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Natalia Cortes
ncortes@trincoll.edu

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“You Are Meant To Be the Best”:
Women in Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale* and
Yang Mo’s *Song of Youth*

Natalia Cortes

Trinity College

Senior Thesis: Italian Studies and Chinese Major

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I. Introduction

“You are meant to be the best” is a reference to Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale* that is relevant to both this novel and Yang Mo’s *Song of Youth* (Ferrante, 308).

Women in society were not often allowed to be educated, and those that could constantly did their best and excelled in their studies. The main emphasis of these two novels is the position of women in society in terms of education and life standards in both Italy and China. As a Language and Culture Studies major studying Italian and Chinese, I am fascinated by the continuities between these two novels from very different cultures. In this essay, I compare the representation of the female protagonists of *L’amica geniale* (2011) by Elena Ferrante (Elena and Lila) with *Song of Youth* (1958) by Yang Mo (Lin Tao-Ching). Although written more than fifty years apart, both novels are set in and around the same period: the aftermath of WWII (1950s Italy) and the Second Sino Japanese War (China 1937-1945).

Using feminist theory, specifically the theory of Marxist and socialist feminism, as well as secondary sources on the history and literature of both countries, I consider how the role of women was shaped by the experience of war and by societal changes. Fiction has the benefit with respect to historical scholarship of portraying the psychology of characters. In the case of both novels, we learn about the fears, hopes, love, friendship, and life plans of women constrained by societal and paternalistic norms. How do they negotiate traditional gender norms with a desire to assert their individual identity? Moreover, as a college-educated student I am particularly interested in the role education plays for each of the protagonists.

Ferrante's novel takes place in Post-World War II Italy. *L'amica geniale* specifically takes place in Naples around the 1950s. During the 1950s, Italy was facing the aftermath of World War II where the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) lost to the Allied powers (France, Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent, China). In the late 1950s and 1960s, Italy was transformed by an economic boom which was a miracle as many of the cities such as Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, and Genoa were "nearly destroyed by bombing while poverty and disease dominated life in Naples and the rural south"¹. This economic boom made it easy for people to migrate from the rural areas to the urban areas in search for work.

Furthermore, women during this time chose to migrate to the city or nearby towns in order to gain a greater sense of independence and autonomy from Italy's patriarchal system. Life in rural Italy was different than that of urban Italy in that women's choices were more restricted in terms of education, work, and free time. These women could not often marry the person of their choosing and had to subject to their parent's decisions about who to marry. As such, men had a lot more power in society and women were fighting more and more every day to have the same rights as these men.

Song of Youth, however, takes place in China during the Japanese invasion of China during the Second Sino Japanese war. The Second Sino Japanese war took place from 1937-1945. This was a conflict between China and Japan in which China tried to prevent the Japanese invasion of China. China's president was Chiang Kai-

¹ Niamhcullen. "The Post-War Generation: Growing up and Coming of Age in 1950s Italy." *Niamh Cullen*, 11 Mar. 2012, <https://niamhcullen.wordpress.com/2012/03/11/the-post-war-generation-growing-up-and-coming-of-age-in-1950s-italy/>.

Shek. He had said that if they did not claim back the territories that they had lost back in three years, that he would kill himself. During the same time, there was a puppet empire and front created in Northern China led by Wang Jingwei. Wang Jingwei was a rival to Chiang Kai-Shek. However, rather than focusing the efforts of combating the invading Japanese armies, Chiang Kai-shek decided that it would be in China's best benefit to focus on the "communist bandits" that were beginning to rise. Chiang Kai-Shek thought that it would be more important to go against the people of his own country due to their revolutionary mindset, than to go against the imminent foreign threat to their country. There were a lot of student protests as they did not want to see their beloved China be destroyed by the Japanese. *Song of Youth* focuses on the role of one woman during the Kuomintang rule in China and her adventure in finding her revolutionary spirit. Lin Tao-Ching goes from being the daughter of a landlord to advocating for the peasants in China. She seems that the system is flawed and leaves her house when her father wants her to marry someone that is not of her choosing and causes her to meet people associated with the revolution. Her curiosity and determination to join shows her fierce nature fueled by the revolution. It shows the power that even women had within society as they fought alongside the men and were heard by their society.

