

Women's Same-Sex Love in Two Fictional Memoirs of the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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Abstract

This paper investigates the representations of women's same-sex relationships during the Cultural Revolution in *Sunken Snow* (1997) and *Red Azalea* (1992). The authors of these two fictional memoirs were rusticated youths during the Cultural Revolution, and they use women's same-sex relationships as a gendered protest against the masculinist political movements and gender oppression that they experienced during their youth. This paper analyzes the two stories' differing strategies of imagining a resisting female-female relationship; at the same time, it problematizes this gendered resistance by identifying the alternative power discourses that enable such imaginaries. *Sunken Snow* associates the feminine with softness and valorizes it as a shield against the invasion of the masculine collective, yet it adheres to the gender essentialism that reemerged in postsocialist China. *Red Azalea* passionately champions the feminine sexual power and female-female bond but still exhibits power worship by endorsing the heterosexual institution in its geopolitical variant, Orientalism. The endings of both stories show the dissolution of women's same-sex love, revealing that feminist resistance through the imagination of an exclusive female-female relationship is deeply fragmented and fundamentally ambivalent.

Key words

same-sex love, the Cultural Revolution, *zhiqing* literature, gender essentialism, Orientalism

Women's Same-Sex Relationships and the Cultural Revolution

Much has been written about the repression, remodeling, or disappearance of femininity during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), solidifying the impression of Maoist culture as a masculine enterprise that allowed little or no room for gendered voices. Some critics have pointed out that the

Communists' policy of gender equality replaced women's subjugation to men with women's subjugation to the collective; that is, in order to enjoy the equality offered by the collective, women had to forsake their femininity and assume a neutral gender (Meng & Dai, 1989; Yang, 1999). However, the "collective" in Maoist China was not gender-neutral: It was organized in such a way as to maximize productivity (both materially and ideologically) and was built on a masculine/military model. The socialist state thus acted as an organizer and enforcer of male supremacy. Physical power and mental tenacity were exalted as the ideals of the socialist regime, whereas femininity was often associated with a bourgeois lifestyle and unproductiveness. The model female figure in the Mao era was the "iron girl" (*tie guniang*),¹ a "masculine woman" or "tomboy" in today's terms. Ostensibly, as Mayfair Mei-hui Yang points out, the Maoist gender policy "erased more of feminine gender than masculine and at the same time took away the language that could articulate the disappearance of women" (Yang, 1999, p. 46).

Recent scholarship has begun to question this simplistic reading of Maoist gender policy as an effective top-down wipeout of feminine gender and sexuality.² As Zheng Wang argues, Mao's gender policy "disrupted conventional gender norms and created a new discursive space that allowed a cohort of young women to grow up without being always conscious of their gender" (Wang, 2001, p. 52). Paradoxically, this new discursive space liberated new sexual imaginations as much as it inhibited conventional sexual expression. For example, women's same-sex relationships assumed an unusual momentum during the Mao era, which suggests that the gender policy and social arrangements during the Mao era undermined the pressure of heterosexuality to a certain degree. As the socialist regime sought to reform the female gender, it promoted new gender imaginations in which women were not forced to sexualize themselves in the bourgeois feminine style. The Mao-era ban on premarital heterosexual romance and its policy of sex segregation among rus-

¹ For a detailed discussion of the "iron girl," see Emily Honig's "Iron Girls Revisited" (Honig, 2000) and Jin Yihong's "'Tie guniang' de zai sikao" (Jin, 2006).

² Emily Honig calls us to heed the "complexities of the articulation of gender identity" during the Cultural Revolution (Honig, 2002, p. 256); Zheng Wang directs our attention to "the examination of pro-women policies or laws" passed by the socialist state and the active role of women in socialist policy making (Wang, 2005, p. 520).

ticated youths also gave rise to same-sex relationships. Tze-lan Sang's study shows that, although Mao's China foreclosed the representation of same-sex love in the public arena, in everyday life "[...] emotional intimacy and constant physical proximity between those of the same sex may have been common; in fact, same-sex relations may have been less inhibited than premarital male-female intimate relations were" (Sang, 2003, p. 164). Emily Honig suggests that the Cultural Revolution "represented far more than a simple rejection of femininity" (Honig, 2002, p. 256). Her interviews with female former Red Guards tell us that, during the Cultural Revolution, girls would assume explicit masculine or feminine roles in homoerotic relationships at school (Honig, 2002, p. 261). Therefore, as Lisa Rofel puts it, "the discursive power of socialism [...] produced, and did not just repress, other gender identities and practices" (Rofel, 1999, p. 225).

In this paper, I focus on two women-authored fictional memoirs depicting women's same-sex relationships during the Cultural Revolution: Tianjin twin sisters Li Jing and Li Ying's *Sunken Snow* (Chenxue, 1997) and émigré writer Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* (1992). Although *Sunken Snow* was written in Chinese and *Red Azalea* in English, both are fictional memoirs that recount the female protagonist's life as a rusticated youth (*zhiqing*) during the Cultural Revolution in China. Both stories can be read as therapeutic writings that serve to suture the feminine subjects into an overtly masculine history through representations of women's same-sex relationships. However, as my reading shows, the narratives of women's same-sex love in these two stories display different political agendas as the authors endorse alternative forms of power discourses, which, despite their obvious differences from the socialist discourse, are still masculinist in nature. I argue that while women's same-sex love in these two fictional memoirs works as a form of resistance to masculinist political power during the Cultural Revolution, its simultaneous endorsement of a postsocialist gender essentialism (in the case of *Sunken Snow*) or a post-Cold War Orientalism (in the case of *Red Azalea*) has ultimately obscured its political potential as a form of feminist resistance.

