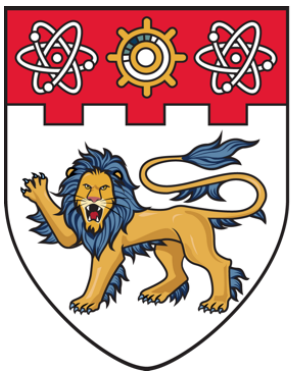

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE

LOVE'S POTENTIAL: TRACING A LITERARY GENEALOGY OF LOVE THROUGH 20TH CENTURY CHINESE WOMEN'S WRITING

ADELINE LOH BAO JUE

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

2025

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School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

2025

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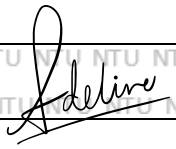
Signature of student:	

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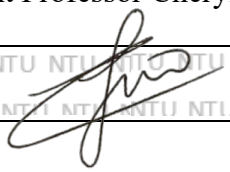
Signature of Supervisor:	

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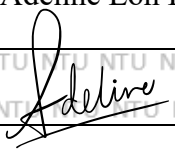
Signature of student:	

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When I first began thinking about what I might want to research in graduate school, all I really had was a selfish wish to reach through history and feel that I was being spoken to by the Chinese women writers I'd read and loved, and to feel like I had something worthwhile to say in return. Though my work ultimately offers little by way of praxis, it is my hope that every woman will always get to live and love as they wish. May the women and people of Palestine, too, see liberation and justice in this lifetime.

I owe a foremost debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Assistant Professor Cheryl Julia Lee, who has been unceasingly kind and patient throughout the writing process and all of life's troubles. Her critical and incisive feedback was vital in helping me to further develop my arguments and identify gaps in my research that I would have otherwise missed. I am also grateful for her steadfast guidance through the ups and downs in my last semester of teaching in HL1005. I hope to be able to model your aptitude and grace as an academic and educator in the future.

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And finally! To myself, at yet another crossroads in life: 今日敗者の君たちよ、明日は何者になる？

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SUMMARY

This thesis attempts to trace and extend a genealogy of love by threading together women's literary narratives on love throughout the 20th century in China. This genealogy particularly attends to romantic love as an ever-changing phenomenon that first came to prominence in public discourses at the start of the 20th century and following the end of the Qing dynasty, where the freedom to pursue romantic relationships and marriages premised upon love of one's own volition was newly emphasised as an important component of the human experience and China's modernisation efforts. Accordingly, my thesis takes this as a starting point to put forward romantic love as a methodology for critically reading Chinese women's writing on love and its varied transformations throughout the 20th century. My contributions to this genealogy of love are primarily recuperative in nature, wherein I endeavour to identify and synthesise the compounding possibilities and potentialities of romantic love for women in order to argue for love's continuing significance as a way of life, rather than attempting to construct a chronological analysis of love's evolutions throughout the 20th century in China.

My thesis, then, attends to Chinese women's writing on love across three sociopolitically significant flashpoints in 20th century China that correspondingly shaped public discourses of romantic love for women. My first chapter examines the nascent iterations of romantic love in Republican China through a comparative reading of Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* (1943), Ding Ling's "Miss Sophia's Diary" (1927), and Ling Shuhua's "Once Upon a Time" (1928) that establishes romantic's love potential for facilitating the generation of possibilities and self-empowerment for women, even when the promises of love were elusive and often foreclosed to them. My second chapter responds to the rapidly changing moral codes surrounding romantic love throughout the Cultural

Revolution through a reading of the queer romance in Yan Geling's *White Snake* (1999) that argues for the transgressive potential of romantic love as an embodied strategy for eluding and surviving state-sanctioned restrictions on women's agency in love and queerness. Finally, my third chapter takes up Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (1999) to advance the possibility of romantic love as a form of worldmaking that offers ontological security in constructing a stable sense of self and futurity, amidst the destabilising forces of transnational capital and culture flows that characterised China's push for globalisation towards the end of the 20th century. Altogether, my interpretations across this selected body of texts locate the multitudinous possibilities for romantic love to empower women to assert their independent subjectivities in the face of restrictive state policies and social mores that disenfranchise them, and to envision more equitable and fulfilling modes of living and futures for themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Love's Potential

> Of experience she had little before she was twenty-three. Once, coming back to her aunt's flat from shopping, she felt a momentary hollowness: 'I'm 22, I write love stories, yet I have never loved; it wouldn't do to let people know.' At twenty-three she experienced her first love, and it was on a true story told her by her lover, Hu Lancheng (1906–81), that she based a one-page vignette she wrote and entitled simply 'Love.'
>
> —Lydia Pan, *When True Love Came to China*

The thought that even Eileen Chang might have once struggled with comprehending the nuances and magnitude of romantic love is perhaps equal parts confounding and compelling. Chang, as one of China's most prolific and recognised authors from the 20th century, is arguably best known for her moving renditions of women's emotional interiorities and their manifold experiences in love. That a young Chang in her early 20s had fretted over her perceived inadequacies in the workings of love almost seems antithetical to the historical fact that some of her most accomplished and intricate writings on love, including *Love in a Fallen City* and *The Golden Cangue*, were published during this very time in her life. The comparative brevity and simplicity of "Love," then, can attest to love's clarifying wash upon Chang, who deftly concludes her story of a young girl's lifelong memory of her fleeting encounter with love with a proclamation that "you meet the one you meet amongst thousands and tens of thousands of people, amidst thousands and tens of thousands of years, in the boundless wilderness of time, not a step sooner, not a step later" (Chang). The confidence of

this assertion hardly belies the uncertainty that Chang felt beforehand, though it still bears traces of love's presumably unplumbable depths. In Chang's words, love is something that simply happens to its unsuspecting target at the right place and time—it is rendered as unfathomable as it is inevitable.

This thesis takes up this supposed inevitability of love as its central line of inquiry in its examination of Chinese women's writing on love in the 20th century. What is most interesting about the discourse of romantic love in China is the ways in which its modern definitions and origins as a phenomenon of individual emotion can be systematically traced back to China's sociopolitical transition out of the Qing dynasty at the beginning of the 20th century. To this end, scholars working on Chinese discourses of love including Guo Ting and Lee Haiyan have proposed reading and reconciling the historically disparate attitudes towards love in China, filtered through both local and global discourses, as a continuous genealogy. In *Religion, Secularism, and Love as a Political Discourse in Modern China*, Guo offers a comprehensive genealogical survey of how concepts of love have been adapted and appropriated for political ends throughout China's transition into modernity following the fall of the Qing Dynasty. Confucian ideals and morals prior to this end of dynastic rule in China conceived of love as a kind of moral benevolence that was synonymous with "generosity, clemency, or kindness" as an ideal behavioural framework in life rather than interpersonal romantic love (24). The idea of love later became enfolded into national narratives of patriotism in exemplifying a collective love for country and democracy in the early years of the 20th century and eventually supplanted the pre-eminence of romantic love as individually felt experiences as well (28).[1] Similarly, Lee posits a genealogical method for reading China's history of love in *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-*

[1] These manifestations of love as patriotic sentiment functioned as a replacement for "the hierarchical Confucian value of kindness" (Guo 29), thereby highlighting a continuity in discourses of love even when being explicitly instrumentalised for political discourses rather than interpersonal romantic love.

1950, where she analyses the cultural transformations that the concept of romantic love undergoes, ever-present throughout China's modern history "as a transhistorical and transcultural constant," which remained interconnected throughout China's dramatic transition from the Qing dynasty into the Republic of China (8-9). Most importantly, Lee's genealogical approach to the study of love in China acknowledges that conceptions of romantic love were "neither wholly imported nor wholly indigenous," and instead evolved in tandem with China's oft-contradictory social mores (9). That being said, love was still largely thought of as being unknowable or inconsequential to scholars of love and sexuality studying China from Western, Anglophone perspectives, who suggested that the idea of romantic love was altogether unimportant to Chinese people because they are "culturally restrained in their internal life and emotional experiences; their feelings and desires are dependent on the social context, its values and expectations" (Karandashev 250), even throughout the later, more globalised decades of the 20th century. This narrow, one-dimensional view of Chinese people in love is, of course, immediately rebuffed by the enduring continuity of romantic love as a predominant theme and trope throughout China's extensive literary history (Jankowiak 167).

In response, my intervention in this puzzling premise of love in China wherein romantic love finds itself continually sidelined by sociopolitical discourses that are reluctant to precisely articulate its affective and cultural significances and ramifications, especially for women, is twofold. Firstly, I attempt to extend this genealogy of love as a literary methodology for critically evaluating Chinese women's writing on love in the 20th century as both a continuous and compounding series of developments. When read together, these developments illustrate the ways in which romantic love can be leveraged as cogent participatory strategies for women to adapt to shifting historical paradigms that circumscribed their ways of life and social standings, often to their disadvantage. Secondly, I principally foreground Chinese women's emotional experiences in love as sustained sites of possibility

where romantic love can be situated as life-affirming modes of living that empower women to assert themselves as autonomous loving subjects vis-à-vis sociopolitical vicissitudes that seek to deny or diminish their subjectivity, especially against the backdrop of increasing transnationalism. Correspondingly, my choice here to emphasise women's experiences in love is a direct answer to historical tendencies that dismiss love as a serious subject matter, especially when pertaining to women. Though recent scholarly research, especially within the interdisciplinary field of love studies, has now acknowledged the relevance of evaluating love on its own terms, there remains a continued reluctance to seriously pursue love as a subject of critical inquiry because it is deemed to be too elusive or frivolous in nature, and therefore not suited for any kind of concerted analytical study (Jónasdóttir, "Love Studies" 18). In refuting this general consensus surrounding love's alleged slipperiness, I thread together various narratives of love written by women over the course of the 20th century in China in order to demonstrate how romantic love can altogether be interpreted as agential action that responds to its societal contexts rather than as a mere circumstantial inevitability that is passively received and experienced as a fateful encounter.

In this way, my readings of romantic love are founded upon an understanding of the act of loving as "a basic, existential way of relating that goes out from one's core being" and as "a movement towards the world out of one's own inner direction and directedness" (Candiotto and De Jaegher 511). Put simply, love is conceived as inextricably intertwined with one's relational existence and participation in the world around them. Beyond love's precise directionality towards its intended recipient, the practice of love can be described as participatory sense-making, where "subjects are existentially involved and engaged in the world, in the other, in themselves, and in their relations and interactions" (Candiotto and De Jaegher 514). If the act of loving is so bound up with its accompanying circumstantial contexts and external environments, then it follows that any considerable engagement with

love's variegated transformations must account for the historical conditions that gave rise to these developments to begin with.

Accordingly, my contribution to a genealogy of love, woven through Chinese women's writing in the 20th century, echoes a Foucauldian approach to genealogy as recording and recuperating "what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" (Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 139-40). Foucault resists the impulse to make genealogy historically linear and uniform and instead calls for genealogy to be sensitive to recurring patterns and "to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles…defin[ing] even those instances where they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealised" (141). Contrary to conventional understandings of genealogy as a clear demarcation of historical lineage rooted in pinning down a distinct origin story, Foucault advocates for his iteration of genealogy as one that "opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (140). This approach is especially illuminating for my project, where instances of romantic love recur according to and refract their fickle societal contexts, rather than following a clearly defined trajectory of upwards progress towards increased freedoms in love for women. In other words, my undertaking of this genealogy of love strives to thread together the compounding (and perhaps inconstant) possibilities and potentialities of romantic love for women in arguing for love's continuing significance as a way of life, rather than to offer a chronological, systematic breakdown of love's evolutions throughout the 20th century in China. This understanding of genealogy, then, allows for a more rigorous consideration of romantic love's potentialities in facilitating women's self-empowerment and progress, even at moments where love fails to directly demonstrate some kind of tangible, historical progress in advancing its intertwined causes of feminism and gender equity or otherwise, or to live up to its sentimental promises of happiness and fulfilment.

The Beginnings of Love

At this juncture, I turn to a brief survey of Chinese etymology, key terminologies, and sociocultural sentiments on romantic love at the onset of the 20th century in China that inform this Chinese genealogy of love. The modern emphasis on love as a foremost emotion and experience in one's interpersonal, romantic relationships arguably finds its first footing with founding of the Republic of China (1911-1949) following the successful 1911 Revolution that brought an end to dynastic rule, which were both premised upon a total rejection of traditional Confucian ideologies. This culminated in the New Culture Movement and its successor, the May Fourth movement. These movements were broadly conceived of as nationalist projects centred on the quest for Chinese modernisation, which sought to galvanise a strong and unified nationalist identity that was distinct from the repressive attitudes of the Qing dynasty (Stevens 84).

In particular, the May Fourth movement was characterised as an intellectual uprising borne from a collective dissatisfaction with the world order's poor treatment of China after World War I despite its provision of military support for the Allied forces, where "the Treaty of Versailles ceded former German holdings in China to Japan, instead of returning the territories to China itself" (Stevens 83-84). As part of this burgeoning displeasure with the inferior treatment of China within the world order of the time—compounded further by the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937—the May Fourth movement "also encompassed widespread cultural and literary innovation" as a way of asserting and shoring up China's national identity and multifaceted strengths against hostile foreign powers (Stevens 84). Interestingly, the Chinese iteration of modernisation in this time continued to be fraught by internal struggles between a desire for independent self-determination and the pull of Western ideological influence. This was exacerbated by the ideological dissonances

formed from China's technical status as an independent nation, even as "portions of China were under foreign control throughout the first half of the twentieth century" (Stevens 84).

Still, China found itself continually influenced and shaped by Western intellectual thought in its fashioning of modernity, even while contending with the material and political ramifications of Western imperialist ambitions that threatened its fledgling statehood (Stevens 84). Furthermore, this troubled binary between China and the West was further complicated by China's complex relationship with Japan, with the latter serving "as the mediating transmitter of Western culture and a potent force in the formation of Chinese modernism" (Shih 4). While Japan provided a model example of the Westernisation of an Asian nation that China sought to follow as well as a means of access to Western literary and cultural thought via Japanese translations that were brought into China, it was also an impending imperialist threat with its sights set on conquering Chinese territories (Shih 4).[2] As Shih Shumei puts it, China's Republican era could be understood as being "semicolonial" insofar as China's dissonant and fragmented relationships with colonial domination led to a bifurcation of Western and Japanese colonial politics and their cultural productions (36), wherein Chinese intellectuals had to grapple with their resistance of Western and Japanese imperialism even while borrowing ideas and inspiration for China's project of modernisation from these very imperial powers (12). This created a sense of cognitive dissonance, generated by the fact that "the conditions that allowed Western modernism and modernists to travel to China were those of military and economic power acquired from a century of incursion on Chinese territory," which in turn spurred Chinese intellectuals into launching "various literary and cultural renovation campaigns" intended to preserve and revitalise a uniquely Chinese cultural heritage independent of imperialist encroachment (12). Even as Republican China

[2] In particular, the concept of a "Modern Japan," built from transformative modernisation campaigns following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, was a significant source of inspiration for Chinese intellectuals and political figures who sought to emulate this success in China's own modernisation efforts. For a more comprehensive analysis, see Shih.

grappled with these contradictions, this complex triangulation between China, Japan, and Western imperial powers would later come to have significant bearings on the ways in which the questions of feminism and love for women were conceptualised within its search for a national identity.

Accordingly, part of these "renovation campaigns" throughout the May Fourth movement encompassed China's nascent struggles to define and shape a distinctively Chinese feminist movement, resulting in clashing ideals of womanhood that "[reveal] not only the anxieties associated with changing roles for women, but also the anxieties associated with modernity and the modern nation" (Stevens 82). The movement's total rejection of traditional Confucian values, including the authoritarian and patriarchal family system that subjugated women (Lee 5), made the issue of women's liberation—including the freedom to pursue "free love" for women—particularly complementary to public discourse surrounding national modernisation (Wang, "Engaging *Nüquanzhuyi*" 392). The term "feminism" as it is employed in Chinese intellectual discourse is notably an imported translation; "feminism" as a term only began circulating in China from 1900 onwards, when Chinese translations of feminist texts from the West and Japan were introduced by late Qing reformers (391-392).[3] Although there have been varying terms used to denote this topic of feminism, "women's rights-ism" ("女权主义") came to be the predominant term for "feminism" in the Republican era (Wang qtd. in Wang, "Engaging *Nüquanzhuyi*" 392; Sudo, "Concepts of Women's Rights" 475). Even so, it was not typically women who spoke for themselves—the growing awareness surrounding women's emancipation in this era was fostered by radical male intellectuals and scholars, who dominated the sphere of public intellectual thought and

[3] Specifically, these late Qing reformers were concerned with critiquing the cultural legacies and traditions of the bygone Qing dynasty, including abolishing the destructive practice of foot binding for women and granting women equitable access to education. As part of these efforts, promoting "women's rights" ("女权") was deemed a necessary component of China's modernisation process, and late Qing reformers undertook the task of translating feminist texts from Europe, the United States, and Japan. For a more detailed summary, see Wang Bo.

advocated for feminism as a key tenet for the development of the nation-state and a collective national identity (Wang, "Engaging *Nüquanzhuyi*" 388). While well-intentioned, their modes of feminist consciousness tended to be contradictory, for their "paternalistic appropriations of feminism stifled women's voices" especially when these male intellectuals were positioned as the foremost champions of the feminist movement (388).

While this is not to say that women were not equally active in advocating for their own cause of liberation and gender equity, their contributions tended to be ironically downplayed by their male counterparts, especially in the literary sphere. Though Chinese women writers frequently incorporated feminist themes into their work, they were historically perceived as "focusing on small, trivial subject matter; having feelings predominate reason in their writing; or echoing what men had said when they spoke on women's issues" (388). It was not until much later that Chinese women's writing in the early 20th century was critically studied and acknowledged for their usage of "new hybrid genres and other innovative textual strategies" that creatively explored various facets of feminism that integrated their own experiences and insights which were lacking in the writing of their male counterparts (388).[4]

China's entanglements with Japan also played a pivotal role in these early transmissions and transmutations of Chinese feminist thought, which means that the core vocabularies underpinning any Chinese genealogy of love are already fundamentally transnational and transcultural in nature. The linguistic similarities between Chinese and Japanese meant that it was usually more efficient to translate already-available Japanese translations of Western texts into Chinese (Sudo, "Concepts of Women's Rights" 473). With these Japanese translations serving as an intermediary alongside the two languages' linguistic compatibility, many formal terminologies employed in China originated as loan words from

[4] Wang Bo's observation that women's "works that were denigrated or neglected as trivial and non-feminist may reveal unexpected feminist orientations and subversive rhetorical strategies" is likewise aligned with this thesis's primary goal of leveraging the oft-dismissed premise of romantic love as a rhetorical strategy for reading Chinese women's writing in the 20th century (388).

their respective Japanese counterparts, especially "terms used in Japanese to render Western terminology in the social sciences and humanities" (Sudo, "Concepts of Women's Rights" 473). Both the Chinese and Japanese dictionary definitions of "feminism" in the early 1900s are likewise functionally almost the same (i.e. "女权主义, *nüquanzhuyi*" and "女子の権利, *joshi no kenri*"), though their respective cultural connotations and significances would continue to evolve (Sudo, "近代中国的女权概念" 45).[5]

This transregional confluence in feminist thought was especially evident with the rise of the figure of the 'New Woman,' which was popular across Europe, the United States, and Japan in the late 1800s and later introduced via Japan and co-opted by the May Fourth movement in China (Stevens 87). In these countries, the 'New Woman' broadly represented educated women who were also active in political advocacy (Stevens 87), whereas the 'New Woman' as it was adopted in Republican China signified an ideal Chinese woman who was distinguished by her "unique and deep emotional interior" (Feng 2) and contributed to the progress of Chinese modernisation even while pursuing her own individuality and self-fulfilment (Feng 7). To be specific, this Chinese figure of the 'New Woman' ('新女性') came to be viewed as an emblem of the May Fourth movement's modernisation project, so much so that her defining traits were "her revolutionary nature, her devotion to the larger cause of nationalism, and the fact that her search to find self-identity [was] inevitably bracketed within the larger nationalistic struggle" (Stevens 87). Again, portrayals of this 'New Woman' were largely subject to the interpretations of male intellectuals, and were eventually constrained by their lingering anxieties and attachments to patriarchal traditions—for instance, male authorial depictions of the 'New Woman' in literary fiction "commandeered the interior, if

[5] Though both China and Japan functionally took the terms "women's rights" and "women's power" ("女性的权利或权力") as interchangeable denotations for feminism ("女权"), the precise connotations of these terms were constantly shifting in response to developments in the feminist movements of both countries (Sudo 45; my trans.). For a thorough analysis of how the meanings of these terms evolved through their usages in Chinese newspapers and magazines, see Sudo, "近代中国的女权概念" 45-49.

not always the body, of the new woman for the illustration of ideologies and the fortification of male subjectivity" (Feng 7). In turn, the ideal manifestation of this 'New Woman' became a woman who undertook the project of nation-building and was willing to sacrifice trivial pursuits, including romantic love, for the cause (Stevens 91), which thereby signalled a patriarchal containment of "liberated women" (Feng 7).[6]

In the same vein, the figure of the 'Modern Girl' ('摩登女子') emerged as a fellow contemporary to the 'New Woman,' and typically embodied "the superficial aspects of modern life, while at the same time symbolizing the alienation of modernity" (Stevens 89).[7] The 'Modern Girl' was a figure that was similarly imported and transplanted into Chinese intellectual discourse from Japan's own emergent iteration of the *modan garu* ('モダンガール') in the 1920s (Sang, "The Modern Girl" 413). The varying and often diametrical portrayals of this 'Modern Girl' made her out to be a "chameleon-like enigma over whose definition intense ideological struggles were fought out" (Sang 412). The 'Modern Girl' was either depicted to be intensely selfish and superficial in her pursuit of romance and inclination towards hedonistic consumerism, or intelligent and socially responsible as a patriotic participant in civil society (Sang 412). Altogether, her dedication to the liberating promises of true love amidst these contrarian representations reflected the alienation and tensions experienced by women "experiencing a crisis in subjectivity and self-identity" (Stevens 91).[8]

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[6] That male intellectuals and writers were so influential in shaping this figure of the 'New Woman' further evinces the unequal gender dynamics underpinning the liberatory ethos of the May Fourth movement; their constricting depictions of the 'New Woman' served as deliberate rhetorical gestures that afforded "both an affirmation of the individuality of the male intellectual self in the fictional narrative as unique, emotive human being and a foil for their extratextual performance of modern identity" (Feng 8).

[7] Both the English spelling of 'Modern Girl' and various Chinese translations including '摩登女子,' '摩登女郎,' '摩登小姐,' '时代姑娘,' and '时代小姐' were widely circulated by the 1930s (Sang, "The Modern Girl" 413).

[8] This figure of the Chinese 'Modern Girl' is altogether a complex amalgamation of the growing influence of global capitalism and liberationist ideologies in this period (Sang, "The Modern Girl" 421). Scholars have further expounded on the multifaceted portrayals of the 'Modern Girl' as offshoots of both transnational capitalism and a global 'Modern Girl' phenomenon at the time, as well as local political debates surrounding how the 'Modern Girl' might be instrumentalised in service of China's modernisation project (415). For the purposes of this thesis, however, I exclusively focus on the 'Modern Girl's' relationship to romantic love. For a more detailed breakdown of these scholarly debates, see 414-416.

The ‘Modern Girl’s’ persistent quest for romantic love—also read as a “trope for personal liberation” amidst China’s budding feminist movement (Stevens 91)—brings us to the discourse of “free love” that took off in Republican China, where “free love” was simply defined as the human right for everyone to pursue romantic relationships and marriage of their own emotional volition. Given that the institution of arranged marriages also came under the umbrella of traditional Confucian ideologies that were being overhauled, the notion of “free love” for all took its place, and marriage without mutual love was deemed unacceptable (Lee 6). Even so, these discussions of “free love” eventually wended their way into the nationalist movement’s ethos to bolster the sentimental appeal of its patriotic cause to the masses, wherein the emotion of love as directed towards the nation was deemed a noble calling. Lee Haiyan identifies how the nationalist project came to adopt the language of love:

> As a modern ideology, nationalism also spoke the language of love. Ideologically, the nation was organised in emotive terms, emphasising horizontal identification, egalitarianism, voluntarism, and patriotic sacrifice. Nationalism insisted on a higher, or heroic, mode of activity—national liberation, resistance, revolution—that transcended and subordinated the everyday, and articulated the tension between the heroic and the everyday as the conflict between patriotic love and romantic love. (10)

The ambitions of this nationalist project, understood as a kind of love for the nation, initially seemed compatible with romantic love at the individual, interpersonal level. The language of love was prominently invoked in the May Fourth movement’s guiding slogan—“love is supreme” (“恋爱至上”)—which sought to “tug everything into sphere of love” (108), so much so that one’s existence was consumed by the imperative of love as a lifelong project (99).

This attempt to pair patriotic love with interpersonal, romantic love on an equitable level within a literary frame was best exemplified by the "revolution plus love" ("革命加恋爱") formula in literary writing that was popularised in the late 1920s as a direct response to the May Fourth movement's galvanising calls for total societal reform (J. Liu 1). Specifically, this literary formula "played a crucial role in mythicising fiction's social function, as if fiction could manoeuvre China's fate," to the extent that the formula itself instead came to represent how "the politics of nationalism at this stage had subsumed other and different politics, such as ""the woman question," free marriage, and personal fulfilment" (9). Though the formula's naming connotes the importance of romantic love, it was actually only invoked "analogically in political theory to support the "imagined community" of nationalism" (9).[9] What this formula portended, then, was how quickly the urgency of "revolution" in China's modernisation efforts would come to supplant Republican China's initial promises of "free love" for all. As a result, women who sought "free love" without first demonstrating their personal investment in the national cause of "revolution" were deemed selfish and regressive (133).

Crucially, these applications and definitions of love did not develop unilaterally within the Chinese language and the sociocultural landscapes of the time. Prior to the 20th century, romantic love (typically assumed to be a heterosexual union) was broadly referred to as *qing* (情) (Yang 66), which can be generally translated as "emotion," "feeling," or "sentiment" (Pan 59). The predominant term for "romantic love" in China arrived as an imported translation in the 1900s when foreign missionaries opted to use the Chinese *lian'ai*

[9] The "revolution plus love" formula in literary writing, however, quickly lost its popularity due to dissonant and incongruous definitions of "revolution" that resisted easy categorisation and replication in shaping a shared vision of Chinese modernisation (J. Liu 57). As Liu Jianmei puts it, "both revolution and love are culturally variable rather than fixed and timeless entities" (2), which makes it "impossible to delineate a coherent history of revolution and love" (12).