Feminism was prevalent in both Italy and China during this time. Feminism by definition is "the belief in full social, economic, and political equality for women"².

² "Feminism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 7 Apr. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism#:~:text=What%20is%20feminism%3F,has%20global%20manifestations%20and%20variations>.

Throughout history, there have been a lot of daily activities that women could not do. They could not read, be educated, walk alone in the street, vote, drive, the list goes on. However, “emerging during the 16th century produced long lists of women of courage and accomplishment and proclaimed that women would be the intellectual equals of men if they were given equal access to education”³. This relates to the theme of *L’amica geniale* as Lila and Elena both show that they could be superior to their male classmates having been fortunate enough to study with them and to prove their worth and intellect.

There are also several different types of feminism. These include: “liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, cultural feminism, and eco feminism”⁴. The types of feminism that most closely relate to the novels Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale* and Yang Mo’s *Song of Youth* are that of Marxist and socialist feminism. Elizabeth Armstrong states in her book *Marxist and Socialist Feminisms* that “socialist feminism emphasized “patriarchy” as a power role that oppressively shaped women’s lives. For socialist feminism, patriarchy overlapped but differed from Marxist emphasis on primacy of capitalism and class exploitation “⁵. In both China and Italy during these

³ “Feminism.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 7 Apr. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism#:~:text=What%20is%20feminism%3F,has%20global%20manifestations%20and%20variations>.

⁴ “University of Alabama in Huntsville.” *Kinds of Feminism*, https://www.uah.edu/woolf/feminism_kinds.htm.

⁵ Armstrong, Elizabeth. *Marxist and Socialist Feminisms - Wiley Online Library*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781119314967.ch3>.

similar points in time, women felt that they needed to be part of the process for change in their society and for their voices to be heard.

Feminism in Italy sparked in 1968 through the influence of the Chinese cultural revolution. Italian feminism emerged through Italy's new left. Women took part in large student and worker strikes. Although the women participated, the men still made the decisions regarding these strikes. The women in Italian society thought that "there is no revolution without the liberalization of women; there is no liberation of women without revolution" (Birubbaum, 81). Similar to the situation of China, the Italians believed in revolution and in leftist ideals. They believed that through these ideals they would be able to provide a positive change to their society. The women took part in this effort and thought that without them, there could be no revolution.

II. *L'amica geniale*

Author: Elena Ferrante

The author of *L'amica geniale* was born in Naples Italy in 1943. Elena Ferrante is a pseudonym. The Economist even wrote that "Elena Ferrante may be the best contemporary novelist that you have never heard of"⁶. Most of her books were written in the early 2000s. For the longest time, nobody knew her name and simply knew her as Elena Ferrante. She said that she decided to keep her identity secret to "preserve

⁶ "Menu." *Elena Ferrante*, <http://elenaferrante.com/tv-series/romper-is-my-brilliant-friend-based-on-a-true-story-the-hbo-show-is-inspired-by-a-beautiful-italian-novel-of-the-same-name/>.

her flesh and blood”⁷. She was nominated for the Strega Prize, “the most important literary award since 1947 that honors the best work of prose fiction written in the Italian language by an author of any nationality”⁸. Despite being nominated for this prize, she did not give away her identity. It was later revealed or speculated that her name is Anita Raja and is the wife of another famous Italian writer Domenico Starnone, years after several of her novels were published. She wrote the book *L’amica geniale* in 2011 and many others. *L’amica geniale* is the first of a four book series surrounding the life of Elena and Lila. It has been made into an HBO series. According to The Guardian, the novel is “number eleven of the one hundred best books of the 21st century”⁹. Her book vividly elucidates the role that women played in society in Post-World War II Italy and the situations they faced as they tried to live their everyday lives. Women could not do the same things as men and Elena Ferrante demonstrates a different perspective as she shows the power that Elena and Lila have within their society. Despite being women, they are influential and admired.

