it is more of the situation that they tell their story and their confusion to other new women and try to find an answer for it.

After examining the new women depicted during the May Fourth period, it is not hard to see that at that time, there is a need, but the society is not totally ready for the appearance of a new woman. Although the May Fourth discourse has encouraged women to run away from their patriarchal family, there is no one who can provide a perfect solution for the new women's future after they run away. Male writers write new women not for creating the new women itself, but as a way to express their new ideas. New women in their writing are created with an agenda to justify their own rebellion toward

the traditional thoughts and society. Women writers write new women at the same time when they themselves are trying to be new women. But they have to face the pressure from the society; therefore, new women under their writings are either sick or dead in the end, or always stay in their struggle of being both a new woman and a wife in the family under the moral confinement. The new women in the May Fourth period bear the limitation of the time on them, and have not developed as truly new women yet.

After the May Fourth period, the creation of new women comes into the second stage, with Mao Dun's and Ding Ling's new women as two representatives.

### Mao Dun's New Women

Mao Dun criticized the new women image during the May Fourth Movement especially those in women writers' writings lacks time spirit, which means that women writers only care about personal issues rather than combining their pursuit of free love and the female subjectivity with the need for a progressed society and nation. In order to emend such a lack of time spirit, he depicted many new women in his own writings, in order to present a perfect combination of the women and the new time. The portrayal of such images in Mao Dun's works constitutes an important part of the women's writings inherited from the May Fourth period.

Mao Dun is a participant of the May Fourth Movement involved mainly in a number of literary publications, translation of foreign literary theories and critiques, and aiding the Communist Party with their underground activities during the May Fourth period. From 1924, China came into the "Revolution Period" (大革命时期), in which KMT and CPC entered into an alliance to fight against the warlords and imperial power

in China, and set out to unite the nation. But this revolution ended in 1927 because the Jiang Jieshi Nanjing government and Wang Jingwei Wuhan government turned against CPC, and the revolution failed with the breakup of the KMT-CPC alliance. As a CPC revolutionist, Mao Dun had to run in order to escape the chase of KMT. He finally settled down in Shanghai where he met Lu Xun and Ye Shengtao, and began to write literary works to make a living.

Chinese literature in 1920s is on a turning point, moving from the May Fourth New Culture Movement to revolutionary literature in response to the social changes at that time. Mao Dun's writing has traces from the May Fourth period, but he cares more about depicting the revolutionary spirit of the time in his works. Mao Dun depicted more about new women's imagination of their participation in the historical progress and the possible meanings they could bring to the society. With such a goal, the woman's body is written into an important narrative subject. Mao Dun tries to write about women's emotions and psychology from women's perspective, and creates many unconventional "new women" torn between individual desire and revolution. A new recognition of the female body appears: it is a female body which merges into the grand narrative of the modernity and the spirit of the time. However, the process of combining the female body with the narrative of time and revolution is actually full of crashes and conflicts. The new woman would shift from the revolutionary subject to an object, stripped only as a body being gazed, and becomes the very opponent for the revolution to inspect and fire at. And this has most to do with Mao Dun's own contradiction in combining women's body with the revolution.

As Jianmei Liu states in the introduction of her book *Revolution plus Love*, as early as 1904, there were already people considering modernizing China through the modernization of the Chinese women. The late Qing scholar Jin Tianhe wrote, “Woman is the mother of the nation. If we want to rejuvenate China, we need to first rejuvenate women; if we want to fortify China, we need to first fortify women; if we want to civilize China, we need to first civilize women; if we want to save China, we need to first save women.”<sup>10</sup> Women who have been oppressed and subordinate in the long Chinese history now were given the opportunity for power and began to gain a sense of responsibility for the nation for the first time. From then on, reformists and revolutionaries had thought of women as the mother capable of giving birth to new citizens who would build a new and modern China. However, this view of women does not allow Chinese women much subjectivity. When women are thought of and discussed as the mother of the nation, their personal feelings, emotions and desires are fully neglected, and they are turned into sheer political and scientific instrument and reduced as a reproductive machine in this nationalist discourse.

The leftist writers in the late 1920s and the early 1930s inherited such a discourse, and continued to create new women images that carried revolutionary missions on them. Jianmei Liu points out that there is a “fashion” the leftist writers pursued in their work in the late 1920s and the early 1930s that a split personality lies “beneath the harmonious relationship between personal love and revolutionary passion.”<sup>11</sup> At the turning point of history, those writers (mainly male writers) tried hard to turn themselves from petit

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<sup>10</sup> Jin Tianhe, “Nuzi shijie fakan ci” (Foreword to Women’s World), *Nuzi shijie* (Women’s World) 1 (1904) Quoted from Jianmei Liu, *Revolution plus Love*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Jianmei Liu, *Revolution plus Love*, 18.

bourgeois to proletarians, yet they still had difficulty finding a new position in the torrent of revolution, torn by “personal interest and national demand, nostalgia for the past and dreams of the future, revolutionary ideals and cruel reality.”<sup>12</sup> On one hand, they wanted to devote themselves to the revolution and the nation; on the other hand, they were not totally ready to give up the self, the individual and the subjectivity to the revolution and their utopian China. The new women images are created right under such anxiety of their “rebirth” as revolutionaries, thus they always appear corrupted yet revolutionary in those writers’ work. And among those leftist writers, Mao Dun created the most representative new women images that can exhibit this paradox.

