

Writing Women
in
Modern China

AN ANTHOLOGY OF WOMEN'S LITERATURE
FROM THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Ling Shuhua

凌叔華

Ling Shuhua (1900–1990)

One of China's most highly regarded modern writers, Ling Shuhua was the daughter of the fourth wife of a top-ranking Qing official from the southern province of Canton who later served as the mayor of Beijing. Like many young ladies of her privileged-class background, Ling received private training in classical Chinese literature and painting. An accomplished artist, Ling continued to paint throughout her life and exhibited her work on sev-

eral occasions, including a 1962 individual show in Paris where she received high praise from the French intellectual André Malraux.

These accomplishments would once have been more than sufficient for the well-bred daughter of a high official, but Ling Shuhua came of age just as the clamor for advanced educational opportunities for women reached a fevered pitch. In 1922 she enrolled, along with fellow woman writer Bing Xin, in Yanjing University to pursue a degree in foreign literature. Soon after graduating, she married Chen Yuan, the founder of the important May Fourth journal *Contemporary Review*, and in 1927 the couple moved to Hunan so that Chen could teach at Wuhan University.

During her years in Wuhan, Ling Shuhua became closely acquainted with the women writers Yuan Changying and Su Xuelin, as well as British writer Julian Bell, all of whom were affiliated with the department of literature where Ling's husband taught. Bell not only helped cotranslate many of her short stories for the English-language journal *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, but also put her in touch with his distinguished aunt, Virginia Woolf. The two women writers maintained a correspondence between 1938 and 1941. Woolf agreed to read drafts of the memoirs Ling had begun writing and encouraged her in one letter, "Please go on, write freely, do not mind how directly you translate the Chinese into English. In fact, I would advise you to come as close to the Chinese both in style and in meaning as you can." Composed in English, Ling's narrative of growing up in an old-style scholarly Beijing family within a rapidly changing society are recorded in a memoir that was eventually published in 1953 under the title *Ancient Melodies*. Ling dedicated this work to Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, whom she met in England in the late 1940s.

Ling Shuhua began writing during her college years, and the bulk of her fiction was produced during a relatively concentrated period in the late

1920s and early '30s. Because her short stories first appeared in journals such as *Crescent Monthly* and *Contemporary Review*, Ling Shuhua is often associated with the westernized literary aesthetic for which those literary journals were known, and critics dubbed her the "Katherine Mansfield of China." Ling's refined literary style and her frequent depictions of what Lu Xun once described as "the obedient ladies of the old-style family" also gained her the dubious distinction, along with her contemporaries Bing Xin and Chen Hengzhe, of being a new "guixiu" writer—a slightly derogatory term which at the time denoted a highly "feminine" style of writing on narrow domestic subjects. The subtle irony that runs through much of her work clearly undercuts the serene surface of her narratives, suggesting a more complex critique of the domesticity depicted in many of her stories. Ling Shuhua published most of her stories in three separate volumes, *Temple of Flowers* (1928), *Women* (1930), and *Two Little Brothers* (1935), and her work continues to be widely anthologized today.

The stories translated here, "Intoxicated," first published in *Contemporary Criticism* in 1925, and "Once Upon a Time," from the 1928 collection *Temple of Flowers*, both explore the theme of female desire, focusing in particular on transgressive acts by women who defy the conventions of sexual "propriety." In "Intoxicated," a young wife reveals to her husband that she has passionate feelings for another man. "Once Upon a Time" centers on the relationship of two schoolgirls who find (if only temporarily) love and physical intimacy outside of the institution of heterosexual marriage. The theme of schoolgirl lesbianism in this story was not uncommon in May Fourth women's writing (both Lu Yin and Chen Xuezhao, for example, also explored the subject in short stories), although the mildly erotic description Ling employs is a departure from the typically platonic terms used to describe these relationships during this period.

