

## **Smoothing Over Sex in Modern Chinese Literature: Translation and the #MeToo Movement\***

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### **Abstract**

This paper arises from a series of class discussions inspired by Shen Congwen's (沈從文, 1902-88) short story about child marriage, "Xiaoxiao" (蕭蕭, 1929), which is set in the spring of 2018 during an unending series of breaking news stories related to sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace. Beginning from the close reading of one seemingly innocuous line in the English translation—"Finally, one day, she let Motley sing his way into her heart, and he made a woman of her"—the paper seeks to address the following questions: How can translational practices inform and revise conventional ways of reading canonical fictional texts, especially in relationship to current conversations about sexual harassment, rape, and the #MeToo movement? What is the pedagogical responsibility of educators teaching literature to address instances of sexual violence, especially in cultural and historical contexts that seem remote from our own? And finally, what is at stake in this rereading of modern Chinese literary classics? Drawing from examples in two frequently studied and taught short stories published in China during the Republican period—Shen Congwen's "Xiaoxiao" and Mao Dun's (茅盾, 1896-1981) "Chun can" (春蠶 "Spring Silkworms," 1932)—I argue that translation in the present moment offers readers a valuable opportunity to re-examine commonly overlooked scenes of sexual ambiguity and abuse, especially in the field of East Asian literature, where many students arrive with a wide range of preconceptions and stereotypes about gender relations.

### **Keywords**

#MeToo, translation, Chinese literature, rape, sexualized violence

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\* Many thanks to Eugene Eoyang for his tireless effort in giving me access to the two earlier translations of "Xiaoxiao," and to the students in my GCHN-SHU 263 course in Spring 2018 at NYU Shanghai and in PAAS 357 at the University of Victoria in Spring 2019.

This article arises out of a series of discussions with my undergraduate literature class, consisting primarily of female students (twelve out of a class of thirteen), in the spring of 2018 at NYU Shanghai, amidst an unending series of breaking news stories around the globe related to sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace. The modern Chinese literature course began predictably, with texts written by May Fourth literary celebrities such as Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881-1936) and Yu Dafu (郁達夫, 1896-1945). A few weeks into the semester, when we read Shen Congwen's (沈從文, 1902-88) "Xiaoxiao" (蕭蕭, 1929), a question came up in class about love. The short story, which takes place in Hunan province, tells the tale of the orphan Xiaoxiao, who is married to a two-year-old according to the traditional practice of arranged child marriage. Working for her in-laws and raising her husband in exchange for room and board, Xiaoxiao commits adultery with the village farmhand Motley Mutt and gets pregnant, but because their offspring turns out to be a boy, Xiaoxiao avoids being killed or sold off as dictated by local custom, and remains married to her child-husband.

For today's readers, the story's most striking element is how the institution of marriage is being applied to a bride of eleven years, while even more shockingly her groom is described as being "hardly two years old—almost ten years younger, and not long ago sucking at his mother's breast" (Eoyang, "Xiaoxiao" 83). Shen Congwen depicts something that seems unnatural and ridiculous as being surprisingly organic, even reasonable. So when, during our class discussion of the story, specifically regarding the ethical question of marital infidelity, one student interjected, "What's the problem? They fell in love!" I was momentarily taken aback, thinking initially that by "they" my student was referring to the loving relationship that eventually develops between Xiaoxiao and her husband. But then the student clarified, "No, I mean Xiaoxiao and Motley Mutt." Together in class, we traced her deductive process back to one seemingly innocuous line in the English translation: "Finally, one day, she let Motley sing his way into her heart, and he made a woman of her" (Eoyang, "Xiaoxiao" 90).

A closer reading of this sentence led to further discussions of the ambiguities of the English language, and of what love in this context would look like for the two characters. As the NYU Shanghai student demographic is composed of a nearly even split of half Chinese nationals and half "international" students (with the majority from the US), a substantial number of students in the class were reading from Chinese online versions, while all had access to Eugene Eoyang's 1981 English translation. Prior to the course, the students' familiarity with Chinese literature ranged from non-existent to the passion of an avid Shen Congwen fan,

and this disparity did not seem to have a direct influence on the general sense of perplexity regarding the story's gender dynamics and the questions of sexual consent and desire that surfaced during our discussions.

My students were not presented with alternative English translations at the time, but the classroom exchanges led me to think about how reading in translation can inform and revise our conventional ways of understanding and discussing fictional texts, especially in relationship to current conversations about sexual violence and the #MeToo movement. Each translation of a text is historically situated and constructed, just as its "original" source and all subsequent interpretations. Given Benjamin's famous assertion that "a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife" (Benjamin 76), my paper asks: What is the pedagogical responsibility of educators who are teaching literature in translation when it comes to addressing instances of sexual violence, especially in cultural and historical contexts that seem remote from our own? And what is at stake in this rereading of modern Chinese fiction?

Compared with other literary traditions, such as those of the Latin classicist Ovid's writing which has been described as "notoriously riddled with rape scenes" (Beek), mainstream modern Chinese literature is relatively quiet about sexual violence—except for the accounts of Japanese war-related atrocities inflicted on Chinese women in works like Ding Ling's (丁玲) "When I Was in Xia Village" (我在霞村的時候 "Wo zai Xiaacun de shihou") from 1941, or more recently Mo Yan's (莫言) 1986 novel *Red Sorghum* (红高粱家族 *Hong Gaoliang Jiazu*). Focusing on "Xiaoxiao" and another short story from the same period that frequently is taught in courses on modern Chinese literature, Mao Dun's (茅盾, 1896-1981) "Chun can" (春蠶 "Spring Silkworms," 1932), I will argue that current translations offer readers a valuable opportunity to re-examine previously overlooked scenes of sexual ambiguity and abuse, especially in the domain of East Asian literature, where many readers come to the text with a wide range of preconceptions and stereotypes about gender relations.

Both stories were first published in the post- May Fourth era during which the "woman problem" (funü wenti 婦女問題) was a central point of debate in intellectual discourse. From the 1920s New Culture Movement on, women's oppression was perceived as one of the main reasons for China's political, economic, and cultural decline in the first half of the twentieth century. The issue of gender inequality pervaded nearly every aspect of daily life, including educational reform, marriage, labor and consumer practices, and subsequently became a favorite topic for cultural production such as literature and film. In *The Question of Women*

in *Chinese Feminism*, Tani E. Barlow traces the process of colonial modernity through the genealogy of the term *nüxing* 女性, from its earlier predecessor *funü* 婦女 to the former's origins in the 1920s, alongside the replacement of the Confucian canon term *wen* 文 with the modernist concept of *wenxue* 文學 (Barlow 52). This new, anti-Confucian definition of womanhood, which signaled beyond kin categories of relation (mother, sister, daughter, wife), was founded on "universal" (European) humanism and nineteenth-century Victorian scientific sex theory (Barlow 53) that emphasized the male-female binary.