Power Worship in *Zhiqing* Literature

Both *Sunken Snow* and *Red Azalea* can be categorized as *zhiqing wenxue* (rusticated youth literature) because they are fictional accounts of the *zhiqing*

life written by former *zhiqing*.³ In his *History of Chinese Zhiqing Literature*, Yang Jian defines *zhiqing* literature as a product of the rusticated youth movement that started in the mid-1950s and culminated during the Cultural Revolution (Yang, 2002). In order to receive “the baptism of blood and fire” (*xue yu buo de xili*) and play a prominent role in China’s socialist revolution, millions of Chinese youths went to the countryside to join the local agricultural labor force. Between 1962 and 1979, over 17 million urban youths were sent down to the countryside. Although most of these young people chose to become *zhiqing* voluntarily, their revolutionary zeal started to wear out when they faced the gloomy reality in the countryside, and their desire for revolution was replaced by the desire to return home during the last few years of the Cultural Revolution. Yang Jian astutely points out that the rusticated youth movement was ultimately driven by the desire for power; for the same reason, *zhiqing* literature continues to align itself with the power discourse and official ideology after the Cultural Revolution (Yang, 2002).

With the publication of Lu Xinhua’s short story “Scar” (*Shanghen*)⁴ in 1978, former rusticated youths’ disillusionment with and repudiation of the Cultural Revolution soon became an important political force, which was immediately appropriated by the new political regime in the postsocialist period. Throughout the 1980s, many literary works produced by former rusticated youths closely collaborated with the power discourse of the new generation of CCP leaders (led by Deng Xiaoping) to repudiate the leftist mistakes made during the Cultural Revolution, recuperate humanistic values, and promote ideological emancipation and urbanization (Yang, 2002). As Dai Jinhua writes, by bidding farewell to revolution (*gaobie geming*), these narratives of the Cultural Revolution colluded with the grand narrative of progress and development in postsocialist China (Dai, 1999). According to Dai’s observation, *zhiqing* literature “subtly misaligns yet also converges” with the mainstream ideology in postsocialist

³ The “rusticated-youth movement” (*zhiqing yundong*), also known as the “sent-down youth movement” or “educated youth movement,” witnessed the resettlement of millions of Chinese teenagers (most of whom were Red Guards) from cities to rural areas to participate in agricultural production. The movement started in the 1950s, reached its peak in 1969, and wound down toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. The majority of these “sent-down youth” were young students who, driven by revolutionary zeal, voluntarily requested to go to the countryside to prove their resolution to reform themselves into ideal socialist subjects.

⁴ Lu’s “Scar” is regarded as a pioneering work in the “Scar Literature” (*Shanghen wenxue*) movement.

China so that it can adhere to, in a passionate and irrational way, “a form of heroism in which one feels no regret despite having been severely damaged” (Dai, 1999, p. 96). Thus, *zhiqing* literature in the postsocialist period embodies the same symptomatic desire of rusticated youths to follow the “sublime figure of history” (Wang, 1997),⁵ despite the nation’s transition from socialist revolution to socialist market economy in the 1980s and 1990s.

While the first group of *zhiqing* writers bid farewell to revolution, another group of *zhiqing* writers, such as Liang Xiaosheng (1949–) and Zhang Chengzhi (1948–), depict their youth experiences of rustication in a heroic and idealistic light, enshrining them with the sentimental slogan “youth knows no regret” (*qingchun wubui*).⁶ By reproducing masculinized narratives and reflections of the Cultural Revolution as a sanctioned collective memory, these writers have preserved the socialist power discourse; at the same time, they are also involuntarily aligned with the new power discourse in the postsocialist period. For example, “youth knows no regret” can easily be translated into “no pain, no gain” and appropriated by the new political and economic movement of Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang*) marshaled by Deng Xiaoping. Therefore, as a genre, *zhiqing* literature is always intertwined with one or more forms of masculinist power discourses.

Sunken Snow and *Red Azalea* are two rare texts in *zhiqing* literature that focus on and idealize same-sex relationships between female rusticated youths. Representations of idealized female same-sex relationships were commonplace in Chinese literature in the modern period (Martin, 2010; Sang, 2003). Since female-female relationships can be both homosocial and homoerotic, they do not simply lead to lesbianism as a fixed sexual identity. Instead, they reveal a façade or a stage of women’s psychical and sexual formation that is often-times repressed by the established conventions of heterosexuality. Romantic love between women “is very frequently taken seriously and presented as a complex, deeply felt, troublingly memorable affective experience [and] is framed as continuous with, rather than antithetical to, normative femininity” (Martin, 2010, p. 185).

⁵ Ban Wang coined the term “the sublime figure of history” to address “the interplay between the aesthetic and the political” (Wang, 1997, p. 2). The figure of Mao Zedong, Wang argues, is such a sublime figure in modern China (Wang, 1997).

⁶ Liang Xiaosheng has been criticized for whitewashing history and taking a high moral tone whilst assuming a form of historical amnesia (Ke, 1999).

As two fictional memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, *Sunken Snow* and *Red Azalea* both employ the mnemonic mode of representation through their narratives of women's same-sex love. They both portray the resistance and persistence of femininity in the face of the forbidding figure of the masculinist collective or masculinist political power. As my reading below shows, the representations of female same-sex love in *Sunken Snow* and *Red Azalea* work as double-edged swords: while they have effectively challenged the power discourse of the Cultural Revolution, they have done so by subscribing to, wittingly or unwittingly, alternative power discourses in the postsocialist and diasporic contexts, respectively, and these alternative power discourses have simply replaced the socialist discourse to subjugate the female gender in the post-socialist period.

