

Gender Relations and Female Agency in Republican China Through Ding Ling's *Miss Sophia's Diary* and Eileen Chang's *The Golden Cangue*

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Abstract

This paper compares Ding Ling's *Miss Sophia's Diary* (1928) and Eileen Chang's *The Golden Cangue* (1943) by asking how each story constructs gender relations through courtship, marriage, family authority, and money. The comparison begins with narrative form because a woman's ability to speak and reflect affects how unequal relationships are represented. Sophia's diary lets her examine her attraction to Weidi and Ling Jishi and reject the passive role expected of women, although she cannot create the equal love she wants. Chang's third-person narration follows Cao Qiqiao inside a marriage and family hierarchy that deny her intimacy and economic control. After Qiqiao gains property, she acquires power, but she uses it to control her children and repeat the same gender rules. The difference between the two women is therefore not a simple contrast between freedom and oppression. Both act within unequal relationships. Sophia's agency lies mainly in self-questioning and refusal, while Qiqiao's lies in household power secured through property. Their stories show how relations between women and men shape the limits of female agency in Republican China.

Keywords: *Miss Sophia's Diary*, *The Golden Cangue*, female agency, gender relations, research

1. Introduction

Ding Ling (1904-1986) grew up in Hunan and attended progressive schools before entering the literary and political circles of Beijing and Shanghai. Her early fiction often examines how difficult it is to become a modern woman when family duty and sexual respectability still shape a woman's choices. Eileen Chang (1920-1995) was born into a formerly prominent Shanghai family, studied in Hong Kong, and returned to Shanghai after the Pacific War interrupted her education. Her fiction looks closely at marriage, money, and

the quiet bargains through which family members gain or lose power. These backgrounds do not explain every difference between the writers, but they help locate their shared interest in gender relations (Barlow & Bjorge; Feuerwerker; Hsia).

Miss Sophia's Diary appeared in 1928, less than a decade after May Fourth debates had made the educated, independent New Woman a visible and disputed figure. Yet Sophia's story is already far from optimistic. She lives away from a traditional household, but illness, isolation, and

unequal encounters with men leave her unsure what freedom would mean in practice. *The Golden Cangue* appeared in 1943 in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, where war and political uncertainty existed alongside a commercial urban culture. Chang sets much of the novella inside the Jiang household, an older family order governed by marriage rank, inheritance, and dependence on male-controlled property. The two dates should not be treated as a simple rise and fall of May Fourth hope. Both works show that new ideas about women could exist beside older patterns of male privilege and family control.

This paper therefore compares the stories through gender relations: the unequal expectations and exchanges between women and men in love, sex, marriage, and family life. It asks how narrative voice reveals these relations, how romantic and sexual desire is shaped by them, and how money changes a woman's ability to act. Sophia can name inequality and refuse men who do not meet her idea of mutual love, but she cannot build the equal relationship she imagines. Qiqiao gains economic power after years of humiliation, yet she uses that power within the family system that injured her. Their agency differs because their relationships give them different forms of voice, dependence, and control.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on modern Chinese women's writing has treated gender as part of debates over modernity, nation, and family. Tani Barlow argues that the category of "woman" in twentieth-century China was produced through these debates rather than simply imported from a Western sequence of feminist "waves" (Barlow). Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker reads Ding Ling's fiction through the changing relation between ideology and narrative, while Ka Wong emphasizes the meeting of modernity and sexuality in *Miss Sophia's Diary* (Feuerwerker; Wong). Together, these studies help explain Sophia's contradictions: she seeks equality with men, yet her choices remain shaped by ideas of respectable love, female passivity, and the modern New Woman.

Criticism of Eileen Chang has more often focused on marriage and domestic power. C. T. Hsia places Chang's fiction within modern Chinese literature and draws attention to her close observation of family life (Hsia). Rachel Leng's study of dysfunctional marriage and the figure of

the "hysterical woman" connects female suffering in Chang's writing to sexual, familial, and social pressure (Leng). This scholarship makes Cao Qiqiao's cruelty more than an individual moral failure. It develops within a marriage that denies intimacy and within a family that measures women by status, childbirth, and property.

