

CHAPTER 1

Toward Individual Emancipation and Personal Moral/Spiritual Salvation



FROM THE MAY FOURTH INDIVIDUALIST REBELLION TO
THE MARXIST CAUSE OF INDIVIDUAL EMANCIPATION

A May Fourth Individualist Awakening

GUO'S PAINFUL PERSONAL STRUGGLE AGAINST AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE

Guo was probably the most influential Chinese intellectual in the May Fourth battle against the Confucian family and *lijiao* society on the issue of arranged marriages, and it all started with his own painful struggle against a marriage that was arranged for him by his parents.

Arranged marriages had been a part of the social norms of *lijiao*. Behind the practice of arranged marriages were the Confucian concepts of the Three Bonds and filial piety, which required that the son should always obey his father, and children should always obey their parents. In accordance with these Confucian concepts, the final decision on marriage was made by the parents for their child, and it was to be obeyed by the child, even though the parents might occasionally consult the child when arranging the marriage. In Confucian society, where social connections were highly important for a family to succeed, arranged marriages had unique social functions. A well-arranged marriage, one that matched the social status of two families, could benefit both families, since it enabled them to join force and help each other in gaining power, wealth, and influence. To a great extent, such a marriage was not so much a union of two individuals but rather a marriage between two families. The individuals might find themselves having to sacrifice their happiness for the sake of their families if their marriage worked well for the families but not for themselves, which, not surprisingly, was quite often the case.

When Guo was growing up, arranged marriages were still very much in practice, and at a very young age he found himself in a position of having to react to

and deal with this traditional social norm. The first marriage arrangement was made for him before he was ten years old. This marriage, however, did not happen, because the girl died when Guo was fourteen. As Guo later described it, he was actually glad that he had become a "widower." By that time, he said, "I had already read some new [Western] and old [Chinese] novels and had been greatly attracted to the love stories in the old novels and the romance in the new novels. For me, of course, such romance at the time was simply beyond my reach. To dream for such romance was like trying to catch the moon by following its reflection in the water or trying to reach the sky by touching its image in the mirror." However, since he was now temporarily freed from the arranged marriage, he was hoping that somehow a miracle could happen so that he himself could someday have the love and romance that he had read about in the novels.¹ As a result, he kept expressing reluctance in the next two or three years when his parents talked to him about marriage. Because of this reluctance, his parents, who "had been very understanding," had to turn down marriage proposals for him from forty or fifty families in his home region. Some of those families were good matches for his family. Some were even of higher social status than his family. Since there were not too many more families left in the locality that could match his family well, in the following two or three years there were few proposals of marriage for Guo. This, for his parents, meant that he was running out of possibilities for a good marriage, and they naturally became concerned. Their concern seemed to have been confirmed when a neighboring family of some low-life background and poor social image proposed to have Guo marry their daughter, whom he described as ugly and possibly sick with some disease. His mother, in particular, took this proposal as an insult. Further, by the time he was nineteen, his younger brother and a younger sister had both had their marriages arranged. According to social norms, however, their weddings had to wait until he (their older brother) married. His marriage, therefore, became not only an issue of filial piety but also an issue of honoring his Confucian obligations as an older brother to take good care of his younger brother and sisters.²

It was with this background that Guo's parents in 1911 hurriedly arranged a marriage to a girl Guo had never met. This time they did not consult him. He was at the time studying in Sichuan's capital city, Chengdu, which is about ninety miles away from his hometown of Shawanzhen. He was simply informed of the marriage decision in October of that year through a letter that his parents wrote to an older cousin of his, who was then working in Chengdu. According to the letter, the go-between for this marriage arrangement was a remote aunt, and the girl was a cousin of this aunt. It was a good match between the two families and, as described by the aunt, the girl "had good looks," "was going to school," and had the modern "unbound feet." The aunt, according to Guo's mother, was trustworthy, thus her description of the girl should be credible. Guo's parents, who themselves had to a certain extent been influenced by social changes at the time, seemed to be making efforts to satisfy Guo's desire to marry a modern woman. It seemed to them that if the girl had

unbound feet and was going to school then she should be modern enough for their son.³ What was beyond them as the older generation, however, was that the arranged marriage itself was fundamentally antimodern. Such marriages, as proven so many times in China's history, could result in personal unhappiness and even tragedy. Guo was somewhat caught by surprise by his parents' sudden decision. He was certainly not excited about this marriage arrangement. Under increasing Western influence, he now dreamed that someday he would have a Western-style romance. He had the fantasy that he would be like a Western prince who ran into a woman of "unrivalled beauty" on a desert island during a hurricane. He had also imagined that he would be like a Western gentleman who "won the love of a beauty at a duel." If such Western-style romance could not happen, then he still dreamed that his marriage would offer a beautiful and poetic experience.⁴ With all of the Western influence that he had received, however, he also had been brought up with Confucian *lijiao* ethics through a combination of parental guidance, formal education, and the influence of social norms and popular culture. According to those ethics, he had no choice but to honor his Confucian duty of filial piety and obey his parents' decision on the marriage. Besides, there were simply no other alternatives available to him at the time. Everybody around him was having his or her marriage arranged in those days. It was simply a very natural part of life. Furthermore, there was also the curiosity of the unknown in such a blind arrangement. If the girl was said to be so good, then maybe she would turn out to be an ideal wife for him. What got his attention was that his aunt had mentioned that the girl was as beautiful as one of his (cousin) sisters-in-law. Ever since his childhood, he had secretly admired the beauty of that sister-in-law. If the girl could be that beautiful, then why not marry her.⁵ With such mixed feelings, he obeyed his parents on the marriage arrangement.

