

Modernity, Sexuality, and Colonial Fantasy in Ding Ling's "Miss Sophia Diary" (1928)

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Introduction

How can I describe the beauty of this strange man? Obviously, his lean stature, white delicate features, fine and thin lips, as well as soft hair are quite enough to dazzle one's eyes. But there is an elegance to him, difficult to describe, an elusive quality, that shook me profoundly. When I asked his name, he handed me his name card with extraordinary grace and finesse ... "Ling Jishi, Singapore..." (55).

我將怎樣去形容他的美呢？固然，他的頎長的身軀，白嫩的面龐，薄薄的小嘴唇，柔軟的頭髮，都足以閃耀人的眼睛，但他還另外有一種說不出，捉不到的豐儀來煽動你的心。比如，當我請問他的名字時， he 會用那種我想不到的不急遽的態度遞過那只擎有名片的手來。...「凌吉士，新加坡.....」¹

¹ The Chinese text is from Ding Ling, "Shafei nüshi de riji" [Miss Sophia's Diary], in *Zhongguo xiandai zuojia xuanji: Ding Ling* [Selected works by modern Chinese writer: Ding Ling], Yang Guixin, ed. (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1985), pp. 3-40. The English translation, with modifications where necessary, is based on Tani E. Barlow & Gary J. Bjorge, eds., *I Myself am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling*, pp. 50-81 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). Hereafter, the page numbers of the English translation are given in the article.

Since her sensational debut in 1928, Ding Ling's 丁玲 (1904-1986) fictional protagonist Sophia 莎菲 in "Miss Sophia's Diary" 莎菲女士的日記 [*Shafei nüshì de rìjì*] has remained an icon in modern Chinese literature. Being one of the few female intellectuals of the May Fourth generation who revolted against traditional culture and advocated vernacular language for literature, Ding Ling is an exemplary figure who sets herself apart by always placing women at the center of her writing.² The confessional "Miss Sophia's Diary" boldly exposes the psyche of a modern Chinese woman who is tormented by her erotic desires for an exotic man from Singapore. Through thirty-three diary entries, Ding Ling theorizes the "stance of the modern girl"³ and allows her character "to speak of a woman's experiences from her own perspective,"⁴ although problematic or contradictory at times.

Without question the subject of the story is Sophia—a woman who is grappling with the dilemma of understanding her own sexuality and identity. Seldom are the questions raised about the object of her desire, Ling Jishi. "How could I become infatuated with this totally *Nanyang* (Southeast Asian) man," Sophia ponders, "just because of his unwitting seductiveness? [我豈肯為了這些無意識的引誘而迷戀一個十足的南洋人] (68)." More than his good-looks, there is something elusive, something Sophia can neither explain nor resist, that makes Ling Jishi so bewitching. The way Sophia looks at

² Barlow, "Introduction," in *I Myself am a Woman*, pp. 2.

³ Wendy Larson, "The End of 'Funü Wenxue': Women Literature in 1925-1935," in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 67.

⁴ Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 172.

him, and the language she uses to construct him in her diary, denotes an unconventionality that further adds to the enigma. Is he any male who simply plays an “essential” gendered role against the female Sophia? Or, is his being an ethnic Chinese from *Nanyang* not by chance but a choice, however subconscious it may be?

To see the *Nanyang* man swirling within the amorphous mass of female desire, and to ask what he may mean, necessitates new ways of reading “Miss Sophia’s Diary.” Many May Fourth intellectuals depend on the artistic representation and narrative deployment of the “new women” to “both indict a ‘benighted’ cultural tradition and create their own emerging modern identity.”⁵ Yet the aspect of racial and social location in Sophia’s sexual obsession has not received much attention, and thus offers a refreshing perspective to reconsider the gendered subjectivity.

How Sophia, the modern Chinese woman, relates her “self” to the “other-worldly” man forms the primary focus of this discussion. In the story, modernity can be seen as unfolding itself in the struggle among two interrelated notions from which a Chinese identity is created: “compulsory heterosexuality” and “colonial fantasy.” With Ling Jishi as the binding thread, this paper explores these problematic aspects of Chinese modernity that weave the intricate web of Sophia’s identity, as a woman, a writer, and a Chinese. Before examining Sophia’s critical self-discovery through the “other,” it is important to understand where she came from and how she was interpreted before re-casting her in a different light.

Reading “Miss Sophia’s Diary” through Feminist Eyes

With the publication of “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” Ding Ling made an instant name for herself as a woman writer who can successfully

⁵ Jin Feng, *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004).

portray modern Chinese women. Starting the habit of diary-writing upon the request of her dear friend Elder Sister Yun 蘊姊, the title character Sophia, a twenty-year-old woman suffering from tuberculosis, reflects upon her relationships with three different persons—Elder Sister Yun who passes away soon after she marries, her Chinese admirer Weidi (Younger Brother Wei) 葦弟 who is actually older than Sophia, and her love interest from *Nanyang* Ling Jishi—in the hope of better understanding herself.