Sunken Snow: The Dialectic between the Individual and the Collective

Compared with most works of *zhiqing* literature, Li Jing and Li Ying's *Sunken Snow* shows a dogged resistance to the traction of power discourses by turning away from the grand narrative of history and supplanting it with fragmented, trivial, and reflective monologues.⁷ The authors, Li Jing and Li Ying, are twin sisters born in Tianjin in 1952. They were sent to a unit of the Production and Construction Corps in Heilongjiang Province in North China in 1969 as rusticated youths and they stayed there for nearly seven years. Based on the Li sisters' own experiences, *Sunken Snow* is set in the Great Northern Wilderness (*beidabuang*) and is a fictional coming-of-age story about the protagonist Sun Xiaoying. *Sunken Snow* won the *United Daily* (*Lianhe bao*) Literary Award for Novel-length Fiction in 1997.⁸ The plot centers on the same-sex love between Sun Xiaoying and Shu Di, a masculine woman who helps Xiaoying conquer their dreadful conditions in the Great Northern Wilderness.

⁷ Author Li Jing insists on maintaining a distance from any power discourse, including any contemporary discourse that seeks to appropriate and capitalize on *zhiqing* experiences. In 1990, she declined an invitation to join the Retrospective Exhibition of the Great Northern Wilderness in Beijing.

⁸ An abridged version of *Sunken Snow* was published in Taiwan by Lianjing Publishers in 1997. It was then serialized in 1998 in the Chinese-language American newspaper *World Daily* (*Shijie ribao*). As the series was so tremendously successful, the unabridged version of the story was published in mainland China by Beijing Zuoja Chubanshe in 1998. This was followed by a symposium on the work, which was reprinted by Zhongguo Gongren Chubanshe in 2004. In this paper, I use the unabridged 2004 edition.

While Sun Xiaoying envies Shu Di's masculine strength, Shu Di envies Xiaoying's femininity. As their friendship rapidly deepens, they start to enjoy cuddling and caressing each other every night in the same bed.

Sunken Snow has attracted the attention of critics with its uniquely feminine narrative voice. Taiwanese writer Chu Hsi-ning notes, "It is a rare achievement that throughout the entire work there are no expressions of praise or blame, resistance or trauma" (Li & Li, 2004, p. v). This remark is echoed by Lin Xi, a mainland Chinese writer, who asserts that *Sunken Snow* ends the "antagonistic mode" of *zhiqing* literature (Li & Li, 2004, p. 2). The story's narrative tone is objective, meditative, and sometimes philosophical; at the same time, it is highly personal, setting itself apart from totalitarian narrative voices. Sun Xiaoying's unhurried monologue depicts her continuing tension with the collective and her distaste for manual labor. It also faithfully records many unique fragments of China's socialist history, such as China's conflict with the Soviet Union, the "recalling past bitterness" (*yiku*) meetings, the study of Mao's "three old articles" (*laosanpian*), the silencing of sexuality, the movement to learn from Dazhai in agriculture, the wildfire in North China that devoured fourteen young lives, China's first nuclear experiment, and the rusticated youths' interactions with local people.

In the eyes of the withdrawn and calm narrator, Sun Xiaoying, the collective appears to be a massive and frightening figure. On the one hand, she is wary of other people, inclined always to retreat into her enclosed private space; on the other hand, she is sensitive and fragile, constantly desiring protection or help from other people. There are moments of crisis and danger when Sun Xiaoying is grateful for the shelter offered by the collective and other people, and there are moments when she enjoys the merriment and pride of being part of the collective. The collective, however, presses its members to be strong. As the weakest member in the collective, Sun Xiaoying is forced to reform herself through hard labor despite her deep aversion to it.

This dialectic between the individual and the collective can be captured by the metaphor of the sun in *Sunken Snow*. In the prologue, Li Jing and Li Ying depict the middle-aged Sun Xiaoying from a third-person perspective. One day, Xiaoying comes across two of Vincent Willem van Gogh's self-portraits. They are the "self-portraits of a sufferer" (Li & Li, 2004, p. 1) and lead Xiaoying to ponder life, time, and the soul. As she gazes at the portraits, she finds that both of them are "plated with sunlight" (Li & Li, 2004, p. 3). She remembers that in order to dissipate the inner coldness and loneliness, the artist pursued

the sun until his death.

It is this encounter with a Western male figure that shapes the articulation of Xiaoying's traumatic memory of the relentless sun and the collective during the Cultural Revolution. If Vincent van Gogh's relationship with the sun is aestheticized, Sun Xiaoying's memory of the sun is traumatically realistic. She knows that "creation under the scorching sun is extremely painful and must be paid by one's life" (Li & Li, 2004, p. 4). She recalls her own experience of working under the sun in the Great Northern Wilderness and how she was afraid of the damaging power of the sun:

[...] it hangs high above, like a giant badge [...] the blazing ball is turning blue and black, like the hideous head of a monster. The sky and the earth, however, is more splendid, circling the monster's head in a sublime manner. (Li & Li, 2004, pp. 4-5)

The excessive sunlight in Sun Xiaoying's memory conveys her impression of the masculine political power that subsumed all individuals during the Cultural Revolution.⁹ The prologue does not repudiate the Maoist politics of the collective as completely evil but instead criticizes its excessiveness. In the main body of the story, there are quite a few instances when Sun Xiaoying remembers the sun in the Great Northern Wilderness fondly, viewing it as a source of warmth, life, and beauty. However, the scorching sun in the prologue is not an ambiguous figure—it represents the psychological trauma of the individual who follows the overtly masculine collective during the Maoist era.

