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## The New Woman: An Age of Revolution Through the Eyes of Twentieth Century Chinese Women Writers

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The New Woman: An Age of Revolution Through the Eyes of Twentieth Century Chinese  
Women Writers

Senior Project Submitted to  
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of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## ABSTRACT

During an age of revolution, Chinese women writers began to emerge. While the country was going through an internal struggle for modernity and cultural rebirth, women fought their own battle to make their voices heard from within the literary field. This thesis investigates various stories by Chinese women writers published between the years of the May Fourth Movement and well into the Cultural Revolution. This investigation endeavors to illustrate the changing “New Woman” ideology, originally coined at the beginning of the May Fourth Movement, as well as analyze the various themes in women’s work such as love, marriage, family, social structures, and social behaviors. This thesis will ponder upon the subversive aspects of women’s writing that make it distinctly different from their male counterparts that has left a lasting impression on Chinese writers today. As a result, this thesis will also serve as a lens through which the reader can view the age of revolution in early 20th century China.



## **INTRODUCTION: A History of Modern Chinese Women Writers**

The twentieth century is one of the most crucial periods of social and political change for China. In 1911, the several millennial long tradition of imperial dynasties came to an end at the hands of young revolutionaries who wanted to move the country in a new direction. After decades of civil war, the revolutionaries, known as the Chinese Communist Party, emerged victorious and formed the current People's Republic of China (PRC) that we know today. While Chinese society as a whole was changing, there was also a revolution happening within the literary community.

Prior to the end of the imperial dynasties, there were very few women writers and even less were acknowledged in this field. This was due to the fact that according to Chinese tradition, women's lives were primarily determined by their relationships to men. This is evident in many ritualistic aspects of life, such as women kneeling repeatedly during their marriage ceremony as a symbol of "her departure from her natal family and her entry, in a position of utmost subservience, into her husband's lineage" (viii).<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of Chinese citizens in traditional Chinese society were of the peasant class and, men and women alike, were illiterate, only passing stories through folk songs. Even women of wealth, though often educated and literate, remained restricted to their domestic roles as a daughter, wife, or mother and focused their skills on sewing, weaving, embroidering, and other housework. This submissive role coupled with a lack of literacy and/ or restricted lifestyle accounted for the general absence of women's literature in the history of Chinese literature.

Novels by Chinese women authors began to flourish at the start of the May Fourth Movement.<sup>2</sup> The May Fourth Movement was a turning point for China, from being weak to forming a new nation through, although partly, the development of new literature. The proliferation of women writers continued until the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In his *Female Consciousness in Contemporary Chinese Women's Writing*, Haixin Jiang states that the reason for this sudden halt is due to the restriction on "gender-specific thoughts and experiences in literature".<sup>11</sup> However, this surge left a lasting impression on Chinese literature that can still be felt in the 21st century. The three authors I cover in this thesis Ding Ling, Xiao Hong, and Eileen Chang all highlight the ever-changing "New Woman" ideal that first emerged in the 20th century. They all cover themes such as love, the female self, family, social structures, education, and social behavior portraying their own "New Women" ideal.

One question that I found often appeared when I research the topic of women writers was whether or not there was a distinction between male authors and female authors writing. If there was no distinction between the two, then there would be no "gender-specific thought and experiences" that Haixin Jiang mentions. In Michael Duke's *Modern Chinese Women Writers: Critical Appraisals*, he begins his analysis with a quote by the British writer at the forefront of modernist literature in the 20th century, Virginia Woolf. "A women's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine".<sup>4</sup> This seemed to be the case with the authors I read. The common characteristic of their writing is their expression of emotions, while illustrating a paradoxical mundane narrative. By mundane, I mean that their narratives and

protagonists, for the most part, lack any extra-ordinary qualities, merely presenting an individual's personal life in an autobiographical form.

In addition to Virginia Woolf's analysis of the distinction between male and female writers, Chinese author Chen Shunxin also argues that when male writing and female writing during the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution were compared, it was apparent that "the narrator's position, cognitive extent, and vantage point...[in men's literature] can be summarized as 'authoritative, collective, and [are] thus in the mainstream'," whereas their female counterparts exhibit more emotional and individualistic qualities in their writing and are thus marginalized.<sup>11</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution, all arts, including literature, were bent to political and propaganda means under the guidelines of the Central Cultural Revolution group. Art during that period were expected to contain elements that were "red, shining, and bright" to encourage revolution.<sup>11</sup> Any written work created that posed a challenge to the Maoist ideology resulted in the persecution and torture of the author and nearly all creative writing stopped. It wasn't until the Cultural Revolution came to an end when there was resurgence in women writers.

### **Inherent Marginality**

Despite the increasing attention Chinese women writers have gained recently, they still remain at the margins of the literary forefront. This becomes very evident by merely analyzing the diction used to refer to women's literature. Michael Duke highlights the "fact of Chinese social and linguistic reality" that is the term 作家 (writer) is not usually used to refer to women writers, but rather the phrase 女作家 (female writer).<sup>6</sup> At

first glance, this doesn't seem to be of any significance, however, by coining this term to women's literature, it forces their work into a subcategory or subgenre that is far removed from the realm of mainstream literature.

The phenomenon of inherent marginalization is further perpetuated with the term 小说 that has come to mean novel or fiction. 小说, which literally translates to "small talk", had never been viewed with the same scholarly reverence as poetry and philosophy had prior to the 20th century. "In traditional China prior to modern times, 小说 was a catchall term for writings that did not belong to official history, classics, or orthodox branches of learning" (21)<sup>6</sup>. 小说 first appeared in Zhuangzi meaning "chatter of no significant consequence" and during the Qin and Han dynasties, it began to mean "small talk on the streets or market." It wasn't until the early 20th century when 小说 became more widely written. Around this period there was also a surge in women writing prose.

