

# Free Love : Gender Politics of Romance in the Chinese Revolution

## รักเสรี : การเมืองเพศภาวะของโรมานซ์ ในการปฏิวัติจีน

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้วิเคราะห์เชิงเปรียบเทียบประวัติชีวิต ประสบการณ์ และมุมมองเกี่ยวกับ “ความรักเสรี” (free love) ของนักเขียนหญิงที่มีชื่อเสียง บทบาท และอิทธิพลสูงสุดในวงวรรณกรรมจีนสมัยใหม่ 2 ท่าน คือ ดิงหลิง (จาง ปิ่งจื่อ) และ ไอลีน ซาง (จาง อ้ายหลิง) แม้จะดูเหมือนว่านักเขียนทั้งสองมีจุดยืนอยู่คนละฟากฝั่งมโนทัศน์ในยุคสงครามเย็น และผลงานสำคัญๆ ของทั้งสองจะได้รับการตีพิมพ์ในระยะเวลาที่ห่างกันถึงกว่าทศวรรษ แต่ประวัติชีวิต ประสบการณ์ และมุมมองที่มีต่อ “ความรักเสรี” ซึ่งนำเสนอผ่านผลงานวรรณกรรมของท่านทั้งสองนั้นกลับคล้ายคลึงและเห็นพ้องต้องกันเป็นอย่างยิ่ง ทั้งสองท่านมอง “ความรักเสรี” เป็นหนทางสู่อัตนियาม (Self-identification) และการปลดแอกทางสังคม อย่างไรก็ตาม นักเขียนทั้งสองท่านก็ถูกกระแสวิพากษ์วิจารณ์ในทศวรรษอันเขียวครากของยุคสมัยนั้น (ดิงหลิง เข้าไปมีส่วนร่วมในการปฏิวัติคอมมิวนิสต์จีน ในขณะที่ ไอลีน ซาง ต้องไปทำงานให้รัฐบาลสหรัฐอเมริกาในยุคสงครามเย็น) บีบบังคับให้ต้องละทิ้งแนวทางแห่ง “ความรักเสรี” ซึ่งเป็นโครงเรื่องหลักในผลงานชิ้นเอกของทั้งสองท่านในยุคแรกๆ “ความ

รักเสรี” ถูกประเมินว่ามีความสำคัญน้อยกว่าการปฏิวัติของฝ่ายคอมมิวนิสต์ในประเทศจีนและไม่ยิ่งใหญ่เท่ากับการต่อสู้เพื่ออำรงรักษาไว้ซึ่งเสรีภาพของสหรัฐอเมริกาในยุคสงครามเย็น บัดนี้ เมื่อสงครามเย็นได้กลายเป็นอดีตไปแล้วและยุคสมัยแห่งโลกาภิวัตน์น่าจะมีบรรยากาศที่เปิดกว้างให้เราได้ศึกษาผลงานชิ้นเอกของนักเขียนทั้งสองท่านนี้ตามแนวทางแห่ง “ความรักเสรี” ซึ่งเป็นโครงเรื่องหลักสำคัญโดยแท้จริงแทนที่จะถูกจำกัดไว้ในกรอบมโนทัศน์ทางการเมืองที่คับแคบดังเช่นที่เคยเป็นมาในยุคสงครามเย็น

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## Abstract

This study compares and contrasts the life, experience, and perceptions toward the concept of 'free love' of two prominent female authors of modern China—Ding Ling (Jiang Bingzhi) and Aileen Chang (Zhang Ailing). Even though these two authors appeared to be on opposite sides of the ideological divide of the Cold War and their masterpieces were first published more than a decade apart, their life, experience, and perceptions towards 'free love' as presented in their literary works are actually quite similar and complimentary. Both perceived 'free love' as a path to self-identification and social liberation. Nonetheless, both were forced by the momentous tides of ideological struggles of their time—Ding Ling by the Communist Revolution in China and Aileen Chang by the Cold War—to abandon this theme that was so central in their earlier masterpieces. 'Free love' was deemed less important than the revolution for Communist China and not nearly as important as the preservation of liberty for the US throughout the Cold War years. Now that the Cold War has become a thing of the past, the age of Globalization could provide a broader and more tolerant atmosphere to study these brilliant female authors and their masterpieces for the themes that truly define them instead of the rigid ideological stances that they were forced to take during their time.