The novel *L’amica geniale* is essentially a story of friendship and coming of age in Post-World War II Italy. It focuses on the friendship between Lila Cerullo and Elena

⁷ “Italian Author Elena Ferrante Stays in Shadows despite Prize Nomination.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/20/elena-ferrante-author-secret-identity-strega-prize>.

⁸ “Strega Prize 2023.” *Dante Society of BC*, <https://www.dantesocietybc.ca/strega-prize>.

⁹ “The 100 Best Books of the 21st Century.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 21 Sept. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/best-books-of-the-21st-century>.

Greco. Lila and Elena had become friends in elementary school. However, their friendship has always been one fueled by competition. Throughout the course of the novel, we see how Elena is always trying to outshine her best friend Lila in every aspect of her life, from education, to love, to her appearance. The story focuses mostly on education in this novel and the fight for these women to be the best in their class. When Lila drops out of school to work in the family company, a shoe company, Elena is left without competition at school. However, in order to ensure that their friendship and rivalry continue, Lila takes up all the material that Elena is learning from Latin to even Greek. There are many themes in the novel, but it is best to focus on the overlapping themes of women being the objects of men's attentions, friendship, love, and education as there is a clear parallel between this novel and that of Yang Mo's within these specific aspects of women in society.

The first theme that is of importance to *L'amica geniale* is that of friendship. Women had to take comfort in their friends during this tough time in society. In this coming of age story, Lila and Elena have been friends since elementary school. Throughout the novel, the budding of a friendship based on competition and the strife to be the best is evident. Lila, a rebellious student, was constantly put on a pedestal to stop her from misbehaving. Elena sees such behavior and believes that she is the one that should be receiving such treatment and not Lila who was constantly rowdy and disturbing the class. Throughout her adolescence, Elena watches as Lila becomes friends with other people and ignores Elena to be with others. Elena feels alone and thinks of her friend while studying even if she is not physically there. She does because she believes that by doing so, she will be able to beat her friend Lila. Elena and Lila

have been there for each other through thick and thin. The final message that Lila gives to Elena is to keep studying and that she is her “amica geniale”, her brilliant friend.

Lila tells Elena to never stop studying. She says specifically: “studying will never end for you, you are my “amica geniale” and must become the best of all people, male or female” (Ferrante, 308-309). What does it mean to be the best? It means to excel and do better in studies than everyone else. Lila, having chosen a different path in life than studying, is engaged to become married and becomes jealous of Elena and her studies. She seems to miss the days where she used to be one of the best students in her class and realizes that she will be able to feel that way if her best friend Elena keeps being the best in her class. Lila takes up Greek and English and Latin in order to challenge Elena intellectually and get her to study to her fullest potential. Through Lila, Elena is able to push herself to her maximum and become the best student that she could possibly be. While Lila had long ago given up her studies, Elena focuses mostly on doing well in school and studying whenever she can. Lila seems to regret the fact that she is not studying anymore but can see how her working for her father’s shoe company shapes her as an individual. She becomes educated in the shoe industry and wants to create new designs for the shoes. She wants her to create the best shoes in the whole world. Her artistry and skill with shoes make onlookers like Marcelo and Stephano take interest in her work and propose marriage to her. To their eyes, Lila’s work is beyond comparison and there will never be anything like her work. Elena is jealous as she has always strived to be the best at everything that she does and wants to be better than Lila at everything. She admits that the shoes are beautiful but is

jealous at the masterpieces that she created. However, Lila supports Elena and keeps motivating her to do her best.