In 1927, the author Ding Ling (丁玲, 1904-86) published her groundbreaking short story "Miss Sophia's Diary" (沙菲女士的日記 "Shafei nüshi de riji"), illustrating the social expectations and emotional conflict experienced by young women associated with marriage, friendship, dating, and sexual desire. The first-person narrator Miss Sophia reflects in one diary entry,

These days when young people get together, they love to explore the meaning of the word "love." Although I feel at times that I understand love, in the end I can never really explain it. I know all about what goes on between men and women. Perhaps what I already know about it makes love seem vague, makes it hard for me to believe in love between the sexes, makes it impossible to think of myself as someone pure enough, innocent enough to be loved. I am skeptical of what everyone calls "love." I'm just as skeptical of the love I've received. (Ding 66)

Miss Sophia vacillates between her physical attraction to the young man Ling Jishi, and the realization of his intellectual inferiority and her illusion of "love" as thrill of pursuit. Praising Ding Ling for her bold descriptions, Mao Dun described the fictional Miss Sophia as "representative of the contradictory psychology regarding sexual love found in young women liberated since May Fourth" (Feuerwerker 43). Unlike the urban and intellectual "modern girl" figure that Miss Sophia represents, the young female characters in "Xiaoxiao" and "Spring Silkworms" belong to the peasant class residing in the rural countryside. Nonetheless, readers of Shen Congwen and Mao Dun's fiction in the late-1920s and early-1930s were familiar with the contested issues of free love vs. arranged marriage and female sexual chastity vs. sexual liberation depicted in mainstream fiction, and read the injustices faced by fictional women in the context of real-life institutional changes such as co-ed education.

For today's readers, women's suffrage and footbinding seem like distant issues, and only a few students may notice a story's publication date of their own volition, not to mention when it was subsequently translated. Many of the translations discussed in this article appear in anthologies of Chinese literature targeted for classroom use. The most recent, Eugene Eoyang's translation of "Xiaoxiao," was commissioned in the 1970s for a 1981 Columbia University anthology. The most dated, Lee Yi-hsieh's 1938 version of the same story, first appeared in the China-based English-language monthly *T'ien Hsia*, a publication whose mission was to promote international cultural understanding by providing "an interpretation of China to the West" (Sun 5). The role of Panda Books, a translation series initiated in the early 1980s by Beijing's official publishing house Foreign Languages Press is especially noteworthy, as English versions of both "Xiaoxiao" and "Spring Silkworms" were published as imprints by the Foreign Languages Press (FLP), which began translating Chinese literature for English-language readers in the 1950s for *Chinese Literature*, a monthly journal edited by Mao Dun until 1966 (Hegel 179). As interest in contemporary Chinese literature and literature from the pre-1949 period grew, the Panda series reflected the "tremendously ambitious desire to make Chinese writing known and appreciated abroad" (Hegel 182) in the post-Cultural Revolution era. The question of which texts to translate was a touchy one, as the Panda series featured 1930s writers "whose reputations were blemished during the Cultural Revolution or enshrouded in anonymity in China" (L. Lee 563). On the issue of selection, Leo Ou-fan Lee concludes, "[t]hese titles not only provide much interesting and pleasurable reading material (in particular, the works of Shen Congwen, Lao She, and Xiao Hong); together they make for a refreshing counterbalance to the steady stream of overtly ideological works that have issued from the FLP" (L. Lee 563). In the wake of the Cold War, the re-evaluation of modern Chinese literature in translation as more than socialist propaganda was a complicated process shaped by many interrelated factors such as English-language literary criticism by diasporic Chinese scholars (Chi-chen Wang, C. T. Hsia), publication of previously banned authors in places like Taiwan and Hong Kong, and newly issued anthologies and the Panda series. Given the institutional affiliations and literary stakes associated with a majority of these translated works, it's not a surprise that depictions of sexual violence have been overlooked historically.

In "Rape, Lost in Translation," Stephanie McCarter parses translations of the myth of Leucothoe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to demonstrate that "Translation all too often replicates contemporary social attitudes regarding what constitutes

seduction, rape, and consent—and the often problematically hazy lines” between them (McCarter n. pag.). My paper’s title refers to this process of “smoothing over” sex by taking into account how translation is complicit in the act of easing readers’ minds, when it comes to questionable sexual encounters in literature, and at the same time how it can or should be used to draw attention to instances of sexual abuse. Gayatri Spivak contends that through language, we “make sense of things, of ourselves” (179). In her consideration of the politics of translation, particularly in the case of English translations of feminist writing, Spivak conceives of translation as “the most intimate act of reading”: “The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay” (181). The challenge lies in taking rhetorical risks against logic, in the space “outside language,” the “silence between and around words”: “The jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing, is a relationship by which a world is made for the agent, so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way, a day-to-day way; so that that agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world” (Spivak 181). While I acknowledge the importance of placing texts in their varied historical contexts, my analysis investigates cultural narratives located in this “between and around” space that reveal a persistent inability or refusal to make explicit lingering patterns of sexualized violence.

### **Love and Agency in Shen Congwen’s “Xiaoxiao”**

To return to the story of “Xiaoxiao,” from the very beginning the reader throughout time is presented with Xiaoxiao’s limited agency as an orphaned young female in rural, fictionalized West Hunan. My student’s simple, off-handed question, “What’s the problem?” raises an important aspect of the story, the role of the migrant worker Motley Mutt.<sup>1</sup> The victim of a child marriage, Xiaoxiao’s entire existence (career, marital status, family status) is predicated on a lack of choice, and this lack seems to extend to her sexual and romantic options as well. Xiaoxiao’s

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<sup>1</sup> “Motley Mutt” is Eugene Eoyang’s English translation of the character called *Huagou* (花狗) or, literally translated, Spotted Dog, in the 1929 original version. Eoyang’s version appears in the most commonly used collection of translated Chinese literature in the English language used to teach modern Chinese literature in the American college classroom, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* (2007). The translation was first published under the title *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas 1919-1949* (1981), and then anthologized in the *Columbia Anthology of Chinese Literature* (1995; second edition, 2007).

relationship with Motley Mutt obviously differs from that of her and her husband inasmuch as Motley Mutt is sexually available to Xiaoxiao. In Eugene Eoyang's English translation, the line which clearly indicates that Xiaoxiao and Motley Mutt finally have sex is couched in ambiguous metaphorical language: "Finally, one day, she let Motley sing his way into her heart, and he made a woman of her" (Eoyang, "Xiaoxiao" 90). In fact, Motley Mutt seduces Xiaoxiao by singing to her and also by finding ways to distract her "Little Husband." For Shen's readers, the social institution of marriage and its relationship to sexual desire was a pressing concern associated with China's modernization project. In the heyday of Chinese translations of social science theories on evolution, the implications of the woman problem extended to the "marriage problem" (婚姻問題 *hunyin wenti*). For example, the theorist Yi Jiayue (易家鉞) drew from philosophers like Edward Morgan and Friedrich Engels to promote the idea that "[h]eterosexual free-choice marriage was the most natural and enlightened form because it enabled the free expression of natural sexual desire" (Barlow 106). In contrast, twenty-first century readers may assume that marriage automatically designates free-choice, or that arranged marriage precludes emotional attachment.

