The Pursuit of Free Love in the Post May Fourth Era:
Analysis of Eight Works by Chinese Women Writers of the Period

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis presents connections found between the works of a number of Chinese women authors during the period stretching from the May Fourth movement, in 1919, to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Through my analysis of these works I hope to bring light to collective impressions of a vibrant group of women intellectuals of the time, who were committed to bettering Chinese women’s situations, but foresaw many obstacles. It is important to note that these obstacles, while reflective of other feminist concerns around the world, were uniquely Chinese, and were influenced by the state of affairs during the extremely transitional historical period in which the works were written as well as Chinese culture and literature stretching back to Confucius. The characters created by these authors face similar problems due to their shared identity as modern Chinese women.

The topics of the eight works I will discuss in this thesis revolve around the idea of free love, which grew in popularity following the May Fourth movement in 1919. Romantic love can often be feminized and therefore diminished in terms of academic discussion, but for Chinese women at the beginning of the twentieth century, engaging in romantic love was a radical expression of freedom. Prior to this time for a woman to choose her own partner was unthinkable. However with the rise of women’s rights and education, more and more daughters were beginning to rebel against their parents in favor of a love match. This was the rise of free love, an
idea that began to represent both women’s freedom of choice and the rejection of tradition (i.e. modernity).

In the works of these women writers are highly serious considerations of the future of women who choose to pursue free love. These authors themselves were in a position to make this choice and usually did. These women were rebelling against the norms of their day by pursuing their own education, careers, and romantic relationships, and began to wonder if a so-called “free” love relationship between a Chinese man and woman could ever exist. These women explore the inherent problems to be found on the path to an equal relationship between Chinese men and women and sometimes offer their own solutions.

Following this introduction I will offer an explanation of the important historical, political and literary events that give context to these works in order to engage solely in a literary evaluation of the works themselves and their common themes in the following chapters. I will look at the position of women in the late Qing dynasty, and at the reform movement during that time with regard to its effects on women’s liberation. I then aim to explore the May Fourth movement of 1919 and the resulting deluge of literary works that emerged, and to identify the Chinese intellectual. I will also place the women authors that emerged during this time into context by exploring their shared backgrounds.

Following this I will begin my literary analysis, beginning with the works *Separation* (根绝) by Feng Yuanjun (冯沅君) and *Fish* (鱼) by Mei Niang (梅娘), two works that explicitly warn of the dangers of raising up the idea of free love. They explore the mentalities of two women who betray their parents’ values by choosing...
their own lover. This portrays free love as a dangerous and idealistic fantasy that is irresistible to these women and is doomed to fail not just because of the actions of the men, but because of the ingrained mentality of the women as well. In my analysis of these works, I will not only explore how free love is represented by these authors, but will also identify the aspects of these characters that conform to a shared identity as Chinese women and show how this role constricts their ability to participate freely in romantic relationships, therefore proving obstacle to their pursuit of free love. The women in these works share a fantasy of free love, and the protagonist of Separation takes this fantasy to an extreme, revealing the expectations of many women who pursue these relationships, whereas Fish explores a possible aftermath of such a relationship, with the self-awareness of a woman who has woken up from the fantasy. Together these works paint a picture of free love as an unreasonable expectation for Chinese women.

I will then explore the seemingly insurmountable barriers of motherhood and wifehood to equal relationships between men and women. These identities, specific to Chinese women, prevented the existence of woman as an individual in the minds of Chinese women at that time. I will analyze both Woman (妻) by Shen Ying (沈櫻), and After Victory (胜利以后) by Lu Yin (廬隱). The Chinese roles of wife and mother are specific, gendered roles by which women are expected to conform, both by society and by the women themselves. In Woman a woman fears the destruction of her own character when she becomes pregnant, revealing an expectation of biological responsibility to conform to the role of mother. The characterization of this woman reveals the pervasiveness of the woman gender role in China as not only
a set of stereotypes, but as an identity. *After Victory* further emphasizes this through the eyes of women who have married and have found themselves unable to continue their intellectual lives, because of the expectation of wifehood being the end to intellectual personhood. Through these stories I will further shape the Chinese woman as both stereotype and identity, specifically examining how these gender roles are not only performed, but embodied by Chinese women.

After this I will examine the unbound woman as she is represented by the deceivingly stereotypical *femme fatale* character, borrowed from the Western male gaze. When her narrative is flipped the *femme fatale* becomes protagonist rather than sex object, and reveals a hidden power struggle often unrecognized by her male counterparts. To explore this I will look at *Miss Sophia’s Diary* (莎菲女士的日记) by Ding Ling (丁玲) and *Moth* (蛾) by Su Qing (苏青). Sophia from *Miss Sophia’s Diary* and Mingqiu from *Moth* further the narrative of the Chinese woman as an identity by presenting an opposition to it. Both women break from societal expectations by bringing in sex- Sophia through her sexual desires and Mingqiu through the actual act- and yet they are misunderstood in their actions because of their stereotypes. By identifying the source of this misunderstanding the reader can understand the women’s true motivations. Inherent inequality is revealed in these women’s relationships with men because of men’s infantilized projections upon them due to Chinese characterizations of women. These depictions of women further problematize the idea of free love, particularly when it comes to sexual relationships, and push forward a new woman character who is subject rather than object.
Finally, I will look at cases of hope in the writings of these authors, represented by two works, *Intoxicated* (酒后) by Ling Shuhua (凌叔华) and *Love Begins* (爱情的开始) by Shen Ying (沈樱). In these two works each couple becomes closer by breaking from their gender roles. By identifying the roles that these women and men are breaking from we can see how these roles hold the Chinese people back. *Intoxicated* proposes a unique perspective of how Chinese couples should behave, while including a seemingly contradictory female character. By dissecting this character’s actions we see that what changed in this case were two things. First, the male character responded to his partner’s desires with trust and respect, and second, the woman *initiated* this conversation by speaking about her desires, breaking the stereotype of the silent, asexual Chinese woman. This is echoed in *Love Begins*, which features an unhappy couple whose male half cannot understand the difficulty in their relationship, as he only wants the woman to always be happy. They begin to fight when the woman speaks up for herself, seemingly for the first time. What these works posit is that while men must attempt to understand women as fully formed people, *women* must be the gender that initiates this change for the sake of men and women.

What these works convey is that choosing one’s own partner is meaningless if Chinese women are bound by their traditional identity both externally and internally. While the works of these women authors contain hope towards the possibility of an equal free love, this love is unachievable unless women first free themselves from the roles they are raised to fill. The works of these women writers problematize these roles by using stereotypical woman characters to reveal the
discrepancy between desire and performance of the Chinese woman. These characters, despite their identity as Chinese women deviate from their gender roles and create contradictions by doing so, which push the reader to more deeply analyze their motivations and desires. The problems these women face are unique to their identity as both their desires and the need to hide those desires arise from their ingrained gender roles. These women writers subvert women’s stereotypes in order to redefine the Chinese woman as subject, simultaneously rejecting the Chinese woman stereotype as created by the male gaze (or in other words, the dominant cultural lens of a patriarchal China) and accepting the reality of a Chinese woman identity with the unique practical and psychological problems it presents those women.

Through this it becomes evident that change must come from women themselves, for if these women continue to embody gender roles that inherently silence their problems and desires they will be unable to have equal relationships with men. The Chinese woman identity can only be fully understood by Chinese women therefore necessitating their active voices in the movement for women’s liberation. On the part of the Chinese man the responsibility is depicted as that of a listener, to attempt to look beyond the stereotypes belonging to the male gaze and understand the unique problems of women. Only if both these conditions are fulfilled can a Chinese man and woman have a free love.
A Historical Background

In 1900, China was still under the rule of the last imperial dynasty, the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Traditions of the Qing Dynasty were extremely restrictive for women, and many by this time were calling for reform in the area of women’s rights, such as through the outlawing of foot binding. It was a time of great social and political upheaval, and in 1912, the dynasty fell. This theme of rebellion and reform continued on in the May Fourth movement in 1919, first spurred by political outrage to the Versailles Treaty, but morphing into an intellectual movement that produced a plethora of politically-minded essays and literary pieces. One of the ideas that sprang into prominence through the movement was the idea of free love, the idea that young men and women should choose their own marriage partners. It was in the wake of this movement that these women authors as well as many more came of age and began writing. The social and political position of women was changing every day.

Traditions in the Qing Dynasty proved especially restrictive for women, particularly for those of the upper classes. At this time foot binding was extremely common, women were raised in order to be married off, and education for women was non-existent apart from teachings of the classics to those of the upper class. Most women were illiterate. In fact, literary talent in most of China at this time was considered as belonging solely to men. This is not to say that there were no women writers, but by the Qing era the saying was “女子无才便是德”, or, for women, lack of literary talent is a virtue. (Larson, Women and Writing 3) This implies strong social
discouragement to women writers, by alternatively equating literary talent in women with a lack of virtue.

Many of the social restrictions upon women were deeply influenced by a combination of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist principles that had permeated Chinese culture for generations. These ideas, which were by no means static, had evolved in such a way that created a hierarchy for women and men. For example, the Daoist principle of yin and yang, a duality that ideologically separated (but also connected) opposites such as heaven and earth, light and dark, and fire and water came to be connected to gender as well, differentiating the genders as well as placing men in a position of privilege over women for their cosmological connection to heaven and other positively viewed elements. (Yun 586) Buddhism and Confucianism also led to moral importance being placed on the physical virtue of women, her chastity, or her 真. This increased the importance of the isolation of women to the private sphere as a means of protecting that chastity. (Grant 6) This enforced the Confucian notion that separated the duties of men and woman as being respectively towards the emperor (or the state), or the husband (or family).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, changes were starting to be made with regard to women’s rights. Activists including Christian missionaries began to fight against foot binding, and in 1902 the imperial government joined as well by attempting to outlaw the practice, though the ban was short-lived. (Fan 6) It was also around this time women’s education reform began to see results, and girls were allowed to stay in school along with boys (though still almost no institutes of higher education were available for women within China). The cry of the education
reformers was, “贤妻良母”, or *good wife wise mother*, an old saying that showed the need for women to be educated in order to be effective in child-rearing. (Orliski 55) Education for girls still largely focused on their futures as wives and mothers, but through this education, more girls became literate in written Chinese, and possibly of greater importance, they found a space outside their family circles.

By the start of the twentieth century there was great unrest in China under the Qing Dynasty, in large part due to increased pressure from Western powers. The imperial government attempted to lessen these tensions by undergoing new reforms in an effort to modernize the nation, but after the death of Empress Cixi in 1908, the Dynasty was virtually over. It continued to founder for a few years under Cixi's infant nephew, but was eventually disbanded in 1912 to make way for the Republic of China.

Despite factionalism, the Republic of China served as the official government during this time. In 1919, the government agreed to and signed the Treaty of Versailles, which ceded territory in China to the Japanese. This evoked a hugely negative response from the Chinese people, leading to protests all over China, most notably in the case of a largely student-based protest in Beijing on May 4, 1919 that grew into a political and literary movement known as the May Fourth Movement (or alternatively the New Culture Movement). This movement centered on themes of modernization, nationalism, socialism, and (most relevant to us) women's liberation. These young intellectuals fought against Chinese cultural traditions that they deemed to be outdated and detrimental to the nation and its path to modernization. (Glosser 3)
It was at this time, partially due to the influence of this popular push for women’s liberation that schools began to open for women within China, such as Beijing’s Women’s Normal College, which opened in 1919. The first few generations of this school included notable writers such as Lu Yin, Feng Yuanjun, Su Xuelin and Shi Pingmei. These women were active participants in the literature being produced at this point, for although literate and educated women were still few, new publications and magazines actively sought these women’s contributions.

Editors of progressive magazines also began actively recruiting young college students... to write for their journals. Having women as contributors was clearly considered a rather politically correct and ‘modern’ thing to do. But such encouragement also stemmed from an understanding that women would provide new insights into the issues critical to the Woman Question. (Dooling, Writing Women 14)

However despite the active voice these newly educated women enjoyed, its should be noted that the majority of the intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement were men, and thus the readership of these women’s works were primarily men.

Male dominance of feminist goals was an obstacle acknowledged by many in the May Fourth Movement, such as Mao Dun, the famous writer, who feared a paternalistic tone in the “liberation” of women. (Ching-kiu 13) This problem was especially evident with regard to the proponents of free love and the 小家庭, or small family, who aimed to dismantle the traditional Chinese family in favor of the Western family model. The ideas of the intellectuals behind this movement were well meaning, stressing the need for economic independence of both the man and woman in a couple, as well as a need for the rearing and education of children to be shared. (Glosser 45) However the popular momentum of the free love movement
came from young educated men who wished to make their own choices in marriage and have an educated wife, but who had no intention of eschewing their respective gender roles. These young men appropriated free love but continued to enjoy traditional privileges.

Another ideological problem of the movement for women’s liberation was its symbolic connection to nationalism. As noted, at first women were being educated to be good mothers, making women’s education into a necessity for improving the nation. This theme continued as male feminists pushed for women’s equality as a way of modernizing China to compete with Western powers. (Liu 35) The Chinese woman became a symbol for all of China, enslaved by tradition.