**Keywords:** Free love, ideology, revolution, War of Resistance, feminism, Confucianism

## Introduction

*It's certainly fortunate that in this universe, my life is my own plaything.*

*(Miss Sophia's Diary, Ding Ling)*

In 1927, when the above statement was first published in its original Chinese form, it was truly revolutionary. In Confucian China, the notion that one's life belonged to oneself was in fact the opposite of accepted social norms. As a philosophy that emphasizes harmony in human relations, Confucianism credits the family unit with paramount importance. Consequently, every person owes his/her life to his/her biological parents. One was expected to take good care of one's body and make the most of one's life not for the sake of one's own personal happiness but as a gesture of filial piety, which was, of course, one of the most highly valued virtues of this ancient school of thought. That one would even contemplate treating one's life as one's own would already be considered as quite revolutionary in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. That a woman would not only claim her life to be her own, but treat it as a "plaything" was almost sacrilegious.

Free love was never a popular notion in China prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marriage in pre-modern China was a social contract. It was the most crucial tool in merging families, building strong and reliable social alliances through kinship relations. Most importantly, marriage presupposed reproduction, births of male heirs to preserve the family name and perform ancestral sacrifices as well as female offspring who

would be offered as wives, concubines, and daughters-in-law of other families in the unending process of expanding the family's kinship connections. A successful marriage meant a successful expansion of the family as well as a renewed assurance of the family name's survival through the younger generations. Consequently, what would be deemed a successful marriage often depended more on the harmonious relationship between the bride and the mother-in-law than the romantic attractions between husband and wife.<sup>1</sup> Hence, arranged marriages had long been the sanctified means of sustaining the family unit in Confucian China.

Yet, with the rise of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement,<sup>2</sup> free love nearly became a national agenda. Along with the outburst of other socio-cultural and political ideas—science, democracy, anarchism, socialism, vernacular literature, and mass art—the May 4<sup>th</sup> generation also experimented with love and relationships. Confucian values were blamed for China's backwardness as well as the young Republic's inability to adapt and meet the new challenges of the modern world. Likewise, Confucian family traditions were branded as oppressive and misogynist. Revolutionary youngsters rebelled against their parents' demand for arranged marriages while university students and young professionals cohabited freely with their lovers. Various May 4<sup>th</sup> icons—the author Lu Xun being the most notable example—lived the lifestyle they preached, abandoning their family-arranged marriages and establishing their own common-law relationships. Ding Ling herself was no exception. The spirit of self-determination was the trend of that era.

Many young women of urban China of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century embraced the notion of free love as a way to liberate themselves from the oppressive Confucian family. Opposing the notion of marriage, free love allowed women to stake a claim over their own bodies. No longer needing to belong to a husband or live according to the whims of their male relatives, the Chinese modern girl could become financially independent through the growing textile industry or pursue a career in education and literary circles. Many became heavily involved in politics, devoting themselves to various forms of activism. The notion that Chinese women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century need not be tied down by Confucian norms of being a dedicated mother or virtuous wife allowed them to search for and discover a voice of their own in the fast-changing Chinese society of the modern era. Consequently, post-May 4<sup>th</sup> China experienced a significant rise of female literacy and the sharp increase in the number of female authors made an important contribution to the first golden age of modern Chinese literature that followed the époque-making events of May 4<sup>th</sup> 1919.<sup>3</sup> Of all female literary stars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century China constellation, the names of Ding Ling (née Jiang Bingzhi, 蒋冰之) and Eileen Chang (ch. Zhang Ailing, 张爱玲) undoubtedly appear among the best and brightest of that era. Both are highly celebrated authors who put the subject of female sexuality and womanhood in the fast-changing socio-political context of modern China as the central theme of their works. Both produced their masterpieces in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and based in highly unstable urban context. Considering all these parallels, the two may seem like the perfect couple for comparison in a study of female authors of early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. Nonetheless, very little has

been done in terms of comparison between these two leading figures in modern Chinese literature.