### **Reflection of the Status of Women in Society**

One major, overarching theme present in all of the literature analyzed in this thesis is the status of women in modern Chinese society. Ding Ling, Xiao Hong, and Eileen Chang all employ various forms of narratives that comment on the status of women in modern Chinese society and ultimately attempt to subvert modern societal norms. In Duke's critical essay, he lists several general themes that he believes characterize many late twentieth century women writers' works. Of those themes, I believe that there are four that are applicable to the writers I discuss here. (xi)<sup>4</sup> The first theme is that "Female (quite often first-person) protagonists predominate". In all but one of the stories outlined in the chapters ahead, the protagonist is female. These female leads are often mirror images of the authors themselves, depicted with similar characteristics such as place of birth or political beliefs. An example of this would be Ding Ling's protagonist Du Wanxiang. Throughout the novel Du is illustrated as a daughter of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that serves the people wholeheartedly. Ding Ling had always been a political activist in the Cultural Revolution, however, her constant critic of gender standards in modern society resulted in her arrest. She was sentenced to undergo self-reform and willingly accepted this punishment, in order to become a cog for the CCP. This character design is meant to reflect Ding Ling's reformed self.

The second generalization observed was that the narratives' primary concerns were the problems of women in modern society. More specifically, these problems "revolved around sex, love, marriage, and family." (xi)<sup>4</sup> This leads into the third general theme present in these works: these problems of sex, love, marriage, and family are "almost always intended to reflect and comment upon large and important contemporary

social issues, including not only the feminist issue of women's place in Chinese society but also other important political and economical issues of the day.” (xi)<sup>4</sup> However, in the case of the selected reading presented here, I have found these authors very rarely wrote pieces focusing on political events, unlike male writers. Rather, they focus on the social aspects of life, such as in Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*. This piece recounts the daily lives of several peasants living in a small village in northern China. The story follows one character in particular, a young girl name Golden Bough. When she mistakenly becomes pregnant out of wedlock, she is forced into an abusive marriage in order to save face. Xiao Hong's detailed description of the horrible abuse Golden Bough succumbs to is meant to reflect social gender standards, as women's worth was measured by their relationship to men. A married woman was viewed more favorably than a single mother. Thus, Golden Bough was socially obligated to marry.

The final generalization observed in these works was that the style in which they were written is often exploratory. Modern Chinese female authors often illustrate the protagonist with characteristics outside of social norms. Given that most of the works listed here were written between the end of the dynasty era and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the authors used their narratives as a canvas to brainstorm what their role in this new society would be as well as what kinds of social standards should be set. Writers like Eileen Chang expressed their vision of the status of women in modern society or the “new woman” ideal by embellishing her female protagonist with modern or progressive characteristic.

## Chapter 1: The New Woman: Gender, Revolution, and Love

### Miss Sophia's Diary- Ding Ling

*Miss Sophia's Diary* was one of Ding Ling's first works of fiction, which brought her recognition as a writer. This short story, although fictional, consists of almost daily diary entries of the protagonist's, Sophia's, life over the course of three months. This autobiography gives a detailed look into the psychological, physical, and emotional turmoil that Sophia must first go through to be reborn. On the surface, this short story seems to be merely about a woman's mixed feelings of love for a man, however, this work is rather socially and politically charged. One can view this autobiography as a metaphor for a change or deviation from traditional Confucian ideology of what a woman's role and behavior in society should be. This reading of the text is extremely relevant given the period during which it was written.

Nearly a decade prior to *Miss Sophia's Diary's* publication, thousands of university students and faculty took to the streets of several major cities in China to protest. There were many issues being protested against, however, the major issue was the settlement treaty at Versailles that gave Japan a large amount of territory in mainland China. This protest was a milestone for young Chinese citizens as it allowed them to come together as a unified entity and express their opposition towards "traditional education, Confucianism, arranged marriages, patriarchal family structures, and suppression of women and their rights".<sup>11</sup> These series of protests continued until 1921 and became known as the May Fourth Movement, named after the initial student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919.<sup>11</sup>

*Miss Sophia's Diary* very subtly mirrors the revolutionary ideas of the student protesters of the May Fourth Movement. By just analyzing the way in which the story is written, it is evident that this is a modern text, with the mention of hostels, films, and European Medieval Knights. However, the most striking indicator of modern themes is the protagonist's name, "Sophia." Despite the main character being a natural born Chinese citizen, she possesses [do you mean possesses?] a distinctly western name, whereas all of the other characters, including an overseas Chinese, have Chinese names. This detail is very significant as it is the first instance where the reader views her as a progressive/ modern character. Ding Ling's purpose for naming Sophia as such becomes clearer as she continues to shape Sophia into the perfect example of the "New Woman" or "Modern Girl" in Chinese culture.<sup>15</sup>

In actuality, Sophia's "New Woman" character isn't really achieved until the end of the story. Throughout the autobiography, Sophia is torn between her sexual desire for an overseas Chinese man named Ling Jishi and her moral/social obligation to remain a chaste woman:

It's as if I were involved in a struggle with something, something I want but won't go after. I must find a way of making him give it himself. Yes, I understand myself, I'm only a completely female woman. Women devote all their thoughts to the men they want to conquer. I want to possess him. I want him to give his heart unconditionally and kneel before me begging me to kiss him.

(58)<sup>15</sup>



As we can see, Sophia wants to have a romantic relationship with Ling Jishi, however, she is torn between her sexual desires for him (which reflect the modern side of her) and her social obligation to have the man pursue her. Sophia's sexual desires mirror the desires of May Fourth protesters for women to have the right to choose who they want to marry, while her subconscious is pushing her outward behavior in the direction of Confucian ethics.