The diary covers a brief three-month period from December 24 to March 28, the coldest time of winter in Beijing. She lives alone in an apartment, without attending any school or job, and therefore occupies a space, both physically and psychologically, outside of any familial or social structures in the middle of the harshest “natural” setting. Sophia puts her thoughts into words because they disclose “the psychology of a woman driven insane by the way a man looked” [一個完全癲狂於男人儀表上的女人的心理] (79). The issue then becomes whether she, a physically ill and mentally confused woman, can make any sense of, or is even capable of a sense of, herself.

It is impossible to discuss “Miss Sophia’s Diary” without acknowledging that gender and sexuality are key themes and reasons for its popularity. If Sophia feels lost in articulating her thoughts when she encounters the stunning Ling Jishi, there is no lack of words, from literary critics to general readers, about how one should this character. To her contemporary readers, Sophia represents the *fin-de-siècle* “bourgeois woman intellectual” whose outlook on modern womanhood becomes intensely problematic.⁶ Hailed as “a bomb thrown into the silent literary arena” for its description of female sexual desire, the appearance of Sophia instantly created a heroine of

⁶ Yi-tsi Feuerwerker, *Ding Ling’s Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 31.

the new republic, a symbol of “modern Chinese women emancipated by the May Fourth Movement yet still bearing the scars of the era and harboring contradictory sexual desires.”⁷ The fact that the story is an internal monologue by and about a young woman, written by a female author, is often applauded as the emergence of “Chinese feminism.”

A feminist reading of the story—addressing female agency, expressing female desire, as well as dealing with the modern woman’s moral predicaments—opens up questions about the “gendering” of modern Chinese literature and “gendered literary representations.”⁸ Lydia Liu believes that the story boasts “an extraordinary sense of gendered subjectivity, resistance to conventional portrayals of courtship and woman, an anticlimactic debunking of the romantic love plot, and the eventual undermining of writing as a reliable path towards self-knowledge.”⁹ For Rey Chow, “the psychic, ideological contradictions” in this story “are embedded in a Westernized Chinese woman writer’s attempt at self-representation.”¹⁰ Likewise, Tani Barlow sees Sophia’s suffering as the echoing voices of “many liberated Chinese women” during the turn of the twentieth century “who struggled against the contradictory claim of political rights and

⁷ “Miss Sophia’s Diary” has drawn numerous criticisms and much debate since its first appearance in *Short Story Monthly* (1928). See Yi Zhen, “*Ding Ling nüshì*” (Miss Ding Ling, 1930), in *Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao* [Research information on Ding Ling], ed. Yuan Liangjun (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1982), pp. 223; Mao Dun, “*Nüzuojia Ding Ling*” [The Woman Writer Ding Ling], in *Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao*, pp. 252-6.

⁸ Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, pp. 132.

⁹ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, pp. 173.

¹⁰ Rey Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 163.

modern theories that made women less than men by nature.”¹¹ Accordingly, the story follows the familiar “European drama of self-knowledge,” and Sophia stands for liberated but troubled Chinese womanhood, assuming a status equivalent to Henrik Ibsen’s “Nora” (*A Doll’s House*) or Gustave Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary” in the course of Western literary modernity.¹²

Feminist readings, of course, are no longer limited to gender alone. Viewing “Miss Sophia’s Diary” in gendered terms entails more than just reading it as a sexual or emotional battle between the sexes. Feminist discussions remind us that gender—the discursive historical and social construct about sexual differences—enables inequitable relations of power not merely between the sexes but also among classes, races, and nations; they also call attention to “the slipperiness of language” and “the warring forces of signification within the text itself.”¹³ Sophia’s dilemma must thus be located as “simply one form of desire within a web of multiple, competing desires that are in turn embedded” in different political, cultural, and literary economies.¹⁴

Sophia’s desire for the *Nanyang* man is inevitably interwoven in the imaginative fabric of modern Chinese identity and nationalism, although women’s writings, of which “Miss Sophia’s Diary” is part, are hardly ever appreciated in such light. Sophia begins her task of self-representation by appropriating the Western-style confessional

¹¹Barlow, *I Myself am a Woman*, pp. 49-50.

¹²Barlow, “Gender and Identity in Ding Ling’s Mother,” in *Modern Chinese Women Writers: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Michael Duke (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), pp. 15.

¹³Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 2-7.

¹⁴Gayatri Gopinath, “Homo-Economics: Queer Sexualities in a Transnational Frame,” in *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*, ed. Rosemary Marangoly George (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 103.

narrative that emphasizes the “I” as a legitimate subject against the external world.¹⁵ The rise of autobiographical writings and “I-as-narrator” fiction is a manifestation of modernity that goes hand in hand with nation building programs.¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, keeping the eminent Chinese writer Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) in mind, even proposes that every “Third World text” is a “national allegory” of “the embattled situation” of the public’s repressed aspirations within their culture.¹⁷ However, this allegorical duty seemingly belongs exclusively to men. While the confessional fictions by male authors always assume a political identity, similar writings by women can at most create subjectivities.¹⁸ Despite female writers’ perceptive representations of modern Chinese lives—the plight of women in particular, they are often deemed to be fixated on their feminine selves and overt sentimentality; the enterprise of building nations, leading revolutions, or changing history is mostly placed on the shoulders of men.¹⁹

¹⁵ See David Goldknopf, *The Life of the Novel* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 11.