A second central theme to the book *L'amica geniale* is that of women as the object of men's attentions. This theme is highly prevalent throughout the novel. Women were not allowed to walk the streets alone or look up when walking down the streets of Naples. This was the case not only in Naples, but all around the world. When walking alone on the streets, men would stare at women hungrily. In *L'amica geniale*, there is a specific scene where five girls including Lila and Elena are walking down the street and Lila looks up oblivious to the fact that they were not supposed to. In doing so, a man started whistling towards her and calling her heinous names even though she was about fifteen years old, and he was a full grown man. There was also an important scene of women being the object of men's attentions in terms of Elena. Elena, who was never looked on by people in society, finally caught the eye of the father of the boy that she likes during a vacation that she won through her studies. This boy's father took advantage of her innocence and ruined her possibility for love with Nino, the boy she liked. After this moment in the book, Elena undergoes emotional trauma as she constantly thinks of the perpetrator whenever she sees Nino. This causes her to leave the vacation prematurely. This demonstrates how sometimes men took advantage of younger girls as there was not much that the women could do in such situations. Being seen as weak and innocent, they were unfortunately the ideal candidates for these men. This is horrible to say, but this is one of the problems that women faced in society as being the object of men's attentions.

Love is a recurring central theme of the text. In this text, it shows how when people fall in love, they tend to abandon their friends and follow their love interests. In *L'amica geniale*, Lila and Elena stop seeing a lot of each other when Lila becomes involved with Stefano. She is swept by Stefano and fails to realize that the more time she spends with him, the less time she is making for her friend.

Furthermore, in this story, the element of competition in love is constant. Elena wanted to be the first out of the two friends to have a romantic encounter, so she became the girlfriend of Alfonso in order to attempt to one up Lila. Like in education, there was always a constant with competition throughout all the aspects of Elena's life especially when it pertained to her attitude towards her best friend. Elena states this in the novel on page 136. She states: "And yet I had now a single true thought: to find a boyfriend, immediately, before Lila announced to me that she was going with Pasquale" (Ferrante, 136). In this scene, we see Elena's desperation to find a boyfriend before Lila as she always had to be the best and the fastest at everything that she did. Contrary to Lila's relationships, Elena did not love Alfonso or her other boyfriends often referring to them as idiots. Most of the relationships that she gets into are to challenge those of Lila. At the end of the story, she follows her love interests and ends up being with Nino.

This depicts a position for women in terms of love in that they could choose who they wanted to marry. At one point in time, Lila's father decides that Lila is going to get married to Marcelo, a man that she seems to like but is abusive and violent. However, when Stefano buys the shoes from the store, Lila's father allows her to marry Stefano

who she ended up loving. In many areas around the world, there are various marriages that have been arranged and women learn to either love their husbands or learn to live with them. In order for the marriage to be approved in Italy, the parents of the daughter had to accept the future groom as well and welcome him as family to their home.

Furthermore, education is a theme that is a central and recurring theme in *L'amica geniale*. Historically speaking, the population of Italy was vastly illiterate at the time. "By the 1950s about 19% and 11.7% of women aged 30-34 had achieved at least lower secondary education while for instance this share was only 9.3% and 4.4% for the population aged 65-69"¹⁰. Therefore, a large percentage, 81% of males and approximately 89% of females had not received secondary education. Women were not commonly seen in schools and often had to cook and clean for their families. Although few, the women that had education were influential in daily Italian life.

During the 20th century in Italy, it was uncommon for women to study and receive an education. Elena and Lila go to school and did their best in order to remain in school. They were told by their parents that they could not go to school if they failed as their families could often not afford to send them back to school. However, when Elena fails one of her classes and her father cannot afford to send her back to school, her mother tells Elena to independently study and that if she passes the exam she can keep on studying. Lila helps Elena study, and she ends up passing with a 9/10. Education is important as it gives everyone the knowledge that they need for success in life. Lila's

¹⁰ "Italy." *Edu 20c*, <https://edu20c.org/italy/>.

socio-economic status was at a lesser level than that of Elena. When Lila fails her classes either from boredom or lack of motivation, she is forced to either stay at home with her mother or go work with her brother and father. She chooses to go work at her father's shoe store and uses her creativity and persistence in order to help her father succeed with his business. She cannot go back to school as her family could not afford sending her and although her brother worked so that she could be educated, her constant failure was enough to end her education. Elena kept studying and working as hard as she could to be the best in her studies, and Lila worked to be the best in the shoe store.