Another lens through which to view Sophia's character over the course of the story is as a larva that eventually becomes a butterfly (4).<sup>18</sup> Sophia is from a traditional household and it is her first time away from her family and living in a big city alone. In Rey Chow's *Woman and Chinese Modernity: the Politics of Reading between West and East*, she states that, "we find Sophia referring to herself as being 'wrapped up in my quilt.' This is a condition she wants to leave but to which she repeatedly returns in the course of the story" (164).<sup>2</sup> Sophia is both socially and physically restrained. Initially she lacks any deep friendships, as she estranges herself from the few acquaintances that come to visit her, and is physically bedridden at one point with tuberculosis. Sophia's tiny apartment also acts her physical cocoon, "the four whitewashed walls that stare blankly back at me no matter where I sit. I try to escape by lying on the bed, I'm crushed by the ceiling, just as oppressively white" (51).<sup>15</sup> It is only at the end, when she leaves Beijing and heads south, does she escape her cocoon and realize all the agony she experienced was caused by own inner turmoil.

A significant trait about the characters in this short story is the juxtaposition of the overseas Chinese man from Singapore, Ling Jishi, and the native born Chinese Sophia. As stated before, although she was born in China and most likely never went abroad,

Sophia is the epitome of a progressive or “new woman.” In stark contrast, Ling Jishi grew up in a significantly more modern place than China during the early 20th century. Singapore during the 1920s is often described as a modern and developed age. At the end of the 19th century, Singapore became heavily influenced by the west due to British occupation of the Crown Colony. As a major port city, western industrialization brought new ideas, technology, and cultures to the tiny island. However, one of the most notable progressive achievements was in the “evolution of women’s identity and their enhanced social status during this period”.<sup>15</sup> Being a man from a modern city as such, one would almost expect him to hold similar progressive views, especially when it comes to women’s social status. However, he is arguably the least progressive character in the entire story.

“His tall body, his tender pink face, his soft lips, and his charming eyes could allure a lot of women who were vulnerable to beauty, and his languid manner could bowl over any who were still capable of love. But why should I fall for a hundred-per-cent overseas Chinese just because of those meaningless charms? Really, I've found out from our latest conversations how pathetic his ideas are and what he wants: money, a young wife who would know how to entertain his business friends in the drawing room, and several fat, fair-skinned and very well-dressed sons. What's his idea of love? Spending his money in the whorehouse to buy a moment's physical pleasure, or sitting on a well-upholstered settee with his arms round a scented body, smoking a cigarette and joking with his friends, his left leg folded on his right knee. If he wasn't feeling very

cheerful he'd forged about it and go back home to his wife. His passions are debates; tennis tournaments; going to study at Harvard; becoming a diplomat, an ambassador or a minister; following in his father's professional footsteps; going into the rubber business; becoming a capitalist..."

(69)<sup>15</sup>

From this quote we can see that Ling Jishi is the epitome of a Confucian man. His ideals are in line with those from the traditional Chinese era. Although Sophia is drawn to Ling Jishi's physical appearance, she is also disgusted by his traditionalist personality. Only when she finally gives into desires and kisses him does she realize that she never really loved him, only his outward appearance. Sophia's constant disgust towards Ling Jishi's character and her final physical rejection of him at the end of the novella convey Ding Ling's own disdain of traditionalist beliefs.

### **Du Wanxiang- Ding Ling**

Written before the end of the of the Cultural Revolution but not published until 1978, Ding Ling's final work of fiction *Du Wanxiang* is a short story that starkly contrasts her earlier works, especially *Miss Sophia's Diary*. As opposed to the progressive, feminist ideals that she initially wrote on, *Du Wanxiang* is a narrative about an ideal socialist woman who "served the people heart and soul". At first glance, this parable seems to be inconsistent with Ding Ling's earlier works as the protagonist Du embodies many of the traditional Confucian virtues of women: "tractable, silent, loyal,

gentle, stern, hardworking, and utterly selfless” (330).<sup>15</sup> Over the course of the allegory, Du’s role reappropriates many stereotypes of the average woman of pre-May Fourth China- the orphaned stepdaughter that is married off and becomes a suffering daughter-in-law, loyal wife, and nurturing mother who sings the praise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Despite this 180° change in writing style from Ding Ling’s previous works, Tani Barlow and Gary Bjorge suggest that *Du Wanxiang* is written in this way as a commentary on the political struggle of the socialist woman during the Cultural Revolution. In addition, they argue that this allegory is “Ding Ling’s final laying to rest of Sophia’s desires” (329).<sup>15</sup> There is a heavy emphasis placed on Du’s love of Maoist values, however, there is no mention of Mao’s *Little Red Book* directly. Instead, Du uses her own voice as a daughter of the CCP to motivate the masses. When compared to Sophia, Du doesn’t speak for women directly. Rather, it is subtly hinted at by Ding Ling’s narration as she portrays Du Wanxiang as the “socialist New Woman”.

Much of Ding Ling’s own personal history is reflected in *Du Wanxiang*. In her preliminary writing, Ding Ling pondered the meaning of young women’s lives through provocative, feminine autobiographies such as in *Miss Sophia’s Diary* and *Meng Ke*.<sup>11</sup> However, by the time of *Du Wanxiang*, Ding Ling had joined the CCP for over 40 years. After her husband’s death in 1931 by the hands of the Nationalist Government, Ding Ling’s resolve to serve the Communist Party had be solidified. Initially after her transformation, her work still retained many bold feminist themes such as with her works *Thoughts on March 8* and *When I Was in Xia Village* and she received much criticism for this.<sup>11</sup> On several occasions she questioned the CCP’s efforts at leveling the gender

imbalance and abolishing the double standards towards women. For Ding Ling's constant ridicule of the party, in 1957, she was labeled a "rightist" and sentenced to do manual labor in a remote rural area for self-reform. Ding Ling accepted her punishment stating, "I am willing to be a cog of the Party and revolution; I am willing to go wherever the Party sends me and do whatever the Party wants me to do".<sup>11</sup> This "cog" mentality is precisely the kind that Du Wanxiang possesses throughout the novella.

