

# An Analysis of the Marriage Crisis of Modern Chinese Intellectuals in *Regret for the Past*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempted a close study of the marriage tragedy in Lu Xun's famous short story *Regret for the Past* with a focus on the contradictory relationship between traditional "family culture" and individualism of Chinese society in the 1920s. According to Lu Xun's intention, the fictional tragedy can be extended to the common marriage and spiritual crisis among Chinese intellectuals in that period of social transition. In this case, the paper would explore the three layers of contradiction between the two opposite values, including the oppression of individuals by the family-centred mores of the society, the coexists of traditional family value and liberated individualism in people's heart, and the division of emphasis on "family" and "individual" between the two parties in marriage. The research methods used in this paper include literature research and interdisciplinary research. This study aims to help the understanding of factors behind the marriage crisis from a historical and psycho-cultural perspective, reflect the cultural psychology that still affects modern Chinese people and their marriage, as well as provide a new perspective of modern China after the May Fourth Movement.

**Keywords:** *Family culture, Regret for the Past, May Fourth Movement, individualism, marriage and family*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has always been a mirror of the society, and analysis of the texts created in different periods can provide an insight into the related historical background, social customs, as well as the spiritual outlook of contemporary people, whether masses or particular groups. There is no doubt that Lu Xun's *Regret for the Past* is a typical example of this kind of works, in which Zijun and Juansheng, two young people with emancipation thoughts, left their feudal family and created a "new small family" of their own. However, such a marriage based on liberated mind and free love ended in tragedy. Love vanished and Zijun died, leaving Juansheng with endless regrets and guilt. To some extent, Lu Xun intended to illustrate the real survival and mental situation of Chinese intellectuals after the May Fourth Movement as well as his own reflection on these crises. In 1925, when the novel was written, the tide of the May Fourth ideological emancipation began to subside, and countless youngsters who had rebelled and ran away from the feudal family suddenly found their "liberation" ended up in predicaments, and they often failed to achieve their ideal life or marriage. Scholars have made various analyses on factors that led to such crises in different perspectives, for example, the social environment, political and economic factors, the process of female liberation and enlightenment. However, there is one point which has seldom been mentioned, which is the complex contradiction between

Chinese traditional family culture and the modern individualism in that particular period of social transformation. In the story, the contradiction exists not only between the feudal society and the intellectuals, but also between both parties of the marriage. Even deep in the personal psychology of the "new youth", the two values also coexist and torture them all the time. In fact, this problem still exists in contemporary Chinese society. In this case, analyzing the marriage crisis and the profound reasons behind in *Regret for the Past* can help people understand the social reality and cultural psychology in China after the May Fourth Movement, as well as provide a new perspective for contemporary Chinese people's marriage. Based on this background, the paper will compare the attitudes of two characters towards love, family and personal status in marriage, in order to explore the three layers of contradiction of family value and individualism of modern Chinese intellectuals after the May Fourth Movement.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### *2.1. Family Culture in China and the Oppression of Individual*

The consanguineous family, as the basic unit of agriculture and handicraft under the natural economy, has been occupying an irreplaceable and lofty position in Chinese people's mind for thousands of years. To trace it

back to its source, the family-centred value originated from China's deep-rooted agricultural economy and the centralization political system, as orders and individual devotion to the collective are the best ways to maintain the economy as well as ruling stability. Ideologically, the family culture is manifested by the recognized ethical norms based on family relations—the "Three Cardinal Guides" advocated by Confucianism, that is, father guides son, husband guides wife, and the king guides his subjects. These norms set up a strict order in Chinese family and even in the whole society (In Chinese people's mind, the state is also a big "family"). According to this value, the inferior in the "family" must obey the authority, that is, the husband, father, monarch and other people playing the "parent" role, in order to maintain the prosperity and stability of the "family".

In the story, Zijun and Juansheng obviously violated this principle—they left their original family and might also rejected the family-arranged marriage, posing a big challenge to the traditional authority. And without a doubt, the oppression would come to them. Juansheng was discharged, because his relationship with Zijun had angered his boss as they lived together without getting married under the permission of their family. What is more, as Juansheng recalls, it was not easy for them to find a lodging, as for the most part they were refused with excuses. On the road, they were also met with "searching looks, sarcastic smiles or lewd and contemptuous glances which tended" [6]. These plots reveals that in the 1920s, without a complete social revolution, the traditional family culture still widely existed, and the society regarded their relationship as a violation of the family ethics. Just as Jasminer Mamak wrote, the story was about "the domination of the past over the future and the senior generation over the younger" [3], in such a society where feudal family morality still occupied the mainstream, it is no wonder that individuals like Zijun and Juansheng who pursued freedom and rebelled against the tradition would not have enough space or chance to live or maintain their love.

