



Escapee Veiled in a Secluded Suicide: Achieving Autonomy in Lin Yutang's *Moment in Peking*

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Abstract

Lin Yutang's Moment in Peking (1939), a work of fiction set between the tumultuous years of 1900 and 1938, is a socio-historical pedagogy and xiao shuo, a source of entertainment. Lin was an internationally successful bilingual writer who wrote more than thirty-five novels; after moving to the United States by invitation, Lin became China's literary spokesman and unofficial cultural representative.

Lin combats the mystery of the Chinese woman common within his Orientalist and xenophobic American audience by humanizing his characters as complex entities who achieve autonomy. I will employ a historical-feminist analysis to understand two minor characters' (Silverscreen and Redjade) endeavors to escape by examining Chinese proverbs and shifting cultural perspectives in China while addressing Western feminist influences. Silverscreen, a bondmaid to the eldest Yao son, and Redjade, a cousin to the Yao sisters, struggle as outsiders to the Yao family. These women integrate feminist convictions, furnish a commentary on social structures, and attempt to modify traditional gender roles.

Suicide in Lin Yutang's Moment in Peking serves as an escape from a woman's body in order to establish autonomy, as the intersectional characters, Silverscreen and Redjade, struggle with social mobility and a sacrificial submersion into silence.

Lin Yutang's Works: The Chinese Novel, The International Author, and His Audience

Lin Yutang's Moment in Peking: A Novel of Contemporary Chinese Life is part pedagogical socio-historical novel and part *xiao shuo*, a source of entertainment. Published in 1939 for an American audience, this fictional plot is set in China between the tumultuous years of 1900 and 1938, and follows an esteemed family as they survive the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the Boxer Uprising, the Republican Revolution, the Warlord Era, rising conflicts between the Nationalist and Communist parties and, finally, the genesis of the Sino-Japanese War. In part, the novel explicitly explains Chinese history, culture, and political movements to a non-Chinese audience in order to combat xenophobic

stereotypes about the Chinese. This paper will utilize a feminist lense to analyze two minor characters, Silverscreen and Redjade, and the historical implications and sociological circumstances which contribute to their suicides.

Lin¹ Yutang (1895-1976) was an internationally successful bilingual writer who wrote more than thirty-five novels, yet was also a husband, father, cosmopolitan, radical thinker, China's spokesman and unofficial cultural representative to America, cynic, comedian, translator, philologist, administrator, creator of words,² political critic, educator, and much more. Son of a Christian pastor, Lin began studying English from a young age; he was a graduate of St. John's University in Shanghai, studied comparative literature at Harvard University, and obtained his Ph.D. from Leipzig with a thesis he wrote in German (Chua ix). To Chinese readers, Lin embodied "a Westernized Chinese gentleman" who grew up in an impoverished family (Qian "Legacy" 2); to Western readers, Lin was regarded as a Chinese philosopher and often refused to have his photograph printed because he did not "want to spoil his readers' 'illusion' of him as a grand old wise man of the East, with a flowing beard" (Biographical 4). Lin lived extendedly in seven countries and was known to have claimed "all the world my home" (Chua xxii). His eclectic compositions and democratic stances rendered him a man blacklisted who was forced to move away from Beijing in 1926 (Qian "Legacy" 7). After the Communists claimed power in 1949, and during the subsequent Mao-era, Lin's writing was banned in China in favor of radical writers such as Lu Xun and Hu Shi; however, Lin's writing began to resurge within mainland China in 1986.³

Pearl S. Buck⁴ met Lin in China, was immediately engrossed by him, and invited him to move to America to write specifically for an American audience. Lin published *My Country and My People* (1935) and instantly became China's new cultural spokesperson; his following novels *The Importance of Living* (1938), *Moment in Peking* (1939) and *The Wisdom of China and India* (1942) "made Lin almost a household name in America" (Qian "Legacy" 1). These novels were

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1. In China, the surname is placed before the given name. Therefore, Lin is his family name and Yutang is his first name. Although Lin published multiple books written in English through John Day Company, he always kept his name in the same order as in accordance with Chinese culture: Lin Yutang. For this reason, the author will introduce important figures and fictional characters with their surname followed by the given name.
 2. In his novels, Lin creates new words when he feels one is lacking. In *Moment in Peking* Lin creates the word milkenergy via translation: a word which indicates the usage of one's utmost strength. This word is Lin's variation of 吃奶的劲 (chī nǎi de jìn) literally *eat milk -possessive particle--* or 吃奶的力气 (chī nǎi de lìqì), literally *eat milk -possessive particle - strength force*. Lin also coined words in his native tongue: "Since Lin didn't believe the Chinese language had a term adequate to express the idea he had come to associate with *humor*, holding that 滑稽 (*huaji*) meant 'trying to be funny' . . . [He] coined the term 幽默 (*youmo*), and it caught on. Lin did this, in part, to promote its discussion and thereby enhance cultural education and spiritual development" (Huson 36).
 3. A publishing company in Chongqing (重庆人民出版社) published a collection of his works in 1986.
 4. Buck's fiction, *The Good Earth* (1931), served as the stand-in encyclopedia for non-Chinese Americans to "all things Chinese."

published in America in the decades following the Chinese Exclusion Act⁵, in part, to serve as an exposure to Chinese culture and to dismantle stereotypes about the Chinese.

Moment in Peking: A Feminist and Anti-Orientalist Novel

The most discernible indication of *Moment in Peking* as a pedagogical tool is that it includes cultural explanations within its introduction; one of which incorporates an explanation for how to pronounce Chinese names, a family tree of major characters, and some Chinese terms of address. These blurbs aid the non-Chinese in better understanding social dynamics within the novel. Specifically, Lin intertwines several pages about China's relevant historical and political implications to inform his reader, such as when he describes the reasons why the family is fleeing from war in the first chapter or when he initiates the second section with an explanation of the fall of the Qing dynasty. Additionally, Lin subtly explains Chinese literary movements and elegantly translates proverbs into his character's dialogue. Most importantly, Lin's didactic novel deliberately expresses the complex human nature of his characters set in a moment of time; his characters are not independent of one another, but are rather interlocked at such an intimate level in promoting feminism and combatting Orientalism that the text cannot be fully appreciated without analyzing them concomitantly.

Lin Yutang contests the xenophobic perceptions of Chinese by humanizing his characters in how they live their lives. Eleven years before the fictional birth of Silverscreen, the United States passed the Page Law which "in 1875 ... barred Chinese women from entering the country, partly on the grounds that it was too difficult to distinguish between a Chinese woman and a prostitute" (Chua *xiii*). Lin's book contrasts against his audience's conceptualization of China as a mysterious land far away and Chinese people as this othered⁶ entity. Even though Orientalism was not a formal theory yet,⁷ Lin still employs his characters as a pedagogical tool to dismantle pervading American perceptions of Chinese people. China was dominated by other countries; by 1900, the scars were still glistening in China's underbelly from losing three wars⁸ and China

5. This act barred all Chinese laborers from legally immigrating to America. Lin's controversial novel, *Chinatown Family*, addresses a Chinese-American family living in America during such a discriminative time period.