"I'm going." Having said this, she tiptoed toward the big chair where Ziyi had fallen asleep. As she drew nearer she could see Ziyi's face more distinctly, and her heart began beating faster. As she reached the front of the chair, her heart was throbbing so rapidly that the beating seemed to have become louder. Suddenly her cheeks grew unusually hot and her heart fluttered strangely. After she had fixed her gaze on Ziyi for a moment, her face cooled and the fierce pounding of her heart subsided. In two or three steps she was back in front of Yongzhang; she sat down without a word, and lowered her head. Yongzhang looked at her and asked impatiently, "What is it now, Caitiao?"

"Nothing. I don't want to kiss him anymore."

ONCE UPON A TIME

(1928)

One afternoon when classes had finished, the sun sat low in the sky, eagerly draping the windows of the East Building at the C— School in a curtain of golden orange. Upstairs several girl students, dressed in a variety of light blue and violet prints, were talking and laughing together. Yunluo, who was in her room tidying up, suddenly heard someone in the courtyard shout out in a loud voice, "*Juliet, Juliet, Romeo seeks thee Juliet!*" A burst of laughter followed.

Yunluo had recently been cast in the role of Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, the play they were putting on in celebration of the school's ten-year anniversary; the part of Romeo had been given to Yingman, a student in the class above her. Just over twenty years old, Yingman was a tall, outgoing northerner who loved to joke around. Yunluo had never had the nerve to talk to her before, and since Yingman had been teasing her in front of the other students during rehearsals over the past few days, she felt incredibly uncomfortable, even a bit annoyed. But then why did her heart start to pound a little each time she heard Yingman shouting "Juliet"? It surely wasn't out of anger.

"What a bother," Yunluo muttered to herself, pretending not to have heard Yingman holler, "She wants to rehearse again!"

The girl students upstairs suddenly started giggling again, and Yingman raised her voice and yelled, "Juliet, hurry up. Aren't you worried Romeo might get sick from impatience?"

Despite her slight irritation, Yunluo could no longer pretend she hadn't heard. She threw down the handkerchief she had just rinsed, stuck her head out the door of the dormitory, and replied, "Do we have to rehearse that stupid play again? I'm coming, but I'm not done reviewing the lessons we're being tested on tomorrow. . . ."

When Yunluo could stall no longer, she went downstairs pouting.

On the evening of their final rehearsal, Yingman accompanied Yunluo back to her dormitory. Sitting under the lamp, she watched Yunluo undo her hair and plait it into a loose braid, then change into her imported pastel pajamas with snowflakes embroidered along the cuffs and collar. Probably from the exhaustion of rehearsing, the tender rosiness of Yunluo's cheeks had risen to her eyelids, and she had to struggle to keep her pretty eyes open. She looked exceptionally delicate and vulnerable.

"Oh, I could die of exhaustion!" Yunluo rubbed her back with her hand, then fell onto her bed.

"Juliet, shall I massage your back for you?" Yingman said with a grin as she went over to Yunluo, gazing at the ivory skin of her exposed chest, then down past the large collar where she could make out the faint curve of her soft, slightly protruding breasts. Her small arc-shaped mouth, now slightly agape, was so adorable; two small dimples appeared at the corners of her mouth and then two more on her cheeks. She looked more enticing now than she had in the play when she was on the verge of kissing Romeo. Now and then an intoxicating aroma of Yunluo's powder, hair, or flesh—it was hard to tell which—wafted up through the bed curtains.

Suddenly, Yingman flopped down on the bed too and cradled her arm around Yunluo's neck, and said, "My entire body feels weak. What is that fragrance? Let me smell!"

"There you go teasing me again. What a nuisance!" Yunluo smiled, gently nudging her away.

"Don't be annoyed with me. I would die if you were annoyed with me!" Yingman went ahead and hugged her tightly.

When Yunluo's roommate Meiling pushed open the door and found the two of them like this, she chuckled loudly. "Romeo, don't die of heartache, I've decided to give our Juliet to you. Elder Sister Zhu, do you agree?"

Lying under her quilt reading a book, their other roommate, Zhu, smiled and said, "How could I refuse?! Meiling, you better get over to your own bed. Three's a crowd!"

As the others laughed, Yingman seized the moment to bury her face in Yunluo's breast and inhale deeply.

Whether Yunluo no longer had the energy to resist or was enjoying having such a warm, soft thing hugging her chest, she didn't put up a fuss this time, but merely laughed gently and said, "You're suffocating me!"