(恋爰) to refer to "love" and "like" in a romantic sense (Yang 66).[10] Nonetheless, it was again Japanese influence that propelled the term *lian'ai* into mainstream usage in China— its Japanese equivalent *ren'ai* (恋愛) gained rapid traction at the turn of the century, and subsequently became the primary conduit by which romantic love was precisely translated and introduced in Chinese literature and vernacular shortly thereafter (Yang 67-68).[11] Kuriyagawa Hakuson, a Japanese scholar of English literature, was also one of the principal intermediaries through which these newfound conceptions of *lian'ai* were disseminated to the wider Chinese public (Pan 31). Kuriyagawa's *Modern Views of Love*—a treatise on love published in 1921 in Japan—examined varying ideals of love from European authors and works, and was later translated into Chinese in 1923 and even received many reprints throughout its long shelf-life; a new and revised edition of the treatise was published in 1964, long after its first appearance in a bygone Republican China (Pan 31). His ultimatum that human morality is intrinsically tied up with love (Kuriyagawa qtd. in Lee 173) is similarly echoed in the May Fourth movement's renouncement of traditional Confucian ideologies that contravened one's right to bodily autonomy and agency.

Like its Japanese counterpart, *lian'ai* initially connoted a romantic union between a woman and a man, borne of their respective free wills (Yang 70). Various linguistic iterations of *lian'ai* were gradually developed to account for the nuances of romantic love as well. The earlier *qing* that encompassed all human feelings was paired with either *ai* (爰; love) or *yu* (欲; desire, lust) to form the compound terms *aiqing* (爰情) and *qingyu* (情欲) (Lee 106),

[10] The term *lian'ai*, taken to mean "passion between men and women" and romantic love, was first included in *A Complete English-Chinese Dictionary* in 1908. Similarly, the term was formally included in the *Ci Yuan* (Origin of Words) in 1915 and "indicated mutual love between the sexes" (Yang 67).

[11] The Japanese term for romantic love *ren'ai* (恋愛) was closely tied to the notion of a "love marriage" (*恋愛結婚 ren'ai kekkon*), as a direct response to and rejection of traditional arranged marriages that denied emotional fulfilment for women. Similarly, the May Fourth movement's call for "free love" was closely linked to the emerging popularity of "love marriage" in Japan that was "based on mutual love and initiated by the partners themselves" (Suzuki 65). See *Becoming Modern Women*.

meaning “romantic love” and “sexual desire” respectively. The prefix *ziyou* (自由; freedom) was similarly appended to *lian’ai* (i.e. *ziyou lian’ai*; 自由恋爱) to signify “free love,” thereby taking on the loaded connotations of justice and individual will (Yang 71-72) and becoming “the battle cry of a generation of aspiring individualists seeking to break away from the Confucian family and patriarchal ideology” (Lee 106).

All of this, then, is to say that these ongoing linguistic evolutions of “love” in the Chinese vernacular, beginning from and extending beyond Republican China, meant that writing on romantic love in the 20th century was correspondingly tenuous and culturally contingent on these shifting norms around gender, nationalism, and self-determination. My thesis, then, takes on the mantle of attempting to untangle these multitudinous apprehensions of romantic love as a starting point for examining women’s narratives of romantic love across three sociopolitically significant flashpoints in 20th century China that correspondingly shaped women’s experiences in love.

Chapter Overviews

The first chapter of this thesis begins with situating romantic love as an ever-changing phenomenon that eluded fixed classifications and definitions, especially in its nascent iterations in Republican China, by way of a comparative reading of Eileen Chang’s *Love in Fallen City* (1943), Ding Ling’s “Miss Sophia’s Diary” (1927), and Ling Shuhua’s “Once Upon a Time” (1928). In advancing the potential of romantic love to serve as a generative site of further possibilities in life for women, I put forward an analysis of compounding tropes shared across the three texts—inarticulate love, love in crisis, and incomplete love—that underscore how romantic love’s contradictory, rocky beginnings in 20th century made the once-alluring promise of “free love” difficult to realise for women, and often resulted in encounters with romantic love coming to premature ends. My argument here, however,

proposes that women's individual, inadequate experiences of romantic love can still directly engender and facilitate a kind of self-empowerment that enables these women to assert their agency and autonomy against the abiding restrictive heteropatriarchal strictures that permeated Republican China.

The second chapter turns to a drastically changed China under the People's Republic of China through a reading of Yan Geling's *White Snake* (1999), set during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution and inspired by Yan's own experiences of living through the event. The initial promises of "free love" for women now dissolve and become fully subsumed by Communist China's authoritarian demands for all its citizens to prioritise their ideological devotion to the party's cause at the cost of their "staggering sacrifice of personal freedom, including the liberty to give primacy to the lurchings of the heart over order and discipline" (Pan 280). In response, my analysis of *White Snake* posits that the novella's lesbian romance, couched within repressive state mandates, evinces the transgressive potential of romantic love as an embodied survival strategy, therefore enabling women to elude and withstand unbearable circumstances that foreclose the achievement and fulfilment of romantic love. This thread of argumentation, then, further illuminates how a genealogy of love can bend to take on the shape of its contingent historical contexts—even at junctures where romantic love is censored and falls through, it can still afford women a place for respite that affirms their independent subjectivity.

Finally, the third chapter takes on a rapidly globalising China at the end of the 20th century through Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (1999), where romantic love comes to adopt the languages of transnational capitalism and cultural exchanges. Though the love triangle that takes centre stage in the novel is fundamentally troubled and tenuous in nature, my interpretation argues that romantic love now comes to function as a kind of worldmaking that affords women renewed freedoms in constructing their sense of self, oriented towards

forming a hospitable future for themselves when faced with the destabilising forces of transnational capital and culture that threaten to subsume their agency in life. Having survived its shaky first iterations in Republican China as well as its near-absolute censorship throughout the first decades of the People's Republic of China, the promise of "free love" for women now steps into its expansive potential as a means of worldmaking that positions love as a site of futurity and possibility rather than failure and limitation.

Altogether, my companionable interpretations of Chinese women's writing across these significant sociopolitical flashpoints in the trajectory of romantic love across 20th century present a genealogy of love that is founded not upon the assumption that romantic love is a passive inevitability which happens upon women indiscriminately, but rather, one that continues to be consciously constructed through the concerted efforts of women to adapt to hostile societal conditions and render them more liveable through their pursuits of romantic love.

CHAPTER ONE

Dreaming An Unreasonable Dream

> Then she understood his meaning: everything that had happened while the city was sealed off was a nonoccurrence. The whole city of Shanghai had dozed off and dreamed an unreasonable dream.
>
> —Eileen Chang, "Sealed Off," *Love in a Fallen City and Other Stories*
>
> 她明白他的意思了:封锁期间的一切，等于没有发生。整个的上海打了个盹，做了个不近情理的梦。
>
> —张爱玲，"封锁，"*倾城之恋*

In Eileen Chang's "Sealed Off," an ephemeral encounter with love blossoms and falls through within the stretch of a tram ride when it is forced to a sudden stop during a temporary city blockade. Written in 1943, the short story takes place during World War II in Japanese-occupied Shanghai and weaves its wartime setting into its exploration of a seemingly mundane brush with love that casts the oft-contradictory ethos of "free love" throughout Republican China into sharp relief. While Lu Zongzhen's chance meeting with Wu Cuiyuan is initially motivated by his desire to avoid an unwanted encounter with a relative he sees on the tram by busying himself with small talk elsewhere, the pair's tentative relationship begins to take off at an exponential rate even as the tramcar remains at a standstill. Romantic possibilities quickly multiply as they converse, generating nascent iterations of a fateful love story for the unlikely couple in their imaginations. Amidst their hesitant flirtations, the narrator plainly declares that "they were in love" (Chang 247). The original Mandarin text—"他们恋爱着了。" (Chang 157)—can be read as "they were *already* in love" (emphasis

mine), and thus gestures towards the ostensible inevitability of Cuiyuan and Zongzhen falling in love with each other. Yet, as soon as the blockade is lifted and the tram resumes its journey, their shared reverie is shattered, with Cuiyuan's imminent heartbreak over the improbability of becoming the concubine of the already-married Zongzhen similarly interrupted. The ending of the short story disavows the promise of love as resolutely as the narrator's earlier proclamation of love, with the city of Shanghai itself seemingly serving as a co-conspirator in the perpetuation of this improbable fantasy. The "unreasonable dream" that is but Cuiyuan's simple fantasy of romance is itself encumbered by evidently slow-changing social norms—even in a time where "free love" is purportedly promised to all women under the guise of increasing gender equality, it is men like Zongzhen who are free to continue keeping multiple concubines while remaining married, and women like Cuiyuan must content themselves with playing second fiddle to their male lovers.

Crucially, the dreamlike nature of this fleeting affair suggests that love is only rendered possible at all within narrow and specific spatio-temporal constraints. Cuiyuan and Zongzhen's encounter only transfigures into a possible romance by virtue of them happening to share the brief, interstitial space of waiting out a blockade on a tram. Their short-lived romance is likewise figuratively punctuated by the tram's ringing bells that signal its starting and stopping—with each "ding" of the bell accumulating to "[form] a line that cut through space and time" (Chang 237; 250)—bookending both the beginning and ending of the short story and their romance. Just as the blockade and the tram's bells segment a particular time and space in which the potential and promise of romantic love survives, so too, does their cessation close off the possibility of love. This deliberate compression of time and space that ultimately confines and denies romantic fulfilment, then, can perhaps be read as a reflection of the frenetic winds of change that swept through Republican China and conversely closed in on the supposed freedoms of romantic love that were newly conferred onto women. As

much as romantic love may be inevitable, as Chang posits in "Love," women still find themselves at the mercy of contradictory social mores that continue to privilege their male counterparts at their expense and foreclose the possibility of love for them.

The central preoccupations of "Sealed Off" therefore find resonances with this chapter's investigation of Chinese women's writing on love throughout the Republican era, where the phenomenon of romantic love is at once possible and within reach for women, and yet still unable to fully shake off the historical baggage of the preceding Qing dynasty's traditional patriarchal values. Correspondingly, this chapter contends with the interstitial spaces afforded in Chinese women's writing that open up the possibility of experiencing "free love" as a woman despite its varied constraints and contradictions. As evinced by "Sealed Off," the spatio-temporal bounds wherein women can freely envision romantic love for themselves are frequently situated within brief respites in their lived realities (as in the surreal confines of a stalled tram) or the privacy of their own imaginations, before they are thwarted by a bleak reality—often rooted in their lower social standings—that denies it to them. This chapter's primary intervention is therefore to establish the promissory potential of love for women even without its culmination in a conventional romantic union (i.e. becoming a couple or getting married) that would unequivocally attest to love's success. Instead, I argue that the pursuit of "free love" for women in and of itself can be constituted as a core component of self-determination that is both enriching and empowering even in instances where love does not eventually come to pass. I advance this argument by attending to a comparative reading of a novella and two short stories—Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, Ding Ling's "Miss Sophia's Diary," and Ling Shuhua's "Once Upon a Time"—that demonstrates how love, even when unfulfilled and unfulfilling, can give rise to clarifying moments of self-determination and empowerment that are only made possible through the very possibility of love in the first place. I principally borrow from Anna Jónasdóttir's work

on love studies to make this argument, whereby the ambiguity or ultimate failure of love for the women across these works can hold promissory potential in the form of *love power* that serves as a generative force, facilitating fundamental paradigm shifts in the ways in which they conceive of themselves and their outlooks in life.

For Eileen Chang, *Love in a Fallen City* was an encapsulation of her disillusionment with the grand ambitions of the May Fourth movement for both revolutionary societal change and women's liberation. Written just one month after "Sealed Off" (Huang 460), the novella's ambiguous stance on the possibility of love echoes the short story's disillusionment with love, though it is wartime that ironically facilitates the completion of love and the achievement of matrimony by the novella's end. Set between Hong Kong and Shanghai in the months leading up to the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in 1941, the novella revolves around the predicament of Bai Liusu, a divorcee who feels compelled to get re-married due to the familial and societal stigma she experiences after her divorce. When her single, younger sister is introduced to Fan Liuyuan, he instead takes an interest in Liusu, and the two begin a tentative courtship with Liusu hoping to win him over to secure her own re-marriage and financial stability in life. The novella ends with the fall of Hong Kong and the pair's matrimonial bliss, though it remains cynical about the permanence of romantic love for them. In this manner, Chang conspicuously wrote against the grain of her contemporaries, who were much more amenable to the plausibility of experiencing genuine romantic love. She describes her writing as simply capturing the lived experiences and realities of people in a particular moment in history, rather than aspiring to represent the historical epoch she was living through:

> And, in fact, all I really write about are some of the trivial things that happen between men and women. There is no war and revolution in my works. I think

> that people are more straightforward and unguarded in love than they are in war or revolution. (*Written on Water* 18)

The backdrop of war and revolution, then, also served as rhetorical gestures that allowed Chang to explore the limitations and vulnerabilities of romantic love as an all-consuming experience, akin to the experience of war being imposed on the masses (*Written on Water* 18).

Ding Ling's early writing throughout the Republican era follows a similar trajectory. Her earliest work tackled the impossible paradox of being a modern Chinese woman, who could not hope to "succeed in living a life of truly independent personality" when faced with "the impossibility of female individualism in a postrevolutionary, post-Confucian society" that simultaneously espoused women's liberation while continuing to uphold harmful patriarchal principles (Barlow, *I Myself Am a Woman* 25). The publication of "Miss Sophia's Diary" in 1927 deftly recapitulates Ding's sentiments in this period, with Sophia—embodying the lascivious and self-centred 'Modern Girl' in pursuit of love—facing the conundrum of shaping her individuality against the unpredictable whims of Republican China's ongoing modernisation efforts and growing Western influence (Liu 126). The short story takes the form of diary entries penned by Sophia, who documents her experiences as a tuberculosis patient and her increasingly maddening obsession with Ling Jishi, a Singaporean Chinese man whom she finds herself sexually attracted to. Sophia's foreign, Western name is a deliberate choice on Ding's part as well, for Ding's fictional women were often conferred similarly Western names as "marks of their universal femininity, their transcendence of parochial Chinese social restraints" (Barlow, *I Myself Am a Woman* 26). Sophia's name holds particular significance in situating her within a revolutionary, feminist lineage; Ding had named her after revolutionary figures like Sophia Perovskaya and Sophia Zhang, and so her iteration of Sophia "assumes without question the ethical and political correctness of

unrestricted freedom of choice for women" (Barlow, *I Myself Am a Woman* 26).[12] Accordingly, Sophia's desire for romantic love throughout her diary plays out as "a trope for personal liberation" (Stevens 91), but it ultimately falls short of her lofty expectations because it proves impossible to sustain an imported, Western brand of feminism that promised undisputed female subjectivity amidst Republican China's self-contradicting espousal of gender equality (Barlow, *I Myself Am a Woman* 1).[13]

Ling Shuhua's literary sensibilities also echoed Eileen Chang's disaffection with the May Fourth movement's revolutionary concerns. Her oeuvre was similarly centred on "seemingly trivial events surrounding women and children rather than grand social issues," which led to her being labelled a "minor" writer amongst her contemporaries (Shih 221). Written in 1928, the queer schoolgirl romance in "Once Upon a Time" follows the thematic schema of female homoerotic representations throughout the 1920s and 1930s in Chinese literary writing, wherein same-sex love between women is rendered temporary and eventually "forcibly severed by the incursion of socially mandated cross-sex relations, frequently in the form of the marriage of one of the partners" (Martin 12).[14] In the same vein, Yingman and Yunluo share an intense and short-lived romance as schoolmates in an all-girls' boarding school that ends in tragedy when the latter is abruptly married off by her family with no chance for further contact between the two. The short story thus grapples with the contested dynamics of lesbian love within May Fourth discourse on "free love;" though spiritual love between women was acknowledged, sexual desire and physical intimacy between women

[12] Sophia Perovskaya was a Russian revolutionary who was best known for her role in planning the assassination of Alexander II, the Emperor of Russia (1855-1881), while Sophia Zhang (better known by her Chinese name Zhang Mojun 张默君) was a Chinese writer, women's rights activist, and politician who was best known for her participation in the 1911 Revolution and for being the only female member in the Nationalist Party. See Moss and Judge.

[13] To be sure, Sophia's ideals of romantic love as a representation of the 'Modern Girl' develop as a direct contrast to the societal expectations of the 'New Woman' as explicated in the introduction, who was expected to prioritise civil and political participation over the search for romantic love (Stevens 91).

[14] "Once Upon a Time" is a retelling of a short story by the name of "Why Did She Suddenly Go Crazy" ("她为什么忽然发疯了"), written by Yang Zhansheng in 1926, and rewritten by Ling Shuhua at his request. The plot of Ling's short story follows the key plot points of the original work (Sang 148-149).

were denounced as immoral, especially when they posed a threat to the institution of heterosexual marriage (Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian* 130-132). Even though contemporary narratives surrounding women's same-sex love at the time positioned queerness "as a temporary stage preceding the feminine protagonist's reorientation toward adult cross-sex relations" (Martin 14), including the tragic ending of Ling's own short story, Ling's writing still insists on the possibility of a queer love between women that endures beyond this thwarted adolescent affair (Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian* 150).

Having situated these writers and their works within their contemporary contexts vis-à-vis the troubled social mores of Republican China, my comparative reading of these three works is located within the shared developmental stages that define women's attempted pursuits of "free love" throughout this historical period, which I have identified and termed 'inarticulable love,' 'love in crisis,' and 'incomplete love' respectively. Where these three tenets of love across the novella and two short stories reiterate the varying preclusions of love's possibilities promised to women in Republican China, my analysis ultimately puts forth an alternative reading that posits that these compounding shortcomings of romantic love ultimately still lend themselves to the generation of future possibilities of love and self-determination that continue to persist beyond the borders of these works.

Inarticulable Love

The seemingly unfettered pursuit of "free love" for women within these works is almost immediately complicated by the protagonists' shared inability to precisely articulate what the achievement of romantic love entails for them, as well as to distinguish between desire and love. Crucially, 'desire' here manifests differently for each protagonist (i.e. sexual lust or otherwise), though their manifold experiences of desire are similarly addled and struggle to transfigure into a romantic love that fulfils their material expectations for a

relationship. Inasmuch as their pursuit of romantic love can be grounded in both lofty May Fourth ideals and their material circumstances, their inability to intimate the significance of romantic love to their lives gestures towards romantic love operating as an ongoing force that perpetually propels them towards a self-reckoning that challenges and extends their ideals of romantic love even as they attempt to deny or defer its variegated impacts on their lives.

In Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, Bai Liusu's burgeoning hopes for romantic love—if any, prior to meeting Fan Liuyuan—are entirely obscured by the overwhelming pressure she feels to seek out another marriage partner in order to attain financial independence and security, as well as to repair her public image that has been tarnished by her status as a divorced woman. For Liusu, enmeshed in a traditional heteropatriarchal family that still adheres to Confucian strictures which disdain women for deviating from their prescribed duties of serving their husbands and families (Chang 111), securing another husband becomes a pressing matter of material survival. The articulation and contemplation of any kind of longing for romantic love is necessarily secondary to Liusu's desperation to escape her family, given that the sentimental promises of romantic alone cannot guarantee her a tangible escape route. Ironically, even the matrimony that Liusu now seeks out is one that affirms her family's Confucian heteropatriarchal beliefs that a woman's worth lies in her marital status, which further hampers her ability to articulate what romantic love might personally signify for her.

Therefore, when Liusu meets Fan Liuyuan—a wealthy overseas Chinese man—and begins pursuing a relationship with him, she finds herself at an utter loss as to how to elicit a commitment to monogamy and marriage from him because she is unable to relate to his own ability to articulate his beliefs and objectives in romantic love. To begin with, Liuyuan lacks the emotional, Confucian baggage that Liusu bears by virtue of her familial upbringing, as his Western upbringing makes him an enigmatic figure who sidesteps the shifting sentiments

around “free love” for women, as well as traditional expectations to settle down in marriage. In other words, he is already at odds with Liusu’s single-minded determination to remarry for the sole purpose of bolstering her financial and material circumstances because he is straightforward with his romantic affections. When Liusu chooses to follow Liuyuan to Hong Kong in hopes of sustaining his initial attraction to her, her first encounter with him already reveals the presence of a sentimental gulf between the two—Liuyuan has no reservations with expressing his desire and interest in meeting with Liusu again, while Liusu cannot articulate any romantic inclinations of her own:

> “No, I’ve been waiting here for you,” Liuyuan said lightly. It had never occurred to Liusu that he would be so direct. She didn’t inquire further, afraid that if he went on to say that it was he, not Mrs. Xu, who had invited her to Hong Kong, she wouldn’t know how to respond. She treated it as a joke, and replied with a smile. (132)
>
> 柳原轻轻的答道: “我在这儿等着你呢。”流苏想不到他这样直爽，倒不便深究，只怕说穿了，不是徐太太请她上香港而是他请的，自己反而下不落台，因此只当他说玩话，向他笑了一笑。(175)

Though the translation spotlights Liusu’s embarrassment at Liuyuan’s straightforward flirtations, the original Mandarin text implicates her as being unable to respond to a seemingly earnest proclamation of affection. She refuses to accept the romantic connotations of Liuyuan’s words at face value, but still considers it “inconvenient to seriously consider” (“不便深究”; my trans.) the hidden motives that Liuyuan might harbour towards her. For Liusu, dwelling on the possibility that Liuyuan could have gone out of his way to invite her to join him in Hong Kong is disorienting, because she is unable to reconcile her own pragmatic scheming to win his hand in marriage with the possibility that Liuyuan’s affection for her may be genuine. In turn, Liuyuan’s ability to articulate his own feelings in matters of love

highlights Liusu's own inability to articulate her own nascent longings for a romantic love that might develop between the two of them. This is further underscored by her deliberate choice here to gloss over Liuyuan's flirtations—she pointedly shuts down the possibility that he was being sincere lest she finds herself "humiliated in front of other people" ("下不落台"; my trans.). Her vulnerability in this moment is thus made explicit through her choice of words, for she believes that having to contend with Liuyuan's tacit attraction to her at all bears great potential for her own public humiliation should she indicate her reciprocation only to find out that he was not being genuine after all. The Mandarin idiom that she employs here (i.e. "下不落台") is especially telling of the divide that she enacts between herself, as it originates from *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦), a classical novel authored by Cao Xueqin in the 18th century and widely considered one of the greatest works of Chinese literature. Put simply, even the defensive language that Liusu invokes to shield herself against Liusu's outward affections is infused with the historical baggage of the heteropatriarchal Confucian values that she is most familiar with, originating from *Dream of the Red Chamber*'s Qing dynasty provenance. Even so, her choice to "[treat] it as a joke" alongside her ambiguous, non-verbal response already insinuates the beginnings of her own romantic affections towards Liuyuan, though she remains unable to articulate them at this stage and instead errs on the side of caution in not giving her true feelings away yet.

This fundamental contradiction between Liusu's inarticulation and Liuyuan's enigmatic courtship comes to a head during a walk along Repulse Bay, where Liuyuan makes his lofty ideals of love known to Liusu, only to be rebuffed by the latter. At a grey brick retaining wall that they encounter along their walk, Liuyuan makes his revelatory proclamation—should the world ever come to its inevitable end, perhaps this wall would remain standing and become the stage wherein Liusu "will honestly care about [him], and [he] will honestly care about [her]" (139). Liusu, however, interprets this as an admission of

Liuyuan's guilt in toying with her feelings, and this sentiment is even more stark in the original Mandarin where Liuyuan muses on the possibility of them "being a little more sincere" ("一点真心"; my trans.) to each other (181). To Liusu, Liuyuan's teasing that he could act more sincerely towards her is essentially his overt acknowledgement that his courtship of her was thus far disingenuous. Correspondingly, Liusu again chooses to believe that Liuyuan is disingenuous in his affections for her and lashes out at him to "stop patronising [her]" (139). That Liusu might feel patronised at all already alludes to the deepening of her reciprocation of Liuyuan's feelings, though she fails to express this beyond a harsh rebuke. Even Liuyuan's frustrated outburst when met with Liusu's emotional indifference to his attempt to express his care for her—as he repeatedly tells her that "I don't understand myself—but I want you to understand me!" (140)—is taken by Liusu to be a tantrum she is obliged to appease. Her responses of "I do understand. I do" are presented as an act of comfort that she performs to placate him without any real acknowledgement of his distress at Liusu's uncharitable interpretation of his affections (140). In this way, Liusu's inarticulacy extends even to the realm of her thought processes, wherein having to comprehend that Liuyuan might be earnest in his feelings towards her requires her to dismantle her beliefs that a romantic union is premised upon maximising her monetary and social gains in life. In order for Liusu to begin understanding Liuyuan at all, she must embark on the difficult task of decoupling her ideals of love from her unaffected notions of financial security. As Roland Barthes puts it, an attempt to understand the possibility of genuine romantic love is "to divide the image, to undo the *I*, proud organ of misapprehension" (60). Liusu, then, can only turn to evasion when faced with Liuyuan's calls for her to understand him—her inability to intimate the significance of romantic love to both herself and Liuyuan is the price she pays to avoid having to challenge her worldview on love and marriage, and to consequently have to reckon with her fundamental misapprehensions of her own beliefs and

identity as a woman in her contemporary context where marrying for love is more amenable than before.

Liusu's persistent inability to articulate her blossoming affections for Liuyuan finally reaches its breaking point with Liuyuan's confession of love to her. Though Liuyuan's sudden confession is mediated through a series of phone calls to Liusu's hotel room, his straightforward declaration of "I love you" (Chang 148) leaves little room for Liusu to misconstrue his intentions. Even then, there is little indication of Liusu's own feelings beyond "her heart pounding" after Liuyuan hangs up. When Liuyuan calls again to ask if Liusu reciprocates his feelings, she staunchly deflects his question:

> Liusu coughed. When at last she spoke her throat was still dry and raspy. "You must have known long ago," she said in a low voice. "Why else did I come to Hong Kong?" (148)

While Liusu frames this as an indirect confession of her own feelings in turn, Liuyuan interprets her roundabout answer as a confirmation that she does not reciprocate his feelings, and their phone call spirals into a heated argument culminating with Liusu accusing Liuyuan of not wanting to marry her after all while Liuyuan rejects the prospect of marrying a woman who does not appear to love him back (149). Even as Liusu refuses to let her true feelings slip through, her guarded responses to Liuyuan's confessions are revelatory of her inner turmoil. Her fixation on forcing Liuyuan's hand in unequivocally declaring his intention to marry her comes at the expense of articulating the fact that what she now feels for him is closer to romantic love than before. This ultimately gestures towards her inability to consider herself beyond a bargaining chip to be bartered off in a marriage that promises her freedom from her family. Most importantly, her instinctual reaction to write these phone calls off as a dream is telling of how her inarticulacy in matters of the heart is rooted in a sense of shame and defeat, for to privately wonder if she had become so infatuated with Liuyuan "that even in her sleep

she dreamed of him calling her to say, “I love you”” (150) is something she can admit neither to herself or Liuyuan, as though the mere act of dreaming about romantic love is tantamount to an utter disavowal of everything she believed about marriage as a tool of social mobility.