If the sun is a metaphor for the masculine collective, then the snow is a metaphor for the individuals in the collective. In one of the scenes in the later part of the story, Sun Xiaoying attentively watches the falling snow:

The snowflakes are soft and beautiful, as if they are a living crowd or large lily flowers. They embrace each other, dance in intoxication, cheering for the new falling. Wind and fridity make them gather more closely during the fall, gradually losing their softness and becoming a hard, thick layer of snow blanket attached to the land, almost desperately holding onto anything on the ground. (Li & Li, 2004, p. 307).

⁹ The image of the giant badge-like sun may be an allusion to Chairman Mao, who was frequently exalted as the "Red Sun" (*Hongtaiyang*) of China during the socialist period.

This scene of falling snow contains Sun Xiaoying's philosophical meditation on the individual and the collective, as well as the feminine and the masculine. The individual starts her life like the soft snowflakes falling from the sky; during the process of falling, the snowflakes are already members of a collective and, voluntarily or involuntarily, form bonds with each other. The adversity of nature also forces the snowflakes to lose their softness and beauty. The fate of the individual resembles the falling snow in that she/he must merge with the group and assume a "hard" (masculine) second nature. This sentiment echoes the popular view about the Cultural Revolution, which is "presumably represented as a corruption of women's innately timid, gentle nature" (Honig, 2002, p. 261).

However, Sun Xiaoying believed that weakness and softness were her true nature and held onto these qualities despite the invasion of a hardening reality. While Xiaoying tried her utmost to follow the collective during the day, she always embraced her own soft and fragile nature at night. Such a separation was necessary to prevent one's "nature" from being annihilated. *Sunken Snow* seems to suggest that soft femininity—a quality that contrasts sharply with that of the masculine collective—is the natural, essential, and primary quality of women.

Thus, in *Sunken Snow*, the dialectic between the individual and the collective is represented in terms of the relationship between the feminine and the masculine. This fictional memoir's strongest criticism of the collectivistic culture of the Cultural Revolution is that it encroached upon the innate soft nature of the individuals. *Sunken Snow* successfully challenges the masculine power discourse experienced by rusticated youth through Sun Xiaoying's persistence in femininity and through the persistent feminine narrative voice, one that is personal, fragmented, delicate, and sentimental.

However, at the same time, *Sunken Snow* endorses the viewpoint of natural sex differentiation that quickly gained momentum after the Cultural Revolution. When the Mao-era proposition of gender equality faced a strong backlash in the 1980s, many Chinese people turned back to the "natural" divisions of sex and gender, with the belief that masculinity and femininity are inherent and essential qualities of man and woman, respectively. As Lisa Rofel puts it, re-naturalized gender is regarded as part of "an emancipatory story, holding out the promise that people can unshackle their innate human selves by emancipating themselves from the socialist state" (Rofel, 1999, p. 218). Chinese women's studies scholars, such as Li Xiaojiang, have highlighted the

“sex gap” (*xinggou*) between men and women and have called for a reorganization of social labor and family structure based on “natural” sexual differences.¹⁰ While these viewpoints signified the return of humanistic values in post-socialist China, they are also complicit with the new power discourses of market economy and globalization. In Zheng Wang’s recent book, *Finding Women in the State*, she laments “the radical transformation of state feminists from socialist revolutionaries to market apostles” since the 1980s (Wang, 2016, p. 252) and repudiates the masculinist postsocialist discourse that turned women into “individualistic, privatized, and sexualized bourgeois consumer[s] who [are] also commoditized simultaneously” (Wang, 2016, p. 253). For Zheng Wang, since the 1980s, gender differentiation, itself “a hallmark of a market economy,” has intensified social (gender, class, and urban/rural) stratifications and has facilitated China’s integration into a global capitalism dominated by hegemonic masculinity. Rofel also alerts us to the “new forms of women’s subordination created through this hegemonic difference” in the postsocialist period, when people seek to naturalize gender (Rofel, 1999, p. 220). Thus, *Sunken Snow*’s acceptance of these sex differences and gender norms is itself a symptom of the postsocialist culture that has restored the binary gender division on the premise of gender essentialism. It is ultimately complicit with the new power discourses of market and globalization, both of which are masculinist in nature.

A Shield against the Collective

Although Li Jing denies that *Sunken Snow* depicts homosexuality, the same-sex love between Sun Xiaoying and Shu Di still captured critics’ attention. The Taiwanese writer Yuan Ch’iung-ch’iung describes the relationship between Xiaoying and Di as a lesbian one (Li & Li, 2004, p. vi), and Chinese sexologist Li Yinhe says, “The lesbianism in *Sunken Snow* is different from that in the West. Western lesbianism is radical, but the lesbianism in the story is natural and not anti-social” (Li & Li, 2004, p. iv).

Xiaoying defines her deep bond with Shu Di as pure friendship. In Sun Xiaoying’s eyes, Shu Di appears more like a protective maternal figure than a man. In many depictions, the same-sex bond between Sun Xiaoying and Shu

¹⁰ “Sex gap” is the title of Li Xiaojiang’s 1989 book.

Di resembles the bond between a child and a mother. It is noteworthy that the name Xiaoying means “little baby” in Chinese, which is suggestive of the infantile state she enjoys in this same-sex relationship.

Although *Sunken Snow* is narrated solely from the perspective of Sun Xiaoying, a novella written by Li Jing in 1990, “The Lime Kiln” (*Hui yaodi*), offers abundant insights into Shu Di’s world. “The Lime Kiln,” published in *Tianjin Literature* (*Tianjin wenxue*) in 1990, is probably the first literary work on homosexuality published in the People’s Republic of China, though the story has barely attracted any critic’s attention.¹¹ This novella focuses exclusively on the same-sex bond between two rusticated youths, Lan Rubing (the archetype of Sun Xiaoying) and Hong Jingyuan (the archetype of Shu Di). *Sunken Snow* is actually an expanded version of “The Lime Kiln,” but since the earlier novella alternates in narration between Lan Rubing’s and Hong Jingyuan’s voices, it reveals the Maoist tomboy’s envy of femininity: in “The Lime Kiln,” Hong Jingyuan envies the feminine beauty of other women and is ashamed of her own coarseness (Li, 1990).