Indeed there are also quite a few obvious reasons why Ding Ling and Eileen Chang would not appear to belong in the same comparative category. Firstly, and probably the most notable of all is the drastic difference in their political ideology. While Ding Ling spent most of her adult life supporting the Chinese Communist Party, Eileen Chang—who left the Mainland shortly after the People’s Republic was established—devoted much of her time writing anti-Communist pieces both in Chinese and English. Secondly, also quite significant is their age differences. Ding Ling was among the youth of the May 4<sup>th</sup> era. Born during the final decade of Qing rule, her masterpiece, *Miss Sophia’s Diary* (莎菲女士的日记), which was published in 1927, was among the brightest literary gems of the May 4<sup>th</sup> tradition. Eileen Chang, on the other hand, was born a year after the May 4<sup>th</sup> Incident and remain relatively unknown in the Chinese literary world until the early 1940s when she was suddenly shot to stardom with the publication of her own masterpieces, *Love in a Fallen City* (倾城之恋) and *The Golden Cangue* (金锁记). While Ding Ling was a budding teenager at the time of the May 4<sup>th</sup> demonstrations, Eileen Chang came of age during the war years.<sup>4</sup> Hence, at first glance, it would appear that the two belonged, not only in opposing ideological camps, their masterpieces produced under dissimilar socio-political contexts, and belonged to different temporal eras altogether.

Yet once one takes a closer look at the lives and works of these two extraordinary authors, it would become evident that the very differences between them are the very aspects that accentuates the

amazing similarities in their perspectives on life, especially in the areas of romance, sexuality, womanhood, as well as the notion of free love itself. Coming from total opposite ideological background and coming of age in consecutive eras in the turbulent history of modern China, Ding Ling and Eileen Chang delightfully experienced the same spark of hope in the possibility of liberation for Chinese women in the modern era. Subsequently, they both suffered the same painful disappointment with the failure of their respective political ideology in truly liberating women from their oppressed position in Chinese society. Finally, they were, in some aspects, both defeated by the overwhelming political current of the Cold War. Both were coerced by greater political forces to put aside the issues of sexuality and womanhood, from which their masterpieces were derived, in order to write propaganda pieces whose strong ideological aspects too often overshadowed their literary talent.

### **The parallel lives of Ding Ling and Eileen Chang**

Considering the great similarities in their childhood experience and early family life, Ding Ling and Eileen Chang could have been sisters. They were both born into declining gentry families with relatively well-educated fathers who squandered family savings by living beyond their means and becoming addicted to opium. Ding Ling was slightly more fortunate due to her father's early death, which allowed her to be brought up solely by her forward-minded mother. Eileen Chang, on the other hand, suffered through her parents' divorce when she was 8, and had to endure her father's physical and psychological abuse until she finally ran away from home to join her mother some 10 years later. Nonetheless,

both women were heavily influenced by their extraordinarily progressive and well-educated mothers. Yu Manzhen, Ding Ling's mother was among the earliest graduates from Changde Women's Normal Academy and made a career as a leading educator in many new-style schools<sup>5</sup> in Hunan Province. Eileen Chang's mother had the rare opportunity of traveling to and residing in Europe for many years. She was particularly daring and independent—a true icon of the ideal 'new woman' of China in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang educated well in the progressive/western style of schooling from a very young age.

Urged on by the excitement of the May 4<sup>th</sup> demonstrations, Ding Ling left her home province to join the anarchist movement in Shanghai when she was barely 16. She became heavily involved in the left-wing literary circles and worked as editor of many well known progressive publications. The socio-political context of Eileen Chang's adolescent years was no less turbulent, yet, there was probably enough excitement in Shanghai, which happened to be her hometown, that Chang remained with her mother until she won a scholarship to at the University of London at the age of 19. However, the outbreak of the War of Resistance preventing her from traveling to Europe and Eileen Chang ended up studying English literature at the University of Hong Kong instead. However, she had to return to Shanghai when Japanese troops captured Hong Kong in 1941. Chang attempted to finish her degree at the University of Shanghai, but had to quit due to lack of funding. Despite the fact that their lives were lived in totally different temporal contexts, it is quite intriguing that both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang—despite having flirted with the literary profession from their adolescent years—did not take up

writing as their career until both were in their early 20s. More interestingly, both female authors achieved stardom from their earliest publications. For Ding Ling, it was the publication of *Miss Sophia's Diary* in 1927. For Eileen Chang, it was the publication of *The Golden Cangue* and *Love in a Fallen City* in 1943-44.