6. Edward Said's masterpiece *Orientalism* critiqued xenophobic notions of othering Asian peoples: "There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power" (Said 36). Here, the term "Oriental" is othering in painting peoples from Asia (or the East generally) as an exotic and/or foreign entity. "For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (Said 43).

7. Edward Said's *Orientalism* was published in 1978, two years following Lin's death.

8. The Opium Wars (1839-42, 1856-60) and the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5.

was losing de facto economic control and land.⁹ Citizens became increasingly disappointed and disgruntled with their imperial government,¹⁰ and in this time, intellectuals were fearful that China was being ripped asunder: their country was losing its sovereignty.

While Lin's expository writing explicitly raises Americans' awareness of an ethical portrayal of China, he also distinctly criticizes the patriarchy within China by revealing women in their complexity. Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" in part revealed the myth of the woman in that men too often discredited woman of her complexity as instead being this unapproachable other,¹¹ this vast mystery. Lin was one of the rare¹² writers of the early twentieth century who affirmed "woman [as] a human being is not to impoverish man's experience" (Beauvoir 1272). Published in 1939, *Moment in Peking* occurs during the first wave of Western feminism.¹³ Lin criticizes the patriarchy and how it affects women's rights and social constructs within late dynastic and early Republican China:

How many girls in those days had dreams that were never fulfilled and ambitions that were never satisfied, hopes that were thwarted on the threshold of marriage, and later lay dormant in the breast and were expressed in the form of hopes for their sons! How many wanted to go on with their studies and could not! How many wanted to go to college and could not! How many wanted to marry the type of young man that they cared for and could not! ... These were the lovely unsung women, the silent heroines, who married husbands either worthy or unworthy of them, and whose record was left for posterity only in a simple tombstone standing before an earthen mound among wild berries and thistles on some village hill. (Lin 269-270).

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9. As Qingdao (Tsingdao) was controlled economically by Germany from 1897 to 1914, Hong Kong was colonized by Great Britain from 1841 to 1997, and north-eastern China was subject 9 (cont.)...to Japanese invasion. This is by no means an exhaustive list of areas occupied during the Scramble for Concessions and the subsequent years.
 10. This immense dissatisfaction significantly contributed to a rise in anti-traditional stances and supported a surge in novel ideas -- free love, the outlawing of foot binding, a change in writing styles, and challenged Neo-Confucian doctrines -- interfused with utter despair and fear as Nationalists, Communists, and corrupt warlords contended for land and power.
 11. As Beauvoir notes in her analysis of the other, "there is mystery in the Black, the Yellow, in so far as they are considering absolutely as the inessential Other. It should be noted that the American citizen, who profoundly baffles the average European, is not, however, considered as being 'mysterious': one states more modestly that one does not understand him" (Beauvoir 1270).
 12. "There are some men (all too few) who aren't afraid of femininity" (Cixous 1952).
 13. Meanwhile, literary movements within China addressed women's rights, the most commonly accredited wave occurs during the New Culture Movement surrounding the May 4th Movement. These movements predominantly focused on eliminating foot-binding, promoting free love, and encouraging women's education. As education was commonplace for upper and middle-class women to be taught privately in the home, public education (and co-education) also began to increase among the wealthy.

Lin combats the mystery of woman specifically within his female characters. While Lin invokes women as a question of wonder -- “How many girls” -- thus a categorized mystery, Lin simultaneously rejects woman as a mystery by instead conjuring women in her complexity -- as someone with the ability to choose to study, to marry, to remain single, to be a supporter of free love.¹⁴ Despite Lin’s efforts to embody his female characters’ agency, he still reveals women in their entrapped role in society: Lin, a male author, writes these female characters into being; they are written into eternity by Old Yao engraving Silverscreen’s name into a tombstone and by carving Redjade’s poem into wood. When women pass away, they are eternalized by writing or in an amalgamation with nature, such as when Redjade is absorbed into the lake. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “[W]oman--like man--is a being rooted in nature; she is more enslaved to the species than is the male ... but in her as in him the given traits are taken on through the fact of existence, she belongs also to the human realm” (Beauvoir 1267). Lin humanizes women by describing them in conjunction with their various responsibilities and dreams; however, they still struggle to rise above the institutions enforced by society.

Silverscreen, a bondmaid to the eldest Yao son, and Redjade, a cousin to the Yao sisters, struggle as outsiders to the Yao family throughout the novel. These two women’s tragic endeavors integrate feminist convictions, furnish a commentary on social structures, and attempt to modify traditional gender roles. I will expand de Beauvoir’s critique of woman as a mystery into an analysis of how Lin utilizes his characters to combat othering in an Orientalist manner.

An Othering Language: Suicide

In addition to the issues Lin addresses within his novel, he also endures being othered as he operates within the institution of the oppressive English language. Depending on the language, Lin employed different tactics to write.¹⁵ To write in English, Lin must adhere to the syntax, grammatical rules, and the culture associated with the language. A predominant issue within English is its discrimination of race. Henry Louis Gates addresses the “non-Western” writer, raising the important question of whether writing can make a difference in combatting racism (Gates 66). Specifically, he notes that slave narratives “represent the attempt of blacks to *write themselves into being*” (Gates 57, emphasis original) while acknowledging that “Black people, we know, have not been ‘liberated’ from racism by their writings” (Gates 65). Like Gates’ argument that blacks attempt to utilize writing as a tool to “write themselves out of slavery,” I propose Lin’s English writing humanizes his Chinese characters in an effort

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14. Free love indicates the ability to choose one’s spouse as opposed to their parents employing traditional match-making to find a suitable partner.
 15. “In contrast to his polite and self-mocking tone, light-hearted jokes, and apolitical attitude that characterized his English writing, his writing in Chinese published during the same time period was often highly political, angry, impassioned, and even rebellious” (Yin 180).

to strip away the veil of the mystery of the Orient. Similar to how Lin suffers within an oppressive language, his characters Silverscreen and Redjade struggle to communicate in a language which others them; first, in that they both speak southern dialects in contrast with the Mandarin spoken by the family; second, as females operating within a patriarchal society.

Speaking in an othering language is to lack sovereignty; when women believe that they lack autonomy, suicide allows them the ability to become an escapee.¹⁶ In the context of early twentieth century Chinese culture, the suicides of Lin's two female characters contain intricate connotations. It cannot be confined into a binary of success and failure; rather, suicide must be understood in the circumstances surrounding the individual: for what reason would someone commit suicide? This paper will focus on two: the first is a defense of one's filial piety, whereas the second is an act of political protest: "[M]any saw the act of suicide itself as admirable and as effective in expressing loyalty, in bringing attention to an unjust situation, and in seeking revenge against one's oppressors" (Ropp 8). While there were critics¹⁷ of suicide, many still honored its filial connotation: a "widow killing herself after her husband's death was seen as acting both correctly and freely" (Hsieh 45). In a politically charged time in which the country itself is losing sovereignty, suicide is an attempt to achieve autonomy.