¹⁶ Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 92.

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” in *The Jameson Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 320. His concept of “national allegory” has invited many rejoinders, however. For example, Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3-25.

¹⁸ See Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992); Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 92. For instance, Yu Dafu’s 郁達夫 (1896-1944) short story “Sinking” (沉淪 *Chenlun*, 1921), regardless of its autobiographic, sexual and emotional overtones, has always been linked to Chinese nationalism. Owing a great debt to Japanese ‘I-novel’ (*shi-shosetsu*), the story

Like its male counterpart, the topic of female sexuality can present a fruitful opportunity to re-view the discursive production of modern Chinese identity and nationhood. Sophia's ambiguity and ambivalence toward sexuality must first be viewed in its historical context—"the particular limbo in which the quasi-liberated young woman found herself during the 1920s and 1930s when she was only partially freed from the traditional institutionalized modes of womanly behavior."²⁰ Telling the story in first-person narration and using the diary form, Ding Ling simultaneously sets up "the contrast between two incompatible orders" of modernity—the linear progressive concept of time and the fragmentary and elusive notion of self.²¹ From the very beginning, Sophia is depicted as a "Westernized" young woman, both in her foreign name (the only character with an English name in the story) and her occupation of a space outside of the traditional Chinese family structure as she is living independently by herself. Her Western name may have provoked a greater sense of iconoclast among her contemporary readers as the name "Sophia" was widely recognized as an early twentieth-century revolutionary symbol of modern womanhood, thanks to the immortalization of Russian anarchist Sophia Perovskaya in popular Chinese fiction.²²

combines the crisis of selfhood with the crisis of nationhood, sexuality (or masculinity) with patriotism. The protagonist's sexual impotence can be easily read as a metaphor for China's weakness, especially in the face of Japan.

²⁰ Feuerwerker, *Ding Ling's Fiction*, pp. 44.

²¹ Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 164.

²² The anarchist Sophia Perovskaya, being "notorious" for her assassination of Tsar Alexander II, became one of the most powerful cultural icons at the turn of the twentieth century. She was immortalized in Luo Pu's novel *Heroines of Eastern Europe* [*Dong'ou nübaojie*, 1902]. There was even a popular saying among anti-Qing (anti-Manchu dynasty) revolutionaries: "To marry, one should marry someone like

Unlike other docile female “Chinese” characters, Sophia’s egocentric bearings mark her as a troubled and troublesome woman from the start. “What infuriates me is the daily routine” (51), she writes in her journal. While everything in her current life “infuriates” her, she is desperate for “novelty,” even in the negative forms of “complaints and dissatisfactions,” though they are out of her reach as well [但我寧肯能找到些新的不快活，不滿足；只是新的，無論好壞，似乎都隔我太遠了] (51). This angry young woman is infected with tuberculosis, and her sickness may possess a social dimension, as Susan Sontag mentioned “every form of social deviation can be considered an illness.”²³ The convalescent Sophia is told by her doctor not to “read or think” and just “sleep and eat,” but she simply cannot do so [醫生說 頂好能多睡，多吃，莫看書，莫想事，偏這就不能] (50).

It is tempting to link Sophia’s physical condition to a metaphorical one. The modern woman is trapped in a restrictive structure, in which her failing body is undertaking a prescribed “recovery” to restore her healthy “self.” Sophia looks at herself in the mirror and is distressed by her inability to make out a real and constant image. All self-representations within this mental and physical confinement are distorted: “Glancing from one side you’ve

Sophia.” See Xia Xiaohong, *Late Qing Intellectuals’ Concept about Women* [*Wanqing wenren funü guan*] (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1995), pp. 113; Ying Hu, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 107; Jianmei Liu, *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women’s Bodies and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), pp. 10-12.

²³ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS as its Metaphor* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp. 56. Sontag also maintains that tuberculosis can produce “exacerbated sexual desire;” “having TB was imagined to be an aphrodisiac, and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction,” pp. 13.

got a face a foot long; tilt your head slightly to the side and suddenly it gets so flat you startle yourself... It all infuriates me [這是一面可以把你的臉拖到一尺多長的鏡子，不過只要你肯稍微一偏你的頭，那你的臉又會扁的使你自己也害怕... 這都可以令人生氣了又生氣] (51).” She talks about moving, but no actual move materializes. Sophia’s longing for newness and her discontent with her incarceration gradually give way to the form of a love affair with the exotic Ling Jishi. The “new” Singaporean man whom she meets on New Year’s Day (January 1st of the Western calendar), with an air of “the European medieval knights [歐洲中古的騎士風度],” offers her great expectations to break away from her cocoon (73). Meandering through the tension and emotion of “loving” Ling Jishi, Sophia herself becomes the site where the various aspects of modern womanhood, particularly compulsory heterosexuality and colonial fantasy, play off and against each other. In order to better understand the “colonized” *Nanyang* man, and all he may represent, Sophia’s own “sexuality” must first be thoroughly examined.