In the Chinese original, the line "終於有一天，蕭蕭就這樣給花狗把心竅子唱開，變成個婦人了" (Shen 230) presents the transformation of Xiaoxiao into a mature, proper "woman" via her sexual activities as an inevitable and natural occurrence, a metaphorical act of "becoming." Additionally, the "singing open" (唱開 *changkai*) of her "heart" (心竅子 *xinqiaozi*) refers also literally to Xiaoxiao's capitulation to the physical bodily act of "opening oneself," that is, of "submitting" to Motley Mutt's persistent advances.

Examining the two other existing English translations of the story, Gladys Yang's Panda Books 1981 version (originally published in 1929) and Lee Yi-hsieh's 1938 translation (Eoyang, "Freud" 56), further reveals different interpretations of Xiaoxiao's role in the sexual act. Lee's translation describes Xiaoxiao passively being "made" a woman by Motley Mutt, the doer: "Thus it came to pass that eventually Spotted Dog made a woman of her" (Y. Lee 304). Yang's version translates literally the process of Xiaoxiao "becoming" woman: "And so at last the day came when Huagou melted her heart and Xiaoxiao became a woman" (Yang 113). The connotations of "finally" and "at last" in the second version suggest the inevitable in a positive sense, something waiting to happen, whereas "it came to pass" suggests the inevitable as something otherwise unavoidable.

Yang's translation, with its "melted her heart," resembles more closely Eoyang's "sing his way into her heart," and both of these translations take into account the word "heart" (心 *xin*) in the original. But the Chinese word *xinqiaozi* implies more than just the heart, which in English connotes romantic affection or passion in opposition to the mind's rationale. *Xinqiaozi* has multiple definitions, most obviously the capacity for thinking clearly, as the word *xin* in Chinese refers to what is often called the "heart-mind" in both the emotional and cognitive senses. The imagery in Chinese is also described more vividly, as part of Xiaoxiao is literally "sung open."

Returning to Eoyang's translation, given the combination of serenading songs and the English word "heart," an anglophone reader could logically conclude that Xiaoxiao and Motley Mutt are therefore in love, but for Shen's contemporaries, extramarital "love" would be improper, thereby unlikely to be romanticized. Closer examination of the text reveals a significant lack of clarity in how the sexual act is narrated, which is characteristic of mainstream Chinese literature published during this time. A subsequent passage, equally vague, describes the same sexual encounter, during which Motley Mutt promises Xiaoxiao that he will not tell anyone about their affair: "But she asked him to swear before Heaven, and after he swore—which seemed a good enough guarantee—she abandoned herself to him" (Eoyang, "Xiaoxiao" 91). In Eoyang's translation "abandoned" is used as a past tense verb, but in its noun form, "abandon" suggests a lack of sexual restraint or modesty, implying Xiaoxiao's recklessness, or at least some degree of complicity on her part. Likewise, both Lee's and Yang's translations employ the phrase "let him have his way" as a euphemism for the sex that Xiaoxiao reluctantly subjects herself to (Yang 114; Y. Lee 305). Compared to the Chinese text, which states "她要他當真對天賭咒，賭了咒，一切好像有了保障，她就一切盡他了" (Shen 231), the three English translations of the verb *jin* 盡 ("to leave up to" or "to go along with") do not clarify Xiaoxiao's position, or the degree of her willingness to have sex with Motley Mutt.

The narrator reflects on Xiaoxiao and Motley Mutt's sexual relationship in the next passage: "When Little Husband came back, his hand had been stung by a furry insect, and it was swelling up: he ran to Xiaoxiao. She pinched his hand, blew on the sting, and sucked on it to reduce the swelling. She remembered her thoughtless behavior of a moment ago, and she was dimly aware that she had done something not quite right" (Eoyang, "Xiaoxiao" 91).<sup>2</sup> In the case of the caterpillar's sting, the

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<sup>2</sup> For translations of the same passage in the other two versions, see Y. Lee 305; Yang 114.



physical act of Xiaoxiao exhaling and sucking on her husband's swollen hand is what jolts her into recognition of what has transpired between her and Motley Mutt. The narrator's meticulous description of the details of this physically intimate interaction between husband and wife stands in stark juxtaposition to the figurative mode used to gloss over the sex act. In the original, the sexual act is referred to as *hutu* 糊塗 (foolishness), which recalls the earlier reference to her *xinqiaozi*.

In fact, it is “only then”—emphasis in the original 才仿佛明白 (Shen 231)—that Xiaoxiao seems to realize that her actions may have been improper. Eoyang's translation picks up on the “dimly” and “not quite,” qualifiers of Xiaoxiao's state of semi-oblivion, whereas the original and Yang's translation emphasize the gradual process of Xiaoxiao's realization. Another interpretation of their sexual relationship appears in the ensuing paragraph, which begins, “When Motley took her, it was May” (Eoyang, “Xiaoxiao” 91). Lee's and Yang's English translations render Motley culpable as the “taker” of Xiaoxiao's virginity: “Spotted Dog seduced Hsiao-hsiao” (Y. Lee 305). Yang writes, “Huagou led her astray” (Yang 114). In the Chinese, Motley Mutt is also the subject, but he is the one that lures or seduces (誘 *you*) Xiaoxiao into “doing the bad thing” (做壞事情 *zuo huai shiqing*) (Shen 231), as described from Xiaoxiao's limited point of view. Jiwei Xiao has evoked Andreas Huyssen's notion of “imaginary femininity” to describe Shen Congwen's use of nature imagery to illustrate his female characters' psychology. After Motley runs away and fall arrives, Xiaoxiao's husband reminds her of the caterpillar bite when he sees caterpillars transforming into chrysalises (Eoyang, “Xiaoxiao” 93). Xiao traces the figure of the caterpillar and the physical marker of its sting “as both a blocker and a reminder of the shame and resentment” that Xiaoxiao feels with regard to her first sexual encounter (Xiao 49).

Reading the story, the present day reader is tempted to view Xiaoxiao's relationship with Motley Mutt as the sole example of her agency, to believe that despite the fact that she has no choice in the matter of marriage, at least she has some control over her body and sexual partner. But looking at these three English translations in conjunction with the Chinese original provides insight into the ambivalence with which the narrator describes the sexual acts of Xiaoxiao and Motley Mutt, suggesting that Xiaoxiao, with her few options, has as little control over this relationship as she does over anything else in her life. After impregnating Xiaoxiao, Motley Mutt abandons her, disappearing from the village without a trace, and leaving Xiaoxiao to face that which was her worst fear from the beginning, that everyone will come to know that she has had sex with someone who is not her husband—the customary local punishment for extramarital sex being death. The

story does not explain where Motley Mutt has gone, leaving villagers to wonder: “Had he merely drifted off into the hills, or had he enlisted in the army?” (Eoyang, “Xiaoxiao” 92). Compared to Motley Mutt, who as a male farmworker has options, however limited, to come and go, Xiaoxiao has no clear way to escape, especially given her pregnancy.