Existing studies clarify each writer's treatment of women, but they often discuss narrative form, sexuality, marriage, and economic power separately. This essay brings those questions together through gender relations, understood here as the unequal expectations and exchanges between women and men in courtship, marriage, and family life. Anarchist feminism offers useful language for Sophia's suspicion of marriage and authority, but it is not used as a label for either writer. The comparison instead asks how each story represents a woman trying to act within relationships that give men and patriarchal families greater social and economic power.

2.1 Narrative Form and Self Awareness in Gender Relations

Ding Ling's diary form places Sophia's self-awareness inside her relationships with men. Because Sophia writes privately, she can admit attraction, irritation, vanity, and shame that she does not express to Weidi or Ling Jishi. The gap between what she writes and what she says shows the pressure of gender expectations. In public, a young woman is supposed to receive male attention modestly; in the diary, Sophia judges the men and asks what she wants from them.

Sophia's foreign name, her distance from a traditional family, and her refusal to act like a conventional young woman connect her with the modern "New Woman." Yet her encounters with Weidi and Ling Jishi show that a modern identity does not automatically create equal gender relations. Weidi's devotion still casts her as the woman who should reward male sincerity, while Ling Jishi's beauty and confidence draw her into a form of desire she mistrusts. Writing lets her recognize these pressures, though it does not free her from them.

The Golden Cangue uses third-person narration rather than giving Qiqiao a private account of her own. The narrator often stays close to her feelings, but also shows scenes that Qiqiao cannot fully interpret. This distance matters to the novella's gender relations. Readers see how her

unwanted marriage, her uncertain desire for Ji Ze, and her dependence on Jiang family property shape her conduct over time.

Qiqiao is highly alert to rank, money, and threats to her position, but this practical awareness differs from Sophia's habit of questioning herself. She understands the rules of the household well enough to use them, but she cannot imagine a relationship outside them. When she later controls her son and daughter, the narration reveals how a woman injured by patriarchal authority can become one of its agents.

The two narrative forms therefore create different views of self-awareness. Sophia speaks for herself and tests the terms on which men approach her. Qiqiao is viewed from a shifting third-person perspective that records both her suffering and the suffering she causes. In each work, narrative form shows that agency develops through relationships: Sophia gains a private voice but little social power, while Qiqiao gains household power without an equal or trusting relationship.

2.2 *Desire and Its Divergent Forms*

The two protagonists' desires do not develop in isolation. Each desire takes shape through relations with men and through the rules that define an acceptable woman.

2.2.1 Romantic Desire: Equality Versus Possession

Romantic desire in both works raises the same question: can a woman seek love as an equal when courtship and marriage still give men greater freedom?

Sophia wants a person who can understand her intellectually and emotionally. For her, this would be a form of "pure love" between equals. She rejects Weidi because his sentimental devotion does not reach the more troubled and complicated parts of her character. She is attracted to Ling Jishi, but she also sees his shallowness and cannot respect him. Neither man gives her the understanding she wants.

Cao Qiqiao's romantic desire is directed toward Ji Ze, but it is mixed with her need for affection, respect, and security inside the Jiang family. Ji Ze is not her equal partner, and his interest in her may also be connected to money. After the family property is divided, Qiqiao suspects that he has returned only for a loan. Her need to protect her wealth then becomes stronger than her trust in him.

Sophia's rejection of Weidi and Ling Jishi shows

that she wants emotional and intellectual equality, even though her attraction to Ling Jishi remains contradictory. Qiqiao's relation with Ji Ze is shaped from the beginning by her marriage into his family and by her lower status within it. Their desires differ not simply because of personality, but because neither woman meets men on equal terms.

2.2.2 Sexual Desire: Subversion Versus Repression

Sexual desire makes the imbalance in these gender relations more visible. Sophia can name her desire but distrusts the terms on which men return it; Qiqiao's desire is confined by an unwanted marriage and economic dependence.

In her diary, Sophia admits that she wants to kiss Ling Jishi even though she later rejects him. She writes about herself as an active person who desires, not only as someone waiting to be desired. This private admission reverses the expected positions of active man and passive woman, at least on the page.

