

GLOBAL RESONANCES OF MODERNISM AND FEMINISM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF AND SHEN CONGWEN

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Abstract: This essay breaks new ground by investigating British modernism's impact on the Chinese modernist author Shen Congwen's composition of "Xiaoxiao" and, reciprocally, China's impact on Virginia Woolf's composition of To the Lighthouse and Mrs. Dalloway. It demonstrates the various ways through which Woolf came to know China and Shen came to know British modernism. I argue that Woolf's knowledge of China contributed to her portrayal of Lily Briscoe not only as the other of the British patriarchal society, but as one reminiscent of the 'othered' Chinese subjects under England's semi-colonial rule. Reciprocally, Shen's affiliation with the Chinese Crescent Moon Group helped shape his portrayal of Xiaoxiao, the female protagonist in "Xiaoxiao", as an emerging modern woman, who not only dreams of independence and freedom, but takes actions to achieve them. In their common challenges against their respective patriarchal society, Lily and Xiaoxiao become emblems of modern subjectivity simultaneously embracing and transcending their historical and cultural locations. The international context I propose in this essay finally illuminates the important conflation of global modernism and feminism in both authors' works.

That modernism is an international phenomenon is a claim more often articulated than substantiated. However, in recent years there has been an ongoing shift toward a global approach to modernist studies, which has significantly broadened existing nationalist perspectives that tend to lay emphasis on literary and cultural continuity and homogeneity in the study of national literatures. Within this

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paradigm shift, Patrician Laurence's book (2003) proposes a new global approach to the study of British modernism and Chinese modernism, in which she argues that modernism in Britain and China did not evolve locally, but internationally. For this reason, an "international map" should be drawn in order to shed light on the "interdependency" (Laurence 29) of these two literary and cultural traditions. If the Bloomsbury Group and the Chinese Crescent Moon Group have each contributed to the formation and development of the other's modernism, this literary and cultural phenomenon deserves our serious attention and investigation. Focusing on Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Shen's "Xiaoxiao" (1929), this essay demonstrates that the conflation of modernism and feminism in Woolf's novel is partly attributable to her sympathetic imagination of semi-colonial China through her affiliation with the Bloomsbury Group. Reciprocally, the same conflation in Shen's story can be traced, in part, to his exposure to Western modernism through his involvement in the Crescent Moon Group.

Much of Woolf's intellectual life was closely entangled with that of many Bloomsbureans, who took a keen interest in Chinese culture. Among them are Roger Fry, G. L. Dickinson, E. M. Forster, and her nephew Julian Bell. Such interest not only sent some of these fellow Bloombureans to China like G. L. Dickinson, Bertrand Russell, and Roger Fry, but it prompted them to write about China based on their personal experience. Others like Forster engaged China indirectly, yet equally sympathetically through his friendship with Xiao Qian, a Chinese journalist and writer studying at King's College at the time. Forster also gained knowledge of China through Dickinson's letters sent from China. Woolf's knowledge of China also came from the books she read about China. Their library contained two of H. G. Giles' translations about China: *The Travels of Fa-Hsien* (1923) and *Chaos in China* (1924). From this variety of sources Woolf drew the inspirations for her portrayal of Lily Briscoe as a feminist artist with Chinese appearance, particularly her "Chinese eyes" (17) in *To the Lighthouse*.

Shen was exposed to Western modernism through his involvement in the Crescent Moon Group formed around 1925 in Beijing. Born in Western Hunan and having lived the life of a sailor and a soldier, Shen went to Beijing in 1922 to become a writer at the age of 20 under the influence of the May 4 Movement of 1919, which grew out of the Chinese intellectuals' dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles. Aiming at protesting against imperialism and Chinese cultural and political traditions, this cultural Movement marks the upsurge of Chinese