Meanwhile, the eponymous Sophia of Ding Ling’s “Miss Sophia’s Diary” experiences her inarticulacy in love in markedly different ways, as she grapples with the increasingly irreconcilable gulf between her beliefs and principles in matters of romantic love and her increasingly intense fixation with Ling Jishi, a Singaporean Chinese man introduced to her by her friend, Yufang, and her partner, Yunlin. Prior to her initial encounter with Ling Jishi, Sophia asserts the importance of romantic love to her life in the first of her diary entries, musing that she has “always wanted a man who would really understand [her]” (Ding 52). From the outset, Sophia’s longing to experience romantic love stems from her insecurities about the authenticity of her family and friends’ affections, which she describes in the original Mandarin text as them “insistently and blindly doting on her” (“如此盲的爱惜我”; Ding 45-46; my trans.), to the extent that they continue to excessively placate her even when she expresses doubt and frustration about the nature of their care. For Sophia, her longstanding tuberculosis diagnosis makes it such that she is no longer able to discern whether the love she receives from the people around her is borne out of pity or a genuine interest in her an agential individual beyond her illness. She consequently longs for a romantic relationship where she can feel sure that she is known and understood beyond the bounds of her terminal illness, with Yufang and Yunlin’s relationship serving as a model for her ideals of romantic love. She observes the crux of their romance as being “two people, neither of whom wants anything more than each other, passing their days in peace and conversation” (Ding 54-55), and it is this mundanity of romantic love—rooted in a genuine, reciprocal understanding cultivated between two individuals—that Sophia seeks for herself.

Yet, Sophia's incipient impressions of romantic love are upended by her immediate infatuation with Ling Jishi's physical appearance, so much so that the intensity of her attraction renders her unable to articulate the significance of romantic love to her life or how Jishi might fit into her visions of romantic love, if at all. For instance, she attentively details her physical attraction to him, with particular attention to his "soft, red, moist, deeply inset lips" (55). Most interestingly, her attraction is coupled with shame; Sophia's preoccupation with Jishi's lips is followed by her frustrated lament that she could not "admit to anyone that [she] gazed at those provocative lips like a small hungry child eyeing sweets" (55). The implications of this shame are twofold—that Sophia herself is taken aback by the forcefulness of her physical attraction to Jishi, while simultaneously unable to articulate the nature of her attraction and whether it can be construed as romantic love on her part. This inarticulation is further compounded by the increasing intensity and urgency of her physical attraction to Jishi as the two continue to meet, as it becomes evident that Sophia's desperation to act upon her sexual desires for Jishi is rooted in the perpetual unease she feels with regards to her limited life expectancy. Her tuberculosis makes it such that she is unable to fathom living without the imminent threat of death—she proclaims to "love life with greater urgency than most" (56) in her bid to experience as much joy and pleasure as possible before she passes away. Accordingly, this directly influences her outlook on romantic relationships, where she privileges satiating her obsessive fixation with Jishi's physical appearance even while being unable to articulate the nature of any supposed romantic love that she feels for him when she "[doesn't] know anything about him" (57). Her need for instant gratification intensifies further when her fantasies of Jishi progress to explicit admissions of wanting to enact them in real life:

> If I'd shown more interest when he pressed my hand, if I'd let him know I couldn't refuse him, he'd have gone a lot further. I'm convinced that if you

> dare to have sex with someone you find reasonably attractive, the pleasure must be like bones dissolving, flesh melting. Why was I so strict and tight with him? (61)

Within days of becoming acquainted with Jishi, Sophia already finds herself mired in the potential pleasures of acting upon her sexual desires, with little inclination towards her earlier ideals of romance and companionship. Critically, the original Mandarin text suggests that even her physical attraction to Jishi is now secondary to the exigency of her need for immediate sexual gratification—beyond just having sex with "someone you find reasonably attractive," Sophia believes that this overwhelming sexual pleasure is attainable as long as she is "not tired of or fed up with the other person" ("只要不厌烦那人"; Ding 50; my trans.). In other words, Sophia's sexual desires now extend even beyond her infatuation with Jishi, to the point that a potential romantic partner does not even need to be likeable, only tolerable enough for the pleasures of sex. This, of course, entirely contradicts Sophia's earlier rumination on romantic love as founded upon a kind of mutual understanding consciously fostered between two people. Consequently, Sophia finds herself no longer able to articulate how Jishi and her sexual desires for him relate to any model of romantic love. Sophia's desperation to live out a pleasurable, if short-lived, life by way of instantaneous sexual gratification therefore comes to supersede any cogent articulation of her own longing for romantic love, perhaps because her own vision of romantic love is one that needs to be nurtured with time which she cannot afford to spare due to her terminal illness.

I now briefly return to Sophia's initial ideals of romantic love to clarify the disparity between her ideals and inability to articulate the importance of romantic love to her life. Recalling that Sophia's principal motivation in wishing to experience romantic love is to be recognised and understood as an autonomous individual beyond the disabling physical constraints imposed on her by her terminal illness, Sophia's understanding of romantic love,

then, is akin to how Iris Murdoch denotes love as being "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real" as well as "the discovery of reality" (51). Correspondingly, any failure to articulate romantic love can be considered a failure to recognise another person's existence outside of "a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own" (Murdoch 52). Where Sophia initially envisages romantic love to mean a mutual understanding shared between two people who each recognises the independence of the other, she becomes unable to articulate any kindred feelings of love she may feel towards Jishi because her sexual desire for him necessarily reduces his existence to a vessel for sexual gratification in Sophia's eyes. Katie Wong's elucidation of unselfing as a core component of love, drawing from Murdoch's ideas of love as a point of departure, makes Sophia's inarticulation even more distinct:

> When we unself, we occupy a standpoint that is simultaneously detached and attached. It is detached because we are drawn out of the self-related standpoint that, by stipulation, blinds us to the beloved's independent reality. It is attached because we are arrestingly aware of or moved by an external object's value or reality when unselfing. Being thus moved just is what draws us out of the self-related standpoint. Unselfing has the structure needed to help us really see the beloved when self-attachment gets in our way. (15-16)

Wong's definition of unselfing here identifies the precise root of Sophia's inarticulation in matters of romantic love: her inability to exit her "self-related standpoint" vis-à-vis the looming existential threat of her terminal illness means that she can never fully apprehend Jishi's "independent reality" as a person outside of her need for instant sexual gratification. This is not to say that this act of unselfing alone is infallible in demonstrating one's commitment to love and recognising "the beloved's independent reality," especially when a

failure to do so can have other causes beyond self-attachment such as "the beloved's lack of transparency or the lover's forgetfulness" (16). In Sophia's case, her self-attachment is a natural outcome proceeding from her legitimate fear of dying a premature death, rather than a wilful refusal to acknowledge Jishi's own personhood beyond her fantasies. Still, this means that Sophia is inevitably unable to articulate, or even practice, her own ideals of love as a shared recognition of one another's "independent reality" because they require an ongoing commitment to unselfing that Sophia cannot achieve.

Consequently, Sophia can only continue to mire herself in her increasingly destructive fantasies of Jishi, even when she gradually recognises the harm she is inflicting upon herself. She eventually becomes disillusioned by her realisation that he conflates romantic love with sexual pleasure, without any need for the acts of unselfing and mutual understanding that she believes to be essential to her vision of romantic love. Even though this provokes a sense of cognitive dissonance within her where she feels that reciprocating Jishi's sexual advances constitutes an act of self-betrayal that make her feel "the same as any whore" and degrades her into a "cheap, ordinary soul" (Ding 68) for not upholding her own ideals of romantic love, she stubbornly continues to cling onto her fantasies of him because they allow her to "drink the sweet wine of youthful love to [her] heart's content and spend the morning basking in the smile of love" rather than to be left alone with no other avenue of pleasure, however temporary (69). Sophia is thus no longer able to articulate the significance of romantic love to her life when she remains consumed by her need to defer the threat of death with her sexual dalliances with Jishi that at least maintain a flawed illusion of love.

The inarticulacy in Ling Shuhua's "Once Upon a Time," however, takes on a markedly different form wherein the queer schoolgirl romance between Yingman and Yunluo is already established *in media res* from the beginning. The romance between the two girls is neither hindered by shackles to the hegemonic patriarchal doctrines of the past or the

impending threat of death that burdens Liusu and Sophia respectively. Rather, Yingman and Yunluo find themselves in a conundrum whereby they can freely express their love for one another but cannot unambiguously articulate the legitimacy of their sexuality and love to each other and the people around them. The short story's Mandarin title ("说有这么一回事") already hints at the schoolgirls' failure to directly articulate the legitimacy of their love story, which is instead transmitted as gossip or hearsay far removed from their lived reality, only that "it was said that something like this happened" (my trans.).

This theme continues into the short story's opening, with the pair being introduced by way of their classmate teasing Yunluo by calling out ""Juliet, Juliet, Romeo seeks thee Juliet!"" (Ling 185). This forms the basis for Yingman and Yunluo's budding relationship, having become acquainted with one another after being cast as Romeo and Juliet respectively in their school's theatrical staging of Romeo and Juliet. These epithets, borne from the Shakespearean tragedy, then become synonymous with the pair and their relationship throughout the short story. An early example of this occurs when Yunluo's roommate, Meiling, greets the pair when they enter Yunluo's dorm room:

> When the two burst into the room clutching a single tiny umbrella and with their arms wrapped around each other's waists, Meiling greeted them with a grin. "Bravo, Romeo and Juliet have arrived as a pair. I just made some tea. Drink as husband and wife." (187)

The romance between Yingman and Yunluo is immediately evident, augmented by both their physical intimacy as well as continual references to the pair as either "Romeo and Juliet" or "husband and wife." Crucially, these references are perpetually ensconced within the heteronormative paradigm of Romeo and Juliet as a heterosexual couple— when Meiling refers to them as "husband and wife," she uses the Mandarin term "俩口子" while Yingman uses the Mandarin term "眷属" when playfully calling Yunluo her "spouse" (86-87). Both

terms are exclusively used to refer to a heterosexual couple (i.e. “husband and wife” as in the English translation), which thus firmly situates the schoolgirls within this heteronormative paradigm with no actual acknowledgement of their queerness from either themselves or their peers.

Even as their romance takes on an overtly heterosexual guise, the fact that neither of the girls can properly articulate the legitimacy of their queerness and love becomes an insurmountable obstacle to the survival of their love. Potential disaster arrives in the form of Yunluo’s receipt of a letter from her older brother who entreats her to accept an arranged marriage, and even Yunluo’s distress at the matter is expressed as a lament that Yingman is not a man (190). Though she refuses to elaborate further on her outburst, her wish for Yingman to be a man can be interpreted as a wish for their love to be legitimised in the form of a heterosexual union, in which she could presumably marry Yingman instead of being pressured into an arranged marriage by her family. For Yunluo, it is not that she is unable to articulate her love for Yingman and vice versa, but that she has no recourse for articulating the legitimacy of their love to her family. Even as Yingman rushes to comfort Yunluo and implore her to reject her brother’s proposal, she likewise has no means of articulating their love on its own terms:

> ““Why can’t we be together forever? Look at the primary school instructors Miss Chen and Miss Chu, haven't they been living together for five or six years? You mean to say we can’t be like them? Don’t be so stubborn. My love for you is deeper and more permanent than any man’s could ever be, surely you know this. Can't you just consider this the same as being married to me?”” (191)

Even while attempting to convince Yunluo that their love is genuine and enduring, she can only base her plea on their female teachers’ romance as yet another external referential point,

wherein the true, queer nature of their teachers' relationship is only alluded to by virtue of their long-term cohabitation. Most notably, Yingman's plea in the original Mandarin text connotes that the pair can and should take their teachers as an exemplar to model their own relationship after, given that she asks if "they could not learn from their teachers' own relationship" ("我们俩难道不可以学她们吗?"; Ling 91, my trans.). In response, Yunluo passionately confesses her love to Yingman, and even this reads as an aberration because she declares it in English: ""My God, how can I live without you! I love you. Say you love me, my love."" (Ling 191). Where Yingman grasps at external benchmarks of queerness to give validity to her own feelings, the very language Yunluo uses in trying to articulate her love is one that is separate from her native language and that paradoxically renders their queerness as being culturally divorced from and inarticulable within their lived reality.

The crisis of an arranged marriage is temporarily averted following Yunluo's confession, but their romantic bliss remains propped up only by the very heteronormative paradigm that denies them any articulation of the legitimacy of their love. Certainly, this heteronormative paradigm is far from a fictional plot device: the schoolgirls' inability to independently articulate their love reflects Republican China's cultural anxieties surrounding the supposed impurity of same-sex love between women in which the "legitimacy of lust between women was called into question and bluntly denied" (Sang, The Emerging Lesbian 131). Although same-sex attachments between schoolgirls were considered a common and innocuous phenomenon at the time (118), they were typically dismissed as "a "fashion" that might be "extinguished" and "prevented"" (109), and considered temporary in nature as "their amorous acts and speeches [were] mimetic rather than serious in intention and consequence" (115). Altogether, these queer schoolgirl romances were deemed an aberration that would resolve itself when wayward girls matured into adult women who returned to the rightful paths of heterosexuality and marriage (122).

In this historical context, Yingman and Yunluo therefore cannot hope to articulate their sexuality and love for each other outside of their continuous deferral to heteronormative frames of reference. David Halperin makes a similar observation on this conundrum of queer love:

> Precisely because love has so often served to consecrate the kinds of social relations that are already approved and admired, it has posed a persistent problem for queers. Queers have not had access to love, either as a representation or as a form of life. Or, rather, they have had access to it only at the expense of their own queerness; love has offered an escape—often desired, sometimes despised—from the abnormality of being queer. Where the happy couple advances, deviance retreats (397).

If romantic love in Yingman and Yunluo's contemporary context is sanctioned only in heterosexual norms that "consecrate the kinds of social relations that are already approved and admired," it follows that they can only indulge in their love insofar as it conforms to these heterosexual standards that categorically reject their "abnormality of being queer." This is most evident when their peers "no longer referred to them by their real names, as though they had always been called Romeo and Juliet" (Ling 192) as the short story progresses. Just as Yingman and Yunluo can only speak of their love for one another using gendered, heteronormative terms or external referential points, their peers only acknowledge their romantic relationship by enfolding them into this heteronormative paradigm with no further recognition of their queerness. "Romeo and Juliet" comes to pass as a metonym for Yingman and Yunluo, who are then rendered perpetually inarticulate with no access to a more liberating vocabulary that could enable them to articulate the legitimacy of their love for each other on their own terms.

Love in Crisis

The inarticulacy of love across the three works is further compounded and complicated by the sudden onset of crisis that threatens to stall the possibility of achieving romantic love for the protagonists. Even as these women continue grappling with their inabilities to articulate their perceptions of and needs in romantic love, crises at both the personal and national level render love an impossible task. This is perhaps most evident in *Love in a Fallen City*, with the novella's title referencing the fall of Hong Kong to the Japanese in 1941 during the Second Sino-Japanese War, which occurred in tandem with World War II. For a time, it seems that Liusu's anguish over where Liuyuan's affections lie has finally been put to rest—the pair eventually confirm their feelings for each other after Liuyuan's initial confession, and Liusu settles into a rented house while waiting for Liuyuan's return from his year-long trip to England (Chang 154-156). The novella, however, abruptly segues into a detached account of wartime events immediately hereafter. The romance that Liusu has laboriously toiled to achieve is literally blown up; after narrowly surviving a bombing that hits her rented house, Liusu's mind briefly wanders to Liuyuan and wonders if his ship to England had departed safely, though now "he seemed vague to her, like someone in another world" (Chang 159), or even someone from "a different lifetime" altogether ("如同隔世"; Chang 195; my trans.). Where finally entering into a romantic relationship with Liuyuan poised for their eventual marriage might have encouraged Liusu to begin evaluating the nuances of her romantic feelings for Liuyuan and separating them from her single-minded focus on the financial gains of marrying him, Liusu is instead forced to defer her own sentimental contemplations of Liuyuan. The urgency of survival, then, takes precedence for Liusu, and she is left with no other avenue for untangling the true nature of her romantic feelings for Liuyuan.

Still, this crisis of war inevitably becomes entwined with Liusu's crisis in love, as it turns out that Liuyuan's ship did not manage to depart from Hong Kong due to the outbreak of war. Instead, he rushes to pick up Liusu so that they can both take refuge at Repulse Bay (Chang 160). Nevertheless, the pair's reunion is far from picturesque, as the turmoil and uncertainty of wartime, coupled with the increasingly real threat of death, casts doubt over the sincerity of their romantic love for each other. Upon seeing Liuyuan again, Liusu cannot help but to remark that "[her] story would be over" should he have been killed, while the inverse would be true for Liuyuan should she have been killed instead (160). The imbalanced, gendered power dynamic that Liusu grimly recalls here again reiterates the precarity of her social standing as a divorced woman, for even the devastation of wartime cannot remediate the societal ostracization and financial insecurity that will again befall her if she is no longer able to marry Liuyuan. That Liusu's personal crisis persists even in the face of wartime death and destruction further underscores romantic love—hindered by the workings of gender inequality enduring throughout the Republican era despite its promises of reform—as an insurmountable endeavour for her, and consequently, perpetually inarticulable. As Wang Xiaoping puts it, Liusu's crisis can be considered "a crisis of the formation of a class identity/subjectivity" where she is caught between the ephemerality of both love and a striving towards the bourgeois middle class, which are both continually destabilised by unexpected sociopolitical vicissitudes that prevent her from attaining a secure social standing (581). Subsequently, wartime relentlessly deepens Liusu's dependence on Liuyuan for her financial and material survival, with the narrator wryly noting that "all she had was him; all he had was her" after the pair narrowly survives yet another bombing (Chang 161). Under these dire circumstances, it no longer becomes clear if Liusu and Liuyuan stay together in a romantic relationship out of a genuine love for each other or to bolster their chances of mutual survival throughout wartime.

Be that as it may, wartime speeds up the progression of Liusu and Liuyuan's relationship, even as the sincerity of their deepening feelings for each other is deliberately left ambiguous. Just when it seems that Liusu and Liuyuan have finally reached a mutual equilibrium in the establishment of their romantic relationship, with neither believing the other to harbour ulterior motives, the narrator blithely observes that this "was enough to keep them happy together for a decade or so" (164). Put simply, the narrator's omniscient interjection implies that the pair's romantic love for each other, if any, might eventually outlive their need for survival once the unrest of war comes to an end:

> He was just a selfish man; she was a selfish woman. In this age of chaos and disorder, there is no place for those who stand on their own, but for an ordinary married couple, room can always be found. (165)

The cynical messaging here is that Liusu and Liuyuan's shared selfishness outweighs whatever romantic love that they may genuinely feel for each other, for they both recognise that it would be easier for "an ordinary married couple" to survive wartime together as opposed to attempting to do so individually. Liusu's crisis in love therefore extends into a crisis of perpetual deferral as well; as long as societal unrest and wartime continue to linger, there remains no way for Liusu to articulate her own feelings of romantic love that can be unequivocally detached from her need for survival. This crisis of a deferred articulation of romantic love ultimately permeates the entirety of the novella, with Eileen Chang remarking that even she did not feel the need to fully understand Liuyuan in her own writing, given that Liusu herself never managed to fully understand Liuyuan and her feelings of romantic love for him (Pan 239).

The crisis in "Miss Sophia's Diary," however, can be considered the exact opposite of *Love in a Fallen City*. Again, Sophia's crisis is rooted in the looming threat of her mortality from her terminal illness throughout the course of the short story, as opposed to the

unexpected, instantaneous outbreak of war. It is her frail health that spurs the intensity of her romantic and sexual desires for Jishi even when they provoke a sense of self-loathing within her because she feels more compelled to "love life with greater urgency than most" and to "spend days and nights dreaming up ways [she] could die without regret" (Ding 56). Most significantly, Sophia's crisis and desperation to maximise the pleasure she can feel within her short-lived life through acting upon her sexual desires for Jishi only intensifies with the grief she feels from the passing of her closest friend, Yunjie. Sophia grieves the untimely nature of Yunjie's death, and believes that Yunjie would not have passed away from her terminal illness so quickly "if she hadn't been tricked by God into loving that ashen-faced man" (72). Yunjie—trapped in an unfulfilling, loveless marriage while also terminally ill prior to her death—can thus be read as a parallel to Sophia, who chooses to prioritise short-term, instant gratification so that the possibility of her own death might occur under less tragic circumstances if she had already experienced a modicum of pleasure at all, even if it is not the romantic love that she actually wants.

Although Sophia is markedly reserved in detailing her relationship with Yunjie, her deep affection and subsequent grief over the latter's death is pronounced, and this manifests in the form of a six-weeks-long gap in her diary entries that precede her intensifying obsession with Jishi even as she comes to resent herself for indulging in her fantasies of him that are "driving [her] mad with desire" (74). For Sophia, Yunjie's death represents her irrecoverable loss of the one person in her life who she believed to have genuinely understood her and never patronised her on account of her terminal illness. Compared to her other friends, Sophia believes that she cannot "possibly equate [her] relation to them with the love Yunjie and [her] had" (72). Notwithstanding the queer undertones in Sophia's relationship with Yunjie, it is evident that Yunjie is whom Sophia trusted with her most authentic, unrestrained self while she feels unable to extend this same trust to her other

friends (72). Accordingly, Sophia feels compelled to compensate for Yunjie's absence by fixating on satiating her sexual desires for Jishi as a vehicle for her to still experience some semblance of intimacy and pleasure in the wake of losing her most trusted companion in life. Sophia's phenomenological experience of her sexual desire for Jishi then becomes the only remaining avenue through which she can attempt to assert her personal agency beyond the constraints of her terminal illness, which otherwise hinder her mobility and ability to participate in society. Crucially, the confusion and shame that she feels towards her own sexual desire arises from her inability to precisely articulate a coherent vision of romantic love that she seeks, and she thus feels unable to reconcile her sexual fantasies of Jishi with her own beliefs and principles. In Martin Stephen Frommer's analysis of sexual lust as a subjective experience that can be predicated upon having experienced damage to one's sense of self, he suggests that lust can be experienced as a kind of otherness originating from a dissonant self-identity, wherein "lust's otherness is frequently constituted from psychic experiences that are not only inconsistent but in conflict with whom we imagine ourselves to be" (642). Considered this way, Sophia's obsessive sexual desire reads as a direct byproduct of a breakdown in her own sense of self, catalysed by her grief over Yunjie's death. Correspondingly, Sophia can only compensate for the loss of her most trusted confidant by indulging in her sexual desires that are "frequently constituted by and through self-experiences that lie outside the boundaries of not only more familiar but also more acceptable experiences of self" (Frommer 643). In doing so, Sophia feels empowered through experiencing a temporary mode of being that grants her agency over her own ailing body, which otherwise denies her a sense of autonomy in her other interpersonal relationships, even though it contradicts her own ideals of romantic love. While Sophia also recognises that even Jishi's endearment towards her is rooted in his perception of her helplessness and vulnerability due to her terminal illness (Ding 71), her choice to wilfully act upon her sexual

desire for him still constitutes a way for her to "repair a damaged sense of self…and retaliate for the wrongs that have been done" (Frommer 643) so that she might still experience some pleasure and satisfaction in her life, even if romantic fulfilment appears to remain out of reach for her.

These crises of love, mortality, and wartime converge for Yingman and Yunluo in "Once Upon a Time," where tragedy strikes upon their separation over their school's summer vacation, during which they both return to their respective hometowns. In the meantime, Yingman strives to keep their romance alive by sending multiple letters to Yunluo, though this epistolary line of communication is delayed and eventually severed by the outbreak of fighting in Jiangsu and Zhejiang (Ling 193).[15] These love letters initially stave off the schoolgirls' crisis of separation, though it does little to ameliorate the lurking threat of Yunluo's arranged marriage. In fact, the only direct excerpt from these love letters is taken from Yunluo's sole response to Yingman; though she reaffirms the depth and sincerity of her feelings for Yingman, she alludes to her displeasure at being compelled by her mother to "change [her] clothes and put on face powder" in order to entertain guests at home—presumably potential suitors for Yunluo—on a daily basis (192). Despite its troubling connotations, Yunluo's reply still manages to allay Yingman's anxieties, which she takes as a stand-in for Yunluo's physical presence, repeatedly kissing and rereading the letter all the while (193).

The reassurance that Yunluo's letter affords proves to be temporary, as the schoolgirls' summer vacation ends with no further correspondence from Yunluo despite Yingman's insistence on sending more letters to the former even after returning to school and realising that Yunluo herself has yet to return (193-194). The imminent crisis of Yunluo's

[15] This presumably refers to the outbreak of the first Jiangsu-Zhejiang War in 1924, which was a part of escalating political tensions between clashing factions vying for control of China following the 1911 Revolution. For a more detailed analysis of its political implications on modern Chinese history, see Waldron 73-90.

arranged marriage, then, finally rears its ugly head when Yingman overhears her classmates speculating that Yunluo's absence was likely because she had been married off already (194). This news, of course, distresses Yingman to the point of collapse. Most significantly, these rumours of Yunluo's arranged marriage are delivered through hearsay from their peers, just as the pair's heteronormative Shakespearean epithets were bestowed upon them and enshrined by their peers. Even in Yingman's time of crisis, she is denied agency in being able to personally receive direct confirmation of this news, nor can she attempt to assert her love for Yunluo in any bid to stall the marriage. This ultimately becomes a crisis of both queer love and sexuality for Yingman, now permanently estranged from Yunluo with no possibility of recourse or any further acknowledgement of the love they shared. Recalling that Yingman and Yunluo were both unable to articulate their love outside of a strict heteronormative paradigm, it is perhaps even more devastating that their romance comes to an abrupt end within this same paradigm that fundamentally denies the legitimacy of their love.

With Yunluo's complete disappearance from the short story following her first and only letter to Yingman, it is Yingman who is left to contend with the fallout of losing her beloved. Yunluo's conspicuous absence now spotlights the aberrant nature of Yingman's heartbreak for Yunluo, which leads to both her gender identity and sexuality being mocked and policed by her peers. Yingman's schoolmates recognise that her despair at not having Yunluo by her side is not wholly platonic in nature, and perhaps veers into a deviance from heteronormative norms of romantic love wherein "the lesbian stands outside the category "woman,"" therefore conspicuously marking Yingman as a "not-woman" who is "incapable of being a woman within heterosexual society" (Calhoun 206). To Yingman's schoolmates, the only legible and legitimate version of womanhood is one that is strictly heterosexual, such that Yingman's queerness in her affection for Yunluo is now read by them as a direct contravention of her outward existence as a woman.