His wedding took place on March 2, 1912.⁶ It was a rushed wedding. After the collapse of the central order of the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1911, Sichuan Province fell into social chaos with numerous bandits becoming increasingly active. Furthermore, the radical change from dynastic rule to the brand new concept of a republic was too confusing a transition for many, who believed that such change would lead to greater chaos in China's society. As a result, some people with unmarried, grown-up daughters were in a hurry to marry their daughters, for they feared that in the upcoming social chaos their daughters would be exposed to the danger of being raped and losing their virginity. Once raped, their daughters would be devalued as unmarried women in Confucian society and would have less chance of enjoying decent marriages. It was against this background that the parents of the girl wrote to ask Guo's family to have the wedding done in a hurry.⁷

Guo was at home during a school break when the letter from the girl's family arrived. This time his parents consulted him. Since the marriage had already been arranged and was therefore going to happen anyway, and since he somehow still had some hope for this marriage, he agreed to the wedding. Years later, when writing an autobiography in 1929, he noticed that his own agreement to the wedding,

which amounted to his own agreement to the marriage, had been the thing that he had “repented the most” in his life.⁸

The wedding turned out to be a complete nightmare for him. On the first day of the wedding ceremonies, the bride, whom he and his family had never seen before and had been described as very good looking and with unbound feet, shocked him with a pair of old-fashioned bound feet and, in his eyes, a very ugly nose!⁹ He was numbed and reluctant to go on with the rest of the ceremonies. Seeing him behaving like this, his mother gave him a talk. First, in an indirect way, she blamed the go-between aunt for having given a misleading description of the girl’s feet and looks. Then she went on to say that he should not behave like this at the wedding. “We can ask her [the bride] to unbind her feet tomorrow and, as a man, you shouldn’t concern yourself too much about your wife’s looks.” “If she [the bride] has a good personality and is intelligent,” said the mother, “I can teach her some [Confucian] ethics and you can also teach her to read poems and books. As long as she has these it’s going to be OK.”¹⁰ Guo kept silent. Then the real lecture started. His mother began to blame him for his “lack of filial piety.” After working very hard for the arrangement and preparation for this wedding, said the mother, his father was heartbroken to see him looking so miserable. It was not right, said the Confucian mother, for him “as a son and as a human being” to break his father’s heart like this!¹¹ This finally and painfully aroused him from his numbness.¹² He was, after all, a Confucian son with a strong sense of filial piety toward his parents, a sense that resulted from longtime moral teachings of *lijiao*. For the sake of not making his beloved parents suffer, who “had already overworked themselves in their lives,” he decided with great pain to carry on with the rest of the wedding ceremonies.¹³ The whole nightmare of the arranged marriage, however, was simply too much for him to take. Just a few days after the wedding, he found some excuse and left home for Chengdu, thus starting a passive rebellion against the marriage and against *lijiao*.¹⁴

One major reason behind his rebellion, of course, was the fact that he had been influenced by modern Western concepts of love, romance, and individuality and could hardly sacrifice himself completely for *lijiao* norms. In fact, though the ethic of filial piety still had a strong hold on him, the whole *lijiao* system of traditional life had already been undermined in his surroundings, sometimes by himself. For instance, pushed by his Western-influenced oldest brother, the practice of footbinding, a symbol of women’s status in the Confucian system, had already been stopped for some women in his community, including his mother.¹⁵ Under Western influence, the old Confucian authority of teachers also had been seriously challenged at the schools that he had attended. In one of his autobiographies he would later recall such an incident in his second semester of primary school, a quarrel that took place among some students over a meal. In his investigation of the incident, the school principal happened to have slapped a student on the face to show his authority, just as teachers used to do in the traditional education system. Guo and some other students were present when the principal beat the student, and Guo

shouted to the principal, "What you did is barbaric! . . . Yes, barbaric!" Other students followed: "You can no longer beat students in such a civilized time!" "You are very inhumane (*taiwu rendao* 太無人道)!" "You have violated us students' human dignity (*renge* 人格)!" The principal was overwhelmed by the students, even though he later managed to give Guo a demerit for punishment.¹⁶ What this incident tells us is that even at a very young age Guo had already been influenced by the modern Western emphasis on humanity and respect for the "dignity" of individuals. To a great extent, it was such Western humanism and individualism that was making him deviate, step-by-step, from the collective norms of *lijiao* society.

It is important to note here that in Guo's resentment and rebellion against the arranged marriage, he was not without a certain amount of sensitivity and feelings of pity and guilt for what he had actually done to the woman he had married, which is consistent with his influence by modern Western humanism. For instance, on his way to Chengdu right after the wedding, he wrote in a poem that he felt "sorry" for the wife that he was leaving behind, whom he believed was thinking of him at home.¹⁷ Years later, when writing his autobiographies, he more than once pointed out that it was she who had been hurt the most in the "tragedy" of the traditional marriage.¹⁸ It was such moral sensitivity on his part that added to the pain and sense of guilt that he later felt for a long time when trying to morally justify to himself and society his rebellion against the marriage.

Once he was back to school in Chengdu, the pain of the marriage helped lead to "a most dangerous period" in his life.¹⁹ He "wildly" abused alcohol and indulged himself in gambling and other "unhealthy" habits.²⁰ His only hope now was to leave Sichuan and get farther away from his problems. However, his parents could not let him go. For one thing, he completely relied on his parents and elder brothers for his expenses, and they were not rich enough to support his studies away from Sichuan. As a result, he continued his "disgusting" lifestyle in Chengdu for a "long" period of a year and a half.²¹ It was not until 1913, after he was admitted into a government-sponsored medical college in Tianjin with a full scholarship, that he was finally able to leave his home province of Sichuan.²²

Guo left Chengdu for Tianjin in September 1913 to attend the medical college. When he arrived in Tianjin, however, he found that the college did not match his expectations, and so he soon went to Beijing to visit his oldest brother, whom he thought was staying in Beijing at that time. There was, of course, a deeper reason for him to leave the medical school. With his longtime interest in literature and possibly also because of his Confucian idealism and Taoist antimundane mentality, he felt at the time that it was simply too "practical" of an idea for him to make a career in medicine. After all, it was not the study of medicine but a chance to leave Sichuan that had brought him to Tianjin.²³

Guo's brother turned out not to be in Beijing at the time but was traveling in Japan and Korea. Guo waited in Beijing until his brother returned from abroad in mid-December. Not long after his return, the brother decided to send Guo to study in Japan. Since his brother could only support him financially for half a year,

Guo would have to study hard in Japan so that he could qualify for a scholarship from the Chinese government in half a year. Guo had no idea if he could succeed in getting such a scholarship in such a short time. However, the chance to go to Japan, something that he had long dreamed about, made him very excited. Accompanied by a friend of his brother's who happened to be traveling to Japan, he left Beijing on December 28, 1913, and arrived in Tokyo on January 13, 1914, thus starting his study and life in Japan.²⁴