As readers, how *do* we answer the question: “What’s the problem? Aren’t they in love?” Reading her relationship with Motley Mutt as a certain form of modern romance, which includes sexual consent, requires a firm belief in Xiaoxiao’s agency and free choice. Considering that free-choice marriage was a key issue in the post-May Fourth era, Shen Congwen’s contemporaries would recognize Xiaoxiao’s arranged marriage as outdated, but in the absence of any textual claim to “love,” be hard pressed to read her relationship with Motley Mutt as based on any emotional attachment or intimacy. In other words, unlike Ding Ling’s Miss Sophia, who self-consciously questions the conventions of heterosexual marriage, Xiaoxiao is not depicted by Shen Congwen as critiquing the practices of child marriage or adultery. These absences in the text—both in the source text and its translations—consistently challenge established readings of the story that focus inaccurately on Xiaoxiao’s innocence and lack of consciousness on the one hand, or optimistically on her sexual “awakening” on the other hand. Eoyang’s English translation, with its use of words associated with romantic courtship, picks up the role of musical serenading present in the courtship process in the original, but downplays the narrator’s commentary about Xiaoxiao’s concern and hesitation. Shen Congwen’s story was first published in the January 1930 issue of *Short Story Magazine* (小說月報 *Xiaoshuo yuebao*), a popular monthly literary journal that originated in Shanghai and eventually played a key role in the promotion of literary reform in the May Fourth movement (under the editorship of Mao Dun beginning in 1921). However, in contrast to the work of other May Fourth intellectuals like Lu Xun, Shen Congwen’s writing was perceived as lacking social message, political meaning, and moral judgment, three crucial characteristics of social realist aesthetics in Chinese literary modernity (Xiao 47).

To recognize and acknowledge this textual ambiguity in “Xiaoxiao” is to challenge existing interpretations of Shen Congwen’s role in Chinese literary historiography. While his work essentially disappeared from the mainland—dismissed for not being politically engaged beginning from the 1940s—and unknown in Taiwan during the Maoist period, Sinophone readers were (re-)introduced to Shen Congwen’s *oeuvre* after the reprinting of his writings in the 1980s. This was at least partially due to the overseas recognition bestowed upon

him by C. T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, which was published in 1961 as a Cold War corrective to the Mao-centric literary historiography of the Socialist era, subsequently translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan in 1979 (Kinkley, "English Translations" 50; S. Chen 475), and also due to the root-searching (尋根 *xungen*) movement's tracing-backward of literary history in the post-Cultural Revolution period (Kinkley, "Shen Congwen's" 75).

Celebrated for his regional (鄉土 *xiangtu*) literature depicting rural life and the Miao ethnic minority culture in southern China, Shen Congwen continues to be a fascinating subject for scholars, who indeed are especially drawn to the story of "Xiaoxiao" and this titular character's lack of self-consciousness and self-awareness. Thus Li Li argues that Xiaoxiao is an example of Shen Congwen's larger project of exploring "women's oppression and tragic fate in the context of a feudal, patriarchal society" (Li 37), and describes Xiaoxiao as being someone who lacks a female self-identity, an awareness of her own womanhood. Similarly, Zhou Hua argues against reading this story as a critique of the feudal practice of child marriage, inasmuch as Xiaoxiao's marriage to her husband is described as having "little disruptive impact on her everyday life" (Zhou 13).

However, both Li Li and Zhou Hua fail to address the relationship between self-awareness and agency. The word that comes closest to representing the concept of "agency"—*ziyou* 自由 ("freedom")—appears in the story in the context of the co-eds, female college students who appear in the countryside. According to Zhou, the appearance of these young women in the countryside is a laughable, if not bizarre, temporary distraction, functioning as no more than "a kind of hazy backdrop" (Zhou 15) and having no lasting consequences for Xiaoxiao and her fellow villagers. The word *ziyou* appears in scare quotes twice, facetiously, when spoken by the grandfather and Motley Mott, as a way of mocking both the co-eds and any possibility of the realization of Xiaoxiao's aspirations (Shen 224, 228), and another time, also teasingly, by her grandfather in reference to cutting off Xiaoxiao's long, braided hair (Shen 229).

These appearances in the text of *ziyou*, translated as "freedom" in all of the English versions, ironically emphasize Xiaoxiao's lack thereof, and reveal the incommensurability of any Chinese equivalent for the English word "agency," which implies the ability to act freely. The word *ziyou* appears again in a short conversation between Motley Mutt and Xiaoxiao, when Xiaoxiao suggests going to the city "for freedom" (到城里去自由 *dao chengli qu ziyou*) (Shen 231), which is translated by Eoyang as going to "where we can be free in the city" and "going to freedom in the city" (Eoyang, "Xiaoxiao" 91), but is reduced to "going to town"

(Yang 114, 115) in Yang's version and "going to live in the city" (Y. Lee 305) by Lee. Reducing Xiaoxiao's demand for survival to the limited space of the city, and ignoring the importance of freedom in Shen Congwen's original text, diminishes the important connection, through the role of the female co-eds, with the larger social movement for women's rights. Xiaoxiao's perceived lack of self-awareness, then, can also be interpreted as the pragmatic acknowledgement of her limited options for survival, once her proposal to Motley Mutt that he run away with her to the city is rejected.

In Anglophone literary criticism, C. T. Hsia identifies "animal innocence" and the lack of a "highly developed intellect and emotional capacity" (Hsia 166) as the essential elements for attaining happiness in Shen Congwen's fiction, and he claims that with "Xiaoxiao" we have the "subtle manifestations of the powers of innocence and spontaneity" (Hsia 167). Comparing Xiaoxiao to the female character Lena Grove in Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), Hsia describes the two women as being "both simple farm girls seduced by hired men yet utterly inviolable in the strength of their animal purity" (Hsia 168).

Similarly, in Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie's *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, the authors describe Xiaoxiao as appearing "to be quite happy looking after her young husband, until she is seduced by a hired hand at the age of fourteen" (McDougall and Louie 127). To romanticize the process that leads Xiaoxiao to have sex with Motley Mutt as one of straightforward seduction is to ignore the unequal gender dynamic between the two characters, and to attribute Xiaoxiao's actions to her ignorance of the social implications of this uneven relationship, in particular Motley Mutt's agency to come and go as a male migrant worker.

These kinds of scholarly readings erase the subtle ways in which Shen Congwen's third-person limited narrator expresses Xiaoxiao's awareness of the life-or-death social consequences she faces for having sex with any man other than her husband, and further disregard the fact that as an orphan, she has little control over the conditions of her marital and work status. A close look at the three translations reveals that, as regards Xiaoxiao's relationship with Motley Mutt, in some cases the translators were translating literally from the original, which was already trying to "smooth over" the ambivalence and pressure that Xiaoxiao experiences. At other moments, the translator must make a moral judgment regarding Xiaoxiao, and perhaps the question is not to what degree she realizes that having sex with Motley Mutt will have dire consequences, but rather—given her situation and limited social position—the question as to whether there is any alternative to conceding to his

sexual advances. Regardless of historical time, the story's numerous versions consistently refuse to delineate the adulterous relationship in the same terms of physical intimacy and emotional affection as granted to her with her actual husband.