Mao Dun had long been interested in women issues since 1919 when he published his first essay on the emancipation of women, and continued his women’s studies in the 1920s. In Mao Dun’s view, the new women have instinctive enthusiasm toward revolution. *Huanmie* (Disillusion) depicts the new women’s fever to revolution and their enthusiasm of feeling their participation into the society. They need to go for the revolution to feel their presence in the modern time and society. There are several such new women images in Mao Dun’s early fictions, like Miss Hui in *Huanmie* (Disillusion), Sun Wuyang in *Dongyao* (Vacillation), Xianxian in *Chuangzao* (Creation). The intermingling of the public and political life with the private and, more specifically speaking, erotic life of the new women is a common strategy in Mao Dun’s early work. They pursue the sensational excitement as well as their own participation of revolution, and combine the two easily. Through this kind of writing, it allows him to vent his own frustration when he devoted himself into the torrent of the revolution. In the modern cultural context which pursues individual freedom and emancipation, the imagination and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

creation of a feminine “Other” is always males’ first choice when they confront all kinds of life crisis and confusion and try to build the self-as-subject, which has been the situation since the May Fourth period as I discuss above.

Compared with the new women images during the May Fourth literature, who were either depicted as victims of the old feudal and patriarchal family with their painful awareness of feminine consciousness, or brave pioneers who cut the bond and break from their old family determinedly, the new women images created by Mao Dun have become a more positive representation of the revolutionary spirit and begin to gain more power and autonomy. Yet they gain their power through the usage of their bodies. Their sexy bodies, especially their breasts, symbolize their revolutionary power to the readers, and help to devote themselves to the revolution. Their passion for revolution well matches the glory of their bodies. They know exactly why they want to go for revolution, and they use their passion and sexy bodies to encourage the males to go with them. Male characters would be enchanted by both her resolution and her body, and cannot help getting involved into revolution. Sun Wuyang is the clearest representation of Mao Dun’s effort to incarnate the revolution into the new women’s bodies. In *Dongyao* (Vacillation), Sun is always the focus. The depiction of her flesh, breasts, underwear and smell, and her sexy and active motions indicates that she is the combination of the flesh and spirit of the revolution. Such a sexy and energetic female body adds a bright light to the revolution, and endows a discourse of urban modernity with it.

However, although the seductive new women’s bodies are originally created to be the subject of the revolution, they cannot escape the male’s obsessive gaze, which tamper

the subjectivity of the new women and their power gained through their bodies. Rey Chow argues this is a regression in depicting a new woman image:

In the midst of the most radical change in Chinese literary language – an analytic openness in fictional writing – we are confronted with the return of woman as the traditional, visually fetishized object, which, in spite of women’s new “cerebral” development, still fascinates in a way that is beyond the intellect, beyond analysis! One cannot conceptualize the breasts without “seeing” or “feeling” them in one’s mind; the “intellectual” grip on reality is then loosened, sensuously.<sup>13</sup>

How can the new women image created to gain women more subjectivity and power turn out to be gazed as an object again? It is still resulted from the writer’s own puzzlement about the definition of a new woman. It is not hard to see the leftist writers’ logic: if to build a new China is to learn from the more developed West and to modernize it, then the new women must learn from the more open western new women, too. Therefore, Mao Dun created all those seductive new women with his description emphasized on their sexy bodies. However, it seems that Mao Dun was captivated by the audacious new women he created by himself. He was not ready for this and became fascinated and terrified by these women at the same time. He lacks the courage and control to reach their mind over their seductive bodies. The separation of their mind once again turns these new women’s sexual bodies into the fetishized object. Therefore, although on the surface, Mao Dun successfully created many new women who are more powerful than the new women in May Fourth literature, after scrutiny, these independent and audacious women are more “new” in their attitude toward sex. It is hard to combine these women with revolution and make them the subject of the revolution.