As Ding Ling's final work of fiction, *Du Wanxiang* is the product of her years of self-reform as well as a laying to rest of her feminist work as there is no mention of sexual desires or bold feminine ideologies. Throughout the novella, Du is portrayed as a self-less, carefree, mundane, and sexless character. The reader's first encounter with her describes her as an eight-year-old girl from a poor village who suffered abuse from her stepmother for three years. Despite her unfortunate upbringing, Du views the world around her through inverted colors:

"By this time she already shouldered a lot of household labor, and got pleasure from it. She could go down for water to the deep, deep gully return with two half-buckets on her shoulder pole, so her father didn't have to do that at all anymore. And every noon, she'd climb a mile up the high steppe to where her father was working, carrying his meager lunch...[her father] could do little more than gaze in silent sympathy...Wanxiang herself paid little attention to such things, preferring instead the wide blue sky and drifting white clouds."

From her childhood, it is evident that Du already embodies the “cog” mentality that is in full bloom in her adulthood. Her family works her to the bone and her hard labor only increases as she gets older and marries into a slightly wealthier family than her own. When her husband requested for Du to accompany him to “the Great Northern Wasteland”, she readily accepts despite her in-laws’ unwillingness to allow her to travel to a place where “criminals had been banished” and “snow fell even in June ... people froze to death or got blown away by the wind.” To this Du simply replied, “if Li Gui can go, why shouldn’t I? Li Gui is part of a population transfer that involves, not just him, but a whole lot of people. If they can live out there, why can’t I?” (336)<sup>15</sup> This kind of statement embodies the right-thinking slogans of Mao Zedong’s “cog” philosophy.

During her time in the Great Northern Wasteland, Du Wanxiang becomes the model worker often portrayed in Chinese literature of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Although she had no formal job, she does house chores and takes responsibility of the chores of the other families in the village such as cleaning the public latrine, making cloth shoes for the other women’s children, and or mending other villagers’ clothes. Despite the tasks being strongly gendered, Du is able to transcend gender through her labor. She willingly shoulders the responsibilities of the group for no pay, thus mirroring the role of a “daughter of the party”.<sup>5</sup> Her selfless acts for the villagers can be viewed as acts for the nation since the role of villagers in the Great Northern Wasteland is to serve the nation. Du’s domestic responsibilities are expanded to serving China as a whole, which Du has dedicated her life to doing.

I chose to analyze these two works by Ding Ling, *Miss Sophia’s Diary* and *Du Wanxiang*, because they illustrate the change of the New Woman identity pre- and post-

Cultural Revolution. As Ding Ling's preliminary work, *Miss Sophia's Diary* exhibited many of Ding Ling's raw, progressive beliefs. *Miss Sophia's Diary* shattered centuries of traditional thought on female conduct with its bold feminist protagonist. By allowing the reader a look into the erotic thoughts of a young woman in search of an independent life, we are able to see her modern self. By juxtaposing the progressive Sophia and her traditionalist love interest Ling Jishi, Ding Ling initiates a discussion on the proper behavior and function women should play in modern society. Ling Jishi categorizes women as objects of pleasure that should remain in the submissive, domestic realm. Sophia, in contrast, casts women in a powerful, independent light. By her rejecting Ling Jishi at the end of the novella, Ding Ling very clearly rejects traditionalist ideas and aligns her beliefs of what women's place in society is with those of Sophia.

By the end of Ding Ling's literary career, her writing style became tamer as she began to conceal her opposition to the current gender standards of the time. *Du Wanxiang*, a product of Ding Ling's years of self-reform, on the surface, is an ungendered piece about a woman who embodies the CCP's cog mentality of working for the good of the nation. However, despite being a politically charged novella, it also subtly questions gender equality during the Cultural Revolution by bringing to its center a narration of a woman's achievements in both the domestic and political realms.

## Chapter 2: The New Woman and Women as Victims and Scapegoats

### Hands- Xiao Hong

The story follows Wang Yaming, the daughter of a poor dyer as she studies at an all-girls school. Throughout the story, students ridiculed her for her bad English, strange laugh and especially her dye-blackened hands. Although she tries her best to succeed in school, it is evident that she feels unwelcome and is often called “the freak” or “special case”. This mistreatment is not only at the hands of students but faculty as well. When Wang’s father comes to visit her at school, she asks for a pair of gloves to cover her discolored hands, but even this doesn’t stop the principal from cloistering Wang away when visitors come to the school. “What we want is uniformity, and even if you wore gloves you still wouldn’t be like the others” (52).<sup>9</sup>

As the story continues, Wang’s isolation becomes even more extreme with the other students at her school refusing to share a bed with her, forcing her to sleep on the bench in the corridor. Regardless of the mistreatment, Wang tries her best to brush it off and focus on her studies even though she remains at the bottom of the class. The narrator, through whom we view the events, begins to sympathize and become friends with Wang as the story progresses. When the narrator lends Wang her copy of Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, Wang is triggered by the book’s protagonist’s resemblance to herself that she discloses her family’s financial situation to the narrator. Due to her father’s meager wages as a dyer, her family had to sacrifice every penny they earned to send Wang to school with hopes that she would teach her younger siblings when she was done.



