The members of the Creation Society, who were to play such vital roles in the construction of this new literature, were all young when the Society was formed in 1921, and the exuberance of their early writings was in keeping with the character of the age. Moreover, the most important of the founding members, including Guo Moruo (1892–1978), Yu Dafú (1896–1945), Zhang Ziping (1893–1959), and Cheng Fangwu (1897–1984), were all in Japan when the idea of forming a literary society was conceived. All four had been sent to Japan by the Chinese government in order to acquire practical skills, which they were expected to apply to the modernization of China upon their return. However, as with Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, and other writers who had preceded them to Japan as exchange students, the Creationists, in Japan during the former part of the Taishô period, came under the spell of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western literature and decided to pursue the path of the literati (wenren).1

If youthfulness is one of the hallmarks of the writers who rose to prominence during the May Fourth era, then the Creationists can be considered representative of the age.2 In all, the young writers who would later form the nucleus of the Creation Society spent from five to twelve years studying in Japan. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that their intellectual biases and literary tastes should have been informed by their experiences in Japan.

The idea of forming a literary coterie was first conceived in 1918 when Guo Moruo, who had entered Kyushu Imperial University in order to pursue medical studies, met with Cheng Fangwu, an acquaintance of his, and decided to enlist the aid of a few like-minded students in founding a literary coterie and producing a magazine. At
roughly the same time, Yu Dafu, who was studying economics and Zhang Ziping, who was majoring in geology, both at Tokyo Imperial University, were also discussing the idea of producing a literary magazine. Due to financial problems and a shortage of manuscripts, their plans for a magazine were eventually aborted. When Guo contacted Yu, with whom he had become acquainted soon after arriving in Japan, the stage was set for a merging of the two groups and the establishment of a new literary society. When Guo contacted Yu, with whom he had become acquainted soon after arriving in Japan, the stage was set for a merging of the two groups and the establishment of a new literary society.3

The original aims of the Society were spelled out in a number of places including an essay by Guo Moruo, which appeared in May 1923 in the Creation Weekly. In this essay entitled “Women de wenxue xin yundong” (Our New Literary Movement), after identifying nature and history as the Society’s true teachers, Guo expressed the Society’s dissatisfaction with the current state of Chinese literature. He further indicated their intention to create a completely new movement to eradicate the received literary tradition in order to cultivate new modes of expression.4

Similar aims had been articulated earlier in a manifesto entitled “Chunwenxue jikan Chuangzao chuban yugao” (Announcement of the Publication of the Pure Literature Journal Creation), which appeared in Shishi xinbao (Current Affairs News) on September 29 and 30 in 1921. In the manifesto, which included the names of the seven founding members, they announced the imminent publication of the Creation Quarterly and stated their intention to create a new national literature to serve the future. They also included a proposed table of contents for the first issue.5

This study concentrates on the fiction produced by the Creation Society during the first phase of its existence—years in which the self-referential fiction under discussion was a prominent part of their literary output. This is not to suggest that all of the early fiction of the Creation Society was of the self-referential variety, nor does it mean that in later phases of their careers the writers associated with the Creation Society produced no self-referential fiction. Nevertheless, by focusing on this earliest phase of the Creation Society one can most effectively explore the development of such fiction and most clearly demonstrate its connections to the Japanese shishōsetsu.

The Creation Society was established in 1921 in Tokyo at the residence of Yu Dafu and was disbanded by government command in February 1929 in Shanghai. The period under consideration here includes the earliest efforts of the individual writers even before the Society was officially founded in 1921 and extends until 1924 when,