After "desperate" hard work, in June 1914 Guo passed the entrance tests for a one-year preparation program designed for Chinese students at Tokyo First Higher School.²⁵ After that program, which lasted from September 1914 to the summer of 1915, he was assigned to the Sixth Higher School in Okayama to major in premedicine, a major that he now chose for himself.²⁶ After three years of study, in the summer of 1918 he graduated from the Okayama school and was admitted to the Medical School of Kyushu Imperial University at Fukuoka, from which he was to graduate in 1923.²⁷

Throughout his first years in Japan, from 1914 to 1919, his struggle against the arranged marriage and Confucian *lijiao* and the pain and guilt he felt over this struggle seemed to have overshadowed many other aspects of his life. First of all, away from home in Japan, a foreign country distant from China and more Westernized than China, he was provided with a real opportunity to rebel against his nightmare marriage. In the summer of 1916, about two and a half years after he arrived in Japan, he fell in love with Sato Tomiko (1897-?), a Japanese Christian girl whose father was a Protestant minister. Tomiko was at the time working as a student nurse in a hospital in Tokyo after graduating from an American missionary school. A friend of Guo happened to have stayed in Tomiko's hospital for treatment of tuberculosis before he transferred to and died in a sanatorium. Guo had just finished his first year at the Sixth Higher School and was in Tokyo visiting his sick friend during the summer break. After the friend's death, when handling the friend's funeral affairs, he went one day to Tomiko's hospital to ask for an X-ray taken when his friend was under treatment. The nurse he talked to about the X-ray was Tomiko. Hearing of the death of Guo's friend, Tomiko broke into tears and spoke with him to share his sorrow over his friend's death. About a week later, when mailing the X-ray to Guo, Tomiko enclosed a long letter in English in which she used "a lot" of Christian language to console him over the pain of losing his friend. Guo was greatly moved by Tomiko's sympathy and loving personality and felt attracted to her. He then started a regular correspondence with her. Before long, he persuaded her to move from Tokyo to Okayama in December of that year, and the two soon started living together as common-law husband and wife.²⁸

Guo's relationship with Tomiko brought him the love and romance that he had long desired. However, it also caused him tremendous suffering and a strong sense of guilt. For one thing, after learning about his living with Tomiko, Guo's parents stopped writing to him until after Tomiko gave birth to Guo's first son in December 1917. Even when they resumed correspondence, his parents still

refused to accept Tomiko as their legitimate daughter-in-law. They would insist on addressing her as his “concubine” (*qie* 妾) and calling their sons “concubine kids” (*shuzi* 庶子).²⁹ The main issue here was again filial piety and other Confucian *lijiao* ethics. Judged by *lijiao*, Guo’s living with Tomiko was against the marriage formally arranged for him by his parents and therefore showed his lack of filial piety to his parents. In China’s traditional system, it should be noted here, men’s extramarital sexual desire could be accepted in the form of their taking on concubines in addition to their legal wives. Guo’s oldest brother, for example, had at least temporarily taken on a woman as a concubine.³⁰ With such an accepted practice in the *lijiao* system, Guo could have, to a certain degree, made up for his lack of filial piety by nominally staying with his marriage arrangement while simply living with Tomiko as some kind of a concubine. Guo’s desire, however, turned out to be too modern for the old wife/concubine format to accommodate. With his modern thinking, he now wanted love, romance, and, most importantly, personal freedom in finding and enjoying his romantic love. The old wife/concubine lifestyle did not interest him at all. As he later described it, he was “most heartbroken” and “most sick” when his parents called Tomiko his “concubine” and called his sons with Tomiko “concubine kids.”³¹ As far as Guo was concerned, the old, arranged marriage was completely over, and Tomiko was now his beloved wife.

It should be noted that Guo’s having a son with Tomiko had made up a little bit for his misbehavior in the eyes of his parents, since infertility, especially to be without a son, would be an even greater offense against filial piety in the Confucian culture. As Guo later put it, Tomiko’s giving birth to a son was a major reason his parents eventually “forgave” him and resumed their correspondence with him.³² Guo’s modern desire for love and romance and his insistence on dishonoring his arranged marriage, however, had and would always put him in profound and irresolvable conflict with his parents.

Guo agonized tremendously over his parents’ disapproval of his conduct. He simply could not bear to see his parents be hurt like this. Yet with modern Western influence, he could not overcome his desire for personal happiness. He also felt guilty for what he had done to his wife back in Sichuan. According to Confucian ethics, not only should a wife obey her husband, a husband also had responsibilities to his wife. Brought up with such traditional concepts, he still found himself in certain ways connected to his arranged wife. During this period he sometimes received letters from his wife, and in the letters that he wrote home to Sichuan he also from time to time referred to her.³³ In fact, in a letter that he wrote home on July 20, 1915, in the tone of a typical Confucian husband, he even asked his wife to “take good care of” his parents for him.³⁴ With all of the Confucian obligations and connections that he felt toward his parents and his arranged wife, he suffered greatly in rebelling against the arranged marriage. During this period and later he “had decided several times” to write to his Sichuan home to “ask for a divorce” from his arranged wife, but every time he was stopped because he was certain that his divorce request would greatly anger his parents, and such anger was very likely

to kill them in their old age. He also was afraid that asking for a divorce would “surely” drive his arranged wife to commit suicide, because she had “an old-fashioned mind” of the ethics of *lijiao*, which considered it a great disgrace for a woman to be divorced by her husband. If his arranged wife committed suicide, he felt that he would really “be guilty of murder.” After all, he also felt sorry for her because she, like him, was trapped in this marriage as a victim.³⁵

Thus began one of the most painful and tortured periods in Guo’s life. As he later recalled, 1916 and 1917 were “the most confusing and dangerous years” for him. Sometimes he “wanted to commit suicide.” Sometimes he wanted to be a Buddhist “monk.”³⁶ In 1916, he wrote the first of his suicide poems:

I went out of home to commit suicide,
 there was the lonely moon moving in the sky.
 Bitter wind had frozen my soul,
 regret over my sin had torn me apart.
 Where to go in this vast world?
 I sighed with every step I took.
 I have so far had no achievements,
 and ended up being a nothing between heaven and earth.
 Since it is so hard to drag on like this in the world,
 it shouldn’t be a difficult decision to die!
 Yet I can’t help thinking of my family and country,
 and came back to live in this world with pains.
 When I returned home and saw my love,
 she was all in tears.³⁷

It should be remembered that 1916 was the year he fell in love with Tomiko, and 1917 was their first year living together. The end of 1917 also seemed to be the point at which his parents refused to write to him because of his living with Tomiko.³⁸ In other words, instead of fully enjoying his newfound love and romance with Tomiko, he was haunted by the ethics of *lijiao* and tortured by a strong sense of guilt and immorality. On May 25, 1918, after his parents resumed correspondence with him, he wrote the following in a letter to home:

Dear father and mother:

Since I have committed such a sin [living with Tomiko] and can not atone for it and have thus made you greatly worried and concerned, I really regret and could do nothing but cry everyday in my heart. After receiving my brother’s letter the other day that blamed me, I have tried several times to write home. But every time I tried I could not even write a single sentence because I felt very ashamed and could find no excuses for myself. Today I have just received a letter from Yu Ying [his arranged wife]. It describes how you have been hurt by me and this has made me suffer even more.³⁹

Later in 1918, after living with Tomiko for about two years and when their first son was about one year old, he wrote another poem expressing his wish to die:

I remember it was seven years ago,
 my Seventh Sister was still a child.
 She and I were both homesick,
 and we both cried until we collapsed.
 But now I am alone far away from home,
 and I have cried with so many tears.
 I have lost my soul and now only have an empty body,
 I regret that I have not died to finish my misery.
 I have a motherland but it amounts to nothing,
 since the country is constantly suffering from wars.
 I have a home but I can not return to it,
 my parents are there sick and old.
 I have my love but she has already been ruined,
 like a bird without its nest.
 I have a son who is only one year old,
 and it takes a lot to take care of him.
 I thus have a life which is not happy,
 so I often hope that I can die soon.
 Overwhelming sadness and regret is tearing me apart,
 and I have cried from morning till night.
 I have such profound sadness in my heart,
 which is hard to end even if I die ten thousand times.⁴⁰

Clearly this poem demonstrates his depression, sense of guilt, and regret that because of his rebellion against his arranged marriage he could not go back home to see his beloved parents. As he later elaborates in an autobiographical novel in the 1920s, he was afraid that if he went back home he would have to confront his parents and his arranged wife about his marriage. Such a confrontation, he worried, would anger his parents and might cost them their lives. As he saw no functional solution to the situation, the only thing left to do was to avoid going home and pay the price of not seeing his parents.⁴¹ To his great regret, indeed, he was never to see his mother alive again.

One thing that needs mentioning is that Guo in this poem refers to his "Seventh Sister," to whom he did not otherwise seem to pay special attention among his siblings.⁴² One reason he thought of this younger sister in this 1918 poem was probably because he had heard that this sister was being married that year.⁴³ Guo was strongly against the marriage arrangement for his sister, clearly because it reminded him of his own misery and made him very worried about his sister's future. The sister's marriage arrangement was first mentioned by Guo in a letter that he wrote to home on July 20, 1915. In that letter, which gives major attention

to his sister's marriage arrangement, Guo notices that he had heard that his mother was going to visit a family to see if they and their son matched Guo's family and sister. "I cannot say that I agree [with this decision by mother to visit the family] and yet I cannot say that I disagree," said Guo in the letter. "It's hard to understand the marriage system in our country. . . . Since father and mother despite their old age are willing to make a trip for their daughter, how dare I as a son say anything differently [on my sister's marriage arrangement]? After all, as the saying goes: 'marriages were determined in our previous lives and we cannot do anything about them in our current lives'; 'if you happen to be married to a chicken then live your life with this chicken and if you happen to have married a dog then live a life with this dog.'" Guo goes on in the letter, however, to say that his Seventh Sister is still too young and is in no hurry to be married. "If mother has not yet made the trip [for the sister's marriage arrangement]," Guo asks, "could mother and father please first try to learn more about that family and see if their son is good for my sister? Not only could this prevent my sister from potential misery, it will also reward [our] parents' efforts to work for their children's happiness. . . . With all said, however, I believe that if mother thinks a person is good [for my sister] then he must be good."⁴⁴

This 1915 letter clearly demonstrates the dilemma in Guo's thinking between his love and filial piety for his parents and his reservations about the marriage that they were arranging for his sister, the kind of dilemma that he had known so well. His parents were very angry at this letter and "severely blamed" him for it. Guo's sarcastic description of the possibility that his sister's arranged marriage might not turn out to be a happy one also led to his sister's several attempts to commit suicide, which was to a certain extent another example of the sometimes life-and-death seriousness of arranged marriages in Confucian society.⁴⁵ On November 7, 1917, Guo wrote the following in a letter to home, further petitioning for his Seventh Sister:

I remember that my brother mentioned in his last letter that Seventh Sister was to be married next year. I am afraid that she is still too young and such early marriage will be most harmful to her still growing body. The system of early marriages in our country is really no good. To reform it, people should start with their own families. . . . My opinion is that my Seventh Sister's marriage could still wait for another two years.⁴⁶

Guo's concern and sympathy for his Seventh Sister's arranged marriage is clearly because her marriage had reminded him of his own matrimonial misery. As a Chinese saying goes, "An ill person tends to sympathize with those who suffer from the same illness as his" (*tongbing xianglian* 同病相憐). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Guo mentions his Seventh Sister in the previously quoted 1918 poem, which is mainly an expression of the pains caused by his arranged marriage. In fact, several years later in the 1920s, when he wrote an autobiographical novel, Guo would once

again be reminded of his Seventh Sister's experience when mentioning the pain of his own arranged marriage.⁴⁷