Moreover, in “The Lime Kiln,” the mother-child bond between Hong Jingyuan and Lan Rubing is more explicit. For example, Lan Rubing describes Hong Jingyuan’s embrace as if it is maternal: “[Her] arms are warm and wide. Like a baby, she is lifted lightly. A pair of big breasts warm up her own bosom. The breasts are too full. And behind the softness, an extremely sturdy heart is pumping” (Li, 1990, p. 11). This mother-child relationship is the only form of non-invasive intimacy that Lan Rubing can accept. Hong Jingyuan, by contrast, oscillates between feminine and masculine gender roles. Her desire for femininity sometimes drives her further to the polar opposite—masculinity—because sexual desires are only sanctioned in heterosexual form. Consequently, even though Hong Jingyuan adores the “natural” femininity as much as Lan Rubing, she involuntarily casts herself in an “artificial” masculine role in her daily interaction with other women. “The Lime Kiln” depicts Hong Jingyuan’s hobby of cleaning young women’s ears with a hairpin, with both sides deriving a great deal of pleasure from this activity (Li, 1990).¹² However, Lan Rubing has no interest in this intimate game

¹¹ Chen Ran’s 1991 story “Kongxin ren de dansheng” (The birth of a hollow man) is often regarded as the first homosexual/lesbian story in mainland China. Chen’s story was written in August 1990 and published in 1991; Li Jing’s “Hui Yaodi” was published in August 1990.

¹² The same plot also appears in *Sunken Snow*.

that is highly symbolic of genital intercourse.

In *Sunken Snow*, Sun Xiaoying's adherence to femininity drives her further away from invasive genital sex. Xiaoying is very skeptical about heterosexual love, because she finds that intimacy between men and women always "develops into something scary, as if [the women] are possessed by demons" (Li & Li, 2004, p. 252). Her reflection leads her to the conclusion that sexual love is of secondary importance in her life: "I am by no means that kind of girl who would sacrifice her entire life in order to serve a man" (Li & Li, 2004, pp. 292–293).

Sun Xiaoying's fear of genital sex puts an abrupt end to her close relationship with Shu Di. In the later part of the story, when Sun Xiaoying visits Shu Di in a lime kiln, the two hold each other in bed at night. The excited Shu Di tells Sun Xiaoying that during the Battle of Stalingrad, the Russian soldiers embraced women to stay warm, suggesting a further move toward genital sex. Seized by "a strange fear," Sun Xiaoying recoils at this sexually suggestive story (Li & Li, 2004). Later, when Shu Di touches her genital area, Sun Xiaoying feels deeply violated and begins to turn her love for Shu Di into hatred.

In *Sunken Snow*, Sun Xiaoying's aversion to genital sex overlaps with her fear of manual labor: both represent a form of aggressive and sadistic masculine power that encroaches on her feminine self. In Xiaoying's eyes, all male *zhigong* "are like barbarians," whose laughter could chill her soul, and she can feel "evil and savagery passing through their hearts" (Li & Li, 2004, p. 294). It is only in the later part of the story, when Sun Xiaoying forces herself to accept manual labor, that she temporarily dates a gentle Shanghainese man. However, even a kiss from this man proves to be a painful experience for her: "as if he wants to leave a mark on my face" (Li & Li, 2004, p. 339). The intimacy that Sun Xiaoying yearns for is a form of emotional intimacy that stands in opposition to both the impersonal brutality of the collective and the aggressiveness of heterosexual genital sex. The arduous life of the rusticated youth required everyone to be as hard as the sunken snow, but Sun Xiaoying insists on preserving all her feminine softness in her emotions, which she believed to be the foundation of life: "Humans must live on emotions" (Li & Li, 2004, p. 209).

Thus, it is Sun Xiaoying's persistence about the soft nature of human beings that leads her to the same-sex relationship. In face of the harsh reality that demands radical transformations of her body and soul, she resorts to the same-sex relationship with Shu Di, which is the most tender and protective

relationship she can find in the Great Northern Wilderness. She has subconsciously equated the collectivist culture of the Cultural Revolution with invasive male sexual desire, both of which would result in a tragic fate for women. Sun Xiaoying thus has no intention of engaging in a sexual relationship with Shu Di; on the contrary, in her eyes, Shu Di's aberrant sexual desires for women only indicate how unnatural and violent the socialist collective is.

Sun Xiaoying's belief in essential gender differences and her fear of masculine aggressiveness lead to her instant disavowal of Shu Di's sexual advance. After Shu Di has crossed the red line between emotional love and sexual love, Sun Xiaoying starts to give up the imaginary mother figure in her mind and lets the same-sex relationship dissolve. She rescues herself by allowing the collectivist culture to reform her, partially, so that she can be selected as an outstanding *zhìqing* to leave the farm to go to school in the city. However, her final flight from the Great Northern Wilderness is not experienced as a triumphant act but rather as the start of melancholic mourning over an unspeakable loss.

In the "Addendum" of *Sunken Snow*, the middle-aged Sun Xiaoying confesses that she likes to juxtapose the "profundity of the bygone love" in the past with "the absolute apathy" of the present (Li & Li, 2004, p. 367). Probably because her memories of the fulfilling same-sex love overpower the memories of the grueling manual labor and the masculine collective, Sun Xiaoying still revisits her *zhìqing* life to mourn her unspeakable loss. In this sense, the same-sex love in *Sunken Snow* can be read as a "profound political allegory" (Shi, 1999, p. 277), in that it constructs the Cultural Revolution as a synecdoche for the masculine violence and masculine political power that assaults feminine emotions, sensibility, and imaginations. Women's same-sex love works as an antithesis to the masculine collective and provides the protagonist with temporary shelter, but it is inevitably disavowed as an alternative form of sexuality.