After a while, the dormitory warden, Mrs. Zhou, came in to check the room, and Yingman reluctantly got up and returned to her own dormitory in the rear courtyard.

The next night, after the performance, it was raining so hard that Yunluo dragged Yingman into her room to escape the downpour before she went on home. When the two burst into the room clutching a single tiny umbrella and with their arms wrapped around each other's waists, Meiling greeted them with a grin. "Bravo, Romeo and Juliet have arrived as a pair. I just made some tea. Drink as husband and wife." Having said this, she gazed at Yunluo's face for a moment then fell back onto her bed in a spasm of giggles.

"You little monkey, what's so funny?" Yingman laughed.

"Backstage earlier you couldn't stop laughing—did we mess up or something?" Yunluo asked.

"It was so hysterical, tonight. . . ." Meiling was laughing so hard she couldn't finish.

"Tomorrow we should change your nickname to the laughing monkey! Can't you ever stop laughing?" said Yingman, with a silly laugh herself.

"Oh, I'm going to die of laughter!" Meiling sat up, wiping her eyes. "If I tell you, you will too. Your performance tonight was brilliant; it's just that when you got to the scene where you have to kiss each other, I was hiding in the curtains watching two boys who were sitting in the front row—the ones that looked like students—someone said they are Yang Yuqing's older cousins. Anyway, they were gawking at the two of you with their mouths hanging wide open as if they were waiting for some delicious morsel of food! As luck would have it, in the row behind them, a little kid was leaning over with his father's cane and the curved handle went right into one of the boy's mouths; the other one saw what happened and quickly pulled it out for him, but the first one sat there grinning with his mouth still wide open. It was hysterical. Didn't you see?"

They both laughed. Elder Sister Zhu threw a book down from the bed and said, "The things you say! I refuse to believe that the boy didn't even notice when there was a cane in his own mouth."

"If you don't believe me go ask someone else; I'm not the only one who saw it." Meiling laughed as she dashed out of the room.

As Yingman looked at Yunluo laughing, Yunluo's pink cheeks turned a shade darker. They sat together on the bed giggling and chatting.

After a while, Meiling bounced back in the room and yelled, "It's raining so hard I almost slipped and fell. Romeo, I have good news to report: you don't have to leave tonight. Old Lady Wu just told everyone downstairs that Mrs. Zhou isn't feeling well this evening, so she won't be coming to check the rooms."

"Let's shut the door and go to bed then!" Zhu said, shooting a meaningful look at Meiling, who got the message and went to close the door.

Shortly thereafter, the lights went out. Yingman stood up and asked, "Should I go?"

"Don't. . ." Yunluo pulled her back down. "It's raining so hard, you. . ."

"Your bed is too small, how can I squeeze in?"

"Romeo, don't you know a good thing when you see it? If Juliet wants you to stay, how can you refuse?" Meiling said, poking her head out from the covers.

"Who's refusing? I'm just afraid we'll be so crowded that she will be uncomfortable." Yingman pulled off her jacket and skirt and lay down next to Yunluo.

The room was filled with a humid, earthy smell and the rain pattered on in the courtyard. Suddenly Meiling burst out laughing again, breaking the dark silence. "Elder Sister Zhu, do you remember the rest of the saying 'May the world's lovers . . .?'"

"Isn't it 'all become spouses'?" Zhu replied. "Now stop being so talkative and go to sleep."

Yingman nestled her face close to Yunluo's and giggled softly. "Did you hear that, you are my spouse."

"There you go making fun of me again. I'm not sleeping with you anymore." Yunluo gave her shove, but then took advantage of the moment to snuggle her head in Yingman's bosom.

Yunluo awoke in the middle of the night. Lying there under the warm covers, with a soft arm as her pillow and a hand resting on her waist, she was overcome for the first time with an indescribable sense of well-being. That feeling of emptiness, fear, and loneliness that normally came to her

when she awoke late at night seemed to have been dissolved by this sensation of warmth. She covered Yingman up again with the quilt lest she catch a chill.