Actually “Vacillation” is a perfect example to see Mao Dun’s “vacillation” at that time. Fang Luolan is the male protagonist who is attracted by the decadent and

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<sup>13</sup> Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, 107.

emancipated women Sun Wuyang while refuses to see her real characters. He has heard of rumors about Sun's promiscuity and he knows what kind of woman Sun is, but he continues to believe that Sun is a "new woman" with a pristine and noble soul. By defining Sun as a new woman and refusing to see what she really is, Fang tries to cover the truth that he is only attracted by Sun's seductive body rather than her unconventional mind. After Sun tells Fang that she only plays with men but never tries to love one, Mao Dun writes, "[Fang] is extremely disturbed – one minute, he wants to turn around and escape; another minute, he wants to embrace this lovely and dreadful lady."<sup>14</sup> This ambivalent attitude toward the "new women" is a common situation in many of Mao Dun's writings and indicates his own confusion. He longs for a new woman figure to fulfill his wish of a modernized China and to project himself on, but those new women he creates in his writings are mostly women who are so eager to get rid of the patriarchal tradition that they abandon all the social expectation for women in the old system and even become self-prostituted to show their resolution. For them, sex is the core content of individual freedom, and the emancipation of women is the emancipation of sex. From those new women's perspective, they are new and they have control of their volition. They "choose" to dissipate their bodies and use this to reverse the traditional way how men play with women. But if we look at those women from the men's perspective or from a more current and objective point of view, they are objects under males' gaze as usual, as it has long been in Chinese history. There is no difference, though those women themselves think of their prostitution differently. They might get their revenge on a man like Fang Luolan, but for those men who play with women, they are still merely seductive bodies, no matter how these seductive bodies "think." Therefore, most of Mao

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<sup>14</sup> Mao Dun, *Eclipse*, 219

Dun's new women fall into this category: hyper-gendered to the extent of being promiscuous. Then can we still define them as "new women"? And where is their "newness"?

Later Mao Dun realized this problem. In *Hong* (Rainbow, 1929), "Nora" showed up again. But this time, she became a target of criticism. The protagonist Mei Suxing feels discontent with Nora's fully effort to recognize herself as a female, and claims that women should restrain her femininity and maternity to get prepared for dedicating herself to the more important and greater future. Mei marks the accomplishment of new women's "revolutionalization" in Mao Dun's writing under the appeal of the Proletarian Revolution. By this time, new women images had been totally depicted under the discourse of revolution and a national narrative, which was continued by the leftist in 1930s and became almost the only way of depicting new women at the end of this new women phenomenon.

## Modern Women vs. New Women

Before I discuss Ding Ling's new woman Sophie, it is inevitable to bring up the notion of "modern women" which had existed both in reality and in literature of modern China. The film scholar Yingjin Zhang had argued that, from the 1910s to the 1930s, the notions of "modern women" and "new women" are "two interchangeable terms frequently used in Chinese literature and film as a means of attracting larger audiences."<sup>15</sup> But now the two notions have been used in different discourses and distinguish from each other.

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<sup>15</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender*, 188.

In 1930s, there began a trend of a group of images more often called “modern women” in literature. The Shanghai new sensational group including Liu Na’ou, Shi Zhecun, and Mu Shiyong’s writing and Shao Xunmei’s poetry is the main group to produce images of “modern women” and formed a special type of Shanghai modern women who represented the new women of “modernity” under semicolonial environment and with the absence of nationalism. Actually the Shanghai new sensational group is mainly influenced by the Japanese new sensational group, in whose writing modern girl (modan gaaru) is created to represent Japan’s modernization. A modern girl likes western clothes, music and dance. She wears bob cut, drinks coffee and may also work in a coffee shop, independent economically and emotionally, with access to money and consumer goods. She is sexually liberated and free to choose her own suitors. When modern girl is implanted into Chinese literature, she is usually called modern woman (摩登女郎). Unlike new women who are imposed with different discourses and thus have to bear many tasks at the time - such as being an independent woman who can fight with her male companion against the patriarchal society, an ideal mother who reproduces the new generation for a modern nation state, and a revolutionist willing to devote herself for the nation – a modern girl does not need to bear all those political tasks, but she only cares about herself.

Shu-mei Shih in her article “Gender, Race, and Semi-colonialism: Liu Na’ou’s Urban Shanghai Landscape” analyzes this group of modern women image in Shanghai under its semicolonial environment. She mainly takes those modern women images in Liu Na’ou’s works. Contrasting to the gender and race politics in postcolonial theory, Shih finds the absence of nationalism in semicolonial Shanghai, unlike in the other part

of China. There is no obvious political reference in Liu Na'ou's images of modern women at all. Liu on the one hand criticizes the immoral capitalism, on the other hand is indulgent in describing the corrupt aspects of the capitalistic city life. The city is the very consequence of the semicolonial cultural condition. The modern women of this city inevitably carry the characteristics of modernity, corruption, fetishism, sensational pleasure and consumption. The comparison of the two categories of characters in Shanghai in Liu Na'ou's works the alienated male protagonists and the modern women - foregrounds the modern women's features. The male protagonists Liu creates are ambiguous and unstable. They are not able to catch up with the modern time as those modern women do, nor are they able to identify themselves with the large Chinese populace. The modern women are a parallel metaphor of the city, "replicate[s] the attraction and the alienation he [those male protagonists] feels towards the city."<sup>16</sup> The modern women resist "both Western Orientalism and Chinese patriarchy"<sup>17</sup> because of her ambivalent identity as essential Chinese. The depiction of these modern women indicated the new sensational group's hopeful attitude toward modernity that "captured the coexistence of the metropolitan and the colonial."<sup>18</sup>