### **Free love as social liberation**

That both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang's masterpieces were written when both authors were in their 20s could be taken as a reflection in another significantly similar aspect in their lives. Both entered into their first seriously committed romantic relationship in the period close to the production of their early masterpieces. Ding Ling became the common law wife of impoverished proletarian poet Hu Yepin in the mid-1920s while Eileen Chang married the highly influential writer/editor and Japanese collaborator, Hu Lancheng, in a secret ceremony in 1944. Ideologically speaking, the two women's choice of men could not be more opposite. Yet, the nature of their romance reflects their similar perspective concerning the notion of free love. That is, both relationships were very irregular considering the prevailing cultural values and social norms of China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ding Ling cohabited with Hu Yepin and his best friend Shen Congwen, a highly provocative arrangement that was interpreted by most onlookers to be an outrageous ménage à trios.<sup>7</sup> As for Chang, when she married Hu, he was still married to his 3<sup>rd</sup> wife—making her, logically, his 4<sup>th</sup> wife. Interestingly, the fact that he was a married man was not the reason why their wedding was carried out in secret with only 2 friends as witnesses since that was apparently not

nearly as outrageous as the fact that Hu Lancheng was a Japanese sympathizer and served in the puppet government in Nanjing.

For both authors free love was in itself a path to liberation from the rigid confinements of traditional/Confucian social norms of Chinese society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a reoccurring theme in the early masterpieces of Ding Ling and Eileen Chang. Ding Ling mockingly criticized the traditional Chinese/Confucian notion of love and family life in Sophia's disdainful summery of the Singaporean overseas Chinese, Ling Jishi, the object of her affection in *Miss Sophia's Diary*,

*Our most recent conversations have taught me a lot about his really stupid ideas. All he wants is money. Money. A young wife to entertain his business associates in the living room, and several fat, fair-skinned, well-dressed little sons. What does love mean to him? Nothing more than spending money in a brothel, squandering it on a moment of carnal pleasure, or sitting on a soft sofa fondling scented flesh, a cigarette between his lips, his legs crossed casually, laughing and talking with his friends. When it's not fun anymore, never mind; he just runs home to his little wifey.<sup>8</sup>*

Here Ding Ling described the harsh reality of the social values involved in convention marriages in modern China where the purpose of having a wife is to have someone to keep the house cozy and clean, to care for the children (preferably, sons), and to faithfully wait for her husband's return from his joyful outings at the brothels. Eileen Chang expressed her dissatisfaction with the accepted norms of marriages in China even more harshly when she suggested through the conclusion

of one character in *Love in a Fallen City* that Chinese people tend to think that “marriage is long-term prostitution.”<sup>9</sup> It would appear that both authors, despite the time difference between the production of their masterpieces, were in agreement that there was nothing in terms of love, dignity, and emotional fulfillment for women in Chinese marriages. Though proper marriages were usually considered a reliable source of financial stability for women in early modern China, both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang clearly expressed in many of their stories that the traditional Chinese marriage does not in the least equate a give-away retirement fund. On the contrary, it is hard-earned money acquired through years and decades of slaving away with household chores, child rearing, as well as enduring all sorts of physical and emotional abuses from the husband and the in-laws.

Chang even expressed this idea in the name of another one of her masterpieces, *The Golden Cangue*. A ‘cangue’ is an instrument used to restrain a criminal while public humiliation and corporal punishment is being administered. It is known to be commonly employed in judicial procedures throughout pre-modern East Asia. In *The Golden Cangue*, Eileen Chang tells the story of a woman who sacrificed her entire life for the sake of financial stability by entering into a marriage with a crippled son of a wealthy gentry family. For decades she slaved away caring for her sickly husband while suffering constant torture and humiliation from her in-laws. Not surprisingly, towards the autumn of her life, by outliving her husband and all his relatives, she gained control of much of the family estate. Yet, none of this came at a low price, she basically went crazy due to suffering so many years of abuse and spent the autumn

of her life continuing the torture and humiliation upon her daughter and daughter-in-law.