Throughout the story, Xiao Hong portrays Wang as a strong yet sympathetic character. Even when ridiculed by teachers and students alike and at the bottom of her class for the whole, Wang's determination to succeed is undeterred. Her character can be seen as an embodiment of the working class of the mid-1930s who strived to better themselves. The shift of the narrator's attitude towards Wang from one who bullied the protagonist to one who sympathizes with her also emphasizes the author's desire for the reader to sympathize with Wang. Since the narrator remains nameless throughout the story, she can take the form of any reader.

### **The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River- Xiao Hong**

Xiao Hong's first novel, *The Field of Life and Death*, was written in 1934, while *Tales of Hulan River* was her final novel published in 1942 before her death. Despite having an almost ten-year gap between these two works, they are both considered to be among Xiao Hong's most notable novels for their enthralling depictions of the visceral experiences of village women's lives. These stories portray the chaotic and brutal nature of rural life and for this reason, I have chosen to analyze these two novels together.

Xiao Hong's usage of a disjointed narrative in *The Field of Life and Death* illustrates her perspective of village life during the 1920s and 1930s. During this period Japan had begun its invasion of what was then known to the outside world as Manchuria, throwing the country into chaos. The disjointed nature of this piece mimics the chaos felt by villagers during that period.

Despite being labeled by critics as "anti-Japanese literature" for its seemingly destructive presentation of the Japanese invasion, this only arises in the final chapters of

*The Field*. Rather, Xiao Hong's focus is on the self-destructive power of the feudal system. Throughout the novel the constant references to crippling poverty at the hands of greedy landowners and superstition that turn the villagers callous to the point of being almost not human. This animalistic metaphor is perpetuated as Xiao Hong continuously refers to the villagers as animals. "Five minutes later, the young girl was still pinned to the ground like a helpless chick in the grasp of a wild animal...having been interrupted, the husky young man left the sorghum field with the girl, like a hound with its prey." (16)<sup>7</sup> Xiao Hong's comparisons of villagers to animals can also be viewed as a representation of the relationship between the landlords and the villagers: cattle that worked the field for their master.

Xiao Hong's emphasis on the animalistic behavior of the villagers appears ironic when compared to the treatment of animals and women/children in the novel. In the beginning of the story a goat from the Li family goes missing. The father Two-and-a-Half Li spends days looking for the goat, even willingly braving a thunderstorm to do so. When he returned from his search unsuccessful, Granny Pockface begins to weep miserably "my... my goat. I fed it every day... and it grew. I raised it with my own hands."(9)<sup>7</sup> The amount of concern for this animal is starkly contrasted with the emotionless recollection of the death of Mother Wang's daughter within this same chapter. As Mother Wang describes the gruesome death scene, she states, "the death of a child is nothing. Do you really think I'd moan and wail over that? At first I shook a little. But when I saw the wheat field out in front me, I had no regrets, and didn't shed a single tear. That year we had a fine harvest." (11)<sup>7</sup> This juxtaposition of farm animals and human life is a commentary on value being placed on material goods during the 20s and

30s: due to extreme poverty, farm animals and fruitful harvests were cherished more than the lives of children.

From a feminist perspective, one can view the treatment of children in this novel as a subversion of traditional patriarchal norms. In traditional society, women had three main roles, to be a daughter, wife, and mother. Their domain is within the household as they are subject to obey the commands from the men in their life, whether that be from a father, husband or son. Mother Wang's feelings towards her dead child subvert the traditional behavior of a mother mourning the loss of a child. Mother Wang also broke traditional norms by marrying three times. However, she remains the most independent female character in the novel and is often juxtaposed with other married women.<sup>17</sup> In chapter 4, Mother Wang witnesses the slow death of a once beautiful woman Yueying. In her youth, Yueying had been the most beautiful women in Fisherman's village, with eyes so expressive that anyone who met her gaze felt pleasure and warmth: "A gentle woman, no one had ever heard her raise her voice in laughter or in anger."<sup>(32)</sup><sup>7</sup> However, after marriage, she soon becomes paralyzed from the waist down and is often heard sobbing. A year after being inflicted with paralysis, Yueying's husband neglects her completely leaving her to die in a pile of her own excrements. The extreme contrast between Yueying's premarital beauty and post-union decline clearly reflects Xiao Hong's critical perspective of traditional marriage. Yueying's physical impairment is a metaphor for women being sequestered to the household in traditional society.

In contrast, Xiao Hong portrays Mother Wang as a progressive, indomitable character, which becomes very evident after the failed rebellion against the landlord by her husband. Due to increasing rent prices, Mother Wang's husband Zhao San and the

other men of the village plot to murder the their landlord Second Master Liu. While many of the wives of the villagers are unaware of their husbands' plans, Mother Wang is well aware of it and even joins the rebellion. However, her role in the revolt illustrates her superiority to the male villagers. She not only manages to get a gun for her husband, but also teaches Zhao San who "had never used one... how to put in the gunpowder and how to load the buckshot." However, their rebellion soon comes to an abrupt end when Zhao Sun breaks the leg of a thief he mistook to be a servant of Second Master Liu and is imprisoned. Once released on the order of Second Master Liu, Zhao San becomes humble and gentle towards both the landlord and his family. He willingly accepts the increase in rent and is forced to weave and sell chicken cages to get by. Mother Wang, in contrast, becomes the dominant figure of the family, keeping track of the money earned from Zhao San's sales and often belittles her husband. This inversion of gender roles is another method Xiao Hong employs to break traditional norms.