This theme became especially problematic as China’s intellectual atmosphere became increasingly politicized during the 1940s. Literature was being reimagined as a political tool, specifically for the good of the state. Writers were encouraged to write nationalistic, sometimes communistic, anti-Japanese works, and feminism was seen as a secondary issue, one that would be resolved when the nation was reclaimed. Works focusing on women’s issues were no longer as desired by the literary public. However for some women writers such as Mei Niang and Su Qing, who lived in occupied territories, the pressure was to depoliticize, giving them freedom to write about women individualistically, the result of which helped to create a body of women’s literature that continues from the 20s into the 30s and 40s. This specific body of literature defies pressure to symbolize the Chinese woman and instead focuses primarily on revealing her as a subjective individual.
CHAPTER ONE
THE FATAL FANTASY

More and more women were beginning to pursue their own equality by means of a free love relationship, chosen by themselves rather than their parents. In most cases this meant that they would not be accepted into their husband’s parents’ house as was previously expected, and so would have to start their own household, similar to Western style families, called by free love proponents a 小家庭, or small family. (Glosser 3) Thus these women were not only rejecting an arranged marriage, but also the traditional Chinese household system, a system in which a woman was beholden to her parents until marriage, after which she was beholden to her husband and her husband’s parents. While the small family frees the woman from obligation to these respective families, it also means the new couple will not have those families’ financial support. It also meant that in the case of divorce or separation, the woman could not depend on either family to take her in- a very dangerous situation for the woman to be in, as while the idea of working women was being promoted at the time, there still remained many obstacles for middle-class women seeking employment due to “the persistence of a gendered division of labor and school curriculum” (Orliski 59).

Despite these risks, the growing view among the young and newly educated women intellectuals was that an arranged marriage was tantamount to a prison, and a self-chosen relationship was the ultimate rejection of this. However, some of these women, having to face this choice themselves (or perhaps already having made it),
feared that a self-chosen match did not guarantee equality and happiness in a relationship, and in fact made it no more likely. As shown through a survey conducted by Chen Heqin of 631 Chinese men from six academic institutions in 1920, there was a distinct difference between the rhetoric of the New Culture movement and its practice. Urban, educated men now had the expectation of an educated wife, but most often would not reject the traditional roles of the wife and husband, therefore expecting their wives to carry on traditional roles while assuming new duties of social engagement. (Glosser 73) These men wished for the freedom to choose their own partners, but did not necessarily reject the traditional hierarchies placing women below men, and even if the case was that both the woman and man did openly reject these and proclaimed to want the truly free love that was being conceptualized by intellectual writers, this guaranteed nothing as patriarchy was and is still ingrained in both men and women through their upbringings and culture and cannot be easily gotten rid of.

In the following works, Separation by Feng Yuanjun and Fish by Mei Niang, I will explore how the women narrators idealize love, and I will analyze their characters to decipher how their identities as Chinese women influence their perception of love. While their shared status as Chinese women provides practical constraints on their ability to engage in free love relationships, it is the internal expectations that these women have of themselves to perform their gender role that both lead them into free love relationships and constrict their ability to realize them. Women writers expressed in their works the danger of over-idealizing these free love relationships specifically because of these problems.
Separation by Feng Yuanjun

Separation, published in 1923, is a story narrated by a woman separated from her self-chosen lover and imprisoned by her mother, who wants her to marry an arranged partner. The story may seem superficially romantic, but the woman’s narrative is complicated when her desires are more deeply examined. What first leads the reader to question the narrator’s own perspective of the relationship is her extremely over-idealized depiction of it. The woman speaks of the relationship abstractly, and refers to a dream and a poem to describe it, rather than giving a concrete account. Secondly, the narrator is questionable because of her obsession with the relationship’s purity. She feels she must defend this purity by maintaining the total perfection of this relationship. This reveals a struggle within the narrator between her proposed loyalty to the idea of free love, and her ingrained traditional values that tell her that the relationship is dirty. Finally, the narrator is made most questionable by her repeated declarations of her intent to commit suicide if she is not reunited with her lover. These declarations both reaffirm the narrator’s adherence to traditional values and prove an inherent inequality in this couple’s relationship. By creating this contradictory narrator, the author pushes the reader to examine the woman’s character more thoroughly, which in turn helps to comment upon common internal problems of Chinese women who would reject tradition.
This very short story, written as a love letter over two days to an unnamed lover, starts on the second day of the woman’s imprisonment by her mother. Despite her imprisonment her room is well furnished, and her cousin has secretly given her paper and a pen so she can write. The reader soon learns that her relationship with her lover was not arranged by their parents, and that this woman believes ardently in the virtue of free love, claiming that “love must be sought freely” (106). She believes that their relationship is the epitome of pure and free love, and states very clearly that the only reason she has not committed suicide is because she has hope that her lover will come to rescue her. Because, according to her, if she were to kill herself and her mother were to send her body to the house of her arranged husband it would be her “greatest degradation” (106). She then goes on to describe a dream she had of the two of them and rewrites a poem they had once shared describing their love.

The story starts again on the following day. The woman claims she was delirious in her writing the day before, and yet as she thinks of the unfairness of their situation, and how society has scorned them, she begins again to praise their love and recount their relationship, particularly the first time they had sex. She then becomes philosophical and remarks bitterly on love and society. She writes that her arranged husband will be coming the next day, and that she is to either escape that night with her lover’s help, or die.

As it always is in the case of a first person narrative, before searching for meaning in the work, the reader must dissect the narrator’s own character in order to correctly analyze the narration. It is especially hard to determine the reality of the
situation in a case such as this in which there is no dialogue, and very little factual information is given. However it seems reasonable to assume that the description of the lovers’ relationship is exaggerated, by looking at the language used. This makes sense, as most in love will see their own love more romantically than others, however I believe in this case the woman not only romanticizes the relationship she and her lover share, but completely idealizes it, wholly removing it from reality. For example she proclaims that their love is “concrete yet boundless” (106), admitting herself the impossibility of their love, which to her makes it all the greater. She also claims that their love is “sacred, noble and innocent” (106). This reveals a priority she maintains throughout the text to emphasize the supposed purity of their relationship.

Her idealization is made evident through her dreamlike language as she continues to describe their relationship. Instead of actually giving details about the relationship, she recounts a dream she had where they were in a perfect, beautiful world, and yet forgot their physical surroundings in the wonder of their love. In discussing her dream she reveals an important character trait, the preference for dream over reality, which she states openly. “What is the difference between dreams and reality? Why don’t we just dream a few more sweet dreams?” (107).

This trait is further emphasized as she repeats a poem they shared about a night out together, where she says much the same thing. But in contrast to her statement about the dream, or vision, that she had, she goes on to describe this poem as a “realistic work”. She seemingly recognizes this discrepancy later. “...but the replay of this scene is so different from reality. The more enchanted this scene
appears to me now, the more unbearable the feeling in my heart” (108). The reader can recognize in this a common theme of love stories, increased romanticization under duress. In Romeo and Juliet, the lovers do not love each other so intensely despite their tragic situation, but rather because of it. Such is the case of this woman separated from her lover.

The dream and the poem also share a small dispute between the two lovers, which could seem to bring them closer to reality. However in each case, what happens is that the woman becomes angry with the man because he does not act the way she wants him to, and then she pretends that it did not happen. In the case of the dream, the man puts a leaf on the woman’s head that she in turn puts on his head. He shakes it off, causing her to be angry with him. Her anger over such a small issue confirms her idealization of their relationship, and shows how this idealization can become problematic in actuality. Her idealization results in expectations of perfection in their respective roles as lovers. The woman’s inclination to then deny the conflict further shows her unwillingness to accept any imperfection.

After the dream and the poem we begin to learn more substantial information about the lovers. We find that they met in a clubhouse, that they went out several times together, and that when the man was first going to kiss her, the woman was very nervous, and later wrote him a letter admonishing him for his conduct. He soon proclaims his deep love for her and the woman becomes somewhat frightened by the strength of the man’s feelings. However once the man says that he would die for her, she becomes entirely devoted to him. “A desire to sacrifice myself to satisfy you spread through my heart like green grass in spring...
as if I had received a heavenly mandate” (109). When they have sex for the first time, they maintain an air of decorum, as the man undresses her only to the last layer, which he then asks her to remove herself.

From the woman’s reaction to the man’s expression of love towards her, we can see that she is swayed by his great exclamations, which he continues to make throughout their relationship. She echoes these sentiments, as once he says he is willing to do anything for her she feels the same. Initially, the woman’s reaction is one of discomfort, and she feels that it is improper for the man to be forward with her. Additionally, it was important to her that the man show at least a superficial respect for her chastity, with the ritual of leaving the last layer of clothing for her to remove. This shows that she does feel compelled to respect the rules of interaction between men and woman in Chinese society, which condemn extra-marital relations. However what makes her change her mind is the apparent intensity with which the man loves her, declaring that he will jump into the river for her. She echoes this intensity herself by continuing to declare her intent of suicide.

It is a contradiction that the woman espouses such loyalty to the idea of free love, but still wishes to follow these rules, both prior to the start of the relationship and in the height of it. However this contradiction can explain her continued idealization of the relationship. What allows her to break through her uneasiness of engaging in a relationship not approved by society is her perception of the relationship as being perfect, of having an almost holy existence, proven by the pair’s willingness to sacrifice themselves for the other. In truth, the woman cannot free herself from a mentality taught to her by society that regards extra-marital
relationships as inherently dirty, and can only continue on by maintaining an internal narrative that idealizes her relationship with her lover.

This is further proven through the woman’s defensiveness towards the relationship’s purity, often despairing that the world cannot recognize this purity. When specifically defending the purity of their relationship to those in society who would ‘debase’ them, she says that they spent ten days together and “did nothing more than hug, kiss, and talk” (111). This implies that she thinks that by not having sex they proved that they were together for entirely pure reasons, showing that she abides by the traditional notion that sex outside of marriage is shameful. Yet she then goes on to describe their first sexual encounter, in order to say how respectful her partner was when undressing her by not undressing her all the way. Even though this woman claims to believe in free love she seems to simultaneously hold traditional notions of sex, revealing her own shame.

The woman’s shame towards the relationship is what spurs her towards her intent to commit suicide. Superficially, the woman says she will commit suicide if she cannot be with her lover, however this extreme reaction is actually because she feels she must protect her purity through maintaining absolute loyalty to her partner. What reveals this deeper objective is the immediacy of her intent. She feels she must explain to her partner why she is even still alive, and she claims she will commit suicide if she does not escape the very next night. She also feels she will be degraded if she dies and her body is sent to her arranged husband’s household. Her complete rejection towards this arranged marriage, even unto the point of death proves that her ultimate priority is not to be with her lover, but to maintain her
purity. An immediate suicide makes little sense if the woman’s goal is to reunite with her lover, as even after an arranged marriage she could still theoretically escape to be with him. Suicide only protects an ideological loyalty, making it so the woman is never degraded by being with another man.

This is reminiscent of the traditional expectation of Chinese women to commit suicide after a husband’s death, or in the case of rape. In the case of the widower, the woman is expected to commit suicide as an act of loyalty to her husband, making remarriage impossible, and therefore guaranteeing her purity. Chinese society encourages women to attain purity through death, implying that a woman’s purity (or perhaps chastity) is more important than her life. (Ropp 5) The narrator intends to prove her love and loyalty to her partner through her suicide, but she is also protecting her own conceptual purity, which is in danger because of her participation in a free love relationship. And yet it should be noted that her lover’s purity is never in question, despite the fact that her lover is actually married and has sex with another woman. While the narrator easily accepts this reality in her lover’s case, she is so unwilling to herself violate this code that she would rather die. This double standard reveals the woman’s internalized feelings of guilt for her role in a relationship she has been raised to see as illicit. As a woman the expectations of purity for her are much greater than for her lover.

I believe that the guilt this woman feels is the true motivation for her return to her mother, as she was hoping that through her mother’s acceptance she would be absolved of her sin. She obviously has great love for her mother, who is a woman of traditional values. She regrets not being able to see her mother or the rest of her
family for such a long period of time (six or seven years), and feels it is her filial duty to return and see her, again showing her own ties to traditional values.

When describing her relationship with her mother she remarks, “no matter what kind of relationship you are in, the one who nurtures you also controls you” (112). Through this she implicitly states that she believes no relationship can truly be free, implying that her relationship with her lover is constrained by this as well. The contradictions that arise in this woman’s free love reveal the difficulty for women who reject traditional marriage by choosing their own partner. It is one thing for a woman to outwardly accept the idea of free love and reject tradition, but it is much more difficult for a woman to throw away years of internalized values. This is revealed in the shame this woman bears towards her free love relationship, and is doubly emphasized by her devaluation of her own life for the sake of that relationship’s purity.