If the family is understood as an institution, it is a microcosm that serves as a model for the larger political regime of the country.¹⁸ To physically rebel against one's family is to protest the larger establishment. For an individual to voice personal convictions by ending one's own life, one rejects the political ideologies forced upon them.¹⁹ There is a Chinese proverb²⁰ which states: of any integrities, filial piety is the predominant virtue. Among the Han²¹ population, a child's body was believed to originate from the "parents' blood and bones. To show our respect and thankfulness to our parents, we were not entitled to harm our bodies without good reason, (not even to cut our hair)" (Meng 301).²² Suicide actively rebels against one's filial duty; by ending one's life, an individual actively destroys one's own parents' creation.

16. "I-woman, escapee" (Cixous 1946).

17. namely Yu Zhengxie, Mao Zedong, and Lu Xun

18. 家国同构 (Jiā guó tóng gòu) Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

19. One of China's holidays, the Dragon Boat Festival, is a national celebration which commemorates Qu Yuan's political suicide, protesting the Qin conquering of the Chu capital. This festival raises the issues of how suicide is still viewed in contemporary China and why suicide is viewed as the ultimate option of protest.

20. 百善孝为先 (bǎi shàn xiào wèi xiān)

21. China is composed of 56 ethnic groups. The Han composes the majority of the population and this paper refers to the Han when writing Chinese people, unless otherwise noted.

22. Various ethnic groups differently interpret this filial concept. For example, the Manchus, who ruled during the Qing dynasty, created one of their earlier mandates after they usurped the Ming dynasty that was to command their citizens 留头不留发, 留发不留头 (liú tóu bù liú fā, liú fā bù liú tóu) to choose between cutting one's hair off and styling it like that of the Manchus or being decapitated for political resistance. Yet, high- (and later, middle-) class Han women would bind their daughters' feet (foot binding was an excruciating practice which broke a girl's feet and bent the toes inward to create a "gilded lotus" which was valued for its erotic implications).

Silverscreen commits suicide as a political act in order to obtain autonomy and gain power over Yao taitai.²³ Redjade views herself as an outsider and withdraws in a filial manner in order for others to live without her burden. *Moment in Peking* offers a space for otherwise forgotten characters to be written alive, complete within all their complexities. Silverscreen and Redjade are to be understood as characters who integrate feminist convictions, furnish a commentary on social structures, and subtly attempt to modify traditional gender roles within the context of a socio-historical novel of the early twentieth century. Suicide in Lin Yutang's *Moment in Peking* serves as an escape from a woman's body in order to establish autonomy over oneself as the intersectional characters, Silverscreen and Redjade, exhibit via struggling with social mobility and a sacrificial submersion into silence.

Silverscreen: Sophisticated Servant Struggles for Social Mobility

The Yaos are a fictional, esteemed, wealthy family living in Peking during the final years of the Qing Dynasty. When the Boxers invade Peking in July of 1900, the Yaos flee to their southern home in Hangchow. The Yao family is in a secure enough financial position to leave with eight family members, four servants, and five carts. The family is instructed to bring very little before beginning what the children treat as a journey south. Silverscreen -- Tijen's personal maid -- disobeys. The protagonist of the novel, Mulan, "heard her mother scolding Silverscreen, a maid of sixteen in the other cart, for being overpainted and overdressed" (Lin Peking 5). Although the Yao family is fleeing during war, Silverscreen squanders time to dress well and to apply cosmetics. Yet, Yao taitai views this as an ostentatious act and reprimands Silverscreen for this conceited decision. Silverscreen's vain behavior is employed as an attempt to ascend her social status, as she increasingly obsesses over her appearance.

Yao taitai is "the mother [and] the ruler of the family. She was a woman in the middle thirties, broad-shouldered, square-faced, and inclined to be stout; and she spoke in a clear, commanding voice" (Lin 5). This authoritative figure decides matters for internal family affairs and has the ultimate power regarding the servants. One of Yao taitai's obligations is to quash quarrels among the servants and to ensure that the servants do not step out of line. Silverscreen often contests established boundaries: "Of all the maids in the house, [Silverscreen] was now the eldest [in her twenties] and she paid the most attention to her dress" (Lin 179). Typically, the oldest is regarded with the highest level of respect and yields the most power. However, due to Silverscreen's tactless tongue, she often has disputes among her co-workers; therefore, she is not granted the chief position among the servants. Rather, Yao taitai is increasingly vocal about her disapproval and intense dislike of Silverscreen.

In contrast to Yao taitai's stern views of Silverscreen, the eldest Yao son

23. 太太 (tāitāi): In dynastic and Republic China, taitai indicates the headmistress of the family, the head of the household; in modern days, the title refers to a wife.

becomes increasingly attached to his personal maid: “Although a bondmaid, she had learned the gestures and glances of a girl of the family. Tijen was charmed by these movements of a girl’s fingers smoothing her hair, turning her palm downward or inward in drooping gestures and showing her painted fingernails to the best advantage” (Lin 179). Silverscreen breaks binding social confines by pioneering a risqué relationship with Tijen in using flirtations similar to that of the Yao women. Her actions foremost deem her worthy of his attention and secondly, demonstrate how she envisions herself as a woman with power like that of a Yao family member. Silverscreen’s flirtations are not invisible to the keen eye of Yao taitai who perceives Silverscreen as a threat to her eldest son: “A little bondmaid like her must not be too ambitious” (Lin 189). This power contention is a factor in why the Yaos send Tijen alone to study abroad in order to develop his character. Alas, Silverscreen and Tijen maintain a reciprocal emotional investment despite their socio-economic differences.

The following scene is the first time Silverscreen alludes to death as a character who ultimately commits suicide. Before he leaves, Tijen approaches Silverscreen privately, asking if she will miss him:

‘That is easy,’ she said. ‘If your heart does not change, they cannot drive me away from this house. And if the worst comes, there is still death.’

‘Hush, you must not die,’ he said. ‘You must live and enjoy life together with me when I come back.’

‘Death is nothing extraordinary. Everybody must die sooner or later ... The only difference is whether one dies in a worthy manner or not.’ (Lin 179-180)

How Silverscreen utters death is a passive act, as she excludes the personal “I” twice, saying “there is still death” instead of directly stating she could die. Silverscreen has an urgency to express her loyalty in a willingness to die, yet distances herself by again avoiding the personal “I” by affirming a universal claim that all must die.

Per tradition, the quality of one’s afterlife is intertwined with one’s burial and com-memoration after death. As the Young Master of the Yao family, Tijen is guaranteed to be worshiped after death when his tablet is added into his family’s ancestral hall; however, Silverscreen will merely be another servant tumbling away like a leaf in the storm unless she can triumph in rising above her social class. Silverscreen flippantly speaks of a worthy death because she desires to be remembered post-mortem. Who remembers servants after they die? Their memory will fade quickly, as they must not reside within the family’s ancestral hall. If Tijen remembers her, and indeed returns for her, Silverscreen’s memory will veritably be preserved.

As a man, Tijen possesses the ability to secure Silverscreen’s immortality by solidifying her memory: Traditionally, the bride will leave her family’s house to join her husband’s family. After the marriage, she is considered part of the male family and no longer belongs to her biological family. “Semantically, marrying means ‘going home,’ which symbolically means that the marriage is the woman’s

permanent residence for the rest of her life” (Meng 304). By “going home,” Silverscreen can institute a secure future, an ideal stratum.

