Of all the different forms of cultural changes in modern China, the quest for a new self-identity is perhaps the most crucial in China’s transition from tradition to modernity. Identity is never considered as a psychical dimension of the self in traditional Chinese culture. However, in the West, ‘identity’ is a psychological term, which covers both concepts of ‘self-sameness’ and ‘sharing certain characteristics with other people’ in the formation of selfhood (Erikson 110). Identity speaks of one’s relation with one’s self, as well as one’s relation with others. Hence, any discussion of identity and its formation must inevitably begin with the construction of self, which is often examined in relation to subjectivity in the Western dichotomy between mind and body (Ames 157; Tam and Yip 200–1).

In cultures other than that of the West, such as the Chinese, the ‘self’ is conceived as a psychosomatic process of socialization involving both body and mind. The culture-specificity of the concept renders the discussion of identity impossible to be based on a universally-accepted notion of the self. Furthermore, the Chinese term for identity is ‘rentong,’ which means ‘to recognize oneself as the same with others.’ In the customary Chinese usage, identity always means to be identified with others, rather than to be distinguished from others as in the modern Western tradition. Added to the problem of cultural difference in the comparative study of identity is the recent debate on a new paradigm for the construction of female identity, which is often considered as ‘a process’ (Gardiner 349), in which a woman constructs her self in relational roles with others. Yet, so far there is still a lack of a full definition of female identity and all attempts on the issue are variant constructions only.

The traditional Chinese notion of the self is so different from its Western counterpart that the comparative study of identity must at the same time be based on the comparative study of self. To begin with, the self, male or female, is an elusive concept in both Chinese and Western cultures. In the
West, there are theorists who believe that it is a category of the mind, and there are also others who think that it is a physical entity, which can be objectified for scientific study. Other binary notions of the self include those of subject versus object, fact versus construct, structure versus process, unity versus fragmentation, consistency versus inconsistency, and stability versus instability. The self can be examined from many different vantage points, but central to the problem of identity is the conception of the self as a cultural construct. This paper will focus on the modern Chinese attempts by male and female writers in the construction of the female self in relation to the formation of self-identity.

The traditional Chinese self is a moral self defined as ‘the center of relationships’ in a socializing process, in which the person cultivates (or represses) himself for the purpose of perfecting his self to better serve others (Tu 231). As succinctly summed up in *Daxue* (Great learning): ‘Cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world,’ such a Confucian view reveals a strong sense of communitarianism, in which the self is repressed into a relational role-self.¹ In this relationship a person is not an independent individual, and he lives mainly to fulfill dutifully the various roles expected of him. Individuality is only allowed within the limits of roles. Defined in such a way, the traditional Chinese self is a product of Confucian discourse, which is part of the self-other relationship and is negated as an agent or subject.

The major legacy of Chinese modernity since the May Fourth 1919 New Culture Movement can be summarized in the emergence of a new concept of the person as an individual with a strong sense of agency in defiance of the Confucian notion of a role-self. Thus when individualism was first introduced to China in the early twentieth century, it was received as an explosive blow to traditional Chinese culture. The introduction of the Western concepts of democracy, accompanying Chinese discussions of individualism, contributed directly to the disintegration of the Confucian moral system, which is based on the reciprocal ruler–subject/father–son relationships (Tu 234). Lu Xun, the foremost modern Chinese thinker, is among the early few intellectuals who introduce the revolutionary ideas of European Romanticism and Ibsenian individualism as an antidote to the collapsing Confucian moral order and bring to the attention of the Chinese the sense of the individual as an existential self and uncompromising self exemplified in Ibsen’s hero, Dr. Stockmann.

In a similar vein, Hu Shi, the American educated scholar and spokesman of the May Fourth cultural movement, introduces Ibsenism and strongly attacks the Confucian moral order as dying institutions in China in his

¹The concept of role is central to the Confucian moral as stated in the following: ‘Let the ruler be ruler, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son’ (Analects XII, 11).