Modernity as Compulsory Heterosexuality

The earlier feminist discussions of Sophia draw our attention to the impact of modernity, of which Western-modeled “compulsory heterosexuality”—that enforces a binary ordering of sex, gender, and sexuality—becomes a mandatory element.²⁴ For Sophia to be “modern” she must follow and fantasize herself in this heterosexual economy. Embodying the qualities that a traditional Chinese man lacks, Ling Jishi opens Sophia’s eyes for the first time to “masculine beauty” in a Western sense.

That tall one is really pretty. For the first time, I
found myself really attracted to masculine beauty.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

I'd never paid much attention before. I've always felt that it was enough for men to be glib, witty, and cautious; that's about the extent of it. But today as I watched the tall one, I saw how a man could be cast in a different, a noble, mold... (55)

那高个儿可真漂亮，这是我第一次感觉到男人的美，从来我还没有留心到。只以为一男人的本行是会说话，会看眼色，会小心就够了。今天我看了这高个儿，才懂得男人是另铸有一种高贵的模型 ...

Coming out of a “noble” and “different” mold, the *Nanyang* man makes his Chinese counterparts “look so insignificant and clumsy” and even “pitiful” by comparison [我看出在他面前的雲霖顯得多麼委瑣，多麼呆拙……我真要可憐雲霖] (55). Being a sensitive young man, Sophia's other suitor Weidi is completely devoted to her. However, he is a far cry from the “ideal” of modern masculine beauty that Sophia learns to revere. Although she often relents and comforts Weidi in a “sisterly way,” she considers his masochist tears nuisances on the one hand, but, on the other hand, is secretly amused by the sadistic pleasure of making him cry.

I teased him mercilessly until he burst into tears. That cheered me up, so I said, “Please, please! Spare the tears. Don't imagine your sister is so feminine and weak like other women that I can't resist a tear... If you still want to cry, return home and do it. I'm disgusted whenever I see tears...” ... He just curled up in the corner of the chair, as tears from who knows where streamed openly and soundlessly down his face. While this pleased me, I was still a little

ashamed of myself. So I caressed his hair in a sisterly way and told him to go wash his face. He smiled through his tears (54).

我便故意去捉弄，看到他哭了，我却快意起來，並且說：「請珍重點你的眼淚吧，不要以為姊姊像別的女人一樣脆弱得受不起一顆眼淚……還要哭，請你轉家去哭，我看見眼淚就討厭...」他只蜷在椅角邊老老實實無聲的去流那不知從哪裏得來的那末多的眼淚。我，自然，得意夠了，又會慚愧起來，於是用着姊姊的態度去喊他洗臉，撫摩他的頭髮。他鑲著淚珠又笑了。

Weidi can be seen as a typical “masochist”: a passive, infantile character whose fantastic submission to the mother figure is interspersed with suspense, fear, loss, and punishment.²⁵ Tears, as Steve Neale argues with regard to melodrama, are more than a signification of “powerlessness” but also a suggestion of “narcissistic power in implying an Other who will respond.”²⁶ Crying always involves dual aspects of performance and response, expecting identification with an understanding audience who internalizes and sympathizes with such pain. This suffering male figure, no matter how authentically Chinese he might be, is not what Sophia, a “modern” woman, is supposed to desire.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Sacher-Masoch: An Interpretation*. Jean McNeil, trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1971); also see Kaja Silverman, “Masochism and Subjectivity,” *Framework* 12 (1980): 2-9.

²⁶ Steve Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screen* 27, no.6 (1986): 22. Also see Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 127.

Rather, Sophia's initiation to modernity lies in her participation in the heterosexual economy with the "different" *Nanyang* man. Asking Ling Jishi to teach her English as an excuse, Sophia keeps her "dream" man around, "enmeshing herself in wonderful fantasies" for days and nights (56). In fact, the most arresting aspect in her relationships with Ling Jishi and Weidi is neither the contrast between familial and sexual dynamics that she plays out through them, nor is it the matter of her contempt for a Chinese man and her fancy for a "Westernized" one, but rather her internalized self-image as a woman whose sexuality can only be defined by pairing with a man.