nationalism and re-evaluation of Chinese cultural institutions such as Confucianism. In his preface to *Selected Fiction of Shen Congwen* (1980), Shen explains why he decided to quit his service in the local army and go to Beijing: “Around 1922 the aftermath of the May 4 Movement reached Western Hunan. . . My exposure to the ideas of literary revolution and the new hope and ideal for a new society in the new books and newspapers I read stirred in me the courage to seek knowledge and enlightenment. I then left the remote Miao county and went to Beijing with a population of a million residents” (67, 1984, v. 11’).¹ While auditing classes at Beijing University, Shen was introduced to such members of the Crescent Moon Group as Hu Shi and Xu Zhimo. Founded by such Western-educated intellectuals as Chen Yuan and Xu Zhimo, the Crescent Moon Group mostly drew its members from Beijing University, which was at the time the center of the May 4 Movement. Because many members of the Group had studied in England, the Group carried with it a modern spirit of English flavor of a sort. For example, the Group’s official magazine, *Crescent Moon Monthly*, was modeled on the Victorian Yellow Book (Laurence 108). While studying at Cambridge, Xu Zhimo became intensely interested in English Romantic poets and wrote many of his own imitating Wordsworth and Coleridge. One distinctive feature of this Group is its insistence on the independence of literature and art, an idea that was considered heretical at the time, when literature and art were expected to serve political purposes.² Another feature is its emphasis on modern individuality, which signals a departure from traditional Chinese values that tend to ignore the individual in favor of the collective.

As a member of the Crescent Moon Group, Shen contributed regularly to two of the Group’s magazines: *Contemporary Review* and *Crescent Moon Monthly*. An admirer of Xu Zhimo, Shen wrote many essays commenting on his poetry and prose. In his essay “On the Poetry of Xu Zhimo” (1984), Shen compares Xu’s poetry to that of Wen Yido, another member of the Crescent Moon Group, noting

¹The English translations of Shen’s works, except “Xiaoxiao” are provided by myself.

²Another literary group in Shanghai, the *Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers* spearheaded by Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai, was formed under the influence of May 4 Movement. While both groups share the larger modernist spirit of anti-imperialism and anti-traditionalism, this group took a different approach to literature and art, an approach which emphasizes the inevitable affiliation of literature and art with politics and ideology.

that both poets were resonant of the elegiac tone found in Keats and Blake, a tone through which both poets uttered their agony and grief toward a repressive cultural tradition that privileges conformity over individuality. In another essay “Imitating the Lyric Quality in the Works of Xu Zhimo” (1984), Shen commented on Xu’s two prose pieces: “The Cambridge I know of” and “The Claws of Paris”, and his two poems “Number 7 at Stone Tiger Lane” and “The Wandering Cloud”. Shen spoke highly of the fresh “images” (217, 1984) Xu creates in these pieces, which convey a sense of fluidity and movement: the flowing river across the campus of Cambridge, the ever-changing mood of the house garden, and the free-spirited and wandering cloud. In the *Preface to Selected Apprentice Fiction of Shen Congwen* (1936), Shen expresses his deep gratitude toward Xu’s tutorship and friendship: “Worthy of special mention is Mr. Xu Zhimo, without whom [his help and encouragement] I would have chosen one of the two paths I mentioned in my autobiography: either became a police officer in Beijing or died and rotted away under someone’s eaves. If you can gain some strength or feel some joy upon finishing this book, I hope you will remember to pay respect and gratitude to the poet himself, who prematurely died [in a plane crash] because the warmth you feel came from him; I merely took the fire from him” (47, 1984, vol.11).

While Woolf’s knowledge of China contributed to her portrayal of Lily Briscoe not only as the other of the British patriarchal society, but as one reminiscent of the othered Chinese subjects under England’s semi-colonial rule, Shen’s affiliation with the Crescent Moon Group helped shape his portrayal of Xiaoxiao, the female protagonist in “Xiaoxiao”, as an emerging modern woman, who not only dreams of independence and freedom, but takes actions to achieve them. In their common challenges against their respective patriarchal society, Lily and Xiaoxiao become emblems of modern subjectivity simultaneously embracing and transcending their historical and cultural locations. Lily’s otherness is not hard to see in the novel. Choosing to be an independent artist, Lily regards marriage as nothing more than “degradation” (102). Because of her feminist stance, Lily stands out as an anomaly in the ideologically conservative community; to those around her, she appears an outfit, an inferior. Charles Tansley, for example, refuses to admit her talent, insisting repeatedly that “women can’t write, women can’t paint (86). For Tansley, women in general are “silly, superficial, and flimsy”; they “talk...of rot”; they “made civilization impossible with all their ‘charm’, all their silliness” (85). Even as kind a person as Mrs. Ramsay cannot accept the idea of a woman not wanting to marry, as she tells