In fact, Xiaoxiao's self-awareness or self-consciousness may seem to be distinct from the question of her agency in this case. As a young female orphan, her only options may be to get away from Motley Mutt, have her baby, and start taking care of it together with her infant husband, or to have an abortion and then go to the city with Motley Mutt. "To be in love" implies intimacy and affection, romantic desire, which Eoyang's translation certainly encourages, yet to apply today's definition of sexual consent would seem to be remiss in this case. In these conventional interpretations of Shen Congwen's writing, female characters like Xiaoxiao and Cui Cui from his 1934 novel *Bordertown* (邊城 *Bian Cheng*) have largely served the aim of projecting an imagined nostalgia for the countryside, one clearly at odds with the more politically-minded, intellectual-driven May Fourth movement. Jeffrey Kinkley has argued against the pigeonholing of Shen, either as a rural, regional writer or as a universal "timeless" writer, demonstrating how translations of Shen's work locate his role instead as that of a "global literary author" (51-52). Kinkley further qualifies this label by speculating that in the case of the four English translations of the novel *Bordertown*,<sup>3</sup> while they were perhaps globally distributed, most "headed for university libraries in the West and assorted reading rooms in other countries" (56). That some English translations of "Xiaoxiao" deny her character any possibility of even a desire for resistance, in the form of that cognitive recognition and awareness that are present in the original, speaks to the extent to which her lack of a "consciousness" is a crucial element in this harmonious pastoral myth, tempting readers to believe that she will really fall in love with Motley Mutt. From the Republican period to the early twenty-first century, smoothing over sex in literature has been the norm, but today's reader should and must demand more clarity.

### **Silence and the Unspeakable in Mao Dun's "Spring Silkworms"**

The issue of female agency also arises in Mao Dun's "Spring Silkworms," the ensuing short story on my syllabus for the same class. The short story was first

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<sup>3</sup> This includes one published in *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, and another, Yang's 1962 translation, reprinted by Panda in 1981.

published in the November 11, 1932 issue of the influential, Shanghai-based literary journal *Les Contemporains* (現代 *Xiandai*), the periodical edited by modernist writer Shi Zhecun (施蛰存). Translated into English by Sidney Shapiro for a Mao Dun translated collection in 1956 published by the Foreign Languages Press, “Spring Silkworms” recounts the tragic fate of a village in Zhejiang province, whose main source of income relies on the raising of silkworms for silk production. The story is set during Japan’s attack on Shanghai in January of 1932, and it has been praised for its historical pertinence as well as for its sympathetic attitude toward the peasants’ reactions to changes in the textile industry. Old Tongbao, the family patriarch, clings stubbornly to superstitious practices in the ritual of raising silkworms, and despite enjoying a rich harvest, the villagers are unable to find a factory that will buy their cocoons at a reasonable price because of the Sino-Japanese military conflict going on in the neighboring city, and they end up amassing more debt.

Only two days after our class discussion on love and “Xiaoxiao,” we came across another questionable sexual encounter. I had already taught “Spring Silkworms” at least five times, and never stopped to think about this particular case or to question what was happening: “The girl and A Duo were standing beside a large basket, stripping leaves. In the dim starlight, they worked quite close to each other, partly hidden by the pile of mulberry branches before them. Suddenly Sixth Treasure felt someone pinch her thigh. She knew well enough who it was, and she suppressed a giggle. But when, a moment later, a hand brushed against her breasts, she jumped; a little shriek escaped her” (Shapiro 68).<sup>4</sup> The third-person omniscient narrator in the original Chinese explains that Sixth Treasure surmises the identity of the hand, and so “stifles” her laughter (忍住了不笑 *renzhu le buxiao*) and the “making public” (聲張 *shengzhang*) of the act, one which does not make it into Shapiro’s translation.

In Chi-chen Wang’s translation for *Contemporary Chinese Stories*, published by Columbia University Press in 1944 and re-published in Cyril Birch’s 1972 *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, the same passage reads: “They were close together in the faint starlight, and they were hidden by the branches. All at once she felt a hand on her thigh, and a pinch. She knew very well who it was and managed not to giggle or call out. But when the hand was cupping her breast, she jumped up and

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<sup>4</sup> 那六寶是和阿多同站在一個筐子邊捋葉。在半明半暗的星光下，她和阿多靠得很近。忽然她覺得在那槓條的隱蔽下，有一隻手在她大腿上擰了一把。好像知道是誰擰的，她忍住了不笑，也不聲張。驀地那手又在她胸前摸了一把，六寶直跳起來，出驚地喊了一聲。(Mao, “Chun can” 284)

yelled ‘*Ai-ya!*’” (C. Wang 332). Both English translators choose the verb “pinch” for *ning* (擰), which is most commonly used to describe the action of twisting or wringing out a towel or dishrag. The image of the hand, which in the passage seems to be disembodied, is more benign in the English versions where it just playfully pinches. In the second action, *mole yiba* (摸了一把) is preceded by *mode* (驀地), suggesting the suddenness and unexpectedness of the physical violation, overlooked in translation. In fact, *mole yiba* implies a forceful grab, rather than an accidental or intentional gentle “brushing” or “cupping” as Shapiro and Wang suggest. Shapiro’s diction in the three lines downplays Sixth Treasure’s alarm, especially by translating *chujing de hanle yisheng* (出驚地喊了一聲), which implies her visceral bodily reaction to being violated by A Duo (阿多, Old Tongbao’s son), as merely “a little shriek.”

In the same episode, when Sixth Treasure finally does cry out, her cry is overheard by A Si’s wife, Old Tong Bao’s daughter-in-law, who asks if anything is wrong. Hearing her question, Sixth Treasure’s face is described as turning red (“flamed scarlet” in Shapiro’s words, while Wang translates *rehonghong le* 熱烘烘了 as “burned”). In Shapiro’s translation: “Sixth Treasure’s face flamed scarlet. She shot a glance at A Duo, then quickly lowered her head and resumed stripping leaves. ‘Nothing,’ she replied. ‘I think a caterpillar bit me!’” (Shapiro 68). Wang translates, “Liu-pao’s face burned; she glanced at Ah Tuo, then stripped away furiously at the leaves with her head down: “Nothing. Must have been a caterpillar bit me” (C. Wang 332).<sup>5</sup>

In the original version, there is a greater emphasis on Sixth Treasure’s self-consciousness, as she is described as feeling the physical sensation of her face reddening before secretly looking at A Duo and subsequently lowering her head. In both English translations, the verb “glance” takes away any potential for Sixth Treasure to have been calculating, which is implied by the much more active verb *deng* (瞪), “to glare” or “to stare.”