Sophia's desire for Ling Jishi also exposes the fundamental structure of her paralysis and sickness. Her sexual frustrations are caused by "her social position as a Chinese woman who is bound by centuries of sexual etiquette."²⁷ Sophia describes her needs to be both a "respectable" and a "modern" woman, yet her moralist and modernist selves are constantly at war with each other. "I guess this fairy-tale like affair can never come true," Sophia notes. "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 [我估定這像傳奇中的事是難實現了。難道我去找他嗎？一個女人這樣放肆，是不會得好結果的。何況還要別人能尊敬我呢。] (57)". While Sophie defiantly proclaims her passionate desires, she does not or cannot feel free to indulge them. Heterosexual attraction, in Sophia's mind, has opened the floodgate of self-doubt, self-restraint, and self-denial:

How could I admit to anyone that I gazed at those
two provocative [lips] like a hungry child eyeing
sweets? I know very well that in this society I'm

²⁷ Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 165.

forbidden to take what I need to gratify my impulses and desires even when it clearly wouldn't hurt anybody... (55)

我能告訴人嗎，我是用一種小兒要糖果的心情在望著那惹人的兩個小東西。但我知道在這個社會裏面是不准許任我去取得我所要的來滿足我的衝動，我的慾望，無論這於人並沒有損害的事...

In Sophia's tumultuous romances with Ling Jishi and Weidi, she comes face to face with her confusion about love, which is labeled entirely in heterosexual terms; however, her fulfillment of love comes not from a man but from a woman. She wants only someone "who can really understand her (52)," and she has found this soul-mate in Sister Yun. In the good old days, Sophia would "trick Sister Yun into babying and fondling her" by "whimpering about the most trivial dissatisfactions to work on her tearful anxiety [為了想蘊姊撫摩我，我伏在桌上想到一些小不滿意的事而啾啾唧唧的哭]" (71). They would spend the nights lying in the French Park while Sister Yun sang the romantic opera "Peony Pavilion" [牡丹亭] (72). Sister Yun is the source of sympathy and validation for Sophia, as Yun not only provides unconditional support but also responds to Sophia's problems without passing any moral judgment (71). Writing her diary for Sister Yun, Sophia endeavors to report her thoughts to and recapture the fond memories of her beloved friend (73). The journal, in this regard, is a literary work by a woman for a woman.

Consequently, Sophia is often perceived as a liberated Chinese woman who "is capable of desiring women as well as men,

and speaks of her body and sexuality with a new openness.”²⁸ While “her desire for Ling Jishi is physical, combative, and corrosive to her own sense of self-worth, her love for Sister Yun is emotional, reciprocal and conducive to self-validation.”²⁹ Unfortunately, the flowering female paradise is fated to be lost once the “modern” heterosexuality plants its seed of supremacy. Sister Yun dies young, probably due to her miserable marriage to an “ashen-faced man,” who is the elder brother of Weidi (72). Marriage, the ultimate “happy ending” for modern lovers, may not provide the joy and satisfaction that women are taught to believe.

Sophia initially tries to create the same dynamics that nurtured her previous relationship with Sister Yun with a man. By offering Weidi her diary, Sophia hopes that she can make him “understand” her, and finally, she can “become the most beloved and beautiful woman in the world, the woman of his desires” [假使葦弟知道我...我將替他願望那世界上最可愛，最美的人] (74). Weidi, possessing as much “feminine” sense and sensibility as a man can, is still unable to forsake his male pride and prejudice. Interpreting the diary in typical heterosexual terms, he fails to fathom the subjectivity of Sophia and misreads it as a personal rejection and a declaration of her love for Ling Jishi (74). Sophia’s writings, executed in the Western-form confessional narrative that is supposed to represent the modern subject, remain incomprehensible to a man because his reading depends upon male language and heterosexual ideology. The problem of Sophia displays a similar feminist outcry by Luce Irigaray who “argues that women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself,” since women

²⁸ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, pp. 172.

²⁹ Feng, *The New Woman*, pp. 154.

exemplify the “unrepresentable” category in the “phallogocentric” signifying system.³⁰ When Sophia asks, “Can I name what I really need? [我能說得出我真實的需要是些什麼呢]” (56), the question can be directed towards not solely her inadequate self but also the existing “symbolic order”: Can the “male” language truthfully signify the need of a woman?

Sophia realizes that the “love” she experienced with Sister Yun cannot possibly be replicated and translated into her relationships with her two suitors (72). Yet, she is not willing to surrender, and she cannot “allow herself to be like other women who faint into their men’s arms” [我不能像別的女人一樣暈倒在她那愛人的臂膀裏!] (79). Indeed, many female writings of the May Fourth period “celebrate the intense affections between women” that depart from the norm of heterosexual romance.³¹ During the 1920s, “intimate female relationships gained unprecedented topicality in China” and were publicly discussed, for the very first time, in terms of “the neologism same-sex love (*tongxing ai*) in the major intellectual journals on the women question, gender, sexuality, and education.”³² The connection between Sophia and Sister Yun manifests the complexity of sexuality. To generalize this female bonding as “lesbianism” in a Western sense can be problematic, however. Without an appropriate term for now, it nonetheless signifies a form

³⁰ Luce Irigaray, quotes in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 14.

³¹ Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson, eds., *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women’s Literature from the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 19.

³² Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 127.

of female intimacy that is replaced and even destroyed by the Western discourse of heterosexuality.