Lily the universal truth: “there could be no disputing: an unmarried woman ...has missed the best of life” (49). Firmly believing in marriage as the only way to fully realize a woman’s being, Mrs. Ramsay decides that Lily must marry Mr. Banks (71).

Importantly still, Woolf subtly links Lily’s otherness to her non-British appearance: her small face and small Chinese eyes, which are referred to three times in the novel, of which two are mentioned by Mrs. Ramsay. In fact, it is Mrs. Ramsay alone in the novel who recognizes Lily’s Chinese eyes that register a site of special significance, and it is to Mrs. Ramsay that Lily’s eyes are as distinctive as her painting. When recalling her promise to sit still for Lily’s picture, Mrs. Ramsay forms such this image of Lily: “Lily’s picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face, she would never marry” (17). If Lily’s eyes are small, they must be different from the large eyes usually found in Europeans, yet for Mrs. Ramsay Lily’s eyes are precisely where her unique beauty lies. Still sitting at the window for Lily’s picture, Mrs. Ramsay thinks to herself: “Lily’s charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white puckered little face” (26). Yet such charm, Mrs. Ramsay goes on to muse, is not easily recognizable to a man: “but it would take a clever man to see it” (26). As it turns out, unfortunately, there is no such man in the novel clever enough to notice and appreciate Lily’s exotic beauty, not even Mr. Banks who likes Lily as a friend. Lily’s Chinese eyes are brought up again by the narrator in part three of the novel, when Lily was trying to complete her picture while the remaining Ramsays were sailing to the lighthouse. As she was looking at her canvas, “she stood screwing up her little Chinese eyes in her small puckered face” (157). Woolf’s clustered references to Lily’s Oriental appearance, I argue, are by no means arbitrary; rather, they are deployed to reveal the complicitous liaison between British imperialism and the law of the British patriarchal society, a complicity that has generated much critical attention in recent studies of Woolf’s fiction.³

Woolf’s critique of such complicity is resonant in many of her fictional works. In *The Voyage Out* (1914), for example, Rachel Vinrace embodies the

³See, for example, Wurtz and Gerend for their postcolonial approaches of *To the Lighthouse*. Although neither of them mentioned Lily’s Chinese eyes as examples of Woolf’s postcolonial stance, their readings of the novel in light of postcolonial theory are enlightening. See also Philips for a book-length study on Woolf’s critique of British imperialism.

same double-sided otherness Lily inhabits. Through Rachel's journey to the South American colony Santa Marina and her premature death from a fever she catches in the jungle, Woolf portrays Rachel as a double victim of Mr. Dalloway's rude harassment, who takes advantage of her innocence and forces his "kiss" (80) upon her, and of Santa Marina's postcolonial revenge against modern British tourists for their predecessors' unjust treatment of the natives. As the narrator reveals, the making of British Empire in general and of Santa Marina in particular were carried out by imperial fanatics like Richard Dalloway: "had there been men like Richard Dalloway in the time of Charles the first, the map would undoubtedly be red where it is now an odious green" (96). Because of England's imperial subjugation of Santa Marina, the modern colonizers have to pay a price, and that price is paid by Rachel. The fever she catches in the wilderness takes her young life, when it just starts to flourish. She dies on the threshold of love and marriage, never making her way back to civilization; she has to pay for the imperial crime her fellow countrymen committed. Like Conrad's Kurtz, then, Rachel is simultaneously a beneficiary and a victim of the British imperial enterprise.⁴