Guo's depression and sense of guilt was a major factor that shadowed his family life with Tomiko and their first son during this period. There were, however, other factors. For instance, after he started living with Tomiko as common-law husband and wife, especially after their first son was born in December 1917, Guo gradually became somewhat disillusioned with family life. The tedious and trivial daily routines in the household and the tiring work of taking care of his infant son were anything but romantic and colorful. Tomiko, whom he used to find so attractive, now seemed to have lost her "mysterious" beauty of "purity" and simply turned into an ordinary housewife.⁴⁸ To be sure, Guo did sometimes find happiness and joy with Tomiko and their child, and this was shown in some of the poems that he wrote during this period. However, he also had from time to time written poems to indicate that life in his family was not happy. In a poem written in 1918, for instance, he began to describe Tomiko and his son as "burdens" for him.⁴⁹ Then, in early 1919, he wrote the following poem:

It is a cold day in spring,
 I feel very depressed and unhappy.
 I have profound sadness beyond description,
 but I have to force a smile for my son.
 The son is in my arms sick,
 he does not talk yet and can only babble.
 My wife [Tomiko] looks as miserable as withered grass,
 she is doing laundry at the well.
 I look into the vast sky with tears,
 the sky is full of depressing clouds.
 I want to fly but I have no wings,
 I want to die but I can't move, as if I am paralyzed.
 It is I who have ruined my wife and child,
 my heart is aching as if thousands of arrows are piercing it.⁵⁰

Guo and Tomiko also were despised by their neighbors when they first started living together. When Tomiko came from Tokyo to stay with Guo in Okayama at the end of 1916, the two somehow believed that their relationship could be kept as that between a brother and a sister, and Guo actually told his neighbors (landlord) that Tomiko was his sister. However, it was not long before they became common-law husband and wife. As Guo recalled, once his neighbors (landlord) found out about this, they showed contempt for them. This reaction by the neighbors was in fact very natural, considering the fact that Japanese society, even with substantial Western influence, was still very much controlled by Confucian and other traditional Japanese values. For Guo, as a morally sensitive person, his neighbors' (landlord's) attitude of course added to his sense of immorality and guilt.

Guo's depression through his rebellion against the arranged marriage, in addition to his exhaustion from overwork at school, helped lead to a serious health problem. By the summer of 1915, he had begun to suffer from severe neurasthenia. His symptoms at the time included irregular and rapid heartbeats and serious chest pains that made it hard for him to walk even slowly. He also was suffering from insomnia. He only managed about three or four hours of sleep each night, and in his limited sleep he was "constantly" bothered by nightmares. He also seemed to have "completely" lost his memory. For some time he found it very hard to memorize anything he was reading. It also was from this time on that he began to complain that sometimes he had severe dizziness and his head "burned like a furnace."⁵¹ Though the severity of his neurasthenia did not seem to have lasted long, some of its symptoms did stay with him, and he was to complain about them in some of his later writings.

JUSTIFYING REBELLION AGAINST *LIJIAO* IN PUBLIC

In struggling to justify his rebellion against *lijiao*, Guo in his early years in Japan desperately sought help, guidance, and comfort in his intellectual environment. During the worst days of his personal crisis, he first found Sir Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) to be his "spiritual teacher."⁵² The first time he read Tagore was in early 1915, when he was in his second semester of the one-year preparatory study at the First Higher School in Tokyo.⁵³ He was then living with a relative, who also was studying in Japan. One day this relative showed him mimeograph copies of some English poems written by the Indian Hindu poet, who as a winner of the Nobel Prize in literature was at the time very popular in Japan. The poems were *Baby's Way*, *Sleep-Stealer*, *Clouds and Waves*, and *On the Seashore*. Guo was immediately attracted to these poems. He was "surprised" to find that they were easy to understand and that their prose style differed from other English poems he had read and the old style Chinese poems with which he was so familiar. As he later described it, reading these poems by Tagore "especially" made him "feel purified, refreshed, and free from mundane worries." Tagore's poems, he said, made him "joyful" with something "beyond their poetic beauty." "From then on," he had become a "worshiper" of Tagore and developed an "indissoluble bond" with the poet's works. He had thus started "eagerly" looking for Tagore's books to read.⁵⁴ Because of their popularity, however, Tagore's books were usually sold out the moment they reached book stores in Tokyo. It was not until after he graduated from the preparatory program in Tokyo in the summer of 1915 and went to the Sixth Higher School at Okayama that he was finally able to purchase a copy of Tagore's *The Crescent Moon*. Then, in the fall of 1916, he "suddenly" found Tagore's *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, and *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* at a library in Okayama. The discovery of these books made him really feel that he had found the "life" and "fountain" of his life. Every day, as soon as school was over, at about two or three o'clock in the afternoon, he would hurry to a "very quiet and dimly lit" reading room at the library and read these books facing the wall

in a corner. "From time to time," with "tears of gratitude," he would try to memorize the books' contents. Reading these works, which conveyed Hindu moral and spiritual messages, he "enjoyed the happiness of Nirvana" and felt a "quiet and pure sadness rippling both inside and outside of" him. It was usually not until evening that he could finally tear himself away from these books and walk back slowly to his "lonesome" dorm.⁵⁵

Through Tagore, especially through his *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Guo came to be attracted to Kabir (1450?–1518), a major religious figure in India's Hindu tradition. Tagore's works also had made him interested in and "fond of" the philosophy of the Upanishads, the Indian classic that gives spiritual and moral teachings on human souls and the world soul.⁵⁶ As Guo later wrote, he had "reveled in" Tagore's poems for about two or three years and had read "almost all" of Tagore's early collections and dramas.⁵⁷