Like many other women writers of her time, Xiao Hong wrote with her heart rather than for political reasons or propaganda. In both *The Field of Life and Death* and *Tales of Hulan River* she depicts women as victims of traditional society and suffer the most. Their subordinate roles in society make them the scapegoats for their male counterparts' violent frustrations.<sup>14</sup> During a horrifying childbirth scene in chapter 6 of *The Field of Life and Death*, Second Sister's husband is unsympathetic of her pain and insults her as she remains unresponsive.

"The naked woman could no longer even crawl, unable to manage a final burst of effort in this life-and-death moment. Though it was getting light outside, fear lay heavily in the house like a corpse... A man stumbled

in. He was drunk. Half his face was red and swollen; he came up to the curtain and snarled; ‘Give me my boots!’ The woman could not reply...’Feign death, will you? Let’s see how long you can keep that up!’...Whenever he saw his wife giving birth, that was how he showed his disapproval.”

(44)<sup>7</sup>

Despite men’s insensitivity shown towards women’s suffering, Xiao Hong is also able to use this as leverage to illustrate their resilience. When Mother Wang swallows poison after the death of her son, her husband is prepared to accept her death and awaits her last breath. Growing impatient, Zhao San attempts to force her last breath by “greedily press[ing] down hard on her with the pole as if it were a knife laid across her waist.” As he is ready to bury her, Mother Wang miraculously comes back to life, as if defying her husband’s hopes for her death. Under a feminist lens, this supernatural episode is an expression of Xiao Hong’s belief that women are capable of choosing their own destiny.

### **Chapter 3: Shanghai Modern: Urban Cosmopolitanism and Chinese Transcultural Modernisms**

#### **Love in a Fallen City- Eileen Chang**

Whereas the other two writers I have analyzed thus far wrote on more socially controversial matters such as the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese Communist Party, and class systems, Eileen Chang remained apolitical in her work, only concerning herself with personal matters. (17)<sup>16</sup> While most writers of her time depicted great historical events such as war and revolution, Eileen Chang focused much more on relationships between men and women. She was even quoted saying, “all I really write about are some trivial things that happen between men and women. There is no war or revolution in my works.” (17)<sup>16</sup> However, these “trivial” matters can be framed to reflect how they influenced major political events of the time. In this section, I will show that in the melodramatic romance *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang depicts the conflict between marriage and love in a semi traditional-semi modern society.

Before going further, it is important to first distinguish what is meant by “love” in Chinese society and by Chinese writers themselves. During my research, I have come across two different definitions of love. To borrow from Haixin, the two levels of love are “ the spiritual and the amorous”.(43)<sup>11</sup> He differentiates the two by defining the spiritual as romantic love and the amorous as primarily physical, carnal desires. Although different, they are not mutually exclusive. These two forms of love are often present in Chinese women’s literature, but are easily confused and conflated. Momentarily returning to my discourse on *Miss Sophia’s diary* from chapter 1, I mention how Sophia had “fall[en] for [the] hundred-per-cent overseas Chinese” Ling Jishi. In that case, Ding Ling

was, in fact, portraying the second form of love, amorous. Sophia felt no spiritual love towards him due to his traditional beliefs and therefore abandons him. Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, by contrast, contains both forms of love, as I will demonstrate later.

The story begins by mentioning that the main family of the story, the Bai family, still moved "by the old clock" rather than succumbing to the daylight saving time.<sup>1</sup> Although this detail seems rather trivial, it indicates that the Bai family is behind the times of the modern world. Even though "their singing was behind the beat; they couldn't keep up with the huqin of life." In this sense, the Bai family represents traditional Chinese customs during China's transition from traditionalism to modernity.

One exception to this is the female protagonist Bai Liusu. She, unlike the rest of her family, exhibits some modern characteristics. She takes the initiative in divorcing her husband after suffering from abuse and moves back in with her extended family. With neither money to support herself nor an education to establish herself professionally, she lacks any respect from her family. Daily, she is taunted and insulted by her family members for her decision to divorce her husband, instilling in her psyche that "[her] life is already over." (119)<sup>1, 18</sup> She is well aware that she occupies the lowest rung of the family's hierarchy, but is unable to elevate her status without marriage. After eight years she is forced out once again by her in-laws who insist on following traditional customs. Thus, she is forced to remarry in order to save face.

Liusu is torn between the traditional and modern worlds. She insists on maintaining her independent, modern spirit while simultaneously being forced to fulfill her Confucian duties.

“Following the undulating tune, Liusu's head tilted to one side, and her hands and eyes started to gesture subtly. As she performed in the mirror, the huqin no longer sounded like a huqin, but like strings and flutes intoning a solemn court dance...the music came to a discordant halt. The huqin went on playing outside, but it was telling tales of fealty and filial piety, chastity and righteousness: distant tales that had nothing to do with her.”

(121) <sup>1</sup>

Liusu's performance illustrates her internal divided self by transforming the huqin, which was initially “behind the beat” (a representation of classical China) into strings and flutes, symbols of the modern world. Though she is described as a woman with little education, Liusu possessed knowledge of western customs that other women of her status were ignorant to such as being the only person in a part of women who could dance in the “lewd” modern ballroom style.<sup>16</sup> Yet she still attempts to align herself with Confucian values by feigning ignorance in public settings. In this sense, Liusu can be viewed as an embodiment of the struggle between traditionalism and modernity felt by Chinese youths amidst the urban cosmopolis.

In contrast with the Bai family, the male protagonist Fan Liuyuan is the embodiment of modernity. Liuyuan, a man of thirty, was born in Hong Kong and lived in England for many years. Born from two overseas Chinese parents who were unofficially married, Fan doesn't hold marriage sacred. Because of his father's wealthy background, he was widely sought after by mothers forcefully pushing their daughters at him.