In turn, her schoolmates identify Yingman and her queerness as irreconcilable outliers, and she is mockingly referred to "Romeo" without her accompanying "Juliet" in tow (Ling 194). Since Yingman's continued love for Yunluo even after their separation causes her to fail to pass as a heterosexual woman, her queerness can only be understood by her peers as being aligned with the heterosexual love of a male "Romeo" within the binary categories of "man" and "woman" that do not permit any deviance. Put simply, the only acknowledgement of Yingman's queer love is her peers' prescription of her role as a "Romeo," or rather, a lesbian "functioning as a man in relation to women" who shares "a sexual desire for and love of women" with other men (Calhoun 206). Yingman's crises of loss and queerness now transfigure to a crisis of denial, where both her gender identity and queerness are systematically denied by her peers, with no further acknowledgement or legitimacy granted to her relationship with Yunluo. Likewise, Yunluo's arranged marriage can be similarly interpreted as a means to "compel her back into the category "woman"" (Calhoun 206), where her deviant resistance to an arranged marriage is overcome when she is eventually assimilated back into heterosexual womanhood through marriage and never heard from again in the short story. In this way, Yunluo's queerness is similarly policed and remediated in ways that reject any mode of feminine existence outside strict heteronormative doctrines that conflate womanhood and heterosexuality.

Incomplete Love

Having examined these pivotal shortfalls in love across the three works, the possibility of achieving romantic love for these characters remains ambiguous, and their love stories seem destined to remain incomplete. In the wake of crises at the personal and national levels, it seems that romantic love has lost all significance—the characters' quests for romantic love drive the plots of these works, and yet they come to an end without definite

consummations of love. The point of love, then, instead rests in the generation of further possibilities that affirm the transformative potential of love (even if unfulfilled) and empower these characters with a capacity of self-determination that was not previously accessible to them.

Liusu's trajectory in *Love in a Fallen City* is perhaps the best example of this because her wartime marriage to Liuyuan proves to be her ticket to liberation from her oppressive, patriarchal family as well as the financial stability she needs to establish her own independence in life. For all intents and purposes, their marriage entails utmost success for Liusu, who survives the beginnings of war and manages to return home to Shanghai with Liuyuan (Chang 167). While this might make her love story seem the most "complete" as compared to the two short stories, the ambiguity surrounding the authenticity of the couple's romantic love for each other lingers and Liusu continues to harbour doubts about the true nature of Liuyuan's love for her. This misapprehension at the core of their relationship surfaces for the final time when Liusu asks once and for all if Liuyuan truly wishes to marry her for love:

> They went on walking, and Liuyuan said, "The gods must be behind this; we really did find out what love is!"
>
> "You said a long time ago that you loved me."
>
> "That doesn't count. We were too busy falling in love—how could we have found time to really love each other?" (Chang 166)
>
> 他们继续走路， 柳原又道:"鬼使神差地，我们倒真的恋爱起来了!"流苏道:"你早就说过你爱我。"柳原笑道:"那不算。我们那时候太忙着谈恋爱了，哪里还有工夫恋爱?" (Chang 200)

The question of romantic love between the two, left hanging even after Liuyuan's dramatic phone call confession and the outbreak of war, now appears to have reached a tidy resolution.

Liuyuan celebrates that "by the work of the demons and gods, we really, unexpectedly ended up being in love with each other" ("鬼使神差地，我们倒真的恋爱起来了!"; my trans.). To Liuyuan, their marriage is a kind of unexplainable, supernatural phenomenon, as though his earlier courtship of Liusu had little bearing on the success of their romantic union. His observation holds a temporal significance for Liusu, who counters by saying "you already said before that you loved me" ("你早就说过你爱我。"; my trans., emphasis mine) and effectively challenges the distinction between what Liuyuan describes as them being in love now and his confession of love before the war. Liuyuan, then, doubles down on this distinction: he insists that his prior confession does not hold water because they were "too busy courting each other" and could not have had the leisure of being in love with each other ("那不算。我们那时候太忙着谈恋爱了，哪里还有工夫恋爱?"; my trans.). In other words, Liuyuan believes that his confession of love was merely a component of his courtship of Liusu, which he takes as a markedly different occurrence from his romantic love now that the pair have confirmed the reciprocity of their love on the cusp of their marriage.

What Liuyuan has inadvertently struck upon here is the idea that romantic love is a sequential, relational process between two individuals that demands concerted time and effort in order to produce the state of being in a love as an outcome. Correspondingly, Liuyuan's demarcation between the states of falling in love and actually being in love respectively can be productively interpreted through the lens of Anna Jónasdóttir's theory of "love power," derived from her Marxist analyses of work and human labour. As a scholar of gender and love studies, Jónasdóttir posits that the experience of human love can be read analogously to Marxist ideas of "activity" and "human practice" (i.e. what Marx identifies as "human labour") because "both are renewable sources of generativity/creativity, and both are insubstitutable by other social powers, such as rights or money" ("The difference that love (power) makes" 18). Jónasdóttir further identifies the fundamental difference between labour

and love as being the fact that love "is not purposive in the sense of aiming at a predesigned result," which is to say, the very act of loving another person cannot be equated to an act of labour (18). Rather, love is a "relational practical activity or practices" that makes it comparable to how Marx conceptualises labour as sensuous activity, and love therefore constitutes the reciprocal process through which lovers enter into a love relationship (18). "Love power," then, is the resulting force that is continuously generated and transferred between the lovers through the exchange of love within this relationship (18). For as long as this relationship is sustained, it functions as a three-party relationship in which "love power" continues to be generated and regenerated as an ongoing, reciprocal exchange between the lovers (18). Most importantly, "love power" is "a renewable source of bio-social human capacities" that can be both used for the benefit of others or enjoyed individually "for pleasure, growth, and care of the self, or solidary actions with others" (20). When applied to Liuyuan's distinction between courtship and the state of being in love, it is "love power," or its previous lack thereof, that emerges as the key difference between these two states. Liuyuan's earlier phone call confession necessarily fails to generate "love power" though it was explicit in its proclamation of romantic love and intent because it did not result in the formation of a love relationship. Conversely, the generation of "love power" can only begin when the pair finally reach a mutual reciprocation of love within the bounds of a love relationship through their agreement to get married.

The workings of "love power" for Liusu, then, extend beyond its continued generation and presence in fortifying and sustaining the relationship between her and Liuyuan. Rather, it is its potential to extend outwards beyond the boundaries of their love relationship that evinces the promissory potential of romantic love, which grants Liusu the freedom to pursue her own self-determination in life. The state of being in love alongside the simultaneous (re)generation of "love power" is consequently an active state of doing, which elevates

romantic love into a creative force (i.e. beyond just feeling it as an emotion) that can be considered "a fundamentally significant and unique creative/productive power, able to bring about change or something new" (Jónasdóttir, "Love Studies" 21). At the interpersonal level, it is this creative potential—conferred by "love power"—that emancipates Liusu from her patriarchal family for good after having married Liuyuan (Chang 167). More interestingly, the creative potential of "love power" manifests most evidently at a national level, where the narrator directly notes that "Hong Kong's defeat had brought Liusu victory" (167). In fact, a more literal rendition of this observation in the original Mandarin text—"the conquest of Hong Kong completed her" ("香港的陷落成全了她"; Chang 201; my trans., emphasis mine)—outright suggests that it is this wartime devastation with "countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, after that an earth-shaking revolution" that facilitates Liusu's fulfilment in life (Chang 167). Here, the creative potential of "love power" seems to transcend even the destructive reality of war, and Liusu walks away unscathed with both the promise of romantic love and the agency to enact her own self-determination in life, now that she is no longer forced to depend upon her family for her continued survival. That Liusu is completed by Hong Kong's total defeat at the novella's end emphasises "love power's" core undertaking in "bring[ing] about change or something new," for her marriage to Liuyuan and continued survival opens up new possibilities in life for her that extend even beyond the novella's end. Even Liusu herself acknowledges that there is not "anything subtle about her place in history" (167), where she now becomes emblematic of "love power's" creative potential in generating further possibilities and futures even when faced with the agitated tides of historical change. This is even clearer considering that this correlation between Liusu's fulfilment and Hong Kong's collapse operates as a callback to the novella's title, where Liusu indeed finds "love in a fallen city," which also bears historical allusions to ancient legends "in which the beauty of a woman is blamed for the collapse of a

kingdom" (Huang 460). Compared to the ubiquitous myths surrounding "these legendary beauties who felled cities and kingdoms," the narrator remarks that even "they do not come to have such a perfect and satisfactory ending" ("可不见得有这么圆满的收场"; Chang 201; my trans.) like that of Liusu's love story. The novella concludes on this note, as if to intimate that Liusu and her love story have been elevated above even these legends of old. If "love power's" creative potential "enable[s] the 'object' of love to confirm its own capacity to 'create' or 'shape' himself or herself and his or her own goals" (Jónasdóttir, "What Kind of Power is 'Love Power'?" 54), then what Liusu has managed to achieve for herself by the novella's end is her own freedom to her self-determination and social mobility in life, unfettered by the familial and societal stigma she once bore as a divorcee. Though this could only be achieved by virtue of her marriage to Liuyuan that re-legitimises her social standing in a heteropatriarchal society, and the sincerity of Liuyuan's affections remain ambiguous even in matrimony (Chang 167), what remains certain for Liusu is the promise of a considerably more hospitable future to come, where she might now be able to inhabit the liberatory ethos of her time that called for women to assert their own autonomy in life.

On the contrary, Sophia can only assert her own independence and capacity for self-determination through her categorical rejection of Jishi and his hasty profession of love towards the short story's end. "Miss Sophia's Diary" concludes on a startlingly abrupt note, with Sophia forcing herself to repudiate Jishi's advances once and for all and resolving to leave Beijing and live out the rest of her days in solitude. Where the active generation of "love power" leads to further possibilities in life for Liusu, its seeming absence in Sophia's aborted love story with Jishi might suggest that her failed encounter with love closes off her own agency in life. Yet, Sophia herself counters this prospect by rejecting Jishi's superficial confession of love rather than giving into her all-consuming sexual desire for him, so much so that "[she] felt [her] self-respect revive finally" even though she "ought to be mad with joy

now, since all the wondrous elements of [her] fantasy actually happened to me as though in a dream, effortlessly" (Ding 79). Sophia's earlier desperation to experience maximum pleasure in life, no matter the cost to herself and her ideals of romantic love, now subsides through a critical moment of self-reflection wherein she expresses that "it hurts [her] deeply that [she is] not able to command his respect and understanding" (75). By her own admission, her ideals of romantic love, premised upon an understanding of love as unselfing, are impossible between her and Jishi. Sophia's final rejection of Jishi, then, delineates the failure of her attempts to experience some modicum of pleasure in her short-lived life through indulging in her sexual desire for Jishi, at the expense of her original longings for romantic love.

Even so, all is not lost for Sophia, for it is this very failure of romantic love that catalyses the conditions for Sophia to decisively reclaim her agency in life. In her final diary entry, Sophia documents the heightened clarity that Jishi's superficial confession of love provokes within her, which repulses her because she realises that his own impressions of love merely comprise shallow considerations of social status and wealth, which leads him to wrongly assume that "all [she] desire[s] is marriage and family…all that amuses [her] is money" (79). Sophia's rejection of Jishi thus represents a return to her ideals of romantic love, rooted in a mutual understanding shared between two people, where she now recognises that "it's absurd to say that he knows what love is, that he's able to love her" (79). Naturally, this revelation is accompanied with the impossibility of romantic love between Sophia and Jishi—if there is no love relationship formed between them, then "love power" and its promissory potential for change and transformation cannot be generated for Sophia. Implicit in Sophia's absolute rejection of Jishi, then, is perhaps her realisation that the "love power" that would be generated within a romantic relationship with someone like Jishi who (in her own words) neither respects nor understands her as a person can be wielded as a double-edged sword that might do her more harm than good. Forasmuch as "love power" can be

fundamentally creative in generating new possibilities for both parties in a relationship in matters of love and life, Jishi's condescension towards Sophia as a potential romantic partner espouses how "men benefit in a certain qualified sense one-sidedly from exploitation of women's love power" (Jónasdóttir, "What Kind of Power is 'Love Power'?" 52). While this does not presuppose that Sophia would definitely reap none of "love power's" creative benefits in this kind of relationship, the fact remains that Jishi and Sophia are entrenched within an unbalanced power dynamic along the axes of gender, where Jishi's material wealth and elevated social standing as a man in a heteropatriarchal society already grants him significant advantages over Sophia, whose terminal illness limits her bodily capacities and social mobility and would further deepen her dependence on Jishi should they begin a romantic relationship. If this unbalanced power dynamic is inevitable between Sophia and Jishi, then "one party controls much more effectively than the other the circumstances of differential advantages which keeps the exploitative system going" (Jónasdóttir, "What Kind of Power is 'Love Power'?" 52).[16] Should this romantic relationship come to pass, what awaits Sophia is plausibly "a continuous struggle on the boundaries of 'poverty' in terms of [her] possibilities to operate in society as [a] self-assured and self-evidently worthy [person] exerting [her] capacities effectively and legitimately," wherein she could be worse off with Jishi than without (Jónasdóttir, Why Women are Oppressed 225). That this pronounced absence of "love power" conversely propels Sophia towards her own self-determination is ultimately both an indictment of Jishi as well as an affirmation of Sophia's conviction in

[16] Jónasdóttir further expounds on the institutionalisation of unbalanced gender dynamics within heterosexual love relationships through the elements of care and ecstasy in love, which consequently find themselves in continuous opposition in these relationships. Where it is deemed socially acceptable for men to indulge in their sexuality, expressed through their "limitless desire for ecstasy" with no obligation on their part to practice care towards women, women are instead "'forced' to commit [themselves] to loving care—so that 'Man' can be able to live/experience ecstasy" ("What Kind of Power is 'Love Power'?" 55). Though guessing at how exactly this might manifest in a potential (and factually non-existent) relationship between Sophia and Jishi would veer into the realm of unfounded speculation, it still bears noting that the creative capacities of "love power" can never be divorced from the workings of the patriarchy.

choosing to reclaim agency over her life at the cost of giving up the pleasure she previously derived from her sexual desire for Jishi.

The resolve Sophia musters from her rejection of Jishi and the possibility that any potential "love power" of hers might be exploited to her detriment in a romantic relationship with him is directed into her final impulse to conclude her diary by "decid[ing] to take a train south, somewhere where no one knows [her], where [she] can squander the remaining days of [her] life" (Ding 81). In doing so, Sophia wholly asserts her agency for the first and final time in the short story by rejecting the stagnancy of a life lived with an unsatisfactory lover and friends who cannot come to understand her as a person beyond the constraints of her terminal illness. Though extreme in nature, her emphatic choice to run away in a bid to reclaim her life without any regard for whether she lives or dies demonstrates how even a failed pursuit of romantic love can illuminate a more optimistic way forward in life. The alluring promise of love thus fails Sophia, but it is this failure that directly emboldens her to assert her own path of self-determination in life. What remains for Sophia is a hard-earned freedom—unyoked from social expectations of her as a tuberculosis patient and passive participant in romantic love—imbued with a fervour that eclipses even the matter of her own life and death.

Thus far, the workings of "love power" (or its lack thereof) are clearly delineated for Liusu and Sophia: the generation of "love power" facilitates Liusu's freedom, while Sophia opts to forgo its creative potential to instead pursue a self-determination that does not entrench her within an unbalanced, gendered power dynamic in romantic love. Either way, the absence or presence of "love power" in these two works can be unambiguously determined because the requisite beginning of a love relationship is explicitly depicted or rejected for both Liusu and Sophia respectively. This matter of having a love relationship with a clearly demarcated beginning, however, is missing in "Once Upon a Time," such that the possibilities generated by "love power" for Yingman and Yunluo and their significance

cannot be clearly intimated until it has already been severed and lost following Yunluo's arranged marriage. What is instead witnessed at the end of the short story is the aftermath of "love power," in which Yingman's grief over losing Yunluo bears testament to "love power's" creative potential in the past tense. Although the (re)generation and flow of "love power" is severed along with the schoolgirls' love relationship, its imprint continues to live on through Yingman alone.

For Yingman, the posthumous influence of "love power's" creative potential manifests within the interstitial space of her dreams, where she keeps attempting to (re)construct the flow of "love power" between her and Yunluo, even when the exchange of "love power" is halted without further postal correspondence from Yunluo during their vacation and later severed with the eventual failure of their love. When Yunluo does not return her letters, she is tormented by nightmares of Yunluo "look[ing] like a corpse" or falling severely ill, but still feels anguished when the nightmares cease because she "couldn't even fulfil her desire to see Yunluo in that way" (Ling 193). The temporary cessation of "love power" in this moment already gestures towards its lasting impact on Yingman far beyond its inevitable end—the prospect of living a life without being together with Yunluo is deemed so unbearable for Yingman that she would rather glimpse her in ghastly nightmares than not at all. In this way, what "love power" has already generated for her by way of nourishing possibilities in life is a queer love that has become so essential to Yingman's very being and transcends even her inability to clearly articulate it outside of a heterosexual framework. This is reiterated most clearly when the "love power" between the schoolgirls is terminated for good when Yingman finally learns of Yunluo's marriage, with the breakdown of their love relationship being accompanied by Yingman's final vision of Yunluo as she collapses from the shock of the news. In this last vision, Yingman conjures Yunluo as being "dressed up as a bride with a red veil over her head and sparkling clothes and jewellery,

standing there with a slight smile" (194-195). Yunluo's alleged husband-to-be, however, is conspicuously absent from this vision, and all Yingman sees even under duress are blurry images of Yunluo that flicker between Yunluo appearing to be laughing or crying (195). Here, we finally observe the aftermath of "love power's" creative potential: the queer love shared between the schoolgirls has already been consecrated through the past (re)generation of "love power" all throughout their relationship, to the extent that Yingman staunchly refuses to capitulate to the demands and imagery of the very heterosexuality that has separated her from Yunluo for good. Even in her grief, Yingman's vision exclusively foregrounds Yunluo and does not relinquish Yunluo to any imagined man within the heteronormative construct of marriage that denies her queer love. Crucially, there is also no way for Yingman to imagine Yunluo as unequivocally happy in her bridal visage when this hypothetical image of Yunluo would delegitimise the love that they had shared. This, too, is conceivably the lingering imprint of "love power" at work, where Yingman's unabating grief attests to the enduring depth and sincerity of the schoolgirls' queer love even when it is overwhelmed by the workings of a heteronormative paradigm that actively erases the very possibility of queerness.

Finally, this ill-fated severance of "love power" between the schoolgirls still offers room for Yingman to reaffirm their queer love: if "love is a demand for reciprocity," their queer love now transfigures into a one that "lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect," thereby surviving even the loss of "love power" (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion 130). Simply put, Yingman's grief only further consecrates the legitimacy of their queer love because it acts as the ultimate confirmation that this love was genuine, wherein her grief can only intensify further as "a sign of what it means to not have this love" (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion 130). In this way, the queer love shared between the schoolgirls remains legible and lives on through Yingman alone,

which would have otherwise been lost to time with no formal record or recognition of their relationship outside of themselves and the fleeting gossip of their peers. The failure of their love necessarily extends past the short story's conclusion, for Yingman's enduring grief means that she has not yet allowed herself or her queerness to be assimilated into the heteronormative paradigm that would deny her agency and freedom in love. For as long as Yingman goes on remembering, the possibility of queer love between women, too, continues into the uncertain future, still beyond the reach of a heteronormative paradigm that would seek to erase it.

CHAPTER TWO

Loving Against Revolution

> But I know that no matter what form they may take, they still love each other. Though not bound together by earthly laws or morality, though they never once clasped hands, each possessed the other completely. Nothing could part them.
>
> —Zhang Jie, "Love Must Not Be Forgotten"
>
> Try as it may, the party-state finds it increasingly difficult to demand that individuals give up their irrational impulses, selfish desires, and the pursuit of immediate pleasures for some larger, distant goals.
>
> —Lee Haiyan, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950*

The possibilities and promises of "free love" for women, inaugurated in Republican China, proved to be muddling and often inadequate, though its pre-eminence in the collective societal consciousness of the time at least attested to a growing acknowledgement of women's individual capacities and desires in their pursuits of romantic love. These early steps in shaping a genealogy of love throughout the 20th century, however, were abruptly halted and undone when any and all discourses of romantic love came under the strict auspices of state control and regulation following the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and subsequently, the infamous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Still, in tracing the historical developments and trajectory of romantic love in the first half of 20th century China, Lee Haiyan notes the ardency with which romantic love was pursued by

the masses despite repressive state narratives that sought to clamp down on the frivolity of personal emotions. These sentiments are echoed by Zhang Jie's short story, "Love Must Not Be Forgotten," which was deemed representative of the devastating repercussions of repressing one's longings for romantic love in the name of the People's Republic of China's early doctrines that mandated service to one's country above all else. Written in 1979, the short story details its unmarried narrator's discovery of the tragically unfulfilled, lifelong love between her mother and a Communist Party official who each married different people, with the latter eventually being persecuted and killed during the Cultural Revolution. It was widely lambasted as a direct attack on public morality for portraying extramarital love in a sympathetic light (Davin 65-66) upon its publication, especially considering its concluding exhortation that "waiting in vain is better than loveless marriage" for the sake of genuine societal progress (J. Zhang 13). At the time, Zhang's bold proclamation that marriage should not be decoupled from romantic love was deemed heretic because it challenged national prescriptions of marriage as fulfilling one's patriotic duties for reproduction and as part of socialist obligations to sacrifice one's personal investments for a collective revolutionary ideal (L. Wang 177). What ultimately ties Zhang and Lee's observations together is their shared recognition that romantic love was once nearly lost to the political extremities of the Cultural Revolution, and had to be clawed back into the public mainstream by writers and scholars who strove to recuperate the legitimacy of romantic love as a lived experience.

It is romantic love's ability to persist through systemic censorship and opposition, especially throughout the Cultural Revolution that came to be known as China's "lost decade," that forms this chapter's central inquiry. Of particular interest is Yan Geling's novella, *White Snake*, which was published in 1999 and ends with the exact kind of loveless marriage that "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" warns against. Having lived through the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, which began when she was seven years old, Yan launched her

literary career with novels written based on her experiences (Ma). To date, her work remains controversial for its critical representations of China: Yan's oeuvre is presently banned from circulation and (re)publication in China following her public critiques of the Chinese government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its poor treatment of women (Ma; Yan). The love story of *White Snake*, too, evinces Yan's unflinching scrutiny of the Cultural Revolution's atrocities, and revolves around Sun Likun, a ballerina persecuted and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution for her romantic tryst with a Soviet dancer who was suspected of being a spy. Sun Likun gradually falls in love with Xu Qunshan, a woman who was once infatuated with Likun throughout her girlhood and infiltrates the warehouse Likun is being detained in while disguised as a male government official investigating Likun's case. When Qunshan's true identity as a woman is unmasked, the shock from the revelation causes Likun to experience a mental breakdown, following which she is institutionalised in a mental hospital, where she is again sought out by Qunshan and the two begin a romantic affair in earnest. Set during the later years of the Cultural Revolution, the novella draws upon the mythological framework of the ancient Chinese folktale from which it derives its title, as well as Yan Geling's own background as a dancer for the People's Liberation Army's art and ballet troupe during the Cultural Revolution (Ma). The stakes at play within this queer, illicit love affair are particularly amplified when compared against the relative freedoms of romantic love during Republican China, which were largely left uncontested as basic, individual rights, especially for women. Where Liusu and Liuyuan's flirtatious courtship in Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* are read as essential steps for the achievement of love, Likun's romantic escapades cause her to be publicly denounced and incarcerated by the government. The intensity of Sophia's desires in Ding's "Miss Sophia's Diary" sees resonances in Likun's experience of desire for Qunshan, but her expression of these desires subjects her to intense government surveillance and scrutiny. Most importantly,

the queer love of Yingman and Yunluo's innocuous schoolgirl romance in Ling's "Once Upon a Time" is entirely outlawed through *White Snake* and becomes all the more alien and unfathomable for it. Read this way, *White Snake* is an exceptionally apt successor to the ever-fluctuating question of "free love" for women, with Likun and Qunshan persisting in their love for one another "though not bound together by earthly laws or morality," and despite the threat of suppression by the harsh structures of the Cultural Revolution.

The romantic love at the heart of *White Snake* is therefore one that is fundamentally queer, both for its queer adaptation of the eponymous folktale and its deviation from the sociopolitical regime of the Cultural Revolution. With the folktale's core plot being centred on the transmogrification of mythical snake spirits to their human forms and the novella's corresponding emphases on Likun and Qunshan's bodily and gender expressions, the novella's love story is one that is primarily embodied in nature. Here, I shift from an investigation of romantic love as an individual, lived experience that opens up possibilities for self-determination and the continuity of love to a treatment of romantic love that attends to love as a deliberate, bodily action. My overarching argument therefore advances a reading of the queer romance in *White Snake* as one that principally functions as an embodied strategy to resist assimilation into hegemonic state narratives throughout the Cultural Revolution, and correspondingly, as a form of critique towards the repressive ideology of its time. While my first chapter primarily treated the experience of romantic love as ensconced within emotional interiorities, this chapter aims to examine how romantic love can be verbed as a bodily enactment that then represents a cohesive and cogent attempt to instrumentalise love as a strategy to survive unbearable circumstances. In the following sections, I will first analyse the mythological framing and contexts of the novella, before putting forth a reading of the queer love between Likun and Qunshan as transformative and transgressive enactments of romantic love that altogether facilitate love's potential to be played out as practical refusals

to capitulate to an oppressive state regime in service of queerer and more hospitable ways of being that extend to accommodate queerness where it is otherwise denied or erased.

A Queer Mythology of Love

White Snake's premise hinges upon the Chinese legend of the same name (commonly titled "白蛇传" in Mandarin and henceforth referred to as "The Legend of the White Snake"), with Likun's balletic adaptation serving as the crux of her personhood, so much so that she is referred to as "a counter-revolutionary snake-in-the-grass" in official government correspondence pertaining to her incarceration (Yan 3). The earliest iterations of the myth date back to the Tang and Song dynasties, with the white snake spirit portrayed as a cunning seductress capable of shapeshifting into a beautiful human woman who lures men into sexual encounters before killing them (C.Y. Wang 64-65). The most complete and well-known version of the myth is a vernacular story recorded in writing by Feng Menglong in 1624, titled "Madame Bai Is Imprisoned Forever under Thunder Peak Pagoda" ("白娘子永镇雷峰塔"), which served as the basis for most modern and contemporary adaptations and translations (Idema xi-xii), including Likun's own ballet performance. Though the exact sequence of events and characters in each adaptation continue to vary, Feng's story laid the foundations for most of the myth's following adaptations, including the naming conventions for the white snake (Lady White 白娘子 or Bai Suzhen 白素贞), her female companion (Green Snake or Xiaoqing 小青), and the white snake's love interest (Xu Xian 许仙), as well as the basic plot points of the narrative (Idema xii).[17]

[17] For a brief overview of additional plot points appended to later retellings of the myth as well as an analysis of modern adaptations that reflected the ethos and sociopolitical landscapes in the years following the founding of the People's Republic of China, see Ng 92-95.