Despite their sentimental connection, Tijen cannot truly understand her predicament as a servant; he lacks the ability to conceptualize Silverscreen’s sentiment towards death because of his own high-class, male privilege. Tijen refutes Silverscreen’s response by attempting to silence her with two commands. Silverscreen refuses to be silenced, saying: “If one dies and there is someone to shed a tear over one’s grave, that is what I call a worthy death” (Lin 180). In a traditional Chinese funeral ceremony, a family member must remain beside the deceased one, wailing for days.²⁴ The metaphorical tears Silverscreen invokes are latent of those shed in mourning for a deceased loved one.

This foreshadowing of her death reveals her social class: “Now Silverscreen had talked of death only because it was a common mode of speech among servant girls” (Lin 180). Despite Silverscreen’s desire to appear like the Yao girls, her speech still belongs to that of an uneducated servant; servants are vocal and often utilize a threat of suicide to obtain objectives, whereas women of higher class often internalize their struggle. Because Tijen is unaccustomed to how maids speak of death, he reacts firmly: “‘Stop such talk!’ he said, quite frightened. . . . ‘What I hate most is to hear a pretty young girl talk of death!’” (Lin 180). Tijen reacts in a frightened manner because he, as a high-class male, is not familiar with conversing about death. By classifying Silverscreen as a girl, though he is three years her junior, he undermines her credibility as a mature woman and latently implies that she is naive.²⁵ He loathes hearing²⁶ beautiful females speak of death because it ruins the illusion of sophistication for him.

Although Tijen is unwilling to engage in her seemingly frivolous concern, Silverscreen’s resolve to elaborate on her thoughts about death demonstrates how she takes the liberty to create her own platform to speak and challenge the limitations of the patriarchal institution: “You don’t like to hear girls talk of death, but you have never been a girl yourself. A girl’s life is even cheaper than a man’s and there is nothing difficult about death” (Lin 180). In this moment, Silverscreen addresses the callous reality of how insignificant a girl’s life is. She labels her life as cheap which indicates a commodification of the female sex. Commodities, females, are that which are bought and sold by the consumers, males. A commoditized object lacks autonomy and thus lacks an individual voice. Silverscreen refuses to be this voiceless object even as she brings light to the subject; therefore, she concludes that as an inanimate, commoditized object one is already figuratively lifeless --i.e., dead-- so it is not difficult to die in a literal manner.

24. Depending on the importance of the deceased person, the number of days will change. “Because Redjade was a young girl, the mourning and prayers for her were to last only twenty-one days” whereas a headmistress’ funeral ceremonies may last up to three years (Lin 456, 461).

25. This issue of calling women “girls” is one which still persists in modern U.S. and Chinese culture. For readers interested in non-academic but informative resources, consider online *Bustle’s* article “Why We Need to Stop Calling Women Girls” or *Society Pages’* “Power, Mickey Mouse, and the Infantilization of Women.”

26. Hearing as opposed to listening

After Tijen leaves the country, Yao taitai “became more and more abusive, so that it was clear to Silverscreen that she had no choice but to leave sooner or later. Whenever she spoke of her, Yao [taitai] would refer to [Silverscreen] as ‘that shameless little whore’” (Lin 192). To reserve herself for Tijen, Silverscreen runs away and finds solace in the company of Mrs. Hua, her new landlord and compassionate companion. The family constitutes the central, most important aspect of one’s life; when Yao taitai rejects her, Silverscreen loses a social and physical place to reside, and a stable future. Once safe in the new abode, Silverscreen swears “revenge in her heart. She swore that if Tijen did come back, she would do all in her power to keep him from his mother” (Lin 215). The power struggle finally escalates into a tangible objective: Silverscreen desires to reverse the roles and become the master over Tijen.

Laboring to Achieve Autonomy

When he returns, Tijen funds Silverscreen’s essentials such as quilts and clothing, then gradually more frivolous items, such as jewelry, silk, and a Western painting of a nude woman; “To Silverscreen, whose one ambition was to tighten her hold upon Tijen and keep him from his mother, [the money] seemed like an extra weight in her hand” (Lin 244). Tijen’s gifts are a factor in how Silverscreen develops into a new, free woman who has “completely changed into a well-dressed, mature woman, versed in the arts of entertaining men” (Lin 231). As a newly sophisticated woman, Silverscreen finally reaches the apex of her chance for social mobility when her son, Poya is born: “In Chinese culture, having a son is a major contribution by the daughter-in-law to the family, as the son carries the family name” (Meng 304). Poya is indicative of his mother’s potential to finally rise socially because “Silverscreen had hoped for this. The birth of a grandson would complete her triumph and establish her in an unshakeable position” (Lin 254).

Silverscreen advises Tijen to not share the news of their child; however, in Tijen’s agitation against his mother, he reveals that “the rice is cooked” (Lin 254). This does not resolve Yao taitai’s ill intentions to Silverscreen; rather, she erupts in rage as she “had only one clear feeling now, that she, the mother, was defeated and Silverscreen, the maid, had won” (Lin 254). Whatever title Yao taitai assigns to Silverscreen, she cannot eradicate that Silverscreen is now secure as mother to the first Yao heir.

The taitai inevitably disrupts the power dynamic by sending servants to steal the firstborn. This, what Silverscreen fears the most, occurs when she is alone: “Lotung came with several women servants to her new house, and demanded in the name of the *Taitai* that she give up the baby” (Lin 256). At Silverscreen’s apparent dismay at being located, the dog immediately begins to growl, vocalizing her worry:

Hushing the dog, she stood over the cradle, facing them with her hands sheltering the baby, and demanded, “What do you mean?”

“Taitai’s orders,” replied Lotung. “This is a Yao family child,

and Taitai demands her grandson.”

“How?” she said. “The baby is mine. Young Master has said nothing about it. If the grandson is to be returned to the Yao family, there must be an arrangement.” (Lin 256).

Silverscreen is intent on providing a refuge for her son because she has been stripped of her shelter within the Yao family. The new house is not only indicative of what Silverscreen desires in status; rather, the house is a veiled sanctuary for her child to be harbored from those who have harmed her. When this new house is invaded, Silverscreen sacrificially positions herself over the cradle, exposing herself, in order to physically protect Poya. She then utilizes herself as a threat: “Don’t you dare touch my child, or you’ll have my life to reckon with” (Lin 256). She implies that if Poya is taken away, she will take drastic measures to retaliate, such as committing suicide.²⁷ Her social status resides within Poya; so long as she has custody over her son, she has a bartering point to become a mistress within the Yao family. If she loses her son, she forfeits all chance for social mobility, thus sovereignty. The servants ignore her seemingly common threat, restrain her, and steal her son.

With this realization that her own son does not belong to her, a capitulated Silverscreen weeps on her bed, cursing in her native tongue: “When Tijen came he found her lying in bed and moaning, ‘My son! My son!’” and decides to leave, so as not to concern himself with her woes. “Three days later he came again. . . . In some impatience he pushed the closed door of her room. It opened with difficulty and he had to use a little strength. When he got in he looked behind and saw Silverscreen. She had hanged herself” (Lin 259).