Lack of a formal education is related to obedience, another major theme. The novel demonstrates the relationship of obedience that a daughter must have not only with her parents, but with her brother. In the 1950s, Italy was a patriarchal society where the "father or a male elder has absolute authority over a family group"¹¹. Elena and Lila therefore live in a patriarchal society where they had to obey their fathers and conform to their position in society. Lila is a very rebellious girl but learns that she has to obey her parents and her brother. Her brother finds a way to finance her studying, even when her father has given up on her and cannot afford to send her back to school. When she disobeys her brother, her brother slaps her in the face in order to let her know that he is the boss, and she has to listen to him. This is depicted in the scene when Lila's brother Rino tells her that she has to get back to work and she refuses.

¹¹ "Patriarchy." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/patriarchy>.

This is depicted on page 157 of the book where it states, “he then dragged her by the arm, she defied him with a nasty insult, Rino slapped her, shouted at her, “Then go home, go and help mamma.” She obeyed without even saying goodbye” (Ferrante, 157). If women were not working or at school, they had to help their mother do housework.

The character of Elena constantly heeds her father’s words and tries her best to remain in school with the little resources that her family has. Her father has promised her that she would remain in her classes if she not only excelled but was the best in her class. She feels motivated by her father and her family and always wants to please him with success in her studies.

III. *Song of Youth*

Author: Yang Mo

Yang Mo was a novelist born in 1914 in Beijing, China. She passed away in 1995 at 81 years old. The novel *Song of Youth* was published in 1958. *Song of Youth* is semi-autobiographical novel based on Yang Mo’s personal experience as a female during the time of the Second Sino Japanese War (1937-1945). Her book demonstrates the hardship of being a woman living during this period in time as an influential member of the Communist party. *Song of Youth* was then adapted into a movie in 1959. This historical fiction novel and movie are incredible as they show a

vivid and personal depiction of the role of women during this crucial time in Chinese history, through her life story.

Yang Mo's *Song of Youth* takes place during the Japanese invasion of China. The story revolves around a woman named Lin Tao-Ching who goes from being the daughter of a landowner to a very influential member of the revolutionary party in China. Lin Tao-Ching's mother was a peasant that the landowner took a fancy to when she was living in the village. After Lin Tao-Ching's birth, her mother was expelled from the landowner's house and Tao Ching is treated cruelly by her stepmother. She decides that the best course of action is to run away from home and to get as far away from her family as feasibly possible. Through her journey, she teaches and falls in love with a young fellow. However, when her marriage feels like it is about to crumble and she is about to lose hope, her husband Yung-tse's friend Lu Chia-chuan tells her not to lose hope and that there is a way to get out of misery. He lends Tao-Ching books in order for her to find an escape from the way she was living her life and open her eyes to a new outlook in life.

She falls in love with the power of the revolution and wants to be involved with the revolution despite knowing the dangers that party members face. Lin Tao-Ching is not afraid to voice her opinions when confronted with the dangers of the revolution. These members were kidnapped against their own will by Kuomintang agents, put into jail cells to be tortured for information, and mostly even killed if they failed to be of use to the Kuomintang agents. Some of the people were even asked to work as double agents in order to capture the revolutionaries and give the person an ultimatum. These

people were known as renegades. This book shows that students can have a large impact on society and that through their revolutionary spirit, they can make a difference in both society and in the government. Through their revolutionary spirit, they demonstrate to their government that they cannot be silenced and that they do not stand with China's decision to let Japan influence and invade them without opposition. The following themes were common from the book *L'amica geniale* that also apply to this novel.