Yingman suddenly woke up; the rain had stopped and the faint moonlight shone in through the bed curtains. When she opened her eyes, she found Yunluo staring at her with an infatuated look. Seeing that Yingman was awake, Yunluo felt slightly embarrassed. She covered her eyes with her hand and buried her head in her arm, whispering softly, "Why did you wake up too?"

Yingman wanted to lift Yunluo's face to look at her, but she had nestled up to her shoulder laughing idiotically, which tickled her arm. Her lips touched Yunluo's forehead, and before she knew it she had started kissing her, over and over again.

Yunluo whispered, "Did you sleep well?"

"Splendidly!" Yingman's hand stroked Yunluo's velvety cheeks as she said, "What if I weren't a woman? . . ."

"There you go again. Sleep!" Yunluo pinched her gently, then put her cheek up against Yingman's face. And so they slept, snuggled up closely together.

After that, the two of them would stroll around campus nearly every evening, talking heart-to-heart as their classmates watched from afar, laughing as they walked by.

Time passed quickly and on a night half a month later, the moonlight spilled quietly over the ground like silver frost as Yunluo and Yingman walked together into the courtyard with their arms wrapped around each other's waists. First they recounted what they had each been thinking about over the past few days; after that, they sat on the railing of the pavilion and gazed at the moon, each lost in her own thoughts. Suddenly Yingman laughed and said, "How gentle the moon is! Tonight I feel that she is shining down on us with a particular brightness, and her round face looks as though she's smiling. Do you see how beautifully she smiles?"

Yunluo knit her brow and, looking at Yingman, replied, "You are always such an optimist! How is it that I can't see her smiling? If there's a smile on that frosty snow-white face, then it's a cold one! When I look at the moon, all my worries return. I shed tears of grief, for I remember my deceased father and sister as well as my living mother and brother." As she spoke, something appeared at the edge of her eye that caught the light of the moon; Yingman reached out and helped her wipe it away.

"You really are so *sentimental*;² you can't even bear the spring breeze or the bright moon!" As she spoke, she smiled and kissed Yunluo's cheeks repeatedly; then she smoothed down the strands of hair that the wind had blown astray. The more Yunluo's tears were wiped dry the more she cried, and finally she threw herself in Yingman's arms and started to weep. This stunned Yingman.

"What is it, *my love*?" asked Yingman softly, as she embraced Yunluo tightly and nuzzled her face up close.

Her sobs escalated, and when Yingman pressed her again several more times, she finally burst out, "My life is so meaningless!"

At a loss for words, Yingman looked at her blankly. Helping her wipe away her tears, she said, "Why do you always say there's no point in living? If something's worrying you, tell me. I hate it when you're sad."

Yunluo sighed; her face turned even more pale and pathetic. She stared blankly at Yingman for a while and then suddenly squeezed her hand tightly and, lowering her head, asked her regretfully, "Why aren't you a man?"

"Must I be a man in order to hear what's bothering you?" Yingman retorted, smiling faintly.

"No, did I say that? What I mean is that it's no use telling you!" She hung her head even lower.

"You mustn't hide your troubles from me; don't we share everything now? Your worries are my worries, so why can't you tell me what's bothering you?"

"I can't bear to make you sad on my behalf so I'm not telling you." She gazed silently at the moon for a while, then continued. "Yesterday my older brother wrote again and said that his section chief has begged him repeatedly to arrange a meeting with me; brother claims that this man is really all right and that he is extremely respectful toward my mother. He says he really can't refuse him." She lowered her head again. "Think about it, I have never even seen this man and, what's more, yesterday I overheard Yuying talking about him. She said that less than two months after his wife died, he was on the prowl for a new one. From Yuying's tone of voice, I think he might have even asked her. And if Yuying hasn't consented, then why would I . . ." she said, somewhat angrily. "But brother has already sent seven or eight letters saying how much he respects this

2. Original in English.

man, and that he's doing this for my sake, that I should save face for him and make up my mind soon and stop being so doubtful."

At first Yingman listened with her eyes fixed on Yunluo; afterward, her eyes seemed a little moist and she looked at the ground. When she realized that Yunluo had finished speaking, her tears started flowing, and she asked anxiously, "So what are you going to do?"