For today’s classroom readers, this episode, one minor detail among countless others in the course of the story, is easy to overlook. For Mao Dun’s contemporaries, as with Shen Congwen’s—primarily urban intellectuals—this is a singular moment in a series of character interactions that sets up the everyday ritualized labor of sericulture in the story, attesting to the reality of rural life. Readers attuned to the debates on revolutionary literature in the late-1920s, of which Mao Dun was a key

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<sup>5</sup> 六寶覺得自己臉熱烘烘了，她偷偷地瞪了阿多一眼，就趕快低下頭，很快地掙葉，一面回答：「沒有什麼。想來是毛毛蟲刺了我一下。」(Mao, “Chun can” 284)

proponent on the “literature for life’s sake” side, could glide over the incident as an example of the author’s commitment to literature conveying the “feeling of an epoch” (Mao, “On Reading” 300) from an objective point of view. For both types of readers, the harvesting passage fits relatively smoothly within the narrative by revealing the light-hearted nature of local workers, as if to point out the ways in which they can find time for a little relaxation and enjoyment amidst the long hours of toil and hard work. From A Duo’s perspective it is all in good fun; the narrator says that “A Duo bit his lips to keep from laughing aloud” (Shapiro 68). But encountering a character pressured into silence allows the reader to think about the different motivations for keeping quiet. In A Duo’s case, silence prevents him from being lectured by his father, Old Tongbao, whereas for Sixth Treasure the social consequences are more far-reaching and serious; there is no suggestion of any alternative, on her part, to enduring A Duo’s groping. What would it say about the art of literature if, just as an experiment, we imagined what the story might look like if, in response to A Si’s wife’s inquiry as to what was the matter, Mao Dun had written the following line of dialogue for Sixth Treasure: “A Duo just groped me”? And what would it say about our own contemporary culture if this hypothetical moment of speaking out seemed unimaginable, completely preposterous?

For Sixth Treasure, the unspeakable is silenced not because no one has noticed her distress, but because it doesn’t fit with the pastoral narrative of villagers at work. Hard labor is linked to masculine pleasure, as we see in the narrator’s explanation of A Duo’s work philosophy: “He enjoyed work, just as he enjoyed fooling around with Sixth Treasure” (Shapiro 68) / “Still he worked with a will: it was something he enjoyed, just like flirting with Liu-pao” (C. Wang 332). While the passage may seem to romanticize the carefree nature of country life, it can also be interpreted as Mao Dun’s subtle commentary on gender relations and the ideals of femininity in the village. In the Chinese original, the narrator observes, “但是他仍舊很高興地工作著，他覺得這也是一種快活，正像和六寶調情一樣” (Mao, “Chun can” 284). What gets translated as harmless “fooling around” or “flirting” (調情 *tiaoqing*) from A Duo’s point of view allows the reader to avoid having to consider Sixth Treasure’s uneven position in the social hierarchy.

Wang’s translation on 332, which uses the verb “managed,” tells us that Sixth Treasure realizes the negative consequences of drawing attention to A Duo’s harassment. Her initial reaction is dependent on the fact that she knows the identity of the one pinching her, as she suppresses breaking out in laughter or crying out when she feels a hand grabbing her thigh. However, when that same hand reaches out to stroke her breast, she jumps up and shouts loudly. The setting is significant,



as it is the dim light that allows A Duo's actions to be overlooked by everyone else. In this interaction there is no direct commentary on Sixth Treasure's reaction, such as whether or not getting groped by A Duo while stripping leaves for silkworms is something she enjoys. However, this episode actually makes more sense in the context of another female character, Lotus, who is described as being a former maid who married Old Tongbao's elderly neighbor: "That was less than six months ago, but her love affairs and escapades already were the talk of the village" (Shapiro 62).

In fact, Lotus and Sixth Treasure are both contrasted with Old Tong Bao's daughter-in-law who is "more decorous" (Shapiro 62), and in fact they are likened to A Duo, whom Old Tong Bao also complains about as lacking a "sense of propriety" (Shapiro 63). In the story, the problem of Lotus's impropriety is directly linked to Old Tong Bao's concern that she will bring bad luck to the village: "What disturbed him particularly was the way A Duo and Lotus were always talking and laughing together. 'That bitch is an evil spirit. Fooling with her will bring ruin on our house,' he had often warned his younger son" (Shapiro 63). Lotus's bad fortune as linked to her marital status and social stigma in the village is reminiscent of Lu Xun's tragic tale of Sister Xianglin (祥林嫂 *Xianglin sao*) in the 1924 short story "New Year's Sacrifice" (祝福 "Zhufu"). The unnamed narrator's uncle, who represents the cruelty and superstition of Confucian tradition (albeit subject to Lu Xun's critique), warns of the potential danger in allowing the titular female character to participate in the hallowed annual lunar new year ancestral sacrifice: "People like her may seem quite pitiable, to be sure, but one must remember that they do have a deleterious influence on the morals of society" (Lu 235). Readers in the 1920s and 1930s would have been familiar with the writing of male May Fourth authors, which foregrounds woman's oppression yet barely hints at the notion of sexual consent, not to mention any possibility of female sexual desire.

Existing literary studies of "Spring Silkworms" have failed for the most part to consider the role of gender dynamics in unsettling the main narrative, which is about the material transformations taking place in a rural working environment in southern China in the early 1930s. For instance, C. T. Hsia writes, "As a Communist commentary on the Chinese scene, 'Spring Silkworms' shows the bankruptcy of the peasantry under the dual pressure of imperialist aggression and traditional usury [?!], and as such the story is usually praised" (Hsia 135). Calling the story Mao Dun's best, Hsia argues that the author's "loving portrayal of good peasants at their customary tasks transforms this supposed Communist tract into a testament to human dignity" (Hsia 135). David Der-wei Wang echoes this sentiment: "Mao Dun may not necessarily be an expert with regard to the silkworm

raising industry, but by detailing a farm family's hardships in the new naturalist-scientific way, he manages to usher his readers into a world where an old and diseased mode of production is still being practiced, even though history has evolved and reached the next stage of its set course" (D. Wang 52).

Indeed, critics have drawn attention to Old Tongbao's opening line, "Even the weather's not what it used to be" (Shapiro 110),<sup>6</sup> as testament to the encroachment of the new culture Old Tongbao now faces. In more recent Chinese-language scholarship, Han Min reads Old Tongbao's plaintive observation as evidence of his recognition of the coming societal upheaval, particularly in the domain of gender relations and women's rights (Han 71). Seeing the secondary female characters, A Si's wife and Lotus, as embodying the 1930s feminist movement, Han rightly concludes that although these two women may represent the beginning of the struggle for women's rights, the story fails to show any real changes in women's fate: "A Si's wife challenges Old Tongbao's refusal to raise foreign silkworms but nonetheless submits to his will, demonstrating that despite her awareness of women's improving social status, she still ultimately conforms to male authority" (Han 73).

I would like to propose that an unsettling conversation between A Duo and Lotus is clearly more instrumental in revealing the male anxiety about gender relations in 1930s China. Later in the story, in the middle of the night, A Duo catches Lotus trying to steal some of his family's silkworms as a way of getting revenge for being treated as an outcast in the village. She accuses him and his relatives, saying "You acted as if I wasn't even human!" (Shapiro 69) / "You have all treated me as if I were not human!" (C. Wang 333).<sup>7</sup> Lotus refers to the inhumane way in which she is treated by the villagers, who fear being contaminated by her own misfortunes, since her poor silkworm crop is seen as being an infectious ailment by the others.