The popular operatic version of the myth that Likun adapts in the novella presents the white and green snake spirits as having transmogrified into beautiful women after attaining magical powers, with Lady White falling in love with Xu Xian's beauty at first sight soon after (Ng 90). Though Lady White succeeds in marrying Xu Xian, their marital bliss is short-lived because a Buddhist monk convinces Xu Xian to trick Lady White into revealing her true snake spirit form, the sight of which causes Xu Xian to die of fright (Ng 91). This devastates Lady White, who successfully resurrects him but is ultimately captured and imprisoned by the Buddhist monk for the rest of her life (Ng 91). In essence, "The Legend of the White Snake" largely follows the classic Chinese folktale script of a cross-species romance between a nonhuman woman and a human man, with its key elements including "the metamorphosis of the otherworldly maiden, the encounter and marriage between her and a human male, and their eventual separation" (C.Y. Wang 63), perhaps gesturing to the inevitable ousting of deviant women within patriarchal societies.

What is most interesting about later iterations of the myth, however, is the addition of Xiaoqing as Lady White's faithful companion. Xiaoqing's presence complicates an otherwise straightforward, heterosexual romance by introducing new dimensions of female companionship and homosexual desire that play out in tandem with the development of Lady White and Xu Xian's relationship (C.Y. Wang 66). In this manner, Lady White conceivably skirts the boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual love, just as she evolves from earlier interpretations of her as a malevolent femme fatale into a more noble "symbol of the new woman who bravely confronts patriarchal authority in her struggle for free love" (Idema xi).[18] Correspondingly, it is also Xiaoqing and her steadfast loyalty to White Snake who tempers the latter's image as a temptress on a single-minded pursuit of her male love interest, as the deep affection shared between the two female snake spirits nuances White Snake's

[18] For a detailed account of these evolutions in the characterisations of Lady White, see E.H. Zhang 109-118.

character as one that can hold multiple, complex emotional attachments beyond a presumedly shallow attachment to a beautiful man. Most importantly, Xiaoqing's androgynous appearances in theatrical stagings of the myth "evinces a potential to disrupt the romance between White Snake and Xu Xian" (C.Y. Wang 66)—a mantle that is taken up by the androgynous Qunshan in Yan's novella, who manages to effortlessly disguise herself as a man in order to approach Likun. This constitutes the departure point from which the novella diverges from the myth's narrative formula, for Qunshan comes to wholly supplant Xu Xian's role as White Snake's love interest.[19]

Having established the critical mythological context underpinning *White Snake*, I now turn to the novella's structure as well as predominant attitudes towards romantic love and queerness throughout the Cultural Revolution to further examine the novella's mythological framework. To begin with, the novella mimics the oral storytelling tradition of myths through its multivocal chapters that altogether piece Likun and Qunshan's love story together through various "accounts." These "accounts" flit between official government or media correspondence, public hearsay, and private memory, and are respectively titled "The Official Account," "The Popular Account," and "The Untold Story" in the novella. The official accounts are primarily written as government reports detailing updates on investigations into Likun's encounters with Qunshan and Likun's subsequent mental breakdown, parodying the "neutral and dispassionate rendering" of historical events in Maoist government missives and mainstream media that presents a veneer of authority and objective truth (Xia 176). These official accounts are also harshest in their depictions of Likun, as they are "tinted with a dogmatical, arbitrary, and judgemental style typical of Maoist years" (Xia 176). In contrast, the popular accounts are recounted from an omniscient, intradiegetic third-person

[19] That a Peking operatic adaptation of "The Legend of the White Snake" was one of the first operas to be restaged after the end of the Cultural Revolution (Idema xi) also attests to its lasting influence as a symbol of "free love" for women.

perspective. These popular accounts serve as speculative and voyeuristic impressions of Likun and Qunshan and foreground an antagonistic public memory that denigrates both women. Finally, the untold accounts are split between Likun's third-person narration of her version of events and Qunshan's first-person diary entries. Though these untold accounts are profoundly intimate and revelatory of the women's emotional interiorities, the truth of their romantic love never makes its way into the public sphere. Rather, the two women are eventually enfolded into the overwhelming web of public gossip—encapsulated by both the official and popular accounts—and the queer love that unfolds between them becomes a lost relic that must be excavated and recovered from their private memories. In this way, the novella's very structure emphasises the significance of its mythological foundations. Just as "The Legend of the White Snake" has been passed down and filtered through changing social mores in all its different historical iterations, so too, does *White Snake* demand discernment and scepticism from its readers in apprehending the truth of Likun and Qunshan's love story amidst its unreliable narration across both public and private memory.

At this juncture, it is also apt to consider the national mythos behind the Cultural Revolution which guide and shape the actions and behaviours of the characters in the novella. In lieu of a comprehensive historical account of the Cultural Revolution, I will focus on the movement's attitudes towards romantic love to contextualise the societal sentiments surrounding Likun and Qunshan in the novella. Formally known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the Cultural Revolution was a mass sociopolitical movement spearheaded by Mao Zedong, aimed at overhauling and purging bourgeois and capitalist elements within the People's Republic of China.[20] In line with the Cultural Revolution's principal goals of eliminating counter-revolutionary sentiments within Chinese society, a

[20] For an overview of historical events leading up to its implementation and its main developments, see Kraus 1-23.

sense of public duty to the nation and a collective Communist morality were absolutely privileged over individual, personal affairs and sentiments; anything to do with one's personal existence "had always to be dealt with in relation to the political and to be shown as subordinate" to one's political duties (Davin 64).

This, of course, encompassed any and all personal experiences of romantic love and marriage, which was essentially a reversal of the social discourses surrounding the right to "free love" in Republican China. Following the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China, romantic love and heterosexual marriage were practices that were already stripped of their individuality and instead standardised by the Communist Party in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution, such that "it made no difference whom you married, party doctrines having stereotyped everybody and shrunk individual differences" (Xu qtd. in Pan 269). This ideal was then taken to its logical extreme during the Cultural Revolution, wherein any public discussion pertaining to women's marital and sexual relationships was suppressed and conspicuously excluded from official discourse (Evans 365). Needless to say, the same treatment was extended to homosexuality—though it was never explicitly outlawed (Sang, The Emerging Lesbian 167), same-sex love as a category "was largely erased from the public arena, and it disappeared from the print media as well" (163).[21] Despite the lack of legal criminalisation and enforcement, public stigma against same-sex love was rampant and those caught engaging in same-sex relations received punishments of varying degrees and from varying organisations, meted out arbitrarily "by participants in mass, Party-mobilised campaigns, by the police, or by the relevant work unit" (167).

The converging point of both public gossip and state discourse is Likun herself, equally revered and demonised by the masses. As the principal choreographer and dancer of

[21] As exemplified by *White Snake*, queer love between women continued to persist in this period despite the erasure of their narratives. See Sang 164-166.

the ballet adaptation of "The Legend of the White Snake," Likun becomes conflated with the mythical figure of the seductive White Snake in the public eye. The first descriptions of Likun in the novella's "Popular Account" chapters are at once demeaning and deifying: Likun is denounced as a "major international slut" who possesses a nonhuman, snake-like body that "could wind back and forth at will, so the effect was as if she had no bones at all" (Yan 6). Though her alleged promiscuity renders her human and fallible in her actions and therefore deserving of shame and ridicule, she is still elevated as a mysteriously powerful, god-like figure that remains untouchable by the critique levelled at her.

Still, if Likun is to be thought of as an embodiment of the myth that she performs, then it is likewise crucial to recognise that her version of the myth is one that is fundamentally queer, even more so than its original source material. In Likun's ballet, White Snake's companion, Blue Snake, is initially a male snake set on winning White Snake's hand in marriage through a duel between the two snake spirits (Yan 29).[22] Blue Snake, however, loses the battle and must instead become White Snake's servant for the rest of her life (29).[23] Not only is the Blue Snake also capable of transmogrifying into a human form, she is also transgender in nature, with her love and devotion towards White Snake enduring through both the spontaneous changes in her gender and physical form. Blue Snake's heterosexual attraction, then, turns into a homosexual one following her transition from male to female, just as Qunshan's romance with Likun shifts from a heterosexual to a homosexual one after her true gender is revealed in the novella. Even so, the queer parallels between this myth and the pair's relationship are never acknowledged beyond its "The Untold Story" chapters, as the love story at the heart of the novella runs counter to and ultimately remains within the

[22] Xiaoqing 小青 can be translated as either "Green Snake" or "Blue Snake," and is translated as the latter in the novella.
[23] This version of events in Likun's adaptation is consistent with some Qing dynasty theatrical adaptations, wherein the male Blue Snake "willingly transforms into a female to act as White Snake's maid" after being defeated by White Snake (C.Y. Wang 66).

margins of dominant government and public assumptions that determine Likun's public image. Nevertheless, it is this premise of transformation that undergirds the queer, myth-like love between Likun and Qunshan which enables them to elude detection and retaliation and facilitates their romantic encounters in the first place.

Transformative Love

If the love that develops between Likun and Qunshan is to be considered an embodied act, it follows that this love first manifests in a bodily manner that directly alters the pair's outward appearances and mannerisms. Accordingly, the act of transformation, taken to mean a dramatic change in one's appearance and form, is the central medium that maps the trajectory of Likun and Qunshan's love story. Parts of these bodily transformations encompass the phenomenological experience of love, which also shapes one's own experience of their body. To this end, I borrow key ideas from Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology in my analysis, wherein she reframes sexual orientation as a matter "of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (1). This framework is especially illuminating for a reading of Likun and Qunshan's queer romance as an embodied act—their bodies respond to and are themselves transformed by their experience of love, just as "the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies" (Ahmed 3). In other words, the growing attraction between Likun and Qunshan affords them the transformative potential to bend and mould their physical appearances into accommodating the queer nature of their love.

I begin my analysis of these experiences of bodily transformation with Qunshan, who herself embodies this very concept through her metaphorical role as the transgender Blue Snake within the novella's mythological frame. Most significantly, the transformations in her appearance are primarily linked to her androgynous appearance, which she later leverages to

convincingly disguise herself as a man. The seeds of both Qunshan's desire for Likun and her cross-dressing ploys are sowed early on in her life—the second instance of an "Untold Story" chapter is comprised of diary entries from Qunshan's girlhood, which recount her early infatuation with Likun and her ballet performance as the White Snake. Qunshan's admiration for Likun is already rooted in her physical desire for Likun as a young girl, and she even feels fear towards the suggestive nature of her fascination with the beauty of Likun's body, to the extent that she wonders if her friends also "think about touching her body" like she does (Yan 28). Interestingly, Qunshan's desire for Likun is laced with envy as well, as she laments that "[her] body is so pitiful" as compared to Likun whose "bosom is really beautiful, like you'd see on a heroine in distress" (27), and wishes to look like White Snake when she grows up (28). The physical gulf between Likun and Qunshan becomes even more pronounced when Likun proceeds to mistake Qunshan for a young boy because of her wristwatch and short hair (28-29). Furthermore, when Likun accedes to Qunshan's plea to watch her last ballet performance despite not having a ticket, she refers to Qunshan as a "男娃娃" (literally translated as "boy doll"), typically used as a diminutive pet name for a young boy, to further emphasise the naïve boyishness of her appearance that distances her from an older and more mature Likun. This thus shapes the quandary that Qunshan faces in the novella's present-day: she feels that she cannot attain the feminine, sensual beauty that she covets from Likun, and yet only passes as a boy that is juvenile in appearance.

What Qunshan has grasped during her prepubescent girlhood is the malleability and potency of her body, which already affects her comportment and relationships to her family and community in ways that she deems abnormal and deviant. For instance, she recounts her mother telling her that she is "not a very normal child," which frightens her because she "hope[s] that [she's] normal, that [she's] just like everyone else" so that she will not be isolated from her peers (28). This reflection directly succeeds her detailing of her fascination

with Likun's physical body, which suggests that Qunshan's fear of being viewed as noticeably "abnormal" by the people around her is tied to her awareness that her fixation with Likun is similarly "abnormal" in nature. This is further reinforced by Qunshan's resolve to "not think about White Snake anymore," because she wishes "to be normal and healthy" (29). Nonetheless, her fixation with Likun as a young girl also becomes conflated with Likun's performance of "The Legend of the White Snake," and she expresses strong contempt towards Xu Xian, believing that his absence means that "White Snake and Blue Snake certainly would have been very happy together" (29). Crucially, Qunshan believes that it would have been best for Blue Snake to have won both his duel with White Snake and her hand in marriage, rather than having to become a human woman. This transgender dilemma that undergirds the character of Blue Snake—wherein she cannot enter a romantic relationship with White Snake as a male snake nor as her female, human servant—then, becomes a kind of premonition that a teenaged Qunshan overturns in her impulsive bid to escape her fate of working in a rural village in Shanxi Province as an "Intellectual Youth" during the Cultural Revolution.[24] Like Qunshan, millions of urban-dwelling youths were forcibly sent to do intensive manual labour in China's rural areas, and Qunshan resentfully takes notice of the ways in which her female peers are leered at by the male villagers while working (34). Consequently, Qunshan resolves to "get [her] hair cut a little shorter," so that she might look less feminine and more androgynous and "both the foreman and the brigade cadres will have even fewer "meaningful looks" for me" (34). What Qunshan derides here as "meaningful looks" suggests that her female peers are subject to extensive sexual harassment, where the male villagers continue "plotting the day when they would draw them into their huts and onto their *kangs*," which to say, their "brick beds" ("炕"; 34). This factors into her

[24] This was instituted as part of the "Up to the Mountains, Down to the Villages" movement, which disrupted the education of millions of Chinese youths who had to endure years of extreme poverty and poor living conditions in the underdeveloped countryside. See Kraus 15-16.

refusal to both continue participating in the forced labour and present as a feminine woman in her physical appearance.

A fortuitous chance of escape presents itself when Qunshan looks through her clothes for something to wear and chances upon a male military school uniform that she received as a parting gift from her older brother. Upon donning it on a whim to go run her errands, her peers who see her immediately assume that she is leaving the village to join the army, an assumption that she does not correct and instead seizes as an opportunity to escape without being questioned (34). This first instance of transformation—from a female to a male façade—immediately summons forth a rush of euphoria for Qunshan:

> Is it just as simple as that? When I put the cover of *Red Flag* on top of one of my old movie magazines, then what I was reading became *Red Flag*. When I put the cover of *Quotations of Chairman Mao* over my copy of *Les Misérables*, then it became *Quotations of Chairman Mao*. A woollen military uniform immediately transforms me into a first-class, high-level person, receiving everyone's admiration as a wool-clad special soldier. (35)

Critically, Qunshan likens her enjoyment of cross-dressing here to her secret, counter-revolutionary acts of reading banned books, disguised as state-sanctioned Communist texts. The thrill she experiences from her male presentation is therefore one that derives from the very transgression inherent to the act, in which she is deliberately performing a gender identity that contradicts her original one. Beyond doing something transgressive for the sake of it, Qunshan also discovers that her new, masculine persona "opened a strange and wondrous door…that led to unlimited possibilities" (36). Her androgynous appearance as a woman, previously thought of as "abnormal" and "unusual," now enables her to convincingly pass as a man who can strive for "a destiny that transcends the dichotomy of male and female" (36). What Qunshan has thus grasped in her amazement—that it is "just as simple as

that" to instantaneously transform into a man—is the nature of gender as a performance and series of repetitions, akin to how Judith Butler interprets gender as "the repeated stylisation of the body" that eventually produces the impression of naturalness and substance in one's inhabitation of a particular gender (*Gender Trouble* 45). For Qunshan, the easy malleability of her androgynous body, transformed through her deliberate performance of maleness, means that her body becomes dramatic in nature, and is now "not merely matter but a continual and incessant materialising of possibilities" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 521). Above all, Qunshan implicitly recognises the "first-class, high-level" social status and mobility conferred upon her by this male persona, that is otherwise denied to her when she is being perceived as a woman in a patriarchal society. Armed with this newfound realisation, Qunshan takes only her books, magazines, and an old photo of Likun as the White Snake with her in search of these "unlimited possibilities" in life (Yan 36).

Although not explicitly depicted in the novella, what Qunshan presumably embarks on following her deceptive escape from the village is a cross-country journey to search out her father's whereabouts: unbeknownst to her, he is conducting top-secret research for the country as a defense research scientist (49; 55). Yet, it is by her own admission that she abandons her search as soon as she coincidentally happens upon an imprisoned Likun in Sichuan (55). The surge of "mad desire" that floods her upon seeing Likun again compels her to recontextualise her erratic and impulsive decision to don a male guise and leave the village, so much so that "she realised that this mad desire and all her recent actions had a mysterious connection" (55). The hypothetical "unlimited possibilities" that Qunshan earlier delights in inevitably narrows down to the arrow of her lifelong desire for Likun, which she now unwaveringly follows in her subsequent, calculated scheme to infiltrate Likun's quarters, including forging official identification documents to give her disguise as "a special envoy from the Central Government with the assignment of investigating Sun's case" credence (4).

In this way, Qunshan can be thought of as 'orienting' herself towards Likun. Ahmed considers the act of orientation along similar lines as Butler does and posits that bodies "acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions or others" (*Queer Phenomenology* 58). Qunshan's body can then perhaps be considered doubly malleable in its twin transformations—just as she comes to wholly inhabit her male persona through repetitions of typical male dressing conventions and comportments, she also wills her desire for Qunshan into a repeated bodily, physical proximity between the two that facilitates her complete 'orientation' towards Likun, which thereby lays the foundations for their ensuing romantic relationship.

Viewed through the third-person, public perspective of the "Popular Account" chapters, Qunshan definitively succeeds in performing maleness through her costuming and repetition of 'masculine' mannerisms, including a confident gait reminiscent of "some kind of old warlord" and a "regal bearing and faultless comportment" that call Chairman Mao (i.e. a societal paragon of masculinity and power) to mind (Yan 14). In turn, the equivalent measure of Qunshan's success in orienting herself and her body towards Likun is her physical infiltration of Likun's quarters, where the intensity of her desire for Likun is so overwhelming that it provokes her to entirely transform her physical body and commit fraud at a governmental level simply for the chance to meet Likun again. Still, Qunshan's transformation is paradoxical at its core—her transgender transformation in service of her desire to seek Likun out is fundamentally queer, and yet it is crucial in facilitating her body's conformity to the restrictive orientations of compulsory heterosexuality that "shape which bodies one "can" legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which one cannot" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 91). Similarly, what later transpires between the pair is interpreted by both government officials and public onlookers as a heterosexual fling precisely because Qunshan can only be allowed to approach Likun at all in this transformed, male state. That

Qunshan enacts and maintains this paradoxical transformation for the express purpose of reaching Likun attests to the very force of her queer desire, repeated and reiterated so often throughout her life that her first instinct in her new male persona is to bodily orient herself towards Likun, even at great personal cost and risk of criminal punishment.

Though Qunshan derives a sense of complete fulfilment from inhabiting a male persona, Likun is conversely fixated on the femininity of her physique as a ballerina, where the loss of her body's slim and toned physique during her incarceration is tantamount to a loss of self. Without the recognition she previously received for her body's appearance and performance as ballerina, Likun struggles to conjure a self-image beyond her physical bounds:

> They loved everything about her, except herself. And what was herself? Apart from her dancing, would she exist? (Yan 17)

Likun can only assign value to herself, both as a romantic object of interest to men and as a person, through her body and aptitude for ballet. Though she realises here that her admirers only love her for her physical beauty, she similarly cannot imagine having an independent identity outside of what her body can offer to others. In her own words, "her heart was depleted of good places," and she feels devoid of any genuine emotions prior to her first encounter with Qunshan (17). Bystander descriptions of Likun in the "Popular Account" chapters further reinforce her bodily objectification, where she is described as having become fat and ordinary in captivity, becoming "exactly like any middle-aged woman you'd see on the street" (6). These third-person accounts are exceptionally degrading in emphasising Likun's loss of physical beauty and deride her for now having "a keg-shaped waist, gourdlike breasts, and big squarish buttocks that spread out so wide you could lay out a whole meal on them" (6). The female guards tasked to monitor Likun also delight in her humiliation and indignity from being forced to use the bathroom in front of them, wherein they take pleasure

in getting to watch her "squatting on the latrine like millions of [her] fellow countrymen" as a stark contrast to when she "used to be so elegant…like a celestial being" as a ballerina (8). The repeated degradation that Likun experiences as a prisoner is therefore reflected upon her body prior to her first encounter with Qunshan, who later catalyses Likun's own bodily transformation.

The version of Qunshan that Likun then encounters during her captivity is one that is wholly and utterly oriented towards Likun in both body and mind. Qunshan's attention and presence in their first encounter is already inexplicably disorienting for Likun, who immediately feels compelled to temporarily hide herself from Qunshan so that she can "change completely her bearing and attitude," as though she wishes to try and leave a favourable impression on Qunshan despite having only just met her (20). For the first time in her captivity, Qunshan's unexpected visit to her quarters causes her to feel incredibly self-conscious of how "her appearance and comportment were unspeakably vile," and she finds herself "unable to find a suitable state of mind or facial expression" that might endear Qunshan to her (20). Although Likun is at a loss for words in deciphering the effect that Qunshan has on her, Likun still emerges from hiding "completely transformed":

> Under her skin, from somewhere deep inside her bones, her snakelike suppleness and coiled splendour had revived—accompanied by a snake's cold radiance and proud aloofness. (20)

This transformation, while metaphorical in nature, speaks to the overwhelming and instant impact that Qunshan has on Likun, to the extent that Likun finds herself able to restore a semblance of the dignity and grace that she carried herself with as the fabled performer of White Snake. In following her desire for a seemingly unreachable version of Likun from her girlhood, Qunshan inadvertently triggers a revitalisation of present-day Likun—physically and mentally worn down by her incarceration—into the elegant ballerina of Qunshan's

memories. Qunshan herself is physically affected by this dramatic transformation in Likun's comportment, for she "stood up without realising it" upon witnessing Likun's transformed demeanour, as though she is likewise moved by being in Likun's presence (20). This initial exchange between the two, marked by a heightened awareness of how one comes to affect the other in bodily ways, thus becomes the foundation for their emerging love affair.

Correspondingly, the progression of Likun and Qunshan's relationship throughout Qunshan's visits is never outrightly described, but rather, traced through the physical changes in Likun's own body. Over time, Likun comes to recognise that the dynamic between her and Qunshan has shifted into one that is more intimate, and that she "could no longer be without him, no matter who he was" (38). Notably, the novella's English translation omits Likun's comparison of Qunshan with Blue Snake when she dwells upon her intensifying attraction to Qunshan:

> 她感到他是来搭救她的，以她无法看透的手段。如同青蛇搭救盗仙草的白蛇。(Yan 52)
>
> She felt that he had come to save her, through means that she had no way of comprehending. It was just like how Blue Snake saved White Snake when she had stolen the herb of immortality. (my trans.)

What Likun calls to mind here is the moment in "The Legend of the White Snake" when White Snake searches for the herb of immortality that can resurrect her dead husband but is viciously attacked by the herb's guardian animals in the process (Ng 91). It is Blue Snake who comes to White Snake's rescue then, and equivalently, it is Qunshan who now comes to Likun's aid in her despair while being imprisoned. Likun's choice of analogy here is a critical acknowledgement of both her growing feelings for Qunshan, whom she now considers as her beloved partner (i.e. as Blue Snake was to White Snake), as well as her renewed sense of self in re-inhabiting her dancer-persona of White Snake again upon encountering Qunshan. In lieu

of conversation or physical intimacy, the deepening of the pair's relationship is accordingly enacted through Likun's dance performances for Qunshan during the latter's visits, under the premise of these performances being "an important component of the investigation" into Likun (Yan 38). These dance performances draw attention to the shape and fluidity of Likun's body, especially as Likun strips to her leotard before she begins to dance, with Qunshan "watching her take off her quilted cotton outer garments, molting them layer by layer until her form was finally revealed" (37). Likun's very act of dancing is itself preceded by an act of transformation, for the removal, or "molting," of her clothes in preparation is likened to snakes shedding their skin in the original Mandarin text ("蜕"; Yan 52). In the same way that snakes shed their old skins to accommodate their growth, Likun, too, transforms anew with every performance for Qunshan. She gradually loses weight from the exertion, until "she regained her original form" as a lithe and slender dancer in her youthful prime (Yan 40). This "original form" of hers, then, is one that also becomes fully oriented towards Qunshan in return.

Through the repetitions of her dance for Qunshan, Likun's body now tends towards Qunshan—as Ahmed puts it, her body's new tendency in orienting itself towards Qunshan is not originary or unilateral, but rather, is the direct "[effect] of the repetition of the "tending toward"" (*Queer Phenomenology* 58) that Likun has engaged in through her performances for Qunshan. Simply put, Likun's blossoming love for Qunshan is not a spontaneous development, but rather, a natural consequence of her repeated performances for Qunshan that have inscribed this queer love onto her body and its new orientation towards Qunshan. With this, Likun's transformation is complete, and its end outcome has her finally admitting that "she fell in love with this young man in the woollen military academy uniform" (Yan 40). Even prior to the imminent revelation that Qunshan is a woman, instead of the dashing military man that Likun believes her to be, Likun's bodily orientation has already positioned

her as what Ahmed deems a "contingent lesbian…who is shaped by the pull of her desire, which puts her in contact with others and with objects that are off the vertical line" (*Queer Phenomenology* 94). Through this instance of transformation and Likun's subsequent bodily orientation towards Qunshan, she—unbeknownst to even herself—already becomes queer, for the pull of her desire for Qunshan endures through the shock of discovering Qunshan's true identity and the transgression of falling in love with a woman. The succeeding queer love shared between the two, then, points to both the embodied and transformative potential of romantic love, wherein the bodily transformations that Likun and Qunshan undergo prove essential to this very realisation of love that empowers the pair to resist further interference by the hostile state regime that seeks to persecute them for their affair.