*Fish by Mei Niang*

鱼 — 梅娘

*Unfortunately this work is unavailable in English Translation. Therefore when referring to the work I will quote the original Chinese and then provide my own translation. Any mistakes in translation are my own.*

*Fish*, published in 1941, is told by a woman who leaves her family for love and lives as her lover’s mistress for three years before she decides to leave him.
While this work was published much later than the works typically defined as part of the May Fourth movement’s literature, *Fish* shares with the literature of the 20s and early 30s a focus on women’s conditions over politics and national empowerment. While most of the country was becoming polarized politically between the nationalist and communist movements, quite a few writers remained in areas surrounding Beijing or Shanghai, under the influence of Japanese imperialism, instead of following one movement or the other, thus establishing “a difficult in between position”, which forced them to align themselves with non-politicization in writing. (Larson, “The End of ‘Funü Wenxue’” 59) Mei Niang wrote in Northern China in occupied zones, which allowed, or perhaps forced her to write non-politically, freeing her to focus on women's issues.

What Mei Niang portrays in *Fish* is an unfortunate aftermath to the story of a young woman who was swept off her feet by a man. By leaving her family for her lover she was left with only this one man as her entire world. This woman, called Xiaofen, is a fairly normal young woman, and by examining the choices that led her to her current situation, we can discover motivations common to the women who pursued free love. Her motivations are simple desires such as love and a home and are deeply connected to her identity as a Chinese woman. However Xiaofen is unique in the strength she later shows in this story through the recognition of her own failures and insecurities, and by moving forward despite her situation. Xiaofen’s awakening to the unfairness of her situation provides excellent insight into the inherent inequalities of free love relationships between women and men.
Xiaofen both provides warning to the idealization of free love and acts as a model for women who seek true liberation.

The story is told in first person narrative, by the protagonist Xiaofen, but it is not the reader she is talking to but another character- a man called Lin. Xiaofen has just been beaten by her husband, Lin Shengmin, when Lin, a relative of Lin Shengmin’s, arrives at her apartment. Xiaofen uses Lin's pity and admiration of her to make him stay and listen to her story. Her story starts when Xiaofen is a young heartbroken student and she meets Lin Shengmin by chance. The second time they meet is on Xiaofen’s way home after graduation. Lin Shengmin starts writing letters to her and she starts to see him secretly. At one point Xiaofen sneaks out of the house to see Lin Shengmin and he convinces her to have sex with him. When she returns home her father punishes her, so she runs away to live with Lin Shengmin. Almost immediately Lin Shengmin’s personality appears to change and he becomes less charming. However Xiaofen cannot bear to leave him because of her attachment to him, and later on because of the child they share and Lin Shengmin’s affections towards that child. They live together for several years when Xiaofen finds out that Lin Shengmin is actually married to another woman (an arranged marriage), and that he has been living two lives, hiding Xiaofen from his family. His family has also recently found out about Xiaofen and her son’s existence and decides to have Lin Shengmin bring them to the main house to replace the old wife, who has not borne any children. However following the discovery of Lin Shengmin’s second wife, and with some kindness from Lin, Xiaofen decides to reject this offer to go to the main house, and instead leaves with her son for good.
The story revolves around two decisions Xiaofen makes: her decision to leave her family to be with Lin Shengmin, or why she falls in love with him, and her decision to leave Lin Shengmin. Both go against traditional Chinese expectations of women, but Xiaofen through her narrative actually comes off as a very normal Chinese girl. By tracing the situations that lead her to fall in love with Lin Shengmin, the reader can understand and sympathize with her choices, and we can understand how the Chinese woman identity influenced the women who left their own houses for a free love. Additionally, by understanding Xiaofen’s motivations for leaving Lin Shengmin, we can understand the inherent inequalities to be found in free love relationships and discover what true freedom for women means to this author.

An important element of Xiaofen’s attraction to Lin Shengmin comes from her mental state in the moments when he first pays attention to her. When the two meet for the first time, she is in high school, and is she heartbroken over a failed love. She has a crush on one of her teachers, but discovers that he is involved with another female student. She later regains some of her confidence through her performance as a lead in the school play, through her excellence in performing and through the audience’s appreciation. However when her crush arrives, just after her play has ended, solely to see his lover perform in the following play, she becomes so distraught that she runs off crying. It is at this moment that Lin Shengmin approaches Xiaofen and the two share a moment together.

Shortly before she graduates from high school, Xiaofen’s mother dies. This is a huge blow to her as her mother was the only person she was close to in her family. She now feels that she has no home. In addition, because of her teacher’s rejection
Xiaofen feels that as a person she is not worthy of others’ recognition or love. It is at this point that she again meets Lin Shengmin, who sits next to her on the way home from her graduation ceremony. When Xiaofen realizes that Lin Shengmin is interested in her romantically, Xiaofen is elated. His interest gives her self-confidence. However it should be noted that during these two encounters, Xiaofen is virtually silent. This not only implies that Xiaofen performs her gender role as the silent woman, but also that Lin Shengmin only finds her attractive physically, and if he likes her for more than that, it is as her embodiment of a silent woman.

The pattern that emerges is that Xiaofen’s self-worth is completely dependent on others’ love for her. Because her crush does not love her she feels she has no worth, and she is doubly injured when her mother dies, taking away another person to love her. It is at this point that Lin Shengmin comes into the picture, making it extremely logical for the Xiaofen who sees no value in herself to fall for him, as it is through his attentions that she does gain back some self-confidence. Xiaofen’s desire for love and its connection to her own self-worth remain relevant throughout the story.

Besides love, Xiaofen’s other desire is for a home. When she suffers rejection and graduates, Xiaofen loses school as a home, and when her mother dies she loses her own house as a home. At her father’s house she is completely under the thumb of her relatives and is not allowed to pursue any of her actual interests, as they only want to make her a fine Chinese wife. To Xiaofen what a home means is both a place where people love her, but also a place where she has some control and safety. Her father’s house provides none of these things, as she has no decision-making power.
This is an important motivation for her to leave her house to live with Lin Shengmin. Additionally, after Xiaofen sneaks out and loses her virginity, her father effectively puts her under lockdown, taking away all of her remaining freedom, and attempts to get her to marry a young man he has picked out, creating a situation somewhat similar to the narrator’s in *Separation*. This takes away all of Xiaofen’s power and exacerbates her sense of alienation, making it no surprise when Xiaofen rejects the marriage and leaves for good. After she moves in with Lin Shengmin she is incredibly happy to play his wife, manage the house and decorate it according to her liking. She feels her desires for a home and love have been realized, though her hopes are soon betrayed.

Xiaofen’s primary motivators for falling in love with Lin Shengmin and leaving her family are her desires for love and a home, two very normal desires. Her character is not markedly different from the stereotypical Chinese woman, and her desires most likely come from her identity as a Chinese woman. Her desire for love and a home come from her connection of her own self-worth with the love that others give her. Xiaofen cannot find value within herself without it being given to her by someone else. Her self-image is drawn from how Chinese society values women, through their relationships to men as wives, mothers and daughters. Desire for a home can also be seen as a part of Xiaofen’s identity as a Chinese woman, as Chinese women’s gender roles are deeply tied to the home and its management. Ironically, Chinese expectations of women are what sway Xiaofen to break societal expectations.
However, Xiaofen’s eventual empowerment does not come from her identity as a Chinese woman, though it does continue to influence her. Objectively, Xiaofen’s choice to leave Lin Shengmin, after she has been told that she will be accepted into his family’s house as his first wife could seem strange. She would have a family and more security in her lifestyle, as well as more respect from society as an official wife. However, it is actually the fact that Lin Shengmin would offer such a thing that causes Xiaofen to have an epiphany. Seeing how Lin Shengmin would throw out his first wife just because she was not able to give birth allows her to realize that Lin Shengmin sees women only as things, and has never loved her at all.

This in turn causes her to wake up to the inherent inequality in their situation. Lin Shengmin continues to be accepted by his family and society for having a child with a woman he was not married to, while Xiaofen is abandoned by her family and is scorned by the people around her. Even Lin Shengmin’s family, who would take Xiaofen in in order to gain a grandson would always look down on her for her deviant actions, despite the fact that Lin Shengmin is the one who lied to Xiaofen. This provides an important insight into the lives of real-life Chinese women who pursued free love relationships. While they were looking for equality, such a relationship between a man and a woman could never be equal in the eyes of society as a woman at that time would be condemned for her actions while a man would receive much less disapproval. Practically speaking, for a woman, pursuing a free love relationship came with far more risks than for a man.

When Xiaofen realizes how unequally she has been treated, she scorns all the time she has wasted attempting to keep an image of legitimacy with others, by
pretending to be a happy wife and by pretending that she did not have a child out of wedlock. She realizes that society will never approve of her, so she should not care what others think. She feels she can finally give up her charade. She also realizes that Lin Shengmin himself only saw her as a woman, an object for sexual comfort, housekeeping, and to raise his child, but not as an actual person worthy of respect. Originally he pursued her for feminine comfort and sexual gratification, and afterwards only continued to live with her out of a sense of obligation.

What gives Xiaofen the strength to come to these unfortunate realizations is Lin. After Xiaofen finds out about Lin Shengmin’s first wife she cries alone in her house when Lin stops by. She is glad that he is there as he was the only person to show her pity rather than scorn, and she tries to pretend that she is happy. Lin sees through this and tells her that she should treasure herself more. When she starts to cry he holds her in his arms and kisses her on her eye. Xiaofen tells Lin after finishing her story how much his words and kiss meant to her. However she also realizes that the affection Lin gave her was like a piece of bread. He was rich and she was starving and he pitied her so he thought nothing of giving her the bread. (37) To him it meant little, while to her it meant everything. Again Xiaofen’s self-worth is drawn from another person, rather than herself. But it is enough for her to regain her pride. She will not go back to Lin Shengmin’s parents house to be the wife of a man who treats her like an object, in a family who believes that she was the one who was wrong, rather than giving equal blame to both her and Lin Shengmin. She decides she does not want her son to grow up to be a man who treats women like
objects. In this way Xiaofen rejects her victimization and breaks free from her gender role.

When telling her story, Xiaofen refers to herself as a fish,

网里的鱼只有自己窟窿躜出去，等着已经网上来的人在把你放在水里，那是比梦还飘渺的事。幸而能躜出去，管它失落再说里，落在地上都好，第二步是后来的是。若怕起来，那就只好等再网里被提去杀头，不然就都死，不是吗？” (17-18)

A fish in a net can only search for holes to jump out of, waiting in the net for a man to take them out and put them in the water is no more than a dream. If the fish is lucky enough to jump out of a hole, it does not matter whether it lands in the water or on the land; either is fine, because the second step is a matter for later. If you are too afraid, then you will wait in the net until you are taken out and your head is chopped off. Either way you are dead, no?

In this excerpt Xiaofen reveals much about how she views women. She sees them as trapped and nearly powerless, at the mercy of society. But she also feels that women must try to free themselves, even if they are to die. She says herself that it is fine even if she dies from starvation after she leaves. For Xiaofen, to be an object is just as bad as death, because “either way you are dead, no?” This shows her determination to leave Lin Shengmin despite the hardships and the condemnation she will face.

In her analogy, the net represents the social expectations placed upon women and the barriers that come with them. But her analogy changes towards the end of the narrative when she explains that she is simply a person who wants love, and because of this she has only one road she can take. As she realizes the intangibility of social barriers she realizes that there is no net and that she is free to leave Lin Shengmin. It is her own self that kept her fettered. But she knows that the
life she leads will be a hard and lonely one, so at the end of the narration she asks Lin to stay next to her for a little longer.

Internal and External Expectations of the Chinese Woman

Who is the Chinese woman, as introduced by Feng Yuanjun and Mei Niang? Separation’s narration reveals the internal expectations of a young Chinese woman for herself. The woman feels her reason for being is tied up with the realization of her free love, but she is pulled in two directions by conflicting traditional values, loyalty to the family and loyalty to the husband. Xiaofen in Fish is constrained by societal expectations that limit her ability to act outside her gender role and cause her to suffer in an unequal relationship, but is also influenced in her actions by her identity as a Chinese woman. Both women are constrained both through internalized expectations of themselves (i.e. the identity) and outward expectations placed upon them by society (i.e. the stereotype).

Why do these women find their respective romances so compelling? For Xiaofen the conditions leading to this romance are clear. Xiaofen is suffering from severe depression, self-hate, and even just boredom from being trapped in a suffocating gender role. Yet it is her identity as a Chinese woman that leads her to place all of her self-worth in the love gained from other people. Xiaofen from the start enacts her gender role by playing the silent woman, and after she leaves home to live with Lin Shengmin, she is happy to place herself in the role of the caring wife
and mother, so long as by doing so she is appreciated and loved by her husband. Her unhappiness comes when it becomes clear that her husband does not love her, because he only sees her as an object, therefore creating a catch-22. Xiaofen is performing her gender role to gain love, which in turn prevents her from being seen as an actual person worthy of love. And yet throughout her unhappiness she feels obliged to maintain the appearance of a happy wife. Ultimately, Xiaofen’s decision to leave Lin Shengmin is also influenced by her desire for love because of her realization that Lin Shengmin only views her as an object and thus is unable to love her.