Lily is not Woolf's only female character endowed with exotic Chinese eyes. Elizabeth Dalloway, Mrs. Dalloway's daughter in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), is described as having charming Chinese eyes, as well. Elizabeth's oriental appearance and temperament are brought up twice in the novel. About half way through the novel, the narrator deplores not being able to offer a better explanation for her oriental look than imagine that "some Mongol had been wrecked on the coast of Norfolk. . . had mixed with the Dalloway ladies, perhaps, a hundred years ago" (122-23) since Elizabeth has little in common with her own people: "For the Dalloways, in general, were fair-haired; blue-eyes; Elizabeth, on the contrary, was dark; had Chinese eyes in a pale face; an oriental mystery; was gentle, considerate, still" (123). It turns out that her Chinese charm proves hopelessly attractive to her housemaid, Miss Kilman, much older than Elizabeth. So enamored by Elizabeth's exotic beauty and jealous of Mrs. Dalloway as a mother, Miss Kilman tries to manipulate Elizabeth using religion to steal her away from her mother. Knowing that Mrs. Dalloway was having a party that evening, Miss Kilman took Elizabeth to tea and tried to keep her as long as she could, although Elizabeth wanted to go home: "Miss Kilman took another cup of

⁴For a study of Woolf's critique of British imperialism's kinship with patriarchal dominance, see Iyer.

tea. Elizabeth, with her oriental bearing, her inscrutable mystery, sat perfectly upright; no, she did not want anything more. . . Ah, but she must not go! Miss Kilman could not let her go! This youth, that was so beautiful, this girl, whom she genuinely loved!” (131). At the same time, Miss Kilman endeavored to talk Elizabeth into skipping the party, and when she saw Elizabeth not embracing her idea, she turned hysteric toward her: “She [Miss Kilman] was about to split asunder, she felt. The agony was so terrific. If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and forever and then die; that was all she wanted. . .” (132). But, as Woolf indicates, Elizabeth’s oriental bearing proves an enigma to both her mother and Miss Kilman. While Mrs. Dalloway cannot figure out why on earth her own daughter has fallen “in love” (11) with a “brutal monster” (12), Miss Kilman cannot understand why Elizabeth chooses to reject her and attend the party that evening (133). To both women, then, Elizabeth remains only an oriental “inscrutable mystery” (131).

Xiaoxiao’s otherness was imposed upon her by the Chinese patriarchal society’s child wife custom, popular in rural China at the time, in which teenage girls were married off to husbands considerably younger. The couple usually would have an initial wedding ceremony of formality because of the age difference, like the one Xiaoxiao had in the story, and wait to become husband and wife when both came of age. The orthodox theory behind this custom is that through the older wife’s long-time sister-like care of the young husband they would form an enduring bond of affection and loyalty, and that the marriage would last a long time. From modernist and feminist points of view, however, this custom functions as an additional measure to make Chinese women dependents of men to the extent that child wives were totally deprived of the opportunity for education and economic independence. Not to mention the marriage was always arranged through a match-maker without both partners’ consent. On the day of the wedding, the 11-year-old Xiaoxiao was taken to live with her in-laws and her toddler husband nine years younger, “scarcely aware of what she was getting into: all she knew was that she was to become someone’s new daughter-in-law” (97). While her main responsibility in her new home was to take care of her husband, she was expected to perform a variety of household chores like “twisting hemp, washing, spinning thread. . . getting feed for the pigs, working at the mill, flossing silk, and weaving” (105). Despite her diligent service, Xiaoxiao was treated as a second-class family member — an *other*. The only interaction we see between Xiaoxiao and her family before they decided to drown her is the summer night

scenes, where the grandfather tried to scare Xiaoxiao by portraying the coeds, women who went to co-educational schools in the city, as people-biting strangers. Most of the time, Xiaoxiao was left alone with Sonny, her baby husband, with no one loving or caring about her; she was like “an unnoticed sampling at the corner of the garden, sprouting big leaves and branches after days of wind and rain” (99).