The theme of friendship is very different in the novel than it is in *L'amica geniale*. In this book, it demonstrates how friends can both love and betray you. This is evident in the relationship between Lin Tao-Ching and Wang Hsiao-yen. Hsiao-yen is Lin Tao-Ching's friend from high school and Lin Tao-Ching shows Hsiao-yen the importance of the revolution and the effect that it has in Chinese society. However, Lin Tao-Ching is not able to help nurture Hsiao-wen's revolutionary studies as she always had to be on the run from the authorities. Hsiao-wen becomes emotionally involved with a counter-revolutionary Tai Yu and believes that Tao-Ching has gone renegade meaning that she has abandoned the party. She fails to realize that it is her boyfriend and fiancé that is the traitor and betrays her friend without knowing the whole story. When she finds out the truth, she begs Lin Tao-Ching for forgiveness and realizes that her actions could have gotten Lin Tao-Ching killed. She follows her friend and continues to fight for the revolution under Tao-Ching's instructions.

Similarly to *L'amica geniale*, there is a quote where Lin Tao-Ching tells Wang Hsiao-wen that she must keep studying. She says: "Hsiao-yen I hope that you study

harder than ever so that soon your wish will come true. You're luckier than I am..." (Mo, 81). Lin Tao-Ching had stopped studying after high school, taught at different schools, and became involved in revolutionary actions that were meant to change her society and the world around her. She saw that her life had a different type of value than simply gaining knowledge through the educational system. She had no time for anything else, so like Lila in *L'amica geniale*, Lin Tao-Ching encourages Hsiao-yen to keep studying, seeing her successes as her own since she could no longer receive a proper education.

Women as Object of Men's Attentions:

Historically, women have always been the objects of men's attentions. This is why women made ideal candidates for becoming influential members during the revolution. Women often prostituted themselves for the revolution giving away their innocence for the good of their country. Like a double-edged sword, the revolution enabled women to help produce social change, but did not help them from the societal backlash that they received. Women extracted information for the revolution. Women were often seen in a negative light as they used pillow talk to extract information. However, in the book *Song of Youth*, it talks about how men's attentions towards women are inevitable. Women had to keep on living their daily lives despite constantly being ogled by the male population.

The male gaze is a concept where men view “the female body as something for the heterosexual male to watch, conquer, and possess, and use to further their goals”¹². As such, women are viewed as objects and have to live in a world where it is normal for them to fall prey under the male gaze. The male gaze is also thought to show that the male gaze controls the narrative of life and shows that women are not equal to men. This causes women to doubt their self-worth as they are constantly being ogled by this arguably uncontrollable behavior expressed by men. The male gaze seems to be built in the male anatomy where it is a constant in their daily life. They can neither suppress it, nor act upon it as females would become highly uncomfortable being with that person. The bodies of women “are meant to sell and attract the male attention”. As such, although the male gaze demonstrates this relation between woman and object, they do so because the female body was created to attract the attentions of men. Plato’s *Symposium* demonstrates how men and women at one point existed as one and were later split apart. The male and female are meant to come back together as they were once one being, constantly longing for one another. This has relation to what was mentioned above as it demonstrates that despite the fact that it is inevitable, it is also natural occurrence for men to have this “male gaze” when it comes to women.

However, this does not change the fact that it makes women feel shame, embarrassed, burdened, or uncomfortable under this gaze. Even though this is a natural occurrence, it still does not mean that it is ok to view women in this light.

¹² Vanbuskirk, Sarah. “What Is the Male Gaze?” Verywell Mind. Verywell Mind, November 14, 2022. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-male-gaze-5118422>.

Women often change their jobs or move due to indecent behaviors of men. This relationship between women and leaving their works and locations is constant in both the novel *L'amica geniale* and *Song of Youth*.