Transgressive Love

When Likun and Qunshan finally act upon their feelings to consummate their love, their actions are necessarily ones of evasion that allow them to continue their relationship away from both state and public policing and retaliation. To be precise, the narrative makes it overbearingly clear that both Likun and Qunshan are subject to extreme state surveillance and scrutiny in all their actions and movements. Official government reports, presented through the novella's "Official Account" chapters, detail the flurry of investigations that follow in the wake of Qunshan's disappearance as a male government official, now suspected of instigating the illicit love affair with Likun that caused the latter's mental breakdown. Even so, it is their queerness that facilitates their bodily transformations as they orient themselves towards each other, and here, it is this same queerness that enables them to elude detection and punishment. For the pair's surveillants and onlookers, it is entirely unfathomable that a lesbian love is what undergirds the mysterious encounters between them. The far-reaching apparatuses of state surveillance and power are heavily foregrounded in the novella: male

individuals across China named Qunshan are quickly identified and their personal backgrounds investigated by the Beijing Public Security Bureau in order to unmask the impostor (Yan 49), while Likun is forcibly subject to a non-consensual gynaecological examination as part of the investigation into whether or not she engaged in penetrative sexual acts with the male government official known as Xu Qunshan. For these government officials, the very possibility of queer love is so transgressive that they cannot imagine any deviation from a prescribed script of heterosexuality, which paradoxically works in Likun and Qunshan's favour. Although they correctly identify Qunshan and even procure detailed records of her parents' backgrounds and jobs, and even her own private activities in illegally reading banned books and her interpersonal relationships, they ultimately "conclude that this Xu Qunshan is unrelated to the impostor Xu Qunshan, because this particular Xu Qunshan is female" (50). In the same vein, Likun's violative gynaecological examination fails to turn up definitive evidence of her having had hetero-penetrative sex, and "it could not be ascertained conclusively whether Sun had had sexual relations with Xu" (23). It is thus these strictly policed bounds of heterosexuality that enable Likun and Qunshan's queer love to escape and proliferate undetected within its overlooked margins, where the prospect of queerness is written off altogether.

Crucially, Likun and Qunshan's love affair has already been ousted as a kind of counter-revolutionary action that needs to be clamped down on, simply because Qunshan's fraudulent infiltration has posed a direct challenge to the state's absolute authority in meting out and upholding punishments for its political prisoners. That their love is also queer, rather than heterosexual, only further underscores the nature of their love as a deliberate act of transgression against the repressive mandates of the Cultural Revolution. In attending to their queer love as deliberate, embodied action, I refer to Michael Gratzke's examination of "love acts" as understood in the field of Critical Love Studies, wherein "each occurrence of love

should be judged against the backdrop of the socio-historic circumstances in which a set of love acts is performed," for expressions of love can vary greatly across different languages and cultures (4). He builds upon Jónasdóttir's ideas that "love is a distinctive, creative/re-creative human capacity and energy" (i.e. the "love power" discussed in Chapter 1; Jónasdóttir qtd. in Gratzke 7) and argues that "love only comes into being as an act of love" (Gratzke 8). The practice of love is what Gratzke terms a "love *dispositif*," which comprises practices, discourses, and material conditions that altogether make love a performative action (11).[25] Essentially, Gratzke extends Jónasdóttir's concept of "love power" as a continuous, generative exchange to propose that the experience of romantic love is founded upon acts of performance and repetition that facilitate this exchange in the first place, in a complementary fashion to Butler and Ahmed's theorisations of gender as performance and bodily orientations that respectively inform the embodied queer love between Likun and Qunshan. Eve Sedgwick's consideration of "queer" as a form of ongoing action likewise affirms this understanding of love as embodied action. Sedgwick examines the etymology of the word "queer," noting that it "means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root -*twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*" (viii). Queerness can therefore be conceived as an active state of being and doing that crosses and cuts across boundaries (Sedgwick viii). The queer love of *White Snake* can therefore be read as one that develops and flourishes through actions that run counter to the novella's government and public narratives, just as Likun and Qunshan's bodily transformations assert and reiterate their queerness.

The principal transgression that drives the government investigations into Likun and Qunshan is the pair's climactic tryst at a provincial government guesthouse, made possible by

[25] Michael Gratzke develops this notion through a comparative reading of J.L Austin and John R. Searle's work on speech acts, Erving Goffman's micro-sociological analysis of social performances, and Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as performative that challenges the assumed dichotomy of practices and discourses. See Gratzke 8-11.

Qunshan who had fraudulently invoked the authority of the Central Government to temporarily release Likun from her imprisonment for six hours (Yan 4-5). This pivotal encounter is, of course, romantic in nature and marks an irrevocable shift in Likun and Qunshan's dynamic, as Likun finally realises that Qunshan has been a woman all along and must now confront the queer nature of her love. Likun intuits that Qunshan's true identity might be that of a woman when they are finally alone together in the guesthouse, sensing that Qunshan's advances towards her were akin to her insinuating that "if you really dare, then that's your own fault" (46). The original Mandarin text is perhaps even bolder in laying out this implicit warning that Likun picks up—it is as though Likun would be "asking for it" should she choose to still proceed with her seduction ("那就是自找"; Yan 62; my trans.) even while already suspecting that Qunshan is actually a woman. This phrasing further gestures to the nature of the impending transgression at hand—what is at risk here is not Likun's love for Qunshan itself, but her inevitable realisation that she (and her love) is undeniably queer. This foreboding atmosphere is compounded by Qunshan's choice to play music from Likun's "The Legend of the White Snake" ballet from her portable tape player, which Likun recognises as being from the scene in which White Snake mourns Xu Xian's death and attempts to resuscitate him (Yan 46). The inclusion of this climactic plot point from the myth again reinforces Likun's equivalence to the figure of White Snake; just as White Snake grieves her male lover in this scene, Likun finds herself on the brink of losing the illusion of her male lover ensconced within Qunshan's disguise, with no way to bring the illusory man she loves back to life.

Likun presses on nonetheless, though the final revelation that Qunshan has been a woman all along causes her great despair, for she feels that "the pining body of a thirty-four-year-old woman had been humiliated, toyed with, defiled by Xu Qunshan" (48). Here, Likun's visceral sense of betrayal and despondence at once evinces the transformative

potential of her love for Qunshan as well as the key transgression at the core of this love. That the intensity of Likun's love for Qunshan is so strong to the extent that she feels "humiliated" and "defiled" by Qunshan demonstrates how wholly her life in imprisonment was recuperated by her encounters with Qunshan. Even though Likun "had become accustomed to her ignominy" throughout her earlier humiliation at the hands of her guards and "no longer felt as if she would die of shame whenever she was called a string of nasty names" before meeting Qunshan (8), losing her illusion of Qunshan as the male lover who has come to deliver her from suffering now makes her believe "she would be left with nothing" (48). In turn, the unyielding intensity of this love despite the shattering of this illusion makes Likun's own queerness undeniable, which causes her to react with revulsion to both herself and Qunshan. In Gratzke's words, one's experience of love is governed by "a set of rules which define the validity of love in a given socio-historic context" (2), and it is Likun's realisation that her queer love for Qunshan entirely contravenes the social mores of her time that gives rise to her anguish. Likun herself admits that "the conventional love between the sexes [she] had once understood was now sapped of all meaning" (54), which is to say that her realisation is accompanied with a complete dismantling of her prior conformity to a socially permissible heterosexuality.

Be that as it may, Likun retains a clear-headed sense of agency in acting upon her love for Qunshan even as this realisation dawns upon her. Though Likun's recollection of the event are hazy after her consequent mental breakdown, she "would recall clearly that she herself undid the first button" in initiating intimacy with Qunshan (47). The significance of this detail being the only thing Likun remembers cannot be overstated, for it is this very premise of romantic agency and initiative that is weaponised against Likun to justify her incarceration in the first place. When Likun is first investigated for her affair with the Soviet dancer, she is repeatedly pressured to recount in detail "which one of them undid the trouser

waistband first" because her interrogators believed "whoever had undone his trousers first influenced major affairs of state, perhaps determining which nation would trespass on which nation's border" (32). Likun is ultimately imprisoned because she cannot recall who made the first move in this illicit encounter; in other words, Likun's crime is not being able to categorically deny that she was the one who initiated her affair with the Soviet dancer, for to admit to her own romantic and sexual agency as a woman is transgressive even within the accepted bounds of heterosexuality. For Likun to then insist upon the clarity and surety with which she initiated her seduction of Qunshan is her overt acknowledgement that her queer love for Qunshan is rooted in conscious, bodily acts that she undertakes of her own volition, even when she is overwhelmed by the transgressive nature of this queer love. Certainly, Likun's agency in this moment does not negate her social reality where queerness is taboo—in this instance, the relationship between Likun's actions as "an occurrence of love (a set of interrelated love acts) and its social context may…constitute some form of deviation from the norm" (Gratzke 2). Nevertheless, Gratzke suggests that "love acts which deviate from the norm achieve 'critical mass' and have a transformative effect on their social world" (2). In not just taking the initiative to act upon her queer love for Qunshan but also admitting to it in her memory, Likun generates this "critical mass" of embodied action that confirms that her love is enacted and sustained through acts of doing. Correspondingly, her love acts enable the radical transformation of the social world shared between her and Qunshan, such that the transgressive nature of their love becomes the cornerstone of Likun's survival throughout her subsequent institutionalisation in a mental hospital to her eventual release at the end of the Cultural Revolution.

While Likun does not recall her mental breakdown beyond the fact "that this period of indiscriminate crying and laughing would last for more than a year" (Yan 54), she is transferred from her detention quarters to a specialised research institution for mental

illnesses as part of her continued incarceration (5). When Qunshan again tracks down Likun in Shanghai to visit her (sans her male disguise), a romantic relationship blossoms in earnest between the two within the confines of the hospital. Their relationship, first told through the eyes of public gossip in a "Popular Account" chapter, is overtly intimate: their onlookers observe that they constantly hold hands and each other's shoulders and waists, and that the ways they look at each other are "like the looks exchanged between a man and a woman" (52). For their onlookers, the emotional intensity of their relationship is off-putting and frightening, and they even refer to Qunshan in derogatory terms as being "out of her mind" for how fervently she stares at Likun ("像有毛病一样"; Yan 70; my trans.). The ironic connotations of this descriptor are especially pronounced in this setting of a mental hospital—the very notion of queerness is so alien to Likun's fellow patients that they can only paint Qunshan as being mentally ill herself to explain away the pair's taboo behaviours, including their frequent trips to the woods by the hospital, presumably to engage in sexual acts in private (Yan 52).

In a bid to reconcile the dissonance between their heteronormative worldview and the incongruity of witnessing romantic intimacy between two women, their onlookers conclude that Qunshan must secretly be a man, which would explain how their secret trysts in the woods are possible at all. Yet, when Qunshan is forcibly subjected to a strip search by a group of nurses and patients and is confirmed to be a woman beyond all doubt, the pair's onlookers "completely lost interest in the two of them" regardless of how intimate they were with each other or how often they disappeared into the woods together (52). This reaction is thus emblematic of the extent to which queerness was taboo within the novella's cultural context—the very prospect of love and sex between two women is deemed so transgressive that it is immediately dismissed as impossible and of little note from the outset. In this way,

Likun and Qunshan's ability to elude detection and reprisal for their queer love is also one borne of happenstance, simply because no one else can imagine it at all.

It is this unthinkable transgression between Likun and Qunshan, however, that ultimately facilitates Likun's survival and eventual recovery throughout the remainder of her incarceration. As Likun gradually overcomes the shock of realising her own queerness, she comes to accept and embrace the love she feels for Qunshan as a woman. Most significantly, Likun starts to call Qunshan "Shan-shan," a diminutive and feminine nickname derived from repeating the last character of her name (i.e. "shan" from "Qunshan"). This shift in address can thus be interpreted as a love act, where Likun pointedly acknowledges her love or Qunshan as a woman, separate from her prior illusion of Qunshan as a male government official. If it is the performative repetition of love acts that makes love intelligible to its recipient (Gratzke 2), then Likun's repeated and intentional acts of re-ascribing a more feminine name to Qunshan can be read as definitive love acts that assert that she genuinely loves Qunshan as a woman as well. As Likun herself admits, "she loved her as the illusory Xu Qunshan, and she also loved her as the real person Shan-shan" (Yan 56). Though Likun does begin calling Qunshan "Shan-shan" in a "cheesy and tacky" manner ("俗里俗气"; Yan 74; my trans.)—perhaps as an exaggerated form of sarcasm to reiterate Qunshan's deception through her male persona—her continued repetition of the nickname ultimately generates what Gratzke terms the "critical mass" required for the transformation of the social world that the pair inhabits together (2). Accordingly, this "critical mass" comprises of Likun's affirmation and acceptance of her queer love for Qunshan, which in turn validates Qunshan's overwhelming infatuation with Likun throughout her girlhood to the present-day, so that the two can finally meet on equal footing and act upon their queer love for one another even against the grain of their restrictive, heteronormative environment. Qunshan responds to Likun with the equivalently feminine, honorific address of "Elder Sister Sun," thereby

completing the transformation of their shared social world into one that is indubitably rooted in their queer love (Yan 55).

This transformation can likewise be observed as embodied enactments directly affected by these love acts of addressing each other. Likun's feminine nickname for Qunshan catalyses a final transformation for Qunshan, who, too, decides to embrace her own femininity, with "her atrophied docility return[ing] to her bit by bit" (55). Considering that Qunshan earlier denounces "the superficiality of girls" and declares that "a purely feminine girl is both silly and insipid" (36), her bodily acquiescence to Likun's feminine moniker demonstrates a corresponding re-making of their shared social world, where she now feels comfortable in her own femininity as a woman who loves another woman in return. This queer love that grows between them is thus one that is more genuine than before, for it is no longer premised upon the false pretences of Qunshan's male disguise. In turn, the love acts they share shape their queer romance as one that "hinge[s] much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" (Sedgwick 8). These particular love acts that they perform and repeat in shaping their queer love and "filiation" can also be understood through what José Esteban Muñoz terms "disidentification," wherein he calls upon queer and/or minoritarian subjects to wilfully disidentify with what the majoritarian culture has deemed as being "real" (12). "Disidentification" rejects the binary of either capitulation to a majoritarian hegemony or a total opposition to it, but instead advocates for a disidentificatory practice that disassembles the components of a majoritarian hegemony and "uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world" (196). These acts of "disidentification" are therefore "performative acts of conjuring that deform and re-form the world" (196). Read this way, Likun and Qunshan's queer love is all the more transgressive because of the intentionality with which they enact a shared iteration of queerness exclusive to them. They go beyond

straightforward resistance to twist the gendered and heteronormative standards of their societal context to their favour in the achievement of their queer love, as exemplified by Qunshan's elaborate infiltration ruse and the ways in which they skirt the known boundaries of heteronormativity to repeatedly affirm their love for one another through love acts that "re-form" their world into one that accommodates their queer love throughout Likun's incarceration.

Likun's exoneration and release towards the end of the Cultural Revolution bodes the couple's inevitable separation, with both women returning to their original lives and places of residence. Though the novella offers little detail as to how life carries on for both women or how much time passes in the interim, Likun is presumably released sometime between the novella's present-day setting in 1972 and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, with the novella finally concluding in 1980 when both Likun and Qunshan are now engaged to be married to men. That Likun finds out about Qunshan's marriage through a long-distance phone call also suggests that the pair are no longer in frequent contact following the end of Likun's incarceration (Yan 59), and they only reunite for the last time when Likun attends Qunshan's wedding. Still, their final encounter at Qunshan's wedding makes it evident that both of them have already been irrevocably changed by the queer love they shared. Both women conspicuously struggle with adopting the heteronormative norms expected of married women—Likun upsets herself when she conjures up "an image of herself as such an old ungainly fiancée" (59), while Qunshan appears to be "clumsily learning how to act as a woman" in serving the guests at her own wedding (60). Critically, it is not the actual performance of femininity that both women find strenuous here, given the ease with which they lean into their womanhood in their queer love for each other. Rather, it is the performance of femininity within the construct of heterosexual marriage that now feels unnatural to them because neither can fully relinquish this queer love to move forward in the

heterosexual futures they have chosen. Qunshan herself concedes "that she has a fatal need for correction" (61). What is "fatal" here is essentially Qunshan's choice to proceed with marrying a man to assimilate back into her social norms that deny queerness, even at the expense of her love for Likun and the disidentificatory practice that has shaped the trajectory of their love. Their queer love can only stretch to the novella's end, with both of them clinging onto its remnants until the last possible minute. When Likun leaves Qunshan's wedding and is sent off by the latter, they both linger with each other for as long as possible. Facing each other, they are described to be "a lone body and shadow comforting each other" ("形影相吊"; Yan 85; my trans.). Beyond connoting the deep helplessness and loneliness both women bear throughout their final parting, this choice of idiom further underscores the depth of the love they shared, to the extent that they—like a body and its shadow—remain inseparable as a singular, entwined being.

Even as their queer love comes to a close, the transgressive nature of their love is not so easily erased from their lives, for they have already been thoroughly transformed by this love. Likun and Qunshan reach out for one another even at the moment of their separation because "they both knew this was the last time they would touch each other" (Yan 62), perhaps as a farewell iteration of a love act that can never be performed again hereafter. In this way, their queer love, constituted as repeated enactments of embodied actions oriented towards each other, retains its power to endure beyond the relationship's star-crossed end. Fittingly, the novella ends with Likun's final, incomplete love act that binds her to Qunshan past the novella's conclusion as she calls out for "Xu Qunshan" in her heart (62). Though this utterance never reaches Qunshan's ears, Likun invokes her full name as a parting declaration that she loved Qunshan for all that she was, both as Qunshan the male government official, and Shan-shan, her female lover. What endures through Likun is the persistent transgression of holding onto a queer love that refuses its erasure from public memory, but rather demands

what Muñoz calls “an active kernel of utopian possibility” (25) that insists upon the possibility of enacting a world in which queer love is remembered and instrumentalised in service of creating alternate modes of living and loving that refuse capitulation to hegemonic state regimes that would deny the very existence of queerness. Likun’s stubborn cry for Qunshan at the novella’s end, then, evinces both the transformative and transgressive potential of romantic love as a project of worldmaking that extends love beyond an interior emotion to praxis that can affect change in romantic love’s subjects and their environments. In doing so, people like Likun become practitioners of love, who are “*not* content merely to survive, but instead use the stuff of the “real world” to remake collective sense of “worldness” through spectacles, performances, and wilful enactments of the self for others” (Muñoz 200) in (re)shaping worlds that can come to accommodate the expanse of their love.

CHAPTER THREE

Baobei, Not Baby

> They have more freedom than women of fifty years ago, better looks than those of thirty years ago, and a greater variety of orgasms than women of ten years ago.
>
> —Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*
>
> 她们比50 年前的女性多了自由，比30 年前的女性多了美貌，比10 年女性多了不同类别的性高潮。
>
> —卫慧，*上海宝贝*

Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* was met with explosive criticism and censorship upon its publication in China in 1999, with the novel receiving a nationwide ban. Though its plot simply follows a series of episodic events in the life of Coco, a 25-year-old Shanghainese woman, its unflinching depictions of love, sex, and drugs were deemed too licentious and a threat to the country's cultural and moral integrity, which resulted in the government recalling and banning the novel altogether (H. Lu 41). The novel's controversy, of course, only served to fuel its popularity as well as Wei Hui's own infamy: pirated copies of the novel became bestsellers (41) while the novel was also reprinted for publication in Hong Kong and Taiwan and translated into various foreign languages (S.H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity* 54). As Coco—the novel's protagonist and first-person narrator—notes, *Shanghai Baby* landed on China's literary scene in a profoundly changed and nearly unrecognisable cultural paradigm. Chinese women at the end of the 20th century were no longer strictly bound to the

contradictory patriarchal hangups of Republican China, nor were they forcibly stripped of their femininity and individual self-expression following the end of the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong's regime. In this postrevolutionary era that emphasised economic and political reform, women like Coco found themselves armed with greater romantic and sexual freedoms than ever before in their encounters with love.

This chapter threads together the previous chapters' discussions of the generative possibilities of romantic love conferred by "love power" as well as the transformative potential of romantic love as an embodied survival strategy that enacts queer(er) modes of living and loving respectively to propose that they altogether extend romantic love as a practical tool for worldmaking. The kind of worldmaking I refer to here builds upon the second chapter's concluding reflections that the practice of love can come to (re)create more hospitable futures, and I now seek to develop this idea further through a reading of *Shanghai Baby* that foregrounds Coco's exploits in romantic love as a cogent attempt at worldmaking that empowers her to clarify her own conception of self amidst a rapidly changing China at the end of the 20th century. Here, the tentative undertakings of romantic love during Republican China, which were forcibly muted upon the establishment of the People's Republic of China and its earlier policymaking leading up to the repressive ethos of the Cultural Revolution, now return in full force, with Coco at its helm with a hedonistic vengeance. Having survived its rocky, nascent iterations at the start of the 20th century and the subsequent clampdown on individual sentiment altogether for the better half of the century, romantic love now finds its footing at the century's end with renewed liberties. *Shanghai Baby*'s brush with romantic love, by way of Coco's love affairs, offers a possible model for how romantic love might be construed as a kind of worldmaking that allows Coco to ground herself in a radically different cultural moment.

Like Coco, Wei Hui and her writing reflect China's rapidly changing social mores on the cusp of another new century. Wei Hui, who omits her given surname of "Zhou" as an author, was born only towards the end of the Cultural Revolution and grew up with no recollection of its brutalities. *Shanghai Baby* is a self-professed semi-autobiographical work that then draws upon Wei Hui's own life experiences as a young woman in this time. Coco's milestones throughout the novel explicitly mimic Wei Hui's own real-life achievements: like Wei Hui, Coco studied literature at the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai and is also an aspiring novelist who first experienced a brief bout of literary success with the publication of her debut short story collection, *Shriek of the Butterfly*, which featured risqué and sexually explicit content. Coco, too, writes a semi-autobiographical novel throughout *Shanghai Baby* that presumably takes after Wei Hui's own *Shanghai Baby*. For Wei Hui, her entry into adulthood occurred in tandem with China's accelerating participation in global trade and investments (S.H. Lu, "Popular Culture and Body Politics" 168). This was primarily expedited by Deng Xiaoping, who came into power as Mao Zedong's successor after the end of the Cultural Revolution and initiated China's Open Door Policy in 1978, which encouraged foreign trade and investments in China to expand and strengthen China's economic ties with the West.[26] Correspondingly, both Wei Hui and Coco find themselves situated within a global cosmopolitan moment premised upon transnational capitalist and cultural flows.

The very premise of the novel hinges on a transnational love triangle between Coco; Tian Tian, her Chinese boyfriend; and Mark, a German expat employed at a German-owned multinational investment consultancy in Shanghai. Accordingly, the imprints of these intercultural criss-crossings in both life and love are continuously highlighted throughout the

[26] This included the setting up of foreign corporations in Chinese cities, like the one Mark works for in the novel. For more details on the policy and its impacts, see Howell 119-124.

novel. Coco herself personifies this, for the novel opens with her introducing herself with her real name, Nikki (or "Ni Ke" in Mandarin; "倪可"), though it turns out that she actually goes by the name Coco, self-styled after the French fashion designer Coco Chanel whom she identifies as one of her idols alongside the American novelist Henry Miller, though she conspicuously fails to elaborate on why she idolises them or chooses to take on this particular moniker (Wei Hui 1). Coco, then, is already established from the beginning as a vessel for the hollow, transnational capitalist consumerism that pervades the novel, and is right at home amongst the novel's multitudinous references to Western capitalist and cultural imports. Each chapter of the novel begins with epigraphs taken from prominent Western figures, including writers like Marguerite Duras, Jack Kerouac, and Virginia Woolf, artists and musicians like Salvador Dali, Joni Mitchell, and Bob Dylan, as well as intellectuals like René Descartes, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. Coco and the novel's eclectic cast of characters also indulge in material goods from foreign luxury brands including Gucci, Christian Dior, and Yves Saint Laurent.

Aside from the consumerist excesses fuelled by China's expanding economic borders, global geopolitical tensions make themselves known even within the novel's local Shanghai setting. For instance, the accidental 1999 American bombing of the Chinese Consulate in Yugoslavia and its resulting sociopolitical ramifications form a minor plot point in the novel, wherein a Serbian man instigates a fight with an American man over the incident at a party hosted by Coco and Tian Tian in their apartment (Wei Hui 261). The flashpoint of the fight is rooted in the Serbian's man anger over American military intervention around the world, believing all Americans to be "shameless and greedy beyond their belief" in their country's indiscriminate violence that has, in this incident, strained their country's ties with both China and Serbia, the results of which are still intimately felt even outside of Serbia and in Shanghai (Wei Hui 261). All of this, then, is to say that *Shanghai Baby* is written around a bricolage of

transnational cultural capitals and politics that duly shape Coco's experiences of romantic love in the novel.

Wei Hui herself debuted as a writer in a time of literary commercialisation in China towards the end of the 20th century. She is considered a part of the "beauty writers" ("美女作家") that came into the spotlight in the 1990s, who were so named "because most of them were young, attractive women writing in styles that publicly called attention to the female body" (Z. Zhang 389).[27] These "beauty writers" pioneered a literary style known as "body writing" ("身体写作") that emphasised female sexuality in literally writing about one's own body in order to "produce shock value and cater to the commercial logic that 'sex sells'" (389).[28] They came to represent a kind of consumerist subjectivity that underscores a woman's dilemma in her contemporary moment—though a woman's social value was reduced to her body in this time, she can only reclaim and reassert her own subjectivity through self-commodification and self-objectification amidst the pressures of local and global economic forces that emphasised consumerist behaviours (389). Furthermore, women like Coco found themselves grappling with increasingly misogynistic societal customs that "re-gendered and feminised [women] according to traditional norms far away from Maoist revolutionary ideals" (Turner 50). Coco, as the novel's self-styled, titular *baobei* (宝贝), must thus wrestle her way through these complex social configurations in navigating her romantic affairs throughout the novel. More than just an endearment that loosely translates to "baby" as per the novel's English translation, *baobei* can at once connote affection and sardonic contempt, especially when used to infantilise and patronise women while belittling them,

[27] Another well-known "beauty writer" is Mian Mian, whose novel *Candy* received a similar critical reception as *Shanghai Baby* for its equally sexually explicit content. Together, both writers are typically considered representative of these "beauty writers." For a comparative introduction to both writers and their novels, see Song.

[28] On a paratextual note, Wei Hui herself claims that her controversial and explicit writing style is intended as an experiment to see how commercially successful it can be. For a more detailed explication of China's literary commercialisation in the 1990s, see Zhang Zhen.

thereby reflecting Coco's own dilemma in maintaining her lovers' impressions of her as their object of adoration while having to contend with fashioning her own identity and place in the world.

To be sure, the transnational love triangle that scaffolds *Shanghai Baby* bears little resemblance to the typical makings of a love story. Coco and Tian Tian's relationship is overtly saccharine while fraught by the irreparable rift caused by Tian Tian's sexual impotence, who later passes away at the end of the novel from his drug abuse. Mark, on the other hand, serves as an adulterous and oft-abusive stand-in for the physical fulfilment that Coco desperately wants from Tian Tian, and he, too, leaves Coco for his home country of Germany at the novel's end. What is said about the emotional vicissitudes of romantic love in the novel ends up couched in exaggeration or denial within Coco's unreliable narration, for she tends towards idealising and romanticising Tian Tian and Mark's qualities, at the expense of addressing her own emotional needs and feelings and retaining her personhood within these relationships. With the loss of both lovers, all Coco has left is a version of herself that she no longer recognises, and the novel ends with her unresolved question of "Who am I?" (Wei Hui 311).