Not unlike decisions made in life, both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang depicted unconventional romantic relationships based on free love in their literary works as an important path that could lead to social liberation of modern Chinese women. Sophia, the eccentric female protagonist of Ding Ling's *Miss Sophia's Diary*, is a prime example of a woman who refuses to be pressured into wearing the *golden cage* or engage in what Eileen Chang considered to be 'long-term prostitution.'" Although, according to the story, she is sick with tuberculosis and is often depressed by the state of her sickness, but the author managed to make a very clear contrast between Sophia and everyone else in the sense that she appeared to be the most liberated among all the characters in the entire narrative. In a way Sophia's feeble body and tormented mind actually helps accentuate the liberated position. Unlike most Chinese women of her time, Sophia is the master of her own life. Even though that life is sickly and at times rather depressing, but her own free will that allows her to love whoever she pleases and to enter into or get out of relationship whenever she sees fit, is celebrated as a great blessing. The protagonist states this aspect of the storyline herself as she approaches the conclusion of the narrative, "It's certainly fortunate that in this universe, my life is my own plaything."<sup>10</sup> In a way, Sophia's liberated attitude towards her life reflects Ding Ling's own attitude towards love, relationship, and marriage. When her relatives in Hunan arranged for her to marry one of her cousins, Ding Ling adamantly refused on the grounds that she owned her own body.<sup>11</sup>

There are no shortages of happy examples of free love in Eileen Chang's narratives. In fact, there appears to be more happy endings to unconventional romance based on free love than to those socially accepted ones. In *Love in a Fallen City*, the female protagonist liberated herself from an abusive marriage through divorce then escaped daily torture and humiliation from the highly conservative family members of her own family by allowing herself to run away with her lover and cohabit with him in 'the fallen city' of Hong Kong.<sup>12</sup> In *Shut Down* (封锁), the female protagonist contemplated running off with a married man as a way to free herself from the pressures and expectations of her family,

*Her family—all of them holier-than-thou—she hated them!  
She had been living their lies too long. They wanted her to  
find them a rich son-in-law. Zongzhen had no money, but  
did have a wife—that would rile them! Serve them right!*<sup>13</sup>

Not unlike Ding Ling, Eileen Chang was fond of juxtaposing the rigid and oppressing environment within traditional Chinese marriages with the sense of liberation that comes with the kind of love that is outside of the confinements of marriage and family life. Her 1947 story, *Great Felicity* (鸿鸾喜), Chang expands on the various torturing aspects of preparing for a proper wedding in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. It provides a vivid description of subtle power struggle and veiled hostility between the bride-to-be and the groom's family. Even though the bride seemed to have succeeded partly in getting her way in most of the wedding preparations, there is a not-so-subtle hint that what little leverage she had prior to the wedding day would vanish nearly completely once she completes all ceremonial procedures and truly becomes a member of

the groom's family. Regardless of how modern/western the wedding ceremony appeared to be, in reality most urban upper-class Chinese families of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to position the childless daughter-in-law at the very bottom of the chain of command. Hence, the newly wedded female protagonist of *Great Felicity* would probably have to put up with her in-laws' small tortures for quite a few more years, or at least until she manages to produce a male heir for her husband's lineage.

### **Free love as self-identification**

In the lives and works of both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang, there seems to be an aspect of free love that is even more powerful and effects their individuality far beyond the liberating qualities mentioned above. That is, aside from serving as a path to liberation from the rigid and oppressive Confucian family structure, free love is, for both authors, a way of realizing one's true identity—one's individuality, not just as a woman but as a person. This quality of free love is, in a way, a consequence from its liberating qualities described in the earlier section. Because free love exists outside of the conventional/orthodox Confucian family structure, it allows women to construct identities that are not limited to their status and role within the family system. Through free love, women could become more than wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, and nieces. Aside from regaining control of their own bodies, they could also regain their identity and individuality that could surpass the confinements of the family structure or even socially accepted sexuality. Free love allows each woman to be what she really is independently—one

need not have a husband in order to have a name and a woman could be a woman even if she is not sexually engaged with a man. By regaining her identity and individuality, a woman regains, not only the power of self-determination, but also the power to influence interactions and relationships within the socio-political context in which she is involved.