Readers are not allowed to witness Silverscreen’s last moments; instead, they perceive her through bifocal male lenses. Through the careful intentions of Lin Yutang (male-author), it is only when Tijen (man-master) returns, readers accompany Tijen in discovering Silverscreen already dead. Silverscreen’s passively portrayed suicide is shrouded with mystery; during Tijen’s absence, her actions and words are not recorded. Despite being discovered in such a voiceless state which renders her a passive entity, Silverscreen’s vocalicity was evident. Months earlier, she threatened Tijen with an implicit ultimatum: “‘I won’t die if you are true to me – I won’t die under any circumstances. But you must not stay away too long’” (Lin 180). Poya, the little Tijen, is stolen, Tijen has disappeared; both of Silverscreen’s options to gain social mobility have become obsolete. She, at last, is defeated and her physical appearance deteriorates; she has returned to a powerless state of being which lacks autonomy and, instead, exerts control over her life in the only way she can: by committing suicide.

27. Recollect that “death was a common mode of speech among servant girls” (Lin 180).

Suicide's Fruition

Tijen immediately blames his mother for Silverscreen's suicide, exclaiming "You killed her!" twice before committing the greatest unfilial act: "And you will pay for this. Her curse is upon you and upon this house. Her ghost will strike you one day, and follow you and harass you to the end of your days" (Lin 260). The house Tijen speaks of is not the physical dwelling they reside within, but instead signifies the family as a unit.²⁸ By cursing "the house," Silverscreen gains autonomy. Yao taitai does not blame herself for Silverscreen's suicide; instead, she vociferates that her own son has cursed her -- how could he! Tijen refutes the blame, saying "It is [Silverscreen] who cursed you and this house. And, mother, you deserve it!" (Lin 260). Yao taitai does not experience guilt for acting as a catalyst in Silverscreen's death; rather, she loses respect within the family: "Tijen could not forgive [his mother] now that Silverscreen was dead" (260). During Silverscreen's burial, he refuses to allow any of his family members to attend; he "had now rebelled against his whole family and was further out of his mother's reach than ever" (260). Silverscreen's ultimate ambition has been accomplished through her suicide; she has eternally separated Tijen from his mother. She has won.

When Old Yao discovers Silverscreen had taken her life, he blamed the mother for not taking her in. "After all," he said, "she is the mother of our grandson." And he went himself to see Silverscreen's grave and ordered some alterations, and said that a tablet should be put up in their family niche, on which were inscribed the words: "The seat of the spirit of Chang Silverscreen of Ningpo." So Silverscreen after her death was installed in the Yao family of spirits. (Lin 261)

Although Silverscreen is illiterate, she is immortalized by the writing on this tombstone, which secures her position as a Yao family member. In the afterlife, Silverscreen flaunts her newly claimed power by killing Tijen in order to gain a companion in the afterlife. Silverscreen reveals to Yao taitai that she was the cause of Tijen's death and instructs her to treat Poya fairly. A now humbled Yao taitai loses the ability to speak and the "servants were agreed that ... Tijen's curse upon his mother had come true. And now [Yao taitai] could not tolerate near her the presence of the little Poya" (Lin 383). Silverscreen successfully silences the once sovereign Yao taitai. Poya is the embodiment of Silverscreen's success in achieving autonomy; as years pass, he "became enraged and wanted to defend her against everybody. He knew already that he was the grandson of this Yao family and future owner of this prince's garden, and he meant to grow up to be a great man, to avenge his mother and put her portrait in the center" (Lin 383). Poya is the filial son, Silverscreen's creation who will fortify her honor.

Lin utilizes cultural and temporal contexts as a form of an institution to comment on Silverscreen: "A slight change of circumstance and standing,
28. In Chinese, 家 (jiā) semantically indicates family and/or home.

and [Silverscreen] would have held for life a position exactly similar to that of Mulan's mother--mistress of a huge fortune, an able housewife, and a devoted mother, perfect in her children's eyes" (Lin 259). Although Silverscreen is subject to a situation that is not ideal, she successfully obtains her own sovereignty as a result of her suicide. In conclusion, Silverscreen creates a realm of her own. The French feminist, Helene Cixous declares: "If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man, ... it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,' to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of" (Cixous 1953). Silverscreen rejects operating within the discourse of man after her death by reinventing the power a maid can assert. For she (female-escapee), though dead, asserts the power to take the life of a male.

Redjade: Reticent Poet Submerged in Silence

Similar to Silverscreen, Redjade also inverts the discourse of man by making writing her own, doing so secretly in the cover of night. Redjade is silenced within her community and first seeks escape in writing and literature before her ultimate escape, suicide. Yao taitai expels Silverscreen from the Yao estate just as Redjade is introduced into the family. Redjade is an extended member of a high-class family; however, she still desires to escape the social confines engulfing her. Seven-year-old Redjade and her parents leave their home in Hangchow to join the scene in Peking.

Young Redjade is propelled into a new location where a language not her own, the Peking Mandarin, dominates. Mandarin is the official language of China; other accents are ridiculed as being a secondary accent. Redjade is defensive in preserving her dignity in harvesting harmony within the family by first conforming to how her extended family speaks. Afraid of the possibility of her cousins condescendingly laughing at her, Redjade utilizes silence as an escape from the social stress provided of being thrust into a foreign environment. Her transition into speaking occurs with an emphasis on time; for, "it took a long time for the sisters to befriend her" and "days passed before she began to feel at home" yet "in an amazingly short time ... she learned to talk with the Peking accent" and finally, "after a few weeks' stay, she began to be very talkative" (Lin 187). Though Redjade has already begun to mimic Mandarin, it is only after the cousins befriend her through the medium of learning characters that her fear of speaking begins to dissipate. "After a few weeks' stay, she began to be very talkative, and, when the sisters asked her why she was so silent at first, she replied that she was afraid of speaking the Hangchow accent and being laughed at" (Lin 187). Redjade quickly grasps the concept of written elements; this will build into her fascination with the Chinese language and literature.

Several months later, the Yao family savors a summer day by the lake, but the delightful day ends in tragedy:

They rushed downstairs and learned that a girl picking lotus

had been drowned in the lake. Her tub had capsized and people had heard her scream for help and seen her come up once or twice and then disappear. Her family rushed to the rescue but it was too late. Those standing around the drowned girl's weeping mother said that there were many "water ghosts" in the lake, for many women had been drowned in it. Redjade, who was an extremely sensitive child, turned pale. The incident made a deep impression upon her, and for days afterward she kept asking what happened to that girl when she was drowned, until her mother forbade her to mention it again. (Lin 201)

Water literally envelopes objects within it; for the drowned person, water pulls the person under and makes one invisible to those above. The water ghosts embody a contrast of community and outsider. Religiously, the ghosts are simply unlucky entities within the lake who are best avoided. In a supernatural sense, the ghosts represent fate; these ghosts consist of previous women who have drowned and been suppressed within the lake. They seek to have another join them in order to build a community against the patriarchy, which resides above their watery grave. The eyewitnesses have a propensity to accredit the tragedy to ghosts for three reasons: first, to absolve themselves from blame; second, to remove blame from the victim's family; thirdly, to forewarn anyone who ventures into the lake next.