Red Azalea: Feminizing the Cultural Revolution

Red Azalea, by Anchee Min (Min Anqi, 1957–), is one of the most celebrated memoirs of the Cultural Revolution in the English-speaking world. As a national bestseller, it won the Carl Sandburg Literary Award in 1993 and was named a *New York Times* Notable Book in 1994. Min was born in Shanghai and grew up to become a school leader of the Red Guards during the

Cultural Revolution. She later became a rusticated youth at a farm near the East China Sea before she was selected to be a movie actress at the Shanghai Film Studio. After failing to secure the lead in the revolutionary movie *Red Azalea*, a pet project of Jiang Qing (aka Jiang Ching), Min made her way to the United States in 1984. *Red Azalea* is Min's first fictional memoir and consists of three parts: Part 1 narrates Anchee's childhood life in Shanghai; Part 2 focuses on the same-sex relationship between Anchee and Yan Sheng, the Party secretary and a commander of the female company at Red Fire Farm; and Part 3 depicts the story between Anchee and the androgynous Supervisor at the Shanghai Film Studio.

In contrast to *zhiqing* literature produced in mainland China, most of the notable memoirs of the Maoist era in the West have been written by female writers. Diasporic women writers' memoirs, such as Cheng Nien's *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1986), Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Generations of Chinese Women* (1991), Rae Yang's *Spider Eater: A Memoir* (1997), Tingxing Ye's *A Leaf in the Bitter Wind: A Memoir* (1997), and Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*, are popular texts from which Westerners obtain knowledge about socialist China and the Cultural Revolution. It is not a coincidence that the writings of female Chinese diasporic writers have been picked by Western readers as the authentic voices representing Chinese history. Edward Said has masterfully shown how the orient is always feminized in Westerners' representations (Said, 1979). The Chinese, in particular, internalized this feminizing gaze from the West in the early twentieth century in their avid pursuit of Western modernity (Chow, 1991; Zhu, 2015). In this sense, those émigré Chinese women's memoirs wittingly or unwittingly cater to Western readers' curiosity and imaginings of a Communist China that was forbidding, irrational, and exotic. As Ban Wang points out, by telling stories of "personal tragedy, tortuous bildungsroman, the purgatory experience under the 'totalitarian regime'" from a female perspective, these narratives "appeal to an audience that would still like to see a 'Red China' with demonic intents of the enemy" in the post-Cold War era (Wang, 2002, p. 45). Reading such writings helps Americans to project their country as the home of ethnic, religious, racial, and sexual diversity, tolerance, and inclusion.

Free from the Chinese Government's censorship system and driven by a Western book market that capitalizes on the lingering mindset of the Cold War, as well as Orientalism, Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* differs from Chinese *zhiqing* literature in the author's undisguised repugnance for the Communist

history she lived through. In her story, Communists are typically depicted as butchers, paraphilic individuals, schemers, and masturbators, as the author is determined to show how the Chinese Cultural Revolution “brought destruction to every family in the nation and took millions of lives” (Min, 2011, p. 1). However, *Red Azalea* still displays the same symptom of power worship prevalent in *zhiqing* literature. As Wendy Larson observes, Min’s characters “are totally committed to the Maoist enterprise, and they compete for honors within this system” (Larson, 1999, p. 435). At first glance, the sexual relationship between Anchee and Yan, and later between Anchee and the Supervisor, seem to defy the revolutionary faith of the Communists. Instead of following the standard Maoist formula of sublimating the sexual (personal) into the political, *Red Azalea* suggests the opposite—it de-sublimates the political into the realm of sexuality. This reversal of libidinal flow causes the story to be highly ambivalent: as much as it is supposed to be subversive, it still adheres to the same heterosexual power structure that it intends to subvert.

Unlike *Sunken Snow*, the masculine and the feminine in *Red Azalea* do not represent the stronger and the weaker, but disembodied political power and embodied sexual power. By de-sublimating the political into the realm of sexuality, Min intends to valorize the feminine more than the masculine. Anchee’s life story repeatedly demonstrates that one can gain access to power through sexuality. Anchee worships the masculine Commander and Party Secretary Yan Sheng at Red Fire Farm immediately, because Yan represents power: “[She] had a man’s muscles. Her feet were like animal paws [...] She was more real than Mao” (Min, 2011, p. 55). Anchee imitates Yan’s way of walking, talking, and dressing to the extent that she starts to covet her: “I developed a desire to conquer Yan. More truthfully, to conquer myself, because Yan symbolized my faith [...] I wanted her to surrender. I was obsessed” (Min, 2011, p. 69). Here, power worship is cloaked in sexual desires, desires that disrespect the institution of heterosexuality. Anchee wants to merge with Yan both emotionally and physically so that she can become the power figure that Yan represents.

Anchee is empowered by her desire to embody phallic power and is picked by the Supervisor, an envoy sent by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, at the Shanghai Film Studio. This “grotesquely beautiful” male supervisor is portrayed as a nameless and mysterious androgyne (Min, 2011, p. 234). Behind this feminized image of the Supervisor is the figure of Jiang Qing, “the standard-bearer, China’s modern empress” (Min, 2011, p. 247). The Supervisor carries Jiang

Qing's most ambitious mission to "fight for the people," and he finds in Anchee the same ambition of "want[ing] to be somebody [...] want[ing] to be history" (Min, 2011, p. 247). With the Supervisor's help, Anchee finally secures the lead role she intensely desires and becomes "Comrade Jiang Ching and the Supervisor's physical substance" (Min, 2011, p. 294). Anchee's ambition to become "somebody" and "history" through her lead role in the film *Red Azalea* is also an ambition to usurp the overpowering, all-conquering masculine power. However, the shooting of *Red Azalea* ends abruptly with Mao's death on September 9, 1976, leaving Anchee's ambition of embodying the epitome of power unfulfilled.