The narrator describes A Duo's response: "It didn't occur to him to either hate or pity Lotus, but the last thing she had said remained in his mind. It seemed to him there was something eternally wrong in the scheme of human relations; but he couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly, nor did he know why it should be. In a little while, he forgot about this too" (Shapiro 69) / "He felt neither pity nor hatred for Lotus, but her words came back to him. He felt there was something between them that could never be straightened out, but couldn't have said what it was or

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<sup>6</sup> 真是天也變了！(Mao, "Chun can" 270)

<sup>7</sup> 你們不把我當人看待！(Mao, "Chun can" 286)

what caused it. Soon he forgot the whole thing” (C. Wang 333).<sup>8</sup> The narrator may fail to grasp the significance of Lotus’s accusation.

For current readers this pause is noteworthy, as this moment of reflection on human cruelty is perceived as being inscrutable; its source or origin is impossible to determine, and the conflict it poses impossible to resolve. The most noticeable difference between the two English versions is how the translator conceives of A Duo’s temporary confusion. Shapiro sticks more closely to the original, which refers to the interpersonal relationships among the characters (人 和 人 中 間 *renheren zhongjian*), recalling Lotus’s complaint that her neighbors refused to treat her as a human being; Wang’s translation makes A Duo’s discomfort much more localized, grounded in the relationship between A Duo and Lotus. Both Shapiro’s translation and Mao Dun’s original grant the character of A Duo the capacity to recognize that something is not quite right. Read alongside Old Tongbao’s critique of female sexuality and the earlier interactions between Sixth Treasure and A Duo, this A Duo-Lotus interaction recalls, or prolongs, the unspeakable horror of Sixth Treasure’s and A Si’s wife’s inability to break their silence when faced with A Duo’s sexual violation. Falling short of being able to enunciate what is at stake in treating women as human beings, A Duo allows the narrator room for speculation on the question of human dignity, and the question as to how what may seem like customary tasks for male workers like A Duo are fraught with peril for women workers like Lotus and Sixth Treasure. Rey Chow argues that Mao Dun’s writing is easily translatable to English, as his “analytic narrative language that turns ‘thought’ into the new object of representation” demonstrates the “conceptual creation of ‘selfhood’ in modern Chinese literature” (Chow 107). While this may be true of his female characters in earlier work, neither Mao Dun’s original text in “Spring Silkworms” nor its English versions satisfy current readers’ expectations in conveying Sixth Treasure’s response to A Duo’s assault as a female subject.

These examples of English translations of Shen Congwen’s “Xiaoxiao” and Mao Dun’s “Spring Silkworms” are instructive in terms of how we might evaluate their accuracy, that is, in terms of how slight variations in word choice can have a crucial impact on the reader’s understanding of ambiguously narrated scenes of sexual violence. Both stories help to illuminate the working conditions of young women in the countryside in 1930s China, acting as a much-needed counterpoint to the “allure vs. threat” binary that pervades conventional May Fourth discourse

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<sup>8</sup> 他並沒想到荷花可恨或可憐，然而他不能忘記荷花那一番話；他覺到人和人中間有什麼地方是永遠弄不對的，可是他不能夠明白想出來是什麼地方，或是為什麼。再過一會兒，他就什麼都忘記了。(Mao, “Chun can” 286)

about the urban figures of the modern girl and the New Woman, a discourse in which Shen Congwen participates through his depiction of the female co-eds. Here, familiarity with Mao Dun's background as a founding member of the League of Left-Wing Writers in 1930, and his essays and fiction related to women's emancipation, can shape the reader's understanding of *Lotus* and *A Duo's* predicament (Y. Chen 131). Yu-shih Chen cites Mao Dun's January 1931 essay "All [of Women's] Problems Are Left Intact" to identify a shift in the author's writing from the 1930s that departs from the earlier revolutionary woman figure in his fiction: "On the surface, the women's problem in China is already resolved, just as the problem of revolution in China seems to have been resolved. The fact of the matter is quite different. . . . Bourgeois women in the inland cities and peasant women in the countryside have no political rights to speak of. . . . The solution to women's problems may have to wait until a fundamental reconstruction of our social organization is in place" (Y. Chen 151).

In "Xiaoxiao," textual passages narrating Xiaoxiao's loss of virginity and its consequences reveal how the original Chinese version and its multiple English translations similarly fail to provide any definitive answer or explanation with regard to Xiaoxiao's willingness to engage in sex with Motley Mutt, and that this "narrative absence" in itself has gone unquestioned is even more remarkable. In "Spring Silkworms," the interactions between *A Duo*, *Sixth Treasure*, and *Lotus* make clear how the sexual abuse inflicted on working women is just an unavoidable part of their daily working routine, their daily work environment. These stories, both in their contexts of original time of publication during the Republican period, as well as in later Cold War, post-Cold War era translations, consistently illustrate the pressure of the need for young women to remain silent in a work culture in which they have limited or no options outside of enduring physical mistreatment at the hands of their always-already more powerful male companions. Surveying the varying historical, political and cultural climates from which the two stories and their subsequent translations have originated, one underlying trait shared among writers, translators, and readers is the inability to express and acknowledge sexualized violence openly and directly, something that must change as a direct consequence of the #MeToo movement.

### **Conclusion: Toward a Collective Female Agency**

From early January of 2018 up to the present moment, an incessant stream of allegations of sexual abuse has been reported by mainstream news media almost

daily. A cursory glance backward would begin with the aftermath of the “Weinstein effect,” including the worldwide Women’s March of January 20-21, 2018, the gymnastics sex abuse scandal that broke on January 22 and involved the sentencing of the USA team doctor, the February 2 charge of academic #MeToo in Paris, and American businessman Steve Wynn’s resignation on February 6. Translated as 米兔 (*mitu*), a homonym for “rice rabbit,” and #我也是 (*#woyeshi*), the #MeToo movement has had a considerable impact in China as well, beginning from January 1, 2018, when Luo Qianqian (羅茜茜) posted online her firsthand account of the sexual harassment she suffered, as a doctoral student at Beihang University in Beijing, at the hands of her advisor Chen Xiaowu (陳小武) (Luo).

Teaching “Xiaoxiao” and “Spring Silkworms” in this context, during the first week of February 2018, to a group of American and Chinese university students in Shanghai, made it imperative for me to comment on the tangled relationship between our course readings from nearly a century ago and contemporary discussions of sexual abuse, workplace harassment, and women’s silence. As university students themselves, my students at NYU Shanghai were well aware of the heated online discussions of sexual harassment taking place on Weibo and WeChat, as well as the accusations surfacing in such international media outlets as *The New York Times*, many of which were related to abusive student-teacher relationships. In my literature classroom, and also as I suspect in many literature classrooms around the globe, unsettling passages, previously overlooked in familiar stories, have somehow floated to the surface, transforming moments that seemed insignificant only a few semesters ago into perturbing and potentially disruptive displays of the entrenched ways in which socio-economic structures have persistently perpetuated male power and female silence, in everyday interactions across national boundaries and throughout time.