Redjade, an already quiet girl, is coerced into a new silence by her mother. Because Redjade is forced to deny what she witnessed, she is unable to cope with her reality and this traumatic experience, so she internalizes her fear. She is primarily terrified by water and boating trips in general; however, her fear acts as a gilded facet for her concluding obsession. Redjade begins to read classics which feature romanticized ghost motifs²⁹ in order to better understand the scene that was shrouded in silence by her elders. Because Redjade is submerged and isolated from those around her, she instead writes as a means of escape instead of reaching out to the women within her community: literature offers her a ground to develop herself.

Years later, the Yao family once more returns to the lake. In merriment, Old Yao proposes a literary game for those present in which they must complete a couplet: "*Encircling water embraces hill, hill embraces water.*" The couplet was difficult because it must repeat three words and must apply to the actual scene, and the tones had to be perfectly contrasted" (Lin 345). While the group excitedly begins to share their compositions,

Redjade had been keeping quiet, thinking out her line all this time. . . she steeped herself in Chinese by natural inclination and ability. "I don't know if this will do," she said. Her line was--

29. In *Moment in Peking*, Redjade often reads and alludes to *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Peony Pavilion*. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is one of China's four greatest classic novels and intertwines romance in tragedy among an aristocrat family; the novel contains ten suicides and the apparitions of ghosts. *The Peony Pavilion* crafts a story of a romantic bibliophile who commits suicide in her pursuit to join a lover met in a dream.

“Leisurely men watch actors, actors watch men.” ...

There was no question that Redjade had carried away the honors, and her father was very proud of her. It was not only that the line was perfectly natural and effortless. It was most appropriate to the situation, and behind it was the profound philosophy that the spectators watching the play were themselves but acting in the drama of life watched by the actors across the water. Consequently, afterward Mr. Yao had Redjade’s couplet inscribed on wood and hung in the Dim Fragrance Studio. (Lin 346)

Redjade’s tentative, silent nature is present in that she pauses before sharing her poem. Although Redjade is a talented poet who quickly becomes renowned within her community, she is ever cognizant of her position as an outsider, as she is desperately trying to communicate in a language not her own. Again, *“Encircling water embraces hill, hill embraces water ... Leisurely men watch actors, actors watch men”* (Lin 346). Within the juxtaposition of the actors and men, Redjade herself is excluded. Where is she, as woman, present other than in the act of writing? Redjade contributes only half of the couplet, as if she is half of humanity -- the other sex. Her half of the couplet invokes the trauma of seeing a drowned woman when she was younger and being forced to remain silent. Her expression exists within how men and actors watch one another while she is absent even as a narrator in her own writing.

Ironically, Redjade is immortalized by this poem, specifically by its being carved into wood, as representative of a merging with nature. This silence enforced by other “languages” is present throughout Redjade’s development. When a newcomer in Peking, she silences herself until she can mimic Mandarin; when writing poetry, she follows the custom of writing in various masculine styles that mimic dynastic epochs. As writing was understood as a masculine act, and the pen itself an emblem of the phallus, language, therefore, is an extension of othering. Redjade is estranged from herself in that she is unaware that even her writing belongs to another language. Redjade is translating her experience; she is struggling to survive within the language of the patriarchy: “poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women” (Cixous 1946). This unconsciousness resembles the myth of woman as mystery in that Redjade has internalized her silence and repression. Redjade is invigorated within the act of writing poetry because she has either silenced herself or has been repressed by the female members of her family.

Silence is a romanticized notion which grants greater meaning to what few words Redjade chooses to speak.³⁰ Because Redjade is still being forced silent, she begins to subject Afei, with whom she has the most intimate relationship, into silence (Lin 187). The most climactic conflict between the two occurs after they

30. A Chinese proverb emphasizes the importance of silence over hastily spoken words, saying “silence is gold” (not too different from the Western idiom “silence is golden.”). 沉默是金 (Chénmò shì jīn).

return from the boating trip in which Redjade implores Afei to not go into the water because it “is so dangerous” (Lin 361). Afei enters her room, invading the room which is her own;³¹ Redjade “had not intended to speak to him at all, but now when he did not reply and looked so repentant and miserable, she softened toward him” (Lin 361). Redjade wipes tears from her eyes as she chastises him, “You really shouldn’t go boating. I was so afraid for you. . . . You know I do not like noisy movements. I am afraid of the water, ever since I saw that little girl drowned at Shishahai. . . . But never mind, when I am gone, there will be someone to go playing with you, someone who likes boating and flying kites” (Lin 361-2). Redjade’s allusion to suicide is refined by creating an image of absence. Annoyed at Redjade’s reference to a time in which she is nonexistent, Afei playfully “came forward and threatened to place his hand on her mouth. ‘If you say that again, I’ll seal up your mouth!’” (Lin 362). Similar to Silverscreen and Tijen’s scene, Afei is literally silencing Redjade and her latent allusion to death. Afei is representative of the patriarchy in action, silencing Redjade’s concerns.

Operating as instruments of the patriarchy, the females of the family blame reading and writing on Redjade’s failing health. Redjade’s mother and particularly her cousin, Mochow, attempt to discourage her from writing: “‘Last spring she was in bed for over a month, but she wasn’t resting. She read novels deep into the night. Reading too many novels is no good for a young girl. But that is not so serious as her . . . desire to excel. That is the root of her illness’” (Lin 357). Similar to Silverscreen’s desire for social mobility, Redjade’s infatuation with literature, a masculine occupation, is frowned upon. Despite the criticism, Redjade continues to write hidden by the veil of night. Mochow continues to castigate her younger cousin:

“Get down to the earth. We women cannot get away from the job of rearing children and attending to food and apparel. . . . Reading history and poetry is all right, but we must not take it too seriously, or the more we read the farther apart we get from everyday life. When you are ill, I should advise you to give up reading novels. . . . your talent ranks above us sisters. But for that reason you ought to be careful of yourself. You have read so many stories of talented girls and beauties; how many of them ended happily?” (Lin 360).

Mochow’s admonition is a form of foreshadowing; Redjade will ultimately end her life in suicide as many of the characters she has read of have. This binary between male and female writers highlights how Redjade is othered as Mochow explicitly tells Redjade to “get down” from her towering position. According to Redjade’s position as the other sex, she inherently is “unworthy” of writing, which is shameful and dangerous. Cixous exposes the anxiety of writing as a female: “Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great --that is, for ‘great men’ . . . Besides, you’ve written a little, but in

31. With others present, males are allowed to enter into female chambers; however, the book does not offer a scene in which a female enters into a male’s bedroom.

secret” (Cixous 1943). This secret writing dramatizes the conflict between the lofty men and the lowly women writing.³² Redjade stands, shakily, on a pedestal above her half of humanity but cannot ascend to the tier above. Mochow confirms this, saying Redjade is higher than “us sisters,” yet not as eminent as her male contemporaries.