The Supervisor tells Anchee the story of Jiang Qing, a zealous female revolutionary who, after losing the love of Mao, created revolutionary model operas (*yangban xi*) and launched the Cultural Revolution. Anchee realizes that the "fearless, the diabolical, the lustful, the obscene heroine" in *Red Azalea* actually is Jiang Qing herself, as is the female part of the Supervisor (Min, 2011, p. 293). By playing the lead role in the film *Red Azalea*, Anchee is able to achieve another female-female identification that invigorates her with an enormous energy. If, as the story tells us, Jiang Qing had usurped Mao's power, then Anchee shares this usurped power through her identification with Jiang Qing.

The story thus becomes extremely ambivalent in the final part: If the feminine desire for power is the ultimate driving force of the Cultural Revolution, then the protagonist's condemnation of the political violence during the Cultural Revolution is directed toward something with which she fully identifies. What is more, this feminine desire acclaimed as history making by the Supervisor seems to stem from another form of power worship, namely, Jiang Qing's unfulfilled desire for Mao. Does this suggest that, in Min's eyes, women's natural and primary desires are heterosexual? *Red Azalea* vividly demonstrates the power structure and discursive legacy that still haunts the *zhiqing* generation.

Two Narratives of Female Sexuality in *Red Azalea*

While power worship in *Red Azalea* bears the essential mark of *zhiqing* literature, the story's sexualization of political and human relationships is not limited to *zhiqing* literary works. The 1990s saw an explosion in sexual expression. The discussion of sex, as Emily Honig notes, "is emblematic of the seemingly absolute distinction" between the Cultural Revolution and the post-Mao era

(Honig, 2003, p. 143). In Wendy Larson's words, *Red Azalea* "is by no means alone in fixing sexual expression as an important strategy for reinterpreting or distancing the Maoist past" (Larson, 1999, p. 432). This trend of "sexualizing" Mao's China takes its root in Chinese intellectuals' rediscovery of "human nature" (*renxing*) following the Cultural Revolution. As He Guimei writes, in the intellectual discourse since the 1980s, only desires associated with the body can be viewed as natural and humanistic (He, 2010, p. 10). The naturalization of "human nature" leads to the dehistoricization of sexual desire, and women are often appropriated as the embodiment of this essentialized sexual desire that has sprung from human nature (He, 2010, p. 10).

This essentialized and feminized desire plays a central role in *Red Azalea*. After Anchee turns eighteen, she is seized by an intense sexual desire that makes her restless. Yan also yearns for sexual love: She desires Leopard Lee, an effeminate man and the head of a neighboring *zhiqing* company. Because Leopard Lee is afraid of breaking the Communist Party's puritanical policy by engaging in a sexual relationship with Yan, Yan transfers her sexual desires to Anchee. The two develop a surprisingly blissful physical relationship despite the suspicion and surveillance of Ice Lu, Deputy Commander of the female *zhiqing* company. There is also a strong emotional bond connecting Anchee with Yan, in which Anchee oscillates between being herself, Yan's imaginary man, and Yan's double.

After Anchee leaves Red Fire Farm, she resumes physical intimacy with Yan when she arranges the rendezvous between Yan and Leopard Lee at her home. While Yan and Leopard make love on the porch, Anchee stands behind the drapes, feeling the "desire to watch my other self—Yan" (Min, 2011, p. 216). She feels that she "was in Yan. It was three instead of two people on the porch" (Min, 2011, p. 216). She finally looks out from behind the drapes, watches the scene of intercourse, and is seized by overwhelming jealousy. Ironically, it is through this scene of heterosexual sex that the existence of women's same-sex desire is once again reaffirmed. As Anchee watches the heterosexual scene, she finds that Leopard's sexual love is merely "devouring" Yan; he cannot "read the poetry of [Yan's] body" or "understand the way her heart sings" like she does (Min, 2011, p. 220). She believes that Yan does not love Leopard and is only using the sex with Leopard to kill Anchee's love for her and her love for Anchee. While Anchee and Yan's physical intimacy had developed out of the absence of heterosexual love in Red Fire Farm, they both later realize that their love is superior to heterosexual love. Although

this same-sex love had to be hidden and repressed, Anchee constantly misses Yan, who has become a part of her. Even the androgynous Supervisor did not have Anchee's love, as she confesses: "If it was love I shared with Yan, it was ambition I shared with the Supervisor" (Min, 2011, pp. 266–267). This strong female-female identification is something that disrupts the totality of the story's power-worshipping logic; it also effectively challenges the heterosexual assumption that is used as a rationale for the love between Anchee and Yan and even as the cause of the Cultural Revolution.