However, this modern woman image did not last long and soon disappeared from Chinese literature with the pressure from the leftist, lack of support of the readers and the breakout of the Sino-Japanese War. If to say a new woman bears more political consciousness, then a modern woman bears more feminine desire and emotion. In Ding

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<sup>16</sup> Shih, Shu-Mei. "Gender, Race, and Semicolonialism: Liu Na'ou's Urban Shanghai Landscape." 947.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 951.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 953.

Ling's writing, the wrestling between her political consciousness and her feminine consciousness is even obvious.

### Ding Ling's writing of New Women

Ding Ling has been considered one of the most important women writers in modern Chinese literature. She became well-known during the late 1920s. She is compared by Mao Dun with Bing Xin with her prominent talent at that time. The new women under her writing have the most vivid characteristics with the sign of the times and represent the most typical new women image after May Fourth.

Miss Sophie in *Miss Sophie's Diary* is one classic character in modern Chinese literature. While Bing Xin has her focus on writing about motherly love and nature, Ding Ling's early works distinguish themselves from this kind of description of new women. She bears more spirit of the May Fourth and writes more about women's psychology:

This is a bold description; at least for a Chinese woman writer of the time, it is bold. Miss Sophie is representative of the liberated young woman after May Fourth and her psychological contradictions in sexual love!<sup>19</sup>

The protagonist Miss Sophie is a twenty-year old woman who has run away from home and lives in Beijing by herself. She does not go to the university like her friends, nor does she participate in social activities. Having broken with traditional norms by leaving home and escaping from the arranged marriage, she finds herself alone, poor, without a regular job, and suffering from tuberculosis. She discovers her passion for Ling Jishi. Ding Ling boldly depicts Sophie's desire for Ling Jishi's kiss. Ling Jishi's blushed face when Sophie asked him to give her extra English lessons makes Sophie want him

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<sup>19</sup> Mao Dun. "Nu zuojia Ding Ling" [The woman writer Ding Ling], 253.

than ever. It is full of Sophie's obsession with Ling Jishi's physicality in the writing. Although Ling Jishi is gentle and handsome, Sophie's incessant self-interrogation makes her aware of the fact that Ling Jishi was born with an "ill-matched soul" and a relationship with him could only break her heart. However, Sophie just cannot stop her secret sexual desire for Ling Jishi and such desire increases as the story develops. But when Ling Jishi comes to Sophie's room intending to make love to her, she becomes frightened. She gives him a kiss, then pushes him away and begins to cry. It seems like that she has dominated her sexual inclinations, however, she later realizes that she had allowed herself to be tainted because the warmth, softness and tenderness of his lips pressing against her lingered and brought her to a peak of ecstasy. At the end, still feeling meaningless and goalless, Sophie leaves Beijing to go on a trip to the south, hoping to live on and die quietly somewhere.

After scrutiny of the story and comparison of Sophie with other new women or modern women images, I find it hard to define Sophie's category. Sophie is definitely not a traditional woman who is submissive to males and oppressed by the society, nor is she like the new women born during the May Fourth movement who never touch upon their personal desire. She is created to represent Ding Ling's individual observation of the new women in 1920s. Ding Ling clarified that "*Miss Sophie's Diary* does not aim to reflect the darkness after the failure of the first revolution (the 1924-1927 Revolution)...I depict some people's anguish before the first revolution."<sup>20</sup> In the middle 1920s, young men and women had been influenced by the May Fourth Movement and awakened from the feudal rules and conventions, but the society is not capable of providing them a place to realize their dream of total freedom, and they are still pressured by the social environment. As

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<sup>20</sup> Zhuang Qingzhong, Sun Lichuan: "Ding Ling tongzhi dawenlu." *Xinwenxue shiliao*, 1991.3.

Lu Xun has pointed out that the most painful thing in life is no way to go after awakened, the young men and women who are awakened during the May Fourth period have to face such a pain. And Sophie is one of them.

Lu Xun creates Zijun with a goal to realize the whole nation's emancipation, therefore he emphasizes more on the whole nation's awakening rather than the awakening of women. Therefore Zijun in his writing lacks self-consciousness as an individual subjectivity. But Ding Ling starts from woman's personal experience to find the way for woman's subjectivity. Sophie leaves her home to live in an urban city without a stable job. She wanders in the city with a vagrant nature. The vagrant life experience and attitude indicates her feeling of anxiety and alienation brought by the changes of the society and the urbanization of the city, and by her own effort to figure out her identity and to seek female subjectivity. All of this is described subtly and particularly by Ding Ling.