In comparison to the men who assert their dominance and the women who submit to it, Redjade, as an othered writer, neither penetrates nor is penetrated. Literary intelligence is akin to the stigma associated with sexual desire; just as men are allowed to be overt in their sexual activities,³³ women instead must remain silent. Helene Cixous continues her metaphor about the shame of writing: “you punished yourself for writing, because you didn’t go all the way; or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off” (Cixous 1943). The act of comforting oneself³⁴ is a metaphor of sexual shame, which reveals Redjade’s tense relationship with how she hides her pleasure of writing. Redjade’s body physically punishes itself for such a scandalous passion; her deteriorating health is an involuntary symbol of the stereotypical, frail woman who is weakened because of her efforts to write.

The Yao family began hosting literary parties in the garden; at these events, the noted “old poet Lin and the young poet Paku thought a great deal of [Redjade], and under Lin she began to learn old poetry. . . . Her mother disapproved of these exertions, because [Redjade] was . . . suffering from pulmonary consumption and she had to pay for a day of merrymaking by staying in bed for seven or eight days” (Lin 430). Despite her physical impediment, Redjade determinately thrusts herself into the literary community. Redjade’s inability to ascend her position resonates as a futile attempt to reach the climax of the hierarchy.

The edge of Redjade’s “orgasm” is actualized when Old Yao carves her half of the couplet into wood to be hung up. Although Redjade cannot rise above her position, her poetry is literally nailed above her, symbolically invoking the awkward tension of the hierarchy: “Poetry was associated with romance, and romance spelled a woman’s downfall” (Lin 309). Both poetry and romance are “too great” for women (Cixous 1943). If women are already ranked beneath men, where to can they fall once romance has plagued them? As Redjade demonstrates in her inability to create a language of her own, she escapes in the only other way she can: by committing suicide.

32. “The Chinese idea that women are waterlike probably dates back to the Ming dynasty vernacular fiction. Because water changes its shape to fit any vessel, it has traditionally been taken as a metaphor for inconstancy and moral relativism. Additionally, because water always flows from high ground to low, the phrase ‘flow downward’ (*xialiu* 下流) has come to refer to moral degeneration and indecency” (Qian Zhongshu 206).

33. Particularly in their engagement with concubines.

34. Female masturbation (自慰 *ziwèi*) semantically indicates self-pleasure/comfort/relief. This private act of desire which allows the subject to create comfort is ironically correlated with public shame. Note: there are no explicit sexual scenes within Lin’s “Moment in Peking.” The analysis I provide is my own creative liberty.

Redjade's demise occurs when she misinterprets a conversation between Afei and a guest, assuming Afei only agrees to marry Redjade out of pity. With this misunderstanding, Redjade's romantic hope perishes and she returns to her room. In contrast to the silence in which Redjade has been shrouded, she laughs hysterically, spewing words forth as her maid listens: "I understand it all now ... I should have known. ... Do you know that Afei loves me? He said so just a moment ago. ... He is a good boy, isn't he? *Isn't he?* ... You believe in destiny, don't you?" (Lin 448). These phrases are spoken in a rushed and obscure manner. Redjade, in stark comparison to her typical quiet demeanor, finally speaks to that which bothers her. By mentioning destiny, Redjade believes she is fated, much like her favorite fictional characters and the drowned girl, to die.

Redjade conjures the great oracle, which has haunted her mind for months. The oracle, a slip of paper, obtained at a Buddhist temple is often interpreted by believers in one of two ways: first, as a religious prophecy of one's life; second, as poppycock. Redjade believes in the oracle she draws: "To paint the brows of love in a lady's chamber. / Peonies on the steps breathe happiness. / Take not the real as false, the false as real. / Pass the perfume and all is emptiness" (Lin 407). After reading the oracle, Redjade was noticeably unhappy:

That night on the Lake,... she had seen a boat in the distance with a young man and girl and heard them chattering together and then had seen it suddenly disappear in the mist leaving no trace behind. The story was told of a pair of lovers at the end of the Ming Dynasty who leaped together into the lake, and how on moonlight nights, people sometimes saw a phantom boat with this couple come out to enjoy themselves in the moonlight. The couple never grew old. ... Nobody had seen it but Redjade. (Lin 408)

The memory of these two as interconnected subjects, the oracle and the ghosts, prompts Redjade to laugh hysterically. Redjade does not want to be a burden to Afei, so to sacrifice herself to the water, which has haunted her for so long, becomes a seemingly simplistic option. She connects her bleak future to the comforting concept of suicide, a notion which she now regards as fated. Redjade asks her maid if she believes in destiny:

"Yes. Why?"

Redjade did not answer, but sat before the dressing table and began to attend to her make-up again. She had calmed down now and said to Honeybush, "I don't need you now. You can go back. I want only a little quiet."

Honeybush asked if she was going back to the dinner with the guests.

"Perhaps. Stay as long as you like. My mother needs you."

Honeybush left her sitting at the dressing table, repainting her eyebrows. (Lin 448)

Redjade believes the oracle predicts her ending; she follows it verbatim. The last living image of Redjade the reader has is when she repaints her eyebrows which mirrors the oracle's "to paint the brows of love in a *lady's chamber*" (Lin 407). Beyond the physical act of applying a mask, a facade to effectively cast her maid away, the oracle's line is a literary allusion to the *women's chamber* in the novel Redjade adores, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The following line of the oracle, "*Peonies on the steps breathe happiness*" invokes another classical text, *The Peony Pavilion*. For Redjade, these combinations of romance, literature, and fate as parts of a romanticized ideology are cleverly interwoven into her own life as a silenced poet. With her recent assumption that Afei intends on marrying her only out of pity, Redjade views herself as the empty perfume in comparison to the Rare Perfume (Paofen, Afei's new maid and later, actual wife), as described in the oracle: "Take not the real as false, the false as real" (Lini 407). Redjade, therefore, views herself as "false" and unworthy, someone who impedes Afei's ability to select a partner with whom he ought to share passion.

Redjade is determined to end her life, so she dismisses her maid so as to have a silent space to conduct her suicide in a single, uninterrupted act. Everyone else is attending dinner at another location; so long as she's quiet, which she is inherently, her attempt will be successful. Redjade poetically emphasizes Honeybush's permanence by saying "Stay as long as you like," while latently revealing her own impermanence. The last word Redjade speaks is "you" in a successful effort to divert attention away from herself.

Redjade entered the Yao estate in silence and into silence she leaves. Make-up is temporary; Redjade is painting on a face that moments later, shall become erased within the surge of water. What is not entirely washed away, however, are her suicide notes. The first letter addresses the foremost problem within Redjade's mind, Afei: "A secret message records: 'Tell Afei to proceed according to the oracle of the Old Man in the Moon. I wish him happiness in marriage.'" (Lin 450). She loves Afei absolutely, jealously, and does not endeavor to be a deterrent to his happiness. This hidden note allows Redjade to keep Afei's immediate role in her suicide a secret; she (woman-escapee) is ironically protecting man. Just like her ephemeral make-up, Redjade recognizes her own impermanent position as Afei's unofficial fiancé. Latent is the revelation of her sacrifice of life in order for Afei to not be forced into a dismal relationship with someone whose suffering body has "taken more medicine than food" (Lin 450).