"I haven't written back yet. I wish that the two of us could live together for the rest of our lives. . . . It's just that I'm afraid that my mother and brother would never . . ." Yunluo glanced at Yingman, then started crying again; Yingman did not say a word but simply cried along with her. "Don't be sad. Don't be sad, my heart is going to break . . ."

Yingman took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "People make their own destinies. Why can't we be together forever? Look at the primary school instructors Miss Chen and *Miss Chu*,³ haven't they been living together for five or six years? You mean to say we can't be like them? Don't be so stubborn. My love for you is deeper and more permanent than any man's could ever be, surely you know this. Can't you just consider this the same as being married to me?"

The ashen hue of Yunluo's face seemed to have diminished somewhat, but when she heard the final question, her brow wrinkled slightly, revealing that in her heart she couldn't accept this, though she didn't dare say so openly. Seeing that she hadn't responded, Yingman touched her shoulder and, facing her, went on, "Can't you consider this being married? Write back and tell your brother to refuse that man!" Yunluo's eyelids dropped, like a coquettish young lady meeting a stranger; Yingman saw this but pretended not to notice. Her mouth was half open, as though there were something strange in the air making it difficult for her to breathe. Yunluo embraced her tightly and said, "*My God, how can I live without you! I love you. Say you love me, my love.*"⁴

When they both looked at the moon, it seemed to have changed into glittering silver dance clothes, standing in the center of the sky congratulating them with a smile. As the cool, early May night breeze blew against their faces, carrying the fragrance of the white tea roses growing beneath the western wall, it was as though the moon had opened a

3. Original in English.

4. Original in English.

bottle of sweet wine and poured it into their wedding goblets as she awaited them.

"You are the moon, and I am that star beside you . . ." Yingman laughed with her face turned up; hand in hand, they walked down from the pavilion.

"You'll follow me forever, and I'll always accompany you . . ." Yunluo said, walking with her head lowered.

Their affections seemed to grow like the blossoms of the tea roses, and peach and plum trees on campus, and when people at school spoke of them they no longer referred to them by their real names, as though they had always been called Romeo and Juliet. Even Old Lady Wu, who came and sold pastries at the cafeteria for an hour each day, learned of their new nicknames.

When summer vacation arrived, Yingman accompanied Yunluo to Tianjin and waited until she had boarded her train to Jinling before taking a train back to her own hometown. As they said good-bye, Yunluo grasped Yingman's hand and wept so profusely she couldn't say a thing.

The day Yingman arrived back home, she sat in her room and composed a letter, which she then hurried to have someone post. Her parents and her elder brother and sister-in-law all teased her, saying that the reason she wasn't as mischievous and playful as before was that she must be in love.

After sending off her letter, Yingman waited a week without receiving a reply, so she mailed two more express letters in a row. One day, as she was flipping through some photos of herself and Yunluo, a letter arrived. The contents moved her greatly:

How could you suspect that I would ever forget you? I am the one who is afraid that you will forget me in the end! I myself realize that I have nothing to make someone admire me forever; for one, my intelligence can't even compare to yours and moreover I am lazy and like to play. So how could I ever rival you? I am even lazier when I am at home. Ever since I got back, Mother and I have had guests every day. It's such a bother. Whenever someone comes, my mother nags me to change my clothes and put on face powder. Yesterday I realized there was something wrong with this and refused to obey her, but that night at dinner she said, her eyes brimming with tears, "Now that you're all grown up and mature, everything your old moth-

er has to say is rubbish." I had no choice but to force a smile and hold back my tears as I listened to her chatter. Alas, since my father's death, she has suffered so much for my brother and me.

Don't blame me for taking so long to write; this is the first letter I've written since I got back. Last night, I stared at that star next to the moon for ages, as if in a trance. I suspect you are so happy to be home that you don't have time to look at the moon, do you? My star, my dazzling bright star, can you see the sparkle of my tears?

When Yingman read to this point, she lifted the letter to her lips and, teary-eyed, kissed it over and over again. That night, after everyone had gone to bed, she lit the candle again and re-read it so many times the words began to blur. She fell asleep with the letter in her hand.