Soon after his interest in Tagore started in early 1915, Guo also became attracted to the moral teaching of China's Neo-Confucian master Wang Yangming (1472–1528), whose thinking also had been influential in Japan. In September 1915, the time when he was suffering from neurasthenia, "in the depths" of his "soul" Guo felt a desperate "need for spiritual cultivation" and bought himself the *Complete Works of Wang Wen Cheng Gong* (Wang Yangming) at a used book store in Tokyo.⁵⁸ From then on he started a routine of reading ten pages of Wang's works every day. Every morning after getting up and every night before bed he also practiced thirty minutes of "quiet sitting," a method of self-cultivation taught by Wang's mind-heart school of Neo-Confucianism.⁵⁹ Thanks to Wang's teaching and the quiet sitting, Guo soon began to see "remarkable" improvement in his health. Within two weeks, both the quantity and quality of his sleep began to improve, and his irregular heart beating had become less serious.⁶⁰ Further, "spiritually," he found that he had been "thoroughly" enlightened by Wang Yangming to a "world of wonders." While the world in his eyes had been nothing but a "dead and flat picture," Wang's philosophy now brought the world "alive" and "three-dimensional" and thus enabled him to clearly and "thoroughly" comprehend this world.⁶¹ As he later noted, even though he had been "fond of" reading the *Zhuang Zi* (莊子) before, he could hardly understand Zhuang Zi's thinking. Now, through the teaching of Wang Yangming, who had been influenced by Taoist philosophies, he had begun to really appreciate and understand the thinking of Zhuang Zi.⁶² The enlightenment that he had found in Wang's Neo-Confucian philosophy also had contributed to his interest in the metaphysics of Lao Zi (老子), Confucius, Indian philosophers, and various thinkers of "early modern European" schools of idealism, especially Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677). In his words, Wang Yangming's teaching had started his discovery of a clear and "solemn" world of metaphysics.⁶³

Based on Guo's writings later in the 1920s, what Wang Yangming's teaching and career provided for him during this period probably also included an inspiration for "the expansion of the self" and an encouragement for the individual to "fight against" his "evil environments."⁶⁴ In the middle of his lonesome struggle against the

lijiao society, Wang's message of Confucian personalism could to a certain extent help serve as a support for him. Zhuang Zi also might have helped him in coping with *lijiao*. In a sense, Zhuang Zi's teaching of transcending mundane concerns and freeing oneself from established society could help him numb his pain and find some temporary escape from the heavy moral pressure of mundane *lijiao* ethics.

For a while Guo also became interested in Christianity, and one of the factors contributing to his interest was very possibly Tomiko's influence over him.⁶⁵ In fact, together with Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism, Zhuang Zi's Taoist philosophy, and Tagore's Hinduist messages, Christianity had at least for a while served to meet his needs for spiritual and moral comfort and guidance. In 1916 and 1917, the time when he was tortured the most by his sense of guilt and immorality as a result of his falling in love and then living with Tomiko, he had made it a daily routine to practice quiet sitting and "read Zhuang Zi, Wang Yangming, and the New and Old Testaments" as his spiritual and moral lessons. It also was during this period that he read many of Tagore's works. As Guo put it, the need for religion was a result of people's "loneliness and pains," and the pain in his life at the time had suppressed his "liveliness" as a young man and pushed him to ponder metaphysical and moral issues covered in Eastern and Western philosophies and religions.⁶⁶

Despite some effect and comfort on Guo, however, the moral and spiritual messages of Wang Yangming, Zhuang Zi, Tagore, and Christianity had in a way made it even harder for him to justify his rebellion against *lijiao*. He had turned to these messages for help and guidance largely because he had been tortured by his sense of guilt and immorality as a result of dishonoring his arranged marriage and living with another woman. These moral and spiritual messages, however, told him basically that he should purify his soul and keep away from human desires. In other words, all of these philosophies and religions from which he was seeking help were largely telling him that he was morally wrong in following his human and mundane feelings and desires and living with Tomiko as a married man. Wang Yangming, for example, especially emphasized in his works the moral importance of practicing filial piety and "ridding oneself of human desires," such as men's desire for women.⁶⁷ Using Wang's teaching to ease his sense of guilt, which was largely a result of his living with Tomiko and disobeying his parents, Guo was to a great extent actually adding fuel to the flames. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that with all of his efforts to seek spiritual and moral help, he had never ceased suffering from his strong sense of guilt before 1919.

The breakthrough started for Guo in September 1919. On the eleventh of that month, *Xue Deng* (學燈 *Lamp of Learning*), the literary supplement of Shanghai's *Shi Shi Xin Bao* (時事新報 *The China Times*), started publishing his new-style vernacular poems and thus triggered an "outburst" of his poetry and other writings from September 1919 to the first half of 1920.⁶⁸ He began to be known in China as a modern poet and writer.⁶⁹ This success fundamentally changed his life. The publication of his work was recognition and encouragement not only of his new literary style but also of the thinking and feelings that he expressed in his

writings. With such encouragement, he went through a period of what he later referred to as the “emancipation” of his “feelings.”⁷⁰ In other words, through his published writings, he finally found an outlet for his “pent-up feelings” over his “personal and national problems.”⁷¹

It was largely starting with *San Ye Ji* (三葉集 *Cloverleaf*), a collection of letters between Guo and two friends, Tian Shouchang (田壽昌 also known as Tian Han 田漢) (1898–1968) and Zong Baihua (宗白華) (1897–?), that Guo openly expressed feelings over his personal crisis and struggle and with the help of his friends found in the Romanticism and individualism of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) the justification that he had needed for his rebellion against *lijiao*.⁷²

In a letter dated mid-February 1920, in *San Ye Ji*, he told Tian about his love story with Tomiko. After describing in detail how he had met Tomiko and how they started living together as brother and sister, he wrote:

Alas! Brother Shouchang! I was after all too confident in my weak soul! Shortly after living together with Tomiko, my soul completely collapsed! I ruined my Tomiko! . . . If my sin were merely the violation of the sacredness of love, or more directly, merely having sex with Tomiko, then my sense of guilt would not be as strong as it has been. The truth is that I have another painful experience which is really hard for me to tell. In 1913 I was married according to my parents' arrangement. . . . Shortly after my wedding I left home and finally came to Japan in January 1914. After the marriage I already had a profound flaw in my heart, which was beyond cure. Then, unexpectedly, I met my Tomiko. When we started as friends I was already a married man and she knew that. And it was because I trusted myself as a married man that I felt that I could safely live with her as brother and sister. Alas! I ended up ruining her! . . . I have written so much in this letter to you, and I feel that I am really like a convict waiting for his death sentence. You said that we should make known our character, but my character is almost too bad to be known. . . . I am literally the quintessence of sin.⁷³

To Guo's great relief, not only did Tian understand and accept his confession but in his reply Tian also encouraged and justified his rebellion against *lijiao* by citing the example of Goethe:

. . . I do not consider what you have done as your personal sins. Instead, I see them as sins of all mankind, or at least of those who feel strongly for romantic love. Further, they are sins that are more likely to be committed by geniuses . . . Goethe had at least nineteen lovers in his life. . . . If we talk about sin, then Goethe in his later years was really “the quintessence of sin.” . . . My radical opinion is that what you have done is very natural. Even though you were married—married, as you said, according to your parents' arrangement—once you fall in love with [an] other woman you already have less and little love, if not no love at all, for the woman to whom you are married. Once that happens, your marriage is no longer a marriage

in its complete sense. No! It should no longer count as a marriage. Such being the case, it's completely alright for you to follow the idea of "you go your way, we go ours." . . . If someone should prosecute you for your sins on the Day of Judgment, I would bravely step forward and serve as your apologist!⁷⁴

Tian's citing of Goethe's example here is of great significance for Guo. Thanks to his education in Taisho, Japan, which carried a tendency to favor German culture and German thinking in the learning from the modern West, Guo by now already had substantial knowledge about Goethe and had become a worshiper of his life, works, and thinking.⁷⁵ In an earlier letter in *San Ye Ji*, for instance, he had admired Goethe, with all of his achievements as well as the qualities of a "Mephistopheles," "devil," and "dog," as one of only two all-around "geniuses" in human history and "the best of all human beings."⁷⁶ Naturally, Tian's comparing his rebellion against *lijiao* with the Romantic experience of Goethe was liberating for him in trying to get rid of his sense of guilt and immorality. If Goethe could live as a free soul and did not hesitate to break social and moral norms, then why couldn't he?! If Goethe was celebrated for having desires of the "flesh," love, romance, and the qualities of a "Mephistopheles," "devil," and "dog," then why should he be ashamed of the same qualities in his life?⁷⁷ With great excitement and deep gratitude, Guo, in his reply to Tian, wrote that Tian's words had made him "really feel like a convict who had been awaiting his death sentence but was eventually pardoned."⁷⁸

As Tian Shouchang had, Zong Baihua also helped free Guo from his pain and sense of guilt. In a letter to Guo in late February, Zong wrote:

In all fairness, it should not be considered a grave sin if a man and a woman live together as a result of their pure and serious love for each other. Further, since you have the sincerity to confess and the vigorous improvement of yourself, your sin is merely Mephistopheles in your mind, something that can help make you improve your character! I am very glad to see that you have developed sincerity and the courage to confess thanks to the influence of Western literature, such as the influence of Rousseau and Tolstoy. It shows here that this is something unique to Western literature, something that Eastern literature lacks.⁷⁹

Zong's help for Guo also can be seen in his preface to *San Ye Ji*, where he sets aside all other issues that the collection of letters covers and focuses solely on the issue of rebelling against arranged marriages, as raised by Guo's case:

Readers! Why do we want to publish this small book [*San Ye Ji*]? . . . Our purpose is to raise a serious and urgent social and moral issue for you to discuss and judge in public! . . .

This issue is a very comprehensive one. Generally speaking, it is "the issue of marriage." More specifically, it covers a) the issue of the freedom of romantic love; b) the issue of the system of arranged marriages; c) the issue of free romantic

love under the system of arranged marriages; and d) the issue of whom to hold responsible for the serious consequences of the conflict between the system of arranged marriages and free romantic love. . . .⁸⁰

Clearly, as far as Zong was concerned, the single, most important purpose of publishing *San Ye Ji* was to direct the public's attention to problems caused by the conflict between the Western concept of free romantic love and China's long-established system of arranged marriages, a system under which Guo had been victimized.

The help from Zong Baihua and Tian Shouchang meant a lot to Guo. Zong was then editor-in-chief of *Shi Shi Xin Bao's Xue Deng* and editor of *Young China* monthly (*shaonian zhongguo* 少年中國), both influential publications at the time.⁸¹ Tian was also known to the May Fourth reading public for his published works.⁸² Further, both Zong and Tian were members of the Young China Association (*shaonian zhongguo xuehui* 少年中國學會), an influential organization of May Fourth intellectuals that was founded in 1919 by such major figures as Li Dazhao.⁸³ As active and influential members of May Fourth intellectual circles, Zong's and Tian's understanding, sympathy, and support for Guo's rebellion against his arranged marriage were certainly important to Guo.

What was of greater importance to Guo was the success of *San Ye Ji*. After its initial publication, the book sold very well and was reprinted several times.⁸⁴ This, among other things, signaled that the May Fourth reading public was sympathetic toward his rebellion against the arranged marriage and against *lijiao*, and it accepted and supported his and his friends' justification for his rebellion. Greatly encouraged, in May 1921, one year after the initial publication of *San Ye Ji*, he further emancipated his thinking and made his first explicit written attack on *lijiao*.⁸⁵ It was in Guo's preface to a new edition of *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang Ji* 西廂記), punctuated and edited by himself, that he made the attack:

. . . *Xixiang Ji* is a triumphal song and memorial tower for the victory of a lively humanity over the lifeless *lijiao*. . . .

Our nation has always taken pride in its *lijiao* and kept especially on guard about the relationship between men and women. Sexual desire has been regarded as a flood or wild beast, and young men and women have been treated as criminals. . . . The great China, which has been proud of its *lijiao* for thousands of years, has actually been nothing but a huge hospital of millions of patients with suppressed and abnormal sexual desires. . . . Nowadays, sex education has gradually started; the awakening of young men and women to their individuality has taken place like the eruption of volcanoes; and the old and unreasonable system of *lijiao*, which has done nothing but drive people to sexual abnormality, has already been quickly burned to ashes like withered branches and dead leaves caught on fire.⁸⁶

Then, in the summer of 1921, soon after writing the preface to *Xixiang Ji*, Guo started translating Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* into Chinese. His

translation of the German classic, which features a celebration of romantic love and individual freedom, was to a certain extent an expression of his own conflict between his romantic love with Tomiko and Confucian *lijiao*. The translation turned out to be another great success for him. It was published in April 1922 and was to be reprinted at least fifteen times by 1932.⁸⁷ Among other things, the success of the translation was to reassure him that China's modern reading public was in favor of and enthusiastic about the Western Goethean concept of romantic love and individuality, the concept on which he had relied as a major basis for the justification of his rebellion against his arranged marriage and against the Confucian family and *lijiao*.