Women as the object of men's attentions is evident in the novel *Song of Youth*. This is seen when Lin Tao-Ching goes to the village to search for her cousin because her father wanted her to marry someone that was not of her choosing. She then goes to a village where she is ogled by everyman on the bus either because of the instruments that she carries or because she is a woman travelling alone in China. At the time, women in China were also encouraged not to go anywhere alone and to always be accompanied by a male. Lin Tao-Ching says that she is not alone and that she is on her way to visit her cousin that lives in the village. People seem to leave her alone after she says this and when she asks if they know her cousin, they all fall silent because they know that her cousin disappeared without a trace. They do not know where he went but know that he no longer works at the village.

There is another key moment that has to do with women being the object of men's attentions that is crucial in Yang Mo's *Song of Youth*. This scene also takes place near the beginning of the novel at the village. Similarly to *L'amica geniale*, Lin Tao-Ching is observed in an indecent manner by a man three times her age. Old Yu was the principal of the school in the village and often told Lin Tao-Ching about his fantasies of having her for a wife. Lin Tao-Ching refuses his advances and asks him for a job. She is not given one until the man's nephew, who takes interest in Lin Tao-Ching, tells him to give her a job. However, Old Yu continues his advances and does

not stop pestering Lin Tao-Ching even though she has constantly rejected his advances. This forces her to leave the village and look for the nephew of Old Yu.

This shows that women change their situations constantly due to possible indecent interactions with men. They are forced to abandon their jobs and often end up losing their innocence. However, Lin Tao-Ching was able to join the revolution after looking for Yung-tse, the nephew. She sees that she can make a difference not only in her life, but in the life of the people that surround her. She “divorces” Yung-tse and continues to live her life independently without a man.

The theme of love is evident throughout this novel. However, more than a physical love between people, it seems to be more of a love for education and for one’s country. However, through the revolution, Lin Tao-Ching does end up meeting the man she loves despite the fact that she was “married” to another man. The word married is in quotations because there was no official celebration but is living with him and performing wifely duties. During this period in China, people did not need an official ceremony in order to be married. They needed to be of similar social standings, and both agree to live together. Tao Ching and Yung-tse agree to live together as a husband and wife would. In doing so, Tao Ching constantly felt bored and felt as if her life did not have any meaning. Her husband would go to work whereas she would stay at home to tend to the house. When she found out about the revolution and became an active member, she divorced or left Yung-tse as they did not see eye to eye on such topics. Lin Tao-Ching falls in love not only with the revolution, but with Lu Chia-Chuan.

Falling in love with Lu Chia-Chuan, a member of the Communist party, for Lin Tao-Ching was the best thing that happened to her. He made her motivated to provide services for her neighbors and for the rebels. This gave her happiness and meaning in life. After he was tortured and killed by the Kuomintang, she thought that she would never fall in love again. She writes poems that are meant for him, even though he would never receive them. She meets another man, Chiang Hua, that is also an active member of the revolution and falls in love with him. Although she would never forget her feelings for Lu Chia-Chuan, she knows that he would feel happy for her and would not want her to suffer the heartbreak that comes along with losing one's love.

The theme of love for one's country is powerful as it shows that people will do anything and everything in their power for their country. Yang Mo states in *Song of Youth* that "anyone who believes in communism and is willing to fight for the right and for the happiness of the overwhelming majority of mankind do not hesitate to give their lives for the cause...because these are people who never die" (Mo, 387). This powerful message encapsulates the revolution as people that die are still alive in spirit supporting and being part of the revolution. These revolutionaries loved their countries so much that they did not give in to the Kuomintang's torture and would rather die than give away their fellow comrades. The term comrade in China is powerful as it is more than a friend, it is someone that companion that shares one's ideals and is willing to give themselves up for a cause. Through the love of one's country, the loyalty that Lin Tao-Ching and all the other revolutionaries that were imprisoned for being suspected of being part of this organization is evident. Love causes people to be loyal and the women seem to be the most loyal of comrades, ready to give their lives to the cause.