## **2.2. May Fourth Movement, Ibsenism and the Rebellion of Individual**

As mentioned above, there is a sharp contradiction between the traditional family culture and the individual pursue for liberation. And in essence, the family-centred morality is a kind of exploitation and oppression of individuals by the feudal authority, as excessive focus on collective interests and order would undoubtedly disregard desire and rights of individuals, oppress their living space, and even force them to sacrifice for the "family". In pre-modern Chinese society and literature, the "individual" is often absent and silent, and even if there were stories of personal heroes, they were still always struggling and sacrificing for their family and country. For example, Hua Mulan took her father's place in the conscription army as a female for decades. Yet there were also many stories

describing young people's pursuit of free love, their resistance to arranged marriages or powerful forces, in order to reveal the strangling effect of feudal ethics on individuals. *Peacock Flying Southeast, The Romance of West Chamber, the Peony Pavilion, A Dream in Red Mansions* are all prominent representatives of these works. However, generated in a feudal society, the pursuit of "love and happy family" in ancient Chinese literature remained with more physiological and emotional characteristics, and lacked rational consciousness [9]. On the contrary, with the enlightenment of the May Fourth Movement, the marriage in *Regret for the Past* born a distinct imprint of rationalism and individualism.

In 1918, Hu Shi published his famous Ibsenism on *New Youth*, combining literary translation with the dissemination of ideas to introduce and analyze Ibsen's plays. In the essay, Hu Shi came to a conclusion, "society loves despotism most, and tends to crush individuality and suppress the spirit of individual freedom and independence" [4], pointing out the necessity of individual emancipation. This idea was like a strong wind, shocked and inspired young Chinese intellectuals who had always been living under the restraint of feudal family morality. An "Ibsen fever" suddenly appeared in the literary world, his works and thoughts have appeared in various new-style newspapers and magazines. Under the influence of characters with independent liberation spirit like Nora in *A Doll's House*, Chinese writers vigorously attacked the despotism values of the feudal culture, especially the family-centered ideas which restrained people with traditional ethics and arranged marriage, while boldly calling for personality and marriage based on personal will, trying to liberate the "individual" from the traditional authority. Many young people left their families in pursuit of individual freedom, just like Zijun and Juansheng.

## **2.3. Contradiction of Family-centred Value and Individualism**

However, the ideological emancipation was not achieved overnight. In the heart of these young intellectuals who pursued free marriage and personal liberation, the influence of feudal family culture still existed. At the beginning, Zijun firmly said "I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me!" [6]. These words seemed to be a strong independent declaration of a female who bravely pursued her own freedom and love. According to some critics, Zijun, who boldly abandoned the traditional morality and left her uncle's home, is definitely a "new woman" with ideas of individual liberation [7]. However, the real "new woman" should have an absolute identification with self-value as well as independence in various aspects such as personality, thought, and property. Obviously, Lu Xun did not endow Zijun with such characters in *Regret for the Past*. She did not leave the traditional family to achieve her own value in society, but to be the wife of Juansheng. And she even sold her only gold ring and earrings to join the "shares" of

their family. This act seemed to embody Zijun's independent consciousness of pursuing personality equality in love, however, from the perspective of family culture, it just revealed the traditional "family first" value in her heart—Zijun regarded the small family she and Juansheng had formed as an undivided whole. In her view, love and marriage did not distinguish between "you" and "me", so she was willing to give up her financial autonomy and wholeheartedly devote herself to the family [2]. She had no money, no work and no personal ideal, and what she cared about after establishing their family was nothing more than trivial chores. In this case, her "individualism" only focused on the rebellion against her feudal family and the pursuit of free love, but failed to realize the importance of self-achievement and financial independence as an individual in the society. From this point of view, Zijun's "determination" and "rebellion" before she left her family, and her "satisfaction" and "cowardice" after cohabitation with Juansheng are not the dual opposition of her personality, but the internal unity of her thoughts, which was essentially dominated by traditional family values [2]. Her rebellion against the tradition was out of love, an emotional instinct rather than a rational idea, just like the pursuit of Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion* or Cui Yingying in *The Romance of West Chamber*, rather than Nora's awakening of independent consciousness. The satisfaction she showed in her marriage was also a normal expression of traditional women's sense of family belonging. The long-term suppression of traditional family morality has been internalized into her female self-suppression [5]—this value was deeply rooted in her mind, influencing her behavior and beliefs, and even in turn attacking and destabilizing the new ideas that have just been formed. Zijun's unconscious backwardness eventually bored Juansheng, and led to the tragedy of their marriage. In contrast to Zijun, in Juansheng's mind, individualism occupied a more important position, which was reflected in his "self-preservation tendency" [8]. When the couple were brought before the ordeal of poverty and hunger, Juansheng chose to gradually lose his attachment to their small family—he ate the chicks and abandoned their dog Asui, as there was not enough food. Then he abandoned Zijun because her sorrow and trance bored him, and once the love is gone, Zijun was just another burden for him. Finally, for his own spiritual comfort and survival, Juansheng chose to forget Zijun and move on to a new future. All that he had done seemed to be a manifestation of his moral defects, but more importantly, they also revealed the "selfish individualism" of Juansheng. He enjoyed the sweetness of a marriage based on free love, but was unwilling to share with Zijun the inevitable housework and other burdens that came with it, and he eventually gave up Zijun and their love for personal development. In this small family, Juansheng was the one who had always been demanding and protecting himself by harming the interests of the other. However, it is worth noting that this practice of "abandoning wife", which destroyed the integrity of the family is equally inexcusable in traditional Chinese family morality. From this point of