The presence of the coeds in the story marks a significant moment in Shen’s complex negotiation with modernism, feminism, and nationalism. Although sharing the larger modernist spirit of the May 4 Movement, Shen often appears critical of Chinese modernity forcefully ushered in by the Opium War of 1848 and subsequently consolidated by European imperialist interferences in China as evidenced by the sharp contrast Shen draws between the empty, withered, and superficial life-style in the metropolis and the colorful, vivacious, and down-to-earth lifestyle in rural Western Hunan.⁵ Such contrast vividly reveals how human nature is corrupted and twisted by the modern lifestyle in the metropolis and how rural folks in Western Hunan continue to hold on to a simple, healthy, and natural lifestyle. Shen’s aversion for the modern metropolis and his nostalgic love for his home town derive, in part, from his desire to be what he calls “a rural person” (33, 1984, vol. 11), a desire he carries with him throughout his life. Yet, Shen’s nationalist critique of Western modernism is complicated by his modernist and feminist critique of Chinese nationalism and traditionalism. Such critique is illustrated by the presence of the coeds, who represent the liberated Chinese women from the oppressive patriarchal cultural network. Unlike Xiaoxiao, they went to school with boys; they “read books from abroad” (100); the girls “sleep overnight with the boys, with no thought of a go-between or a matchmaker” (100); they “watch foreigners performing shadow-plays (101). In terms of their attitude toward marriage and men, they are strongly feminist-minded for they tend to marry late and remain independent: “By the time they are twenty-four, some still won’t marry, while others at thirty or forty still have the cheek to contemplate marriage. They are not afraid of men, thinking men

⁵Shen’s nostalgic feelings for the rural folks in his home town also are clearly displayed in his novella *Border Town* (1934), in which Shen portrays Cuicui, a teenage girl, and her grandfather, a ferryman, as examples of rural simplicity and honesty. The grandfather, for example, refuses to take money from the ferry passengers because he just wanted to help these villagers.

can't wrong them, for if they do they take the men to court and insist that the magistrate fine them" (101). Not surprisingly then, these modern women are "weird" (101) in the eyes of the local farmers.

Shen's essay "On Conservatism" (1938) speaks loud and clear his modernist critique of Chinese conservatism on the one hand and his ardent advocacy for reform in China on the other. As he writes: "Any [social] progress is the result of reform that will transform what is unjust into what is just...As a result, many people become fearful of and disgusted with reform" (237, 1984, vol 1). Later in the essay Shen aligns the desire for change to the larger modernist spirit of the May 4 Movement, of which New Literature becomes a direct vehicle of expression: "The outbreak of the My 4 Movement can be seen as a protest against the traditional Chinese concept of accepting one's fate by educated people of forty or younger, and as their emerging awareness to become a new person. The New Literature Movement, growing out of the May 4 Movement, is precisely the expression of such protest and awareness" (241, 1984, v. 11). In the story, Xiaoxiao's grandfather is portrayed as a typical "old timer" (100), who resents the changes the coeds represent. Not only does he sarcastically laugh at them, but he describes them as ferocious cannibals who "bite people, like the officials, [who] only eat simple folk...munch even the bones and don't spit up the remains" (101).

Critics of Shen Congwen, both in and outside China, have largely commented on the important intersection of modernism and feminism in Shen's works. Jeffrey Kinkley, for example, discusses three kinds of modernisms in China: foreign-imported modernism, Shanghai modernism, and academic modernism. Kinkley aligns Shen with academic modernism, whose modern spirit is largely reflected in the deployment of modern motifs. Kinkley briefly discusses such deployment in Shen's three works *Fen Zi* (1932, 1937), a novella, "Notes on Watching Rainbow" (1941), a short story, and *Water and Cloud* (1942), a collection of essays. Because the discussions are quite brief, it is hard for the reader to see how academic modernism actually manifests in these works. However, Kinkley did not mention "Xiaoxiao" despite its salient modernist themes. Similarly, in the two essays on "Xiaoxiao" by Liao (2008) and Ren (2010), neither took note of Shen's dialogue with modernism and feminism. In my view, the absence of discussions on Shen's modernism and feminism is attributable to two factors. The first is Shen's critical attitude toward the influence of Western modernism on China reflected in many of his fictional works set in such metropolitan cities as Beijing and Shanghai. In these works, Shen deplores