Even so, I propose that Coco's fixation with her lovers gesture towards the function of romantic love as a compass to orient herself vis-à-vis the whirlwinds of socioeconomic change and ultimately offers her a means of worldmaking that enables her to form her own identity and life trajectory, independent of her reliance on the language of capitalist consumerism and the utopian fantasies and visions she assigns to her lovers. By worldmaking, I primarily refer to the term as it was first coined by Nelson Goodman, who argued that a singular, verifiable "world" does not exist, but rather, that different world-versions and their corresponding, different ways of worldmaking are continuously built and rebuilt upon the foundations of existing world-versions. In turn, what Coco is granted through

this worldmaking is the opportunity to produce a surer sense of self that is not warped by transnational capital and consumption even through the "ongoing process of constructing worlds, a process that is active, incomplete, and contestatory and that does not presuppose a settled cartography" (Schoonover and Galt 5). The achievement of romantic love, in the case of *Shanghai Baby*, is not the final goal or outcome for Coco. Instead, Coco's troubled and troubling encounters with love compel her towards a reckoning of her own beliefs in life and love. I will first advance a reading of Coco's entanglements with both Tian Tian and Mark as partial attempts at grounding herself in a coherent worldview that foregrounds love and sex as markers of her own identity, before exploring how they can altogether give rise to a kind of worldmaking that empowers Coco to forge a more genuine sense of self.

Love, Sex, and Consumerism

Though Coco describes her relationship with Tian Tian in picturesque terms, the fact of the matter is that her fidelity to him is frequently challenged by his sexual impotence. Despite this, Coco remains attached to him and refuses to leave him even as she spends much of the novel cheating on him with Mark. For Coco, then, what Tian Tian lacks in the bedroom is compensated by his participation in her unrealised fantasies of him that promise ontological stability and security in a world where neither are readily available to her.

This world, of course, primarily refers to the city of Shanghai, where Coco and Tian Tian reside. As Coco puts it, "Shanghai is a city obsessed with pleasure" (Wei Hui 45). Interestingly, Coco muses that Shanghai's dazzling consumerism—characterised by frequent dining at Western-style cafes and restaurants and shopping at glitzy department stores stocked with luxury goods from all over the world—is "tempered by feminine elegance" (134), as though this contemporary mode of consumption and living is primarily inhabited by women. Coco further takes her observation of the proliferation of young women leading these

upmarket lifestyles in Shanghai to mean that "the aimless ennui of Eileen Chang's unmarried women and the refined melancholy of Chen Dan-Yan's writing are rooted here" (134). What she presumably refers to here is both Chang and Chen's oeuvres as Chinese women writers in the 20th century who are recognised for their writing on women's interiorities and struggles in life, often tinged with despondence in their depictions of women's experiences which are also largely set in the city of Shanghai as well.[29] Coco's invoking of her literary predecessors to begin apprehending her relationship to the city already suggests that her sense of self is built upon shaky foundations—she previously names Eileen Chang as an author she looks up to, and yet fails to offer any further reasoning for her admiration (20). Already, it can be gleaned that Coco heavily relies on external referential points in crystallising a sense of self, for she can recognise a kinship with Chang but stops short at being able to articulate precisely why or what part of her identity feels represented by Chang's work.

Still, it is significant that Coco particularly calls upon Chang's writings on women's experiences of love and their subjectivities in order to try and decipher her own experiences as a woman in Shanghai, as opposed to her extensive references to and quotations of Western artists and intellectuals throughout the novel. In tracing this literary genealogy, Coco hints at the very insecurities that motivate her actions for much of the novel—it is this kindred, "aimless ennui" that drives her to seek out more stable foundations in life through love, rather than the capitalist consumption that she, too, participates in. Like Chang's female protagonists, Coco herself struggles with straddling her own longings for romantic love and consumerist proclivities in fashioning a sense of self, in ways reminiscent of Liusu's confused approach to financial gain and marriage as discussed in the first chapter. Essentially, Coco's sense of self vis-à-vis the globalised Shanghai that she inhabits is one that

[29] Though she is not explicitly discussed in this thesis, Chen Danyan is a writer born in 1958 and is best known for her writing on Shanghainese women's experiences as well as the city of Shanghai itself. For a more detailed explication of her oeuvre, see Schaffer and Song.

is troubled by both the figure of the Shanghainese woman as a consumerist subject, as well as her own disorientation in situating herself within this context.

Even as Coco flounders in establishing her independent subjectivity, she is precise in linking the conundrum of womanhood to the consumerist excess that dominates her daily life. In *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, Lisa Rofel elucidates the social uncertainties that emerged as China contended with increasing globalisation and transcultural encounters, which led Chinese citizens to "create a 'desiring China' that would, they hoped, guide them out of the ruins of Maoist socialism, beyond the reminders of China's colonial history, and into a world of freedom" (197). This 'desiring China' she refers to specifically entails a new version of China, transformed by its rapid globalisation at the end of the 20th century and produced by the citizen as a desiring subject "who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest" to reconfigure their relationship to the country's changing ways (3). Rofel also particularly takes "desire" to encompass the resulting culture of consumerism, wherein young heterosexual women like Coco become distinct conduits "for grappling with the tension between transcending the local and re-negotiating China's place in the world" and "are normalised as the mediators of cosmopolitan desire" because they, as Coco observes, are already primed to be consumers (112).

Coco, too, often turns to consumerism and "buy[s] up a storm" to assuage herself whenever she feels upset, only to never wear "the heap of things" she purchased just because she "bought them in a bad mood" (Wei Hui 102). The clothing she buys while upset remains unworn purely because they are "exaggerated or X-rated," and serve purely as a means for her to avoid having to contemplate her identity outside of her consumption habits because "they're only suitable for dressing up like Marilyn Monroe and viewing oneself narcissistically in the mirror at home" (102). As Rofel elucidates:

> But consumption, one of their measures of freedom, is not just about pleasure. It is a post-socialist technology of the self by which Chinese young women and, by metonymic association, the Chinese nation, enable themselves to transcend the specificities of place and identity and be part of the "world." (118)

Coco, like the women she observes throughout *Shanghai Baby*, therefore turns to consumerism as an attempt to configure for herself a place in her "world" of Shanghai, where the "specificities of place and identity" are becoming increasingly blurred and lost to the influx of Western cultural and material imports. It is apt that Coco partakes in this consumerist behaviour as a means of self-soothing rather than mindless pleasure— if "consumption is about embodiment, embodying a new self," then what lies within this embodiment is desire itself, where the "properly cosmopolitan self is supposed to be desirous and this desire is supposed to be open and unconstrained" (Rofel 118). This desire, however, is one that unsettles and demands an indefinite loop of consumption to sustain it, alongside the cosmopolitan sense of self that is continuously generated through this desire. To extend Rofel's analysis, Coco has already demonstrated that her own consumption habits alone do not suffice in granting her continued emotional stability, nor do they permanently ease her anxieties about her sense of self. In other words, Coco's struggle with establishing a concrete sense of self throughout *Shanghai Baby* is inextricably linked to this unsatisfactory mode of consumption; where Coco fails to establish her identity and place in an ever-changing Shanghai through consumerism, she instead turns to romantic love as an anchor for her sense of self.

In turn, Tian Tian acts as this anchor that Coco insistently fixes herself to despite her repeated admissions that Tian Tian's sexual impotence directly challenges the durability of their relationship. For Coco who "had seen sex as a basic necessity" for most of her

adolescence and early adulthood, discovering that Tian Tian was unable to engage in penetrative sex with her was so devastating that she "didn't know if [she] could stay with him" (Wei Hui 5). Nevertheless, Coco immediately jumps to Tian Tian's defense, declaring that she has since "corrected herself" ("已有所矫正"; Wei Hui 5; my trans.) in her belief of sex as being essential to all romantic relationships. Her choice of words here, of course, is already telling of her actual inability to put the matter to rest. That her disappointment with Tian Tian's sexual impotence is described as a kind of flaw that needs to be consciously "corrected" speaks to her latent reluctance to accept Tian Tian as he is. Forasmuch as Coco tries to convince herself that their relationship is fulfilling enough even without sex, she continues to implore him to try to "come into [her] body like a real lover" (Wei Hui 17). Her plea to Tian Tian here thus underscores her inability to take Tian Tian as a "genuine" ("真正"; Wei Hui 15) lover as long as he is unable to provide her with the sex that she wishes for in their relationship. Consequently, Tian Tian remains as an inauthentic and incomplete lover, even as Coco continues to cling onto him as a means of making sense of her identity and place in the world.

In the absence of the penetrative sex that Coco desires from Tian Tian in order to consummate and legitimise their romantic relationship, she instead turns to romanticising Tian Tian to justify staying with him. Her descriptions of Tian Tian's qualities as her lover are often infantilising in nature, painting him as frail and guileless. For instance, she says that what initially attracted her to Tian Tian was how he was "kind, loving and trusting as a dolphin" (Wei Hui 6), and calls him her "innocent little butterfly of a lover" (Wei Hui 198), or translated differently, a "pure-hearted and helpless" butterfly ("纯洁无助"; Wei Hui 168; my trans.). Most significantly, Coco's descriptors frequently lean on benign animal imagery—to her, Tian Tian is given to a kind of innocence that transcends the complexities of human nature, and instead renders him naïve and defenceless like a small animal.

Correspondingly, this gives Coco a sense of purpose in life because she feels obligated to protect him:

> Everything was unfathomable. Perhaps my love grew from how greatly I was needed; however much he needed, that was how much I provided. (Wei Hui 79)

Here, Tian Tian's apparently guileless and dependent nature offers a straightforward solution to Coco's own aimlessness in life, for his dependence on her love means that she is immediately granted a tangible purpose in life. If she feels that Tian Tian "needed [her] existence like he needed oxygen and water," becoming the sole fountain of love and companionship by which Tian Tian sustains himself offers a comprehensible mode of life when everything else is "unfathomable" to her.

This narrative that Coco stubbornly shapes around Tian Tian in their relationship is what Lauren Berlant might term a "love plot," wherein a configuration of romantic love is "marked by a longing for love to have the power to make the loved one transparent, and therefore a safe site on which to place one's own desire without fear of its usual unsettling effects" (90). Put simply, Coco's deliberate romanticisation of Tian Tian as her hapless lover who is wholly dependent on her is her attempt at forming a shared world between the two, where she is able to comfortably live out a fixed identity and lifestyle as his devoted lover, without needing to contend with her own aimlessness in life. When Coco quits her waitressing job to focus on becoming a novelist at the start of *Shanghai Baby*, she does so solely at Tian Tian's behest, and concedes that "abandoning something was almost instinctive, as easy as the flip of a hand" to her because she believes herself to be intrinsically capricious in nature (Wei Hui 25). Her impulsiveness and restlessness are stayed only by Tian Tian—when Tian Tian encourages her further and insists that he "just felt [she was] cut out to be a writer," Coco entreats him to continue praising her because listening to his

affirmations of her potential brings her both emotional and sexual pleasure (25). Tian Tian therefore offers a "safe site" to which Coco can entrust her unsteady sense of self and begin to establish stable foundations in life as both his lover and an aspiring novelist. To borrow Berlant's wording, Tian Tian serves as an ideal blank canvas on which Coco can begin to paint a vision of her ideal world, where the "love plot" she forms around her and Tian Tian "express[es] the desire for love to simplify living" without ever having to confront any further obstacles in life (Berlant 89) while also "confirm[ing] the futurity of a known self, and dissolv[ing] the enigmas that marks one's lovers" (95).

Even so, Coco perhaps already begins to realise that her own dependence on being needed by Tian Tian to feel like she has an ontologically secure purpose and place in her world is flawed and insufficient, for she also likens him to "a foetus soaking in formaldehyde who owed his life to unadulterated love" (Wei Hui 79). Like the earlier animal imagery she employs, her description of Tian Tian here pinpoints him as a "different species" from other men that elevates him beyond the reach of humanity. This imagery that she turns to in summing up Tian Tian's nature is inherently paradoxical—he is at once eternally infantilised and pure, yet already dead and incapable of generating any further possibilities in life, long before his death by the novel's end. Though Tian Tian appears to offer Coco an unyielding site where she can safely invest both her love and identity, this attempt at a "love plot" ultimately falls flat. As Berlant puts it, the core flaw of any given "love plot" is its unrealistic "promise to structure both conventional life and the magical life of intimate mutuality across distance and difference" even when romantic love fails (93). Inasmuch as Coco works to keep up the façade of her fantastical "love plot" with Tian Tian despite her dissatisfactions, the inadequacy of her "love plot" to compensate for Tian Tian's fundamental inability to fully fulfil her emotional and sexual needs in love is confirmed by Coco herself when she capitulates to Mark's seductions and begins her secret affair with him. Try as she might,

Coco must concede that Tian Tian alone cannot provide her with the singular, coherent world she wishes for, and that her affair with Mark was all but inevitable because "her life with Tian Tian had too many fine cracks that [they] couldn't mend on [their] own" (Wei Hui 75).

"A woman's inherent flaw"

Mark, on the other hand, manifests in Coco's life as Tian Tian's exact opposite. If Tian Tian's is Coco's child-like, innocent lover who offers her refuge and respite from a turbulent social order, Mark embodies the morally ambiguous allure of Western cultural hegemony that permeates the sociocultural landscapes of the novel and promises her an alternative mode of constituting herself as a confident cosmopolitan subject. Already, the oppositional dynamics between Tian Tian and Mark gesture towards the geopolitical tensions undergirding the novel: the Chinese lover is reclusive and sexually impotent, while the foreign, German lover is wealthy, well-connected, and sexually virile which collectively make him irresistible to Coco. Just as the material consumerism that takes centre stage in the novel cannot be separated from the influx of Western branding and thought into China, Coco discovers that she, too, ultimately fails in keeping love and sex separate in her relationships. In the same manner that she cannot take Tian Tian as a genuine lover because he cannot perform penetrative sex, she ends up "fall[ing] into the trap of love and passion" set by Mark because the sex he offers her inevitably lends itself to the development of love (Wei Hui 278). In other words, she confesses to falling in love with Mark and deems this as a personal failure akin to "a woman's inherent flaw" (278). Most interestingly, Coco likens this to a feminist failure of her own doing. She laments that "the hypnotic quality of this kind of sex has been demystified" by the advancements of feminism, and yet she still finds herself utterly bewitched by the sexual pleasure she receives from Mark (278). Her phrasing here suggests that the love she begins to feel for Mark—made inseparable from their sexual affair—is one

that is incomprehensible and fundamentally at odds with her self-professed feminist leanings. While Coco's affair with Mark may entail a betrayal of her feminist beliefs, however, the seeming inscrutability of her romantic attraction to Mark is a misapprehension that can be readily resolved by following the throughlines of Coco's own inclinations towards Mark.

To begin with, Mark's seemingly intangible allure as a sexual partner can be gleaned through Coco's intense fascination with his very being as a foreign, German man. Not only does Mark provide Coco with the sex absent from her and Tian Tian's relationship, but he also grants her proximity to Western cultural capital that she can consume from him. Even the concept of Mark as a "sex partner" (denoted in English in the original Mandarin text) is consciously demarcated as a foreign one, as though their affair exists on a separate geographical plane from the novel's local Chinese setting and lingua franca (238).

Additionally, Coco's continual consumption of Western brands and cultural thought can be construed as an attempt to participate in cosmopolitanism, defined by Lisa Rofel as "a site for the production of knowledge about what it means to be human in this reconfigured world, knowledge that is being embraced, digested, reworked, contested, and resisted in China" (112). Accordingly, Coco's decisions and worldview throughout the novel draw from a cosmopolitan patchwork of Western thinkers in her attempts to shape her own identity, even at the expense of her own independent thought. A critical example of her reliance on external Western thought occurs at the moment when she finally reciprocates Mark's seductions and begins their sexual affair. Though she owns up to her lack of self-control, she justifies her impulsiveness by citing Salvador Dali, who, according to her, said that "a person can do anything, including those things that should be done, and those that ought not" (Wei Hui 70). Beyond shunning personal responsibility for her decision to cheat on Tian Tian with Mark by deferring the rationale behind her actions to an influential Western figure, she further bolsters her flimsy reasoning by referring to Salvador Dali as "the great Dali" ("伟大

的达利"; Wei Hui 60), as though he possesses an elevated authority through which she can validate her ill-advised choices. When even rash and monumental decisions are seemingly outsourced rather than independently considered, it therefore appears that Coco's attempts at fashioning her own identity through cosmopolitan thought tend to be taken to their logical extremes, so much so that her own reasonings in life are secondary to a revolving door of Western role models.

Returning to Coco's fixation on the novelty of Mark's foreignness, her descriptions of Mark's body and sexual appeal typically home in on his distinctly European physical features, which she finds both alluring and exotic. For example, Coco often describes her attraction to Mark's blonde hair, to which she ascribes an ethereal quality. During sex, Mark's "golden body hairs were like fine rays of sunlight, zealously and intimately nibbling at my body" (Wei Hui 71), while "his golden hair [waves] in the wind like a dream of exotic love" outside of the bedroom (158). She is similarly drawn to his body's scent, which she idealises as a "body odour from the vast lands of Northern Europe" that she finds equally exotic and arousing (113), and especially enjoyable because of its "animal smell" (86). Critically, her descriptions of her sexual attraction to Mark's physique are primarily associated with natural and primal imagery that denote his Western, European descent, as though her enjoyment of these features is something that has been embedded into her human nature and instincts by default, rather than as a preference that has been culturally cultivated, consciously or otherwise. Framed this way, Mark's foreignness confers a pleasurable novelty upon him that Coco eagerly laps up with little scrutiny as to why she delights in his foreignness. Mark's body, as ostensibly experienced by Coco through their sexual affair, therefore becomes enfolded into Coco's habitual, uncritical consumption of Western cultural thought throughout the novel that acts as both a form of superficial self-soothing as well as a stand-in for her own guiding principles in life in lieu of a properly defined sense of self. Just

as Coco fails to engage in any considered evaluation of her consumerist preferences and tendencies in her enjoyment of Western products, she also neglects to reflect upon her preoccupations with Mark's distinctly foreign physique.

Insofar as Coco's indulgent sexual encounters with Mark can come to constitute one of her attempts at worldmaking, her excessive romanticisation of Mark's foreignness bears substantially troubling implications. Though Mark certainly plays into Coco's eager consumption of Western cultural thought, Coco also wishes to be consumed and subjugated by Mark in equal measure and evidently derives great pleasure from being degraded and objectified by him. The most problematic occurrence of this is perhaps Coco's narration of her fantasies during the first time that she and Mark have sex:

> I imagined what he would be like in high boots and a leather coat, and what kind of cruelty would show in those Nordic blue eyes. These thoughts increased my excitement. 'Every woman adores a Fascist/The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you…' wrote Sylvia Plath. I closed my eyes and listened to him moan a sentence or two in indistinct German, sounds from my dreams that struck the most sensitive part of my womb. (Wei Hui 71)
>
> 我想象他穿上纳粹的制服、长靴和皮大衣会是什么样子，那双日耳曼人的蓝眼睛里该有怎样的冷酷和兽性，这种想象有效地激励着我肉体的兴奋。“每个女人都崇拜法西斯分子，脸上挂着长靴，野蛮的，野蛮的心，长在野兽身上，像你……”把头伸进烤箱自杀的席尔维亚•普拉斯这样写道。闭上眼睛听他的呻吟，一两句含混的德语，这些曾在我梦中出现过的声音击中了我子宫最敏感的地方。(Wei Hui 61).

The English translation alone bears alarming implications, and yet its conservative translation choices belie the shock value in the original Mandarin text: Coco leaves no room

for doubt about how she pictures Mark in a "Nazi uniform," ("纳粹的制服") along with the "callous brutality" in his eyes ("冷酷和兽性"). Even Coco's audacious sexual fantasies here borrow from Sylvia Plath's own controversial poem, "Daddy," which features similarly contentious Nazi imagery in recounting the American poet's complicated relationship to her father. Here, what Coco borrows from Plath is both the metaphor of the fascist Nazi figure as a source of patriarchal oppression, as well as the sensationalised circumstances around her suicide wherein "she committed suicide by sticking her head in an oven" ("把头伸进烤箱自杀"; my trans.). Like Plath, Coco envisions herself as being beleaguered by great suffering, though she twists the context of the former's pain to equate it to her experience of sadomasochistic sexual pleasure. Not only does Coco continue to rely on external Western sources for validation of her sexual impulses, but she also stretches her consumption of Western culture to its ethical extremes by latching onto Mark's Germanic origins in crafting a depraved sexual fantasy rooted in her own degradation and subjugation (i.e. to have "the boot in the face"). Likewise, her fantasy is especially problematic considering the already imbalanced racial power dynamic between her and Mark, now replicated and reiterated even in her imagination, especially when Coco herself is fully cognisant that Mark views her as "the oriental princess of his dreams" (Wei Hui 278).

While the fantasy she conjures is appalling in its own right, it is by no means unique to her—fascism and Nazism (especially in its origins from Nazi Germany) already "come to figure as master tropes for domination and submission, for a kind of repressed sexuality that breaks out in the form of sadistic cruelty" (Tatar 190), just like how Coco assigns these tropes to Mark during sexual intercourse. Furthermore, the sadomasochistic undertones of Coco's fantasy directly evoke the sexual metaphors utilised by fascist dictators, including, of course, Adolf Hitler, who "regarded leadership as sexual mastery of the "feminine" masses, as rape"

(Sontag 102). It thus follows that what is most disturbing about this fantasy is not so much the sexual ecstasy Coco apparently derives from being subjected to physical violence, but rather, how this aesthetic of fascism becomes yet another product to be consumed, with little attention to its ethical and political ramifications. Coco makes one more mention of how "women like to have the fascist with the boot in the face in their beds" in reminiscing on her affair with Mark prior to his imminent departure at the novel's end, only to again double down on her opinion that women viscerally enjoy sex of this nature (Wei Hui 297).

The sadomasochistic sex that Coco fantasies about with Mark, then, returns to the question of her consumption habits. If the sexual "fad for Nazi regalia indicates…a response to an oppressive freedom of choice in sex (and in other matters), to an unbearable degree of individuality" (Sontag 104), Coco's own Nazi fantasies of Mark might perhaps gesture towards the overwhelming nature of her unfettered consumption throughout the novel, to the extent that she finds a stable footing in life only through a kind of degrading sex that clearly circumscribes a limited identity for her as a subject to be dominated and conquered. Consequently, these sadomasochistic tendencies that take inspiration from fascist symbols are "perhaps only a logical extension of an affluent society's tendency to turn every part of people's lives into a taste" (Sontag 104). Coco therefore responds in kind with this deviant sexual fantasy that mediates her turbulent attempts at worldmaking, where her self-prescribed sexual deviancy offers a level of ontological certainty that her continuous consumerism throughout the novel cannot. Since Coco's consumption of material goods and Western intellectual thought continues to do little for solidifying her sense of self, her ontological insecurity is instead safely (re)packaged as a pornographic fantasy that can be continually consumed and restaged to provide another anchor in life to justify her affair with Mark.

This anchor that her wayward sexual fantasies proffers, however, diverges from the straightforward, and even innocuous, nature of the "love plot" that she maps onto Tian Tian.

Instead, the extremities of her fantasies and the unrestrained sex she shares with Mark can be construed as a phenomenological experience of sex that departs from an experience of romantic love that might presuppose a mutual, reciprocated sense of care that extends to sexual intercourse as well. In Jeffrey Gordon and Audrey McKinney's investigation of the continuum of human sexuality, with romantic love and sexual lust without love positioned as antithetical ends of a spectrum, they identify the allure of sexual lust at its extremes as experienced by Coco as offering "a radical escape from the ambiguities of [her] normal condition as embodied subject and the ambiguities of [her] normal interaction with others," in which she can "sink swooningly into [her] powerlessness" (25).[30] This form of "radical escape" particularly clarifies Coco's sustained fascination with her fantasies, as their provocative nature necessarily transplants both Coco and Mark into a fantastical setting of sexual ecstasy (albeit immoral) that can be experienced separately from the reality of their mutual infidelity. Sexual lust—taken to its outlandish extremes—temporarily empowers Coco to cast aside her troubled sense of self and restlessness in life by reducing her to a sexual object for Mark's sole consumption and pleasure. As Gordon and McKinney observe, the appeal of unabashed sexual lust lies in its reductive ability to allow individuals like Coco to "divest [herself] of subjectivity as of a stifling garment," but still remain "wholly unchanged by this encounter" because these sexual encounters "are rigorously excluded from the narratives of self, and this is why they seem to occur in another world" (25). If Coco can only mould her sense of self around her own habits of consumption, it also follows that she derives a temporal sense of stability from designating herself as a product to be consumed with a guaranteed positive outcome, that is, Mark's sexual gratification. Correspondingly, the true appeal of Coco's fetishistic fantasy—rooted in the dynamics of patriarchal and racial

[30] Gordon and McKinney particularly refer to both romantic love and lust as phenomena "involving two persons, in contrast to solitary longing, pining, or mere desire" (11).

oppression—is its potential for granting her a much-needed reprieve from the ontological insecurity that troubles her, without having to confront the hollowness of her own subjectivity outside of the clearly delineated borders of sex.

Read this way, Coco's seemingly irrational compulsions and sexual obsession with Mark can also be better interpreted through the lens of sexual lust as an attitudinal emotion, in which the experience of sexual lust presupposes one's ability to evaluate whether or not to act on any particular sexual attraction (Herzberg 284). Sexual lust can be considered a "socially adaptive" experience in which one's sexual lust for another is further amplified and intensified by the knowledge that this sexual lust is being reciprocated by the other party (284-286). Coco's sexual attraction to Mark is, in turn, "socially adaptive" in that she deliberately chooses to gratify Mark during sexual intercourse by directly responding to the voracity of his sexual lust for her. She chooses to reciprocate and replicate his sexual lust even at her own expense because his sexual satisfaction translates to a concretely defined sense of purpose for herself, where she can "adapt" herself to Mark's simple parameters of sexual pleasure. Choosing to give into Mark's demands, then, sustains their shared experience of sexual lust which affords her the temporal ability to "abandon the burdens of [her] selfhood" through overwhelming sexual pleasure (Gordon and McKinney 25).

Beyond her perverted fantasies, actual instances of sex with Mark are also mostly painful and border on physical violence—by virtue of his "terrifyingly large organ" ("大得吓人的器官"; Wei Hui 61) and aggression—though Coco staunchly insists on her enjoyment of the fact. One such example transpires early in the novel, when Mark suddenly pulls a reluctant Coco into the filthy bathroom of a bar for sex. What Mark describes as "making love" in the bathroom is excruciatingly painful for Coco, who endures the pain and shock only to end up in tears and feeling that "something in [her] body had been lost, leaving a gaping hole" (Wei Hui 84). Even when Mark apologises to her after the act, having

recognised his forcefulness, Coco rejects his apology and insists that "[he] didn't rape me… no one could" (84). The dissonance between Coco's distressed demeanour and what she actually says to Mark here only serves to further evince her willingness to put aside her own discomfort in order to see Mark's sexual advances through. Similarly, when Mark propositions her for sustained, daily bouts of sex in the month leading up to his departure from China, Coco passively accedes, even when she starts bleeding from the increased intensity and frequency of sexual intercourse (279), and even when it "hurt so much it was hard to bear" despite having used lubricant (297). When the excitement of the moment fades for Coco, however, she again feels despondent and likens herself to "a doll that's been raped too often—but whose body, were she to undress again, would start the magic of it again" (280).