Thus, the same-sex relationship in *Red Azalea* exists in two narratives: a grand narrative and a personal narrative. The story constructs a larger narrative of Maoist China under the premise of heterosexuality, in which women are portrayed as desiring machines driving history forward. In a dramatic manner, feminine desires are rendered as an excessive output that cannot be contained by a compulsory heterosexual system or rigid political institution, and which therefore inevitably become an autonomous and powerful agent of history. The Cultural Revolution is feminized as a revolution borne out of a dysfunctional heterosexual relationship and a misogynist political system that excluded women. Jiang Qing, according to the Supervisor's account, became a madwoman after she was abandoned by Mao after he became the leader of China, but she never stopped waiting for him or fighting for her own ideal of revolutionary heroines. When Mao was isolated by the old cadres in the Party for his Great Leap Forward plan, Jiang Qing resumed her alliance with him. She created eight model operas to "secure his red kingdom," and she started the Cultural Revolution to "reunite her with her past" (Min, 2011, p. 291). The model operas, including *Red Azalea*, were "operas of heroines," because Jiang Qing wanted to pass on her ideal. In this grand narrative, the erotic is closely intertwined with power, since Mao represents not only the object of Jiang Qing's love but also her ideal of women's liberation.¹³

In contrast to the heterosexual framework of the grand narrative, *Red Azalea* depicts the same-sex love between Anchee and Yan through a personal narrative. Although at first Anchee desired Yan for her power and Yan regarded Anchee as a substitute for male love, the emotional and physical bond

¹³ Min's reconstruction of Jiang Qing as a revolutionary heroine is a revolt against the prevalent post-Cultural Revolution misogynist discourse in which Jiang Qing was scapegoated for being a female demonic power. For more discussions on the scapegoating of Jiang Qing, see Rebecca Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in Twentieth-Century World*, p. 123.

between the two grew and persisted despite the change in power dynamics between them. In this more personal account of Anchee's attachment to Yan, their secret and repressed bond is depicted as being so deep, enduring, and enriching that it eclipses all heterosexual relationships. This personal narrative of the women's same-sex relationship poses a more radical challenge to heterosexual politics than the feminization of history in the grand narrative, since the latter condemns but does not subvert the primacy of heterosexual institution. This personal narrative of women's same-sex love also disrupts the logic of power worship in the grand narrative of feminized history, because the emotional and physical bond that Anchee and Yan share proves to be more fulfilling than the attainment of power. If the feminization of revolution in the grand narrative is a protest against the injustice of the heterosexual institution, then the representation of women's same-sex love in the personal narrative defies the institution of heterosexuality by exposing its inferior and secondary nature.

Although the two narratives of female sexuality are not uniform in their challenge to heterosexuality, both of them carry an aura of misandry. *Red Azalea* could be viewed as an ostensibly feminist text that portrays men as cowardly, capricious, and cruel beings who exist only in the margins of history. However, the authenticity of this feminist stance can be problematized. Kathy Miriam asserts that "lesbianism itself has been refigured by heteronormativity today as central to the heterosexual norm, that is, for the pleasure of men [...] a pornographic view of lesbian sexuality has become a staple of masculine culture" (Miriam, 2007, p. 212). This raises the question of whether the sexualization and feminization of the Cultural Revolution constitutes another form of Orientalism: It portrays sexuality in China in such an exotic fashion that it affirms the civilized position of Western men and women. In this sense, *Red Azalea's* feminist stance is undercut by the Orientalist cultural politics it endorses, which again conforms to the heterosexual system at large.

Min's feminization of the Cultural Revolution and her concentration on same-sex love can thus be viewed as another form of power worship, with the West now assuming the masculine gaze and China being the erotic feminine other. The sexualization of women and the feminization of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, viewed in this light, reinforce the heterosexual Orientalist gaze. Such a narrative caters to "the fear of loss and the desire for connection" of American readers (Klein, 2003, pp. 43-44), who seek to overcome the irreconcilable ideological gulf between the free world and the total-

itarian China in their imagination through the unmenacing trope of an accessible Chinese female. As the author of *Red Azalea* tries to graft her individual memories onto an alternative discourse of power—Orientalism—as a means of integrating herself with the new imagined community, the United States, she inevitably creates ambivalent narratives of the Cultural Revolution that obscure the author’s feminist stance.

Conclusion

Red Azalea and *Sunken Snow* share a similar story—the same-sex love between women during their early years as rusticated youths. Furthermore, both stories endeavor to reconstruct the history of the Cultural Revolution around the centrality of the female-female relationship. However, the two stories also differ drastically. *Sunken Snow* focuses on the asexual feminine qualities of softness, sensibility, and emotion, whereas *Red Azalea* regards sexual desires as the essence of femininity. *Sunken Snow* depicts the feminine as something that is weak but enduring, while *Red Azalea* portrays feminine desires as the overpowering and all-conquering force of life. Li Jing and Li Ying’s protagonist turns away from the masculine power of the Cultural Revolution by favoring a female-female relationship, while Anchee Min’s story transcends compulsory heterosexuality by transferring its structure to a lesbian relationship. *Sunken Snow* consciously keeps its distance from any power discourse yet at the same time lacks the consciousness to challenge gender essentialism or the institution of heterosexuality, whereas *Red Azalea* is overtly rebellious yet profoundly complicit with the heterosexual premise and its geopolitical variant, Orientalism.

The two fictional memoirs interpret the Cultural Revolution as a unique period that both engendered and suppressed same-sex love between women. On an allegorical level, the Cultural Revolution in these two fictional memoirs is represented as a form of heterosexual violence, and the female-female relationships in both stories are used to challenge masculine political access to the individual’s body and soul. *Sunken Snow* represents the Cultural Revolution as a form of masculine brutality that invades the feminine nature, while *Red Azalea* represents it as a failed heterosexual romance that finally stages the resurgence of the feminine. However, their ultimate departure from the power discourse of the Cultural Revolution is conditioned by their endorsement of the new power discourses—postsocialist gender essentialism and post-Cold

War Orientalism, respectively. Consequently, neither is ultimately able to shake the foundations of the heterosexual institution of our society. The feminist impasses in both stories again reveal that feminist resistance is widely divergent, deeply fragmented, and fundamentally ambivalent.

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