the loss of human spontaneity and morality as a result of Western influences by portraying a group of “spiritually and emotionally sick” metropolitan characters.⁶ In contrast, Shen wrote his early fictional works against the background of his hometown in western Hunan, in which he portrays a group of “ordinary people”—sailors, farmers, soldiers as representatives of “healthy human beings.” The second has to do with Shen’s unusually complex attitude toward modernism and feminism seen through Xiaoxiao and the co-eds. The co-existence of Xiaoxiao and the co-eds in the story suggests Shen’s dissent of the unfair treatment of women and his sympathy toward women’s emancipation, an attitude that is incongruent with that reflected in many of his other works set in Western Hunan and metropolitan cities, in which he praises local folks while chastising city folks corrupted by the influences of Western modernity. Such incongruence makes the story seem a singular piece in Shen’s fictional oeuvre. It should not be difficult to see that the modernist and feminist consciousness Shen displays through Xiaoxiao and the co-eds clearly echoes that of Woolf in the sense that like Lily, Xiaoxiao and the co-eds become cultural icons of modern and feminist subjectivity, though in different cultural locations.

Although being treated as an *other* in their respective patriarchal societies, Lily and Xiaoxiao both kept their dreams of freedom. In Lily’s case, her dream is never explicitly depicted in the novel; for this reason the reader is never sure of what it is. However, Woolf provides several implicit clues from which one can infer that Lily’s feminist challenge to the patriarchal society goes beyond her rejection of marriage and family, a challenge that is so unorthodox and subversive that she can only keep to herself and expresses through her mysterious painting. The fact that Mrs. Ramsay is the only one who takes note of Lily’s Chinese eyes offers a clue to Lily’s secret dream hidden in her painting. Throughout the novel Lily endeavors to complete her picture, which would include Mrs. Ramsay and the place surrounding her, struggling with colors and the arrangement of objects. Above all, she struggles with her vision that keeps evading her while she desperately tries to “clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her” (19). Why does Lily’s vision keep eliding her, and why does she have trouble translating it into her

⁶See Yaohui Hong for relevant discussions on Shen’s explorations on rebuilding the nationalist character.

painting? Because her vision is intimately intertwined with her complex negotiation with her sexual orientation, one that is so alarming that she herself scarcely dares to admit. In her vision, she remembers her effort “to control her impulse to fling herself (thank heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee and say to her...’I’m in love with you’” (19). But the moment Lily captures her vision, she denies it “No, that was not true. ‘I’m in love with this all...It was absurd, it was impossible’” (19). The vision has to be kept a “secret” (52) that cannot be “spoken [of] or shown” (52) to anyone except in her painting, and this is why Lily feels that Mr. Banks has seen her secret when he catches a glimpse of her picture by accident: “But it had been seen; it had been taken from her. This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate” (53).

Like Lily, Xiaoxiao has dreams of her own which she could not share with anyone else. While enduring the hardships of life with astonishing tenacity and patience, Xiaoxiao never gives up her hope for a better and free life. Yet, rather than expressing her secrets in an artistic form as the educated Lily does, the illiterate Xiaoxiao has to hide them in her unconscious, which then surface to haunt her in her dreams. The narrator describes Xiaoxiao’s dreams this way:

“When she went to sleep she would dream dreams that a girl of her age dreams; she dreamed that she found a cache of copper coins at the back gate, or some other place, and that she had good things to eat; she dreamed that she was climbing a tree; she dreamed that she was a fish, floating freely in the water; she dreamed she was so light and lithe that she flew up clear to the stars, where there was no one, but all she could see was a flash of white and of gold, and she cried aloud for her mother—whereupon she woke up, her heart still thumping” (98).