For the narrator of *Separation*, her commitment to her love relationship comes from her desire for a pure and noble love that transcends all societal barriers. This is the only way the relationship can exist because if it were not perfect it would be dirty, as the narrator has not truly been able to escape her internalized traditional values that consider extra-marital relationships illicit. Therefore her commitment to this deviant relationship stems from her own traditional values, emphasized by her intent to commit suicide to protect her purity. Her identity as a Chinese woman warps her views towards her own relationship creating an unfair standard by which she internally abides.

*Fish* reveals more of the external constraints placed on women through social expectations and stereotypes. Xiaofen’s family has complete control over her and does not understand her unhappiness and boredom with her household life because they feel she should accept her duty as a daughter being raised to be a future wife. Lin Shengmin himself only sees her as an object for comfort, sex and childrearing.
Society condemns her for breaking filial bonds by having a child out of wedlock, and Lin Shengmin's family sees her as the villain for having had sex with Lin Shengmin. However these external constraints are ultimately depicted as secondary to the psychological obligation Xiaofen herself feels to perform her gender role, and the 'net' of social expectations eventually disappears when Xiaofen decides to reject it.

Both *Fish* and *Separation* reveal the internal contradictions created when Chinese women's pursuit of free love is influenced by their Chinese woman identity, and *Fish* also reveals inherent inequality between men and women engaging in free love relationships in the eyes of society. In both stories, free love relationships are portrayed as dangerous, in *Fish* because of how society treats women who disobey their families and “seduce” men, and in *Separation* because of the unhealthy mentality that unreasonable expectations of free love relationships create, which in the narrator's case may lead to death via suicide.

In both stories the authors present the reader with characters constrained by their identity as Chinese women who despite this identity choose free love. This contradiction requires the reader to analyze the motivations behind these choices, creating a more subjective reading of the characters. Through this reading it is revealed that the women's motivations to choose free love are deeply influenced by traditional desires, problematizing that choice, and reaffirming the strength of their identity as Chinese women. However it is important that these women are read subjectively as their stereotyping would ignore the desires that are drawn from their identity and therefore be unable to understand their deviance from the expected stereotype. Xiaofen openly shares her repulsion towards objectification by
claiming that to live as an object is tantamount to death, prodding the reader to throw away stereotypes and biases in order to analyze her character.

While *Separation* and *Fish* problematize relationships between men and women, even when sought outside of the arranged marriage system, Mei Niang and Feng Yuanjun both did marry for love. What this could imply is that while an idealized concept of free love is problematic, perhaps it is possible to push through these problems, and accept that while a relationship may not be perfectly equal it does not mean that it is not worthwhile. It is also possible that by recognizing the problems that exist in such a relationship a couple can move beyond them.
CHAPTER 2
THE MOTHER AND WIFE

For Chinese women, choosing to be a wife or mother not only made pursuing a socially equal role to men difficult, but posed a possibly insurmountable barrier, not just because of what was expected by society, and not just because of the practical issues that come with co-habitation and child-rearing. What seems the most troubling for the women represented in the following works is the conflict of mentalities between that of a woman as a human being and a woman as a mother or wife. The women in Woman and After Victory have trouble resolving their wishes to be independent and ambitious with the desire to fulfill “motherly” or “wifely” roles. This desire is portrayed as an almost biological instinct. This contradiction reflects upon the ingrained gender roles in China at this time. Women were traditionally seen as belonging solely in the private sphere, filling the role of wife or mother, subservient to the husband. (Fengxian 64) These roles were integral to the Chinese woman identity, as the function of the role and the person embodying it were inseparable. The works I will be examining show the conflict women faced, as they both rejected these roles and yet desired to become wives and/or mothers, and thus faced instinctual desires to embody the roles despite their wishes.

In these two works, Woman by Shen Ying and After Victory by Lu Yin, I intend to dissect the problems faced by these women internally by examining the changes they undergo after becoming a mother or wife. In Woman, the main woman character becomes increasingly attached to her fetus after becoming pregnant,
despite her initial rejection, and in *After Victory*, the women become melancholic after marriage and lose their intellectual and creative ability. These changes are due to internal expectations these women place upon themselves to fulfill their gender roles. These women defy stereotypes by striving to break free of these roles, but also reaffirm their identity as Chinese women through their deep attachment to these roles.

*Woman by Shen Ying*

*妻—沈櫻*

*Woman*, published in 1929, is a rather unique story in that it tells the story of a woman who decides to have an abortion solely from the husband’s perspective. While the man in the relationship is portrayed sympathetically, he is shown to bear a lesser burden throughout, and he is unable to understand the weight this unborn child has upon his wife. This weight is social, physical and psychological. Socially the woman’s responsibility towards a child is much greater than the man’s because of their respective gender roles. Physically of course the woman bears everything— the difficulty of pregnancy and the pain of birth, or in this case, abortion. Psychologically, the woman feels that she will be overtaken by maternal instinct and will lose her personhood. This aspect is most important to the woman, and she lives out her own fears by undergoing an emotional evolution from a person to a mother.
The story begins at the end, with the husband trying to comfort his wife who has sunken into depression. He then explains that they had been together half a year when the wife became pregnant. The couple is an intellectual love match and both are ambitious. The wife is greatly dismayed by her pregnancy because she believes motherhood will wholly eradicate her own character and she is unwilling to give up her ambition. The husband on the other hand easily warms to the idea. As time passes the wife becomes increasingly depressed and finally approaches the husband about having an abortion. The husband is appalled and although he eventually agrees he does not contact a hospital, hoping that if enough time passes the wife will change her mind. After a while the woman arranges matters herself and she is admitted into a hospital where she must stay for a while before the fetus eventually comes out. The process itself is described as incredibly painful for the woman and results in strange feelings of happiness, depression, attachment, and relief. It is unclear when she returns home from the hospital whether or not she will recover emotionally, but the information given at the beginning of the story indicates that she remains depressed for some time.

The difference in burden between the husband and wife is first shown by their respective reactions to the wife’s pregnancy. While the husband at first is also upset by the pregnancy, this easily turns into acceptance and even excitement. The wife however becomes increasingly depressed, maintaining that she absolutely does not want a child. But she never does mention abortion, and the man does not even think of it, assuming that once pregnant, having the child is the only option. However the woman’s continued insistence that she does not want a child indicates
that she may have had other ideas early on. Why? According to the wife, to have a child would mean to give up her ambition, and to become a conventional wife and mother.

The woman in this story has intellectual goals, and knows that childrearing would take an immense toll on her ability to both continue academic pursuits and to participate in intellectual society. On the other hand, the Chinese man’s responsibilities towards the child are assumed to be extremely minimal, mostly being to provide, which is connected to social involvement and continued ambition, whereas for Chinese women a child means retreat from the social sphere to reside solely in the private sphere. The wife’s reluctance to bear the child shows the inequality in weight borne between the man and woman in a romantic relationship when a child is involved due to society’s expectations.

Beyond this social obligation and the cultural notion of motherly duties, the physical price the woman has to bear is huge, whereas for the man it is nonexistent. The text goes into great detail describing the woman’s pain. “Every muscle in her face was tense and trembling; I had never seen a more pained expression” (293). The process is described as being similar to childbirth, but less extreme because of the smaller size of the fetus. This highlights the physical toll childbirth takes on women as well as emphasizing the ordeal the wife must go through for her decision.

The painful ordeal of her abortion also brings important light to the actions of the husband previously, when he intentionally delays scheduling an appointment for his wife’s abortion. His intention is to take so much time that she either changes her mind or has no choice but to go through with it. He does this despite questioning
his own moral judgment and despite his wife’s worsening depression and pain. In this act he not only places his own concept of morality above his wife’s and her freedom of choice, but also causes her much greater physical and mental pain by waiting until the fetus had grown. His actions further highlight both the inequality in their relationship by his presumption of moral superiority, as well as his inability to understand his wife’s difficulties.

Above all the husband does not understand his wife’s views towards the psychological aspect of childbirth, which she fears most. The woman feels that if she gives birth to a child, it will consume everything that she is. Her husband seems to think this is not an issue, saying, “Even if we were to have the child, it wouldn’t be that much trouble” (281), and she replies,

_How is that possible? Having a baby automatically transforms a woman into a maternal person. Even now, whenever I think about it I feel disgusted by it, but oddly enough, at the same time I find myself beginning to wonder about the joys of motherhood. It’s all too frightening! Women have maternal instincts, so it would be impossible to have a child without becoming a mother._ (281)

She remains resolute in this logic, and her husband acknowledges it, but remains un-intimidated by the prospect of a child. However the woman continues to fulfill her own prophecy by becoming more and more emotionally attached to her unborn baby.

The male gaze in this story serves the purpose of an outside view of the wife’s changing emotions. From the husband’s perspective she is manic, alternating from one emotion to the next without explanation. However these emotional variances are in fact an emotional evolution, taking place within the woman, embodying her own theory of motherhood enveloping selfhood. Before her abortion
she swings from depression to happiness over the thought of her future child, unconsciously finding herself thinking about baby clothes and the like. After she decides to have an abortion she again alternates between depression over the loss of her future child and happy relief over her escape from motherhood.

But does she truly escape motherhood? The concept that motherhood is a biological instinct that eradicates selfhood plays into her increasing attachment to her unborn baby throughout the text. It is this increasing attachment that in turn leads to her increased depression. After the abortion, she still feels emotionally attached to the fetus. She calls it their son, and wants to continue remembering him. Also, the visual imagery of the abortion is incredibly similar to that of a birth. The pregnancy is so far along that the fetus is recognizably human, and exits her body much like a baby might. Afterwards the woman, or perhaps the mother, wants to look at the fetus. Did the woman have an abortion, or did she simply give birth to a dead baby? Her lingering depression following her trauma shows her mental transition into a mother, regretting the loss of her child. She is no longer able to pursue her ambitions because of her depression, thus realizing her fears. Despite the abortion being her own choice she wishes to remember the fetus as their child. Even if she does not fulfill the functional role of a mother, to have a child is to be a mother, and in her mind she has already become one. The child provides no practical obstacle to her ambitions but rather a purely psychological one.

Through this evolution, Woman portrays motherhood as a biological obligation tied up with an all-consuming role. If a woman is to maintain her selfhood she cannot give birth, but even with constant vigilance and prevention the woman
may eventually succumb to the role, as it is an internal expectation of the woman upon herself, an inescapable identity. The role of the mother is intertwined with the identity of the Chinese woman, guaranteeing inevitable death to selfhood of the woman.

*After Victory* by Lu Yin

*胜利以后* — 廬隱

*After Victory*, published in 1925, is an interesting work for its narrative style. It begins in the third person from the point of view of one woman, Qiongfang, but Qiongfang almost immediately picks up another woman’s letter and starts reading. The letter-writer, Qinzhi, retains the narrative for most of the text. And yet within her letter she includes other women’s narratives as well, creating the impression of a group of women who remain in contact with one another. Through the collective narratives of these women one narrative is born, that of the woman intellectual who gets married. These women feel that having achieved marriage they must give up their dreams because of social pressures to perform the duties of a wife, practical barriers they face in matters of employment and social inequality, and a deeper psychological barrier that results in the death of ambition for Chinese women “after victory”. As with *Woman*, this psychological barrier comes from the women’s own internal inclination to embody the role of the Chinese wife.
All the women in this story were classmates at one point, revealing that they are well educated for women at the time. They are also all ambitious in their desire to contribute to society. Qinzhi reminisces of her lofty goals to “sacrifice (her)self for the human race” (147), and later laments that once a woman marries it is difficult for her to fight for social change. The narratives clearly connect to one another, as is first revealed through the shared metaphor of Qinzhi and the original third person narrative of Qiongfang that speaks of a neat, but empty courtyard with no signs of life. Qinzhi immediately echoes this sentiment in her letter by explaining how once her husband went back to work, she “would be left alone in this quiet, remote courtyard” (146). The courtyard is a symbol for the household and its constraints. Its quietness, remoteness, and lack of life show the women's own state of existence. This unfortunate feeling is shared by all of the women.

Each woman in the story marries for love and initially is extremely happy in their marriage, experiencing what we in the U.S. would call the ‘honeymoon phase’. Through the eyes of Qinzhi we see how the relationship at this time is experienced like a dream, showing its idealized nature. Qinzhi describes the scenery of her and her husband’s love beautifully at first, referring to bees and butterflies “dancing”, and speaking of angels in cemeteries blessing the couple. However, she notes, “before we knew it, this pretty picture faded and our profound passionate love gradually came to feel very commonplace” (146). This emotive description is reminiscent of Separation, and speaks of the dangers of idealizing romantic love.

The women's idealization of their relationships leads to a lack of foresight prior to marriage. Marriage is usually seen beforehand as unproblematic, but
becomes so quickly after the fact as the couple assumes their assigned roles of husband and wife. Qinzhi sees herself as above the role of a housewife, and does not at first expect to take up all of the housework, but eventually does. Qinzhi does not satisfactorily explain this, only mentioning that her husband has to work, however she herself works outside of the home as a teacher, which throws suspicion on such an explanation. This would seem to indicate that there is a greater social influence that results in the wives taking up their expected duties. Qinzhi herself implies this when she says, “the moment I began questioning whether women were born simply to take care of the house, I couldn’t help wondering what the future held for me” (146). This shows the internal doubts Qinzhi has towards the situation, implying that she believes that the real reason she is the one doing the work is because she is a woman.