This aspect of free love as self-identification is most strongly expressed in two of Ding Ling's earliest masterpieces, *Miss Sophia's Diary* and *A Woman and a Man*. The female protagonists in both stories establish their most distinguish identity outside of the conventional family structure. In *Miss Sophia's Diary*, Sophia's character is distinctively disconnected with any family system in which she could possibly be involved. In the college environment, which serves as the main setting for the entire story, Sophia is surrounded by friends and acquaintances, none of whom are part of her biological family. Moreover, she constantly resists becoming involved in seriously committed romantic relationships that could possibly result in conventional marriage and family life. Consequently, Sophia is able of establish an identity for herself, independent of traditional male-dominant family values. Having successfully established this independent identity, Sophia is therefore capable of exerting her influence upon the socio-political context in which she is involved. In most cases, she is not only respected and treated by her male acquaintances as their equal; Sophia also often plays the dominant role in her interactions with men. She constantly calls her closest male friend "Wei-di," which literally means "younger brother Wei," even though he is several years older than her. In her flirtatious interactions with the Singaporean overseas Chinese student, Ling Jishi, Sophia also takes on

the role of the seductress and treated Ling as a sex object—a role that men tend to assume in conventional Chinese romances.<sup>14</sup>

In *A Woman and a Man*, Ding Ling portrayed the female protagonist, Wendy, as highly independent and forward-looking—the archetypal modern girl of China. The story seems to be the flipside happy-ending version of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.<sup>15</sup> Wendy is happily married to a husband who is the love of her life. They both are from respectable family background and lead a comfortably wealthy life. Yet, Wendy feels that there must be more to her life and playing the obedient housewife and enduring the painfully repetitive lifestyle that comes with conventional Chinese marriage. Though she swears undying love and loyalty for her husband, Wendy constantly gets herself involved in extramarital affairs with different male characters she finds especially interesting. These affairs do not affect her identity her relationship with her husband. At the same time, her relationship and her devotion to her husband does not change the true self of Wendy. She has absolute control over herself, her body, her identity and individuality. She loves her husband and yet she remains as much of an individual as she would have been without a husband or a family to belong to.<sup>16</sup> She exercises free love in her affairs with various men but never allows herself to be possessed by them. They are all her lovers, but she would be a mistress of no man. Wendy remains her own master despite having a devoted husband and having been involved in countless affairs. Finally, as an ultimate refusal to Flaubert's regrettable ending of *Madame Bovary*, Ding Ling allowed Wendy to live happily ever after both in her happily married life and in her loose-woman/salome-type lifestyle.

Eileen Chang's works are also not lacking of independent female protagonists who learn to establish their identity and regain their individuality through the notion of free love. In *Shut Down*, the female protagonist, school teacher Wu Cuiyuan, mockingly questioned and criticized, not only Chinese women, but Chinese people in general who allow themselves to be swept away by the prevailing social values and fashionable conventions. Once one started following all that was good and admirable according to social norms, ignoring and neglecting one's true nature and desires, one ultimately loses all trace of one's identity and individuality,

*She was a good daughter, a good student. The people in her family were good people. They bathed every day, they read the newspaper and when they listened to the radio, it wasn't to Shanghai songs or comic Peking operas or things like that, but to the symphonies of Beethoven and Wagner. They did not understand them, but they listened anyway. Good people outnumbered real people in this world...Life was like reading the Bible. It was translated from Hebrew to Greek, Greek to Latin, Latin to English, and English to Mandarin. When Cuiyuan read the Bible, she had to translate it once more in her head, into Shanghainese. Something was sure to be lost in the translation.<sup>17</sup>*

Hence, during the small slice of life that took place in a tram during the shut down,<sup>18</sup> Cuiyuan allowed herself to love freely—to fall in love with the married man who came to sit next to her in the tram, to listen to him and empathize with him, to break free from all social constraints that prevented her from being herself,

*They began to fall in love. He told her many things about himself: his work at the bank, who was friendly with him, who hated him behind his back, the quarrels at home, his secret sorrows, the aspirations of his student days...his words flowed on and on. But she did not mind. A man in love likes to talk. A woman in love, unlike her usual self, does not talk much. This is because, subconsciously, she knows that a man won't love her any more if he understands her too well.<sup>19</sup>*