In the spring of 2019, I taught these two stories again in the context of filmic adaptations of modern literature, this time to a large undergraduate class of 80 students consisting mostly of Chinese international students and some domestic Canadian students, at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. When I raised the issue of what exactly is happening in the leaf-stripping scene between A Duo and Sixth Treasure in “Spring Silkworms” during the first week of class, one particularly vocal and provocative male student responded nonchalantly, “Come on, it’s just flirting, no big deal!” No one in the auditorium was willing to challenge him. However, the following week, during our discussion of “Xiaoxiao,” I played a clip from the assigned film, *Xiangnu Xiaoxiao* 湘女蕭蕭 (*A Girl from Hunan*, 1986, dir. Xie Fei [謝飛] and U Lan [烏蘭]), asking students to compare the textual

passage from Shen Congwen's story with what unfolds onscreen between Hua Gou (played by the actor Deng Xiaoguang [鄧曉光]) and Xiaoxiao (Na Renhua [娜仁花]).

In this scene, the threesome seek shelter during a rainstorm and Xiaoxiao attempts to hide herself under a stack of hay, and then calls for her son to stay but to no avail, as Hua Gou sends Chunguan away. Hua Gou approaches her as she begs him repeatedly, while attempting to retreat from his advance, "Don't come over here!" (00:38:13), and the camera builds up the tension by alternating closeups of the two characters' faces with shots of the grinding millstone. Finally, Hua Gou unravels Xiaoxiao's chest binding and presumably takes her up into the haystack, as the audience is confronted with a supine rear view of Hua Gou (Xiaoxiao being no longer visible), accompanied by the sound of Xiaoxiao's cries, running water, and the rhythmic millstone (00:39:14). After watching the clip together, we discussed the relevance of that week's secondary reading, Lawrence Venuti's "Adaptation, Translation, Critique," and how cinematic elements could either elucidate or obfuscate details from literature, ultimately coming to the consensus that *A Girl from Human* makes Xiaoxiao's discomfort unavoidable, thereby explicitly portraying Hua Gou's act as an act of sexual violence.

Writing about the circulation of world literature, David Damrosch argues for the importance of examining a circulated work of literature as it gets "reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts" (24). The process of transculturation has also been discussed more recently in relation to the dimension of time, a practice some scholars call "Reading over Time" (Halpern and Rabinowitz 631), and both of these methods of literary scholarship rely on the recognition that a reader's understanding of literature does not exist in a vacuum. It is impossible to read and search for meaning without any consideration of the real events unfolding around us. For teachers of literature, this requires a kind of balancing act: on the one hand presenting texts in a way that does not completely mold our students' understanding to our own, and on the other hand taking advantage of the opportunity to draw connections between the world outside the classroom and the books on our syllabus.

In the last five years, the university climate has shifted dramatically from when I attended college in the 1990s. Students are now encouraged to speak more openly about sexual consent and gray zones, in a marked departure from the old days when the danger of drinking too much at frat parties was just quietly assumed and accepted by young men and women. This paper has shown what can be gained through the rereading of modern Chinese literary classics, which is that when we

take the time to pause in the classroom, to read closely these ambiguous moments in the text that have been “smoothed over” by authors, translators, and instructors alike, we may form meaningful connections between our everyday lives and the fictional lives narrated in literature. For example, when I first started thinking about this topic, I was surprised to see that Shen Congwen’s story in Chinese used the same metaphorical language as Eoyang, that of “singing open” Xiaoxiao’s heart; accustomed to teaching the English translation of the text, I was convinced that this euphemism was Eoyang’s creation. This incorrect assumption on my part revealed my own bias toward Republican period literature written by male authors, and it was a pleasant surprise to realize the potential for re-thinking these old stories in the light of new ways of identifying and questioning the still-too-common problem of sexual violence in the workplace.

Reading multiple translations also provides opportunities for reexamining scenes easily skipped over in monolingual readings, where scenes of sexual encounters—taken for granted or taken at face value, on a matter-of-fact basis—were readily accepted. Looking more closely at these ambiguous scenes can help us to understand sexual and gender dynamics, and making these kinds of moments worthy of class discussions and class time in general can heighten students’ and readers’ awareness of the need to continue asking more questions, specifically regarding the relationship between (male) power and (female) silence. The reach of the #MeToo movement has certainly extended beyond national boundaries, and in China it has called attention to sexual harassment in the university setting, domestic violence, discriminatory hiring, and other unfair business practices. High-profile public figures such as TV hosts, journalists, and coaches have been among those accused of sexual misconduct, and #MeToo was identified by *New Weekly* as one of the top ten keywords of the year (Kuang et al. n. pag.).

Talking openly about the #MeToo movement in the literature classroom, as it has unfolded in both surprising and not-so-surprising ways in China, and as it relates to modern Chinese literature both in Chinese and in translation as it circulates around the world, is one way of showing students that many of these problems have existed for centuries, and the fact that literary scholars, critics, students, and readers in general have long neglected to acknowledge what was taken for granted as the way things must be for women is telling in and of itself. The fact that victims of sexual abuse who come forward with their stories continue to get censored, publicly shamed, or themselves accused also speaks to the validity of the hesitation, fear, and uncertainty experienced by fictional characters like Xiaoxiao.

But there is also something more at stake when we try to understand modern Chinese literature from the beginning of the twentieth century through our current filter, that is, in the immediate aftermath of the #MeToo movement. The potential danger of this kind of re-reading is related to the practice of using stories like “Xiaoxiao” and “Spring Silkworms” to talk about current events. Here the problem is that when we look at the conditions under which Xiaoxiao gets pregnant or Sixth Treasure gets groped by A Duo, to classify these instances as acts of rape or workplace harassment is to read their stories through the filter of our contemporary understanding of concepts like consent and gray zones. In fact, many readers and students of Chinese literature believe that Chinese literature (or any Asian literature for that matter) is inherently misogynistic and that Chinese culture is oppressive, especially in its treatment of women. When students come to the classroom armed with preconceptions and stereotypes about uneven gender relations and submissive women, turning to the multiple translations as well as the original text is one concrete way of complicating the picture, in order to understand, historically and culturally, what have been the reasons for women’s silence. What kinds of connections can be drawn between Sixth Treasure’s reticence and the #NoPerfectVictim movement, inspired by an online video posted in an effort to incriminate the young woman accusing JD.com founder Richard Liu of rape (Y. Li)?

In teaching literature, we emphasize how important the historical context is, that what today as readers we may find offensive, unappealing, or downright bizarre, perhaps in another setting or cultural context, or to another set of individuals with other morals and preferences in place, other social expectations to fulfill, those same choices or actions that appear questionable to the contemporary reader may have a completely different set of implications. But this seems like a small price to pay, as Faye Halpern and Peter J. Rabinowitz remind us, for “if reading over time summons us to think about the past, it also points us toward the future” (Halpern and Rabinowitz 632). Authors, translators, readers, and instructors alike may have, to varying degrees, been complicit in the past. If even scholars of classical Greek and Roman mythology are urging that “it’s time to stop pretending that these ancient fictions have no influence on real life. The same narrative outlines that appear in Ovid’s work are still being taught in schools and used in films, television, books, and video games. People accept them as realistic because they are constantly repeated and infrequently questioned” (Beek n. pag.), then certainly less “ancient” works of Chinese literature and their translations from the early twentieth century should be subjected to the same kind of critical scrutiny. The opportunity to re-read classic stories, and to re-evaluate the human need to smooth over sexual uneasiness,



awkwardness, violence, and outright assault—this is also what allows us to recognize the potential for collective female agency and speaking out.

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