In addition to the expectation to take up household duties, these women are also expected to keep up social appearances by playing the excellent female host, which limits their opportunities to have intellectual conversations and exercise their mental facilities. To these women this posed not only an additional barrier by taking up their time, but also perpetuated a greater social pressure upon them to perform the role of the ideal wife. In addition to this, by maintaining this social appearance Qinzhi feels that her number of true friends is decreasing, and that she now has no one to talk to about her lost dreams apart from her old school friends. This further pushes her into the performance of her role.

Apart from social pressures, these women also faced practical barriers in their pursuit of a socially active life. The employment situation at the time is
described as difficult even for men, but for women the situation is much worse as only certain jobs are seen as suitable for women. Particularly for these educated, upper-class women, the careers they can realistically pursue are actually only one-that of a teacher. In addition to this, Qinzhi feels that the job of the teacher has become increasingly problematic, as the teachers are expected to “mechanically repeat things just like recording machines” (152). She has come to feel that modern teaching is fraudulent in nature. The lack of options women have creates exasperation on the part of many of these women who had hoped to contribute to society. “What’s the point of higher education for women if they abandon their work in society the minute they get married?” (151)

Some of these women face additional inequality because of their social position as women, such as Lengxiu. Lengxiu’s lover was already married when they met, but in an arranged marriage that was only a formality. She did not initially foresee any problem with this as the first wife was agreeable to their marriage, but after becoming the man’s second wife she found herself more and more resentful of the situation. Lengxiu says that she has, “been fooled by love... In my imagination, a perfect love was as simple and clear as the cloudless autumn sky; nothing could stop me from a harmonious union” (154). Lengxiu imagined that her position as a second wife would not be problematic, but afterwards finds her own feelings marred by jealousy and a sense of unfairness. The author is again warning of the danger of idealizing love and marriage- Lengxiu goes into a marriage knowing she will have a lesser social position, but assumes that this will not matter because of the purity of
her love. Finding that her feelings are not so pure she becomes disillusioned towards love.

Beyond the social and practical barriers to participating in social and intellectual affairs, the narrations of the women suggest an even deeper psychological barrier preventing married women from rising above their roles as wives. Qinzhi, besides regretting lost ambition, also misses her great ability to see beauty in things, which she has lost after marriage.

Qiongfang, you must still remember that beautiful autumn morning when the fields were green with just a hint of deep yellow... at the rock garden, you found a clean, white stone to sit on while I reclined on the green grass beside you. You once joked that I was crazy, but since that day, such picture-perfect moments seem to exist only in dreams, and my craziness exists only in your memory!

(148)

When given the opportunity to continue intellectual work, the women find themselves dried up and unable to write. If Qiongfang, the letter-reader, sees a bird or flower in her empty courtyard it only irritates her, as it reminds her that her spring is over. This feeling of defeat stems from the narrative that is built for Chinese women that marks marriage as the pinnacle achievement of a woman's life. A woman is taught to model herself to be more marketable to marriage partners, creating a feeling that there is no point once this goal is achieved. After this 'victory', ambition becomes meaningless. Intellectual pursuits are for individuals, not wives.

It is the loss of their dreams that creates such a melancholy in these women. One of these dreams was the pursuit of free love.

How heroic it seemed when we fought with our families and willingly sacrificed everything for love! We've all managed to achieve this victory, but now after victory our joys are few and our troubles great. And we have little to aspire to.

(155)
These women have accomplished their dream of free love, but because of this they have had to give up their other dreams. With the accomplishment of the dream they did choose, they now have nothing to live for. Qinzhi repeatedly says that there is no actual reason women cannot pursue their ambitions after marriage, but by the end of her letter she seems to have given up this hope, claiming that “nothing is beyond the control of circumstances” (155). Even Qiongfang, whom Qinzhi praises for continuing to write, has in reality succumbed to the same melancholy as the rest of the women.

The story ends with Qiongfang finishing Qinzhi’s letter, and having a brief conversation with her waking husband. He says, “What is there to do? There is no point in getting up!” She replies, “There is no point in living!” and he in kind says, “That’s right, there is no point at all in living” (156). This implies that this situation is problematic for the men in these relationships as well. Both Chinese women and men are expected to sacrifice their ambitions for the sake of conforming to the identities of husband and wife, a relationship in which the woman is expected to commit herself fully to the functioning of the household, and the man is expected to give his entirety to acquiring a position that both supports the household financially and brings his family respect. The story is ultimately full of condemnation for the traditional roles that men and women are expected to fulfill, but cynical of their ability to escape those roles. Women’s inability to resist these roles proves that these are not just expectations that society places upon these women, but identities that women themselves unconsciously embody.
The Chinese Woman in the Performance of Gender Roles

The women in these two stories suffer from similar problems of being bound by traditional Chinese concepts of women’s roles and in both works the women attempt to reject these gender roles. In Woman, the protagonist does this by seeking an abortion, and in After Victory, the women attempt to continue pursuing their intellectual ambitions after marriage. The woman in Woman also has intellectual ambitions, further connecting the two stories. The women in each story have been successful in their pursuit of a free love relationship, but despite their intellectual connection with their partners and their freedom to pursue their ambitions, their lives remain fettered by traditional gender roles as the husbands go out and the wives remain in. There are practical barriers keeping these women from breaking their gender roles, but what ultimately confines them is not society but their own selves.

Woman portrays motherhood as a role that completely overtakes the self, creating the impression that the identity and the role are one and the same. Motherhood is both role and identity, inseparable from one another, and additionally inseparable from the Chinese woman identity. It is not outward expectations of women to be “wifely” or “maternal” that confine these women, but rather an internally-driven identity. And yet this identity seems to mean death to the woman as a subjective individual, reducing her solely to the function she supplies in relation to others, implying that by embodying this role these women are self-objectifying. Any resistance to this subconscious self-objectification is futile as
evidenced by the protagonist in *Woman* who successfully has an abortion, but still succumbs to motherhood.

In *After Victory* the role of wife is seen as killer to creativity. As duty to the household takes over their entire reason, the pursuit of art and intellectual affairs is seen as frivolous compared to the performance of that duty. Women are taught that the culmination of their existence is in obtaining a husband to serve, and after this victory a mental block sets in. The women in the story see their lives as bleak and lonely, having accepted their roles as wives, and even resent the appearance of life around them as reminiscent of their lost creativity. In accomplishing their dream they have lost the dreaming itself. In terms of their life cycle, they are finished, the rest of their lives are set. They are now *wives*, not women, and they always will be. Their role slowly consumes their selfhood, just as motherhood does in *Woman*.

While these authors create subjective portrayals of Chinese women, their depiction of wifehood and motherhood as roles that consume those subjective women deeply problematizes the Chinese woman identity. Chinese cultural influences define the role of the woman as being in relationship (and often subservience) to others, and the Chinese woman identity reflects this through its self-objectification. These women make clear choices to reject these ingrained gender roles, but find themselves psychologically bound by them.
CHAPTER 3
THE FEMME FATALE

The femme fatale is a character that often appears in novels and movies, who uses femininity/sexuality to gain power over men, often serving as an "Eve" to drag the man into sin through her womanhood. She is powerful, in-control, and sexy. In modern films women very similar to the femme fatale have proliferated into a trope, serving as both an object of sexual desire for the protagonist and also as a pretense of feminism by providing a "strong" female character. In reality these characters lack depth and simply adhere to a stereotype. (Crewe 20) What is important to note about the classical image of the femme fatale is that her character is almost always represented through a male gaze, without analysis into the motivations behind her characterization, leaving no evidence that any exists. As previously mentioned, her power is evident, as well as her position as an object of sexual desire. However, what happens when this narrative is flipped and women who use their femininity to control men are made the protagonists?

This is exactly what happened in many of the works of women writers in China from May Fourth on. The femme fatale, according to many critics, began to appear in the works of women authors and was apparently borrowed from western literature such as Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. (Barlow, I Myself am a Woman 27) Some have looked at these borrowed characters as a way for women writers to provide an example of a sexually liberated woman, but because of their
manipulative nature, these characters hardly serve as role models. Others, such as Tani E. Barlow have claimed that these characters,

All share qualities represented as universal and innate, qualities bracketed in the text as the ‘feminine’: repressed eroticism, self-delusion, irrational and sudden mood changes, obstructed will, hyper-romanticism, childish impulsiveness, obscured vision. (*Myself am a Woman* 26)

Specifically calling out Ding Ling’s Sophia of *Miss Sophia’s Diary*, Barlow claims that the appropriation of the femme fatale from Western culture resulted in depiction of a “femininity” that was ultimately disparaging of women.

However it is important to note that while the character of the femme fatale as she exists in women’s literature in the post May Fourth period may have been in large part influenced by the Western version, a Chinese femme fatale has long existed in older Chinese literature and folk tales as well. The Chinese phrase for this is “红颜祸水”, or “dangerous beauties will incur misfortunes”. Quite a few women were blamed for the downfall of empires in China, such as the infamous Daji who brought about the end of the Shang Dynasty. The basic theme of the femme fatale trope (of men lured to bad ends by women) had long been extremely common in Chinese literature and culture prior to the May Fourth movement. (*Yi-Tsi* 147)

What I argue is that in *Miss Sophia’s Diary* and *Moth*, femme fatales serve an important purpose in the discussion of men-women relationships by providing insight into the psyches of women who have lived their whole lives in patriarchal societies. When the narrative of the femme fatale is flipped these characters become humanized, creating a need to further analyze their motivations and understand
them as subjective individuals. What the actions of these two protagonists boil down to is a struggle for power and healing.

*Miss Sophia’s Diary* by Ding Ling

*莎菲女士的日记* — 丁玲

In *Miss Sophia’s Diary*, published in 1927, a young woman suffering from tuberculosis starts a diary, which delves into her contradictory feelings regarding love and men. In order to understand Sophia, it is necessary to understand these contradictions and where they come from. One contradiction is her strong sexual desire and her cold attitude towards her object of affection, Ling Jishi. The second contradiction is Sophia’s reaction of repulsion to the affection of others despite her desire for love. These contradictions can be explained by constraints placed upon women through both external and internal expectations. Once beyond these constraints Sophia’s true motivations can be found—her desire for empowerment and her desire to be seen as a subject.

Sophia begins the story in a hospital, feeling extremely bored. She is visited by her two friends, a couple, a woman named Yufang, and a man named Yunlin. She is also visited often by a man named Weidi, who bears romantic feelings towards her that she does not return. Yufang and Yunlin on one of their visits bring a classmate, a tall man named Ling Jishi, whom Sophia immediately feels an immense sexual attraction to. When she gets out of the hospital she makes plans to get closer
to Ling Jishi by moving near his dormitory and visiting Yunlin often. Her intentions are successful and she receives his attentions, which she finds both pleasurable and repulsive. At the same time a close friend of hers dies, causing her to self-evaluate. She then shares her diary with Weidi in an attempt at gaining understanding, but after this is unsuccessful she begins planning to move to the nearby countryside in order to escape from her friends and her own sexual attachment to Ling Jishi. However, after a final meeting with Ling Jishi in which it is clear that she has totally captivated him, she changes her mind and instead decides to go south, to a place where no one knows her.

Sophia’s actions seem objectively nonsensical. Even her own subjective descriptions of her emotions are contradictory and she recognizes this. Sophia clearly meets the requirements of a femme fatale by manipulating others, particularly men, but her motivation for doing this is unclear. Superficially, she appears to want sex, but is limited by her gender, as respectable Chinese women are not traditionally allowed to have sexual desires. She often defends her actions by claiming that while some may think she is cold, she is actually acting in the way that is seen as proper for women. This is one way in which contradiction arises within Sophia’s own desires. “Should I go looking for him? A woman that uninhibited would risk having everything blow up in her face. I still want people to respect me” (57). Because of the role pushed upon her, Sophia must constantly question her own basic desires. She has sexual desires, but above this she prioritizes the respect of others and thus is unable to act upon her impulses.
However this contradiction does not fully explain Sophia. While her actions can be objectively explained through society’s limitations, her emotions are more complicated. The most puzzling piece is Sophia’s reaction to affection from others. It seems that although she always desires attention from others, once she receives it she feels disinterest in the person giving it to her. For example, when she succeeds in encouraging Ling Jishi to begin coming to her apartment, she is happy in her accomplishment but feels unable to pay any attention to him. Later in the story she begins to feel repulsed by him despite her continued sexual desires. Once he admires her, she feels that he is not actually worthy of any attention. Her feelings towards him continue to fluctuate in relation to his attentions and her own self-worth. When he is paying attention to her and her self-worth is high she finds him repulsive, but when he pays little attention to her and her self-esteem is low she desires him.