As Sophia gradually accomplishes her goal of winning over Ling Jishi's affection, she realizes that Western-style ideology does not deliver the promise of obtaining her own autonomy as a modern woman. It is the same old patriarchal oppression of women in spite of its elegant and misleading package. In particular, Ling Jishi symbolizes a type of colonial fantasy within this heterosexual economy that Sophia eventually despises, which is discussed in the next section.

Modernity as Colonial Fantasy

Within the binary heterosexual framework, Sophia's "object" of desire Ling Jishi is usually considered as the personification of the West and masculinity in contrast to the Chineseness and femininity of her own or Weidi.³³ However, Ling Jishi is not a Westerner but an ethnic Chinese from then British colonial Singapore. If Sophia's candid diary undermines the dramatic quest for self-knowledge of a modern Chinese woman, how does she learn about her "self" through desiring a Chinese man from another country? This issue of race and nationality is an overlooked aspect that deserves further exploration.

³³ For example, Feuerwerker states that "Ling Jishi is both enhanced and tainted by Western connotations (in fact, being from Singapore, he is only ambiguously Chinese). Tall and slim, he has a white complexion, bright red and tempting soft lips—an important focus for Sophia's fantasies—and hopelessly 'Western values.'" Feuerwerker, *Ding Ling's Fiction*, pp. 28. In addition, Liu claims that "Sophia's fantasy is not exactly about a Caucasian man but a Chinese man with a Caucasian man's sex appeal... Sophia ends up rejecting Ling Jishi, and in doing so, she also bids farewell to her own fantasies about the Caucasian knight." Liu, *Translingual Practice*, pp. 172.

Sophia's obsession with this *Nanyang* man is deeply rooted in her own quest for a modern self. The desire to represent the national "other" is linked to the power and knowledge nexus. Sophia's desire to be "a self-sustaining, autonomous, and sovereign subject" and her sexual desire for Ling Jishi can be interpreted as a "colonial fantasy."³⁴ In this case, the fantastic "other" is a colonized and Westernized Chinese man, who falls somewhere between China and the West. Examining the attraction and tension between Sophia and Ling Jishi, thus, invites a different understanding of Chinese modernity besides the readily conceived binary paradigms of East and West, female and male, femininity and masculinity.

Desire is often constructed in terms of what is different from the self and what, therefore, needs to be displaced, excluded, and debased.³⁵ After suffering years of the onslaught of Western "civilization," it seems only natural that the May Fourth intellectuals would seek a reference point from which to reconstitute some sense of Chinese cultural superiority, especially with the advent of a self-imposed complete Westernization. The Chinese writers did not have to stretch far beyond their own experiences and discovered this "other" image in the *Nanyang* Chinese diasporas, phenomena created in part by the same Western dominance they sought to address.

Nanyang, literally meaning "Southern Ocean," is the historical Chinese term for the maritime trade area that is comparable to today's "Southeast Asia." Even though the term is still commonly used at present, what was regarded as *Nanyang* at the turn of the twentieth century was a vast region of Euro-American colonies including the Malay Archipelago, as well as many islands in the

³⁴ Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 14.

³⁵ Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 169.

Pacific and Indian Oceans. Before modern times, many of these indigenous cultures included a substantial ethnic Chinese population and were in tributary relationships with Chinese dynastic empires, whose cultural hegemony was replaced by Europe only after the dawn of colonialism. Nonetheless, *Nanyang* was never a unified political or national entity. It existed mainly in Chinese geographic and textual convention, with its constituent and meaning changing from time to time.³⁶

In the familiar faces from *Nanyang*, elements of the Chinese self exist, but they are also alienated. In certain ways, *Nanyang* was more “modernized,” yet at the same time more repressed in subjugation to Western colonial power. They benefited from the material and economic developments of their colonial rulers. However, the price seemed to be a “loss of soul,” a harbinger of the potential price of modernity that China might eventually have to pay. Viewing the successful yet subjected *Nanyang*, Chinese intellectuals seemingly find an image that is both desirable and revolting. The *Nanyang* label becomes the sign for the love-hate relationship that the aspiring Chinese have for modernization, which always means Westernization and comes in the form of colonization. It is through the course of longing, conquering, and eventually denouncing these “colonized” characters of modernity that a fragile sense of positive identity can germinate.

That these clashing notions would evince themselves in tales of sexual yearning is not surprising. Erotic and political desires often reinforce one another. What seems to be an erotic gaze—Sophia’s

³⁶ For a discussion of the historical term *Nanyang*, see Aaron K.W. Chan 陳佳榮, “*Nanyang xinkao*” 南洋新考 [A New Note on *Nanyang*] in *Asian Culture* 亞洲文化 16 (June 1992); Pin-tsun Chang, “The First Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century,” in *Emporia, Commodities and Entrepreneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, c. 1400-1750*, eds. Roderich Ptak and Dietmar Rothermund (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991).

checking out “the white delicate features, fine thin lips, and soft hair” of Ling Jishi—may signify something more than just a sexual look. It can demonstrate the “inextricability of politics in the history of nation-building” as an inevitable story “of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, or economic interests that should or should not come together.”³⁷

The “colonial relation that is established with the colonized” is always embedded in the processing of “unconscious” fantasy and desire.³⁸ The colonized object, rendered as the “inferior” one, is emasculated in symbolic relation to the colonizing subject, perceived as the “superior” power, which simultaneously feeds back into the sexual fantasies of both the dominated and dominator. While it is surely not the only way to read modern Chinese literature, the strand of “ethnic” element must be integrated into the whole evaluation of sex and gender in literary representations. *Nanyang* Chinese, for better or worse, provide a surrogate for this colonial fantasy in the mix.