At night, she would often dream of Yunluo wearing beautiful clothes, with streams of tears running down her lovely snow-white face. She would rush toward her, but then suddenly she would realize that Yunluo looked like a corpse and she would wake up sobbing. Everyone in the family laughed at her behavior.

After that letter, two weeks went by without another; Yingman was beside herself and she argued every day with her parents about returning to school early. Later, when fighting broke out in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, the Tianjin-Shanghai rail line was suspended so it took more than twenty days for mail from Shanghai to reach Tianjin. There was nothing she could do. At first, she had nightmares and would wake up in tears; later, the bad dreams stopped and she couldn't even fulfill her desire to see Yunluo in that way. She grew anxious and despondent. Sometimes, in her dreams, she seemed to hear someone say that Yunluo was seriously ill and couldn't write and that she should go see her; in the dream, she would desperately want to go to her but her parents wouldn't allow it. Her anxious cries would wake her mother in the room next door, and all Yingman could do was close her eyes and pretend to be asleep when she came in to check on her.

Week after week, she waited without hearing a single word from Yunluo. Summer vacation was drawing to a close, but the war still hadn't ended; nevertheless, a week before classes were to start, she said good-bye to her parents and returned to school in Beijing. But she was in for a disappointment, as the wardens at the dormitory still hadn't received news about the date of Yunluo's arrival.

She sent off countless express letters, though no telegrams—to send a telegram she would have to ask someone to help her, for she had never sent one herself. Besides, she had heard that telegrams from Beijing to Nanjing often didn't go through during military operations. She was so troubled that she would lie on her bed every day staring listlessly at the top of the bed canopy.

One day near dusk, as she was strolling around campus alone, she noticed that several round blossoms had appeared on the Jiangnan chrysanthemum bushes next to the pavilion; the thought of that southern region stirred up her worries and she left the garden in tears. She contemplated going back to her room to wash the handkerchiefs that had accumulated over the past few days, but this too reminded her of Yunluo, how she always used to take them away quietly and wash them for her. As she walked past the playground, she saw her other classmates strolling and chatting in couples, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand; they seemed to her to be deliberately acting even more intimate than before. After a while, she saw one pair turn to look at her and they shouted, with a note of derision in their voices, "Romeo, why don't you come for a walk with us?" then smiled at her arrogantly. This only added to her sorrow.

The lingering pale golden sunlight streamed through the windows of the dormitory and cheerful shouts and laughs frequently emanated from inside the rooms. For some inexplicable reason she had recently come to loathe the sound of people laughing. She now thought people sounded really stupid when they laughed, and she was especially irritated when they looked at her and laughed. As she walked slowly down the corridor, she cursed the person laughing, that laughing fool, that infuriating laughter. . . .

Suddenly, she halted in her tracks as she heard the name Yunluo. A classmate in room three was saying, "Yunluo? She's now my older sister's sister-in-law."

"She got married?"

"That's what my sister said. She wrote that her new sister-in-law's last name is Xie, that she's really pretty, and that she went to school with me for two years. Who else could it be besides Yunluo?" As soon as Yingman overheard this a loud boom filled her ears, but still she could make out the words, "Pretty . . . the bridegroom is beaming . . . his new bride is smiling . . ." Yet she couldn't decipher what it meant. Then everything turned black; after a moment, an image of Yunluo's sad face appeared before her, then an image of her dressed up as a bride with a

red veil over her head and sparkling clothes and jewelry, standing there with a slight smile. . . .⁵

She collapsed on the floor with a thud. The people inside the room rushed out and found her there; then, their lips blue with fright, they screamed in trembling voices, "Oh my God! What's the matter with her? What happened?"

Her classmates moved her onto a bed. When she opened her eyes she could see a crowd of people and everyone seemed to be talking at once. She couldn't make out what they were saying and didn't have the patience to listen; she had no choice but to close her eyes. One moment Yunluo appeared before her crying faintly, the next she seemed to be laughing, but then she was crying again!

Yingman couldn't bear the sight of her anymore. As she let out a deep sigh, the people standing around her all said, "It's all right, it's all right, she's coming to!"

5. Brides in China traditionally wear red.