Sophia’s motives for the manipulation of others can be found in her base difference from the classic femme fatale. The difference is in her lack of power. Sophia is introduced to the reader in a position of no power, inside a hospital in which she refers to herself and the other patients as “inmates” (51). She is desperate for attention from her friends but doubts their love when it is given- “(d)o they just pity me because I have TB?” (52). Despite this fear, she proceeds to take advantage of her sickness and others’ pity by using it to gain attention and favors. She paradoxically uses her position of powerlessness to gain power over others. This reveals her motivation in her actions with regard to romantic affairs as well. What Sophia truly desires is power, a natural inclination for her being in the position of
not only a sick person, but also a woman. Expected to be silent, demure, asexual and weak, she comes from a position of powerlessness as a woman, and thus uses her femininity through displays of weakness that are doubly emphasized by her tuberculosis in order to gain the attentions of others and gain control over them, giving her power.

Sophia’s obsession with power is revealed through her experiences of degradation, which result from both her successes and her failures. She fails when she makes a play for attention and the other (usually Ling Jishi) does not respond to it. In these cases she fully feels her powerlessness through her inability to control others. She fears having obviously sought attention, taboo to her gender role, and feels that others will now look down on her. When she fails in gaining the attention of others she also feels that it is a failure of her own femininity and that she is unfit to be with others. “Ling Jishi hasn’t been by in days. Then again, I don’t dress well, I’m no good at entertaining, I’m a terrible housekeeper, I’ve got TB, and I’m broke. So why should he?” (70) Because Sophia uses her femininity to gain power, she feels that any loss of power is indicative of her failure as a woman.

On the other hand, when Sophia succeeds in gaining others attention, she also experiences degradation. This comes from a realization of her psychological “sickness”. She states that it is “(i)mpossible to think of myself as someone pure enough, innocent enough to be loved. I am skeptical of what everyone calls ‘love’. I’m just as skeptical of the love I’ve received” (66). When Ling Jishi passionately kisses her at the end of the story, she knows she has won - he is in love with her, not just sexually but romantically, and she feels victorious, but also despises herself.
What she despises in herself is her falseness and her tendency towards manipulation, revealed by her inability to return the genuine affection of others. After her victories she has no more interest in Ling Jishi because she does not actually care for him in a romantic sense. In fact she is repulsed by his affection, as that affection is misplaced, belonging to the weak woman Sophia is only performing. Sophia’s manipulative tendencies point to an alternative motivation separate from a desire for affection.

Sophia’s sexual desire is real, but her genuine goal in manipulating Ling Jishi and others is to gain power. Sophia takes almost sexual pleasure in taking power from others, shown through her violent language.

“I’d never refuse the lovely news that somebody had gotten sick over me.” (53)  
“I find myself laughing with the satisfaction of a savage as his tears fall on my folded hands.” (54)  
“I want to possess him. I want unconditional surrender of his heart. I want him kneeling down in front of me, begging me to kiss him.” (59)  
“Why don’t I crush his mouth with kisses” (75)  
“The pain this caused him flooded me with a pleasure I’d never experienced before.” (77)  

She experiences this sadism because of the power she gains through other people’s weakness and pain, and this sadism feeds into Sophia’s own self-loathing.

Beneath Sophia’s struggle for power is a belief that if someone understands her, she will be fixed. She despises herself for her manipulative, sadistic tendencies and feels that if someone were to see through her outer façade of the weak, sick, female then she could begin to fix herself. This is the core reason why she winds up despising those who admire her, as she sees herself as unworthy of love, and if others love her then they must only love her façade. She mentions this when
discussing her tuberculosis, questioning her friends’ love as pity rather than love. She greatly desires attention, but in order to gain it she feels she must pretend to be someone else, this role that society has created, and thus the attention that she receives is not truly for her.

The true climax of the story is when Sophia shows her diary to Weidi, in the hope that perhaps from it he will see the real her. “Then I’d become the most beloved, beautiful woman in the world, the woman of his desires” (74). Of course, he does not understand it, instead becoming jealous of Sophia’s descriptions of her attraction towards Ling Jishi in her writings. This is what really motivates Sophia to leave for good. This follows the death of the one person Sophia felt somewhat understood her, her friend Yun, who according to Sophia wasted away because of an unhappy marriage. In her loneliness she reached out to another person, and was let down. Ling Jishi’s kiss was the final, disillusioning blow, being something she had desired so greatly, but delivering only self-disgust.

Sophia’s emotions and motivations, while complicated, are explained by her identity and constraints as a Chinese woman. She seeks power because she has grown up in a position of powerlessness, and she seeks love for the same reason as Xiaofen in Fish, because she has been taught that her own worth comes from the love of others. Her actions are also curtailed by her unwillingness to violate expectations of her role as a silent, asexual woman, despite her strong sexual desires, creating a seemingly contradictory, but ultimately realistic depiction of a woman.
Moth by Su Qing
蛾 — 苏青

Unfortunately this work is unavailable in English Translation. Therefore when referring to the work I will quote the original Chinese and then provide my own translation. Any mistakes in translation are my own.

Moth was written in 1944 by Su Qing. Like Mei Niang, author of Fish, Su Qing was similarly influenced by Japanese Imperialism to avoid writing nationalist or anti-imperialist works. Su Qing wrote in occupied Shanghai, putting her in a position that required her to be apolitical. Despite the constriction of the political aspects of Shanghai culture, Shanghai’s art scene was blossoming at the time, fueled by a “hedonistic mood” that enveloped the city under Japanese rule. (Dooling, Women’s Literary Feminism 138) Any politics in writing and art had to take on a subtlety that was an anathema to the increasing virulence of speech in the rest of the country. Like Mei Niang, Su Qing escaped the pressure to politicize and was able to continue the work of many earlier women writers by focusing on women’s issues.

Moth follows a young woman called Mingqiu who has sex with a man she is not truly fond of, and then proceeds to have an abortion. This is a very short story, and like Miss Sophia’s Diary stars a woman who makes seemingly incomprehensible decisions. She, like Miss Sophia, uses her femininity to gain something, which in this case is sex. However this story continues after the sex into the very real consequences the woman must face. Mingqiu embodies a femme fatale by enacting the gender stereotype of a silent woman to seduce the man, and because of her
misinterpretation by the male gaze. In order to understand Mingqiu as a rejection of the Chinese woman as a stereotype we must answer several questions. Why did she have sex? Why did she have an abortion? Why does she regret the abortion?

The story begins with Mingqiu alone in a courtyard, wondering if her friends will come by. When she hears some people arrive she hides herself so she will not have to meet them, and stands by herself in a dark room. A male guest enters the room and finds her, and though Mingqiu does not seem to like the man, they have sex. It is a one-night stand, and the man promises not to bother her again. However Mingqiu becomes pregnant and must find a doctor who will perform an abortion. She first goes to a practice that refuses her because of her lack of money. Afterwards she finds a male doctor known for performing abortions on desperate women. After the abortion is complete she is filled with sadness and regret and the doctor, seeing this regret breaks down and tells her how he was born out of wedlock, and how he always hated his mother, which is why he performs abortions, to prevent more children like him. He then takes her home and puts her to bed.

Mingqiu is an atypical example of a femme fatale because she is passive in her seduction, however she does seduce the male guest, through her enactment of the silent woman. While this stereotype may not customarily be viewed as sexual, in Moth, Mingqiu uses this role to engage in sex without breaking her expected gender role. When the man enters the room, he asks if she is lonely and she does not answer. He then remarks that she looks pale, and she does not answer. Through her repeated silence, she implies to the man an openness of a sexual nature. This is because of the implicit ‘dirtiness’ of their situation, the situation of an unmarried
man and an unmarried woman alone in a room together at night. This implicit
dirtiness colors Mingqiu’s silence as implicative, which causes the man to become
passionate towards her. From this point on all Mingqiu has to do is not object. In this
way Mingqiu takes advantage of her gender role and uses her femininity to have sex
without disgracing herself by seeking it.

Although this story is scandalous for its inclusion of pre-marital sex, Mingqiu
is not painted as having a strong sexual desire like Sophia in Miss Sophia’s Diary. The
lead-in to their sex seems almost painful for her as when the man whispers in her
ear she actually wants to cry. Their encounter is not described as very pleasurable
for Mingqiu, begging the question- why is she having sex with him in the first place?
Whereas in Miss Sophia’s Diary sexual desire was mixed in with Sophia’s desire for
control, it was always tempered by her desire to conform to society’s expectations
for her as a woman, meaning she could never fully act on her sexual desire. Yet
Mingqiu has sex despite not having this sexual desire, increasing the seriousness of
her act. She felt she had to have sex with this man. Why? She certainly does not love
the man, as she openly describes her dislike towards him. The man is not even given
a name in the story- he is only referred to as the ‘guest’. When Mingqiu later finds
that she has gotten pregnant she is unwilling to ask the man for money because she
does not want anything tying the two of them.

The male doctor, after helping Mingqiu, says to her, “不要再胡闹了” (3), or,
do not make mischief again. After he returns her to her house and puts her to bed
she replies to him, “请你不要笑我，我是还想做扑火的飞蛾，只要有目的，便不算
胡闹” (3). *Please don’t laugh at me, I am still a moth that wants to throw itself on the flame, only I have a purpose, it is not “making mischief”.*

As is in the case of Miss Sophia’s Diary, Mingqiu is misunderstood by those around her. The purpose of this story is to have the reader understand her motivations, and she indicates that it is not what the main male character in the story, the doctor, believes it to be- “making mischief” (or alternatively, “making trouble”). This is where Mingqiu echoes Sophia’s version of the twisted *femme fatale*, as her motivations are simplified through the male gaze into stereotypical female pettiness, ignoring any deeper feeling. Even the doctor recognizes that lust is not an adequate motivation for engaging in pre-marital sex with the risks it entails, instead claiming that she did it to “make mischief”, thereby painting her as an attention-seeker, but not even exploring why she might have desired attention. This over-simplification of woman’s desires comes from the stereotypes surrounding women.

Even though the story is short, the reader can learn much of Mingqiu through the narrative. This story is told through semi-omniscient third person narration, as the narrator knows only Mingqiu’s thoughts and actions. From the very start the reader learns that Mingqiu has turned away her friends, claiming that she “爱静” (1), *loves quiet*, exhibiting a manipulative tendency. In truth, she wrestles over whether or not she wants to see them, for if she is alone, she will actually be lonely, but if her friends do come, after they leave she will feel even lonelier, and her greatest fear will soon follow, “无限的空虚”, *a boundless void* (1). References to this void reoccur
throughout the work, and through them it becomes evident that this woman is not in a stable state. She is in fact deeply depressed.

The void becomes a personified character as Mingqiu’s relationship with it is described. She is unable to not fear the void, and because of this she cannot escape it. The only method she knows is to sleep. When the void is re-characterized as depression, Mingqiu’s problem becomes clear, and her actions are similar to other depressed people, isolating themselves and spending inordinate amounts of time sleeping. But the void continues to come to her as soon as she wakes or finds herself with nothing to do. “冷冷地向她一笑道：‘你总不能抛弃我吧？我的乖乖！’” (1),

(\textit{the void says}) coldly towards her with a laugh: “You are still unable to abandon me? My darling!” The void is characterized as a tormentor, keeping Mingqiu captive. It is all around her throughout the room, which is lonely and dark. She thinks maybe turning on the light will help, but she finds herself unable to do so because of the cold stiffness of her fingers. This creates a sense of powerlessness.

Mingqiu’s actions become clearer when they are seen as an attempt to fill this void she is experiencing. It is in this moment of extreme desperation that the male visitor comes to her. She feels that she hates the male visitor who speaks to her, but also likes him, as he has broken her solitude.

Mingqiu’s actions are best explained through a metaphor she uses in the middle of the story.

欲望像火，人便像扑火的蛾，飞呀，飞呀，飞在火焰旁，赞美光明，崇拜热烈，都不过是自己骗自己，使得增加力气 。。。扑灯的蛾，为了追求热烈，假如葬身在火焰中，还算是死得悲壮痛苦的。只怕是灼着未死，损伤了翅膀，给人家笑话。 (2)
Desire is like a fire, and people are like moths that throw themselves on it. They fly right by the flame, praising its light and warmth, but this is just them fooling themselves, to give themselves strength... These moths that throw themselves on the flame to pursue warmth, if they bury themselves in the flame their painful deaths will be tragic, but what should be feared is to be burned without dying, to damage one’s wings, giving others cause to laugh.

To Mingqiu, this flame, or passion, is any kind of warmth that can drive the cold void away. She believes that all humans are like her, and that love is a fantasy to disguise what is truly desired- the flame, or warmth. This notion is enforced through her actions. She has sex with the male visitor merely to abate the loneliness and depression she has, despite the terrible risks it carries, and despite the male’s lack of regard towards her. To Mingqiu the man is the flame that will save her from herself, even if it is only for a brief while. It is not that Mingqiu is unaware of the risks, or of her objectification in the man’s mind, it is that for her, compared to the terrible void the risks and degradation seem a lesser evil.

However Mingqiu is still constrained by society’s expectations, despite blatantly disregarding them to have sex. She reveals this when she says, “what should be feared is to be burned without dying, to damage one’s wings, giving others cause to laugh.” Although she does not believe her actions are inherently shameful she believes there is shame in those actions being discovered by others. Because she must not break society’s rules she must hide her deviant behavior by having an abortion. She is so distraught by her pregnancy that she actually forgets about the void. Seeking an abortion could be seen as an additional deviation from societal expectations, but for women in a society that so greatly condemned extra-marital sex, abortion was the only option. This is shown by Mingqiu’s lack of forethought
before seeking abortion and by the respective doctors’ easy acceptance of the situation.