“They had schemed and squabbled, pulling every trick in the book and making a huge fuss over him. This had completely spoiled Mr. Fan; from then on he took women to be so much mud under his feet... gradually he became a playboy- he gambled, he gourmandized, he visited prostitutes. The only pleasure he denied himself was married bliss.”

(122)<sup>1</sup>

Despite, his promiscuous past, Liuyuan takes a liking to Liusu when he encounters her at a party and begins pursuing her.

Initially, Liusu is leery of Liuyuan, believing that “he was used to lying to women.” (127)<sup>1</sup> However, given the opportunity to follow Liuyuan when he returns to Hong Kong, Liusu quickly accepts him, believing this to be a rare chance at escaping the ridicule of her family and her low social status by pursuing Liuyuan. To her this is a gamble of her future. “If she lost, her reputation would be ruined, and even the role of stepmother of five children would be far above her. If she won, she’d get the prize the whole crowd was eyeing like so many greedy tigers-Fan Liuyuan- and all her stifled rancor would be swept clean away.” (130)<sup>1</sup> By leaving Shanghai for Hong Kong, Liusu, in a sense, is able to leave her traditional ethnic-moral code behind. However, Liusu’s pursuit is for marriage, whereas Liuyuan only wants to court her as his mistress. Realizing Liuyuan’s unwillingness for marriage, Liusu returns to Shanghai defeated. It isn’t until after several months when Liuyuan sends for her again. Upon arrival in Hong Kong, they both give into their feelings for one another and consummate their relationship. “he pushed her into the mirror, they seemed to fall down into it, into another

shadowy world—freezing cold, searing hot, the flames of the forest burning all over their bodies.” (154) <sup>1</sup>

After a night of lust, Liuyuan decided to depart for England, prepared to leave Liusu behind. But the bombing of Hong Kong prevents him from leaving. As they struggle for survival, only then do they experience spiritual love for one another.

“Suddenly, [Liusu] crawled over to [Liuyuan], hugging him through his quilt. He reached out from the bedding and grasped her hand. They looked and saw each other, saw each other entirely. It was a mere moment of deep understanding, but it was enough to keep them happy together for a decade or so.”

(164)1

After the bombing ceased, the couple soon decides to get married. In the final pages of the novel, Liusu ponders on journey to Hong Kong and the events that brought her and Liuyuan together. Had Liusu never left Shanghai, she wouldn't have been able to escape “the fetters of feudal China”(285).<sup>13</sup> Eileen Chang's juxtaposition of the destruction of Hong Kong and Liusu's ironic triumph in elevating her status also suggests the progressive idea that social change can be achieved by toppling an empire.

### **Golden Cangue- Eileen Chang**

Eileen was considered by many to be one of China's most influential and important writers today.<sup>10</sup> This is due to her ability to write stories with introspective and sentimental qualities.<sup>4</sup> Whereas other writers of her time focused on grand aspects such as the May Fourth Movement, the national condition of instability and turmoil, or used

communist plot to subvert literature into a vehicle for propaganda, Eileen Chang's work dealt with modern relationships between men and women as well as the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Eileen Chang's short story titled *The Golden Cangue* (金□□, 1943), combines the thematic tradition of classical Chinese novels with modern techniques and has aroused interest in literary critics and researchers since its publication. In C.T. Hsia's anthology *Twentieth-Century Chinese Stories*, he even proclaims *The Golden Cangue* to be "the greatest novelette in the history of Chinese literature" and goes on to support this claim as follows:

"Eileen Chang has evinced an unerring knowledge of the manners and mores of the decadent upper class throughout the story and has studied the heroine's life in terms of an unflinching psychological realism; but what elevates this perception and this realism into the realm of tragedy is the personal emotion behind the creation, the attitude of mingled fascination and horror with which the author habitually contemplates her own childhood environment "(143).<sup>10</sup>

The story recounts the life of Ts'ao Ch'i-ch'iao, a daughter of a poor sesame oil shop owner, who is sold to be the wife of a wealthy but blind and crippled aristocrat. Despite her newfound wealth, she detests her husband's physical disabilities and her own mental health is compromised. Ch'i-ch'iao's dysfunctional relationships with her "soft boned" husband, in-laws, and even her own children highlight the suffering of Chinese women in the traditional patriarchal system of the time. The lasting effect on Ch'i-ch'iao's psychological state can be seen throughout the novella but is especially apparent at the

end where Ch'i-ch'iao is illustrated languishing in opium smoke as her children are described as hating her to death for her negligence and failure to give them a decent life.

It is believed that “the publication of *Cangue*...coincide with distinct transitional moments in Chang's life and her experiences of marriage and relationships”.<sup>10</sup> The story was published in 1943 when Chang was 23 and still felt resentment to her negligent mother and dissolute father, to whom she blames for her horrible childhood. Several aspects of her parent's relationship can be seen in *The Golden Cangue* and parallel with Ch'i-ch'iao's character such as her father's addiction to opium and wanton love affairs despite his marriage to Ch'i-ch'iao's mother leading up to their divorce. After publishing *The Golden Cangue*, Eileen Chang married Hu Lancheng, only to be betrayed sexually and emotionally and divorced in 1947.<sup>12</sup> After moving to the United States, Chang remarried Ferdinand Reyher in 1956. Despite their happy marriage, it eventually came to an end when Reyher died after a long-term illness in 1967, the same year Chang published her book *The Rouge of the North*, a story similar to *The Golden Cangue*. Given Chang's family history, it is no wonder why many of her stories discuss marriage, sexual affairs, and issues of parenthood.