Depicted without a larger discourse on the top, Sophie represents the most original feelings of a new woman. She pursues the accordance of the body and the soul and boldly faces the issue of women's desire with a strong female consciousness. There are no elegant words, gentle female characters or modest behaviors in this novel. All we see in it is women's bold expressions of feelings, desires and aspirations. Such a catharsis-like writing overturns the regular aesthetic expectation and shows a strong feeling of self-consciousness. Sophie is distinctive because it accurately portrays the psychology of women. She has a strong sense of the self, but this only makes her more desperate and confused. When Ding Ling describes such a character, she does not aim to bring out the darkness of society, nor does she seek to find an explanation or

understanding of what happened in the story. There is no mention of objective events in society but only subjective desire. Yet through her distinguishing way of depicting a new woman's inner feelings, Ding Ling's writing does reflect the social problem. Sophie's loneliness and desperation is the reflection of the spiritual situation of the Chinese women who have just been emancipated from the feudal prison for thousands of years, because the emancipation appears to be something granted to them, not a freedom earned by women themselves. Admittedly, we see her pain and perturbation in searching for her self-consciousness, because the newly established self-consciousness is still very fragile. But such pain gives a hope, a hope to see the Chinese new women to take out their first step to gain their female voice and space. At this aspect, Sophie represents the independence of the new women who try to understand female identity, sex and seek for female subjectivity and liberation in 1920s.

At the same time, Sophie resembles some characteristics of modern women. First, Sophie lives in a city and enjoys the petit-bourgeoisie atmosphere. Second, she is egoist and enjoys manipulating her suitors. She is not like Zijun who always needs to be guided by a man, but she tries to escape from the oppression of the male power and become the one who dominates in their relationship. This is a major feature of the modern women, and the new women in Mao Dun's early works also have such a characteristic. But the difference is that for the Shanghai modern women, they play with males as a game; for Mao Dun's new woman, they try to use their manipulating power to bring males together into revolution; while for Sophie, it is only her way of escaping from her inner loneliness. Sophie is not corrupted as Mao Dun's new women or the modern women. When Mao Dun tries so hard to combine the sexual female body with revolution and creates some

character that look so artificial, Ding Ling really grips a sensitive woman's psychology at that time.

Interestingly, the two male characters in *Miss Sophie's Diary* resemble two types of "new youth" in the May Fourth period. Wei Di is a new youth who has certain modern thoughts yet lacks enough courage. He is similar to Yu Zhifu in Yu Dafu's novel, the "T" in Guo Moruo's writing, and other male characters in May Fourth male writers' literature. They are often created to be the guide of the new women, but they actually lack resolution to completely fight against their family and wait for the women to move further ahead. They also need women's affirmation as Wei Di does. In contrary, Ling Jishi is like the male characters in May Fourth women writers' literature, who are often revealed by the women characters to be only using "new youth" as a cover to seek free love. Ling Jishi is handsome, sexy, smart yet selfish. Unlike the May Fourth women writers who criticize such male characters in their writing, Ding Ling describes Sophie as helplessly wanting his love and attracted to his charm although she knows he only possesses a shallow shell. Daring to admit one's desire and love is great progress in depicting new woman. Finally in Ding Ling's writing, we can find a woman character who can express her desire as the male characters in May Fourth male writers' literature do. After comparison of Sophie with modern women, Mao Dun's new woman and the new women in May Fourth literature, Sophie seems most realistic and has characteristics of both the new women and the modern women.

But such a precious image does not last long in Ding Ling's writing. In 1930s, with the development of modernity and the diffusion of the soviet solution of revolution, more and more Chinese new women depicted in literature begin to find their way of

liberation in the participation of revolution. Under the nationalist narrative, women's struggle is subordinated to the class struggle. Without exception, all oppressed peoples, including women, must be liberated. Changes in the status of women can take place only in conjunction with other social changes. Therefore, in both countryside and city, women's inner change of attitudes or outer change of roles is never described without reference to larger aims.

Under such a trend, Ding Ling begins to shift her writing of the new women to fit in this situation, too. Mao Dun records Ding Ling's shift as below:

But at that time Chinese literary circles were seeking more profound, more socially significant works. The proletarian literature movement was emerging in China. Of course Ding Ling could not long remain outside these trends. Therefore after continuing to write several stories with the psychological torment of women [generally sexual] as the central topics, Ding Ling started to write a novel on the popular topic of "revolution and love."<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, her struggle to progress in this pattern begins. She has to write according to the literary "trend," therefore there inevitably appears an irreconcilable conflict between her original way of writing about pure love and women's psychology and her awareness of the need to write the revolution-and-love pattern. Writing in 1932, Ding Ling expresses dissatisfaction with the way her early work always seemed to sympathize with the weakness of women, even though she herself had no such sympathy. For months she was unable to develop a technique that would help her escape from her previous work and fit appropriately with the "new content" at which she was aiming.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mao Dun. "Nu zuojia Ding Ling" [The woman writer Ding Ling], 254.