There is a bitter-sweet and charmingly uncomplicated ending to this public transportation love story. Almost as soon as Cuiyuan and her fellow commuter, Lü Zongzhen, had fallen in love with each other, the shut down was over, the tram began to move forward again, and life went on,

*A wave of cheers rippled through the vast city. The tram moved forward, bell ringing. Zongzhen suddenly stood up, pushed into the crowd and disappeared. Cuiyuan turned her head away and pretended not to care. He was gone. For her it was as if he had died.<sup>20</sup>*

There is no need to complicate things, to get into the legal headache of divorce, or to commit oneself as a concubine in the midst of all the uncertainty and instability of the moment. Love in itself, no matter how fleeting, is sweet and beautiful. This love affair, in the small slice of life that took place during the shut down, allowed Cuiyuan to express herself, to establish her own identity, and take full control of her life, albeit just for a swift moment. She did not have to be the good

daughter of the good family she so despised, nor did she have to live to fulfill their aspirations by being meek and timid and forever on the lookout for a wealthy husband. She could just be herself, converse with whoever she pleases, and say whatever her heart desires. After reading this beautifully brief yet wonderfully profound love story, one could not help but to wonder how amazing life would be if only each and very moment that string together to make a whole lifetime could be as beautiful and profound as this special moment in Eileen Chang's *Shut Down*.

### **After the fleeting moment of sweetness comes the authors' disillusion**

If only life could let love be and politics could be confined to the realm of politicians, perhaps the two female protagonists of this paper, Ding Ling and Eileen Chang, could go on for the rest of their lives happily engaging in and writing about free love. Unfortunately, both were affected rather violently by the politics of their time not long after producing their masterpieces. In 1931, Ding Ling's common law husband, the proletarian poet and communist activist, Hu Yepin, was arrested and executed by the Kuomintang government. The spirit of free love could inspire many things, but it appeared to be hopeless in the midst of the government's brutal suppression of all forms of political dissent. Ding Ling became an official member of the Chinese Communist Party in 1932 and pretty much from then on, the issue of free love, feminism, and sexuality was pushed to the backburner. Ding Ling came to write with a clear communist agenda. Class struggle became the paramount concern and the root of all socio-political ills in the world. From then on she went on to achieve

great success as a communist writer, including the most prestigious Stalin Prize for *The Sun Shines over the Sangan River* (太阳照在桑干河上),<sup>21</sup> yet nothing as intense and profound as *Miss Sophia's Diary* was ever published again for the rest of her life.<sup>22</sup> Eileen Chang, on the other hand, attracted the attention of editor/writer Hu Lancheng with the slice-of-life romance she portrayed in *Shut Down*. They were married in 1944, less than a year after *Shut Down* was published. It was a tumultuous union, brief but not nearly as harmonious as the fleeting romance in *Shut Down*. Aside from that fact that Hu was still married to his third wife when he secretly wedded Chang and continued to have multiple affairs there after, he also collaborated with Japanese invaders and served in puppet government in Nanjing during the war. Consequently, he was branded a traitor when the war ended with Japan's defeat. Amidst mounting political pressure as well as personal conflict, the couple divorced in 1947. Hu then fled to Japan and spent most of the rest of his life there as a political exile. After the divorce, Chang found it increasingly difficult to live in her beloved city of Shanghai. Circumstances worsen during the civil war and became unbearable when the Communists took over in 1949. Having been defeated in love, she was again defeated by politics and felt she had no choice but to abandon the hometown she so cherished and the place where so many of her finest works had been produced in. Eileen Chang left Shanghai and moved to Hong Kong in 1952. There she found employment with the United States Information Service (USIS). In an ironic turn of fate, Chang ended up as a writer of Cold War propaganda fiction, like Ding Ling, but only for the opposite side of the battlefield.<sup>23</sup>

That is the tragic tale of free love in modern Chinese literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As powerful and liberating as it might have been, it seemed to have been defeated by the violence of war, the harshness of political ideology, and the weakness of the human spirit. Yet the spirit of free love lives on today in the undying works of both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang. Now that Communist China has fully embraced the market economy with its 'special characteristics' and its WTO membership and there seems to be no sufficient amount of Cold War left to feed the production of USA/free world propaganda, the time may have come that our generation could enjoy the works of these two amazing authors together without the ideological divide and free love could finally be the main focus of our discussions so that it could, at long last, serve to liberate and empower us all as it had, albeit for a fleeting moment, so liberated and empowered both Ding Ling and Eileen Chang in their writings more than half a century ago.