Throughout *The Golden Cangue* there is a heavy emphasis placed on marital and sexual relations. In the beginning the narrator delves into a detailed description of how Ch'i-ch'iao is disgusted by the sight of her husband and illustrates how she feels trapped between life and death. While her husband is alive, Ch'i-ch'iao is apprehensive of being around him for too long, believing that “staying with a cripple, [she will] smell crippled too” (154).<sup>10</sup> Ch'i-ch'iao believes that others, including her own family, see her as an object of ridicule and disgust because of her sexual relations with a crippled and blind

man. From the opening scene of the book, Ch'i-ch'iao's sisters-in-law and the house servants are seen gossiping about her, a continuous theme in the novella especially after Ch'i-ch'iao succumbs to an opium addiction to "take her mind off things" (169).<sup>10</sup> Ch'i-ch'iao's heavy use of opium also traps her between life and death, regardless of physically being alive, her mental state deteriorates to such an extent where she becomes crippled like her late husband.

Ch'i-ch'iao's bitterness towards her marriage not only stems from her awareness of others' perception of her marriage, but also from her own feelings about her husband's condition. Ch'i-ch'iao seems to be deeply scarred and haunted by it. In a scene after her husband has passed, Ch'i-ch'iao confides in her brother-in-law, Chi-tse, about how even touching her husband was enough to make "one realize how good it is not to be sick" (160).<sup>10</sup> Just the mere recollection of the moment was enough to send Ch'i-ch'iao into a sobbing fit that "seemed to be not so much weeping as vomiting, churning and pumping out her bowels" (161).<sup>10</sup> Even in moments of privacy, Ch'i-ch'iao can't seem to shake the thoughts of her husband. While reminiscing about her childhood days before being married off, her mind can't help but wander to her crippled husband. Anger and resentment towards him and her family who forced her into that situation built up inside her, causing her already drug-altered consciousness to further deteriorate.

Once her husband died, Ch'i-ch'iao directed her anger toward their children, the by-products and constant reminders of her marriage to him. Rather than feeling hatred toward them, she obsessed over them in hopes that they wouldn't end up in a miserable marriage as she once found herself. She is particularly stringent with her daughter, Ch'ang-an, often over reacting when any man gets near her. This is because Ch'i-Ch'iao

believes men to be dangerous having been hurt by several men in her life. The only man she retains a connection with is her son, Ch'ang-pai, however, this relationship is later destroyed as her mental state deteriorates.

Eileen Chang's emotional narrative points to several everyday events of traditional Chinese society that were present during the time the novella was published, and some of which that are still present such as compromised love, clashes between family members, and conflicts between duty and self-fulfillment. These seemingly mundane topics are portrayed with an ironic touch to challenge the reader's own beliefs. It is for these reasons why Eileen Chang is still considered one of China's most important women writers.

## Conclusion

For my senior project I chose to analyze twentieth Century Chinese women's literature for two reasons. The first reason being that during my time here at Bard I have read very few works by Chinese women, if any at all. The Chinese literature classes that I have taken focused heavily on men's literature. However, this was to be expected due to the nature of Chinese society during the time period in which they were written. Many of the works I studied in those classes dated back to pre-Qing dynasty, periods in which women's social roles were dictated by Confucianism. This brings me to the second reason why I wanted to study modern women's literature. Although the literary realm was dominated by male writers, there was a surge in the number of works written by women during the 54-year period between the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. This period was a time when China was in the midst of becoming modernized/westernized and changing hands of power. The turbulence that arose during this time allowed women writers to establish themselves in the Chinese literary canon. When I first started this project, I was interested in observing how these literary women portrayed their own female identity in their literature within the male dominated society. However, this later developed into observing how women imagined their place in the new Chinese society.

In Ding Ling's Preliminary work *Miss Sophia's Diary*, many of her bold, feminist beliefs can be observed. This piece is meant to shatter centuries of traditional thought and move the status of women in modern society into a more progressive realm. The protagonist of this story not only possesses a western name (which can also be view as a symbol of modernity) but she also possesses a strong independent spirit. Although she is

initially attracted to the traditionalist Ling Jishi, this attraction is only skin-deep. Sophia is disgusted by his belief that women are merely objects of pleasure that should remain in the domestic realm. However, her final physical rejection of Jishi clearly illustrates Ding Ling's objection to traditionalist gender standards. Although Ding Ling's final work *Du Wanxiang* heavily conceals her feminist spirit, it remains present nonetheless. Underneath the politically charged novella, it subtly questions gender inequality during the Cultural Revolution by bringing to its center a narration of a woman's achievements in both the domestic and political realms.

Xiao Hong also tackles the theme of gender inequality while adding the element of class to the argument. In the short story *Hands*, Xiao Hong narrates the story of a young woman who is from a poor family of dyers. In order to elevate her status in society, she attends a school where she is ridiculed for her low socioeconomic status. In the end, she remains trapped in her class due to her family's inability to fund her tuition any longer. This story can be viewed as a commentary on traditional class structures in China at the time. Xiao Hong's other two novels outlined in this thesis also pertain to the socioeconomic status of the working class. However in *The Field of Life and Death* and *Tales of Hulan River*, she also emphasizes that women in this low class suffered from more gender inequality than women of other classes in traditional society. Thus, rejecting traditional standards for women.

Finally, Eileen Chang's novellas *Love in a Fallen City* and *The Golden Cangue* illustrate the several difficulties that arose during the transition from traditional Chinese society to a modern one. The protagonists of each story are portrayed as torn individuals



that wrestle with overcoming traditional customs and values. However, they must relinquish those customs before they emerge triumphant.

All of the authors analyzed in this thesis approached the theme of the new woman identity in modern Chinese society by subverting or rejecting aspects of traditional society. They are able to shattered Confucian womanly virtues with their strong and bold female protagonist. Their placement of women in dominant and powerful roles illustrates their desires for women to no longer be subordinate to men.

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