<sup>22</sup> Ding Ling, "Wo de chuanguo jingyan" [My experience in literary creation], 106.

Qian Qianwu marks the beginning of the end of the “modern woman” era with the publication of Ding Ling’s novel *Weihu*, in which Weihu has to leave Lijia to turn himself into a “new person,” while Lijia, the modern woman is described in a way as to negate the “modern woman” portrayed before.<sup>23</sup> From this work, revolution has more and more weight than love in Ding Ling’s works. Ding Ling continues to write on women and love up to 1930. Her later works after 1931 begin her description of the psychology of a group rather than an individual, emphasize class awareness and collective strength, and do not have gender-specific experience displayed in those works any more. Her later writing of new women merged into the images in the leftist view and produced more women soldiers for the revolution. This need of shifting can be seen from people’s different attitudes in 1930s toward Wei Ming and Li Aying, both of whom are characters from the film *New Women*.

### *New Women*

*New Women*, written by Sun Shiyi and directed by Cai Chusheng in 1935, aroused big controversy right after its public show. By the 1930s, the writers of film scripts are mostly leftist writers; therefore I would like to take *New Women* the film as a text to examine how people’s attitude toward new women has been shaped by the overall leftist environment by then, and analyze how an ideal new woman image finally goes to the extreme as being desexualized.

The protagonist Wei Ming is a new woman affected by the May Fourth movement. She left home for her freedom of marriage, but got abandoned after giving

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<sup>23</sup> Qian Qianwu, “Ding Ling,” 233-236.

birth to her daughter. She stayed in Shanghai and worked as a music teacher in a middle school. She also wrote fictions in her spare time. She seemed to live an independent and sufficient life. But when her daughter got seriously sick, she was trapped by her boss and had to almost sell her body to earn money for her daughter. When her daughter died, she lost her last hope for this society and committed a suicide.

Wei Ming is definitely a new woman, and she fits better in Sophie's new women category. But her death in the end of the film represents the failure of the new women image established by the May Fourth movement.

When Nora first appeared in China, it sets running away from home as a symbol of women's self-awareness. This running away from home has two steps to go. The first one is to leave home of the Father. The second one is to leave the home of the Husband. It is much more difficult for the new women to take the second step. Zijun's death after leaving her husband and returning to her father's home in Lun Xun's *Shangshi* (Regret for the Past) is one example to see how new women are struck by the second step. It is destined to be a tragedy for May Fourth new women to put their hope of liberation on men and long for the men to rescue them. It is the same difficulty for Wei Ming to leave her husband (actually she is abandoned by her husband) and live a life totally independent. Fortunately, she has received the new-fashioned education and has her ability to live on her own. She became a music teacher in a middle school, respected by her students; she is also a writer loved by her readers. She is surrounded by pursuers with money or highly social status or talent. Piano, composition, fiction, Cheongsam and dance constitute almost the whole life of this new woman who seeks liberation and independence.

She does not go back to the traditional family as Zijun did. When she needs money for her daughter and is talked to sell her body for one night, she refutes the procuress and said: “Only a slave would sell her body! That is not what a human will do!” Wei Ming has a strong sense of being a human, which is the mark of the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Pursuing freedom and independence is Wei Ming’s last but strongest support. She buys a dharma doll, and calls it a woman who will never tumble down. This shows her strong female consciousness and her expectation and encouragement for herself. But she did not get her happy ending. Entering the society with a job does not help her to escape from the patriarchal society’s shaping and consuming of her. The woman who will never tumble down falls completely. She dies in the society full of male power. Her whole life is in the whirl of male gaze. Once her book is published with the author shown as “woman writer,” it will sell, especially when published with her beautiful photo. In daily life, she cannot avoid such gaze, either. Those men in power trap her in a net she cannot escape. Symbolically she sells her body in the male dominated society. She scolds them for trapping the women to sell themselves in every aspect. She chooses to commit suicide because she knows there is no way for a new woman to live her life with freedom.