Sophia's sexual desire, however, conflicts with her idea of romantic love. When Ling Jishi finally confesses his love, she feels disgusted. She calls his world a "nest of lust" and describes his feelings as "nothing but their despicable and shallow desires." What disgusts her is not desire itself, but a kind of male desire that reduces her to an object. She also refuses to imagine love only in terms of marriage, family, wealth, and social status. These refusals resemble anarchist-feminist criticisms of marriage and the traditional family, although Sophia herself remains inconsistent and uncertain.

Cao Qiqiao's sexual desire develops inside a marriage that gives her little physical or emotional satisfaction. She often looks for chances to be near Ji Ze, jokes with him, and becomes friendly with his wife, Lanxian. In one scene, Qiqiao puts her hand on Ji Ze's leg while describing her husband's body: "Have you ever touched his flesh? It is soft and heavy, like the numbness in one foot." The contrast between the two men's bodies makes her frustration clear. Even after leaving the Jiang household, she still desires Ji Ze. When he visits, she dresses carefully and trades suggestive jokes with him. At the same time, she suspects that he may only want her money, so affection and distrust cannot be separated.

Both women experience sexual desire, but their gender relations give that desire different

meanings. Sophia can write about attraction and judge the man she desires, although she still lacks an equal partner. Qiqiao's desire remains tied to marriage, family duty, and financial dependence. Because she has no safe or equal relationship in which to express it, desire returns in bitter and damaging forms.

2.2.3 The Desire for Freedom: Bodily / Intellectual Versus Economic

The desire for freedom grows from the same unequal relationships. For Sophia, freedom means control over her body, judgment, and choice of partner. For Qiqiao, it first means protection from dependence on her husband's family.

Sophia's fantasies of physical intimacy, recorded in her diary, show her wish to recognize and control her own body. Her refusal of Weidi and Ling Jishi shows her wish to keep her own judgment instead of accepting a relationship that lacks real understanding. By writing openly about loneliness, pleasure, and pain, she also claims an emotional freedom that women of her time were often expected to hide.

Qiqiao has much less access to bodily, intellectual, or emotional freedom. Inside the Jiang family, money seems to be the only realistic way for her to gain security and status. Her wish for property therefore begins as more than simple greed. After the family estate is divided, however, her need for economic safety turns into an obsession with protecting wealth and controlling anyone who might threaten it.

Both characters want freedom, but they can imagine it only through the gender relations available to them. Sophia can name bodily, intellectual, and emotional freedom even when she cannot fully achieve it. Qiqiao sees property as protection from dependence on men, but that protection gradually becomes a means of controlling others.

2.2.4 The Desire for Money: Faint Trace Versus All-Consuming Drive

Money changes the balance of power inside gender relations. It is barely visible in Sophia's encounters with men, but it governs Qiqiao's marriage, her relation with Ji Ze, and her authority over her children.

For Qiqiao, wealth becomes increasingly important after she leaves the Jiang household. She comes from a family that owns a sesame oil shop, and her brother and sister-in-law marry her

into the richer Jiang family in an arrangement shaped by money and status. In that household, economic security seems to be her only path to independence and respect. After the estate is divided, she finally receives property of her own. Yet her wish to protect this independence grows into an obsession. She becomes suspicious and aggressive toward anyone who may threaten her wealth.

For instance, after the division of the Jiang family's estate and upon the visit of Ji Ze to ask for a loan from Cao Qiqiao, Cao Qiqiao expressed rage towards him: "She sprang to her feet and hurled the round fan in her hand at Ji Ze's head. He leaned slightly to one side; the fan struck his shoulder instead, knocking over a glass of sour plum soup, which splashed all over him." Such a response towards the man for whom she once had the greatest affection illustrates the power of her obsession with her wealth.

Qiqiao's attachment to money also becomes a need to control her children. When her daughter Chang'an loses some bedding at school, Qiqiao humiliates her in public and calls her "a born spendthrift." Chang'an had enjoyed school, but afterward she stops attending. Qiqiao also blocks Chang'an's marriage by withholding her dowry and creates conflict between her son Changbai and his wife Zhishou by using her son's financial dependence. In this way, money gives Qiqiao power, but she uses it to limit the lives of others.