Though Coco repeatedly deprecates herself and admits that having sex with Mark consistently leaves her feeling objectified and worthless, she persists with their affair in pursuit of the "magic" that manifests only at the moment of sexual intercourse, regardless of her own physical wellbeing. Forasmuch as Coco's sexual affair with Mark negatively impacts her self-esteem, his sexual depravity can be clearly demarcated from real life as well as Coco's romantic relationship with Tian Tian. In turn, what happens in the bedroom between Coco and Mark becomes an essential form of escapism for Coco who would sacrifice even her own body to delay confronting her troubled sense of self. Just as Tian Tian provides Coco with the illusion of ontological stability and security, Mark and the sexual lust he represents "holds the promise of casting off the burdens and perplexities of [one's] complex and anguished condition" (Gordon and McKinney 25). Coco can therefore cling onto this experience of sexual lust as a distraction from her strained relationship with Tian Tian and his sexual impotence, as well as to temporarily fashion herself as an agential enactor of her own

sexual lust, in lieu of properly confronting the unsteadiness of her bearings in life and the anguish that Mark inflicts upon her.

Baobei, Rewriting the World

Coco's relationships with Tian Tian and Mark have thus far constituted inadequate attempts at stabilising her sense of self as well as her place in a fast-changing world that offers little ontological security, dominated by the cultural logics of consumerism and Western intellectual thought as key tools for constructing a personal identity. If consumerism can be thought of as a social ideology that masquerades as a form of culture which enables one to become "the master of one's self-image, self-production, and reproduction, and of one's "identity"" through consumption that promises freedom (X. Zhang 364), then Coco's persistent failures in building a self-identity separate from her maladaptive fantasies of her lovers only serve to demonstrate consumption's inadequacy as a mode of life and love for her.[31] Her reliance on consumption throughout the novel renders her passive, to the extent that it is a brief moment of queer intimacy shared with another woman that jolts Coco into realising the profound depth of her reliance on these heteronormative fantasies. Her fleeting infatuation with Shamir, a lesbian filmmaker from Germany and an acquaintance of Mark's, reveals an uncomfortable truth about herself when Shamir pins her down as "a frightening *baobei*…[who'd] say and do anything" (Wei Hui 246). The degree of truth in Shamir's statement clearly startles Coco, who is shocked by how "other women can unfailingly uncover another woman's most subtle, most secret characteristics" (246). These "subtle" and "secret" characteristics that Coco possesses, then, are presumably her willingness to bend herself to fit into her lovers' lives and to facilitate both her relationships and the

[31] Zhang Xudong particularly outlines this ideology of consumerism as one specific to upper-class Shanghainese elites like Coco, who came to define themselves through consumption and subsequently became detached from civil and political participation and community-building (364).

corresponding fantasies assigned to them. What makes Coco so "frightening" is precisely her willingness to play the role of the agreeable and diminutive *baobei* to both of her lovers in service of sustaining these fantasies that smooth over her uncertain sense of self.

This is not to say that Coco's entanglements with romantic love are entirely for naught, for it is Coco's authorial processes in writing her novel throughout *Shanghai Baby* (i.e. a fictional iteration of *Shanghai Baby* by Coco) that provide rare glimpses into the ways in which Coco comes to synthesise her experiences of love and sex into a more genuine and independent sense of self on her own terms. Essentially, I posit that Coco's writing of her novel entails a cogent and sustained attempt at worldmaking that challenges her to forge a personal interiority, premised upon the production of her life's narrative rather than the acts of consumption that otherwise saturate the novel. As previously discussed, Coco's fantasies of her lovers are but temporary salves that do little for building an ontologically sound sense of self. Instead, it is the undertaking of her novel—which I frame as an act of production—that serves as her primary avenue for a kind of worldmaking that enables her to inhabit a more ontologically secure sense of self that can stand independently from her dependence on her lovers.

I borrow my principal definition of worldmaking from Nelson Goodman, who first theorised a pluralist approach to the concept of worldmaking in *Ways of Worldmaking*, and specifically argued for a multiplicity of actual worlds wherein "many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base" (4). Goodman further elucidates the process of worldmaking as one that is regenerative and built from existing worlds rather than originating from a blank slate, for "worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking" (6). This is an especially illuminating framework for Coco's authorial process, where she is engaged in writing a semi-autobiographical novel akin to Wei Hui's *Shanghai*

Baby—this premise of a double-voiced narrative, or a novel within a novel, already attests to the presence of multiple worlds that exert influence over Coco's sense of self, including her relationships with Tian Tian and Mark. Goodman also identifies different possible procedures for this form of worldmaking rooted in first remaking existing worlds, though I chiefly reference his ideas on worldmaking as composition and decomposition, where wholes are divided into parts to draw distinctions between them, before wholes are again (re)composed from parts to form new connections (7).

In Coco's context, this process of worldmaking by way of composition and decomposition takes the form of rewriting, wherein her writing of her novel throughout *Shanghai Baby* already entails a rewriting of her experiences in love to make them legible to both herself and her audience. When Coco reflects on her personal motivations for her novel while secluding herself for a week to write, she realises that writing the novel as a semi-autobiographical account of her life offers her a pathway into shaping her sense of self, separate from her lovers:

> I gave up embellishment and lies. I intended to put a completely genuine version of my life before the public's eye. This didn't require too much courage, just obedience to that mysterious force. As long as it felt good, that was enough; I didn't have to play naïve or cool. This is how I discovered my real self, and overcame my terror of loneliness, poverty, death and all other potential disasters. (Wei Hui 195)

Coco's profession here is exceptionally striking because she readily admits to the self-conscious pretences of herself as "naïve or cool" that she stages in front of her lovers to keep them. Without the writing of her novel, these pretences would have prevented her from developing a "real self" and would instead mask her "terror of loneliness… and all other potential disasters" that stand in opposition to the development of an ontologically secure

sense of self. Most importantly, Coco finds that striving towards rewriting her own experiences as "a completely genuine version," sans her default "embellishment and lies" in her interpersonal relationships, feels good.

Put another way, Coco's rewriting creates an avenue for her to reconstruct her sense of self because she is able to break down these "embellishment[s] and lies" to recompose them into an independent sense of self through her novel itself. The relief of being able to shed her earlier pretences through this act of rewriting feels so liberating that Coco is compelled to hyperbole: she describes the experience of writing as feeling like she has "achieved *dao* and ascended to immortality" ("得道升仙"; Wei Hui 166; my trans.), which to her is akin to achieving a spiritual enlightenment that elevates her above humanity and grants her complete, cosmic harmony with the universe.[32] Crucially, that rewriting as a form of worldmaking is so relieving that she equates it to transcending the very bounds of her mortal existence simultaneously demonstrates the constrictive nature of her prior pretences as well as her intrinsic determination to carve out a distinct and whole sense of self, independent of the expectations her lovers have imposed on her. Coco even likens this rewriting to a kind of heaven, where she can "[be] at ease and completely free of worry," and where "there are no men to notice your hairstyle and clothes, no one to fuss about whether you're full-breasted or your eyes are sufficiently elegant" (Wei Hui 195). If her personas as Tian Tian and Mark's lover can be thought of as carefully composed "world-versions"—as Goodman might argue for in his concept of worldmaking as remaking—where she must craft specific iterations of her physical traits and personal characteristics to suit both men respectively, then the

[32] The *dao* ("道") that Coco speaks of here pertains to a Chinese philosophical concept that can be characterised as "as the fundamental root of heaven and earth, infinite in nature, invisible in shape" as well as "the primordial One having ingression into all forms of being" (Fang 110). Though its metaphysical arguments and applications are elusive with varying definitions, to "achieve" *dao* as Coco suggests is akin to a kind of spiritual enlightenment in which one cultivates their self to be in complete harmony with the *dao* as the origin of the universe and all lifeforms. This form of enlightenment is often likened to attaining immortality, which Coco references as well. For a more comprehensive summary, see Fang.

rewriting she engages in through her novel likewise constitutes worldmaking insofar as she is deliberately breaking down her own pretences to recompose them into an independent sense of self, unfettered by the burdens of living up to the fantasies of her lovers. In Coco's own words, her newfound sense of self, shaped through worldmaking as the act of rewriting, is now wholly hers, with "no one to reappear and squeeze [her] dry of affection" (196).

Considering Coco's authorial process as her means of worldmaking is also remarkably clarifying in comparison to her earlier beliefs about novel-writing as yet another means of fantasy-making which she can manipulate in hopes of landing upon a sense of self that she can consume without needing to assume agency over its creation. At the outset, Coco believes the act of writing to be another passive act of consumption, where she would "set up a hotline to [her] soul, and await the stealthy arrival of plot and characters" (26). In Coco's earlier reflections, the act of writing as a form of production and worldmaking appear entirely divorced from her authorial process, as she can only conceive of writing as being "like sorcery" (106) and as her invoking "her magical power to write a genuine book of enchantment" (26). These obfuscating descriptions of writing as mystical and unfathomable abilities, conferred upon a passive recipient like herself, reinforce Coco's reliance on consumption as an arbiter of her identity, where even the agential act of writing is something to be received from an external source and consumed in turn.

Correspondingly, even her early motivations for beginning to write her novel at all stem from Tian Tian's insistence and supervision because she believes that "that was how Tian Tian liked [her]," and abandoning the novel would then mean losing his love (129). She engages in writing the novel only at Tian Tian's behest, who "like an overseer, urged [her] on with [her] writing" (50) and "watched over [her] like a slave driver" (26). Given that so much of Coco's initial motivations were spurred by her longing for Tian Tian's approval rather than her own intrinsic agency, it follows that her novel-in-progress is but another fantastical

product that she hopes to consume as part of sustaining the romantic fantasy shrouding her and Tian Tian. Fantasy takes precedence over worldmaking, where Coco's novel "would explode like a firework and give meaning to [their] existence" (76), which would otherwise remain as a smokescreen mired in Coco's fantastical ideals of love.

Coco's shift from passive consumption to an active production of her own personal narrative in her novel-writing is therefore a critical shift that foregrounds worldmaking as her axis for being, which then allows her to continue fashioning an independent sense of self beyond Tian Tian's death and Mark's departure from Shanghai. That Coco continues writing her novel to completion even after Tian Tian's sudden passing already demonstrates her complete transition into the act of rewriting as worldmaking—she has fully assumed agency over the authoring of her own life and sense of self without needing to entwine her authorial process with Tian Tian's affirmation and approval. When contemplating her novel's near-completion in the aftermath of Tian Tian's death, Coco feels both "release, and a strange sense of sadness" (300) because:

> I don't believe I can predict the fate of this book. It's part of my fate too, and I haven't the means to control it. Nor can I take any further responsibility for the characters and story created by my imagination. Now they've been put down on paper, it's time for them to live and die on their own. (300-301)

Here, Coco finally relinquishes her need for control over her romantic fantasies, now that they have been dismantled through her lovers' departures from her life. Though her fantasies have fallen apart, the ontological instability and insecurity that she so feared in their absence does not overwhelm her to the point of total collapse. Rather, she comes to terms with not being able to exert full control over both her life's trajectory (now abruptly, if temporarily, derailed by the loss of her lovers) and her own sense of self. Coco's act of rewriting her life's experiences and producing an autonomous account of herself results not in a specific set of

features and traits that altogether present a definite characterisation of her, but empowers her to become comfortable with ontological uncertainty, now decoupled from the safety net of her fantasies. If the "characters and story created by [her] imagination" can be thought of synonymous to her own life experiences, now (re)produced through her novel as an act of worldmaking, then her acceptance that they will "live and die on their own" now constitutes the success of her worldmaking. Recalling that the act of rewriting as worldmaking for Coco means to break down the composite parts of her elaborate romantic fantasies to again (re)compose them into a surer sense of self independent of love's illusions as a precondition for ontological security, her ability to resign herself to the unknowability of life here exemplifies her successful creation of a world that she can inhabit without fear of her own uncertain sense of self or need for the pacifying effects of romantic fantasy. Though Coco is still left with the inordinate task of grieving Tian Tian as well as dealing with Mark's continued e-mail correspondence from Germany, the novel's completion enables her to continue moving forward in life, with or without her fantastical illusions of love. Perhaps it is this version of Coco at the novel's end, then, that can finally begin apprehending the magnitude of searching for a genuine romantic love that generates further possibilities in life, even beyond the bounds of her previous imaginations.

To conclude Coco's worldmaking trajectory, woven by and through her visions of love and her lovers, it may be apt to return again to the origins of the concept of "body writing," defined earlier as a literary style pioneered by women writers who wrote explicitly about their experiences with lust and sex. The version of "body writing" that Coco partakes in throughout *Shanghai Baby* extends beyond her lurid descriptions of sex and into the literal impacts of her lovers on her physical body; Coco once muses that Tian Tian and Mark are oppositional forces in her life, "like beings from two different universes" and whose "existences met in inverted images of themselves projected on to [her] body" (207). In

rewriting her experiences into her novel, and in turn, writing about her body itself, Coco's worldmaking necessarily involves first making her sensuous affairs with her lovers legible to herself, even while producing her own sense of self. Still, the proliferation of this idea of "body writing" in China can be traced back to the popularity of the Chinese translation of Hélène Cixous' seminal essay on women's writing, "The Laugh of the Medusa," released in 1992 (Knight 127). Cixous' famous call for "*écriture feminine*" ("feminine writing") resonated with a Chinese audience, and "body writing" evolved to be a catchphrase that "highlight[ed] the unpredictable evolution of feminist theories as they flow[ed] through different contexts," including but not limited to sensationalist depictions of women's sexuality (127). Coco's attempts at worldmaking through the act of rewriting in her novel ultimately find resonances with "body writing's" original imperative for women to take agency over authoring their lived experiences through a reclamation of their bodies as a means for communicating their senses of self. Inasmuch as her earlier fantasies—founded upon idealised visions of her lovers as balms to assuage her own ontological insecurities—can be read as juvenile escapism, they hold value as a direct response to Cixous's exhortation for women to "put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 875). Just as Coco writes her body and sense of self into being through her novel, so too, do her reserves of love speak to Cixous' sentimental closing statement that writing as women "calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love" (893).

CONCLUSION

After Love

> 'Loving and being loved is always a good thing,' I said, smiling sadly. This was what everyone always talked about. Even if I and my story vanished without trace, other people's stories would continue, and the word 'love' would be present in all of them, and revolving around it would be endless dramas, both soul-stirring and bruising.
>
> —Wei Hui, *Shanghai Baby*
>
> "爱人和被人爱总是好的。"我对他笑了一笑，这一笑也许不免凄然。谈来谈去总是这样的话题，就算我和我故事同时销声匿迹了，别人的故事依旧在上演，充斥其中的字眼就是一个"爱"字，围绕它展开的是惊心动魄，伤筋动骨，林林总总，五花八门的场面。
>
> —卫慧, *上海宝贝*

Romantic love, for all intents and purposes, remains fallible and flawed through a century's worth of its varying iterations and permutations. Still, it is perhaps apt that Coco's (mis)adventures in love serve as both the closing chapter of this thesis and the end of the 20th century in China, irrevocably changed by its ever-evolving narratives of romantic love. Her melancholic resignation to love's enduring presence sums up this thesis' primary intention in demonstrating that love can be envisaged as an affective, continuous force throughout history, closely intertwined with changing sociopolitical orders and cultural paradigm shifts that determine women's experiences and positions in life. Love still goes on,

in ways good and bad—for all of Coco's trials and tribulations in *Shanghai Baby*, her twin pursuits of love and life march on into the new century in Wei Hui's sequel, *Marrying Buddha*, which was released in 2005 and sees an older Coco traversing new, transnational love affairs across different cities around the world. In this way, Coco kicks off a new generation of romantic love in the tradition of her literary predecessors, who began writing at the start of the 20th century under the aegis of the "New Woman." Both Coco and Wei Hui as women writers come to represent a renewed version of the "New Woman" at the century's end, reviving the original figure of the "New Woman" from the 1930s who has now "re-emerged in contemporary China as a force of social and cultural change…for challenging the boundaries of women's social roles" (Ferry 664). Though simply writing about women's experiences is not an inherently radical act that necessarily resists the patriarchal structures that define society, this version of the "New Woman" in the 1990s that emerges into the 21st century continues to disrupt social norms that persist with policing women's autonomy and sexuality, even as she is invoked as a romanticised icon of nostalgia for "the halcyon days of the 1930s… when China was closest to a Western modern ideal" (664-665).

This thesis has ultimately endeavoured to put forward romantic love as a methodology for critically reading and evaluating Chinese women's writing throughout the 20th century. In doing so, my interpretations locate the manifold possibilities for love to directly offer avenues for women to both assert their subjectivities, independent of their restrictive social mores and gender inequalities, as well as develop more expansive modes of living for themselves that extend beyond sociopolitical mandates that enforce strict regulations on women's individual freedoms and queerness. Chapter 1 began this undertaking through a comparative reading of three texts situated within the period of Republican China in order to first establish love's potential for facilitating breakthroughs in self-empowerment for women, even when the newness of "free love" for women was slippery and difficult to grasp or name, let alone come

to fruition. Chapter 2 grappled with the whiplash of rapidly changing moral codes that accompanied the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China and subsequently, the Cultural Revolution's legacy, and argued for romantic love as a cogent strategy for eluding and surviving harsh strictures imposed on women's purported agency in (queer) love. Finally, Chapter 3 attended to the turbulent vicissitudes of a globalising China towards the end of the 20th century and advanced the possibility of romantic love as a form of worldmaking that affords ontological security and continuity in the face of contradictory societal standards, compounded by vacillating foreign influences, and prolonged sociopolitical uncertainties, particularly in the context of women's writing on love. Altogether, this broad survey of Chinese women's writing on love across three sociopolitically significant flashpoints in 20th century China has demonstrated the viability of romantic love as a coherent and sustained line of inquiry—even throughout differing strands of Chinese women's writing—that evinces its enduring pertinence as an analytical and theoretical practice beyond assumptions of its trivialised sentimentality as a field of study.

This is, of course, not to suggest that romantic love can operate as a panacea-esque mode of literary inquiry that unfailingly gets to the heart of women's writing and their lived experiences. Inasmuch as unpacking women's experiences in love can illuminate recuperative and restorative readings of women's writing that foreground their agency and multifaceted subjectivities, uncritically equating the presence of romantic love to women's liberation remains an illusory and reductive premise. Romantic love has been and continues to be instrumentalised in service of political agendas and state narratives that disenfranchise women: just as love was co-opted into the discourse of revolution in the earlier half of the 20th century, love is similarly leveraged in contemporary times where "the manipulative orchestration of love is central to China's neoliberal and neocolonial agenda" (C.Y. Zhang 8). The possibility of love remains strictly policed for women, who are boxed into the state's

heteronormative and pronatalist conceptions of conjugal love that reify men's "unchallengeable superiority in heteronormative gender relationships" (144). Where the promise of "free love" at the onset of the 20th century was once envisioned as the freedom for women to marry for love, the survival of this idea throughout the bulk of the century seems to be just that—an ideal that never quite completed its full transition into praxis. For instance, the contemporary phenomenon of the "leftover woman" ("剩女") in China bespeaks the heightening pressure from both official state narratives and public discourses for women to settle into a heterosexual union as soon as possible, with the end goal of forming a nuclear family unit to bolster both social stability and workforce productivity (You and Nussey 1059). The term "leftover woman" was itself formalised and officially defined by the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Education in 2007 as meaning "highly successful unmarried women over the age of 27 with advanced degrees" (Feldshuh 39), which is to say that this stigma against unmarried women is ingrained within even the highest levels of state planning and social organisation. The figure of the "leftover woman" is therefore one that embodies the contradictory social forces at play within the alleged promise of increasing gender equality and freedom for women—forasmuch as women now have access to upwards social mobility and increased freedoms in life and love, any deviance from state-sanctioned delineations of their roles as mothers and wives in conjugal partnerships (Kam 78) brands them as undesirable "leftovers" that constitute problematic outliers in society.

Needless to say, if even the seemingly liberatory experience of heterosexual romantic love is subject to these numerous, narrowly defined parameters tied to cisheterosexual women's biological and reproductive capacities, queerness is all the more regulated and policed even as queer communities, organisations, and scholarship within China grows and flourishes. Queer Chinese women in particular are "still considered abnormal in the popular imagination," and the legibility and legitimacy of their existences are culturally dismissed

and socially penalised as "sexual deviants" from the heteronormative model (Kam 81). The lesbian experience is made even more isolating considering their significantly reduced public visibility within media representations and pop culture as compared to their gay men counterparts (Laurent 182). All of this, then, is to say that love's work is far from complete when China's contemporary public imagination of love remains entrenched in heteronormative paradigms that emphasise love for women as a means to a state-sanctioned end of (re)producing nuclear family units.

Even so, what this thesis has worked towards is the threading together of women's literary narratives on love in hopes of building upon and extending what Lee Haiyan has termed a "genealogy of love" in her extensive mapping of love's variegated transformations in the first half of 20th century China. As Lee puts it, "to write a genealogy of love is both to deny it essence, facticity, and universality, and to examine how discourses of sentiment produce precisely these effects and for what purposes" (299). In the case of this thesis, to spotlight women's writing on love is to systematically explicate how women's experiences of love are not unknowable phenomena relegated to the intangible realms of giddy, irrational sentiment, but rather, distinctly culturally and historically contingent enactments that can be connected in a legible, traceable genealogy. It bears remembering that "romantic love in China today has a history of only about eighty years to look back upon" (Pan 281), and that women's experiences of love continue to be diminished and dismissed even in contemporary times.

Nonetheless, the present moment in China is awash with an abundance of romantic love everywhere one can care to look, ranging from television dramas and reality television programmes to both print and web literature, even against the backdrop of growing online discourses surrounding women's disenchantment with the capitalist commodification of love and the gender inequalities that love can perpetuate (Zou et al. 763). Love evolves and

persists to keep pace with contemporary times, and it is this changeability and malleability that this thesis has begun to tackle with its demonstration of how women's experiences of love can be altogether read as a series of continuous and compounding developments within a shared genealogy. While this thesis remains limited in its historical scope, having attended only to select instances of women's writing in the 20th century, the future of this genealogy continues to inscribe itself in increasingly novel ways that invite further considerations and possibilities for love.

China's contemporary renditions of romantic love—especially those created by and for women—now see unprecedented traction as global, transnational cultural exports. The proliferation of Internet literature in the 21st century has facilitated the transnational *danmei* ("耽美"; lit. trans. "indulge in beauty") boom, revolving around a primary demographic of young, well-educated women who produce and consume Boys' Love narratives "because it provides a more egalitarian model of intimacy than heterosexual romance and facilitates women's exploration of queer sexual identities and desires" (Sun and Yang 13). Though the niche bears its fair share of controversies surrounding its queer subject matter and tendencies to reiterate gendered stereotypes, it is often conceived of "as a creative site where fans can manifest their ideal love" that directly goes against the state's heteropatriarchal mandates of love (C.Y. Zhang 158). That the women writers of these queer stories are heavily censored and persecuted by the state for "producing and distributing obscene material" (Ma and Yang; P. Zhang) only attests to *danmei*'s subversive potential as well as its potency as a contemporary avenue for women to reimagine their experiences of love. Even state-wide crackdowns on *danmei* cannot deny the global demand for its content—the Chinese government and its state media have accordingly homed in on elements of its transnational exports that effectively promote Chinese cultural power to a global audience (Ng and Li 626). In the same vein, albeit with lesser mainstream popularity, is women's production and

consumption of *baihe* (“百合”; lit. trans. “lily”), or Girls’ Love narratives, that similarly afford avenues for women to explore their queer desire for other women in fantastical and utopian settings where “female–female relationships are portrayed as transcending given realities rather than being frustrated by them” (Ni 74). Even heterosexual subgenres of Chinese Internet literature oriented towards a female readership bear clear imprints of women’s ongoing re-evaluation of their ideals in love, including the recent formulaic trope of “older women dating younger men” (“姐弟恋”) wherein accomplished and successful women can participate in romantic love without having their subjectivities diminished by uneven gender dynamics and norms that typically privilege pairings of older, dominant men with younger, submissive women (Lei 27-28). Beyond the auspices of print and web literary publishing also lies the advent of women-oriented digital media, especially in the form of romance simulation video games where women are at liberty to “(re-)imagine and (re-)negotiate ideal masculinities and gender relations” in their ideals of romantic love while pursuing fictitious relationships with a cast of male characters (E.Y. Liu 145). In turn, the enduring demand for spaces wherein women can continue reinscribing their experiences of love is evidenced by the explosive international popularity of these games—*Love and Deepspace* (*恋与深空*), a live-service romance simulation video game from the Chinese game developer Papergames, has generated record-breaking commercial success to the tune of $400 million in revenue since its global launch in 2024 (Low).

What is most evident now in the present moment, with a keen eye to the future, is the insistent continuity of women producing and consuming narratives pertaining to their experiences of romantic love, even as the shapes and forms that they take adapt to their contemporary moments and just as their literary predecessors in the 20th century wrote around their respective historical epochs. To attempt to contribute to a genealogy of love—even just confined to the scope of Chinese women’s writing on the matter—is to make an indefinite

commitment to advocating for the relevance of romantic love as a subject of serious inquiry in a time when genuine love seems to be becoming increasingly scarce even as it permeates nearly every aspect of Chinese culture (Sun and Yang 12). When women's ideals of love remain at odds with state and societal expectations of their stations in life, their pursuit of love through alternative avenues of literary consumption and production becomes a collective call to action for love to reclaim its telos of ontological affirmation, rooted in a sincere acknowledgement of their autonomy and subjectivity (Dillon 357). Even as this remains an uphill struggle in reality, that women continue to creatively reconfigure and reinvent how narratives of love can fulfil them outside of traditional heteropatriarchal bounds speaks to love's inexhaustible potential as a site for women to envision more equitable and fulfilling modes of living and futures. Perhaps romantic love for women might truly only be genuine and possible "with the relative liberation of women from traditional subservient and economic roles" (Solomon 14), or that our collective imagination of romantic love must extend even beyond existing institutions and practices of love. For as long as romantic love lingers within our shared cultural affect, the genealogy of love carries on with weaving together past, present, and future threads of women's reckonings with their desires and longings in love. Love's work, then, is in this endless reaching for a more bearable way to live.

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