As one notes, what Xiaoxiao dreams of are what she does not have in life: money, good food, freedom, and love, yet she refuses to take for granted her fate of a child wife imposed upon her. It is not surprising, then, when Xiaoxiao displays exciting interest in the coeds when she hears about them from her grandfather, and when she tells him that she is not afraid of them. She is so drawn to the coeds that she would “often dream about being a coed, about being one of them” (101); she even dreams of riding “in the box [motor car] with the coeds” (102). Not only does Xiaoxiao dream of becoming a coed, but she takes actions to

realize her dream, when she suggests to Motley Mutt that they run away to the city so that they can be free after she becomes pregnant with his child: “Brother Motley, why don’t we go where we can be free in the city and find work there?” (106). For Xiaoxiao, the coeds have opened her eyes to an alternative mode of life of which she had previously been unaware. Xiaoxiao’s most daring challenge to the patriarchal child wife custom is her attempt to run away alone to join the coeds when Motley Mutt dumps her: “She thought, well, Motley ran away, I can run away too. So she collected few things bent on joining the coeds on their way to the city in search of freedom” (108).

By allowing themselves to harbor dreams that are disconcerting to the conventional expectations of women, both Lily and Xiaoxiao perform a cultural transgression that not only leads to their marginalization and otherness, but to the hindrance (Lily) and foil (Xiaoxiao) of their dreams and visions. In Lily’s case, her transgression is double-sided through her rejection of marriage and family on the one hand and her romantic passion for Mrs. Ramsay on the other. To her patriarchal society, it seems, her rejection of marriage and family is less abhorrent than her homosexual orientation. Although Charles Tansley seizes every opportunity to belittle Lily’s artistic talent, he puts up with sitting at the same dinner table with her. How might he react to Lily if he knew of her secret passion for Mrs. Ramsay? Would he faint, scream, or yell? Possibly. How might Mr. Banks react to Lily if he knew of her secret?; Dumping her as a friend?—Possibly. This is why even Lily denies her intimate feelings for Mrs. Ramsay, though without much success. By repeatedly dramatizing Lily’s complex negotiation with her relation with Mrs. Ramsay through her struggle with her artistic vision, Woolf suggests that Lily’s radical transgression of her gender role, though mostly imaginative, alienates her from the community.⁷ There are moments in the novel in which Lily seems to have captured her vision yet is reluctant to preserve it in her painting even after Mrs. Ramsay’s death. One such moment occurs toward the end of the novel when Lily recalls Mrs. Ramsay sitting on the beach in silence while Lily worked at her painting. Lily imagines that Mrs. Ramsay, though in silence, and she, in silence, too, exchanged intimate knowledge of one another

⁷Given Woolf’s well-known lesbian orientation, critics have recently approached her fiction in light of queer theory, although they seem to have overlooked Lily’s lesbian desire. See Haffey and Delsandro for their queer readings of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*.

because to Lily Mrs. Ramsay would have said “Aren’t we more expressive thus [in silence]?” (172). For Lily, this moment is “extraordinarily fertile” (172); it is a moment of perfection. Yet, rather than allowing her vision to enter and live through her painting, Lily feels obliged to bury it in the sand, as if to memorialize a part of herself, her dark past: “She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment. It was like a drop of silver in which one dipped and illumined the darkness of the past” (172). Rather than burying her dream in the sand, Xiaoxiao holds on to it and projects it onto her son, wishing him to marry a “coed” (110) when he grows up, although her dream was completely dampened by the local custom, when her family “tied her hands, put her away in a shed, and gave her nothing to eat for a whole day” (108). For the local community, Xiaoxiao’s transgression is “a grave offence...a scandal.... There were angry outbursts, there were tears, there were scoldings: each one had his own complaint to make” (108). According to the local custom, Xiaoxiao should be “drowned” (109); her life is saved only because she gives birth to a boy, not a girl, with Mutley Mutt. Placed in the context of Woolf’s knowledge of China through her ties with the Bloomsbury Group and Shen’s exposure to Western modernism through his affiliation with the Crescent Moon Group, the otherness of Lily and Xiaoxiao, as I have demonstrated in this essay, becomes a multi-layered site, where the global resonances of modernist narratives are illuminated.

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