However, Mingqiu experiences a deep pain and regret once she feels that the precious life of “her child” has ended. She realizes that her desire to throw herself on the flame had not been totally without purpose because it had given her this child. She feels that raising the child could have forever filled the void, and now that the child is dead she feels an even greater pain. Mingqiu knows that the only reason she killed her child was to save face and to avoid trouble, causing her to hate the world that forces women into such situations.

An additional question we might ponder is why Mingqiu is depressed in the first place. This is unclear in the story, but I would suggest that Mingqiu wishes to be understood, but feels that she cannot be. It is obvious that loneliness is the key symptom of her depression, and she exhibits manipulative tendencies through her communication to her friends that she “loves quiet”, and her silence with the male visitor. As such Mingqiu’s character is reminiscent of Sophia’s, suggesting that they may share a common motivation, the desire for understanding.

*The Chinese Woman as Sexual Subject*

As in *Miss Sophia’s Diary*, Mingqiu in *Moth* is misunderstood by the male gaze. The assumption of the male gaze is that her actions are incomprehensible *because* she is a stereotypical woman rather than thinking that her actions are motivated by
problems unique to women. Sophia is motivated by her desire for power over others, which comes from her own disadvantaged position as a sick woman, and for Mingqiu the motivation is to abate her depression, a state also likely connected to her identity as a Chinese woman.

Both Mingqiu and Sophia are unusual in Chinese literature for their depiction as sexual subjects. It is more common in literature for women to be portrayed as sexual objects for male appreciation, sexually desirable but not capable of sexual desire or initiation. Instead women are supposed to react to and satisfy male desire. By admitting the possibility that women could also want sex, these authors open up new avenues for the woman psyche to be understood. Denial of a woman’s sexuality creates an expectation for women that cannot be met and further limits understanding of their motivations and desires.

By creating characters that are sexual subjects, these authors are rejecting cultural objectification of women. Within these stories Sophia and Mingqiu themselves are repulsed by other’s objectification of them, though they play into this objectification by performing a role. By loving the stereotypical woman that Sophia is performing, Sophia’s friends are unwittingly objectifying her, Ling Jishi particularly so because of the sexual nature of his attraction to her. While Sophia performs her role as a woman to gain power, this objectification actually further disempowers Sophia and causes her to be repulsed by others and look down upon them. Mingqiu finds herself similarly trapped in her role as the man she has seduced clearly shows his lack of regard for her as a person by carelessly remarking, “I will not get you pregnant” (2). She hates this objectification, but must continue her
performance in order to get what she wants. Thus these women, while deviant of social expectations are still trapped within the gender role that they supposedly take advantage of.

Mingqiu and Sophia both desire to be seen as subjective individuals, shown through their attempts at gaining the understanding of others. Sophia does this by showing Weidi her diary, and is disappointed because Weidi is unable to see her as more than a sexual object. Mingqiu rejects the doctor’s objectification of her through his insistence that she is only ‘making trouble’ by telling him that she does have a goal. Mingqiu and Sophia, despite successfully using their gender role to gain the attentions of others, ultimately fail their deeper desire to be seen as subjects because of their gender performance.

By writing characters that are sexual subjects, Ding Ling and Su Qing create more realistic and sympathetic portrayals of women, with a greater chance of representing real women. Additionally by going against traditional concepts of women these characters challenge the male gaze and provoke their audience in an attempt at reimagining women as subjects and understanding the problems and motivations that unite women.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE FANTASY REALIZED

While many of the works of these women writers contained warnings of the danger of idealizing free love, and taking up specific gender roles, there were some authors that wrote works that were genuinely hopeful towards the concept of free love. This was not in the sense that they idealized it themselves, but in the sense that through such an initial violation of traditional values men and women could open a path to relationships that were truly equal.

In order to do this Chinese men and women had to continue to break traditional gender roles. The roles created for them were inherently oppressive to women. Specifically the identity of the Chinese woman as silent is stymying to real change for women’s rights and social situations. Without women’s voices it is impossible to make positive changes for women, as it is impossible to identify their deeper issues. The silent woman stereotype is also both restricting to women’s expression of personality, and practically preventative of real connections between men and women.

By creating women characters that break their silence, Ling Shuhua and Shen Ying are doubling the impact that they themselves held in the male-dominated sphere of intellectuals fighting for women’s rights. Their writing emphasized the need for women to add their voices to this struggle in order to fully realize women’s liberation.
The character Caitiao in *Intoxicated* and the woman in *Love Begins* both break the role of the silent woman by speaking to their lover about their issues, particularly by revealing emotions that were not seen as acceptable for women to have. Caitiao does this by speaking of her own desire and the woman in *Love Begins* does this by revealing her *anger* to her husband. By revealing these taboo parts of themselves these two women succeed in establishing more equal connections with their partners, creating a path for all Chinese women who wish to be respected as equals.

*Intoxicated by Ling Shuhua*

酒后 — 凌叔華

*Intoxicated* has been translated- however I will be using both the translation and my own knowledge of the original work due to several discrepancies.

Like many of the previous works, *Intoxicated*, published in 1925, centers on a complex woman whose actions must be examined closely for understanding. It also has the distinctly Chinese, (or at least anti-Western) quality of brevity, being only a few pages long. In this space Ling Shuhua creates a puzzle for the reader through which the reader not only has to analyze the motivations of the characters in the story, but also the assumptions the reader themselves may make regarding how a couple should act. Through this Ling Shuhua breaks barriers and proposes a new version of free love, one that cannot be achieved just through choice, but through
real respect and trust. In order to solve this puzzle we must answer two questions posed by the text regarding the woman character’s motivation.

The story takes place in the home of a couple having just thrown a party. All the people have left except for one man who has passed out on a couch. The couple sits across from the man and talks sweetly. However, while the man, Yongzhang, is praising his lover Caitiao, it becomes evident that she is distracted by the other man, Ziyi. Yongzhang continues to praise Caitiao’s virtues, and ends by saying that since it will soon be New Year’s he will buy her something. He asks what she wants from him, and Caitiao looks over at Ziyi and hesitantly asks Yongzhang if he will allow her to smell¹ Ziyi. Yongzhang does not understand her meaning and after questioning her says, “Oh, so you want to go KISS² him, Caitiao?” (183) In Chinese, the word for smell is wén, and the word for kiss is wěn. Caitiao really does ask Yongzhang if she can smell Ziyi, but Yongzhang, not understanding what she means, thinks she means kiss, and to clear the misunderstanding, uses the English word ‘kiss’. Caitiao, wanting that more, takes advantage of his misunderstanding.

Yongzhang does not want Caitiao to kiss Ziyi, but is unable to articulate why, only saying that it is not right or normal. Caitiao continues to argue that if he trusts her, he should let her. He concedes to her and she prepares to go kiss Ziyi, but is too nervous by herself so asks Yongzhang to accompany her over. He does, and together they approach Ziyi and Caitiao leans down to kiss him. She stares into his face for a while, feeling excited, but after a few moments the flush fades from her cheeks and

¹ I am using my knowledge of the original work in this case. The English translation was unable to properly deal with this play-on-words.
² This “KISS” is in English in the original text.
she backs up and goes to stand beside Yongzhang. He asks her what the matter is and she replies, “Nothing. I don’t want to kiss him anymore” (184).

As with many of these stories, the question we must ask is of the motivation of the woman character. These authors purposely create contradictory characters in order to confuse the reader and push them into delving deeper into the woman characters’ motivations. The wrong way to read these stories would be to assume that these women’s motivations are somehow lacking because they are women, or because these characters are portraying a stereotype of women, but rather that their motivations are drawn from their womanhood, and unique to it, meaning that in order to understand the actions of these woman one must try to understand the ideological problems facing women.

The two questions in this story are why did Caitiao want to kiss Ziyi and why did she not kiss him? If Caitiao’s only motivation was love or lust for Ziyi, it makes no sense that she would then change her mind. The reader could assume that she is simply fickle, perhaps even qualifying for the position of a femme fatale, playing with Yongzhang’s feelings without any actual reason, however, this is Ling Shuhua, a notable writer who is also known for *Once Upon a Time*, a story of a romantic love between two girls at school, so it seems illogical that she would be breaking gender barriers in one story and reinforcing stereotypes in another.

One big clue in the short story is the description of Caitiao when she leans in to kiss Ziyi. She is genuinely nervous about her actions, and as she gets closer her heartbeats get faster and louder. “Suddenly her cheeks grew unusually hot and her heart fluttered strangely” (184). This proves that Caitiao is not playing with her
husband, and genuinely does want to kiss Ziyi, as he makes her nervous. However the entire mystery of the story comes in the next lines. “After she had fixed her gaze on Ziyi for a moment, her face cooled and the fierce pounding of her heart subsided” (184). If the feelings Caitiao had for Ziyi were genuine, why would they change so suddenly? The answer is that what excited her about kissing Ziyi was not her love for Ziyi, but something else entirely. What excited Caitiao about the kiss was not the kiss itself, but instead its illicit nature.

This may seem illogical, as Caitiao explicitly asks permission from her husband to kiss this man. But does this take away its illicitness? Yes, somewhat, but not fully. In our modern day society a wife kissing another man with her husband’s permission is actually thought of as even more unusual. Certainly in China a woman kissing another man regardless of the situation was seen as taboo, even though men could take several concubines in addition to a wife, even in the post May Fourth period. There is a saying in Chinese society dictating women’s interactions with men that goes “男女授受不亲”, literally, *men and women’s hands should not touch*. The connotation was that even in the case of exchanging an item such as a book, men and women should be careful that their hands do not touch. This saying shows the extremely taboo nature of what Caitiao is asking.

At the same time, while Caitiao wishes to do something considered extremely taboo, she is asking for her husband’s permission. By receiving his permission, what Caitiao receives from her lover is the freedom to kiss another man, making Yongzhang an incredibly radical man. Although he makes it clear that he is uncomfortable with Caitiao kissing Ziyi, and that he does not want it, he still gives
his permission, proving not only his love for Caitiao, but also his trust, and his respect for her wishes. What Caitiao asks from her husband is permission to go kiss Ziyi, which does not mean that her husband wants her to kiss him, only that he is taking away his social privilege as her husband to prevent her from doing as she freely wishes.

What Caitiao’s actions at the end of the story reveal is that what Caitiao really wanted was this choice. She was excited by her own freedom and by being able to kiss this man who was not her lover or husband, but when she actually arrives at the moment, and looks on his face, she realizes that she does not love him, and feels no further desire to kiss him. In fact, by choosing not to kiss Ziyi, Caitiao was reaffirming her own freedom of choice. If she had kissed him, it would have been by the permission of her husband. By asking if she could kiss him, and then choosing not too, she was doubling the strength of her choice.

This short interaction between man and wife is in fact a love story. By granting his wife the freedom to kiss another man, Yongzhang proved his respect for his wife and her desires. Modern portrayal of love tends to emphasize jealousy in a relationship, implying that one who does not feel jealousy does not truly love their partner. But Yongzhang does not love his wife less because of this. It is shown in this story not just through his praise of her, but also of his statement that he does not really want her to kiss Ziyi. What Yongzhang is proving is that he sees his wife as an equal, who has the right to make her own choices. This respect in a man-woman relationship gives possibility to the future of free love.
For Caitiao’s part, she proves her love through her choice to not kiss Ziyi. Although excited by the prospect of breaking a taboo, she looks upon Ziyi coolly, and once she realizes she truly does not feel any affection towards him, she returns to Yongzhang. Although Yongzhang said she could kiss Ziyi, Caitiao was aware that he did not want her too. By choosing not to, she was reaffirming her own love towards her husband. She now knows that it is not convention that keeps her from kissing Ziyi, but love for her husband. Had Yongzhang not agreed, she would never have known this. Through this story their love and respect for each other is reaffirmed, calling back to the title 酒后. While this can be translated as intoxicated, it literally means after wine, and is referential to the phrase 酒后吐真言, literally after wine spit out the truth, or less awkwardly, after wine the truth comes out.

Ling Shuhua’s portrayal of this couple breaks traditional views of how love relationships should be. In order to arrive at this conclusion, the reader must themselves reject their own biases towards romance, such as, “lovers must feel jealousy” or “if a woman has desire towards another person, they do not love their husband”. These are still biases we carry today. This couple brings hope to the idea of free love, but it is clear that if this free love is to be achieved between a Chinese man and woman, they must first break the gender roles imposed upon them by Chinese society. Caitiao breaks her own gender role by admitting that she has desire towards a man, and a man that is not her husband. She confides this in her husband, showing her trust in him. Yongzhang breaks his gender role by giving his wife the freedom to kiss another man, showing his respect for her choice and relinquishing his own privilege. Their love and respect for one another is confirmed through their
rejection of societal norms, proving that the choices they make are made through love and not obligation.

Love Begins by Shen Ying

爱情的开始 — 沈樱

Unfortunately this work is unavailable in English Translation. Therefore when referring to the work I will quote the original Chinese and then provide my own translation. Any mistakes in translation are my own.