In her preminent suicide note, Redjade signs her name in blood. This letter "written in the classical, balanced style" reveals her intelligence, craft, and style which reveal her as an outsider (Lin 450). Redjade's writing is superior to her companions; however, she views this as just another way which isolates her:

DEAR FATHER AND MOTHER: Your unfilial daughter has received your care and love from childhood and has not been able to repay you. Also due to Uncle and Aunt's love, I have been treated like their own child and surrounded with luxury and comfort. But unfortunately, your little daughter was born weak in health; I have lain in bed for months

and years and have taken more medicine than food. Although I wish to continue to live to serve you, I shall only be an obstacle to another's future. Alas! Life and death are predetermined and one's destiny is unalterable. I have studied poetry and books since childhood, and I have not been able to escape the tangle of romance. Recently, the Old Man in the Moon has opened my eyes. Once the oracle was revealed, I reached a great understanding. Great as the universe is, how should it miss a little being like Redjade? Enough! Parting in life or death is unavoidable, and please do not grieve. I am returning my body to my parents pure as jade. (Lin 450)

Despite how her words pigment her as an unfilial daughter because of her suicide and destruction of her parents' creation, Redjade dies as a filial virgin, "pure as jade." She is not bringing shame to the family name in comparison to how Silverscreen forced the family to lose Face. Redjade, to her last stroke, envisions herself as an impermanent outsider, as someone whose final diction reveals her innermost guilt: *received your care, [unable] to repay, serve, obstacle, returning my body, sin*. As depicting herself as such an unfilial character, Redjade traps herself within a Romantic notion: she must sacrifice her deficient self so Afei can be free to pursue his fated lover. Instead of approaching Afei to discuss what she overheard, Redjade instead climatically enshrouds herself in death and Afei in silence.

In an act to destroy her previous non-silence, Redjade burns all her poems save for the couplet inscribed on wood hanging above her (Lin 455). Due to her guilt of exploiting her voice and beautification of her body, Redjade desires to be forgotten, erased, and literally burned away from the memory of those she affects. After she "buries" herself in the family pond but before her body is discovered, the wooden tablet engraved with her poem was "taken down by Mr. Yao's order, as being too pathetic" (Lin 451). The taking down of her couplet resembles her own act of destroying her writing and is a fulfillment of her own decision to be forgotten. Though internal, this act is still an act of sovereignty.

Redjade's suicide is not deemed as pathetic by Mr. Yao; rather, the statement of the couplet is tragically ironic. Although Redjade's couplet is taken down, the words are still applicable to the scene in which the Yao's attempt to find her body: "*Encircling hill embraces water, water embraces hill. / Leisurely men watch actors, actors watch men*" (Lin 346). This time, the hill represents the Yao family's garden. According to *fengshui*³⁵, the most ideal place to be buried is atop a mountain or hill in which water resides to the front. Here, the hill and water are inseparable, as Redjade's submersion in water is an amalgamation with nature; she cannot be separated from the water which contains her but her remains will be buried in the ground (ideally on a hill) in due time. The Yao family, the leisurely men who moments ago were enjoying their dinner, are now running amok within the garden as nature observes. They are silly manifestations of "spectators"

35. 风水 Literally "wind and water," this is a study of how *qi* flows across an area.

“acting in the drama of life” who will also, eventually, die (Lin 346); under the cover of night, the pond reflects lights cast in search of Redjade’s corpse, “which lay in the pale moonlight peaceful and undisturbed, withholding from the terrified spectators a mystery within its dark green bosom” (Lin 451). After all, the family must acknowledge Redjade’s decision.

After the couplet is taken down, only Redjade’s suicide note to her parents remains within the public domain. She refuses to be an instigator of a language not her own, so she willingly erases herself in a spirited act of sovereignty. She is successful in her private protest of the patriarchy while simultaneously being drowned by the masculine ideals forced upon her. Like a moth drawn to the flame, Redjade is infatuated with the promise of a watery grave; only this water can epitomize the overwhelming sensation of the patriarchy. Redjade wishes to be submerged, to be forgotten, and not return as a ghost. As a talented poet, Redjade must “get down” and in her suicide, she descends into water and thus returns to nature. Water, that which she once greatly feared, now embodies her erotic obsession. As a female-escapee, her suicide is a personal choice to rebel against the patriarchy. Even in her silence, she articulates her desire clearly: she will unite with nature.

Conclusion: Suicide’s Reconstruction

The tragic deaths of Silverscreen and Redjade are an instrument of hope for what others can achieve. Redjade’s autonomy resides within her internal decision to end her life whereas Silverscreen’s power is invested within her sovereignty gained as a ghost -- an agent in securing social mobility for another maid in the house. After Redjade’s death, Yao taitai is an agent in Paofen’s social mobility; she blesses the maid to marry Afei (Lin 461).

Redjade and Silverscreen are not the only characters who commit suicide in *Moment in Peking*; Mannia and Mrs. New commit suicide whereas Suyun attempts suicide. Mannia is like that of the classical Chinese woman who hangs herself to verify her innocence and uphold filial piety. Mrs. New, after watching her notorious family lose favor in society’s eyes, kills herself by ingesting Lysol (Lin 490). Before Suyun’s suicide attempt, she attempts to divide her husband’s family and property: “Whether the attempt at suicide was genuine or not, Suyun won a partial victory” in that her suicide attempt succeeds in dividing finances (Lin 395).

Silverscreen and Mannia both commit suicide by hanging themselves. To hang oneself is a visible act of rebellion in which the body is physically on display. Silverscreen boycotted her treatment and position as an ignoble maid whereas Mannia prohibited the invasion of her body while she was alive during the Rape of Nanking. After Suyun’s attempt to hang herself, the novel’s protagonist Mulan spoke to a maid, saying, “You had better not say anything at all. We might have been charged by her family with forcing suicide,³⁶ if she had succeeded” (Lin 395). To suspend one’s body is to send a very direct message to

36. To encourage another to commit suicide is punishable under law (Ropp 7).

the public whereas death by drowning is an act symbolically withdrawing all of one's internal disappointment and overwhelming social circumstances. Drowning can occur as water literally swells within one's lungs or within poison, such as when Lysol invades one's veins. For Redjade, her body is lost within the water: she physically hides herself in an attempt not to exist.

In the wake of these characters' suicides, Lin's writing has contributed significantly to early twentieth century Americans understanding of China, Chinese culture, and Chinese women. Notably, the "positive image he constructed played a significant role in improving Western understanding of Chinese women; the cultural and narrative strategies he developed in this rewriting solidified his contributions to cross-cultural literary practice" (Lu 231). Lin's novel reveals that woman certainly is not this mythical, mythicized other; he has taken a step in freeing "the infinite bondage of woman" (Beauvoir 1273) by revealing these women as complex entities who are active agent in the affairs of their lives. Simply, these women are merely players within history -- history which is the ultimate institution yielding the greatest power, even in a moment set in Beijing.

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