## Endnote

- 1 Wolf, Margery. 1972. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 2 The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement (五四运动) was an anti-imperialist/nationalist movement led by students and intellectuals. It took rise from a massive student demonstration at Tian An Men (天安门) on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1919. The demonstration was in protest of the outcome of the Versailles Treaty, which granted German concessions in China to Japan instead of returning them to China at the conclusion of the First World War. The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement challenged many traditional values—especially Confucianism—and called for mass cultural and political reforms through various modern/western notions—most noted among them, science and democracy. The movement has also been credited as a significant foundation for the later establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 (see, Mitter, Rana. 2004. *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 3 Stevens, Sarah E. 2003 “Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China,” *NWSA Journal* vol.15, no.3
- 4 The War of Resistance (抗日战争, 1937-1945), which later became part of the Second World War in the Asia Pacific region.
- 5 This refers to schools that teach modern/western curriculum, including geography, mathematics, and world history, as opposed to traditional Chinese schools that tend to teach only knowledge from Confucian classics (see, Barlow, Tani E. 1989. *I Myself Am a Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 18-19).
- 6 Kingsbury, Karen S. 2007. *Love in a Fallen City and Other Stories*. London: Penguin Books, x.
- 7 Barlow, Tani E. 1989. *I Myself Am a Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 24.

- 8 Ibid. 68.
- 9 Kingsbury, Karen S. 2007. *Love in a Fallen City and Other Stories*. London: Penguin Books, 149.
- 10 Ibid. 80.
- 11 Barlow, Tani E. 1989. *I Myself Am a Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 22.
- 12 The story included events of Japanese troops capturing Hong Kong and the numerous air-raids in that same area during the later stages of the Second World War.
- 13 Hung, Eva ed. 2000. *Traces of Love and Other Stories*. Hong Kong: Renditions, 34.
- 14 Liu, Lydia H. 2002 "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature" in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom ed., *Chinese Femininity, Chinese Masculinity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 15 Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was one of Ding Ling's most favorite novels. According to Shen Congwen, a close friend and confidant, she read this masterpiece at least a dozen times (see, Barlow, Tani E. 1989. *I Myself Am a Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 27). Flaubert's influence upon Ding Ling's early works is quite profound and at times rather obvious. For example, when reading the rickshaw scene in *A Woman and a Man* where Wendy ride away with Ouwai Ou during their first secret meeting, one could not help being reminded of Emma Bovary's eventful ride with Léon Dupuis in the famous carriage scene in *Madame Bovary*.
- 16 This is clearly signaled by the fact that she is always referred to by her modern/western name, Wendy, without a family name, neither her husband's nor her father's.

- 17 Hung, Eva. ed. 2000. *Traces of Love and Other Stories*. Hong Kong: Renditions, 26-27.
- 18 This refers to the frequent air-raids of Shanghai during the Second World War.
- 19 Hung, Eva ed. 2000. *Traces of Love and Other Stories*. Hong Kong: Renditions, 33.
- 20 Ibid. 36.
- 21 First published in 1948, this piece became the first Chinese novel to win the Stalin Prize in 1951.
- 22 In fact these earlier works would come back to haunt her through the many purges she endured throughout her life as a member of the Chinese Communist Party. During the Cultural Revolution *Miss Sophia's Diary* was deemed bourgeois literature and attacked for what the Red Guards claimed to be a lack of class consciousness. Ding Ling was among the few leading authors who survived the brutal purge of that era.
- 23 In the mid-1950s Chang emigrated to the US, remarried, and found employment as writer in residence and researcher in various universities. There was a revival of her old works in Hong Kong and Taiwan during the 1970s, which later spread to the Mainland as well. Yet, Eileen Chang spent most of her later life as a recluse. In 1999, she died alone in her Los Angeles apartment where her body was not discovered until several days later (see, Kingsbury, Karen S. 2007. *Love in a Fallen City and Other Stories*. London: Penguin Books).

## References

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