view, between the couple, Juansheng was the one who held a more thorough rebellious individualism against traditional Chinese family culture. But at the same time, this self-centred value also hurt Zijun and resulted in their love tragedy. Therefore, the conflict between "family culture" and individualism is not only manifested in the confrontation between the two and society as well as the feudal family, but also lies between them—Zijun is more family-oriented, while Juansheng is more individual-oriented, even though the sense of responsibility for family and the pursuit of his personal development tormented him all the time, Juansheng turned to an egoistic individualism.

### 3. DISCUSSION

In the final analysis, although the May Fourth Movement has spread the idea of individualism in China, feudal thoughts related with family culture were still deeply rooted in the hearts of Chinese people, and even the enlightened intellectuals themselves could not avoid the subtle influence that has lasted for thousands of years. Between the two contradictory values formed a crevice, in which countless modern Chinese intellectuals struggled to survive. In the tragedy of marriage and survival in *Regret for the Past*, this contradiction can be summarized as follows. Firstly, in a semi-colonized and semi-feudalism society, the traditional family-centred value still existed and oppressed young people who have emancipated their minds and pursued independence whether materially or spiritually, making it hard for them to step into a real "new life". Secondly, the intellectuals themselves who were not fully enlightened also struggled between the remnants of family values in their subconscious and the awakening of individualism. Last but not least, the division of emphasis on "family" and "individual" between the two parties in marriage. The backgrounds of the marriage between Zijun and Juansheng were the long-standing family-centered value system and the deep-rooted cultural genes, meanwhile, the emancipation had given this love a modern individualism color. The new and old ideas collided with each other, but failed to reach a harmonious unification. Finally, this kind of contradiction led to their marriage tragedy.

The May Fourth Movement introduced the enlightenment ideas of rationalism and individualism to China, inspiring young intellectuals with "new ideas" to pursue personal liberation and free love. However, Lu Xun had clearly realized that without a complete liberation of the society, the awakening of the intellectuals themselves was incomplete and had little power. Ideological liberation is not achieved overnight, but a slow process. However, in China, the fact was just like what Li Helin said: "They have developed these thoughts over a period of 200 to 300 years, but we have shortened it to 20 years to reflect them" [1]. In this case, it is no wonder that the enlightenment idea of individualism was not deepened in China during that period, thus leading to its contradiction with family morality. And one thing that can not be

ignored is that, even in contemporary society where feudal concepts oppressing people's normal desires and rights have almost been broken down, deep in the hearts of some Chinese people, "family" still has an irreplaceable position. The contradiction is still affecting the marriage and family of modern Chinese. However, it does not mean that they could not coexist. In a liberated and highly developed modern society, "family" and "individual" should not have become opposites. In Ibsenism, Hu Shi put forward the concept of the "sound individualism", which is a positive development of individual personality, "there must be two conditions: first, the individual must have free will; second, the individual must be responsible for their words and deeds[4]". The former refers to the personal rights of free choice, and the latter emphasizes on the responsibility of the individual for all his or her choices and actions. This undoubtedly provided a way for enlightenment intellectuals suffering from the contradiction—to pursue their own independence, and at the same time, to abandon extreme selfish individualism, and maintain a sense of responsibility of oneself as well as the new family based on free love. The right solution is that, society, instead of just individuals, also needs to make an effort to find a balance between family culture and individualism.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The marriage crisis of Zijun and Juansheng resulted not only from their survival problem, but also from the irreconcilable contradictions between the family culture and individualism. In China in the 1920s, when the nature of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society had not been changed completely and the ideological enlightenment was not deepened, traditional family-centred value and individualism would inevitably come into conflict. The depiction of the contradiction has analyzed the heavy burden of traditional family values on individuals, probes into the reasons why it was hard to carry out individual liberation during the period of May Fourth Movement, and also provides enlightenment for the current marriage problem and ideological change in China from a more far-reaching and broader perspective. However, due to the author's limited theoretical level and research ability, there are still some deficiencies in this study. Firstly, as the contradiction between traditional family culture and individualism still exists in modern society, there is a lack of relevant examples and corresponding social background analysis. If it can be deeply discussed and compared with the writing period of *Regret for the Past*, it can provide further help for the study of marriage problems and social cultural psychology of both two periods. Secondly, the reasons behind Zijun and Juansheng's different emphasis on family culture and individualism are also worth further exploration. For example, it may result from the fact that men are consistently more socially connected, and their ability to absorb new information and change old ways of thinking is likely to be better than women's in some sense. The difference of social status over a long period of time might

have affected their ideology, which relates to gender issues in marriage and society. The above aspects are waiting for follow-up research for further exploration and improvement.

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