When Wei Ming is abandoned by her lover, she has to live on her own. She cannot send her daughter back to her father’s home, nor can she send her daughter to her husband’s place. She can only entrust her daughter to her sister. When her sister takes her daughter to her place, she dares not to let her daughter to stay where she lives. As a working woman, she avoids her family role on purpose to escape from the society’s charge. Free love and free marriage can mean dangerous to new women if they do not

have corresponding economic support by herself. After running away from home, women lose their protection from father's home. At this level, the need for work is not only from the need of freedom but a need to make a living. Women must have economic rights to survive. For these runaway-from-home "Noras," Lu Xun has tried to find the way for their future life. He knows women need to have equal rights both in family and in the society. Moreover, he points out that women also need to have new roles once they leave home. But he sighs that this progress will be more difficult than the claim for women suffrage. With the male gaze and power in the society, it is almost impossible for the new women to be independent working women. Their professional role always comes after their gender role. Wei Ming's tragedy intensively shows the interactions and conflicts between the professional role, family role and gender role of the new women and the society and the difficulty for the new women born during the May Fourth Movement to achieve their liberation.

Wei Ming's life is struck heavily and finally destroyed by the society. She cries out "I want to live!" but it is no use. She believes that there is one day that all these male traps will disappear, but she does not know how to find the right way for women's liberation. She told her sister, "I cannot live on any longer. For this society, we have no ability to change it." Although Wei Ming embodies the new women's essentials of independence, freedom and equality which is encouraged during the May Fourth period, she also carries with the perturbation of the new women generation who model after Nora and run away from home. Her failure after all her effort and struggle is actually the failure of the time, an inevitable failure due to the asynchronous development of the society. It illustrates that the May Fourth new women cannot fit into the time, and will

certainly face their fates of failure. Instead, there is a new group of new women showing up, which is represented by another female character in this film: Li Aying.

The leftist revolutionary literature and the leftist film movement were at their climax in the year of 1935. In the early 1930s, there were a lot of films reflecting the miserable life of the oppressed workers and peasants and their struggle to fight against all the injustice. And more and more filmmakers began to focus on the Chinese women to display their tribulation and to inspire people's hatred to the dark and corrupt society. *Three Modern Girls* is one example, with other films aiming at the same purpose like *Nuxing de Nahan* (Women's Call 1933), *Zhifen Shichang* (Rouge Market 1933), *Shennu* (Goddess 1934), *Si Jiemei* (Four Sisters 1934) and so on.

It is the feature of the leftist films to focus on women's fate at that time, among these films *New Women* does the best in portraying a new woman and relating her fate with the proletarian revolutionary undertakings. Li Aying is the "real" new woman from the proletarian view in those leftist films. Aying is a worker in a factory. She barely has any feminine characteristics on her: she wears dark clothes, short hair; she has loud voice; and she is determined and independent. She does not have much education, nor does she have any trouble of love, marriage or living. When she takes the lyrics of *New Women* to invite Wei Ming to compose it, the director put the dharma doll in the front of the scene on purpose to compare it with Aying standing behind. The dharma doll is almost a duplicate of Aying, with same clothes, hair style and colors. Such similarity indicates that Aying is the new woman representing the ideal standard of the 1930s' progressive forces in the director's viewpoint.

In order to clarify his different attitudes toward the two new women with different time spirits, Cai Chusheng used a sequence of montages to compare the two female characters' lives: when Wei Ming is enjoying the dance with Dr Wang in a ballroom, Aying is arranging her full schedule; dancing people's leather shoes are spinning in the ballroom while workers' straw shoes are stepping with difficulty; when Wei Ming is still dancing with Dr. Wang, Aying is teaching women workers singing; when Wei Ming came back from the ballroom, Aying is going to work for a new day, with her shadow growing bigger and bigger until it totally engulfs Wei Ming's tiny figure. In such a clear comparison, the director sets up worker Aying as a new woman model with grand ideal and revolutionary spirit, and feels pity for the intellectual and modern new woman Wei Ming for her weakness and perturbation.

At the end, Wei Ming seems to finally realize Aying's choice is the right path for women's liberation and independence. When she wakes up from the rescue of her suicide, Aying persuades her that "Being alive is the prerequisite of everything... As long as you can stand up again, you will win the victory at the end." Wei Ming gains the power of life, hope of victory and courage from Aying, and decides to throw all her troubles to restart her life. Then Cai uses another set of montage to shift the scene back and forth from the singing of Aying with other women workers and Wei Ming's unwilling death to show the proletarian revolution's ideological meanings carried by this film. In Cai's view, the proletarian will definitely "win the victory at the end." New women should turn their self-consciousness into revolutionary consciousness, and merge their self-liberation into the bigger liberation of the whole nation and the whole proletarian class, and then they can at the same time achieve the complete women's liberation through this process.