The romance between Sophia and Ling Jishi brings out the issues of “sexual politics,” in which desire and desirability, femininity and masculinity are reconditioned and redistributed along the lines of nation, ethnicity, and culture in terms of power relations.³⁹ The allure of the *Nanyang* man, first and foremost, lies in his ambiguous status of “Chineseness” that is molded by Western ideals into the form of a gorgeous body. He is personalized in the figure of a “chivalric European medieval knight” with “his own special Eastern gentleness [東方特長的溫柔]” (73). Yet he is also the embodiment of a

³⁷ Doris Sommer, “Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 75.

³⁸ Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, pp. 2.

³⁹ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, pp. 172.

colonial “capitalist,” a model of Chinese modernity that is, in Sophia’s eyes, seductive but soulless. When she realizes that “in this posh, beautiful form” resides “a cheap, ordinary soul,” Sophia is “overwhelmed with regret” (68).

Our recent conversations have taught me a lot more about his pathetic ideas. What does he want? Money. A young wife to entertain his business associates in the living room, and several fat, fair-skinned, well-dressed little sons. What does love mean to him? Nothing more than spending money in a brothel, squandering it on a moment of carnal pleasure, or sitting on a soft sofa fondling perfumed women’s bodies, a cigarette between his lips, his right leg crossed casually on his left one, laughing and talking with his friends. When it’s not fun anymore, hell with it; he just runs home to his little wife. He’s passionate about the Debate Club, playing tennis matches and studying abroad at Harvard, becoming a diplomat, an important statesman, or inheriting his father’s business and doing the rubber trade. He wants to be a capitalist... that is the extent of his ambition! (68)

在他最近的談話中，我懂得了他的可憐的思想；他需要的是什麼？是金錢是在客廳中能應酬買賣中朋友們的年輕太太，是幾個穿得很標緻的白胖兒子。他的愛情是什麼？是拿金錢在妓院中，去揮霍而得來的一時肉感的享受，和坐在軟軟的沙發上，擁著香噴噴的肉體，抽著煙卷，同朋友們任意談笑，還把左腿疊壓在右膝上；不高興時便拉倒，回到家裡老婆那裡去。熱心於演講辯會，網球比賽，留學哈佛，做外交官，公使大臣，或

繼承父親的職業，做橡樹生意，成資本家... 這便是他的志趣！

Simply imitating the modern West in superficial ways is never enough. Under the dazzling sheen of material wealth and Western prestige, from playing tennis to attending Harvard University to making money in business, Ling Jishi is always a “colonized” object but never a sovereign subject. Despite the “modern” packaging, a “soulless” copy is not the solution to Sophia’s problems. Her disappointment is as much about Ling Jishi’s being a shallow man as colonial modernity’s being an empty promise for a fulfilling future.

Nevertheless, not only what Ling Jishi may symbolize but also how he is textually represented should be taken into consideration. If language constitutes the imaginable domain of subjectivity, Sophia has no other way but to express herself and describe others than through the “phallogocentric” economy of signification.⁴⁰ In her attempt to appropriate her “modern” identity, Sophia also finds herself re-endorsing rather than rebelling against the social restrictions placed on her gender. There is no language for female desire in the system. In her diary writing, she has to internalize a male-centered consciousness even as she strives to confront both traditional Chinese gender codes and Western heterosexual role models. The male gaze, once adopted by Sophia, exerts insidious influence on her conception and performance of gender. Throughout the diary Sophia transports the “phallogocentric” language of desire into her fantasy of the *Nanyang* man, fragmenting him into body parts of “white delicate face” and “soft red lips,” and hence, turning him into a “feminized” sexual object.

⁴⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2004).

There is much more at stake in this gendered language appropriation, however. The way that Sophia takes in and writes about Ling Jishi is more than just to “overturn the paradigm of man-as-gaze and woman-as-sex object,” as most discussions on this story have focused.⁴¹ Sophia not only assumes the “masculine” gaze but also the “superior” Chinese nationality. In spite of the chaotic situation, China was still an “independent” country, and in fact, a time-honored and enlightened civilization, which was once the paragon of the other *Nanyang* communities. The constitution of Sophia’s erotic desire hence consists of two modes of differentiation, the national and the sexual. Their relationship is destined to be sexualized according to their national origin and political position.