To a great extent, Guo in his struggle against *lijiao* was rescued by the May Fourth movement. First of all, if China had not been in the midst of the May Fourth's (seemingly) overall attacks on Confucian tradition, or if there had not been the May Fourth's enthusiasm for Western concepts such as individual freedom and celebration of romantic love, his rebellion could hardly have received the kind of reception it did. Also, without the overall atmosphere of the emancipation of thinking, Zong Baihua and Tian Shouchang might never have been able to fully develop and express their modern ideas and provide Guo with the understanding and encouragement that he had badly needed from friends. Finally, without the May Fourth vernacular movement, there might never have been the modern poet Guo Moruo. It was the vernacular movement that had made it possible for Guo to discover himself in modern poetry and literature and "emancipate" his feelings as a modern writer.

In turn, it should be emphasized, Guo contributed significantly to the May Fourth's attacks on the Confucian family and *lijiao*. Through publicizing his personal rebellion, he took the lead in China in the early 1920s in influencing the reading public in their fight against *lijiao*'s arranged marriages and became the May Fourth's leading advocate of Western Goethean Romanticism and individualism. The fact that both *San Ye Ji* and his translation of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* sold so well shows that he had made a significant impact on the May Fourth's reading public. What was most inspiring for his fellow May Fourthians was the bold display of his Western individualism against the Confucian *lijiao* society. Though not without tremendous mental suffering, he had publicly dishonored his arranged marriage at the expense of his parents and wife, who in this case personified the Confucian family and *lijiao* society for him and the public and to whom he was expected to carry out the Confucian social obligations of a son and husband. In so doing, he set an example for the May Fourth's public in asserting himself in a Goethean Romanticist and individualist manner against Confucian social norms and rules (the Confucian bonds between the father/parent and son/child and between the husband and wife).⁸⁸

While justifying his disobedience to *lijiao* with Western Goethean Romanticism and individualism, Guo also managed to interpret Confucian personalism to the extent that it also sounded favorable to his assertion of his individuality against the Confucian family and *lijiao* society. Confucius, he wrote, considered people's

individuality a “natural expression of God” and “developed his own individuality to extreme [perfection]—in depth and scope.”⁸⁹ “The Confucian thinking of our country centers upon individuality,” he also stated.⁹⁰ He specifically managed to find in Confucius’s life an example of romantic love and individual freedom. Confucius, he said, “wanted to see” the beautiful woman Nanzi (南子). When editing *The Book of Songs*, Confucius did not leave out those poems that talked about love and sex, which he probably “loved” to read. Confucius was in favor of “freedom of love,” as he did not forbid human desires. Further, as Guo believed, Confucius himself “practiced freedom of divorce.”⁹¹ All in all, as with Goethe, Confucius was “human” and had developed both his soul and flesh into “perfection” and was thus “the best of all human beings.”⁹² Obviously, such a Confucius would have little problem with Guo’s seeking romantic love and asserting himself against the arranged marriage.

Guo’s interpretation of Confucius here was certainly radical and unconventional. To a great extent, he was reading into Confucius’s life and thinking of his own modern Western concepts of “freedom of love” and “freedom of divorce,” the opposite of the Confucian ethics of *lijiao*. However, with the thinking of Confucius having been interpreted and reinterpreted so many times in China’s history in order to suit the different needs of different times, one cannot simply disregard Guo’s interpretation as total nonsense. Though his interpretation was against those of most of the previous interpreters of Confucianism, which, among other things, had over the years formed the essence of *lijiao*, the purpose of Guo’s effort is actually not that different from those of previous interpreters: what he was doing was drawing and elaborating on some facts in Confucius’s life and sayings and making these facts work for his own needs and for those of his May Fourth generation.

This brings up a major difference between Guo and many of his fellow May Fourthians (despite their shared anti-*lijiao* radicalism): while subconsciously still carrying certain elements of the Confucian tradition, the others publicly attacked *lijiao* and Confucianism in general; Guo, on the other hand, tried to get rid of *lijiao* by proving that *lijiao* is against the true meaning of Confucianism. Under the name of upholding Confucianism as a whole, therefore, he stole *lijiao* out of Confucianism and at the same time openly justified his continuation with parts of the Confucian tradition.

Under Western influence, it should be mentioned, Guo also interpreted traditional Taoism with an individualist approach. In “On Chinese and German Cultures,” he writes that Lao Zi, like Nietzsche, based his thinking on “the individual” and “strove for positive development.” Lao Zi was against “established ethics,” which “completely trammled the freedom of the individual.” Such a Lao Zi, of course, also sounded in favor of Guo’s individualist rebellion against the established Confucian social norms.⁹³

Guo’s Western-inspired individualism was for a while also reflected somewhat in his view on the social functions of literature and the arts. In September 1920, for instance, he published two letters to his friend Chen Jianlei (陳建雷), one of which contained the following poem:

Spring Silkworms

Silkworms!

you are spinning silk. . . .

No, it is poetry you are spinning!⁹⁴

How is it that your poetry is so fine?

so charming?

so delicate?

so pure?

so . . .

Alas, my vocabulary isn't enough to describe you,

Silkworms!

Silkworms!

I want to ask you:

is your poetry premeditated?

or is it unprompted?

is it artificial?

or is it a natural flow?

Do you make it for others?

or simply for yourselves? . . .

Silkworms! Alas, why don't you answer me?

Silkworms!

I believe that your poetry

is spontaneous;

and it is a natural flow;

you are creating your "palace of art,"

and you are creating it for yourselves . . .

Isn't that right? Silkworms!

Silkworms!

I believe that

you are also unselfish:

you do not mind making sacrifices,

you do not mind others' taking your silk.

Musicians play various music,

with strings made of the silk they take from you;

Young girls embroider the Madonna,

with the silk they take from you.

The Madonna, the musicians' music,

are all from your silk [poetry],

but to have your silk [poetry],

the musicians and girls have to come and get it themselves.

Isn't that right? Silkworms!

Why don't you answer me?⁹⁵