Love Begins, published in 1929, is about an unhappy couple. The husband has cheated in the past and the wife is unwilling to perform “wifely” duties such as cleaning and playing the host for guests. This angers the husband and eventually leads to a confrontation between the two. However this confrontation unexpectedly is portrayed as necessary. The questions we must ask in this story are as follows; first, why does the woman feel unable to speak about her unhappiness, and second, why does she eventually speak? We must analyze this woman’s motivations to both conform to and deviate from her prescribed gender role. After this we can consider what the woman’s deviation means for the couple’s future.

The story starts with the couple in bed together, unhappy and silent. The man begins speaking and the woman replies to him coldly and minimally. The man says that he regrets that they are so cold to one another when they are still a young couple, and that they should both take responsibility for their wrongdoing. To the
woman what this sounds like is that the man really thinks it is her fault, even though it is revealed that he was unfaithful to her. As the man continues to speak she thinks of various replies to him, but remains silent. She eventually breaks down crying and says that although she loves him he doesn't love her and that their love will not come back. He says that this is not true and that he will be kinder to her, and decides that their problems are now done and they will be happier. The woman is less certain but they go to sleep.

When she wakes up the next morning, the woman is as unhappy as ever, but the man thinks the problem has been solved. While the woman’s body feels heavy and her eyes are sore from crying, the man is up early and calls to the woman not to laze around. She slowly starts cleaning, but drags in doing so, and the husband gets annoyed at her. She decides to get away from her husband by visiting her friend, but as her friend is out she returns home, hoping that her husband has already gone out. But instead her husband’s friend has stopped by so she must put on the act of a host, although she hates doing so. Her husband’s friend invites them to a coffee shop and as the afternoon drags on the woman becomes more and more reticent, and her husband grows increasingly annoyed with her. They walk home and he purposefully walks too fast, and compliments other women on their liveliness and happy looks. Once home the husband asks why the wife cannot be a proper host and she snaps. They have a fight in which both of them are angry at each other and the man is shocked by his wife’s anger. He threatens to leave her, but in the end they both go to bed and quickly fall asleep.
The point of this story is made clear by the title *Love Begins*. In the text it is somewhat unclear what has happened - the couple has had their first real fight, but afterwards they go to sleep. The end of the story mirrors the beginning as it calls back to the start “两人就又回覆了昨晚那样沉默，但这沉默不久变成了熟睡的声息” (66), *The pair* (after going back to their bed) *returns to the silence of the night before, but this silence quickly turned into the sound of snoring*. This carefree atmosphere contrasts with the tension of the night before, showing a change. Although the husband is shocked by his wife’s attitude, it appears that the fight was actually cathartic, and therefore is unlikely to cause their separation. What is implied by the title is that this is the true start of their love, meaning that this confrontation was necessary. It was necessary for the woman to push through her unwillingness to expose the emotions she held that contradicted her gender role.

The woman’s unwillingness to speak her mind to her husband is shown through her internal responses to her husband’s “play-acting”. In her eyes, her husband is playing the role of the responsible husband comforting the troublesome wife. She angrily scorns his responses in her mind, but aloud she only responds tersely, coming off as cold and passive aggressive. The husband, while accepting the responsibility for cheating on her, maintains that she is at fault too because of her unhappiness. Although he knows that his cheating is the superficial cause of her unhappiness, he does not truly understand why she is unhappy. To him her unhappiness is illegitimate, as she has no right to remain unhappy as his affair has already ended and he has made several attempts to make amends. His lack of understanding towards her shows his lack of regard for her as anything more than a
wife. The woman understands this as she remarks “因为我已经是你的妻子，不是你的爱人，恋爱的时期已经毁灭了”(63), because I am already your wife, not your lover, the time of love has already died.

This line would seem to indicate that she does express her troubles. However the key difference between what she says in her head and what she voices aloud are the emotions she conveys. She tries to control herself for as long as possible, and when she finally breaks, she breaks into tears. What was portrayed through her internal narrative was anger towards her husband and her situation, but the emotion that exhibited itself was sadness. Why? The answer is that anger for women is an emotion condemned in Chinese society. Women are raised to be accommodating and to hide such feelings. But because the woman’s expression of her unhappiness is through tears rather than anger, her own performance is ultimately demeaning to her as an admittance of her own responsibility towards her situation. Because she feels she is not allowed to express her anger, she is unable to convey her feelings of unfairness towards their roles in the relationship.

However her anger towards the husband grows to an unmanageable point after her husband rebukes her for being anti-social with a friend. She is angry that so much is expected of her as a wife while so little is expected of him as a husband. He says that she does not have a personality that can make others happy and she asks him if he has such a personality. The fact that this is the first time that the woman has ever expressed such emotions is revealed in the disbelief of the husband towards her attitude. He is so appalled by her anger that he threatens to divorce her, but she only responds by saying that he might as well because she will not let him
threaten her. He continues to say that he did not realize she was such a person, further proving the notion that this fight is a first for their relationship and that it is the climax of the text.

The woman’s motivations to confront her husband and express her anger towards him center on one point she has, her wish to be recognized as an individual rather than a ‘wife’. Her husband continues to make complaints towards her conduct by comparing her to other people and other wives. The woman responds to this by saying, “为什么一个人不喜欢应酬，便要做作着去应酬？人家的太太好，与我有什么关系，我是我，为什么我应该跟人家一样” (65) Why must a person who does not like to socialize go socialize anyway? If someone else’s wife is a good wife, what does that have to do with me? I am me, why should I be the same as others?

While the woman does hold anger towards the husband’s unfaithfulness, her deeper issue is with the man’s inability to see her as a person. By finally speaking up she is reasserting her own personhood, which is what makes way for a more equal relationship.

It is the husband’s shock that potentiates a better future for the couple. It is possible that by finally voicing her anger the woman has ended her husband’s dismissive views towards her problems, and perhaps he can now begin to see her as a person. By revealing her anger the woman has revealed that she does blame the husband for his actions, and has made it clear that she will not accept a disingenuous apology for his misdoings. By speaking her anger she is breaking her gender role as an accommodating woman, leading to the conclusion that for love to exist between a man and a woman, gender roles must be broken, and women must
be the ones to break them. After all, how can equality exist between two people if one is not allowed to be angry? In Love Begins, Shen Ying is advocating relationships in which women stand up for themselves and point out inequalities, but also that women assert themselves as subjective individuals.

The Chinese Woman Breaks Her Silence

Intoxicated and Love Begins highlight a theme strong in many of these works, Chinese women beginning to speak their feelings, breaking the stereotype of the silent woman. In Intoxicated and Love Begins specifically, these women speak for the first time of two things that Chinese women were not allowed to express—sexual desire and anger. By breaking this stereotype these women are breaking through the aspect of their ingrained traditional values that causes them to self-objectify and are declaring their own subjectivity.

If the social expectation upon Chinese women for silence is problematic, the taboo surrounding expressions of anger are doubly so. This is because repressing women’s anger is a tool of oppression. By making it taboo to be angry, women are not allowed to complain of inequity, and they are not allowed to rise up in any way.

The ability to express sexual desires, especially to one’s own lover is equally important, as despite being represented as asexual, women are often symbolic of sex because of their position as sexual objects in traditional narrative. To be seen as a sexual object without also being seen to have sexual desire diminishes a woman’s
role as an active participant in sex, painting them as an object to be acted upon, which further diminishes their subjectivity as a person in general. The unreasonable expectation of asexuality additionally places a moral burden on women when they do experience desire, causing them to retreat further into their roles.

These limitations of speech placed upon women create a general passivity of being that reaffirms their status as objects. By breaking their silence, these characters are not just breaking the stereotype of the silent Chinese woman- they are transforming in nature from passive objects to active subjects. Other characters perform this function as well, such as Xiaofen in Fish, who both stands up to her husband and seeks understanding from Lin. Sophia and Mingqiu also break their silence through their attempts to gain understanding as subjective individuals. This theme is echoed throughout all women’s works of the May Fourth Movement, as the women themselves first violate their own stereotypes through the very act of writing.

Importantly, the audience for this transformation is their partner in their free love relationships- men. By breaking through their gender roles these women take a step towards an equal free love relationship, however in order for this to be accomplished, what is also necessary is an attempt at understanding on the part of the man. While responsibility for moving forward in gender relations is placed upon the woman, without the participation of men there is very little a woman can do on her own.
CONCLUSION

These stories revolve around women’s desire to be understood as subjective individuals, either by the male counterpart or by the reader himself (or herself). As such I make it my goal to analyze the women characters’ motivations to both conform to and break from their gender roles and in turn understand how they reflect the motivations of real Chinese women of the time. I do this by identifying stereotypical behaviors and dissecting those behaviors by deciding whether they are caused by external expectations placed upon women or by internal expectations of the woman upon herself, due to her identity as a Chinese woman. Alternatively when a character breaks from her stereotype, I make the assumption that this deviance is not indicative of a break from her identity as a Chinese woman and therefore I continue on to determine how her identity causes her to break from social expectations.

A stereotypical depiction of woman that is misleading to the reader is that of emotionality, volatility, and irrationality. All of these characterizations are inherently non-conducive to any attempt at understanding women. To view a woman through this stereotype is to haphazardly attribute her emotions to her emotionality, any changes in her actions or emotions to her volatility, and anything at all that is hard to understand about her to her irrationality. In fiction, if a character appears that seems to be a “stereotypical woman” in this manner, either the writer is inept at his or her job, or they are trying to deceive the male gaze and subvert the stereotype by purposefully creating a stereotypical character that
should be analyzed subjectively. If stereotypes are reflective of a general trend, the origin of that trend should be explored. If women conform to a stereotype, then this stereotype should be dissected and the causal factors identified. What I have done in this work is link the causal factors to two things: the Chinese woman identity and the social expectations placed upon women. These factors influence women’s actions and society’s perceptions of those actions, thus creating the Chinese woman stereotype.

In all of these works the women have pursued a free love relationship, but are still bound to their traditional identity as Chinese women. These women’s characters become contradictory due to their desires as Chinese women being often at odds with the gender role they must perform. This conflict of desire and performance gives depth to the stereotypical woman character. It is actually the desires integral to the identity of the Chinese woman that lead to her deviance from social expectation. The reader can find and understand the Chinese woman’s motivations by identifying the influence the Chinese woman identity has upon her. In result the reader must reject the stereotype as a false expectation and yet accept the Chinese woman identity as imperative to the motivations of Chinese women. This requires the reestablishment of the woman character as subject.

The crux of these writings on free love relationships between men and women depend on determining the audience of these works. While women intellectuals did read each other’s works, most women during the post May Fourth period were still illiterate, and men dominated the feminist intellectual movement. Thus the readership of these works was primarily male intellectuals. What did these
women feel they were offering to these male readers in a literary movement that was already inundated by writings by male feminists? Of course what they offered was the ability to genuinely understand and depict women's internal conflicts, thus rejecting traditional literary narratives that represent women as passive objects.

A theme that is constantly repeated throughout these works is the pursuit of this understanding. Just as the women in many of the stories begin to speak, these women writers are doing the same thing. Even in the works in which the women characters are not explicitly looking for understanding from their male counterparts, the authors create situations which require analysis in order to make the reader look deeper into the characters’ motivations. In Woman, Shen Ying portrays a pregnant woman through the eyes of her husband who is unable to understand her. She presents a contradictory character with conflicting desires to both embody her role and to save her individuality. By creating these contradictory characters with opposing desires these authors are not just revealing struggles of many real women, they are also creating motivation for the male readership to attempt to understand these conflicting desires and how they influence women.

The reader must avoid the male gaze, which would tend to see only the stereotypical woman character and assume the pervasiveness of the stereotype. This is why an underlying goal of seeking understanding is written into so many of these characters’ motivations. For example, Sophia’s desire for understanding in order to be “fixed” motivates her to show her admirer Weidi her diary, but he is unable to understand her at all because of his perception of her as a love object. Also Xiaofen in Fish spends the entire text speaking to one person, Lin, because she wants
him to understand her, to not just see her as a woman who had extra-marital sex. Mingqiu in *Moth* also speaks out by the end of her story by telling the doctor that he has misunderstood her by believing her to only be “making mischief” by having sex with a man before marriage. She wants him to understand that she has deeper motivations and that they are not so petty as an irrational impulse to make trouble. By breaking their silence these women fight to be seen as subjective individuals.

The most important aspect of the Chinese woman stereotype that is broken in these works is that of the silent woman. All adherence to stereotypes can be detrimental, however the silent woman stereotype is doubly so because it provides a practical barrier to understanding between men and women. In order to seek understanding these women have to deviate from normal social expectations, and understanding is absolutely essential in the pursuit of free love, because of how the Chinese woman identity problematizes men-women relationships. During this time all women writers broke the silent woman stereotype every time they published a work, making the position of women writers exceptionally deviant, both for their violation of the silent woman stereotype and for their pursuit of literary talent. These women prove that while the Chinese woman identity is pervasive, women can move beyond self-objectification and seek understanding by breaking their silence.
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