Here, the new women are defined from almost exclusively male perspective, and the term of new women can be exchanged with other generalized and desexualized notions like “the masses,” “the working class” and “the pioneers of the new society,” where there are no gender differences. Besides, the new women are encouraged not to indulge in their love or other personal feelings. In the early 1930s, “leftist film discourse gradually turned away from the discourses of love and aesthetics that had prevailed in the preceding two decades.”<sup>24</sup> Aying as a model built for new women is totally different from Wei Ming’s modern new woman image; instead she becomes a member of the revolutionary masses with no difference from the males and gets desexualized or masculinized. Such desexualized new women image marks the end of the Wei Ming-like new women image of the May Fourth Movement.

## Conclusion

After examining different types of new women and their evolution in modern Chinese literature, can we say there is actually a new woman? Certainly there is. Although all those new women images have some flaws, they contain something advanced with the time, and gradually disappear after they fulfill their tasks.

The first group of new women shows up right after the May Fourth Movement, featured with their new-fashioned education and runaway-from-home sign. Zijun in Lun Xun’s *Shangshi* (Regret for the Past) belongs to this group and is considered as a typical one. They model after Nora and leave home in order to enter the society to find free love and personal independence. But at that time, the economic situation and social structure

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<sup>24</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender*, 206.

is not ready for these new women to get independent and gain liberation. Therefore, most new women of this group in the writing at that time end in a tragedy. Then they gradually disappeared and were taken place by those modern women or revolutionary women.

The second group of new women is more often called modern girl or modern women, with two different types within it. One is from the writing of the Shanghai New Sensational Group. The modern women in these writers' fictions carry features of urban modernity as well as urban decadency. They reflect people's fascination as well as fears toward the metropolis city. The other one is represented by those modern women in Ding Ling's writing, who represent the new women's effort and perturbation in seeking for women identity and subjectivity after May Fourth. The common ground between the two types of modern women is that both of them are described under a personal narrative and there is an absence of nationalism. But soon these kinds of modern women were considered disconnected with the time and society and become eliminated. The Shanghai New Sensational Group died out soon after the main members of it pulled back from the literati in the late 1930s. And Ding Ling joined the leftist writers' group and began to write about new women as revolutionary soldiers with the development of the revolution.

The third group of new women is established from the leftists' perspective. New women images in Mao Dun's fictions like Mei Suxing serve as an example in literature. There are also many new women of this group in 1930s' leftist films, like Zhang Shuzhen in *Three Modern Girls*, Li Aying in *New Women*. At first, Mao Dun tried to combine the new women's bodies with revolution in 1920s and endowed the time spirit in his depiction of these new women. But later he found the conflict between the discourse of revolution and modernity. Gradually new women in his writing became the objects of the

revolution. Only by jumping out of personal feelings and troubles and dedicating oneself into the revolution can these new women exist in the new era and accomplish their liberation through revolution, like Zhou Shuzhen and Li Aying did in the films. With the break-out of the Sino-Japanese War, such new women of revolutionary soldiers are produced more and more to support the nation for the war environment. This group lasts for the longest time and constitutes the biggest part of the new women images in modern Chinese literature and films. But these new women are actually desexualized and mainly gazed and shaped under the male perspective, a nationalist discourse and a national narrative. Women lost their subjectivity in this image, how could they even talk about gaining liberation and subjectivity. Such a new woman image is from the need of revolution and will be shifted once the task is fulfilled. Then Chinese women need to wait for another chance for their “new women” image in a new time.

In 2006, there came out a Chinese film *Jasmine Flower*, adapted from Su Tong’s novel *Women’s Life*, with its tagline of “the struggle and growth of three generations’ women.” It basically tells stories of the love and marriage life of three generations’ women in one family. The story of the first generation happened in 1930s, which corresponds with the time period I focus on in my thesis. It is a typical “1930s” story: a woman met with someone who helped her to become a big star but later abandoned her shortly after she gave birth to their daughter. 1930s has been marked as a period when people began to expect the appearance of a “new woman” and women believed that they could be one, while in the fact there were no women who succeeded to be “new women” and lived a happily-ever-after life. The film ends with the last generation Hua’s story in 1980s. Hua has her own job and determinedly divorced her husband when she found out

his affair while she was pregnant. She got through all the difficulties of pregnancy by herself and then she gave birth to her child at a rainy night. This very scene suggests her final gesture of becoming a totally independent “new woman.” Her following life in the film becomes much easier, and the film ends with a still on her smiling face. It seems that we can celebrate that there is finally a new woman without any drawback in Chinese literature and other artistic forms. But after scrutiny, she still falls into the “new women without love life” category, which is developed during the 1930s by the leftist and represented by Li Aying in the film *New Women*. She loses her personal love life and marriage and raises her child all by herself, which leads me to ask if a woman has to give up her personal desire and leave her lover to show her independence and to be represented as a “new woman.” It seems to me that about 70 years have passed, but there has not yet been found a way to build a new woman in Chinese literature and film who can live a happy life without giving up her desire, her subjectivity, her feminine characteristics and her marriage. The “new women” image still has a long way to go before it can be well described and represented.

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