If the colonized culture is feminine, and the feminine is colonized, the nature of femininity and the nature of the colonized can only be configured as one and the same thing in representation.⁴² This equivalent position, in the case of Sophia, puts her readily in the mindset of a colonizing and masculine subject—“the other culture is always like the other sex.”⁴³ Ling Jishi, therefore, can only be represented as a feminized object. Revealingly, Sophia’s account of her pursuit of the *Nanyang* man is heavily invested in the “colonial” metaphors of conquest and unconditional submission.

Now I’m concentrating all my energy on strategy; it’s like battling with someone. I desire something, and I must find a tactic that gets it offered to me voluntarily. Yes, I understand myself completely... I want to possess him. I want unconditional surrender

⁴¹ Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, pp. 164.

⁴² Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, pp. 56.

⁴³ Ibid.

of his heart. I want him kneeling down in front of me, begging me to kiss him. (59)

我把所有的心計都放在這上面，好像同什麼東西搏鬥一樣。我要那樣東西，我還不願去取得，我務必想方設計讓他自己送來。是的，我瞭解我自己... 我要佔有他，我要他無條件的獻上他的心，跪著求我賜給他的吻呢。

Sophia realizes she is a woman, but a Chinese woman who has the urge to strategically “conquer” the other. Above all, it is Sophia who chases after Ling Jishi, starts the courtship, and terminates the relationship.

Her final rejection of the *Nanyang* man, to deny him sexual intimacy, exposes not merely the triumph of a woman’s right, but also a victory over the fantasy of colonial modernity, through which the Chinese subject, however troubled and tormented, retains its own sovereignty. In many ways, Ling Jishi also brings to mind the ardent reformers at the turn of the twentieth century, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), who believed in a coalesced modernization with “Chineseness” as the future for the country’s salvation. They advocated the famous slogan “Chinese knowledge should remain as the body, and the Western learning be used for practical development” (*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*). Like the flirtatious yet flawed Ling Jishi, the Chinese body with Western practices proved to be a futile effort as well.

Sophia is still by herself as the diary ends. Yet she feels that she has “won,” for she finally sees “how pathetic and ludicrous” her efforts were (79). She realizes that “the ‘beauty’ that has been the center of her tangled dreams for months has dissolved away, revealed as nothing more than the image of a tall man’s exquisite bearing” [我這幾月來所縈縈於夢想的一點「美」反縈縈了，這個美便是那

高個兒的豐儀] (79). Although it might be a lonely and unknown path, Sophia chooses her own independence at last, instead of obsessing with a colonial fantasy.

Through the story of a Chinese subject's desire for a *Nanyang* object, the narrative of Chinese modernity appears even more complicated. Sophia's problems have not gone away. Neither did those of the Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century. The national dynamic may partially explain why modern Chinese fictional characters, whether male or female, are often fascinated by the colonized, feminized, and objectified *Nanyang* others. Sophia indeed is not alone. Eileen Zhang's 張愛玲 (1920-1995) "Red Rose and White Rose" 紅玫瑰與白玫瑰 [*Hong meigui yu bai meigui*] is another case in point. Like Sophia's dilemma, the novella recounts the love affairs of a bourgeois married man, who is torn between his desire for a *Nanyang* woman—the sensual and passionate "red rose"—and his loyalty to his Chinese wife—the chaste and meek "white rose." Realizing the shallowness of the former and the virtue of the latter, the protagonist comes to his senses and returns to be a decent family man at the end.

Conclusion

In the onset of love, Sophia struggles to recover her "self" in the hostile modern world. Despite her failure to connect with either Ling Jishi or Wedi, she feels "victory," howbeit "sorrowful" and full of tears (79). At this point of revelation, neither does she need to write the diary anymore nor need it as a vent or consolation. Her diary reveals that the Western discourse of modernity privileges only one form of subjectivity—a masculine and colonial kind that is affirmed by a feminized "other" positioned antagonistically to the self. It is this male-centricity—highlighted by compulsory heterosexuality and colonial fantasy—that colors the formation of the modern Chinese identity.

While any discussion of gender and sexuality also implicates discussion of ethnicity,⁴⁴ the promotion or denunciation of identity politics has never been the agenda of this article. In their imaginative creations, writers often need an “other,” either as a superior “ideal” or an inferior “object,” be it knowingly or unintentionally, to define oneself.⁴⁵ What is imperative about literary representations of gender and nationality is not that a particular work can be shown to be sexist or racist. Rather it is that literary texts can call many established ideas about such categories into question and unravel their development throughout history. Re-reading “Miss Sophia’s Diary” along these lines is an endeavor to look at both China and *Nanyang* anew. The ethnic and spatial elements that are rooted in the literary images, along with the prevalent issues of sex and gender, further open up new subject positions from which to look at a multifaceted Chineseness that has been constantly evolving and will continue to evolve over time. After all, literary expressions reveal not only how Chinese see the “Other,” but more importantly, how Chinese see themselves.

⁴⁴ Williams and Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, pp. 17.

⁴⁵ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Finding Feminist Readings: Dante-Yeats,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 18.

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