Theme of Education

Education in this novel is shown in a different kind of light than *L'amica geniale*. In this novel, there is an importance to women becoming educated as not many of them were educated. Similarly to 1950s Italy, a very low percentage of the population was literate. "Prior to 1949, China faced a stark literary rate of only 15 to 25%"¹³. This novel does not lay a focus on school education, but rather the education that one could receive outside school in being part of the battle for revolution. Although Lin Tao-Ching does go to high school and Hsiao-yen goes to college, this novel centers the focus on the learning of the revolution. Revolutionary education involved reading a vast amount of left-winged books. These included books like *The Iron Flood*, *The Nineteenth*, and *Gorky's Mother*, as well as other books from Mao Tsetung and Lenin's *The state and the Revolution*, "Left Wing" Communism, *An Infantile Disorder*, and *Outline of Political Economy*. This form of education as such was heavily influenced by literature, where they used the teachings and morals of these literary works in order to live their lives. Their education also consisted of the way that society viewed them, and they made sure to put themselves out in society protesting and advocating for change. These

¹³ 1949 *The Educational Revolution Begins in China*,

<https://schugurensky.faculty.asu.edu/moments/1949china.html#:~:text=Prior%20to%201949%2C%20China%20faced,with%20minimal%20national%20curricular%20goals.>

revolutionaries are taught to fight and die for their country and to give their lives to the revolution.

Being educated during this time was like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they are being educated and have the knowledge in order to be able to make a productive social change. On the other hand, they are living in constant fear of being tortured, killed, or imprisoned for their counter revolutionary tactics. Is the duality worth it? Would you keep studying if you knew that your life was at risk? Lin Tao-Ching and the other revolutionaries involved in this movement certainly thought that they were helping their motherland by being involved in this revolutionary education.

Again, education and obedience (or disobedience) are linked, but it is different than that of *L'amica geniale*. Lin Tao-Ching goes against the patriarchal society in China as she runs away from her family to a village in search of a cousin who disappeared. As such, she did not have to obey a fatherly figure. However, when doing revolutionary work, she was sent to live in a landowner family. She had to be obedient for it was highly dangerous to go against these landowning families and could jeopardize her cover in acquiring the information for the revolution. Rebelling against such family was treachery and could label a person as a Red or a communist. Lin Tao-Ching is torn as she is told to play the role of a governess and entertain the two children in this family. She cannot bare to see how the peasants are being treated in the countryside. They were constantly beat, and it made her angry that they were treated in such a way. Although she was supposed to obey the landowner, she decides to side with the peasants and in her carelessness finds herself suspected as a red. She feels

joy when the peasants protest against the landowning family shucking their wheat and taking it to their homes. Lin Tao-Ching is forced to run away from the family as staying there would lead to her death. Being on the move was common for her and other revolutionaries, as they constantly had to move from place to place and never had permanent lodgings. This scene demonstrates not only the importance of obedience in such a society, but also the consequences of disobedience that plagued the peasants and revolutionaries in society.

Lin Tao-Ching is used to running away and knows that she must do right by the peasants living in the society. She ignores the danger that would later face her and knows that if she does the right thing for the revolutionary party, that she will be rewarded. This event causes her to run away and live a very solitary life, one which started with joining the revolution. This shows the power of women during the revolution as they were present in the fight for liberation and were active members in creating necessary change in their environment.

IV. Conclusion

It is evident that there is a clear relationship between both of these countries in terms of the experiences of war, especially pertaining to the position of women in society. Feminist theory demonstrates that women are capable and independent. They do not need men or patriarchal figures in order to be important actors for a significant change in society. Like Lila and Elena, and Lin Tao-Ching, there have been many influential women throughout society. A lot of women believed that by

going against their political and cultural system, they could help bring about a positive change for themselves and for their society.

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