Money therefore has very different meanings in the two works. Sophia's refusals are mainly emotional and intellectual because property does not organize her relations with Weidi and Ling Jishi. For Qiqiao, wealth becomes safety, a test of Ji Ze's loyalty, and a way to control her son and daughter. Economic independence changes her position inside the family, but it does not create equal gender relations.

2.3 Agency Within Gender Relations

Agency means the ability to make choices and act on them, but those choices depend on a person's position in a relationship. Sophia tests, refuses, and sometimes manipulates the men around her instead of waiting passively for love. She rejects Weidi and questions her attraction to Ling Jishi. These actions challenge male expectations, although illness, loneliness, and her lack of social power limit what she can do.

Her refusals do not give her the same freedom that the men possess. Weidi can offer devotion without risking his reputation, and Ling Jishi can

enjoy attention without promising equality. Sophia can withdraw, criticize, and leave, but she cannot make either relationship mutual. Her agency is real, yet mostly negative: she can say no more easily than she can build the life she wants.

Qiqiao is not without agency. After gaining control of property, she can make decisions that affect other family members. Yet her power comes from the same marriage and inheritance system that once made her dependent. She can control others, but she cannot turn that control into trust, intimacy, or equality.

Qiqiao is therefore both a victim of unequal gender relations and a person who enforces them. Chang'an might have built a more independent future through education, but her mother destroys that chance. Qiqiao also uses Changbai's financial dependence to interfere in his marriage. After surviving a family order based on rank, money, and control, she repeats its methods against the next generation.

Chang's critique lies in this repetition. The novella exposes women's victimization while showing that limited power inside a patriarchal family may allow a woman to enforce its rules rather than escape them.

Both women act against gendered limits, but neither reaches an equal relationship. Sophia uses writing and refusal, yet remains socially and emotionally isolated. Qiqiao uses property and family authority, yet repeats the values that shaped her suffering. The difference is best understood as two forms of limited female agency within unequal gender relations, not as two separate schools of feminism.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Miss Sophia's Diary and *The Golden Cangue* present female desire and agency through unequal gender relations. Ding Ling gives Sophia a private voice with which to examine the men who desire her and the man she desires. Chang follows Qiqiao through a marriage and family hierarchy in which intimacy, status, and property cannot be separated. Both works criticize women's oppression, but they show different ways in which a woman may respond to it.

Sophia wants emotional and intellectual equality, and her sexual desire challenges the idea that women should remain passive. Qiqiao's desire for Ji Ze is tied to family rank and money, so trust becomes almost impossible. Sophia can describe several kinds of freedom even when she cannot

achieve them. Qiqiao seeks security through wealth, the strongest resource available to her, but later uses it to control her family. She changes from an oppressed woman into someone who also oppresses others.

The two women also have different kinds of self-awareness. Sophia reflects constantly, although illness, loneliness, and conflicting desires divide her. Qiqiao is aware of threats to her position, but she does not turn that awareness into a new understanding of herself. Her power depends on property and works through the family hierarchy. For this reason, Qiqiao should not simply be treated as a failed version of Sophia. Each character shows a different limit placed on women's ability to act.

The historical distance between the two works does not form a simple story of progress or decline. Sophia's diary shows that the language of the New Woman could make inequality visible without giving women the social means to overcome it. *The Golden Cangue* presents a different but related problem. When a patriarchal family grants a woman power only through property and seniority, that power may preserve the family order rather than change it. Qiqiao's cruelty therefore shows how patriarchal authority can be passed on through women as well as men.

Reading the two works together also questions a narrow definition of liberation. A woman is not free simply because she can speak, reject a man, own property, or command a household. Such acts matter, but their meaning depends on whether they change the terms of her relationships with others. Sophia gains a voice but not reciprocity. Qiqiao gains authority but remains governed by the same logic of domination. Female agency becomes transformative only when it changes the relations that produce dependence, silence, and control. The larger importance of both works lies here: women's freedom depends not only on individual courage, but also on whether love, marriage, family, and property can be organized on more equal terms.

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